

MAURITANIA

COUNTRY READER TABLE OF CONTENTS

Henry S. Villard	1960-1961	Ambassador, Dakar
Phillip M. Kaiser	1961-1964	Ambassador, Dakar
David A. Korn	1964-1965	Chargé d'Affaires, Nouakchott
David Hamilton Shinn	1974-1976	Deputy Chief of Mission, Nouakchott
Holsey G. Handyside	1975-1977	Ambassador, Mauritania
E. Gregory Kryza	1977-1980	Ambassador, Mauritania
Richard C. Howland	1978	Office of the Inspector General, Washington, DC
Parker W. Borg	1979-1981	Country Director, West African Affairs, Washington, DC
Willis J. Sutter	1982-1984	Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Nouakchott
Edward L. Peck	1983-1985	Ambassador, Mauritania
Glenn Slocum	1988-1990	USAID Representative, Nouakchott
Gordon S. Brown	1991-1994	Ambassador, Mauritania
Dorothy M. Sampas	1994-1997	Ambassador, Mauritania

HENRY S. VILLARD **Ambassador** **Dakar (1960-1961)**

Henry S. Villard was born in New York City in 1900. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Harvard University he did post graduate work at Magdalen College at Oxford University. His career includes positions in Tehran, Washington D.C., Rio de Janeiro, Venezuela, Norway, Libya, and ambassadorship to Senegal and Mauritania. Ambassador Villard was interviewed by Dmitri Villard in July 1991.

Q: In 1960 you were then appointed ambassador to Senegal and to Mauritania. If I am not mistaken you were originally appointed ambassador to the Mali Federation which included the country of Mali as well. What happened?

VILLARD: What happened was that the Mali Federation, composed of Senegal and Mali, which were components of what used to be French West Africa, the large bulge on the map of Africa, couldn't make a go of it. Tribal animosities were so great that they split up. By the time I had been at my post a few days, literally, there was no longer any possibility of being accredited to a federation. I could either stay in Dakar, which was the capital of Senegal or go to Bamako, which was the capital of Mali.

Q: There wasn't much choice was there? [laughter]

VILLARD: That's right, I stayed in Senegal. I tried to be accredited, as my British colleague did also try, to be accredited to both and to make visits to Mali, basing in Senegal, but the Mali government would have none of that. They would have nobody connected to Senegal make a trip to their territory. So I remained in Senegal.

Q: How did the appointment itself come about?

VILLARD: The appointment came about through Loy Henderson, who at that time was Under Secretary for Administration. He called me up one day in Geneva and pointed out the fact that I had consistently declined several appointments as ambassador and it was high time I accepted an appointment as such. He said, "I think that it would be well for you to take the appointment to the Mali Federation. It is the best post among the new African countries in which the Department is setting up embassies." These were the former French African colonies which had been made independent by General de Gaulle. Henderson was engaged personally on a trip through Africa setting up the sites for new embassies everywhere. So I accepted this new post.

Q: This was in fact the second new nation that you were envoy to.

VILLARD: Yes indeed.

Q: What was the situation as far as our interests in Africa and specifically in Senegal and Mauritania at that time?

VILLARD: There were very few American interests as such except that Dakar had been, during the war, one of our listening posts and its strategic value was very great. Trade between the United States and Senegal was minimal, but the relations were chiefly, in my case, on a personal level with the president, Leopold Senghor. He was a celebrated African poet in his own right. Educated in France, a teacher of French--he spoke better French than the French--under whom it was an inspiration to carry on. Our discussions were mainly of a general character. It was mostly connected with the status of the Negro in America and our domestic policies.

Q: How was your staff?

VILLARD: The staff at Dakar was consistently a good staff. Previous to it becoming an embassy it was a consulate general and as a fairly large office it had a thoroughly qualified staff.

Q: So upgrading to an embassy was not as difficult as setting up a brand-new embassy where there had been no representation at all?

VILLARD: The transition was easy, on the other hand, being also accredited to Mauritania, I made a trip to Nouakchott, the capital, also recently independent, and it was very primitive indeed. There was no embassy of any kind. I was taken out to a tract of land on the edge of the capital and shown the site of the future American embassy. The horizon was limitless.

Q: Did you supervise the building of an embassy and assign people there?

VILLARD: No, this was to come later. Relations were established with the Prime Minister and head of government at that time, a very able, French-trained, official with a French wife to whom I presented my credentials. It was too early to construct an embassy and establish a staff in place. Our relations were conducted at long distance from Dakar.

PHILLIP M. KAISER
Ambassador
Dakar (1961-1964)

Phillip M. Kaiser was born in New York City in 1913. He received his bachelor's degree in 1935 and then went on to study as a Rhodes Scholar at Balliol College at Oxford University. In Washington D.C. he served many positions in the State department and also served as the Special Assistant to the Governor of New York, Averill Harriman. He has had ambassadorships to Senegal and Mauritania, Hungary, and Austria, as well as different positions in London. Ambassador Kaiser was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in May 2005.

Q: Let's talk about Mauritania, particularly the relationship to Morocco since you were going there. What was going on?

KAISER: Entirely different. Mauritania is a country in terms of area bigger than Texas with a total population of about a million people. Not recognized by Morocco. Very interesting. When I saw the president before going out - Kennedy used to see his ambassadors - he said, he talked in shorthand, "You got a problem in Mongolia." I was embarrassed. I said, "Mr. President, I'm going to Mauritania." He said, "I know where you're going. You're going to Mauritania, but Mauritania is involved in a crisis now that relates to Mongolia," and he was right. The crisis was getting Mauritania a membership in the United Nations. Morocco was blocking it. The issue became resolvable on a deal under which we would agree, I think this is right, to admitting Outer Mongolia. If you would be willing to admit Mauritania. The African countries all told at that time were very actively supporting Mauritania and they wanted us to agree not to veto Outer

Mongolia.

Q: Because it was a Soviet satellite.

KAISER: The Chinese - we didn't recognize Beijing at that time, we recognized Chiang Kai-shek China - were against accepting Outer Mongolia and we had to vote against China being recognized. China was a permanent member of the Security Council. Wasn't that right?

Q: Yes.

KAISER: So, it took a lot of pressure to get that configuration. Kennedy was all in favor of working this thing out. The 12 Francophone African countries threatened to do something, I can't remember, counter to our interests unless we got Mauritania in there. Mauritania had been centuries ago, before the imperial period, a part of Morocco. The president was also a French product. He was a French lawyer married to a French girl. He was a nice guy. His name was Mokhtar Ould Daddah. He had problems. He had a black population on the border of Senegal. The most educated sector of his population, although a minority, the official language of the country was French. The spoken language of the majority was Arabic. So there was real tension. The majority of the people wanted to change the official language because most of the jobs worthwhile were government jobs and they didn't know French. There was tension that exploded several years after I left.

I visited Mauritania. I had a French friend who was running the biggest project in Mauritania. It was a company exploiting the development and production of iron ore. They discovered in the middle of the Sahara Desert a mountain of high-class iron ore. In order to develop it, they got the biggest loan from the World Bank ever given to an African country. This friend of mine, Jean Audibert, ran an international company, American, but mostly European to develop and exploit, to produce, to bring iron ore to the market. In order to do so he had to build the 300 kilometer railroad from the mountain of iron ore to the port. Big, major project. I would go to visit Nouakchott every six months, get up at 5:00 in the morning and take the goddamn airplane. He was a family friend who would stay with us in Dakar. He used to fly from Paris to Dakar and then drive up to Mauritania, Nouakchott. He said, "You've got to go see this project. You're ambassador." So I did. He picked me up in Nouakchott and flew me to the desert. We landed in the desert and were picked up by his car and driven to where they were laying the railroad tracks.

The temperature was 127 degrees Fahrenheit. I watched for about 45 minutes. Audibert was a lovely guy, a marvelous guy. My son is writing about him right now. He said, "Philippe, you've been a good boy and now we've got 35 more kilometers and there's a wonderful lunch waiting for you." Well I had to head back and I drove 40 kilometers to where the plane landed and no road, just over the African terrain. I said to myself, "You're finished if you go 35 and back 75 you've had it." I noticed a cluster of metal huts about a mile away. I said, "What's that over there?" He said, "Oh, that's where the French technical engineers and so on live." I said, "Can't we have lunch there?" He said, "Yes, but they're not expecting us." I said, "Americans are very informal." So, we drove there. And the first thing I noticed, in the middle of the Sahara, was air conditioning. We walk into this sort of like a diner, completely *climatiseé*, air-conditioned. Stu, it was a half an hour and there was a bar there, and in a half an hour we had a first class French

meal. Soup, entrecôte, all the cheeses, I remember, fruit, wine, Evian. So I said, “Jean, what the hell were we going to eat?” “Oh,” he said, “you missed caviar, you missed lobster.”

An interesting thing was the way Mokhtar and Senghor used to talk to me about each other.

Q: Were you supposed to carry messages back and forth?

KAISER: They just sort of complained about each other. It is called the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and it's the only Islamic country that - except for Egypt and Jordan, they recognize Israel, too -

Q: Well, now, did you find yourself, let me put it diplomatically, in a pissing contest with our ambassador in Rabat? Because our ambassador in Rabat tends to be the captive of the king there. There is a tension there.

KAISER: I don't know. I didn't have much to do with it.

Q: Today is the 5th of August, 2005. We're going to talk about Mauritania.

KAISER: Mauritania is a big chunk of land bigger than Texas in square miles. A large part of it is desert. The least of the West African countries borders on its north of Senegal divided by the Senegalese River and interestingly enough the country, the blacks in that area divided between Senegal and Mauritania. The blacks in Mauritania were intellectually the dominant group. Mauritania is a country of the Moors, who were Arab, but kind of special Arab. This was a source of great tension, the fact that French was the official language of the government and the Moors all spoke Arabic. Because the blacks in that region were relatively well educated, they held the majority of the positions in the civil service in the government which is the major source of employment and the cause of great resentment on the part of the dominant sector of the population. In fact, later on, I talked to the president about the problem, the tension between the two groups on some occasions, but he was overly relaxed about it and later on after I left, several years after, there were great riots. There were a lot of casualties. Arabic became the official language of the country.

I want to tell you about the time that I got a visit for the prime minister, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, to the president, to Kennedy. Of course he was thrilled. I came to Washington before he did, and prior to his visit Kennedy had me in his living quarters in the White House to brief him. There wasn't too much to tell him. He said, “No problems between us?” I said, “Yes, there's one problem. Pan American has just put on a new flight. They had one in West Africa and now they had a new one from New York to Lisbon to Morocco, and from Morocco to Guinea. The most direct way to Guinea was across the great landmass of Mauritania, the most efficient way. However, Morocco did not recognize at that time the existence of Mauritania. Also they landed at Portugal, which was still undemocratic. It was a dictatorship. So Mokhtar Ould Daddah, to show what a tough guy he was, what a defender he was of the democratic cause, but mainly because of his anger toward Morocco, denied Pan Am the use of the air space. They had to go all the way around, it cost tens of thousands of dollars extra in order to make that round trip without using Mauritania.

I could see the president (laughs) was a little reluctant to raise this issue with him. I said to him - this is a self-serving story - I said to him, "Mr. President, I know the way to handle this. Don't raise it. Don't raise it during his formal visit. On the way back to New York, when I take him back on the plane and we have to pick up the flight back to Africa, he will I'm sure tell me how much he enjoyed meeting with you. I will say to him 'Yes, because you were his visitor he treated you in the best Arab tradition. He did not raise an issue of contention between our two countries.' He'll say, 'What's that?'"

- my man in Nouakchott to go see the foreign minister the next morning. And, the impact of Kennedy was such that before Eagleton in Nouakchott called up the foreign minister, the foreign minister called him and told him to come in and say we're lifting the ban.

Now, go back to the meeting itself. We were given one hour for the meeting and quickly rapport was established. I remember what impressed the president, that he had balanced his budget without any special aid for that purpose. Well, they got to talking for two hours, Kennedy and the African president, on all kinds of issues, advice, and discussion. He just charmed the pants off this character. That's why what I just described worked so well.

I'm going to backtrack a little bit on myself. The phrase I used for the president during the briefing was, "Give him the Arab treatment." He said, "What's the Arab treatment?" You never bring up any subject that's embarrassing to the guest. He said, "Ambassador, that's a great idea."

Waiting outside of the president's office was. Kenny O'Donnell, the Boston Irishman; he was a leading political advisor, really a hard-nosed political guy. When I came out with him, I got a dirty look. He had a delegation from Illinois waiting to see the president, purely political meeting. As I walked out all he could say was, with real bite in his voice, "How many votes are there in Mauritania?" I had a good relationship with him in any case, but that sealed the relationship. After I left he was removed in a military coup. Ironically enough a coup was taking place in Mauritania just this past week.

DAVID A. KORN
Chargé d'Affaires
Nouakchott (1964-1965)

David A. Korn was born in Texas on September 1, 1930. He grew up in Missouri and attended the University of Missouri. He was in the Army overseas from 1951 to 1953. He graduated from SAIS and worked for the ICA and joined the Foreign Service in 1957. Mr. Korn served in Paris, Beirut, Nouakchott, Tel Aviv, Calcutta, Addis Ababa, and Lome. He also served at the State Department in the Near East Bureau in three different capacities and on Policy Planning staff. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on December 11, 1990.

Q: *You went from there to where? To Mauritania?*

KORN: I went to Mauritania in 1964, but was there little less than a year. I got sick there and returned to Washington.

Q: How long had Mauritania been independent at that time?

KORN: Theoretically it had been independent since 1961. However, the government had only moved to Nouakchott in 1963.

Q: Was the embassy still on a trailer...?

KORN: It was a little quiet town with so-called French technicians around. The Mauritians were mostly bedouin Arabs. They had built what they called villas for Ministers' housing, but most of them camped out in the backyard. The climate was much more comfortable sleeping in a tent. It was a cozy, comfortable little place. There was nothing really going on at the time. This was before the Western Sahara situation; it was still in Spanish hands.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were just there to show that the Americans were there?

KORN: Well, this was an embassy that was obviously set up because we had an embassy everywhere. For me it was an experience because I was all of a sudden Chargé d'Affaires for a long period. When I arrived the first ambassador had been named. I arrived in the Fall, this was mid-October, in 1964, and was Chargé until the end of April. So even in a small place being Chargé gave one a certain feeling of importance.

Q: Did we have anything to say to them? Were we deferring to the French or were we acting as a form of tutor in a way...?

KORN: The Mauritians were looking to the United States for aid. The government was very friendly towards the West. Moktar Ould Daddah was the president and was a great friend of the French. We were not playing any independent role there. We were simply having a presence there. If anything, we were helping the French shore up a pro-Western position.

Q: You fell ill and left, is that right?

KORN: I went back on home leave and then stayed in Washington. That is when I worked for Kurt Moore on the Arabian Peninsula Desk.

DAVID HAMILTON SHINN
Deputy Chief of Mission
Mauritania (1974-1976)

David Hamilton Shinn was born in Washington in 1940. He received three degrees from George Washington University. During his career he had positions in Kenya, Washington D.C., Tanzania, Mauritania, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, and

ambassadorships to Burkina Faso and Ethiopia. Ambassador Shinn was interviewed in July 2002 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: You left Tanzania in 1974 and were assigned to Mauritania.

SHINN: Yes, to Nouakchott. It was considerably different than Tanzania. It was a difficult assignment; the living conditions were much harsher. We lived on a compound. Nouakchott is on the edge of the Sahara desert. It does border the Atlantic Ocean, but is not that usable because of the severe weather conditions that exist for much of the year. There are sand storms, dangerous undertows or sharks lurking offshore. Entering the water required considerable vigilance.

This was another two year assignment. I was anxious to have this first opportunity to serve as a deputy chief of mission. I saw that as an important career progression. In retrospect, this was probably our most difficult tour.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

SHINN: Holsey Handyside.

Q: He and I entered the Foreign Service at the same time. I remember he left the Senior Seminar early to take the Mauritania job. He was a very hard charger and serious man. Tell us how you saw him.

SHINN: He was a character - intense and intelligent. Whenever we think of Holsey, we envisage him pacing the compound, which he did regularly. He was single. He was focused and always looking for the best possible results. He suffered fools badly. He did a good job in Mauritania. I have a lot of respect for Holsey, but he was not the easiest boss to work for. Compound living did not allow much distance between people but we got along fine.

My biggest career scare came when our youngest son set a fire in our backyard garden and nearly burned down the compound. Holsey was not amused.

I learned a lot from Handyside and found the assignment to be a good career experience. Nouakchott was a good mission to learn about being a DCM. Furthermore, it happened to be an interesting time to be in Mauritania. In the mid-1970s, there were important political developments that were of interest to Washington.

The main issue was the Polisario, which was beginning to loom in importance. Supported by Algeria, it consisted of Saharawi, some of whom lived in the western part of the desert that constituted a former Spanish colony known as the Western Sahara. In order to escape Moroccan rule, the Saharawi migrated to Algeria, which then became their main sponsor. The Polisario, a liberation organization, wanted an independent Western Sahara to be called the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.

During my time in Mauritania, Morocco and Mauritania divided the Western Sahara between them. The Moroccans took two-thirds of the country and Mauritania took the remaining southern

third, leaving the Polisario empty-handed. The Polisario did not accept this arrangement and began its insurgency. The Mauritians were a lot easier to attack than the Moroccans. The Polisario periodically crossed into Mauritania and lobbed mortar rounds into Nouakchott. Unfortunately, the embassy compound bordered the presidential compound. The Polisario's aim was not very good and their mortar shells found their way into our compound. That was not welcomed by our staff and families. Fortunately, the buildings on the compound were surrounded by sand; the shells tended to bury themselves in the sand. As a result, we did not suffer any significant damage, although it had an impact on morale.

I remember one occasion when the mortars were hitting the compound. After exploding, fragments hit our bedroom windows. They didn't have enough force to shatter the glass; it was more like throwing pebbles at the windows. We didn't know how serious the attack was. I can remember trying to stuff our kids under a bed which did not have enough height to accommodate them. Sometimes, under pressure, you do stupid things. Ultimately, we took them into a hallway that was protected by double walls. The shelling did not last very long, perhaps an hour. Then the rebels got into their Land Cruisers and retreated back across the Sahara Desert. It was an exciting period.

Q: How was the government at the time and how did you deal with it?

SHINN: The prime minister was Mokhtar Ould Daddah with whom we had a reasonably good relationship. The government was still somewhat wedded to African socialism; economically and ideologically we didn't always see eye to eye. But I don't recall any particular issues or incidents that disturbed our relationship. Mauritania had a large iron ore mining project in the northern part of the country. It was run by the French. The Mauritians wanted to keep the project functioning because it was a large foreign exchange earner. Polisario attacks periodically shut down the operation.

Q: Did we have any interests in Mauritania?

SHINN: Not really. It was very much part of the French "sphere of influence." We had minimal business interests there. Boeing tried to sell some of their planes; we spent a lot of time working on that, although I don't think we succeeded. We did have a couple of CODELs. Charles Diggs visited the country. But in general, our interests in Mauritania were limited.

Q: Mauritania was part of the AF bureau. Did it fit there or might have come under the jurisdiction of NEA?

SHINN: In fact, it does not fit neatly in either. In AF, we always had a problem with issues that touched on both Mauritania and Morocco, which was part of NEA. It was no contest; NEA would always win any dispute between the two bureaus. So any Mauritania-Morocco disputes were resolved with the U.S. supporting Morocco. Fortunately, we didn't have any serious problems between the two countries during my tour in Mauritania. But we did feel that we were always an after-thought as far as Washington was concerned. Morocco was the preferred client.

Q: It has been said that some of our ambassadors in Rabat developed a strong case of

“clientitis” for his majesty. Did you have that feeling?

SHINN: I don't really recall that it was a significant issue during my tour. I don't recall who our ambassador to Morocco was at the time.

Q: Were there any problems between Mauritania and Senegal or Mali?

SHINN: There were serious issues between Mauritania and Senegal because the ethnic group living in southern Mauritania is related to the ethnic group living in northern Senegal. This ethnic group has nothing in common with the Moors in Mauritania. The Senegal-Mauritania border was arbitrary. There were always issues concerning the southern Mauritians, e.g. whether they had adequate representation in government and equal access to state economic resources. I think the general conclusion was that they were not treated equally.

Q: Did the French play a major role in Mauritania in this period?

SHINN: They did. Their embassy was the most important one in the country. French business interests also dominated.

Q: Did you feel isolated in Mauritania?

SHINN: We did, both physically and intellectually. Mauritania does not loom large on the world stage. Physically, it was hard to get in and out of the country. Often we would have to go through Dakar in Senegal to leave the region. Nouakchott had an airport, but it was difficult to reach your destination directly. We didn't get many visitors. We used Dakar as a supply base. We visited the Canary Islands for a change of scenery.

Q: As DCM, you had responsibility for the management of the embassy. Did you have problems with the staff because of the isolation and location?

SHINN: We did. Since this was my first DCM assignment, it was a learning experience. I made my share of mistakes, particularly in the management area, but the difficult nature of the post made it inevitable that we would have some personnel problems. Nouakchott is a hard place. It was and, I suspect, still is a post which has morale problems. I am sure that there were periods when the morale was high, but I am also sure they were the exception rather than the rule. I don't think that morale was particularly high during my tour. We had to work hard to keep people happy; there was not much for them to do.

Q: I would guess it was difficult to get a single person, particularly a woman, to come to that post.

SHINN: Very much so. As a result, we had only one secretary for the ambassador, the DCM and the political officer. She was the spouse of the administrative officer. We had a number of “tandem” assignments, both husband and wife working, either officially or unofficially.

HOLSEY G. HANDYSIDE
Ambassador
Mauritania (1975-1977)

Ambassador Holsey G. Handyside was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1927. He attended Amherst College in Massachusetts, majoring in French and political science. Handyside received his B.A. in 1950, and went on to the University of Grenoble on a Fulbright Fellowship. He then attended the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University for two years, and received his M.P.A. in 1953. Ambassador Handyside entered the Foreign Service in 1955. He served in Beirut, Baghdad, Tripoli and Mauritania. He was interviewed by C. Stuart Kennedy on April 19, 1993.

Q: Well, your next assignment was for not quite a year, you went to the Senior Seminar. We both went to that together in 1975. Then you were appointed as Ambassador to Mauritania. How did that come about? You served there from 1975-77.

HANDYSIDE: I don't know how that came about. All I know is that at one point I got a telephone call from the Director General, Ambassador Nathaniel Davis. He said that my name had been put forward and had been accepted and then asked if I accepted the nomination. I subsequently ran into Dean Brown who in the course of the conversation said, "You know what is going to happen to you don't you?"

Q: Who is Dean Brown?

HANDYSIDE: Dean Brown was then the Under Secretary for Management. I rightly interpreted that what he had in mind was not that I was going to be run over by a truck or something like that, but that in effect I was to go on to Mauritania as my next assignment. Not that I ever had any question about the fact that Nat Davis gave me the correct information, but I certainly got it a couple of days later in a quite informal way from Dean Brown. In any event, how it happened I have no idea.

Ambassador Davis' announcement launched me on a whole series of involvements that I had never anticipated before. Beginning with and most significantly, the whole business of meticulously working out the paperwork that was required by the process, specifically the kinds of detailed presentations of one's background and financial interests, etc., that were required by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. These detailed procedures had been put in place by Senator Fulbright, the Chairman of the Committee, who was trying very rigorously to weed out the excessive utilization of worthy large contributors to political parties as candidates for US ambassadorships. The Committee had, for example, instituted just two years earlier very rigorous requirements about full disclosure of political contributions. All the career officers had to do this, even though it was quite clear to the members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its staff that the typical Foreign Service officer didn't have enough pennies in his back pocket to contribute to any political activity, whatever the connections. But the only way they could get at the problem of major contributors to one of the primary parties was by subjecting all

ambassadorial nominees to the same process.

I can recall quite vividly the afternoon that several of us appeared before the Foreign Relations Committee. I especially remember the questions I got about Mauritania first and foremost from the chairman, who was on his last legs, as it turned out, as the chairman of the committee. He dutifully read the questions which had been prepared by the members of the staff to be put to me and the others. There was another member of the committee who fancied himself as a world traveler and apparently kept score of the number of countries he had visited.

Q: It sounds like Ellender.

HANDYSIDE: It was Ellender.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia one time and he said he had never been in Romania and we went through God knows what to get him into Romania for an hour or two just so he could say he had been there.

HANDYSIDE: Senator Ellender said to me, "I can't remember whether or not I have ever been in the country to which you are about to be assigned, see if you can help me resurrect my recollection." He described where he had traveled in Africa. I decided that discretion being the better part of valor, I would interpret the facts he provided as suggesting that while he had perhaps never actually been on the ground in Mauritania, he had indeed overflowed Mauritania. He just beamed. He thought that was just great. I had no particular problems while before the Committee, but I must say I certainly hadn't expected that kind of a question.

In any event, the Committee hearing, which was one of the early things in this process of nomination, was quickly followed by Senate confirmation and finally by the swearing-in ceremony on the Eighth Floor and all of the various people who had been involved in one way or another in my development as a professional Foreign Service officer as guests. Interspersed throughout the process were the detailed mechanics of mastering the substance involved and of getting to the post.

I still have very clear recollections of conferring with some parts of the Department, for example Security. I had a car that I was terribly fond of and wanted to take it to post. So I asked SY, "Am I permitted to take my personal automobile to post?" I was a little taken back when the response from the appropriate security officials was an absolute and thunderous "no". When I said, "I don't understand. I have always had a car wherever I have been", they said, "Mr. Ambassador, we will give you the car we want you to ride in and we will not permit you to be a passenger in any other car." This was my introduction to the kinds of security precautions that were made for senior US officials living and working abroad. In all of my years in the Foreign Service, in spite of all the bullets I had dodged and the numbers of times that I had to crawl around on the floor of my living room because the dissidents were shooting into my windows, it had never occurred to me that at some stage in the game I was going to have to ride in an automobile that had the kind of built in protection that would fend off not only stray and intentionally aimed bullets, but would protect the occupants of the car against land mines.

Sure enough when I arrived at Mauritania there was a new official car that, while not a fully armored vehicle, was armored from the floor boards up to the window sills, so that if we drove over something and it exploded, the occupants of the automobile would have a reasonable chance of surviving.

One of the other things I very quickly learned after I arrived in Nouakchott and checked into the Residence, was that I was expected to sleep behind a steel door. When I objected mildly to this, the DCM said that given some of the people I hadn't met yet, but would during the course of the next few months, I would discover that there were some people resident in the community who were not very friendly to the United States and who certainly did not make a profession of wishing the American Ambassador well. He ended with "we think not only in terms of your official responsibilities but in terms of your survival, you will want to sleep behind a steel door".

That was my first introduction to a way of life which has unfortunately now come to characterize the existence of most Foreign Service people living abroad. And as I look back, Stu, at the kind of life the Foreign Service presented to us when we were freshman in this organization, where we were still bright eyed and bushy tailed and enthusiastic about traveling abroad to see new things and to visit with new people and get involved in winning friends and developing influence for the United States, we were living in an environment which prompted a degree of naivete that is almost painful to recollect now. Certainly the Foreign Service I encountered on my last posting to Mauritania was a far cry from the Foreign Service I joined in 1955 with such enthusiasm and such anticipation.

Q: When you went out there did you have any concept of what were American interests, if any, or what you were going to accomplish?

HANDYSIDE: Early in the nomination-confirmation process I learned that as far as the United States was concerned, Mauritania was important for a number of reasons. It certainly wasn't a major player in any of the various international groupings it was a member of. But it provided a view into the Arab caucus, (because Mauritania prides itself on being an Arab country and insists that it is Arabophone, not Francophone), the African group, and the "Third World" generally. So even though Mauritania was usually the most junior of junior partners in the Arab League and they rarely played a leading role in the discussions within the pan-Arab organizations, nevertheless from the point of view of the United States government, it was very interesting and sometimes very useful to get the impressions of a particular Arab League meeting or more generally of inter-Arab discussions from the Mauritanian government. As part of the US government's continuing efforts to figure out what the Arabs were thinking and why they were thinking it, Mauritania provided a useful, sometimes very profitable, window into the Arab diplomatic mind.

Similarly, Mauritania viewed itself as an African power and was not only a founding member but a very active participant in the Organization of Africa Unity. Consequently, to the extent the US government needed from time to time a similar or a parallel window into the deliberations of the African states south of the Sahara, by discussing these problems with our Mauritanian counterparts, we frequently could get insights that were not necessarily available or at least were confirmatory to things that other representatives of the United States government had picked up

in other embassies throughout the southern two thirds of the continent of Africa....Mauritania was a very active participant in various parts of the UN system. Because it was a member of various of the groupings within the world of parliamentary diplomacy, Mauritania was also useful as a kind of vantage point on developments taking place behind the closed doors of the African caucus, the Arab caucus or the Third World Caucus, or the Bandung Conference caucus, or whatever it was. So our interest was an intelligence/information gathering one.

In addition, 1975 was about the third year into the terrible drought in the Sahel. Since the US had an interest in responding in a humanitarian fashion to the terrible impacts of the fifth and sixth years of no rain in that part of Africa, and more specifically, since we had a bilateral aid effort in Mauritania, Embassy Nouakchott had frequent interactions with the Mauritians on drought relief.

Q: What was the political situation in Mauritania when you were there?

HANDYSIDE: Mauritania was a typical newly independent nation and government that reflected all of the characteristics of a whole generation of African independent states which had either earned or wrested their independence from the usually European colonial powers in the period immediately following the Second World War. Mauritania had originally been a part of what was called French Equatorial Africa along with Mali, Niger, and Senegal. While a quite different piece of the French colonial puzzle, it was nevertheless part of the French colonial empire, just as Morocco and Algeria a little further to the north had been at a somewhat earlier period. The man who was then President of Mauritania had been the primary independence leader, Moktar Ould Daddah. He had been the firebrand who pushed the French government into relinquishing its direct control of this piece of desert real estate, and was valiantly attempting to make the transition which a whole host of other African leaders like Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah and all the others who had begun as independence movement leaders, were struggling post-independence to become governmental leaders and international statesmen.

Moktar Ould Daddah was a French educated Arab/African whose intellectual analytical capabilities were very similar to those of his French counterparts. He was much more of that Cartesian cast of mind than the more pragmatic, practical minded Anglo-Saxons, whether they were in Great Britain or in the United States, or in the African countries which had formerly been British colonies.

It was a fascinating experience from a professional point of view. It was not a terribly comfortable experience because Nouakchott was then and still is a very primitive city built on the edge of the desert. In the summer time the ambient temperature just a few miles inland from the capital city is 140 degrees, F. Even with the moderating influence of the Atlantic ocean, the summer-time temperature in Nouakchott is frequently 110 to 120 degrees. Moreover, even on what seems to be the clearest and crispest day, there is an enormous amount of dust suspended in the atmosphere. So one of the chores the household staff had to do each sundown was sweep up all the dust that had accumulated on the various porches and patios. If any of the outdoor spaces were going to be used for entertaining that evening, we simply couldn't have guests sit on those dusty chairs. This surprised me greatly; I had been fooled into believing that because the air looked so clean and crisp that there wasn't any dust suspended in it. The day's accumulation of

dust on the flagstones or the patios, while obviously considerably less than the accumulation during a real dust storm, was still nevertheless a significant thing to be reckoned with.

One of the other major problems we faced was that we were really at the end of the supply line. The Embassy in Mauritania was frequently referred to, both in the Department and by our colleagues in Dakar, Senegal, as “Fort Apache”. We were really on the edge of civilization and at the end of the supply line. Over time, I learned that we could cope [with] reasonably well with the supply line realities by planning further ahead and ordering things sooner. We had to anticipate our needs, both official and personal, and get the orders in; otherwise we had a gap in supplies.

The other reality of existence in Mauritania was the almost total lack of medical support. The Embassy had an Embassy nurse. We were very fortunate, we were able, at least all the time I was there, to find among the longer term American residents or within the mission family, an Embassy wife or a missionary wife or a business wife who was a registered nurse. And we were close enough to the home base of the regional medical officer, who was stationed in Dakar, to benefit from one or two-day visits. He scheduled more frequent trips to Mauritania because he recognized that literally there were no health care personnel to be trusted in Nouakchott, unlike other parts of West Africa where there were some reasonably well-educated medical personnel to take care of the embassy staff.

The only medical care that existed in Mauritania was provided by a team of French military physicians. I don't know how the French army went about recruiting these doctors, but they obviously didn't know very much medicine. Moreover, whatever little knowledge they did have was seriously undermined by the totally inadequate standards of cleanliness and antisepsis in the building that passed as the government hospital. In Nouakchott, an ill person would be better off not going to the hospital than exposing him or herself to that kind of sewer.

As a result, our standing operating procedure for [that] anyone who got the slightest bit sick: if we couldn't consult with either the regional medical officer or occasionally the Peace Corps doctor, who was stationed in Dakar, by telephone and find out what to do, we simply flew the patient out. If they were mildly ill we would fly them to Dakar; if they were seriously ill, we would get them on an airplane and send them off to one of the Defense Department hospitals in Western Europe.

Q: How did you find your American staff while you were there?

HANDYSIDE: The American staff in terms of Foreign Service quality was really quite good, far better on the substantive side than on the management side. I had an absolutely superb DCM when I arrived. He was and still is a first rate officer who has since gone on and has had by now at least two missions of his own.

Q: Who is that?

HANDYSIDE: David Shinn. He was a terribly knowledgeable and competent guy who had enormous amounts of background in African affairs and who had been in Mauritania about eight

or nine months by the time I arrived. He was already well-connected within the community. There was an absolutely first rate junior political officer who was there for the first six months I was at post. He has now moved up to the senior ranks of the Foreign Service. Finally, there was a highly competent husband and wife team: administrative officer- American secretary. The Embassy at that point consisted of five Foreign Service Americans in the Embassy and the beginnings of an AID presence of two. The AID presence was strictly for the organization and delivery of humanitarian assistance to ease the drought. During the time I was in Nouakchott, almost three years, we went from five Americans in the Embassy and two AID people, up to an American diplomatic mission of about 40 plus a group of about 10 Peace Corps volunteers, plus another, perhaps, 50 Foreign Service Local employees. So we went from a sleepy little post of five Americans and maybe 15 local employees, which it was for several years before my arrival, up to a group of about 40-45 American employees and an equal number of locals.

We gradually built a major AID mission because we phased out of purely humanitarian drought assistance into a full-blown economic development program. The AID mission grew from a food stuffs delivery staff into a group of highly sophisticated, economic development planning people. There were some very able development people who worked closely with their counterparts in the Ministry of Planning and in the technical ministries. There was also a Peace Corp contingent. It was a Peace Corps presence that posed some very serious problems at the outset, but we finally managed with the help of some people back in Washington to get it sorted out.

Q: What were the problems?

HANDYSIDE: The problem was twofold. First, the Mauritians didn't quite understand what the Peace Corps and its people were all about. Second, there was an almost total lack of support in terms of bureaucratic infrastructure and pipeline support to the Peace Corps contingent on site in Fort Apache. On one of my consultation trips to Washington, I went around to the Assistant Director of the Peace Corps for African Affairs and said in effect, "Your operation in my country has now gotten to the point where it is an embarrassment to the United States and the United States government. I insist that you either fix it or pull it out. I simply cannot any longer put up with this gaggle of incompetence. It has come to the point where the Peace Corps is undermining some of the other things the Mission is trying to accomplish."

Q: The incompetence was where?

HANDYSIDE: In Washington mostly. The result of my very quiet, very candid, and very firm intervention with this senior Peace Corps person, who admitted that he knew there were problems but had no idea they were of that variety and that serious, was a commitment to fix the program. And sure enough in a very short period of time, the person who had been the Peace Corps director, who was terribly nice and terribly well-meaning but generally incompetent, was transferred out and replaced by a very, very bright young guy who was a first rate officer and a real dynamo. He was a Foreign Service brat, bilingual in French and English who had been brought up in a political officer's family and who had lots of intercultural antenna all over. He was superbly qualified in terms of language and just had all kinds of things going for him. He was a young fellow about 25. He worked incredible hours and within a matter of three or four months, he had the Peace Corps program back into shape. He organized a whole new crop of

volunteers who began to filter in, and were installed in key places around the country where they could do something meaningful.

Q: What were they doing?

HANDYSIDE: Most of them were teaching English. A couple of them were teaching agricultural technology of one kind or another. Mostly it was an English teaching program. They had been well recruited, well prepared. They came to Mauritania with some vague knowledge of Arabic and a useful working knowledge of French. Consequently they were able to plug in right away to the various secondary schools and other places where they were supposed to be teaching English. The new Director, strongly supported by Peace Corps Washington, turned the program around. But I am firmly convinced that if I hadn't made a real issue of the unsatisfactory situation and had not done it in a way that forced people to confront the problem, we would have bumbled along, and never would have gotten the damn thing fixed.

I had a similar problem with my people from Langley. The Agency presence in Mauritania had been a very carefully constructed arrangement. It had taken months to negotiate the treaty between the State Department and the CIA. What the State Department had ultimately agreed to was a modest, almost minimal presence, created for one purpose and operating within some very tight parameters presence. If Agency staffers in the course of running around the city picked up ordinary bits of intelligence of interest to a typical Foreign Service officer, they were required by the terms of the treaty to turn that information over to the Deputy Chief of Mission. The DCM would either report the information himself as a political reporting officer, or would farm it out to one of the other economic or political officers. The information would be combined with other information that had been obtained by State Department people and sent into Washington as an Embassy report. Reciprocally, if any State personnel came across information related to the Agency's sole purpose, it would be turned over to the station and reported in Agency channels.

The first young man and his very attractive wife, who was his helper, who established the Agency presence in Mauritania, were absolutely first class. He was totally loyal to the mission and had absolute and complete respect for the terms of the treaty. He turned out to be one of the best young political officers I ever had the good fortune to supervise. He and his wife were extremely useful members of our little community.

In the fullness of time, however, he was rotated out and replaced by a guy who had delusions of grandeur. He had not been involved in the negotiation of the treaty with the State Department, and as he read it he obviously must have said to himself, "This is a lot of bunkum and I am not going to pay any attention to it." The upshot of it was that I kept having problems with him getting into things that he was not supposed to get into and operating the way he probably would have somewhere else where their mission consisted of the full spectrum of things they ordinarily do. Rather than make an issue of this by written communication, I took advantage of another trip back to Washington on consultation, and went out to Langley to see their equivalent of the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. I had organized this consultation through his principal deputy who was a fellow that I had known very well at one of my previous posts. I called my former colleague and said I had a problem and wanted to come out and talk to them about it. He set it up. We had a very candid discussion. I laid it right out, very calmly: "These are the kinds of

things that are going on. I am unwilling to permit this to continue. I have cautioned this guy about it; I have called his attention to the terms of the memorandum of understanding between our two groups. The thing that I am concerned about is that it is ultimately my responsibility to make the political judgment as to whether or not what we are doing is going to get the United States into trouble. Whether that trouble is going to be only local, or whether that trouble is going to be regional, or whether that trouble is going to be worldwide is one of the things that I have to judge. I have to balance what is the anticipated product of a particular course of action against the risks that are involved. I can't do this if I don't know what is going on. I can't do this if the guy goes and does something and then tells me afterward. We are at a crossroads now. I intentionally have not put any of this down on paper because I don't want any record of it. What I want is the three of us talking the problem out at this meeting and over lunch. If you guys will fix it, then I will never mention it again. But it has to be fixed because I just can't take the risk of our continuing down the path we are now on."

They heard me out. Then the senior of the two fellows said, "I don't know about my deputy here, but I had no idea that this was going on in your backyard. It should not be going on in your backyard, and I will fix it. If I am unsuccessful in fixing it the first time around, you will have a new member of your staff." "Perfect, that is exactly what I wanted to hear." I remained in Washington for a few more days. By the time I got back to post a couple of weeks had gone by. I never knew what headquarters had sent out by way of a communication, but I hadn't been talking to the Agency staffer for more than five minutes before I recognized that somebody had dropped a ton of bricks on him. I never had any more difficulty with him.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point and we will get together again.

HANDYSIDE: Okay.

Q: Today is May 28, 1993. Handy, let's continue with your time in Mauritania. How did you find the Mauritanian government? How did you deal with it?

HANDYSIDE: Of the various Third World governments I dealt with, the Mauritanian government certainly compared favorably. There were areas of very considerable competence. There were other areas of typical Third World lethargy and incompetence. But in general, it seemed to me given the kinds of problems it had and the environment in which it operated, the Mauritanian Government as I knew it, that is before the military takeover, was a reasonably effective organization in terms of meeting the needs of the country and its people. Mauritania is both the westernmost of the Arab countries and in a sense the southernmost of the western Arab countries. Or, put another way, the northernmost of the black African states. It was both a member of the Arab League and the Organization of African Unity. The senior people of the Mauritanian government, specifically the president, the speaker of the parliament and the minister of foreign affairs, frequently made mention of the fact that Mauritania participated actively in both these international groupings of like minded states. And this indeed was one of the reasons that Mauritania was of particular interest to the United States. It was a good listening post into both the Arab community and the black African community. In many respects, however, Mauritania was quite different from the other Arab governments. Perhaps this was in part a reflection of its one foot in the African camp. For example, mind you this was 1975, there

were typically two or three women cabinet ministers and other senior female officials in the Mauritanian government. Like their male counterparts they were enormously competent individuals. Their presence in the government reflected a widespread popularly held view. Indeed, the male Minister of Planning observed to me once that Mauritania had too few educated and experienced citizens to rule out the participation of one half the population in the management of the country.

Q: How long had Mauritania been independent?

HANDYSIDE: It became independent in the early 1960s; I was there roughly 15 years after independence.

Another one of the things that set Mauritania apart was its insistence that it was an Arabophone, that is an Arabic-speaking country. This insistence was curious for a couple of reasons. First, because Hasaniya Arabic is technically quite different from even Western Arabic and is mutually unintelligible to the speakers of Arabic in the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Second, French was the only written language a large portion of the population knew; most African dialects at this stage of the game have no writing system. As a result, most of the government's business, at least with people outside the borders of Mauritania, was done in French.

One of the other things that I think was interesting about the government was that the senior officials recognized, and it was one of two governments in all of Africa in the 1970s that did, that they had a divisive social problem created by the presence within their country of black Africans and Arabs. Recognizing that this was a potentially difficult, perhaps even a destructive force, the Mauritanian government, in a very self-conscious way, began to pursue almost immediately after independence a set of policies that was designed to knit the two communities together. There was a great deal on the radio, and finally when the government began to publish a newspaper, which happened during my time in Mauritania, there were repeated references to the "new Mauritanian man." What they were getting at here was trying consciously to integrate the Arab community and the black African community, and to build a single national population into a single nation state. The government pursued this objective in a variety of ways. The most obvious one was in the educational system. All the youngsters who were beginning school were instructed in their native language only in the first couple of years. Beginning in about the third grade, they were instructed in Arabic and in French. So as this initial group of youngsters began going through the school system, they were beginning to fill a pipeline with individuals who had two languages in common, and the pipeline was set to begin pouring out into the society. For the first time all the youngsters in Mauritania knew and could use both French and Arabic as a means of communication. This program not only gave the black Africans a modern Western language as part of their intellectual baggage and an economic tool, it also made it possible for them to deal more effectively with the other half of the population and with the government in terms via Arabic. Simultaneously, the program provided the Arabic-speaking youngsters a working knowledge of French which enabled them to communicate with their black fellow citizens as well as the world outside Mauritania. In sum, the government was embarked on a very real, conscious effort to build [these] the African and Arab communities together into an integrated whole.

Sudan was the only other country in Africa which faced the problem of fundamentally different populations on the same scale. We see now in 1993 that the separation of the two communities and the antagonism between the Moslem Arabs of the north and the Christian or animist blacks in the south of the Sudan is every bit as difficult now as it has ever been. The Sudanese government, unlike the Mauritanian government, never attempted to knit these two communities together. Unhappily, the end result 25 years later in Mauritania is not a great deal better. But this is largely because of the decisions and actions of the various military coup governments. The first ousted the civilian government led by President Daddah. The subsequent military coup governments quite consciously started off in the other direction. One after another, they very intentionally began once again to pit the two communities against each other. This new approach ended up two or three years ago with a series of authoritarian-induced riots in Mauritania which killed tens, if not hundreds of black Mauritians. These massacres were followed by riots in Dakar with the black Senegalese population attacking the very large Mauritanian expatriate community. I understand there were some 400 Mauritians killed in Senegal.

Q: The time you were there did you find easy access to the Mauritanian government?

HANDYSIDE: Oh, yes. There was no problem with access at all in spite of the policy differences. The Mauritians were very upset with our continuing support of Israel. They were equally and continually upset with American support of the last vestiges of the European colonial regimes in southern Africa. They were upset with our very friendly relationship with the South African government. Finally, they were upset by our actions in Vietnam. In a formal sense, certainly at the beginning when I arrived in 1975, it was a very prickly relationship. During the presentation of my credentials, the President lectured me on Vietnam, and then chastised me and chastised my government for our continued support of Israel and South Africa. He felt so strongly about these problems and he felt it was so important to impress upon the new American Ambassador the unhappiness of his government, that I had a real Dutch uncle kind of talking to for a period of 15 or 20 minutes. But as time went on, the Mauritians began to realize that we had been supplying a very substantial amount of food and other humanitarian assistance to help them sustain their drought-decimated population. More importantly, they came to understand that we had done this without asking for any kind of quid pro quo or asking for any political change of attitude. Slowly their attitude began to change. At first they changed on the basis of personal relationships. There were four Western ambassadors resident in Nouakchott at that point: the Americans, the West Germans, the Spanish, and the French. In all four instances, the ambassadors were people who were of some special competence, had some particular background in working with underdeveloped countries and typically Arab countries. They were also people who were personally very approachable and personable. Consequently, they were all able to build a warm working association with the host government. So there was a period of time when things began to get significantly better on a personal level. And subsequently even on a governmental level, the relationship became warmer and certainly more productive.

During the mid 1970's, the US government reacted with considerable annoyance to some of the official positions that were taken by the Permanent Representative of Mauritania to the United Nations. As a member of the Arab bloc and as a member of the revolutionary black African bloc, and as virtually a charter member of the Third World with a pronounced Bandung Conference mentality, the Mauritians frequently signed on to sponsorship of various initiatives in the

General Assembly or the Security Council and once in a while in one UN subcommittee or another, or in other fashions adopted positions that Washington found very offensive. Frequently, Nouakchott's policy proclivities were exacerbated by the tenuousness of its control over the senior representative in New York. Frequently, things were said and done by him and by his staff in New York that did not accurately reflect the much more nuanced policy direction of the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. All too often the actions and rhetoric of the Mauritanian mission were very heavy and very ham-handed and the Perm Rep behaved as a kind of rah, rah, cheerleader.

Q: I take it they probably almost became captive of militant anti-Western groups.

HANDYSIDE: Yes, almost. What made it worse was there was a succession of senior representatives in New York who took it upon themselves to engage in rhetoric that I think must have been embarrassing to some of the senior people in Nouakchott. There was one issue that the United States was particularly unhappy about. That was the support the Mauritians provided the Committee of 24 on the issue of Cuba. The Committee of 24 had the responsibility for producing the annual decolonization report. One of the topics that was always covered in this report was the unhappy relationship between the United States and Cuba, particularly after the famous Bay of Pigs operation.

Q: Okay.

HANDYSIDE: Some time in either the summer of 1975 or, more probably, early in the following summer as the preparatory work for the 1976 General Assembly got underway, the newly in-position Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Affairs, Mr. Sam Lewis, sent out instructions all over the world that the United States had decided that it was going to become much tougher on countries who talk one way in New York and talk another way in their own capital. Embassy Nouakchott was on the receiving end of a long instruction which particularly cited the Committee of 24 disagreement. Subsequently, there were some special addenda for Mauritania which came in the form of Official-Informal letters. The Official-Informals spelled out Washington's unhappiness with the Mauritanian who was in New York at that stage of the game. He had a particular tendency to get up on his hind legs and bay at the moon in ways that were really very distressing to many of my IO, AF, and NEA colleagues in Washington. I was instructed to go in and do something about it.

It was quite clear to me that I could go through a standard kind of presentation to the Foreign Office, that I could have an hour with some senior person in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as the Permanent Under Secretary, deliver my message, and that would be the end of it. If I really wanted to have any kind of a long range impact, I realized I would have to go about it in some way other than the traditional senior level demarche. And since there was no time limit, no specific deadline for an action report, and because I still had some eight weeks before the General Assembly was to begin, I decided I would structure the required demarche as a kind of professional seminar for a couple of senior people in the Foreign Office. I decided to approach the problem not as an American senior diplomat accosting senior Mauritanian officials as representatives of their government, but more in terms of a discussion amongst professional diplomats who were bureaucratic equals.

I made known to the Permanent Under Secretary and indirectly to the Minister of Foreign Affairs that I thought we ought to sit down and start talking a little bit about the upcoming General Assembly. I suggested that to the extent we could do so, it would be useful to lay groundwork that would minimize conflict later on. And they agreed. They thought this was a good idea.

This came roughly at the time I had been accepted personally by the senior people in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and they were beginning to have a slightly different attitude towards the United States. We were becoming somewhat more helpful than others in terms of the POLISARIO civil insurrection against the Mauritanian government in the context of the decolonization of the Spanish Sahara, and of a whole series of other issues that were important to the Mauritians. They had, I think, expected us to take a rigidly anti position on the Sahara and we did not do that. Thus, on an issue that they considered terribly important, they discovered that the United States was the only one of the large countries of the world that was at least willing to sit down and talk to them about the Rio de Oro, instead of immediately rushing to the assistance of Spain, the colonial power. So the scene had been set for a productive discussion.

I organized a series of perhaps six or eight two-hour sessions which for the most part turned out to be one-on-one. Once or twice there were a couple of other senior people involved, but most of the time it was in effect the Permanent Under Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and me. The gist of my pitch was simply, "Hey, fellows, you need to learn how to do a much more professional, much more effective, much more complete job of analyzing the content of the various options that are presented to your government. You need to have a better sense of what courses of action are going to produce what kind of results, to rack up those that are going to be beneficial to Mauritania, and to set them off against the ones that are obviously going to be detrimental to Mauritania." Then I was able to start using some of the examples taken from the UN context. I got on to the one about Cuba and said, "Look, here is one of the UN topics that poses a problem. Let's use it as an example. I urge you to go back, and in effect do your policy arithmetic much more carefully than you have done it in the past. Why? Because quite clearly if this year you become a sponsor of and become a vocal supporter of the attack on the United States over Cuba, there are a series of things that you are going to lose from the United States. There is just no question about it. Partly it is the new atmosphere in Washington, but just any rational analysis of what the attitude of the United States is going to be to this kind of kicking in the shins can be established in a fairly objective way."

"So, if you support the Cuba business, then on one side of your ledger you want to outline the adverse things that are unquestionably going to result from this in terms of the actions the United States and various other countries in the UN will take. And then rack up your list of positives on the other side of the ledger. What profits can you legitimately expect to get by sponsoring the Decolonization Committee report and the attack it usually contains on the United States over Cuba? What are you going to get? You ought to get something from the Cubans for supporting them in their fight with the United States. But I would suggest to you that what you are going to get from the Cubans is probably zero. Theoretically you ought to be getting some goodies from some of the other sponsors of the Committee and of the Report, some of the other prominent leaders in the Third World movement. I find it a little difficult to imagine what they might be, but you ought to sit down and rack all these things up. When you have done the analysis on the

plus side and the analysis on the minus side, then somebody should sit down and balance one against the other. At that point you then decide whether it makes sense to continue your pattern of sponsoring the Committee of 24 diatribe against the United States or not. I don't make any recommendation to you at this stage of the game. Maybe I will be required to six week from now after the General Assembly gets started, but now we are professionals talking together, discussing diplomatic technique."

These sessions went on roughly once a week for the interval, which was probably another five or six weeks. I was struck by the fact that the Under Secretary never canceled a single session. I derived from that the satisfaction of knowing that he was finding them at least interesting, if not valuable. The upshot of it was that the last one of these sessions probably went into the actual period of the General Assembly. And as we came up against some of these issues, such as the Committee of 24 report, which arose about four or five weeks after the last seminar, well into the General Assembly, when some of these issues were becoming important, I was called in by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hamdi al-Moukhnass. He started out by saying, "I won't take up a great deal of your time, Mr. Ambassador, but I did want to pass along to you one specific thing. The President just signed and we sent out last night the instructions to our mission in New York to govern their activities during the rest of the General Assembly and beyond. These instructions were reformulated on the basis of your long series of conversations with the Permanent Under Secretary. I just wanted to let you know, let your government know, that the instructions which by this time have arrived in New York, are very explicit. They say that neither the Permanent Representative nor anyone else in the delegation is to take a position which is gratuitously anti-American. There will probably be certain issues during the course of the General Assembly where the government will decide that it is in our interest to take a particular position which may upset Washington or may tromp on American toes a little bit. But at least we now have clearly established the principle that we are not going to make any gratuitous statements. We are not going to jump on a bandwagon just because there is the bandwagon wheeling by. This all comes as a result of your very welcome and careful discussion of this set of issues over the last five or six weeks."

I was quite pleased at the Minister's statement because I thought not only had we managed to produce a political result which was going to be significant in its own modest sort of way in terms of our relations...of US relations with Mauritania and modestly significant in terms of the United States' overall position in the UN in New York. But I also had the sense that I had managed to communicate to senior officials in the Mauritanian government the need for a much more systematic and analytical approach to problems in foreign policy decision-making which would stand them, and indirectly us, in good stead for at least the length of time that particular group of men now in charge in Nouakchott are running things in Mauritania.

Q: What was our position? Mauritania, just looking at the map, has a troubled border, butting on Algeria, and the whole mess up in Morocco and the Sahara. What was happening there in brief and also what was our position at that time and how did we deal with it?

HANDYSIDE: The borders, with one exception, that is the border with Morocco, were not any more or any less troublesome than other borders throughout the northern third of the African continent. That statement covers a large part of the terrain. These were borders that were drawn

on a map largely by the French; no one had ever really made a systematic effort to try to set the map onto the terrain. So while some of the borders have been appropriately demarcated by survey parties and physical border markers, most of them were just some place in a great stretch of desert.

The problem arose in the difficulties that were going on in the Spanish colony, the Spanish Sahara, where there were increasingly more active efforts on the part of the local residents to throw the Spanish out. The Spanish Sahara was one of, if not the last, certainly one of the last two or three colonial areas on the African continent. There was an active independence movement for which the acronym was POLISARIO. The POLISARIO grouping was made up of a variety of people, many of whom were indeed technically Mauritians because the population is a very nomadic one. The bedouin population circulates in fairly large circles throughout what was then Spanish Morocco, the Spanish Sahara, northern Mauritania and westernmost Mali. Traditionally over the centuries there were a couple of major nomadic routes. One was an ellipse that was focused on the Atlantic coast, with a north and south axis. The other one was an ellipse that was focused on roughly the boundary with Mali; it also was a north and south movement of populations on a north-south axis. This was an area where the mapmakers and chancellors of Western Europe simply didn't recognize or reflect any of the on-the-ground realities. They drew lines on maps that didn't correspond with any kind of social practice or ethnic background.

As the Polisario struggle against the Spanish overlords continued, it became increasingly, in my view, a question of their longer range objective. It gradually became clear, as we learned more about the group of young men who ran the POLISARIO, that their long range objective was a nation state based on the ethnic group that in Mauritania was called Moors. These were the people who were an amalgam of the Arab population streaming westward out of the Arabian peninsula and moving regularly and methodically westward across north Africa, and the Berber population that had been indigenous to the Atlas mountains in Morocco. When these two groups of people began to inter-marry, over the centuries they became what in the western part of the Arab world was called the Moors.

There were a whole series of young Moorish men who had been trained in Western Europe; one or two had been trained in the United States. They were determined that they were going to modernize their home territory. Moreover, they were determined they were going to start running things their own way. The objectives of these young Moors were both identical to and in certain respects, clashed with the national ethnic aspirations of the then-president of Mauritania. Moktar Ould Daddah regularly in his speeches prior to independence had referred to an entity called the "Greater Mauritania", and talked and wrote regularly about getting independence from the French and the Spanish in order to establish this Greater Mauritanian state.

Tracking back through the records and finding the speeches that he had made in the early 1950s made it quite clear that for Ould Daddah, the Greater Mauritania began at the Senegal River, which was the frontier with Senegal, and went northward to a place called the Wadi Drah, which is located some 70 or 80 miles north of the traditional southern boundary of Morocco. Similarly, Greater Mauritania extended as far east as bits and pieces of Algeria and bits and pieces of Mali. This eastward thrust was required to encompass the nomadic ellipses I mentioned earlier on, to ensure all the territory they covered would be included within the boundaries of Greater

Mauritania. Thus there was an intellectual basis for this territorial desire. All the Moors living in the Spanish colony were to be included, thus all the Spanish territory. Finally, the Wadi Draa boundary would bring in all the Moors who lived in Morocco and who were considered second class citizens by the Moroccans in the north of the country.

For the first several years, that is the latter half of the 1960s and the first couple of years of the 1970s, the Mauritanian government was outspokenly supportive of the POLISARIO fight against the Spanish and frequently provided refuge for the leadership in Mauritania. The government also provided, to the extent that it had any spare cash at all, financial support for the POLISARIO. Additionally, it provided political support for the POLISARIO with frequent diplomatic activities in the UN and other places. They were joined in this, in these early days, by the Moroccan government, largely in order to push the Spanish out. Although I suspect that even at that early stage of the game, the Moroccans were more interested in acquiring the Spanish territory in toto, as they subsequently made explicit. That is, they were interested in controlling the phosphate deposits that were located in the Spanish Sahara in order to enhance their own monopolistic position in the world phosphate market. At that early stage it was simpler to be ambiguous about their objectives and made it easier to work happily with not only the POLISARIO, but also with the Mauritians.

About 1975 or early 1976, it became clear that the independence effort was reaching a new stage. This was in part because the Spanish had finally become sufficiently unhappy with what was going on, that they had decided to cut and run. All of a sudden, it began to look as if there were real possibilities some time in the next few years of moving the Spanish out. As soon as the Spanish decision came to light, some of the divergent and conflicting objectives that had been hidden by the collection of ambiguity came out into the open.

At about this stage, I discovered that through my Spanish colleague, the Spanish Ambassador, and members of his staff, I had from time to time, a pipeline to some of the POLISARIO people. I recall one conversation with the Spanish Ambassador who had just finished a two or three-day session in Nouakchott with these young men a day or so earlier. One of the things he passed on to me following this session, was the description of the POLISARIO leadership as being absolutely determined that their objective was a nation-state based on their ethnic group. This was made explicit by a couple of these young fellows who told the Spanish Ambassador that they no longer shared the Mauritanian view that the southern boundary of the new Moorish state was to be the Senegal River. They explained they no longer shared the Mauritanian government's view because there was a strip along the northern bank of the Senegal River that was black. The POLISARIO leadership redefined the southern frontier for the Spanish Ambassador as the ethnic, linguistic border line in Southern Mauritania between the Moors and the black Africans. Their view was very, very clearly and very vigorously articulated. They told the Spanish Ambassador that one of two things would happen. Either they would draw the border along that ethnic boundary and then Senegal could take over the southernmost 20 miles of Mauritania. Or they would simply use military force and push the blacks across the river into Senegal. They didn't want them in their new Mauritania under any circumstances. They were going to solve this centuries-old community rivalry problem by simply exporting the blacks to the other(south) side of the river, or by redrawing the frontier.

Learning this fact was the thing that really crystallized my appreciation of this problem. It became very clear to me at that point that the objective was not just to throw out the Spanish and it was not necessarily just to have a nation-state so that they could have a foreign ministry and ambassadors around the world. It became clear to me that there really was some theoretical and philosophical fire underlying their objective of having their own ethnic-based nation-state.

Apparently the Moroccans must have come to about the same conclusion, because it was at that stage of the game that the Moroccan government began to be considerably more active in this situation. Rabat began pushing its real border farther and farther south into the old Spanish territory. Then the Moroccans and the Mauritians finally worked out the way in which they were going to divide up the Spanish territory. Realistically, neither government was going to support a separate state for the Moors. Further, the Moroccans were simply not going to allow Moors to have their own nation state in the whole of the old Spanish territory. And the extension of that nation state into southern Morocco was simply out of the question.

Originally when the negotiations began between the Mauritians and Moroccans, we believed the Spanish territory was going to be divided one-third Moroccan and two-thirds Mauritanian, with the boundary located at the extension of the area that jutted out into Mauritania. However, by the time they were finished, the power positions had altered. The split was still one-third, two-thirds, but the Mauritians were to get only the southern third. The Moroccans on the scene began pushing farther and farther south after the negotiations. So that by the time the Spanish pulled out, the old Spanish territory was in fact divided in that fashion.

Q: When did they pull out?

HANDYSIDE: It must have been about 1977.

Q: But, you were there?

HANDYSIDE: Yes, I was there. On a couple of occasions, I reported back to Washington my philosophical, analytical conclusion that what the young men of the POLISARIO were after was a nation state based on their own ethnic group. It became clear from various follow-on instructions and a number of Official-Informal letters that Washington thought this was a quaint idea, to which it didn't accord any real weight or meaning. Twenty years ago, nobody had any final judgment on this hypothesis. But I would submit that the very fact that this fight is still going on, the very fact that the POLISARIO problem still has not been resolved, although things are looking a little bit better now than three or five years ago; that my basic conclusion that there is not going to be a final resolution of this problem until there is in fact a nation-state based on this ethnic group is still true. Moreover, the problem is going to continue to plague the peoples who live in that area and all the rest of us who have anything to do with them from time to time, until it is resolved in some fashion that meets the aspirations of the Moors.

Q: Obviously we were basically bystanders in this. You must have been reading communications from our embassy in Rabat and they were reading yours. I don't recall who the ambassador was there, but particularly the political ambassadors tend to become captive of the king. He gobbles them up and they begin to report as though they were loyal Moroccan subjects. Did you find this

phenomenon happening when you were there?

HANDYSIDE: I was certainly conscious of this, although if you ask me if I can produce a particular example of this mentality I would have to say no. At one stage, perhaps in mid 1977, I secured the Department's permission to go to Rabat and then on to Algiers to consult with my two counterparts. I found my session in Rabat of special interest because Bill Crawford, who was the chief of the political section at the time and an old friend, was willing to be totally candid. What I heard in our private discussions was a detailed description of the various subterfuges Bill and the political section staff had to use to get uncomplimentary information out of the embassy and back to Washington. One of their time-honored devices, inherited from their predecessors, was a candid memorandum of conversation covered by a brief innocuous airgram. Bill or one of his political officers would have a long conversation with some political figure who was either critical of the King's policy or was in explicit, overt opposition to the King and his government. Back in the office, instead of doing a proper analytical reporting and analysis telegram or airgram which would put the information from this particular conversation into a matrix and then offer up the embassy's interpretation, they would prepare an Airgram/MemCon combination. They would follow this course because they knew they couldn't get a candid analytical piece out of the front office. Washington got the hard anti-government information in the MemCon and the analysis in a later official informal-letter to the desk officer. In my view this subterfuge was a complete abdication of a political officer's responsibility for reporting fully and accurately and interpreting what he was reporting. But it was the only way to get that kind of information out of that embassy.

Q: But there has to be a form of communication that allows at least both sides. You can't have an ambassador being the only voice. What is the point of having other people there? If the ambassador has become captive of the state, or sometimes in opposition to the state, you have to have something.

HANDYSIDE: There is an anecdote that comes from my posting to Lebanon, which I did not mention earlier, but which fits precisely here. Ambassador McClintock took quite the opposite view on this problem. Toward the end of the famous summer of 1958 when after both Marines and Airborne troops had been put in place and the situation finally began to move toward a resolution on the basis of a "no winners, no losers proposition", there was still the potential for a new flare up. In late September, the Christian community in Lebanon began to make it quite clear to some of us middle-grade officers that if certain kinds of things happened, if the government agreed to allow certain dissidents to do certain sorts of things, they were determined to reignite the inter-community warfare.

A number of the Arabic Language School students kept coming back into the embassy and putting down in memoranda of conversation these kinds of comments. Our information was in total conflict with what the ambassador was being told by the senior members of the government and by the heads of the political parties. When this conflict finally crystallized within the embassy, we had a session with the ambassador. We described to him the kinds of people we had been talking to. He told us that he was getting quite the opposite from the President of the Republic. One of the students suggested that the senior political leadership in Lebanon did not really understand what was going on in its own constituency. The members of the Christian

political party who said there would be no flare-up simply didn't know how their own followers were thinking.

After reflecting for a moment, Ambassador McClintock said, "Okay, let's do this. You men write up the impressions you have been getting from these conversations, and then I will put an introductory paragraph or a concluding paragraph which will state that this information is diametrically opposed to what I am getting from the Lebanese leadership. Then I will add a final paragraph that says we don't know how to sort this all out at this point, but we think it is important and that Washington should know about it now."

And three or four weeks later the place exploded. There was another final, orgiastic burst of inter-community killing before the leadership finally was able to put the lid back. Eventually by November the crisis was all over.

Q: McClintock treated this thing as a professional rather than becoming captive. As I do these interviews one notes that there often is this split between the junior officers, who are out talking to ordinary people...they are not always right and they tend to go after the opposition; its more fun. So one has to take this into account. But at the same time at the upper level they become trapped by dealing with the government. They really don't have the time to get out and do this. And they hear this and then comes the problem of the balancing. Sometimes there isn't a balance, particularly from the top because they become almost creatures of the government to which they are accredited. It is not just political appointees, it is sometimes career officers who get caught this way too.

Handy, just to clear up one thing. Your conversation with Bill Crawford, we are talking really about somewhat different time because that was when Henry Tasca was the ambassador, which was in the late 60s. He became ambassador to Greece in 1970.

HANDYSIDE: That's right. My conversation with Bill Crawford was probably in 1977. But the problem persisted.

Q: And it continues today. King Hassan of Morocco has again and again captured our ambassadors. The ones he doesn't capture became persona non gratia.

HANDYSIDE: And he tells the United States to withdraw them.

Q: Bill Crawford was one of those who was not enamored of the king and the king likes to be enamored. Well let's see. Were there any other major issues in Mauritania before we move on?

HANDYSIDE: There are two anecdotal kinds of things that I would like to relate; I think from the Foreign Service point of view they are interesting and important. One was that during the POLISARIO civil war, the center of action at one stage of the game, moved sufficiently to the south, so that the POLISARIO brought the war to the capital of Mauritania.

Q: This was while you were there?

HANDYSIDE: While I was there. This was during the summer and must have been 1976 or '77, at this point I am not sure which. In any event, one of the marauding columns that had made its way south very substantially into Mauritania had eluded the forces of the Mauritanian Republic. By navigating cross lots, if you will, through the desert, the POLISARIO suddenly arrived on the outskirts of Nouakchott. Since this was obviously a hit and run raid, it was not aimed at attacking the capitol frontally. Instead, the primary target was the Presidential compound which contained both the office and the residence of Moktar Ould Daddah. It just so happens that the American embassy compound is immediately next door to the President's compound. And since the Polisario raiding party was not all that accurate in its gunnery, a couple of the rounds that were destined for the Presidential residence or office building landed in the ten or twelve acres of scrub desert at the rear of the American embassy.

This attack occurred late in the afternoon, it was still light. Somehow or other we heard the first couple of rounds impact in the Presidential compound. A couple of other members of the embassy and I quickly got up on the roof of the residence where there was a masonry parapet that we could hide behind but still see over. Some two and a half miles out into the desert to the east of the city, we could see a group of maybe ten or twelve Land Rovers stopping and moving, stopping and moving and shooting.

The rounds that landed in the embassy compound came close enough to shatter several of the windows in the Residence living room. The Presidential guard finally rallied round and began to chase the raiding party back into the desert darkness, and the thing was all over. The whole episode probably didn't last more than 15 or 20 minutes at the most. It was clearly a politically-motivated hit and run raid on the capital. But from the point of view of the Foreign Service, the POLISARIO raid did bring home one more time that the profession you and I entered nearly 40 years ago, has been transformed from a decorous international conversation into something that is quite different.

The other anecdote I think we ought to record is that small, remote capitol cities produce unusual friendships. The arrival dates of three of the senior chiefs of mission in Mauritania, the Soviet Ambassador, the Chinese Communist Ambassador, and the United States Ambassador, were in close sequence. As a consequence, whenever we assembled for some protocol function, the first one in line would be the Soviet, and then the American, and then the Chinese or vice versa. The result was that I got to know my two communist counterparts quite well in at least a superficial, formal way. It was fascinating. From a professional point of view it was very useful. And it enlivened the interminable protocol formations at the airport. The command performances were either to say goodbye to the President who was off to Addis Ababa for an OAU meeting or whatever, or to say welcome home when he came back. The homecomings were worse because the plane was always late. The thing that took the edge off these ultimately boring experiences was the chance to have interesting conversations with my Soviet or my Chinese counterpart. By that I became quite personally fond of both of these gentlemen for quite different reasons.

The Soviet, whose name was Startsef, was from Siberia. He had a wife and two late teenage sons who were stashed away in some school in Moscow; so he was in Nouakchott by himself. He had a huge embassy staff; it was very difficult to figure out what they all did at any given time. The Soviets were in the process of building an enormous new embassy compound during much of the

time that I was in Mauritania. Finally it was finished. It had a whole series of interesting design characteristics that made it possible for the rest of the diplomatic corps to twit Ambassador Startsef on many, many occasions. There were, for example, two moving picture theaters in the embassy, one for the ambassador and one for everybody else. Startsef was really a jolly kind of a guy. As a Soviet Middle East hand, he had gotten to know some of our Foreign Service colleagues like Bill Eagleton, quite well in other parts of the Arab world. He used an Arabic interpreter, but his English was good, so he was an interesting companion. Also, getting to know him, and through that process getting to know some of the members of his staff, dovetailed very neatly with one of the Embassy's objectives. It was therefore very fortuitous that our arrival dates were close together. And it turned out for a very personal reason as well to be very rewarding.

It so happened that Mr. Startsef had without any question the best cook in Mauritania. Far better than the French Ambassador's. Periodically I would be invited to the Soviet residence for an absolutely fantastic dinner. It was great fun. In turn I would invite Startsef to my house for dinner. These exchanges of hospitality gave me an opportunity to get to know some of his junior people. And it gave my junior people an opportunity to get to know some of his junior people, since both sets of juniors were invited to the various functions.

The result was the Chinese actually turned out to be the more interesting. He was a representative of the old school in China. I never knew enough about him to know where his independence and his clout came from. But it was quite clear that he enjoyed a position of special privilege or importance. This was immediately obvious upon meeting him and his wife at a formal, social function. He was always appropriately attired in his Mao suit, but she, instead of being clad in the female equivalent of a Mao suit, was always attired in the most wonderful silk brocades, cut in the most fabulous new fashion designs. She was a stunning woman. They were both older. I would suspect that the Chinese Ambassador was certainly well over 70 in 1977-78. And she must have been nearly his age, perhaps a couple of years younger, but very much old school Chinese.

At the time of the Chinese Ambassador's arrival, the issue came up of making calls on our counterparts. It soon became very, very obvious that the Chinese Ambassador was a stickler on protocol. My recollection is that he came quickly to see me in my office in the American embassy, but he limited his call to a ten minute visit with a handshake. Then he disappeared. He refused to permit me to make the required diplomatic return call. Perhaps he felt that he could justify to the militants on his staff his going over to see the American Ambassador, but he couldn't justify to the militants on his staff receiving the ambassador from a country with which China had no official diplomatic relations at that time.

But, in spite of this very persnickety kind of attitude towards things protocol, it quickly became apparent that on informal occasions and on neutral territory, like somebody else's residence or some public building, the Chinese Ambassador was always more than willing to engage his American counterpart in conversation. It became great fun talking to him....His foreign language, acquired during his education in China, was English. While he had taken some French in school, once in Mauritania he quickly discovered that his aim of trying to refurbish his French was a hopeless cause. He was just too old, in effect, to learn a new language. So he decided it would be

much better to spend the same amount of time refurbishing his once-fluent command of English. So that was what he did, and the results were quickly apparent.

He very quickly became one of the members of the English-speaking group of the diplomatic corps. The German Ambassador, the Spanish Ambassador, the Chinese Ambassador, the Pakistani Ambassador, and I, became kind of a linguistic sub-unit within the diplomatic corps. Very soon after this evolutionary social arrangement had been worked out, the Chinese Ambassador would seek me out at the Residence of the French Ambassador or at a public place or function, because he wanted someone to talk to. Because his French was next to non-existent, he was unable to talk to the Mauritians without having one of his interpreter flunkies around. For any conversation, the presence of an interpreter is an inhibiting factor. But I suspect that for political reasons as well, it was inhibiting as far as the Chinese Ambassador was concerned, given his ties to the Mandarinate of the old days in China.

In any event, this whole business came to a laughable peak towards the end of my stay in Mauritania when the Pakistani Ambassador organized a dinner party and evening for the English speaking subgroup of the Nouakchott diplomatic corps. In telephoning the invitations around to us, he stressed that this was to be an English evening and was only to be for the English speakers. Therefore there was no need to bring any staff members along to bridge linguistic gaps. He apparently told the Chinese Ambassador exactly the same thing. So the Chinese Ambassador arrived at the Pakistani residence by himself. But in the meantime, as the Pakistani Ambassador was wont to do, he had completely changed the rules of the game. Once we got inside his Residence at this English speaking evening, we discovered that it was heavily populated with a large group of senior Mauritanian officials whose only foreign language was French. So here was the Chinese Ambassador, who had been assured that there was no need to bring his French interpreter, suddenly dumped in the middle of a bunch of French-speaking people.

The Chinese Ambassador and a shifting group of the other English speakers clustered together, and started to make the best of this rather strange evening. Then all of a sudden we were told that his Excellency, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was to arrive. And sure enough within another fifteen or twenty minutes, Mr. Mouknass appeared in the Pakistani's living room. He quickly declared in his impeccable French that he couldn't stay very long, that he had just dropped in to say hello. The Minister noted that three of the English speakers, the Soviet, the Chinese, and the American, happened at that moment to be engaged in a lively conversation. The Minister came over to greet us briefly. He began by repeating a comment he had made many times before...that it was always such a joy for him as the foreign minister of a non-aligned country to see the senior representatives of the three great powers in deep conversation and obviously enjoying themselves.

The Minister moved on to greet briefly several more conversational groupings. Then it became clear that he wanted to see individual members of the diplomatic corps in an adjoining room for a brief personal chat. Lo and behold he started his series of conversations with the Chinese. Since the Chinese Ambassador's French was about as good as Mouknass's English, that is, next door to non-existent, they quickly discovered that they couldn't communicate. I first learned of this when the Minister's staff aid dashed up to me and said, "Mr. Ambassador would you please come?" I asked, "What do you need me for?" He replied, "The Foreign Minister needs you." Another

command performance. So I put down whatever I was doing and went off.

To make a long story short, I was dumped into the middle of the embarrassing and very difficult position of having to serve as the English-French interpreter for the Chinese Communist Ambassador's talk with the Mauritanian Minister of Foreign Affairs. I think I was more embarrassed by this than they were. The other two didn't seem to have any problem at all. But I must say, even as I look back on it, I am still most uncomfortable with having been put in that position. It is one more indication, however, that a member of the Foreign Service one has to be ready for anything, and should not be too surprised when very different kinds of things happen.

Q: I found myself one time being an interpreter between an American mortician expert and a Yugoslav mortician expert sitting in a graveyard in Skopje, Yugoslav after a bad earthquake and they talked about techniques. It was just after lunch. Why don't we break now and pick it up next time when you leave Mauritania?

E. GREGORY KRYZA
Ambassador
Mauritania (1977-1980)

Ambassador E. Gregory Kryza was born in Michigan on March 12, 1922. He served in the U.S. Navy extensively. He was a U.S. Naval attaché in Tangier, Morocco. After joining the Foreign Service, he served in Washington, DC in the Near East Bureau and was Director of African Affairs. Ambassador Kryza also served in Nairobi, Kinshasa, and Mauritania. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 14, 1988.

Q: ...How did you become Ambassador to Mauritania, appointed Ambassador to Mauritania?

KRYZA: I really don't know. I was ready to -- I was approaching, I was about 54 years old. I was thinking seriously that I had done what probably I was able to do in the Foreign Service. And I had been offered a job in the U.N. with the -- what's the U.N. organization in Canada? ICAO. I was seriously considering taking -- in fact, I had accepted it. One of the functional Deputy Assistant Secretaries in the Administrative area had never been to Africa and I was taking a trip to Africa. It was going to be my final trip as the Executive Director. Then I [stopped. I] met my wife in France on the way back to attend my niece's -- you may remember my late wife was French -- to attend my niece's wedding. And I got a phone call from the Office of the Director General saying: how would you like to be Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. I said I didn't think so, but give me 48 hours and I'll call back. My wife wasn't all that keen on going. But I looked upon it as, after all, why does one join the Foreign Service? This was the ultimate, whether it's Mauritania or Paris. So I accepted it. the people at the other end said, thank goodness, because your name has already gone to the White House. So I really never worked for Moose. He had come in just about that time. In fact, he may have been instrumental in getting me the appointment.

Q: *Well, as you saw it what was our interest in Mauritania at that time? We're talking about when?*

KRYZA: We're talking 1977.

Q: '77.

KRYZA: Middle of 1977. Our interests were almost non-existent. Mauritania is kind of an artificial country. It didn't really exist prior to World War II or even during World War II. It was part of French Equatorial Africa. I guess that's what they called it. About the time of World War II the French discovered that there were some important deposits of iron ore in the northern part of what is now Mauritania. So they established a presence. They began to mine the iron ore. They built a port facility. It was called Port Etienne.

Q: *Port of what?*

KRYZA: The French word for Steven, E-T-I-E-N-N-E which is now -- do you have a map of Africa? They've changed the name of the [port to Nouadhibou]. In any event our interests were extremely limited. My predecessor was Holsey Handyside, who believed in a very lean operation. We had one or two very small AID projects going and the Peace Corps was beginning to knock on our door. But the conditions were not all that good to want to have. But Holsey Handyside did agree just before his departure to allow I think about 30 Peace Corps volunteers to come in. It turned out to be a very good decision. In fact, I expanded on it when I was Ambassador. Our interests were as I say very, very --

Q: *No economic interests particularly?*

KRYZA: There's nothing, no. There's nothing in Mauritania. There's no trade of any substance where the iron ore is of not much importance to us. It's of great importance to the Japanese. It's a special kind. It was merely, I think, we have an Embassy there because after the independence movement in Africa took place we fortunately or unfortunately made a decision that we would establish an embassy in every independent country and send an ambassador there. I looked upon my role there as trying to help the Mauritians get themselves establish, some economic basis.

Aside from the iron ore, the only other resource they have is in the ocean. They have some of the richest fisheries in the world by dint of circumstances. The way the configuration of the floor of the ocean, the confluence of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, all these things do something that attracts certain types of small fish which in turn attract larger fish. So according to the experts you get, and according to an amateur fisherman like myself, I ate some of the most delicious freshest fish in the world. But the trouble with that is a poor country like Mauritania does not have the infrastructure of the capability to exploit this wonderful resource. And what happens is that countries like the Soviet Union, like the Japanese, like Spain, like Korea, who tend to do their fishing in these huge fishing factories. They're self contained. They do it all at sea. Send their huge trawlers, fishing factories in there and literally rape the bottom. They destroy the ecology.

One of the few things that I think I did, and it still exists I'm told, is through the good offices of the U.S. Coast Guard and USAID we provided the Mauritians with a Coast Guard cutter and trained them how to use it. How effective that one Coast Guard cutter is against the Japanese who are invading, in effect encroaching upon Mauritanian waters. The big fishers, the people involved like Del Monte and others involved in tuna harvesting and canning, were never really interested. We'd had talks with them. Never really interested because of the high cost. We apparently require on-shore infrastructure to do all this kind of thing. And also they felt, I guess there are different types of tuna. And the type of tuna we eat in the United States is slightly different. This was a type of tuna that you would get in Spain. In any event that was one thing that we tried.

Meanwhile, the Sahara Desert keeps moving inexorably down and down and down. Where as recently as 25 or 30 years ago Mauritania was actually a net exporter of meat, it's now virtually all desert. And what's happened is whereas even when Holsey Handyside was Ambassador there -- Mauritania is a relatively large country in terms of area, geographically. One of the larger countries in Africa. But it has a small population, probably less than two million people. And it's an admixture of black Africans. More than half the people you'll see in Mauritania have black skins. That does not mean that they classify themselves as blacks. You're either a black or you're an Arab. And one can have real black skin and one can still be an Arab. It depends on the language that one speaks at home, etcetera.

As late as perhaps the time just before my arrival, mid-1970, 85 percent of Mauritania's population was nomadic. And only 15 percent was sedentary. The people who were sedentary were in just little pockets, one at Rosso, across the river from St. Louis. St. Louis is in Senegal. Obviously along the river you had some blacks who did some marginal farming. The city of Nouakchott is an artificial city like Brasilia and Washington, D.C. It was designed by a group of French architects, city planners, to comfortably accommodate thirty to forty thousand people. It was going to be an administrative center. It does not have a natural port. I could talk for hours on this. But maybe we can come back later. So you had a few people in Nouakchott. Then you had a few people up north involved in the iron ore. All the rest of the people were nomads. They traveled with their camels and their sheep and their goats. Now the situation has more than reversed itself. Now you have something like 85 percent who are sedentary and 15 percent who are nomadic. And almost all of the sedentary people have moved to Nouakchott, a city that was designed for thirty or forty thousand people at most now has literally 85 percent of the population. It's approaching a million people is what I'm told.

Q: I would like to ask you, what sort of political environment were you dealing with when you were in Mauritania?

KRYZA: The situation in Mauritania in the late 1970 -- well, late 1977 early '78 -- the situation leading up to the coup was one in which the military had become very disenchanted with its participation in the war against the so-called Polisario in what had been Spanish Sahara. Morocco claimed rights over that territory going back into historic precedent. For reasons that were best known to the participants at that time, Mauritania joined forces with the Moroccans to try to oust the freedom fighters, the Polisario. It was an unhappy marriage from the very beginning, Morocco being the dominant by far of the two countries -- Morocco staking claim to

the more productive, in terms of minerals, two-thirds of Western Sahara, and Mauritania being left with what was more or less the dregs of the country, very non-productive desert.

It was a losing war. And more important than that -- I use the term losing -- it was a war that really could not be won decisively with the kinds of activities, the kinds of resources that were available.

But more important than that to Mauritania, the war was going on adjacent to the most vulnerable part of Mauritania, that is the iron ore mines. The iron ore is located 600 kilometers from the ocean, from the port. So a single track rail line joins the mines with the Port of Nouadhibou where the ore is shipped abroad. Obviously this rail line was extremely vulnerable to attack. So not only was Mauritania using a great deal of its treasury in fighting this war and losing some of its finest young men, but it was also very literally losing its only source of foreign capital.

One thing led to another. And the founding father, the George Washington of Mauritania, Moktar Ould Daddah, was ousted sometime -- I don't have precise dates, I can fill that in later -- sometime in June of 1978. That is roughly seven or eight months after my arrival. It just so happened that the American Embassy compound is directly adjacent to the presidency. So in effect it was my next door neighbor that was being removed from power. It was not a frightening experience. But we were obviously apprehensive.

Q: Was it a bloody coup?

KRYZA: Well, there was very little bloodshed. There was a lot of posturing. The military were out. And there were tanks parked around our compound. We were forbidden either from leaving or from entering. Luckily, I had two or three people in the compound. And so we had excellent communication facilities. Unfortunately, my DCM was off on a trip in the interior, and the Chief of Station was out of the country. So I was pretty much the only substantive reporting officer at the time. But as I say we had excellent communications. And for one of the few times that I can remember, the telephone system within Nouakchott worked. Most of the staff had walkie talkie radio communication. But we didn't even have to use that, we were able to use the regular telephones. And we were able to ascertain almost immediately that everyone was accounted for. No one outside the palace was touched.

Q: When you have a coup like this, you as an ambassador, what is your prime concern? You hear there's a coup going on.

KRYZA: Well, our first concern was to make sure that everyone in the mission was aware that there was danger and that they should stay put. Of course, the next in order of importance was to let the Department of State know that something was amiss and to inform them also that as far as we could determine, all the Americans were accounted for including our Peace Corps volunteers. That was of some concern. The coup was limited. It was indeed a palace coup. So there was not widespread activity except in the downtown or in the area of the presidency. The president had his residence and the office of the presidency in one large compound which happened to be right next door to the American compound. We were able to carry on conversations with the other

western embassies.

The Spanish Embassy compound was immediately adjacent to us on the other side. We had that presidency on one side and the Spanish Embassy. Next to it was the German Embassy, the West German Embassy and next to it was the French Embassy. So by walking through our backyards in effect we could maintain conversation and communication with the French and the Germans and the Spaniards.

Moktar Ould Daddah was put into, well, house arrest is the expression they use. They kept moving him around the country from time to time. He was still well-loved by most of the citizens. They had nothing against him personally. But I think most of the citizens who were aware of what was going on did support the military action in withdrawing Mauritania from that war.

Q: This was the incident, I mean, this was the cause.

KRYZA: It was the cause that was triggered off. Then, of course, the military could never get its act together. The man who first took charge was probably the most competent, I may have my sequence wrong, was killed in an unfortunate aviation accident landing at the airport in Dakar, Senegal. And then there was a succession -- during my time there were three additional changes. And these were all completely bloodless, as just palace takeovers, changes within the military from one colonel to another, usually resulting in house arrest. But there was very little violence. In fact, my perceptions of the Mauritians are that they are non-violent. Typical of most nomadic people, they tend to be philosophers, poets by nature. Fairly gentle people.

Aside from the war, the Polisario war, and aside from the constant drought and the spreading of the desert, the biggest political problem related to the two basic groups of people, the African ethnics and the so-called Arabs. As a compromise, much as took place in Belgium, the Mauritians decided that French would be their official language and Hassanya Arabic would be their national language. Now, you tell me what the distinction is between the official and a national language. The point of it is that all decrees, all government documents had to be done in both languages. All street signs were in both languages. And every year at the beginning of the school year, the only time I saw any violence on the streets, the question was which language would dominate in the school system in the upcoming school year. These problems, of course, were never resolved. In effect, the blacks, the non-Arabic blacks, they're non-Arabic but they were Islamic. Ninety-nine percent of the country is Islamic. The blacks have an advantage, because to get a good job in the civil service it was important that one have French and Arabic. And actually the French was probably more important than the Arabic. So in that sense, the blacks had a better chance of getting second and even first level jobs. The Secretariat in many of the ministries often were headed by blacks because they were truly more bilingual than the ethnic Arabs.

Q: Which foreign country was sort of the major one? Was it France, if not calling the shots, but being sort of the predominant country?

KRYZA: Yes. Although France never took a great interest in Mauritania, it was legally part of

France immediately after World War II. Yes, the ties were still towards France. However, before the coup and even after the coup, before Mauritania broke with Morocco, and in effect changed sides from siding with Morocco and being against Algeria shortly after I left, they completely reversed themselves and became more or less the enemies of Morocco and the friends of Algeria. The Algerians were supposedly backing very heavily the rebels of the so-called Polisario. But, yes, the French ambassador had a great deal more influence than I had, obviously. And as I was going to say, until they broke with Morocco, King Hassan used to look upon his ambassador in Nouakchott as sort of a viceroy. And every time there was a change in government in Mauritania, he fired his ambassador. So I went through four coups and four changes of Moroccan ambassadors, which was interesting.

Q: Uneasy lies the head of a Moroccan ambassador.

KRYZA: Yes. They were all good people. We became very friendly with all of them -- we meaning my wife and myself, the members of the Embassy, having lived in Morocco early on in my career, and my wife especially had some affinity. We still love, I still love Moroccan cuisine. The other countries that were represented -- of course, all the Arab countries had some form of representation -- many of the black African countries had some representation. The Soviet Union had a large number of people but we could never figure out what they were doing.

As far as we could determine there was no economic assistance. They had no AID projects. There was a considerable amount of educational, you know, cultural, that is they sponsored, they provided scholarships for Mauritians. Many of the engineers who worked in the iron ore fields were trained in Russia. And oddly enough they were very private-enterprise oriented, probably as a result of their experience in the Soviet Union.

But the big mystery was the People's Republic of China. In the inscrutable fashion of the Chinese, someone made a determination that Mauritania, in the long run at least, was going to be important to China. And of all the countries, all the so-called donor countries, China spent easily more than all the rest of the countries including the United States combined as far as I could determine. They financed an east-west road from the coast to the Malian border through the desert. The actual building was done by a Brazilian firm, but the financing came from the Chinese. They built a sports stadium. They built a youth center. They built several medical clinics throughout the country.

But their single most ambitious product, and I don't know whether they ever finished it, was to build a deep-water port in Nouakchott. As I said earlier, Nouakchott is an artificial city designed by the French to be the capital of the new country. But if you've ever seen the coast of West Africa it's a very formidable thing. There are a few pockets where there are natural harbors. But there are very few of them. And with the constant pounding of the sea the Chinese undertook to build this. It was a tremendous undertaking to do a deep-sea port, a deep-water port. And they poured in Lord knows how much money. And there were always large numbers of Chinese, not as large in numbers as the Chinese wanted to have, but certainly far out numbering any other foreign nationals.

Q: But were you as ambassador trying to look for AID projects or really sort of sitting back and

relaxing?

KRYZA: No, I was not sitting back and relaxing. I was encouraged by the Department because our principal interest in Mauritania, aside from being there, was humanitarian. We were very much aware of the drought, very much aware of the poverty. And we looked for projects that could have long-term effect. We tried to do projects that we labeled renewable resources, to try to find innovative ways to replant the forest, to stop that movement of the desert. We did quite a bit of agricultural projects along the river, along the southern border, on the Senegal River, which still had arable land. The desert had not yet crept up to it. Trying to keep the desert back in that area.

There were political problems because the river, of course, was the habitat of the blacks. And so the Arabs who still dominated; although middle management was black the authority was essentially Arabic. We were under constant pressure to do things in the northern part in the real desert. There we did less in the agricultural. We did some date oasis-type restorations. But there we concentrated essentially on health care, that is we sent competent teams of nurses. These are essentially Peace Corps combination social workers and trained nurses. We put them in various so-called urban areas where we taught hygiene, prepared young mothers for the delivery and taught them how to care for their progeny. That essentially is what we did. We kept a relatively low profile.

Q: Well, how did you get along with -- this is now the Carter Administration?

KRYZA: This is the Carter Administration.

Q: How did you get along with the African Bureau in those days?

KRYZA: Extremely well.

Q: And they gave you the support you needed?

KRYZA: They gave me excellent support. Mauritania, there are two countries that are in the African Bureau that could just as well be in the Near East Bureau. So maybe I should rephrase my answer. I got excellent support. Among other things I had just come from the Bureau and many of the people that were supporting me were people that I had worked with. In fact, my Deputy as Executive Director took over my job. So that was helpful in terms of resources. I think I was well placed.

In terms of substantive support it was good. But as I was starting to say, Mauritania and the Sudan could perhaps be better served if they were part of the Near East Bureau because the focus -- the people in the Bureau, Near East and South Asian Affairs were much more concerned about the Polisario's activity and relations with Algeria and Morocco than the Bureau of African Affairs was, for reasons that are fairly understandable. As I say, you have the same problem on the eastern end with the Sudan.

In other words, I was the Ambassador to a country that had one foot in the Arab world and the

other foot in the black world. In that sense it was a rather interesting locus for reporting because we were able to get the flavor of Mauritania's relations both with the Arabs and the Africans. They attended all the OAU meetings and they attended all the Arab summits and all the regional alliances of Arab countries. They in those days had good relations with Qadhafi. That's changed since then.

So in that sense we were able to get from time to time tidbits of information that might not be available elsewhere. I had an excellent DCM.

Q: *Who was that?*

KRYZA: Charles Dunbar who is now an Ambassador in one of the Arab Emirates I believe.

Q: *Was Qadhafi and Libya a problem?*

KRYZA: Qadhafi was a role model for the military in Mauritania, as he probably is in other parts of North Africa. He was looked upon as the legitimate successor of Nasser. He was looked upon as the man who could unify North Africa, the Arab-speaking North Africa.

Q: *I realize you have to hurry. So you retired from the Foreign Service from Mauritania.*

KRYZA: I left Mauritania in the middle, the third quarter of 1980 and retired I think at the end of September of that year.

RICHARD C. HOWLAND
Office of the Inspector General
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: Then back to Dakar for a day of rest and then we did what I feel was probably the best part of the inspection and it was one of the most exotic places I've ever been: Mauritania. Bill Hamilton, the incurable romantic that he was, always wanted to see Port Louis, which was the first slave port in Africa. It was in Senegal, north of Dakar, and also a key place for the Transatlantic ferry runs of bombers and seaplanes during World War II. They'd fly down to Brazil, and cross the Atlantic, ferrying supplies to North Africa or wherever they were going. The bombers had landed in Dakar and the seaplanes, the Pan Am clippers, which were taken over by the military, had landed in this big swampy inlet in Port Louis. Bill was also a great gourmet, and said he had heard the best single restaurant in West

Africa was in Port Louis. It was true.

So, we decided to drive along the coast from Dakar to Nouakchott, capital of Mauritania. We got an Embassy car from Dakar to take us to the ferry landing on the south bank of the Senegal River. The Embassy in Nouakchott agreed to send a Jeep Wagoneer to pick us up on the opposite side. Can you believe that, after almost seven weeks in disorganized West Africa at that point, and having had years of experience in the Third World, Bill and I blithely went off to do this mad road-trip, presuming the Nouakchott Embassy car would be there? Well, It was there, but no one in their right mind would do that today. I mean it would just never show up today.

Anyway, off we set for Port Louis, which is a nice drive, across the desert in Senegal which was characterized by these beautiful Baobab trees, big thick trees with little branches up at the top with thousands of birds and animals living on them. They're one of the greatest environments on the planet. We stopped and we looked at the Baobab trees, marvelous things, and little worlds of their own. We had our lunch at Port Louis, and got to the Senegal River, well, maybe about 2:00 pm. The distances were not vast.

There we sat in the hot car looking at the ferry, which was still sitting at the other side of the river. There were lots of Africans standing round on our side, also waiting for the ferry and being eaten by a million biting flies. It was the first time I ever saw a kid with his eyes open, with a fly walking across one eye, and not paying any attention to it. Flies had obviously done that on his eyes for years. There we sat, with windows closed to keep the flies out. No ferry.

We learned that the ferry crew was having their lunch on the other side, then of course a nap. They'd be over in a while, we were told, but meanwhile we could just envision the hours going by, and the Nouakchott car -- if it was there -- getting worried about darkness and returning to the Embassy before we got there. Then we would have been stranded amidst the flies on that side of the river, with our car from Dakar having left too.

Finally we showed our diplomatic passports and persuaded the ferry office on this side to run up a signal flag, and saw the ferry grudgingly come across the Senegal River. It was a great, wide river, half a mile wide, a nice river, a picturesque river with native boats and huts along the banks. The ferry swept in and with great trepidation we asked the ferry guy if there was a truck waiting for us. They didn't know, but hustled us onto the ferry. With more trepidation we sent our Embassy truck back to Dakar. Then we were really following in the footsteps of the ancient explorers. Bill Hamilton, the incurable romantic, was in heaven -- I confess to a thrill as well, setting off into the unknown across the Senegal River into Mauritania. The other two team members couldn't have cared less.

The ferry landed and amazingly the Nouakchott Embassy Wagoneer was there, the truck was there! We all piled in the truck. But it was a close thing. The driver said, well, good thing you came now because I would have had to go back pretty soon, even though I saw you on the other side. The road becomes impassable by the late afternoon because the wind from the ocean blows sand across it. Every morning guys from the villages are paid to dig out the

sand, but they quit at noon so you only have this brief time. Never mind, a great day after all.

As we drove farther north through the desert, a beautiful desert with high dunes and occasional glimpses of the sea, the sand was starting to blow down across the road and at times we had to skid through it. We got about half way up and we hadn't seen a living creature for 20 miles so we made a pit-stop. It was all sand as far as the eye could see. Not a living creature, not a blade of grass. But within seconds we were covered with flies. We quickly got back in the car and drove fast so the wind could blow the flies out of the car. I asked the driver how, if nothing lives there, and flies only live a couple of days, how come they're always there? The guy says, oh, yes, there are always flies here, everywhere in the desert. Well, there must be a lot of flies, I said. They must come in from somewhere. It is the will of God, he answered.

We got nearer to Nouakchott, a distant and low town on the desert horizon. As we drove closer in, we saw a Mauritanian couple, husband and wife, walking along the main road. The husband was emaciated and dressed in rags, leading the wife on a chain. She was dressed in blue finery and jewels, and very over-weight to say the least. The driver said that was the ideal of marriage in the country. In the town there were a lot of buildings with shell holes in them because the war was going on with the Polisario, the rebel front trying to liberate the Spanish Sahara.

Q: Algerians?

HOWLAND: No, not exactly, but a Saharan war with Morocco had spilled over into Mauritania as well, and the Moroccans and Algerians were involved. The Embassy had been hit in a coup attempt because there was a cabinet minister who lived next door. There was a rocket hole on the side of the Embassy.

Nouakchott was, in many ways, an exotic and strangely beautiful place. I imagine you could go mad there in a year, but for a short visit it was great. The bead market was fabulous. The Embassy housed us in a strange "modular hotel" right on the beach, in the dunes by the Atlantic and the booming waves. It was run by Canadians, an aid project to house their aid workers, and consisted of a row of what appeared to be lift vans. Each one was a self-contained modular room with an air conditioner and a water tank and was nicely furnished inside, cool, and pleasant. They were all connected by a tunnel. You went through the tunnel to the main part of the hotel where the dining room and the front desk were, and then you went back through the tunnel to your little modular room, which was absolutely tightly sealed.

I wondered: why are we living like this? Then when I went outside I realized was because all day long the sand blows in from the dunes on the strong ocean winds, and slowly covers up these cocoons where we were living. That was during the day. In the evening the ocean wind died, and the hotel started up some big airplane engines mounted on the backs of trucks, which blew the sand back onto the dunes toward the ocean. The swimming pool was full of sand because you couldn't blow the sand out of the swimming pool. That was the Canadian hotel. That said, it was a nice hotel with good food and we learned a lot about the country

from the Canadian AID guys living there. The best part was that it was right on the water. You had to walk over the dunes, some 200 feet high, magnificent dunes. When you got over them the Atlantic of course was very rough and beautiful, but you couldn't swim. The currents were very fierce and there were sharks.

Now, I should mention by the way that a kind of serfdom still existed in Mauritania at that time, in 1978, maybe it still does. There were two elements of the population: there were the Mauritanian Arabs, and then the blacks from Senegal who had either emigrated, or been abducted, supposedly by gangs that sold them to wealthy Mauritians. They did the heavy lifting that the Mauritanian Arabs wouldn't do. One of the things that the Africans did was fish along the shore, catching fish for their masters to sell at the market and to the hotel among other things. These were very rich fishing grounds because the cold deep Atlantic current swept up along that shore bringing nutrients to the surface.

So nearly every morning I woke at about 6:00 am and walked down to the beach to go jogging, just as some fishermen were pulling in their nets and others were swimming out to set more of them all along the shore. They had no boats. In this terribly dangerous water, full of sharks, the way they'd get the net out would be for a bunch of guys to take one end of a net and swim out with it holding on to small logs. The other end of the net was secured on the shore. The swimmers would go out a ways and then traverse along the shore, setting the net outside the breakers, and then swim back in to the beach.

After a short time, the men started hauling in the nets, chanting and singing. There were fish flopping on the sand everywhere, big fish too, the women cleaning and putting them in plastic tubs, gulls fighting over the entrails. Meanwhile behind the beach to the east, the sun was coming up behind the dunes. On the highest ridgelines an occasional *Marabou*, the wandering holy men of Morocco and Algeria, walked slowly by, black robes blowing in the wind, casting a long shadow from the sunrise. Well, what a thrill it was, to stand there as the sunlight began to illuminate this great traditional African scene, to experience the old, old sights and sounds of an Africa which now I am sure has passed away. I was very privileged to be there.

The staff lived on the Embassy compound, which looked for all the world like Fort Apache, a series of low buildings bordering a quadrangle with a flagpole at the center. You could almost hear the Foreign Legion bugler as you drove in every morning.

The Ambassador, I remember him very well, was named Greg Kryza. He had been the executive officer of the AF bureau and a very good admin officer, a very nice man, very able Ambassador, but with not much to do except watch for incoming rockets, I supposed. The DCM was a really good officer and Arabist named Charlie Dunbar. He had sailed to the post on a small yacht across the Atlantic, after being on home leave. He had sailed to the mouth of the Senegal River and then had his sailboat put on a big Sahara transport truck and driven to Nouakchott. That's how he got to his post, on a sailboat. I thought that was pretty neat, too; again, very African.

As one would expect with an Embassy run by a good Ambassador and DCM, there were no

problems that I recall, so the Mauritania stop was easy to write up. Besides a few adventures -- I went out on the desert looking for "sand roses," an unexplained natural phenomenon in the dunes, with some Embassy staffers -- there were some great stories.

The Ambassador's secretary was dating a sergeant in the French foreign legion, who was actually seconded as an Intel specialist at the French Embassy. She invited me home for a drink and a chat with him, and he had a great trove of stories about his time in West Africa. For instance, a previous assignment had been as commandant of the prison in Chad during the transition from the last days of the colonial rule. During the dry season there was nothing to eat in Chad so many people committed petty crimes to get into the French jail where they knew they would be fed. He said the real thrill of his day was in the morning when he'd walk into the prison yard and thousands of prisoners, waiting for breakfast, would shout: "Vive le Commandant! Vive La France!" as they banged on their dinner plates with spoons. Ah, again the old, old Africa.

The Polisario frequently raided Nouakchott, which had sided with Morocco against them. Whenever he heard rumors there was going to be a Polisario attack, the sergeant would try to check them out. Once he went out in the desert on his motorcycle, climbed up on a dune with binoculars and saw dozens of Land Rovers coming along a track. There he was, out about 40 miles from Nouakchott in the desert, with no compass, nothing, but he knew how to get back because he knew the desert. He just stopped and stood there. The Polisario came up and he saw there were Algerian officers among them, actually in uniform. Then they asked him for directions to Nouakchott, and of course he sent them the wrong way.

He said, who knows if they ever got back. They probably ran out of gas. They're out there dead somewhere. This was a large war party and he probably saved quite a lot of lives by putting them astray. He said, to this day I don't understand, why they didn't kill me, a French sergeant in uniform, and why they believed me. He thought it was very interesting that the Polisario actually had Land Rovers. Where did they get the Land Rovers? Well, the Algerians of course. They got them from the Algerians. They wouldn't use Soviet vehicles because they couldn't last in the desert. But the Land Rovers were built by the British for the desert. So, they had Land Rovers from the Algerians. Thus his view on the Polisario insurrection was that it was an Algerian plot to encircle Morocco, an arch-enemy for years before the colonial period.

We also got a lot of insights about the country from the Canadian aid workers, usually in the bar at the hotel. They were quite frustrated with the Mauritanian inability to focus on development. For example, little was being done to expand a very valuable iron mine that the French and Germans were exploiting in the north of Mauritania although it was the main source of income for the government. Also, there was no harbor at Nouakchott, just ocean shoreline as I described earlier. The only way goods could get to Nouakchott was via a natural port way up in the North at the iron mine, or by means of the Senegal River. Either way the road was not so good. Or by air, which was expensive. So it was very hard to get stuff in. The Germans wanted to keep on the right side of the government, and offered to build them a beautiful floating dock to start a harbor offshore Nouakchott. That would greatly reduce cargo costs and promote development -- it was part of the reason for the

Canadian aid projects as well.

But unfortunately the Germans also said to them, it'll promote tourism. You'll be able to get tourist dollars from cruise ships. There was a wonderful market in Nouakchott, a bead market and the Germans realized that the tourists would love it and the rest of the picturesque desert town -- plus the beaches of course, girls in bikinis escaping the cold North European winter.

If the Germans hadn't described the tourism benefits, the government would have agreed, but once the government realized that tourists coming in to Mauritania would witness such traditions as marital slavery -- wives were bought and sold, for instance -- they saw trouble ahead. I mentioned that we saw at least a dozen instances of emaciated men, dressed in simple clothing, leading around overweight women, dressed in gold and jewels and bright new garments, around the market, buying them beads. It was quite a sight. The men led them around on leashes, their faces uncovered and heavily made-up, hair was in a jeweled veils and bodies partly revealed in brightly-colored clothing. The men were emaciated and dressed practically in rags, but the women were obviously force-fed to make them as obese as possible. It was a mark of a man's status among the people. They were showing off their wives, who were their property.

The government became terribly worried about this proposal, and decided to retreat to the desert, like the Bedouin in Saudi Arabia, to ponder and consult over such a difficult decision. The reluctance to admit tourists was also a Saudi-like phenomenon. One week-end the cabinet ministers and other notables drove off with guards into the desert with their tents, miles out in the desert, and sat out there under the stars on their carpets, talked about the whole situation, asked Allah for guidance and so forth. On Monday they came back to Nouakchott.

Now, this German harbor project would have been exactly what the country needed, it was brilliantly conceived and would have worked, would have gotten all kinds of goods in there for the population. It would cost \$60 or \$70 million in aid funds, which in the '70s was a big project. But the government said, no, thank you, they just didn't want that project, thank you very much. And, by the way, goodbye.

The Germans were flabbergasted. They were afraid the decision meant all kinds of problems for their operations at the iron mine, but no, that was fine, the Mauritanian government simply wanted to preserve the lifestyle of the country, and was afraid tourists would destroy it. They were probably right, and that was the end of my African adventures until much later.

We flew back to Dakar at dawn on a "Twin Otter," cruising along above those wonderful beaches, afraid we would miss a Pan Am flight, the only flight of the week back to the United States. The Pan Am came across Africa all the way from Nairobi, across the Congo, stopped in the Ivory Coast and other places. It was July and US Embassy families from all over Africa were going on home leave, required to cross the Atlantic on an American carrier. We had managed to get seats, and after 66 days away from our families on this trip, we were very anxious to get back. As it turned out, the Pan Am flight was nine hours late. It was indeed full of Embassy families from all over Africa heading for home leave. As I sat there on the plane, happy to be leaving West Africa, the child ahead of me stood up in his seat,

turned around, leaned over the back of his seat and threw up in my lap.

Q: Oh, no.

HOWLAND: So, there I sat. We had been on the road all day. The stewardess, bless her heart, the Pan Am stewardess helped clean it all up and brought me three of those little mini-Scotch bottles, saying: you know, it's a long flight. Just drink these right down and go out. So, I did. It reminded me of arriving in Africa 66 days earlier, when the UTA stewardess said, you're getting off at Niger? You better take this bottle of wine, it's a terrible place. Well, this other stewardess had been nice to me and I went right out. We'd been up since 2:00 in the morning and woke up the next day, arriving at JFK at 2:00 in the morning. No onward flights then, of course. I sat around there with a terrible hangover from the Scotch, tried to eat, but I couldn't eat. At dawn I called my wife and then caught the first flight to Washington. And that's how we got back from our 66-day inspection tour of West Africa.

PARKER W. BORG
Country Director, West African Affairs
Washington, DC (1979-1981)

Ambassador Borg was born and raised in Minnesota and educated at Dartmouth College and Cornell University. In 1965, after a tour with the Peace Corps in the Philippines, he joined the Foreign Service and was posted to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. During his career he served in Vietnam and Zaire, and in the State Department in his senior positions concerning Vietnam, West Africa and Counter Terrorism. He served as a US Ambassador to Mali (1981-1984) and to Iceland from 1993 to 1996. Ambassador Borg was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2002.

Q: First, let's do this Polisario problem. I almost have the feeling that here we had American ambassadors who tended to become almost clients of King Hassan in Morocco and took a very pro-Moroccan point of view. Here you are dealing with it sort of from the other side. Did you find yourself, to use a diplomatic term, in a pissing contest with the people dealing with Moroccan interests in the State Department?

BORG: Morocco is not the only case of a country where our ambassadors take very strong protective measure on behalf of the nation. Saudi Arabia comes to mind as another good example of a country like that. India and Pakistan are also places where our ambassadors often take the local side in a conflict. Morocco was special in that we have gone out of our way to see that we only have political appointees there and people who are going to recognize the importance of getting along with the royal family so that the ambassador takes usually a very strong position in favor of what the Moroccans would prefer. This is translated into what the Middle Eastern Bureau often pushes as the policy. We were somewhat in the middle, not completely, but the conflict is usually looked at as a completely Algerian-Moroccan conflict, but there was an overlapping conflict with Mauritania. The Mauritians were initially sympathetic to the

Moroccans, and the rulers who ran Mauritania looked upon themselves as part of the greater world of Morocco. There were some incidents that occurred that changed their perspective to make them a little more wary of Moroccan interests. But it was more a question of was Mauritania going to survive or was Mauritania likely to collapse also because of what was going on in the western Sahara. I was in continuous disputes with Carleton Coon, who was the country director for northwest Africa. We had endless arguments about this issue. If I remember correctly, our office was first sympathetic to the Moroccans and then we were much less sympathetic towards what the Moroccans were doing. But when the Reagan Administration came in, we were told to switch back and be sympathetic to Morocco, that we were not paying any attention to the Algerian point of view. There were lots of arguments and I can't remember what they were all about.

WILLIS J. SUTTER
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Nouakchott (1982-1984)

Willis J. Sutter was born in New Jersey on July 16, 1936. He received a B.A. from St. Joseph's College and an M.A. from the University of Philadelphia. He joined the USIA in 1966. Mr. Sutter served in Bangkok, Moscow, Kinshasa, Nouakchott, Vientiane, and Washington, DC. He was interviewed by Jack O'Brien on February 24, 1988.

Q: How would you compare that program with the one you found in Mauritania?

SUTTER: Oh, no comparison. Mauritania is a country in the process of dying. It was a one-person post. There really was no reason to have a post there, and shortly after I arrived, I recommended that the Agency close it.

I was not being disingenuous, because I really enjoyed being there, and did not mind my two years in Mauritania. But, I saw no real reason for USIS to be there. The population is evenly divided between Arabs and black Africans and is run by the white Moors -- the Arabs.

The Moors are very parochial, inward-looking people. Their horizons do not extend any farther than the world of Islam. They have no interest whatsoever in the Western world, except as a source of aid. The blacks do. The blacks are basically Francophone, and the Moors are oriented to the Arab world. The blacks -- now, if the blacks were in charge, it would be a different place. But, because the Moors were in charge, it was difficult.

They did not restrict me and they were always very friendly and very welcoming. Toward the end of my tour there, I finally found out how to really make it with my contacts. The national newspaper published a long poem about the plight of the country. The country is drying up and blowing away, because of a severe drought over the last thirteen, fourteen years.

So, this little civilization is slowly dying. This writer wrote this long epic poem about the death

of the civilization. He wrote it in Hassanya which is a dialect of Arabic. It was published in the paper in French. I was taken by it, so I translated it into English, just for myself. I wrote a long report about it back to USIS-Washington, and the State Department. Essentially I said that the poem had the impact among the Moors of a similar statement about nuclear war in the United States. The consequences were about the same thing.

The point of my story is, I was unclear about some of the French terms he had used, because these were sort of Arab words he had worked into French. I could not find any good definitions. So, I went to the newspaper -- I knew the editor well -- and said that I was translating this guy's poem and that I wondered if somebody could give me an explanation of some of the French terms.

They were actually flabbergasted and just pleased pink, that I would be translating, that I was interested in this guy's poem. It turned out the guy is their greatest poet and the Moors are people who love poems. At that, we just caught on like a house-a-fire. This was two weeks before I -- no two months before I left. If I had done that when I first arrived, my relationship with these guys would have been much, much better.

They wanted to introduce me to the poet, so that he could sit down with me and talk about the poem himself; explain what he really meant and all this business. They were just pleased as punch that I translated this thing into English. I gave them a copy of my English translation, which, when I look at it now, it is not all that good. The point is, that once you take an interest in the things that interest them, that really strike them, they are ready to meet you.

EDWARD L. PECK
Ambassador
Mauritania (1983-1985)

Ambassador Edward L. Peck was born in California in 1929. He obtained a B.S. from the University of California at Los Angeles and an M.B.A. from George Washington University. He served in the U.S. Army for four years. After joining the Foreign Service, Ambassador Peck served in Goteborg, Tangier, Tunis, Oran, Cairo, Baghdad, Nouakchott, and Washington, DC. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 29, 1989.

Q: Okay, let's move on then to your next assignment. I'm not sure whether it was -- I mean to be an ambassador is always a step up, but at the same time Mauritania doesn't strike one as being the greatest place to go. Do you feel that you were put out to pasture, or was this a movement forward?

PECK: It was both. One of the things -- I don't want this to sound overly self-serving. It's always a question of timing, you know. That summer that I was picked for Mauritania, two -- well, Mauritania is an Arab country. It's a member of the Arab League and all the rest of it. There were

three Arab posts that came open that summer. One of them went to a country director who was from that area. One of them went to a deputy assistant secretary who had earned it. And the third one went to me, but it went to me illustrating the problem.

The fellow who'd been named to go there two years before was Henry Precht, the DCM in Cairo. He was named, went through the long process, and then he was turned down by the Senate, and his name was withdrawn. To replace him they picked a fellow named David Korn, who had been the director of the Office of Israeli and Arab-Israeli Affairs. So he was going on, that was his reward. He went through the process and got turned down by the Mauritians.

Q: I might add, Precht got turned down by the Senate mainly because he had been country director for Iran, and there were problems there. Korn was a -- was he Jewish or not?

PECK: No, I don't think Korn was Jewish.

Q: I was wondering whether this --

PECK: He had served in Mauritania before, and he was known to them. He also was married to a very well-known Jewish activist and, thirdly, there was some confusion over the fact that there was a man named David Korn who was a senior advisor to the Secretary of State for Israeli Affairs. And David Korn had been the director of the Office of Israeli and Arab-Israeli Affairs, and the Mauritians are pretty goosey on this kind of business. In any event, they never turned him down, they just never accepted him.

So there had to be a long pause to teach them a lesson, and then I was picked for the job, and I went through an inordinately long process, partly because a political appointee came into the process and then dropped out. So that between being told I was going to get the post and actually going, eleven months passed.

So Mauritania. As Nick Veliotis said, "At least you are getting an embassy." I did not come out of NEA smelling like a rose. Much of that was my fault. Part of it was the system under which I was working. Thirdly was the fact that I'd been, you know, beating a dead horse, trying to get Egypt -- the desk -- back up into the system a bit more. I did not come out as a shining star.

So Mauritania was a sideways move at best, but it was an embassy. When I went there, there were fifty U.S. direct-hire Americans at post; I was astounded. From a career perspective, being a reasonably objective individual, I could not have gone to a worse post at a worse time for me, personally. For a lot of reasons.

Mauritania is a small, underdeveloped, largely desert country with a small population, and is jerked around by all the major powers, including those Muslim and Arab countries that give it the money on which it subsists: Saudi Arabia and others. It also had been, until not too long before I arrived, involved in a war in which it had no business being.

When the Spaniards withdrew from the Spanish Sahara, Mauritania and Morocco partitioned the country, Morocco taking the top two-thirds, and Mauritania the bottom third. Then they both got

involved in a war against the Polisario, which was, depending on to whom you spoke, either displaced Saharawis fighting to reestablish themselves in their homeland or Algerian mercenaries. After a long and for them costly and bloody war, the Mauritians said, "Hey, we want no part of this," and backed out of the territory. The Moroccans took it all, looked down upon the Mauritians for having betrayed them in this effort, and the Mauritians devoted themselves to trying to overcome the effects of the world's longest and most savage drought on a country which had been just barely Sahelian up to that point.

Q: Sahelian referring to the creeping desert that was happening in the Sahel.

PECK: The Sahel is a band across the northern part of Africa, taking in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, the Sudan, and so forth. The northern part being Saharan, and the bottom part being Semi Arid, animal grazing, minimal rainfall, you can raise certain crops and so on. Moving down into Africa, you get to the bottom of that band, which then takes in Senegal and the lower quarter of Mauritania. The drought had been going on for so long that Mauritania, which had been three-quarters Saharan had become nine-tenths Saharan, that is, just plain desert.

By the way, a digression. Sahara, in Arabic, means "desert". So the Sahara Desert is the desert desert, like the Rio River in Spanish.

Q: Ed, you were talking a bit about the situation of Mauritania and American interests therein.

PECK: Well, I'll take the American interests part. They're the minimal ones that you find the Americans had or have in all countries, you know, to prevent worse things from happening. The country was deteriorating badly. We wanted to ensure that didn't provide an opportunity for the bad guys, whoever they are, to come in. And you had various humanitarian programs and political dialogue on all sorts of issues, and it was a presence. The American presence, which was -- you could say, in the best of terms, sort of a knee jerk. It was reflexive. Because there was a country there, like the famous mountain climber, you know, who claimed "because it's there." The Chinese, for example, had a huge mission, an enormous aid program, left over from the days when they were trying to compete against the Russians in international affairs.

Well, several things happened that set the stage for my performance. First was that Mauritians, at the time of the Shatila and . . .

Q: Massacres in Lebanon of Palestinian -- the Israeli --

PECK: Massacres, yes. That we just talked about. They demonstrated against the American embassy in Nouakchott, as did lots of other people around the world, and had some very, very nasty anti-American editorials in the local newspapers, which at that time had been infiltrated by people who were funded by, or at least believed in, Libyan anti-Americanism. So crowds went out and they stoned the embassy. I remember joking at the time, I was still here, that that was incorrect, because they could "sand" the embassy, but unless the stones were imported, you couldn't really stone it. Anyway, the American chargé d'affaires, who had been there for almost two years as chargé because there had not been an ambassador for that long, sent in all kinds of negative reports -- and the Americans, here in town --

Q: In Washington.

PECK: Yes, in the Department, called in the French-educated Mauritanian ambassador on three separate occasions and slapped him around the office. I exaggerate of course. A deputy assistant secretary of state, twice, and a country director, once, gave him direct, focused tongue-lashings and reported this back to Nouakchott, with what I can only describe, as I watched it, not yet being confirmed by the Senate, something like glee.

And I remember thinking at the time that the reason that they were doing this, was that they could not do it to the Algerians or the Indians or the French or the Australians or the Swedes. Barring the demonstrations, they were doing and saying the same vile and terrible things about the U.S. all over the world. You couldn't call in those ambassadors and give them a tongue-lashing, but you could do it to the helpless Mauritanian, because nobody really gave a damn about that country. And you could work out your macho fantasies, "Yes, we had a talk -- I really laid into him. I really gave it to him."

And they really did light into this -- you've never met him -- very quiet, very soft-spoken, very dignified gentleman who doesn't speak English, by the way.

Shortly afterwards, the Mauritanian Government declared two members of the AID mission persona non grata. They did it because the minister of rural development accused the deputy director and a project officer of having accused him of being involved in a recently-discovered bit of corruption involving an AID-financed project. There had been some money and some supplies lost.

The Mauritians were very upset about this, and the Americans canceled the project because of the \$29,000 dollar loss. Inadvertently, the project officer, whose French wasn't so good anyway, did not carefully look at the translation into French of his report on the losses, which was sent to the minister. He wrote in his report a phrase to the effect that, "It is clear that some Mauritanian officials were aware of or perhaps involved in" the corruption. The translator wrote, "Il est évident que les responsables Mauritaniennes," meaning Mauritanian officials, but "les responsables" means the people in charge, and the minister took it very personally.

Q: The persons responsible.

PECK: Yes. Les responsables, the responsible persons. The translation wasn't checked anywhere in the AID mission. I didn't see it till long afterwards when I got there. The deputy director of the AID mission, an unusual man to find in an AID program, a former Green Beret, very macho, tough guy, kick ass kind of fellow, was going to cocktail parties and diplomatic functions telling people that he was going to get that minister, because he was a vile, no good, lousy, dirty, sneak and a crook and a cheat. The minister, French-educated as well, had him declared PNG. I had not yet been declared as the candidate, and was still working in Egyptian Affairs, in fact.

I heard about this and I said, "Oh, boy, those guys have got to go." Everybody in the West Africa country directorate, AF/W, agreed, but AID wouldn't hear of it. Messages came in from the post

saying both of these men are innocent, they're pure and pristine and virginal and decent and all of that.

So therefore AID had its way, and a message was sent out to the chargé -- a different chargé by now, my chargé, my future DCM -- telling the Mauritians -- I remember the final paragraph -- it said, "It would be unfortunate if a country suffering the effects of a ravaging drought would underestimate the potential impact on assistance programs that it vitally needs by carrying out this unfriendly act" (the PNG action).

Which is called blackmail in the trade, I think. Anyway, I saw that final paragraph, and I was outraged. And I went to see the country director and I said, "Jesus, who cleared this?"

He said, "Well, the deputy assistant secretary, the fellow who called in the ambassador."

So I went to see this chap, and I said, "That is unseemly and unsanitary and indecent and not in keeping with the standards" -- we had quite an exchange about it. Anyway, he essentially threw me out of the office.

Three days later a memo came down from Larry Eagleburger, clipped to a copy of that message saying, "Who wrote this?" And Eagleburger --

Q: Larry Eagleburger was --

PECK: Was Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and he said, "You don't send this kind of message." It was another one of this macho, "we'll show these little brown bastards" kind of thing. Anyway, it was just an awful business.

Well, the chargé had the good sense not to use the last paragraph. He didn't say he wasn't going to do it, but he didn't. Anyway, they forced the Mauritians to swallow the PNG action over the violent objections of the minister and his coterie -- saying you can't let these arrogant, overbearing Americans do these kinds of things. Anyway, the Mauritanian Government was ripped open, but we had made it clear that if the Mauritians carried out the PNG we were going to cut the aid program. So they swallowed it, with real gnashing of teeth.

Four months later I arrived, and two months after that we cut the aid program.

Q: Completely or cut . . .

PECK: Seventy-five percent. The AID mission director had gone in to see that minister of rural development, and they'd had a diatribe again. The minister was a very, very touchy, very feisty guy. And he spoke beautiful, elegant French, and the AID mission director spoke what AID called a 3+ --

Q: Which was a supposedly working level --

PECK: More than.

Q: A little more than working level.

PECK: The AID Director, an extremely competent and pleasant man, spoke French very badly. In any event he did something to offend the minister, and they had a heated exchange, and the director came out actually in tears, he was that distressed. And Washington said, "Okay, by God, we're going to cut all the programs."

I sent in messages saying, "Wait, before you do this. By some mechanism, which I do not attempt to describe or dissect, the United States Government and all its parts concluded that this country was worth about so much in economic assistance, in order to achieve the purposes which we as Americans have for the country and the region. Nothing has changed of which I am aware except that two people involved in the program have had a heated exchange. Now the proposal is to cut the program by seventy-five percent. That seems to me to be petty, irrational, nonprofessional, and not at all in U.S. interests as they existed seventy-two hours ago."

The reply came back and it said, "Shut up, and go tell the President." I sent a telegram in and I said, "Let me deliver the demarché to the Prime Minister, a man with whom I have spoken a number of times, and a man with whom I have discussed the problems that we're having with the assistance program, and who will understand."

They said, "No, you are to go and see the President."

Q: This was coming from the same person who --

PECK: Yeah, essentially. Well, AID had a big hand in it. They were very outraged and the rest of the State Department didn't care. What the hell is Mauritania? So I went to see the president who greeted me with a smile, and then I lowered this boom on him, and I showed him where he was going to lose about twenty-six million dollars in overall assistance. And he was just devastated. "For what -- what -- why -- wh-who?"

The main problem was that I'm a take-charge kind of guy, and the post had fractioned, in the two-and-a-half years since an ambassador had last been there, as individual fiefdoms sprang up. By the time I got there, there were lots of totally independent groups. I'll illustrate the problem. We had something there called the American Employee's Recreation Association of Nouakchott -- AERAN. It had a clubhouse, leased by the U.S. Government, which also paid the utilities and provided the furniture, and you know, other support. AERAN ran the restaurant a bar, they had bridge night and dances, they had one of these enormous TV screens.

Q: Back-projection.

PECK: Yes, and a VCR, and all that kind of thing: Ping pong, and pool tables and everything. It was run by a five-member elected board, three employees and two dependents, who also ran the commissary.

I'd been there perhaps six weeks, and one morning saw a flyer in my in-box which said,

"AERAN presents 'Porno Night'. Through the good efforts of Steve and Gladys Jones, we're going to have "Up this" and "In that" and so on. Come early, get a good seat, get a good sandwich -- dadadadada."

I called in the DCM and I said, "We have foreign diplomatic members, we have some Mauritanian members, this is Mauritania, its a US Government building, you can't have a "porno night" in the American club."

So he called together the board. He said, "You can't do this."

And they essentially replied, "Who the hell says so?"

And he said, "Well, the Ambassador says so."

And one of the dependents said, "Well, who the hell does he think he is?" [Laughter]

And the DCM said, "Well, I have the distinct impression that he believes he's the Ambassador."

They said, "Well, he doesn't have the right to tell us what to do."

He said, "Look, you can show this in your own home, do this in your own home, but you're not going to do it in the club."

Well, the outrage that ran through parts of the community, because somebody was telling them what they could and couldn't do was incredible.

The DCM had to come and tell me about another problem, which I only select because it outlines the situation. Big compound there, the embassy buildings and the American school, four residences, two swimming pools, a tennis court, and a huge play area. One of the swimming pools was in the back yard of the residence, one was over behind the tennis court. One was the community pool, one was the ambassador's pool. For two and a half years both pools had been community pools, because the residence had been the guest house and the transient quarters, where they gave parties and banquets and balls. My wife, when we first saw the place, said of the furniture in the living room, "We're going to have to send this stuff out to have it scraped." Obviously they'd had a lot of barbecues and had forgot to pass out napkins, because the upholstery was really gross.

Anyway, I had two small children, and just before I moved into the house the admin officer closed the pool on my behalf. Outrage in the community. The AID mission director came to see me, and said, "I understand that you're going to close the other community pool."

I said, "What other community pool? There's just one." [Laughter]

He said, "Yes, but we swim in that pool all the time."

I said, "Well, you know, it's in my back yard for a reason." Very, very stressed they were, that

this ass came in and thinks that our pool is his pool, just because its in his yard.

A number of things happened which afterwards led me to discover that I was being blamed for a number of contentious decisions reached by the AID mission director, or his bosses. This seriously undercut my relations with the AID mission staff. I illustrate the problem -- I hate to take up too much time with this because it doesn't sound like foreign affairs and yet it is, in a sense, as far as oral history's concerned. The AID mission director and I sat down and agreed that the deputy director had to be transferred, because his working efficiency had been seriously impaired by the failed PNG exercise, since many Mauritians would no longer deal with him. We agreed that he would leave on the thirty-first of March, 1983. I got there in January. Thirty-first of March. So I wrote a telegram to Washington telling everyone this, and "The AID mission director has fully participated in the preparation of this message, and has cleared it herewith." Sent that in, and we agreed that we would together tell the deputy director.

So we three went out to the beach one night, having martinis, watching the waves break on the sand, and I turned to the deputy director and I said, after a long introduction, "We've set the date of the thirty-first of March for your departure." And the mission director immediately turned to me and he said, "Oh, Mr. Ambassador, surely we can let him stay longer than that."

In the silence which followed, I realized why ambassadors get extra pay. I had just been stabbed in the back, as it were, by this guy, who was trying to protect his own relationship with his deputy and the rest of AID.

Shortly thereafter, the AID mission director went to Washington on consultations. Ten days later a message came for the AID deputy director from the assistant administrator for AID, telling him that because of all the other things he had to do, he shouldn't plan on leaving until about the twenty-fifth of April instead of March 31st. I found out later that that message had been written by the AID mission director, back in Washington.

I called AF/W and said, "Hey. He's supposed to leave on the thirty-first of March. I have spoken." They said, "Ed, don't fight this one. AID is really dug in." So I had my, you know, part of my ambassadorial authority shot off right there.

Mauritania had a lot of problems which I worked on, one of which was that relations with the U.S. were not very good, for a lot of reasons. One had to do with the fact that I had told the foreign ministry that the AID deputy was leaving. They had asked me, to move him out as early as possible, and I'd reported this to Washington. They wanted him to leave because it was an embarrassment to them to have him there, and couldn't we please, now that we had forced them to compromise their honor by letting the man stay, reduce the shame and the residual internal strife by moving him now that he had permission to remain. I had told them he was leaving on the thirty-first of March, and then he didn't. Anyway, the whole thing was very bad, but overall relations I worked on as best I could.

I traveled a great deal in that country, which is very hard to do. I slowly hammered the various disparate parts of the embassy into shape. This was a lot easier as people were transferred out, you know, new ones came that didn't think of the ambassador's pool as being theirs, and so on.

But it was not a happy post for a number of reasons. It's not an easy place. In the first eight months I was there, we had five people sent home for psychiatric reasons, three of whom came in and lasted periods of five to seven weeks and then left, you know, in plastic bags. It was really a difficult time in a difficult place.

The most unbelievable sandstorms I have ever experienced. One of the guys I served with in Baghdad went from there to Nouakchott and I spoke with him before I went there. I said, "Come on, is Mauritania really as dusty as Baghdad?" He said, "Ed, you're going to laugh when I tell you, but Mauritania makes Baghdad look like Colorado Springs." And I laughed, but it does.

Baghdad is dusty, but Mauritania is unbelievable. I have never in my life experienced anything like it. Terribly isolated, extraordinarily limited opportunities to do anything except sit in sandstorms. No places to travel, nothing to see, nothing to do. No restaurants, no hotels, I mean, it's a very difficult post. Some people love it. My wife and I did. Other people can't stand it.

Because it's a hard place to staff, some elements of the U.S. Government tend to send people who can't be placed anywhere else. We got one wonderful State telegram telling us, "Congratulations, we are finally sending out a new communicator. He has just finished the alcohol awareness program, and his divorce is final, and he'll be there on Friday." He was there for six Fridays, and then we had to physically put him on the plane and fly him out, forever.

Q: There's a tendency to feel that if you have an alcohol program, they send them to the most unsuitable post. I had a friend of mine was sent to Dublin after he had gone through the alcohol program.

PECK: Well, personnel people, this is one of the syndromes every organization suffers from, personnel people have to fill slots. There, that position is now filled, and that takes care of that. [Wipes hands] They say, "We sent you a guy, now don't bother us anymore."

So it was a difficult place, but I was already very crossways with Washington, a relationship I was unfortunately able to maintain and even foster in the ensuing months. A terrible, terrible, relationship which had largely to do with the fellow who was the deputy assistant secretary, with whom I was never able to get along personally and with whom professionally I had nothing but -

Q: Can you give a name? I mean, uh --

PECK: Yes, James Bishop, who is not famed for being a warm fuzzy puppy. But with me, we just [slaps hands] didn't hit it off at all. He saw Mauritania as a place where he could work off certain other frustrations. I saw Mauritania as a place in which the United States was doing a lot of dumb things for a lot of dumb reasons. And we just did not hit it off at all.

As an illustration of this problem, when the AID mission director was eventually replaced, the man who took the job was not terribly "ept", and spoke even worse French. He brought in to me one day, shortly after he arrived, a letter that he wanted to send to the minister of health, a man

that he had not yet been able to meet, in which he flat out accused the minister of selling US-furnished medical supplies for personal profit.

And I said, "Oh, good Jesus Christ, you can't do this! That's what got us into the trouble a year and a half ago. What's this all about?"

He told me some of his people suspected medicines were being sold, and I said, "No, no. You can't write that for God's sake." So I sat down and wrote the letter the right way, indicating that America, very concerned about Mauritania's problems, was helping in every way it could and wished to underline once more to the minister, very much regretting that his absence from the capital had prevented a meeting up to now -- this is now a letter from the AID mission director -- wanted to reemphasize that should any of this medical material being sent ever be misused or misdirected, it could have the most serious consequences for the program.

"Well, here take this", I said, "And get it fixed up and send it."

And about four days later I got a copy of a letter from that minister to the president of the republic, saying, "I cannot in good conscience as a loyal servant of my country and my people, permit some foreigner to address me in this accusatory fashion."

I called the AID mission director. I said, "What did you do? Did my letter cause that reaction?"

He said, "No, I didn't use your letter. My staff convinced me that we should use the one that I showed you."

Here was this insulting letter from the AID mission director, which had gone to the minister of health, who had written to his president. The Counselor of State for ministerial Affairs, who sat outside the president's door, was the former Minister of Rural Development, who had himself been down that road once before with AID.

So I sent a message to Washington saying, "Oh, God, here we go again." Reported the problem, went to see the president, went to see the minister, brought in the AID mission director. He apologized in halting French, which helped to make it very clear to the minister that he didn't really know what it was he had signed, castigated the AID mission director for failing to carry out instructions and for not behaving in a proper fashion.

There were various repercussions and relations took another serious dip because the Mauritians, like any impoverished people, are very proud and certainly don't want to have guests in their country accusing them in writing -- which their staffs also see -- and on and on. All the reasons you can think of.

Well, I reported some of this, and after several weeks I got a No-Dis cable from the State Department, saying "We've been reading your reporting on this issue with some interest, and should you feel that the AID mission director should perhaps be sent home, the State Department would back you up, Mr. Ambassador."

Well, I guess that cable in a sense marked the nadir of my relationship, because it looked like wimp Peck didn't have the guts to be able to do it himself. They'd forgotten I had told them that if I sent him away, the guys who had already written two offensive letters would be the ones left in charge, number one. Two, I couldn't send them away because the AID mission director was a helpless, blundering incompetent, and they were the only good people he had on his staff. And thirdly, I'd already tried to send somebody out once before, and they had told me to stick it in my ear after I told him he was to go. So that message really upset me, because obviously I had not communicated any of these things appropriately.

By the time I left, after two and a half years, relationships with Mauritania were pretty good. There had been a coup. I was able to describe on a firsthand personal basis all of the individuals who came in to replace the guys who left, because I had traveled and met them, and knew them and had established relationships with them. I had been able to go in and get the Mauritians to stop doing some things which we thought were unfortunate. I'd been able to get the Mauritians to alter marginally but visibly their U.N. voting habits, which had been the source of some concern for some parts of the Reagan Administration. I'd been able to get the Mauritians to do some things to shove the Libyans out. I'd been able to do all kinds of things. I traveled up into the war zone.

Anyway, it was a nice thing going, and by the time I left, relations with Mauritania were good, relations with the Department of State were poor, especially on a personal basis. And when I came out of Mauritania it was without an on-going assignment. I had been able to fight, semi-successfully, some of the dumber things that we were doing in the field of economic development. I lost on a couple. I was able to get the Peace Corps relaunched and refocused. I was able to get a pretty enthusiastic, rather pulled together bunch of people at post. Done all kinds of things which I thought were useful, but I had essentially put the kibosh on the career, because I had been out of NEA for some years, and I had soured the relationship with the Bureau of African Affairs, so I came out to a non-assignment, which, as you may know, happens to an awful lot of people when they come out of embassies, or DCM-ships, or consulate generalships, or counselor-at-embassy for this or that. You come home and, you know, there isn't anything.

Q: And once you've lost the momentum -- I speak from good solid experience myself. I went through that. You came back, and you were called, what, the deputy director on terrorism?

PECK: Well, I was called back --

Q: This was 1985.

PECK: We're in 1985, while I was still in Nouakchott, I contacted the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs to point out that Nick Veliotis needed a DCM in Cairo.

GLENN SLOCUM
USAID Representative
Mauritania (1988-1990)

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.

Q: So you went to Mauritania straight from Paris as Mission Director, right?

SLOCUM: Yes, overnight; but not exactly as Mission Director. When I came back to Washington to get sworn in, Larry Saiers, the deputy assistant administrator for Africa, informed me that the decision had been made to downgrade it to an AID Representative job. He said, "Oh, by the way, Glenn, tomorrow morning you will be sworn in as an AID Rep. and not as a Mission Director." That caused some grief at the embassy when I got to post because they felt they should have been consulted by AID in that decision.

So, I went out as an AID Rep., arriving on May 5, 1988. My family here in Washington — I'm not married but my mother and sister were desirous of visiting me one last time in Paris — so, when they realized I would be leaving Paris in May they came over in April for a week and we took the Orient Express to Venice and back. It was a nice little family gathering. As soon as they left, I set to packing out and preparing to leave for Mauritania. I was leaving the Club some months earlier than I normally would have but AID wanted Mauritania covered. Off I went, from the culinary capital of the world to the Sahara Desert.

Q: What was the situation in Mauritania, the political and economic situation?

SLOCUM: At the going-away lunch with my Club colleagues in Paris, I asked Anne for her advice. She is very insightful and a good analyst. I said, "What are the kinds of things you think I should be looking at in Mauritania? What kinds of things should we be focusing on?" She thought for a second and said, "I don't think you can do development in Mauritania."

Q: That was a cheerful introduction.

SLOCUM: Yes, and that is typical of Anne, of course, going right to the heart of the matter. I kept that in mind. (By the way, she was right!) Nonetheless, donors were engaged in development activities across the board in Mauritania, and AID had a number of different activities that were in full implementation.

Q: Before going into activities, let's talk about the country.

SLOCUM: Sure. There is so much to say about Mauritania. It is essentially a feudal society. The Moors are essentially a nomadic people, although many of them have become sedentary as a result of education and the southern push of the desert. It is a country, like many of the Sahel countries, where there is kind of an invisible line between an Arab population in the northern part and an African population in the south. Over time tensions have arisen between those two groups. In Mauritania, power has always resided with the Moor group, who are light-skinned Arab stock. And they always will, as long as they can control the country and its political system.

The sedentary population, sometimes called black or African Mauritians, lives along the Senegal river in the south, and they are sedentary agriculturalists whereas the Moors have been herders and traders. This distinction between the two groups took on enormous - and tragic - significance in the two years I was in Mauritania because of a sudden outburst of violence that none of us could have predicted. With the spread of the desert and the declining carrying capacity of the land and the soil, large numbers of Moors were naturally moving further south. They were running out of water and needed more land for their herds. So there became increasing tension over access to, and ownership of, the more fertile land in the southern part of the country bordering the Senegal river.

Politically and ethnically national power has always resided in the Moors. The Moors have always said that they outnumber the rest of the population by about two to one, although this is in dispute. Among the Moors themselves there are many clans and groups and a delicate partition of power among them that an outsider is incapable of understanding. Ministerial nominations are part of that balance of power. We look on them all as Moors, but in fact, they are very clannish and there has to be a division of jobs among these clans in positions of responsibilities. This also holds true, of course, for nominations of senior positions to members of the tribes from the south, the "Africans."

So, this was, and is, an increasingly desertified country which put strains on the economy and on welfare. Despite its ecological fragility, Mauritania has great mineral deposits in the north, mainly of iron and phosphates. There is a huge fishery wealth offshore, which the Mauritians exploit through lucrative contracts with countries around the world - Japan, Russia, China, and many others. The country's second city, Nouadhibou, is further north up the coast from the capital city of Nouakchott. It is at Nouadhibou that the major fisheries operations dock, and it is the point from which all the ore extracted from the interior comes by rail for shipment. Minerals and fisheries are the two major foreign exchange earners, and they are significant. But their benefits have not been used to improve the standard of living of the average Mauritanian, who remains rooted in primitive patterns of herding and farming.

Mauritania is officially called The Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The Moors, themselves, are quite hospitable, typical of the desert nomad culture. Wherever you travel you will be welcomed into a home and given a place to stay and taken care of even though the pickings are meager. You will be invited to share their meal. When I describe them as nomadic, I am referring to their origins. Most of them have become sedentary as they have been obliged to accommodate to changing circumstances.

I think development prospects, as Anne had warned me, were limited, and we had completed some fairly major investments that hadn't shown too much success, but AID still had a fairly impressive list of activities that were going on.

Q: How big was the Mission?

SLOCUM: We must have had five or six direct hire, three personal services contractors and then a local staff of about 30. We had agricultural, health and engineering divisions (engineering because we had a fairly major roads project in the south). There was one major design activity

when I got there, an irrigated perimeter project which got to the final approval stage, but it was never submitted for approval in final form to Washington because of the tragic events that occurred in 1989, which caused us to phase down the program and close out the Mission over the next two years. This is why I only stayed there two years. I would have stayed there longer but for human rights reasons.

Q: What were some of the programs and how did they work?

SLOCUM: There was a longstanding agricultural research activity through the University of Arizona. It was a classic Title XII-supported agricultural research project which included field research, training, etc.

Q: Connected with a university or some institution in the country?

SLOCUM: The Arizona team worked with the National Agricultural Research Center.

Q: There was no Mauritanian educational counterpart to this?

SLOCUM: Only to the extent that the national ag research network trained researchers and extension agents, but no, it had no connection with the University of Mauritania in Nouakchott. The research headquarters were located in the town of Kaedi which was southwest of Nouakchott on the Senegal River. Serving the agricultural sector, the Center was staffed predominantly by the different ethnic groups from the African Mauritanian population in the south, which became a problem for the continuation of the project later. The Minister of Rural Development during my period of service was a Moor without any technical qualifications for the sector. Under his tenure, he began trying to shift the focus of research to more drought-resistant crops which could be grown away from the river. This caused us problems because we were focusing on food and cash crops more appropriate to the river valley.

Q: Was most of this research along the river?

SLOCUM: Yes, just because that was where the country's large-scale agriculture took place. The rest of the country was desert, and the only agriculture was the oases and some small gardening in villages near other water sources. There had earlier been an oasis development activity which had not given much in the way of results and was already terminated by the time I came.

Q: Were we trying to train any Mauritians to be researchers?

SLOCUM: Oh, yes. The University of Arizona program included a major training component. I don't recall how many Mauritians received long-term training at Arizona or affiliated consortium universities, but I guess it was between 10 and 20. By the way, I think in retrospect that the most lasting impact we had in Mauritania was in human resource development. We had a personal services contractor who was responsible for all the training, both project-level training as well as broader opportunities offered through AFGRAD and HRDA. By 1990 I believe the Mission had well over 100 Mauritians in training or who had completed training programs.

Q: What kind of crops were they researching?

SLOCUM: Grains, some legumes, even rice, in a variety of irrigation schemes connected with the river. Imported rice is a staple of their diet, believe it or not. I say this because rice is perhaps the most water-intensive crop in the world, and thus a fairly expensive imported habit. Garden vegetables that could be grown around homes, usually by the women, were also improved through the project.

But, something unusual happened with irrigated rice production during the time I was there. There emerged a phenomenon of Moor businessmen from Nouakchott who invested in irrigation plots in an area along the river in the delta, in southwest Mauritania. They were buying up land from the local landowners, and they developed their own rice cropping schemes that became very successful. Elliot Berg, the renowned development economist, was constantly watching for unexpected developments in food production economics in the Sahel, and alerted us to this. On a visit to Mauritania for the World Bank, he told me, “We don’t know of any other experience of unique private sector investments in fairly big schemes like this elsewhere in the Sahel.” So, we funded his proposal to look at that. Before we could get the study underway, however, the disruptions of 1989 prevented us from going ahead with Elliot’s proposal.

Q: Were there rice varieties that were a result of our research work?

SLOCUM: I don’t think so. I think we focused more on the non-rice crops more traditional to the valley. But, it was something that I think our own research activity would have gotten more involved in if we had stayed longer.

Q: What were some of the other projects?

SLOCUM: I was getting into training. We had a very good human resources person and we had a vast training project that successfully identified opportunities for at least a hundred Mauritians in a wide variety of disciplines over a 10-year period. Demand was high, even at the undergraduate level, because of the relatively restricted opportunities for students locally. Moreover, because of their nomadic-trader tradition, the Moors had very good business instincts. We weren’t involved in private sector promotion or structural adjustment as the World Bank was, but because of the Moors’ own business acumen, there were areas that we found for formal training. For example, vocational training, which could support some of these activities. We did a lot in the fisheries sector up in Nouadhibou. We even helped train a Mauritanian businessman who was building a dry dock for repairs so they wouldn’t have to pay for costly repairs to their fleets, and those of other countries, outside Mauritania.

Our HRD adviser (PSC) had set up a neat arrangement for vocational training activities in Tunisia. Tunisian Arabic and Mauritanian Arabic, called hassaniya, are very similar, and he had identified a Tunisian training organization with which the Mission entered into a long-term contract. I had the occasion to visit the headquarters of the Tunisian Agency for Technical Training. At any given time the agency had up to 100 young Mauritians in a variety of vocation-level training programs, generally geared to private-sector employment: machinery repair and related subjects. And that was a very useful thing, to use another African country

where language was not a problem and which offered very practical, hands-on courses.

We also did academic training, of course, as I described earlier, both graduate-level training through the AFGRAD program and other training through the Africa Regional Human Resources Development Activity (HRDA).

Q: Did you find a sufficient number of Mauritanian candidates?

SLOCUM: Oh, Yes. Graduates from the liberal studies at the University of Nouakchott plus Mauritanians who had profited from earlier training abroad, of whom there were quite a few. The demand and competition were intense. The one thing we never got off the ground and wanted to was an alumni association which could offer a forum for returned trainees (participants) to exchange views about their experiences and allow us to monitor their employment after their return.

Q: Did they come back regularly after their studies in the States?

SLOCUM: To my knowledge the return rate was as good as any other country. I can't cite you statistics, but it was not a problem. However, an "alumni association" would have helped get a more precise fix on this.

Q: They settled into good positions?

SLOCUM: Yes. They were well received by the government. In addition to the agricultural activity, we had a health project with the Ministry of Health which had a training component. Unfortunately, though, after the disruptions of mid-1989, many of the non-Moor Mauritanians found themselves marginalized in their civil service positions or, worse, expelled from Mauritania as "Senegalese" or forced to flee with their families out of fear.

Q: Did the health project set up clinics around the country?

SLOCUM: The focus was on building the capacity of the Ministry to manage, expand and improve the quality of the public health clinics.

Q: To open the northern areas?

SLOCUM: No, the emphasis was less geographical than it was quality and quantity of health care services being offered in existing clinics. Mauritanians number about two million, as I recall, most of them in rural areas, and the push was for better clinics. I recall that access was less a problem because drought had pushed people closer to urban or semi-urban areas. Nonetheless, given the scarcity of water in most areas and the high rate of poverty, Mauritanians' health indicators were poor, with a high mortality rate. I think the lifespan was something like 42 years.

Q: Were there any cultural problems promoting health care?

SLOCUM: No. Even though all Mauritians are Muslim, they are quite open to modern health methods, including birth control. Because of the declining land carrying capacity, people tended to be living closer to public services, so that they became more used to having health services.

Q: Were there squatter settlements around Nouakchott?

SLOCUM: Oh, boy, yes. There are squatter towns on the dunes outside town with ramshackle huts made of just about anything people could get their hands on. This was another consequence of the drought and the declining “carrying capacity” of the land.

Q: Were you working with those people?

SLOCUM: Not directly, except for the health activity. But these expanding settlements presented enormous problems to already strained services. So, there certainly was an effort to expand services there. Our main effort was through NGOs using food-for-work from proceeds of Title II food aid. Even Catholic Relief Services had an active program there, along with a Christian fundamentalist group known as Doulos, something of an anomaly in the Islamic Republic.

Q: What were some of the other project areas?

SLOCUM: In the Mauritians’ eyes, undoubtedly the most important contribution of the USAID program was the Title II food aid program. Given the significant structural food gap - between their own production and the population’s food needs - most donors had a major food aid component.

Q: This was Title II?

SLOCUM: Yes.

Q: Used for development?

SLOCUM: Yes.

Q: In what kind of work?

SLOCUM: In addition to Food-for-Work, the proceeds of food sales were allotted to small-scale schemes to spur local initiatives. The program also had a heavy policy component. That is where we had, I think, our greatest influence. The Mauritanian official responsible for food security, the Food Aid Commissioner, was very good, a devout person of great integrity. His job was of crucial political importance. He had the president’s mandate to make sure there was enough food in the country to feed the population. He was very amenable to debate the nature and pace of the reform agenda, including areas such as pricing policy to make sure that donor food aid did not serve as a disincentive to local production. So, thanks to the Commissaire, we had a very smooth relationship on the policy issues.

Q: Was that used for food for work kinds of programs?

SLOCUM: There were some food-for-work activities, but it was more tied to agricultural policy reforms in a multi-donor context. The European Community with German leadership was the other major food-aid donor. Of course, it was the World Bank which led the policy reform effort.

Q: What kind of policies were you trying to address?

SLOCUM: The policies ranged from appropriate pricing policies for agricultural products to broader efforts to support structural adjustment. We worked very closely with the Bank on these issues.

Q: Did it have an effect?

SLOCUM: I think the dialogue with the Mauritians helped them understand how to use food imports in more productive ways that didn't act against domestic economic initiatives. Food aid use became more rational, and there was some evidence of decreasing dependency on food aid. Mauritania will always be a "structurally food deficit" country, so the best one can hope for is that food aid does not serve as a disincentive to local production. Again, for production increases you had to look to the south and the proper development of the river basin. Increasingly there were investments by all the donors — the European Union, the World Bank, the French, the Germans and even some NGOs — in irrigation development along the river.

Q: Were there other project areas that you were working in?

SLOCUM: Yes. The fragile agricultural systems were very vulnerable to pest infestation of crops. We had a component of the integrated pest management (IPM) project that was very important because production was already threatened enough because of limited areas of soil fertility and water. In 1988 Mauritania had an incredible locust invasion that denuded everything in its path including virtually all the vegetation in the capital city of Nouakchott. The locusts were so thick that when you walked through them they would scatter to create a path for you to walk through. Their numbers were so great that you could hear them eating away the foliage. The only things they didn't eat were pine trees and the like. Everything else was stripped. We got emergency funds and did a lot of spraying down in the river valley where the agricultural production was the most important.

And then we had a fairly big roads project in the south with an American engineer working with the public works ministry. We provided the heavy equipment and technical assistance and oversight. The roads in question were important for opening up markets for the agricultural region.

Q: Down in the south?

SLOCUM: In the river valley, opening up the area.

Q: Nothing in the northern part?

SLOCUM: Except for the oasis project I mentioned earlier, we did nothing in the agricultural sector beyond the south. If you look at a map of Mauritania, the process of desertification has resulted in a southern progression that appears inexorable. Historically Mauritania had major population centers in the north, but those that exist today derive their economic value from the minerals and fisheries exploitation.

But the north had remnants of once great cities. One city, almost a ghost town, owed its significance to a salt mine which made it an important stop on a major caravan trail. The town, called Tichit, was no longer easily reachable by road, but on one occasion the Ambassador had use of the regional U.S. Air Force plane and we flew to the Tichit prefecture. It was a small town, barely visible from the air. In fact, the pilot had trouble finding the landing strip and asked our help in siting it. Just north of Tichit was a long, high cliff, which I guess served to protect the town somewhat from the encroaching dunes. There was a small population, and a local official, the *prefet*, who came out to greet us in a blowing sandstorm that made landing in our small plane an experience the pilot later told me he would place in the “bottom 10 percent” of his flying experience. The city had been an important Islamic center, and the remains of its school, known as a *medersa*, were still there. The remaining buildings were well preserved, and remarkably, a librarian managed the sacred texts that were dated before the year 1,000 AD. They were remarkable to behold: hand-printed and -painted, protected by the dry desert air. The man who let us in allowed us to examine those books. But one could sense that the northern cities such as Tichit will eventually disappear under the dunes. The only cities in the north that would remain are those that are linked to the minerals exploitation and can support, therefore, the infrastructure required to keep a city intact. So, you are really talking about a country of about 2 million people with the majority living in a very small land surface area of the country, the southern region.

Q: Were we involved in oasis development?

SLOCUM: We had been.

Q: What were we trying to do?

SLOCUM: Trying to exploit whatever could be produced from oasis areas. Date palms, of course, but also vegetable gardens. However, this was phased out before my time there. I suspect that there had been some political pressure from the Moors to take a look at oasis agriculture, but it didn't get very far because of the obvious low economic return to the investment.

Q: You mentioned the RAMS project. Was that active while you were there?

SLOCUM: No, that had already been completed. I am not sure of the extent to which the extensive reports were useful. For example, in my two years there, I never once heard reference to them in discussions with Mauritanian officials.

Q: Were there any Consultative Group meetings among the donors?

SLOCUM: Not a World Bank-sponsored classic CG, no, nor do I recall any UNDP Round Table meetings. After the civil unrest of 1989, the World Bank organized a meeting in Paris, at the

OECD, of donors to help get Mauritania back on path.

Q: What was it that happened while you were there?

SLOCUM: In May 1989, a year after I arrived, an incident occurred on a small island in the Senegal River. As I recall the reports at the time, Mauritanian herders had taken cattle to graze on an island in the middle of the river, where farmers from Senegal had crops. The two sides exchanged words, which escalated into fighting. The herders killed two farmers from Matam, a nearby town on the Senegal side. When word reached Matam about the killings, the townspeople began attacking Moors living there. Mauritians, as I mentioned, the Moors, are traders throughout West Africa, running little shops on the streets of towns and cities. So, in any city in Senegal, as well as other countries in West Africa, you will find stands or kiosks run by Moors. The Moors in Matam were randomly attacked and a number were killed. When word of this spread to Mauritania, Moors staged retaliatory attacks on the Senegalese population in Mauritanian cities, notably in Nouakchott. Word of this got back to Senegal, and a mounting spiral of violence was underway, with scores of Moors getting attacked and killed in Senegal, and the same fate striking Senegalese in Mauritania. There developed a spreading phenomenon of tit-for-tat, which escalated to the point that both countries were virtually at war.

I was in Washington at the time to attend the senior management seminar, but the Ambassador asked me to come back immediately because of what had happened. The fighting continued spreading, and within days any Senegalese in Mauritania were fair game and any Moors in Senegal were at risk. A lot of people were killed, well into the hundreds. The result was a UN-sponsored airlift in which all Senegalese in Mauritania were taken to Dakar and any Moors in Senegal were airlifted up to Mauritania. This doesn't capture the brutality of the events, though. One of my household staff told me he saw a Moor twist the neck of a Senegalese baby until it died. At the airport, departing Senegalese were forced by the Mauritanian military to give up all their belongings, including personal papers, photos, even money. I saw for myself torn money notes in the latrines, the departing Senegalese deciding that if they couldn't take it with them, the Moors would not get it either. They preferred to destroy their money rather than hand it over to the soldiers. One of the events that particularly disturbed me was the testimony of American colleagues who had witnessed truckloads of Moors being dispatched in the early-morning hours from a store around the corner from the USAID offices. The trucks were loaded with haratine (the Arab word for ex-slave Moors, the lowest class of Moor) and their Moor masters were instructing them where to go to kill Senegalese and destroy their houses and property. We had patronized that store regularly. It was one of those general stores where one could find just about anything. We called it "the Amazing Boutique." After hearing of the role the store owners had played in the atrocities, none of us ever patronized the store again. This was my introduction to terror and violence. Unfortunately it would not be the only episode in my career. Ironically, some of the toughest lessons of my career lay before me, lessons for which one could not possibly be prepared, and a reminder that we development officers were not well equipped to deal with them.

Removing the antagonists and victims was an immediate and necessary solution, but that didn't resolve the underlying political impasse between the two countries. What had been underlying tensions were now open hostility, and the war turned into a rhetorical war of words between politicians of the two countries, and this lasted for well over a year. Their rhetoric consisted in

charging the other side with total responsibility for the violence. In the meantime, the Moors became very suspicious of their black African population in southern Mauritania and began to force a lot of the African Mauritians across the Senegal River into Senegal, claiming that they were not real Mauritians. Prominent officials in Nouakchott who were members of the ethnic groups from along the river were also expelled. The Director of Agriculture in the GIRM (Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania) was either expelled or made so uncomfortable that he fled with his family for fear of their safety. Despite the efforts of the diplomatic community to put a stop to that and get the GIRM to accept back the expelled people, they stonewalled, claiming that anyone who left had done so voluntarily and, were, by the way, not really Mauritians anyway but Senegalese. This became the status quo for months, maybe more than a year. (To the best of my knowledge, which may not be accurate, the majority of the 50,000 black Mauritians forced to resettle in northern Senegal in 1989 are still there.).

The State Department felt that it was important for AID to maintain its programs as a tool of State diplomacy to keep the Mauritians from doing even worse things. AID felt that, in that climate of killing, reprisals and expulsions of its own nationals, especially from the most productive region of the country, it really didn't make sense for AID to maintain its programs there. This thinking process developed over several months. It was very frustrating for those of us to see this turn of events. Mauritanian society was split in two, and people who before had been working together harmoniously suddenly were not.

The reaction of our staff was very instructive. They split right down the ethnic line. Moors refused to believe their brothers had committed atrocities in the quarters where Senegalese lived. Even highly educated, U.S.-trained FSNs, behaved as though nothing had happened. In contrast, the non-Moor Mauritanian staff ceased conversing with the Moor staff. Whenever I discussed among the staff the need for the GIRM to redress the excesses of recent months, the Moors would remind me that I should share the same view with the Senegalese Government with respect to the Moors who had been killed, mistreated or expelled from Senegal. This was the beginning of my education in conflict and its impact on us and our programs. I would learn in my next assignment the risks of not accounting for the potential for conflict as we designed our programs and strategies. I personally think AID's decision to phase out gradually was the right decision. I was, therefore, transferred in the summer of 1990. However, a program was maintained for some time and my deputy was kept on in an acting capacity for another year or so. I don't think the activities were fully closed for another two or three years, and even training activities were kept on for a long time, managed out of the regional office in Abidjan.

The other lesson from the Mauritanian experience was that when people in power judge that their own national interests are at stake, they will go to extraordinary means to protect those interests. In this case, the Moor power structure had determined that it had to secure its southern lands for themselves at any cost, including kicking off the indigenous population, no matter how strong the international outcry and human-rights criticisms. Our ambassador, Bill Twaddell, who now is our ambassador in Lagos, worked very hard in trying to get the Moors to reverse the expulsions, but they simply would not admit that there was an official expulsion policy of African Mauritians. "Those people left on their own. They are Senegalese" was the constant line. For me, it was a very sad wake-up call that we ignored, at our peril, these fundamental dynamics of societies in which we provided assistance. We had to close things down that we were doing well

because they lay on fragile ground. The last element of the program to terminate was training. The reason for this was not that AID could no longer run a training program out of Abidjan. It was because there was very clear evidence in the selection process of the candidates that the Mauritanian government officials responsible for finalizing the list based on exam results had doctored the rank ordering of the list. Candidates were handpicked instead of chosen based on exam results. It became clear that the official responsible for approving the final list of applicants had simply moved names up to the top of the list that were Moors and moved non-Moors to the bottom. At that point the ambassador realized that we couldn't approve such a list of candidates and ordered the program canceled.

Q: Could you tell the difference?

SLOCUM: You can by the name, yes. A Moor always has in his name "Ould" which means "son of" and a woman has "Mint." The tribes in the south also have names which show that they are Wolof, Toucouleur or Sarakhole.

Q: How did you find working with the government apart from these clannish differences?

SLOCUM: Officials ranged from fairly competent to not very competent at all. As I said earlier, appointments were often based as much on clan balance as on ability. On balance, I found an acceptable degree of competence in the people with whom we worked on a regular basis, both technicians and managers. There were some really bright people. Moors are survivors by instinct. They are astute and good business people, great bargainers. There were some cases where people were not well trained. It was not uncommon to have a minister who hadn't gotten beyond high school. The ministers were always shifting around as part of the whole process to try to keep this balance of clans. Over time a minister would bring his own clan in to occupy certain positions in the ministry. So, while I said working with the government was fairly congenial, there were some operational problems because people were constantly being shifted, and somebody with whom you had built up a working relationship could in a day be gone.

Q: Was there a professional civil service evolving?

SLOCUM: There certainly was a civil service but the civil service in the French tradition, and those countries under French colonialism, of course, imitated them. It is very different from ours. If you are a civil servant in France you can be transferred to any ministry. You may start off your career in the EPA and then get a position as a diplomat in the foreign ministry and then come back to become an administrator in customs, etc.

Q: Generalists so to speak?

SLOCUM: There were technical people who were very competent and trained in their field, but in the overall civil service system they tend to be moved around from ministry to ministry. Going into a Mauritanian office was unlike any other place that I have ever seen. You often encountered people lying on the floor. In the nomadic lifestyle, of course, when you are not moving you are reclining. That is the way of the desert. So, it was not uncommon to go into the ground floor office of a ministry and see people literally lying around on the floor. I suspect they

were the unemployed clan members, just hanging around.

Q: Were there any programs supporting women's development?

SLOCUM: The only activity with direct benefits to women was the health program, with improved health service standards to women and children, promotion of family planning, and training of female health assistants. In the training activities we made a successful effort to identify women. The Mauritanian woman is fairly strong in her own right, with a certain amount of independence. A very fine Mauritanian woman who worked for us refused to accompany her husband when he was named ambassador to a European country. She decided she liked working for us too much and wasn't going to go. We heard later that the president of the country called her in and asked her to go. She said that she liked doing what she was doing here. Mauritania is an Islamic Republic, but their application of Islamic principles is mixed. For example, some years ago they decided to prohibit the sale and consumption of alcohol products. But there was a huge black market for alcoholic beverages. I would call their approach to their religion pragmatic. But the appearance of Islam was very important.

Q: How did you find living in Mauritania?

SLOCUM: I said earlier that Mauritania is not a place I would have picked out and put on a list as a choice of assignment. Both in my earlier assignments in Dakar in the late seventies and my Sahel responsibilities in Washington, plus the Club du Sahel job, I had visited Mauritania several times. Of all the Sahel countries, I had unconsciously said to myself that Mauritania was the one I would least pick as an assignment. But, the opportunity was important to go there as director, or AID rep. My expectations of life in Nouakchott were not very high. So I went there realizing it was going to be environmentally a hostile place, with very hot temperatures and sandstorms that could turn your house into a sand palace in half a day. As it turned out, it was a very enjoyable tour, except for the tragic killings that took place a year after I got there, which was terribly demoralizing for all of us. Nouakchott was isolated; it was not very easy to get anywhere, and for half the year the weather was very hot. Socially, people took care of each other, recognizing that activities were limited and distractions had to be home grown. The isolation intensified after the troubles with Senegal, because the road south was closed at the border.

I have talked about the hospitality of the Moors and that was genuine. Whenever you were on a trip to the interior, and I never got out as much as I wanted, but on those occasions when I did get out we would be invited to the governor's house, where we sat on cushions and palavered with the governor and his staff. The first thing would be a bowl of water for you to wash your hands in. They would always bring drinks and a snack to eat despite the typical shortage of food.

Q: What would they feed you?

SLOCUM: A meal was always lamb or mutton, which is really good on the first run, when you had it specially cooked that evening with rice or couscous. Part of the best dish was called mehoui, which is a stuffed lamb or goat. It is very tender, and stuffed usually with rice and raisins and things like that. They always gave you dates as an appetizer because they are the favorite fruit from oasis palms. Usually the meal would be quite fine, although often you had to

pick it apart with your hands. If you were an overnight guest, an invitation to stay in the prefet's or governor's house was to be expected. In the morning very often you would have the previous evening's leftovers for breakfast, which was considerably less appetizing. On one trip with the ambassador, I remember I had brought my own cereal and milk, and the next morning what came out were the leftovers from the night before. I had my own cereal, milk, and banana, and the ambassador said I was smart to have brought my own breakfast.

Q: How do you sum up the prospects for development in Mauritania?

SLOCUM: Let's go back to Anne de Lattre. As she said, "I don't think you can do development in Mauritania." The combination of a determined Moor population anxious to secure the territory for its own interests, a feudal mentality and the encroaching desert does not create a very propitious environment for development. The prospects are that as long as the desert keeps moving southward, the Moors will move in increasing numbers towards the south and there will be more conflict over the land along the river. So you will have a Mauritania for the Moors and they will fend for themselves. Mauritania will always be dependent on aid, especially for food, but it's unclear how this aid can promote real development. I think Mauritania is a country where one should help them feed their population, enhance the skills they need to manage their society, and provide basic services such as health and education.

Q: It sounds like eventually they will all abandon the country. Is the population declining?

SLOCUM: I don't recall the trends. The one thing I can say about the population is that the percentage of Moors vis à vis the percentage of non-Moors is a sensitive topic. The World Health Organization had sent out a team to design a project. One of the team members had read a report before leaving Geneva which asserted that, despite Moors' statements, the non-Moor population exceeded the Moorish population. When the Minister of Health saw that repeated in one of the reports they were writing, reportedly he had the team expelled. It was a pretty sensitive topic. I think this anecdote proves my hypothesis: that the Moors' goal is to keep Mauritania safe for themselves. If the carrying capacity of the land forces more Moors further south, then the people living there are going to have to move.

Q: Anything else on Mauritania?

SLOCUM: It was my introduction to major conflicts and tragedy. In some ways I was glad I was away from post during the worst of the events because a lot of my colleagues saw some very nasty things. Andy Gilboy, the PSC human resources adviser, lived in a house almost across the street from the "amazing boutique." One of his household staff saw people being loaded onto trucks receiving orders and directions to go to attack and kill the Senegalese, as I mentioned earlier. None of us ever went back to the "amazing boutique" when we learned that it was one of the ring leaders of the teams dispatched to kill the Senegalese in their neighborhoods. We knew that people on our own block were murderers - the AID office, my home, and Andy's house were all in the same block, including the "amazing boutique."

The tragedy of 1989 changed our attitude towards the country forever, and made us profoundly sad. I guess it was the professional equivalent of the adolescent loss of innocence. I spoke earlier

of the inhumane treatment of the Senegalese leaving on the airlift who were forced to give up all their possessions, including personal photographs. I remember visiting the site where they had been airlifted out and seeing the remnants of their possessions which they had destroyed rather than hand over to the Mauritanian soldiers. There appeared to be no way to stop that. It was a UN-sponsored airlift and couldn't there have been some measure of security provided so that the people could at least get their personal papers and possessions out? This was my first experience of seeing this kind of brutality. Unfortunately not my last; I would see a lot more of that later. It kind of marks the rest of my career and would have a profound impact on my sense of the priorities we should have for Africa.

GORDON S. BROWN
Ambassador
Mauritania (1991-1994)

Ambassador Gordon S. Brown was born in Italy in 1936. He graduated from Stanford University in 1957 and served in the U.S. Army from 1957 to 1960. Ambassador Brown entered the Foreign Service in 1960 and served in numerous countries including Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, Tunisia, and Mauritania. He was interviewed December 11, 1996 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Today is the 30th of January 1997. Did you have the feeling that somebody said, this Gordon Brown did all right in the Gulf war, let's send him to Nouakchott. How did you get your appointment to go to Mauritania?

BROWN: That's hard to say. When you start jockeying around for chief of mission-type appointments, there are so many things that enter into the mix that you really don't have a clue what it is eventually that gets you the job. Or at least I didn't. In my case, I know that certain people in the Director General's office were trying to get me a post. I was getting better support there than I was getting from other parts of the Department. The African Bureau had, over the years, kind of made some of the Saharan posts available to Arabists on the theory that NEA had a lot of good candidates, and didn't have very many posts, whereas the African Bureau had a lot of posts -- some Arabic speaking posts. So I was at some point or other asked if I wanted to run for either Niger or Mauritania. I thought it over. Mauritania is an Arabic speaking country, and I was leaning in that direction when they told me I should definitely lean in that direction, because the other viable candidate for a post that year was a woman, and she had just chosen Niger - and since women had the upper hand in the assignment process, I was left with Mauritania. I really don't know how I got the job. I do remember that Larry Eagleburger, the Deputy Secretary, when I met him before going out to post, asked me what I'd done wrong, to get Nouakchott!. It was not a post that was being fought after by a lot of people -- as I discovered when I got to Washington. Mauritania's behavior during the Gulf War, and during a previous crisis with Senegal, had put it deep in the doghouse in Washington. I was taking over a pariah post.

Q: You were in Mauritania from when to when?

BROWN: '91 to '94.

Q: In '91 what did they tell you? Explain about the pariah post, and what were you getting out of Washington before you went there. Did you have any objectives in mind as you went out to the place?

BROWN: To put it in context, Mauritania is an ethnically divided country, governed by Arabs, but with substantial populations of peoples linked to the neighboring African countries, particularly Senegal. Border problems with Senegal in '89 had created a crisis, with blood shed in riots on both sides of the border and mutual expulsions of the other's citizens. The Mauritians went further, and expelled some Mauritians who happened to be ethnically related to Senegal, in an effort at that point I guess somewhat motivated by ethnic cleansing considerations. They wanted to get rid of a lot of African -Mauritians who were in the army and civil service, and who had contacts south of the border and were considered to be a fifth column for the Senegalese. So they went into a purge. They were partly pushed into that by the fact they were fairly closely allied with the Iraqis at that point and subjected to some strong doses of Arab nationalist sentiment. They made some really bad mistakes. They'd also refused to support us in the Gulf War. They hadn't lined up with Iraq, but they hadn't supported us either, so they were thoroughly in the doghouse. By the time I took over the embassy in '91 I discovered how much they were discredited in Washington. Our embassy had been cut down to a staff of four or five people as a result of the two crises and the Gulf-War related drawdown..

Q: In the first place you were in the AF Bureau.

BROWN: Nouakchott is in the AF Bureau, which, of course, is an anomaly. It's an Arab country in an African Bureau, and the African Bureau has a certain point of view. The way ethnic strife is conducted in borderline states -- Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Sudan, all of those border line states with Arab/African splits -- tends to give them a bad reputation in the African Bureau just to begin with.

Q: Did you go out with, I mean outside of wishes of good luck, were there any encouragements to do something when you went out there, or was it keep the flag flying.

BROWN: We were now in the post-Cold War period, and we were looking at America's new role of promoting a world of states like us, and therefore what we were trying to do in states like Mauritania, where we had very few other interests, was simply to get them to accept some of our governing principles. Specifically: fair treatment on human rights problems, and some kind of participatory government -- democracy, whatever you want to call it. The Mauritians were, of course, way behind the eight ball on the question of human rights, and on participatory democracy. They started moving forward slowly and reluctantly, but nonetheless somewhat, while I was there. My instructions were relatively simple: try to push these two agenda items, to push for fair treatment of all Mauritians under generally accepted principles of equal treatment for ethnic minorities. And try to get some kind of democratization, good decent elections, etc. Other than that, it was the usual instruction: Take care of US policy interests in the UN, Middle East peace process, do trade, do good consular work, etc. But we had no real interests; therefore our objectives were extremely generalized, and were pointed to human rights.

Q: What about the boundary, Algeria, Morocco and Mali and Senegal. How were things along those boundaries?

BROWN: There are no boundary problems as such except a minor one in Senegal, but the state of Mauritania is not a truly secure state. It has neighbors who don't particularly wish it well on most sides, and a powerful neighbor to the north, Morocco, which is not necessarily friendly. So Mauritania has a great deal of paranoia in its policy about its encirclement by non-friendly states, and it tends to look toward the United States as part of the problem, because of our good relations with Morocco and Senegal, rather than part of the solution. So there was some anxiety about border issues and security issues. But most of our problems were about internal Mauritanian affairs. And this is an awkward position that ambassadors are put in these days, because we are asked to get governments to change their internal behavior. We are accused, I think, sometimes fairly accurately, of interfering with their internal affairs because of the portfolio we are pushing on human rights -- which are Ministry of Interior-type responsibilities in most of these countries. And democracy, which is also a Ministry of Interior issue for them rather than a foreign policy issue. So ambassadors who are pushing for social and political reform, on the basis of American foreign policy goals, are put in a kind of awkward position to begin with.

Q: When you arrived there how did you find you were received? Did they figure here is somebody out of Desert Storm and is sent to sort of rub our nose in backing the losing side.

BROWN: They were very, very apprehensive. Exactly -- that I was sent out by General Schwarzkopf to clobber them!

Q: Case the joint.

BROWN: I tried quite hard to encourage them to consider me as a friendly interlocutor. But given the fact that almost all those issues I had to raise with them had to do with, directly or indirectly, support for their minorities and their trans-border friends, I was seen as a security problem -- not only because of the place I came from, but as a result of the fact that I was essentially pushing a hostile set of issues, a pro-Senegalese set of issues.

Q: Well, Senegal had a pretty nasty government for a long time.

BROWN: No, you're thinking of Guinea. Senegal was run by Abu Diouf, who had been a long-time friend of the United States, and a "long time Democrat" (although democracy in Senegal was just as peculiar as it is anyplace else in that part of the world). We nonetheless were very friendly with Senegal, and Senegal got a great deal of USAID money. We had defense cooperation with Senegal. It made me look rather suspicious in Mauritania, when I was pushing issues which favored Mauritanian minorities who were allied with Senegal.

Q: These were basically what we would call black African groups.

BROWN: Mauritania is an interesting country. There are Arabs who are light skinned. There are

Arabs who are very dark skinned, many from the Haratines, the slave caste. And then there are Mauritians who are very dark skinned, but not Arab speaking, not Arab in culture, not in the Arab world emotionally or politically, but are rather allied to related tribal groups in Mali or Senegal. The biggest tribal or ethnic group in Mauritania at this time, other than the Arabs, were the Halpulaar. They are related to the clans in Senegal, and many of them are so well intermarried and interrelated that they have relatives in Senegal who hold government positions - some have very high government positions. So they are seen by the Arab ruling class in Mauritania as not entirely trustworthy Mauritians. And yet I was pushing issues which essentially asked for redress for the people from this ethnic group who had been punished during the crisis of '89-'90, and the result was seen as pushing a pro-Senegalese agenda.

Q: How does one push something like this? I mean, you're the ambassador there and what does one do to push?

BROWN: Well, you go and you talk about the need for national reconciliation, and the fact that they are going to remain essentially in our doghouse until they allow the refugees back. They have to treat the expelled people fairly -- give them back their property when they do come back. So you're talking about human rights issues, and people who were expelled during the crisis. And you're talking about opening up voting lists and opening up political activities for opposition parties. And in the circumstances, of course, the opposition parties immediately organized themselves around these expelled people, and the ethnic groups who had been hurt during "The Troubles." So in both cases, when you're arguing for opposition groups, you're arguing a case which the Mauritanian government felt relatively difficult to take. So it was an awkward assignment, to be perfectly honest.

Q: What was in it for them to pay any attention to you?

BROWN: We're the United States of America. If we were Ecuador or even Luxembourg they wouldn't pay any attention to us. In fact, if we were Spain they wouldn't pay any attention to us, probably. But we are the United States of America, and they wanted to be on our good side. The trouble is they don't want to do anything that is politically threatening, or costly to themselves. So they always walked this line between wanting to please the American ambassador -- because maybe that would make the American ambassador get Washington, or allow the American ambassador to get Washington to be a little bit less unfriendly. And yet, they really are not prepared to pay a great domestic price for a foreign policy advantage. The foreign minister would go to the Council of Ministers meeting and say, "The American Ambassador needs something from us." And the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Defense, all the political people around the President would say that somebody out in the back woods was not going to like that, that they couldn't do it if it didn't sell in their version of Peoria. So the foreign policy considerations were always put on the back burner, and the ambassador of the United States was told that they would try to move next week.

Q: What about UN votes?

BROWN: The Mauritians have a long and conspicuous policy of taking a hike whenever there's a very difficult UN vote. I shouldn't be too cynical. The one place where we had a serious

issue with the Mauritians and their neighbors during the years I was there was the question of the isolation of Libya. They were pretty good on that. They maintained the boycott against Libya. They told us they didn't like it, but they told us it was a UN decision and they'd have to live with it, and they did.

Q: I would think Mauritania would be an ideal place for the Libyans to mess around, with money and a place that could be bought, fellow Arabs and all that.

BROWN: Indeed it was. The Libyans had messed around in it, and probably were messing around a little bit while we were there. But nothing serious, to be perfectly honest. Mauritanian internal policy was quite often played out through groups which allied themselves with foreign sponsors. And yes, the Libyans had become the sponsors of a group of people in the government that called themselves the Nasserists, or the Nationalists. They were opposed, I suppose in the kind of in-fighting that went on, to another Arab group known as the Baath, who were getting their support from Iraq. As I suggested earlier the Baathis had a fairly good run in '89-'90 and the Libyans were kind of on the outskirts. I think that, when the Mauritians discovered that their infatuation with Arab politics had gotten them off on some pretty bad tangents in '89-'90, they learned the lesson -- not that they should dump the Baathis and then go with the Libyan-backed people -- but that they should dump all Arab politics and try to develop their own national agenda.

Q: Did you find the Palestinian-Israeli problem on your front burner?

BROWN: No, it was definitely on the second burner, but it was there and the Mauritians did feel that this was an area where they could give me something. As I said, they never gave me much that cost them anything in terms of their internal political balance. But they did give the United States quite a bit on the Arab-Israel issue, and they became relatively reliable for "yes" votes, when the Madrid Peace Conference was going forward, when the multilateral talks were going forward. They have no clout in the Arab world but they did step out and say yes, We'll take part in multilateral talks at this point. And after I left they're talking with Israel; they were ready to move in that direction, and they did. It didn't buy them anything in Washington, because I was reporting back to the African Bureau, which didn't give a damn.

Q: Could you describe the Mauritanian government?

BROWN: While I was there the Mauritanian government converted itself from a government of military rule they'd had since 1978 when the first military coup took place. They'd had a government which essentially disbanded the constitution, or ignored the previous constitution, and ruled by military decree. To their credit they passed, shortly before I got there, a fairly liberal French-style constitution. It gives the presidency quite a bit of power, with two houses of parliament, and a lot of trappings of democracy. All the military people in the government took off their uniforms and retired, and some of them ran for office and got elected, including the president. There was a certain amount of dishonesty, but not a tremendous amount. It was then declared a civilian government, and the houses of parliament began to operate. There were parliamentary elections -- also slightly dishonest, but not egregiously so given the setting, and given the lack of history in Mauritania of any kind of democracy in that country and part of the

world. They were working fairly cautiously towards opening up government in some way or another, while at the same time not wanting to lose control. The President never lost control, he remained president during the transition -- still is, and frankly over time has probably been able to reassert his control as strong as it ever was before '89 or '90. He didn't install "democracy" in his country because he's a democrat, but rather because of '89 or '90. He saw the imperative need to give himself a new mandate after the disasters of 89-90.

Q: Could you describe Nouakchott as a place?

BROWN: Yes. I went out there, having heard all these stories about the sand coming over the wall of the embassy compound, and discovered that the city had really grown up. It scarcely qualifies as a city. It was built as an administrative capital; it was supposed to be under 50,000 people. But then the desert -- I won't say desert economy -- but the rural economy, which had been a pastoral economy, broke down because of the great Sahelian drought of ten years, in the '70s and '80s. All the people who came to town made the city grow to a half million people, on an infrastructure of a town of 50,000. So what we had was a little nucleus of a city with streets which were paved. (Although quite often they and all the gutters were full of sand. Until the first time they cleaned the streets I didn't even realize there had been gutters because it was sand except in the middle. When they cleaned it, you found sidewalks and gutters -- but within months it would fill up again with sand.) You had this nucleus, shops, a couple of tall buildings, markets, mosques, etc., a pretty small town but still decent with occasional trees. Not a bad place, close to the coast and fairly decent living.

Around that nucleus the town had grown up in a complete hodge podge. There were nice suburbs with big villas, with gardens which were just getting established; some had been built in the last three or four years; a lot of building going on while we were there. There were other suburbs which were absolute shanty towns of people who had come in from desert after having had to sell their animals, because the desert had been too tough a place to live, and come to town with nothing. They lived in tin shacks, cardboard shacks, plastic shacks. It was pretty nasty. So it's a very mixed town, but you could find things to buy there in cluttered shops. There's a Lebanese trading community, and there's enough of a diplomatic community so that there's enough purchasing power to support a couple of good stores, and a lot of good importation. This is one of those places where the freight planes came in a couple of times a week, and the next day you'd have fresh produce from France in the stores, and it would be bought out by the time the next plane came in. You lived from planeload to planeload.

Q: Where did the money come from?

BROWN: There's quite a bit of money in the iron ore mine which is the original reason why the French gave independence to Mauritania -- because there's a very good iron ore mine in the north of the country which makes a fair amount of money. And there's quite a bit of money, of course, in fisheries off the coast. It's a very rich fishery. So the government makes a fair amount of money, and parcels it out in ways which would allow for a trickle down economy. So there's quite a few rich people, and even a slightly developing middle class, in that country.

Q: What about the embassy? How did you find the staff, was it sort of hard to keep everybody

happy?

BROWN: Well, I think not, in answer to your last question. The embassy was small. We started off, I think, a little over 20 people when I got there, plus Marines. The Marine contingent was closed shortly after I left, but it was still there when I was there -- but we reduced to maybe 13 people or so. I think the embassy now is down to eight or ten people, under ten people anyway, no Marines. So we were shrinking all the time I was there, and since we didn't have that much of a reason for being there, the shrinking was entirely appropriate, and natural. There is a point at which the shrinking might make it difficult for us to do any job well, but that hadn't been reached while I was there. We were trying to do many of the things a normal embassy does. We suffered, I think, by virtue of the fact that we were completely abandoned by USIA. We tried very hard to put on public diplomacy programs with our own time and our own efforts and so on; we got a little bit of support from USIA to do that, but it was difficult. We did some trade promotion. We had an increasing consular load. And we did a fair amount of political reporting because -- whether or not Mauritania was of interest to more than ten people in the Department or not -- those ten people created quite a need for careful explanation and discussion about developments. So, a fair amount of standard political reporting.

You asked me whether we could keep things happy. I think we had a very good group of people who were interested, and who like me got intrigued in trying to understand what is a very fascinating country, and traveled quite a bit. Most of us were good in French. Frankly, I think, we had a good crowd, people who enjoyed the post and found a small post like that was a place team spirit builds. We had a good team. I think people enjoyed it, and the interesting thing is we keep in touch with these people, and a lot of them now are at bigger posts like Abidjan -- and they complain like hell.

Q: That is often the case. Were there any AID or Peace Corps?

BROWN: AID. was there. As we arrived it was closing up, so it disappeared. We closed out the last AID. programs; kept a few things going. There were a few FSN employees with AID until about my second year there. The Peace Corps was there. It went up to about 50 volunteers, which is probably more than they could manage well, so they cut back to about 30 or 35. They were doing some very good things because it was almost the ideal situation for Peace Corps programs. This is a country where the level of technical skills is so low that even a Peace Corps volunteer could really bring technical expertise and technical assistance of value. They were doing some good things in public hygiene and rural development kind of stuff.

Q: You mentioned the great drought of the '70s and '80s in the Sahel. Were things changing there as far as that went or not a concern about that?

BROWN: I go back to something I said earlier, where I'd expected to see the sand coming over the wall. Not only had the city grown out beyond the nucleus so that the walls of other people's houses farther out were collecting the sand, but in fact the rains had gradually gotten better. We were there for three years; we had one year of very good rain, one year of passable rain, and one year of no rain. I think there has been a couple years of rain since we left. The cycle has probably broken. The Sahara is not going to green up again, but at least that period in which the dust

storms were so bad that the airport was closed sometimes five days a week for three times a month, or something like that, those are past, it's now stabilized. The country is still very marginal, at the edge of the climate zone. A couple years of rain can stabilize the dunes and allow people to build up their herds, and then a couple of years of no rain will mean the herds all have to be slaughtered.

Q: I think I know the answer before I ask it, but did you get any visits from anybody of particular note while you were there?

BROWN: We had, I think, one congressional visit which was actually planned, the head of the House African subcommittee, who came out. A couple of staff visits, a couple of State Department visits at medium and senior level, deputy assistant secretary kind of thing. One sort of accidental Senatorial delegation, and that was about it. Nobody goes to Mauritania who doesn't need to. The accidental Senate delegation just came in, really, to refuel their plane. I made them stay for four hours and meet with people, and they were mad at me.

Q: That reminds me, I was interviewing somebody who was ambassador to Costa Rica during the '60s before things heated up in Central America and he said the highest visit was the lieutenant governor of Mississippi.

Did you note any change at all there...you were betwixt and between Bush to Clinton. I take it this was not a subject of any great debate.

BROWN: No, there's absolutely no domestic politics involved in our relationship with Mauritania. Well, put it this way, there are no national level politics. There is some congressional politics.

Q: How about the role of the French while you were there?

BROWN: The French, ... well, it's their ex-colony...they have the traditional French disdain for anybody else who wants to sort of poach on their hunting territory, and they didn't really like the American commercial and other interests in Mauritania, so they tried to stymie and stiff us as much as they could. But they were happy with the fact that we were, essentially, falling on our own sword all the time because we kept pushing a human rights agenda which was not very popular with the government, and the French sort of laughed all the way to the bank as their companies kept beating our companies for contracts. So they didn't mind watching the American ambassador make himself unpopular in the presidential palace.

Q: Did you ever find yourself excluded, or pushed off to one side because of your agenda that you had to follow?

BROWN: By the Mauritians, no. The Mauritians were most courteous to me. They don't tell a straight story to anybody, including to each other. So the fact that they didn't tell me the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, didn't in my opinion serve as an exclusion. They always treated me extremely well. The French excluded us occasionally. The French included my wife and me and most members of the embassy socially in a lot of things, and they were

good that way. We enjoyed seeing them, etc. but from the point of view of western coordination, no. The French blocked, for example, EC, or EU now, coordination with the American embassy. They simply said that was inappropriate for the EU to coordinate in Mauritania. They never did. The other EU ambassadors wanted to, but the French succeeded in blocking it.

Q: *You left there in '94.*

BROWN: Right.

Q: *And were there any major developments, earthquakes, coups, civil unrest, etc.*

BROWN: The three years I was there were almost entirely preoccupied with the shaking down on the new political order in Mauritania. Getting over the nasty things they'd done to each other during the '89-'90 crisis and trying to figure out how much democracy they were going to allow. And we had some fun. We stirred the pot a lot. We gave money to the opposition, not parties but groups in the opposition, human rights activists, etc. We were the only embassy that was stirring the pot, and since we probably didn't have anything to lose, we could afford to. The other European embassies were always looking for business in Mauritania and were not too anxious to be controversial. We didn't mind being controversial. We had fun but there were no major issues.

DOROTHY M. SAMPAS
Ambassador
Mauritania (1994-1997)

Dorothy M. Sampas was born in Washington D.C. in 1933. As a foreign service spouse she lived in Ottawa, Paris, Iceland, and Washington D.C. After re-entering the Foreign Service she had positions in Brussels, China, New York, and an ambassadorship to Mauritania. Ambassador Sampas was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in October 1998.

Q: *When you were getting ready to go out to Mauritania, where did you go and whom did you talk to find out what this place was all about and what were American interests and all?*

SAMPAS: Well, fortunately, the people on the Desk gave me a whole list of people to see. There were people in AID, even though we had dropped our AID mission; people in USIA, even though we had dropped the USIA operation; people who dealt with the Marine Corps, even though the Marines were being pulled out.

Q: *The CIA, I imagine.*

SAMPAS: Yes, yes, yes. So I imagine there were about 15, 18 people that I went around to see. None of them seemed to have a very clear idea saying, "This is why we want to be in Mauritania." After all, strangely enough, we had gone to bat for this country two or three times in history. In 1960, the Russians had opposed the entry of Mauritania to the United Nations.

They wanted a group of “their” countries; we wanted a group of “our” countries, including Mauritania. We fought for the group including Mauritania and won. In 1981, I think - I'm not too clear, but I think it was '81 - the Moroccans tried to stage a coup in Mauritania, and we apparently shook our finger at them and said, "You'd better wise up and stop this." In the late '80s, when Senegal and Mauritania had a dust-up and it appeared, certainly to many Mauritians across the Senegal River from Senegal, that Senegal wanted to expand its boundary northward and take in most or all of the arable land in Mauritania - and at that point Hank Cohen, the assistant secretary - and I think on his own - said, "No, the river is going to remain the boundary." And Senegal pulled back. Senegal did expel all of the Moors that they could, and while Mauritania had not wanted to do any mutual expulsions, they couldn't get the Senegalese to stop the idea, so they expelled many people who looked like Senegalese as well, many of whom were Mauritians. Other countries in the area provided airplanes so that this massive joint expulsion could be effected. It was pretty nasty on both sides. And interestingly enough, there was violence on both sides of the river, and a cultural difference in the violence shown on each side of the river. In Mauritania, where every adult male keeps a knife in his pocket to slay sheep or carve them up, as the case may be, there was knifing. In Senegal, there was burning of live Moors. So it was a very nasty situation. But in the long run, peace was restored. The same two presidents have been in power since, but they seem to get along personally and through the force of their personal agreement have been able to keep their countries calm since 1990. But since Mauritania borders on the Western Sahara, which is in dispute, Algeria, where you have quite a lot of violence, Mali, where you did have violence and expulsions - quite a lot of Malians landed in Mauritania and remained for years in refugee camps there - and Senegal, which had had this flare-up with its desire to oust the Moors, who were thought to control most of their retail trade, Mauritania remains in a touchy neighborhood. Should it ever break apart or be dominated by one of its neighbors, the whole region would be affected.

Q: *The term Moor means a Mauritanian? Is that what they use?*

SAMPAS: Yes, they do. As you hear in *Maur-itania*. Maur is the French word for Moor. But of course, the other ethnic groups - Halpulaars, Soninke, and Wolof - are not Moors.

Q: *Ah.*

SAMPAS: In any case, there fortunately hasn't been violence since 1990. But there has not been a strong of U.S. foreign policy that it behooves us to be proactive with the countries in the region to make certain that such outbreaks of violence don't get started again. Many know all the evil things about Mauritania. There was scarcely a person dealing with the area who didn't know Mauritania has *slavery* and Mauritania *attacked* people who looked like Senegalese in 1989-90, and so forth. Strangely, in all the time that people briefed me about how awful Mauritania was and how it was a gross violator of human rights, no one said anything about the slaves in Mali, and it is not just one little ambassador telling you that there are slaves in Mali. When the Malian refugees fled from violence in Mali and entered Mauritania and went into refugee camps, if my recollection is correct, 15 percent of the Malians in the refugee camps in Mauritania were *Bellah*, Malian slaves, although during my years of service, their existence was never mentioned in the annual Human Rights Report prepared by the Department of State. If you tell me that our embassy in Mali has never seen them, that none of our embassy people could ever have seen

slaves in Mali, I would have to express some amazement, because the area where these refugees that fled into Mauritania came from was largely the area around Timbuktu. Now Timbuktu is a tourist center. It's where tourists - and presumably U.S. diplomats in Mali - go on occasion. And Malian slaves, the *Bellah* women, wear a very typical dress, a black dress with white rickrack, so they're easy to spot. But why is it, do you suppose, that we have never heard anyone say anything about slaves in Mali? Or why do you think no one has ever said anything about slaves in Senegal? Why do you suppose that in the wake of this terrible dust-up between Senegal and Mauritania, people criticize Mauritania for what it did but never criticize Senegal? It's as if Senegal was, you know, Little Boy Blue or some such thing.

Q: Well, was this "localitis" on the part of our reporting embassies in those places, do you think?

SAMPAS: I wish I knew. I don't think it's just that, because the international human rights organizations had the same viewpoint. They would publish reams of paper about how awful Mauritania was but never comment on its neighbors. I don't know. I never really succeeded in explaining it to myself.

Q: When you arrived there, what did you sort of carry in your attaché case insofar as what you thought you could do when you were there?

SAMPAS: Well, I knew that I had to raise the question of slavery and human rights right away, and I did so. I am sure there has never been any ambassador from any country ever to go to Mauritania who talked more about slavery and human rights than I did - with the president, with his ministers, and with people that I was having dinner or lunch with - and human rights generally in the wake of this attack on people who looked like Senegalese. And about attacks on people who looked Senegalese in the military in Mauritania in the same period of time, the late '80s and early '90s. So I knew that I had to protest about that. It was not clear what anyone in the United States expected anyone there to do about it. I had some ideas that I had gained, either from my own thoughts or from talking to Assistant Secretary Moose about naming some sort of a board or committee - the kind of thing we would do here - and let somebody there do a good study of it and see what could be done. And indeed, in due course, I suggested such a thing - obviously turned down flat on all of these suggestions. The Mauritanian government had its own reasons for not doing any of the things that we would have done. Other than Assistant Secretary Moose, there really wasn't anyone that followed it very closely.

And it's interesting what the end of all this seems to have been. Little by little, Americans came into Mauritania and started saying nice things about it - not tourists - but Africare came in, and of course, Africare has been active in Africa for many years and has a great reputation, and they sent first a young African-American man - actually, he was from Philadelphia, I think, but he was active in their Senegal office - and he came in and talked with people and toured around. We got him all the appointments that he wanted. And before he left he wrote a very nice letter to the president of Mauritania saying, you know, "I came expecting to see one thing and found something else entirely, and your country is certainly not what" - he didn't use the exact words - "it's been cracked up in my country to be" - but more or less that. And then the head of Anti-Slavery International from England came. He came after a human rights conference in Central Africa. But he, too, said, when people asked him about slavery and he was still in Mauritania

replied something like, "Well, I haven't actually seen that phenomenon here." So we felt that those remarks by people other than the embassy ought to carry some weight in Washington. For some years, the Human Rights Bureau had failed to send out any officer to see Mauritania directly; they would freely edit the Human Rights Reports we sent in, but never set foot in the country to observe directly. But then shortly after my departure, a deputy assistant secretary from the Human Rights Bureau came out. I repeat, we had never been able to get anyone from Human Rights Bureau out during my stay there. He came out and he looked around and he saw, and he went back and said something like, "We've seen the wrong thing, apparently." And I would think, from what I've heard since his visit, that the Department has changed about 180 degrees in its view of Mauritania.

Q: Well, it sounds like, from what you were saying before, that AID was pulling out, the Marines were pulling out, USIA was pulling out - did you feel that you were on not a sinking ship but a stranded ship or something like that?

SAMPAS: Oh, absolutely. It's not easy to run an embassy with six officers, and there are certain things that just will not get done properly with that sort of a staff. They had pulled out the security officer and the Marines just before I got there. One day, one of our humorous communicators came into the embassy, and decided to test the embassy's guards (placed at the front gate of the driveway into our compound). The local staff was required to look under the hood of each entering vehicle and look underneath the car with a mirror to see what was there. This communicator had packed some firecracker-like material under the hood of the car - nice red, round firecrackers - and waited for reaction from the guards. He got out of his car and watched while the guards were doing an inspection. And these firecracker-like things were perfectly visible, near the engine, but no one remarked anything special about it. So he went up a little closer to his car and started screaming, "Oh, oh!" The local guards still didn't see that there was anything wrong. And you see, that's what happens when people just aren't trained. They know they're supposed to open the hood. They have no idea what they're supposed to look for under the hood. And I'm sure the same thing would have happened if he had put the firecrackers under the frame of his car. And unfortunately, even when the Marines were there and the security officer was there, I don't believe they spoke French or Arabic. Almost no Americans in the embassy ever spoke Hassaniya Arabic. So, it was difficult to train the local guards and periodically to evaluate their understanding of their duties.

Q: Was it Berber or was it Arabic?

SAMPAS: It was Mauritania's own special variety of Arabic, called Hassaniya. When I got there, the DCM who was there had been there for some time, and he had learned quite a bit of Hassaniya, and so when I needed to go and talk with a minister who spoke only Arabic or the Mauritanian variety of Arabic, he could do a very good job of translating in both directions. He had been trained in Arabic by the Department, and he was very helpful indeed. Nearly all ministers spoke French, so I could handle them by myself, but one simply refused to speak French. So I had no alternative but to look for a U.S. officer to take along.

Q: Who was your DCM?

SAMPAS: Joe Stafford. More recently he's been DCM in Algeria, and he's just off to someplace else, but I'm sorry I don't remember where he's been sent now. His successor in Nouakchott had a much more difficult time understanding Hassaniya Arabic. If she found somebody who spoke classic Arabic, it went alright, but if it was one of the younger people who hadn't been trained classically and just spoke Hassaniya, it didn't go very well. One of the things that I think FSI could do better - and I have unfortunately a tic that makes me, as an administrative officer, think in quantitative terms - but I do believe that talking with individuals and learning as much about them as possible is one of the most important things that anyone can do in the Foreign Service. And I'm not sure that FSI really gives training in getting acquainted with somebody relatively quickly - to the point that you can ask them sensitive questions and be given what seems to be a truthful response. So I had some officers who could do that very, very well. One of the young women there was a whiz-bang on making friends, and I would often be asked about her by people that I knew because they had known her very well as well. But others didn't seem to go out very much.

Q: Well, I would imagine it was a relatively difficult society to penetrate, wasn't it, or not?

SAMPAS: Less so, I think, than probably most other Arabic-speaking countries. We had a big U.S.-Mauritanian women's group that got together on a monthly basis and was friendly enough that I think anyone who really chatted up one of the women in that group - a woman chatting up a woman in that group - could have invited that woman and her family over. But I'm willing to give the benefit of the doubt that it was harder for anyone else than it was for me. The embassy had never developed a good contact list. That was one thing I tried to get them started on.

Q: Where did Mauritania fit into the Washington apparatus? I mean, in a way, a lot of its problems were within what we would call the black African part, yet it was an Arab state - I would think it would be neither-

SAMPAS: -fish nor fowl?

Q: -fish nor fowl.

SAMPAS: Yes, I think that's probably one of the problems. Mauritania had at one time tried very hard to get into the Arab League. Morocco was fighting it all the way. Morocco sometimes, high-flying guys there, will say something about "Morocco should extend to the Senegal River." But when Mauritania was kind of snubbed by Arabic states, it kind of closed in a little bit more upon itself. But with the dust-up with Senegal, which was highly regarded as a sign of great prejudice toward blacks on the part of Mauritania but not great prejudice toward Moors, some of whom are equally black in color, on the part of Senegal, the black Africans were not enthusiastic about setting up embassies there. The Senegalese had one. The Zaireans had one. The Nigerians had one. The Sudanese *did* have one, but they closed their embassy while I was there. Egypt was there; Libya was there; Algeria and Morocco were there. But there's a whole host of black African countries that haven't set up embassies, and the Department had decided that French was the language of Mauritania, and, of course, it's easier to teach French, easier to find people who speak French. But it wasn't the language of the country. With French, you could get along with most of the people in government - or just about all the senior people in government - but people

on the street? Uh-uh. So that was another thing that created this divide. Almost no one there speaks English, although I understand they're soon going to open up a school that will teach English. The problem is even though culturally and linguistically it's an Arab country, Senegal is the best place for administrative support, because it has a real road to Mauritania, and you can get across the Senegal River by ferry very easily. And then you have a nice road up to Nouakchott, so for the administrative staff, if a piece in your communications equipment breaks down or you need a communicator to run your communications equipment, you have to call Senegal and get them to come and help out. And that really wouldn't work with Morocco or Algeria. There is a road down along the coast through Morocco, but with the Western Sahara as ticklish a place as it is, you wouldn't be certain of getting near. And Algeria is a long, long way from Nouakchott in terms of transportation.

Q: You'll end up in Fort Zinderneuf or something like that (the old P. C. Wren story). What about dealing with the government there?

SAMPAS: Well, that was a pleasant surprise for me. I mean, here I was, a woman, French-speaking but not Arabic-speaking, not an African specialist, who had to go and talk to these people about human rights, their attitude toward their own black citizens, slavery, and female genital mutilation.

Q: Oh, yes. That's a great subject to [tackle]. There isn't much sensitivity training that they can give you to do that.

SAMPAS: Certainly not. And if you think it's easy for a sweet little Washington girl to talk to male ministers and others about female genital mutilation, you've got another thought coming. That took quite a bit of courage, but I got there. I got there. But it was clear that the Mauritians wanted to be nice to me, and I had the feeling that it came directly from the president's orders. In my statement to the Senate, which was then published (They put those things in the Congressional Record.), I had not bullied Mauritania; I had said there were problems, serious problems, but progress had been made and there was no reason progress could not continue. And the Mauritians were so pleased at that kind of an attitude that I had the feeling that they were really trying to flatter me.

Q: This is the Human Rights Report.

SAMPAS: That's right (The statement to which I was referring, though, was the statement I made in connection with my appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.). And I don't think that I was, you know, going to fall flat on my face with their flattery, but I recognized it for what it was, and I felt that they needed a lot of help, quite frankly.

Q: You were the first female ambassador they'd dealt with?

SAMPAS: Yes, first female ever. But Mauritanian women are not like other Arab women.

Q: More like the Tuareg, where the women are more open.

SAMPAS: Oh, very much. They have never worn a veil, unless the sand is blowing. There was an Arabic visitor back in the 13th or 14th century who was utterly shocked to find women sitting with men in the tent unveiled. But the women of Mauritania make a special point of wearing dresses that are unique. It's mostly just a long piece of cloth colored in a very different way - each one different. Any idea that they would get into some black garb like the Saudi women do or the Afghani women or Iraqi women is just a non-starter. I don't think they'll ever do that. And the Mauritanian men are quite happy when they have daughters as well. There's nothing of the "Sorry for your troubles, lady" business when a female child is born. They're very fond of their daughters. So they heard me out. They didn't get angry. They gave me their point of view on everything that I was fussing about. I never had a moment's feeling - whether it was the president or one of the ministers or one of the others - that they would have told a male something, in my position, that they weren't telling me. And they couldn't get angry at me because in their culture men don't get angry; they don't raise their voice to women. And the women there, unlike women, I think, in any other African country I've heard of or any other Arabic country I've heard of, will often initiate divorce and feel that the more divorces they have, the better off they are. In a sense, they are, since they get to keep some of the riches of the household. But it's rather like collecting men like beads on a string. So men are very gentle with women and very kind. And, oh, I would often throw back in their face kind words that "I know that that's flattery, and I think it's nice, but don't expect me to believe it." And they would understand. They would understand.

Q: What about UN votes? Did you find yourself, as an old UN hand, running down with the yearly shopping list of UN votes?

SAMPAS: Oh, yes. Please do this and this and this for us. And often they did what we would want. What I was surprised at was the number of times our own position seemed to change, so even though we had geared up and ginned up this vote on behalf of X, our own people wouldn't vote that way when the time came. The one thing that we could never get Mauritania to do in the UN was vote against China for human rights abuses because China and Mauritania were in many ways very similar. Obviously one is overpopulated and one is - I won't say underpopulated, but has few people, two million something. But the standard of living is remarkably similar. I used to laugh at the idea of barefoot doctors before I went to China and looked around. And barefoot doctors there are not a bad idea. You go in and explain, you know, you've got to wash your hands and you've got to boil drinking water - very simple things - and I believe that the Chinese may already have achieved a longer life span than men in the Bronx. That's not a bad record, and that's the kind of thing that Mauritania can do as well. They've trained a number of doctors, but they have to get them out to the villages, and they're trying. The Chinese had at one point, a minister explained to me, come in and tried to proselytize with some of their magazines. You know, they put out these fancy magazines sometimes. And the Mauritians called them in and said, "We don't want that. It's your philosophy, that's fine, let it be your philosophy, but we don't want you going around trying to make communists of our people. So we're going to stop this, aren't we?" And the Chinese did. But because China has helped them with foreign aid so much, they're not about to vote against China on any human rights issue. They feel we're unfair with Mauritania on the human rights question, so they certainly carry that over and think that we're unfair with China as well. The Chinese built Nouakchott's deep port. It didn't have a deep port before then. They have built a very glitzy international conference center, really quite remarkable, and a sports stadium - some of the things that they're doing in other African

countries as well. But you know, we're about the only industrialized country which doesn't give Mauritania foreign aid. The French and the European Community are competing as to which one's going to give more, and they make little statements to the press: "We give more" - "No, we give more." The Germans are big donors; the Japanese are big donors; the other industrialized countries are there.

Q: Did you feel that you and your mission were sort of marginalized because you were not a donor?

SAMPAS: Oh, yes, to a certain extent, I did feel that way, but I don't believe that you can buy votes with aid either. These other countries had a long period of time when they consistently looked after Mauritania's interests. We weren't doing that. We came in at particular incidents, but other than that we kind of distanced ourselves from the country. But it was hard to convince them to change because if there were an aid project that might make some difference, you had no ability to give it. If there were something that you could do with a cultural program, you couldn't do it. We didn't have the Agency any more, either. They left. So in a sense you were without a certain number of eyes and ears as well, particularly when most of your own staff couldn't deal with the local people in their own language.

Q: What about with Morocco? I mean, one of the things I've heard about our embassies neighboring Morocco used to get mad as hell because they felt our ambassador, whoever it was there, had sort of got in bed with the King, practically. There seems to be a virulent form of localitis that hits particularly political ambassadors to Morocco. Did you see any manifestation of this?

SAMPAS: Well, not really, although I know one of the political ambassadors rather well. The problem there is, I think, Morocco and its intentions. You know, in a way, it seems to me, the Cold War was fought, if you will, between those who were trying to expand their area and those who were pleased with their area and just trying to hold on. Morocco seems to be the kind of country that is expansionist, but our government as a whole doesn't want to say anything about it. Our government as a whole wants everyone to remember that Morocco is our oldest ally, and even when the King came here for a visit, I don't think anyone gave him anything but praise. I'm sure no one even mentioned Mauritania to the King on his last visit - 1995, I think. That's, I don't think, advisable; but if your president sets that tone, what on earth is the local ambassador going to do? If you couldn't get Clinton to say anything about Morocco's expansionism, then you know you'd better be quiet and sweet.

Q: What about the Libyans? Were they fishing in troubled waters there at all? Did you feel any Libyan manifestations?

SAMPAS: Yes, the Libyans were there, and they were, I think, making a lot of contacts around. But at one point they were PNGed out of there by the government of Mauritania. The suggestion in one of the newspapers, which doesn't mean anything for its validity, but the suggestion in one of the newspapers was that they were passing fraudulent currency. That might have been so. I wouldn't put anything past the Libyans, but they certainly were there and watched very carefully by the government. I think we were all watched carefully, but I think they more so than the

others. I think the Sudanese were watched very carefully, too, because the Sudanese have certain reputation in West Africa of wanting to get involved in internal affairs on the side of non-democrats as well. Eventually, the Sudanese pulled out of Mauritania.

Q: Did you feel under any security threat, not so much from the Mauritians but from people like the Sudanese or other groups at that particular time?

SAMPAS: No, I didn't. Fortunately, our embassy was right next door to the Presidential Palace, and we had a few local contract guards in front of our embassy, usually three out in front, and the president's forces were standing right at the corner. So with them keeping their eye on things as well as our guards, I really never thought anyone would try anything. And the equivalent of, I suppose, the FBI was down the street, and they certainly would follow people around any time they wanted.

Q: You were there from '94 to when?

SAMPAS: July '97.

Q: Were there any sort of major outcroppings of problems that came up while you were there?

SAMPAS: No, things really went pretty consistently in the other direction. We were able to start a small program between our military and their military. And I was happy to have the help of our military. We didn't have any locally; the military attaché was based in Senegal. And the NATO group, the American group based in Stuttgart, which has responsibility for all of Africa, except for a couple of countries on the eastern seaboard, took an interest in Africa. They wanted to be on the scene, and they sent people down twice, an admiral and a general, and helped us get underway again. They saw the advantage of this. Now there are people here in Washington who thought that the Mauritanian military was really quite awful because the military had been involved in serious human rights abuses in the late '80s, '89, up to '91, and they weren't being punished by their government. But when I spoke to other Western embassies that had been in Nouakchott throughout the period, they insisted that the Mauritanian amnesty law, which protected the military from prosecution for the human rights abuses that had been committed in this period of the late '80s up to '91, that that law had to be passed if Mauritania was going to be allowed to adopt a constitution and try to form a democratic government at all. And I don't know of any country where the military has been involved in that kind of abuse that hasn't followed up by some sort of amnesty law.

Q: Oh, absolutely. I mean, this is-

SAMPAS: So it's not unusual. It's a normal course of events. And indeed, we got close enough to the military to realize that they themselves were not as happy with the president as they would like to be, and I had never expected to get close enough to them that they would complain about the president to me. I thought that was a marker of sorts.

Q: Well, the president the whole time you were there was the same person?

SAMPAS: Yes.

Q: *Who was that?*

SAMPAS: Taya, President Maaouya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya.

Q: *Were you sort of off the beaten track, or were you able to get high-level visitors or congressional visitors, that sort of thing?*

SAMPAS: No congressional visitor. High-level? We had a deputy assistant secretary for African affairs once. As I say, no one from Human Rights and Democracy. The inspectors came through, but they didn't do a great deal, because they had been there not long before. It was much closer than the normal three-year tour. I can't think of any other high-level visitor that we had.

Q: *Well, you left there in '97. What did you do?*

SAMPAS: Well, I was carried out on a stretcher and went by medevac plane directly to London and stayed in London for about a month in a hospital there.

Q: *What was the problem?*

SAMPAS: I had a brain aneurysm which broke.

Q: *Did you have any warning, or it just-*

SAMPAS: I should have had a warning, but I didn't know it. I had fallen when I got out of the tub once, perhaps a month earlier, but I had no notion that such a thing as that imbalance might be associated with an aneurysm. I learned later that it could have been.

Q: *So then you were fortunate to be able to get out of there and get-*

SAMPAS: Absolutely, we had a wonderful nurse at the embassy, a Canadian woman who was married to a Moor, and she got a medevac plane in there. Med okayed it right away, and I got out that night. It was really quite remarkable, and apparently very important because what they're afraid of most of all in those cases is that some sort of pressure will build up in your brain and cause much, much worse damage. From time to time, I think that the operation might have caused additional damage. But anyway, my rehabilitation people think that I'm well on my way to being rehabilitated.

Q: *Well, I mean, the very fact that we have on tape here a considerable amount of recollection shows that it's happened.*

SAMPAS: Yes.

Q: *Well, I assume, then, that you retired at that point.*

SAMPAS: Later. I had hoped that perhaps I might come back for a little bit, but when I realized that even though I was rehabilitating and everyone said, "That's going very well, very well," nevertheless, the time frame that the doctors were suggesting for my being able to come back to work kept moving forward as fast as I was going in rehabilitation. So I figured I might as well-

Q: Also you were reaching sort of the end of a normal tour anyway by this time.

SAMPAS: That's right.

Q: Well, since you've retired, what have you been up to?

SAMPAS: Well, not a great deal. One of the things about a problem with the frontal lobe of your brain is that you lose all sense of initiating something. You know, you could stay for years, I think, with a blanket pulled up over your head in bed and think that was just grand. But I have been working on trying to get this sense of energy back again, and I'm sure I'm better than I was - not as good, perhaps, as I hope I will be one day. But that's the worst part of it, and I had never realized that that would be in any way -

Q: Do you sort of post notes to yourself saying do this and to that?

SAMPAS: Well, in a sense I try to put everything down on the calendar, because it isn't so much forgetting as this lack of initiative.

Q: Very obviously you're a lady who in normal circumstances was not a passive onlooker on the parade of life.

SAMPAS: No, certainly not. But, you know, you work at everything, and little by little maybe it gets better.

Q: Alright, well, why don't we stop at this point? One last question: while you were there, thinking back on it, whither Mauritania, from your perspective?

SAMPAS: Oh, I think if the right kind of attention is paid to Mauritania, I think Mauritania can be helpful to us as contributing to the stability of Africa, particularly, of course, northwest Africa. Through religious groups, Mauritania has significant influence in Senegal, in Mali, and in Algeria, even in the Ivory Coast. They have these brotherhoods that mean a great deal to them, as their religion means a great deal to them. I think it's important to maintain Mauritania as a stable country, which means a country where the economic pie is expanding, little bit by little bit, that people feel that if they're not getting rich they're at least doing as well as they did yesterday, maybe a little bit better. I think we should step in when it's threatened, the way we have at certain significant moments in the past, and keep its neighbors from moving in on it. Its neighbors see a weak country with a very small army, and so it's a tempting target for expansionist powers. A little bit of foreign aid would help, but I'm not one who believes in great, huge foreign aid projects. I think we've done harm as well as good with those, even on the Senegal River. The river has diseases in it now that are endemic that never were there before the Great Manantali Dam in Mali was built and the smaller dam at the mouth of the river that prevents the tidal

washing which used to occur. I'm very much in favor of small loans to poor people. World Vision has been doing that, and you've probably read about it going on in Asia as well. It turns out that the poor are very good repayers of loans, and if you follow them through this loan, you can teach them as well - teach them how to keep their accounts, teach them how to improve their product. Those are things that do help the life of very ordinary or poor citizens, and I wish we had thought of that idea back in the '60s, instead of starting with these huge big dam projects and other things. I think we should try to push Mauritania into adopting a universal education standard. They've done remarkably well at building schools all over. Unbelievable to go to a place where there's almost nothing around - almost no people around - and the kids will say, "Yes, we're in school." And I think we ought to help them as we're now willing to help other African countries. I think we ought to help the Mauritians devise a curriculum that will help their children go forward in a way that we would find acceptable - something about equality of mankind would be good. And they're already giving elementary education in three different languages - four, I guess: Soninke, Wolof, Halpular, and Arabic - French, of course, too. I think if we helped build up their education system through junior highs, we could also do something important about female genital mutilation. Their girls marry much too young, but it's the grandmothers that insist upon the mutilation. But if every girl finished junior high school and knew by then the harm genital mutilation was going to do her daughters, it might be wiped out in a generation or two.

Q: *AIDS?*

SAMPAS: You know, one never knows in Mauritania how much AIDS there is. At one time there was a study of pregnant women at the hospital, and apparently it found that maybe five percent were HIV-positive. However, AIDS is a great danger because of Mauritania's connections with other countries. For instance, Ivory Coast - Côte d'Ivoire - has a huge number of Mauritians who go there for business, and they go without their families, so you have these men all over the place, and I'm certain that many come back with AIDS, and I'm certain that it will spread increasingly quickly in Mauritania.

Q: *Even five percent is not an insignificant figure, and you realize it moves up almost geometrically.*

SAMPAS: Yes, exactly.

Q: *We're talking about acquired - what is it?*

SAMPAS: Immuno-deficiency disease.

Q: *Yes. Basically, it's a sexually transmitted disease which is just devastating Africa at this point, and it's very scary.*

SAMPAS: While the Mauritians are religious, and while they do take their religion seriously, they do have, I think, a good deal more adultery than they do in most other Arab countries.

Q: *Yes, that gives you some control there - really more the black African pattern rather than the*

Islamic pattern.

SAMPAS: Yes. And I've read, or heard since I've been back, that AIDS can pass through mother's milk for a nursing mother as well, and of course, everyone's trying to get mothers in Africa to nurse because it's normally so much healthier than using formulas. But there they are passing it on.

End of reader