Interview with John Propst Blane

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JOHN PROPST BLANE

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you could give me a little of your background. Where did you come from?

BLANE: Well, I was born in Alabama, grew up there. Went to school at the University of Tennessee. Went in the Army toward the end of the Korean conflict. I didn't go to Korea, I went to Germany rather than Korea. Before that, however, I should mention I had a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Vienna for a year just prior to going into the Army. And spent my Army career, inglorious though it was, in Germany.

And it was there that I first came into contact with the Foreign Service. Because part of my duties involved working with the escapee program, as it was called in those days. The escapee program was managed by one of the AID's predecessor organizations, a forerunner of AID. There were Foreign Service officers managing the various activities, and I worked with them in helping set up a new camp at Schoenendorf, near N#rnberg.

Following my career in the Army, I decided that the Foreign Service looked like something that I might find rewarding. I consequently took the examination and passed it, took the oral, passed it. And in November 1956 I came into the service.

Q: I wonder if you could describe your class of young Foreign Service officers that came in, in 1956.

BLANE: The November A-100 course class was composed of sixteen young men, no minorities. Most of them had done some graduate work, but not all. One of our number had not been to college, but had managed to, obviously, pass the Foreign Service examination nevertheless. But it was a very, how shall I say, establishmentarian sort of thing: white, male, mostly Eastern, with one Southerner and maybe one Westerner, but with what one sort of thought of as the typical Foreign Service makeup at that time.

Q: What was your attitude towards the role of the United States in the world at that time? When you came into the Foreign Service, what did you see yourself doing?

BLANE: Our role, as you mentioned before we started the interview, was, as it is now, that power that puts things together and tries to keep the world on an even keel. I thought that our policy in Europe seemed to me to make a great deal of sense. That is to say: the containment of the Soviet Union. I certainly felt that we were justified in the action in Korea.

I also felt we were doing some good in the world. That, coming I suppose more than anything else from my work with the escapees. Many of these people had gone through absolute hell to get out from behind the curtain. They had crawled through mine fields. Some of them had had their feet blown off. We had two young men who stole an airplane in Czechoslovakia and flew it out. And neither had ever been in an airplane before this, much less had flown one.

So I thought, basically, and do think still, that we were a force for good in the world. I hoped that I could continue to contribute toward these worthy ends.

Q: Your first assignment was really very, very interesting, because you were thrown in a part of the world, unlike so many of our officers who go to some of the major capitals or places, you went first, what, to Somalia?

BLANE: Mogadishu.

Q: How did that assignment come about and what were you doing there?

BLANE: As far as I know, it came about because I was one of two members of my class who spoke some Italian. This was, remember, 1956, long before the unification of former Italian Somaliland with former British, so the language of the country at that time was Italian. Our other Italian-speaker went to Italy; I drew the long straw and went to Mogadishu.

What had happened was that the Department of State suddenly became aware that there was a continent called Africa down there. Just as sure as hell, most of these countries were going to get their independence before too long, and so the decision was made to get in and get some posts opened.

We were two that went out to Mogadishu, two of us, and we were one of six teams that went out at the same time to open what at that point were consulates in various parts of Africa in preparation for coming independence.

Now I must say that we didn't do this very well, at least the Mogadishu part very well, and I hope my colleagues in other posts did better. Because the political people in the department decided we needed a post. They hadn't exactly coordinated this with the administrative people. So we arrived to open a post with absolutely nothing.

Fortunately I had a portable typewriter, and we used that for about the first six or seven months we were there. Because it took about that long before we got our first shipment of anything from the department. So we made do with what we had.

Our first office was a small room in the Public Works Department, which the Somalis made available to us. Ultimately we got ourselves an office building put up by an Italian contractor who, as far as I know, had never built a building over one story high. And I certainly had never built any kind of building. But we managed to get this thing put up. I never saw anybody from FBO during this process.

Q: FBO is the Federal Buildings Operations, which is supposedly to supervise the...

BLANE: That's right, supposedly. Subsequently I've had a lot to do with FBO, but not during that period.

Anyway, this building was a rather miserable effort, and I felt that if it stood up for five years, we would be extremely lucky. Now, 33 years or 34 years later, whatever, it is still our embassy in Mogadishu, it is still our chancellery. They're building a new one, and we're about to get out of that monster, but it has lasted all of that time.

Q: What was the government? I mean, who did you deal with?

BLANE: At that time Somalia was a United Nations trust territory, having been created in that form following World War II, but administered by the Italians, the former colonial power. And I don't think that arrangement was found anywhere else, where we turned it right back to the former colonial power. But in effect the Italians did no governing while I was there. The governor-general was a gentleman by the name of Anselotti who said that the trusteeship arrangement gave him the authority to veto any law of the Somali legislature.

And I should have gone back to say that Somali did have a government of sorts. They were running things under the supervision of the Italians. They had a prime minister, they had a complete ministerial cabinet, and a prom.

But anyway, Anselotti said, “I can veto any law that the Somalis pass. I have never vetoed one. I don't intend ever to veto one. It is their country, and until they are independent, I will sit here and watch them run it.” And he did. The Italians provided certain technical assistance, but they didn't get in the Somalis way politically at all.

There was one interesting aspect to this whole business. The Somalis hadn't had their government very long, and they weren't terribly familiar with running governments. They were just being broken in, so that come independence they would be ready. And I didn't know anything about the Foreign Service, since this was my first post.

My colleague, the other officer who was there, was a Class V officer. (We didn't send out very high-powered people in those days.) He was off is Addis Ababa doing some sort of administrative stuff, and I was at the post alone. And so I sent 'round to the government and told them I was there.

A short time thereafter I was received by the prime minister, with his full cabinet assembled. He sat at one end of the long table, I sat at the other, and all the ministers were on either side. I thought, “Hell, that's the way American vice consuls were received everywhere.” I've gone downhill ever since. I was never received in such a fashion again!

Q: Did we play much of a role there? Were you getting any instructions to do this or do that?

BLANE: No. Basically our instruction was to get a post opened, which we did. To make contact with the local political people, which we did. To report what little there was to report, and there wasn't a great deal going on at the time. I don't remember having gotten any political instructions at all. If I did, they were of such a nature that they weren't important enough to stick with me. Basically we were to get a post opened and create a presence, and that's what we did.

Q: You moved relatively soon then to Asmara, is that right? You were there how long?

BLANE: I was in Mogadishu just short of a year. Well, I was assigned to Mogadishu just short of a year. For several months of that period I was in a hospital in Nairobi, which is why I was transferred. I got a really dandy hepatitis, and I was evacuated to Nairobi and spent a couple of months in the hospital. Came back to Mogadishu for two or three weeks, had a relapse, went back to Nairobi to the hospital.

After the second time, the medical branch decided it would be just as well if I was moved from what was then a relatively hard to place to live. We had no air conditioning, we had no fresh water system. Medical services were rudimentary, I think you could say honestly.

And so without asking me (in those days they didn't ask you very much), I just, lying in my hospital bed one day, was brought a telegram by somebody from our consulate in Nairobi announcing my transfer to Asmara.

Q: The idea being it was higher, it was...

BLANE: Cool, high. We had an Army base in Asmara, medical facilities.

Q: I might add that, particularly in this period, hepatitis was sort of a Foreign Service disease, you might say. I mean, it was the main bane of Foreign Service personnel, because of health conditions.

BLANE: Yes, it almost killed me. I lost 60 pounds; I was in miserable shape.

Q: What were you doing in Asmara, and what was its relation in the Ethiopian context?

BLANE: Eritrea was at that point, to quote the formula: “an autonomous republic federated with the Empire of Ethiopia.” It was not an integral part of the empire, but it was very closely associated with it. Now during the time I was there, the emperor, Haile Selassie,

took a series of steps which clearly were aimed at incorporating Eritrea totally into the empire. And one year following my departure from Eritrea, that did in fact happen.

Now it was just as apparent as anything in the world that the Eritreans would not take kindly to being swallowed up by the empire, and it was pretty clear that they were going to fight. They've been fighting ever since, and they're doing it today.

All, we did so report. Nobody argued our conclusions. Everybody, I think, pretty well agreed that that was the likely scenario. And that is in fact what happened.

Now the Eritreans at that point had their own chief executive. They had their own parliament. They passed their own laws for governing most aspects of life: education, a legal system, what have you. And these autonomous powers were eroded bit by bit by bit.

First thing that happened, and this was in 1958, fairly early on, if my memory serves me, the emperor forbade Eritrea to have its own flag. Up until that point it had a flag. Well, he said no more Eritrean flag, just the Ethiopian flag.

And that just kept on and on and on. People were arrested. Opposition politicians did not fare well. There was some sporadic violence a couple of times, mostly the work of the labor unions. This was put down with great force, and the future of the territory was, as I said, perfectly apparent. And they haven't disappointed us, they have done exactly what we thought they would do.

Q: Now you're sitting in Asmara. We had a consulate general in Asmara, is that right?

BLANE: We did in fact.

Q: And there was an embassy in Addis.

BLANE: That's correct.

Q: Did you find yourself, as sometimes happens, you're sitting in one place and you're seeing what the situation is, and, I mean, were you getting this reflected in the relations, that you were saying, "Say, the Ethiopians shouldn't be doing this," and the embassy was more or less taking the empire line, or something like this?

BLANE: Yes, I think so. That normally happens. On the other hand, I think the people in the embassy were convinced, as we were, that the Eritreans were really quite serious in not wanting to be incorporated into the empire. Obviously embassy reporting tended to justify the emperor's moves. Whereas we, on the other end, were just about as outraged as our Eritrean colleagues.

I will say that Eritrea is the only place in my whole career where I became emotionally involved with the local politics. I was, in my heart of hearts, as fervent an Eritrean nationalist as existed. My little friends were being done wrong and I didn't like it.

Q: Why was this?

BLANE: I don't know, they were nice people, you could see them being mashed, they were unhappy—it was inevitable. I hoped that it didn't color our reporting too badly. I recognized the syndrome and tried to compensate for it, but nevertheless the feeling was there.

Q: How much did you feel that our military establishment, Kagnew Station, was dictating everything we did in Ethiopia?

BLANE: Not very much. Because during those years technology was advancing all over, and Kagnew was becoming less and less vital.

Q: Everyone understood this where you were. It was, what, basically a communications relay station, was that it, or was it a listening post?

BLANE: It was a listening post. Well, both, but its primary importance at that point was as a listening point. But some years later, strangely enough, the Army wanted to close the station, and it was only through the valiant efforts of the State Department that the station was kept open. Normally the roles would have been reversed.

Q: Absolutely, yes.

BLANE: But the Army ultimately said, “We don't need it any more, therefore we should shut it down.” And the State Department, which was trying desperately to support the then-faltering emperor, felt that the economic dislocation would be so great—and it would, because the town lived off Kagnew: it employed a great many people, it pumped a lot of money into the economy—and the department's point of view was that if you shut that down now, this will be a real body blow to the emperor, and he's got all the troubles he can handle.

Q: This must have been in the late Seventies.

BLANE: Early Seventies. The emperor had all the trouble he could handle at that point without our adding to it.

Q: You left Asmara in 1960 and you went directly to Salzburg, is that right?

BLANE: Correct.

Q: What sort of work were you doing in Salzburg, Austria?

BLANE: Typical consular work. During the summer, mostly welfare and protection. Because at that time probably half a million Americans a year came to Salzburg—probably a great deal more now—but still, it was a mob of tourists. And, as tourists everywhere, a fair number of them would get their tail in the crack one way or another. They'd get sick, or die, or get arrested, or you name it. So we did a lot of typical welfare and protection

work taking care of our citizenry. And we were a full-service post, so we issued visas and renewed passports, did all that sort of thing.

Q: I just wanted to touch on that because I think we want to get back to your... You've probably been much more of a specialist than almost anybody I've talked to, as far as Africa goes. After you left Salzburg in 1962, what happened then?

BLANE: Rather than going on home leave and going back to Salzburg, which would have been pretty much a normal situation, I asked the department to send me to school, to do African area studies. Again, we're right in the middle of the period when all of the African countries were getting their independence.

Q: In State Department terms, it was The Discovery of Africa.

BLANE: That's right, and it was the coming area for world interest. Or everybody thought it was at that time. It faded relatively quickly, but at that time there was a great deal of attention being paid to Africa.

Q: I was in African INR, well, the Horn of Africa, actually, 1960 to '61ish, '62ish.

BLANE: I felt that Africa was where I ought to be, so I asked for university training. And since there was very little competition, as far as I could tell, I got it.

Q: Where did you go?

BLANE: Northwestern.

Q: That and Boston University were about it, weren't they?

BLANE: And UCLA. Northwestern had the first African Areas Program, started by Professor Herskovits. He died, unfortunately, during my sojourn in Evanston. So I did a year, doing mostly economics, anthropology, a little political science, and history.

Q: Just to get a feel for the time, this is 1962, '63. What was your impression of the thrust of academic thinking about Africa, those people who were African specialists at the time? In the first place, were they black? Were they non-black? And what were they thinking?

BLANE: No, the Africanist community at that point was almost completely white. They were people who saw themselves, I think, justified, in that they had chosen to study Africa before it had become really in vogue and here they were, on center stage, as it were. They were typically very strongly anti-colonial. They had good credentials, in having pushed strongly for African independence. They were (I suppose I should say “we” were) all overly optimistic. We thought that once the bonds of colonial servitude were broken, the African countries would spring forward rapidly to take their place in the modern world, which pretty generally has not happened. Most of the academics were, as I suppose they still are, a bit to the left of the political spectrum.

Q: Did you find yourself, as a State Department person in that atmosphere, being almost pushed into a more almost conservative or rightist thing, only just to balance off? Or did you just sort of...

BLANE: No, I didn't feel myself in any way alienated from my colleagues. Got along real well with them, actually, because basically I was of the same general political persuasion as they. Considerably more conservative in some aspects, certainly, but nevertheless, as regarded Africa, I was on the same wavelength.

Q: Your first assignment on going back was to Yaound#, Cameroon. How did that assignment come about and what was the situation there?

BLANE: Well, it came about as all assignments still in those days came about: I got an operations memorandum (no telegram) from the Department of State informing me that I had been assigned to Yaound# as political officer.

Q: It was an independent country at that time.

BLANE: That's correct.

Q: What did our embassy consist of?

BLANE: Ambassador, DCM, two political officers, an economic officer, and a general junior-officer dogsbody who did everything.

Q: Our ambassador, Leland Barrows, had almost made a career out of Cameroon, hadn't he? He was there six years.

BLANE: He was there about six and a half years, and if they had just gone off and left him alone, he would have been there the next ten, too. He liked Cameroon, the Cameroonians liked him, and I think he did an exceptionally good job there. But he hung on as long as he could.

Q: This was your first embassy. What was his style of operation?

BLANE: How shall I say, he watched over things and didn't get in the way of his officers very much. I thought he had a very good operational style. I would discuss things with him. Saw him of course every day in a small embassy. But my reporting was mine; he didn't hector me much on that at all. He was very supportive.

Q: What was the political situation in Cameroon? At one time it had been really two colonial people...

BLANE: That's right. There was the larger, former French territory and a much smaller, former British territory. But through a vote in the British territory, they had melded themselves into one country.

It was a bilingual country—something that none of us, by the way, ever thought would work but which, strangely enough, has worked. We thought that West Cameroon (that's the ex-British part) was, just as sure as the world, a future Francophone country, that pretty soon English would vanish, because they were so much smaller, and that it would be a lot easier for them to learn French than for the French-speakers to learn English. As it turns out, there is an awful lot of bilingualism in the country. A lot of the French-speakers did learn English. Never thought it would happen, but it's worked.

Q: What type of government did it have?

BLANE: Presidential. Well, a president and a parliament. There was at the time an illegal opposition, Communist-dominated, called the Union of Cameroon Peoples, which had some rather inept guerilla fighters out in the bush. They didn't do very much—shoot up a car every now and again, and they were of marginal importance at that. Cameroon then was under the then-president, Ahmadou Ahidjo. A very stable country. A country with which the United States had very good relations. The working climate was superb.

Q: When you say "the working climate," here you are a political officer, what did you do? Because, you see, these interviews are designed for people who are not overly familiar, often, with the work of the Foreign Service, and so I emphasize.

BLANE: I did what I suppose all political officers do, I tried to inform myself as to what was going on in Cameroon and tell Washington about it, so that our government could be informed in its policymaking process. A political officer, as I saw it and as I practiced the trade, is pretty much a journalist. You go out and find out what's going on, you meet people, you travel around, you write articles—to a very limited audience.

Q: What were American interests in Cameroon?

BLANE: Basically, stability. Nigeria was just getting ready to have its civil war, and we needed a sort of an island of stability in what was a shaky part of the world. The Congo,

that is, the former French Congo, had undergone some quite severe political turmoil and was being ruled by a very, very left-leaning government which was hostile to us, leading us (how good is my memory?) to break relations with the Congo in 1965, and we didn't resume relations for nine years. It was a very unsettled time in the area.

Q: How did we feel about the Soviet, or Communist, threat, and were they the same?

BLANE: I think those of us who worked in Africa pretty much discounted any Soviet threat. We just didn't see it. I know that you would see references made to it. Some of the right-wing columnists in the United States would from time to time write about the Soviet designs on Black Africa and all of this. But on the ground it was very hard to see any Soviet designs. They didn't do much of anything, and I don't think they ever had serious designs. Obviously they would have been happy to take whatever influence they could, without spending a lot of time and effort on it, or money, but they certainly made no concerted effort, in any place that I've been, to create a power base for themselves.

Q: Did you see any fertile ground for this type of thing?

BLANE: Not in Cameroon, no. The Cameroonians are a relatively conservative society. The northern Cameroonians are all Muslim, and Muslims tend not to lend themselves terribly well to that sort of proselytizing. There was no strong radical sentiment at all in the country.

Q: How about the role of the French there? I mean, they had been the colonial power. At the time, did you feel that we were saying, “Ok, if there's going to be any outside influence, it's going to be mainly the French.”?

BLANE: Certainly, because the French had the money, and still have the money, in Black Africa. We had neither the personnel nor the money to try to compete with the French. We were perfectly happy to let them be the principal European interlocutor with the Africans.

The French didn't always believe this about this time, by the way. The French kept showing very definite signs of paranoia, fearing that we were somehow going to try to supplant them. And nothing could have been further from Washington's mind, believe me! Nobody in this town wanted to supplant the French.

Q: This was, I would imagine, one of your and the whole embassy's major tasks, to keep the French mollified.

BLANE: Well, we tried not to frighten them. Don't disturb them, don't disturb them. But basically on the ground, certainly in Cameroon, I don't think the French harbored any illusions about our ambitions. Their bosses in Paris from time to time did. I think we went out of our way, certainly in Africa, and I suspect in Paris and Washington as well, to try to disabuse the French of any notion that we really wanted to get out in front of them anywhere in Africa.

Q: I think the French, at least in my experiences, tend to see grand designs, as opposed to our seeing practicalities. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That type of cultural thing is our attitude.

BLANE: And as far as just managing involvement—in education, in economic development assistance, this sort of thing—to do it, you have to have French-speakers. And we don't have all that many French-speakers. It's very difficult for us to find French-speaking range management specialists and things like that. So, for that reason alone, we were certainly not challenging the French.

Q: While you were there, were there any real problems that the embassy or you had to deal with?

BLANE: None at all. None at all. It was a very, very smooth, very smooth time.

Q: It sounds like a very good posting.

BLANE: It was a good posting. It was very good. As I say, the government at that time was very accessible. You could get in to see a minister in fifteen minutes. There was just no great protocol or any other difficulties put in our way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

the French reserve, I was convinced in my heart of hearts that the money line would be reestablished, I couldn't tell them when. Well, ultimately it was, and Riggs got their money.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah!” A revelation. An absolute revelation.

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

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

BLANE: Well, how shall I say, in a very collegial fashion. We had staff meetings every day at that time. We would get together and inform him of what was going on in our various countries; he would tell us what was going on in the upper reaches of the State Department; we'd get our marching orders for the day and we'd go off about our business. At these staff meetings, we'd discuss any policy questions that came up. This was a time of lots of visits. We would talk about presidential visits over here, African presidents visiting the United States. But Joe ran a very open shop, he was very informal. He kept quite close touch with everything that was going on.

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

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

Q: You then went to INR for awhile, is that right?

BLANE: I went to INR for a bit less than a year.

Q: You were dealing with what areas?

BLANE: I had about sixteen countries. I had Northern and Eastern Africa. At that time Mr. Kissinger had not yet cut off North Africa from Africa, so it was still part of our bailiwick.

So I had all of the Arab Africa and down the East Coast, down to South Africa. Didn't have South Africa, but everything north of there.

Q: You were there really a short time, but how did you see the role of INR in the State Department? What was it doing and what were you doing?

BLANE: We were writing intelligence reports and more lengthy studies of various situations, topics involving our little countries. I basically saw our role as trying to keep the policymakers informed, giving them our best assessment of what was going on. I felt that INR did have a useful role to play, in that we were, at least supposedly, not bound by immediate policy dictates. Which is to say, we could call the shots, we felt, a little more freely than the people on the desk could, who were bound to look at a situation strictly through policy eyes. And we were not so bound.

Q: Did you feel that you were getting listened to wherever policy was being developed?

BLANE: Yes, I think very much we were listened to. We had a very good working relationship with the African Bureau, very close. We were rather an extension of, but yet, as I said, set far enough apart that we didn't have to look at things solely as a function of what an immediate policy response might be.

Q: You were there about a year, and then what happened?

BLANE: Then I went off to Chad, for the first time, as DCM.

Q: You were there from '69 to '72, is that right?

BLANE: Right, I was there for about, oh, three years and four months or three years and five months, something of that nature.

Q: How did you get the job?

BLANE: The country director for East Africa was Terry Todman. I was the INR guy for East Africa, so I saw a lot of Todman, obviously, and he asked me would I like to go out and be his DCM. So I said yes.

Q: Todman, of course, is one of our major career ambassadors. Could you describe how he used you and how he operated in the time you were together in Chad?

BLANE: As he phrased it (and I suppose it's been phrased by many ambassadors in the same way), I was to be his alter ego. I was to run things as I thought he would run them. I tried to do that. As most DCMs, I was the chief day-to-day, hands-on, management person. Keep the machine running. And I was also the principal political reporter.

Q: Chad later became quite a focus, particularly at the time when you were back there as ambassador. But at this period of time, what was the situation?

BLANE: Well, we had a little civil war going on. In '65 the western and northern peoples, primarily the desert types, revolted against the southern-dominated government.

I might point out that Chad sits astride the line that separates the Sahara Desert from Forest Africa, if you will. About the northern half of the country is in the Sahara. Sparsely populated, I might add, by nomadic desert people. Southern Chad's population is settled, agrarian, non-Muslim. You get a pretty distinct two groups: nomadic Muslim and sedentary non-Muslim.

Q: What was the civil war about?

BLANE: Basically, the desert folks didn't like being governed by the southerners. Specifically, what started it was taxes. At that point the southern peoples paid almost all of the taxes that were paid. They were probably not a great deal, but nevertheless the tax base of the country was in the south. And so the then-president, Tombalbaye, decided that he should get some more revenue from the northern folk.

So he attempted to do this. He tried to carry out an information campaign to tell these people what taxes were, what their taxes would be used for, and all this sort of thing. He had public meetings to propagandize or inform these people what the government was about.

At one such meeting, held in a little town in eastern Chad called Mangalm#, in 1965, a group of nine or ten people from the central government, including several parliamentarians, met with a group of nomadic folk. During the discussion, it came out that the nomads were claiming that they didn't have any money to pay taxes with.

And one of the government representatives made the unfortunate mistake of saying, “That's all right, you can pay us in kind. We'll just take some of your cattle.”

You don't take the nomads' cattle very easily. The nomadic folk at the gathering took great exception to this and slew all of the government's representatives on the spot.

Q: That ended the negotiations that day.

BLANE: That's right, they just killed them all. And that was the start of what at first was just a sort of spontaneous uprising. There was no real organization or anything, it was just kicking back against a government that these peoples felt was oppressive and unfriendly.

Q: We're talking about the '69 to '72 period. What were our interests and our attitude towards the situation there?

BLANE: Well, again, we had no specific national interests in Chad. Obviously we wanted stability. If we could help contribute towards the maintenance of stability, we thought that would be a good thing. We did have a small economic assistance program, helped the folks in that fashion, but we had no concrete US interests there, obviously.

As the rebellion continued, however, it began to take on what appeared to be more and more a political character. Which is to say, some exiled Chadians formed something they called Frolinat, the National Liberation Front, and they used a lot of Marxist rhetoric. And I suspect that there were those somewhere around who could see an ideological threat of some sort building up in Chad. I don't think those of us who were there gave any credence to this at all. No matter what these exiles were saying, they had very little contact with the fighters on the ground. They were people in Paris, sitting up there running off leaflets and to hell with it. They weren't affecting what went on in Chad at all.

Q: Again, was this one of these places where, whatever international concern there was, we were quite happy to see the French take care of things?

BLANE: The French were taking care of things. Because the French were in combat in Chad from April 1969 until September 1972. They were in combat for three years there. It took them less time than it took us to realize that this was a sandpile that they weren't going to get out of very easily. So in the summer of '72 they said to hell with it, we're going home. And they went.

Q: They went home not out of a huff or something, it was really a concrete decision this isn't in our interests, was it?

BLANE: Their presence during these years had two aspects. The military aspect: they had troops in the field fighting. And an administrative/political aspect: they were trying to reform the government. They had something called the MRA in place. This was the Mission de Reform Administratif. The Administrative Reform Mission was trying to make the government work better and be less venal and less oppressive, and they weren't getting anywhere with the government at all. They weren't getting very far with the people out in the desert either. Finally the French said, “Well, if we can't help give this country a better government, there is no point in our wasting French money and French lives propping this regime up.” And they went home.

Q: What was your impression of the regime? The president was Tomb...

BLANE: Fran#ois Tombalbaye.

Q: What was your impression, and what sort of contacts did you have with the government then?

BLANE: I had frequent contacts with the government. Mr. Tombalbaye was, in my view, a thoroughly evil person. He was corrupt, he was oppressive. He was, I do believe, not quite mentally sound. And he was doing his best to make life miserable for his countrymen. He was not a pleasant person at all.

Q: Again, we were just there.

BLANE: We were just there.

Q: This is obviously an unclassified interview, but did our CIA establishment have any eyes on trying to do something there?

BLANE: No. No, no. No, no. Not at all.

Q: What about Libya? Was it playing any particular role? How did we feel about Libya at the time?

BLANE: All of this came about shortly following Mr. [take your pick] Qadhafi's, Khadafy's, Gadhafi's, al-Qadhafi's coming to power, which was in the fall of 1969. After Qadhafi came to power, Libya was playing, the Chadians felt, a very unhelpful role, with the result that in late '70 or early '71 (I'd have to go look it up) Chad broke diplomatic relations with Libya and sent the Libyan diplomats packing. That situation obtained for two or three years, and then ultimately relations were reestablished. But the government didn't feel that the Libyans had their best interests at heart.

Q: When you left Chad in '72 to come back to Washington, what was your impression whither Chad at that time?

BLANE: The war was still going on. My impression was that sooner or later the Tombalbaye government would, in one fashion or another, pass from the scene. Which happened two years later, when some members of the Army took the president out and shot him. But I don't think anybody who had served in Chad would have predicted that Tombalbaye would last indefinitely. I think we all felt that this government was going to collapse sooner or later.

Q: You came back again to Washington and you were in the African Bureau again. What were you doing?

BLANE: I was a policy officer.

Q: Which means what? That sounds great, but what does it mean?

BLANE: What it meant was that I wrote policy papers for the assistant secretary on whatever we happened to be doing at the time. I would rip off little option papers: This is the situation, here are three options for dealing with it (or five, or one, or whatever); get it cleared all over the building; and if the subject was important enough, then it would go to the interdepartmental group of the National Security Council. And I was the executive secretary of that as well. So we had a fair number of big meetings during those years.

Q: This was the time Henry Kissinger was the secretary of state.

BLANE: He was in fact.

Q: And had a great deal of concern down in Angola. That was our prime African interest, wasn't it? And Ethiopia, I don't know whether we...

BLANE: Ethiopia, yes, and Angola and Mozambique.

Q: What was your impression? I mean, we talked before about the "Soviet menace" in Kissinger's time, who at least has the reputation of seeing things in East-West confrontation at the time. When you were writing policy papers, was this uppermost in your mind?

BLANE: The Africa Bureau and Mr. Kissinger did not get along well during those years. I was the policy officer. I wrote papers for the assistant secretary.

Q: Who was the assistant secretary?

BLANE: Don Easum at first, and then Matt Davis. Mr. Easum was fired; Davis came aboard. He lasted about five months, and he was fired. What these people were fired over, basically, was that we did not see Africa the way Mr. Kissinger saw Africa. We kept writing things he didn't want to read.

Q: What was the different perception?

BLANE: As you say, he saw things in a very black-and- white, East-West fashion. On Ethiopia, Mr. Kissinger wanted to continue arms supply to Mengistu, and a number of us in the African Bureau thought that would be idiotic. For the only time in my life, I joined with eight other young gentlemen in sending a very strong dissent channel message up to the secretary. And I think it worked.

Q: What was the rationale for support of Mengistu in Ethiopia, who was heading a very totalitarian successor government to...

BLANE: I think simply the hope that if we were real sweet and nice to him, although he had just butchered all our friends, he wouldn't "turn to the Soviets." But the way we saw it, the man already was as turned toward the Soviets as you could conceivably get. He

was a homicidal maniac at that point anyway. We felt it would certainly not be in the best interests of the United States to keep giving that guy goods. And we ultimately stopped giving him goods.

Q: How about in Angola?

BLANE: In Angola, we felt that the situation simply was beyond our control; there wasn't anything the United States could do about it. Remember that all of this was coming down in Angola at exactly the same moment helicopters were lifting people off the roof in Saigon. And we considered it unlikely that the United States government would ever devote the manpower and resources to Angola that it would take to reverse the flow of events there. Nor did we necessarily feel that it would be in the best interests of the nation to do so.

Mr. Kissinger felt that we could do something, we could turn things around. He was wrong, of course, but he tried.

Q: Here you were, writing policy papers and involved in the policy process, dealing with Angola, which had a Marxist government supported by Cuba at the time, and by the East Bloc, opposed to some rather varied groups with South African support and all. How did you look upon this Angolan thing, I mean, you and maybe some of your colleagues in the African Bureau?

BLANE: In the first place, as I say, we thought there was nothing we could do about it. The MPLA might not be the best vehicle in all the world for a government, as far as our interests were concerned, but it was beyond our poor powers to change anything, one.

Two, we had real American interests in Angola: oil. Angolan oil is exploited solely by American companies. The American companies were all in favor of our just staying the hell out of there. Because they got along perfectly well with the MPLA, and still get along well

with the MPLA. They never had any trouble whatsoever. So our real cash money interests were being protected.

Q: So this was one of these cases where somebody from the academic world would say: "Ah, well, you know, we go where economic interests are going." But yet we had a policy which was in a way somewhat opposed to the economic interests.

BLANE: Very much, very much opposed.

Q: It was very interesting.

BLANE: Because some of the guys we were supporting at least made attempts to disrupt oil production. You had the very weird situation of Cuban troops deployed around the perimeter of American oil fields, protecting them. [Tape blip] ...for years and years.

Q: Yes, it's something I guess we've sort of known, but nobody ever paid any attention to it.

BLANE: Anytime anybody would start getting the least activist, we would hear screams from the oil industry: "Stay the hell out of there for God's sake!"

Q: Did you find yourself, working on the straightforward policy thing there, being undercut, or never really quite knowing what was happening across the river? I'm referring, of course, to the CIA.

BLANE: Well, after awhile. At first, I was on an intelligence working group dealing with Angola. I represented the bureau. And after the bureau's position became more and more apparent, I was removed from this committee, I was bounced.

Q: In other words, you weren't saying the right things, was this it?

BLANE: The bureau generally opposed doing what other people wanted to do. We thought it was silly, and we tried our best to...

And we weren't alone. I can remember, at one of our interdepartmental group meetings, the representative of the Air Force was a major general whose name doesn't come to mind immediately. Anyway, when we were going around the room at this juncture, getting everybody's opinion, the general stood up and said (he was from Texas), “It is thuh opinion of thuh Ayah Foace, that US policy toward Angola should be one of studied indifference.” And he sat down.

And so, obviously, we did get in there and muck about. And this was long before the South Africans were doing anything of any significance. Without South African involvement, Mr. Savimbi undoubtedly would not have done as well as he did. I suppose we helped him continue his existence, but basically we didn't reverse things the way it was hoped that we would be able to. Now this was fifteen years ago, and the MPLA is still there fifteen years later.

Q: War is still kind of going on, I guess.

BLANE: It's still going on. The Angolans are getting rid of the Cubans because the Cubans were a very, very expensive hobby. And we knew that this would happen. See, the Cubans were not there for free; they're paid for by the Angolan government from their oil revenues. It costs the Angolan government hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars to maintain those Cuban troops, so they're getting rid of them.

But again, to recapitulate, our feeling was that US interests were not vitally affected. In fact, our real dollar and cents interests were not affected in the least, one.

Two, we were not about to put the type of money or the manpower into Angola that it would take to really affect the situation. Not coming right on the heels of the Vietnam collapse. That just wasn't in the cards.

Q: You then had one of these out-of-department assignments for awhile. How did this come about?

BLANE: Well, basically I felt it was time for me to go away for awhile.

Q: You had certainly spent much more time in Africa and dealing in African affairs than almost anybody I've...

BLANE: Well, yeah, but that's not why I felt I ought to go away. There was just an awful lot of flak still being generated by the Angola affair, and I had just lost two bosses, and I thought it would be nice to lower my visibility somewhat, go away.

Q: So your assignment was what?

BLANE: I was assigned to the Environmental Protection Agency as director of their Bilateral Programs Division.

Q: This was from 1975 to '77, sort of the end of the Kissinger era. What were you doing?

BLANE: Two sorts of things.

We have 5,000 miles of border with Canada, and quite a decent border with Mexico as well (in length, that is). And environmental problems arise up and down these borders all the time. Either we're fouling them, or they're fouling us, or we foul each other. Basically cooperation between the governments is good. And rather than sit around and call each other names (which we did, too, by the way, at times), we tried to cooperate in cleaning up the mess rather than blaming each other for it. And we were involved in a multibillion dollar Great Lakes cleanup. We did a lot of work on acid rain and cross-border air pollution. In

Mexico, we did a lot of work on cross-border water pollution, and with Canada, too. We did both. That was one set of activities.

The other was joint research ventures. Now we have joint research programs with a wide variety of countries. The largest, at that point and probably still, was with the Soviet Union. But also with Japan, with England, with Sweden, Italy, Poland, India, a wide variety of countries. And these undertakings were managed by my division. We managers were not scientists, but we had the scientists and our job was to get the scientists to the problems and this sort of thing. And outline the various projects with the countries concerned.

One of the things I did during that period was to serve on the American delegation that renegotiated our environmental cooperation agreement with the Soviet Union. Our agreement with the Soviets is in five-year increments, and one of these ran out while I was there. We trotted off to Moscow and negotiated the new agreement, got it signed, and came home.

We did lots of work with the Japanese on all sorts of air and water pollution problems. It was a very active time, very active. We were moving lots of bodies around the globe all of the time.

Q: It was just about this time when the environment became a really major concern, wasn't it?

BLANE: Yes, it was. My first boss was Russell Trane, under the Republican administration. And then, when Mr. Carter came in, Mr. Kostell took over. But the environment was getting a lot of play then, and we were devoting a lot of attention and a lot of resources. Lots of resources.

Q: How did you find the State Department and its apparatus, embassies and all, responded? Was this sort of a thorn in the side because they had other business at hand?

BLANE: Not at all. Not at all. Certainly we got very good cooperation from the department, and the department officers who worked on environmental things were very knowledgeable and very helpful. We had State people on almost all of our delegations. We did odd things for Foreign Service officers.

We would conduct public hearings on environmental questions, as required by the legislation. Before you change something, you have to publish it in the Federal Register, and wait thirty days, and have public hearings to give the affected citizenry a chance to let its views be known.

I learned a lot about my own country, particularly the border areas of my own country, during this period. Moved up and down the borders fairly frequently.

Q: Well then, whammo, in '77 you are right back into your old pea patch, aren't you?

BLANE: Oh, absolutely.

Q: What happened and where'd you go?

BLANE: In '77 I had been at EPA for two years, and I didn't know what the future was going to have in store for me. Then I was wandering down the hall in the State Department one day and passed the senior officers' assignment office and went in and asked somebody what sorts of jobs they had going.

And they said, “Well, the only thing we have right now that you might be interested in is DCM in Nairobi.”

And I said, “Yeah, I would be, I would, I, I, I, yeah, I'd die and go to heaven, yes, very, very, interested. Got it?”

I was told that I shouldn't bother, however, because there were forty-some-odd names on the list already.

And I said, “Fine, put my name on it, too.”

And then, without waiting for the system to do what systems do, I trotted around and met the newly appointed ambassador, a political appointee, Wilbert LeMelle. We had lunch together, and at the end of the lunch he asked me would I like to come out and be his DCM. And I said, Yes, thank you.”

Q: I might add, in the African Bureau when you die and go to heaven, Nairobi is where you go.

BLANE: Exactly. Exactly.

Q: What was LeMelle's background?

BLANE: Academic. Academic and Ford Foundation. He came to the job directly from the Ford Foundation, but he had spent most of his career teaching or working in foundation work. He's president of a college right now, back in academia.

Q: So how did he use you, as an ambassador?

BLANE: Fortunately he pretty much let me run the show. Because he had no background in embassy management or anything of that nature. And so basically I ran the embassy, the day-to-day function of the embassy, I ran it just, you know, totally.

Q: You were in Kenya from 1977 to 1980. What was the political situation and our role in it?

BLANE: In 1978 Jomo Kenyatta died. Kenyatta had been the first president of Kenya following independence and had been in office ever since. He was one of the truly great

men of Africa and, as far as I'm concerned, one of the truly great men of the Twentieth Century. But he passed away and was succeeded by the present president, Mr. Moi. It was a time of general prosperity, stability. Coffee prices were good.

When I first got to Kenya, I met at a reception a parliamentarian. They were just coming up to parliamentary elections, and I asked him how did he think he would fare in it, what were his chances of reelection. And he just smiled and said, “Well, if coffee prices are still good, I'll get reelected. If coffee prices fall, I won't.” He said, “Unfortunately, although I can't control the world market or the weather, in my district if coffee prices are good, people are happy and they don't want to change things. If coffee prices fall, they're unhappy and they do want to change things.”

But it was a peaceful period by and large. There was some friction between the Kenyans and the Somalis, but it never blew up into anything of great importance.

The Middle East was going into a very tenuous period at this time, with the overthrow of the shah and this sort of thing, and it was decided that we needed a naval presence in the Indian Ocean/Persian Gulf. And if you're going to have a naval presence, you've got to have some place to park your boats. And we didn't have any place to park our boats.

So therefore we went to our Kenyan friends and persuaded them to enter into agreement with us to give us military access to the port of Massawa [Mombasa?], where we could bring our ships in to provision them, give the sailors shore leave. They had good dry dock facilities, all of this sort of thing. It was absolutely essential at that time, because that was the only possible port anywhere on the eastern African littoral, or anywhere else. That was it. So that was probably the policy high point of my time in Kenya, negotiating the agreement and getting it signed.

Q: Were there any great problems? Were the Kenyans reluctant? You're shaking your head.

BLANE: No, no, they were not at all reluctant. They were perfectly happy to have us. We had an ongoing military relationship with Kenya, in that we were doing an Air Force fighter squadron program there. We sold them the airplanes, and had American instructors living in the country, teaching the Kenyans to fly, that sort of thing. So it was not breaking totally new ground to have a military relationship. And this made the whole thing more reliable, if you will.

Q: What was the Kenyan attitude towards Tanzania? It had sort of an extreme Socialist leader, Nyerere, who just seemed to be running it down to the ground.

BLANE: Did a good job of it, too.

Q: What was the attitude in Kenya towards this?

BLANE: The Kenyan attitude was one of antipathy, I think you could say. They had no dealings with one another. The border was closed, you couldn't go across the border between the two countries.

Q: How about Uganda? That was not a good situation there at that time, was it?

BLANE: The Kenyans had no real policy problems with Uganda. They knew, or felt, that Idi Amin was a madman, and they had great problems with some of the things he did. But most of the things he did, though, did not vitally affect Kenya. It was the other way around: Kenya could vitally affect Uganda because it sat between Uganda and the sea. But the other way, the Ugandans had no real leverage on Kenya at all.

Q: I'm assuming that there was no great problem with, say, the State Department. One, it was the Carter administration. The one thing they wanted was a place to put their boats.

BLANE: Had to have it. They had to have it.

Q: And you gave it to them, I mean, essentially, as an embassy, so that things must have gone fairly well.

BLANE: Oh, yeah, very well indeed. Our relations were very trouble free. It was a good period. It was a good period.

Q: In oral history, of course one always dwells on the trouble problems. But it does show it was a good, solid relationship.

BLANE: Very good, solid relationship. When we needed a port, we could get one. And we needed one very badly. As I say, there was no alternative, nowhere else to go.

Q: You were in Nairobi until 1980, and then what did you do?

BLANE: I came back here and went to the Senior Seminar. Spent a year traveling around the United States, listening to a lot of interesting speakers, trying to find out something about what made the United States tick, having spent most of my career outside it. It was a good course.

Q: I was in it a couple of years before that. For the record, it's the equivalent to the war college of the military. Not quite, but, I mean, of that nature.

BLANE: Well, it's sort of a graduate-level war college. We were twenty-six in my class, and of the twenty-six, something like seventeen had done the war college as well, two or three or four years earlier, and then moved on up. I think I profited from it; it was a good course.

Q: Then you went as ambassador to Rwanda, is that right?

BLANE: Well, not immediately. What I did immediately following the seminar was to go to New York as the Africa man at the General Assembly.

I will note that each of the bureaus sends a disant expert up to the UN during the General Assembly, to maintain contact with the African representatives, and to keep our representative informed on African matters, to write, again, policy option papers for things that we might want to do at the UN involving Africa, that sort of thing.

Q: Which American administration was in at this time?

BLANE: This was Mr. Reagan.

Q: Then this was Mr. Reagan at, I guess you might say, his hottest. Did you find that his initial anti-UN bias and al this was apparent?

BLANE: I don't think so. Because he had two real honest-to-God activists up there. He had Jeane Kirkpatrick and Ken Edelman. And it would be a little hard to ignore Kirkpatrick and Edelman. You'd have to really work at it.

Q: What was our fit, from your vantage point, in the UN, this first year of the Reagan administration?

BLANE: It was, how shall I say, the reintroduction of a more generally conservative international viewpoint. I think it's fair to describe Mrs. Kirkpatrick as conservative. We, under her leadership, were very activist. We did not sit back, we were lobbying for something all the time. We had an opinion about everything, and we did our best to make everybody aware of that opinion. And we tried our best to swing votes and do this sort of thing. It was a busy time, busy time. Although the administration may not have thought much about the U.N., Mrs. Kirkpatrick, while she was there, did her best to use it to what she saw was the best interests of the United States.

Q: In African Affairs, what was your particular concern and what were we pushing?

BLANE: There were no burning African issues. South Africa, always. Angola, always. Mozambique, Ethiopia. The sore points that had been the sore points for the last fifteen years, and they're still the sore points. We spent a lot of time on those issues, but a lot of time on economic issues. But we had no difficult bilateral issues at that time.

Q: Well then, your next assignment, what was it and how did it come about?

BLANE: Toward the end of my time at the UN, I got a telephone call from the Department of State informing me that the Libyans, who had been occupying the capital of Chad for about a year and a half, were going to pull their troops out, and we wanted to have a presence in Chad immediately. Therefore it was kindly requested that I would dispatch myself off to Chad. And I did that.

At first we had a little house over across the river.

Q: Was your family with you?

BLANE: No, no.

The Chari River forms a border between Chad and Cameroon, and we had a little house over on the Cameroonian side. We had had this little house throughout the Libyan occupation, and we sort of looked across the river to see how things were going. And so, for the first couple or three weeks I was out there, I lived over on the Cameroonian side and commuted across into Chad by pirogue. I was maybe the only representative of the United States who went to work by pirogue every morning. I got quite a long, two-column piece on this aspect from The New York Times during this period.

Q: Did you fly your flag on the pirogue?

BLANE: No, I had the flag on the car.

So I went out and we reopened our embassy in N'Djamena on January 17, 1982. I had had to convert the ambassador's residence into an office building because our chancellery had been pretty well destroyed during the second battle for N'Djamena.

The second battle, I might note, lasted for nine months. They fought back and forth across the town, using tanks and heavy artillery and aerial bombardment and this sort of thing. Pretty well destroyed the town; there wasn't much left in '82. N'Djamena was just rubble. And there were almost no people. All the Chadians at that point were living in a refugee camp also across the river in Cameroon. About 200,000 were living over there.

And so, setting up again as best one could, working with almost nothing, I got an embassy functioning again and turned it over to Peter Moffat. I was there, oh, three and half months or so and then Peter came out to be permanent charg#. A year or so later he became ambassador, and I went back to the Department of State to go through the preliminaries to go out to Rwanda as ambassador.

Q: Why had the Libyans pulled out of Chad?

BLANE: They didn't pull out of Chad. They said they were going to pull out of Chad, but they didn't really do it. They pulled out of the capital and some of the more southerly areas. They sort of pulled back up into the desert, they didn't really go home.

Q: What type of government had they left?

BLANE: Well, the president was a gentleman by the name of Goukouni Oueddei, who now lives in Tripoli. He was one of the original rebels from a long dot, as we say, (I can't even speak English any more), from a long time ago. He had had a falling out with the other principal rebel, Mr. Hissen Habr#, who is now president. Goukouni had asked the Libyans to come in on his side. They managed to chase Habr#'s forces out of the country

into Sudan, and Goukouni was making an effort at running the country—not a very good effort.

Q: You came back for your appointment as ambassador to Rwanda. This is always one of the countries considered sort of a nice place to go.

BLANE: Oh, it is an awfully nice place to go.

Q: I'm surprised, particularly during a rather partisan administration, as partisan as they come, that they didn't pass this off to a safari-loving buddy of somebody in the Republican Party.

BLANE: My replacement, his replacement, and his replacement have all been political appointees. The next three. One is not quite there yet, but there have been two political appointees and another one is going. It's a nice sweet little country. Spent three very happy years there.

Q: What was the political situation there? You were there from '82 to '85.

BLANE: Again, peaceful, stable. It was during a relatively prosperous time. Coffee and tea prices were pretty good. Rwanda is another coffee and tea exporter; that's all they export. And market prices were pretty good.

The only real problem we had during these years was an influx of refugees from Uganda. We had lots and lots of refugees come in from Uganda, and camps were established for them at various places in the country. We were involved in all sorts of ways: providing foodstuffs, medicines, one thing or another. We did a lot of work with volunteer agencies.

Q: Is Belgium considered sort of a major power for giving out assistance there?

BLANE: Oh, yes.

Q: So, again, this was one of these places where we, with a certain amount of relief, were able to say, "Well, if there's going to be a guardian power, this is Belgium," was that it?

BLANE: That's correct, although we wanted to help out financially, and did. Especially, as I said, with the refugee situation. Rwanda was one of the first four countries to be chosen for an economic reform program, financed by the United States. That was, I suspect, my major achievement there, fighting and dying against an awful lot of competition from around the world for a piece of that money. And we managed.

Q: Just to give an idea for somebody who's not involved in foreign affairs, how do you fight for it? I mean, here you're the ambassador, and people, I'm sure, in Indonesia and...

BLANE: Everywhere else in the world.

Q: Ecuador, Liechtenstein, I mean, they're all looking for a way to get this. How do you fight for it?

BLANE: First there was the announcement that the program was going into effect. Then there was the announcement that a pot of money had been set aside. The criteria were discussed, sort of the general criteria of eligibility.

And so what you do then is sit down and start writing long descriptive pieces explaining why your country fits all of the criteria: They're brave little people. They're doing their best to stabilize their economy. They are self-sufficient in foodstuffs. They are not ostentatious at all, there's no conspicuous consumption, no corruption. These are good little people and deserving of our help.

Q: You know, this sounds almost exactly like the same abilities that are required to get a grant from various corporations. It's grantsmanship.

BLANE: That's right, that's right. And so, through a series of exchanges and meetings, we made our case and we got the money. And I think it has been well used.

Q: How did you deal with the government? I mean, you're the ambassador. Again, looking for somebody, I mean, at your, how does one...?

BLANE: In Rwanda, I dealt with all the ministers, but my principal point of contact was the foreign minister. On important things, or things that either Washington felt were terribly important or the Rwandan president felt were terribly important, I would then be called into the presidency and discuss these things directly with the president.

Q: Was the Rwandan government following world events in the UN and things like this?

BLANE: Oh, yes, very much, very much.

Q: So would this be the sort of thing that you would get involved in?

BLANE: Oh, we always had consultations before the General Assembly every year. We have had, in every country I worked in, I might add. But certainly. And, very fortunately, the Rwandans were almost always with us on everything, being of a very conservative government and we had a very conservative government. The international policies of the two governments were largely identical, and so we didn't get into any pushing matches at all.

Q: How about your embassy staff? It was obviously relatively small.

BLANE: Oh, very small, very small. I had a deputy chief of mission; an admin. officer, a GSO; a consular/economic officer; and a secretary. Two communicators.

Q: Was this about right?

BLANE: Absolutely. We really couldn't have done our job with fewer; we didn't need any more.

Q: Did you have any problem in avoiding having more bodies put in from other places? Sometimes this happens, you know. I'm sure in, say, Kenya that... Was this a problem, that too many people were based there from other agencies, aviation and all? If you're in a nice place, people tend to end up there.

BLANE: Well, certainly Bill Harrop, who followed LeMelle as ambassador, felt very strongly that the American presence in Kenya was too big. He was signally unsuccessful in reducing it. He fought hard. I read cable after cable he would send back explaining why he needed to get rid of X, Y, or Z organization. You can't do it.

Q: It's one of those battles one learns.

BLANE: On the other hand, when I was there I didn't really feel that it made any difference. We had a huge American community in Nairobi. Probably had 7,000 Americans living in Nairobi, mostly private business people. So another five or six hundred government people—I don't think it bothered the Kenyans in the least, and it was no particular burden to us.

Q: It was much more of a multicultural society anyway, so it probably made less difference.

BLANE: There were a lot of people. But the residents didn't bother us, those who lived there, nearly as much as the visitors. Because if you live in a nice place that has lots of pretty wild animals, your visitor stream is immense. In Nairobi we had a section that did nothing but take care of visitors—and there were lots of them.

Q: I want to ask you about the social life of Nairobi. There used to be a saying: "Are you married or are you from Kenya?"

BLANE: Yes, yes, well. Those days are, I think, long gone. Those were the Happy Valley days during the colonial period. There was a lot of social life certainly, but we had a steady stream of visitors through. Just immense numbers.

This was not true in Rwanda. We had a few, but not many. One of the things I set out to do, and did, was to host the annual AID mission directors meeting for Africa. It's held in some African capital each year. All the AID mission directors come together and spend a week chatting about their problems. And normally these confabs are held in Nairobi or Dakar or Abidjan or someplace like that. And I decided oh, hell, let 'em come out to a little post. So we struggled, and, again, gamesmanship or grantsmanship or what have you, we got it, and we hosted the AID mission directors conference very successfully.

Q: It looks there is a certain balance in things. After Kenya and Rwanda, in 1985 you got your comeuppance, didn't you? At least they shook you out of the rather nice area and sent you back to your old stamping ground.

BLANE: They couldn't have done anything nicer for me. If I had been allowed to pick my post, I would have picked N'Djamena.

Q: You went back to Chad as ambassador from '85 to '88. It certainly made sense. I mean, nobody had had more experience there. Was the job just a logical choice and you got it, or was there any maneuvering?

BLANE: I certainly didn't maneuver. It was sort of funny. Normally, before one is named to an ambassadorship, the Personnel people will call you up and say, “Mr. Blane, if the president were to name you to, let us say, Rwanda, would you accept the assignment?”

And you say, “Yes.”

And they say, “Fine.”

Then after awhile, some days later, Mr. Reagan would call you up and say, “Hey, you want to go to Rwanda?”

“Right.”

For Chad, it didn't go like that. Personnel called me up and they didn't ask me anything. They called me up and said, “Ambassador Blane?”

“Yes.”

“The president has decided to name you ambassador to Chad. Goodbye.”

They didn't ask my opinion one way or another. I think they knew the answer anyway.

Q: You went in '85. What was the situation at that time?

BLANE: About forty-five percent of the country was occupied by the Libyan army. The Libyans had a major air base in northern Chad, built from scratch, at a place called Wadi Doum. They had lots and lots of army there. They had armor, combat aviation. Their whole military might was based in northern Chad, or in southern Libya just north of northern Chad.

Nobody knew what was going to happen, whether they were going to try to move south and retake the capital. Because between '82, when I left, and '85, when I came back, the forces of Hissen Habr# had managed to drive in from Sudan and oust the Libyan-backed president, Mr. Goukouni Oueddei. Goukouni was back off in Libya, the army was in the northern part of Chad, and Mr. Habr# was in power in N'Djamena. And Mr. Habr# and the Libyans did not get along—and do not get along.

So we didn't really know what the Libyan intentions were, but the fact of the matter on the ground was: they were there in force. And the Chadian objective, ultimate objective, was to drive them out. But for the first several months I was there, the stalemate, which had

existed since '83, continued. The Libyans were north of the 16th Parallel; the Chadians were south of the 16th Parallel. And basically, nothing happened.

Then, beginning in '86, the Libyans and their Chadian allies... Because Mr. Goukouni Oueddei had a few forces of his own. In theory, they were the anti-Habr# element and only being helped by the Libyans. Actually, the Libyans had fifty times as many people as Goukouni did. He really was, militarily, of no consequence at all. Anyway, there were some probing actions down south across the 16th, which were successfully repelled by the Chadian army.

And then, on January 1, 1987, the Chadian army went on the offensive itself and struck the southernmost Libyan base, which was at Fada, and, in a very short but sharp action, took the town; routed the Libyans; destroyed an awful lot of Libyan armor; captured some Libyan airplanes that never got off they ground; shot down some Libyan aircraft, both fixed-wing and rotary-wing; and generally acquitted themselves beautifully.

Now this astounded the French. Because it had been evident for some time that the Chadians were mulling over starting an offensive, the French had cautioned them very strongly against it, saying that if you take on the Libyans, you remember what happened last time, the Libyans drove down and occupied the capital. If you waken this sleeping dog, the same thing may happen again.

And the Chadians said, “Phooey, no conceivable way. We are superior to the Libyan army and will so demonstrate.” And they did.

The war then went on until the late spring of '88, by which time the Libyans had been, to all intents and purposes, driven out of Chad. The Libyans lost probably seven hundred heavy tanks, a hundred or so combat aircraft. Several thousand Libyans were taken prisoner. All of their major bases in Chad were taken. The huge Libyan air base at Matan Isara, up inside Libya, was destroyed.

The Chadians were having a little problem at one point with the Libyan combat aviation. The Chadians had no combat aviation—not a single airplane. The Libyans didn't use theirs very effectively, but they were there, and the Chadians were sort of irritated by then. Since they couldn't do anything in the air against the Libyans, they just mounted a lightning strike, drove up into Libya, and just totally wasted the air base. Just gone. All the airplanes on the ground.

They took a lot of people with them who could drive, obviously, because they brought back six hundred trucks. They captured six hundred trucks on that...

Q: When you were all there, how come the Chadians were so good and the Libyans were so bad?

BLANE: The Chadians are extremely good desert fighters; they know how to do it. The Libyans have never demonstrated they could do anything militarily; they're awful. The Chadians were good, but the Libyans were just hopeless. All they could do was get themselves killed.

Now the difference between 1980-81 and 1986-88 was that the Chadians had something to fight with. When they were fighting the Libyans earlier, they had a few old bolt-action World War II Italian rifles, a few machine guns, and that's about it. They didn't have much mobility, they didn't have any firepower. In the '86-88 war, they had great mobility and great firepower.

Q: How come?

BLANE: We gave it to them, that's how come.

Q: Was this overt, covert, or how did this thing work out?

BLANE: It was quite overt. Had to be—there were times that the N'Djamena Airport looked like Rhein Main. I mean, I had C-5s, and C-141s lined up on that runway; we were running an airlift in that place you wouldn't believe.

Q: Why? What was our policy in Chad at the time you were there?

BLANE: All-out support of the Chadians. As you may remember, Mr. Reagan had a thing about Col Qadhafi. He just didn't like Col. Qadhafi at all. And if you've got somebody who has a capable force—willing to use it, wanting to use it, going to use it against Mr. Qadhafi—you help him. And we helped.

Q: As of today, August 8, 1990, America is putting troops into Saudi Arabia because of a major threat from Iraq, and it's a very difficult situation. At one point not too long ago, we were looking upon Iraq as being somebody we would like to give support to because of their fighting Iranians. Were we ever concerned about what we were doing in Chad, as far as the balance of Central Africa might be concerned?

BLANE: We were trying to help Chad establish itself as a counterweight to Libya. And we did, and they did.

Q: Was there any sort of greater Chadian movement, that this might spread out?

BLANE: No. No. No, the Chadians said, always, that they didn't want one square foot of the Libyan desert, they had all the desert they needed thank you very much. They just wanted the Libyans the hell out of their country. They have no territorial aspirations in other directions at all.

Q: Could you tell me about your dealings with and your evaluation of Hissen Habr#.

BLANE: I worked very closely with the president because he was his own defense minister. Whereas in Rwanda I had maybe a half a dozen private meetings with the

president in three years, there were long periods in Rwanda where I met with the president almost daily, at least three or four times a week. So I got to know him quite well, and we worked together, I think, obviously successfully, because the work got done. He was a good man to work with. Very decisive. Very strong fellow. He spent a lot of time out fighting. I mean, that's how he came to power, he was a war leader. He's had lots and lots of combat time himself, so he knew what the people were doing. His one objective, his only objective, during my period of service there, was to get rid of the Libyans. That's all he thought about. And he did it.

Q: Here he was, a man of the north desert and all, and you talked about Chad being divided. How was this mix of, you might say, the desert and the cultivated, maybe even it's black and, more Arab...

BLANE: No, no, it's linguistic, not skin color. Northern Chadians are just as black as anybody else. Linguistically, it's different.

We commented at the time, I think everybody commented, that Col. Qadhafi had done more for Chadian unity than any other force imaginable, than any force since the assessioned independence of the country.

The Chadian northerners and southerners don't feel an awful lot of kinship one for the other at times. But they were united on one thing: neither wanted the Libyans. They were absolutely united in wanting to liberate the country from the Libyans. No reticence on the southerner's part at all.

Q: Had the Libyans had a pretty heavy hand when they were in, all the way down at N'Djamena?

BLANE: I don't think so. You just don't like your country being occupied by a foreign power. No, the Libyans didn't do anything really horrid while they were there. They did some horrid stuff as they left, primarily in broadcasting hundreds of thousands of plastic

land mines all over the bloody desert. It's going to be years and years and years and years before all those things get cleaned up. Other than that, I don't think they did commit any of the real atrocities. I've never heard of any. But they weren't beloved, and the southerners fought right alongside the northerners in getting them out.

The army is still largely non-Saharan, because there aren't many Saharan peoples. So, numerically, any army, or any other kind of organization in Chad, is going to be very heavily non-Saharan.

Q: Habr# made a visit to the United States in June of '87.

BLANE: He did that.

Q: Did you go with him?

BLANE: I did.

Q: How did it go?

BLANE: It went beautifully. I came over ahead of him to help prepare things. My wife came back with me and was with Mrs. Habr# the whole time. Oh, it just went swimmingly. Mr. Habr# and Mr. Reagan got along just dandily. Yes, indeed. Mr. Habr# had just finished delivering Col Qadhafi's head on a platter.

As you know, ambassadors very often will recommend to Washington that their heads of state be invited for a visit. Now this has happened at every post I have ever served at, with the exception of Chad. I did not recommend that visit. I got a cable one day saying the president would love to see Mr. Habr#. So I trotted over to see the boss, and Mr. Habr# said he would be delighted to go.

Q: Was Habr# politically astute, would you say?

BLANE: Well, he has a degree of political sensitivity. He wasted his life: he's got one degree in law and one in political science, so...ruined. Yeah, he's a bright guy, very, very bright, yep.

Q: Did you have any problem, as the ambassador, in dealing with, really, obviously a massive amount of military aid? You must have had the CIA doing their thing. You know, an awful lot in a small country. Was this a problem of coordinating?

BLANE: No, no problem of coordination at all, because it was all done basically between me and the president. There were only two of us doing all this coordinating, so that didn't cause any problems.

One thing it did necessitate was my learning an awful lot more about modern weapons systems and things like that than I ever thought I would need to know, but I got my... [tape ended]

Q: Obviously when you've got a war going on like this, you get a lot of press. How about the media, was this a problem?

BLANE: Not much. I'm very fortunate in that I know practically every journalist that works in Africa. I have known them for years and years and years, they keep coming back. See, most of them live in Nairobi, so if you've done three years in Nairobi, you tend to have met all of the journalists around. I had a lot of good friends amongst the journalists. No, they didn't cause any problems. They came in quite frequently. We didn't have any resident in Chad, but we had lots of visitors of all kinds: John Randal from the Post, Greg James from the Times, all sorts.

Q: When you were there before, France was the predominant power. By the time you were there again, would you say the United States had the major interest?

BLANE: No, France certainly was still the predominant foreign partner of Chad, in that France just put so much more money into the effort. Not the military effort but the total support package: aid, teachers, budget support, you name it. We gave budget support, too, by the way. We supported seven ministries, and the French supported the rest. We divided the pie. And this was a straight money transfer.

Q: You left there in 1988. How did you feel about Chad? Wither Chad, not just the war but as a government and all that?

BLANE: Chad is a very poor country, and it's not going to go much of anyplace until its government's revenues are, I think the word these days is “enhanced,” a lot.

Fortunately, that is in the offing. Chad's got a lot of oil. Now so far this oil has not done Chad any good because the oil is in Chad; the oil is not somewhere else. Chad is, if you will notice, a long way from any oceans. And so what is going to have to happen is that somebody is going to have to build a pipeline, probably to Douala through Cameroon. This will be about an eight- or nine-hundred-mile pipeline. This is going to cost a couple of billion bucks. Now the oil companies are prepared to make this sort of investment...when the price is right. As they've said so often, nobody can pump $13 oil from Chad. But looking at the current world situation, you know, it's an ill wind that blows no good. This ill wind may be blowing Chad a very...

Q: We're referring to the present situation in which Iraq has just seized Kuwait; oil prices have gone way up.

BLANE: And a significant chunk of the world's oil reserves are under hostile domination at the moment. So this may be doing Chad a good turn. Because the oil is there, and it will be pumped, but probably not until the market price is around $25 bucks a barrel. At $25 bucks a barrel, they can make money on Chadian oil.

Q: When you left in 1980, did you decide to retire at that time?

BLANE: I did. Well, how shall I say, I was in the situation that so many of us find ourselves in: no interesting onward assignment was forthcoming.

Q: Well, it's hard to go from the excitement of that to another quiet place.

BLANE: Oh, absolutely. But I didn't have to go on in my proconsul role at all. I would have been perfectly happy to take any sort of job, I didn't care what its rank looked like or anything, as long as it was interesting. But nobody offered my anything that I thought was terribly interesting, and since I had over the maximum number of years for accumulating retirement anyway, I decided to quit. Now if I had it to do over again, would I have retired? Probably not. But I did.

Q: Looking back on it, if a young person came to you and said I'm interested in joining the Foreign Service, how would you reply, as far as recommendations for or against? Because you have seen more of the modern Foreign Service than many of the people I have interviewed.

BLANE: Well, the service has probably more than its share of frustrations compared to most professions. I would be hard-pressed to make a very strong recommendation for any young person to come into the Foreign Service.

On the other hand, I still think that it offers remarkable opportunities for achievement, for professional satisfaction. I suspect that in the years to come there'll be an awful lot of things that need being done, and will be done by the Foreign Service, because we're the only institution out there to do them.

I'm not sure that the communications revolution has helped the Foreign Service. We're too close to Washington in many respects. Earlier on in my career we just did an awful lot of

things that now people would tend to refer back to Washington, or very often Washington insists that you do so.

I've often questioned the wisdom of this, refusing to let fairly experienced people in the field make a decision, referring them, to the contrary, to some FSO VI twenty-nine-year-old desk officer back here who will make the decision and get the assistant secretary's chop on it. When I look around the department, I find the decision-makers tend to be younger and less experienced than those in the field, but they sit at the seat of power. They sit at the seat of power. They may not, in fact, know nearly as much about what's going on, or why, as the man out in the field.

I have had several very, very bright young officers who worked for me leave the service in the past several years. Some of the very best. Basically because they could get positions of greater, how shall I say, influence, more professional freedom, more responsibility, outside than in.

And we've done some fairly silly things. I had a GSO in...

Q: That's a General Services officer, administrative officer.

BLANE: Yes, General Services officer who is basically the bottom of the totem pole in the administrative field, traditionally the one who sees that your toilets get fixed and this sort of thing, who had a degree in economics and wanted to change to the economic cone. He had been arbitrarily put in the administrative cone, and he tried and we tried every way we could think of to get him switched, but the system would not budge. So he left the service in 1985, and just two months ago got his Ph.D. from Harvard economics. He went to Harvard on a full scholarship. When he left the service he was planning to get his Ph.D. and then come back in. Now he has decided to teach instead. He's going to academia.

Another one of my bright young boys is now vice president of the Morgan Guarantee Bank in S#o Paulo, Brazil. He had served in S#o Paulo in the Foreign Service.

And it goes on.

I hope that the young crop doesn't get too discouraged. Now, much more so than when I came in, I think the frustration level is going to be high. The feeling that you're really not accomplishing anything and can't accomplish anything will be high.

At my first post, I was fifty percent of the staff. Much of the time I was a hundred percent of the staff. In all of my assignments I've been fortunate in that I have always been in a position of some responsibility. I have always been either deputy principal officer or deputy chief of mission. One time, head of the political section. But I've always been where I felt that I was a real player. And I'm afraid that a lot of the kids these days don't have the feeling that they're real players.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much. We stopped and now just a little addendum. You were mentioning, in Chad, the difference between the French attitude and the United States attitude. I wonder if you would could...

BLANE: As I was pointing out, the French were a bit ambivalent.

On the one hand, Chad is a former French territory. They have been very supportive of all of their former African territories.

On the other hand, French economic and political interests in the Arab world were such that the French government was quite concerned that an overidentification as the enemy of an Arab country would redound to their disadvantage in the Arab world at large. I think this was an unreal fear, in that most of the Arab countries seemed to dislike Colonel Qadhafi about as much as anybody else did.

But certainly the United States was not in any such ambivalent position. Our position was absolutely clear. We thought that Colonel Qadhafi was a menace to the peace of the region and of the world. And we were willing to support the Chadian efforts to rid

themselves of the Libyan occupation. What this meant in effect was that whereas the French total financial involvement in Chad was much greater than ours, we supplied most of the modern firepower for the Chadian forces. And we supplied a good many vehicles as well.

Q: Well, just in off-tape conversation, I gather that, for once, we did not get ourselves too bogged down with trying to recreate the American Army of the Rhine or something like this, but we gave the Chadians what they needed, which was basically light but very powerful firepower, wasn't it?

BLANE: That's correct. Both we and the French, I think, showed admirable restraint in that line. Neither of us tried to tell the Chadians how to fight their war. I don't think we would have been successful in convincing them had we tried, but we didn't.

A question frequently asked by the journalists was: “Who does the training of the Chadian forces, you guys or the French?” And the answer was: “Neither.” Because neither we nor the French know how to fight the type of desert war the Chadians are fighting. We are learning things from this war; and there will probably be theses written at the National War College on the basis of things we learned in that war. But it would have been presumptuous, to say the least, if we had gone in, to try to tell people who have lived all their lives up there in that bloody desert how to fight a war in it.

Basically the Chadians fought like the American Indians. Rather than horses around the wagon train, it was Toyotas around the wagon train, or Jeeps, or what have you—fast, light vehicles with 106-inch recoilless rifles on the back, or twin or quad .50-caliber machine guns, automatic grenade launchers, that sort of thing. But very, very mobile, very fast. The Chadians would attack at 100 kilometers an hour—they did move! And the poor Libyan gunners sitting in their tank turrets simply couldn't track the vehicles at all well.

The first antitank weapon we gave them was the LAW missile (that's Light Assault Weapon), which I don't think anybody in the American Army thought could kill a Soviet

tank. They can. They killed lots of Soviet tanks. But they can only do so within 50 meters, so you've got to have somebody gutsy enough to get that missile launcher within 50 meters of the tank. In open terrain that's fairly scary, but the Chadians could do it.

Later, we provided them with the TOW missiles.

Q: Target On Wire missiles.

BLANE: Right, wire-guided missiles, which are quite effective. We gave them first the Red-Eye anti-aircraft missile, which anyone can quote me as saying is absolute garbage. Might as well give them slingshots. I don't know who sold us those things, but whoever it was should be ashamed of himself. Subsequently, we were able to get some Stinger missiles. That was a job of salesmanship, too, because we tend to control those things very, very tightly.

Every time, the Chadian tactics were more or less the same: hit very fast from a quarter they don't expect you, don't slow up at all, and shoot. Therefore our ammunition resupply was quite heavy, because the Chadians didn't have an awful lot of fire discipline. If they had ammunition, they used it, and used it to good effect.

Q: Ok, well, thank you again.

End of interview