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

NICOLAS ROBERTSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 28th of September, 2009. This is an interview with Nicolas Robertson. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

And you go by Nick, is that right?

ROBERTSON: I do.

Q: Nick, well let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

ROBERTSON: I was born in 1950 in Wilmington, California, the heart of the Los Angeles Harbor district.

Q: Oh yes. Let's get a feel on your- let's take your father's side first. Where do they come from; what do you know about them?

ROBERTSON: My father was from a rather unsuccessful farming family. He was born in Nebraska, grew up in West Virginia, graduated from high school in Laramie, Wyoming, and then moved out to work in the aircraft industry in California.

Q: During World War II, I'll guess.

ROBERTSON: Just before the war, at the end of the Depression.

Q: The Depression, yes.

ROBERTSON: He spent a long time in Rural Retreat, Virginia, down the road here, and a lot of time around West Virginia but ended up at about 19 years old working at North American Aviation in Long Beach and never left Southern California after that.

Q: Where in Southern California; in the Wilmington area?

ROBERTSON: No, we went from Wilmington to Long Beach up to Ventura and then my parents had the wit to move to a beautiful small town, Ojai.

Q: That's up near Santa Barbara, isn't it?

ROBERTSON: Yes. And as I always joke that has kept us a very tight knit family. It was always a nice place to go back to for vacations for all five of us.

Q: Okay, let's- I take it your father did not graduate from college.

ROBERTSON: No, he didn't.

Q: How about on your mother's side? What do you know about her?

ROBERTSON: My mother was born in Los Angeles; her mother was from Louisiana, her father from Minnesota. She was a child movie star.

Q: What sort of movies was she in?

ROBERTSON: Actually, from "The Little Rascals", and Shirley Temple movies to "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch." Never a big star, but worked in movies from the time she was six months old in "The Winning of Barbara Worth," until the time she became a mother.

Q: I'm a movie buff so I- Was she in the "Our Gang" comedies or not?

ROBERTSON: She was in "Our Gang," She was from a family of seven and all of them worked off and on in films. Most of them appeared in the movie "Tom Sawyer."

Q: Did she go to school, I mean, college or not?

ROBERTSON: She went to USC (University of Southern California) for a year, I think, but-

Q: And then _____ moved into- married and-

ROBERTSON: Actually, she was a bit of a beach girl and I think she just found working in the movies and surfing a better life. She was a tiny woman, five foot three, but she used to surf with those big old redwood boards before fiberglass.

Q: The long boards around 10 feet long or so.

ROBERTSON: Yes, and she used to surf until she met my father and got married at age 27.

Q: Did she do, what was it, "Beach Blanket Bingo" or-

ROBERTSON: She retired before surfing became a fad and movies were made about it. I suppose surfing wouldn't have been a fad if it hadn't been for fiberglass.

Q: Yes. Okay, well did you basically grow up in-

ROBERTSON: Ventura and Ojai.

Q: Ventura and Ojai. How big was your family?

ROBERTSON: We're five children, two and a half to three years all the way down the line.

Q: Where did you fit in there?

ROBERTSON: I'm the oldest.

Q: On the family, is it pretty much a unified family, getting together and all?

ROBERTSON: Very much. We are spread around the U.S., all but me still in the west, but we get together regularly.

Q: Where did the family fit politically?

ROBERTSON: Hmm. Oddly enough, my mother may have been a republican influenced by her father. My father was a New Deal Democrat, although neither of them were very political until Vietnam, really, and then everything became more political. My mother moved far left, my father moved a bit to the right, and we had our share of family arguments. As for us, the siblings, there has never been a conservative vote cast in any election.

Q: What about religion? Was there much religion or was this a factor?

ROBERTSON: No, no. We're several generations of only vague believers. Not a whole lot of time spent in church.

Q: Okay, well I see in the Ventura-Ojai, let's talk about, which one, Ventura first?

ROBERTSON: Yes, that's where I started elementary school.

Q: What was Ventura like?

ROBERTSON: I'm just laughing grimly with people about this housing crisis; when I was learning to read, I remember asking my parents, "What does 'GIs, no down, 2.9' mean?" That was on billboards all over Southern California.

Q: This means GI housing.

ROBERTSON: Yes, the GI tracts. They were sprouting up all over Southern California, with these low interest loans and small down payments.

Q: Yes. So what was life like for a small kid in Ventura and the Ojai?

ROBERTSON: Let's see; what was distinctive? My father worked in the oil fields. He went around to different wells so a weekend would often be jumping into his company car and riding around in the hills. California had a pretty big oil industry at that time and we would just go visit oil wells on the weekend. It was fun for a kid.

Q: Sure. Well, also that was still the era where in the spring the wildflowers came out.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: It was really gorgeous.

ROBERTSON: It was. I grew up with the mountains going down to the Pacific Ocean and then moved up to Ojai's beautiful valley so I've been sort of spoiled by natural beauty and take it for granted.

Q: Yes. Were you, as a kid, much of a reader?

ROBERTSON: Oh yes, yes. My mother was a big reader and she passed it on, and I have been a bookworm since the time I could read, about first grade.

Q: Do you recall sort of in early days any particular books or series of books or something that particularly grabbed you?

ROBERTSON: We had all the sort of standards like a children's version of "King Arthur," children's version of "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey." I remember very distinctly one book they gave me, "The Golden Book of Mathematics," which was mathematics for children. I must have been six years old, seven years old and they gave me this book that talked about pi and Pythagorean theorem, and I remember it very clearly. My mother also had a collection of the Oz books. Even though she wasn't university educated, she was a real fanatic reader and she liked popular classical books, like the Mary Renault books on Greece, which I reread with great pleasure today.

Q: Well, for the generation or the past generation of people that I'm interviewing now the great majority still had not been college graduates but I know that era because I'm part of it or came along a little bit later and they were all great readers. I mean, not all but I mean reading was very much- The Book of the Month Club had really serious books and books were a great part of the environment, much more so than now. An awful lot people were getting a very good education by reading.

ROBERTSON: And I look at my father, who grew up and went to school in rural West Virginia and Virginia, and naturally he had a smattering of Shakespeare, and a good general education. I remember a few years ago fuming that some group was making a big deal about "multi-cultural education," about how the Arabs invented algebra and the zero and all this. I said that my father knew that in West Virginia schools; one room schoolhouses taught that Arabs invented algebra. A friend informed me politely that there had been a gap, and it wasn't general education anymore. Looking at the general level of education in the 1920s and 30s you think gosh, how much they knew - Shakespeare, the kings of England and that kind of stuff.

Q: Sure, oh yes, absolutely.

ROBERTSON: And knew it in a form where it was passed on; it was assumed that you would read and learn.

Q: Well now, in California at that time, with a cohesive family, was there sort of a thing where at dinnertime you all sat around the table and talked about what was going on?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely. It was a rule. I mean, we didn't have many rules in the house but you will come to dinner and talk; that was one of them.

Q: How about getting news?

ROBERTSON: My grandfather had been an accountant at the "Los Angeles Times" so we had the "Los Angeles Times" all my life. And of course around 1960 that became a very good paper.

Q: Yes. And how about, was TV news or did you watch much of that or-?

ROBERTSON: I remember our first TV; I still remember two programs. One was "Watch Mr. Wizard," home science, which I still tell people is the foundation of American economic success. And Edward R. Murrow did a thing called "You Are There," where they would interview Socrates and stuff, fake news. It was great, and I still remember them even though I was only three or four years old

Q: Oh yes, absolutely first rate stuff.

ROBERTSON: And I don't think- since we were a newspaper family TV news wasn't a central fact of our lives.

Q: What was the community of, say Ventura first, like?

ROBERTSON: Ventura, GI tract, - let's see, this would have been- we moved there in 1955 so everybody would have been in their mid to early 30s, all veterans, largely from Texas and Oklahoma with the expansion of the oil industry. A lot of California was Texas and Oklahoma. No black families, a fair sprinkling of Mexicans, all of whom were veterans of Korea and World War II. I remember polio vaccine because in our class we didn't have polio victims but in the three grades up they had them. I'd say a thoroughly unremarkable childhood. I mean, I suppose if people looked at it now they'd be surprised at how light a hand parents had; I mean, just throw your books on the table when you came home from school and go out and play sports and we'd do that all year round.

Q: Yes. Well this is it; in my interviews I often describe that way of life as the kids- I came through that too. I think this goes way, way back. Kids were basically feral, you know, they were, you know, dinner will be at 6:00 and you be home but get out of the house. And particularly in California you could do it all the time.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: What sort of things did you do?

ROBERTSON: Played sports all year round. I mean, whatever the sport was, you know, baseball in summer, football in the fall, basketball. Even though there was no climactic reason for changing our sports we followed TV with the sports news.

Q: Well also I assume that these weren't organized sports, these were just the kids getting together.

ROBERTSON: And playing in the street. Breaking windows and paying for it. Now, legally you can't leave a child home alone until they're 14; back then, at eight years old you'd be in charge of a dozen kids.

Q: Yes. Well, it was a different attitude. Let's take elementary school; how did school suit you?

ROBERTSON: I was always a good student. I got in trouble, like everybody else, but I got good grades. At that time they didn't track us so much, they didn't divide us into classes, I don't think. Sputnik went up in '56 and they began all this testing stuff on children, they invented all these tests for us. Every year they'd bring in new tests, so it got more refined and divided by the year, but I always got along fine with teachers and fine with classmates.

Q: I would think that, you're talking about the composition of class, kids being from- the children mainly of Oklahomans and Texans came up and were working in basically blue collar, hard working area and you didn't have a massive infusion of either Orientals or Jews who usually were very competitive that you didn't- there wasn't probably as great a push academically as one might think.

ROBERTSON: That's probably true. The issues weren't academic; they were more disciplinary, you know, and Catholic school was always the threat.

Q: Well also too, you know, from my experience, I mean, going through part of the system, the kids from Texas and Oklahoma were more prone to fight, you know. I mean, it was part of the culture, you know…

ROBERTSON: Yes, I think it is, and I'm glad I got to grow up in that culture. There are important lessons to learn about fighting, and one of the lessons is how far you can go, how much you can say, before someone hits you. That's an important lesson in life, and that was one of the reasons I was so emphatic about my kid going to public school here.

Q: It certainly is.

ROBERTSON: And the other thing, of course, is how to be bored. By and large, I was faster than the class and I would be frequently bored.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: But life can frequently be boring. It's good to practice.

Q: Well thank God for the windows in the classroom. You know, when I shut my eyes and think about elementary school particularly I really think about looking out the window more-

ROBERTSON: Than looking at the blackboard.

Q: Were you in Ventura throughout elementary school?

ROBERTSON: Through fifth grade, yes, and then we moved to Ojai.

Q: And how about Ojai; what was it like?

ROBERTSON: Despite the fact that it's now a resort town rather tied to Santa Barbara, at the time it was another Texas-Oklahoma bedroom community for the oil industry. It was obviously smaller, less traffic. I didn't notice a big change in the environment. It seemed like more or less the same people. I had met a number of good teachers in Ventura, but in Ojai I had a spectacular teacher who had actually had taught in the UK, was married to an English woman.

Q: Who was that?

ROBERTSON: Mr. John Hook.

Q: I like to get the names, give a little immortality for good teachers, to get them into the question.

ROBERTSON: He was spectacular. Growing up, I haven't mentioned, there were Boy Scouts, there were radio clubs; even though we didn't have a lot of organized stuff you could do almost anything you wanted. With Mr. Hook, we had a school garden; he taught us to play soccer and rugby. We had spectacular science projects, and he let us move ahead in science and math as fast as we could. We still had corporal punishment; I had my- both my butt and my hand rapped sharply by him. But it- I think that was maybe the first time I ever thought of myself as a good student intellectually.

Q: Well did- I can't remember; is Ojai on the coast or not?

ROBERTSON: No, it's in the mountains.

Q: So what did you do when you were turned loose?

ROBERTSON: Played sports. And the same, I mean, the same environment; we could go a little further afield. We had a big park next to us with a football field and baseball diamond and stuff like that. But the same general thing; you'd go home and you'd throw your books on the table and run out and come back for dinner.

Q: So you- high school; what high school did you go to?

ROBERTSON: I went to junior high in Ojai for a year and a half. My father was transferred to Las Vegas to work at the nuclear test site. His company mapped oil drill holes, which was also relevant to the underground testing. A year and a half we lived in Las Vegas, which was not a particularly nice year and a half and then we came back to Ojai. I suppose my cosmopolitan life began there. I was working for a potter, a ceramicist, who was quite old then, and needed help on the physical side of ceramics and I was kneading clay and cleaning the studio for her. She had been a USIA (United States Information Agency) visitor to India and she had become sort of a quasi Indian. She had a friend from an Indian ministry of culture visiting her, and I was working around the studio, and somebody said I should interview her and send it to the newspaper, which I

did. I began writing newspaper stuff, began working sort of as a journalist from the time I was in tenth grade.

Q: You graduated, what, '68 or so?

ROBERTSON: Sixty-eight, yes.

Q: Did events, I can think of the election of 1960, you would have been 10, it was Nixon-Kennedy, got people quite a bit excited; did you feel that at all?

ROBERTSON: Thinking back on that. I remember watching a convention, the Democratic Convention that nominated Kennedy. I don't think any of us cared or understood really, but we were all crowded into a bedroom, fighting and playing and eating and watching the Democratic Convention of 1960 nominate Kennedy. I mean, you had a sense that something exciting was happening; I don't think anybody understood.

Q: How about two years later, the missile crisis; did that-?

ROBERTSON: I remember that, yes. The sense of threat, I mean, even though we were removed from it, we were far away.

Q: But did you learn to duck and cover and that stuff?

ROBERTSON: Yes, you know, the whole time I was in those elementary schools up until the 1960s, we used to have the thing where they told you to kneel under your desk and cover your head and then we would have a mock drill where they walked us home. And of course people were building bomb shelters and stuff like that.

Q: Yes. And the Kennedy assassination, '63.

ROBERTSON: Yes, we were in physical education, just before Thanksgiving, physical education class and somebody came out and said someone just shot Kennedy.

Q: Yes. In high school, what was social life like then?

ROBERTSON: I went to the public high school in Ojai for a semester. That was getting a little rocky. I had started going to anti Vietnam stuff; I was, what, 15, 16, and that was getting a little rocky and this ceramicist had tried to get me into a private school, wanted me to go and got me a scholarship to a private school that was associated with Krishnamurti and Aldous Huxley. So I went to a very small school.

Q: Well Aldous Huxley was of course very much avant-garde; I just finished listening to "Oh Brave New World," you know. And what was the school like?

ROBERTSON: It was sort of a much milder version of Summerhill. All the kids had long hair; I mean, all the kids had long hair, which might have been like any school around

Los Angeles but it was strange for Ojai. It had an element of the reform school – getting trouble-making high school students out of the house. Again, a spectacular education. They had good teachers or when we didn't we at least had good curriculum. There were some tensions between the school and the community - I came close to getting in fights with people at the public school and things were changing pretty rapidly.

Q: What would cause a kid your age, coming from essentially a background of people who supported the military, to turn into an anti-war person?

ROBERTSON: I wasn't reflexively left wing, you're right. As a matter of fact I had long wanted to go to Annapolis and join the Navy; I've always liked ships. Anyway, in the opening weeks of 10th grade one of my older friends convinced me that Viet Nam was a really crazy thing to do, and I remember discussing it with him over lunch.

Q: Well how did this manifest itself for you?

ROBERTSON: Well, just, we had weekly vigils against the Vietnam War in Ojai from '65, '66 on and- I mean, these weren't big-

Q: No, no, I was just thinking, I guess, the Ojai movement did not- the ripple effect did not hit Washington very much.

ROBERTSON: But in a very, very civil, quiet vigil. We had a fair number of Quakers, and this big center of Theosophy; I mean, there were pacifists there. Actually, we had a small community of Finnish draft dodgers from 1939. Ojai is one of those places that turned out a disproportionate number of soldiers; it became normal. I mean, if you didn't go off to college in September after your senior year you went into the military. I had a half dozen friends killed.

Q: As you were moving up you would have graduated from high school by 1968, I guess?

ROBERTSON: Yes. We got Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations for our graduation commemorations.

Q: What were you pointed towards?

ROBERTSON: By that time I thought journalism would be fun to do. I was working at a newspaper. I also did lots of other jobs, too, I mean, construction, painting houses, all that kind of stuff. I went off to Santa Cruz, with a scholarship and actually sent money back to my family from university. But I went off to Santa Cruz-

Q: It's the University of Santa Cruz.

ROBERTSON: Yes, University of California at Santa Cruz.

Q: It's part of the California system.

ROBERTSON: Yes. I didn't put a lot of thought into university. Where also did I apply? I can't even remember. Princeton, maybe. Maybe I applied to one Ivy League and maybe one other on the West Coast but I ended up at Santa Cruz, very similar in style to the so-called progressive high school I went to.

Q: Yes, Santa Cruz is kind of an avant-garde area.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And no grades, going to school without grades, which I thought was a nice thing. And to be quite honest all of my friends who wanted to go to medical school or law school or graduate school, all of us did what we wanted to do. I mean, having no grades wasn't a burden.

I was pointed generally towards, I don't know, humanities or social sciences. I'm thinking back on the Foreign Service or academics: I didn't know university professors, I didn't know people who had PhDs in history, and I didn't know Foreign Service people. I mean, you ask what was I pointed to; I don't know. It was still a world in which being a high school teacher was the intellectual peak, intellectually satisfying work. On the other hand, there was not any particular worry about careers – we didn't spend any time at all discussing small stuff like what careers we would pursue, we only discussed important stuff like the meaning of the universe…

Q: Yes. You know, one can- I think everybody's getting more sophisticated now in a way but it was not a time when, you know, if you were a woman they'd say well do you want to be a nurse, a secretary or a teacher. That was kind of it, or a housewife, obviously, and if you're a guy it was sort of, well, if you took shop then you went into the trades or if you took the other you would see what happened.

ROBERTSON: Our experiences were parochial, a parochial world and California wasn't urban. Southern California, even with Los Angeles wasn't really urban.

Q: One man I've interviewed, I've forgotten his name, had not graduated from high school, joined the Marines before we got involved in the war, came back and went to Bakersfield Community College. But he had seen somebody at an embassy and he said I'd like to be one of those guys there and so the trades counselor, a diplomat, you know, thumb through or Foreign Service office and said well, you should do this, and so he went- he finished at the community college, went to Berkeley, went to Indiana, and eventually became an ambassador in one of- I think in Georgia or one of the former- But I mean, you know, there's very much a lot of these stories of people just sort of stumbling on this and not being prepared for it the way children who came from families that were sort of well clued in, particularly East Coast families.

ROBERTSON: You know, I notice that. Working overseas you notice very few people from the West Coast register at an embassy or go visit the consular section. You just don't think of it. Whereas people who grow up here know it's there, know it's there to serve you. It's just a world-

Q: There really are differences.

Then, what was- How did you find the teaching at Santa Cruz?

ROBERTSON: I did a lot of independent studies. I had two principle professors, one Hungarian, a Hungarian Jew who now does a lot of stuff on the Holocaust, goes to a lot of stuff, conferences on the Holocaust although then he didn't talk about it. Incidentally, I took my son to have dinner with him in Budapest four years ago and that was really worth the trip. You know, it was pretty exciting if you're from California to talk with a guy who lived through World War II as a Jew, then was involved in the Hungarian revolt against the Soviets. And he had this odd, detached attitude about so much. When we met in Budapest, after more than 20 years, I teased him about a second career as a Holocaust specialist, because when I was his student he would not talk about it very much. He asked me why I found it surprising, and I replied that I was coming to the conclusion that Holocaust studies were not such a great idea, because of all the arguments about whether Rwanda, Darfur, Bosnia, Kosovo etc. are Holocausts. He shrugged and said, "Oh, but you must study the Holocaust not for lessons but for *irony*." He began comments – Jews emigrating and then returning before 1939, behavior of different countries. What a great experience for my son….

Q: By the time you were in college the Vietnam- by the time you were getting close to the end of your time there, Vietnam was no longer a particular factor, was it?

ROBERTSON: I didn't take my student deferment; a matter of sort of principle, and I went for the physical and then in, what year was it, yes, '69 or '70 they had the lottery and that ended that. As a matter of fact, I lived in a house with eight other guys and the lowest number was like 260. I mean, it was just a blessed night.

Q: Yes. Well what was social life like at Santa Cruz?

ROBERTSON: Sex, drugs and rock and roll. What can I say? But I wasn't there. Social life at Santa Cruz, I lived in a big house with a whole lot of guys; we still see each other, you know. My college roommate and that whole gang of half a dozen, 10 people, we still spend a lot of time together.

Q: Yes. Well it's- Did you go down to the beach much?

ROBERTSON: The beach? I had a rowboat, we bought some crab traps and used to go catch big Dungeness crabs in Monterey Harbor and fish and drink beer in the boat. If I didn't mention it earlier, I was an amateur jazz musician at the time, which I kept up. I used to play in clubs in Santa Cruz. It was a lovely time to be at university and a lovely place to be at university.

Q: I spent a year in Monterey at the Army Language School the year you were- the year after you were born.

ROBERTSON: Really? You were there then?

Q: I took Russian at the Army Language School.

ROBERTSON: Oh. Our, nurse practitioner in Niger, Peter Chordas, was the son of one of the Russians who taught there. And I studied Russian under a guy named Ben Clark, who started at Monterey as a professor and then ended up at Santa Cruz.

Q: At Santa Cruz did you, other than sex, drugs and music, was there- did you have any academic specialty?

ROBERTSON: You know, I lived, perhaps on the surface a sort of wild life but I became a sort of passionate student of history and decided I wanted to be an academic for awhile; a passion which has stayed with me. Yes, I became, academically, super serious, did all my work in Russian history and European economic history and then went on to Berkeley, thinking I wanted to be an academic. Then I remained serious about history - that carried over to my Foreign Service career because anywhere I went I would soon be one of a people who really knew local history. I didn't care about the issue of the week, or what the embassy was doing about it; I would get into the history and how did we get into where we were.

Q: Oh yes, the history- Well the history is so important.

ROBERTSON: And I was sort of surprised, in much of our reporting, how much is ignored.

Q: Part of the problem, I think, actually what we both are doing here is part of the problem, that there's very little knowledge of the people who are in the Foreign Service and what the Foreign Service did and does.

ROBERTSON: I had an interesting experience with that. One of the problems with evaluating AID programs or World Bank programs is that it's very easy to mark the failure. I mean, that's sort of contemporary journalism, and contemporary academics: you look at how one guy screwed up here and you write about that. But that's cheap and easy. Finding failure is easy, but finding a successful project is really intellectually difficult. You've got to pick the project, you've got to explain what it is and why it was successful, and one of the characteristics of any successful AID project would be that we no longer have anything to do with it.

Q: Yes. I mean, we get it started and let go.

ROBERTSON: Yes. There's no bureaucratic interest in knowing this at all. The guy who set it up is long retired, the program no longer exists, so why would anybody care if it worked or not? It really weakens the whole process of project analysis. And it's

interesting, sort of like the Foreign Service attitude that nothing very important happened "before I became ambassador."

Q: Yes. Well of course everybody, you know, I've served on promotion panel and seen how every person who arrived in a job turned to the- turned the embassy or the section around.

ROBERTSON: Which, I'll tell you, on a personal level doesn't bother me, but I do think it too often had effects on analysis. I understand we've got to shine for the promotion boards but let's step back here a bit.

Q: No, no, well this is one of the things, that I think there's, you know, they should know where we've been so we don't have to repeat everything.

Well when you were getting ready to graduate in 1972?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Whither?

ROBERTSON: I went to Berkeley. I applied to graduate schools and ended up going to Berkeley to do Russian history. I stayed for a year. A very distinguished American historian, Lawrence Levine, gave our welcoming address, saying you are 50 who have been admitted; I expect that three of you will finish, and he was right. I did fine, I didn't have any problem with it, but I decided that-

Q: Well, what was it, about a four year-?

ROBERTSON: Four to eight year commitment for what looked like increasingly grim job prospects.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: I mean, I studied with these guys who grew up in this magical time in the '50s where you get your PhD or you get your MA and then you begin teaching here but you don't like the climate so you go there and-

Q: Yes, yes.

ROBERTSON: -and universities were opening all over. Then all of a sudden bang, the brakes came on; one tenure position, that's it.

Q: Well did you get any feel while you were at Berkeley for- were there still residues of the free speech movement?

ROBERTSON: Oh sure.

Q: You know, I mean, anything goes and all that?

ROBERTSON: Yes. It affected the whole climate. Maybe there was government recruiting but you would have kept it quiet. I mean, forget CIA or something, no military, and except for the national defense loans for studying foreign languages but aside from that, again, the government was very far away. I suppose if I'd been a political scientist or something that there would have been a closer relationship.

Q: Did you get to sample the Berkeley extracurricular community?

ROBERTSON: Well, you know, pre-DVD movies were pretty important, and there were great movie houses. And there were terrific cultural offerings at Berkeley, the concerts, the lectures. And the environment was so special, you find yourself standing next to Czeslaw Milosz... in line for coffee. Gee, that's pretty hot stuff.

Q: Yes. Well when you were studying Russian history did you- was the Soviet- were you getting back sort of czarist Russia or Soviet Russia?

ROBERTSON: I did a lot of stuff on Soviet Russia as an undergraduate, and I was very much influenced by Dr. Peter Kenez, the Hungarian I mentioned before. At Berkeley I ended up doing more on earlier periods, but as far as forming a world view Kenez was more important. In the 60s, 70s we were discussing that book Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?, about the problems of nationalities. Despite his warm feelings about the Red Army, since he was a Jewish child saved only by its arrival in Budapest, he always took the approach that in the general sense the whole Soviet project was a screw up. It held together by sheer force but this image of the Soviet Union as this unified, solid terrifying monolith always surprised him.

I remember somebody during the Reagan era in one of those FSI courses going on about the collapse of NATO- he was upset because Dutch soldiers could have long hair and wear hairnets. We were supposed to share his fear, his worry about whether NATO could fight like this. And I asked if he would like to have to march your Russian troops through Poland if you're the Warsaw Pact. This image of the Soviet Bloc has been this unified, coherent, efficient thing struck me as kind of crazy.

Q: Well you were to spend two years at Berkeley or-?

ROBERTSON: Just one year.

Q: One year. So this brings us to '73?

ROBERTSON: Yes. Then I went back teaching, a little substitute teaching, worked on the newspaper a little bit, did odds and ends.

Q: In Ojai or-?

ROBERTSON: Yes, I went back to Ojai for awhile. I did a little work with the U.S. Committee for UNICEF; a friend of mine retired from the UN. And then, I spent most of my pre-Foreign Service time as a cook in the Merchant Marine, working in the offshore oil industry, and in research ships off the coast of California and then South America. I started that in '75, in '75, and did that until May of '78, when I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Okay. Why a cook?

ROBERTSON: You know, I was always a good cook in college. I lived in this big house and I cooked every day for everybody in return for being completely excused from housekeeping duties. And then I also would get little catering jobs and stuff so I knew how to cook. My father had worked as an engineer on small boats, and my first home was an old PT boat tied up in Wilmington. I had been on boats from the time I was born so I knew I didn't get seasick. My father at that time was working as a carpenter. He was refitting some sailboats and he heard about a research ship that needed a cook immediately. I didn't have a job, I could cook and I didn't get seasick, so there I was.

Q: What was this ship researching?

ROBERTSON: The University of Southern California had a big marine research ship, and there were NSF (National Science Foundation) grants to do bottom drags in biology. There were contracts for seismic work, when they mapped the sea bottom, which at that time, before GPS (Global Positioning System), I mean, you'd have a room full of radio equipment to plot positions.

Q: to map the bottom?

ROBERTSON: Before GPS, the Omega system was a series of broadcasters, including one in Liberia, which allowed you to pinpoint your course. The equipment on the ship probably occupied half this room. You'd sail around setting off dynamite charges and plotting the echoes. And we worked in California, we worked in Mexico. I worked on offshore oil platforms for a year. From there I ended up with the most interesting job, as cook aboard the Research Vessel Hero, working for the National Oceans and Space Administration ship in the Antarctic. The Hero was a wooden ship with sails, and our regular route was between Tierra del Fuego in Argentina and the Antarctic Peninsula.

Q: How did you find that?

ROBERTSON: What a great adventure for a young man!.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: Six months day in, day out, no break, cooking for and taking care of 25 people. We were six weeks in dry dock in Chile; that was fun. I mean, it was Chile under

Pinochet, it was rough. Then we went sailed around the Horn into Tierra del Fuego, then made our north/south voyages to the Antarctic every few weeks.

Q: What's going around the Horn like?

ROBERTSON: As bad as advertised, as bad as legend has it. It was very stormy. The ship was designed to take 45 degree roles and it used the sail for stability. And we weren't sailing around; we were sailing north and south, which was worse because you're right in the trough of the 30, 45 foot waves, routinely.

Q: Well, a little technical thing; who ordered the supplies? I mean, did you?

ROBERTSON: From the time I started in 1975 as the cook I was the steward too. I just worked out what we'd need for six months of supplies. I mean, actually more like one month at a time, six weeks at a time when we'd pull in. I was a very democratic steward, especially in South America. With a big budget like that I was offered great entitlements, which I always split fairly among the crew. I mean, they were going to give them to somebody so I took them and, you know, cases of whiskey or whatever they were giving away and just split them with the crew. I'm just naturally good at organizing the logistics of that sort of thing - I could add, subtract, count, figure out step a, step b, and take care of 25 people for six months and figure out what we'd need and how much it would cost.

Q: Great.

ROBERTSON: Just do it.

Q: What brought you to look at the Foreign Service?

ROBERTSON: I'd always wanted to do something international. I wanted to be a journalist in terms of a foreign correspondent, although that was sort of anachronistic. In the '20s and '30s guys like Hemingway were wandering all over the world, selling stories to the Kansas City Star and all these other mid-size or small newspapers. He made enough money, everybody was buying stories. But I couldn't figure out how to get into that business, if it even existed. During Vietnam I hadn't, frankly, thought of the government. As I said, I didn't know anybody in the Foreign Service, didn't know anybody with the U.S. Government except for military guys. But in '76, I took the Foreign Service exam.

Q: You were at Berkeley at the time?

ROBERTSON: No, I was working on ships. And I took the written exam, and in '77 I went for my oral exams in Los Angeles and passed that.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions they asked you?

ROBERTSON: I remember there was an "in basket test" where they gave me a bunch of stuff, what would I do with this and that and the other thing. Questions they asked me - No, I don't. Later I stayed in touch with one of the examiners, Roberta Jones, for many years. She was another person who spent a lot of time in Africa. I was pleasantly surprised to have passed the test; I didn't really know what to do. I showed up in a leisure suit. That's the only thing I had.

Q: In what kind of suit?

ROBERTSON: A leisure suit. I mean, it wasn't even a real suit; I didn't even have a real suit, just had something like this with a- more or less of jeans texture. But anyway, I passed the test and then they began the security exam and in September of '77, I went down to Chile to meet the ship and was actually invited to join the Foreign Service when I was down there.

Q: Ah ha. Did you- during your time working in- along the Latin American coast did you get a chance to go to embassies or anything?

ROBERTSON: After the end of my contract, after I knew I'd be joining the foreign service. While roaming around I went into Santiago to meet a mutual friend, somebody who worked in the consular section I think. During my contract, we were in southern Chile, near Concepción, Talcahuano, and there was no embassy; in Tierra del Fuego there was no embassy. They invited me to join the Foreign Service in January but they called me so late I only had two weeks before the class opened, so I said I'll have to postpone it. So they called me, invited me back for May. I finished off my contract and then spent a couple of months traveling around South America with my wife, who I met in Tierra del Fuego.

Q: Well then, let's see, you now were married?

ROBERTSON: No, I was still just going out with her. She is now the secretary over in SAIT (School of Applied Information Technology).

Q: Yes. Okay, how did you meet her?

ROBERTSON: There was an American down there, Natalie Goodall, married to an Anglo-Argentine, Tommy Goodall. Natalie did research on cetaceans in Tierra del Fuego, and Norma had been working with her in her whale research. Norma was teaching in Tierra del Fuego, ducking the Dirty War. She was from the Province of Buenos Aries, where it was very violent, and a friend in the police told her that the military was coming for her, so she ducked down in Tierra del Fuego, thinking that it would be a little quieter down there, and it was. And anyway, we met in Natalie Goodall's house and- I must say, Ushuaia was only five, 6,000 people and I don't think there were six single attractive women in town. At that time, actually, a war began- my introduction to foreign affairs was this stupid war between Chile and Argentina over these three tiny islands at the mouth of the Beagle Channel.

Q: Oh yes.

ROBERTSON: In ’77, ’78, it was what I call the preliminary bout for the South Atlantic war with Britain. It went from a sleepy town of 6,000 then all of a sudden 15,000 troops were sent in. Actually, the town really changed – another teacher going out with one of the Hero crewmen got sacked from all her jobs in Tierra del Fuego.

Q: Well then, you came into the Foreign Service when?

ROBERTSON: May of ’78.

Q: Okay. What was your impression of Washington and of your new Foreign Service class?

ROBERTSON: Oh, the first time living in Washington, the first time living in an American city, actually, a real city. Gosh, there was so much to take in at the time; it was all so new. I was laughing with a friend- At that time the economy was more open, so many of us took the job thinking “out of sight: travel on somebody else’s money, come and go, get a nice house; I’ll do this for five years and see what happens.”

Q: That’s sort of the trap that I think all of us who get in, you know, it’s going to be a nice little excursion.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: And the retention rate is up in the 90s, I think.

ROBERTSON: I woke up one morning realizing I was- gee, I’m half way through it if I want to retire.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And I never thought really thought of a career. But the experience of being in Washington was all so new and so overwhelming, making money, doing interesting things. Training at the time, a lot of technical stuff, and we learned to do TV editing, make posters, build exhibits -

Q: You came in as-

ROBERTSON: USIA.

Q: USIA.

ROBERTSON: Yes. I had never been a Fulbright or anything so I didn’t really have any experience with any USIA programs. One of my classmates said, you know, we were

mostly failed academics. In the '50s it was mostly former newspapermen, USIA, was mostly composed of journalists. And then by the time I got in it was mostly academics. I mean, just about everybody had advanced graduate work and none of the things like international relations or political science or pre-foreign service stuff, but a fair number of literary and history scholars. A very varied class – out of the 15 of us, there were six women, three African-Americans and an Asian-American. One of the USIA higher-ups who addressed the class opened his remarks by noting his "surprise" that there were so few Ivy League degrees among us. I thought it was a joke, but someone later assured me that it was not a joke and "concern" rather than "surprise" was what he meant.

Q: Did you have any feel for where you wanted to go or what you wanted to do?

ROBERTSON: I wanted to go back to South America since I had just come from there, thought I would continue dating my wife. But my second area of interest was Africa. If I can digress a minute, while I was at Berkeley I was caught up in the outbreak of World War I and the revolutions of 1848 and the European Industrial Revolution; I was getting a little tired of it. And one of my younger brothers had gone to Europe, gotten bored and he and a friend of his had traveled overland and oversea to Ethiopia. There was a family from Ojai that were working there for Church World Services. So he was writing me from Ethiopia and I began getting interested in Africa, just because it wasn't the revolutions of 1848 or something. And so I'd done a fair amount of reading about Africa and I think there were specific things that I thought were really interesting about it, development issues and everything, economic history issues, and so my first bids were all on South America, my second were on Africa. I didn't want to go to Russia, despite my background in Russian language, where I got a one plus and one, something like that. I didn't like Cold War rigidity and living in a compound, and it seemed a limited life - Cuba or Russia, where you couldn't really have friends, you can't really get out. And so I put in for Africa and South America; ended up getting posted to South Africa. Then I called Norma in Argentina and invited her to South Africa, but we would have to get married. Not much romance, but no problem. She came up to the U.S., we got married and set off for South Africa.

Q: Alright. You were in South Africa from when to when?

ROBERTSON: 78 to '79.

Q: And where in South Africa?

ROBERTSON: Pretoria, with time spent in Cape Town and Johannesburg, too.

Q: What was your job?

ROBERTSON: Junior officer trainee, a position which was pretty unstructured, and I was pretty unstructured myself.

Q: What was-

ROBERTSON: The ambassador was Bill Edmondson; PAO (public affairs officer) was Bernie Lavin, who had spent all his time in Asia. South Africa was exciting. As I said, I had always been a musician; I always played jazz a little bit. South Africa was the only place I ever went where jazz was popular. We had a small room in the embassy, in the USIS (United States Information Service), though we didn't have a library in Pretoria, and used this small auditorium that they had used for occasional concerts, and started playing jazz there, regularly, once a month. So I put a lot of time into playing music.

At the time I think Carter- the Carter Administration was really on a collision course with South Africa; very tense, official relations.

Q: This is over apartheid.

ROBERTSON: Yes. I got great support for the jazz. I mean, we played football stadiums in black townships; it was pretty good outreach stuff.

In policy terms and in narrow program terms I didn't do too much that was important. But even then I could see the importance of the USIS library, that you could go to because you were a citizen, because you were a normal person. I mean, you know, a public institution which required nothing of you, a public institution which functioned like a public institution should.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: This was odd, obviously, for racial reasons in South Africa but even in Nigeria and even South America the idea of an open, functioning public institution which welcomed you was novel.

Q: Well how did it work in the various places? You were in Pretoria-

ROBERTSON: Yes. And then-

Q: Pretoria is sort of the heart of the Boers, isn't it?

ROBERTSON: It was, indeed, although Miriam Makeba is from Pretoria, as is Zeke Mphahlele, the writer. We always said it was culturally more important than anybody was willing to grant. I'd also say it had something that struck me at the time as interesting. The black townships weren't industrial townships; there were people who had come in from the nearby farms but yet I knew a lot of people who were second or even third generation living in Atteridgeville and Mamelodi. I think there wasn't this great influx of people like in Soweto or, I mean, it was a more stable society at the time.

Q: Well then, at the- well you didn't have a- you had an open thing, it wasn't a library, what was it?

ROBERTSON: The library was in Johannesburg; we moved to a new location while I was there. We had libraries in Durban and in Cape Town. Because we didn't have a building that lent itself to that in Pretoria we all did more at home, more informal stuff. This may sound trite, I suppose, but even at the time it was a small but crucial achievement: a lot of people met each other for the first time in our homes. I had one student group, a student group from University of Pretoria, which was an Afrikaans speaking university, the student leadership from there plus the secondary schools in Mamelodi and Atteridgeville, a group of student leaders at my house who had never met each other and had no other real forum where they would have met each other. I think that was sort of the extent of my "policy" work. But, eventually all those little chips that everybody took out of the structure made the transition easier.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: You had people who knew each other.

Q: Well were you finding, I mean, did you run across hostility from the Boers?

ROBERTSON: You know, I didn't plan it but somebody told me since I was in South Africa, I should really join a sports club. So I joined this sports club and practiced rugby. It wasn't really a plan but, I mean, I joined a white South African Afrikaans club and played rugby with them. That's their secular religion. Not that secular, come to think of it.

Q: What was your impression of the black Africans that you met there?

ROBERTSON: I was reading some of the ADST accounts in the Library of Congress, of other people who have been in South Africa. I think everybody said there was no bitterness here, there was no real clash here.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: I mean, there were not vast townships of people dreaming of rape and pillage and revenge. They were looking for opportunities, better lives for their children. It was violent – we arrived shortly after the killing of Steve Biko and the Soweto riots, and the violence grew worse in the townships over the years. It was a wonder that in 1994 they were able to arrange a transition so peacefully. It would have been easier for everybody if they had done it 20 years before - 20 years earlier, before the population grew a lot, and the violence and lawlessness was much worse in '94 than when we departed in late '79. I never could understand why the Nationalists (the ruling political party from 1948-94) felt so threatened. I mean, there really wasn't a continent of black people at their throats..

Q: Yes. Well, did the South African, I don't know what you call it, intelligence service or something sort of give you a rough time or not?

ROBERTSON: Actually, my wife's from Argentina so we had a Spanish speaker tapping our telephone. Norma was talking to one of her Argentine friends one day, using an Argentine expletive, and this voice broke in and said, "what does *boludo* mean?" They were hiring Spanish phone tappers but they weren't conversant with Argentine slang.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: Yes, they were irritated. There were a couple of other things that happened; I can't even remember them. I didn't really pay that much attention. It's, you know, rugby with the whites, jazz with the blacks. The greatest country in the world for jazz, drinking and sports. I mean, it had this overlaying issue, this overlaying tragedy, but it was an exciting country. And, oddly enough, after all that, South African whites constitute one of the largest foreign communities in Nigeria now.

Q: Well then, you left there-

ROBERTSON: I wanted to say somebody outbid me. I was naïve then, I didn't know about bidding and hustling. So I didn't stay; I ended up going to Barbados for two years; Barbados, and the eastern Caribbean. Ambassador Sally Shelton followed by a Reagan appointee whom I can't remember. Ashley Wills was the PAO; he's been ambassador in Sri Lanka and somewhere else, I forgot. A beautiful place to live, not very exciting.

Q: Well you were in Barbados from when to when?

ROBERTSON: Eighty and '81, January '80 to December '81.

Q: What was the situation on Barbados?

ROBERTSON: Barbados was a very successful country. I mean, there's not too much to discuss with Barbados. At the time, you know, I just turned 30; I didn't want success, I wanted excitement and it wasn't very exciting. And then that was while Grenada had its Marxist government and I couldn't take it seriously.

Q: This is the New Jewel Movement and all.

ROBERTSON: Yes. After living in Chile, Argentina and South Africa, to find these goofy guys introducing that level of violence was weird. All I could say was, "Why are you doing this? I mean, you didn't have guns there before, why this coup? I mean, haven't you looked around the continent, haven't you looked around your neighborhood and seen where this leads?" And you know, you could engage them but it was- well, it seemed a very small world.

Q: Well did you go to Grenada?

ROBERTSON: No, I was going to the other islands; Ashley Wills, later Ambassador in Sri Lanka, was the PAO, and we divided up Antigua, St. Kitts, Dominica. I mean, after

1978 and the New Jewel Movement, nobody could pull that off again; everyone exercised more caution. You can only do that once. There was always talk about Caribbean economic integration. Venezuela was a big player in the region – it was the 1970s. Venezuela still had a lot of oil money and they were giving scholarships, teaching people Spanish and everything. What changed everything in the region was offshore finance and all the money that flowed in from banks and funds.

Q: Drugs hadn't hit the place yet, had it?

ROBERTSON: No. When you talk about drugs it was just smoking marijuana still. It hadn't been taken to international levels.

Q: How did you find Sally Shelton as ambassador?

ROBERTSON: She was nice, she was smart and it was a pleasure to work with her. I didn't know enough about Washington then to know she had something to do with the human rights office; had been in South Africa before. But I hadn't realized at the time what a swath she cut in Washington, how- what her- how much she had done here.

Q: What were you doing information-wise in Barbados?

ROBERTSON: Actually, I had forgotten about this until just you reminded me. I had become friends with the AP correspondent who was based in Puerto Rico. After the 1980 election, with the new Reagan Administration, at one point I'm getting all these calls about this Pentagon exercise, which was a mock invasion of an island off Puerto Rico and they'd called- I forget what they called it but it was all sort of vaguely Grenada-ish, all the terminology. Ashley Wills was out, so I called the State Department for comment and got very clear guidance, and we denied that such a thing as this invasion rehearsal had taken place. So I had my guidance, and dispensed it freely. Then this friend of mine from AP called me and he said, "Nick, what's your guidance on this?" I said nothing similar took place. He asked if I was sure that I wanted to go with that, and I said yes. He said, "Well Nick, I hate to tell you, but not only did they do that but they rounded us all up from the Caribbean and showed us the exercise." But I guess at that time, according to the Pentagon- it wasn't international affairs; it was domestic. They don't have to clear Puerto Rican exercises with the State Department.

Q: Yes. Oh, God. Well, how'd you feel about the Foreign Service?

ROBERTSON: At that time I thought I might do something else. In South Africa, I'd had wonderful times and done things that I'm still delighted to have done but I hadn't really found anything in the Foreign Service that really, per se, interested me or grabbed me, emotionally and intellectually. That came later. And Barbados we had good programs, all the standard USIA programs well funded, but West Indians know the U.S. so well. Americans come to the West Indies in such numbers; you're not a key player there. There was nothing I was doing there that was really grabbing me; that really came when I went back to Washington and ended up with a job in the Office of African Affairs in 1982.

And that's when all this began to come together, all the exciting stuff you could do in the world with USIA. I was working on West African stuff, Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and I walked in there, everybody was very busy. Bob Gosende called me in. I didn't know him then, and he had a very intimidating presence if you didn't know him. A wonderful and brilliant man, who later became ambassador to Somalia and took the hit for the failure there. He called me in, and said "I hear good things about you. Okay, your job's simple; you just have to know everything that's going on in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. I'll call you when I need you. Call me if you can't figure stuff out on your own. Have a good day."

And I took him seriously so I read and memorized everything. At this time we still circulated cables by paper so I'd get this overflowing inbox of cables – including everything, administrative, like we've just sent five boxes of this or that, five boxes of books, or increased some allotment, or approved some travel. I started taking notes on everything. I took him quite literally and you know, in addition to reading everything I could on the countries themselves I felt I had to know how many books they had in their libraries, how many people visited on an average day, the replacement schedules for furniture and autos. He wasn't really expecting me to do that but he was glad I did it. And that was when all of a sudden I found a job where making these connections between U.S. people and institutions and some Africans; gee, you could do really important stuff.

The Nigerians had set up this crazy federal government; they didn't really know how it worked. And I thought the best thing you could say about U.S. Government information programs is that the Nigerian government, when they got oil rich, decided to buy from the State Department, and USIA, all these programs. They had this monster Fulbright program where the Nigerians just said you bring them, we'll pay them. Every elected official in Nigeria was sent over here for some kind of familiarization visit in Washington and the state capitals. The Nigerians think this USIA stuff is so good they're going to pay for everything themselves. Dealing with Nigeria wasn't easy and there were a lot of slip ups. But it was exciting. Nigerians wanted to see how a federal system works. They never learned.

Ghana was a different story at that time, a very nasty Jerry Rawlings regime with a surprising level of support and understanding from the Reagan Administration. And I think when you're looking for real success stories for U.S. diplomacy you have, in Ghana, this continuation of a fairly constant line - get your economic house in order and build a democratic system. And administration, through administration, ambassador after ambassador, everybody followed the same script and it worked.

Q: Yes. Well did- What sort of things were you doing, besides absorbing all the information?

ROBERTSON: Well, we had General Doe's visit to Washington; funny.

Q: Who was General Doe of Liberia? How was- What were you getting from people who had to deal with him?

ROBERTSON: Well, you had a bizarre success story in that he took power in this crazy episode, killed a lot of people; very bloodthirsty.

Q: Yes, the episode on the beach was well, you know, sent shudders-

ROBERTSON: Yeah, Sergeant Doe's Beach Party everybody called it. And of course he killed people who were well connected in the U.S. through the Fraternal Organization of the Masons and all this kind of stuff. I think his initial inclination probably would have been to look to Libya and he was sort of weaned off that. We had this long historical relationship with Liberians – much more important to them than to us, obviously – and a very able team at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia worked with Doe to, well, make him look almost presidential. The problem with that was we ended up with an impossible relationship with him - you know, we had responsibility for him but we couldn't make him do anything.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: Doe came to Washington; not many African leaders had been on the schedule then. There was a reason for keeping Doe on our side, it's not hoping to create some order.

Q: Voice of America.

ROBERTSON: Voice of America, Omega transmissions for navigation before GPS (global positioning system for satellites); the State communications stuff. So we had genuine interests in Liberia, aside from the humanitarian ties and the historical ties and the personal ties. So we wanted this visit to go well. There were people in the embassy in Monrovia who wanted to make this a big public event. It was a different point of view. If you had seen Doe from 1980 to 1982 you saw a guy who was better than he promised to be at the outset. He was better than many people thought he could be. He calmed down after the initial slaughter but he still wasn't ready for prime time. And we had people in Monrovia who wanted to make this a big story and those of us who lived in Washington, figured, ah, if anybody finds out that this is "our guy" now we're dead. I mean, you know, you want to keep our relationship with Doe off the front page, which we succeeded in doing for four days in Washington. Until a woman on "The Washington Post" sidled up to Doe at a reception and made an arrangement to speak to him later and then she got a real story out of him for the Style section. Fortunately, that morning Doe and his entourage had already left town to visit the Firestone headquarters in Ohio. The media conflagration was containable…

One funny episode was that we were all joking about finally inviting an African head of state with a name that President Reagan could pronounce, because the President had some problems with previous heads of state. At that time, we had a closed circuit TV system in USIA and State for all this stuff like the Rose Garden ceremony. We were

sitting around with a bunch of the Liberian press and those Liberians officials in the entourage who did not rate the White House.

So we are sitting around the TV, watching this moment that was such a big deal for the Liberians. We're all sitting there and President Reagan said, "I would like to introduce my good friend, General Samuel K. Moe." And we all fell over laughing. I mean just, of all the things to go wrong, so we had to edit that feed before we sent it back. Gosh, I'd forgot, you know, how different all this telecom stuff was at that time. I remember booking satellite feeds; you had to book a two stage link, where we sent it to Europe via our NTSC television system, and then it was converted to the European PAL system, and then retransmitted to Africa. Actually, that led to another funny episode with the Doe visit. Worried about the Doe entourage in Middle America – Ohio – on their own, the Embassy in Monrovia wanted to assign a USIS officer to join them as the Liberian press officer. That was, of course, illegal according to the USIA charter about not broadcasting or publishing in the U.S., as well as being a genuinely bad idea from the point of USIA and the individual officer if journalists figured that we were providing Doe's spokesperson. The officer assigned was African American, a great officer, and as soon as she got the phone call suggesting that she join the Liberians as press officer she came into the office and we put our heads together to figure out how to kill the idea without pissing off the Ambassador. We explained that it was cheaper, and faster and more reliable to put her on the plane to Monrovia with this all-important tape of Doe in Washington rather than do all of the uplinks and downlinks and risk complete failure from the Liberian crew at the ground station over there. So Charlene Duline set out for Dulles with the tape in hand – with the President's mistake edited out - and we all shared a profound feeling of relief that disaster had been avoided.

I think the best job I ever had in the Foreign Service I got out of that office, which was road manager for a blues band on a seven week tour of Africa. I went with the Johnny Copeland band in September of 1982.

Q: Okay, this is a blues band.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Where did you go?

ROBERTSON: Zaire to Senegal.

Q: How did they- the audiences take to the American blues?

ROBERTSON: Oh, standing room only anywhere that we wanted to play. I mean, it was a fine band, very exciting. The Zairian (once again Congolese) guitarist Franco just invited us over to his compound so we went over there and had a jam session with Franco in Kinshasa one night. That was an easier time; I mean, no terrorism, not even AIDS at that time. While Kinshasa was disorderly and scary you didn't think of it as really life threatening.

Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Libreville, Yaoundé, Douala, then up to Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Conakry and it ended in Senegal. It was hard work – you had to stay on top of everything from keeping tabs on band members to inventorying every piece of equipment every day because we could not have gotten replacements for instruments or sound systems during the trip. I mean, what more could you ask out of the Foreign Service, to be a road manager on a trip like that? It was really fun.

Q: So then you were in Washington until when?

ROBERTSON: Two years; '82 to '84, and I thought that I be returning to Africa. I'm married to an Argentine, but we had no interest in going to Argentina under the military government. Everything changed quickly though, when the Argentines started the war with the UK. After they lost the war, the game was up and an election was arranged. The Peronists didn't win, and Argentina looked exciting and interesting. A job came up as assistant cultural affairs officer in Buenos Aries, which I applied for. It wasn't the only thing on my list but I got it. So our son was born in July of 1984 and three weeks later we went back to Argentina for four very exciting years. All this democratization in Latin America is sort of old hat now; everybody assumes that you will have elected transitions. Before 1982, though, the Argentine military government was really, really awful. And not only did it look awful you didn't see any hope, nothing that could get them out of there. Then all of a sudden Argentina had a transition, the Peronists didn't win, the Argentines became briefly reflective and self-critical. There was really serious discussion about how they came to this path of economic collapse and political stasis.

Professionally I think that was maybe some of the best work I ever did. Argentina really had institutional and political problems. I mean, they had to sort out how you actually run a democratic system; what can you do, what you can't do. And there are two elements of our focus down there and one was economics, the second was developing democratic institutions.

Actually, a lot of Third World dependency theory, import substitution and bad economic ideas were developed by Argentines. But Argentina was very popular and attractive among U.S. intellectual and political circles. Some Argentines came to us and said we'd like to bring important economists down, Nobel Prize winners, and we said okay, but they would have to pick up all the expenses for first class travel and all that. So for four years, gosh, we had Franco Modigliani, Stanley Fisher, James Tobin, Robert Fogel, Robert North, Mancur Olson, James Buchanan; I mean, we had this string of heavyweights in economics and economic history. So, in addition to my work, it was, you know, a beautiful city, great food, a new baby, family, jazz, tango, and spending much of my time sitting around listening to Nobel Prize winning economists talk one on one with Argentine government officials. Wow.

Q: Well what- I mean, this is- You were basically almost running the tutorial for the Argentines, I mean, they must have been getting a lot of this stuff before.

ROBERTSON: The DCM (deputy chief of mission) at the time, John Bushnell, came from the econ cone and said you know, the Argentines have got to accept this. I mean, they've got to start rethinking their economy and accepting it, not just, you know, cribbing the answers, so to speak. It wasn't an uneducated country but it was very parochial and still very much caught up in a lot of these Third World economic ideas. But the Argentines, yes, they had had exposure, but we wanted to make it hit. You know, people coming down to talk about economics and making this all front page news. President Alfonsin came from a tradition of Argentine politics and economics which had some bad ideas on how to run the economy. And so we wanted to make these programs a combination of one-on-one chats, interactions with the intellectual academic community, and at the same time leading the front pages of the newspapers and the evening TV news. The message was that Argentina's changing and getting a lot of international support for this.

Q: Well was there any spillover from what was happening in Chile?

ROBERTSON: No. Actually I was talking to people from the Department a couple of weekends ago about the lack of effect of "good examples". Chile hadn't begun to pull that far ahead at the time, in '84. By '88 it had gone up and then down. Painfully, there doesn't seem to be much of "the good neighborhood" argument working out down there – or, perhaps we should just say that lessons take a long time to sink in. Subsequently, you ended up with a regional difference within Argentina, in that the people in Mendoza-San Juan on the Chilean border saw what was going on, including their own industries like wine, and ended up with a very different view of the world than people in Buenos Aries when the sort of the classic Argentine thinking came back with the Kirchners. But we wanted, you know, Argentina to open its economy and open its mind to the rest of the world and for awhile they did it. I mean, you saw it in the subsequent administration when Menem came in; he changed quite a few things in Argentina. Whatever else he did wrong, he stabilized the currency after 50 years of chronic inflation, and the country finally got a phone system.

Q: Well were, when you were there were the government people trying to work out the problem of the disappeared?

ROBERTSON: I was there for the trial of the military and this was the first one that happened in South America, or anywhere else as I recall. As a matter of fact Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the head of the International Court of Justice was the deputy prosecutor. He was a good friend; we would play small court soccer together, and eat and drink and talk. And the good news in the matter was it was the first time that any South American government had really seriously pursued this, you know, followed-up the activities of a military government. The Sabato Commission, the National Commission on the Disappeared headed by the great writer, very painstakingly documented everything that had gone on. The pity is that there are grim romantics who won't take that. I mean, you routinely hear people say the 30,000, or 50,000 disappeared; well the Sabato Commission counted about 10,000. It was very serious stuff and what was quite new for Argentina was that people were seriously discussing what they had done wrong. I mean,

you had people who had been involved with the Montoneros (the left-wing Peronist guerilla force that challenged the military from 1968 until the military wiped them out by 1980) saying this had been a really bad idea, this was a mistake; bourgeois democracy is a wonderful thing.

Q: There must have problems with the people who had accepted the forced moving of children of parents who were- or was that much of an issue?

ROBERTSON: You know, there are only- there are not 1,000 cases of it. I mean, it's not something that happened very often, not even 1,000 cases, more like 500. It was the subject of a prize winning movie in 1985 or so. It is a pretty strange phenomenon – soldiers who are militants about "Right to Life" issues but then slit the mother's belly after she gives birth and throw her out of an airplane.

The government dealt with the disappeared and the stolen children, but it was only one of many issues. I remember that the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo were in President Alfonsin's office harassing him about something and they said he should devote all his time to resolving the cases of the disappeared. He replied that there was a country to run, and there were other issues to deal with as well. And it was painful - even at that time there were people who didn't believe that their children had died. They charged that they were being kept in a camp by Alfonsin for some reason, a camp hidden in Patagonia. It ceased to be a rational legal issue for a certain number of people. And, of course, one of the sad things about the Kirchner government is their attempts to re-vindicate the Montoneros.

Q: Did you, with your wife and all, and friends at the embassy, sort of wonder why Argentina took the course that it had done for some time in one way or another? I mean, here is a country that has got a great deal of natural wealth and well educated people and all and yet it seems it's just gone to hell.

ROBERTSON: I think I ended up becoming an Argentine by marriage; it's not a culture that I was initially attracted to. One of the reasons we get on badly with Argentines is, you know, that we assume that with their history they should be very much like us. I've lived in exotic parts of the world; and when a guy, dressed differently, with facial scars, who looks obviously different, speaks in a heavy accent, comes to you and tells you something which you find implausible, you think, ah, this is very exotic. When a man in very elegant European dress who studied at Oxford sits down and tells you that Eva Peron should be and will be made a saint, you think he's only doing it to give you a hard time, because nobody who looks like me, who dresses like me can think anything so outrageous.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And it was really a profoundly different culture but it doesn't look that different and it takes you aback. It's a very formal culture that does not like to address difficult issues directly. And, you know, my wife obviously knew people and had friends

who were killed. One of the spooky things about the military government then was that it all looked so normal, and very few Argentines would even discuss what was going on. When I was there with the Merchant Marine I ended up getting picked up in Buenos Aries one night and almost shot. I mean, just, you know, 30 seconds and it was almost over.

Q: What happened?

ROBERTSON: I had a friend from California, an Argentine friend from California, and we were riding in a taxi. I had long hair and a beard, and we were just talking. I mean, we'd just had dinner, not even politics talk. As a matter of fact, her second husband had just retired from the military; he was a lifer but he left in disgust. We were just riding in a taxi and all of a sudden, a car cut in front of us and we were stopped. Before I could even begin to figure out what happened I was lying against the car with a pistol between my eyes. And then, you know, she was Argentine and she told them to reach into my pocket and pull out my passport. It was not like that movie "Missing" about the American journalist in Chile, which I thought gave a wildly inaccurate account of what it is like to be in these situations. That stuff can happen really fast, and then they hide your body because shooting a foreigner is a public relations headache and brings too much paperwork. They didn't call the American ambassador and ask permission. I mean, it's Wild West stuff.

Q: Yes. Well, you were in Argentina how long?

ROBERTSON: Four years; '84 to '88.

Q: Who was the ambassador or ambassadors?

ROBERTSON: Frank Ortiz and then Reagan's nominee from San Diego, Ted Gildred.

Q: Did you get any feel for how they dealt with the situation?

ROBERTSON: How long was Ortiz there when I was there? A year? And Gildred liked to play polo, and he had business interests.

Q: So, I mean, they really weren't particular figures on the-

ROBERTSON: No, I don't think they had a lot of involvement. And you know, in many ways it's a snobbish society, and everyone flocks to the U.S. Ambassador's residence if invited. But they're also intellectual snobs and they like to have, you know, they liked heavyweight intellectual engagement. I mean, we had Susan Sontag, Larry McMurtry, painters, musicians, and scholars and intellectuals. There was a high level of engagement; Ronald Dworkin, most of the Yale Law Faculty. Definitely Argentina really liked the engagement with the rest of the world at the highest levels, I mean, whether it was Plácido Domingo singing or working with the Yale Law Faculty.

Q: Well was Argentina looking basically towards Europe and America secondarily?

ROBERTSON: I think from ’84 to ’88 was the first period they began looking at the U.S. much more positively. I mean, you knew it in the way they switched to learning American English. You know, this Anglo-Argentine connection had been very strong. You could still get a good rugby education in Argentina in the 1980s and they’d come out like Victorian Gentlemen, at least on the playing fields and in the classroom…

Q: Well how much of a residue was there from the Malvinas war?

ROBERTSON: You know, it was a hot button issue. I was unusually close to it because I had been there for what we call the preliminary bout with Chile. But it’s one of those things; the intensity of it, it’s one of those things that makes you realize you’re dealing with a different society. I mean, the English were never passionate about it; they kept it for their own reasons. There can’t be 1,000 people in the UK before the war who really cared about it but they weren’t going to give in to the Argentine generals.

Q: Yes. Actually, we had it for a few months.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: The USS Constitution went in there and took it and sort of reported back and they said don’t get us involved, I mean.

ROBERTSON: And the Argentines, when they’re being extremely arch, will also tell us, well the whole thing is our fault.

Q: Well of course.

ROBERTSON: And, I mean, the exciting thing about Argentina, ’84 to ’88, was the first time the Argentines began to take responsibility and say “what did we do wrong,” instead of “why did they do this to us?”

Q: Did you get any feel for Argentina versus Brazil for dominance in the area?

ROBERTSON: Yes. Argentina assumed a leadership position which at the time looked farfetched; not as farfetched as it looks now. There has traditionally been, of course, disdain for Brazil for racial reasons; how can a country that’s so black be a leader country? And for other reasons- Brazil was very backwards in the 19th century. I mean, by the 1970s Argentina was assuming that they would eventually get a seat on the Security Council; it’s always had- it’s always thought of itself as playing out of its league. And, you know, looking back at this after- over 30 years of involvement down there, my lifetime of failures and success, Brazil is an extraordinary victory. I mean, after 16 years of good government. I remember we used to say that Brazil, they can never get over their social cleavage.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And they did.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And Argentina has gone back to its own ways, an unreliable society largely closed off from the rest of the world, politically unreliable, breaking long-term contracts.

Q: Since you were sort of in the cultural field, how was the musical- British musical, "Evita"-

ROBERTSON: They hated it; they hated it.

Q: I would imagine.

ROBERTSON: I think they probably banned it. You could still ban movies and now you can't ban them because of DVDs.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: There were video versions of it. No, they hated the British doing "Evita." There were even Argentines who were anti-Peronists didn't like it very much. I mean, it is an odd story. There's a marvelous book by Tomas Eloy Martinez about Evita's cadaver, a story that is a novel in itself. He was going to write it as a non-fiction book but he said it was so strange it sounded like a novel anyway you wrote it. Obviously, Peron did something in Argentina or reflected something in Argentina that dominates it to this day.

I can look at Peron dispassionately. My wife is from an anti-Peronist family but they don't eat and breathe anti-Peron feeling. My son once had to do a high school paper, and I sort of insisted that he do something about Argentina. He eventually settled on doing something on Peron's economic policy and at the end of it he said, "Dad, there's no policy; he just sort of said stuff and then they sort of do stuff and it's totally unrelated." I said, yes, you've got it. And when you look at Peron as a figure, I mean, what a thoroughly mediocre man. I mean, there is no body of Peronist thought.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: There's nothing he did that had real substance. He redistributed income radically for a few years, and that was fun, but there was no public finance to do that. And he did not want to take it from anyone but a very small band of wealthy people. He certainly did not want to alienate the middle class by taxing. But how could such a mediocre man dominate a country like that?

Q: Yes. And to this day. I mean, the Peronism is not dead.

ROBERTSON: And I wonder, I mean, you know, the Kirchners built up this Montoneros thing, who always said they were fighting to bring Peron back and then of course succeeded in shooting his widow's government out of office. People who actually voted for Peron, at this point how many voters from 1950 or even 1973 are around? I mean, it's gone through at least one generation if not more.

Q: Sure.

ROBERTSON: You do have a one party state; it's just that it's not a consistent party so internal elections are all over the place. Peron said everything.

Q: Well how- During the time you were there, the four years you were there, what was the role of the Church, the Catholic Church, would you say?

ROBERTSON: The Catholic Church… it's formally a Catholic Country but it's not a passionately Catholic country. I always joke that you can learn a lot about Latin America looking at Argentina and Mexico. Mexico's formally secular with a lot of proscriptions on the Church but the people are passionate believers. Argentina is an established Catholic country but nobody goes to Church. It's like Italy or Spain now; nobody goes to church. They elected Menem president, and I don't think he was ever formally a Catholic.

Q: Well, you know, I, having served in Italy, I'd be dragged off to masses from time to time and you know, it was most women. Now, the guys, the husbands and sons used to hang around outside the church while the mass is going on, smoking cigarettes and waiting to escort the women folk home.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And the institutional church, or a wing of it, was allied with the military, a very conservative wing of it. There was something remarkable in Argentina and I think it's been much of the New World, but the right wing military officers were both Catholic and Freemason.

Q: Oh yes. You know, I mean, some of these things are just incredible but well, they've lost their bite.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: And so it becomes socially acceptable to be members. For example, I go back to Italy where I would go to masses for one reason or another. I mean, officially I'm not Catholic but there I'd be standing with some priests and representatives carrying communist banners of the party; we'd all be together, we were part of the authority, you know, I mean, the consular corps and we were just- And so everybody went together.

ROBERTSON: And you have the established Catholic Church, and the Argentine party, the radicals, Unión Cívica Radical, was anti-cleric. I mean, it had some relation to European radical parties which were anti-clerical and so the Church took a dim view of that. The Peronists had more believers. But in Argentina everything there was sort of off from everywhere else, I mean, it didn't quite fit together.

Q: Well was there any real strong tie between the Brits and the Italians and- I mean, the people who settled Argentina?

ROBERTSON: The British had maintained almost a colony there and there were Anglo-Argentines; we knew some who were proper British and proper Argentines. Many of the British, though, have gone back to Britain. They had kept themselves apart. Italians, Germans, Spanish just sort of blended in. You'd have a number of families with branches in both sides. As a matter of fact, Luigi Einaudi, U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States, had an uncle in Argentina. Italian families had split.

Q: Well was there the phenomenon that I heard at one point, and I'm not sure if it's during your time, of anybody with a claim to some other country was going off to make sure they got a passport.

ROBERTSON: That began then, I think, in the 70s. Yes, absolutely. Argentina was by that time- by the '80s - a nation of emigrants instead of immigrants. It changed quite abruptly in- between 1960 and 1980 and that stampede out of Argentina had begun. And it is very hard to find an Argentine who doesn't have a European grandparent, who is therefore entitled to a passport from the grandparent's country. It's a phenomenon I've seen in Venezuela, too – countries that were recipients of immigrants all of a sudden began generating big waves back to Europe.

Q: Yes.

Well then, this is probably a good place to stop, Nick. And we'll pick this up, you left Argentina when?

ROBERTSON: Eighty-eight.

Q: Nineteen eighty-eight; where did you go?

ROBERTSON: Nigeria.

Q: Okay.

ROBERTSON: We left Buenos Aries and awoke the next morning in a plane in Nigeria.

Q: One final question; how did your wife find being back but being the wife of an American diplomat?

ROBERTSON: In the ‘80s it was fine. At that time it was fine. I mean, we were viewed very positively.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: One thing about the tenor of the times was important. While I’m not at all a supporter of Ronald Reagan, but when his government said they supported democratization, this time around they were fair enough and embraced even fairly left wing governments; Alan Garcia in Peru, the Argentines, and some others. Formal relations, diplomatic relations were good and the U.S. was perceived very positively by most Argentines, maybe the only time.

Q: Could you still eat well there?

ROBERTSON: Argentina might be in the throes of economic collapse but you can always eat well. You can always tell when the economy’s really bad because you can’t get a flight out or a table in a good restaurant.

Q: Okay. Well, we’ll pick this up in 1988 when you’re off to Nigeria.

ROBERTSON: Okay.

Q: Great.

Today is the 30th of September, 2009. This is an interview with Nick Robertson and I’m Charles Stuart Kennedy and we’re starting you off to Nigeria when?

ROBERTSON: 1988 to ’91. This time it was the Babangida government during its endless democratic transition. Issues for the U.S. Government were, well, hoping to keep the democratic transition on track; and, mid-way through my tour, the first Gulf War. For general issues of democratization, building a civil society; any time to be in Nigeria is an exciting time to be in Nigeria. Well, you’re sowing a handful of seeds in a very big field and while many of them grow, and are now strong institutions, the country as a whole has continued its slide towards-

Q: I’ve talked to others about Nigeria and sort of the, it more than almost any country has suffered from the curse of oil.

ROBERTSON: It has. It was once upon a time a very serious country. If you look at—it’s a terrible, terrible thing to say — their civil war it wasn’t the sort of normal chaos that you expect in Nigeria. Both sides were well organized with clear objectives. Some of that has resurfaced in recent years. Of course, the Biafrans during the war built their own refineries from scrap. Now Nigeria has no operating refinery in the formal sector; the government owns four big refineries, all of which are out of commission. The rebels, the people stealing crude in the Niger Delta are now refining it and selling gasoline in

Nigeria. It's a very sophisticated criminal band, and it's a society that really knows how to organize itself on the level of an enterprise.

Q: When you got there, you got there in what year?

ROBERTSON: 1988.

Q: Eighty-eight. Who was the president at the time?

ROBERTSON: Babangida.

Q: How was he viewed at that time and his government?

ROBERTSON: Well, everybody hoped that he would continue with his transition program. He had a little democratic transition in mind; he decided that Nigeria would have a two party system, just like the U.S., so he ordered two parties to be created, one a little to the left, one a little to the right. They called him, in Nigeria, "Maradona" because he was always dribbling this way and that way; a little to the left, a little to the right, bringing in his opponents in the government, giving them nice jobs, defusing criticism that way. In fact, if you look at it carefully, Nigeria had a certain proclivity for impunity and he played it out as far as he could. I would say at the end of the Babangida years some sort of moral core of Nigeria had been completely eaten away.

Q: I'm told it was really a very corrupt society.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Who was the ambassador when you got there?

ROBERTSON: Princeton Lyman, a wonderful man.

Q: And what was your job?

ROBERTSON: I was the cultural attaché.

Q: Alright, then let's talk about what you did.

ROBERTSON: There were a couple of efforts, one in general the culture and academic world, the normal spheres of a cultural attaché. Nigeria's a wonderful country. It has a lively art scene. It's always been big enough to have its own cultural markets, its own publishing, its own movies, its own recording industry. And Nigerians buy Nigerian art, collect Nigerian art. The academic world had produced real excellence. The historians that formed the "Ibadan School", and the Ibadan publications on history, are brilliant. My son has been a graduate student in African history and looking at my old collection from Ibadan, he wondered, "wow, what happened to these guys? This is brilliant."

So it was exciting to be in Nigeria because it's a society of real achievement in literature and the arts and the academic world; governance not so much. At the time I was there Nigeria had some singular successes which I still live off. The Studio Museum in Harlem had a big show of contemporary Nigerian art and the Smithsonian Institution did a film called "Kindred Spirits," a PBS (Public Broadcasting System) documentary on contemporary Nigerian artists. Contemporary Nigerian art was booming to the extent that in 1990 the fine arts department at Yaba Tech, a sort of polytechnic college in Lagos, had more applicants than the medical and law schools at the University of Lagos. Obviously I had nothing to do with this success but I still go to Nigeria now because people think I had something to do with that success.

Q: Well, you know, cultural attaché, you're in a country with a booming culture but what are you supposed to do? You're supposed to sell American culture, aren't you? I mean-

ROBERTSON: I sold institutional relations, linkage to programs. That (the support for Nigerian artists) was always incidental. That's always confusion about the cultural attaché: everybody in the country you're assigned to thinks you're supposed to be promoting their culture in the United States and many of us do that, either as a sideline or major focus. Like I said, I didn't have anything to do with Nigeria's great success in the plastic arts; they thought I did. In terms of our own culture we could bring Dizzy Gillespie, we could bring - I can't even remember everyone who came. Nigeria had been one of those countries in the '70s that hosted everybody who had any commercial following at all in Nigeria. Alas, they tended not to pay their bills so they were off the concert circuit, and off the TV and film circuit as well.

But culture with a big "C" was an area we didn't focus on but the nature of the job makes you focus on it. I suggested that we should hire a dependent spouse - I don't know what they call them now - and title somebody as the cultural attaché , who would go to all the receptions and cocktail parties and openings, and allow me some time to run a large office with large programs.

Other areas were institutional development, supporting NGOs (non-governmental organizations), supporting civil society organizations. Nigeria had a very strong civil society if you think of religion and of traditional rulers, traditional society; village organizations and all this kind of stuff is very strong. We supported things like the bar associations, citizen organizations, citizen organizations trying to get government agencies to fulfill their responsibilities. We ended up getting from AID a large block of money in 1991 to do a lot of things with the bar association, university NGOs, journalist shootings, stuff like that.

Q: Let's look at the universities. Somebody I know, Henry Maddox, was-

ROBERTSON: Oh, yes, he was a Fulbright professor and an American historian.

Q: He's- We've been working mutually sort of in the foreign affairs field; he's at the University of North Carolina or was. He was saying, he had a very, I won't say-

disagreeable or very negative impression of going to Nigeria because the universities, one, they didn't have the facilities but two, they weren't running most of the time; they were on strike. He didn't feel he would be doing anything.

ROBERTSON: When we got there I thought a simple basic tool any cultural attaché running a Fulbright program would have would be a university calendar and it would be a simple feat to put one together. So the first task I set myself to was absolutely impossible; there was no such thing as a national academic calendar. Universities opened and closed at random; there were staff strikes, student strikes, and strikes from the non-academic staff. Sometimes a state government would get annoyed and close a university for a while. A Ghanaian friend of mine, who later became a minister in Ghana, was teaching economics in Nigeria for 11 years. One day in Accra we sat down and tried to figure out how much time he had spent in a classroom, and in 11 years he calculated that he had actually taught something like 4.3 years.

Q: If universities have any value they should be imparting knowledge or whatever and if out of 10 years the students are only getting four years worth of knowledge or whatever it is then they're not doing- and the students should be suffering.

ROBERTSON: Students were suffering. Families who were paying to send them to school were suffering. And what we saw – and this, I think, is common in Nigeria - some of the universities could sort of keep on track. We focused on a limited number of universities; they were popping up like mushrooms all over the country, state universities, local universities and now private universities. We focused on particular departments and particular universities that still had quality and still showed the possibility of performing a real serious university role. In fact, they had their major national universities, about seven of them, and then they decided that each state should have a national university, and they managed to create 13; then came the state universities when the national government could not expand from the 13 universities to the 19 states. Lagos State University, when I got there, had just graduated its first class, and they got the top scores in the law exam of all the Nigerian universities. So some of these new institutions were quite good, and for awhile they could run them. You didn't have strong student unions, you didn't have strong teacher unions, you didn't have strong non-academic employee unions. And individual departments in universities could function, some universities could function but like everything in Nigeria it was a struggle just to avoid the slide into complete chaos.

Q: Okay, I'm sure you and your colleagues at the embassy would do this all the time. What was the problem? I mean, why would this group of— from all accounts— extremely bright people who are confidence men which requires fancy footwork of the greatest degree, I mean, but also obviously in literature and arts and all are really- have really superb qualities, why couldn't they get it together?

ROBERTSON: It's an interesting country. The immediate issue, sort of the big factor affecting all Nigerian public institutions at that time, was of course that they boomed during the oil boom with an exchange rate trick. When I went there in 1982, one naira

was $1.50. Nigerian universities were recruiting from all over the world, and a university professor earned 1,000 naira per month – that's $18,000 a year in 1980 – plus a house and a car. When I got there in 1988 it was five naira to the dollar officially, and something like 10 to the dollar on the black market. So, people who had international middle class levels of consumption all of a sudden had no money and they weren't being paid regularly anyway. Babangida's was not a very effective government. So you had a short-term breakdown.

When you look at the medium term history of Africa, the last 50, 60 years of independence, I'm struck by the fact that the word they use for government in the three languages I know something about, the Ashanti language, Yoruba and Igbo all refer to government as white man's work, like government is something that's different, it's "not us". It's an external factor. I asked them, did the Alafin of Oyo have *ijoba*, the Yoruba word for government, before the English got here? The Oyo Empire had taxes, security, armed forces, diplomats, roads, police, and public buildings, but no one says that is *ijoba*.

Q: Well I would think we Americans have in our DNA and our chromosomes something so that we want to make things work, and this must have been terribly frustrating. I mean here, you know, particularly I mean, you know, these aren't a lazy people, these aren't stupid people…-

ROBERTSON: … they're very energetic and misdirected.

Q: You know, I mean, you must have gone in, rubbed your hands and said now if you only go Point A to Point B to Point C and do this and that, you know, we'll work with you, whatever you want to do but let's get this show on the road. I mean, this-

ROBERTSON: That's why they sort of liked working with Americans because we come in and say that, which is something they couldn't say, or don't say.

Q: Well, but, it must have been generation after generation of Americans who went through this and came away either exhausted or had lost their sense of direction too.

ROBERTSON: You talked to my friend and colleague, Claudia Anyaso, who, of course, has had pretty close to 40 years of this. It's a heartbreaking country. It wasted such potential. It's bad at governance, it's bad at large scale organization, it's decidedly brilliant at small scale organization.

Q: Like, you know, putting together their own refinery if it's in their interest or something.

ROBERTSON: While I was there I did a report, a think piece, on the development of the Nigerian university system. One thing that I found really interesting was that the British contributed almost nothing to elementary education during the colonial period; it was almost all- what they call "church schools," which were in fact community based

organizations which raised all the money, including the payment for a foreign headmaster.

Q: Resources generated within the community. That's the American school system in a way. , Our education system over the years been generated by local societies.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And Nigeria was brilliant at that. They became an English speaking society with a significant educated middle class with their own money, and their own efforts. And when you look at that it's a remarkable achievement. And then they decided to replicate the British residential university, not necessarily the best idea for a poor and large country like that. But the corollary to that is when the government nationalized the church schools the system broke down; then schools belonged to somebody else so the goal is to get your students in, pay no fees, get your children raised at somebody else's expense, which is interesting because it's the same people, the same institution, but you slap a different name on it and it belongs to nobody.

Q: Yes. Well how about the, I'm sure obviously as cultural attaché you had close ties to the academics. They must have been frustrated, wanted to get the hell out or what?

ROBERTSON: They did want to get out, and they were very successful at doing so. Actually I'm impressed by the friends I made. Every time I read a letter in the NEH history net from Africa, it is from one of my old friends now in South Africa- the ones who are not here or the UK or Europe are in South Africa. Yes. And unfortunately the most capable of them all left.

You know, the society began raising their children to leave at some point in the 1980s, and by the 1990s it was the norm.

Q: Well, okay, I mean, was there a point where you said okay, we've got these programs here and what's the point? Why don't we essentially write off Nigeria?

ROBERTSON: Well, everybody knows the answer to that; because they have oil. They would be a disorderly, isolated country like Yemen, except they have oil, which also generates some of the disorder.

Q: Yes, but I mean, were you doing anything? I mean, you know, looking- I'm talking about the embassy as a whole but particularly the work you were doing.

ROBERTSON: Yes, and what we did was to build up institutions and institutions which are still in existence without our money and still doing good work. People who would stay, people who worked hard. I'm thinking of a group in Port Harcourt, one of the citizens' groups, the bar association, which became sort of the legal system, as the formal system got weaker and weaker. The bar association at least had some institutional commitment to keeping the rule of law alive.

I can think of a lot of individuals; business associations, the stock exchange, looking at economic reform and all those aspects of the economy, they pulled off a lot. With all its problems they got a banking sector that performs like a banking sector. They have industrialists; over the years they began to rely less on manufacturing groups that relied less and less on government contracts and protection and more and more on the Nigerian market. I mean, I can show you a whole lot of positive developments in Nigeria, they're just not at the level of governance, they're not national.

Q: Yes, it sounds like I'm knocking them but I'm basically challenge you because there when you come up against something like this there's a tendency, inertia says well you've got a government so we'll do it and even if the government doesn't produce we keep doing what we do. But did you find that you were able to sort of, I mean you, I'm talking about you and the embassy, develop a Nigerian model for a failing state that we hope we could turn around?

ROBERTSON: I think what would develop was the notion that Nigerian public institutions that functioned – some public universities, maybe some aspects of the legal system, maybe some local government institutions – were worth continued effort, while the Nigerian government as a whole was not really worth talking to. They couldn't fulfill any commitment. Actually the minister of education was so upset about the way we ran the Fulbright program that he tried to have me expelled from the country.

Q: Why was that? What was the problem?

ROBERTSON: Nigeria had had a Fulbright program where we sent them a bunch of people; they paid them and placed them. All of a sudden we were paying and we weren't going to send them to new institutions, we weren't going to send them to non-functioning institutions. We had a list of schools and departments where we would send people, where we thought it was worth the investment of $40,000 a year. But the National Universities Commission and the Ministry of Education had their own interests and agenda, paying off debts, building up institutions in marginal states and stuff like that. Now, Nigeria keeps creating states, a very good deal for the citizens of the states; it is a disaster for the country. And so they wanted us to send Fulbright professors and give grants to institutions which we thought weren't working or didn't have any track record or anything. And they were very upset when we wouldn't, so the head of the university commission called the minister of education, who called Ambassador Lyman and asked that I be expelled from the country.

Q: And what happened?

ROBERTSON: That's when Ambassador Lyman called the PAO, Mr. Bob LaGamma, and said that the Minister wanted me thrown out of the country. The answer to the Minister from the Ambassador and Bob LaGamma was the same: "Tough."

Q: Yes.

Well tell me, let's talk a little bit more about sort of the universities. What was in it for the teachers? I take it that the teachers were striking because essentially they weren't paid. Was that it?

ROBERTSON: Yes. And what was in it for the teachers? Oddly enough, I asked that very question, why would you stay? I mean, why not go into another business? One guy said because we've got a house and it has a garage which enables my wife to trade. Now, what I wanted to hear was I get a house, which has a big yard, enables me to farm. They hadn't gone quite that far, but obviously the side benefits of academia were becoming more important.

Q: But I take it, I mean, what was holding a lot of the government together- I mean, holding the country together, were the women running- the market women, was this-?: I've heard about this over the years that it was really, I mean, these are, if you want to talk about real traders this is where-

ROBERTSON: Yes. Yes, women in Southern Nigeria have run much of the economy, originally an informal economy but now the formal economy too. Far from being family restrictions on it, their husbands think it's great.

As a matter of fact, I remember I was furious because there was this guy, a blind beggar with children, and one day another child has taken its place with the family. I said why is he having children? He can't support them. Why did he just take another wife? One of the drivers explained, "Mr. Nick, you don't understand. It is not that he cannot afford to marry and *'get pickin'* (have children). He cannot afford not to marry. He needs more wife to keep him."

Q: Yes. Well did you see any bright spots or- I'm talking about this time when you were- this period in the late '80s, early '90s, did you see any sort of positive elements in the society? Not within the people but within the society?

ROBERTSON: I saw a response to economic challenges, which was positive. They sort of weaned themselves off the notion that we'll elect a new government which will then give us money. I saw people generating jobs for themselves. Well, everybody talks about insecurity in Nigeria, crime in Nigeria but Lagos is now a city of 15 million people. There's no police force that does anything recognizably police-like. If somebody mugs me the one thing that will not happen is that the person would be arrested and tried and go to jail for mugging me. Yet I to this day walk around Lagos all by myself without fear of being bothered because it has enough of a social cohesion to maintain a society even without a formal government like that.

Q: Well okay, let's look at sort of the country effort at the embassy. You're the cultural attaché and if nothing else you're sitting on the middle of a booming culture.

I mean, really a lot of fun and all that but what about our political and economic officers? There must have- I mean were they just reporting on disintegration or what were they doing?

ROBERTSON: I think everybody perceived problems in Nigeria. We still recognized the Nigerian government. The dichotomy just to this day, you recognize the Nigerian government, and hope that it will fulfill some of the commitments it makes on- whether the UN votes or doing something in the Niger Delta. But no one expects very much. I should say that the Nigerian government, as bad as it is in many ways and as much as I detest the government of Sani Abacha, did play a positive role in Liberia. Without any international resources, the Nigerians and the Ghanaians intervened in Liberia in a very positive way. No other regional powers that I know of have actually spent their own money and blood in an effort like that. I mean, the bad side is that they looted a lot in Liberia, okay.

Q: Well, you know, I've talked to people who served in Lebanon saying when the Israeli came through on this Sharon's invasion of Lebanon, when they came out their tanks were loaded with stuff. You know, I mean, armies loot. Well, but in a way, thinking both of Ghana and of Nigeria, at least from the pictures it seems like they have a pretty well drilled military force that seems to be the one thing that sort of kept them going in a way.

ROBERTSON: Yes, they could still put troops in Liberia with a goal and with objectives and do it. And they imposed some kind of peace on the country and allowed them to get through an admittedly flawed electoral process. But, I stress, there was no international money, which I thought was, I mean, short-term thinking from the point of view of the UN, that if you behave like a responsible regional power people will pat you on the back. Whereas Kenya made a lot of money from the Somali intervention in '91, '92; the Kenyans' shilling appreciated because the international community went into Somalia and we had to buy all these services from Kenya.

Q: What- I would have thought that on the military side we would have been pretty supportive of- since that it and Ghana are the two military forces in that whole part of Africa.

ROBERTSON: I think we cut off Nigeria from some military assistance. For a variety of reasons we wanted professional military and non-governing military in both countries. And sort of got it, eventually.

Q: Looking at Nigeria again, how about Islam? I was talking to Claudia Anyaso, who said that, you know, there's a tendency to think of, was it the Hausa to the north that's all Islamic and not much more but it's really an awful lot of others, Edo and Yoruba who are Islamic too. I mean, did you find, I mean, particularly on the cultural side, did you find Islam intruded on your bailiwick?

ROBERTSON: No because I happened to like the Yorba culture and I think it's absolutely lovely to live in a society in which families include different religions. Any

respectable family will have Christians, Muslims and animists happily sitting at the same table. I think that's marvelous.

During the Gulf War, at the end of the first week of the ground war, I was invited to be the guest of honor at a Koranic school in Lagos, a slum in Lagos. I didn't clear the invitation with the embassy because I knew that the security people would go bonkers. But the Nigerians couldn't understand why I was concerned. Yes, but you're having a war in Kuwait. Why would that have any effect on Lagos? I told them that in the rest of the world the Muslims are pretty well on an anti-American binge. They said don't worry about it. And actually when I went there it was very charming. You know, this is a big ceremony, there are thousands of people there and it starts late and goes on for hours, like all Nigerian ceremonies. The first speaker said we're glad these children have started school and finished. Yes, everybody applauds. We are glad that our children learned to read the Koran, and everybody shouts "yes" and applauds.. And we know that is important because if they can read the Koran, when they go to paradise they can take in 60 people from their mother's family and 60 from their father's, and everybody applauds wildly and shouts yes, that's why we were sending them to school. That's a lovely version of Islam.

Q: Yes, well certainly. Well, did you have much activity in, you know, up in Kano and up in the more hostile areas?

ROBERTSON: This was before Abuja opened, so a USIS office in Kaduna handled all that, and the country was certainly big enough that I didn't feel that I had to go traipsing around covering other parts of the country.

Q: Well what sort of reports were you getting out of Kaduna?

ROBERTSON: Well, the U.S. Mission left Kaduna in 1990 after some rioting about the Gulf War. And the north was always prone to sensitive international issues with the U.S. One thing I always thought was important about northern Nigeria is that with the Iranian revolution Iran started sending a whole lot of missions with money to the Sahelians (the countries of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Northern Nigeria), to northern Nigeria particularly, and the Saudis countered by sending a lot more.

Q: Iran sent?

ROBERTSON: Iran sent Shia.

Q: Shia.

ROBERTSON: Then the Saudis felt that they had to respond by sending-

Q: Sunnis.

ROBERTSON: -Sunnis. And this really changed northern Nigeria. Imams in the '50s, '60s would make their money selling amulets, doing weddings, funerals. Like any other religious leaders or officials, they responded to a local community. By now, I think most functioning mosques have foreign support. And when you see things in northern Nigeria like stoning adulterers, that's not going back to a Hausa past; that's new. They didn't used to do that.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And so it's become a much more sensitive region, much more of a hotbed now than it was in the early '80s. And after we were driven out of Kaduna, I was approached by some of the ball boys at the Lagos Lawn Tennis Club, which was right down the street from my office, and where I spent a lot of time. The ball boys were kind of Lagos street urchins, and their fathers were low level police people, policemen who lived in the barracks, or they were from the families of local street traders. They said, "ah, Mr. Nick, we feel terrible, you've been driven out of Kaduna by these Arab people, they're making it hot for you. We feel very sad. Do you want us to burn down the Iraqi embassy?" They weren't going to do it for free, of course, and they suggested that something like $1,000 would take care of it. Actually, there is no doubt in mind that for $1,000 those guys would have burned some building to the ground, but I could not have guaranteed that it would be the Embassy of Iraq. Their arson skills were probably good, but their reading skills weren't too hot.

Q: Yes, yes.

How did the Fulbright system work? We were sending people, Nigerians, to the United States. Did they come back?

ROBERTSON: Well, we still had enough control over them to make them come back.

Q: This was on exchange visa, knew they could on a J visa, they couldn't change.

ROBERTSON: As a matter of fact a well known Nigerian poet got a Fulbright and was offered a job at the host university. They wanted to keep him, and he consulted me. I said no, don't even think about it. Come back here for two years, do your time and then apply for the job. And you can even go back and teach for a quarter if you like but don't ask to change your status. I said two years back in Nigeria will go by like nothing and then you'll be free. If he had tried to change status he would have been in court the rest of his life. He later sent me a note thanking me for that advice. And most of them were smart enough, they weren't- A lot of them did leave subsequently; none violated their exchange visas. I wouldn't send their whole family.

Q: Did you come out of this, you and maybe your wife, I mean, was it frustrating? Sort of whither in Nigeria; was this?

ROBERTSON: In one sense I haven't changed my opinion in the almost 30 years I've been coming and going in Nigeria. It's a marvelous society; it's a rotten government. If you're looking for progress, the progress of the Nigerian nation, you're not going to see anything. If you look a little closer you see a society, even their immigrants and illegal immigrants tend to be okay. Their propensity for fraud, alas, is amazing.

Q: It really is remarkable. And it's a worldwide thing. I mean, they don't limit themselves.

ROBERTSON: Oh, they're all over. They're in China, unfortunately. Actually, the genesis of the problem is an interesting topic. We had about 50 to 100,000 Nigerian students here in around '78, 1980. Oil prices were good following the fall of the Shah of Iran. Then around '80, '81 prices dropped and the Nigerian government all of a sudden cut off support for these students. These students were supported by the state governments in Nigeria, and all of a sudden the Central Bank wouldn't give the Nigerian state governments anymore foreign exchange to support their students.. So you had a lot of students left here with no support, and a lot of U.S. universities were calling on USIA to try to figure out how to handle the problem. We – meaning the U.S. Government and private and public universities in the U.S. – had actively recruited these students and all of a sudden there was no money for them. Many institutions, assuming it was just a temporary glitch, ended up advancing credit to them assuming the money would be forthcoming, which it never was. So with all of these students here, suddenly broke, if you trace it, the first thing that happened was credit card fraud, which is easy. You get a credit card, you run up $500, you say you lost it. Then it shifted into fraud and that was sort of the trigger for the Nigerian involvement in drug dealing, too.

Q: Yes, and also automobile theft. I understand there's quite a traffic of stolen automobiles going off to other countries from the States.

ROBERTSON: Yes. That's new, but it has more to do with containerization than Nigerians or anyone else. It used to be the bill of lading for a ship was a negotiable document saying the captain had responsibility for this car, which belonged to this person, and all documents had to be there. Now it's in a container and the documents no longer read this "container said to contain the following automobiles," so no documents are required to get them out. You used to have to drive stolen vehicles out of a country, but now in a container they travel safe from inspection. All of West Africa gets hot vehicles, mostly from Western Europe. In South America a lot of vehicles stolen in the U.S. show up via containers.

Nigerians, as a matter of fact, most African groups, are perfect underground groups. They have family ties that build trust, and a near perfect system of local intelligence to make certain that new recruits are who they say they are. They speak languages that outsiders could not speak or understand. Even by the late 70s they were all over the world and had legitimate trade networks. It was easy for them to go into the underground economy. Easy, but regrettable.

Q: Well you say that the government was basically impossible to deal with.

ROBERTSON: You could deal with them but they wouldn't do anything.

Q: So what could you do, go- make- say please do this and then-

ROBERTSON: And they would say yes.

Q: And they'd say yes or whatever; it was and then you go off and make your own arrangements?

ROBERTSON: Yes. They couldn't or wouldn't fulfill most minimal commitments they made. I remember once a Nigerian artifact went on auction in Switzerland, with an opening bid of $1 million. Bob LaGamma had a lot of friends in the academic community who notified him of this auction of a stolen artifact. So, we told the Nigerian government through formal channels, hey, they're going to auction off your stolen artifacts. And there was no response, no action. So I sent my secretary to see someone who was an avid art collector who knew the Vice President, and he got a letter from the Vice President ordering action. Still nothing happened, so my secretary went to the Ministry of Culture with the letter, and came back with a bag of naira (the local currency; there were no credit cards then, and the largest denomination note in naira was worth only $10). Then she dragged somebody from the ministry of culture to the airline and sat him down and paid for his ticket, then she took him to the airport in a USIS vehicle. He came back with this million dollar bronze head in his hand luggage, which has probably been stolen again and resold. But we wanted to reclaim it; we thought that we can't just sit back and watch this. But it meant sending somebody from our office to get cash from the government and buy a ticket and probably have somebody thrown off the plane because it was around Christmas time.

Q: I imagine that you probably had a very talented staff of Foreign Service nationals because we- one, we paid-

ROBERTSON: We didn't pay much but we paid, and they got the immigrant visas after 15 years. And yes, we had very talented staff, and I still see them, many of them are still friends, from the drivers and guards to the senior people. It's always a pleasure to see them, because here's a country where all the statistics are bad, all the reports horrible, but every time I go back all my friends, from the embassy guards to the senior people, are doing better, thank you. And their children are doing better, thank you. And yes, we did have very talented people, we attracted very gifted people.

Q: Okay. You left there when?

ROBERTSON: Ninety-one.

Q: Whither?

ROBERTSON: I came back to Washington to work in the USIA Office of African Affairs again. A big issue for us at that time in USIA in Washington was that we had begun to get a lot of money from AID. AID had gotten funding for a lot of democratization and governance programs, but they didn't have much training or experience at that time. That was sort of our bag; we did a lot of that institutional work with legal institutions, parliaments, political parties, NGOs. And so here I got a series of fun lessons about Washington. I came back to Washington and Bob Gosende was head of USIA/AF. Bob said that we should really try to institutionalize these interagency transfers of funds from AID.

I hadn't really paid much attention in Washington. You know, I was good at analyzing Nigeria, analyzing Argentina but I hadn't really turned an x-ray eye on Washington; Nigerians taught me something about that. And so I came back and one of my big projects for two years was trying to come up with an institutional way to transfer funds from agency to agency. And my conclusion after two years is that we could not put it in writing. The rules are complex, and it's basically the administrators on the spot who make up the rules that you can follow. So we decided to just tell our PAOs to sign anything, nobody's going to jail for this, it's not fraud. It's just get any program money you can, sign anything and then people here do the same thing because there's no institutional way to do this; it's always going to be flying by the seat of your pants.

Q: So what were they doing with this money?

ROBERTSON: Well eventually AID ended up giving big contracts to universities and their contractors and their NGOs to do studies of democratization and stuff like that. And the per diem costs for these kinds of contracts were extraordinarily high. The U.S. Government per diem for one day in Lagos was more, much more than the monthly wages of our senior FSNs.

Q: Was it because they were being charged more or were they just making money out of it?

ROBERTSON: No, there was no fraud; no one was making illicit money out of it except the Lagos hotels. I remember once during a severe devaluation, Sheraton in Lagos doubled its prices in dollar terms. They said their inputs would double in price. Yes, you bastards, I thought, but your wages costs will be cut in half. And we – the U.S. government – didn't beef about it. I was looking at all this money that would eventually be spent on doing these studies, and thinking that you could fund all the operating costs for legal aid programs or other stuff for years with this kind of money.

Q: Well you know, one of the things, and particularly on the AID side, that I have the impression that the work done say in Africa, the money is allocated, you might say, but African country ends up by paying the University of- Michigan State University. I mean, they do all these damn studies which is a place where a professor and his grad students go. It's great for our schools but it really- you know, what does the study do? You

produce a nice looking study, give it to people who were suffering because, I mean, they were in critical circumstances, doesn't really advance the cause much.

ROBERTSON: That was my feeling. And a compromise we came up with was what they used to call 116e money, the small grant funds for democratization and human rights work with local organizations. AID transferred something like $2 million to the Bureau of African Affairs in State and each embassy could give small grants, sort of like the Ambassador's Self-Help Funds. You could give a grant on your own signature of up to $25,000 or something. And that was money that I thought was well spent.

Q: You know, I've talked to, oh, a man who was ambassador to Nicaragua, was saying that he could give small grants, you know, not much, sometimes just a couple hundred dollars but maybe through around $1,000 and gave it almost always to women because the men would drink it, but the women would use it to buy a sewing machine or to get a refrigerator to run a little market store or something. You know, in other words at the lower level and they'd pay it back.

ROBERTSON: Yes, that was our experience too. Believe it or not a Nigerian NGO showed up at my office and wanted to refund the extra money from a 116e grant because they had cut corners and worked to reduce expenses and had half of it left. I had to tell him that this would not work at all, that the American government did not do things like that, they're going to kill us. Either let's go over your books again and make it balance, or do another program; you can't give it back.

Q: Yes, turning money back to the government was just, you know, I mean, the problem is, it's not designed to accept money and once you do it probably takes more man hours of accounting's work than the money itself.

ROBERTSON: Yes, and when I was back in Washington we built up the 116 e, which I still think was the best money the U.S. Government had in this area.

Also with the wave of elections in Africa in the '90s our missions were swamped with requests for election support – from people to monitor elections to equipment and training. Elections are a very expensive business. AID, State and USIA were able to build up an election support fund so that the Embassies wouldn't have to raid all their other programs. That gave us the ability to respond to requests for election support quite quickly. We had been talking for years about how important elections were, so these African governments would say, "So we're going to have an election, a national election in six months or two months; could we have some monitors? Some voting machines?" That's a very short lead time and we were able to come up with a program that allowed us to respond.

Q: Where did you get the monitors?

ROBERTSON: Oh National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute. Then they would make contact with League of

Women Voters. We did a lot with the League of Women Voters, other NGOs here and there recruit monitors.

Q: Well, what was your impression of the aid apparatus?

ROBERTSON: We didn't have aid in Nigeria when I was there.

Q: Well how about when you get to Washington?

ROBERTSON: My Nigerian friends taught me important lessons about this. I was cursing all this money the U.S. Government was spending on consultants or administration for some program. My Nigerians said, "Hey, why do you think these programs are so popular? Why do you think they have a constituency? Use your head! That's not an accident, that's the point." And my Nigerian friends with their x-ray eye for how systems really work, where money changes hands, x-rayed Washington and said quite directly that programs that gave money to Africans would never be popular (and they did not see why they should be, quite honestly). At this time there were already rumors about shutting down USIA, and they told me that AID's approach gave them friends in Washington and will keep them in business, which of course was right.

Q: Yes. You did this from '91 to when?

ROBERTSON: Ninety-one to '93.

Q: As far as allocating money, you saw the well invested money and not so well invested money?

ROBERTSON: I think one of the things I liked to see that made me happy in Washington during the '90s was this attempt to shift the focus in Africa from aid to business, ending in the African Growth and Opportunity Act. We're talking about a long-term thing but then Washington's not a mid-term to long-term city. And I liked with the wave of elections and multi-party states and all this in Africa that there was a U.S. response which was much broader. I think of Ron Brown in connection with this, the late Ron Brown. Africa is not going to change as result of the World Bank and everything; it's going to change as the result of investment. And I liked that change in Washington, pushing a lot more business activities, not just the standard resource industries.

Q: Well did you find, was there a sudden shifting of funds, say from Africa to Eastern European and the former Soviet empire?

ROBERTSON: Yes, there was. I didn't perceive it because I ended up spending four years in Ghana, which remained the darling of the international community. It was sort of an expansive period for people involved in Eastern Europe, but I don't know how much of that was really pulled out of Africa. Obviously, Africa was way down in the numbers of personnel from the highs in the 60s and 70s; I know somebody who did his junior year with USIS as the third USIS officer in Togo.

Q: We're talking about a small state in Africa.

ROBERTSON: Everybody withdrew resources from Africa which I don't think was a bad thing, necessarily. One of the things that was very good in the '90s was this reinventing government stuff, when you had to really explain what you were going to do and why you were doing it and what was the point of this.

Q: Yes because they're obviously, in any organization, there's a tendency to keep doing what you've been doing, even if circumstances have changed drastically until you need time just to say okay, let's stop here and figure out what we're up to today.

ROBERTSON: And my next assignment, when I went to Ghana, I ended up with some real reservations about many of the things that were done in Ghana as it became the darling of the donor community. Ghanaians seemed to think that "development" was something that happened when your managerial class spent 20 percent of its time in international seminars. You ended up paying people to come to spend a day, a day sitting with you in a "workshop." But everybody has to justify themselves and workshops are the easiest things to track.

Q: Alright, well let's- Okay, '93, you're off to Ghana, is that it?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: And you were there to '97?

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Okay. What was your job?

ROBERTSON: I was the head of USIS, public affairs officer.

Q: PAO, okay. What- Let's talk about Ghana in '93; what was it- I mean, what was it like just as a country and then sort of government-wise?

ROBERTSON: Oh. I had been there briefly in '82 when it was a desert, when for a variety of reasons the economy had just collapsed, partially due to Rawlings' government.

Q: This is Jerry Rawlings.

ROBERTSON: Jerry Rawlings took power in coups in 1979 and 1981 was still in power; he had been elected in '92. There were charges that the election was stolen. In fact, they had a lot of incumbent advantages but we never perceived any ballot box stuffing that was significant. Anyway, he had sort of opened the door, with the election of December 1992. There was a parliament, though the opposition had boycotted the parliamentary

elections, which was stupid, I thought at the time and still think. Ambassador Brown was there, we had good relations-

Q: This is Ken Brown.

ROBERTSON: Ambassador Ken Brown, yes. Jerry Rawlings was reminiscing about Ghana and its path to democracy with a journalist recently. Ghana is an example of a U.S. success – a consistent push for economic and political openings had been pursued there from 1981 on, backed by solid commitments of economic assistance, and it worked. Jerry Rawlings told this journalist that, "it was the State Department that made us do it. We never would have become democratic had it not been for the State Department." He was complaining but I thought it was the nicest thing anybody said about my institution.

Q: Was Rawlings, he was the-?

ROBERTSON: President.

Q: President when you got there. What were you getting, I mean obviously you'd been around the African circuit for some time but what was, when you got out there what was the impression of Rawlings?

ROBERTSON: Well, Rawlings had certainly violated human rights in his early years in power, but with my Argentine, South African and Nigerian experience the scale seemed small; statistically speaking, he didn't seem that bad a guy. He had tried to cast his country in a Cuban mold and brought the economy to a grinding halt. He was, for one reason or another, open to small suggestions and we just kept forcing him, step by step, do this, have an election, have a fair election, have a parliament. Well then, even if it's a rather weak and disorganized parliament, the President does have to sort of answer them. You have a press which is increasingly free, increasingly vocal. You had civil society organizations, the women's lawyer organization, I can't remember the acronym for it, Women's World banking; you had lots of organizations that with a little bit of support from us began playing independent roles and building a society that politically and economically was increasingly diverse and open. It wasn't a straight upward line; Rawlings packed the Supreme Court, so to speak, and the government didn't always observe legal niceties. In general, though, you saw a country that politically and economically was increasingly open. Rawlings visited the U.S. in '94, I think, maybe '95. People who didn't like Rawlings, which incidentally included much of the business, press and academic class who were natural embassy contacts, thought we were lackeys of Rawlings. Ambassador Brown gave a news conference when he came back from the Rawlings visit to Clinton, and the atmosphere was pretty hostile. There was a lot of criticism for being too pro-Rawlings. In 1996 there was another election, Rawlings won again, the opposition to Rawlings cried foul, said it was a stolen election. We begged to differ, we were on the ground, we had a lot monitors. Rawlings had great advantages of being the incumbent, but they just didn't have to stuff ballot boxes. There was only one seat in Parliament that they actually stole, as far as I could tell. But we defended the integrity of the election. You have to… Well, Rawlings did not lead political and

economic change in Ghana, but he let it happen, and so you can credit Rawlings to account for this stuff.

Q: Well, alright, now you're the public affairs officer; let's talk about various elements of the press. What was the press like there? Not the press but the whole media thing?

ROBERTSON: The big change in Ghana and much of Africa, are two real revolutions since 1991: the first is cell phones, the second FM radio. Remember that in any African coup attempt, they went for the broadcasting house. You weren't trying to take the stock exchange or the banks, you wanted the broadcasting house. And so, believe it or not, once they sort of accepted that that there should be FM radio, independent radio, you can't have a coup anymore. It's really interesting.

Q: Well, let me just, on the technique and somebody in later years, what's the difference between an AM and an FM radio coup-wise?

ROBERTSON: FM is small and it's cheap. You can set up an FM radio broadcasting for a few thousand dollars.

Q: Yes. So these got broadcasts spread around.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Do they represent individuals or did they represent companies?

ROBERTSON: The very first were individuals, then companies, and later FM stations became an investment in themselves. We're going from a time in the '80s when the norm in Africa was state controlled TV and radio broadcasting. We had the head of FCC (Federal Communications Commission) out in Ghana soon after I got there in 1993 to talk about frequency allocation on the FM band. And of course the Ghanaians grew up with the military tradition that said that we can't have FM radio for security reasons; we need all of that spectrum for our security needs. And I'd laugh and tell them I lived just a mile from the Pentagon down the road and don't have any trouble getting FM radio or cell phones or anything; I doubt that your frequency needs are more than ours.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: But we eventually chipped away at that and the first FM station in Ghana was a pirate station.

Q: Well were we deliberately looking at FM and saying ah ha, this is going to basically democratize the thing or was this just something that was happening and we were observing it?

ROBERTSON: We actively pushed the process. We brought this FCC guy over specifically to talk about frequency allocation, which eventually became very important

for telephones too. But you were dealing with a norm where the state controls everything – all radio and TV broadcasting, monopolies in telephone, monopolies in electrical power, and for a variety of reasons we were chipping away at all of this. You can't really talk about democratization if you don't have some kind of free media. TV and AM radio can be expensive to get into, which limits the number of groups or people who can potentially enter the business, and makes them are very susceptible to government pressure through contracts. We saw this in Argentina when much of the "advertising" for TV, radio and newspapers was in fact contracts to publish government announcements, government bulletins, the stuff that is in the Federal Register here. FM gave everybody a voice, every group a voice, and so backing it was a sort of natural corollary of economic and political reform efforts. It became really important, and that's why I know there was no fraud in the December 2000 elections in Ghana, because no FM stations reported it. It really changed the nature of politics. All of a sudden you had election monitoring by the whole country. People would use their cell phones to call FM stations and say that there was a shortage of ballots over here, people are lining up over here because the polling station opened late. You had a degree of transparency that was extraordinary, very exciting.

Q: And cell phones; I mean, this is really quite a new-

ROBERTSON: They were just coming in.

Q: I mean, for all of Africa and hell, all over the world cell phones were really changing things; they're changing things right here in Arlington.

ROBERTSON: I had subsequent experience in Ghana with it. They were coming in, they were chipping away at the state monopoly on communications all over. The new technologies made it possible. Argentina had a notoriously bad telephone system and we went from a time when we could barely call across Buenos Aires, and rarely to Washington, to a time after they allowed cell phones when we'd get regular phone calls in Ghana from my wife's home town in the Argentine pampas. From one year to another it just shifted. And Ghana began allowing them. And all these Ghanaian government types, as Ambassador Brown said, they didn't think this through, they just sort of said okay, okay, we've got to have some telephones. Well, we can give a little frequency, dah, dah, dah. They didn't expect FM radios to tie their hands in stuffing ballot boxes, if that is what they wanted to do. None of these governments did but that was the effect. It was fun; it was exciting.

Q: Well then, what about the media then? How about the press itself; was that a different type of-?

ROBERTSON: The press – the Ghanaian private press – was small. The two main newspapers were government papers, one violently pro-Rawlings and the other only officially, moderately pro-Rawlings. The Ghanaian private sector was small, so there was not a lot of advertising possible. This is a small country and a poor country and a rather well behaved country and so when the press began taking on Rawlings after the 1992

election, with the weak parliament, the independent press really became by definition the opposition force. And I was very closely involved in radio stuff, in radio liberalization, the FM, and eventually ended up crossing swords with the government. The Rawlings – neither Mrs. nor Mr. – were not by nature good sports about being attacked and ridiculed in the Ghanaian press. It was not their nature to allow this to happen. Because of international pressure they had to open up the country somewhat, but the issue festered. Things blew up around an issue in which, in fact, the anti-Rawlings press was wrong. There was a Ghanaian diplomat related to a very high level Rawlings security advisor who was caught buying and selling drugs in Switzerland. The opposition press said this is evidence of drug dealing at high levels. It wasn't; it was evidence of the Ghanaians not selecting their diplomats with any regard to their drinking and drug histories. But the press was saying look at this, this is drug dealing on the part of the ruling party, the embassy. It wasn't; there was one guy who had a serious drug problem. I tried to tell them, you don't – if you're a national level drug dealer – walk around knocking on people's houses selling grams of cocaine. Come on you guys, grow up. But this festered and the government by '97 decided to bring these guys up on criminal libel charges, which would have been like 10 to 20 years in jail for this. We thought that was excessive. And I told friends and contacts in the government that if they do this their money was going to dry up overnight. They were very much a client state of Europe and the U.S. and the international organizations. They could not do this anymore. Actually, at a Ghanaian court or something if they asked us to comment on it I would have been happy to say that the Rawlings were right; I mean, they have nothing to do with this drug dealing. But the way it played out, I actually got thrown out of Ghana; I was declared PNG (persona non grata) by a client state of the United States. Rumor had it that it happened because Hillary Clinton was making a visit to Africa and Ghana was on the short list of countries but not the final list. Somebody convinced Mrs. Rawlings that the Embassy had had something to do with this decision and that I was a key player in that. This was Ambassador Ed Brynn by that time.

Q: So you were kicked out.

ROBERTSON: Yes, I was PNGed.

Q: Well let's go back before we come to that; what about academic institutions and our role with them?

ROBERTSON: University years abroad and summer programs for U.S. and European students have become sort a cottage industry in Ghana. Don't forget, it's a safe country; it's a pleasant country and an increasingly comfortable country. And they are nice to strangers. And so the academic institutions had trained a lot of professionals; Washington is filled with Ghanaian professionals. We talked earlier about the ineffectiveness of some international aid. Ghana exports about two-thirds of its doctors, the doctors that it trains, so the World Bank was talking about loaning Ghana money to build another medical school. It would make more sense if you keep the money in the country and pay the doctors in the first place so they did not leave.

Q: Well, was there, while you were there, I mean, just do a compare and contrast of Nigeria; how did that play out for you?

ROBERTSON: Ghana's an infinitely nicer place. They are nicer to foreigners. A friend of mine, a northern Ghanaian who was a minister snapped at me once when I said the Ghanaians were nice. He said we are not nice; we are polite to visitors, which is quite a different thing. During my time in Ghana I would have a lot Nigerian FSNs (Foreign Service nationals) come over on holiday or just to visit. On one of these visits, when we were driving down the road to Cape Coast, there was a car parked by the side of the road. I said, look, that's been there 12 hours and it's still got tires. This is a much more sensible country. The Nigerian laughed and said that I confused sensible with slow thinking. He said they will dismantle the car, but it will take them longer. And there was something to that. It's a sane society; you know, you don't do things that would embarrass people in public, but that's not necessarily the same as integrity. I had never lived before in such a fiercely egalitarian society; they really hated success, and that was interesting.

Q: Was this a little bit like the Japanese say, it's the nail that sticks up that gets hammered down?

ROBERTSON: Yes, yes. I always joked that Nigerians always lie about how big they are. Somebody selling cigarettes and kola nuts out on the street will hand you a business card, listing himself as the director of an export-import company, and tell you that he's working with a cousin, bringing a shipload of Thai rice; come see him next week and he'll have some deals for you. Whereas in Ghana, you can never find a businessman who's ever had a successful year! They always lie about how bad they're doing.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: I had always considered "egalitarian" to be a positive attribute in a society, but when you live there for a while all the negative attributes are displayed.

A true story: A bunch of Ghanaian taxi drivers in Atlanta had a group where they bought a bunch of lottery tickets every Thursday or Friday when they went on sale. Once they won the lottery, but then there was a fight about who was actually a member of the group. Some guys weren't on duty the night the tickets were bought for one reason or another, but otherwise were regular members of the group. They never sat down to figure out any structure for the group because, after all, it was a lottery and their chances of winning were low. So some of these taxi drivers who were not scheduled to get any money took the others to court. Nobody could get any money unless they were included - "I would have been there except I was sick that day," that kind of nonsense. The ethos was to not allow anybody to have the money if they could not get full shares, and it was not amenable to negotiation. Rather than collect the $25 million and share it out, they would rather argue about it for five years. It was strange.

Q: What about the universities?

ROBERTSON: The universities had been anti-government centers but they were becoming less politicized. Rawlings' opponent in 1992 was a distinguished Ghanaian historian, Prof. Adu Boahen.

Ghana was able to keep its universities small. Ghanaians aren't as forceful as Nigerians. There was a lot of pressure on Nigerian governments to expand the university system to create more opportunities. Nigerian governments could not fight off the kind of pressure brought to bear by the Nigerian public – even military governments, not to mention elected governments hoping to be re-elected. So the Nigerian university system expanded, and it more or less killed the universities, but governments could not resist the pressure. The Ghanaians over the years did not expand their university system significantly - they had limited universities, educated relatively few people. A lot of Ghanaians went to school elsewhere and a lot went to Nigeria at different times. But Ghana ended up with universities that functioned like universities and more or less had academic years, and were not so subject to strife. They were good institutions. Oddly enough, one of the things that you have to really look at in terms of the cost to society and all that was that Ghana maintained good public schools and good public universities but the cost of keeping those functioning was to keep them small. Small universities and small public schools became much more preserves of the elite than private schools were. Here you have a left wing government with a commitment to equality; it keeps the public schools good and the top Ghanaian public secondary schools, which are boarding schools, are outstanding but if you don't have really good connections and pay a lot your children don't get in. So private schools were actually sort of the option for the hoi polloi.

Q: The second, yes.

Well did the universities during this time, had they been infected with Marxism or-

ROBERTSON: Oh sure, sure, they were big centers of Marxist- opposition to earlier Ghanaian government. But they always became an opposition. Nkrumah set up his own party schools, indoctrination schools, because the universities weren't Marxist enough for him. It's in the nature of the university to be sort of anti-government. Ghanaian universities were anti-government when it was Nkrumah with his sort of quasi Marxist orientation, anti-government when it was Rawlings with his initially Cuban-Marxist orientation. They opposed the conservative military governments of the late 60s and 1970s. They weren't ideologically as rigid as universities might be in parts of South America, in parts of Europe, even maybe in parts of the U.S. They were opposition centers but they were well behaved and orderly and fulfilled a social role.

Q: Going back to Rawlings, what got him off the Cuban kick?

ROBERTSON: It was a disaster.

Q: Yes, he was an air force lieutenant, wasn't he?

ROBERTSON: Yes, flight lieutenant. This is funny but his father was a Scot, his mother was from a group in Eastern Ghana called the Ewe, who are found from Ghana east to the Nigerian border. Togo was split between England and Germany, and the German part was given to France after WWI. After WWII, before independence, in a referendum, the people of British Togo voted to join their Francophone cousins in Togo, so some Ewe remained Ghanaian, some became Togolese, and a few were in the Benin Republic. When Rawlings was elected, when they went back to constitutional rule, his opponents went to court to argue that he was unqualified to be the president of Ghana, not because his father was a Scotsman, but because his mother was Togolese. In 1992 Ghana had sort of the equivalent of our own "birthers,"

Anyway, Rawlings was impetuous, he was immature, with a taste for violence, a proclivity for violence. A bit of a bully as a student, a bit of a bully as an officer. He was certainly charismatic, he certainly could sell himself well to foreign audiences. He's a very good looking man. He had crazy ideas. He knew that the Cubans had the cane cutting campaigns through the late '60s, so just like Castro he said, "We have to get so many hundred tons of cocoa." But cocoa is different from sugar, it's a small farmer thing, most of the labor is done by families. There were never cocoa plantations in Ghana, ever, because there is no economy of scale, much less the kind of labor requirements that a sugar harvest has. So these poor cocoa farmers were saddled with groups of 50, 100 students that they had to take care of, and they didn't want them anywhere around.

And so the cocoa farmers, in addition to their other grudges, they were being paid at the official rate instead of the black market rate, also had to support vast numbers of useless students.

Q: Yes. What about, I mean, one thinks of Ghana as having peanuts, ground nuts or cocoa; what sort of economy did they have?

ROBERTSON: Well, in addition to other bad ideas they had when they started off in the 1980s, they were trying to pay farmers for cocoa at the official rate, which was one cedi (the national currency) for one dollar, at the time you'd get 30, 40 *cedis* for the dollar on the black market. And so suddenly Togo became one of the world's largest cocoa producers; everybody took it over the border.

Q: It was the same stuff, it just went over the border.

ROBERTSON: Yes, it was exported as Togolese cocoa. Then they rationalized that, and went back to the state purchasing boards which still kept a large percentage of the profit. They did serious damage to the cocoa economy over the years, .and it began reviving in the '90s.

They had had electrical power generated by the Volta Dam, Alcoa Plant. The dam was built and justified by the Alcoa investment in an aluminum plant. They had a revival of mining industry gold. But it was a very small industrial sector. The aluminum plant was the big hirer and that had only about 3,000 workers. After all these years of coddling by

the international community, the NGO sector was far bigger than the industrial sector in Ghana. And they were trying to boost the farm economy, which still provides most of the employment. They came up with elaborate schemes for farm incentives, but all you had to do was pay them for their produce and provide credit and stuff. The Rawlings Government began reviving the agricultural economy and the mining economy. But from the colonial times it had been a very state centered economy, and as a smaller economy and a more quiet economy the state really did exercise control, and may have done some long-term damage to Ghanaian society. Nigeria never really had a dictator, until maybe Sani Abacha, because it's tough to dictate to people in a large country heavily populated by Nigerians. Ghana has tolerated more than its share of dictators.

Q: How about some of the neighbors of Ghana? Were they a problem?

ROBERTSON: It's hard to believe now that in 1995 Cote d'Ivoire was still a regional center for everything, for finance, airlines, everything. Ghana has since picked up most of that. In the 1980s Togo still attracted a lot of European tourism, but fell apart while we were there. The government refused a political opening, refused an ethnic opening, and kicked off a sort of slow-burning civil war. Talking about misconceived international projects, the UN High Commission for Refugees had big refugee camps for Togolese in Ghana, but of course everybody just went to work in Togo and then went back to their camp at night. There was very little incentive for the refugees to go anywhere else. Ghana was very active in Liberia; at one point, some of you may recall, a ship over laden with Liberian refugees landed in Ghana and we persuaded the Ghanaians not to send it back to sea, to let us take off the refugees near Takoradi and put them in a camp. I was made head of that delegation and every time I went to Takoradi they said "oh, let's go visit your people, Nick, and maybe they'll steal your car instead of mine this week." But we burned the Ghanaians on that episode. We promised them that if they allowed the Liberians in there would be international money to take care of them and we wouldn't just leave them on the outskirts of the city. We said this wouldn't happen.

Q: Well then, did- how about culturally with Ghana?

ROBERTSON: You know, you had this massive investment by AID in the former slave castles that Obama visited earlier this year and encouraging sort of cultural tourism, which worked to an extent, although, they don't get tourism like Jamaica. But they get a few hundred thousand people a year coming for cultural tourism and for their Pan-African cultural festival, Panafest, every two years. Panafest has been hard for Ghana to maintain. Ghana had the most exceptional of the Pan African cultural productions, Soul to Soul, in 1973. There was no government money, it was all private money, all private investment, and they got Ike and Tina Turner and a whole bunch of soul music stars out to Ghana and filmed it. A friend of mine who lives in Alexandria, a percussionist with Hugh Masekela, still gets residuals (royalty checks) from Soul to Soul in 1973, but then they had all these fantasies of making it a government operation; it never quite jelled.

But some of their thinking was a little old fashioned; they were talking about sort of new world information order stuff about how the international news agencies, more powerful

then, international news, dominated African cultural reporting. I pointed out to them that they had not covered the death of a friend of mine, a great Nigerian artist, but I read about it in Newsweek.

It's a small country with small cultural markets and you can only do so much with that. They produced some good playwrights, a couple of novelists, some excellent painters, sculptors and ceramicists. It was a great country for music. I loved it with high life, then they developed new forms of reggae and hip hop; I stuck to the high life.

Q: These are dances or-

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Song dances.

ROBERTSON: Sort of big band African music for the 1950s and '60s.

Q: Well, was the Internet coming into that area?

ROBERTSON: In Ghana I got to see the big revolutions in communications. First I mentioned FM radio and cell phones. The other two were the emergence of international broadcasting with CNN, and finally the internet.

When the first Gulf War opened up in August of 1990, we set up an Embassy situation room to monitor the situation. After a few weeks of that, we closed the situation room and the duty officers and other embassy staff were just told to watch developments on CNN.

Which we still got from AFRTS (Armed Forces Radio and Television Service) at the time.

In Ghana, many Ghanaian academics and journalists got their first taste of the Internet in our USIS library. At the time we had some sort of low speed interconnectivity; we got it off the satellite. We used to get a shortened version of The New York Times sent by satellite. It seems pretty small potatoes now, but then we were still awaiting the International Herald Tribune to come a day or two late from Europe, and we'd get the Sunday New York Times a week late through the pouch.

It was just the early days but we would have people over to show them what could be done. We had a few terminals that we'd allow certain selected friends to use and introduced it. This reminds me that I caused a small scandal by allowing senior Fulbright people to use the email, but I wouldn't allow the junior Fulbright researchers to use it.

Q: Did you get a good number of African Americans coming to look for their roots? I would think this would be a prime spot, English speaking and all that.

ROBERTSON: Oh, it was. And we had the president of Lincoln University out there.

Q: And that's where, of course, Nkrumah had gone.

ROBERTSON: Yes. Yes, it was quite an event. This sort of "bridges over the Atlantic" had been really a theme of Ghana even before Nkrumah, with Dr. Aggrey, the founder of Chamita College in Ghana, another U.S.-educated African who advocated strengthening those ties. His son, Rudolph Aggrey, was U.S. Ambassador to Romania and after retirement became a highly respected scholar on Eastern Europe. This relationship between Africa and its diaspora had a long history in Ghana, and cultural tourism is an important sector of the Ghanaian economy. Of course, the most important element for some of the Africans and African-Americans never did jell; you didn't have as many people moving back to Ghana as they had perhaps hoped. There remained up until the '90s more Americans living in Nigeria, a much rougher place, but Americans married to Nigerians could make a living there. Ghana's comfortable, but there's no money there. This talk of the relationship between Africa and the African diaspora that has been a theme of a number of Ghanaian governments makes Ghana loom large in U.S. views of Africa, but thus far it doesn't involve that many Ghanaians. So I think it looms large in American views of Africa but that doesn't involve that many Ghanaians, and it certainly doesn't employ many Ghanaians.

Q: Yes. So in some ways I take it, I mean, it was a nice, I won't say a comfortable spot, but it just didn't have the storm and drang of Nigeria, for you.

ROBERTSON: Look, I loved it, it was the nicest four years our family we spent in the foreign service. My wife works over at SAIT (a nearby office in FSI), and you can ask her about it. A wonderful place to live, lovely people to work with but a small society and a society very dependent upon the generosity of strangers. And it's done very well; it's a real success. I hope it continues.

Incidentally, I wrote a play in Ghana, under a pseudonym, teasing the Ghanaians because of their loss of self-confidence, their unwillingness to take risks. In the 1880s a Ghanaian named Tetteh Quarshie discovered how to plant and cultivate cocoa. Nigerians and Ghanaians had been working in cocoa on Fernando Po, the former Spanish colony just off the coast of Nigeria. Europeans, missionaries as well as business people, had been trying to cultivate cocoa for about 20 years but were unable to do it. Tetteh Quarshie took the seeds back to Ghana from Fernando Po, and figured out how to cultivate it. He launched a real revolution in West Africa, with hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers in Ghana and Nigeria developing a cocoa industry, and putting their money into schools, and hospitals and churches and roads, paying for the first generation of Africans to study in the UK and the U.S. And so you had this explosion, this wonderful success story, an industry that African peasants developed on their own with no foreign involvement until the ships came to pick it up off the docks. And I wrote a play teasing the Ghanaians that the country that revolutionized itself like this, that had entered the 20th century riding this tremendous success, just didn't seem to be the society around me. They were much more cautious, and that is part of the long term damage that years of misrule left.

Q: Okay, let's come to the ill fated trip; how did that develop?

ROBERTSON: It was a real surprise to me. All of a sudden Ambassador Ed Brynn called all the agency heads in and said "Nick, you've got to be on a plane out of here in 72 hours.

Q: Well you were getting pretty close to your time, weren't you?

ROBERTSON: Yes, I would have left in July in any case and this all happened in May. I don't know why they did it. It made no sense to anybody. I was leaving anyway; why do this? What was in it for them? And nobody ever really could tell us.

Q: How did you relate to the government?

ROBERTSON: I was fighting all the independent journalists, so-called independent journalists who all hated Rawlings, about the election that had taken place in December of 96. I said Rawlings did not steal the election. I was there, I was a monitor; there was no election stolen here, you guys. So a lot of journalists considered me a shill for Rawlings, and I thought I'd get an award from Rawlings when I left, which would have been slightly embarrassing. I had no idea I'd be expelled.

They charged me with inciting the press by saying something about the criminal libel laws in public. There was a World Press Freedom Day celebration at the headquarters of the Ghana Association of Journalists and I was invited as a guest speaker. I think that Mr. John Mahama, who is currently the Vice President, was there that day. The speech really hit out hard at the irresponsibility and lack of professionalism of Ghanaian journalists. I knew these guys; they were over my house all the time. There was a regular Sunday brunch with a group of senior journalists. After almost four years, though, I was getting exasperated at their collective failure to behave like serious journalists. I prefaced my speech by noting my view of criminal libel, there was no secret, I had told all of them plus every government official I knew that I think it's a disgusting law. Having said that, why don't we inaugurate a press responsibility day? How about a press responsibility day? Why don't you guys start paying attention to business? And I was quite surprised to find that that had been used as the reason to throw me out.

Q: Did you- Did the embassy have any input in the give and take about Mrs. Clinton's trip or not? I would have thought Ghana, you know, particularly you had Shirley Temple there and Ghana, for a small country, has a fairly high profile.

ROBERTSON: Ghana had a very high profile, but there was a particular problem with a possible visit by our first lady, Hilary Clinton. The problem was her counterpart, the First Lady of Ghana. A lot of the nasty stuff that was being done by the Rawlings government was done by her and her cronies in their "NGO," the December 31 Women's Movement. Whatever her gifts, whatever her leadership qualities, they were involved in a lot of funny stuff.

Q: This is Mrs.-

ROBERTSON: Mrs. Rawlings, yes.

Q: What was her background?

ROBERTSON: Educated middle class Ghanaian, very smart, very attractive. Rather like a certain lady in Argentina once upon a time, perhaps much smarter than her husband, certainly much more energetic in pursuit of her interests. Insofar as you would look at illegitimate use of incumbency advantages in an election, it was her and her NGO. Funny business involving privatization and contracts was also done in her office. We did not think it's appropriate for the First Lady to salute that. And President Clinton himself was coming the next year. It wasn't that big a deal.

Q: This is sort of a minor lashing out and you were the lashee?

ROBERTSON: A little bit like that. Actually, Ambassador Brynn said, how come I was getting credit? Because everybody in the embassy agreed that a visit by Mrs. Clinton would be a bad signal to send.

Q: Yes. Okay, well I think this is probably a good place to stop.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Where'd you go after that?

ROBERTSON: I went to Venezuela. I was there for the election of Chavez; we made great efforts to make sure there was a fair election. Venezuelans loved Chavez; I despised him at the time, I despise him now but Venezuelans love him. Says something about Venezuelans. John Maisto was ambassador, a superb professional.

Q: John and I are having an ongoing dialogue. We've got him out of Venezuela and bringing him back to the OAS. But anyway, this point-

ROBERTSON: I mean, I'm glad that we made great efforts to make sure that there would be a fair election.

Q: Okay. So we'll talk about it- We're talking about '97?

ROBERTSON: Ninety-seven to '99.

Q: Today is the 13th of October, 2009, with Nick Robertson. And Nick, you know where we left off?

ROBERTSON: I'd just been expelled from Ghana and went to Venezuela; that would have been July of 1997.

Q: By the way, getting expelled, I mean, this thing sort of-

ROBERTSON: PNG'd.

Q: PNG'd. Did the agency treat that as say, well, stuff happens and all or did somebody get around and say well, he got himself expelled; was it a blot on your copybook or not?

ROBERTSON: No. As a matter of fact, I seriously think that I had a lot of friends in the government, and when Mrs. Rawlings decided to throw me out my friends made it look as good for me as possible. So I went out as a free-press martyr. As I said, I think it was mostly because Hillary didn't go to Ghana and Mrs. Rawlings thought it was my fault. But they dressed it up and said I was interfering, interfering with their plans to prosecute for criminal libel and the State Department expelled a friend of Mrs. Rawlings from the Ghanaian embassy, as retaliation.

Q: Good.

ROBERTSON: Actually it was a credit to me, much more than I deserved. If they really wanted to mess me up they could have tried to frame me for dealing on the black market or stealing antiquities or something. They said I was interfering with their criminal libel prosecutions and standing up for journalists they wanted to send to jail. That looks great on a CV (curriculum vitae).

Q: Sure. Okay, how did the Venezuela thing, was it just open or did they make room for you or what?

ROBERTSON: No, it was just open. The Ghanaians expelled me pretty much at the end of the tour. My son missed a month of school and he has never forgiven me for it but I had already been assigned to Venezuela by the time I got expelled.

Q: So you were in Venezuela from when to when?

ROBERTSON: July '97 to July '99.

Q: What was the situation in Venezuela, just sort of in general before we get to what you were up to?

ROBERTSON: Interesting. I got there in '97, just before President Clinton visited. That gave such a boost to Venezuela's business prospects that my biggest headache as PAO was finding housing for the U.S. staff because the Venezuelan landlords started canceling leases and doubling rents. And so from say October '97 to January, when the price of oil dropped sharply, it looked like Venezuela was headed for a boom. In January of '98 the

leading presidential candidate was a former Miss Universe. I think Ambassador John Maisto probably talked about it.

Q: Yes, he did.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And it changed quickly. We went from the situation where landlords were literally doubling rents, which were already at Manhattan levels anyway.

Q: Well why would a Clinton visit do that?

ROBERTSON: They thought it was a signal of new levels of engagement. Oil was looking up after the Mexican problems and before the Asian collapse when oil prices just went through the bottom. But Venezuela had a long democratic tradition, they had a reasonably open political system. They had oil and looked to be set on a path for some kind of economic reform. It was really a grotesquely inefficient state and needed reform to unlock all these other possibilities. Clinton was there, and it looked like Mack McLarty had friends and contacts in Venezuela.

Q: McLarty was-

ROBERTSON: McLarty was the childhood friend, of Clinton, and his first White House Chief of Staff. Anyway, the Clinton visit looked like this was just part of a move for greater Venezuelan integration into the international economy besides the oil.

Q: Did you get involved in the Clinton visit?

ROBERTSON: Sure, just like everybody else.

Q: What were you doing?

ROBERTSON: We handled the White House press operation, with the care and feeding job. I mean, there's no substance to it, you've just got a lot of demanding people there, you make sure the telephones work. By this time, by '97, we had to make sure we had internet lines as well. And as usual the lead up is much more painful than the visit. We spent a month in rehearsals with junior White House staff and that takes up time. It was my introduction to cell phones, the first time that we could be tracked. It was really marvelous, being in places like Nigeria and Ghana without telephones. You'd get lost for days and nobody could track you. I missed a White House call and so when I got back to the embassy there was a cell phone waiting for me with instructions on how to use it.

Q: Before you went out to Venezuela, what were you hearing about Venezuela and sort of the upcoming election?

ROBERTSON: As I said, in February, when the oil prices were still reasonably good the leading candidate was Irene Sáez, who was a former Miss Universe, and not a bad politician. She was also the mayor of one of the political entities that comprises Caracas.

Venezuela was known as a chronic under performer. Oil fed corruption for close to a century. Radical change was not on the horizon when I got there in 1997 and it wasn't really on the horizon until April, May of '98, about six months before the election.

Q: Was anybody talking about, you know, at the embassy the discrepancy between the wealthy and the not wealthy and all?

ROBERTSON: Yes, it was a notoriously corrupt and inefficient government. It still is. I mean, it's a curious place; it was notoriously corrupt and inefficient with a very visible social cleavage, and it attracted swarms of immigrants from the rest of Latin America. I despise Chavez; you know, it was painful to see the Venezuelans make that choice. By May, June of '98, with the December election, I still thought it possible Chavez wouldn't make it.

Q: What was your initial contact with the situation there? Why did you despise Chavez?

ROBERTSON: It's my age, I suppose. My wife is from Argentina and as we said, we've seen this movie before.

Q: You're talking about Peron?

ROBERTSON: Yes, Peron. Chavez is left wing military, but there's a certain stylistic-

Q: Right wing, left wing militaries-

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: -is the same.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And Venezuela is in many ways an admirable country, the best country and society I've ever been in for openness about race and religion and region; a very friendly and tolerant society. Most of the racial stratification seemed to me, after being there a couple of years, mostly a product of immigration. The Europeans who came in droves after World War II, and all the way up until 1980, were better prepared than the Venezuelans and much more driven; they moved to the top. It was a reasonably open society; it was corrupt but it wasn't oligarchical; it was very open, and with good connections with the ruling party everybody could play. And on the other end, when I first got there I saw there were black guys pushing ice cream carts in the residential neighborhoods, and Caracas is a very steep valley. I thought gosh, look at those poor guys. This has got to be the worst job in Venezuela. Someone told me these guys are all Haitians; Haitians have the monopoly on ice cream carts. And so you had both at the top and the bottom racial stratification that's sort of a product of immigration. It was curious. Something else caught my attention. We talk about social injustice in Venezuela, which was a fact. But Venezuelans never left. There's no community of poor Venezuelans in Buenos Aries, or Bogota or Rio, whereas Caracas was filled with poor immigrants from

all over the hemisphere. It actually made for a nice environment. It was the most cosmopolitan South American place I've ever been in.

Q: Probably good food of all kinds.

ROBERTSON: Yes. I mean, we had thousands of Argentines, Uruguayans, Mexicans, Colombians, Bolivians, Brazilians, Chileans, plus all the people from the Caribbean. Everybody had come to Venezuela and we could hear all Latin American popular music performers, all the top people from every country came to Caracas.

Q: Well now, there weren't then the top 10 families who'd been there forever as there were in so many of the Latin American countries?

ROBERTSON: No. I'm a failed historian by background, so I jumped into that question as soon as I got there. No, the 19th century in Venezuela was really bloody**.** The independence wars lasted basically from 1810 to 1900 and there was no population **g**rowth in the country in the 19th century for all practical purposes. They slaughtered each other and they ran out of oligarchs. They opened it up just because there weren't enough people of Spanish descent left in the country.

Q: Well they had the Red and the Black or the Red and the White parties for awhile where they used to inter- you know, take turns being in charge or was that elsewhere?

ROBERTSON: Until the end of the 19th century things never got that orderly. It's a great story. They have a slave revolt but it's led by a white royalist. The Spaniards triggered a slave revolt to get rid of Bolivar and his friends. And the slave army drove him out and then the Spanish royalist died and the same army switched teams and went all the way to Peru. But it was very mobilized. You had the tradition of sort of mass mobilization for political ends and so you'd have revolts all over the country in the 19th century and it had been just soaked in blood. There was a really interesting phenomenon I found in Venezuelan popular music. There weren't songs celebrating fighting or war or bloodshed as there are in Colombia, for example. There had been the same songs celebrating bloodthirsty generals and caudillos in Venezuela just like everywhere else, but they had a real cultural change at the beginning of the 20th century; they just decided to drop that. They had a dictator who was brutal, Gomez, but popular music didn't celebrate his excesses. They just dropped all that kind of martial stuff out of popular music. And they got oil in 1917 and became the first petro country. By 1925, eight years later, it was a food importer; only two million people in the whole country and they were importing food; everybody just dropped tools when they found oil.

Q: Well this is one of the, you know, sort of ironies or whatever you want to call it, because Venezuela is a great place for agriculture.

ROBERTSON: Spectacular.

Q: But nobody uses it. I mean, sort of delinquent soil or something, I don't know.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And you know, they missed all of the big export pushes previously. They have rubber, they have cocoa, they have coffee; they had everything, hides and tallow, meat, but they missed all of the export booms because they were just so disorderly.

Q: Yes. And of course it's part of that curse of oil, too.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: Even in a wealthy place where oil could dominate.

When you got there what was the embassy seeing about the election? I mean, what was sort of the word?

ROBERTSON: When I got there, there was an election scheduled. It looked like Irene Sáez was the leading candidate. There was always a possibility of Carlos Andres Perez coming back, as hard as it is to believe. But in 1997 it did not look on the verge of the radical path it has taken. It's very easy to trace what happened; the bottom fell out of the oil market.

Q: Why did that have a difference?

ROBERTSON: Oh, because all Venezuela does is distribute oil money. That was the whole economy. They had all these industrial promotion plans, and all sorts of subsidies, plus a tradition of tariff protection, and most of that just turned into hustles. They had made a good start on some aspects of reform. When I got there they had a light industrial sector in one of the states that exported a billion dollars a year of finished products to Colombia; that's all gone now. It was tough to do business with Venezuela, it was a very expensive place to do business. Wages were high, productivity was low. Just to give you an example they would advertise in downtown Caracas in the sort of poorer areas, a lunch special that was like $8.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: But then the bottom fell out of the oil market and it hit $15 a barrel. The economy was hyper sensitive to that kind of thing and just started winding down sharply. And so in February, it still looked Irene Sáez; May-June, as oil prices continued to slip, it could go either way; by the fall, by this time of the year in 1998, with a December election it looked like Chavez was going to take it. With all of Chavez's behavior and all his comments about the U.S., the U.S. embassy under Maisto's leadership made a great effort to explain to all Venezuelans that this was going to be a fair election and we didn't want any hanky panky. I think a lot of the traditional parties and upper class Venezuelans assumed that the U.S. was going to step in. They didn't have to run a campaign because if it looked like Chavez would win, the U.S. would do anything to prevent that, including backing a coup or supporting some sort of election theft. And we jawboned throughout

1998, telling everybody, no, there's going to be an election and it had better be a fair election. Most of the embassy staff was out there as monitors on election day.

Q: Well was Chavez seen as radical as he became? Or how did-?

ROBERTSON: I don't think there were any real surprises. There were several views which were parallel. First, this is apparently what the country wants; you can't do anything about it. It will be worse if the election doesn't hold. Second, if he has no complaint, if there's no negative U.S. reaction to them, let's see what can happen, maybe we can work with this guy, maybe things will go along smoothly. That didn't work, as you know. We thought that he was more responsive to good treatment than he was. You know, he had a world view in which we're the bad guys and even if we did not oppose him, even if we did nothing to hurt his election campaign it didn't make any difference because he assumes we did. He talks like we did. I mean, he's pretty crazy. His coup attempt in '92, you know, it was really contemptible.

Q: Well then, what did- what were you- you went out-

ROBERTSON: I was the public affairs officer.

Q: Public affairs officer. So you were the top public diplomacy guy.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: How would you describe, when you got there, the media, the press, TV and all?

ROBERTSON: They had very high professional standards. The major newspapers and the regional newspapers, state or provincial newspapers were good. They had money, they had training, they had standards. Venezuelan television is popular throughout the Spanish speaking world, but I've also seen Venezuelan soap operas in Africa dubbed into English, with high production standards, good looking actors and actresses. There hadn't been dramatic issues in Venezuela for a long time, since the Kennedy years, since the guerrilla uprising. The oil boom in the 1970s made the country crazy with hopes and possibilities. Then things began to grind down in the 1980s up until the Chavez coup attempt in 1992. There was an alternation of two parties, mostly the social democrats with a few Christian democratic administrations for a little variety. The Caldera administration elected in 1994 was headed by the traditional Christian Democratic leader but he had put together an interesting coalition including the man who headed the Castroist guerillas in the 1960s. The parties ceased to be very ideological, and politics was all about patronage. There was no trend setting media that led the way. You could read front pages with completely different lead items. You had to read a lot of different things to find out what was going on. It wasn't fragmented, because fragmented implies people pursuing a lot of different interest…

Q: Well, I mean, were the papers, the TV stations particularly partisan or not?

ROBERTSON: They all were tied to the two parties that had been in power since 1958, but there were not major national arguments about specific issues. The media were professional, as we understand it in the U.S. No major media were pro-Chavez, though there were small leftist and rightist publications outside the mainstream. All of the media were democratic, believed in democratic, electoral politics.

Q: Well, was the handwriting pretty well on the wall when the election took place?

ROBERTSON: Yes, by the time the election came around everybody knew that Chavez was going to win. The opponent was a good candidate, the governor of the state that was such an economic success. But it took them a long time to get behind one candidate. Initially both of the traditional parties wanted to come in with their own candidates, a guaranteed loser. They had gotten very complacent during their 40 years, and just didn't take it seriously. As I said before, I think many of them thought that we would step in and do something.

Q: And I take it there was- within the embassy we were trying to say we're not going to do it.

ROBERTSON: Every embassy office made the point with our various contacts that we wanted to see a free and fair election. No discussion.

Q: No winks or nods.

ROBERTSON: No winks or nods. We were clear. And we put the embassy staff on the streets on the day of the election to back our commitment. The Carter Center was there, too. I'm trying to think how long the, I wouldn't call it "honeymoon," how long the sort of peaceful coexistence lasted and it lasted three or four months. I had gone to talk to the editor of one of the newspapers, the former Minister, Teodoro Petkoff who had been the leader of the guerrilla uprising in 1960. We were joking that he had been in politics all his life; he'd tried electoral politics, then he was a guerrilla, and then he went back to electoral politics. We joked that Petkoff has spent his whole life in politics but he was terrible; he was terrible at kissing babies, at going to local stuff. He was a brilliant executive; he was a very good minister of commerce, and frankly he was one of the reasons for the relatively bright view of the country that I mentioned during the 1997 Clinton visit. He is also a brilliant editor. And hostile to Chavez.

Anyway, I went up to talk to him, we're just talking. I walked out, and somebody asked me about our overflights of Venezuelan territory carried out routinely as part of the anti-drug traffic campaigns. Anyway, I went back to the embassy and reported that Chavez was going to revoke our overflight rights for the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) planes, the military.

Q: Yes, you might explain what that was.

ROBERTSON: This was before the famous Colombian bases. We were doing some overflights, part of the anti-drug trafficking activities, and they were military overflights, reconnaissance. It would have been about March of '99, maybe April of '99, and Chavez decided that he was going to stop that.

Q: Now, were we watching the Chavez-Colombia relationship?

ROBERTSON: Yes. Don't forget, though, that at that time the Chavez relationship with FARC, the Colombian rebel groups, was not that deep or formal. One of the sad issues when I was there was the FARC shot three Native American activists who had gone down to work with indigenous groups in Colombia. They were murdered by FARC in Venezuela. They put them down at the border with Venezuela and shot them as they crossed. We weren't at all ambivalent about FARC.

Q: FARC being the-

ROBERTSON: The Colombia guerrilla group, *Fuerzas Armadas revolucionarias de Colombia*. They were very powerful in Venezuela just because the Venezuelans were so lax. It was easy to get money in and out; it was hard to control the Venezuelan banking system because so much comes in and out and they're not terribly – not a very bureaucratic culture. And so it was always a loose banking system which FARC could manipulate. FARC collected taxes from ranchers and farmers almost all the way to Caracas. They had a strong underground presence there. There's a huge population of Colombians in Venezuela and so there was no way to sort of "spot" FARC. It wasn't something that was at the official level – the Venezuelan parties were not even mildly sympathetic - it was just the fact that Venezuelan society made it very easy for them to operate. The same probably holds true of drug traffickers. Colombia had always looked upon Venezuela as a problem, a factor in the ability of FARC to keep going. It's a guerilla force that can do banking, supplies and even R&R for troops just by getting in vehicles and crossing a border. But obviously Chavez tilted the scales at least rhetorically, initially. And this was before the spectacular reversals to FARC's fortunes. Chavez's penchant for talking too much was pretty obvious in the first six months of his government, and it was clear that he was going to provoke diplomatic tensions with Colombia.

Q: At the embassy did you find, you know, I mean your idea is of course to outreach to have, you know, free discussions everywhere; were these beginning to be shut down while you were there?

ROBERTSON: No. No. Chavez always threatened to move against the press. He hadn't done anything when we were there, and for the six months of Chavez's government that I saw we were still in a mode of peaceful coexistence. I don't think we ever left that, except we got irritated. I personally do not believe that the 2002 coup really was our affair. It didn't matter because Chavez thinks we did it, and it fits his world view. But in the first six months we could talk to pretty much anybody, even people within the Chavez government.

Q: How about the Cuban equation? When you were there, did Venezuela recognize Cuba?

ROBERTSON: Oh yes. Chavez never made it a secret that he considered himself sort of a disciple of Fidel Castro. But relations between Cuba and Venezuela are long and deep. Immigrants from the Canary Islands settled in both places so there were many family relations. Cuba was a much better educated, richer society than Venezuela, and in the early 20th century Venezuelans who could not afford New York vacationed in Havana to savor its metropolitan sophistication. A lot of anti-Castro exiles went to Venezuela and believe it or not, if you live in the United States, they became Social Democrats, which is hard for us to imagine for Cuban exiles. They're very big in business; they always had been, even before Castro there had always been a lot of Cuban businesspeople there.

There was also a very large presence of people the Cubans call "soft exiles," because they can live in Venezuela and work and go back to Cuba. Everybody talked about Chavez bringing in Cuban doctors; they were always there and as a matter of fact when I was there it was funny. Well before the election there was a minor problem in education, that Venezuelans who graduated from the public medical schools had to work for two years in a public hospitals or health services, but they couldn't find jobs because Cuban doctors were coming and taking the jobs. The jobs paid a few hundred dollars a month, a fortune for a Cuban doctor and the equivalent of Peace Corps wages for a Venezuelan.

Q: Well as a job, how did you find this? It sounds like there were all sorts of, you might say opportunities, but at the same time they weren't going anywhere.

ROBERTSON: Yes. It was perfectly open, very sophisticated, and very pleasurable in many ways. But for me it was so very different coming from Africa, especially in Ghana with a large, large bilateral aid program and a huge multilateral aid program. The U.S. embassy is a real center of influence in Ghana. In Venezuela the president of the Venezuela American Chamber of Commerce represents this huge fixed investment, hundreds of billions of dollars and he naturally tends to be a more influential figure than the American embassy. I hadn't been anywhere before where the American business community so much dwarfed the American official presence.

Q: Well, I realize it's hard to characterize but would you say the American, when you were there the American business community had an outlook or a stance towards what was happening in Venezuela?

ROBERTSON: What can I say? It was a very corrupt country, certainly one of the most corrupt countries in this hemisphere and a very expensive place to do business. Even before Chavez a lot of multinationals were moving out; Proctor & Gamble and a few others whose names escape me had big manufacturing operations which were leaving Venezuela well before Chavez was on the scene just because it was too expensive and difficult to do business there, and they would rather set up in Colombia. It's funny but

Colombia, with almost a full scale civil war was easier to do business in than Venezuela, which was just corrupt and spectacularly inefficient.

The petroleum companies assumed that they would continue to enjoy a privileged position in Venezuela, and in a way they were right. Things didn't change for them as abruptly. I don't think that there was any coordinated business lobbying going on in Washington or in Caracas trying to get the Administration to take a harsher line on Chavez. I think everybody agreed that there was nothing that could be done; we've got to see if we can live with this.

Q: Yes. What about did Brazil cross your radar and all?

ROBERTSON: You just reminded me about something funny about Venezuela. Yes, I remember Venezuela cheering on Brazil in the World Cup in 1998. That was remarkable; I'd never seen a Latin American country applaud for its neighbors, but Venezuelans are not big in international soccer. They share a border with Brazil, but not much goes over that border

Q: Well when you look at it, it looks like you're heading right off in a real wilderness.

ROBERTSON: Oh yes, yes.

Q: I mean, particularly going south, I mean, well, and I guess north too.

ROBERTSON: Actually, geographically Venezuela is spectacular. You can start in the Andes, in western Venezuela, and drive about 30 hours and be in the middle of the Amazon, the Amazon Basin. Beautiful.

Q: Well how was life there?

ROBERTSON: It was the best country I've been in for music. And I played a lot, continued with my jazz. I put together a band, we did concerts in Caracas, went to other cities and played. It's a spectacular musical culture. Oddly enough, it's a spectacular music culture but it's an open place that does not have any signature sound, like Merengue in the Dominican Republic or salsa in Puerto Rico. But their salsa bands are the greatest in the world. It's the best musical place I've ever been. Los Angeles just hired a Venezuelan conductor for its symphony, and there is a children's orchestral movement throughout the country that is remarkable.

In Venezuela, at any kind of business gathering, official gathering, people would be late, very casual in their attitudes toward the whole thing. Music was different; Music rehearsals, man, everybody's on time and everybody's paying attention. It was really interesting. There was a big recording industry, and a huge domestic market for all styles of Latino music. And at the time I thought they might beat Miami out as a musical center. Other things being equal they could have become a regional center for publishing,

recording, movies, distribution, all of that. So my fun time in Venezuela was spent with music, which was a great way to see Venezuela.

Q: Well how did you and your wife find it socially? Did you find yourselves captured by one group or not or could you mix around? How did it work?

ROBERTSON: Oh, it was, as I said, the most open country I've ever been in for race, religion, nationality and everything. We had friends from all over. Venezuelans are open and friendly, easy to get to know. We had Argentine-Venezuelan friends. An old friend of ours from Barbados, from El Salvador, married to a Colombian, who had worked for the Pan American Development Bank was in Caracas so we spent a lot of time with them. Okay, getting around was a bit difficult. Traffic was a problem and there was some risk of going out at night. It wasn't as bad as it is now. It was a spread out city and you could spend a fair amount of time in transit if you didn't know your way around.

We had one episode which turned out funny. My wife had worked at the Venezuelan American Chamber of Commerce and then she'd gone back to work in the embassy and she was working in the consular section doing visas. Now, Venezuela is a pretty easy country for visas; we had no immigration problem.

Q: Basically they came and went back.

ROBERTSON: Yes. We had no problem. But Norma got a visa recommendation for a Haitian businessman from the Venezuela American Chamber of Commerce. The head of the Venezuela American Chamber of Commerce was a Cuban, more a Miami Cuban than a Venezuelan Cuban. Norma said this is fraud because that guy would never give a visa recommendation to a black man. And she was right. So she goes to the consul and says this is fraud, we've got to check into this. Then we got a threatening phone call. I don't know who it was. We had stepped on some toes and we got a threatening phone call at home saying when our son went to school and got out and that we had better leave Venezuela. And so we had guards for a week, you know, 24 hour personal guard, but we stayed. My wife had taken the call and we reported it, the security people came over, we were discussing, deciding whether to stay or go. I said to Norma, okay, the guy who called, where was he from? What was his accent? She said he was Venezuelan. So we decided well, Venezuelan, these are laidback people, we'll stay. I said if you get a call with a Colombian accent we're on the next plane out of here. And so we had bodyguards 24 hours for a couple of weeks and then they hung around for another few weeks but we apparently hadn't crossed any big time Colombian gangsters.

Q: Well, so you were there what, about two years?

ROBERTSON: Yes, two years. We came back, we could have stayed a year longer but we decided we wanted our son to do three years in high school here.

Q: So where did you go then?

ROBERTSON: We came back here.

Q: When you left Venezuela in what, '99?

ROBERTSON: Ninety-nine.

Q: How did you- I mean, just in your own mind, whither Venezuela?

ROBERTSON: At least it's a society that can go through these kind of traumas without a big official bloodshed, although street violence is apparently out of hand now. But I mean, socialism in Venezuela doesn't mean work; it doesn't mean like, you know, gulags or the White Sea canal or anything like that. I mean, the point of Venezuelan socialism is you get a lot of money for doing no work. The point of Venezuelan socialism is the point of Venezuelan government; you get a lot of oil money, you can give your friends a lot and you can even give your enemies some. Even Juan Vicente Gomez, a man who had no compunction about hanging student leaders up on meat hooks, found it was generally cheaper and more pleasant to buy your enemies off than to kill them.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: And some things in Caracas were funny. I thought that the posh part of town with the fancy restaurants and art galleries would have some trouble but, no, the number of fancy restaurants has doubled. Expensive art galleries continue to flourish. There had been a lot of social mobility and Venezuela was corrupt but it was open. You didn't have to be in there for 200 years to get your money. Everybody could play. I remember a friend of mine, a superb piano player who's now in Vancouver. He came back from studying at Manhattan School of Music and then went to Berklee, Boston, jazz Berklee; he said when he came back, his parents had friends in the ruling party, Accion Democratica, and so somebody just offered him an exclusive right to import Blue Note Records, the prominent jazz record label. He says, you know, it was just sort of friendly, a nice gesture towards a friend's kid, no big deal, no strings – just "How'd you like a monopoly?" And they had controlled imports and all these licenses, what the Indians called the import license raj. These were generous people; everybody gets to play.

And Chavez is Venezuelan, and I don't think he is likely to do anything new in Venezuela. What concerns me is Chavez has a lot of Cubans working in security. I don't think the Venezuelans are likely to shed a lot of blood when it comes time for Chavez to go, but the Cubans might.

Q: Yes. Well the Cuban security service, along with the East German security service and the Czech security service, talking about Cold War times, were the backbone of a lot of these regimes because they were nastier and more efficient than the local people.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And that's certainly true in Venezuela today. Everything is going more or less as predicted – all the indicators in Venezuela are bad.

Q: Well there is the thought of don't, in a way don't confront; I mean, maybe there's not much we can do but just sort of let Chavez run his course. Does that make sense?

ROBERTSON: Yes. That was certainly the policy and the practice when he was elected, and despite the extremely nasty rhetoric during the Bush years nothing much changed there. I mean, he didn't do anything completely out of line. He wasn't any harder on the American oil companies with Bush than he was with Clinton.

I'm of an age to remember the overthrow of Allende in Chile. I was talking about it with a Chilean exile in Caracas, an Allende supporter who had to leave Chile in 1973 and went to Caracas. He said, years from the events, that it was a terrible government, a disaster for Chile, and the story that went down, the story in everybody's mind is that the U.S. ganged up on the socialist government and overthrew it. He said and it didn't happen like that, but in any case Allende would have been voted out and his government relegated to history as a dismal failure, a joke. Instead, by getting involved with Pinochet, we saved Latin American socialism from paying any moral or historical debt for a real disaster. And this time everybody can see Chavez leading his country. I mean, Oliver Stone has just made a movie about him; God, what an embarrassment.

Q: Oliver Stone being a, sort of a left wing director who wrote a movie about sort of the Kennedy assassination, which had somehow a New Orleans kind- I mean, it didn't make any sense but this is the sort of thing he does.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And he just presented that at the Cannes Film Festival this summer. I mean, Chavez has a lot of money to give away; as long as oil prices stay up he's okay. There's no other sector in the Venezuelan economy now. I mean, they're importing everything. They finished off agriculture and they still have some cocoa and some other things but almost everything else in Venezuela has collapsed; it's just government now, taking over.

Q: Alright, well '99, you're back to Washington.

ROBERTSON: Yes.

Q: What did you do?

ROBERTSON: This was the time of consolidation. USIA went into the Department of State so I spent I spent some time at the Corporate Council of Africa, just on assignment waiting for my position to open up in the Office of Public Diplomacy for Africa, where the director was Robin Sanders, now the ambassador to Nigeria. And so for the remaining three years of my career I worked in Washington in the Bureau of African Affairs in the Department of State.

Q: All right. What were you doing?

ROBERTSON: Deputy director, which meant mostly resources and personnel. With the transition, the move into the Department of State officially, there were a lot of money issues to sort out, administrative issues, learning a new personnel system. Staffing, staffing was very hard. This is a time when you had this huge shortage of mid-level officers and so almost every embassy had an ambassador, a DCM and a bunch of first tour people in every mission in Africa. I went back to Nigeria for the Clinton visit in August of 2000.

What else did we do, what were the other big issues? AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunity Act; we did a lot of work, public campaigning, in Africa and working in the U.S. to promote that.

Q: What was that?

ROBERTSON: That was a tariff benefit scheme to promote African exports.

Q: So almost like a free trade agreement?

ROBERTSON: Yes. Most goods produced in Africa come in duty free. With everybody joining the WTO (World Trade Organization) there were issues around textiles; all textile tariffs were supposed to disappear. I guess they didn't. Part of the idea actually of AGOA was somebody looked at what had happened in Lesotho. We had textile quotas at the time, and China had sold us all the textiles allowed, so the Chinese opened up a factory in Lesotho, an independent country in the middle of South Africa, so the Chinese could export textiles with a Lesotho quota. And somebody thought, gosh, this could be good for the whole continent, draw investment in and people would build factories in Africa to sell to the U.S.

Q: Basically you get around our tariffs.

ROBERTSON: Around our quotas, yes..

Q: Well, I mean, but that would take a stroke of a pen to stop that nonsense.

ROBERTSON: It didn't happen and Africa has posed no threat to our national industries.

Q: Well textiles has sort of one away anyway, almost.

ROBERTSON: Yes, but the textile issues are far beyond the capacity of Africa to affect. In any case, I think the timing was bad. In 2000 they had the tech bubble burst and for a variety of reasons during the subsequent years there was almost no U.S. investment anywhere; everybody was just buying mortgage bonds.

Q: Did you find, I mean, you were in Washington when sort of the USIA-State Department merger, i.e., a real administrative earthquake hit. How did this work from

your point of view as far as staffing African countries to get the right people who knew what they were doing?

ROBERTSON: USIA was a much smaller agency and it had also been a very well run agency. Actually, we got a bunch of awards. You remember all that Clinton reinventing government stuff?

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: I mean, it was not pleasant being a PAO because every year I'd have to cut back and you'd have reduced programs and you'd fight to keep staff or reassign staff. I mean, I got away without actually terminating anybody but it was tough – but it was also useful. We knew where the money was. Also in USIA we did all of our own administrative stuff. I mean, we did the housing, we did the building maintenance, we did the budgets. We didn't have admin, FBO; we did everything ourselves so we knew how the money moved. And on various Washington tours I've been through the whole budget cycle where you're working in one fiscal year doing the final discussions for the next fiscal year and putting in the plans for two years in advance. It was about a billion dollar agency at that time; we really knew where the money was and how it moved. State Department was more fragmented, I found, and this became clear in our merger discussions. In USIA we had a normal personnel system. We had so many officers, so many jobs plus 10 percent for training, 10 percent for leave. And you know, you had to be in a job. I mean, there wasn't such a thing as walking the corridors for very long. And you were available for worldwide assignment because there were 1,000 officers and 1,000 jobs and you had to have one of them.

When I was in Nigeria two people were forced out of the Foreign Service because they were assigned to Nigeria and they wouldn't go. And there was no discussion. State Department is different because it's big, it's amorphous and there's all sorts of jobs that aren't filled. I mean, there's no such thing as a forced assignment because there's always an empty job in Washington. It's just not a tight system and anybody can manipulate it.

We got some money from AID while I was working there to do AGOA promotions. Something like 2001 and somebody in B&F (budget and fiscal) said that we couldn't have the money, it was multiyear money and we don't take multiyear money. Well, show me the rule we said. Our admin or B&F guys were our colleagues, not our controllers, and you don't expect your own team to mess up your program. We all worked next to one another, and to run into this sort of bureaucratic nonsense – you can't do this. It should be like talking to your lawyer, how do we do this? Not, you can't do this. And it took some adjustment.

Robin Sanders was a State Department officer, and had spent a long time in Washington at NSC (National Security Council) and in State and on the Hill. One part of her was very traditional State Department, and she would say "we're a policy agency." And I would say to her, but if you don't have boots on the ground or money who gives a shit what your policy is? But you know, we had this tension because the senior State Department

officers were used to reporting and analyzing, not influencing events, and we were there to influence events.

Q: Yes, I mean, looking at this as a State Department officer coming out of the consular branch, I've always been impressed by what- how much long-term real clout our public affairs, particularly in exchange programs and cultural programs, how much they really do effect policy over the long run by developing good ties to foreigners, good feelings toward the United States and all as oppose to the political officers who, you know, danced around the political process. But really policies often develop by people and particularly now we're moving into a completely different age of the Internet and connections which are kind of amorphous but very important as far as working on public opinion.

Were you feeling the impact of the Internet within Africa, not just Internet but cell phones? I mean, that whole process, which was just getting started while you were there.

ROBERTSON: When I, let's see, when I left Ghana in '97 they had cell phones, were just beginning to get them. As a matter of fact I was hoping to spend my retirement working in telecom in Ghana but my minister pal there died. We had the beginnings of Internet and of course by the time I retired Internet was in every office. You know, we used to have guys in USIS whose job it was to read the newspapers and either translate them or type them into cable format and send the leads, the front page that affected U.S. interests. Even though by 2000 anybody could sit in their office and get the newspapers from Nigeria on the Internet, there were people who still wanted that damn cable written. In many countries that didn't have big media we would be sources of foreign news; they didn't have Washington correspondents. That changed, which is good. What we are offering people had to be more, you could no longer just offer international news for the day, but sitting down and talking to them, see what they really need, what can we really do, what are the issues that we can work on together. I missed most of that in the field.

Q: Yes, because it was just really coming online, you might say, by the time you left.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And by the time I left, I remember we had the Clinton visit, the Nigerians very proudly, the Nigerian government, very proudly handed over 50 cell phones to the White House advance teams. And that was all you could get. I mean, the Nigerians are very proud of this and the White House went along with it, but they weren't used to cell phone rationing.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: It was a different world. Of course, Voice of America split off totally separate at the time of the integration with State so I no longer had reason to follow the Washington media offices that closely. We went through a lot of this, you know, with this reinventing government; what is our role, what do we offer, and so as the process worked through, as people got more and more access, we were always shifting with them And I

still remember, you know, the thrill of getting a four page condensation of The New York Times every morning in Ghana. That was a big deal.

Q: Yes.

ROBERTSON: Still waiting for the Herald Tribune.

Q: I've been interviewing Claudia Anyaso and Claudia, and I was sort of being a bit disparaging about Bush II and his administration and she caught me up short and said you know, Africa-wise, Bush really put a lot of resources into Africa, more than some of the others. Did you feel that?

ROBERTSON: Actually I remember that there was a big AGOA meeting opportunity at meetings scheduled for like September 28, 2001, in Washington, and the White House would have agreed to hold it but the Africans felt it would be improper so we postponed it. But at that time there was still there was still, yes, interest in Africa. A lot of money went into AIDS prevention but I don't think resource levels tell all the story, not only AIDS prevention but retroviral provision and stuff like that.

I very much enjoyed working with Walter Kansteiner, who was the assistant secretary for African affairs. I retired in 2002; it was before Iraq.

Q: You know, when you're looking back on it there's really before September 11, 2001, and after, with the Bush Administration. I mean, it was a complete; it wasn't a change of attitude, it was just sort of a focus on the Middle East and the Iraq War and all that, to the detriment of everything else, I guess.

ROBERTSON: Yes. And by the summer of 2002 it was clear that we were going to be invading Iraq and all attention was being focused on that.

Q: So you retired 2002. So what have you been up to since?

ROBERTSON: I had a very good friend in Ghana who was a member of parliament there, a wonderful guy, opposed to Rawlings. Their people won the election in December of 2000 so they go back to Ghana. I had meanwhile become interested in telecommunications because I thought ah, cell phones, Internet, this can really be big stuff. I had met some people here that I was talking to about possible African telecommunications investments. My friend became deputy minister of communications. I began looking for potential investors in Ghana after I retired, looking for a telecom license. I had worked on AGOA, I knew something about business. You'll appreciate that I sat down with my friend and told him, look, no way I can give you money for a license; no way I can give you cash. See, that was the norm. I said but let's be sophisticated; we would never, in America, we would never give money to a sitting politician. After they retire is when they get their money and then they get on the board of directors and all this kind of stuff. I said, John, you're not getting any cash in advance; we'll go to jail. I said,

we'll take care of you when you retire. And we would have gotten him but he was unfortunately killed in a car accident just after I retired, just a few months after I retired.

Q: Ooo.

ROBERTSON: I went back for the funeral but, I mean, it's politics. After the funeral was over and after they won the bye election, the party wasn't going to do anything, the party in government wasn't going to do anything more for me. And so then I spent some time looking for projects in Nigeria. I spent most of my time getting work in Nigeria, spending time in Nigeria. I get little jobs. There's enough money in Nigeria so I can get $1,000 a month and a car and a house to take care of stuff for people. And it's an open enough place where it's fun. People will hire me in security or construction or anything. In a more developed economy I wouldn't have any chance like that.

Q: Yes. Okay, well then, I guess we'll call it quits.

ROBERTSON: Okay.

End of interview