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

AMBASSADOR WILBERT LEMELLE

Interviewed by: Richard Jackson
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is an oral history interview with Ambassador Wilbert LeMelle conducted in the offices of the Phelps-Stokes Fund in New York City on December 3, 1998 by Richard Jackson. Mr. Ambassador, could you tell us a little bit about your early life, education, and how you happened to develop the interest that you've had in foreign affairs?

LEMELLE: Yes, and thanks very much for the opportunity to participate in the oral history project. I was born in southwest Louisiana in a small town called New Iberia, Louisiana. I was one of eight children to Therese and Eloi LeMelle. I grew up there. My first years of schooling were spent at St. Edwards Elementary School. After the seventh grade, I went off to study for the catholic priesthood at a seminary called St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. This was the only minor seminary in the United States in the 1940s which was open to Black Americans to study for the catholic priesthood. The seminary was founded in 1928 by the Divine Word Fathers, the *Societas Verbi Divini*, which was a German order of Catholic priests that was founded in 1875 in Steyl, Holland. It was a missionary order that had come to the United States in 1890. One of their goals was to attract African-Americans to the catholic priesthood. So, at age 12, I went off to study there. I remained in the seminary for 12 years. The normal period of study was 14 years. The study program was based on the German gymnasium, followed by the traditional spiritual formation of Catholic priests with philosophical and theological studies during the last six years. I left the seminary in 1956 and did not

become a priest. When I left, I had two degrees, a bachelor of arts in medieval history and a master of arts in philosophy, with a concentration in legal philosophy. My dissertation, in fact, was on the juristic philosophy of Oliver Wendell Holmes in the light of Thomistic natural law philosophy.

After leaving the seminary in 1956, I obtained a job as an assistant professor of history at Grambling State University back in Louisiana and started an academic career. After one year, I was drafted into the Army. I served two years. I returned to Grambling to teach for an additional two years. In 1961, I went off to the University of Denver Graduate School of International Studies to pursue a Ph.D. in political science/international relations. I graduated with my doctorate in August of 1963 after two years at the University of Denver and took a job at Boston University in the Department of Government as an assistant professor and research associate in the African Studies Program. As you know, Boston University's program was one of the premier African Studies programs in the country. I worked there for a couple of years and was invited then to join the Ford Foundation in February 1965. I went on from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to New York and worked at the Ford Foundation, where I started off as a program officer responsible for West Africa. Following some five years in New York, I was asked to become Ford's Deputy Representative for East and Southern Africa, based in Kenya, where my family and I spent three years. That was followed by four years in North Africa, where I was responsible for the development program in the Maghreb, residing with my family in Tunis, with offices in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia for the Ford Foundation.

Upon my return to New York in November of 1976, I went back to the Ford Foundation headquarters and became the Deputy Director of the Middle East and Africa Program. It was while I was serving in this capacity that President Carter asked me to be Ambassador to Kenya and concurrently to the Seychelles.

Q: That was a program of many millions of dollars of assistance?

LEMELLE: Yes. The Ford Foundation was spending something like $150 million dollars in its international program alone at that time. The total budget of Ford's annual budget expenditure for operations and programs was in the neighborhood of $300 million. McGeorge Bundy at that time was the president of the Ford and believed that the funds of the Foundation were meant to be spent. Whenever he saw a real problem that he thought the Ford Foundation had the resources and people who could do some good about them, he recommenced to the trustees that we should get involved. As you know, his tenure at Ford was somewhat controversial. Eventually, it led Henry Ford, Jr. to quit the board in protest against some of the social reforms the Ford Foundation became involved in, particularly the civil rights movement in this country. Our development program in some areas such as the population field in the newly emerging independent countries, in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, also spurred some controversy. It was a very heady time at Ford under the leadership of McGeorge Bundy. We worked very closely with the new governments on their economic development problems. This covered population, agricultural development, staff development, higher education, university development, and a whole range of training and professional development activities. In a

number of countries our efforts contributed to the training and development of the first cadres of leadership, particularly in the African countries and also in some Asian and Latin American countries as well.

Q: Did that tend to be education on the spot or bringing people to the United States?

LEMELLE: It included both. We helped to build many of the universities and professional training institutions in the developing world at that time. My tours in Africa and in the New York office involved me directly in the establishment and expansion of a large number of universities on the African continent, beginning with expansion of Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone right down the west coast of Africa down to Zaire on to Central Africa and also East Africa. My colleagues in the Middle East side were equally involved in the development of universities like the University of Cairo, the University of Jordan, the Middle East Technical University and others which were modernizing and expanding during this period. I think there was hardly a university that we didn't find something there that we didn't think that we could help or were attracted to try and assist.

At the same time, we also had a major program of bringing to the United States young people who were identified as potential faculty members, potential administrators, potential entrepreneurs, for professional training and advanced degrees who were expected to return to Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America.

Q: To make a commitment to go back.

LEMELLE: That's right, to make a commitment to go back. There was a lot of debate during those early years whether you should bond students. On the one hand, many of us who were university types were reluctant to want to bond individuals to return. When you educate someone, you want to make them as free as possible. On the other hand, we were aware of the problem of the brain drain, as it was then called which continues to be an issue today. So, there was a constant review of what we should do and how we should do in the training of potential leaders from the developing countries here in the United States.

Q: Were there complementarities in coordination with the U.S. aid program and AID? How did that relationship work out in the Maghreb or Africa where you were?

LEMELLE: It worked out quite well. From the very beginning, there was collaboration, consultation, and cooperation between Ford and other international donor agencies such as USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development], USIA [U.S. Information Agency], the Agriculture Department, and most other agencies of the U.S. government that had development interests. There were projects in which we put up some resources from Ford and USAID would complement that. They also took the lead on other projects and we came in to make those projects whole.

There was one particular project that I had a special role in mounting which is a very

good example of cooperation between the foundation and public institutions. It's called the CIGAR Group, the International Consultative Group on Agricultural Research, which was actually started by Ford and Rockefeller in the mid-'60s. I was representing the Ford Foundation Africa Program on the small planning committee. What we did was to use the model of the International Wheat and Maize Improvement Center in Mexico, which the Rockefeller Foundation had established beginning in 1948 to improve the quality of wheat and maize or corn production in Mexico. We used that model to design an international network of agricultural research centers. It all began very small. The project that I was responsible for working on was the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Ibadan, Nigeria. The idea was that we would assist the development of food security and agricultural development in the least developed countries by developing this network of major research centers which would feed information, data, and resources and assist the national research centers in the developing areas. Out of that project, which began with the few centers like Los Banjos in the Philippines, the International Rice Research Center at Los Banos in the Phillippines, ICRISAT (Indian Center for Research in the Semi-arid Tropics), in India, and Ilrad in Kenya and a number of others... there are about 14-15 centers today. The consortium is no longer funded by the Ford Foundation or the Rockefeller Foundation and USAID alone. It is now funded through the World Bank by many international and bilateral aid organizations. I understand that the annual budget is somewhere in the neighborhood of $300 million. But it has done tremendously good work. Norm Borlaug was certainly one of the inspirations for that with his work in the Green Revolution in India, which Ford, Rockefeller, and others, USAID included, supported. So, there was collaboration and cooperation.

In one area, which I think is quite interesting, the population area, we were there before AID because there was a prohibition until the late 1960s against AID becoming involved in population programs. So, we at Rockefeller, the Population Council and the Population Program at Ford, which was a major component of our international program, were very much involved in helping developing countries to understand their population growth and development, to understand the demographic issues, the population and economic issues, and the maternal and child healthcare issues related to population.

Q: You've certainly painted a picture of government-NGO [non-governmental organization] close cooperation, but as AID changed philosophy and moved between infrastructure and trickle down and the various theories, there were a lot of stops and starts. Working in Ford, you must have had a somewhat different theory of development and you must have perhaps looked on this as longer term and maybe cutting edge, leading the way for AID. I don't know. How was the thinking?

LEMELLE: That is a very interesting question. There were stops and starts. I might say that when I was in Ford, I did have something of a feeling that we were on the cutting edge and government was not on the cutting edge. When I served as our United States ambassador to Kenya and concurrently to the Republic of Seychelles, my view changed. In fact, the extent of our AID program was such that it, in fact, dwarfed what we had been doing in the Ford Foundation and what other organizations were pursuing in their development efforts. Over the years, after that experience, I began to try and develop a

more balanced view on cooperation. It all led me after many years to take a more realistic view about development, what you are able to do and how you should go about doing it. In the process I have developed a more balanced position on the role of NGOs and the role of government: that both are needed, both can play an important and useful role, and that we have to find ways in which both can exercise their responsibilities and pursue the goals they have established for themselves.

Q: With this background, you were a logical choice for Kenya and Seychelles. This was the beginning of the Carter presidency. How did that all come about?

LEMELLE: Interestingly, as I mentioned earlier, I had just returned home to New York at the end of 1976 from my post as Representative for the Maghreb to our New York office at Ford. In fact, when I received the call on a Saturday morning in February, from then Secretary of State Vance, that President Carter had asked me to serve as ambassador to Kenya and Seychelles, my sea freight from the Maghreb had not yet arrived back in New York. So, we were just getting resettled in New York. I was back in our New York office at Ford. I was notified that I along with 10-12 other individuals were recommended by the Harriman Commission to President Carter as the first group of ambassadors. Governor Harriman had been asked by President Carter to chair a commission to select individuals for 12 or so key posts. It was in that commission that my name surfaced and the recommendation was made for me to serve as a U.S. ambassador to Kenya and Seychelles. So, that's the origin of the nomination. It was very interesting because what Secretary Vance did was to invite all of us (that is, this group that was nominated by the Harriman Commission) to spend three days in May in Washington for us to become acquainted and also to be briefed and receive an orientation on our assignments. It was a very good group. Some of the people you know well. Mike Mansfield was going to Japan. Bob Goheen was on his way to India. Anne Cox Chambers of the communications publishing family out of Atlanta, was going to Brussels. Kingman Brewster was nominated to the Court of St. James. So we had a very interesting group and got to know one another and in many instances have stayed in touch. And it's been a lifelong kind of camaraderie between us.

Q: You had some time left in the Africa Bureau getting ready. Dick Moose was then head of it. David Newsom was under secretary, having been earlier assistant secretary.

LEMELLE: That's right. I was very happy to work with Dave. Dick Moose was the assistant secretary for African Affairs. Another very good friend who was ambassador in Tunis, Tunisia when I was heading up the Ford Foundation programs for the Maghreb was Ambassador Talcott Seelye. I remember calling on him. We had developed a good friendship while I was in Tunisia and he was ambassador there. I saw a number of other friends whom I had met in my work overseas who were Foreign Service officers or ambassadors and the like. So, it was a warm reception. Everyone tried to be helpful. I appreciated that very much.

Q: This group was obviously on a fast track through the Senate. No problems there with confirmation.

LEMELLE: No. We did not have any problems. No one of the group encountered any real problems. It was very interesting that Senator Starkman was heading the committee in the Senate when I went before the Foreign Relations Committee. He was very forthcoming in his questions. The other members were as well. Senator Pell was on the committee and was always a gracious man. He was also very helpful and asked some supportive questions. So, that went quite well.

Q: So you got back to Nairobi. That was a homecoming. You knew the place well, but you were looking at it with different eyes as ambassador.

LEMELLE: That's right. As I mentioned earlier, I was returning to Nairobi after having served three years as the Ford Foundation Deputy Representative for East and Southern Africa. We had become friends with many of the Kenyan authorities. People we had worked with in higher education and the various ministries in which Ford Foundation had projects; so we knew a number of people. In fact, I had been to events to which President Kenyatta had invited me and my family, so we knew the First Family. It was a real homecoming. There was a huge crowd of people at the airport when I came in. We were warmly welcomed. With me in Kenya was my wife Yvonne, our daughter Patrice and our three sons, Wilbert, Jr., Gerald and Edward. Throughout our stay in Kenya, we were successful in furthering good relations with Kenya, building on the knowledge, interests and experience we had acquired during my earlier period there.

Q: Kenyatta was still on the scene.

LEMELLE: Yes. His health was failing. It was deteriorating. But he was on the scene. In fact, when I presented my credentials to him, we had a few chuckles. I told him in Swahili that I came not as a foreigner, not as a "mgeni," but as a "rafiki" to Kenya. So I opened my remarks to him in Swahili, which he very much appreciated. We ended up seeing one another on a number of occasions subsequent to the presentation of the credentials when our families got together and the children had an opportunity to play and become friends.

Q: President Kenyatta passed on when?

LEMELLE: In August of 1978.

Q: So you were there.

LEMELLE: Yes, I was there during the transition, which if you recall, was an event that many people anticipated. There was a large question mark over what might happen when the "Mzee passed," as the Swahili people would say. The fact is that nothing happened, but what should have happened, and that was that we had a very correct, constitutional transition from Kenyatta to the assumption of the presidency by acting president Daniel arap Moi, the current president of Kenya today. Moi was Kenyatta's vice president. The procedures that had been provided by the constitution for his being sworn in as the

interim president and the procedures for the official confirmation of the new president of Kenya were followed to the letter of the law. I was very happy about that and did everything that I thought was necessary to make sure that the procedures and the process would be carried out in accordance with the constitution of the country.

Q: You must have had a major U.S. delegation to the funeral.

LEMELLE: Yes, we did. We did have some very notable Americans in attendance. Thurgood Marshall led the delegation. He was a member of the Supreme Court at that time. Former Ambassador Andrew Young was in the delegation. We had the late Congressman Charles Diggs, who had done so much for Africa-U.S. relations when he chaired the subcommittee in the House on Africa. We also had any number of other important dignitaries from the United States who came and participated in the funeral of President Kenyatta.

It was a sad day for Kenyans and those of us who felt close to the Kenyan people, but we were happy in that this was a transition which was impeccably pursued in accordance with the law of the land.

Q: You had followed Tony Marshall.

LEMELLE: Yes. Ambassador Marshall preceded me and had done an excellent job in Kenya. He was well-regarded by the people that I came in contact with that knew him. I followed him. He had departed a month or so before I arrived. I arrived just in time to celebrate the Fourth of July at the Embassy, which was quite interesting. This was the first time that I would preside over our national day celebration. Everyone was very helpful. We had a great time both at the residence and at the celebration.

Q: Still, in the transition from a period of a republican presidency to the democrats under Carter, there must have been significant policy changes. How did that work itself out in the case of Kenya?

LEMELLE: In the case of Kenya, I think that what was happening in Washington was very good for us. One, Kenya, as you know, was and considered itself a friend of the United States during the years of President Kenyatta. Both President Kenyatta and President Daniel arap Moi always reinforced this that we were friendly countries. They expressed to me their admiration for the United States and particularly their gratitude for the special assistance the United States had provided from Kenya for Kenya from the very beginning. You will remember the so-called "Kenya airlift," which was not a world-shaking phenomenon, but this effort to bring several plane loads of young Kenyans to study in the United States in order to move as fast as possible with the development of administrative personnel and begin to develop the Kenyan leadership, is still regarded in the minds of older Kenyans as a singular gesture if generosity in the relationship between the United States and Kenya.

On the policy side, Kenya was trying very hard to understand and to embrace the spirit

and basic principles of governance that have characterized the philosophy of democratic government in the United States. Obviously, there was during the Kenyatta period a kind of clash of two systems. On the one hand, Kenyatta was a chief. He was an Mzee, an elder, a leader, an absolutist as it were. On the other hand, we were looking for openness, for transparency, and for participatory government. There was this constant effort of trying to get both sides to understand the values and attitudes of their side. The result was that we sought to constantly remind the government of Kenya that we believed in participatory democracy, that every man and woman should have the vote, that government was accountable to the governed, that there should be an independent judiciary, that the military should be responsive to the civilian government, that politicians should be responsible to the people, and that military dictatorship was not a form of government we felt was in the best interests of the people of a modern state. So, all of these ideas we were promoting through our public education program, our USIS activities, personal contacts; whatever we did, we were trying to encourage those values. That was very important when one looks back today and sees how important the concept of human rights is today. It is something which every country has to deal with and accept that there are penalties for the violation of basic human rights, of fundamental political rights, and the other rights that are becoming part of the international consensus of people's rights. You will recall that a hallmark of the early years of the Carter administration was President Carter's emphasis on human rights. This was particularly true after they were enunciated in, I think, the address by Secretary of State Vance at Notre Dame University. That was a very important speech made on human rights. I personally took that as something that was fundamental to what I wanted to do while serving as ambassador - not that I was going to ram these notions down the throats of my Kenyan friends and colleagues, but that I was going to encourage the examination and acceptance of the basic tenants of democratic governance. I very much appreciated the leadership that President Carter gave us. It was ready-made for what I certainly felt was an important part of what was happening during that time in Kenya.

Q: One thinks of the final years of the Kenyatta period as one of some things being out of control, reports of corruption frequently centered around the family and Mrs. Kenyatta. There were some human rights abuses. Did you see a change in that as Moi came in?

LEMELLE: Yes, I did. This is why it's very paradoxical that in the more recent past, Moi and his reputation have been tarnished and he has become controversial. I'll give you a telling example. I had met Vice President Moi when President Kenyatta was ill. I called on him, I think, two or three times for one reason or another, but certainly to become better acquainted with him. So we knew one another and our relationship became friendly. He has a great smile. There are a lot of things that we were able to smile and talk about. I remember very well the warmth in which he welcomed me to his office and the relationship that was budding. When Moi became president, he and I met several times during the transition period when I was conveying to him our continued desire to support the Kenyan government and to support the constitutional transition, which we were encouraging. I also carried messages from President Carter and from Secretary of State Vance to President Moi. One of the things I had told President Moi was that as a friendly country and as someone who had a very personal interest in the progressive

development of Kenya, I felt that the problems of human rights, particularly the detentions without trial that had occurred in the last several months preceding the death of President Kenyatta were in conflict with constitutional guarantees in Kenya and that there was no basis for this and that he had an opportunity to start his administration without these kinds of difficulties. We talked about it on several occasions. He indicated to me regarding this and certain other matters that had occurred (one I would like to talk about later: the purchase of armaments) and he said, "That did not happen on my watch. I did not do that. I was not responsible for the detention of the 23 so-called political prisoners that were in Kenya's jails." So, we talked about this on several occasions. What happened, which was very interesting, was that on the morning of the national holiday, October 20, he told me before the ceremonies in a personal call that I would be happy to know that he was going to announce the release of all political detainees. In fact, they were released so that when Moi became effectively the president of Kenya, he took the bold step of releasing all political detainees. In the beginning of his administration, he did do this. I congratulated him. There was opposition to this. Certainly the attorney general, Charles Njonjo, was not for this. I am not sure, from what he told me, that he had consulted fully with the attorney general about the release of the political prisoners. But the jails were clear of political prisoners in the beginning of Moi's tenure as president. During the months that followed, certainly during my time in Kenya, we continued to work on the question of transparency, the question of arbitrary decision-making in which from time to time one would hear of police detaining some political opponent or some other controversial incident. I had the opportunity not only with President Moi, but also with other senior members of the government and of the parliament to encourage good governance. As I said, I felt accepted enough by the Kenyan power elite that I could be candid and open about these matters. I never did get a rebuff indicating that this was beyond what I should be doing. I never thought to try and dictate my ideas to the Kenyan government.

I don't accept that approach. I don't think it's necessary and I don't think that you get much by challenging political leaders in their country particularly where it is unnecessary. If one has a situation in which this or that particular leader or leadership is uncommunicative and keeps you at bay and is very autocratic and authoritarian in doing what they are about, I think one can find oneself in a position that could be confrontational; but even so, as a diplomat, I feel that there is a way or several ways in which to try and approach these things. I never on any of the issues on which there was some contention with the Kenyans or with the Seychellois - like Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda- that I had to go public and make something of a public fight in order to make the point. I think we were quite successful on those issues about which we had different views.

Q: Do you think some of the earlier human rights abuses were along tribal lines and that Moi, being from a very small tribe, the Kalengin, was perhaps in a particular position to deal with that?

LEMELLE: I think that the fact that he was from the Kalengin tribe, a small tribe in Kenya, was a mark of President Kenyatta's astuteness. There was very little controversy

over Moi as vice president. Everyone accepted him. Most people felt that he was innocuous, in a way, that he did not represent a large group interest, that he would try to compromise between the various large factions and tribal factions in the country. If one compares this with what we saw transpire in other African countries when the head of state was from the largest or the dominant tribe and the next in line, the vice president, was from the next largest or next dominant group, that was a successful strategy that President Kenyatta pursued in asking Moi to serve as the vice president. So, I do believe that there was some wisdom in that choice.

Q: You mentioned you wanted to come back to arms sales. Could you talk a little bit about that and maybe some of the other particular issues in the bilateral relationship that were major ones?

LEMELLE: Yes. One of the developments in Kenya that I found out about after Moi assumed the presidency was that Kenya, during the Kenyatta period, had contracted with the British to buy some 80 Vickers main battle tanks. This was something which I felt I needed to look into a little more to try and understand why Kenya was buying 80 tanks when I didn't see on the horizon any tank battles that might occur in East Africa, nor did I see Kenya preparing to receive 80 tanks, and with the continuing strain on the resources of the country and the uncertainty of basic food in the country and the need to purchase basic food grains from overseas, that Kenya should be spending what was, in effect, $250 million on 80 tanks. So, I had my economic counselor do an analysis of that transaction. He did. An example of what I felt a friendly country should do followed: I called to State House to arrange for a meeting with President Moi. I said that there was something I wanted to talk to him about and he kindly arranged for me to come over. I brought the analysis that we had done on this transaction. I laid out for him how long it would be that Kenya would by paying off this money, what it would mean in terms of what he would not be able to do in terms of national development priorities that were yet unfunded or underfunded. I said to him, "Look, Mr. President, whatever you can do, and I'm speaking to you as a friend from a friendly country, you should try to do whatever you can to cut back on this. This is going to be ultimately a big waste and could present you with very serious problems in terms of your basic needs in the country as you look towards the future." We had a very wonderful conversation. Here again, as he told me on a number of occasions, "Well, Mr. Ambassador, you know, I am not responsible for having done that." I remember that perfectly. He was smiling at me, saying, "I am not the one who got us into this particular contract, but we are going to look at this." Interestingly, I can't tell you today what the final outcome was, but I happened to be down in Mombasa when the first 12 tanks arrived. I went down to see them. They were on flatcars to be brought up to Nairobi. Our analysis was such that I was able to tell President Moi that maintaining and running these tanks would cost $17 a mile for the Kenyan government. I said, "If you saw the need that your national sovereignty was so threatened that it would put you in need of tanks, I would be the first to say that you have a justification for doing that to protect national sovereignty. I just don't see it." He was very appreciative of this. I think that meeting really sowed the close relationship I had with Daniel arap Moi. This wasn't something that I was instructed to talk to him about, but it seemed to me that if we were working ourselves to the bone trying to get Kenya to be a success story in terms of

development, increasing the number of young children going to schools, increasing the number of schools, increasing the number of kids in the technical schools, increasing food production, increasing manpower at the higher level in the university sector, and doing everything possible to promote peace and stability in Kenya, that it behooved us to take notice of these things which were completely wasteful.

Just recently, I had occasion not to speak about this, but to recall that Kenya has not fought a traditional war during these many years. So, for about 20 years, if they purchased all of those 80 tanks, it's been a complete drain on their limited resources.

Q: Had the previous administration been selling or trying to sell them fighter aircraft?

LEMELLE: That's right. We did. The Kenyans had purchased their first fighter aircraft from the British, the Hawker aircraft. Those discussions about modernizing the Kenya Air Force and all had begun before I got to Kenya. In fact, during my tenure the Air Force did take delivery of six F-1Es, the Northrop fighter aircraft. A detachment of U.S. Air Force officers was assigned to Kenya to help train the Kenyan Air Force. What happened then was that the Hawkers that the Kenyans had become back-up in the Air Force. There were only six and two were lost in crashes. The Hawkers were aging. There was no feeling in the Kenyan Air Force that they should continue with an aircraft that had been passed by already in terms of its maneuverability and its capability. They felt very strongly that the purchase of the F-1E was a modernization of the Air Force. That did occur. The six aircrafts were delivered during my period at the embassy.

Q: You mentioned your economic counselor who did some analysis. What kind of a staff overall did you inherit? Did they meet your needs? Did you eventually replace them with your own people? Did you have a deputy you could rely on?

LEMELLE: Looking back, I think that we had a very good staff at the embassy. I selected John Blaine as my deputy chief of mission. John was a seasoned Foreign Service officer and also an Africa hand. He had served in Chad and Somalia. He had served also in two other posts and was very capable in terms of the skills. He had good skills and was, I think, a very sober person in making judgments. I interviewed five or six people before leaving Washington. I was happy at the choice that I made in asking John Blaine to serve with me. I think that we worked well together and that he was always solicitous of the priorities that I established at the embassy and worked for us to achieve the goals that we had set for ourselves.

I have a story to tell about the staff which, I think, reflects my style of management and what we were able to accomplish. When I got to Kenya, I inherited a number of officers. While there, a number came to the post. What I said to myself was, "If what they say is all true about the Foreign Service officer, these are a lot of very able people in terms of their intelligence, their judgment, their commitment, and I should before starting to make judgments about this or that particular officer and his or her performance, do what I would do if I were taking over a department, or as I did when I became president of Mercy College here in New York." It was a way that I always approached my

responsibilities. I said, "What I'm going to do is see what these guys can do since they appear to be pretty sharp. I had about three officers who were approaching their time in grade when they were at the embassy. They had to make the next promotion or be selected out of the Service. It would be a shame for someone who has been in 15 or more years and was forced to leave, if he had the ability to serve. Why is it that these guys who obviously didn't get in this highly selective service without having something to contribute were falling behind?" What I did was, I turned every other weekly country team meeting into seminars. Every two weeks, instead of the usual country team meeting, we would have a seminar presentation on issues in U.S.-Kenya relations. I assigned the officers to lead the seminars. So, I said, "I'm going to challenge these guys and put them on the spot, give them a topic to wrestle with and to come in and then open them up to their colleagues here." I wanted to create an intellectual atmosphere. What I find and you find on college campuses is that once you reach tenure, once you reach the associate professor level, many professors don't work as hard. You go to bed earlier rather than stay up and try to write another article for a refereed journal or that book just somehow doesn't get written. So, I said that I was going to do this. We instituted this kind of program. I think it was quite successful. All of the officers who were on the bubble, as it were, were promoted. I did not lose one officer for being released from the Service. When I returned to Washington following my assignment, the officers who had served with me gave a party for me. It was in recognition of the special effort we made to make sure that the careers of all of our officers would be enhanced. I tried to drive the officers in such a way that they would reach their potential. Those who were slipping behind were goaded to get back on track. I think we were successful. As I said, we had about three persons who were facing possible elimination from the Service, and they succeeded.

Q: You had concurrent responsibility for the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. How did that play out? Did you get there often?

LEMELLE: Yes. That was interesting. At the beginning I wasn't sure how I would organize myself to do business in the Seychelles. I knew that I had to go out there as soon as was practical to present my credentials to President Francis Rene. It was a different time from today in the Seychelles. Seychelles was a leftist-led country. We were in the midst of the Cold War. Iran hadn't happened yet, but would soon occur. It was a different atmosphere altogether. I went out to Seychelles and found out that I had something very much in common with President Rene. We both had been students for the catholic priesthood. Rene was a Capuchin seminarian in Switzerland. The Capuchin were in Seychelles as missionaries. So, we had something immediately to talk about and it enabled us to quickly develop a good friendship. My wife and President Rene's wife also became close friends. My wife and I are from southwest Louisiana. We are Creoles whose antecedents were Africans, Native Americans and French. That is the people who live in southwest Louisiana. On the island of Seychelles, you had the very same thing. So, we immediately developed an easy relationship and were able to accomplish the goals of both governments, I think, satisfactorily. I renegotiated a 10-year lease to the Air Force tracking station without any difficulty, although the Russians and the Chinese had some objections to this extension. We were able to arrange for port calls by the MIDEASTFOR [Navy Command - Middle East Force] in Seychelles on a request basis. So, anytime we

had ships coming in, they were able to call at Port Victoria. We arranged for replenishment of stores, which was good for Seychelles businesses. We were also able to help the government of Seychelles, which was a target of toppling by the South Africans and mercenaries under Colonel Hoare and others. On three different occasions, I personally informed President Rene of an impending attempt to overthrow his government in the Seychelles. He was able to prepare and to foil those three attempts at the overthrow of the government. I felt very strongly that a coup in the Seychelles was not in the interest of the United States and a coup would only create instability in the Indian Ocean region. There was nothing that we wanted in terms of our interests in the Indian Ocean that we were not able to negotiate satisfactorily with the Rene government. None of what was occurring in the Seychelles interfered with our having access to port calls there, the tracking station, which were terribly important to the U.S. space program. The tracking station facility in Seychelles, after the closure of the U.S. base in South Africa, was the only tracking station we had in the Southern Hemisphere.

Q: You had the embassy branch office in Victoria?

LEMELLE: Yes. In Victoria, we had a full embassy. I had a deputy chief of mission and a small staff. We had a full program there. We had a Peace Corps of three, a dentist, and a couple of other people who did wonders in terms of their work there. I went out to Seychelles about once every five weeks. I would go out and spend a couple of days. This was the practice of a number of other embassies in Nairobi that had responsibilities in Seychelles. I had two excellent DCMs in Victoria. The first was there when I arrived. The second was one of the officers I appointed. He was my chief political officer whom I eventually selected for appointment as the deputy chief of mission there. He did an excellent job and has continued in the Foreign Service. During my tenure, I was very satisfied with the relations that we were able to cultivate and maintain with the Seychelles Government. We had a number of people I sent to the U.S. on exchange programs. A very interesting one was the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was also a linguist. She was trying to complete the first dictionary of the Seychellois patois. I arranged for her to take a trip to the United States with the assistance of the USIS and to go to Louisiana, my home state, to visit with the professors who were doing research on patois at LSU and at the University of Southwest Louisiana, and to also visit Haiti. Out of all of that, she was able to complete the first dictionary of the Seychellois language, which today is the dictionary of the Seychellois language. She was a wonderful person and was very much committed to linguistically structuring the Seychellois common language.

Q: As we come to the conclusion of this period in Kenya and Seychelles, are there any issues that we haven't touched on that you would like to comment on? Would you like to comment on how it was as a family experience?

LEMELLE: First, on the government side, I, like others who have spent many years in Kenya, was somewhat surprised and saddened by the downturn in the relations, particularly in the 1980s, between the U.S. and Kenya. We had worked very hard to establish the basis for a productive, mutually beneficial relationship between the United

States and Kenya. And it has been upsetting to see what has occurred. You mentioned that one of our ambassadors, Ambassador Smith Hempstone, had had a confrontational approach while there. That was very unfortunate. I had known of Smith Hempstone from the early 1960s when he was a journalist reporting on the Congo. Quite candidly, I've always been suspect of his views on Black people. I was chagrined that he felt it necessary to confront the government in the public way that he did during his tenure and I wish that other approaches had been taken to try and preserve the good relationship that had existed and to work on what many of us had tried to do for so many years - and that was to help the Kenyans understand, appreciate and embrace the values that we hold to be fundamental to good government. I think a lot was lost during that confrontational period. I'm happy to see that President Moi participated in the Entebbe Summit with the other presidents from the region; that President Clinton met with President Moi in Uganda; that they all signed the Entebbe Declaration, and that more recently President Moi attended the Africa Summit in Washington. It was so unheard of that someone would go to East Africa and not go to Kenya. So I think it should be said for the record, that we had a very, very solid basis upon which to develop and cultivate relations with Kenya for sometime and somehow more should have been done on the part of the Kenyans and on our side to preserve that understanding and trust and not let relations degenerate to the point that we had all this finger pointing and name calling that occurred during the period when Ambassador Hempstone was in Kenya.

Obviously, with others, I was also saddened at the bombings that took place in Kenya. I still don't know and I guess we're all still wondering how it all happened and who was involved. Here again, there was no basis for this to happen in Kenya during the time that we were developing the kind of close relations. Certainly, Kenya would have done everything possible to prevent anything like that happening and would have been, I think, in fact, very vigilant during the early period about people with evil intentions against the United States or any other friendly country. That is a sad little piece of our relations and I hope that we will be rebuilding and reestablishing our relations and that the kind of trust and confidence that we were able to develop at a certain time will be restored. In all of my time in Kenya, I did not meet any Kenyans who had an implacable hatred of the United States. To the contrary, we now have trained or provided opportunities for higher education and training for more Kenyans than the UK has ever done. As regard our relationship in terms of attitudes and values, there are now more Kenyans who have had the American experience and who believe in and accept basic rights and equity and feel that government should be open and free and who have developed these attitudes because of their opportunity to come to the United States to study, to interact, to experience. That kind of legacy is one that we need to do everything possible to support and to further develop. I hope that those who now have responsibilities for this are looking towards that side of the ledger and less to the kinds of personality things that relate to whether one likes a new president or doesn’t like him or feels that it's in good diplomatic or good friendly country taste to publicly stoke the kinds of fires that we saw sometime during the past 15 years.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, you left Nairobi then in 1980 and have gone on to a distinguished further career with the State University of New York to become the president of Mercy

College, and since 1990, president of the Phelps-Stokes Fund. Thinking about that experience and thinking about Africa, where you are still very involved in, as one who started out in Africa in 1961, one has a feeling that we minimized the difficulties of development in that early stage of optimism and that Africa is still working through a number of difficulties. I wonder if you could talk a little bit as we conclude about how you view that and how you view your role working in foreign affairs from the NGO perspective and also if you would, having been in education, how you view for young people the Foreign Service as a pursuit and particularly for Afro-Americans.

LEMELLE: That is a very good question. I will try to touch on some parts of it. Let me say that I think that the experience and opportunity to serve in the Foreign Service was as important as any other of the major professional experiences that I have had. It certainly provided for me and my family a unique opportunity to serve our country, to participate in a real sense in the policy, formation and the development in not only Kenya and Seychelles, but in that region of the world and in some instances the world at large. Kenya was and is an important point on the world map. I feel that I have benefitted tremendously from this special opportunity to serve there. During my subsequent career, my time in the Foreign Service has been extremely helpful in broadening my understanding of what education is, how one goes about educating young people, and what we need to do in terms of developing educational institutions. This experience helped to prepare me for understanding the new globalism that is upon us. As a senior executive with the State University, I had responsibility for all of the international activities of the University and was able to call upon the Department and to use my contacts and relations with the diplomatic corps and former ambassadors of other countries, that were able to help us enrich the international programs of the 64 campuses of the State University. As the president of Mercy College, which is a major institution in the greater New York area (at the time, about 8,000 students with 60 foreign countries represented in the student body), we were able to push the international curriculum agenda at Mercy to bring to the campus representatives from the diplomatic service and former ambassadors, to participate in our forum program and to provide our students with this kind of enrichment as a result of my work in the Department of State and as ambassador to Kenya and the Seychelles and certainly here at the Phelps-Stokes Fund, which was founded in 1911 and from the very beginning has had an international program interest in Africa my past experiences have been invaluable. We were established by Caroline Phelps-Stokes to provide for an institution that would advocate for educational opportunities for the dispossessed in Africa and for the deprived African-Americans, poor whites, and Native Americans in the United States. That is what our charter calls upon us to do. So, having served in Africa and then coming to this foundation which has a special commitment to African development has created many synergies. Over the years, we have provided scholarships and fellowships for thousands of Africans to come to the United States to study for advanced degrees. Our first recipients were seven Liberians in 1925 who came to the States to study at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This was a collaborative project between the Phelps-Stokes Fund and the Department of State. From then on, our cooperation has continued. We work closely with the Department of State. From 1976 to 1994, a principal program that we had was bringing southern African refugees to study at American

colleges and universities. Many of them are now serving their governments in Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland, and the other countries in that part of the world. They were students who came out of our program.

Currently, we have two programs with the U.S. government that are under the international regime. That is in our Washington office, we have an international exchange program with USIA. We bring not only Africans, but members of professions from a number of countries in the former Soviet Union, from Latin America, the Caribbean, and also from Europe under our international exchange program. We are in the process of restoring Booker Washington Institute, which was started in 1925 when we were asked by the government of Liberia to assist in the development of technical manpower. This Institute opened formally in 1929. We have been working with from time to time ever since. I think you had an opportunity to see just how extensive that is. We have outside of this conference room, the board room, some of the material that we are shipping to Liberia tomorrow by sea freight as part of the effort to rebuild this institution. Like most institutions in Liberia, it was overwhelmed during the civil war and has to be rebuilt from the ground as it were.

Q: That is tremendously impressive. I am impressed with the breadth of the program.

LEMELLE: I'm delighted to see that we got a hit from you on our Web page.

Q: Ambassador LeMelle, we very much appreciate your time and contribution to the Oral History Program. We thank you.

LEMELLE: Thank you. I want to thank the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training for the opportunity to participate in this program.

End of interview