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

ELIZABETH SHACKELFORD

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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BA in History, Minor in African American Studies, Duke University	1997–2001
Study Abroad at University of Cape Town	1999–2000
JD in International Law and Legal Studies, University of Pittsburgh	2003–2006
Intern—USAID's American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative in Kosovo, Serbia	2004
Legal Assistant—Special Court for Sierra Leone Defense Team Freetown, Sierra Leone	2005
Associate—Covington & Burling LLP Washington, D.C.	2006–2007
Legal Expert—Booz Allen Hamilton contracted by USAID 21 countries including Zimbabwe, Liberia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and the West Bank.	2007–2010
Entered the Foreign Service	2010
Warsaw, Poland—Consular Officer	2011–2012
Visa consular work	
One month in Lagos, Nigeria working in Consular American Citizen Services	

Warsaw, Poland—Political Officer, Human Rights Division 2012–2013

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Juba, South Sudan—Political/Consular Officer 2013–2014

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Resigned from Foreign Service November 2017

INTERVIEW

Q: So, today is August 24, 2020. We're starting our interview with Elizabeth Shackelford.

And Elizabeth, where and when were you born?

SHACKELFORD: I was born in Oxford, Mississippi in 1979.

Q: Now, is Oxford also where James Faulkner came from? William Faulkner, William Faulkner.

SHACKELFORD: William Faulkner, yes, yes.

Q: Yeah. So, interesting, yeah, the connections.

When you were growing up, were there any events or anything with him? Did you know him in any way?

SHACKELFORD: No, no. He was somewhat before my time. But I certainly read a fair amount of Faulkner growing up. I mean, I only lived in Oxford for, I mean, a few months while my father finished law school and then they moved to the capital, Jackson. But Faulkner is certainly a thing of lore in Mississippi literary history, so I've done my fair share of that. As beautiful and terrible and difficult as it is to pore through Faulkner, I've done a lot of it.

Q: Great. All right.

So, you're an infant. Your family then moves to Jackson. Are there other sisters and brothers?

SHACKELFORD: My older brother, Stephen, was two years older than me at the time. So, it was just the two of us then. And then, two other younger sisters to come.

Q: Okay. But your family essentially settles in Jackson?

SHACKELFORD: Yes.

Q: Okay. How did your parents meet?

SHACKELFORD: My dad was born and raised in Columbus, Mississippi, which is outside Starkville, where Mississippi State University is. And my mom went to Columbus, Mississippi for college at the Mississippi University for Women, known as the W. She got a scholarship offer to go there, so she packed up and moved from Belgium where she was living with her parents at the time. She met my dad pretty quickly.

Q: Oh, interesting.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah, they got married on a short time scale quite young.

Q: Now, a number of people do ancestry investigation; have you looked back at your forebears, where they came from and so on?

SHACKELFORD: You know, I haven't. I mean, my—not officially, you know, kind of doing a genetic tree or anything. My father did it a while ago and his family had been around and in the South for a very, very long time. My mom's family came mostly from Slovakia and Sweden, and they came over, both sides of her family, I guess, about 100 years ago.

Q: Okay. But she had been living in Belgium?

SHACKELFORD: Yes. But that was because of her father's work.

Q: Oh.

SHACKELFORD: Her father worked for Westinghouse, so she traveled around a bit with him, and he traveled a lot. But they spent a few years in Europe while she was growing up.

Q: Was your father old enough to serve in the military?

SHACKELFORD: He just missed Vietnam. He was—I might not be getting this exactly accurately, but I believe he was called up right before it ended, so he just missed the draft.

Q: Ah, okay, okay.

And then, what sort of work did he do and was your mother working as well?

SHACKELFORD: My father was a lawyer. He was the first one in his family to go to graduate school. And we all like to joke about it. We think that he went to law school to prove something to my mom's father because he was just this country boy when she decided that she was going to marry him, and he wasn't particularly impressive to the future in-laws. But my mom dropped out of college to support my dad through law school and she started having kids. Then she went back to finish while we were living in

Jackson and ended up getting a full scholarship to go to medical school. So, with four little ones she finished college, went back to medical school and worked as an emergency physician.

Q: Good heavens.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah.

Q: I imagine you must have had a babysitter or a nanny or something.

SHACKELFORD: Well, we had a housekeeper who also helped raise us for a lot of that time, luckily, but my mom was one of those mothers who had a lot of energy. She still ensured we had a well-rounded, home cooked dinner every night. Dad had his own law practice by that point, so he was pretty flexible, and he spent a lot of time doing the, you know, kind of kids' sports thing and stuff like that. But they both managed to be around quite a bit. Mom's schedule was very hectic and we all lived through medical school with her. So, I remember her coming home and crying at the dinner table about, you know, cutting up cadavers in gross anatomy class and things like that.

Q: Oh, wow.

SHACKELFORD: She used to take us down at night when she had to do late night lab work and we'd, like, run around the labs and poke things.

Q: Wow. That is—that's actually a fantastic experience for a kid.

SHACKELFORD: It was very strange. And it was also very strange because in Mississippi, these years were the eighties, early nineties, and it was considered very strange by a lot of my friends' parents at that time that my mom was going to school full-time and then in a residency full-time because women just, you know, most women were not working or working part-time and that seemed a little out of place for people in Mississippi. But she always stood out to people in Mississippi, so.

Q: All right. So, you—but you also do your schooling in Jackson. What was the—well, before we actually get to schooling, as a child and an adolescent, what was Jackson like? Was it—did it have the feel of a big city? Were your parents concerned if you went out by yourself? That sort of thing.

SHACKELFORD: I mean, Mississippi, Jackson is the capital city but it's a very small capital city so far as things go. We lived in a pretty safe neighborhood, go out and come back before dark kind of thing. But the city itself had some crime issues. There is a lot of tension, there's a lot of poverty. Mississippi deals with a lot more racial issues than many other parts of the U.S. and I was facing that pretty early on. So, that was always kind of front and center for me, how different parts of the city were so different, how we lived in this primarily white bubble. And I noticed that at a young age, so it's—that would probably be one of the things that really stuck out to me as a child growing up.

Q: Now, what about school? Was it—did you go to public school, private school? How did that work?

SHACKELFORD: Catholic school up to sixth grade and then I went to a prep school, a little private school which, technically speaking, was certainly one of the schools created during white flight in the seventies, Jackson Prep. So, it was not a diverse student body. I remember Alison Rhodes—graduated in my class of maybe 100 people in my high school, and her quote in the book was, remember me, I was the black girl. It was emblematic, I think, of how Mississippi was then and really still is in a lot of ways.

Q: But what about, then, just the overall experience with school? Did you like it? Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

SHACKELFORD: Lots of extracurricular activities. Captain of the debate team. I did theater productions, did choir. Wasn't particularly great at sports, tried track, wasn't excellent at that. My athletic activity was horseback riding, and I enjoyed that, riding around the countryside and rural parts of Mississippi. But yeah, school was good, it was active. I'm certainly not one of those people who thinks high school was the best time of my life. I was ready to get out. Mississippi seemed very small.

Q: Okay, okay. But then, while you were there, did the family travel at all?

SHACKELFORD: We got a lot of the travel bug from my mom's side of the family. My mom's family was based just outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, most of our childhood, so we were kind of considered half Yankee children by our community in Mississippi. As I mentioned, her father traveled a lot for work working for Westinghouse, and so they had experience all over, but primarily really loved Europe. So, we did have a chance to travel to Europe a few times. When I was very young my grandparents were still living there, they had moved to Spain, so we got to visit them there and then go to some of the old stomping grounds that my mom had spent years living in Brussels and sometimes with the family in Paris. So, I was very, very fortunate to have traveled to Europe as a child. But it was interesting to me because at that point it seemed so exotic that my family got to go to Europe and that was before the idea of visiting any other part of the planet had really come up. So, it wasn't until I got to college that I started looking at the rest of the globe. And I was really ready to explore it.

Q: Okay.

Now, at home, was there a lot of attention to the news? Did you guys sit around the dinner table and say oh, you know, this is going on nationally or this is going on in the state or there's some votes coming up? Or to what extent were you engaged or interested even?

SHACKELFORD: No. It's kind of—I've thought about this a lot because at this stage everyone in my family, you know, both my parents, we've all become very engaged in

world affairs and things that are going on. And I'm sure that my mom's family, I mean, they were pretty worldly because my grandpa had not only lived in Europe, but he traveled everywhere, spent a lot of time in the Middle East and Asia, North Africa and South America; he'd been all over. So, they had a lot of exposure to that. My father's family was very different, and my father had never been on an airplane before he flew up to Pittsburgh to marry my mother, so his world view was much narrower at that point. But, yeah, my parents were very young when they started raising us and they weren't particularly politically savvy. And they were relatively conservative then, just as most people are being raised by families that have more conservative views. If you compare that to my wider family now, we've got a lot of—more progressives in it. So, it's interesting to see that transition that happened as my parents got older. But I remember when we were working in, I guess it was the seventh or eighth grade when you had the election of Bill Clinton, and that was the first election I really remember following. It was part of a social studies program that I had to cut articles out of the newspaper and put them into big binders, tracking the election, the entire thing. And that was, I mean, that had such an impact on me because it was the first time that I'd really paid any attention to politics, to the electoral process, to what our democracy was. And I brought it all home and I showed it to everybody. And I have this vague recollection that my parents were really horrified that Bill Clinton was going to get elected, which in retrospect turned out very interesting for the path that—some political interests that my family have taken. So, that was the early stages, you know. We talked a little bit about bad things happening around the world, and my parents certainly knew more, but my interest in the world news then was just wanting to get out there and see it.

Q: Were there any other major social activities that I'm overlooking in high school that, you know, made an impact on you?

SHACKELFORD: I've thought about it a lot with different friends that I've made and colleagues I've had who were raised around the beltway of Washington, DC. You come across a lot of people in the Foreign Service and in the foreign policy world who had that background, so I think mine was a very different background from people who grew up in that area. Though I guess all suburban communities have some similarities, everybody's caring about the soccer games and the local football and what the kids are doing. It was a pretty quiet time. And in fact, I distinctly recall envying my uncle. He was the youngest one in the family and he's only about eleven years older than me, and I remember watching as a child how he lived in all these different parts of Europe and traveled around and had all these experiences, and I was tremendously jealous of that. It's like, why did my family stay in this one small place in Mississippi in this unknown corner of the world. So, I spent a lot of time in my youth thinking and reading about other places to go.

Q: Your uncle, was he in the Foreign Service or this was business and—

SHACKELFORD: No, this—well, he was a lot younger, so while I was growing up, he was in high school, so he was still traveling and living in different places with my grandparents.

Q: Oh, I see, I see. Yeah, yeah, okay.

SHACKELFORD: Right. So, he was having this, you know, a similar kind of lifestyle to a Foreign Service kid, I guess, and it just seemed fascinating.

Q: And did anything in, you know, while you were in high school that you know that there was a Foreign Service and was this a possibility for you to actually work in—

SHACKELFORD: I had no idea. I didn't—I'd heard that there were diplomats. I had no idea how someone became a diplomat. It's funny, I think that my brother was a lot more in tune to those things and we recently found, I want to say, I don't know, it was an old newspaper article from like a local newspaper where he had been interviewed his senior year because he had scored a perfect score on the ACT. My older brother's brilliant. And they were asking him what he wanted to do when he grew up, and I had never known this, but I'm reading this scrapbook later and just—maybe a year or two ago, and he said that he was considering going into foreign policy and might want to be an undersecretary someday.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: I had no idea what that was when I was in high school. So, he was clearly more in tune to those things than I was, and he went off to Harvard the following year. But it was—I had a vague idea because my father was a lawyer that I wanted to do law, I wanted to work in justice, and I had a vague idea that I'd like to travel somewhere exotic, like Africa, and I thought that international human rights law seemed like a really good idea.

Q: Huh.

SHACKELFORD: I had no sense of what that meant at the time, but when I daydreamed about what I might be when I grew up, you know, back when I was in high school, the idea of being an international human rights lawyer somehow had entered my brain. I couldn't tell you where it came from or what I thought that meant, but the idea was bouncing around in my head at that stage in very early nascent form.

Q: Did you have an opportunity or were you interested in foreign languages?

SHACKELFORD: I've always been terrible at foreign languages. I spent four years studying Latin in high school.

Q: Ah, okay.

SHACKELFORD: Which, don't do that. Everybody says it will help you with all these other languages, but you can just learn the other languages.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: You can just go straight to Spanish or French, I don't know. So, I never understood that. But the Latin program at our high school was meant to be the best one, so that's why I decided to take Latin. And I did use Latin a couple of times in the rare books room at Duke University, but I don't think it was worth the four-year investment. Oh, but there's some nice things to read in Latin. So, no, I didn't have a lot of that. And I went off to college and I tried Italian. I was completely useless at foreign languages before I got to kind of really spend a chunk of time at FSI (Foreign Service Institute).

Q: Okay. Now, you mentioned Duke, but before we go there, how was college discussed at home? I mean, was there an expectation you'd go and if so, were there criteria set? What were you thinking about in terms of college?

SHACKELFORD: Well, the path is really laid out for me by my brother, Stephen, because he was a super intellectual overachiever, you know, highest scores in the state, and he was on a path to Harvard from pretty early on. So, I was just the next step. And if Stephen was going to go to Harvard, then of course, I was going to go somewhere in there. And I don't know how it became determined that he was going to go to Harvard. I think my mom got fixated on the idea at some point.

Q: Uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: She was always very ambitious for us.

Q: Well, just out of curiosity, he goes to Harvard; did he like it?

SHACKELFORD: Oh, yeah, he did, he did.

Q: Oh, okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: It did suit him. Then he went to Harvard law and then he clerked at the Supreme Court and he did all those things.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: So, he followed that path pretty well. But yeah, for me, I was the second kid, and I was the oldest daughter, so I had some of the difficulties of being the oldest and a middle child at the same time. The pressure was on to go somewhere really good because Stephen was going to Harvard. But I didn't get accepted to Harvard or Stanford or Princeton or Dartmouth. I applied to a bunch of schools that I didn't get into, so I like to think that made my character stronger.

Q: Okay. Well, you know, it's different for everybody. But you did get into Duke.

SHACKELFORD: I did get into Duke.

Q: And there's certainly nothing wrong with Duke. It's certainly got a great reputation.

SHACKELFORD: Oh, yeah. It was funny because I was going through the list and I knew I needed somewhere—and there were some other schools that I'd applied to as kind of more realistic expectations, but Duke wasn't really on my radar. It was my father who said, "Well, you know, you ought to apply to Duke. It's a good southern school." So, he wanted to keep me physically somewhat closer to home. Of course, Duke's still quite far from Jackson, Mississippi. But then, of course, for anybody in the South, when I said I was going to Duke, they were like, Duke? That's up there in Yankeeland. I was like, "It's in the South; it's North Carolina." And they were like, It's north, North Carolina. So. It was far enough, I guess.

Q: Okay. Did you work in the summers or in-between—after school?

SHACKELFORD: Oh, in high school?

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: You know, I primarily worked at the barn where we kept horses to help pay for horse things, so I mucked stalls and fed horses and rode other people's horses and exercised ponies and things like that.

Q: Okay. Great, great. All right. Now, what year do you arrive at Duke?

SHACKELFORD: It was 1997.

Q: Okay. So, still the tail end of the Clinton Administration. You've had several years now to—whether you were watching or not, to see what was going on up there. What were your first impressions of Duke? You know, obviously a much bigger school now than any of the ones you've so far attended.

SHACKELFORD: Duke was—you're going off to college. Regardless of where you go it's kind of a crazy and exciting thing. It shows you how big the world is, you meet people from all sorts of places you haven't been. So, Duke was exciting. I don't think that I—I'm not sure that Duke was the most impressionable part of my time. In fact, I spent one year studying abroad while I was there, and it blew the rest of my time there away. I picked random things to study at first. I had no idea what direction I was going to take. My freshman year focus was medieval art history because my mother saw it in the program and was like, "Oh, my god. I've always wanted to spend time studying medieval art history," and I just didn't have that much of a sense of what to choose. So, I took that on for my first semester and I got to the end of the semester and it just seemed very strange. Then I started pursuing my interest of learning more about Africa. I got a minor in African and African American studies, and that for me was a really mind opening experience. And the interest there for me was both, you know, I was fascinated by Africa,

but I was also really curious to learn more about my own state's history and race issues in the United States. So, that—the interest in learning more about racial issues in the United States was what first got me interested in taking some of these courses. I took a class on Southern African political history and became fascinated by South Africa and the fact that it seemed like a place that was so similar to what I'd grown up in or to what Mississippi I thought was like before. And the more I studied South Africa and then I went to do a study abroad in South Africa, it just blew me away to see how similar this universe that I'd grown up in was to the day to day experiences in apartheid South Africa.

Q: Hmm. Now, okay, so as you take more and more college classes on Africa, what were you learning or what impressed you? Because obviously there's a lot of history there, there's, you know, history before contact with Europeans, certainly after, and then there's post-war history and you know, independence; what—were you studying it all?

SHACKELFORD: I dabbled in parts of all of it. I ended up becoming very interested in the colonial and post-colonial period because of a lot of the parallels that I saw between that and the early United States and then the legacy that you still see in the United States, particularly in the American South. But the classes that I took on pre-colonial and further back history on the African continent were fascinating because the world history we studied in high school just didn't touch the continent. You come out of a place thinking you've got some basic sense of what the world looks like and then somebody tells you, you know, Oh, Africa's actually massively bigger than all of those things that you studied before. So, that for me, just in terms of—I guess the biggest thing that I learned in my first couple of years at Duke was how to question everything that you've already learned. And I had a couple of professors who pointed that out very specifically, but at the same time, that's kind of a theme when you go through a liberal arts college experience is, you know, what are the sources? How do different sources of information compare? And what do you trust and what do you read out of different sources as opposed to just reading and learning what the page says. That's a concept that you just don't get in high school.

Q: Right. What about the student body? Was it particularly diverse? Did you meet foreign students? What was that like?

SHACKELFORD: The student body at Duke, it is diverse, but it's not very integrated, in my experience. I mean, I would come across, you know, foreign students in different classes and we had many students of color, but it was a pretty segregated place. There wasn't a lot of diversity in the individual social communities. So, that was one of the experiences that for me was a little bit disappointing. Also it felt like much of your entire experience depended on who lived randomly in the freshman dorm hall that you're in, and I loved the people in my freshman dorm hall, but it's just human nature, right, like those are the ones you get to know. And then that's the posse and the group that you continue with. So, I don't think that I took enough advantage of the diversity that was available at Duke. I think that I was less mature, really, at that. I didn't engage in student politics. My real focus was wanting to get out and find opportunities to get out. So, I think I probably left a lot on the field at Duke and that I could have gotten more out of it.

Tried to make up for it with a really incredible year of studying abroad and then I got back my senior year.

Q: We will get to that, but I just also wanted to ask you, you had mentioned taking Italian; did you—was this your opportunity now to sort of focus more on foreign languages?

SHACKELFORD: No, no. That was just more of my mother living vicariously through me.

Q: Ah, okay.

SHACKELFORD: She signed me up, she was like, "You've got to take these, this medieval European program and with it, it just made sense to take Italian." Again, like Latin, it wasn't super useful. But it was an entertaining class. I had good people there. But foreign language for me, ahh. If I could be born again with a superpower it would be foreign languages. My mother has it. I mean, you can go with her on a trip to Turkey and she'll be able to converse with the taxi driver by the time you arrive after reading a book. I just didn't get that gene. So, I squeezed through college with the few credits that I needed and not my best grades in Italian.

Q: Okay. All right, how was it that you decided to go to South Africa? Yeah, how did that come about?

SHACKELFORD: It gets back to this real interest that I had in race issues in Mississippi. Actually, I totally missed this point where we were talking about the high school experience. I did get involved—I was very interested in high school about how segregated Mississippi was and I got involved in trying to do outreach between our private school and public schools. I ended up being the president of the Metro Jackson Student Council, I believe that's what it was called, which was this organization trying to bring together and integrate communities between the public and private schools because there was such a huge disparity and obviously it was so racially non-diverse. So, that's where I really started getting this itch for learning more about racism and racial issues in Mississippi. And that got me to reading about South Africa because it was so recently out of apartheid at the time.

Q: Okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: And so, that was my interest. And I took these classes at Duke and that became a really good way to fulfill this minor in my history major, so I was planning on just doing one semester and went out my sophomore year the second—no. Junior year? I can't even remember now. It was junior into senior year, I believe. But it was two semesters. And it was fascinating. I wanted to see what I thought would be going back in time in Mississippi by going to South Africa, and instead it just reminded me so much of the world that I lived in in Mississippi where you have, you know, a majority black community and yet you can live in a neighborhood where the only black people that you

see are in service industry, working in the yards, working in the houses, and that's really not that different from neighborhoods in Jackson, Mississippi.

Q: Interesting, interesting.

SHACKELFORD: And for me, I remember thinking, It can't be that easy to be this blind to what's going on. But then, as I was a student at the University of Cape Town with a lot of white South African kids, looking at them in disbelief of how you could be blind to what's happening right in front of you the whole time you grew up, and then I realized that in many ways I was doing the same. So, that was eye opening.

Q: Now, when you went to South Africa, I guess all of the studies you did were in English? Or did you learn some Afrikaans?

SHACKELFORD: No, Cape Town's all English speaking. The University of Cape Town was all English speaking. Again, I eluded the need to learn other languages. (Laughs) If aspiring diplomats who are also terrible at languages ever listen to this recording, they can trust that there is a future for you too, even if you're bad at languages.

Q: (Laughs) Okay. All right, so while you were in South Africa, you have the scholastic part and then you have sort of the living part. What stands out in your mind in both those areas?

SHACKELFORD: Well, the courses were very interesting because they were all just homing in on Southern African—recent Southern African political history in a way that you just weren't going to get that level in most courses, in most scenarios in the United States. So, that was fascinating. But what was most—what made the biggest impression on me was watching the social experiment that the University at Cape Town was. I mean, I arrived there in 1999, and so you were five years after the official end of apartheid, at which point they decided that this 99 percent white university was going to become fifty-fifty overnight.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: And there, I mean, that's a noble goal, but there are some very practical challenges, first and foremost being that South Africans, black South Africans were not allowed to study math or science throughout apartheid.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: And I had to—one of the boxes that I checked while I was in—studying my year at UCT (University of Cape Town) was to take a statistics course with a hundred something people, 50 percent of whom had no background in math or science.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: And it's just—it's watching this country overcome, as rapidly as they can, this legacy that left a huge percentage of the country handicapped. It was—and then watching the struggles that they go through. I mean, the western Cape, in Cape Town, is a pretty liberal part of the country, so if you're going to have a population that's amenable to the—a white population that's amenable to these changes, and of course, the white population still controls a lot of the economy and education systems and things like that. They were more amenable than they would have been, say, out further east. But it's still very hard. A lot of the tenured white professors at the University of Cape Town got pushed out to make room for professors of color, which needed to happen, but there still are individual stories of well, how fair is that? But you have to overcome this, and you have to make some big, painful moves in order to reach a more equitable situation when there has been such systemic inequity for so long. So, that was—I think I learned more just watching that campus and just being aware of what was happening around me and the interactions between different students in the class. I learned more in just that—watching that experiment happen around me than really any other part of my college experience.

Q: Okay, but then, while you were there, did you also make contacts or friends who you remained in contact with after you left?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. I actually still do have—I mean, thanks to how social media works there are a lot of friends that I had there who I'd lost contact with for a while but I'm back in touch with, some of whom are South Africans who are writing some really great stuff on South African politics, some are here in the United States, political pundits in their own right assessing what's going on in America and comparing it to elsewhere. I've got—yeah, I have quite a few friends that I was studying with and got to know there that I'm still in contact with. But I also did go back to South Africa after I graduated, so I spent about two and a half years there in total.

Q: Okay, but then, while you were there, did you do any actual scholastic work that you got credit for? A master's thesis or an undergraduate thesis or anything like that?

SHACKELFORD: I did a, yeah, I mean, I did a few papers that were towards my major, but not a thesis or anything. I somehow got out of Duke without a thesis.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: Is that possible? I don't know. It was a long time ago. But the big paper that I wrote was on Robert Mugabe.

Q: Hmm. Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: And we're talking about, I mean, it's amazing. He lasted a really long time. I mean, I was writing in 2000 about how this darling of the post-colonial era had kind of started to go awry and as it turns out that kept happening for decades.

Q: Yeah, yeah. While you were there, did you also notice the interactions between Swaziland and South Africa, the other countries nearby, you know, mentioning Zimbabwe?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. I had an opportunity to travel around quite a bit, which for me it's always a lot easier once you can physically—once you can see something, once it's no longer like a white space in the map in your mind. We studied a lot of it, and you pay attention to the news, but that whole Southern African region is politically connected, and you have issues around there, immigration across borders in the region. Illegal immigration, of course is a big issue in South Africa with a lot of folks coming there to work. Then you have matters of the instability that it causes. You have xenophobia, a lot of violence against immigrants who come in. And South Africa is the major player in that region, but at the time it was still really just emerging in that position. So, its influence and its interest in wielding that influence was—they were struggling with that debate, how much do they want to be the regional power and take any responsibility for what's going on in some of the neighboring states. But it was a fascinating region to watch. And for me, I probably had more exposure to or a better understanding of kind of bilateral and regional dynamics from that than I had of any other regions before, since I hadn't really been paying attention to world politics before college. And Africa being my focus and Southern Africa being my focus, it was really—that was kind of the first place that I saw how humans in their personal dynamics play as well, right. The change in presidents in South Africa has a big impact on relationships because you don't have the same weight as Mandela, you know. It's different. So, it was an interesting time to be both studying and watching it in real time.

Q: The reason I asked if you did any thesis is because if you're there for two years, were you in a program, were you just sort of hanging out?

SHACKELFORD: I was there for one year for my studies, then I went back and graduated from Duke. And then, I took a backpack and convinced a few friends to do our post-college trip hitching around Southern Africa.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: And then I didn't leave for a year and a half.

Q: Fascinating. So, as you were there for the year and a half, did you begin to set out goals for yourself? Or what did you see yourself doing during that time?

SHACKELFORD: I think I had hoped that I could find a way to live in Cape Town for a long time. But you know, we don't necessarily—I mean, it's just as hard for Americans to get work visas in other places sometimes as it is the other way around, which was another life lesson I learned. I was like, oh, wait, I'm an American. I can't just live here? Forever? Just because I want to? But I was trying to break into, I'll just kind of generally call it the do-gooder world. I still knew I wanted to do something that would help make the world better. I mean, it sounds naïve and it was completely naïve. I didn't know what

I was talking about. But I was interested in living somewhere different and exotic and trying to use my resources and abilities to help improve the lives of others. I was drawn to the struggle of South Africa because it was trying to overcome this racist legacy and legacy of deep inequality, so I found a job with a small local non-governmental organization that was able to keep me there for a little while. And it had me in parliament several days a week, listening to committees talk about legislation that was going to have an impact on small rural communities.

Q: Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: So, I kind of just dove right in. I didn't have a five-year plan at that point. I mostly wanted to keep living somewhere fascinating and expanding my mind and my experience. But I just adored South Africa. It was so interesting and robust and dynamic, far more dynamic than where I'd lived before. Duke seemed, it was interesting, but it still seemed like such a kind of suburban America hierarchical social structure of how America seems. So, it felt a lot more mind expanding just to be in a place where I was out of my element.

Q: Yeah. During that time, did you begin to hear about or get in touch with any of the U.S. institutional organizations, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) or Peace Corps or the embassy or the consulate?

SHACKELFORD: I still didn't. I was so late to that game. In fact, I think about all the times I found myself in trouble and how I could have just called up the embassy or the consulate like so many people have done to me. It was—maybe it's a good thing that I didn't know at the time. But no, it was not until—and I don't want to fast forward this too much, but the first Foreign Service officers that I met was when I was doing an internship in Kosovo a few years later while I was in law school.

Q: Oh, wow. My goodness. All right. Then—what I don't want to do is miss any other, you know, interesting anecdotes or experiences you had while you were in South Africa, but I guess at some point you're beginning to realize as much as you like it, the ability to remain there and just, you know, be able to earn a living is just not happening.

SHACKELFORD: I knew that I needed more skills, more experience, something to bring to the table in order to have the type of career that I wasn't quite envisioning yet, but I knew was out there. I didn't quite know what it would be. I thought maybe it would be in the NGO (Non-governmental Organization) world. I remember talking to my mom on the phone while I was there and I had some frustrations about the NGO world and I was saying something about how they weren't very driven, it was kind of like just good enough to feel good that you were trying to do something, but what were you really getting done at the end of the day. And she says, "Yeah, the driven people go into business, Lizzy."

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: I was like, "Oh. Is that so?" She said, "Yeah, they don't go into NGO work." Which wasn't necessarily true, but it made me think—because I had a lot of drive. I wasn't sure where to put it yet, but I wanted to be accomplishing more and aiming higher and wielding more ability to push towards positive change. Again, it was still kind of in theory. I knew I couldn't stay in South Africa in that job forever because I couldn't keep a work visa, so at some point you go home. I went home for a visit and planned to renew my visa, and then 9/11 happened.

Then I came back to finish my work at this program monitoring the legislature in South Africa. It was a fascinating backdrop. I mean, big South African, former rebels—you know, former members of the rebel movement, folks who had been freedom fighters in South Africa who had found their way into government were now filling up these committees and were parliamentarians. And I got to know a lot of them from spending hours and hours sitting in these committee meetings. And for starters, it's really interesting to watch governance happen by people who spent most of their lives fighting a war. Most of them didn't have the schooling, education background that their white counterparts did. Watching them navigate how to write laws and regulations was really interesting. On the one hand, you're like, ah, they don't really understand how these types of provisions work. But they totally understand how the communities work and that's more important when you're trying to pull this together. But it was a very different vibe. It certainly felt different from, let's say, sitting in on the U.S. Senate. But I did have the opportunity to come back right after 9/11. I will never forget the level of deep empathy and support and community that came around the—the outpouring of support that came from other people after 9/11.

Q: Wow. Wow.

SHACKELFORD: I remember all these different parliamentarians coming up to hug me in the hallway, you know—

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: —when I got back and being like, We're with you.

Q: Oh, wow.

SHACKELFORD: And it was so painful in the subsequent years to watch us just burn all of that goodwill.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: So, that was really a hard time to have that image still in my head of all that support and to know that we just destroyed it.

Q: Now, when you say destroyed it, at least from your experience in South Africa, what were the major things that soured South Africans after 9/11?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I mean, South Africa wasn't a particular target in the war on terror, but it was just the sense that the United States decided to go it alone largely, ignoring international law. Commit human rights abuses. When you're looking at a time when communities and governments like South Africa are trying—we're trying to press them to follow and meet international standards of human rights and rule of law and accountability, and this was well before I entered the Foreign Service and could really see this on the inside, but you could see even on the outside this ideal that people had in their heads of what America was and how other countries wanted to strive to emulate a lot of that. There was just this deep disappointment after 9/11, like America tortures too, you know. America kills innocent people. America is totally bucking the trends in the international world because it suits them. And that's where you started to see the real disappointment.

Q: Okay, okay. All right. How did you finally decide to come back for good?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I mean, part of that was helped by the fact that I couldn't get a work visa.

Q: Okay. Yeah, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: But that's a good life lesson. It can be easier for white kids from Europe and the U.S. to get jobs in some of these places overseas even though they're not particularly qualified. Remember, I was right out of college. I wasn't particularly qualified. And there was a big push in South Africa, as there should be, to give jobs that can just go to relatively unqualified smart people to the local population. So, I was never bitter about that. I fully understood and supported it and decided I would go back and probably head to law school. So, I had a year to kill before I started because I came back in the fall and—

Q: Were you accepted into law school?

SHACKELFORD: At that stage I was just applying to law schools.

Q: Okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: And while I did apply, once again, the top schools did not want me.

Q: Ooh.

SHACKELFORD: It's so disappointing. I could paper the walls with my rejection letters. But I ended up, on my uncle's suggestion, applying to the University of Pittsburgh. And I still have family in Pittsburgh, and it had a good small international law program and my uncle had gone there and really loved the professors and so I went. I was able to get a scholarship that covered most of it and then, this is where we get back to language, and I

learned that the U.S. Department of Education, I believe, funds the foreign language and area studies scholarships.

Q: Ah. Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: Which, little known fact, it's like the only really good fellowship out there that you can apply to basically any graduate school because there are not that many things that pay for all of law school.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, this is one, you can apply for any grad school. So, I found out that the University of Pittsburgh taught Serbo-Croatian and that Serbo-Croatian was the least commonly taught language and for that reason it had less competition if you were going to apply for the FLAS, the Foreign Language and Area Studies scholarship. So, I decided on a whim to apply for the FLAS. I got the fellowship, which paid for law school and a stipend and all I had to do was go to class three days a week with a bunch of second-generation Serbian kids who already spoke Serbian.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: My Serbian didn't ever get very strong.

Q: Uh-huh. But that must have been a trip. I mean, they—

SHACKELFORD: They were all like eighteen, they all just wanted an easy *A.*

Q: Right, right. But also, they're probably recalling all of the difficulties of Serbia over the period before and during while you were there.

SHACKELFORD: It was very interesting to see a lot of it because a lot of it we discussed in class. It was all related to the latest news, which of course, at the time was pretty, I mean, it was interesting times and had been very recent interesting history in that region. So, yeah, I did not get very strong at Serbo-Croatian, but it was still an interesting experience and gave me an interest in learning more about it. So, that's what led me to decide to apply to do an internship in Kosovo that summer.

Q: Ahh.

SHACKELFORD: So, that was my summer after my first year in law school. I went to Kosovo to do an internship with the USAID program run by the American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative.

Q: Now, that's interesting because of course in Kosovo yeah, there's some Serbo-Croatian spoken, but there's plenty of Kosovar-Albanian.

SHACKELFORD: Oh, yeah. There's not much Serbo-Croatian spoken. In fact, the fact that I had any at all was really—you didn't really want to tell anybody that because they would assume you were a spy.

Q: Right. Okay.

SHACKELFORD: But it—I was starting to fill in a picture about the region, which was interesting. I knew about the wars, but the Balkans was another place that was just not filled in in my mind. So, I got to go and explore it, spend time with some Serbian kids in class, then travel around the region, and that was another one of those tremendously influential periods in my life.

Q: Let me ask you, then, about what you were learning about Serbia as you're taking the law course, both from the other students and what you're now picking up on this trip. In other words, what were you piecing together about the conflict? How much did you get?

SHACKELFORD: Well, you know, at the front end my experience is really around—it's on the Serbian side, right, so—which is, of course, a very different point of view on all of this from the Kosovar side.

Q: Sure.

SHACKELFORD: My overall takeaway was that history in that part of the world goes back many, many hundreds of years. I remember when we were learning complex numbers and to this—and like, the first question when we were getting the numbers higher than the hundreds, the first question in Serbian to the class was when was the battle of Kosovo Polje – the field of the blackbirds. It's 1389, and every Serbian kid in the class immediately recited it without having to think twice because they all know when the big battle was in Kosovo in the fourteenth century when the Ottoman Empire defeated the Serbs.

Q: Right, right. The big loss, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: And that was the seed that planted all of it. So, to me that—the history that those kids in that class were able to retell from there onward and they would often use those subjects and those old stories for discussion opportunities, which I was somewhat out of my element there, but it was interesting to hear. You add on the fact that I didn't really understand Serbian. I probably learned less than I thought. But it was—the context for me was very important. Not so much that you learn oh, this is a battle that goes back hundreds of years but that there are these emotions tied to history that are very easy to exploit. And that's a theme that I've seen in every part of the world where I worked.

Q: What were the—to the extent you had them, what were the feelings of the students about what was going on there because it was literally history in the making?

SHACKELFORD: I mean, there was a lot of angst and anger towards the world. I mean, primarily the Serbian students that I was around were quite—nationalistic is a loaded term, but they were very sensitive to the region and unlikely—uninclined to accept the responsibilities that the Serbian government had in the war. They were quick to blame the United States for making mistakes and making it more of an international battle than it—than they believed it should have been. They felt as though they had claims to Kosovo. I mean, let's just say it was basically like the equivalent of watching—well, I don't want to get political—it was watching the world through the flat opposite lens of normal Western news media coverage.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: And those beliefs were strong. I mean, it was a little bit like in Mississippi when I was growing up how my sixth-grade teacher would talk about how the Civil War should have been won and how the South continues to be subjugated by the horrible North. I mean, it was very much like watching the Mississippi world view in comparison to what you see from the beltway region.

Q: I have—your—okay, so your video is frozen. Do you still hear me?

SHACKELFORD: Oh, is it? I can still hear you, yeah.

Q: Okay, okay. It was just a moment, okay.

SHACKELFORD: Okay. I come back?

Q: Yeah. All right. Now, the experience in Kosovo. You were there just for the summer or for a short internship?

SHACKELFORD: It was four months in the summer, and it was—I mean, it was chockfull of just future altering experiences. It was the first place I met Foreign Service officers. It was my first experience with USAID projects, it was my first time around embassy communities, and I fell in with this cool group of young Foreign Service officers mostly on their first tours. I met one of them through a running club. The first Foreign Service officer that I really saw and was like, that's an interesting future, I might want to do that, was Dave Holmes, who you might remember, testified during the impeachment hearings. And he was one of the political officers in Kyiv—

Q: Yes. He was sort of the tall—the tall—

SHACKELFORD: A blonde.

Q: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I remember. Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: So, we used to call him Metro Dave because he always looked perfectly together and he would bring a black little rollie suitcase, even to the beach on trips to Greece.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: But I watched him—and he's—obviously he has risen through the ranks. He's an incredible Foreign Service officer. He's got a great future ahead of him. He's a brilliant guy. The first Foreign Service officer I met was a guy named Don who was a consular officer. And I was hearing about his consular tour and I was like, god, consular work, that sounds terrible, which stayed in the back of my mind for a long time. It would be years before I would apply for the Foreign Service because I was like ah, I don't want to have to do visas. But Dave, on the other hand, we'd meet up for drinks and he'd be talking about his work engaging with and following the Serbian opposition groups in Kosovo and tracking the political developments that were getting very dicey in the north. I mean, it was—he was in it. He was this young guy early in his career who was in the middle of these important things that, from what I knew of these communities, I knew that bringing them together and bringing in minority groups in that region and helping Kosovo to work better within the region was—that's incredibly challenging work and here he is in the middle of it. It fascinated me. And it just seemed like this remarkable opportunity where you could be in a career where that's your job to do and you've got the power and the authority of the United States government behind you, giving you that weight to bring to—whether it's negotiations or mediations or just influencing different activities of competing and conflicting sides. It would take me a few years to still apply to the Foreign Service myself, but that planted the seed and it stayed there.

Q: Wow. Okay. All right. But meanwhile, you spent the four months in Kosovo and then you went back to law school.

SHACKELFORD: Correct.

Q: What—was there a particular kind of law that you were focusing on at this point?

SHACKELFORD: I was doing a certificate in international law and I was trying to study as much of that as I could. But international law was still a really vague concept to me and a lot of the focus at Pitt was on the commercial side of it, which in truth is a much more functional aspect of international law. I mean, things actually do work because in the international commercial space nobody gets along there unless the markets are able to function reliably. But I did a lot of really interesting activities. We had the Vis Moot Competition, which is a commercial arbitration competition where you get teams to submit briefs on opposing sides of a fictional case and compete in debates and sessions with teams from many other countries around the world and it happens in Vienna, so that was a really exciting thing that Pitt gets involved in.

Q: Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: And it helps you see how international law can work in business and commerce, which is really fascinating. It just opened my eyes to the wide range of different types of work you can do in the international space with a law degree. So—

Q: Was there a particular topic that year that you focused on?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I mean, my real interest was in human rights law, which is a very fuzzy space in relation to international commercial law. There are areas of international law that are pretty clear and then there's human rights law, which is not clear at all because there are norms and there are treaties and there's not a lot in place to enforce them. And there aren't really strong institutions around consistently enforcing those types of rights as we know because the United States has not been held accountable for its own violations in these areas. So, that was probably one of the things that I learned there.

But in terms of my education in law school, the real takeaway wasn't on the international side. There were very interesting aspects to the international commerce side, which my dear professor and mentor, Ron Brand, was constantly pushing me to go into the commercial side of international law. But law school teaches you how to think analytically and I just don't think that I had done that before. So, for me, I just felt like my brain was getting stronger with every class I took in law school. I loved it. College was okay. I learned interesting facts. I learned that you couldn't trust all of the facts. But I hadn't really learned how to parse them and analyze them and use them. And that's what law school brought to me. It was a small school and I think the best decision that I've made academically in my entire life was picking a school like Pitt where small class sizes were a huge asset—and I was a go-getter, so I was able to really make an impression and build close relationships with a lot of my professors that continue to this day.

Q: Wow. Oh, they—

SHACKELFORD: In just the last week I have emailed with three of my professors from law school.

Q: Oh, that's fantastic because, I mean, those sorts of connections then are useful, I mean, not just personally but also professionally as you move on.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. It was super valuable. And anybody that I know considering law school, I'd just say, you know, "Don't go for the ratings. Go for places where you're going to be able to build those types of mentorships."

Q: Okay. All right. Okay, so now, as you're approaching the end of the studies, the law studies, are you looking—

SHACKELFORD: We've missed my second internship, which was in Sierra Leone.

Q: Ah, thank you, okay. I wouldn't even have thought to ask. Thank you for stopping me and feel free to do that anytime if I overlook something.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. So, in my second year I wanted to do another overseas internship. Meanwhile, Professor Mike Madison, my contracts professor, he'd reached out to me the fall of my second year and said—actually, he'd reached out to me initially my first year. He was like, "You should really consider looking at top law firms for your summer associateships." And I was like, "Nah, I'm going to go to Kosovo." And then next year he was like, "You really should consider going to a big law firm for a summer." And he had—one of his best friends was the hiring partner at Covington and Burling, a very, very well renowned firm, worldwide presence and really a great reputation. And I was like, "Eh, not really corporate law material." So, I said no again, and decided to go to Sierra Leone. It's very competitive to get jobs working in a war crimes court for the prosecution.

Q: Wow. Wow, that's interesting. Okay.

SHACKELFORD: Because everybody wants to prosecute war criminals. Lots of kids from Harvards and UVAs and Princetons and Stanfords want to go and prosecute war criminals. That sounds great. It's a lot harder to find people who are interested in going and defending war criminals.

Q: Right, right.

SHACKELFORD: So, I found a gig on a team that—on a defense team for one of the accused in the Special Court in Sierra Leone that was prosecuting, "The most grave of the offenders" of the recently ended civil war there. And I had no idea what I was getting into. Basically, I knew that Pitt had a little funding to cover the costs and we found someone willing to take me on with the team that was defending Issa Hassan Sesay, who was the former Revolutionary United Front leader in Sierra Leone. He basically ended up the last man holding the bag at the end of the war.

And so, I boarded a flight, several flights, arrived at the beginning of the summer in 2005, and got in at 2:30 in the morning. You have to take a little helicopter from the peninsula over to the mainland. It's a very long story that I could tell you, but it would take a while. Short story is, nobody came to pick me up.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: So, I found myself in the middle of the night in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the darkest place on earth because there's no functional power grid. And the UN forgot to come pick me up.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: So, I had to find my way from there (laughs)—which I did. I'd been put in touch with a small NGO, someone who did some work with a small NGO there, put me in touch with the Sierra Leonean woman who was a dressmaker in case I was trying to find somewhere to stay. So, I called her up in the middle of the night and luckily was able to go and stay with her that night. But it took me a couple of days to get anyone at the UN to even acknowledge that I'd arrived in the country.

Q: Good lord.

SHACKELFORD: Which was—which is amazing. I mean, I was just fascinated. I had somewhere to go. I will never forget I was waiting around and of course, nobody came, and I had—somebody had drawn out directions to this dressmaker's house because there are no street signs, there's no way—there are no MapQuests; there's no way to find your way around Freetown back then.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: So, I had this handwritten map. I've got, like, fifteen-hundred dollars in cash stuffed into my underwear because there are no banks that are functioning there, there are no ATMs (Automatic Teller Machines), so I needed anything that I need to get by for the summer. It's the middle of the night, it's dark as hell, and I'm like, you know, taxi—taxi drivers would be coming up, like, "You need to go somewhere?" And I'm like, "Nope, somebody's going to come get me, they're going to." Nobody does.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: Finally, I am like, okay. So, I find a taxi driver and I'm certain that he's going to pull me over somewhere and rob me and kill me. But he didn't and I ended up at the dressmaker's. Turns out, everybody knew the dressmaker. And the story ended happily. In like a day and a half I managed to connect with the folks at the court and they were like, Eh. We knew you'd been in Kosovo last year. We figured you'd be fine. Like, we got stuck upriver on an investigation and just got word to somebody, but they forgot to come get you. They were very lax about it. But everybody was like, Eh, the new intern's fine.

Q: Wow. You know, I might just turn around and get on the next flight after an experience like that, but you didn't.

SHACKELFORD: Then, after two days in the office, they were like, So, we're so happy you're here. Court's closed for about three weeks. We're all going on R&R (Rest and Recreation), so we need you to stay here and cover, I don't know, this wide variety of things. And they literally left me in the office.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: It was really weird. But after the rough start, a few people took me under their wing and I learned a lot about not only how, frankly inequitable a war crimes court is by its very nature because obviously, to the winner go the spoils and the facts and the truth. It was a very complicated war, like most of them are. I ended up—part of my tasks during that three-week period was to go and spend a few hours every day with the client, Issa, in his holding area to ask him questions about upcoming witnesses. And I can't go into any of the details, but it was really interesting to learn firsthand so much about this very complicated war from a guy who had been brought into it essentially as a child.

Q: Wow. Wow.

SHACKELFORD: So, that—it gave me a really interesting perspective on who are the "enemies" in any war that you're talking about? What drives them? What brought them to where they are? What are their rules of the game and their moral structures? And it rarely spells out the way you think it would at first glance.

Q: Were you dealing with child soldiers?

SHACKELFORD: There were many there. The war was over at this point and you had a lot of them in rehabilitation facilities and the question of how to deal with them. I mean, that was actually one of the most complicated legal questions, was that use of child soldiers had not been an international law prohibition during the war. It had been legally determined much later and it wasn't—there wasn't universal agreement on what makes a child soldier; is it eighteen, is it sixteen, you know. So, that was one of the complicating questions of the many charges against Issa and others in the court, was can you charge them with this crime that was not a crime under either Sierra Leonean law or international law at the time it happened.

Q: Fascinating. I mean, just for a legal person to have to deal with an issue like that right there where the lives of the people you're interacting with you'll have an impact on.

SHACKELFORD: You knew he was going to be convicted. There was no way that the UN had set up this hybrid UN national court with only, I believe there were a total twelve people who were indicted initially, three of whom were dead or missing. I mean, you whittle it down, there were only a handful of people that this entire court that took years and millions and millions of dollars could possibly hold accountable. So, by golly, they were going to hold him accountable. And I mean, war crimes are a tough thing. You've got to be able to have laws on the books that you are trying people against if you're following the rule of law, so it's—legally it was fascinating. Kind of socially and emotionally and from a perspective of communal struggles it was really interesting to see. And at the end of the day, I found myself thinking, On the one hand I've spent a lot of time with this guy, I believe what he says. It's a far more complicated story than you see in *Blood Diamond* the movie or something. But people need some justice. Individualized justice might mean that this guy who was brought in pretty unfairly at an early age himself, is he really accountable for all of the war crimes of this war? But the flip side is,

these people need to see somebody pay for what the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) has done to this country.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, complicated moral questions. And I left Sierra Leone less certain about a lot of those issues while certainly more informed. But it was pretty clear that defending war crimes was not really what I wanted to do with my career.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Do you know what the final outcome was at this point for the principal defendants?

SHACKELFORD: I believe they're all in for life and I think a few of them have already died. But I don't think that they were convicted on all accounts. I'd have to look up which ones. There were a couple of counts that a couple of the accused did not get guilty verdicts on, but the vast majority of them were guilty verdicts.

Q: Were you able to talk to any sort of average Sierra Leoneans about what was going on and what they thought?

SHACKELFORD: I did, just in everyday interactions. I walked to and from work, which had me on the ground crossing through regular communities. I connected early with the U.S. Embassy community, and I quickly realized they lived such a different life there than I did. I was renting a room in this small house with a Pakistani family that was working at the court, and then I moved into a small apartment with several other expats who were also working in the court. But I would walk the few blocks to get to the court every day and I had my place where I bought bananas and I had my place where I got my money changed, I had my place where I picked up beer, and you know, you just chat and interact with people. Now, not every—I mean, it's Krio there, and again I'm not adept at languages, so I was not terribly good at communicating. But after a couple of weeks, you are able to understand more because there's a lot of English involved. But I chatted a lot with them and with drivers and just people about it. And there was a lot of support for the kind of reconciliation aspect going on, for the truth telling involved. A lot of people got their livelihood out of the courts, it brought a lot of money in. Generally speaking, there was, in Freetown in particular, in the capital, there was support. But there were parts of the country where there was less. But it seemed to be having largely the intended impact, which was to bring out the truth, clear the air, give opportunities for the victims to speak, which they did every day in the court when it was in session, and that was a lot—I mean, that was very powerful to see and to watch and to witness.

Q: Wow. All right. And you—then you go back to Pitt to complete the JD (Juris Doctor)?

SHACKELFORD: After briefly hitchhiking to Timbuktu. But we can skip that story.

Q: Oh, my heavens. What year is this now?

SHACKELFORD: Two thousand—2005.

Q: Is Timbuktu still—when you were there, was it still reasonably together? Because—

SHACKELFORD: Probably the stupidest thing I ever did. I knew nothing about Mali. My sister was working, randomly, in Ghana, so we met in the capital in Mali and hitchhiked up the Timbuktu, knowing nothing about the security situation, and blissfully unaware that we were basically just hitting it in-between different wars. There's no—I mean, there were no tourists anywhere. It was a very crazy experience. All the things that I did before I really understood what was going on in the world. Amazing that I survived it.

Q: Yeah. Because there have been reports subsequently in the last few years about how because of the wars and so on that Timbuktu is really suffering and that historical parts of it are being lost.

SHACKELFORD: Absolutely. And it was a remarkable place to get to go see. I remember thinking how surprising it was that there was so much history captured there in this tiny, epically historic city essentially made of dirt and mud that was still intact.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: It was just horrifying to see the reports years later of the cultural destruction by militant groups in 2012, ancient texts in one of the world's oldest libraries that were just destroyed.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: It's a place I am deeply grateful that I got to see before that happened.

Q: Wow. Okay. Well, I mean, I'm glad that luck was with you. Because you're right, given the year it could have been—could have turned out much, much worse.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah, two white girls wandering around was not a normal thing then. People were so confused to see us that actually there was this kind of outpouring of care and feeding. People were just like, Are you okay? Do you need help? What are you doing here? We started to just tell them we were with the Peace Corps because the Peace Corps seemed to be universally loved there and it was harder to explain that we worked for other, you know, aid-types of groups. But people, again, I didn't speak French. Just Peace Corps, and they're like oh, okay.

Q: Good. All right, all right. It worked. My heavens. Okay. But you do eventually make your way back to Pittsburgh.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. Yes. And that fall the same professor, Professor Madison, said, "Okay. You've been to Kosovo; you've been to Sierra Leone. Are you sure you don't

want to try and work for a firm?" I didn't do a summer associateship with a firm, which for folks in the legal world know if you don't do the summer associateship it's hard to get a job. And he was like, "You should really still apply to Covington."

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: And I thought, Well, I don't want to defend war criminals, so maybe I'll just—maybe I'll do this as an entry point. So, I applied for a first-year associate position at Covington and Burling in Washington, DC and I'm sure, based on my professor's very strong recommendation that they actually considered me, and the fact that Covington was apparently trying to enhance its diversity, so not just pull everybody from Harvard and Yale, they gave me a good look and took me on. So, then I finished my year and went to Covington and Burling in DC to experience the corporate law world.

Q: Well, you know, on the other hand, I mean, looking at your background, how many people applying to Covington went to South Africa, Sierra Leone, you know, Kosovo, and had all the kinds of experience you did?

SHACKELFORD: I was an anomaly, but it was another place where, like law school, I went and I just—I built relationships. I'm still in touch with several partners that I worked with there, even though I only worked there for fifty-three weeks before I left.

Q: Was there anything at all in the kind of work Covington did that interested you?

SHACKELFORD: There was. I could have taken a different path and stayed there. I mean, it's an excellent firm and I was around such smart people. It was a short period of time, but I learned so much. My writing improved so much. My thinking improved. The work that I was doing, I was doing some pre-trial litigation work on pharmaceuticals, but mostly I was working on international trade work, which sounds a lot more exciting than it was. Issues like foreign investment in the United States and determining which companies investing externally can get approved and help them get approval for investing in the United States. Helping companies navigate sanctions restrictions. For example, we've got a lot of sanctions against trade with Iran, but there are exceptions for things like chicken vaccines. Who knew? I was working with those types of regulations, which in and of themselves were not that interesting, but I learned a lot about the complications of international trade, and that is a huge aspect of our foreign policy world. We had to do regular work with the Treasury Department to navigate what was going on with what our clients' needs were. So, it was a good experience. I learned a lot about how companies and countries trade in the world.

Q: Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: It also taught me a lot about regulation, government regulation because so much of what we were dealing with was navigating government regulations. And you can be working on anything and if you're working with really, really sharp people it's a great experience.

Q: Yeah, yeah, true. All right. But you're in Washington, you've spent your, I guess it's a year at Covington, what is drawing you out? What's the pull factor?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I have one more step before I get to the Foreign Service because I crammed in so many things into a few years of an early career.

Q: Okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: One of my professors from law school reached out to me not quite a year into my time at Covington, and he had been doing some consulting work for Booz Allen Hamilton—one of the beltway bandits that was primarily doing defense work but was dipping its feet into the area of international development consulting. They were doing some projects with USAID. And he knew that they were hiring somebody for a particular position on a legal and regulatory program.

Q: This is USAI—oh, no, Booz Allen was.

SHACKELFORD: Booz Allen had this USAID contract for business enabling environment work across the globe, basically going out to different countries and doing assessments of legal and regulatory reforms that are needed in order to improve the business environment in order to build prosperity and improve livelihoods and the ability to trade, et cetera, et cetera. But it was legal regulatory based, so that had appeal, and it was based in a lot of different countries. So, I went for it. It was pretty widely supported even by colleagues at Covington because I was leaving for something so different. And then I spent three years working in, I believe, twenty-one different countries with Booz Allen, dropping in, taking in a team of experts who covered different issues, everything from property law to business startups to bankruptcy to contracts, and I'd usually cover some of these topics myself. We'd meet with members of the business community, different government organizations and government departments. We'd meet with banks and we'd pull together in-depth reports to talk about the barriers to trade and business in that country and make recommendations for improvements.

Q: While you were doing that did you also consult with people in the Foreign Commercial Service, the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah, we did some, although not all of these countries have permanent presences of the Foreign Commercial Service.

Q: Right, okay.

SHACKELFORD: But we worked with the embassies, primarily with USAID, but it was another experience, an opportunity to really get to know that world more, kind of learn more about the differences between USAID's Foreign Service and the State Department Foreign Service and what they're involved in and doing. And that was when I—the idea started to come back into my head that Foreign Service, like that's—I wasn't as drawn to

the development work because I felt like the policy work had this overarching impact on everything. And after three years that contract was wrapping up and I was looking around thinking, The other development work didn't really appeal, so I thought well, I'll take the Foreign Service officer test and see what happens.

Q: And what year was that?

SHACKELFORD: I must have taken the test in 2009, entered in 2010.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: And it was—actually I might have taken it, like, January of 2010. Because it was eight or nine months from beginning to end. It was pretty fast because Secretary Clinton had launched the Diplomacy 3.0 program and they were in a big hiring push—a very short period of a hiring increase.

Q: Right. Right, right.

SHACKELFORD: So, I just managed to hit that right.

Q: Yeah, you're right, that was lucky.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah.

Q: Okay, and of course, you know, you had been to three countries and well, actually, three countries for a relatively long time and then many, many others and who knows how long that took for your security clearance, but it finally—that finally came through. Now, at the time that you entered the Foreign Service, were you entering with a cone or was this one of the periods when you didn't have a cone and at some point along the way they would give you one?

SHACKELFORD: So, this was when you'd still select your cone when you applied. So, I came in as political cone.

Q: Okay. All right. And you come in in 2010; about when in the year?

SHACKELFORD: September.

Q: Okay. All right. How large is your entry class?

SHACKELFORD: Just about 100 people.

Q: Good heavens.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah.

Q: That's one of the largest I've ever heard of.

SHACKELFORD: It got big. So, the room, we just didn't even fit in.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: It was so tightly packed, if you wanted to get out—of course, these are all alphabetically spaced, so I'm sitting in the middle next to two other *S* last names. And everybody has to coordinate if somebody has to get up to use the bathroom.

Q: Right. Holy cow.

SHACKELFORD: It was so crowded.

Q: Oh yeah. Oh, my goodness. What was the class like to the extent, you know, 100 people? That's an awful lot of people to meet in five to six weeks. But what were your impressions of the class in terms of diversity and background and so on?

SHACKELFORD: It was a very diverse class. They were working to increase diversity, gender parity, racial parity. We had a diverse class. We had a lot of young people who were coming in with the Pickering fellowships and we had—and I've got to say, I'm always so impressed at people who are able to get through that testing process right out of college because I had a lot of experience to draw on during the orals, the oral assessment, and I just don't know how somebody has that kind of depth to offer when you're that young. So, I was always very impressed by those folks.

We had a lot of vets, military veterans because folks were coming in with a veterans boost. I'm still close to many people from my class, although a few others have also left the service, as happens.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh. What did you think in general of the preparation of the class itself? Did you feel that it really did help prepare you for what you were getting into?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah, I think it did. Because I'd been doing so much work already in the past three years with embassies, I had a lot of that already—that knowledge already.

Q: Yes.

SHACKELFORD: My job with Booz Allen was in a lot of ways kind of a perfect predecessor to a political officer. You are given a problem set, you go out and find the right people to meet to learn about it, assess it, write up a report. I mean, it's very much like political work. But I do, I think they do a good job in orientation. It's hard to target such a wide set of people with varying levels of preparation and experience, but I think they did a really good job with it, yeah, at the time it was five weeks. You get to know people very well. I look back on that time quite fondly. It was fun, it was exciting. You

were—you get to know people really well and you're all about to launch off into these really interesting careers. So, yeah, it was a good experience.

I went right from that into, I don't know if I did language first or consular first, but the consular training was also really, I mean, they do a great job of cramming in everything you need to know when you go off to your first consular job, and they do it in a pretty accessible way.

Q: Right, right.

SHACKELFORD: And then, Polish language.

Q: Holy cow. Nine months or how many months?

SHACKELFORD: So, they just didn't have enough time to get me—they were in such a crunch that summer, so I got like seven months and barely pulled out my—I think I only needed a two/two; I think I got like a two-plus/two. But I mean, it was still—that's a hard language. And as I've mentioned before, I'm not good at languages.

Q: Wow. That's—but even so, to come out with a two plus two, even after seven months is still a pretty reasonable accomplishment.

SHACKELFORD: I worked very hard. It was sheer will to get through it. But it was five hours of language class and I studied four or five hours on top of that. I was so determined to get through it. But it was hard. And Polish language training launched my interest in running marathons because I was not a runner before that, but I felt so behind on studies all the time that the only thing I would allow myself to take a break for was to go for a run.

Q: Ah. Uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: The only thing that was worse than running was studying Polish.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: So, every day my runs got longer and longer. Now, mind you, I wasn't a runner before that and at that stage I'm like thirty. My runs just got longer and longer and longer because they were the only thing that freed me from Polish. And I was doing races by the end of the year and in my first year in Poland ran my first marathon.

Q: Wow. Remarkable. Remarkable. Well, okay. Would you like to—at this point we could break or if you would like we can go on to follow you into your first tour in Poland. What is best for you?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I've got another work deadline today, so it would be good to break before we enter into another chapter.

Q: Okay, that's fine. All right. So, we'll pause here, and I'll be in touch. Let me, well, let me just pause the recording.

All right. So, today is August 31, 2020. We're resuming our interview with Elizabeth Shackleford.

And it is Warsaw you're going to?

SHACKELFORD: Correct.

Q: And what year is that?

SHACKELFORD: This was in 2011. I entered in 2010 and had a lot of months of training before I went out to post.

Q: All right. When you arrived in Warsaw, was it a furnished post?

SHACKELFORD: Yes, it was furnished. You had the option. Though I was put in temporary—a temporary apartment for the first two months there. It was not terribly furnished.

Q: Okay. Funny that the embassy and the embassy community in some of these Eastern European posts have been there now for quite a while, but somehow even at—even by 2011 they didn't have the final embassy up yet. Were you in a newer embassy?

SHACKELFORD: No, no. It was definitely an older embassy which had the benefit of being smack in the middle of town, which is so lovely. It was not an attractive embassy. My understanding is that they had knocked down a beautiful palace and built some hideous, Soviet era style building. But it was very well located.

Q: Okay, okay. So, it essentially had the setback and was considered secure by State Department standards?

SHACKELFORD: It was considered secure enough. I mean, it wasn't a high threat place by any stretch.

Q: Okay. All right. So, when you get there, what is the embassy community like? How big and where did you fit?

SHACKELFORD: It was—I look back on it as a really good first embassy experience. It was a large, mid-sized embassy so you had several hundred—I don't know, a hundred to 200 Americans, I don't remember exactly. But it was big, it was robust. The consular section had—which is where I spent my first year, had like ten or so Americans and the political section was robust and that's where I spent my second year. So, you kind of got to see when you have a political internal section and external section, you have all the

pieces there. So, I really got to see a standard operating procedure type embassy in place for my first tour, which considering how weird my next two tours were I think it was good that I had a picture of what it's supposed to look like.

Q: Okay. Now, when you arrived were you doing visitor visas, immigrant visas, or did they rotate you through all of it?

SHACKELFORD: I did one year of non-immigrant visas. So, it was—I was actually supposed to go out and do, if I recall correctly, two years of visas, but they switched me out because they had some—a staffing issue. So, by the time I arrived at post I had learned that I was only doing one year of visas and then would be going out to the political section. So, that's a pretty knock it out of the park for a first tour for a political officer.

Q: Yeah, absolutely, because in essence you would be completing your consular responsibility in a little less time and then get early experience.

SHACKELFORD: Right, for sure. Although I will say, as a lot of people, particularly folks who come in as political officers just loathe the consular work, that was, in terms of just really good management and leadership and a really well functioning section of great people, it was a really great work experience. So, I stopped pooh-poohing consular after that.

Q: (Laughs) What would—I a lot of times people learn some useful information even when they're on the non-visitor visa line that can be helpful to them in either the economic section or political section. Do you recall anything like that?

SHACKELFORD: Well, yeah. You get a really good sense of the population. You get a good sense of what people are doing professionally in different parts of the country. What's the job market like? What are people looking to get out of and escape? It was—you just see humanity every day. One of the most interesting aspects was dealing with criminal records for people because, of course, part of even as a non-immigrant visa applicant, if you have a criminal record of any sort you have to bring proof of what it was. And you've got these weird protocols for if it's a crime of moral turpitude that can prevent you from getting a visa, and of course, moral turpitude is not a particularly clearly defined term. And I started to realize that one of the most common crimes that people would come in with a record of was drunk bicycling.

Q: Aah. Interesting.

SHACKELFORD: We had to debate internally as to whether or not that would constitute a crime of moral turpitude, and my personal view was they're not driving, that's great. Like, you'd much rather them be on a bike than behind the wheel of a car. But it was interesting because that was a pretty common thing to get a citation for in Warsaw and we had to kind of compare that to our own legal situations to see what—how the American legal system might treat it. So, those were the types of strange things you dove

into and you'd spend time trying to find out what it meant under Polish law. And as a lawyer, with a legal background I found that type of thing pretty fascinating in a nerdy way.

Q: Was—did you run into a lot of problems with people who were former members of the communist party?

SHACKELFORD: You know, we really didn't. I don't even think that that was a question in our application process. But of course, that is—when I went on to South Sudan that was a big issue in terms of people being associated with different rebel groups or militias. But yeah, in Poland it wasn't something that came up.

Q: Okay. What were, in general what—were there places that Poles wanted to go as visitors? Was this all Disneyland or were they going to visit family?

SHACKELFORD: Chicago, Chicago, Chicago, Chicago.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: A lot of Chicago. It was—very, very frequently people who were going to visit family. And consular work is so interesting, visa work is so interesting because what might seem suspicious in one country would seem completely different in another and after a few months on the line in Poland, where you'd be very suspicious of the interests of unemployed women in their fifties going to Chicago to visit a cousin they've never seen before, I actually ended up having this really interesting experience a few months later because our consulate in Lagos, Nigeria, needed some help staffing during a quiet time so I went and did a month on the visa line down there between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It was fascinating. But like, day one, I have this fifty-something year old lady, she's going to visit relatives. I'm like, that seems really dicey to me. And a colleague on the line was like, Oh, no, no, no, no. The women in that age group coming from Nigeria, they don't want to live in America. They always come back, we're not worried about them at all. But it's just the dynamics of different kinds of communities and how that impacts, you know, the risk profile and—and just what people's expectations are, you know. In Warsaw, I see all sorts of people going on vacation to Chicago and then I'm sitting in Lagos and all these Nigerians want to go to places like, Dallas or Houston, and I'm like, nobody goes on vacation there. And my colleagues correct me. Oh, no, everybody does. Everybody getting a visa from Nigeria goes on vacation in Texas, they visit family, they buy everything in the malls and then they come back. And that's a completely standard operating procedure.

Q: Fascinating. I imagine they're direct flights.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Did you run into a lot of fraud in Poland?

SHACKELFORD: It was less fraud than just people planning to overstay visas. I guess that is a fraudulent use of a visa. So, that was primarily our concern, was that people would never come back but that they would get their visas and go and work for six months and come back and work for six months and come back. And you know, it's hard to get too worked up about it when you're comparing it to other things. When I was in Lagos we had somebody who popped up on the screen as a hit for child trafficking. I saw all sorts of interesting things pop up on the screen in Nigeria.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: In Poland, it was a lot less like that. But we did get people who, you know, you've got third country nationals, people from other places who came through, and that was always interesting to parse and see. You'd have people who had applied in other parts of Europe and then with the easy travel around Europe they would come over and try and apply again if they'd been rejected elsewhere. I mean, all in all, visa work was a lot more interesting and nuanced than I'd expected it to be. Your interviews, a lot of them are like, eighty seconds, but the ones that pop up that are complicated are—they really make you think. There are a lot of cases of people trying to take kids or family members over to the States for medical purposes and that was often a challenge to deal with in terms of, all right, who's paying for it, how are people paying for it, what is your plan of action when you get there? And we've gotten to a point now where I think they're even more stringent on people's abilities to come for even, like, lifesaving surgery if you don't have proof of how you're going to pay for it and return to your country. So, those were always hard cases too.

Q: Wow. Yeah, especially—I can imagine—well, now I don't know anybody who'd be—even be able to travel, but as things got worse, sure.

You said you had a month in Lagos. Did you have other opportunities within the consular section to do American Citizen Services or immigrant visas?

SHACKELFORD: I did some American Citizen Services when we had the—it was the European football cup. I'm blanking on the actual title, not being a sports enthusiast. But it was a very big deal. It was the summer of—I arrived in 2011, so it was the summer of 2012. And I got to go with a Polish colleague up to the Gdańsk region along the coast where they were going to have a few games basically just to be there in case there were issues with Americans there. That was really—it was a really interesting opportunity. I hadn't done any American Citizen Services work since I'd just been on the visa line, but they were giving different folks opportunities to travel to different parts of the country to be there and available if Americans had issues because we were expecting thousands of Americans to fly to Poland for the purposes of these games. So, that was—it was positive and exciting and fun. And as would continue to happen throughout my career, I was just amazed at the lengths that we would go to to make sure that we were around to help Americans in case something happened.

Q: Did we still have any consulates that would require assistance in Poland or was it all now in Warsaw?

SHACKELFORD: In Kraków we've got a consulate still, which is—I mean, primarily there, really, to manage all of the congressional delegations that go to visit Auschwitz.

Q: I see.

SHACKELFORD: It happens constantly. And I got to staff a few. That was once I was in the political section, staff a few trips out there. But yeah, traveling there was always great. It's a beautiful, well preserved small city with just a tremendous amount of history. And my friends who worked there, it was such a different experience than being in Warsaw. You know, it's kind of a university town, a historic town, a tourist town. The consulate is right off the main square. Really just a remarkable historic spot.

Q: Yeah. All right. Well, were there any other things from your consular experience that stick out in your mind that I haven't asked you?

SHACKELFORD: I think we've pretty much covered it. It was, like I said, a really good learning experience about the Foreign Service and a great opportunity to kind of get to know the flavor of the country that you've gotten to. A lot of people still talk about whether we should get rid of the consular requirement for Foreign Service officers, which is really primarily there just to manage with the staffing levels, but I think it's such a great way to get to know a country and to get to know how the U.S. influences different places around the world and what the different impressions are of the United States. I think it's a great way to spend a year. I'm glad I only had to do one year at the service window. And it's also quite useful for the language. I had some pretty difficult times with the language in the window and it can time some time for—I mean, I think all of our colleagues, you know, your local staff often come into these jobs and stay there for years and years and years, and they see new Foreign Service officers come and go with the seasons, and they know so much more than we do. But I think they get a lot of enjoyment out of watching us stumble our way through the Polish language. It took about two weeks before one of them finally told me that when I was sitting at the window stumbling through my Polish and trying to explain, you know, sorry, I'm slow, I'm new, it took two weeks for one of our local staff to finally tap me on the shoulder to say, "You keep telling people you're new to town and you're available."

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: So, I was wondering why I kept getting little notes slipped under the window to me with phone numbers. I was like, we have your information, it's fine. But I think they enjoyed that. There are a few other really good ones, but that was probably the best of my language foibles.

Q: All right, so you moved into the political section in 2012, and you're the junior-most member of the section, but did you have a set of responsibilities or were you filling in or how did that work?

SHACKELFORD: As is often the case, I was tasked to be the human rights officer so I had the human rights portfolio. Someone has the human rights portfolio in every embassy that we have in the world, primarily because we are tasked with the congressionally mandated reports, the annual human rights report, which we do in every country, the trafficking in persons report, which we do in every country, and the religious freedom report, which we do in every country. And then there are a series of other ones that depend, it just—the different reports on the child soldier situation which was not an issue in Poland, but that tends to be the portfolio for the human rights officer.

It was very interesting to have that in Poland for a few reasons. I mean, one is yeah, you don't—today, actually, you do think about a lot of human rights issues, but back in 2011, 2012, it was a far more kind of progressive, forward thinking place than it is right now politically. I think it would be more interesting to be the human rights officer in Poland today than it was back then. But it was still an opportunity to dive into different issues like the LGBTQ community there, which, of course, was still largely under wraps and struggling with recognition and rights. Women's issues there, I frankly felt a little embarrassed going around and probing on that because in so many ways the laws in Poland were more progressive and friendly to women than ours are back home in things like family leave. So, you'd get people saying, oh, that's interesting that America is going to be critical of the way that we treat women in our country where at least they can go and get birth control without having to run a gauntlet, which, by the way, we still have to do in America.

So, that was—it's also an interesting way to get to know the country. I had a wonderful, wonderful—her title was political assistant. Kasha had been in the embassy for many, many years doing the human rights portfolio and other things and knew that system backwards and forwards. And basically, she was still in the stage where she was clipping out of the newspaper and I spent an entire year trying to convince her and the others in the political section that, like, we should read things online and email them to each other and that the little stack of cutouts was not necessary. But people get very stuck in their ways. I learned a tremendous amount from her and also kept kind of probing through on the areas that we really weren't pursuing, and one was the situation of the Muslim population in Poland. They have very old traditionally Muslim population that lives in just little pockets there and we had really not done much at all to look into their situation. So, I convinced Kasha that we were going to travel to the—I don't even remember which section of the country it was, but we traveled to go meet the imam of this community. And she was so fascinated—at first she was very skeptical. She was like, "I don't know why you're going to bother with this tiny community, why would we go talk to them?" And afterwards she was like, "I've never met a Muslim. That was just fascinating." They gave us a cookbook. It was very cool. Sometimes she'd be frustrated when I would try and kind of push the bar, but by the end she was quite excited to add some different

things to our portfolio. Year after year you kind of get into a rut if you haven't seen a new point of view, you meet the same people, you update the same stories.

So, it was a great experience and they were just skilled people in that section who'd been around for so long. And I—it's another good way to get to know the country. When it's a portfolio that's not, quite frankly, of high interest to the front office you can kind of go about and make it your own job however you'd like to.

I will say a couple of issues that were fascinating was that at the time the EU was dealing with animal cruelty laws, some of which had to do with how you slaughter animals.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: And there are like three different terms in Polish for slowly bleeding out. The history—learning about a country's language tells you so much about their histories and their traumas. It's really remarkable. But this was one of the few things in my human rights portfolio that got all the way to the front office, to the ambassador's office because it was this big controversy. Poland has a big industry for both kosher and halal meats.

Q: Oh, interesting.

SHACKELFORD: Because halal is very similar to kosher in terms of preparation. And so, they export a lot of meat to different gulf and Middle Eastern countries because they have slaughterhouses that have this capacity. Again, I had to learn all the terminology in Polish because by that point we had Ambassador Steve Mull, who was fluent, so fluent in Polish, so beloved. His first tour had been in Poland and he had been beloved ever since then. But trying to keep up with taking notes for like him in a high-level discussion about how the EU plans to treat Polish slaughterhouses with their various, slow bleeding out preparations was, let's just say I'm not entirely sure that my notes were all that accurate, but you tried to get the big picture, which was, I don't know, let's try and help Poland continue this important industry, but do so in a way that's good to animals and approved by the EU. It's funny how challenges like that become really of high concern.

Q: So, wait. So, just to be certain, in other words the halal or the kosher method was not considered kosher, so to speak, by the EU?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. The challenge was that the EU had passed a law that said that you had to stun the animals before you killed them, and if you stunned the animals then they won't bleed out. I'm reaching back to almost ten years ago in terms of my—and I didn't understand this issue terribly well at the time. But yeah, it was one of those funny things where nobody really thought that this would be a controversial law provision under the EU and then lo and behold, there's a whole industry that raised concern.

Q: Wow. That's amazing. Yeah, I agree with you, I would never have expected that to be in a human rights portfolio, but all right.

SHACKELFORD: Well, of course, my first question was, "Is this really human rights? Sounds like animal rights to me." And they were like, We don't really have anybody else to give it to. Though freedom of religion was also in my portfolio, so that fit.

Q: Okay. Yeah, right. Were there VIP visits that were particularly interesting or useful for you?

SHACKELFORD: We had some—I mean, a lot of people like to come and visit Poland. It's a great place to go. And there are so very many occasions. There were so many memorial services that we went to every year and if—once you go to them it's an insult if the U.S. embassy doesn't send somebody the next year. So, we managed quite a few of those visits.

But the biggest visit that I managed was the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) has Europe's largest human rights conference every year in Warsaw. It's called—HDIM (Human Dimension Implementation Meetings). Acronyms, you know how they are in the government. We had so many special envoys show up, a lot of different ambassadors, a lot of people from Washington. We had a delegation of, if I recall correctly, it was forty-seven people came in from Washington for the occasion and yet we had a lot of different special envoys. We had the special envoy for religious freedom, we had the special envoy for the Holocaust, we had the special envoy for anti-Semitism. During this weeklong conference the special envoy for, I believe it was the Holocaust, was replaced, so we had both of them there, overlapping, the new one and the old one, like, outgoing. I've never managed so many special envoys. I didn't realize until that very moment how many special envoys the U.S. government had. And it was a learning opportunity for me to recognize that new presidents often add new special envoys, but very few actually subtract any.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: And they all want to come to a conference in Poland on human rights. So, that was a very busy time. It was my first introduction to just how much hand holding, suitcase carrying and schedule changing you have to do when you're dealing with a lot of people who find themselves very important.

Q: Right, yeah. I understand. Did any of it—did you find any of it useful for subsequent tours?

SHACKELFORD: I mean, absolutely. That was diving in the deep end in terms of just people management. And as I'm sure you are aware, managing people is something that FSOs have to do a lot in every tour. So, that dumped me into the deep end and I—and again, being in a really functional—I mean, Warsaw was an exceedingly functional post. It was staffed with a lot of the best. You often hear this, but people who have earned, kind of earned their chops in the Foreign Service like to go serve in nice places and Warsaw is a wonderful place to be. So, I got a chance to really learn from a lot of

experienced people who got their top choice of post, which served me very well when I went onward to places that were kind of willy nilly staffed with whoever you could get. And places that didn't function like normal embassies. So, I went in with a baseline. I mean, I had templates of what things looked like, of what paperwork you use to manage visits, of cables on different topics, you know. I continued to rely on those templates for years. I pulled up draft templates when I was in South Sudan and not sure what to do. I would ask myself, what would Warsaw do? Nobody in South Sudan seemed to have good structures or durable organization. For example, we didn't have a contact database in South Sudan. Like, we literally didn't. I asked my predecessor when I arrived where our contact database was and he was like, "Just ask Chol." I was like, "What if Chol gets hit by a car tomorrow? Like, just ask Chol does not seem like a sound information management program to me."

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, it was—it was a great place to learn how things get done.

Q: Were you able to improve your Polish language skill while you were there?

SHACKELFORD: I improved a very shallow part of my language skills. One of the challenges in Warsaw is that everybody speaks English. Now, people on the visa line don't, necessarily, so I got very good at that particular conversation, you know. And I could then go to a party and ask somebody about their travel history and their family and their job. So, I was very good at that. I had kind of taxicab Polish. I don't know, cocktail party Polish. And then I had a variety of strange, in-depth conversations. Like, I could chat with you about your family and your job or I could talk to you about slaughtering animals.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: There wasn't a lot in-between those two.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: I could talk to someone also about trafficking in persons and the sex trade, but there wasn't a lot beyond the surface level and those really specific conversations.

Q: Were you able to travel yourself and see parts of the country that you might not otherwise have seen?

SHACKELFORD: Yes. That was one of the wonderful parts of that tour which some of my subsequent tours, it was a lot harder. For starters, my job was, I mean, I wouldn't say nine to five, but you know, eight to six, which that's the last time I had that kind of schedule. But you were encouraged to get out at a normal time and to go have a life. I didn't work a lot of weekends and I took advantage, not just in Poland but also in the

region. There was an airplane ticket website where you could put your dates in but no destination and it would just tell you where the cheapest place was to go, so me and some of my friends would sometimes be like, sure February seems like a great time to go to this incredibly cold capital of whatever random Eastern European country, so let's do it. Poland also has great trains. The apartment that I had was this wonderful apartment in a park right in the city center and I could walk from there to the train station, hop on a train to Kraków or Gdańsk or down to Berlin, and it was wonderful. The travel opportunities were great.

Q: Did you foresee what the Polish political scene would become while you were there?

SHACKELFORD: You know, I have looked back so many times at—I had a lot of Polish friends there, primarily through—remember I mentioned I got into running.

Q: Ah, yeah, right, uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: I had this triathlon group that I hooked up with, which was great. It was about 50 percent Polish, 50 percent expats, and it was the best way that I really got to know a lot of people from Poland. And I remember how much they would obsess about Russia and how Russia was right on their doorstep and was going to invade at any moment and how this huge commanding threat. And this is back in 2011, 2012, I was like, "Really guys? Like, you're part of the EU. Poland's done tremendously well economically out of its membership in the EU. You've got better education. You've got a good economy, a good environment. It's progressing really well." But Russia was just the boogeyman to them. And at the time, perhaps it was because I was more naïve about the world than I am now, but I just remember almost mocking them for that. And a few years after that, I remember emailing a couple of my Polish friends and being like, I am so sorry I ever mocked that, like, you guys were totally spot on, you've been manipulated, and your political situation has become very dire. And it's hard right now. But what's going on in Poland doesn't differ all that much from a lot of places around the world, including the U.S., where we also have these progressive cities while rural countrysides are really becoming dangerously nationalistic. And it's interesting to see the parallels, particularly considering how much more different I thought that our environments were back then.

Q: All right. Well, by the time you get to the political section, you're also thinking about the next post. Are there mentors or are you asking people or what are you thinking about?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I still had in my head, which I had in my head during A-100, I really wanted to get back to Africa and I was fascinated by the idea of going to South Sudan. So, I had that in mind when the bid list came out while I was in A-100 and then inexplicably got sent instead to a fabulous European post. But I knew that I wanted—I really enjoyed Europe but I knew I wanted to get back to the African continent. And once I saw that Juba was on the list, that was my number one.

Q: Wow. And I imagine once you put Juba on, you're going.

SHACKELFORD: I actually thought it was going to be difficult and competitive. I mean, I don't think we talked about this, but when the bid list came out for our first post, while I was in A-100, Warsaw was like—it's like you put your top choices and your secondary choices and then your, like, last choices. Warsaw was a last choice for me. I had zero interest in going to Europe, I had zero interest in going to a nice easy place to live. I loved it—it was a wonderful experience. But at the time I thought I knew best and I thought that I wanted to get to, well, somewhere very different from that. So, I had it in my mind that they weren't going to send me where I preferred, which often happens, and was kind of shocked when I got Juba. I was on vacation back in the U.S. when I got the notification on my Blackberry, these were Blackberry days.

Q: Oh, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: I was at the beach with my family, with my parents and my sisters, and my dad and my sister were out in the waves and I'm like just sitting there on the beach obsessively refreshing my Blackberry, just obsessively because you're like, where am I going to be living next year, what's my future hold? And this committee that you have no control over just gets to decide.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, I'm sitting on the beach, refreshing, refreshing. And then it pops up and it's Juba. So, I'm super excited and I start shouting to my dad and my sister out in the waves, I'm like, "Juba. I got Juba." And I'm trying to like, do the little YMCA to spell it out for them. My dad comes in and he's like, "I'm so excited. I've always wanted to go to Havana. I think it's going to be great." I'm like, "Juba, Dad. Not Cuba. Juba." And he's like aah.

Q: Oh. Yeah. Oh. (Laughs)

SHACKELFORD: So, they were less excited than me.

Q: Okay. Wow. What was it like to prepare to go there? Were you given any training or was it just a direct transfer? How did that work?

SHACKELFORD: I had, I think I had three weeks back in the U.S. in-between. They were short-staffed, as always seems to be the case with places like that, so it was a very short turnaround. I was reading up on it from the time that I found out I was going, but there's not a lot that can prepare you for Juba, especially then. I mean, I arrived there in summer of 2013 and it was two years almost to the day from South Sudan's independence, and everybody back in the U.S. was still talking, you know, about this great new country that we helped birth. But I had a few people, some seasoned people back in Washington, who were like, Eh, it's not really going that great. But it was—you

were still fed that line, that this was this great success story and this new democracy. And it wasn't.

Q: Yeah. How did you get there? And the reason I ask is because I've interviewed people from USAID who have had to go to South Sudan many times for obvious reasons, and they couldn't even always get there through sort of normal means, you know. In other words, they couldn't get into the city with a plane, they had to drive in from a nearby country or, you know.

SHACKELFORD: I flew in through Addis, through Ethiopia, normal standard fare. But I still remember and I put this in my book too because this moment stood out to me so much, waiting at the gate in Addis Ababa and I hear this man at the check-in counter trying to check in. And the flight attendant for Ethiopian Airlines says, "This is the only passport you have?" And he's like, "Yep." The attendant says, "Well, it's a Sudanese passport and, you know, it's now South Sudan." He asked, "When was the last time you were there?" And the customer was like, "Five years." And the attendant replied, "Well, I'm not sure they're going to honor this, but you can give it a try. Good luck and welcome home." Which was just fascinating to me to be like, this guy hasn't been home since his home was a new country and all those little bureaucratic details like, is your Sudanese passport still valid. It's curious.

Q: Wow. All right. Now, when you arrive there, are you actually met? Do you have quarters?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. Our compound felt a little bit like a kind of crumbling adult summer camp. I was met at the airport by James, my boss in the political section, and we drive in and it's the middle of a workday so the residence is about two blocks away from the embassy, walled in, a couple of small houses and then mostly just these kind of shipping containers put together in the form of kind of little mini apartments, which were, frankly, pretty nice, all things considered. I mean, they were—everybody had like a little screened in porch on the front of their little container unit and it's a bleak landscape of kind of dirt and not much shrubbery. But we had a run-down little pool and bar area that had seen better days. It had all been part of the USAID mission before independence and that's kind of where they'd—they just adapted a USAID mission into what would become the embassy and the residential quarters. And it was still completely dominated by USAID, though.

Q: Uh-huh, yeah, yeah. Was it a SEP post, a special embassy post?

SHACKELFORD: In terms of—I don't know that term, actually.

Q: That might have been abandoned by the time you were there, you know, on minimize or receiving cables and—

SHACKELFORD: No, it wasn't a, I guess de minimis, I think, was the term that we had. It was pseudo regular when I was there until the war broke out again and then went back to—so we did officially go back to de minimis.

Q: Yeah. All right. So, you arrive. Just out of curiosity, how many vaccines and what sort of medical precautions did you have to take?

SHACKELFORD: All the vaccines. All the vaccines in the land. And antimalarials as well. I don't remember exactly how many vaccines it was. I know I had several in each arm on two occasions, so it was plenty. But I mean, I'd spent a lot of time kind of in the broader region before, so that wasn't too new to me. I mean, the most similar environment I'd been in was post-war Sierra Leone.

Q: Ah, yeah, sure.

SHACKELFORD: So, I had a little bit of an image of what to expect. And yeah, it had a similar feel to that. But it was—it had that kind of outpost feel to it.

Q: All right. Take—because South Sudan is a new country and I think very few people really know what the composition is, take just a moment to describe what the country was like. In other words, people, the demographics, were there different ethnic groups and so on?

SHACKELFORD: Sure. Well, there are a lot of different ethnic groups. There are two that are the most influential and powerful, the Dinka and the Nuer. And so, they tend to dominate a lot, although the Dinka for—this is one of the big political problems that was leading up to the war that would start a few months later was that the Dinka-led government was really increasingly closing opportunities, political opportunities and economic opportunities for people outside that community. So, that was becoming a very serious rub. And it wasn't because of ethnic hatred, it was because of power and control in the hands of certain people who were trying to get more of it, as is often the case.

So, the Dinka and the Nuer are traditionally nomadic pastoralists. They have—cattle raiding has traditionally been a common issue. And of course, for decades before that very time there had been ongoing war with the north. The backdrop to all of this is that the embassy itself is in the process of divorcing from Khartoum bureaucratically. They were still trying to split things up. Like, as I was coming out to post, the dropdown menus for all the paperwork only gave you Sudan as an option and I'm like, where's South Sudan? You've had two years, guys. Like, I don't want to send my shipment to Khartoum.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, the country had its divorce and we were having ours and it was all very ugly.

But back to the ethnicity. So, you also have a collection of smaller ethnic groups collectively called the Equatorians because they are more agricultural, more stable in this one place, and so the Equatorian states are right around—Juba is located in Central Equatoria. So, this region had not traditionally been dominated by these—by the Dinka and the Nuer, but now was becoming so because it was the administrative capital and the political capital. So, they tended to be less involved in the fights in prior times and tried to keep their head down for a long time during the civil war subsequently. But it was—they also tended to be frequently the folks that were hired in business and the diplomatic community or the UN because they'd were sometimes better educated and a lot of them had been out of the country and came back, and just being in the central Equatorian area had been a little more stable and settled than other parts of the country during the wars. So, you did see that divide as well frequently. I wouldn't have known it and I didn't for the first couple of months. I wasn't aware when I met people what ethnic background they're from. And you realize once the war breaks out that it's important to know, just for people's safety and security and to know who might be targeted. And we didn't have any records of this because frankly, under U.S. law tracking the ethnicity of people is not exactly kosher.

Q: Right, right.

SHACKELFORD: You know, for hiring purposes and things like that. So. But anyway, so far as the history, I mean, it's—South Sudan had been largely independently governed since 2005 when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed with Khartoum. But between 2005 and 2011 was a period of time when this kind of new government should have really been getting on its feet but because there was going to be a referendum to decide on independence it was this gap period when you couldn't really build up national institutions because it wasn't yet an independent state. So, in a lot of ways, that was really lost time for South Sudan. Because there was this grace period they also weren't working on reconciliation from the war. The different groups that came together to become part of this new semi-independent government had all, frankly, been enemies for much of the civil war. It's just that they kind of came together against a bigger enemy, which was Khartoum, and in order to seem sufficiently unified to get backing from places like the United States. So, you had this very tentative marriage of different groups.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: You had very little oversight of the governance process between 2005 and 2011 and you had an ongoing consolidation of power ahead of what was to be—what was to be that referendum vote. So, it was a tinderbox.

Q: Oh, boy. All right. So, you're there as a political officer, but were you given particular responsibilities? How did they divide up the section?

SHACKELFORD: A few weeks before I arrived I actually found out that I was not just going to be a political officer but that I was also going to be the consular section.

Q: Ah.

SHACKELFORD: It was a total bait and switch. And it had a huge impact on my job. I mean, I was a second tour officer, still a junior officer. My predecessor had opened up kind of the first consular section that we had. He'd done a tremendous job. I have no idea how you manage it, but he'd been doing it alone. We did manage, about a month after I arrived, to hire a consular assistant to help out. He'd been the embassy's cashier, and he'd previously worked in Khartoum. He was just—he was my lifesaver in that section. But we did not have an office. The consular section had been set up in a closet in the cafeteria, literally a closet. They needed to build a new embassy, which they still have not done, and that was the best space that they had.

So, the cafeteria is a separate building from the chancery. It's not as secure. You could break into it with a credit card, and that was where we had our consular safes and all this personal information for applicants and American citizens. We had very limited consular services offered. We did visas for government officials and for members of the military for training supported by the U.S., which is its own curiosity. Mostly, we did American Citizen Services, emergencies, emergency passports, dealing with arrested Americans, dead Americans, sick Americans, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, that was—frankly becoming the bigger part of my job.

My political hat was as a human rights officer. I was the junior of two political officers in the political section and that was also not supposed to be a huge job. It was meant to take up basically 50 percent of the time of a junior officer. But if you've heard anything about the South Sudan war, you know that human rights are a pretty big part of the issue.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, those two jobs were tremendous.

Q: Yeah. Incredible. Were you able to at least get the consular section space, adequate space and security?

SHACKELFORD: No. It was in the closet for that entire year. We weren't lobbying for change. And after I left they did end up moving it into—because we'd reduced our staff so much during the war they were able to take over some parts of the USAID offices, I believe. But today I think they finally have a more functional office space—and they do have a dedicated full-time, more senior consular officer to run it.

Q: You know, you mentioned something in Poland about consular work that made me a little curious, that there were still debates over whether Foreign Service officers should be consular officers at all. And of course, after I left in 2013 they began to hire limited contract consular officers. Was that part of your experience as you were going along, or how did that affect you at all?

SHACKELFORD: I was never at a place where they had those positions. There was a lot of talk and debate going on about it. And when you look at places like—and I have friends who are consular cone and have worked in places where you have a lot of those positions. I'm of two minds on it. I mean, on the one hand yes, doing 180 visa interviews a day in a place like Brazil where you're just cranking them out and you've got dozens and dozens of consular officers doing it, I totally do see a place for it. But at the same time, I think it's one of those jobs—I always liken it to the law review in law school. It's tedious work putting together a law review journal, which is basically an excuse for professors to have somewhere to publish things, and then they get very, very overeducated, smart people to do the menial labor of pulling it together and editing it. You need smart people to do it. You need people who are paying a lot of attention because there are issues like do terrorists slip through, do criminals slip through. I mean, it's a tiny percentage of it the work, though, so in terms of cost-benefit analysis, thinking about how expensive it is to have a Foreign Service officer in these posts and teaching them new languages versus having somebody who's going to be out there for ten years just doing the visa line. I'm torn on it. But I do believe that it's important for all Foreign Service officers to deal with American Citizen Service in part because that is our primary job when we're overseas and because political and economic issues impact American Citizens Services all the time and vice versa. So, I think that everyone should have their turn at doing that so that they have a better understanding of what our fundamental core job is in these countries, which is working on behalf of American citizens.

Q: Okay. I neglected to ask you with all the health questions and the basic comfort questions, what about security? Were there significant security threats against the embassy or against you?

SHACKELFORD: Not when we were first there. And it felt as though—we had a sense that we were somehow, even though we were in a dangerous place that we were somehow insulated, which Americans often feel. And it is often a false sense of security. Even before the war broke out, and the war broke out in December, I arrived in July, even in October and November there were beginning to be incidents. I don't know what incidents happened before I was there because one of the unique aspects of seeing incidents against the UN and U.S. and other diplomatic personnel is that the UN, the U.S. and others tended to sweep it under the rug.

Q: Ah.

SHACKELFORD: So, horrible things could have been happening before I arrived, and I wouldn't have known about it. It wouldn't have been public. But things that I witnessed, things that I was there for and knew were happening were blatant attacks on UN and other personnel in Juba in broad daylight by South Sudanese uniformed security services. One incident happened in November. I heard about it from a UN friend when I was just having coffee with her about a totally separate issue. She was like, "Well, I'm sure you heard that—" and it was a UN peacekeeper, a woman, who had—she was driving down Airport Road, not very far at all from the UN compound, and something happened and a presidential guard, a truck full of presidential guard forces, maybe she cut them off

accidentally but something happened and it pissed them off. So, they ran her off the road, pulled her out of the truck and beat the living daylights out of her. Tossed her in a ditch, she ended up being medevacked back home, and the UN leader, the SRSG, the Special Representative for the Secretary General, did everything in her power to hide that that had happened. I reported it back to our ambassador with total alarm that it had happened and that no report had been made to New York or Washington, and it was just kind of a sign of things to come. The UN back in New York headquarters was upset about it once they found out, but really nothing—there was total impunity for it. And attacks against diplomatic personnel just continued and continued and continued into the war and, I mean, recently as well, it still happens.

So, long story short, I didn't feel at first as though I was at risk, but the city became more and more hostile to outsiders as the government looked for people to blame other than themselves for how bad the situation continued to be. It became very dangerous and the—I mean, I can go into incidents that happened after I left, but even while I was there, U.S. diplomatic vehicles were shot at by security forces. And after I left, there were several incidents which nearly ended up killing many American diplomats and we have gotten no real recourse for any of it.

Q: Wow. And of course, in terms of medical care, if you are in any kind of security situation where you're injured, they basically just have to fly you out.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah.

Q: Or was there anything there?

SHACKELFORD: Not really. I mean, the best services that you had—I broke a bone in my foot and got shuffled over to some U.S. military doctors who were doing training with South Sudanese military doctors and that was the best option available. And they were like, Yeah, you should go get an x-ray in Nairobi. We just didn't—we didn't have any real services there. I got medevac-ed twice in a year for minor things that you just couldn't deal with in South Sudan.

Q: Yeah, yeah. All right. So, as you're watching the country kind of fall apart, what happens? Because you're one of the people who are literally there on the scene as the worst possible thing that you could imagine for a new country happens.

SHACKELFORD: Yes. It was curious because in Washington there seemed to be mostly this dialogue of this prevailing storyline of sure, they're struggling, but it's a new country so that's to be expected. And you get on the ground and there are two different versions of reality going on in parallel, sometimes out of the same people's mouths, which is yes, we've got to give them a break, it's a new country, of course there are going to be these problems, these are growing pains, but at the same time there was growing alarm in the embassy with our leadership and in the diplomatic community and certain South Sudanese political players. But I was following human rights issues and was looking at the ongoing impunity for a lot of acts being done by government forces in different parts

of the country and I kept saying, "Shouldn't we make a statement? Shouldn't we freak out about this?" But there was this sense that we didn't want to embarrass the South Sudanese government, that we needed to stay supportive. So, we'd have private conversations, but we really didn't make a big deal about some things that I felt that we should have. But all of that seemed to lay the groundwork for nothing improving and this behavior getting worse and worse and worse, leading up to December when the war began.

It was a really weird time. First of all, it happens right before Christmas, so I like to joke about how basically the entire A team had flown home for the holidays leaving everybody's deputies behind. Ambassador Page was there, which was great, but my boss was gone, other bosses were gone, the USAID mission director was gone. And everybody pretty much left right after we had this investment—this U.S.-South Sudan investment conference in Juba, which I recall to me seemed a really crazy idea given the state of the country at the time. We had the political chief, who was my boss, and me and then we had a senior econ officer and a junior econ officer, and those two were totally focused on this project. I was like, "An investment conference? Does this seem like a really good time for that? Like, should we be encouraging investment here?" And I had this horrific experience where I was updating our semi annual travel warning for South Sudan, which is a typical consular thing. I was always getting behind the ball on what our standard consular tasks were because our consular section had no institutional memory. So, I kept being late turning in things that I didn't know existed before I found out they were overdue. So, this was one of them.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: So I took a look at our travel warning which for several years now had basically said, "Do not go there. If you do, we will not help you." So, I tidy up some of the language on arrests because I've been dealing with a bunch of American citizen arrests recently. That would take another hour to discuss all of the arrests. I spent a lot of time visiting Americans in jail or various detention centers, official and unofficial, who had been picked up for no apparent reason. So, I update the language basically to highlight that if you're here on business you might get arrested for no particular reason, so beware of that. And I pass it up to my boss to clear and he calls me into his office and says, "Ambassador Page isn't going to approve something saying that nobody can travel to the country if we're promoting people coming here to invest." And I was like, "Yeah, one of those things sounds like a bad idea to me."

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: And you know, it was this dilemma that we had because economic growth and investment is important for building stability in a new country and I totally understand that. But it seemed a little naïve and dangerous to be promoting investment there given what we knew.

So, the investment conference takes place. The special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan comes out to launch it. USAID as the sponsor. And that happens one week before the war breaks out.

Q: Wow. You had mentioned, you know, it's right before Christmas. The Western media, in presenting the whole breakup of Sudan, almost always presented it in terms of, oh, the South is Christian and the North is Muslim and to add to that analysis the North is Muslim under Omar Bashir, this evil fundamentalist Muslim whose human rights violations are beyond imagination and all of these poor Christians were just trying to worship in freedom are being, you know, their rights are being trampled. Was there any truth to that narrative?

SHACKELFORD: It's an understatement to say that that narrative is an oversimplification.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: But it is. I get asked about this a lot, why the U.S. cared so much about South Sudan. And a big part of it was the evangelical lobby that was quite strong in Congress and in the nineties and early 2000s became a very powerful advocate for action on the war in Sudan. And they were joined by the human rights community that was really eager to end this war too. It was the longest running war on the continent. And that all dovetailed quite well with the fact that the U.S. had picked out Khartoum as enemy number one.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: Right. And so, the narrative worked very well. You need a simple narrative to convince Americans to pour money and effort into a place on the equator in Africa. I mean, you need something that's really compelling, and so that's why we kept telling this story. But you know, there are a few—a few aspects of that are misleading. First of all, there's not some fine, even line across Sudan where the split between Christians and Muslims happens. You do have generally a more Arabic North and your more sub-Saharan African South. But it's a lot more mixed and you see that if you go to Khartoum. And you see that when you talk to people. I remember a conversation I had with a colleague who—South Sudanese colleague who told me that he never felt—and he'd lived in Khartoum for many years—he said he never felt like a second-class citizen in Khartoum the way he did in Juba, because in Juba if you were not a Dinka you had no power, you couldn't get jobs with the government and things like that. So, it was certainly not a clear case of good vs. bad and that was one of the issues that became more and more clear in the leadup to the war and then certainly after the war broke out.

Q: Was it a majority Christian country of at least, you know, various denominations?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. I mean, it is. Christianity and your traditional African religions as well and then there's quite a mix in there also. But I would say that you have—and

you have a lot of different religions there and they work together and the biggest part of the advocacy community is really church-based. So, when you're looking for people to negotiate truces and peace between different communities you typically—you'd go through the churches because they do have a lot of influence there. But I would say that it's—in Sudan you have a bigger mix, I think, because you have a lot more what you would call Southerners, but they're basically—they're ethnically connected to those who are dominant in the South but they are mixed in different parts of the country and the rest of Sudan.

Q: Now, as the—okay, so now as the war takes place, what are—you alluded to it earlier, but how do the sides divide?

SHACKELFORD: Well, it's—at the outset you have a political rift between the president, Salva Kiir, and basically everybody else who is not in his cohort. So, the opposition is ethnically very diverse. It includes Dinkas, Equatorians, and Nuer. The government side is—has different ethnic representation, but it is very, very clearly dominated by this core Dinka group. So, the ethnic divide really comes from the government side, initially. And you can see this because the day that the—well, the night that the war breaks out, it starts with a skirmish between different sides of the presidential guard force because again, like so many countries post-independence, the nation's military is really just a collection of ethnically based militias that are brought together and they all have loyalties to their different commanders, they don't necessarily have loyalty to the state. So, these rifts happen quite quickly and very violently.

There's still a lot of debate over exactly how things happened. From what I saw in watching it play out over the first week of the conflict and particularly the first twenty-four hours, I have no doubt in my mind that it might not have been planned for then, for that exact moment when the war broke out, but that there was a plan for the slaughter that happened in Juba, that this—the government side or those with the government who supported this approach had weapons and plans in place for the slaughter that happened, whether or not when it exactly happened was planned, there's evidence that it wasn't quite that smooth. But the government came out quickly with allegations that there was a coup, which were completely false.

But I will say, before I go into all of the reasons for the war, just to give you a picture of that weekend, right. So, I wake up Saturday morning. Friday the special envoy has left. My boss has left. A lot of people have left town. My boss had given me a list of people to call because there was a big political event happening that weekend. The SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) is the lead political party, the political party in power, and they were holding the National Liberation Council—their big political meeting to discuss the future of the party and approve of core party documents. It had been postponed by Kiir several times because he knew that there was going to be a power struggle within the party. So, my boss, who was our lead political guy on it, sent me an email, he's like hey, they're probably going to have the NLC this weekend and if there are developments, talk to Chol. Chol is our political assistant who knew everybody and everything. He was great. My boss said here's a list of people you can call to get some

follow-up quotes and help inform the ambassador about what's going on. I'm like, "Okay."

So, Saturday morning this event's supposed to happen. I was supposed to go with the ambassador as one of our two seats to take notes. I get a message from our DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission, in the morning saying that the embassy had sent a team ahead to check out the situation, and there are a lot of soldiers there. I think we're going to stand down, we're not going to go. So, I think that's kind of a relief. I've got a bunch of work in the consular office I need to deal with and it's a quiet, catchup day. Which is horrible because as a political officer in a position to go to this kind of really important fundamental meeting, I should have really wanted to go. But I was so tired. I'd been working so much, and I was just ready for the holidays for things to quiet down.

Q: Uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: So, we're getting reports throughout the day of how rough things are. And it's a two-day meeting. Two people we were following closely were the former vice president who had been sacked, Riek Machar, and Pagan Amum, who was the SPLM secretary-general but had also been removed and was now in opposition. That Friday, the day before this all started, several members, again, an ethnically diverse group, of the opposition—within the party because there's only one party, so all the opposition is basically inside. They had done a press conference to say they're pushing back against the authoritarian moves of the president and they were putting this out there publicly before the big meeting started.

I'll fast forward to the fact that it doesn't go well. The opposition members don't end up staying for the second day. Things are very tense. Sunday night comes. I'm watching a Christmas movie quietly in my little metal container, just getting ready for the week, and a contact of mine from OXFAM (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) calls and he tells me, "Things are really rough. Things are getting really tense. The meeting today went very poorly. We need to meet." I looked at my calendar for Monday and saw that I had a conference all day, so I asked if we could meet Tuesday. He tells me, "Tuesday it's going to be too late." So I say, "Okay, let's grab breakfast at 7:30." He calls an hour later, shooting has broken out in town. He calls me an hour after that, says, "Riek Machar needs to talk to the ambassador." He calls me after that, saying, "Why haven't you called Riek Machar? I gave him your number." I'm thinking this is way above my paygrade. By this point it's midnight, I'm hearing from a lot of people in different parts of town. I turn my lights off because you hear fighting in town. And it's just occurring to me then, is this how a war starts?

Q: Wow. Wow.

SHACKELFORD: But at the time we don't know it. We don't know if this is just going to be a skirmish. I mean, there's shooting in Juba a lot at night. But that was how it started. That was the night the war started. And at 2:00 a.m. I got a phone call on my little

Nokia cellphone from Riek Machar, the former vice president, trying to reach our ambassador, and that was my entry into the war.

Q: Wow. Holy cow. All right. What happened—I mean, I've never talked to anyone who's been at the very start of a war. What happens next?

SHACKELFORD: Well, I can talk through the days that happened—I will give you the short version. You should read my book; it goes through that period day by day.

Q: Yes, yes, yes. I mean, obviously, I'm not asking you to repeat everything in the book.

SHACKELFORD: I was writing notes, I mean, the whole time. It's like I knew at the time, as tired as I was, I was trying to capture it because something just tells you you're going to want to remember a lot of these moments. Although, frankly, a lot of them you don't forget.

So, at 2:00 in the morning I'm thinking, I can't talk to Riek Machar, way above my paygrade. So, I strapped the boot on my foot and hobbled over in the dark to the ambassador's residence and knocked on her door in the middle of the night. She's up taking phone calls, of course, and over the course of a few hours we pulled together the key people on the Emergency Action Committee. Every embassy has an Emergency Action Committee. That was the first of what would be a hundred meetings of the Emergency Action Committee over the next few months. We met twice a day. Everybody was trying to navigate every issue from how do we talk these leaders into coming back together before everything turns into a total war to how do we deal with American citizens?

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: There were several hundred in the country or more, and we didn't have a great system setup for that.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: Do you evacuate parts of the embassy? Do you evacuate Americans? Do you shut down the embassy? At what point do you? What are the tripwires happening now? And you go through all of those steps and decisions and I kept thinking back to September, I think it was, when we had—a team came out from Washington from the Crisis Training Center to do some war gaming on what to do in a crisis. And I mean, every day of this crisis I was like, thank god they came out there. I've got these checklists and ideas and we'd done preparation in the consular section after that workshop to have information on the hospitals and the prisons and the airport. And we'd had town halls to get contact information for Americans. So, we were probably as prepared as a tiny, understaffed consular section could be. But yeah, you've got two different things in an embassy in a crisis. You've got the political questions, which primarily the ambassador's dealing with and the special envoy and John Kerry. And then you have the American

Citizens Services, what do you do for Americans who are stuck in harm's way. Washington stands up a task force at the State Department Operations Center and you're on speed dial with them all the time.

Q: Were most of the Americans there related to USAID or AID contractors?

SHACKELFORD: There were a lot of those. But there were also a lot of missionaries, dual nationals, folks working for different humanitarian organizations. You had a lot of businesspeople too who either had family ties or other ties to South Sudan, and all those folks we'd encouraged to come invest.

Q: Uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: And it was the holidays so you had people coming back to visit family as well.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: I talked to a lot of people who had just arrived that week after being away for several years, wanting to spend the holidays with their grandmother in the village and they got caught in a war.

Q: What happens in terms of security for the embassy?

SHACKELFORD: So, after the Benghazi attacks the East Africa Response Force, the EARF, another acronym, was set up in Djibouti to be a rapid response team from, I believe, the army, ready to go to places in that broader region, whether it's North Africa or the Middle East or Africa. And we were their test case. We were their first launch. And they came out for what I think they thought was going to be a few days and stayed for about six months.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: The backdrop of this is that there's a slaughter happening in—an ethnic cleansing happening in Juba in these first few days. They have set up checkpoints. There are truckloads of bodies being driven down the street. There are tanks rolling through the streets. It's a very organized, orchestrated effort to go through the Nuer neighborhoods to slaughter the men. And we don't get the reports of that initially. The same contact of mine who put me on the phone with Riek Machar sent me a text on that Monday and said, they're slaughtering Nuer in the streets. And that was—I remember, I can see it on the screen of my Nokia. Just seeing that and just getting chills. That's what's happening just beyond our walls. It's ethnic cleansing. So, that's the backdrop to all of the decisions that we have to make. Do we bring people in? Local staff who are supposed to be working for us. Do we send them all home? Do we bring some of them in because they're Nuer and they're not safe? You know, these are the types of questions that we're dealing with. Do we start—a lot of people are calling the embassy and wanting to come

into the embassy for security. What do we do about that? We didn't necessarily have enough security for ourselves, we certainly didn't have the capacity to take care of others. So, luckily, on the afternoon of the first day, the UN, under duress, opens their doors and says that people can come there for safety. And that kept us from having to do so because I'm not sure what our answer would have been under the circumstances. I mean, we had not been in a secure situation ourselves for a long time. The OIG (Office of the Inspector General) report had frequently said that our facility was not safe. A couple months later in a heavy rain, a fifty-foot section of the perimeter wall of our residence just collapsed. We were not safe there so we certainly didn't want to bring other people into the situation, but.

So, you're dealing with all these questions and then, if you evacuate, who do you evacuate? Who do you evacuate from the staff? How do you help other Americans? And those questions are coming up at every single meeting, so we decide to start evacuating our own staff down to essential levels and to start helping Americans get out. So, that Wednesday is when we do our first evacuation flights.

Q: So, but when you say Americans, you're talking about non-embassy people or embassy people as well?

SHACKELFORD: You start with the embassy people that we have to get out, but we—we ran flights for three weeks, getting other Americans out as well. And other members of diplomatic communities and other people. It's space available and we flew anybody out so that we could have space available. And we just kept the planes coming. I was amazed that Washington kept sending more planes there until—until everybody's gotten out that needs to, we'll keep sending them.

Q: What were we saying publicly?

SHACKELFORD: We were doing a lot of both sides need to stop fighting, which was (sighs) inadequate, in my opinion. We were telling the government that—at this point it had arrested, I guess it was nine people accused of this coup that they claimed happened. We were pressing the government to release them so that negotiations could start towards peace. And we were condemning violence, but we were doing so very broadly.

Now, it did not start out as a coup or a rebellion, but within a few days, Riek Machar and his supporters had declared a rebellion and they were fighting back. But at the time, I mean, that was in response to the slaughter of thousands and thousands of Nuer in the streets of Juba.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: So, I think it—this idea that it was really caused by two bad actors to me is a really misleading read of the situation.

Q: Wow. Were there—okay, at least early, now, in the war, were there outside actors as well?

SHACKELFORD: Yes. And the most important outside player was Uganda. Early on Museveni, the president of Uganda, had decided that he was going to back his neighbor to the north because he felt that that was more stable. So, Ugandan troops were on the ground by some reports before the war started.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: Certainly they were leading the charge in the march towards Bor, when there was a belief that rebels or opposition would be coming south from Bor, which is not that far north of Juba. The Ugandans had come in, they were securing the airport. There were claims that they were keeping the road south from Juba to Uganda safe for Ugandans to leave. But quite frankly, without the support of Uganda early on, Salva Kiir would have been in a far weaker position, probably would have been militarily defeated by the opposition or at the very least would have been in such a precarious position that he would have had to negotiate. So, the length of the war and the fact that it did not end quickly was largely, I believe, due to the Ugandan interference.

Q: Okay. Well, the war does not end quickly. And are you there just for one more year as the political—in your role as political officer?

SHACKELFORD: It was only a one-year tour total because it was a—one of the high risk, hardship posts.

Q: Ah, okay.

SHACKELFORD: So, it was summer 2013 to summer of 2014, so it was very—yes. And you know, we can talk for hours more, but I know we need to get out of South Sudan. But it's—I actually got evacuated to Uganda for about three weeks because—at a point when they thought that rebel forces were going to come down to Juba and they reduced staffing even further. But then I did manage to get back in, which is very hard to do when you go on reduced staffing in an embassy. I was able to get back in and finish my tour in South Sudan, but leaving was hard, given how dire the situation still was. By the week that I was leaving we'd had a Fourth of July event at the residence, which was just depressing. Nobody in the staff wanted to do it. We all thought that it was the wrong message to send during a war. I mean, the use of child soldiers had increased. We were seeing kids manning posts in Juba down the street from the embassy. The violence was terrible.

Q: And this was both sides or principally the government?

SHACKELFORD: Well, in Juba it was just the government.

Q: Oh, right, of course, right.

SHACKELFORD: In Juba it was just the government. Both sides were most likely using child soldiers because that was something that they'd never really corrected in the first place, which is a separate story of why we shouldn't have been supporting their military. But it was a really hard—it was hard to leave a place on that low—I'd only been there a year. My boss had been there for two years. The ambassador had been there for two years. And we all left around the same time. But they had come at a time when it really looked optimistic and to be leaving at such a low point and after the government there had really turned on the United States and was lashing out and was physically attacking people, it was really depressing. So, I knew when I left that I wasn't done with South Sudan. I knew I'd continue to try and work on it. I thought that our policies had been really complicit, and it was a depressing thing to watch and certainly a hard thing to leave.

Q: Wow. Did you write a dissent cable?

SHACKELFORD: I did. I got back to Washington August 2014 and joined Ops, the Operations Center as a watch officer and just remained obsessed with what was going on in South Sudan. So, I got together with my predecessor, Oliver Mains, who'd also had concerns about our policies there, and we jointly penned a dissent in the spring of '15. So, not quite a year after I left. I got several other people who had served there to sign on to it. And it was, as most dissents are, politely received and we received a response in which we were told that everything that we were doing was perfectly fine anyway, but thank you for your interest.

Q: Uh-huh, right, yeah. It's true. It's a rare dissent cable that actually goes anywhere.

SHACKELFORD: Right.

Q: Okay. Now, from the—but from the point of view of the Operations Center as a watch officer, were you also tapped for the Emergency Action Task Force that was working on South Sudan?

SHACKELFORD: The taskforce had stopped by the time I got out there. They had been on for about six months and they were still watching it closely, but they didn't have an active task force by then. What was really interesting, though, is that I had spent so much of that year on the phone with State Ops, which to me was like this black box of people who answered the phone twenty-four hours a day. And I knew very little about it. I'd gone on the tour during A-100, when they showed it to us, so I knew a vague bit about it. But when I arrived there it was so funny because everybody there knew Lizzy from Juba because I was the one who always called. And some colleagues showed me where on the whiteboard my name and number had been and several people there who had been on the taskforce had practically lived through that experience with me.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: So, they all kind of felt like they knew me, but I didn't know them. So, there's the watch floor and then—there's the watch and then there is the—the other half of Ops, which I'm blanking on.

Q: The Emergen—no.

SHACKELFORD: —Crisis—

Q: Yeah, uh-huh. Crisis Management—

SHACKELFORD: Yes, Crisis Management—

Q: Staff or—

SHACKELFORD: Maybe, I don't know. But yes, Crisis Management Support, CMS. So, they're mostly career civil servants with some Foreign Service in there. So, they've all been there and seen everything. It was really—it was neat, though, they had gotten Juba taskforce shot glasses made, and they gave me one. Because it was memorable, that was how they had spent their Christmas and New Year's too, right?

Q: Sure.

SHACKELFORD: These guys had been called in for this task force through the holidays and so, much like my holidays were all war, theirs were as well, just from this dark, windowless room in Washington.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, there was an immediate kind of connection there. But for me, Ops was—it was a choice that I'd made a year before, before the war started, and it's very exciting for people at that stage in their career who haven't lived on the ground during a war because you've got your finger on the pulse of the crises around the globe. But for me it was really strange to be the one on the phone instead of the one on the ground.

Q: I see. Wow. Hmm. Okay.

SHACKELFORD: It seemed dull in comparison.

Q: Were you able, hmm, from Washington were you able—did you feel that you were able to give them sort of the benefit of your knowledge and make any impact from Washington?

SHACKELFORD: Not on South Sudan. I think that generally speaking, when we had other—even for several years after the war, when there would be another kind of crisis and evacuation experience in a similar environment, people would come to me and ask me to read their SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). I was very well known in CA, in

Consular Affairs as having been this—the one man standing in Juba for Consular. And I have to say, CA took very good care of me. They were very careful and looking out for me and asking what resources I needed. When I came back I got a really nice welcome when I went to CA to meet all the people who'd been helping me remotely for so long. But yeah, I poured a lot of my thoughts into different SOPs and memos and things, mostly just things that I pushed forward to try and share because I felt like we'd learned so much in the crisis and evacuation in Juba, and there was no need to reinvent the wheel every time.

There was a particular crisis in Burundi that seemed very similar in its outset that happened the winter of 2014 or '15 and I spent a lot of time on the phone with the consular officer there, being like, here's how you do this evacuation out of an airport that doesn't really function, where you have no internet. And I tried to share as many of those lessons as I could.

Q: Wow. Remarkable. Now, you're in the Ops Center for the year from 2015 to 2016?

SHACKELFORD: It was '14 to '15.

Q: Sorry.

SHACKELFORD: Right. So, I had 2013, '14, I was in Juba 2014, '15. Wait. No. Fourteen, '15. Oh, yes. I was like, what's the gap in there before Somalia? Language again.

Q: Ah. Okay. So, wow, Somalia. Okay. You did not have enough instability in your life (laughs) to keep you away from South Sudan. But before we leave the Ops Center, were there other noteworthy or consequential crises that occurred while you were there?

SHACKELFORD: There were several. One that I keep thinking of lately because of course we're having this conversation in August 2020, was the Ebola crisis. And I had just finished my training in Ops. Now, Ops is this crazy place and you have to learn how to rapidly answer phones and change calls and how to get high-level people on and pass your calls on to other people. I mean, it's like this miraculous dance on the watch floor. So, you learn that training and you have to memorize this incredible roster of everybody running everything because you have to have that at the edge of your brain when somebody calls you from an embassy with a crisis and you've got to figure out where to take them. Now, I was kind of bored in Ops for a lot of reasons. It just didn't feel as exciting as being on the ground. But I will say that year gave me an incredible, like, master's degree in the State Department and the interagency. I mean—

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: —I learned so much that I didn't know from being in the field.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: It gives you really a bird's eye view of how these things interact.

So, the Ebola crisis popped up actually—I mean, it had been going for a while, but my first day of sitting in the first chair as the WO, the kind of lead watch officer, was the day that John Kerry made thirteen different calls to counterparts and heads of state to organize the Ebola response, to raise the funds and organize this combined Ebola response.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: Full disclosure, we were really late to that game. I mean, it was a wonderful example of how this type of diplomacy can work and how it should have worked when we were addressing COVID but didn't. But we were, we certainly let that go on for far too long before we interceded. I will say, though, it was fascinating to spend a day connecting John Kerry with all sorts of people across the globe and managing these calls and having a view on what the different relationships are and how they affect our ability to get things done, you know, how diplomacy works at this level. So, that's—it was a hard day to have my first day in that chair, but it was a fascinating thing that I've looked back on many times in the last six months—

Q: Were you allowed to stay on the call with him or was—or were others taking the notes?

SHACKELFORD: As the WO you're basically managing the calls and making sure that you're getting on the next call. So, I was only on for the first parts of those calls, but then you review all the notes as they come in so you see and hear the conversations later. But this process continued for a while and that was probably the most interesting thing about being in Ops was being the one in the chair taking notes of the secretary's conversations.

Q: Yeah. Full disclosure, I was a watch officer—I'm sorry, I was a—I was not a senior watch officer, I was a watch officer for a year in Ops and had similar experiences, different crises.

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. I mean, it's—I wonder what it's like there now.

Q: Ooh. Yeah. Yeah. Well, that's another story. Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: It is.

Q: But, of course, it's only a year, and as you are working your crises you're also thinking about where you're going next. Are you talking to people about it? You know, are you identifying what it is you want to do and then lobbying? Or how—I'm curious about sort of your mental process about what you're trying to do next.

SHACKELFORD: Well, with Ops being only a one-year tour, you have to start working that basically before you even begin.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: I was a glutton for punishment.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: I don't know that I ever listened to people's advice for me professionally in the Foreign Service. I'm pretty sure I went against what everyone said I should do. And I will say, when I went into Ops, within a few weeks of being there it was pretty clear I had PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) of some form and some folks in Ops, some of the SWOs (Senior Watch Officers) pointed it out to me because I was struggling. And there were more than a few people who were like, Somalia? Really? But I had stopped in Nairobi on my way back through before I went to Ops and I had talked to the folks in the Somalia unit, and it was going to be launching into a full U.S. mission the following year. It was—they were supposed to be moving into Mogadishu. It was supposed to be really positive. And a lot of the people in Somalia also had a lot of experience with South Sudan because it attracts the same people, and several told me, Yeah, this isn't going to be like South Sudan. This is actually optimistic and moving in the right direction. And I foolishly believed them.

Q: Okay. All right. Now, okay, so you volunteer for Somalia. I imagine you have to volunteer. I don't imagine that's somewhere you're going to get a direct—you're coming out of a very rough one-year tour, you're not going to get directed to go to another rough one-year tour, so you must have been a volunteer.

SHACKELFORD: Yes.

Q: And you go into language training?

SHACKELFORD: Yeah. Somali language training. Just me and one other colleague who was going to the embassy in Nairobi to be—to do visas. And she was supposed to be doing visas for Somalis applying for visas to the U.S. I don't think she even ended up using her language at all, but yeah, Amanda, she was great. It was just the two of us and our Somali instructor.

Q: How easily or how difficult—in other words, were you expected to become proficient or what level were they expecting you to reach?

SHACKELFORD: They were expecting me to get to—I think it was just supposed to be required for a two/two, so I ended up getting a two plus/three, I believe. I did pretty well. Well, if you have five and a half hours of just you, one other person and a Somali instructor for like eight months, it's (laughs).

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: How long was that? Maybe it was only six. I don't remember how long Somali was. It was long enough, long enough.

Q: Does Somali, does written Somali use the Arabic letters?

SHACKELFORD: No, but it should because it would make so much more sense with the sounds and things. The spelling in Somalia is insane. I mean, it's—I remember so clearly our instructor was writing a sentence on the board just to show, like, "I am in school. He is in school." I'm like, you spelled school differently in both of those sentences. And he says, "It's fine." The spelling is completely different. Like, not like one letter, like three letters are different in the word school. I mean, it was the hardest language to learn. Polish was difficult because it had lots of rules and lots of exceptions and very few vowels.

Q: Ah. Okay.

SHACKELFORD: Somali had, like, no rules whatsoever. And so, anything can go, but if you're a Type A personality and you like structure, it's a very difficult language.

Q: Okay. Wow. All right. What were—well, before we go to Somalia, this could also be a place to break. I'm happy to continue, but I also want to be respectful of your time. Do you want to take up Somalia at the next session or how would you like to do it?

SHACKELFORD: It might be better. We've gone through a lot today.

Q: All right. No, that's fine, absolutely. All right. So, we'll pause, let me pause the recording.

Q: So, then today is September 8, 2020. We're resuming our interview with Elizabeth Shackelford as she prepares to go out—you are actually going out to Mogadishu?

SHACKELFORD: The permanent mission was still based in Nairobi at the time, so I was going out first to Nairobi and that tour would be split between our offices inside the U.S. mission in Nairobi and Mogadishu, in a bunker.

Q: Okay. The other aspect of addressing Somalia is the large number of refugees. Did you become interested, active; did you visit the refugees?

SHACKELFORD: Inside Kenya?

Q: Yes.

SHACKELFORD: Not in Kenya really. One of the curious aspects of how we divvy things up in the U.S. government is that the refugee camps, which are located in Kenya, were the purview of the Kenya mission. So, the ones who visited the refugee camps in Kenya were all folks who were connected to the refugee office in Kenya—you have a large number of refugees in Kenya, so they've got a dedicated office to refugee issues.

Q: Now, you arrive in Nairobi in what year?

SHACKELFORD: May of 2016.

Q: Okay. How did they divide up responsibilities once you're there?

SHACKELFORD: It was a small mission, but we had a number of career officers, so definitely more well-staffed from the State Department side than South Sudan had been. And I was one of four political/economic officers. We had a political/economic chief, we had a political officer focused on Puntland and Somaliland, which are somewhat separate entities. We had an economic officer and then I was the political officer focused on their national political issues and human rights. Because it was supposed to be an election year in Somalia, of sorts, the electoral process was my main purview.

Q: Is it worth describing how the election worked?

SHACKELFORD: It's a very interesting, complex situation. When I arrived, they were supposed to hold the process to elect the parliament and the president in 2016. I arrived in May. They had not yet figured out how they planned to choose them or when precisely the dates were going to be. So, I was dropped immediately into negotiations over how exactly do you choose the parliamentarians. They had had these hopes of reaching greater representation. It ended up being this incredibly complex situation of having elders, clan elders, who had been—you didn't really know exactly how these guys were all selected. They were all men, of course. And they would choose parliamentarians—or they would choose the number of electors, which ended up being several thousand, who would vote on parliamentarians. So, you have clan elders who would select electors who would vote on parliamentarians. And the parliamentarians would elect the president.

Q: Ah, okay.

SHACKELFORD: Every piece of it was an awkward, difficult negotiation over which clans and subclans had which representation and which were the legitimate clan elders. And who was able to select electors.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: It was a negotiation, right? Not an election, definitely a negotiation.

Q: (Laughs) Wow. Now, the people who are doing the electing, are they physically located in Somalia?

SHACKELFORD: If you look at the history of Somalia since the 1990s, it had been a very long time since you had this number of people selecting who would run the country. And it was notable that it was not entirely selected in Mogadishu. Mogadishu had been the location of all of the selection processes in the past since the transitional federal government had come into power in 2004 and had only gotten to Mogadishu in around 2007. There were a couple of iterations after that, but this had become a more national project, still not that representative, but the elections of parliamentarians happened mostly in the different federal member state capitals. So, people who had been selected by elders would go to the federal member state capitals to cast their ballots for the parliamentarians.

Q: How many states were there?

SHACKELFORD: We were still in the middle of the formation of the federal member states when I arrived.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: At the time they were rapidly trying to piece together different smaller states as federal member states. They had not yet decided what Mogadishu would be, would it be a federal member state, would it be a separate entity? So, Somaliland remained on the outside, but it had representatives. Puntland was functional on its own as an established federal member state. And then you had four other federal member states that were recently established with Hirshabelle still in negotiations over that state's official formation. This was all part of the negotiations between the different regions and Mogadishu, which was trying to have a strong center from which to control a country. Other countries, like the United States, prefer that since they want to be able to negotiate with Mogadishu, not five or six other states.

Q: Right, right, right.

SHACKELFORD: Complicated.

Q: How different were the states in the sense of were there language differences, were there ethnic differences?

SHACKELFORD: There's a myth that Somalia is ethnically homogenous, but that isn't accurate since there is also a large ethnic Bantu minority in the population. Its size is unclear, with no reliable census data. But most of the country's other groups – the ones that weigh in the most politically and economically -- are all ethnic Somali and speak Somali but are broken down into separate clans.

Q: Okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: And subclans because it is human nature. We will find ways to differentiate ourselves regardless of how similar we are. And in Somalia, the basic power structure is not broken down by ethnicity but by clans.

Q: But in general, the language is—the language spoken there is understood by everyone within the boundaries and they all practice the same form of Islam?

SHACKELFORD: It is more ethnically and linguistically homogeneous than most African countries. And the vast majority of the population is Muslim, though you do have small Christian minorities as well.

Q: So, when you were talking about diversity within Somalia, you're principally talking about clans and subclans?

SHACKELFORD: You are. And historically that's what the international community has reinforced. That was probably a mistake because in our attempts to re enforce what we thought would be the most stable structure there, the international community largely bought into this breakdown of clan structure that helps retain power in certain clans. So, we fell into—it's called the four-point five system, where the four "big clans," each get one full representation or vote, and all the other minority groups or marginalized groups get a half a vote collectively. By some estimates the marginalized groups collectively make up around 30 percent of the country.

We have no real sense of it without a reliable census, but we know that they make up a large percentage of the internally displaced population, a large percentage of the people who are most impacted by both violence from the Al-Shabaab insurgency and from flooding and drought and famine in the country that's happened periodically every few years, so it's a significant population and suffers possibly the most from all of the chaos that happened there. The international community has repeatedly reinforced power within the large clans that make up the bulk of political and economic influence, though it's not exactly fair that they do.

Q: And then, finally, we get to Al-Shabaab and any other sort of violent group located within or near Somalia that thinks it has a voice whether it does or not.

SHACKELFORD: There's a complicated back story to Al-Shabaab, which rhymes with a lot of our other counterterrorism efforts across the globe. Al-Shabaab was a small and fairly insignificant group back during the warlords' rule in the late nineties, early 2000s. It was the youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which was a collection of courts that pushed back after years of predatory rule by warlords. The ICU unified several Islamic organizations to fight against the corruption and abuse. But some of those corrupt warlords were being backed by the United States, in our efforts in the country to follow and track terrorists that we believed would be a threat to the U.S. So, as seems to be often the case, the United States, in trying to defend its interests in a difficult location, managed to impede our own interests. We got behind Ethiopia when Ethiopia decided to

invade to oust the ICU. This period well pre-dates me but is important background to understand the political situation.

But the Islamic Courts Union was the first real glimmer of hope in Somalia since the fall of the terrible dictator Siad Barre in 1991. The ICU in 2006 had managed to unify Mogadishu and establish some security there for the first time in 15 years by defeating the warlords. It had created some semblance of law and order, of security, of predictability, had imposed some rules. And then Ethiopia, with our assistance, decided that since it was Islamic it was probably a threat, so Ethiopia invaded. And therein spurred a lot of frustration with foreign intervention in the country, which helped build Al-Shabaab's narrative and popularity. Al-Shabaab had been just a wing of the ICU, but it grew into an insurgency fighting foreign occupation. It was originally very internally focused on Somalia. It was not a threat externally, but the more other countries, including the U.S., got involved, the more Al-Shabaab turned to attacking neighboring states through terrorism within a few years.

Q: Alright. Is there an element of the preparation for these elections that I've missed? I've tried to, you know, put my political officer lenses on and pick out all the potential problems, but am I missing something?

SHACKELFORD: Back to 2016. The United States, the European Union, the African Union, all of these players, had this deep interest in a more stable Somalia, were very interested in this electoral process coming off credibly and with greater representation than before. The real focus of the international community though continues to be on the security situation over everything else. But we wanted this to look and be more representative. We wanted more women to be included in leadership, we wanted more participation and equal participation of at least the clans that we were assuming to have an equal weight. But there was always and continues to be this tension between wanting to prioritize and focus on the security efforts and wanting to push some leverage to make this transition more democratic and representative. So, that was a tension I witnessed every day.

The Somali government that was in power at the time was very reliant on the African Union Mission (AMISOM) and the United States and others to help aid its security situation. From about 2012, when the current president had been selected, and 2016, when this next election is supposed to happen, Somalia had been relatively stable on the security front. In 2006 to 2012 AMISOM and U.S. counterterrorism efforts had begun, regional forces had joined the mission, and they'd really put Al-Shabaab on the back foot. But we got to a point in 2012 of stalemate. So, by 2016 the stalemate has been going for several years without any real progress towards improving government services, improving security, or building a Somali national army able to stand on its own.

There has been no progress towards a new, permanent constitution to spell out the relationship between the federal states and the central government. So between 2012 and 2016 there was no real progress on either the security front, democracy, or the new constitution. On state formation there had been some progress establishing the new states,

but little else. We saw some modest improvements in increasing participation in the electoral process, making it a bit more representative, but that was it. By 2020, you're supposed to see another election and it's meant to be one person, one vote, but instead they are negotiating the same kind of process we had negotiated four years ago. So, that's just to say that bringing us back to today, it looks very similar to what it looked like when I was there four years ago. Progress on democracy and governance has not happened.

The fascinating part of the electoral process though that makes Somalia unique in comparison to most other African states is that Somalis do not tend to select incumbents, so there is a change in power. In 2016, the process led to a new president, just as it had in the prior two selection periods. Even with a deep attempt to abuse the tools of state and the resources that they had, Hassan Sheikh, who was the president at the time in 2016, did his level best to buy a positive result but failed. He ran again but did not succeed. And that alone seemed like a success for choice and democracy in some way.

We were extraordinarily limited in our ability to move around Somalia, even to move around Mogadishu, but there are two moments that I will never forget from that experience in Somalia. Everything we, as the U.S. Mission, got to do was negotiated between different constituencies: how many people, how many Americans we could have in any situation, because we needed security, et cetera, et cetera. We only had ten beds in the bunker in Mogadishu, so at any given time USAID and the State Department mission and the FBI if they were going in there for different reasons, had to get around a table once a week and negotiate who got to go in to sleep in one of these bunk beds.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: (Laughs) As the lead on elections, though, I got to travel a lot. It was the only thing that Washington cared about nearly as much as the security situation because they wanted the elections to be a success. So, I got to spend a lot of time living in a bunker. Because the electoral process was my portfolio, I got to be in the hangar on the Mogadishu International Airport on the day that parliament, one by one, the new parliamentarians, passed their vote for president. They put their votes in a box and then we watched for hours and hours in the Mogadishu heat in this airless hangar as they counted the votes out one by one, one round after another, to select the next president in this country. And I got to watch it. And it was this surprise. The incumbent didn't win. The total surprise candidate won.

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: It was this American Somali dual national—

Q: Ah. That's what one—that is one issue I forgot to ask you, which is to what extent the relatively large Somali diaspora plays in the elections.

SHACKELFORD: He was a bureaucrat from Buffalo, New York, and had moved back essentially for the purpose of running for president. He had been in a prior administration

briefly as prime minister. But he had been living in Buffalo for years, a mild-mannered New Yorker. He and our ambassador, Steve Schwartz, bonded over their Buffalo connection. And quite early on, Ambassador Schwartz said, "I don't know. I think Farmaajo could win." Which we just all called his bluff; we thought that was ridiculous. But Farmaajo ended up winning and we ended up having a really good relationship with the president. But it was a surprise ending to an electoral process that had been fraught and delayed and chaotic. And it passed through the Christmas season. I remember Christmas Day I was in Naivasha, Kenya, getting urgent phone calls about the latest changes to the electoral process which was delayed into 2017. And it was a remarkable thing to watch.

So Somalia got a new president and allegedly uncorrupt government, but in the political, economic, and security situation, the power players continued to be the power players. The folks who controlled the economy continued to control the economy. The folks who worked quietly in tandem with elements of Al-Shabaab to ensure that their shipments came in and their sales happened, and their control stayed in place, none of that fundamentally changed which is why four years on Somalia remains pretty similar.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Wow. And the refugees, which last time I checked were well over 100,000 living in principally Kenya but elsewhere, they still feel they can't go back?

SHACKELFORD: It's true. You've had a small number that have returned. Parters of the country have been freed from Al-Shabaab at different points. AMISOM has managed to liberate some areas, but the challenge continues to be holding those new areas. But that's it. Parts of the country remain largely under the influence, control, and taxation structures of Al-Shabaab. So how do you live with Al-Shabaab and try to stay safe while the United States is bombing them, which happens routinely? Is the threat Al-Shabaab or is the threat just ongoing war for many of these communities? I believe it's both. So Somalia is a long way off from being safe enough for large numbers of people to move back.

Now, one of the challenges in Kenya when I was there and continuing to this day is that Kenya wants the Somalis to leave. So, they've been making a big push to try and close camps and get Somali refugees to return to their country. But the situation is not safe enough for that to be the case.

Q: To what extent if any do other countries like the U.S. and so on accept Somali refugees?

SHACKELFORD: I don't think that we're accepting any refugees at all from Somalia now because I don't think we're accepting many refugees. But you have Somali refugees all around the world. In the past twenty years the United States has accepted quite a few Somali refugees, which is why we have some—quite robust Somali communities in America. I'm in Vermont now; neighboring Maine has a town with the second largest Somali population in the country.

Q: Minnesota.

SHACKELFORD: Yes, that's the largest.

Q: Yeah. It's just so interesting that they come from a hot dry climate or a hot humid climate and then they go, to escape it perhaps, to the coldest parts of the country.

SHACKELFORD: I saw the same thing with South Sudanese as well. They all seemed to go to very cold places. I think they go where someone they know already went and was able to get a job, so that's what often starts these concentrations.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: People like to be around—all of us like to be around people that are like ourselves.

Q: Yeah, yeah. So, the initial thing that you paid attention to is this election. The election takes place and not much changes. How long is the tour expected to be, your tour expected to be?

SHACKELFORD: It's meant to be a two-year tour starting in May of 2016. So, I'm supposed to be there through around May or June of 2018. Even after the election process, the excitement over putting together the government continues. Who's going to be selected as the prime minister? It's the building of the cabinet. And meanwhile, me and others who worked on the election are like, Guys, you have four years to figure out the next election. You should start now. But alas, that was not to be. They still haven't done it and they're supposed to be ready now four years later.

The electoral process finally happened for the president in early February in 2017. And at that stage it really kinds of feels like the big purpose that I was there for had just wrapped up. I probably should have packed up my bags and left at that moment.

Q: Yeah, I mean, that's what I was beginning to think about because in other words, now that it's happened, what is left for you to do?

SHACKELFORD: There was still a lot. It's Somalia. Work on the constitution, on governance, on human rights, which was the other side of my portfolio that I had not been able to put enough time and effort into. But I had benefited from having a portfolio that had significant interest in Washington in a country where 90 percent of the interest in Washington was about the counterterrorism efforts. And that was when I really started to see how lopsided our interest and focus was. Washington, State Department leadership and the National Security Council, they had cared about the election because we in the United States often see elections as success stories in and of themselves, as the trappings of democracy. If you have an election of whatever form you can say it's a success, it's a democracy, and you continue to pour money and support into that country.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: Of course, that's an oversimplification of what had happened there. But I quickly saw this massive vacuum of attention just sucked away from anything I was doing. Suddenly nobody in Washington was reading a cable that I wrote or cared what I had to say about the situation. All focus went onto the security situation again, which had all been going on in the background. We had I think eight State Department officers focused on Somalia. Five of them are focused on military issues because much of the military program there is funded by the State Department and managed by the State Department. So, you've got those five who always have attention because of the security situation. I focused on other things, and suddenly my reliable spot in the bunker disappeared. I traveled in a lot less often because my portfolio no longer had primacy. And I suddenly had to face the truth that every other State Department person did, that all Washington cared about was the counterterrorism effort. And you see the result of that pretty quickly.

Q: Yes, I get it. That is something in State Department life you very vividly and very quickly see or kind of get left in the shallows. So, what are you thinking? Are you thinking about curtailing or are there other opportunities that are presenting themselves in sort of the same region but doing something different? What's next?

SHACKELFORD: Part of me was thinking, Oh, well, now I don't have to spend every waking moment and weekend in a bunker in Mogadishu; that's not bad. But this also came around the same time that Rex Tillerson, our new Secretary of State, did. I wonder if I had still been in the throes of the electoral process, which seemed to me like such a fundamentally important issue, that maybe it would have overridden my concerns about the direction of the administration. So many people who work in countries around the globe could stay the course because they get no focus from Washington. You can continue to plod your path for the interest that the State Department pushes, and you can do that out of the limelight and out of the sway of Washington because it's just not a high priority. But for me that was hard to do with issues like the Muslim travel ban coming up. Somalia is one of seven countries specifically targeted in the Muslim travel ban. And this all happens right around the same time, right. It's January, February, the election process there is wrapped up.

It was hard to ignore the fallout in Mogadishu. We had had the first election watch party in Mogadishu in twenty-five years, which was a particularly big deal given Somalia's own electoral process going on at the time. We'd invited dozens and dozens of Somali activists, government officials, and presidential candidates—there were twenty-six presidential candidates at one point in Somalia—to come join us at 4:00 in the morning, because of the time difference, to watch the results roll in on our presidential election. So, all of this is the backdrop to me wrapping up this work on trying to promote a less corrupt, more representative selection process of the Somali government. So, it's an interesting split screen, if you will.

Q: Were you, in terms of your own sense of accomplishment, were you able to do what you had hoped to do?

SHACKELFORD: On the elections in Somalia? Well, let's say I spent the first six months revising my expectations.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: And setting my bar a little lower. At which point, yes, I exceeded my expectations. It actually happened and there was a change in government.

Q: Okay, okay.

SHACKELFORD: It felt like the work that we were doing, that the U.S. government was doing there was really helping to bring in more diverse representation, voices from across a country where people across the country had not had a voice before. I worked very closely on—specifically on the effort to get Somalia to meet their own law, which said that they would have 30 percent female representation in parliament. They fell short of that, but—I want to say it was somewhere around 20 percent. It was respectable. It was a massive improvement. And that had been something I had really thrown myself into, so much so that I would go into meetings with representatives from different of the federal member states and they would just roll their eyes at me, like, You're going to talk to us about women again, aren't you?

Q: Laughs

SHACKELFORD: And I would, and I did. And that was where having the Somali language was very helpful. I would hear people making snide comments in Somali to each other, for which I would then call them out. I would respond, to their surprise, "I'm not a little girl. I heard that." So, it felt as though we had really accomplished something, which is one of the reasons it was so hard to watch our position as a partner in the country start to fade. The government was still very interested in our military assistance, which continued. But there was a sense that the State Department in the field, in Mogadishu no longer had much sway and that what we said mattered less because Washington contradicted it. We'd tell our counterparts in a meeting, "This partnership is very important. We're working closely with you on electoral progress. We really want to make sure that we help you get a new constitution." And then they would see tweets about the Muslim ban and that would be where their focus would be. And they just stopped trusting that we, the representatives in the field, really had a finger on the pulse of what the U.S. government was going to do.

Q: Were you reporting this back?

SHACKELFORD: Yes. Yes, and we as a mission sent back a cable specifically about the damage of the Muslim travel ban on our efforts in the country. It wasn't a dissent because this came from our ambassador and that was our official point of view as a mission. We pushed back on it because it did nothing for our security interests and really harmed our partnership. It made it harder for us to send even our own staff back to the United States

for training, for meetings, to send counterterrorism partners back to do training in the U.S. And it just looked really bad and fed right into Al-Shabaab's narrative that we were Muslim-hating imperialists.

Q: Okay. Were there any other sectors of Somalia at the time that were nevertheless, let's say at the grassroots level, making any kind of progress?

SHACKELFORD: There's always progress happening on really small scales. USAID had had a fairly successful stabilization project that was working to help build resilience against various shocks, whether that's climate shocks or security shocks. There were small success stories, but they faded to the back—the challenge is the sustainability when USAID funding pulls out, are these businesses still going to thrive. If AMISOM is not there holding that territory, are the people living there going to be able to continue to travel back and forth for trade? So, windows of promise but our focal point on military action made it difficult to have a lasting impact in areas of development and diplomacy.

Q: Are there any other countries in the region who were interested in helping us for any reason at all?

SHACKELFORD: Other countries in the region were the tip of the spear for AMISON. We provided a lot of funding, the EU and others provided a lot of funding to Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and a few other countries that provided troops for the AMISOM peacekeeping mission. There's always been concern that if we pull back, will Kenya and Ethiopia pull back? But Somalia is on their border. They have a far more direct national security interest in keeping Somalia stable from everything from terrorism coming across borders to refugees doing so. So I haven't been convinced that they are only there because the U.S. is. In fact, if the United States weren't doing so much, perhaps more pressure would be on the Somalia government to get its act together rather than continue to be propped up by external military forces. The number of countries giving military training to the Somali national army have reportedly trained tens of thousands of troops by now but they only appear to have a handful. A billion plus dollars spent on it over the last ten years. But these other countries are likely to stay the course for their own reasons.

Q: What about other wealthy Islamic countries, Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia?

SHACKELFORD: I remember Ambassador Schwartz saying that he would have given several years of his Africa experience for just one tour in the Gulf or the Middle East in order to better understand Somalia. You send Africanists there because it's on the continent of Africa, but culturally, historically it is often less connected to sub-Saharan Africa than to the Gulf and the Middle East.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: One of the interesting foreign policy crises that happened then was the big fallout with the Gulf—the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and Qatar. Somalia became a battleground. During the electoral process, bags of money were being carried in

mostly from Gulf states, and we were spending a lot of time trying to pin down who was paying whom for what and what their endgame was. Different advisors in the country were very closely tied to different Gulf states in particular. We made a big push with the new government in 2017 to do its best to stay out of that row and they tried. But Somalia does not throw around sufficient weight to be able to choose when to stay neutral all the time. I mean, looking at where Somalia is, it's incredibly geopolitically strategic; waterways alone make it critical to international trade.

Q: Was it—was piracy still a big issue?

SHACKELFORD: Piracy had wound down by then. There hadn't been attacks in several years. Piracy in Somalia had really gotten out of hand, but it's a great example of how the international community can coordinate and address a problem if it wants to. With patrols from international partners and businesses investing in more security, it was no longer lucrative. While I was there though, businesses got a little lazy. The big shipping companies didn't want to spend as much fuel to stay far off the coast, so they'd get closer and closer. When some piracy returned, it was opportunistic, primarily. But it was rare enough by then that the piracy news was always a little interesting.

Q: Are there many Somalis who actually want to go to the U.S.? I mean, other than the ones who would have family reunification. Is there a great, you know, feeling of urgency that this is where we can finally make our life or whatever?

SHACKELFORD: People think of Somalia as this kind of America-hating place because of the history of the Black Hawk Down years. But like many other parts of the world there's frustration with the American government by many Somalis, but there's also a fascination with our culture and the country itself. I wouldn't say it was pro-American, but it was very America friendly. The people that I knew had a lot of interest in the United States. But also factor in a very ugly American political presidential campaign at the time that I was there, so people were curious, you know. Many people I knew still wanted to go to America, but at the same time were also thinking, what on earth is going on in America?

Q: I see.

SHACKELFORD: So, I believe that that's changed over the past number of years. There was excitement about having a new American ambassador, less about it being American than what it said for the Somalis, that they were getting a U.S. mission again, so that must be a sign of progress. But at the same time there was always an interest in the Somali government and civil society in what the Americans were thinking and what support can the Americans bring? I knew more Somalis who had come back to Somalia from the United States or Europe or the UK because they wanted to help their country rebuild than I knew people trying to escape.

Q: Okay. While you were there, was Al-Shabaab successful in recruitment and if so, what was the benefit or how did they successfully recruit people?

SHACKELFORD: They obviously must have been able to because there were plenty of incidents where they had clearly recruited people inside the government to help them. In one incident, they managed to get access to set off a bomb in the mayor's office in Mogadishu. We don't have a clear narrative on what's going on with Al-Shabaab and the people in Somalia. U.S. diplomats aren't out there, U.S. development professionals aren't out there. U.S. military is out there, but that's a very different thing. There was always a lot of suspicion around the people who were informing the U.S. military about Al-Shabaab targets. There was always this assumption that the U.S. military was closer to particular clans and subclans because they were the ones that were getting coordination and assistance from. In a place where there are so many different fault lines between clans and subclans, different groups people can call it an Al-Shabaab issue, but it's really just an internal—even subclan issue. I don't think that we ever know or can have total confidence that the people giving us information don't have ulterior motives in a lot of these situations. So, I don't think we have a great sense of whether or not Al-Shabaab is really effective in its recruiting. Some recent surveys by a USAID project found that different groups of marginalized communities had really been abused and taken advantage of by more powerful clans or subclans, and so they have some sympathy with the fact that Al-Shabaab does not play into the same clan dynamics that govern things. I'm not going claim Al-Shabaab is this great governance body that they prefer over the Somali government. But I think it is presumptuous of us to assume that the government that we have continued to prop up is particularly attractive either, as it continues to be engaged in corrupt acts. Some government corruption even involves Al-Shabaab. Our decision to pick winners and losers in the eyes of the Somali people is a bit presumptuous. I think that we should be a little bit more honest about all the gray areas there.

Q: All right. Now, what happens to you? (Both laugh) This is all very interesting and yeah, the recent history is very clear, but I don't know if I—I think if I were in your position and Washington were no longer—I was no longer on Washington's radar I'd want to move.

SHACKELFORD: I was pretty committed to the Somalia mission in part because I'd spent several months full-time studying Somali. I mean, you invest to that level. I had developed this intricate knowledge of the clan structures and the players and it's hard to walk away from that. As a Foreign Service officer, you always have to walk away from these things though. You delve in, you get deep in and then it's time to go to the next post.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: But the less attention being paid to my portfolio, the more futile that it seemed, and that did contribute to how much more of a critical eye I was giving what we were doing as a country in our foreign policy writ large. There were the policy aspects and then there were the personnel aspects. We had personnel issues at post; some officers left early for different reasons and as many people know, in the early stages, well,

throughout the Trump administration there has not been a big focus on restaffing the State Department. So, we went from having a pretty full staff to having an acting head of mission, an acting deputy head of mission and a half-staffed political team. It became even harder for us to counterbalance the military weight of the mission. You've got four-star generals flying in routinely, and they can travel liberally around the country when we cannot, you lose the rank of ambassador and you become even less meaningful and influential. Even when we were fully staffed and had an ambassador at the helm, we would constantly struggle with the fact that we weren't allowed to leave the airport compound. Meanwhile, dozens and dozens of U.S. military personnel were traveling freely around the country, wandering down from meetings at Villa Somalia, which is the presidential palace, and getting called into meetings to discuss the political situation because no other Americans were around. I'm like, "Please don't talk to them about the political situation." And our military colleagues didn't want to. That wasn't their job. They didn't want to take on our job. They would frequently ask if we could join them in meetings and travels, but we weren't allowed to because we were not given permission by the White House to travel as they could. We didn't have the resources to get downtown safely and securely. If we wanted to meet with the president or the prime minister, anybody, they had to run the gauntlet to come into the international military compound, which is an embarrassing thing to do for the president of a country.

Q: Sure, sure.

SHACKELFORD: So a difficult situation got worse. Before the Trump era, whether it was the ambassador or me in multilateral meetings, on any given issue, the American mission was always invited to contribute first. What do the Americans say? What do the Americans think we should do? What's your position on this? Even if it was me and I was not senior at all. But gradually over time our position lost its importance—suddenly we have a deputy, an acting in the place of the ambassador, and no one is going to him for our position. People speak up one at a time, Canada, Germany, Kenya, and I'm like, "You have to say something." I'm poking our acting ambassador and encouraging him to speak up because they weren't seeking out our opinion anymore. That wasn't good.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: That starts to wear on me, and then the fallout from the Muslim ban. Then the White House increases authorities for military action in Somalia in March 2017, reducing the need for civilian oversight over certain drone strikes. And we just were losing our position. You start to wonder, we're doing a lot of lethal action in Somalia, are we doing it smartly? Is there enough oversight? Are we inadvertently making the situation worse? And at a certain point I realized that if it was going to go poorly, if we were going to do more harm than good, I didn't want to be a part of that anymore.

Q: Yeah, yeah. No more questions. I mean, the mere fact of the combination of the reduction of the influence of State Department, the Muslim ban and the fact that the military is doing it all diplomatically, and now from a military point of view, once again I'd look around and go, why is State even here?

SHACKELFORD: Uh-huh.

Q: We're not doing anything.

SHACKELFORD: Exactly. And then the question, do I try and curtail and go somewhere else? And I thought about that, but this is my fourth tour and I'd been in—for somebody who had an Africa background and Africa focus I'd been in two places that Washington cared a lot about on the continent. I'd been in places that were not particularly appealing, so for a junior and a mid-level officer, I was able to have a pretty significant role in each. The option of trying to go somewhere to stay under the radar until a new administration wasn't that appealing. I just decided that that wasn't my style.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: I wanted to speak out against what I saw as a misguided approach to our foreign policy, which didn't start with that administration. I'd been speaking out internally against what I felt was a bad approach to our foreign policy for years at that point. Keeping my head down until things changed didn't seem like the right thing for me to do.

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: So, I decided I was going to resign.

Q: Wow. I mean, so you—and did you consider going anywhere else where you might think the administration was at least not causing harm and you could feel comfortable working under the current leadership?

SHACKELFORD: I thought about it. I looked at what the open positions were in different places and I talked to a lot of mentors in the early stages because I was thinking about this for a few months before I finally resigned in November 2017. Well, put in my resignation notice November 2017. And I remember that summer when I first started reaching out to mentors, to trusted people I'd worked for, and at first, uniformly people said, You know, we need people like you to stay in, you can fight to change things on the inside, and by September, October, with everything that was happening with the State Department, almost to a person the tune had changed.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: The vast majority of people that I had sought advice from were like, Yeah, I can see that. You might want to go. The only ones who didn't were people who had already retired early and left. So, they hadn't been seeing day-to-day what we'd been seeing. And I'm a human rights background person as well and that was an area of particular assault under Tillerson's leadership. If I were focused on economic growth and trade, maybe it would have made more sense to stay. I have no criticism of people who

chose the different path to stay in and try to fight from the inside. I think that's incredibly important. But for me, given my professional focus, the types of places that I had expertise in, the conflict and post-conflict regions, the human rights interest, it just didn't seem like there was a lot of space for me to do what I had joined the State Department to do.

Q: Yeah. All right. So, but you need to get back—you can't quit in Somalia, or can you?

SHACKELFORD: You can. It's actually—I mean, I could quit out of Nairobi.

Q: Ah.

SHACKELFORD: Massively easier to do than in the bureaucracy of Foggy Bottom because you don't have to navigate the larger offices at headquarters. Instead, at post, you just call up your neighbor, who's the deputy RSO (Regional Security Officer) and say, hey, I need to come by to do my sign-out. You email your career development officer in Washington, you get the checkout list and you just do it. I mean, I didn't go back to the State Department in Washington, DC again.

Q: Wow.

SHACKELFORD: I just resigned from there. And stayed in Kenya for a while, actually.

Q: That—see, now that is interesting. Okay. You've decided to resign. Fine. But did you have a future in sight? What were you thinking about, you know, at least for the near term?

SHACKELFORD: I didn't really. I mean, people kept asking me what job I was going on to, but I hadn't thought that far ahead. I'd had three really intense, challenging jobs that had put me in difficult places and had exhausted me for years. I was just going to take a little time and reevaluate and see what I want to do when I grow up. I'm glad I took that time. I had in the back of my head that I might want to write a book about the experience in South Sudan. I had thought about that for years. I wasn't sure I was going to have the opportunity to after I resigned, but I knew I wanted to look into it. And so, that's what I ended up doing for the near term after I resigned.

Q: Now, okay. But did you write it principally while you were in Africa or did you come back or how did you—how did you go about doing that?

SHACKELFORD: For most of the writing I was still in Kenya. I was fortunate enough to land a book agent, thanks to my brief fifteen minutes of fame when my resignation letter went viral, and that helped give me some shape around how do you exactly pursue writing a book. But I rented a little cottage on the shores of Lake Naivasha and proceeded to spend most of the next year there, working on a book.

Q: Wow. That's pretty extraordinary. Okay. In writing it, it's still principally about South Sudan, were you able to get to all the sources you needed?

SHACKELFORD: I was well-known for my obnoxious note-taking style of essentially transcribing meetings I was in. And I do a lot of journaling. I had a treasure trove of notebooks to draw from. I also had all the emails that I sent out to friends while I was in South Sudan during the war to give them updates on what was going on. And I caught up with a lot of old friends and colleagues to help fill in the blanks. I'd love to write other books but covering anything I had not personally lived through would be a lot more challenging and require more work.

Q: Right, uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: But there was something about it at the time that I knew I wanted to capture all of that in, I mean, stacks of notebooks (laughs; inaudible).

Q: Now, okay, so you're writing it. You have a contract with a publisher—

SHACKELFORD: First I just had an agent, so—

Q: Okay.

SHACKELFORD: I wrote probably half the book before we started pitching it to publishers. And at the time I had no idea if I was going to be able to get anyone interested in buying a book about South Sudan. It's not exactly beach reading material.

Q: Oh, yeah, no. But you know, there are university presses and a small set of foreign policy presses that could certainly be interested. Which one finally took you up?

SHACKELFORD: PublicAffairs, which is an imprint under Hachette. So, it was under one of the big four, which I was very excited about because again, it's—I didn't want to write an academic book. I wanted to write a book—this gets back to much of what I was thinking about and brainstorming about during my time in the Foreign Service was that I felt that our foreign policy didn't have enough oversight, was not sufficiently connected to a long-term vision of our values and our goals. And I felt that if more of the American public understood what we were doing across the globe in their name that maybe they would care more, maybe they would vote on these issues, maybe they would ask their representatives in Washington what is it that we're doing on behalf of the Saudis. Or whatever the case may be. Why are we propping up governments like Museveni's in Uganda? Why are we pouring all of this money into militaries that abuse their own civilians across the globe? So, I wrote it to be accessible to just about any reader. I mean, it's a story. It's a first-hand story. It's through my eyes as a young diplomat who shows up naïve, bright-eyed and bushy tailed, and is promptly corrected. And that's what I've been trying to do since I've been on the outside, is talk to different groups, talk to people outside the Washington, DC beltway, share stories, tell tales and get them to pay attention.

Q: Now, once the book was published were you able to do a book tour?

SHACKELFORD: It's all been virtual.

Q: Ah, yes, of course.

SHACKELFORD: I mean, all virtual. I've done, I don't know, twenty-something events at this point, you know, and am still trying to reach more audiences. We're now in the fall of 2020, the cancelled year, and starting to line up virtual events at universities now. But it's hard to break into the conversation right now. I mean, it's COVID and an election year.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: It's a weird year. But it's been well-received by the people who read it, which is good.

Q: Now, beyond this, do you have other ideas about what you're going to do next?

SHACKELFORD: I think that I'm going to write commentary for different groups on foreign policy. I'm doing some consulting on the development side to pay the bills. Punditry does not really earn a great living for most people.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: But what's been fascinating though is that you go from a situation where you're inside the State Department and you have a lot of knowledge and a lot of insight and a lot of access, but you don't really have your freedom of speech.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: You're very limited to what you can say publicly. And if you aren't an ambassador, if you aren't an assistant secretary, if you are a worker bee, as I was, your job is to inform the people on the inside and then pursue the policy as they direct. So, being on the outside, being able to publish opinion pieces and write on the pros and cons of our foreign policy and to put that out publicly has been a big change. And it's been—it's been rewarding in a different way. You no longer have the weight of the U.S. government behind you though, which is a powerful thing, as you know.

Q: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SHACKELFORD: But, at the same time, I can really say what I feel, rather than at times just having to grit my teeth and say the party line.

Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Absolutely. Well, this—so what this means is we're approaching the end of this oral history interview. Now, at the end—as I do with everyone, I like to ask you sort of overall reflection questions, starting with the—sort of the simplest and lowest level, which is at this point in American history, if somebody came to you and said, "Hi, I'm really interested in going into the Foreign Service, what advice would you give me about preparing?"

SHACKELFORD: Well, for starters I would say for people who are still in college, young people, I often get this question, I usually tell them it's a wonderful career but maybe go out there and get some experience first before you go in because I think it's really good to have seen parts of the world and other aspects of the system before you become totally shaped by the U.S. government. And I also think it's really hard to get in before that. The Foreign Service is quite competitive. I don't know how you answer all of those questions in the oral exam if you haven't been out there living in the world and doing things.

Q: Right, right.

SHACKELFORD: But read news sources, not politics. Read news sources from around the world. Figure out what regions you're interested in and find out not just what the U.S. government's doing there but what other governments are doing there and how it fits into different regions. I always say, "Read *The Economist*." I think it's a great general source for somebody who just wants to learn more about the world and what's going on and how it fits together. And widen your lens from American news sources, for sure. And pay attention to what Congress does. I feel like that's a really important tool of our foreign policy and when I first entered the Foreign Service, I did not realize just how much influence it wields and how much more it could. So those would be some bits of advice. I think finding out if you actually have any interest in living overseas is always a good thing. I know a lot of people who get in and they're just not good fits for life outside the U.S., in which case there are many other ways that you can get involved in foreign policy that don't involve uprooting yourself and your family every couple of years.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Then, how would you advise the department in terms of recruitment and training?

SHACKELFORD: I think a lot needs to change and there's awareness of that. The State Department had made some small strides towards increasing diversity, both with more Foreign Service officers of color and more women. But as is the case with so many industries the progress of diversity up through the ranks just wasn't happening and still isn't. And now we've seen that roll back. I can't count the number of times I've seen photos in the last three or four years of U.S. delegations made up entirely of white men, and that's a difference. I mean, that's something that even when it was hard to figure out, people would notice and try to address because, frankly, it looks bad. I mean, I remember seeing a photo two years ago of a Somali delegation, I believe it was in Washington, and they had more women from this conservative Muslim country at the table than the Americans did. It might seem just like optics, but people often say you can't be it until

you can see, and in terms of people—having a State Department that reflects America is really important, not just for how it looks overseas, but it's important for what we do. If you have a lot of people with the same background, they're going to bring the same experience to the table. It's a simple fact. Diversity of opinion is necessary for better outcomes. They've done studies on this in many different industries and it's just true, not to mention it's right.

So, I think that the State Department needs to look very seriously at recruiting and promotion. We've got some good fellowship programs that bring in more people of color, but unconscious biases still influence the promotion and assignment process. The corridor reputation, that's what they call it in the State Department - your hallway reputation, is what determines where you get jobs and whether you get promoted. And it has a huge amount of influence on people's careers and futures. And women routinely are described in their various reviews with very gendered language and that turns people off. And it's a problem in any industry, but our ultimate job is a critical one for not just the benefit of the United States but stability in the world. So, it's important we do it right.

Q: When—just to support what you're saying about how women are described—over the time I was in the Foreign Service, and I retired in 2013, promotion boards would have to warn evaluation writers not to use expressions like "she's so vivacious," or "she's astonishingly smart."

SHACKELFORD: Right.

Q: And so on, which you know, these are the kinds of things you would never say about a male.

SHACKELFORD: Never say that about a male. I mean, it's unconscious bias.

Q: Yeah.

SHACKELFORD: It's such a pervasive problem. I can't speak for the experience of people of color, but I have many friends in the Foreign Service and I've heard their stories, but I can speak to the experience of a woman in the State Department. And you do get treated very differently. It affects how you move up, it affects how you are treated in meetings, it affects how your opinions come across. And all that affects whether or not we have a robust conversation about the nature of our policy in the places that we work and how we—and how we implement policies.

It's anecdotal—but my personal experience since I resigned in late 2017, I know a lot of other mid-level people who have resigned, quite a number. And 100 percent of them are people of color or women or both. I don't know any mid-level white men who have resigned.

Q: I know of only two and you know, my career was thirty years. Only two in thirty years.

SHACKELFORD: And what does that tell you? It tells you that either they are people who did not see progress for them along the trajectory, and I know a lot of brilliant, wonderful Foreign Service officers who stayed behind, but everyone that I know who has resigned was really quite stellar. So, either they didn't see a trajectory for it or there was a reason that they felt cut out or not represented. That the vast majority had been women and people of color has a significant impact on the quality of the work they were able to do moving forward because you are reducing that diversity that we have fought to increase in the Foreign Service. In the years to come, if there is a reckoning or a change or a shift, one of the things they will have to really address is how we not only hire but promote and mentor and train and move up through the system and retain a diverse Foreign Service that is a reflection of America. And that understands what America is, its good parts and its bad, its benefits, its warts and all the rest because those are the people who can credibly and authentically sit across the table from a counterpart in any other country in the world and really effectively push for the policies that we think are important. The ones who are doing it today with these very hypocritical points of view that have been coming out of this administration, it's just not convincing. And that means that your effort to lead by example which is, frankly, the best thing for your buck you're going to get, the effort to lead by example has really been lost even more so than it had been before, and you're left with force and fear, which is expensive and not very reliable.

Q: Which is where you're already—you're already beginning to answer my next question, which is, come January, let's say there's a new administration, new secretary of state, what policy advice would you give?

SHACKELFORD: I think that the position of the United States in the world is very damaged right now. This isn't the first time it's happened. It's unique in the extent but it's not unique. I mean, we had a similar situation following the George W. Bush years when we had really pulled ourselves out of the collective and had started going it alone and had really damaging consequences. I think it's similar to that but more extreme.

Q: Yep.

SHACKELFORD: But my advice would be to go out into the world more humbly than we have been, not saying just mea culpa we screwed up, but going out to say, We have race problems in our country. Let's look at the other countries that have dealt with this before; what advice can you give us, what lessons have you learned? We have issues with gender in this country and with being able to move women effectively up into more positions of power and influence. How did you deal with family leave issues? How did you deal with ensuring that women can do what they need to do as mothers and still back into the fold later to continue contributing to the needs of our nation? You know, we have challenges with equality in our country that have been exacerbated by our system of capitalism. What have other countries done in order to address that, to address healthcare? I think that we could build up a lot of that credibility that we have lost by going out there again as a participant, as an enthusiastic participant in global affairs rather than going out there with this need to dominate the international system. So, that would be my advice.

I'll be honest, I don't see a lot of American leaders following that advice. I think that it is our nature to try and go out and leadership to us has traditionally meant wielding power and strength. I feel like in this day and age, and you can see it as a result of this, the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe, it's not wielding military strength or the biggest economy that's benefiting people; it's working together with neighboring countries and the rest of the world to try and reach solutions that will be effective. So, hopefully a lot of world leaders are learning that lesson and maybe the United States will as well.

Q: All right. That concludes all of my questions. Is there anything I forgot to ask you or any parting thoughts you have that you'd like to include?

SHACKELFORD: People often think that because I resigned that I don't promote or recommend a career in the Foreign Service, but I want to make clear that I do. It's an incredibly important role for civil servants to play and being that apolitical foundation that doesn't just get us from election to election but looks at the horizon at the long-term picture.

Q: The long game.

SHACKELFORD: At the long game, exactly. So, I want to continue to advocate for smart, good, diverse groups of people to join the Foreign Service and the Civil Service and help us to build back better.

Q: Could you see yourself going back in at a later time?

SHACKELFORD: I get that question a lot too. I miss being part of a bigger—of a project that's bigger than myself. I miss the service. I mean, I joined for the service. I would certainly welcome an opportunity to go back in if I felt there was a place where I could have a voice and a platform to do important work. The challenge right now is that I've become quite accustomed to being able to speak out publicly. And you give up a lot to join the beast.

Q: Right.

SHACKELFORD: So, I don't see me going back in as a mid-level Foreign Service officer.

Q: Okay. Yeah, yeah.

SHACKELFORD: I see myself finding a way, again in the future, to serve the mission of U.S. foreign policy. But it will depend on how best I can do that. Right now, I am a non-resident fellow with the Quincy Institute, which is pushing back against endless wars. I think that that is a great goal to push for as well. So, I will continue to look for ways that I can use my voice and my experience to serve the ultimate goal, a better U.S. foreign policy.

Q: Excellent. Perfect place to stop. All right, I'm going to pause the recording.

End of interview