

## MAURITIUS

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#### HENRY PRECHT Deputy Chief of Mission Port Louis (1970-1972)

*Henry Precht was born in Georgia in 1932. After receiving his AA from Armstrong College in 1951 and his bachelor's degree from Emory University in 1953, he served in the US Navy from 1953-1957. His career has included positions in Rome, Alexandria, Port Louis, Teheran, and Cairo. Mr. Precht was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in March 2000.*

*Q: You were in Mauritius from when to when?*

PRECHT: From the summer of 1970 to the summer of 1972.

*Q: The capital of Mauritius is what?*

PRECHT: Port Louis.

*Q: When you arrived there how would you describe the economy, politics and people?*

PRECHT: At that time there were about 700,000 people on an island about 25 by 30 miles. The single crop was sugar. Sugar cane was grown everywhere. There was high unemployment, high literacy and an ethnically divided society. The majority were Hindus who had been brought in to cut cane when slavery was abolished and the black slaves, mostly Creoles went off to the coast to fish. Creoles constituted about a quarter of the population. Then there was a large contingent, maybe 10 percent, of Muslims largely from Pakistan or Muslim areas of India. There was a small Chinese community. Their kids always won the exams and prizes. And, a much smaller contingent of descendants of the original French inhabitants who had owned and still owned many of the sugar plantations. They were the social elite of the island. These communities were organized into their own political parties. There was a Muslim political party; a labor party, which was largely Hindu; and the Creoles had their own party which included the Chinese and the Franco-Mauritians. The Hindus basically ran the place.

During the time I was there a white Franco-Mauritian, Paul Berenger, who had been a student in Paris rebellion of 1968, came home to organize a multi-community political party, the MMM (Mauritius Militant Movement). He succeeded in organizing sugar cane workers which had never been done, as well as the port workers. He would call strikes. At one time the port was shut down for two weeks with nothing coming in or going out. Our communications were cut at one time. The depressing thing about Mauritius was that nobody in Washington cared about what was going on. When our communications were cut no one seemed to miss us. Mainly the place was of interest to the U.S. Navy which didn't want the Russians establishing a base there. (I think there was little prospect of their doing that). The Mauritians before independence from the British had had jurisdiction over Diego Garcia, which the British leased to the US Navy. There was some residual Mauritian claim for that island which was to become a major U.S. base in the region. On Diego Garcia there were ex-Mauritians called Illois earning a living picking coconuts. Those people got a very minimum settlement on independence and were shipped back to Mauritius where they were destitute. I made them a cause while I was there with no results. Subsequently, they managed to gain decent compensation.

We were an eight man embassy, counting secretaries and the Peace Corps director. In addition to being DCM, I was the Aid director and the USIS head. We had a million dollars of food aid. We had \$50,000 in self-help money for small projects. I used to bring in speakers for the USIS program. I put on a folk festival at one time and published a magazine on American education. There was plenty of scope to do whatever I wanted to do.

*Q: How did Bill Brewer fit into this?*

PRECHT: Bill is a very formal, some people would say stuffy, foreign service officer. For example, whenever I would write a message back to the department and referred to Mauritius as "the island," he would say it was more than an island, "this is a nation." It was his first ambassadorial post and he was making the most of it. He was very genial and I got along very well with him, but there was this kind of formality that I think the Mauritian government really weren't quite up to in some respects. For example, when I first arrived he gave a big dinner for us and the prime minister was there. It was a long table and I was seated at the end where the prime minister was and Bill was at the other end. After it was over, he rose and said very formally, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Queen." The old prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur

Ramgoolam, leaned over and said to me, “I didn’t know America had a queen.” Mauritius was that kind of sort of informal, slightly wacky place.

*Q: Why would we be toasting the Queen?*

PRECHT: Because she was the titular head of Mauritius. Mauritius was in the British Commonwealth. There was a governor-general there who represented the Queen. It was very much a mixture of the reality of Mauritius, which was very informal, and the British-imported formality.

*Q: We had this policy that we used to call “strategic denial,” which was basically to keep the Soviets’ hands off these islands. It was our playground but not their playground.*

PRECHT: I think that was part of it. There were two abandoned oil tanks on the other side of the island from the harbor, Port Louis, which had been used during World War II. The Navy was concerned that the Russians might get that tiny harbor as a base for their fishing fleet and Navy vessels. The military attaché from Madagascar flew over once and photographed the island and then later sent us prints which he had unfortunately printed backwards so that north was south and south was north.

*Q: Were the Indians at that time showing interest in making the Indian Ocean more Indian?*

PRECHT: Their ties to India were sentimental and cultural. Mauritius looked toward Europe. Every Mauritian aspired to get off the island and study in England or France. Everyone could speak British English, but preferred to speak Creole French. After I left, the incipient industry for textiles and electronics got going and unemployment disappeared and tourism boomed. I understand it has become quite a different place from what it was when we were there.

*Q: Were we trying to do much to develop industry or tourism?*

PRECHT: Our aid program was essentially importing rice. It was sold to the Mauritian government and the funds generated were used largely to build roads. We didn’t have any specific projects. With the smaller self-help money we built a youth club here or a clinic there, etc. But, in Mauritius these things counted for something and we were well regarded.

*Q: Were UN votes an issue?*

PRECHT: They naturally had a vote in the UN. Occasionally I would have to go to the foreign ministry which consisted of a politically appointed foreign minister who could care less about UN votes and one guy who took care of the diplomatic work and their missions in Europe, New York and Washington. I would go to see him and carry out my instructions and he would make a note. I doubt that he ever went to trouble and expense to send a cable to New York. The Mauritians generally went along with what we wanted, but it was probably our ambassador in New York that did the trick.

Once, when I was chargé, during the crisis of the Pentagon Papers which were about to be published by the New York Times, Mr. Kissinger sent a message to all posts worldwide, NIACT [Night Action - meaning regardless of the time, the Communications Section should decode and present cable to a substantive officer] IMMEDIATE, saying that he wanted personal assessments from each chief of mission as to how the publication of these Pentagon Papers would impact on our relations with the host country. That is, if the host country found out we couldn't keep secrets, would they be willing to confide in us and work in partnership with us. I think I must have had one of the first answers back on his desk. I said, "On this island no one had kept a secret more than 30 minutes and they would find it strange if the United States were able to do so." This was just the opposite of what he wanted.

*Q: How was living there?*

PRECHT: Splendid. We had a large house with tennis court. Each person in the embassy had his own beach house. Ours was on the less fashionable side of the island because it was windy, but it had a wide long, if windy, beach. I had my own lateen sail boat. It was an unwritten rule that no one on the island entertained on weekends. Our daughter went to the English girls school and our son went to the French lycée. As my wife had predicted, it was a great place to live.

*Q: In 1972 how did you feel about leaving?*

PRECHT: It was time to go. You didn't want to make your career living on Mauritius.

**WILLIAM D. BREWER**  
**Ambassador**  
**Mauritius (1970-1973)**

*Ambassador William D. Brewer was born in Connecticut in 1922. He received a B.A. degree from Williams College and an M.A. degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He entered the Foreign Service in 1947. He served overseas in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Afghanistan, and in Washington, DC as desk officer for Arab Affairs and Country Director for Arabian Peninsular States. He was appointed ambassador to Mauritius in 1970 and Ambassador to Sudan in 1973. Ambassador Brewer was interviewed by Malcolm Thompson in 1988.*

*Q: Interview with Ambassador William D. Brewer. Bill, in 1970 you received your appointment as Ambassador to Mauritius. How did that come about? Was it a surprise to you? Did you have any choice, or was that just what you drew?*

BREWER: Well, it wasn't entirely a surprise because I was due for an Ambassadorial assignment, and one or two posts had been suggested and I jumped at the proposal that Mauritius might be the one because I had always heard about Mauritius and I relished the opportunity to be the first Ambassador who would serve in Mauritius. So it did not come as a complete surprise although, of course, I was very pleased. You want me to continue with...

Q: *Yes, why don't you.*

BREWER: I did go out to Mauritius in...

Q: *First of all, had you ever been there before? Did you know anything about the place?*

BREWER: No. Well, I knew a little about the place because I had collected stamps as a boy and the Mauritian Penny Blue is the most valuable stamp in the world. I might say, as a sort of digression here, that anyone interested in any kind of international activity as an adult, whether it's the Foreign Service, or international banking, or international business, could do a lot worse than collect stamps, as a boy or girl, as a means of reinforcing his or her understanding of geography. We've been reading in recent days about how knowledge of geography in the United States has become so deplorable, and certainly one of the reasons that my geography was perhaps not bad was because I collected stamps as a kid.

But in any case, I went out there in June 1970 and found it a wonderful opportunity to set the tone of a relationship because we had not had an Ambassador Resident there previously. The country became independent only in 1968 and we had had a series of Charges until my appointment. It was in many ways an idyllic assignment. We had beautiful quarters. It's a lovely island, very similar I'm told to the Hawaiian Islands in character, magnificent beaches, I had a little sailboat, and so on. It was not, of course, in the first rank of concerns of the State Department on policy questions. But there were a couple of issues that were of some significance at that time.

One of them was the question of Soviet naval penetration of the Indian Ocean and this, I think, was one reason that we were interested in resuming this relationship. And I say resuming advisedly because I found on being assigned to Mauritius that in fact we had had an official relationship with Mauritius from 1794 to 1911. We'd had a consulate in Port Louis and we'd had Americans living on the island, we had a very heavy American--in fact, there were more American contacts with Mauritius than with any other area of the African continent except Tangier going back further. This had been completely erased from the collective memory of the State Department because, of course, nothing had happened since just before World War I.

Q: *Would the whaling ships have had anything to do with this?*

BREWER: Oh, yes. The whaling ships did. The Antarctic whaling fleet made Port Louis its headquarters from about 1820-1825 until 1860. And, in fact, in that year the then Consul went to the Mauritian authorities to protest a recent increase in port duties and other charges because if these duties and charges were not rescinded, the American whaling fleet would stop coming. Apparently the Mauritians felt confident that that wouldn't happen, so they said in effect, "We need the revenue, and we're not going to rescind the charges." So they kept the charges unduly high and the whaling fleet transferred to the Cape. And that was the end of the most significant period of our relationship with Mauritius. So it was very interesting to be able to kind of revive and recall some of these early ties when I got out there.

With respect to the Russian activity in the Indian Ocean, we also were interested in improving our position in that part of the world. And one of the decisions that was taken about the time I got out there was that we would build an austere naval facility at an atoll--a thousand miles or so south of Ceylon--called Diego Garcia. Diego Garcia used to be part of Mauritius when Mauritius was under the British. It was no longer part of Mauritius but we in the Embassy in Port Louis played a special role in the inauguration of the work on Diego Garcia and in the support of the SeaBees who were up there doing the work during the construction period.

We had, for example, for one brief period of a couple of months--I think we had an American naval ship a week in Port Louis--and as you may recall from your days as a Consul, when you had a naval visit there was a certain amount of activity. So we were working flat-out on naval visits, and we were assisting them in every way we could. And the thing that was of real assistance was that for the first ship to arrive--you see there was nothing on Diego Garcia, it was a sort of abandoned atoll--the population, that had lived there picking coconuts had been moved off. And so the SeaBees were going to arrive on the beach and start first, I guess, putting up tents or whatever they do. And the question was, where were they going to arrive from. The mother ship sailed from Norfolk, but it was felt that there were not accommodations for all those SeaBees for that long ocean voyage, and the question was where would they be picked up. And I proposed to the Department that they be flown into Mauritius and transferred to the ship and go on from there. The Department, the Bureau of African Affairs, initially reacted very nervously to this. This would maybe upset the non-aligned character of the Mauritian regime and this was something we ought not get involved in. So I cabled, "Why don't we ask the Prime Minister? If he says no, he says no, but what's the objection in raising this?" "Well," they said, "Okay." So I went along and had a meeting with Prime Minister Ramgoolam, who was very cooperative. He said, "I don't see any objection to this." Then he turned to me a little owlshly and said, "You don't think I have to raise this in the full cabinet, do you?" I said, "That's entirely up to you." I don't think he did. So, in fact, he was probably the only Mauritian official who knew about this. But never mind, we had our clearance and the SeaBees were flown into Plaisance airport, and we made arrangements to transfer them to the port by bus. And they got on the ship and sailed away to Diego Garcia without mishap and no news of this move ever surfaced during my entire time in Port Louis. So it was a very effective first step in the construction of this facility.

The Mauritian government proved exceedingly hospitable to US navy visits, and this was very encouraging to the Navy at a time when some other ports on the Indian Ocean were raising restrictions because either of the suspicion that they might carry atomic weapons, or simply a non-aligned view on the part of the government of the time in the country concerned. It was very nice to be able to work closely with a government that still recognized its fundamental ties with the west. And we did all we could to improve those ties to the point that the number two man in the government, Veerasamy Ringadoo, we actually sent to the United States to Bethesda Naval Hospital where he had a major heart operation which I believe he thinks extended his life considerably and enabled him to become Prime Minister when old Ramgoolam finally retired. So that this was a concrete way that we could show our appreciation for what the Mauritians were doing to assist us.

Another thing we did to develop the relationship was to introduce a small Peace Corps operation. I signed the agreement with Prime Minister Ramgoolam, and we brought in a number of units,

never very large because, of course, the country was small. We tried to fine-tune these units to the needs of the country. They didn't need much English teaching, for example, but they did need anything which would assist them in economic development. And one of the things we did which seemed helpful at the time I left--I hope it turned out to be helpful--was to get them started on a shrimp industry. Because Europe has an apparently insatiable desire for shrimp and the Mauritians could raise shrimp but at the time we were there, there were few suitable shrimp being farmed around Mauritius. So we got several Peace Corps volunteers in there and they showed them how to build these little ponds where the shrimp could propagate, and then we had a Hawaiian expert fly in from Honolulu escorting five pregnant shrimp--one of which died on the way--but never mind, four arrived intact and each shrimp apparently produces something between 50,000 and 100,000 baby shrimps so that very swiftly you have a substantial shrimp industry. And I went out and inspected it after these young shrimp had been born and were swimming around, and it looked as if this was going to get started and be an effective addition to the development of the country.

We worked with the Mauritian fisheries people. We also assisted on a number of other projects and we helped Mauritius maintain and I believe slightly enlarge its sugar quota in the United States. This was extremely important to Mauritius because its major output, at that time, was sugar-- something like 600,000 tons a year. And there seemed to be no reason why the United States should close off Mauritian sugar as had been at one stage proposed. We encouraged a visit by the chairman of the House Agricultural Committee with, I believe, four of his colleagues and they were wined and dined and I think they left with a favorable impression of Mauritius. And as a result when the bill was voted it included a slight increase for Mauritius and they were absolutely delighted.

*Q: Very good. Would you like to continue on that assignment on Mauritius, or should we move on to Sudan?*

BREWER: Well, I might say one or two things about personalities, although I don't want to say very much because the country is very small. The Prime Minister, while I was there, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, was a short roly-poly man who had begun life as a doctor. He had been one of the first two non-Franco-Mauritians, I think, to leave the country for training in England. And he had gone into politics, he had a natural gift as a politician, and he had become head of the dominant Labor Party. He saw the need to cooperate with the British who, at that time, still ran Mauritius under a Colonial Governor. And he and the British developed a very useful working relationship as the result of which, when the country became independent, there was no difficulty about it whatever, and Ramgoolam became Prime Minister, and his cabinet took over as an independent cabinet. This, I think, might have been a model for a peaceful transfer of authority.

But there was one interesting thing about the transfer of authority which struck me at the time I was there. You know, of course, the British do not have a written constitution, but one of the things they insist for every colony before it becomes independent is that it have a written constitution because they have to have that document passed through Parliament apparently as a means of constituting the act of independence, you see. So more or less automatically all of the colonies that have become independent wind up with written constitutions which means that

thereafter they are much more interested in American principles of judicial review, and following written articles and written constitution, than in the British precedent way of doing things. And I was consulted more than once by the Chief Justice of the Mauritius Supreme Court who wanted to get a case or two from the Supreme Court files because they shed light on some case that was coming up before the Mauritian Supreme Court. This is a little known fact about how our legal system has, without any particular effort on our part, been spread to many areas of the world simply because they now have written constitutions as we do, and therefore go at the same question of judicial review from the same standpoint as we do.

The role of the British was very modest when I was there but they were still in the background. They still had a significant role with respect to the Special Mobile Force, which was the military force, or a kind of gendarmerie force, on the island. And they still had one or two officials in the Special Branch in a sort of intelligence and advisory role, and they were of assistance on security problems. So the country really did not have much in the way of turbulence. This began to develop during the latter part of my stay when the left-wing MMM (Movement Militant Mauricien) came along under the direction of a number of Hindu politicians and a Franco-Mauritian who had been very much impressed by the student revolt, in France in 1968--he had apparently been a student there and had been very much impressed by the movement to the barricades, etc., and he wanted to carry out this kind of thing in Mauritius. They had some difficulties with the MMM after I left. But I think that perhaps covers Mauritius. It was not a very significant assignment, but a thoroughly enjoyable one and I hope that I helped get our relations off to a good start.

**ROBERT V. KEELEY**  
**Ambassador**  
**Mauritius (1976-1978)**

*Ambassador Robert V. Keeley was born in Lebanon of American parents in 1929. He joined the Foreign Service in 1956. His career included positions in Jordan, Mali, Uganda, Cambodia, and ambassadorships to Greece, Mauritius, and Zimbabwe. Ambassador Keeley was interviewed by Thomas Stern in 1991.*

KEELEY: ... [Eagleburger] gave me three choices, which was rather unusual--sometimes things like this happen. One was Liberia, another was Chad, and the third was Mauritius. I checked out the post reports of all three places. The only one of the three that I was reluctant to accept was Liberia, which I had visited previously on a couple of occasions when I was working on West Africa. That country didn't appeal to me very much, although it was probably the most important of the three posts. We had a large American presence there until recently because of our communications stations there, Roberts Field, VOA transmitters, etc. But that assignment didn't really appeal to me. It would have involved a lot of administrative work, because it was such a large mission. Furthermore, the climate left something to be desired.

After weighing the other two, I decided on Mauritius, which some people would say was the least significant. John Dean advised me to take Chad. He said it was "in the center of things."



Yeah, I said, it's in the center of Africa! Chad eventually did get to be a big deal, but not in 1976. On the other hand, Mauritius was real garden spot. I was tired by this time; I had had a series of difficult posts and the Task Force had sapped a lot of my energy. The Mauritius assignment was supposed to be for two years and looked just right at the time. It was a very small Embassy consisting of perhaps nine Americans and twelve locals. No major problems. Mauritius was not in the geo-political loop. In fact, I had a very interesting and enjoyable two year tour. The tour actually lasted 27 months. I have never regretted that choice.

It was an interesting society, particularly racially. Mauritius has a mixed society of about 1 million people on a very small island. Something like 51% are classified as Hindus, about 29% are Creoles--mixed African-French going back to the early colonial period--about 17% are Muslims--formerly Indians of Muslim persuasion and mostly from what is now known as Pakistan, and the remainder, about 3%, are the original Franco-Mauritians consisting of perhaps 30-40 principal families. The 3% also includes a few Chinese. All the people, strangely enough, get along together. They have a very complex, difficult to understand, political system. They published about 14 daily newspapers, all of them of course very small--four to eight pages. I used to read them all; some were in English, some in French, some partly in Creole. I actually studied Creole a bit on my own and got at least to understand it, but I couldn't speak it at all except for some common phrases; all the politics were conducted in Creole. The political speeches on TV were for example delivered in Creole; I used to watch the TV and eventually got to understand what was being said. Creole is the family language of Mauritians of all races and categories, what they speak at home.

In Parliament, two official languages were used: English and French, which were used interchangeably. All the asides, the jibes, the raucous behavior which is typical of English Parliamentary tradition, all the amusing things were spoken in Creole and were not recorded in Hansard's. So a member could say almost anything he wished in Creole--terrible insults and vulgarities--but the record included only the official statements which had been given in either French or English. So the record sounds much more uplifting, enlightened, and dignified than the proceedings were in fact.

The Mauritian system is very democratic. The British had worked out a complex Constitution which seemed to be working remarkably well. There were some difficulties while I was there; there were elections which were a very serious matter and which came close to stimulating physical confrontations. The economy was quite depressed at that time. Some 70% of the people, when asked by a pollster if they wished to emigrate, responded in the affirmative. When asked if they wished their children to emigrate, 90% responded in the affirmative. That meant only 30% would stay if they had a choice, and they were probably primarily the elderly, and only 10% wanted their children to stay. Now the situation has turned around. Mauritius has had an economic boom and is turning into a mini-Singapore or Hong Kong. Some Chinese entrepreneurs have joined them. The Mauritians established a tax free export processing zone in which they bring some products in duty free and make something else out of them and then re-export the finished goods. They knit sweaters; they make digital watches; they are now involved in a lot of manufacturing activities. In my day Mauritius had essentially a one crop economy--sugar. It is the only crop that survives their periodic cyclones. But the manufacturing effort enabled them to transform their economy and now it is really booming.

It is one of the world's more interesting success stories. The racial situation is calm; they may not all like each other, but have somehow learned to live with each other. Their choice is of course limited; they live on a small island and their alternative is to jump into the sea. That may be the reason they all get along. In any case, Mauritius is a fascinating place.

*Q: What did you think Washington expected from you while you were in Mauritius?*

KEELEY: I don't think Washington expected anything. They expected me to rest for a couple of years to restore my health and morale, to get a better outlook, and then to move on to other things. Mauritius was considered a backwater, a nice place for me to be. I probably took the assignment more seriously than I should have. I got very interested in the political process and the elections. You get to know everyone because it's such a small place. The American Ambassador is known by everyone because there are only about a dozen embassies there. I did an awful lot of reporting. I was the principal reporting officer of the Embassy. I don't think we had a full-time political officer. We had a consular officer, an economic officer, a USIS officer. I just bombarded the State Department with political reporting from a place I don't think anyone was interested in. I am not sure anyone read my messages. Maybe the desk officer and someone in INR who specialized in that part of the world. The CIA liked it; whenever I returned I would be invited out to Langley to debrief them on the personalities; my briefings were always well attended; a lot of people taking notes. These were specialists who had the time to follow things closely. As far as "the powers-that-be" in the State Department, I doubt that any of my reporting got above the Office Director level. At some point, I was mildly admonished to reduce the volume of my reporting because I was clogging the communication channels, or something like that. I didn't mind. It was fun; by profession, I am a political reporting officer and here was an opportunity to practice my skills. I took full advantage of the opportunity. I knew it was not a world shaking situation, but I found it enjoyable to write about things like Mauritius.

*Q: Beyond your personal satisfaction, did you reach any conclusion about the need for the U.S. government to have permanent representation in Mauritius?*

KEELEY: I think it was important for us to have a mission there. There were only about twelve embassies, as I have said. But they represented the principal powers. There was a Soviet Embassy, a British, a French, an Indian one; the Dean of the diplomatic corps was from the Central African Republic. He was there because his famous Emperor, Jean-Bedel Bokassa, had once visited Mauritius and opened an Embassy on that occasion. He of course completely forgot about it subsequently, which is no doubt why the Central African Ambassador stayed there for so many years that he became the Dean. There was a Malagasy Chargé. As I said, most of the principal world powers were represented. We had naval ship visits occasionally and then there was the issue of Diego Garcia. We were in the process of building a major military base there. Diego Garcia had belonged to Mauritius earlier. At independence, the two islands were separated and the British kept Diego Garcia. They leased it to us. So there were reasons for our presence.

The size of our Embassy was about right. It was small and it was not an expensive operation. I thought it was worth that much of an investment. To eliminate our presence or to reduce it to a legation or a Consulate General would not have been acceptable. To have French, British and

Soviet Embassies and not an American Embassy would not have been in keeping with our status as a great power. But we did not exaggerate our size or expense. We had about the right presence. Mauritius could not have been easily covered from another post. We were thousands of miles from anywhere else in the Indian Ocean.

We had some fall-out from the Diego Garcia negotiations because the inhabitants of that island had to be moved to Mauritius. They were destitute people. I frankly don't think anyone did a very good job of caring for them. They were basically coconut pickers; that is all there was on Diego Garcia, coconuts.

We had a minor assistance program in Mauritius. We had had a small Peace Corps program. We tried to help in a minor way. The international assistance had to come essentially from the British and ourselves. I believe that in return for leasing us Diego Garcia, the British had been excused from paying all or some of their share of the development costs of the Polaris submarine nuclear missile. There was some sort of a deal between us and the British. There was considerable resentment in Mauritius over what had happened about Diego Garcia. The Mauritians were basically exploiting a typical situation; if there is an issue on which you can lambaste a great power, you do so. It is an opportunity to be taken advantage of. But it was not really a serious problem. Except that no one had taken proper care of the displaced Diego Garcians--primarily a British responsibility.

I went to Rodrigues Island on a visit because it was part of Mauritius. It's something like 800 miles east of Mauritius, and very neglected. I went with a guy named Gaetan Duval, who represented the principal political party--the Mauritian Social Democratic Party (PMSD)--there. Despite its name it was the conservative party. We spent two or three days there and talked to the local people. They told me that they were in a depressed condition. There were maybe 25,000 people on the island. It was a rather barren place. The head man asked me whether we could help him. He said that they needed coconuts. He wanted to plant a large number of Indian Ocean variety coconut trees.

So I developed an absolutely crazy scheme in my head and sold it to the U.S. Navy. I asked that the next time a U.S. Navy ship came to Mauritius for a ship visit, would it be so kind as to pass by Diego Garcia and pick up several thousand coconuts--if possible not rotten ones lying on the beach, but ones picked from trees which might produce a coconut palm on Rodrigues. I further asked that they pass by the island of Rodrigues on their way to Mauritius and dump their coconut cargo there, if necessary into the sea. The Rodriguans were prepared to sail out in their boats and canoes to herd the thousands of floating coconuts to their shores. The head man there wanted to plant them to restore the local economy.

For some crazy reason the Navy agreed; it considered it a good will gesture for which it could take credit and earn some good publicity. A ship on its way to Mauritius scheduled a stop at Diego Garcia; the crew ran up and down the beach collecting all these coconuts (4,000 or 5,000 of them). They had no storage area, so the Navy built big wooden bins on their deck and dumped the coconuts in them. They got to Rodrigues but could not enter the harbor because it was too shallow. So they dumped the coconuts overboard. You can just picture these American sailors heaving these thousands of coconuts into the sea; they probably couldn't stop laughing--I wish

someone had photographed it. The coconuts did float--contrary to some predictions--and the islanders got all their boats out and went after all of these coconuts. They herded them onto the shore. I don't have the slightest idea whether a coconut industry ever sprouted on Rodrigues, but I know they were planted. If the program was successful, the economic development of that island must have been wondrous to behold.

At the end of my first year in Mauritius I got a message from Assistant Secretary for Africa Dick Moose. I knew him from when he had worked for Senator Fulbright, and I had helped him and his partner Jim Lowenstein with an inquiry they had made for Fulbright's committee into the situation in Greece in 1971. I had seen him at a Chiefs of Mission Conference in Abidjan. He told me that I would have to come back to Washington to help him in the African Bureau as one of his deputies. I told him I would be very happy to do that, but that I had been in Mauritius for only one year and I thought it was wrong to shorten tours too greatly. I was just getting to learn something about the place. I told him I would be delighted to return to Washington if he let me finish my full two years. Sure enough, just as my second anniversary was about to come up, I got a message from Moose telling me to get back to Washington.

**SAMUEL R. GAMMON III**  
**Ambassador**  
**Mauritius (1978-1980)**

*Ambassador Samuel R. Gammon, III was born in 1924 in Texas. He received a bachelor's degree in 1946, a master's degree in 1948, and a doctorate in 1953 from Princeton University. He served in the U.S. Army from 1943-1946 and joined the Foreign Service in 1954. His career included positions in Italy, Ethiopia, and France, and an ambassadorship to Mauritius. Ambassador Gammon was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.*

*Q: You went to Mauritius, we're talking about 1978.*

GAMMON: December of '78.

*Q: Until 1980. I have to say as I look this up in my normal reference, about the only thing in that period that occurred seem to be a reference in the general newspapers of Mauritius, was a heavy weight boxing match with a man named Spinks.*

GAMMON: I think that actually happened just before or just after my time. Very quiet. In Mauritius, it's in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but it's technically in the African bureau, State Department geography! But the real home bureau is the chief of Naval Operations. Mauritius, from US government overall point of view the African bureau only cares because the Bureau of International Organization Affairs says, "Get the damn Mauritians to vote right on such and such an issue in the UN." That's about the only business we deal.

Earlier we had a brief Peace Corps flutter there, but we had almost no aid program in Mauritius. The reason being is that it's French turf. France has the neighboring island of Reunion, which is 90 miles away, and which is a department of the republic. The same way that the Martinique-Guadeloupe are and Tahiti, etc., etc. The African left-wing, extremist, anti-colonial careerists in the Organization for African States were always attacking this "vestige of colonial imperialism," poor Reunion, held, etc., under the fall and all this garbage.

In fact, the French were spending money like it was going out of style. They would cough up-- the hexagon, continental France, was shelling out something like \$400 or \$500 per capita for the 350,000 people in Reunion, so it was not a self-supporting. Even the communist party of Reunion wouldn't say, "We want independence."

They would just say, "We want autonomy." Which meant keep sending the money and leave us alone.

*Q: Did you have responsibility with Reunion?*

GAMMON: I acquired it, because by one of those curious footprints on the beach, the Foreign Service manual, Reunion was actually in the consular district of Antananarivo. Made no sense. So one of the things that I did was I lynched it away from Madagascar, which couldn't have been happier to shuck that off and Reunion was put under Mauritius. Because we had six or eight flights a day back and forth instead of three or four a week from Antananarivo. That made some sense.

I had modest dealings with the French internal security people in Reunion because, thanks to my knowledge of their home structure in Paris, I paid a courtesy call there on one of my visits and that sort of thing. But basically, what we told the Mauritian government, if they wanted aid from us, I'd say, "Shake down the French."

The French were worried about the security of Reunion. They didn't want moderate Mauritius leading the hue & cry against imperialism. So the Mauritians had leverage and they could get money out of the French. A little dab out of the British of course because it was part of the Commonwealth. We had a free ride!

The only irritant was Diego Garcia, which the Mauritians are fond of treating as Mauritius Irridentus. In fact, the British ran all of their 19th Century Indian Ocean possessions out of Mauritius, it was an administrative capitol.

*Q: How far away is Diego Garcia?*

GAMMON: 1500 miles. It's much further north and somewhat east. I never got there, I wanted to go, but in order to go for a visit I would have had to fly from Mauritius to Bombay, change planes and fly to Singapore, board the weekly military supply flight from the Philippines when they refueled in Singapore, fly over to Diego, spend eight hours on the ground then go back to Singapore and reverse course; it would have taken me a week to spend eight hours on the island. I would have done so if I had stayed a full tour.

When the Mauritians would come around with their every four months protest demonstration I would say, "Well, gee whiz, go talk the British high commissioner. We're just renting, they're the landlords, we just rent space there."

*Q: So our interest there was really to make sure that the relations were relatively quietly continued.*

GAMMON: That we continued to enjoy access to a liberty port. The seventh fleet would come in three or four times a year, parts of it, and Mauritius, which has a couple of topless beaches, is a hell of a lot more attractive as a liberty port than Diego Garcia, where the shore party comes on the ship for R and R!

*Q: Did you have any problems with the Navy coming in?*

GAMMON: Not really. It was perfectly all right. We had a nuclear sub in once. No problem of any sort. But at one point when the commander of the seventh fleet was in on his plane, we had a Russian aircraft carrier in port. That was more darn fun because the Prime Minister had organized a handsome representational luncheon to the American admiral and he called me up rather nervously and said, "Russians ships are going to be in here and" gulp, " would you mind if I included the Russian admiral in that."

I said, "No, I'm sure my admiral will be delighted."

Which he was. He offered to go and pay a courtesy call even though he outranked. I bet that burned up the wires from the carrier to the Kremlin. "What do we do now boss?" Our admiral would have given his left arm to go on board for a courtesously call and a peek, but he wasn't permitted. But that was the concern, to deny Mauritius from going a flip flop and the opposition party was socialists and left of center, but it finally came to power in Bob Gordon's period.

*Q: Bob Gordon was the ambassador that took over.*

GAMMON: My successor. A quick adaptation was made so nothing changed. It remained a moderate centralist government, sympathetic to the west. That was about it. My last two weeks in town, I had to stir them up on the issue of Afghanistan. Where interestingly enough, the reaction of the Mauritian government to my unauthorized strong representation, because I knew that in due time when they finished all their clearances in State I'd get an instruction from Washington.

*Q: This is an objection because of the Hindu connection?*

GAMMON: Yes, Mauritius tended to think, "Well, yes, it's terrible what the Russians did in Afghanistan, but you all shouldn't give any arms to Pakistan." Half the population are Hindus and the prime minister and father of independence was Hindu, so they knee-jerked and they vibrated on the Hindu way of life.

*Q: I take it that you saw very definitely your role as making sure that if anybody was going to do something it would be the French ambassador for the most part?*

GAMMON: Yes, when it comes to aid or spending money, and make sure that we continue on an even keel and we don't lose anything we've got, which is friendly relations! Generally sympathetic to the very earliest stages of the present fantastic Mauritian economic progress. It's sort of the junior Singapore now off the African coast. It was very tranquil, I had maybe four or five hours of work a day if I strung it out. The rest of the time I had a beach house, as well as a very handsome residence and garden.

**ROBERT B. PETERSEN**  
**Public Affairs Officer, USIA**  
**Port Louis (1979-1982)**

*Mr. Petersen was born and raised in Ohio and educated at Oberlin College. He entered the USIA Foreign Service in 1965 and served as Public and Cultural Affairs Office in Embassies or Consulates in Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, Mauritius, Israel, Morocco and Cote d'Ivoire. He also served in several senior USIA positions in Washington, DC. Mr. Peterson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2001.*

PETERSEN: ...Up until becoming married, it was simply what kind of adventurous place, challenging place, exciting place, interesting place that I would have on my bid list. But now that we were married, I had to take into consideration what would be of interest and fulfilling for Kioko. So, I bid on Mauritius and got it. I went into full-time French language training and Kioko also started taking some. Although she was still studying English, she also took some French language training. I remember one time going over the post report for Port Louis and explaining to Kioko the demographics of the country and a long list of things that were recommended that we should take with us; we needed to go to the local Safeway or Giant and buy cartons of this and that because you need a supply that will last for several years. I remember going down this list of foodstuffs and saying, "Gee, we're going to have to go buy this and that." I remember Kioko stopping and saying, "Wait a minute. Didn't you tell me about the people living there?" I said, "Yes. There are Afro-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians, and a small Chinese community." She said, "That was it: Chinese. Oh, there are Chinese there. We don't need to take anything. We'll be able to eat. I'll find every ingredient I need. Don't worry about that." That was her approach to planning for the assignment.

*Q: You ended up in Mauritius in '78?*

PETERSEN: Yes. We left Washington in December of '78 and arrived at the very beginning of January.

*Q: From '79 until when?*

PETERSEN: We left in early '82. It was a full three years in Mauritius.

*Q: What was your job?*

PETERSEN: I was the country PAO. I set up the post. I don't want to be unfair to others, but once I was committed to going to Mauritius and started trying to prepare more seriously for the assignment, included in that was discussing with my superiors why we were opening a post in Mauritius. Frankly, there wasn't a good answer. We were opening a post simply because we ought to have a post. I think you understand that sometimes we just do things because it just seems you ought to do them. The real reason was that it came down to one thing: we were getting hammered on the issue of being on Diego Garcia. They wanted public affairs to deal with that. I was told at one briefing either at the NSC (National Security Council) or at the Department before going over, "Your job is to get rid of this public affairs problem we have with Diego Garcia. We're getting hit on that and we want that addressed in a public affairs way."

*Q: You'd better explain Diego Garcia for the record.*

PETERSEN: Diego Garcia is a group of small islands that's northeast of Mauritius, south of India. It was part of the British Indian Ocean territories. It was governed when Mauritius was a British colony as a dependency of Mauritius, which means that the British administered it from their offices in Port Louis. They had some copra production on Diego Garcia. They had some year-round people working in the coconut plantations there. I forget the exact dates when we agreed that it would be good for our navy to take over Diego Garcia as a basing area, a prepositioning area, for our forces in the Indian Ocean. We negotiated with the British and it was agreed that the British would lease it to us. I think the lease agreement is for 99 years. But we stipulated that the territory that we leased from the British should not have any population on it. Technically, from the British point of view, the people working there and living there were not Diego Garcians. They had come from elsewhere. The people who were there might have considered it their rightful home after spending a certain amount of time there. But the agreement was that we would lease Diego Garcia from the British and use it for military purposes. The people who were living and working there were taken off of Diego Garcia and placed in the Seychelles and Mauritius prior to our arrival. At least that's how I understand the history of it. Either these people or others on their behalf placed some claims against the British. When claimants would come to us, we would say, "We lease from the British. This is a British issue, not an American issue." In terms of public affairs, it was an American issue, but legally, we would say it was a British affair, not an American affair. Money was paid into a fund for the people from Diego Garcia who were resettled elsewhere. The money was intended to support them and assist them in resettlement. There are arguments and claims and counterclaims about what happened to the money, whether all of it, most of it, some of it, or none of it got to the Diego Garcians who were being resettled as well as arguments about how the money was used. Was it used properly or improperly? From our point of view, we had a lease agreement. We took over an area that wasn't populated. From the British point of view, they made appropriate payments to the appropriate officials for the resettlement and if something happened after that, after the fact, they couldn't be held accountable. So, when I got to Mauritius, there were – and there had been for some time, sometimes at a low level, sometimes at a more active level –



demonstrations, protests, complaints, legal maneuverings and so forth having to do with our presence in Diego Garcia and how the people who had lived and worked there had been ill treated and cheated, how they had rightful claims that weren't being properly honored.

*Q: We must have taken a look at this. Was our reading that the money had disappeared into the coffers of Mauritian officials and Seychelles officials?*

PETERSEN: First of all, we weren't a responsible party, but we have a responsible attitude. We looked into it, but it truly was a step removed from our direct involvement. I frankly at the time knew this in great detail. I no longer recall. I'm certainly not going to accuse any specific individuals or even a particular government of siphoning the funds off. If this weren't an international thing but was just something that took place in the U.S. where you move a population in order to move the land, if you build some housing and put in roads and agree to add teachers at a local school to teach the students of this new population, you could argue, "Well, I used the money appropriately." The population might say, "No, you haven't. I wanted that money to spend on food and clothing. I didn't want it to improve the school system, which serves other as well. I didn't particularly care for the way the road was done." There certainly were arguments in Mauritius – I don't know about the Seychelles so well – in the Mauritian government, in the Mauritian populace, about whether the people from Diego Garcia had been treated fairly, unfairly, or in between.

*Q: Before we move to what you did, let's talk about how our embassy was constituted and the Mauritian government.*

PETERSEN: I'll start with the Mauritian government. The prime minister was Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. Mauritius was part of the OAU [Organization of African Unity]. Seewoosagur was the only Indian national ever elected to head the OAU, quite a claim to fame. He was the prime minister. There was a governor general responsible to the British Crown. The parliament numbered 40 members. I went to some parliamentary sessions and was very impressed with the pageantry, the demeanor, and the energy of the debates in parliament. Seewoosagur's party was the Labor Party of Mauritius. An opposition political movement was the MMM, the Mauritian Militant Movement. A key leader of that was Paul Bérenger, a young Franco-Mauritian who people sometimes said grew up on the barricades of '69 in Paris and the student revolts of '68 and came back and was leading protests in Mauritius.

Ambassador Sam Gammon was ambassador. He had been in Paris prior to that. Tom Burke was our DCM. I have to mention our admin officer as well because he played an important role. Don Lynch was the admin officer. I mention him because I arrived there in January of '79. In that year, we moved the embassy. As Ambassador Gammon said, "Two moves equal one fire." Two moves and you can destroy an embassy. It was quite a challenge. We moved from one office building in Port Louis. We moved to a brand-new office building down closer to the port called the Rogers House. Rogers was a holding company that controlled Air Mauritius and a variety of enterprises. They put up a brand-new office building and we moved our embassy into the upper floor except for a penthouse or a cafeteria or something on the floor above us. Very nice. It wasn't a high-rise. It was maybe four or five stories. So, we moved to a brand new space. Don had the challenge of handling this and getting it done. You asked about my role as PAO. It was a

very tiny post. I had a couple of very good FSN employees. I hired a few more while I was there. I also got Washington to send out a JOT for a training assignment. I considered that a feather in my cap to get a second officer there. The powers that be in Washington - I took it as a compliment – accepted my arguments that I could provide good training opportunities for a JOT. I'm just delighted that I still maintain contact with a couple of the FSNs who are still doing great work for that embassy there.

We did a lot of the usual things. We had a library. But one of the decisions that I arrived at after I had been in Mauritius for a while was that we really shouldn't maintain the library ourselves. So, we moved stuff over to the University of Mauritius. I felt it would be more accessible and better used there. We did have some cultural programming. We had some very good groups that came out and did the soft power part of international relations.

But the big issue was Diego Garcia. In a nutshell, the way that was handled was, we determined in the embassy that if more Mauritians had an economic stake in the current activities up in Diego Garcia, it would defuse the protests. Instead of the protest being "Get the Americans out of Diego Garcia. Get the Americans to leave," which was something that our friends in the Non-aligned Movement would endorse, we said to ourselves that if Mauritians had an economic stake in what's going on up there, they wouldn't be so eager to protest and argue that we should be leaving. After Ambassador Gammon left, Bob Gordon became ambassador. With him, we brought over some representatives of Morrison Knudsen, the big construction company. The officials who came over from the company were from New Jersey and Texas and it didn't matter whether they were from New Jersey or Texas, they all wore Texas cowboy boots. We had some meetings and talked it over. The company's point was that they had a pool of trained people from the Philippines and Korea, where they had done lots of work, where they were well known and they had a system in place for bringing in people to do the kind of work that they were contracted to do up at Diego Garcia. To suggest using Mauritian workers would cause difficulties because of the need for training and becoming acquainted with their system and so forth. That was one of the issues and we talked through that. The outcome was, over a period of negotiations among ourselves, our military and then the Mauritian government, it was agreed that we, the U.S. government through its contractors, would employ a certain number of Mauritians to go up to Diego Garcia and work and be able to send money back to their families in Mauritius. The first planeload to fly up there, we had the Mauritian foreign minister come out to the tarmac and pose, everybody was smiles and happy and so forth. It defused the issue. It was a win-win situation for everybody. Everybody seemed pleased with the outcome and it worked out quite well. That was one of the major things that I was involved in.

The other was preparing for the inevitability of the ousting of the Labor government. That was difficult. We had some real hot debates in our embassy. The Labor government had been very supportive of the U.S. government. There was great concern about what the Mauritian Militant Movement – some people called it the Mauritian Marxist Movement – what it meant. The MMM was highly critical of us. My position in our debates was, "Look, there is a certain inevitability of what's coming."

*Q: Did you have the feeling that there was going to be a series of changes of government? Or was the Labor government sort of going downhill?*

PETERSEN: It was an open question. I'll say this for the government in power. They were extremely concerned about any public appearance of the U.S. embassy being close to or getting close to the MMM. I was the one who went out and made a lot of contacts with the MMM. At one time, the foreign minister got up in the parliament and by name criticized me. What was this guy at the American embassy doing? It became nasty at times. A lot of journalists were sympathetic to the MMM. There were a couple of publishers who were not, but their staffs were. Through them, I got to know quite a number of the MMM politicians. I succeeded in overcoming internal opposition to getting some of them onto our IV program, which upset the Mauritian government. But my argument all along was, "There is a change that's coming with the next election. It's inevitable if you just go out and take the pulse of what's going on." Others in the embassy with different responsibilities, better attuned to the senior economic group running Mauritius, the plantation owners and others, would insist, "They'll never take over. Nobody's going to vote for the MMM." The people I was talking to were saying, "We're going to get rid of that Labor government and the MMM is what we're going to support." So, we had some real debates in the embassy as to what was going on in the country. At one point, I argued that we ought to go ahead and take the criticism from the government that would come with it, but go ahead and invite on the IV program the head, the titular head, of the MMM, invite him to the States now. My end of it was, "If you wait until the guy's elected, it's too late. You want to get him now." I'll never forget, Ambassador Gordon finally said, "Yes, we're going to do it." He and I went over and met with Anerood Jugnauth and invited him. We went to his chambers. We issued the invitation to him. There were others as well.

*Q: Did he go?*

PETERSEN: Yes. I left Mauritius before the election, but when the election came, it was a clean sweep. It didn't make me happy. I think it was a fantastic tribute to the fairness of the government that was there and its commitment to democracy. I thought it was a fair election and they got trounced. Then they came back.

Mauritius had the most marvelous press. Wide open. You could read the most scurrilous things on the left and the right. People put up with it. It was best summed up by either Paul Bérenger or someone else. He said, "Look, yes, we have serious disagreements with one another. They're very serious. But we're an island. We have nowhere else to go. We've got to live with each other. We've got to find a way to hold the country together and work together despite our disagreements." That seemed to be the touchstone that all Mauritians had.

There had been an outflow of Mauritians at the time of independence. I don't know the exact number, but it seemed that there were certain prominent people who left Mauritius, migrated to Australia, Canada, and Rhodesia, which soon became Zimbabwe. They were concerned about losing their position in Mauritius to what they thought -- once the British left and it was no longer a colony -- would be an Indian domination. Two-thirds of the population of Mauritius was of Indian origin. You can read whatever racial/political/ethnic/cultural undertones to those concerns and attitudes you wish, but some people did depart and decided not to stay around and be part of the new Mauritius. But those who remained said, "It's our country and we love it. We have these serious political disagreements, but we're going to find a way to make it work."

*Q: How did the French and English language work out?*

PETERSEN: Mauritius was known to the Arabs 1400-1500 years ago, but there is no evidence that any Arab seafarer ever went there. But it's mentioned in some of their navigation charts and maps. The first known landing was by the Dutch. They settled in, killed the dodo bird to extinction, and set up factories and stayed for 50-60 years and then left and said there was nothing of value in Mauritius. Between the Dutch and the Arabs, the Portuguese might have landed at Mauritius to get water on their way to Goa and so forth. Then the French came in after the Dutch left and planted sugar. It became a French colony. Then the French lost it to the British in the Napoleonic wars. It became independent in 1968. It was a British colony for a century and a half and yet it was still French culturally. The British, when they had taken it over, had agreed not to disturb the French institutions and culture and so forth. By and large, there was a veneer of British control, but the big sugar families, the ones who ran the plantations, were Franco-Mauritians. The parliament was conducted in English, but the *lingua franca* of Mauritius was Creole. Much more of the press was published in French than in English, although there were some English language newspapers. In the French language newspapers, there would be articles scattered about in English and in the English language newspapers, there would be articles scattered about in French. It was more or less assumed everybody was bilingual, and if you were a Mauritian, trilingual: Creole, French, and English. The radio broadcast the news in something like nine or 10 different languages. A number of Indian subcontinent languages were used. The most popular TV programs were in Tamil or Hindi. There was a tremendous mosaic of languages and cultures and religious festivities and so forth. It was much more than a French-English divide. It was a mosaic of South Asian, French, African, and English.

**RONALD D. PALMER**  
**Ambassador**  
**Mauritius (1986-1989)**

*Ambassador Ronald D. Palmer was born in Pennsylvania in 1932. He received a bachelor's degree from Howard University in 1955 and a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1957. Ambassador Palmer joined the Foreign Service in 1957. His career included positions in Indonesia, Malaysia, Denmark, the Philippines, Togo, and an ambassadorship to Mauritius. Ambassador Palmer was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on May 15, 1992.*

*Q: ... You went to Mauritius from 1986-89. What did you see as our American interests in that area?*

PALMER: There was, of course, a major security interest as a consequence of the fact that we were the lessees of the great American base at Diego Garcia.

*Q: How far is Diego Garcia from Mauritius?*

PALMER: It is about six hours flying, as I recall. It is in a different time zone and closer to India.

*Q: So it isn't next door. Would you explain the administrative relationship of Mauritius and Diego Garcia?*

PALMER: I would be happy to. As I recall, there was a governor general in the British colonial system that was responsible for Mauritius. In that colonial period Mauritius included islands that were in a particular geographical area, spread over a considerable expanse of ocean. This was also the case of Seychelles which is north and west of Mauritius and included a number of islands spread in the sea. The island of Diego Garcia was administered by the governor general who was responsible for Mauritius.

However, in the 1960s as independence approached in Mauritius, there were discussions between the United States and the United Kingdom governments (I am sure this is documented somewhere) which resulted in a decision on the part of the British government to retain Diego Garcia and several other small islands which were called the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). As I recall, it was in the early seventies, perhaps the late sixties, that the United States had some sort of radio station on Diego Garcia. It was the Pakistan/India conflict and the Yom Kippur War (October, 1973) that made it become apparent that the BIOT territory was a strategically located place.

Since 1973 the United States has made a considerable investment, transforming Diego Garcia, with the consent of the British, into a major supply facility. The US has also improved the harbor and port areas, as well as constructing two very large and extensive runways with parking aprons large enough to take large bombers.

*Q: How big?*

PALMER: B-52s. As I recall there were two major runways. One was B-52 capable which meant it had to be quite wide because of the wing expanse of the aircraft, and the other that would be capable of taking the C-141 which is called the Star-Lifter.

I want to underline that these things were done with the consent of the British government. The BIOT remained a British territory and whatever we did on the island was done under the authority or guidance of the British authority. So there has been for some time an annual meeting between the American authorities and the British authorities having to do with what was going on in Diego Garcia.

The point of all of this is that Diego Garcia became a major interest of the United States. The Mauritian government understandably had a certain amount of irritation over this US-British relationship. However, Mauritius took it with relatively good grace. Some people in Mauritius even considered it to have been perhaps the cost of independence. It was one of those things that happened back there at that time in the 1960s as events were approaching independence in 1968.

Therefore my Embassy had no administrative responsibility for the island. We did, however, watch and study carefully comments and attitudes as they developed in Mauritius towards Diego Garcia.

However, the most important concerns of the United States regarding this small island and small population, were, in fact, rather large and symbolic. We had an important political interest in Mauritius largely because it was a successful democracy. It was a successful parliamentary democracy on the model of the British Westminster system. You recall the mid-eighties was a time when democracy was starting to make a comeback in the world. Remember many of the post-colonial governments had been initially democracies and then gone through various types of changes resulting in one party states.

So the United States was generally interested in being supportive of the Mauritius political system which had gone through elections, changes of government, and was a good example of democracy.

On the economic side, we wanted to demonstrate through our AID program some of the virtues of deregulation and helping governments move away from tightly controlled economies and towards free market economies. Thus Mauritius, which had quite a viable private sector, was chosen as one of five governments by AID as models of political and economic systems. In fact there was cooperation with the World Bank. We tried to coordinate our programs and the Bank's programs. The other countries, as I recall, were Senegal, Botswana...I don't recall the other two.

What this meant was that the Mauritius Government was progressively reducing its tariffs, cutting down generally on regulations and trying to move the economy to a more and more open basis.

It happened that Mauritius in the 1970s made a considerable windfall profit as a consequence of the increase in commodity prices. You may recall back in the early 1970s all commodities boomed and Mauritius sugar also boomed when the price went up. Mauritius produces a high quality of sugar. About 650,000 tons are produced.

When the boom came, the government led by one of the great men of this century, Prime Minister Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, provided great leadership. He was a Hindu in a country that was 51 percent Hindu, but with 17 percent Moslems and about 28 percent Creoles or racial mixtures, 3 percent Chinese and 2 percent white or Franco-Mauritians. He had a great capacity for creating a sense of community from the disparate ethnic mix. He had a great capacity to talk to the various elements of the population. In this case, he was able to talk to the Francos who were those who owned the land, were the sugar barons, and encouraged them to use the windfall to invest in light industry and tourism.

Ramgoolam was responsible for the brilliant concept that was developed to make the whole island a free trade zone. In other words, if an investor had a project and wanted to put it in the north, the Mauritian Government would encourage you to do that and the area of your factory would be made a free trade area. So the products you produced were then able to be sold, exported, without duty, and with all the benefits of a specific free trade zone.

One of the things that happened in the 1970s was that this was the beginning of a cooperative connection in textile production between Hong Kong and Malaysia and Mauritius, with the result that by the time I got to Mauritius in 1986, Mauritius was the third largest exporter of knit wear in the world. If you look in the stores in the United States now, certainly if you look around Europe, you will see a vast number of essentially lower-end products (relatively cheap sweaters) made in Mauritius. There are also good products, including apparel, at the middle level. The Limited company which is a major and important merchandising company has a number of suppliers in Mauritius. Benetton, which is an important distributor of textile goods has factories and suppliers in Mauritius. I could go on and on with the companies in America that have connections with Mauritius.

It is interesting, however, that once the textile quota was reached for Mauritian products, instead of moping and sucking their thumb, as is possible to do, the Mauritians aggressively went out looking for other markets. So the Mauritians sell in Brazil, Mexico and are very active in selling textile products in France, Britain, Sweden and Denmark, Italy, Germany. In the European countries they are aiming at the upper end in terms of very well designed products.

So, in short, Mauritius was a very lively environment. It was very interested in the world. One thing about Mauritius, going back to the ethnic mix that I was suggesting earlier, is that they speak a local patois, which is the case in most of the countries where French is one of the languages, called Creole. The Creole in Mauritius is understandable in the Caribbean. The Dutch originally settled the island. Mauritius was uninhabited in the early 17th century. But as the Dutch East Indian Company was able to establish itself on Java as the 17th century wore on, the Dutch shifted their operations from Mauritius to Java. Meanwhile they had introduced the cultivation of sugar using slavery. After they left it was simply a place in the Indian Ocean where the population consisted of refugee slaves. It was not a settled place at the end of the 17th century when the French came in. A number of the French who got to Mauritius were people who fled France in the French Revolution.

*Q: I am going to interrupt you here Ron because let's focus on your time there. As Mauritius goes it actually belongs to our first set of posts abroad, 1790 I think was when it was opened because it was a whaling stop.*

PALMER: I only wanted to make the point, and this is where all this ends, that there is a very, very lively connection between Mauritius and France. There is equally a lively connection between Mauritius and India and a lively connection between Mauritius and the UK. Within that context there was not so much trade with Africa, but there was a lively connection with South Africa. The Franco-Mauritians were the ones who introduced sugar in South Africa.

The point of this is that in contrast to the sometimes isolated conditions of some islands, this was an island where one could feel cosmopolitan--one was in the world. Things were happening. One of the consequences of the Mauritian interest in tourism was that the US were able to make sales of a couple of 767 aircraft because they were developing Air Mauritius and expanding its routes.

*Q: This was the Boeing 767?*

PALMER: Yes. The Mauritians were developing routes including a direct flight from London to Mauritius. To give you some idea it is 12 or 14 hours from London. During my time, however, one of the things that I was able to help with was the Malaysian connection. Daim was the Minister of Finance and he came to Mauritius. One of the consequences of the visit was that the Malaysian government decided to put up a bank there, to support the development of a major hotel and a large textile facility.

Now one of the things that the Malaysians had in mind was the use of Mauritius as sort of a stepping off place in the Indian Ocean and toward Southern Africa, which is going to be a very interesting trade environment once things get stable there. The Singaporeans have also been very active in helping the Mauritians to develop products other than their traditional ones, especially in the area of computer software and hardware.

Therefore my time in Mauritius was in some respects not unlike my time in Togo. It was not just promoting the United States, it was also being present when the country was prepared for relations with the United States. My embassy could encourage that kind of development. I think one could see comparable changes in attitudes. We started getting more students going to the United States, starting to get more people traveling to the United States.

This question of personal travel was an interesting problem with people who were accustomed to doing things in a certain way. People in Mauritius thought nothing about going to Paris or to London, which after all is a long way, but the idea of adding another six or seven hours and going to the United States seemed to them to be too far.

It was a period that was extremely rich in personal and policy developments. When I left the government was really quite prepared to make major new steps towards developing relations with the United States. My successor was fortunate enough to be able to get a working visit for the Prime Minister of Mauritius. I have had the great fortune in my career of preparing the way for my successors. In the case of Eyadema in Togo, he got a chance to go to the United States after I left. Prime Minister Mahathir came to the United States after I left and the same was true of Mauritian Prime Minister Lignanath. That's okay. In this business it is a relay race.

*Q: This is what we professionals learn to live with. We keep working at it and it is a continuing process, not something to make your points and then leave, go back home and check that off and say that in my short term as a diplomat I did such and such.*

PALMER: I like the notion that life and especially this kind of professional life really is a relay race. You pass on the baton.

Let me just say that in the time I was in Mauritius the GNP per capita almost doubled. They are up above \$2,000 per capita which is very good. They are making major efforts to improve local higher education. It is a problem because building universities is very difficult. As matter stand most of their students go overseas for their degrees. The thing to say ultimately about the relations between the United States and Mauritius is that they are good and improving. Mauritius



is one of the few countries where both French and English are official languages. It gives them a great boost in the world.

*Q: I take it then there were no major crises while you were on Mauritius?*

PALMER: On my watch, no. It was basically an opportunity to improve relations. I would have to say that I had the great boon of being present at a time when the local government and the people were interested in turning or opening their focus to the United States. I found them very receptive and had an extremely interesting and happy three years there. I was able to continue something that I had the good fortune of doing throughout my career, and that was to be in contact with all ethnic groups. That is a feat. I was welcomed in the Hindu community and the Moslem community. I was very supportive of the activities that the Creoles were undertaking. I was very close to the Franco community as I am a reasonably good French speaker. Indeed, it was rather clear to me after having had three wonderful years that it was going to be very hard for me to improve on Mauritius and perhaps the time had come to think about doing something else.

**PENNE PERCY KORTH**  
**Ambassador**  
**Mauritius (1989-1993)**

*Penne Percy Korth was raised in Texas and attended the University of Texas Austin. She was Co-Chairman of President George H.W. Bush's Inauguration, after which she was appointed the ambassador to Mauritius. Ambassador Korth was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1993.*

*Q: ... When you went out to Mauritius, did you have any self-imposed instructions? Most ambassadors, going out, say, "These are the major problems, these are the ones I'm going to try to deal with." Did you have any set of priorities?*

KORTH: Lots of priorities! We had the sugar quota, which is an on-going thing. It was there before I came, it's a problem since I left. There is an ongoing and probably not-solvable though resolvable problem with Diego Garcia and the sovereignty issue with Great Britain, and Diego Garcia and Mauritius and the United States -- it's a triangle, almost like the Bermuda Triangle, because every overture that tries to solve it sinks. So this was something I wanted to make better, or at least, ease tensions between the government of Mauritius and the government of Great Britain. There was also, Mr. Kennedy, the fact that I was the first woman in the history of Mauritius to be appointed Ambassador. So I was dealing with a new job, and they were dealing with a whole new breed of cat, if you will, in a woman. Bear in mind that Mauritius is almost seventy percent Indian, and the breakdown in that is two-thirds/one-third Hindu-Muslim. So, again, like the challenge of even completing the nomination and going through the process with the Foreign Relations Committee, I had to prove to the government of Mauritius that I was a serious ambassador, that a woman could do the job -- although in Mauritius, women's rights are light-years behind America and many other countries. So to be taken seriously -- it was self-

imposed, as you say, the assignment: to let them know I was serious about America, that I was serious about doing good things for Mauritian-American relations. President Bush had given me the mandate. He said, "We don't know a lot about Mauritius. Go out there, find out about it, raise a profile."

*Q: You did go out, of course, with that one great advantage, that some political ambassadors have, but a great many don't have, and that is, a friendship with the President. Many come because they are recommended by somebody and there really isn't a Presidential connection. But you had that, and I imagine that was something you could use.*

KORTH: But you don't use that. It goes back to what you asked me about the State Department and the Foreign Service. The President is President of all America and deals with the whole world. He sent me to Mauritius to be his representative there. So I was working through channels as much as possible, with the State Department or the Defense Department or with all these other agencies that are so key to ambassadorial jobs. Now, obviously, I knew there was a possibility that if I needed to do something, the contacts were in place. But that is not how I wanted to run my post. I wasn't there to have a vacation: I was there to do serious business.

*Q: Let's talk about the Embassy and how you found it, your impression of how it ran and how you worked with it, and then we'll talk about some of the issues. Could you talk about the Embassy.*

KORTH: The Embassy, when I got there, was in a bit of difficulty. Not having anything to do with the former Ambassador, but with the way the terms were set for the officers who were there. Two had just left and the third major officer was leaving, so there had been a hundred percent turnover. My DCM went out six weeks ahead of me to get heads up and a little overlap with Ambassador Ronald Palmer who was there before me, but Ambassador Palmer had left, the Political Officer had left, the ECON Officer had left, and six weeks after I got there, the Admin Officer was leaving. So I found myself with all these balls in the air and so much change, trying to get my feet on the ground and establish it as my Embassy. You know that one of my least favorite things as Ambassador is "we have always done it this way." To me, it's just a red flag. I'm sure it's always been done a certain way with the previous Ambassador, and who follows me will do it their way. So I felt it was incumbent on me to put my stamp on the Embassy immediately -- acceptance as much by the people of Mauritius as I needed right there in the walls of the Embassy. In Mauritius, the people who work for you, the Mauritian side of the office, are the most incredible people -- the FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals] have been there, most of them, ten-fifteen-twenty years. They are so good. It is something that -- if any Ambassador fails to recognize and doesn't use as a resource -- it just doesn't make sense.

*Q: There is a tendency today to say, Why don't we hire Americans in these positions?*

KORTH: Well, this is important. You have to cut this baby in two. Mauritius is a very small post. We only have one secretary that the DCM and the Ambassador share. We needed a second person and it took us a long time to get the OK to hire spouses, to hire an American secretary, because of clearances. Just to bring my staff up to speed, to be accepted by them, to let them know this was not just a pretty face that knew the President -- this was the problem.

*Q: I'm sure. There is a judging period that goes on. Who was your DCM and how did he or she work out?*

KORTH: My DCM was a she, Susan Johnson, a Foreign Service officer, who is a fabulous, bright, intelligent woman, who -- again, like Walt Manger -- was a sounding board at all moments. When Susan left, after almost two years, another Foreign Service officer, David Dunn who had been in Burundi as DCM, and before that, in Paris, came to Mauritius, and -- what can I tell you? It was Ying and Yang, Cheech and Chong! It just became the most wonderful partnership. So that in my last bit of time in Mauritius, then I had my wings, the training wheels were off. David and I were able to accomplish so many things, and he was such a great support. He is still there now, as charge. After three years, all these positions I'm talking about, that had been in flux when I got there -- they had all come in while I was Ambassador. It, in fact, was my team and they, in fact, were my family, because, as we discussed earlier, I was at post alone. It became the Embassy family. It was not that when I got there.

It was very important to me that everyone pull together in the same direction. Not only the people who were sent from Washington, but our FSNs and our Marines. The Marine situation was back-and-forth, back-and-forth -- whether the Marines were going to be left in Mauritius, whether they would be recalled. Right in the middle of my tenure we had the Gulf War -- it was very important that they were a presence there. Now, they are not there, as you well know, to protect the Ambassador. They are there to protect the Embassy, to protect our classified information. Their presence was important during that very tense time. The Muslim population in Mauritius was very anti-American -- that became a problem. But in the meantime, we had a visit to Washington. President Bush could not get to Mauritius. He had tried to come to South Africa-Mauritius, make a swing in our part of the world, but it didn't happen. He did invite the Prime Minister of Mauritius to come for a working visit, a three-day visit, and bring whatever delegation.

I went to the Prime Minister and said, "I'm so excited -- I'm so thrilled that the President has invited you and your Ministers," and suggested to him that because of what Mauritius is and does -- their democratization is really one of the first in the African area. They have something called an Export Processing Zone. There are almost six hundred companies there, because it was a former British Commonwealth, they still have access to the EC. So what Mauritius is really all about, other than being multi-racial and democratic with a British parliamentary system, is -- these are people who have come up by their own bootstraps, they realized things were difficult -- these are people who wake up in the morning and have yet another idea for trade, for business. And I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, you have got to take a delegation from the private sector to Washington. What we want to do is paint a whole picture for America and for the Administration about Mauritius. All countries have governments, but not all countries have this incredible get-up-and-go, and Export Processing Zone, and let's tap into these people and take that kind of delegation with us." So we did, and we were seventeen, finally, when we left Mauritius. They went through Atlanta and visited the Martin Luther King Memorial, the Olympic's site -- they're very involved with Olympics and sports in Mauritius -- and we went to Atlanta on a government plane, because that's the way the State Department operates. About a third of the way to Washington, Bill Black, who was Chief of Protocol, came back and said, "Ambassador, you

know we're so pleased to have you, and we're looking forward to having you, but do you know what plane you are on?" And I said, "Air Force -- whatever it is, and we certainly appreciate the ride and the proper entry." And he said, "No, no. What you need to know and what you need to share with the Prime Minister and his wife and the gentlemen with him is that this is President Kennedy's airplane."

Well, I'm telling you -- it just was so extraordinary to me, and then to be able to pass that information to the Prime Minister. Because, here I was, Ambassador for the first time, a gal from Waco, Texas, who lived in Washington -- and remember, I told you earlier, waiting for that very plane to come in, almost thirty years before -- to then find myself on the plane that took the body of the President back to Washington, and now bringing to Washington the Prime Minister to a President that I loved and admired. To me, it was probably the most moving thing that happened during my tenure. Even to the Prime Minister and his ministers -- to this day, Mr. Kennedy, no matter where you go in this world, foreigners want to know about President Kennedy. "Did you know him, did you meet him, will it ever be the same?" It has nothing to do with Republicans and Democrats, it's not a partisan question, but it's always one of the first questions. So that was a highlight of my tenure as Ambassador.

*Q: Among the issues, you mentioned Diego Garcia. Could you explain what the problem was, how you worked with it?*

KORTH: The problem with Diego Garcia started probably in 1968, or perhaps a few years before. Mauritius got its independence from Great Britain, although they remained in the Commonwealth, in 1968. Just prior to their independence, Ambassador David Bruce was our Ambassador to London. As they were working on the papers for independence, the delegation from Mauritius would go up, the delegation from the United States would come over, and spoke with Ambassador Bruce. They wrote a treaty, a fifty-year treaty that will expire in the year 2016, giving Mauritius its independence, but withholding the island of Diego Garcia from the Chagos Archipelago and having Great Britain keep its sovereignty over the island of Diego Garcia. Now where America fits into this equation: it was given, at the same time, a fifty-year lease to put a very strategic military base on Diego Garcia. So the treaty was written, was ratified in March 1968, and Mauritius was given its independence, holding out this island. We're not talking next door -- this is an island that's over a thousand miles away from Mauritius, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, but a very key military base.

Now, for years, it was a secretive sort of thing. The Defense Department didn't want to talk about it, the State Department didn't want to talk about it. Everything was secret. What I found when I got there was that the Mauritians didn't understand what was going on, on the island of Diego. Well, it was top-secret and even you and I can't discuss what the policy is. But further, almost the first two weeks I was in Mauritius, the military head of Diego Garcia was paying a call on his counterparts in the Mauritian government, and he paid a courtesy call on me as the new Ambassador. He came in and said, "How do you do, Ambassador Korth." There I was, remember, ten thousand miles from anybody, and he had an accent that sounded like mine! I said, "Commander, Sir, where are you from?" And he said, "I'm from Itta Bena, Mississippi." And I said, "I was born in Mississippi!" And he said, "Ambassador!" And there was an immediate connection. And he said, "I'd like to invite you to Diego Garcia." I said, "Can you do that?" And

he said, "Of course, I can, I'm in charge." "And I said, "Can I come if you invite me?" And he said, "If you get your clearances. No ambassador has visited there in years and years." So immediately, I spoke with my DCM, and it took the Pentagon, the Defense Department, the NSC, the White House, and one other, to sign off and say, Yes, you can visit this military base.

As we got into this process, which took a bit of doing and a little time, I had gotten to know the British High Commissioner well, and established a wonderful rapport. Mauritius is small; the Diplomatic Corps is thirteen. I said, "Listen, you're taking heat, your country is, America is -- we want to keep it on an even keel with the Mauritians -- why don't you come with me. You call your Government and see if this can be a joint effort, not to tell any secrets, but to demystify what is going on on Diego Garcia. If the Prime Minister is going to come to me and say, What is going on, and if Prime Minister-then Thatcher is going to say, We can't give back the island -- that's the issue now: the Mauritians want the island to be given back to them as part of their territory. So the British High Commissioner and I went to Diego Garcia and were able to see exactly what is going on. Much of it is classified. So we were able to go back, and one of the questions in the press on Mauritius was: We Know that there are 300,000 soldiers on that island. I was able to say, "But there are not 300,000 soldiers on the island. There are a couple of thousand." Diego is a re-supplying base. Ships come in, merchant marine ships come in, and then they do classified things. But we were able to put to rest a little bit of the "What is so scary up there?" That, on the other hand, has been an ongoing problem. The treaty will be up in 2016. Now the Mauritians are working on a plan, which hopefully will go through, which is: what happens in 2016. The Treaty is written as though, and as such, that when it gets to the year 2016, the British and the Americans will look at the necessity for the base again, and will then determine whether to extend the Treaty or to return the territory. This is the sticking point now. I think that, under the good auspices of all three countries, something will be worked out. It became, less than a year later, a very key installation for the US government, during the Gulf War.

*Q: We're talking about the Gulf War, between the United States, many other powers, and Iraq in 1991. Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990.*

KORTH: The first B-52s --

*Q: Those are the heavy bombers.*

KORTH: -- that were allowed to go over the territory, came from Diego Garcia. That was in the news. So it made the Mauritians realize that it is a very serious operation that goes on there. They, in fact, were shielded by Diego Garcia, because that was what was between the island of Mauritius and the Gulf War. So the issue quieted down for a bit. I think where some of the misunderstanding came was from the Seychelles, where our government has listening posts. For the public record, the American government pays a fee to the government of the Seychelles. The American government does not pay a fee, either to the government of Mauritius or the government of Great Britain, for use of Diego Garcia. That was part of the misunderstanding. The Mauritians, I think, felt that if the Seychelles were getting money for that, why wasn't Mauritius getting money for having the military there. Those fears have been, I think, allayed in the last couple of years, but still, the Treaty is in place, there's still a claim of sovereignty, and

there's still a threat of possibly taking it to the United Nations and having the United Nations resolve a territorial dispute -- which can be done.

*Q: You were there during the Gulf War in 1991. How did this play there? You did have one-third of the population Muslim, and Iraq was making a great play for the Muslim fundamentalists -- although we had far more Muslim countries on our side than the Iraqis did. How did that play out?*

KORTH: There's a very interesting vignette. In June of 1991, we were here -- we, the Prime Minister and his delegation visiting the White House. After the official things, the meetings in the Oval Office with the Prime Minister, the meeting in the Cabinet Room with the two delegations, President Bush had a lunch for sixteen -- eight of the American delegation and eight of the Mauritians. And of all the people around the table -- you know President Bush is a very gregarious person, a very easy person to talk to -- there was one Muslim Minister. This was in June and the war had just ended in February/March. We were then here as a delegation, I, leading the American part. The President fell on a dialogue with the Minister, the only Muslim Minister in the Cabinet, and they talked and talked about what it meant to be Muslim, how his people had reacted. Due to this friendship -- I should tell you that this particular Minister later went on to be the President of Mauritius, and became a very close friend of mine. But during the Gulf War, the way that translated was -- when word reached Washington that the Muslims were going to come in front of the American Embassy, going to demonstrate, going possibly to be violent -- this particular Minister, Cassam Uteem, who is now President of Mauritius, went to the mosque and spoke with the Imam and spoke with the people there who were willing to march on our Embassy, and said, "Do not do it. This Ambassador is a friend of this country. America is a friend of Mauritius, and we do not need violence." And there, on the spot, because of the friendship with the President, because of the trip, the march did not take place.

[transcriber's note: the sequence of this story is awkward. was the proposed attack on the Embassy during the Gulf War or after?]

*Q: It's very touching, and of course, this is the importance of these contacts.*

KORTH: I will tell you that my brand of diplomacy, as someone told me, "Penne, it's hug diplomacy with you." But it's very personal. And Mauritius was small enough that I could get my arms around, not only the Embassy, but the Ministers, on a one-to-one basis. They're amazingly available, whether it's the Minister of Agriculture to discuss sugar quotas, or the Minister of Industry to discuss textiles, or the Health Minister to discuss programs for children or women. If I needed to see them, I was there in twenty minutes, and it was the same with the Prime Minister. It was as though no one had ever given them quite as much attention and it worked, based on really personal friendships that developed from constant calling on one another, back and forth. They were welcome in the American Embassy, any time they wanted to be there. The door was always, literally, open. We didn't close the door to the Embassy, to the Ambassador's office. Those sorts of things work. And so when a crunch came, like when the Minister went himself and said, "Do not go to the American Embassy, these are our friends and our relations have never been better. Don't spoil it. Your point is well-taken, that you don't like what is going on in the

Gulf. But we don't want violence." He's a very peaceful man, this man, Cassam Uteem, a wonderful man. And it was over before it started.

*Q: You mentioned the sugar quota as a major issue. What was the problem and how was it resolved?*

KORTH: It hasn't resolved itself, because part of the problem with sugar all over the world -- the Caribbean basin -- they get preferential treatment for their sugar. Mauritius in years gone by has been known as 'Sugar Island.' It was, and remains, more or less, an underpinning of the economy. In the last twenty years, they've taken off from sugar and gone to high-dollar tourism, and as I explained earlier, this Export Processing Zone, so you've got a triangle. Still, sugar is what employs the most people; all cane is cut by hand because it's a volcanic island and you can't put a tractor or cutter in. It's a machete, piece by piece.

So the sugar quota is extremely important to Mauritians and the whole economy. And it goes up and down with the whims of Washington about whether the Caribbean gets it, the South American thing. And then we had NAFTA [North America Treaty Agreement] just as I was leaving and they became really alarmed. So that became a new issue in another direction. Sugar is important and they have a sugar lobby here. I should tell you that just before I went out to Mauritius, I went to a dinner with former Secretary of the Treasury John Connally, from Texas, and he had as his guest that evening Senator Russell Long of Louisiana -- a lot of, lot of sugar -- Mister Sugar. And he called me aside and the Senator put his arm around me and said, "Young lady, I need to talk to you for a minute." I said, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir," like a good Southern girl. And he said, "Don't you be going over there where all that sugar is and tryin' to undo my sugar quota. President Johnson and I wrote that as tight as we could, twenty years ago, and don't you go there and mess with it." "Yes sir, Senator Long." So American sugar is probably one of the more complex issues, because it cuts across economy, trade, agriculture. It touches everything. And it's extremely political. But it's a very important issue for our country. And then you are sent as your country's ambassador to a country where it's an extremely important political-agricultural-economic issue for them, and you just have to do your best to make the two sides at least see each other's point of view.

*Q: Did you change anything?*

KORTH: I didn't mess with Senator Long's sugar quota. But we did our best to keep that on a status quo, and we did work a bit on the textile quote. Because there's a vast amount of exports coming out of Mauritius. It's the third largest exporter of wool knitwear in the world. The wool comes from somewhere else and it's spun into shirts and sweaters and all of that. A lot of it comes from Australia, a bit from India. So there were inroads to be made in another direction that could satisfy Senator Long's admonition to leave his sugar program along, not endangering American industry. Because so much of Mauritius' things went in other places, things such as Status and Adrienne Vittadini, Ralph Lauren Polo, things that your wife or your children wear.

*Q: We're talking about knitwear companies.*

KORTH: There was room for a little bit of movement there. So what I tried to do, in order to help the Mauritians and also, while not endangering American industry, was to see if we couldn't work out some sort of compromise on imports and exports.

*Q: Did tourists impact on you or were these mainly tourists from elsewhere -- the protection and welfare of one's citizens abroad, particularly when they are off having a good time, can be a pain in the neck.*

KORTH: There were not that many American tourists. Mauritius -- I will say, not only in the Foreign Service, where you come from, but in the American tourist segment, people who take far-flung vacations -- this is probably the best-kept secret in the world. It is, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful spots on the face of this earth. Mark Twain went there over a hundred years ago, and said in a famous quote, "You gather that God made Mauritius, and then modeled Heaven after it." And it is that beautiful. It is a tourist spot for primarily Europeans and South Africans. To a lesser extent, the Indians and Japanese. But it is a great, glorious, beautiful piece of this earth.

*Q: You said that the majority of the population are of Indian stock. We've had -- one can only say -- a troubled relationship with India since Independence in 1948. Did any of that spill over -- Indian leftist-neutralism, that sort of thing.*

KORTH: From time to time -- there is the caste system in Mauritius. This is very obvious. There are the Tamils and the Brahmins -- these sorts of nuances factor into what Minister will have what position, and who may or may not ever be Prime Minister. So Mauritius is extremely close with India, extremely close. Yes, the influence is strongly felt.

*Q: India was -- the word is probably a little too strong -- but in foreign affairs, India was always taking an anti-American stance. In UN votes, did you find this a problem.*

KORTH: A little bit, but Mauritius prides itself on being totally independent, and almost in every case, they would vote with the United States. So it wasn't really a problem, but I will tell you that, for instance, I went on a state visit to India, with the Indian High Commissioner's wife, whose honored guest was the Prime Minister's wife, and I was the only other person invited to go. The three of us went. And I think the most telling thing, as we were being met by maharajahs and all that sort of thing, was -- I said to the Prime Minister's wife, "Lady J., what a fabulous trip! It's all so beautiful! What is your feeling about how we are being treated?" And the remark that she made told me everything: she said, "I feel like I've come home." She's in her sari, her roots and her heritage are Indian. So there's a great, strong affinity, not the least of which is geographical. Mauritius is literally in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and three hours from South Africa -- almost that far from Madagascar, three hours from Seychelles, and almost six hours from Bombay. In a neighborhood where distances mean absolutely nothing, this makes sense to me.

*Q: Were there any political upheavals on Mauritius while you were there?*

KORTH: There really were not. Mauritius is a polyglot. You cannot imagine that there are -- that's why the State Department uses it as an example. Because what we've talked about so far,



you and I, the Hindus and the Muslims -- beyond that, you have a population that is two or three percent Chinese, two or three percent Franco-Mauritian -- the French who were the first sugar settlers there came, and with them brought people from Madagascar who now are the creole population. When the French lost Mauritius to the British in the Napoleonic Wars, the British then came in and freed all these people who worked in the cane fields. Slavery became no more. The British then brought in indentured servants, the Indians. That is why we've got in Mauritius this huge Indian population. There wasn't an indigenous group there. The Arabs came in the sixteen-hundreds, the French then came with the Dutch, but the French were the first people who settled there, with the sugar business, and they brought in the slaves from Madagascar, and then it was turned over to the British.

But the thing that is so fascinating is that, even though the French lost Mauritius in this one naval battle right off the coast, they never changed the Napoleonic Code -- it's still French, the language is still French or Creole, and the culture remains, certainly for the Christian part, primarily Catholic, French, French food. And now you have this wonderful mix of Creole food, Indian food, French food, Chinese -- wonderful Chinese who come from mainland China. Because if you think about all the ships -- they came around the Cape of Africa and headed off, maybe for the Far East, and they reprovisioned in Mauritius. And the same thing, coming from the Far East, trying to get in our direction

*Q: Ambassadors are always having to trot up to the Foreign Minister of a country and say, "Look, we have this issue, these UN votes," and sometimes these are issues a country has no interest in at all. How did you work this?*

KORTH: I did it as all ambassadors do. When it was time to go and make a demarche on whatever the subject was, that's simply what I did.

*Q: Did you find it had some effect?*

KORTH: Absolutely. The biggest demarche, and really the first one I made, was to keep this issue over Diego Garcia from going into the UN.

*Q: That can turn into a very political thing that has nothing to do with the issues at hand.*

KORTH: Absolutely. But it was sort of my first victory. In fact, Walt Manger was still the desk officer. I wrote a cable, I suppose, not particularly like Foreign Service people write them, and the first word in it was Hallelujah! They still tease me about the Hallelujah cable from Mauritius.

*Q: It catches peoples' attention.*

KORTH: But, Hallelujah! was really how I felt, because it was the hot issue when I first came, and it was the first demarche, and it worked.

*Q: What was the argument? Why did they accede to that?*

KORTH: As a Foreign Service officer, there's no way to imagine what finally turned it. You like to think it was a combination of your government or your expertise, or your silver tongue telling them could they just wait, I'm a new ambassador -- we'll work with you, just let us -- don't do it yet -- could I buy some time and see what will work --

*Q: Well, Madame Ambassador, looking back on it, how do you feel about this whole experience?*

KORTH: I have to tell you, from a professional point of view and a personal point of view, it was the three happiest years of my life. Because I felt like, when I left there, I had made a difference. I had made a difference for our country, I had grown immeasurably as a human being, I hope I made the State Department proud, I know I made the President proud -- he said so, and Secretary Baker. So it all just came together, and I think the telling thing -- the night before I left, after three years of official entertaining back and forth which all ambassadors must do, the Prime Minister invited me for dinner. And his guests were his wife, his children and his grandchildren, and my DCM. And he said in his toast at dinner, "I want you always to remember America this way, in the form of Ambassador Korth, who came here, who cared. We have had better relations with our country and America." He put that in a letter to President Bush.

**LESLIE M. ALEXANDER**

**Ambassador**

**Mauritius (1993-1996)**

*Ambassador Leslie Alexander was born in Germany of American parents and grew up primarily in Europe. He was educated at the Munich campus of American University, after which he came to the United States and, in 1970, entered the Foreign Service. Speaking several foreign languages, including German, French, Spanish and Portuguese and some Polish, he served in Guyana, Norway, Poland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Haiti, where he twice served, first as Chargé, and later as Special Envoy.. From 1993 to 1996 he served as Ambassador to Mauritius and from 1996 to 1999 as Ambassador to Ecuador. Ambassador Alexander was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.*

*Q: Okay. Today is the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, 2005. Let's talk about Mauritius and how did this come about. You've already said that you slipped through the cracks of ARA.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, I did. I wound up actually being nominated, President Bush, the father, had nominated me, to go from Haiti to Togo but as things turned I never did go to Togo. The incumbent stayed and I found myself on the way to Mauritius. This caused two or three months extra delay in my hearing and everything else in Washington and so I wound up in Mauritius at the end of the year. In fact, two days after I got to post in December we had an enormous hurricane, from what I was told one of the worst that they had had in memory, beat the residents up pretty bad. So that was my introduction to Mauritius and it was probably the most tumultuous experience I had in my sleepy time there.

*Q: Well, in the first place, give somebody who's outside the system a feeling of how you get what's considered a sleepy but good post like Mauritius. It's an ideal place to put somebody who's getting ready to retire, or someone who has just come from a very hot spot, but can you talk about your reception within the bureau and how you felt about it?*

ALEXANDER: My very, very strong sense was AF didn't want me. Despite my knowing the then-assistant secretary and his Foreign Service wife personally. We'd served together, we had a personal relationship.

*Q: Who was that?*

ALEXANDER: It was George Moose. I don't think, certainly in the front office, it was a personal thing. I do think it might have been slightly personal with others in the bureau and understandably so. I had never served in AF and, as we both know, getting ambassadorships is tough enough. Then seeing your embassies go to other people, especially in AF which is constantly robbed for embassies, for ambassadorships. People spend their careers there, pay a lot of dues, a heck of a lot more than the ones who hang out in the cafes in Paris. So to see, an outsider from their perspective, come in and get an embassy of any sort is probably distasteful. The first one I was in line for, Togo, wasn't a bad embassy as far as West African embassies go, but then Mauritius, as you suggested, is sort of a sleepy, small place. It's kind of Hawaii relative to anything else in AF, relative to anything that anyone has as a matter of fact. Mauritius is a very, very pleasant place, extremely prosperous, a beautiful, beautiful resort island, very popular with multimillionaires and with the British royal family. If you've been there you would understand why. It really is Hawaii in the Indian Ocean. It's the First World: great roads, drinkable water, great food, beautiful beaches. It's paradise. How I received that embassy, I'm not certain. I think it was in part because of AF's reaction to me getting the Togo assignment. The then-director general, Genta Hawkins-Holmes had visited me in Haiti during the really bad moments. She had been my predecessor once removed in Haiti and knew what a tough assignment that was and I think she felt that I had paid all the dues I needed to pay to go to AF or anyplace else. When my predecessor left Mauritius, the White House decided that they didn't want that post anymore so it reverted to the career service. It came open abruptly and she was the one who proposed switching me from Togo to Mauritius and I said, "fine by me, I don't care." She suggested this in part because she wanted to save it for the Service before the White House changed its mind and in part because she thought I deserved a nice post after what I'd just gone through. So that's how I got there. That being said, I was not an AF hand and I went from Togo to a very, very desirable post and I think this just irritated the folks in AF even more. Be that as it may, I wound up in Mauritius.

*Q: This is about '93 you say?*

ALEXANDER: This was '93.

*Q: What was the state of play in Mauritius itself and U.S. relations?*

ALEXANDER: I don't think we had much of a relationship with Mauritius. It was somewhat off the radar scope. If you look at a map of Africa you'll see that it's parked out there far enough in

the Indian Ocean that it doesn't get that much attention. It doesn't provoke much attention because it is successful, relatively speaking. I would say that the relationship was benign. The Mauritians had no beefs with us; we had no beefs with them. The only issue being the Mauritian claim to the Chagos Islands and Diego Garcia, where we have a large naval facility as part of the Chagos chain of islands out in the middle of the Indian Ocean. When Mauritius was granted independence from the British, one of the promises was that eventually Mauritius would acquire the Chagos. This was rather peculiar given that there was no historical reason for that. It was because Chagos was administered out of Mauritius when Mauritius was a British colony.

*Q: Explain what Chagos, what they were.*

ALEXANDER: They're a chain of very, very small, tiny little islands; I don't know whether you could even find them on a map. They're in the Indian Ocean, southwest of Sri Lanka. We have a very, very large munitions facility located there and pre-positioned ships that are stocked with all kinds of gear including munitions to be used during times of conflict. In fact, Diego Garcia has played a very, very vital role in our war on terrorism in Afghanistan and our involvement in Iraq, both during the first Gulf War and during the most recent one. So it's a base that is vital to U.S. interests, principally because we can store munitions there. There's nobody around for 1,000 miles so we don't have to have the concerns that we might have if we had a similar facility located on the mainland of Africa or someplace in the Middle East where it would be more vulnerable to attack and if something were to happen it would incur tremendous casualties. Those are concerns that are mitigated by the isolation of the Chagos and the physical isolation of Diego Garcia, which is a tiny, tiny island. I flew there with my British counterpart and with the Mauritian foreign minister. Actually it was probably the only initiative that I ever came up with during my time as ambassador to Mauritius.

The Mauritians would periodically raise the issue of Diego in the United Nations and try to reassert their claim to it. I thought one way to get them to slow down or to back off of their position was to actually let them see the facility. No one in Mauritius had ever been to the Chagos or to Diego Garcia other than the original inhabitants of the island which had been forcibly removed and sent to Mauritius. Certainly none of the Mauritian government officials had ever been there. I thought that if they saw the facility they may slow down in their pursuit of their claim because it's not what I think they think it is. After a long drawn out battle with my British colleague who didn't think this was such a good idea, we flew the foreign minister and a few other Mauritian officials over Diego Garcia so they could see that this was a tiny island. More significantly they could see that there were no storage bunkers of the sort where you could store nuclear weapons. This had always been a concern of theirs and others in the region that we were really storing nuclear weapons there. As we sought to explain to them if you know anything about the security of nuclear weapons, Diego just won't cut it, because we don't have the necessary land mass to secure these weapons as I understand it. I'm no expert on securing nuclear weapons, but I'm told that you have to have three perimeters and the people have to be able to get to the nuclear weapons sites and all this other stuff. Anyway, to make a long story short, Diego clearly would not provide the kind of security that one would need. So by flying them over this little tiny island and letting them see from the air, that there was nothing hidden down there, this helped to alleviate some of their concerns. When we landed we were received by the governor of the Chagos, a British navy commander who was dressed up in all his colonial

mufti; it was really quite a spectacular sight with the old fashioned hat, sort of like King George with the plumes and everything else; it was really splendid. Actually I was quite flattered and pleased that they had the sense of mind to do this kind of thing, because it made the Mauritians feel that they were indeed honored guests and that this was a serious trip and that this wasn't some dog and pony show. They were given free reign, they were taken everywhere. I don't think Diego's larger than five square miles. It's absolutely flat. I mean, I think it's one foot above sea level. I might be exaggerating a bit but it's just a little piece of land parked out there in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Anyway, after they were able to go all over the place and speak with people, including Mauritians who were working there, the equivalent of FSNs, Foreign Service Nationals or local nationals, I don't know what they called them, most of them were Filipinos but there were some Mauritians. I think the Mauritians were satisfied that there no nuclear weapons, and perhaps more significantly, even if the British were to return them to the Mauritians, the islands are so far away from anything that to provision this island would cost a fortune. I think any thoughts they had of converting the facilities there into some kind of tourism facility, they did the arithmetic and I think they realized that it probably wouldn't be, given the technology of the moment, cost effective. Just keeping enough water, making enough water from seawater, we got some figures from the folks there, I don't remember what they were but they were astronomical. I spoke with the foreign minister on the plane on our trip back to Mauritius about what we did there and back on a Navy sub chaser, a P-3, which is also very interesting, but as we spoke it was clear-

*Q: That's an airplane?*

ALEXANDER: It's an airplane.

*Q: It's an Orion, I think.*

ALEXANDER: It's an Orion, yes. Well there are two the Navy used to use; anyway, I don't know what they do now. They had S3s, which were carrier based and they had P-3s which were land based but basically both were for the same purpose of search and rescue and finding subs. I mention this because it wasn't a commercial aircraft, it wasn't a comfortable aircraft; it was a working naval aircraft. It also helped to reinforce the point that this isn't some cushy little island. Even though it was a pleasant island, it looked like a small town in Florida which had been transplanted to the middle of the Indian Ocean, even down to U.S. street signs. In fact I asked the British why, because they own this. They said, "yes, but you guys operate it so we pretty much let you decide what side of the road to drive on and what the road signs look like."

As we were speaking he said "I had visions of our eventually getting this and turning it into some tourism thing. We wouldn't be able to do it, it would just cost too much." As a result, the Mauritians really put this issue on the back burner. Again, I don't know where it stands now with them now, I don't know if they're still bringing it up. I have no idea, but that was probably the only worthwhile thing I did the two-and-a-half years I was in Mauritius.

*Q: Well what about the people from Diego Garcia who were displaced. Were they well received and settled in Mauritius?*

ALEXANDER: Those folks were called the Ilois. The name comes from isle in French, island. The Ilois were removed to Mauritius. They were given a rather large amount of money to help them resettle in Mauritius and to help them integrate into the community. They were not- well, no one is from Mauritius per se. The major ethnic groups of Mauritius are first and foremost East Indian of Hindu and Muslim persuasion; the Creoles who are a mixture of African and French or British, sometimes with a dollop of East Indian blood thrown in. The East Indians who come from what is now India and Pakistan comprise roughly 70 percent of the population. 20 percent is comprised of Creoles and the Creoles are essentially a mixture of African and European, and they can range anywhere from blonde haired, blue eyed to fairly dark even though there were very few truly African looking people in Mauritius. They comprised 20 percent. And then the 10 percent is made up of Chinese and Europeans, French and British, who have been on the island forever. The Ilois didn't fit comfortably into any of these groups and were kind of excluded. They were also excluded because they were not educated and Mauritians in the main are very well educated. They had different customs, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. They very quickly went through the money that they were given and they occupied the last layer of the social strata there. The men turned to drink. The men were reputed to be fast and when I was there, their lot was a rather miserable one. They were always asking for more money and the Mauritians in turn were always asking the British and us for more money to give to the Ilois and the response was always the same. They've been here for 25 to 30 years. They were given a phenomenal sum, millions and millions of dollars, I don't what it would have worked out to on a per capita basis, but it was an enormous sum of money and that's it. If they haven't integrated that's your fault, Mauritius, that's not our fault, and they're not going back to Diego so forget it. That's pretty much where it was when I was there.

*Q: Mauritius, of course, is one of our first consular posts. It was a whaling- I did a history of the consular service and Mauritius figured-*

ALEXANDER: Prominently.

*Q: Quite largely in our early, back in, very early 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

ALEXANDER: I'm impressed because you're absolutely right. There are so few people in this country and so few Americans who know anything about Mauritius. Mark Twain knew Mauritius, went there, and described it as a paradise. There is some debate among stamp collectors about the most valuable stamp in the world. Some people claim it's-

*Q: The Mauritius Blue Penny.*

ALEXANDER: Yes, the blue something of another of whatever. I can't remember what it's called now. Anyway, it is a toss up between the Guyanese stamp and the Mauritian stamp, which one's the most valuable in the world. The other interesting thing about Mauritius which most people don't realize is the Dodo bird came from Mauritius. The Dodo bird has been extinct for 300 years, but the expression dodo still occupies a place in our vocabulary in various forms or another. It's rather interesting because if you go to Mauritius you'll see these statues of the Dodo, and they even have little stuffed animals for kids. I mean, this is a creature that no longer exists

but it captured the imaginations of so many people that we've all heard the expression, dumb as a dodo, or dead as a dodo.

*Q: Well, talk a bit about the relationship with the French.*

ALEXANDER: Reunion?

*Q: Reunion is close to there, but I think of these two entities, one being French and the other British. They used to change hands all the times during the Napoleonic Wars.*

ALEXANDER: They did, they did. In fact, I think his name is O'Brian, the guy who wrote all these books about-

*Q: Patrick O'Brian.*

ALEXANDER: Patrick O'Brian, exactly, all his books about the Mauritius command and all that. In fact I think they recently made a movie with Russell Crowe, Master and Commander, even though it doesn't take place in Mauritius, that's from that epoch and that conflict.

Reunion and Mauritius are culturally close. While the Creole on the two islands is somewhat different, in fact it's difficult for the two people to understand each other's Creole which I find rather extraordinary considering their common history and their proximity. They both do speak a French Creole. The cuisine is familiar, somewhat. It's much more East Indian in Mauritius, but there are ethnic East Indians in Reunion so they are familiar with the cuisine. One frequently travels back and forth just to get away for a change of scenery. Mauritians used to go to Reunion to catch a flight somewhere else. They could fly directly from Mauritius to almost anywhere, but sometimes the connections were easier out of Reunion. Most of the time they went just to get a taste of Europe and the people from Reunion would go to Mauritius to lay on the beaches, which were far superior in Mauritius. So there was this back and forth between the two. TV signals from the islands reached one another so people on both islands would watch both TV stations. Other than that actually there wasn't that much going on between the two. They were very much two independent places. Reunion is a territory of France, as you know, and has a very distinct French identity. Mauritius is far less French despite its having once been a French colony.

*Q: Let's talk about the Mauritian government and your relationship with them.*

ALEXANDER: I had an easy relationship, all in all, with the Mauritian government. The first prime minister, Anerood Jugnauth, was far older than me. I was 45 or so and he was 65, at times going on 75. An intelligent man, but very somber and for some reason the chemistry between us, there was no spark. He was friendly and would come to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July reception and I never had any conflict with him of any sort, but I don't think either of us was particularly enamored of the other. I probably didn't help because I gave an interview within six months of my arrival, in which I described Mauritius as a mouse on steroids. I meant it as a compliment because for an island nation of a little over a million people it was an enormously successful country by any measure and especially if measured against the countries in the region. It was my intention to compliment Mauritius and say despite your being small you've got some economic bulk and you

have political clout because people respect you. You're a firm democracy, a transparent democracy. Somehow this got turned around in the prime minister's mind and he thought I was suggesting that the island was trafficking in drugs or steroids. I explained to the foreign minister, I said please don't take this so literally, it's just an expression. I said, "do you remember the movie The Mouse That Roars? I said I could have used an expression like that." The prime minister couldn't get this image of the mouse out of his head, which I'm told later he translated into rat, and then the steroids. He didn't manifest any open hostility but I think after that I wasn't one of his favorite ambassadors.

On the other hand the leader of the opposition, who became the prime minister halfway through my tour, liked the analogy, understood it immediately. He had spent a lot of time in London. His father was the first prime minister of Mauritius after independence and we were the same age and we had a chemistry that was just absolutely terrific. We used to socialize all the time; he was always over at my house. We were neighbors, we lived within a kilometer of one another, or I was over at his place, and he would consult me on all kinds of things, often on internal policies that had nothing to do with U.S. policy. But, if I thought I had an intelligent opinion on a subject I would offer it. We got along really, really well and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say we liked each other very much. I feel comfortable speaking for him because I was told this by many, many people.

His name was Navin Ramgoolam and came over to my house I think a day or two before taking office because he had heard that I had installed a satellite dish, which was true. The government was furious that I had gone and done this. I installed it so that I could receive TV signals from somewhere other than Mauritius and so that I could watch an occasional baseball or football game or something. I was getting the feed from the Armed Forces Network and also from South Africa. The Mauritians had a very strict policy on controlling information. It was a democracy and the media was fairly free to do its work but outside influences the prime minister didn't like. When I installed this satellite dish it was the first satellite dish that anyone had in a residence, I understood that he got quite upset, even though he was leaving office. The deputy prime minister summoned me, called me in and said, "we understand you have a satellite dish at your residence." I said, "yes, it's sitting on top of my roof; it's pretty hard to miss." "Well you know that's against the law." I said, "yes, I know it's against the law." He said, "well then why'd you do it?" I said, "the law doesn't apply. I can put it on top of my residence whatever I want. I can put 10 satellite dishes; you know that, I know that." I said it's not a question of the law or invoking anything. I said, "I'm allowed to communicate and people are allowed to communicate with me at my residence or at my embassy any way I want, you know that so what's the problem." He said, "well, the problem is the PM's a little upset because he doesn't want anyone to have these satellite dishes." I said that's the PM's problem. And I said, "I've never understood that because you're so open on so many fronts, which I think is why Mauritius is so successful and such a model, particularly for Africa. Yet on this one particular thing about international TV is tightly controlled." He said, "well, you know what his real concern is?" And I said, "what?" He said, "most people here are from what used to be Pakistan and India. We have similar tensions between the Muslims and the Hindus and periodically these tensions explode and people get killed." And it was true. Over the years they would have riots. He said, "he's so afraid that if people start putting up satellite dishes they're going to start looking at TV from India and from Pakistan and this is going to get them all riled up and they're going to go out." I said, "that may



be, but they may watch other TV too and it may have the opposite effect. You can't control information, and to the extent that you do you're going to limit your people's advancement. Information brings knowledge and knowledge is translated into all kinds of success, so I'm surprised." He said, "I tend to agree with you, but again, I'm only deputy PM." I said, "I don't know if the new government's going to take a new position." As it turns out, the new prime minister, just before taking office came over to my house and he said, "I understand you have a satellite dish." And I said, "yes." He said, "can we come over and watch?" I said, "yes, of course you can." I gave him the remote control and he was going through all the channels, he said, "oh, this is great, this is fantastic. As soon as I take office I'm going to liberalize this, I think everyone should be able to have access to this." I said, "are you really going to do that?" And he says, "yes." I said, "well, I understand the PM has this concern about tensions." He said, "that's a legitimate concern, but we've had these riots in the past even though people haven't been able to watch TV and I would like to think that Mauritian people are mature enough where being able to watch a soap opera from the old country is not going to go out and start race riots." As it turns out he was right. Now the Mauritian government itself, which controlled the major TV station, I understand, offers cable service to compete, you know. So the point is, they're in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Q: By the way, we're talking about '93 to-*

ALEXANDER: '96.

Those kinds of difficulties and they were not frequent but they happened. They happened during my tour and it was usually between the Hindus and the Muslims or between the Muslims and the Creoles. Certainly during my time, there was never any open conflict between the Creoles and the Hindus where people would be killed. I never quite understood at all what provoked these. I mean, I understood that there were differences, but they seemed to be set off by the most bizarre things: neighbors arguing in some small village and that somehow spread. Word spread that the Muslims were being slaughtered by the Hindus in the north, but there was no way of knowing when these types of explosions would take place.

*Q: Did we have any American firms, because I understand Mauritius is very much into manufacturing and that sort of thing. Do we have any interests in that?*

ALEXANDER: Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger and some of the other clothing manufacturers, including Lands' End, L.L. Bean all had operations. I shouldn't say operations; they all had product lines that were manufactured in Mauritius. One of Mauritius' great industries is the textile industry and they made a lot of clothes for very well known U.S. designers. Americans didn't own these factories; they were all owned by Hong Kong companies, but they would take orders from, let's say Ralph Lauren and they made millions and millions of shirts or trousers or whatever for Tommy Hilfiger or whoever. We had other investments on the island; but for the most part Mauritians preferred to deal with either the French or British, since the wealthiest people in Mauritius were the Europeans. There was a very small Franco community as it was called and to a lesser extent the very, very small ethnically British colony that remained behind. They had that natural affinity and connection to France. The French were always finding ways to keep the Americans out, and then the Indians preferred to deal with companies in India and the

Chinese with companies in China. We didn't have that much of an economic footprint in Mauritius.

*Q: What about Madagascar? I mean, there's the big red island sitting there across the straits or whatever they're called. Did that play any role at all?*

ALEXANDER: Madagascar was a favorite site for Mauritian overseas investment. The Mauritians in turn as their labor became more expensive they began investing in Madagascar and actually building textile factories to take advantage of their even cheaper labor. I think they were recognizing that eventually Mauritian labor was going to be priced out of the market; they saw China coming on line and I think they read the tea leaves and figured they would never be able to compete with the Chinese in this game so let's take our money and our know how and find some place close by and that was Madagascar. Other than that, I mean politically, no one cared what went on in Madagascar as long as it didn't affect the Mauritians' investments there. Certainly Madagascar projected no power in the region; they were too poverty stricken to do that.

*Q: Did you see Mauritius gearing up to move into the high tech field and all that?*

ALEXANDER: Yes.

*Q: That's kind of the next phase after textiles.*

ALEXANDER: That's a very insightful question. I think Mauritius saw Singapore as its model. High tech, financial; they had a very strong offshore sector there and they were trying to build up their stock market and they were trying to build up their credentials as an offshore tax haven, banking, cum financial center in the region and they were having some success.

*Q: During the time you were there were sort of roaming terrorists a problem or was it a concern?*

ALEXANDER: Not so much in Mauritius. We also had the Comoros. I was accredited to the Comoros and at the end of my tour we closed our embassy in the Seychelles and I took over the Seychelles as well. I was very concerned about Comoros. Number one it was called the Islamic Republic of the Comoros and we'd already had a taste of the future, with the '93 World Trade Center attack in New York and other attacks on U.S. interests that seemed to be principally inspired by or caused by Muslim radicals. I always had the sense that in Comoros we were vulnerable to that kind of problem. Even though the embassy in the Comoros had been closed the year that I arrived in Mauritius and I was accredited to the Comoros, there remained behind a Peace Corps contingent of some 35 to 40 Americans. I was concerned for their wellbeing and from whatever quarter they might have been threatened by Muslim fundamentalists or others. As it turns out we did have, on my watch, a problem in the Comoros that didn't directly affect the Peace Corps volunteers, it might have at some point, but fortunately it didn't go that far, and that was the invasion for want of a better word, of the Comoros by the French mercenary Colonel Bob Denard. He had taken over the Comoros in an earlier life and actually been the prime minister for two years, married a Comorian and ran the place for a couple of years, but this had been many years before, 15 years, 20 years before. So in '95, Bob Denard shows up in the Comoros leading a merry band of mercenaries, old French paras and Belgium paratroopers and

white South Africans and they take over the Comoros. Again, Washington raised so much hell with Paris because we had reason to believe that the French were somehow if not complicit they had foreknowledge of this and so after a week Bob was told by the French to give it up, it ain't gonna happen this time. He was arrested and forced to stand down. Well, the incident came at a rather fortuitous time for me because just the month or so before I had, using my NSD 38 authority-

*Q: Excuse me, could you explain what the NSD 38?*

ALEXANDER: The 38 authority gives the chief of mission the power over the size of his mission. Not so much to expand it, but to decrease it. In fact, we are told when we go out to look at the size of our missions because some of them are surprisingly large around the world and to ask the hard questions; do we need this many agencies at post? Do we need this many people? Are we doing this efficiently? I think this has become even more of an imperative in the world in which we're living in where embassies are attacked and destroyed and people are killed. You don't want to have more people out there being exposed if you don't need them. So the NSD 38, this National Security Directive, gives chiefs of mission the legal right to send people home, to close down certain activities if, in his or her judgment, these activities are, well there are certain guidelines. Anyway, using those guidelines I used my authority to say I want the Peace Corps out of the Comoros and I used as justification our inability to provide sufficient security. They were simply too far away from any embassy, especially my own, but even the nearest embassies on the mainland were just too far away, there was no way to get them out of the Comoros in times of trouble. Those troubles could have been a tsunami or a hurricane or a volcano blowing up; there could have been local unrest, some kind of health epidemic, cholera epidemic. The point is, they were vulnerable and there was no way we could get to these people in a reasonable amount of time and save their lives. That being the case, I said I want them out but I got all this resistance including from the State Department, which surprised me. I spoke with the office director who explained that the director for Peace Corps Africa had called the front office of the State Department African Affairs Bureau and had managed to find a somewhat sympathetic ear there as well. In my conversations with my masters in the AF Bureau I got the impression that they thought I didn't know what I was doing. I had not served in AF and, as I said this has got nothing to do with service in AF, in fact, my immediate post before that had been Haiti and we had evacuated that post twice, it had a very African feel to it in that regard, the kinds of troubles we had there and people who had told me this is like Liberia what you're dealing with. To get to the point I said, "listen, trust me, this is not a question of knowing Africa or not knowing Africa, this is just a common sense issue from where I stand. If someone gets hurt, I'm going to be blamed. No one's going to stick up for me. My authority has to be commensurate with my responsibility; I'm responsible for these people, therefore I have the authority over these people and I want to exercise that authority and send them home, because I cannot assume responsibility for people that I'm just too far away from. Well after the Bob Denard incident all of a sudden I'm really a smart fellow and yes, of course they agree with me 100 percent and blah, blah, blah and we'll have them out of there in no time. So we closed the Peace Corps down.

What really bothered me about all of this exercise was not so much that my judgment was being questioned because I wasn't known to AF, but it was my motivation, my intentions that were being questioned. As I tried to explain to people I said listen, for my own personal convenience I

would prefer that the Peace Corps remain, because when I go to the Comoros I'm met by the Peace Corps director, I'm taken to the Peace Corps headquarters, which gives me a base of operations, which I'm not going to have if I send them home. I'll have to go directly to a hotel, I have no one to meet me. It's a very awkward arrangement for me. So for very selfish reasons I would prefer the Peace Corps stay, but, I'm not going to be selfish and keep them here for my personal convenience knowing that I can't take care of them if something bad happens to them. So that bothered me. I found that rather extraordinary. I was also bothered by the fact that the AF Bureau would side with the Peace Corps against its own ambassador. I mean, you look to Washington, you look to your masters to back you, to support you and for them to get on the phone and tell you we think you're wrong or please don't do this. I wasn't terribly impressed with the AF front office as far as this particular thing goes, But maybe there was something that I wasn't aware of; maybe they had reasons for taking this position.

*Q: It's always difficult working with the Peace Corps. This is true of any organization, they don't like to pull out of places. FAA has a place in Nairobi, they don't want to get out of it no matter how dangerous it is. What was the Peace Corps doing in the Comoros?*

ALEXANDER: Little micro projects. They were building wells all over the place, or working with the villagers to build wells because they had no running water so to speak. It's one of the poorest countries in the world. When you get into that category of the poorest, Niger or Chad or Mali? The Comoros has got to be in there. It's at that point where it's going back in time five or six hundred years. They were doing simple projects like that, but they made a world of difference to folks living in the Comoros. Regardless of what they were doing, I just didn't feel it was worth dying over.

*Q: What was the government of the Comoros doing when it wasn't being taken over by mercenaries?*

ALEXANDER: They were constantly flying to Paris seeking handouts, seeking some kind of French largesse. The Comoros is comprised of four islands, one of which is a French territory. The French just took it. It's called Mayotte. They have a naval facility there and they told the Comorians they weren't going to give it back; it's ours and if you want it, come and take it. It's just ridiculous because the Comorians can't take it back. Deep down inside I don't think they want to take it back because it's convenient to have it there because they can send illegal or undocumented workers to work there, and documented workers to work there and they send their remittances back to the other three islands. It also provides them with a source of help in the case of cyclone or some other natural disaster; the French navy is close by and they can provide some assistance. At least that's the thinking of the folks in Moroni, the capital of the Comoros. For the most part the country is so poor the government does nothing and provides no services, but to its credit it's not one of these leeching governments, it's not an oppressive government's either. It doesn't built fancy ministries and put all its officials in Mercedes Benz, which is so often the case on the Continent; it doesn't do that either. Everyone is poor. So the few shekels that the government officials had they used to fly to Paris, essentially to beg for money. They also send a lot of people to France to work, legally or illegally. What spares the Comoros some of the great dysfunctions of the Continent, of the mainland I should say, is the very small population. I don't think there are more than five or six hundred thousand Comorians, so international

assistance can keep them afloat and does barely. It's a manageable population, which is not the case with some of the other failed states on the mainland, millions and millions and millions who just, that dynamic fortunately doesn't exist.

*Q: Did the Seychelles come under your jurisdiction while you were there?*

ALEXANDER: It did at the end of my tour. The last few months of my tour we closed the embassy down and we took over the Seychelles. I was not accredited to the Seychelles because I was leaving and didn't want to go through that; it just was nonsensical. I sent my DCM there to be the chargé, so to speak, to show the flag and to let the chargé who was at the post know that it's our ballgame now, it's no longer yours, thank you. I said, "the ambassador can be the first one to present his credentials when he arrives." There was some debate arguing that it would be easier if I did it so that the government in the Seychelles got used to this, but I just didn't want to be bothered. We took it over and really did nothing there until I was gone.

*Q: Back to Reunion. Do we have anything on the island or were you reporting on it?*

ALEXANDER: No, it was one of those strange little Foreign Service quirks. Reunion is a French territory, might even be a French department, even though I don't think so, I think it's just a territory. The point is the consular work in Reunion is done out of Paris, which means that the folks in Reunion could not come to Mauritius to renew visas. Not that French citizens needed them, but if they had them for whatever reason they couldn't come to our post to do that. We couldn't provide any kind of consular service to them. There was one case where even the embassy in Paris wanted us to do it, but we couldn't because we weren't accredited to France. We had no work in Reunion.

*Q: How about counselor case? You're sitting on this island paradise, which usually means some American citizen is going to screw up. Did you have any problems?*

ALEXANDER: No, no, we didn't. It was too wealthy, we were just simply too far away from everything. Basically the only way you can get in and out of Mauritius was with a very expensive plane ticket.

*Q: That's a great thing.*

ALEXANDER: Yes. We just didn't have that problem.

*Q: Did you have a lot of particularly wealthy tourists come in? Sometimes the white settlers can lead a rather dissolute life. Was that happening?*

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes, that happened among the European Mauritians, the Franco Mauritians for the most part. In fact, the analogy to Kenya is a good one because they had somewhat of the same mentality, having been to both countries. They had lovely homes on their sugar plantations and they spent much time talking about the good old days as they sipped gin tonics looking over the ocean. It was very much a colonial plantation kind of existence. They really never adjusted to post-independence and continued to maintain certain attitudes. They were a dying breed, but

their kids often adopted many of the same attitudes. They spoke a very bizarre French that no one speaks anymore in France, and they had very bizarre ideas about their place in the world. Most of them were convinced that they were the descendants of French nobility, which they were not. They fabricated these origins, many of them. I think a lot of them sincerely believe. They didn't realize that their great-great-great-great grandfathers had fabricated these noble roots, even though there were a few whose families came to escape the French Revolution. For the most part, they were descendants of French settlers, not necessarily noble. It became very important to them that they be noble. I don't know why, but that was part of their shtick, their psyche, you know: I'm the descendant of so and so and so and so. If you went and looked them up you'd find out well, there's no nobility there. They were a queer lot, friendly, many of them.

My wife and I got to know many of them; in fact, sometimes I had some rather interesting interactions. I remember one night having dinner with one of these very old French Mauritian families and the hostess said to my wife, "you speak French very well." And my wife said, "thank you. And she said, "you know, you speak French almost as well as we do." And my wife stiffened and said, "who is we, madam?" She said, "well, we." She said, "pardon me, but I speak French better than you do." I was so surprised because my wife was not an arrogant person, but in point of fact her French was absolutely native, it's 5/5. She was raised in France; she went to school from the first grade until the eleventh grade in the French school system. Her French is absolutely native as any French person. She later served in Paris and frequently had problems because the French would get confused thinking she was one of the FSNs representing her boss. She'd say, "no, I am the counselor of embassy, I'm not the FSN." "No, that's impossible." Well our host, rather indignant, responded, "well how can you speak French better than us? We're French." My wife said, "but you're not French, you're Mauritian." "Yes, but we're French." "No, no, you're Mauritian and your French is French Mauritian, it is not French French." The evening ended rather abruptly and we left. I happened to agree with her because my French wasn't quite as good as hers. My French, because I had spent so many years in France growing up, was also better than the average French Mauritian. But I cite this as an example of this isolated world that they lived in. I had French, French friends, from France who were not Mauritians, were either assigned to the embassy or working there, who used to make the same observation. They'd say, "we meet these people and they insist on telling you they're French; they're not. They speak the most bizarre French we've ever heard; sometimes you can't even understand them." But again, they lived in such splendid isolation they were convinced it was just yesterday they left the old country.

*Q: How big was your embassy by the way?*

ALEXANDER: It was small. There were roughly 40 of us if I remember correctly. By the time I left I think we were down to 30 or 32.

*Q: Was there much of a consular business there?*

ALEXANDER: No, very little because we had a tiny American community. There were very few American tourists and very few Mauritians asking for visas to go to the U.S. There were a few, mostly students and business people. So consular work was part-time for one of my officers. The consular section was open three days a week for three hours or four hours or something.

*Q: Did you have trouble finding something to do?*

ALEXANDER: I did, yes. Yes, absolutely.

*Q: I was just thinking, after Haiti, it's nice to decompress for about six months-*

ALEXANDER: Exactly. It was fine for six months and then I realized I didn't have a job. Even running off to the Comoros periodically, I really didn't have a job. I suspect that, even now that we have the Seychelles, the ambassador still doesn't have much of a job. That's one of the reasons why I scaled down the embassy. I cut back on the staff in Mauritius and closed down because I said there was no work for us. We really shouldn't be here, certainly not in the numbers that we are.

*Q: Was the French embassy interested in what was going on there?*

ALEXANDER: They were. The French had a very large footprint in Mauritius, in the area. It had been a former colony; they had a billion dollars worth of investments in Mauritius. They had a very large Franco Mauritian community, these folks that I was telling you about. While they might have spoken rather archaic French, many of them had French passports, so they required a considerable amount of servicing. The French ambassador and his staff were much busier than we were. That post was a much more important posting for the French than it was for us, too. My colleagues were relatively senior, they went on to European embassies after that. The French DCM went on to be the number two at the UN, which certainly wouldn't have been the case with my DCM, so that was a much more important post for France than it was for us.

*Q: I take it then, other than chiding you on getting rid of the Peace Corps, the African Bureau didn't play much of a role or have much interest in what you were up to?*

ALEXANDER: No. No, they were very supportive, as was the EUR Bureau, when I came in with a request to take the Mauritian foreign minister and a few others to the Chagos to see Diego Garcia. They were absolutely magnificent. The British resisted the idea at first and AF weighed in along with EUR saying it might not be a bad idea because the Mauritians were constantly bringing this up in the United Nations and it's a minor irritant, but it's an irritant nonetheless. EUR weighed in with the Brits and the Brits finally said okay, let's give it a shot. Other than that I had very little to do with the AF.

*Q: Well then, '96, whither?*

ALEXANDER: '96 I went back to ARA, to Western Hemisphere as it's called now, WHA. I went to Ecuador as ambassador; back into the frying pan. It wasn't violent like Haiti, but it was certainly volatile.

**HAROLD W. GEISEL**

**Ambassador  
Mauritius (1996-1999)**

*Ambassador Harold W. Geisel was born in Illinois in 1947. He received his BA from Johns Hopkins and his MBA from the University of Virginia. After entering the Foreign service in 1971, he was posted in Brussels, Oslo, Bern, Bamako, Durban, Rome, Bonn and Moscow and served as Ambassador to Mauritius. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 30, 2006.*

*Q: ...In the first place, what was Mauritius, what was the state of Mauritius and then what were American interests there?*

GEISEL: Excellent question. And I should make two other points. I always was, luckily for me, non-resident ambassador to Seychelles and to Comoros and therein hangs a tale as well, which we'll get to.

*Q: We'll get to. That's the, yes.*

GEISEL: But the first thing that's interesting was that when I did this roving all over Africa, I went to Mauritius at least twice as a roving administrative officer, fixing the post up. They didn't really need much fixing up because they had some superb FSNs. But in any event when I went to Mauritius 16 years earlier, it was a pretty poor place. The first time I went, which would have been probably 1980, it was the damndest thing. There was a line four miles long waiting to get into the U.S. Embassy. The reason was that someone had spread a rumor that the U.S. Embassy would give unlimited immigration visas to the United States and it was actually picked up by the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation. In those days it was such a poor place that they had a department of emigration to encourage people to leave the island and this famous Swedish social scientist, well I guess he was an economist of sorts, named Malthus, who was sort of full of it, hatched up this theory that was based on Mauritius. The theory was that eventually people in countries with a high birth rate would overwhelm the land and they would starve and Mauritius was what he had in mind.

So when I got there the first time it was lovely but poor. And they did something though that was very smart in between when I went there in 1980 and I came back in 1996. What they did was when Maggie Thatcher agreed to turn back Hong Kong to the Chinese the then, I don't remember if it was the finance minister or the prime minister, went off to Hong Kong with a suitcase full of Mauritius passports and he told the rich Chinese that he met no, you can't buy Mauritian citizenship but, if you invest in Mauritius, you can become a Mauritian citizen. And some very, very rich Chinese built textile factories. By the time I got to Mauritius, it's the damndest thing, here it is a tropical island, and they were the world's number two manufacturer of sweaters. The tallest building in 1980 was Rogers House, the American embassy was on that fourth floor. When I came back they had quasi skyscrapers 30 stories tall and it was an island that was so prosperous that they rated its living standards with Spain or Portugal or even Ireland. I think Ireland was an exaggeration but Spain or Portugal was probably true. It was capitalistic and democratic and everyone adored it by the time I came back.



Now if White House Personnel would have had its act together, I never would have gotten it and I note that I have since been followed by two real estate gazillionaires, one Democratic and then one Republican and Mauritius will probably never go career again. The way it used to work was that there was an informal agreement between State and White House Personnel that there were two embassies; there was Mauritius and there was Seychelles and one would go career and the other would go political. But what the White House didn't realize is that, first of all, the political appointee to Seychelles had died and, secondly, we were closing our embassy in Seychelles because the US Air Force had decided to close its tracking station on the main island of Seychelles. By the time the White House had figured this out, the president had long since put a checkmark by my name and my name had been submitted to the Senate for my three countries.

*Q: Now I know Mauritius at one point was quite important for us as a whaling port but I take it that this is no longer important to whalers.*

GEISEL: Well actually, you're right. It was a refueling and victual ling station. Actually on its coat of arms it says the Star and the Key of the Indian Ocean because it is crucially located in the Indian Ocean if you don't happen to have a Suez Canal. Naturally, their shipping and transshipping business starting falling to hell as soon as the Suez Canal opened. Interesting enough, we established relations with Mauritius and sent a commercial agent there in 1790.

*Q: Okay so, anyway, Mauritius was one of the first posts we opened because of our ships.*

GEISEL: Our ships. We had a hell of a lot more ships going, U.S. flagged ships going through in the 18<sup>th</sup> century than we did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Q: Oh absolutely.*

GEISEL: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, plenty more. And I think they kept it open until 1911 or 1912 and then reopened it just before it got its independence.

*Q: When did it become independent?*

GEISEL: Well independent in the sense of being a self governing, what do they call it, country I guess, within the commonwealth was 1967. And then they became a republic around 1987 but still within the British Commonwealth.

*Q: Well how British and how sort of residual French was it?*

GEISEL: Well it was more, in many ways it was more, culturally, residually French than British but governmentally it was much more British. When the British came in the Napoleonic wars and overthrew the French, just as luck would have it, they had a very reasonable minded army of occupation and very high class people who were much more interested in playing polo and horse racing than oppressing the French who really could have used a bit of oppression because they were pretty arrogant. They let the French planters do their thing and in return the French planters left the British alone as far as government was concerned but the French kept their slaves much longer than they should have and they blackmailed the British into buying them out when they

finally insisted on freeing the slaves. But the majority population group was Indian Hindus who came originally as cane cutters but there were about 17 or 18 percent Indian Muslims who were originally Gujaratis and traders who sold to the Indians. Mauritius actually was named after a Dutch prince because the Dutch discovered it, slaughtered all the Dodo birds because that's the only place the Dodo ever was and didn't think they could do anything else and left. The French came later in the, let's say that would have been the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and grew sugar. They imported slaves. The slaves didn't like cutting cane and ultimately were replaced by Indian coolies when the slaves were freed. I use the word coolies because that's what they were called. There were, I think, it must have been about 25, 30 percent of the island were what were called Creoles, which were the descendants of the slaves who, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, were thoroughly mixed but they were the largest bunch of Christians on the island. The island even had an old Catholic Cardinal so you really had an incredible mixture of cultures with the Muslim culture, the Hindu culture, the Creole culture; then you had the French planters who dominated business, along with the Chinese. The French were about one percent of the population but they lived a very nice life by and two percent of the island were the Chinese, who also had come earlier as coolies but who were brilliant businessmen and were called the Jews of Mauritius because there were no Jews on Mauritius except for me and maybe 10 or 12 other people. In the second World War the British had deported a couple lots of Jews who had shown up in Palestine on some rinky boats and they had sent them to a fortress, a prison fortress in Mauritius and enough of them died that I would always say, not counting the tourists, there were far more dead Jews on Mauritius than live.

*Q: 1996. What were American interests in Mauritius?*

GEISEL: Well, twofold. First and above all else from my point of view were commercial interests. This was a prosperous place; we wanted to sell them everything from airplanes to cell phones. And unlike most places in Africa they paid cash and they had some good businesses on the island. We also had an interest, as one would expect, in having them allow ship visits and the usual business about getting them to vote our way in the United Nations. We had very few tourists, very few American tourists there.

*Q: When you say ship visits you mean?*

GEISEL: I mean U.S. Naval ship visits. And I was able to convince the government to allow them to return. They had come to Mauritius often, in fact the Mauritians never forgot when they had a terrible hurricane and they had many, many terrible hurricanes there; we were right in the middle of what we called Hurricane Alley. The John F. Kennedy, a large aircraft carrier had been nearby and they had literally put the island back together again. But for various reasons, there hadn't been ship visits for many years and I was able to get them to come back, and they still do come as far as I know.

*Q: Well when you got there what were the politics? I mean, you-*

GEISEL: The politics have never changed on Mauritius. And you have to remember, like so many islands, the people on the island think that politically they are the center of the universe. There were essentially three political parties. The one political party which usually dominates

and is at the moment again in command, it was there when I was there, was headed by the son of the first prime minister, Dr. Ramgoolam. They really represented what I would say were lower class Hindu interests, lower class and middle class Hindu interests. And the politics were very racially charged. Everyone gets along but when it comes time to voting, people usually vote for people that look like they do.

*Q: Where did they fall? Because you know, you've got a couple of influences going, the French influence is sort of the left wing Socialists, the British with the Fabian Socialists, you know.*

GEISEL: Yes. You've got it exactly right but by the time I got there, the biggest influence by far was India, which shows how the world had changed because, when I visited the first time, India was in not much shape to influence anything. I used to joke, but I was actually serious, and say that the British, American and French ambassadors were at the top but that the- well of course it was British high commissioner but that at the apex, the top of the top was the Indian high commissioner and the Indian high commissioner was intimately involved in local politics and as a matter of fact the man who was the first Indian high commissioner while I was there is now the number two man at the Indian foreign ministry, he's their permanent secretary.

*Q: Well what was India, India of course has been changing too, so by the time, we're talking about India was no longer sort of-*

GEISEL: A left wing basket case.

*Q: Yes.*

GEISEL: No, exactly.

*Q: India was changing.*

GEISEL: Dramatically. India and Mauritius have a tax treaty which is very favorable to Mauritius and as a result any foreign investor who wants to set up a country in India is going to set up a Mauritian company. There was a good business for the Mauritian accounting firms setting up businesses for Mauritian companies for Americans who would then be able to invest in India and get their money out much more easily than if they were had Indian subsidiaries.

*Q: Well what was your embassy like?*

GEISEL: Our embassy was one of the smallest embassies in the world and it made me so happy. We were on the top floor of what had become a small office building but the rest of the building was occupied by the biggest conglomerate on the island so it was still economically right in the center of everything as far as the island was concerned. We had, let's see, an ambassador, a DCM, a junior officer; I think it's the finest junior officer job in the world who was political, economic, consular, political/military, commercial, you name it. I mean, real vestige of a bygone era in the Foreign Service. Then there was an admin officer, my secretary and a communicator and a public affairs officer and then an FSN staff, many of whom remembered me from my visits there in 1980s.

*Q: Okay. Well now, when you got there was there anything to do?*

GEISEL: Oh, that's a wonderful question. Well, I've seen it all over Africa. There are endless things to do. A better question would be was there anything very worthwhile to do? Because the endless things you do is you play the fact that you're the American ambassador and if you're smart you go to every damn event that comes up so that people are grateful and they owe you. I learned that when I was consul general in Durban. All you have really to give these people, because we weren't giving them any money other than a miserable little self help fund, is your presence but they love that, especially on an island like Mauritius. So I went to endless affairs. My predecessor quite correctly told me that I could spend three years there and never have a meal at home, not breakfast, lunch or dinner, if I wanted it. So I got to know as many people as I could from all of the population groups; I started working like a demon to push a big cell phone contract that we wanted. The embassy was administratively in very, very good shape; I had a wonderful staff.

*Q: Did you keep your hands off the administrative officer?*

GEISEL: I certainly did and I was berated by, and correctly berated by my DCM for taking such a hands off attitude because the admin officer wasn't all that good and was eventually booted out of the Service from what I subsequently heard. Or maybe she wasn't, maybe it was her husband who got booted out. Well one or the other did and both of them are gone but I was determined to have nothing to do with admin because I thought, my God, if I had been an admin officer I couldn't think of a bigger nightmare than having Harry Geisel as my ambassador. I used to tell myself that every day when to hold myself back. Now, when that admin officer left, we were supposed to get another chap, second tour officer who sounded absolutely terrific who'd just finished a consular tour in London and his wife who was Swiss thought that Mauritius was much too wild and savage a place and insisted that he leave the Service rather than go to Mauritius and go to Switzerland instead. So for almost a year we had no admin officer and when I called up AFEX to complain, the response was you can be your own admin officer, Harry, and they were right, of course. Eventually they sent me a guy who was terrible, on temporary duty, and after he cursed out, literally, my best FSNs, I told him to get the hell off of my island. AFEX advised me that I wouldn't be seeing an admin officer for many months and I said that's just fine, I'm not going to see that guy after tomorrow. I had the pleasure of being my own admin officer for quite awhile.

*Q: Talk about your dealing with the local officials.. I mean, did you have much to deal with them?*

GEISEL: I had a lot to deal with them because they didn't have much to do either. I mean, idle hands are the devil's workshop and there were constant political intrigues but I could see the prime minister whenever I wanted to, I could see the foreign minister even more quickly because it was easier to get to his office. I would go in and ask for things and they would be very nice and promise me and of course, having had a lot of experience in Africa I realized that most of the time nothing would be done unless I kept coming back and that was fine.

I should stop right here and tell you about what was beyond question the toughest thing that I did and you'll appreciate it as a consular officer yourself. We had a terrible plane crash, a hijacked plane that crashed in the Comoros Islands while I was there and six Americans were killed. We had no representation on Comoros, of course, that was from us. We had a few people who we knew, including missionaries and we got information as quickly as we could. They were tracking the plane, it was an Ethiopian Airways plane, which tragically crashed just about a mile from the airport when it ran out of fuel.

They had no such things as coffins because they planted folks directly in the ground. So, wheeling and dealing with the French in Comoros, we were able to borrow a few coffins and I brought a coffin with my baggage, if you can imagine. It was a terrible business. The first thing that we did- the French, who dominated the islands, it was a former French colony, advised us that a number of injured Americans were going to be taken to La Reunion, which is this island near Mauritius that is a department of France now, it used to be a French colony. The first thing I did is I flew with the admin officer to the Reunion airport. The French military were very helpful and when the plane landed from Comoros, a French military plane with our injured people on it, I went to them, I interviewed them, the French being the French wanted the customs things done in French so I interpreted, none of the Americans who landed there spoke French. .Actually, I ended up interpreting for lots of other injured people that didn't speak French. It was just wonderful to see the relief in the injured people's faces when I introduced myself as the American ambassador and then explained to them what was going on. The next day, I left for Comoros and there worked with the French, the Israelis who had lost six people and the Japanese who needed help and who also didn't speak French but who'd lost a whole bunch of people. The Comorian government was a farce, it was a dictatorship, it was- they were nice people but they were screamingly incompetent and corrupt to boot. The Department flew an aircraft, you know the plane that the counterterrorism people have, with Consular Affairs and FBI people and all the rest. Our public affairs officer had gone ahead of me and he was helping the Washington people by translating for them and showing them around.. In fact, virtually all of our embassy was out of Mauritius. But you know, it's events like that when you realize what a good thing it is to have a diplomatic presence all over the world.

I'll skip all the gruesome details except for one because this is well worth telling. We'd convinced the Comorans to set up a makeshift morgue in what was meatpacking plant because it was the only place that was cool. We were going to bring the bodies back to America, of course, in the coffins that I had either bought or brought with me and, fortunately and sadly, the Israelis are really experts at taking care of their people who get killed. Now the Jews don't do embalming but still the Israelis that came helped with very basic embalming and they asked us, they'd come on a small plane, could they put their bodies on our plane too because we had decided to stop in Nairobi on the way back where there was proper embalming available. Now, this is where it gets sad and interesting.

The Comorans were supposed to come with a truck to take the Israeli bodies and the American bodies from the meatpacking plant to the airport and we were then going to load them on our plane and go off to Nairobi. The truck doesn't come and the truck doesn't come. Finally it's the damndest sight I saw in my entire career. Finally, up comes a dump truck and in that dump truck you see an orthodox rabbi bowing and praying and chanting over the bodies, the Israelis

were in body bags, our people, including the wife of a Freetown FSN, were in coffins. What had happened is the Comorans had welched and they'd never brought a truck.. So the Israelis, being Israelis, had bribed a dump truck driver to stop and take the coffins and everything. They got to the airport and then the French, for whatever reason I can't imagine, refused to give us the conveyor belt which belonged to I guess Air France to load the plane. So we had to take the stairs, you know, these ordinary stairs that you push up to the airplane, take them, move them to the dump truck, jack them down and put the bodies in the coffins one by one on the stairs then push the stairs to the airplane hold and push the bodies into the hold.

Now, our security people were getting more and more nervous because the Israelis were doing their darnedest to poke all around the airplane. I mean, obviously the Israelis, some of the Israelis were from the Mossad and our security people wanted to get out as quickly as they could. However, there was a brigadier general in the NSC who was being very stubborn and he said you can't stop in Nairobi, it's a deviation from your flight plan, blah, blah, blah and Mary Ryan, the assistant secretary for consular affairs and the pilot, who was an Air Force reservist, came to me and they said we've got to get out. Mary, may she rest in peace, was most worried about what really mattered-that the bodies were decomposing as the NSC bureaucrat did his thing.

*Q: Was she on the phone or was she there?*

GEISEL: No, she was there; she came out on the plane. The pilot was nervous, he was an Air Force captain, he didn't know what was going on and was very worried. So I did something I never did before and never did again. I said to the pilot, you tell that general that the American ambassador has told you to get the fuck off of his island now. No, I said actually to get the fuck out of his country right now. And he said yes sir, yes sir. And we did it. This was madness, it was bureaucratic madness. What really got to me, what was heartbreaking is that one of the people who was killed was a young woman, first tour CIA junior officer, a lovely girl, I had her effects, I had her wallet with her Virginia driver's license. The idea that these bodies were rotting because of some jerk general at the National Security Council was, well, that's why I said get the fuck out of my country. About two weeks later I got a call from Mary, Mary Ryan, saying that this general was making a great deal of trouble for the Air Force pilot and could I please confirm in writing what I had done. So I sent the whole story in and I sent it in I must say, rather matter of factly and of course, typical State Department, I had two calls from people saying my, my, this ambassadorship seems to have gone to your head, Harry. What else would you expect but second guessing? But that was fine, I'd do it again 50 times over.

*Q: You might on this explain what was the hijacking about.*

GEISEL: Oh, it was a couple nuts. It was nothing political at all, it was some goofy kids and they apparently didn't have more than fire axes and fire extinguishers and they seized control of the airplane and didn't even know where they wanted to go. That was what was so awful. These were Ethiopians; the plane had originated somewhere else, I forgot where, and it stopped in Addis and on Addis these youngsters, I think they were in their early 20s, had gotten on and seized control of it. I mean, that's what's so tragic. All of these things are tragic but this utter farce ended with most of the people being killed. One of the people who survived, one of the Americans, although he was hurt but we had him straightened out, was a fellow Foreign Service

officer named Poncho Huddle, I don't know if you know him or have heard of him, he was, what was he? I know he ended up being charge in what was Rangoon. I forgot whether he was still a principal officer in one of the Indian posts, I don't remember which one. But it was awful.

*Q: Well back to on Mauritius, did you find that the Indian government- did the Indian government have any politics that interfered with us there?*

GEISEL: They interfered with the Mauritians, not with us. In fact, the high commissioner previous to me had bet on the wrong horse in the race and the Mauritians asked the Indian government to pull him back. I don't know what their agenda was; like us, an important part of their agenda was commercial because the Indians had lots of exports, they had banking but they just expected the Mauritians to follow their lead and the Mauritians were glad to.

*Q: Did you have any dealing with the French?*

GEISEL: Yes. You know, the French were really in many ways a vestige of a bygone era. The French embassy managed to sell a lot of products. I am personally convinced, although I don't think I could prove it, that many French companies came in and bribed, which was not hard to do. The Mauritian government was, I would say, at the middle end of venality; but not too venal. You couldn't give them money and then not deliver your product; you had to deliver the product too. I was waiting for the opportunity where an American company had been cheated, had won, had really fairly won a contract, should have won a contract for these container tractors in the terminal. Well, a consultant, a World Bank consultant who happened to be a Frenchman. had our people disqualified saying that they hadn't met the terms of what was required, which was unmitigated baloney. In my farewell interview with one of the newspapers I basically said that this was corruption pure and simple. Now, you know it's like everything else, you only fight a fight you can win and it is worth fighting and this was such a fight. I picked my fight carefully because the head of the cargo handling corporation, which was a government corporation, was extremely unpopular. He was known as Monsieur Macro, which is sort of French slang for pimp. In fact they even had a big cartoon in the newspaper when I did it, giving him a farewell souvenir. The government of course got terribly upset and so they asked me for my proof. I went in and I sort of implied that I didn't have much proof, that I just couldn't get the documents that I needed but they should trust me. The foreign minister said to me oh, what a pity, if you only had this proof we could do something. I said oh yes, I know. Then, half an hour later I came back, and said I found the documents. In between he'd already been to the newspaper saying, well, the ambassador doesn't really have any proof so we can't do anything. Then my successor told me that, sure enough, a U.S. company won the next contract because we just put them in a spot. Look, in the bigger picture what difference does it make? But as a matter of principle it's nice to teach these crooks that you can't get away with that with the U.S. Government.

*Q: How did you find the American businesses that came there?*

GEISEL: They were a mixed bag. A couple very good, very, very sharp outfits. I'll mention one in particular, they were the ones that won the cell phone contract, a company called Qualcomm. They did everything right.

*Q: This is tape six, side one with Harry Geisel. Yes.*

GEISEL: Qualcomm had a young woman as their representative. She was headquartered in Singapore; she was an electrical engineer and she could talk to the telephone company, she could talk to the government; absolutely competent, her head screwed on right. In fact, she had, heaven help her, peritonitis while she was on the island and she didn't skip a beat, she got operated on and came right back to business.

There were other American companies that were not serious and didn't do their homework. They hired consultants who they thought had political connections. Once a bunch of them came from the States, they all flew in first class, they stayed at the most lavish hotel on the island and let me tell you, when I say lavish, lavish and Mauritius, the two of them go together, they accomplished really nothing. This woman told me Qualcomm wouldn't even let her fly business class from Singapore unless she got special permission for every trip. She did not stay in a resort hotel; she stayed in the city hotel very near the government. It was very interesting to see and I always swore that I would never buy stock in that other company after I saw the way that they had goofed up on that contract.

*Q: Was there a problem or was Mauritius prosperous enough so that there wasn't a problem that happens in so many places exploiting workers and all that?*

GEISEL: Good question. Well of course remember we didn't really have any facilities on the island; we had agents on the island. All the manufacturing on the island was either textiles or sugar. The Mauritians actually on textiles had rudiments of what I would have to call a labor inspection service. They were pretty good about checking the factories for safe working conditions. For sugar it was not an issue because everybody, one way or another, knew the prime minister and other people so you really did not treat people badly. Look, it's not a wonderful life to cut sugarcane, it's a hell of a life but it was all mechanized really. In fact, that was the one brand the Mauritians, I mean, the average Mauritian thought it was French, didn't even know it was American that had the whole island sewed up and that was Caterpillar. The machine that was used to do the work digging up the cane and getting rid of all the boulders because it was all volcanic was the Caterpillar and they used to refer to it not as an excavator but they would say, a Caterpillar. Most of the generators were Caterpillars too. They really understood how to export.

When I was in Mauritius, there was literally a severe labor shortage in the textile factories and they had to import Chinese textile workers from the mainland and you could say they were exploited because they worked terribly hard hours but, relatively speaking they were well paid and it was clear, because I spoke to the Chinese ambassador about it, these people wanted to work. They wanted to work outrageous hours, they were virtually all young single women who wanted to make money and go back to China with a pocket full of bucks.

*Q: Where did the Mauritians go for holidays? Did they go to France, the United States, England?*

GEISEL: You said it; France, England and India, depending on their interests. We haven't spoken much about the English. The English had really, were not terribly important commercially. They had some agents and some interests but they had really let the business go



over to the French. Of course the laws were English or at least English in origin and Mauritius by its own choice still looked to the Privy Council as the highest court of appeal. The British also had one other thing that upset the Mauritians and we were of course part of it and that was Diego Garcia, which are called now BIOT, the British Indian Ocean Territories. When Mauritius became independent, the British only allowed them to become independent when they agreed that they would not make a claim for Diego Garcia. Now, I don't see how the Mauritians ever could have claimed Diego Garcia in the first place; it actually was first administered from Mauritius but then it was administered from Seychelles. In any event we very much wanted Diego Garcia, as we do today; you know, it's the permanent aircraft carrier on the way to the Arabian Peninsula and the arrangement was made that we would lease it from the British as long as we needed it. The people who were on the island who I think numbered a couple of thousand were forcibly expelled from the island for security reasons. The islands, the group of islands is called Chagos but the only island that is big enough to have a huge air base naval facility, which we have there, is Diego Garcia and there isn't a time that we aren't involved in the Middle East where a whole lot of the air activity doesn't take place from Diego Garcia. So in any event we and the British, well we leased it from the British, the British expelled the people who were there. The British told us to give the Mauritian government some money to help these people start over again. The Mauritians were very broke in those days, that was 1967; they kept the money, the refugees never saw any part of it. I think either one or two more times the British said please give them money. The last time the money actually went to a trust fund which helped those people somewhat. They're all Creoles. Interestingly enough just a few years ago a series of British court decisions essentially said that what had been done to the Chagosians was outrageous. It awarded them all British citizenship if they wanted it and of course including the right of abode in the UK. I don't know that so many of them have taken them up on it because, you know, do you really want to go to the UK and live on welfare? The Brits were afraid that they would all go off and live on welfare. You know, these were island people and all their descendants and it should have been done all along. But we certainly did our part when we gave whatever money the British told us to give them. They would like to go back and occasionally we've said you can come back to tend to the graves and whatnot. But it is a real security concern, obviously. The Mauritians would beat on me but I knew and I'd love to have some read this that what they really wanted was more money again.

By the way, what I do want to talk about, when you're ready for it, is I want to talk a bit about Seychelles and Comoros which were also my beat.

*Q: Yes. Well just quickly, how about ship business? Why was there- what sort of talking did you have to do to get ship business in and how did they work out?*

GEISEL: They worked out great. The first ship, which was a guided missile cruiser, didn't want to leave and the Mauritians didn't want them to leave because the Mauritians had forgotten how much money these sailors will spend in a place where they're happy. And here you had Mauritius, you had ATM machines, you had gorgeous hotels, you had very, very, very friendly people because the Mauritians are wonderful at tourists and no, the basic talking that I had to do to the Mauritians was easy because they had had Indian ship visits, they'd had a couple of South African ship visits and I said now let's be fair about it all and I said, furthermore, you're going to

make a lot of money. They had one visit, our people were wonderful, we had absolutely no incidents whatsoever and the Mauritians said come back whenever you want.

*Q: All you need is a carrier group.*

GEISEL: Fortunately the harbor couldn't support it. Now, where it was trickier but, ultimately much more successful to have ship visits was the Seychelles because Mauritius was out of the way for our ships coming out of the Gulf. You know, they were doing this interdiction business in the Gulf, the blockade we had on Saddam, but Seychelles was very much en route and of course is a wonderful paradise but the Seychelles had a real policy of no U.S. ship visits.

Now, that brings me up to another point. Count on the U.S. military in its own way to not be sensitive as to how tiny a U.S. embassy could be. The military command that was responsible for Mauritius was the Pacific Command in Honolulu and they were also responsible for Comoros. But Central Command insisted on having responsibility for Seychelles. That happened just when I got there. So this junior officer, second tour junior officer, who was our political/military officer, had to deal with calls at all times from two military commands who couldn't understand why we couldn't just jump in and have another officer spend all day talking to them on the phone. In any event, I convinced the Seychelles, using the same logic as with the Mauritians, that they would make a lot of money. Seychelles has a lot of islands but it's a very tiny country, I think it's less than 30,000 people; tiny, beautiful islands. I convinced them that this would be real money which would really help, and they were especially broke at the moment and they agreed, and we just sent in one ship after another after another and they all absolutely loved it and money triumphs over all sometimes; the Seychelles are very, very, very happy to have the money.

The Seychelles seemed to be a complete dictatorship. Well, I can't say that. Can you call a country a dictatorship if by and large the government really represents the people and represents what they want? You know, I'd rather that they had a choice in who they could vote for. They didn't really on the Seychelles. There was an opposition; for a long time there wasn't but they brought a chap back who'd actually been overthrown but he was an unmitigated jerk and I would have voted for the man who was de facto dictator myself rather than vote for him.

*Q: What about, before we move to the Seychelles and Comoros and the problems you had there, what about the tourist business? Because I would have thought that by the late '90s you would have been knee deep in tourists.*

GEISEL: Well we were knee deep in tourists; they just weren't Americans. If you think about it, it's too damn far to go. There are no direct flights; it takes 17, 18 hours to get there from the east coast of the United States, if you're lucky, if you have good connections, usually more. It's a wonderful place to have a holiday. Look, you have ditch diggers that speak French and English and so does everybody else. It's a very charming place; it's a very beautiful place. You have the rich and famous from Europe, you have all sorts of European movie stars who are there just walking around without being bothered. But you know, can you really justify spending so much time to go there when you can go to the Caribbean and have a somewhat similar experience? Not as nice. Mauritius is very much high end tourism but I think that's the main reason the word has

gotten out, that's the main reason that I was followed by two political appointees and probably many more to come.

*End of reader*