

Interview with Robert E. Gribbin

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR ROBERT E. GRIBBIN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: June 23, 2000

Copyright 2002 ADST

Q: Today is the 23rd of June, 2000. This is an interview with Ambassador Robert E. Gribbin. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Do you go by Bob?

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me when and where you were born and a bit about your family?

GRIBBIN: I was born on February 5, 1946, in Durham, North Carolina. My father is an Episcopal clergyman. He was involved in campus ministries at several universities, but I mostly grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on the campus of the University of Alabama. I went to school in Tuscaloosa. I went to the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. I graduated from there in 1968.

Q: Well, we're going way back now. Tell me about your father's background.

GRIBBIN: Well, my father was born in Atlanta, and his father was an Episcopal clergyman as well. He was raised in North Carolina, and he also went to Sewanee. He attended the General Seminary in New York, and then was chaplain at the University of North Carolina,

Library of Congress

where he met my mother and got married. I am one of five children. I have an older sister Alice, a younger brother, Joe, another younger sister, Millie, and my youngest brother is Scott. Q: What's your mother's background?

GRIBBIN: Her name is Elsie Lawrence, and she is also the daughter of an Episcopal clergyman who was the rector of the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill.

Q: Oh, my God, you're to the pulpit born.

GRIBBIN: That's right. Mom was born in Hillsboro, North Carolina, near Chapel Hill. She went to St. Mary's College and then to the University of North Carolina.

Q: Did your father get involved in the war?

GRIBBIN: Well, because he was a clergyman and because he was in the campus ministry, the bishop wouldn't let him enlist. The bishop wanted Dad available to counsel and otherwise be helpful to men who were on their way to war -

Q: Oh, yes, very much so. It was rather a crucial spot at that time because of what young people went through. What was family life, particularly as a young boy?

GRIBBIN: Growing up on the edges of a university was a lot of fun. All the sports facilities were right across the street. Rather than play tennis on one of 20 tennis courts, I rode my bicycle on all of them. I used to sneak into the university basketball arena any time of day or night to play basketball. Tuscaloosa was a small city, and it was a good place to grow up. I had a very typical, almost Norman Rockwell-type childhood. The thing hanging over our head in Tuscaloosa in the 1960s was, of course, the issue of segregation and of bringing it to an end. My father was involved in the process of trying to see that the integration of the University of Alabama went peacefully. So from time to time things got exciting. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in our front yard, and we got threatening telephone calls and things like that. But we managed to weather all that.

Library of Congress

Q: How about as a kid? I assume you went to what today would be described as a segregated school.

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: Were you having trouble with the other students, your father being active in trying to desegregate?

GRIBBIN: No, I don't really recall anything unpleasant. There were some students in the school who were very ardent segregationists themselves, but most folks, to my recollection, were not vocal about the issue; certainly not as much as people outside school.

Q: In school, what was your school like?

GRIBBIN: My high school was one of the biggest high schools in Alabama. We had about 2,200 students in four grades. It was a very typical high school - sports and band and clubs and cliques and everything.

Q: What were you interested in?

GRIBBIN: Well, I did a lot of things in high school. On the academic side, I was in Latin Club, president of the Latin Club. I was one of the senior speakers at graduation. I participated in various other clubs and organizations. I played the baritone horn in the band. I lettered for three years in swimming. My events were breast-stroke and individual medley.

Q: How about academic subjects?

GRIBBIN: I took the college track, if you will. I took four years of Latin, which is kind of unusual.

Library of Congress

Q: It really is, yes.

GRIBBIN: I had four years of math leading up to trigonometry. I took the required amounts of English and history and things like that. It was a decent academic program.

Q: Why Latin?

GRIBBIN: I don't know. I guess because my parents suggested initially, and once I got in it, I stayed.

Q: How about history. I was wondering, with Latin, did sort of Caesar or any of that sort of get your interest, or was it the language itself?

GRIBBIN: I enjoyed the history aspects of Latin. Undeniably there was the fact that my Latin teacher, Mrs. Olivia Fines, was probably the best teacher in the school. She was the kind of person that stimulated students to think of wider horizons. Rather than just teach a dead language, she was instrumental in getting us to look outward. She was also tough.

Q: While you were in high school, did the international world intrude at all, or was it pretty much home?

GRIBBIN: Almost not at all. Tuscaloosa was a pretty insular place, but that being said, the University of Alabama was a university, so Tuscaloosa it did have more sophistication to it than other Alabama towns. I remember knowing foreign students all through my childhood, from Europe and from Asia and a few from the Arab World.

Q: When did the face-off between Governor Wallace and, was it Meredith?

GRIBBIN: Meredith was in Mississippi.

Q: Who was it?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: There were two instances. One was in 1956, with Authurine Lucy. That attempt failed. Wallace wasn't on the scene then. He was governor in 1964 when his famous confrontation took place. One of the students admitted in 1964 was Vivian Malone.

Q: So you were around at that time?

GRIBBIN: I graduated from high school in 1964, so I was around that summer when it finally happened. I saw George standing in the doorway, in fact.

Q: Did that engage the rest of the city?

GRIBBIN: Tuscaloosa had two minds about this. Everyone was very interested in what was going on, of course, but most people objected to what they considered to be outside interference - outside interference by the segregationist forces from outside of Tuscaloosa plus outside interference by the federal government and the news media. Many people at the university and in the city at large felt that if left alone we could handle this in a more appropriate fashion. But that's not the way it worked out.

Q: As it was worked out in a lot of other places, but I guess that once in a while a place becomes a meeting point of influences beyond the local side that take over. Did you have any idea when you were in high school, were you planning to be an Episcopal minister?

GRIBBIN: Obviously, there was family pressure - not pressure, but it was obviously a possibility, but I was never really interested. I never pursued it. Fortunately, I have several cousins who have taken to the cloth and carried forward the family tradition.

Q: But you did go to Sewanee.

GRIBBIN: Yes, I did not want to stay in Tuscaloosa and go to the University of Alabama. I wanted to get out on my own. To show you how provincial Tuscaloosa High School was, I

Library of Congress

think that of my graduating class of 400 plus people, only about 6 or 7 of us left Alabama to go to university elsewhere. I was one. And I went to Tennessee, which wasn't very far.

Q: Well, you went to Sewanee from when to when?

GRIBBIN: 1964 to 1968.

Q: What was Sewanee like at that time?

GRIBBIN: Sewanee was a small liberal arts college. The student body was about 700, and all men. There was a dress code. We wore coats and ties to class. We had a positive focus on academics. At a certain point with a high enough GPA you got "gowned," which meant you were entitled to wear an academic gown, which was something of an honor. Students at Sewanee were essentially the sons of upper middle class families throughout the South. Many of my colleagues went back to the family bank or real estate company or lumber company. Others became professionals, doctors and lawyers and so forth. Many people went back to the communities that they came from.

Q: What were you interested in taking?

GRIBBIN: I became a history major. It was between history and political science, but I found history to be a bit more compelling, so I chose it.

Q: Any particular branch of history?

GRIBBIN: Well, I took everything they offered, which was mostly American and European history.

Q: In that context there, were you taught about, I guess it was called the War of the Rebellion - the Civil War?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. We had a couple of courses on the history of the South and so forth. Sure, I took all of those. The university itself had been founded, in fact, by a couple of Episcopal bishops, including Leonidas Polk, who was also a southern general during the war.

Q: Did you sense that there was a considerable change during thi period?

GRIBBIN: The rest of the South was changing, but Sewanee was tradition bound and modernized slowly. A couple of black students came to the university while I was there, but only a handful. They were brave young men to break those barriers, but were treated decently. Sewanee was a civilized place.

Q: Again, did the international world intrude?

GRIBBIN: I did get involved. When in high school I had been involved - I was president, in fact - in the Episcopal Young Churchman of Alabama. Later in college, I heard of a program, organized by the church, that sent people off to Africa. Since I wanted to get out of the South to see the world, I signed up. I joined a group of college age people, mostly from Canada and the UK, who went to Tanzania.

Q: Oh, this was when?

GRIBBIN: In the summer of 1966. I was involved in a project to build a building at a school called St. Andrew's, in Minaki, Tanzania, about 20 miles outside of Dar-Es-Salaam. During the course of that summer not only did I interact with young people from Tanzania and the UK and Canada, but I met a few Peace Corps Volunteers - one at the school and a couple down the road. I began thinking that the Peace Corps might be an interesting option to pursue after university. Subsequently that's what I did. I joined the Peace Corps.

Q: What was your impression of Tanzania when you were there?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: It was the heyday of Ujama. It was the heyday of Julius Nyerere and his great experiment in self-reliant political institutions based on the traditions of the African village. It was a time of great euphoria in Tanzania. The Tanzanian students that I knew were all caught up in it, quite obviously. They all saw a much brighter future for themselves. They were, of course, the elite. St. Andrew's was one of three schools in the country that had what was called upper secondary, A-Level courses. Consequently all of these young men were going on to good careers, many in government, which most of them subsequently did. Also in Tanzania I remember meeting British and American leftists, who were also caught up in Nyerere's grand socialist experiment. They were intellectuals and writers and activists who very much wanted to be a part of this new world but could only really do so by being theoreticians for it and observers of it rather than intrinsic to it, because they weren't Tanzanians.

Q: Obviously you were, what, between sophomore and junior year- I take it you were enthusiastic, that this was really going to work, this was the future?

GRIBBIN: Well, that's what the Tanzanians thought. I was only an observer, but I thought, sure, the prospects were good.

Q: *St. Andrew's, was that sort of an Episcopal school?*

GRIBBIN: Yes, it was founded by the Universities Mission to Central Africa, which was an Anglican missionary organization, but after independence it was taken over by the government.

Q: *Well, then, when you graduated in 1968, I guess the army was calling, too, wasn't it?*

GRIBBIN: That was the issue, of course, in the 1960s for all young men - whether or not, when, and how one got involved in the draft. I wanted to go into the Peace Corps, so first I applied to the Peace Corps and was accepted. Then my Draft Board had to decide

Library of Congress

whether they were going to defer me for that service. Thankfully, I was deferred for the Peace Corps.

Q: What was Peace Corps training like when you were there? Where did you get it, and where were you going to go?

GRIBBIN: I put down on my Peace Corps application that I wanted to go to East Africa—specifically Tanzania - but I was assigned to a program in Kenya. It turned out that of my training group, which was about 60 people, I was the only one that chose a specific country. Some others had put Africa, but I was the only one that put East Africa. The Peace Corps was still doing training in the United States in 1968, and as far as Kenya was concerned, we were nearly the last group or two that was trained in the United States. We did our training in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Q: A great area to get you ready for Africa.

GRIBBIN: The reason was that the group that had the contract from the Peace Corps to do the training found a Job Corps center in Bismarck, North Dakota, which was empty and available. So that's where we went. It was called Fort Lewis and Clark, right outside of Bismarck.

Q: What was the training?

GRIBBIN: On account of my construction background, not only in Tanzania, but also from summer jobs, I was assigned to be a water development volunteer. Others in my group focused on agriculture extension work, cooperatives, mechanics and the like. We were more technically oriented than most groups. Training consisted essentially of language. We learned Swahili at least six hours a day. We did an immersion, where we didn't speak anything but Swahili, so mealtimes at first were fairly quiet. Kenyan and Tanzanian teachers provided the language instruction. In the afternoons, we would train on our technical specialty. I learned specifics of the water programs that I would be involved in.

Library of Congress

Q: How would you characterize the cadre that you were working with at that time?

GRIBBIN: Although the Peace Corps was co-ed, my group was all men. We had a very compatible group, and being isolated on this old Army post outside of Bismarck, we got to know each other pretty well. I still count among my close friends guys I was in the Peace Corps with.

Q: Then where were you assigned?

GRIBBIN: I was assigned to Kenya. I was involved in an undertaking called Settlement. If you recall the history of Kenya you will remember that much of the best farmland in Kenya was seized by British settlers when they moved into the country in the early part of the 20th century. This area came to be called the White Highlands. Part of the independence deal foresaw that this land would be returned to African ownership. Rather than maintain the large farms, the government would buy them and then cut them down to middle-sized farms, which would be more productive than the subsistence farms of two to ten acres that most Kenyans lived on. In the new settlement areas, the government sought to create a middle class of farmers, a yeomanry, if you will. A Department was added to the Ministry of Lands to oversee the effort. Since Settlement was a temporary phenomenon in Kenya - that is, it was a one-time shot, once done, it was finished - the government did not want to staff Settlement offices and schemes with new hires for whom it would have a long-term employment responsibility. Ergo the Peace Corps stepped forward to provide many of the personnel that made Settlement function. Peace Corps Volunteers did some of the initial surveying, helped families who had been selected to move in, organized cooperatives and built water systems.

One of the initial decisions, which was very correct in my view, was to ensure that potable water would be provided conveniently to all farms. In the Kenya highlands water was available usually only at the bottom of the valley from whence it had to be toted back up the hill. If drilled for, it was found hundreds of feet down. Obviously small farmers were

Library of Congress

not capable of financing wells on their own. So part of the Settlement program was to provide water to all these farms. And again, it was a one-time shot, even though it would take about eight or ten years. Peace Corps volunteers provided most of the hydraulic assistants, which is what I was called, to build the systems.

Q: Let's talk a bit about this water system. How did you do it?

GRIBBIN: I wasn't an engineer my group was composed of men who were degree holding civil engineers plus those of us who had construction experience. Therefore I was not tasked with design, but instead went into a project where construction was just beginning. I was assigned to the Muhoroni Water Project, near Muhoroni in Central Nyanza in western Kenya. Three Settlement schemes were linked together into a single water project. There were 1200 farms and to which I ran about 150 miles of pipe. I built a small dam and provided watering points within a half-mile of each homestead. I took over from two other Peace Corps Volunteers who had begun the project. I managed a group of about 300 men who dug trench, and a group of about 15 more highly skilled men who laid pipe, built water points and performed more complicated construction tasks. So here I was at the age of, what, 21 or 22, running a 350 man construction project. It was one of the biggest management jobs I've ever had.

Q: I can understand teaching English and so on, but the British had been around there for a long time. Wasn't there a cadre of Africans who could have taken on this thing, or was it just that, as you said, the government didn't want to use its skilled people to...

GRIBBIN: There was in the Ministry of Agriculture a Department of Water Development, but it was fully occupied with other projects. Money for the settlement projects came from the World Bank and from the British Government. The government of Kenya was up against a dead line before which that money had to be spent. The short answer to your question is, I guess, that there weren't really enough water development experts available in the time frame required.

Library of Congress

Q: The people who were doing the ditch-digging, pipe-laying, and all that, were they brought in, or were they going to be part of the settlement?

GRIBBIN: They were mostly already there. By the time I got to the Muhoroni Scheme, the settlers were already on the land, and although we generally didn't have the head of the family, we had sons and nephews digging trench. Also, people would come from the surrounding area. It was wage labor and promptly paid. There were few earning opportunities in rural Kenya, so people were eager for the work.

Q: What was your impression of how this was working?

GRIBBIN: I can say that the Muhoroni Water System is still working. I was last there in February 1999. I stopped on my way back from Rwanda driving back to Nairobi. I happened to luck upon the day that the Management Committee of the Water Association was having a meeting, and lo and behold, still on the Management Committee were about three men who were on the original Management Committee that I started in 1968 or '69. The little office building that I had built was still the Water Association headquarters. In fact, the whole place looked like I had just walked out of it the day before. It was really fun to go back and renew those friendships and see that the system was still working. Initially, in terms of the number of people served, the system was planned for about 15 or 20 thousand people at maximum capacity. Today it serves 34,000 people.

Q: What sort of crops were planned and used to being grown there?

GRIBBIN: Throughout Settlement areas the idea was that each farm would be productive, and so depending on where the farms were, the crop mix differed. The Muhoroni scheme was rather unique in that the principal crop was sugar cane, which was harvested by a cooperative and sold to the nearby factory. Each settler had a share in a cane block and then each had a subsistence area, an acre or two for a house, garden and livestock.

Library of Congress

Q: What was your impression of the white farmers who had been running quite large farms? Were they still around? Was there a problem with them?

GRIBBIN: The ones who had been bought out were gone, but in the area I was in, there were still some European families. They were skeptical that this whole settlement process would work. Subsequently in many instances they were proved wrong, in some places right. But the white Kenyans who stayed on, even in that era - we're talking now about the late 1960s, six years after independence - the ones that stayed had cast their lot in Kenya. They considered themselves Kenyans. Many of them held Kenyan passports. When I subsequently was a consul in Mombasa in the mid 1980s, many white Kenyans had retired to the coast. Kenya was their home. Those who really opposed black rule left early on.

Q: What was your impression of how the writ of the government was working or not at that point?

GRIBBIN: Tribalism was the bugaboo of Kenya at the time and it continues to be Kenya's key problem. The issue in the late sixties was whether the Kikuyu tribe, of which President Kenyatta was the chief, or the Luo tribe would predominate. I was in a Luo speaking area, which produced notable politicians such as Vice President Oginga Odinga and Tom Mboya. The Luos were fairly antagonistic towards the Kikuyus politically. It came to a head while I was there, when Tom Mboya was assassinated in Nairobi. I was out in Nyanza Province when this happened where Mboya was a local hero of enormous proportions. He loomed even larger by his martyrdom, so when Mboya's cortege came out to western Kenya, my two housemates and I joined another Peace Corps Volunteer at a nearby crossroads called Ahero to watch the funeral procession come through. The central government was very, very leery about the Luo reaction to the assassination, and so stationed a "general service unit," a paramilitary police unit in Ahero, the first Luo town in Nyanza. It was like pouring gas on fire. When the crowd started ululating and wailing and crying as the funeral cortege approached, the GSU troops opened up with tear gas and flailed away with truncheons. A melee ensued when the people tried to escape from the

Library of Congress

troops. Such emotionally driven violence was repeated throughout all of Nyanza. Mboya was finally laid to rest at his home on Rusinga Island in Lake Victoria.

Q: Were you making good contact with your counterparts on the water boards in other places?

GRIBBIN: We Peace Corps Volunteers lived in rural areas. There were a number of Kenyans around who were settlers or who were people important in local government or politics, including some MPs who had farms. So I got to know some of them. I think one of the most satisfactory things about my stint as a PCV was ensuring that the young men that worked closely with me were fully trained in my job. Subsequently three or four of them went on to take similar positions with the Ministry of Water Development, so it changed their lives for the better. They became professional water construction engineers.

Q: *Did you have any contact with the embassy?*

GRIBBIN: Only once. Ambassador MacIlvane came to visit and stayed at our house. Peace Corps volunteers in the Settlement Program were unusually well housed because the old European farmhouses were left in these areas. The houses were also taken over by the government and some were allocated to settlers, but since the government had the obligation to house Peace Corps volunteers, obviously it was the logical place to put us. We lived in these rambling old European farmhouses, most of which needed a great deal of care and attention, which we were unable to provide, but they were still rather spectacular when you consider the mud-walled, grass-roofed houses that many volunteers in Africa lived in. Anyway, Ambassador MacIlvane was on a tour of western Kenya and wanted to meet Peace Corps Volunteers, so we invited him over.

Q: By the way, when one thinks of Kenya, one thinks of happy valley and the British remittance people living there. This wasn't part of that era.

GRIBBIN: No. The Happy Valley era was prior to independence.

Library of Congress

Q: Were you seeing much effort between the Kikuyus and the Luo -

GRIBBIN: I didn't see much harmony in my area whatsoever. In fact, I saw more and more antagonism as the Luo organized a second party, the Kenyan People's Union. When President Kenyatta, for example, came to Kisumu, which was the largest city in Luo-Land, he was greeted very disrespectfully by the people, even during a formal hospital dedication there. His bodyguards responded with violence and a number of innocents were slaughtered. The incident became a very sore point in the Luo-Kikuyu relationship.

Q: What were you getting from your Kenyan counterparts about thMboya assassination?

GRIBBIN: The assumption among most of the rural Luos was that he had been killed by people in the government. Subsequently that turned out to have been the case.

Q: While you were in the Peace Corps in Kenya, what were you thinking about doing for the future?

GRIBBIN: I had no real idea for the future. The future might be Vietnam, since I was still only draft deferred. When we finished the Peace Corps, two of my housemates and a friend who lived in Ahero bought an old Land Rover that we fixed up and decided to drive to Europe. In order to do that, we sent our draft boards letters saying we were travelling. We had to tell them where we were. Since this was the year the lottery began, we went off not knowing what our fate would be. Subsequently, my three friends escaped via the lottery that year, but my draft board concluded that since I was incommunicado they would defer me from that lottery pool to the next one. Fortunately I drew high numbers both years and was not drafted.

Q: How would you go by Land Rover from Kenya to Europe?

GRIBBIN: We went across Uganda, what was then the Congo and across the Central African Republic. We had to stay out of southern Nigeria because the Biafran war was

Library of Congress

just over, so we went north to N'djamena, Chad. Then we crossed that little neck of the Cameroon into northern Nigeria, over to a town called Kano in northern Nigeria, and then directly north, right across Niger and across the Sahara to Algeria, then over the border into Morocco. We went to Marrakech and then up to Ceuta and across to Spain on a ferry, up to France and then across the channel to the UK.

Q: That was quite an odyssey.

GRIBBIN: It was a fun trip. It took about four and a half months.

Q: How did the Land Rover hold up?

GRIBBIN: We had one flat tire. We broke a gear, and we broke a half-shaft, but we had taken spares, and two of my colleagues were expert mechanics. The only real problem was with the transmission.

Q: So what did you do after the time you got out? Did you go homthen? It would be about, what, 1970?

GRIBBIN: Yes, just about Christmas, 1970. I went home.

Q: And then what?

GRIBBIN: I looked for a job. I found that as a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, I got preferential status with the federal government. The Department of Health Education and Welfare Office of Child Development in Atlanta was hiring, I knew someone who had just signed on there, and so I became a program manager for Head Start.

Q: Oh. What did that mean?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: It meant that we monitored the finances and the program development plans for various Head Start operations all over the South. There were about 20 people in the head office. We were essentially grant managers.

Q: Could you explain for the record what was Head Start?

GRIBBIN: Head Start was a federal government program designed to give poor children a head start in their academic life. The idea was to put them in kindergarten, which otherwise was not available because no public school in the South had kindergarten. Some programs had pre-school before kindergarten as well. The intent was to socialize these children and get them started on pre-school skills so they would, when they got to first grade, be as prepared for school as were their peers from more affluent backgrounds. I think Head Start has been one of the most successful U.S. Government programs ever undertaken.

Q: You were there from 1971 to when?

GRIBBIN: 1971.

Q: How was it being received at that time?

GRIBBIN: In most of Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia and South Carolina Head Start was seen as a civil rights program. It was seen as the federal government doing something for the blacks. In eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina and eastern Kentucky, however, it was deemed to be a federal program combating poverty in Appalachia where most of the clients were white. It was only in western Tennessee and western Kentucky and North Carolina and some larger cities where Head Start was seen as a program for poor people without a particular group designation. These perceptions created interesting problems. You'd be driving a GSA car in eastern Tennessee, and they might think you were a revenueur and shoot at you. If you were driving one in the delta of Mississippi, they might think you were a civil rights lawyer and shoot at you. We had to be

Library of Congress

very careful. The community groups that we dealt with in these various places were often - particularly in Mississippi - rather unique. Under one of Lyndon Johnson's great society programs community action organizations could be created to receive a wide variety of federal funds. Generally the appropriate community action organization was the grantee for Head Start. In most locales traditional community leaders ran these organizations. In Mississippi, however, Community Action Groups wanted nothing to do with civil rights, so in Mississippi the federal government had to create separate grant-receiving organizations, which were mostly black - all black - in order to fund head Start. It only took a while, before the traditional power structure, even in Mississippi, recognized that Head Start was the second largest employer in the county, behind public schools, and that the feds were providing real money. Since local merchants would rather have money spent in Greenville than in Memphis, for example, the power of the purse began to change attitudes towards these sorts of programs.

Q: Were you able to get pretty good staff, do you think, in the various places?

GRIBBIN: The quality of what was done on the ground varied enormously. Part of the idea of Head Start was to employ people who were otherwise unemployable - welfare mothers, for example. Welfare mothers loved children, but they did not have professional qualifications. But Head Start did lots of training. All programs were able to find people for the most important positions who held degrees in early childhood development. The combination of a core cadre of professionals and those with good intentions proved workable.

Q: I assume that the people you hired were pretty much from the locality.

GRIBBIN: That was part of the idea.

Q: Did you find yourself getting involved in local politics at all?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Well, there was a lot of local politics involved, particularly when people recognized that control of these programs was important. Part of our responsibility as grant managers was to keep an eye on this. One imbroglio that I was not involved in happened in Kentucky where there was even armed confrontation over control of one of the programs. A mediator had to go up, arrange a meeting at the courthouse where everyone had to check his gun upon arrival. I mean, there were some strong feelings about this. Obviously, the issue was who would control the money and the jobs. In contrast, I remember a little program in Louisville, Mississippi, south of Starkville, which was quite forward-looking. The whole community, white and black, had joined together in order to assure success.

Just as an aside, just to compare, Head Start in the southern region of the United States, from North Carolina and Kentucky south to Louisiana and Florida, had a budget in 1971 of about \$800 million. The Peace Corps' global budget in 1971 was about \$250 million.

Q: Wow. You did this for about a year, right?

GRIBBIN: Only about nine months.

Q: And then what?

GRIBBIN: I went to graduate school.

Q: Where?

GRIBBIN: I went to the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.

Q: SAIS.

GRIBBIN: SAIS.

Q: Were you ready to burst forth on the international scene or something?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: I had always seen the Head Start thing as an interim. I had planned to go back to school and get a masters in international affairs and look for a career in the global arena. I was especially interested in the Third World, and even more particularly in Africa. I had a sort of vague idea that maybe I would do something with AID or a similar development agency. I matriculated at SAIS in the fall of 1971.

Q: So you were there from 1971 to -

GRIBBIN: 1973. I was there for the two-year master's program.

Q: What was your concentration?

GRIBBIN: At SAIS you do three areas. Everyone had an obligatory area, which was economics. I focused more on the development side of economic issues. Most people chose an area specialty. I did Africa. My third concentration was international organizations. Essentially I oriented everything to Africa.

Q: Africa looms large or small - it waxes and wanes in sort of American interests. Where was it at that time?

GRIBBIN: Africa was pretty low on the totem pole. This was before South Africa became a rallying point. It looked like the white government of South Africa was going to be there forever. Similarly, it was also before the catastrophes of famines that swept across Africa later in the '70s. So Africa really attracted very little attention other than from the Tarzan or safari crowd.

Q: How did you find the African side of the education you were getting in SAIS?

GRIBBIN: I had good professor John McKay and Bob Lystead. Certainly literature was available in the library. Since I had just lived and traveled through a lot of Africa, I was quite interested in a range of subjects.

Library of Congress

Q: As you were moving into 1973, getting your master's, what were you thinking about?

GRIBBIN: I compiled a fairly decent record at SAIS. In fact, I won the Christian Herter award, a scholarship, which meant I achieved the highest grade point average. Because I had done that, Exxon, among others, recruited me for their international operations. However, I was still very altruistic, sort of still in a Peace Corps mode of thinking, and wasn't sure that I wanted to go into business. Jim Bishop, who was a Foreign Service officer doing a sabbatical year at SAIS, encouraged me to take the Foreign Service Exam. I had not realized when I went to SAIS that SAIS was designed as a feeder school for the Foreign Service by Dean Acheson, Christian Herter, and others in the late 1940s. The curriculum was aimed towards the exam, if you will. Most people did take the Foreign Service Exam. I took it and passed, but then wasn't sure I wanted to go into the State Department. I didn't know much about the State Department at all. I was thinking more in terms of development work, but Jim convinced me to go into the State Department. Since that was one of two offers on the table, that's the one I chose.

Q: You took an oral exam.

GRIBBIN: Right.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions or how that went?

GRIBBIN: It's been a long time. Q: Yes.

GRIBBIN: I think they asked me some fairly standard stuff. I think part of it was on international organizations, something having to do with the role of the UN. Since I had just taken a course in that, I was well prepared. They gave me some hypothetical situation involving balance of payments. Since I had just taken a course in that, I was well prepared. I think SAIS, in fact, did prepare me for the substance of what would be covered on the exam. I remember discussing some of my Peace Corps experience and my African travel

Library of Congress

during the interview, but it was a different sort of exam, I think, than the one given now. The current one tends to be more, I think, process rather than content oriented.

Q: Yes, and also they steer away often from one's experience. The whole idea is to keep the hands off, sort of an impersonal exam rather than going at you. Well, so you came into the Foreign Service.

GRIBBIN: Right.

Q: *Were you married at this time?*

GRIBBIN: I was married. I married during my last year of graduate school. My wife, Connie, had also been a Peace Corps volunteer. We met romantically on the shores on Lake Victoria watching the sunset on Thanksgiving Day.

Q: *What was her background?*

GRIBBIN: She's from rural Missouri, and she went to the University of Missouri. She wanted very much to get out of rural Missouri. She was a free thinker, so joined the Peace Corps to get away.

Q: There's nothing like in the United States, World War II and the Peace Corps to get people from the interior the hell out of the interior of the United States.

GRIBBIN: A lot of us come from very nice places to be from.

Q: Yes. It's been a great recruiting ground for the Foreign Service. Well, then, when you came in in 1973, can you characterize your A-100, your basic officer course?

GRIBBIN: Everybody was obviously very bright and very enthusiastic and looking forward very much to a new career. People weren't cut as much out of the same cloth as I thought they might be, and folks really had varying sorts of backgrounds and interests and

Library of Congress

enthusiasms. In fact, thinking back on that group and all the other subsequent people that I've run into in the Foreign Service, I think the only thing that Foreign Service officers have in common is that we test well. Beyond that, there seems not to be a lot of commonality. There's plenty of diversity in the service, and was even then.

Q: This comes across as I do this oral history, where people come from and their backgrounds. I mean, it's not the people to the manor born or anything like that. You get people from all over coming in for diverse reasons.

GRIBBIN: Anyway, I think A-100 was a good orientation to the Department and so forth. Then in those days they gave us a list of possible assignments. I very much wanted to go to a small French-speaking post in Africa while my colleagues were seeing visions of Paris and London. When our list came out, Bangui, Central African Republic, was on it. The assignment people were astonished to find out first that somebody wanted to go to Bangui, but second that he had already been there. I had gone through Bangui on my travels across Africa. So that was the assignment I got. Although I had studied French in graduate school, I was given additional French training before going to post.

Q: *Well, you went out to Bangui. You were there from 1974 -*

GRIBBIN: 1974-76.

Q: *Who was the ambassador then?*

GRIBBIN: Bill Dale, and then Tony Quainton.

Q: *Could you describe the situation in the Central African Republic?*

GRIBBIN: The Central African Republic sounds like a direction rather than a country, still today, but it was very small, very out-of-the-way, very out-of-the-mainstream, not only in terms of the rest of Africa but from the rest of the world. It certainly didn't register at all on the U.S. Government's scopes. The only thing that made the Central African

Library of Congress

Republic notorious at the time was its rather despotic ruler, Jean-B#del Bokassa, who later became emperor. But he was not the emperor in 1974; he was cher Papa, mar#chal and pr#sident # vie. In any case, he ran the country as his own personal fiefdom. It as a very poor place and quite thinly populated. Still today, it has very few people. Bangui was a pleasant little city situated on the banks of the Ubangi River, which is a vast river, one of the two great rivers of the Congo Basin. The climate was not so bad, although it was kind of humid. There were nice rains; and also a good dry season. Central Africans, those who were educated beyond secondary school often also had a Parisian educatiobut there weren't many of them. The elite lived pretty much in fear of the president, which was well merited, but beyond them, his reach did not really extend to the people. The average citizen considered the president to be good theater, which is what he was, but his actions had very little impact on them.

Q: The Central African Republic, is it a tribal unity or broken up?How was it?

GRIBBIN: There are three or four principal tribes in the CAR, but the president was from the Mbaka, which is a small tribe to the south. It was the group French explorers first met coming up the Ubangi, so the first mission stations were there. Consequently, the Mbaka were the first to be educated and "modernized." Bokassa was a relative of Barthelemy Boganda, who was the George Washington of the CAR, the founding father, who died just before independence in a plane crash. Bokassa himself had gone into the French Army because he didn't like school and had become a legitimate war hero. He served both in the Second World War and then in Indochina before he came back and was integrated into what was to become then the Central African Army. After Boganda died, Bokassa's cousin, named David Dacko, became president. Dacko was a fairly inept, ineffectual president. He was a very nice man, whom I later came to know quite well, but he was not a very effective president. There was some scheming in the military which Bokassa, who was the chief of staff, thought was aimed at him. So he quickly mounted his coup and ousted his cousin.

Library of Congress

Dacko was sent away to rusticate. Bokassa killed his military opponents and proclaimed himself president on New Year's Eve of 1965-66.

Q: What was your job at the embassy?

GRIBBIN: I was what they called in those days a FSOG - Foreign Service officer general. I was the vice-consul, the economic-commercial officer and partly a political officer. The only other Foreign Service officers at the embassy were the ambassador, the DCM, and the administrative officer - and one other political officer. Additionally we had two secretaries and a communicator. *Q: Who was the DCM?*

GRIBBIN: Jim Rosenthal, when I first got there, and then Bill Swing.

Q: What were our interests there?

GRIBBIN: Minimal. The missionary community numbered about a hundred. An American company was involved in the diamond production and export. We had a small AID program. Part of our interest was cold war related. Bokassa was firmly in the anti-Communist camp. He had relations with Taiwan and South Korea and South Vietnam. Although the CAR was a place where we had small interests, we had a small embassy to serve them.

Q: Did you have much in the way of contact with the neighbors? Did they make much of a difference, or not?

GRIBBIN: Well, among the neighbors that counted was Zaire. The town right across the river from Bangui was called Zongo, so it used to be "Zongo, Congo," and the "Zongo, Zaire." A good bit of commerce moved back and forth to northern Zaire. In contrast, there was hardly any contact at all with the northern portion of the Republic of Congo, which was impenetrable forest and swamp. The river route to Brazzaville, however, was a main trade link. Overland trade came from the Cameroon, which was the CAR's most vital partner.

Library of Congress

There was some commercattle on the hoof in exchange for lumbe- back and forth to Chad. There was almost no contact at all with the Sudan, which even then was engaged in civil war. Nonetheless, a Sudanese refugee population lived just inside the CAR border in the far east. The CAR was formally grouped with Chad, Cameroon, Congo, and Gabon in an economic community called the Union Douniere des Etats de la Afrique Centrale. The CAR's most important external partner was France.

Q: What did you do during the day?

GRIBBIN: I ran the USIS operation and was also the backup Peace Corps director, and so these varying tasks kept me going. I handled the small amount of consular business. I issued about 100 visas a year and a dozen passports, chiefly to resident American missionaries. I helped oversee the Ambassador's Self Help Program that sponsored small projects proposed by local communities. I traveled in conjunction with that and met local leaders. As mentioned I supervised the cultural center and its library. I wrote economic reports on the diamond industry, the timber industry and on the prospects for tourism. I also wrote the standard reports the Department required - balance of payments, economic trends, budget analysis, and so forth.

Q: Which were received with great interest.

GRIBBIN: Yes, I'm sure - somewhere. No, the day was full, as recall.

Q: It was very good training, too.

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. I was even the charg# at one point.

Q: Oh, my. I would have thought you would have to be with the USIS programs or the information act programs that one would be treading rather carefully because you had this volatile dictator and maybe the wrong message would come out or people would-

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Remember that we weren't selling democracy so strongly in those days, but we did have to be careful about how we promoted American values. We sponsored an English language club where people would come and try to speak English. We had a mixture of English and French language films in the collection. Frequently when television was desperate for something to air, they would call - often at the last minute - to borrow films to show on television that night. So we actually got to program television. One favorite film that people still remembered years afterwards was the 1956 NBA finals that we had in French. The t.v. station must have borrowed that a dozen times or more.

Q: One was hearing stories about Bokassa. What sort of things were you getting about him?

GRIBBIN: Bokassa was indeed a major figure and always good for a story. Those of us who lived in the CAR will never be lacking stories. One of my favorite ones involved an American astronaut who toured Africa. I don't remember his name right now, but he was a private citizen by then, and was involved in Evangelical work. Anyway, Bokassa was something of a self-proclaimed space nut, so when these visitors came to the CAR, he immediately offered them great hospitality. In fact, he took them to his private game park in the north. I believe Bill Swing was the charge# at the time. Bill went with them. But the rest of the embassy staff was invited to a state banquet, which would be on the top floor of the one hotel there in town. The top floor was a garden terrace about 7 or 8 stories up. Since Bokassa didn't often entertain, this was a big event. So we were all "convoked," which is the term they used, so those of us from the American Embassy, all the cabinet ministers and most of the senior military authorities showed up on time and were escorted up to the top of the hotel. Every 10 feet or so was a young soldier with an Uzi who had been there since about two that afternoon. But the guests of honor and the president didn't show up, and they didn't show up, and they didn't show up. Although we sat down, we were not given anything to drink. A band played music so loud that we couldn't talk to anybody. So we waited from about eight o'clock till after 11, when the presidential party finally returned from the game park and showed up at the banquet. By this time, of course, the tropical

Library of Congress

dew had settled, and we were soaking wet, even though it hadn't rained. I remember that I kept worrying about these kids with these Uzis because they would nod off. I hoped that no dream would awaken them and cause them to spray the crowd. In any case, that eventhe mix of enthusiasms and sheer self-centeredness - was very typical of Bokassa.

I met with him a few times while I was there. A group of American ranchers from Nevada were interested in developing a huge cattle ranch in the CAR. Essentially their deal was to provide the expertise whereas the CAR would provide the land and the financing. We're talking about something twice the size of Fairfax County. The government would obtain money from the World Bank. So essentially it was a no-lose deal, or a not-lose-much deal, for the American group, but the CAR would have to sign for all of the real obligations. The parties worked through this very, very carefully and came out with an agreement. I helped with translations and interpreted, in French, foBokassa and these men from Reno. Ultimately, the World Bank refused the deal. Although that was probably the right decision given the bank's criteria, it was certainly the wrong decision from the point of view of the Americans involved and the Central Africans. Frankly, I don't know whether the project would have worked or not, but it was very interesting being in close proximity to Bokassa during the discussions. Sometimes he would interact with the ranchers, then his attention would fade and he would start talking other business to one or two of his ministers. One of his pre-occupations at that time was a bridge that he wanted fixed. He harangued his minister of transport and finally instructed him, "Joseph, if you don't fix that bridge by tomorrow, you go to jail." Well, the bridge didn't get fixed; Joseph didn't go to jail that time, but that was typical of the way Bokassa governed.

Q: Did the Cold War intrude there? This is Kissinger seeineverything in light of the East versus the West and all that.

GRIBBIN: Not really. The Russians were present but not a factor. To mark the anniversary of the end of WWII I remember the Soviets showed a movie which recounted how the Russians liberated Yugoslavia. However, the Yugoslav embassy retaliated by showing a

Library of Congress

movie of how the Yugoslavs liberated Yugoslavia. The Russians escalated by announcing another movie, which most everyone boycotted. A cold war issue that did surface was the diplomatic playoff between Taiwan and Red China. The Central African government wanted money, and both Chinese governments were willing to play. Over the course of time there were several flip-flops in local representation as one or the other would up the ante, if you will, in order to pre-empt the other.

Q: Did Libya get involved at that time?

GRIBBIN: Libya did establish contact, mostly directly between Qaddafi and Bokassa. After I left Bokassa, like Bongo in Gabon, became a Muslim. I forget his Islamic name, but he was as equally faithless to Islamic doctrine as he was to Christianity.

Q: I have Tony Quainton talking about that.

GRIBBIN: Right.

Q: Did that happen while you were there?

GRIBBIN: I think that it happened just after I left.

Q: Was there a feeling that Bokassa carried much weight around there other than with the oddballs like Qadhafi?

GRIBBIN: I don't think he carried much weight with Qadhafi. No, Bokassa's fellow traveler in the area was Mobutu, who lived right across the river. Mobutu was essentially Central African in all but name. Although he was not a tribal brother of Bokassa, he was kin to many Yakoma people of the CAR. Mobutu comes from Gbadolite, which is right on the northern border of Zaire.

Q: Was he up there quite often?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. Mobutu spent a lot of the time in Gbadolite. One of the things, as a junior officer, I used to do - the U.S. had more contact with Mobutu than we did with other African leader Washington or embassy Kinshasa would try to contact Mobutu when he was in Gbadolite. Washington would send messages to Bangui. Then I would take the message out to Mobutu's C-130 aircraft, which was on the tarmac in Bangui but which had a good radio. His crew would radio the message over to Mobutu. At some point I would be called to pick up a reply. Mobutu always thought of his neighboring chiefs of state as little brothers. He could be very patronizing, even to Bokassa.

Bokassa and Amin also struck up a friendship, being of like kind. Ifact, Amin came to visit once.

Q: From Uganda, Idi Amin.

GRIBBIN: Yes. He came to visit once, and although there had been no announcement to that effect, we knew he was coming because Ugandan flags went up on trees around town. The diplomatic corps was convoked to the airport. Ambassador Quainton was there by then, but Tony did not want to go greet Idi Amin. So, he sent me. I waited around the airport for several hours, but Amin didn't come. We were sent home without explanation. Then about two weeks later, all the flags blossomed again, and we were convoked again to the airport, and again I was sent to greet Amin. Tony's ploy for the U.S. ambassador not be there didn't necessarily work, since the chief of protocol introduced me as the American ambassador. Because I was the only obvious English-speaking person in the queue - I was way down at the end - Amin stopped to chat. Bokassa and Amin formed sort of a community of outcasts, if you will.

It turned out that on the day Amin did not come he sent a personal flowery message. In his best idiosyncratic English, he wrote something like, "Dear Brother, I am very pleased to accept your kind invitation to visit" on such and such, but then went on to provide some excuse as to why he wasn't coming. However, the person who translated the message

Library of Congress

for Bokassa missed the fact that Amin was declining rather than accepting. The translator spent a couple of months in jail for that omission.

Q: What was social life like for you and your wife?

GRIBBIN: Bangui was a very small place, small in the American community sense, and small in the diplomatic sense. Central Africans were very leery of contact with foreign missions - in fact, if we wanted to invite somebody, invitations had to be submitted through protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Generally, they weren't passed along and certainly weren't passed along in any timely fashion. So aside from the few official functions that the ambassador hosted such as the Fourth of July or when an important visitor came - social contact with Central Africans was constrained.

Since I ran the USIS center, I established contacts there. I also met many folks when I traveled upcountry. But in town itself there wasn't a very active social circuit. Connie and I were newlyweds, and weren't looking for a terribly active social life. We played tennis, swam and traveled about.

Q: How about the French? Were the French sort of looking on the Americans as intruding on their -

GRIBBIN: There were two kinds of French. Long term French residents, most in business or plantations, were introspective and tied up in their own social circles. I got to know some of them my second time around, but not really my first time around. There was also the French official diplomatic community - young French diplomats like ourselves, cooperants and Peace Corps like *militaires* - and in fact we got to know some of these people quite well. I remember the French ambassador as being fairly snooty. Maybe that was because I was young and he was snooty towards young people. But there was certainly the sense that the CAR was their place and they called the shots. As far as the U.S. was concerned, that was true. We didn't want to call the shots. We didn't want to cough up the couple of million dollars or more that would be necessary to do that. Consequently, we Americans

Library of Congress

felt little tension. I've always found that tension between America and France is more a phenomena that one finds outside than inside. Oftentimes it's something that the host country will try to encourage, because it wants alternatives to France. Bokassa, however, was firmly in the French camp and did not do that.

Q: Were there French troops nearby? At that point I imagine there were French troops in Chad, weren't there?

GRIBBIN: There were French troops in the Central African Republic off and on. In 1974 the base at Bouar had just been closed, so in this era there was only a small contingent in Bangui. The bulk of the French Central Africa force was in Chad.

Q: Was there the general feeling that if struggle brewed, a nasty coup or something like that, that probably the French would send some troops in?

GRIBBIN: Certainly.

Q: Because that had been the pattern for some time.

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes. There were a couple of coup attempts while I was there, including a very notorious one in February of 1976, which was led by the son-in-law of Bokassa who was married to the false Martine. That's another long story, and Tony probably tells it. But the Martines are interesting because of this connection.

Q: I don't know.

GRIBBIN: When Bokassa was a serviceman in the French military in Indochina, he fathered a child whose name was Martine, whom he left behind. He abandoned the child and her mother. But after Bokassa became president, at some point, he reflected upon his life, and he loved children - he had 28 or 29 - and he said, "Well, you know, we really ought to find Martine." So he asked the French government to help him find Martine.

Library of Congress

Subsequently, they canvassed Vietnam, which was fracturing in the early 1970s as the Vietnam war was drawing to a close.

Anyhow French representatives searched and they found a girl who was obviously of a mixed parentage whose name was Martine. She seemed to fit the bill, so they flew her to the Central African Republic. Bokassa turned out the diplomatic corps for a regal reception and she was much feted by the nation. So Martine was welcomed into Bokassa's family. A couple of months later, the French turned up another girl, also metisse, also about 18, who really was Martine the daughter of Bokassa. Her mother had the documentation to substantiate that claim. The French faced potential embarrassment and also some peril. How could they tell Bokassa they had sent the wrong girl? But they decided that he would take it well, and he did. He provided the same warm welcome for Martine. The girls became known as the vraie Martine and the fausse Martine. Bokassa subsequently married both of them off. The vraie Martine to a young doctor and the false Martine to a young military officer. The military officer's name was Fidèle Obrou, and Obrou was involved, the ringleader, if you will, of the plot in 1976 to assassinate Bokassa. I don't know what his motives were. He was well connected and his future would seem to be assured. In any case, Obrou was involved in a plot to assassinate Bokassa at the airport by throwing hand grenades at him and shooting him and so forth. The plot failed principally because the pin on the hand grenade thrown at Bokassa was not pulled. Bokassa, being an old soldier, stood there with his cane and looked down at the hand grenade right between his legs. He noticed that the pin was still in it, so it didn't bother him. He started hollering for his guards to retaliate. Ultimately, Obrou was captured and the story ended very tragically. He was killed, of course. But vengeance was also wreaked on the new baby of the false Martine. The husband of the vraie Martine was a doctor who was reportedly instructed by Bokassa to kill the child, which he did. After Bokassa was overthrown years later the doctor was convicted of that crime. Meanwhile the false Martine disappeared. She was probably killed.

Library of Congress

Q: I assume that any gathering with Bokassa was treated with certain amount of care.

GRIBBIN: Well, Bokassa didn't gather much. He was a very aloof president. He liked the people to know about him, but he didn't really care particularly about them. He didn't go to functions. He didn't go to gatherings. He only turned out for the national day parade once a year, which was a very big, fun event. All the soldiers, many folkloric groups, and thousands of schoolchildren would march. It was a diversion from everyday life. Aside from that Bokassa didn't do public events.

Q: Well, then, by 1976 you were ready to depart. What were you looking for, and what happened?

GRIBBIN: In 1976, I came back to Washington and was assigned to the economic course.

Q: The six-month course?

GRIBBIN: It seemed longer than that. I guess you're right. started in the summer and went to January, yes.

Q: This was the heyday, wasn't it? I mean, it was supposed to be very good.

GRIBBIN: It was the hardest academic work I've ever done because there was so much of it.

Q: Had your time in SAIS gotten you ready for it?

GRIBBIN: I was quite well prepared for some of the material, but the problem was you just had to keep up. We worked through heavy tomes on statistics and development theory and things like that. And if you missed a day's worth of lectures, you would be lost.

Q: Did they have an assignment in mind for you?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: No. And since I came out mid-cycle, I went to the African Bureau and became, in fact, the Desk officer for the Central African Republic, Rwanda, and Burundi.

Q: You did that, when, from 1977 to 1979?

GRIBBIN: 1979.

Q: Let's finish up with the Central African Republic.

GRIBBIN: Well, that assignment was an interesting one, because in my capacity as the Desk officer, I went back and was the official U.S. State Department representative to the coronation. Remember that Bokassa decided to crown himself, over the objections of virtually everyone, but he decided to do it anyway. He did it in December 1977 and, of course, invited every high dignitary including the President of the United States - plus all the royalty they could round up. There was no way President Carter would go. There was a brief discussion as to whether the U.S. Government should send an official delegation, but that was quickly nixed. It was decided, however, that we should send a coronation gift, therefore some one should deliver it. The AF Bureau finessed this a bit so that that somebody would also look as if the U.S. had had accepted the invitation. I got the assignment. Ambassador Quainton was elevated to be the President's representative for the event and I represented the State Department and carried the gift. Grant Smith, the DCM in Bangui, completed the group. So the three of us were the official delegates to the coronation.

Q: What was the gift?

GRIBBIN: The gift was a beautiful Steuben glass etching of a clipper ship. When I became the ambassador in Bangui some years later, I found several coronation gifts displayed here and there around the palace. I kept my eye out for the clipper ship, but never spotted it.

Library of Congress

Q: How was the coronation treated? There must have been a lot of giggles or something.

GRIBBIN: Initially the coronation was an enormous joke for the world's media, but then those who went to cover it began to treat it very seriously. Many journalists went so it became a media zoo. The trappings of the coronation were elaborate. Carriages, costumes and elaborate gowns were fabricated in France. Horses were imported. Music was commissioned. A French military band came out to perform. Some of the world's royalty did attend. I met the pretender to the throne of Georgia, King Zog of Albania and several other dispossessed Europeans. Legitimate African royalty from Ethiopia and Swaziland also attended. So there were some connections to other African empires. The French Government was represented by the minister of cooperation, Robert Galley. The French government picked up most of the bill, which I estimated at 40 million dollars. The French government paid a huge chunk of that. December 4, 1977 was swelteringly hot, and the event, of course, started late. The coronation took place inside the new Yugoslav built basketball center - which Bokassa never let be used for sports afterwards. Following was a procession to the cathedral, where Bokassa being on the outs with the church at the time, was not permitted to receive communion. That evening we attended a huge outdoor banquet. It rained, of course, just before the banquet started, so everything was soaking wet. The coronation concluded the next day with an eight-hour parade. It was fun. Although it was very entertaining to be there, there was the great incongruity of doing this in one of the poorest countries of the world - this stupid lavishness, if you will.

Q: Was there a feeling at that point that Bokassa was getting more difficult?

GRIBBIN: Bokassa never played with a full deck, but he was a very sly kind of a person. For example, he convinced skeptics to support the coronation by floating the idea that he had so fixated himself on this idea of grandeur that he would reign rather than rule and that real power would be given to the prime minister. Observers concluded that this would remove Bokassa from the everyday non-working of the government. He and his court would posture around in his imperial residence located in his home village of Baringo.

Library of Congress

Well, people who thought that Bokassa would really turn loose the reins of power that he had so thoroughly personalized over the years were badly mistaken. For example, Bokassa personally approved the assignments of each Peace Corps volunteer. I don't think he ever changed any of the Peace Corps assignments, but volunteers couldn't go to post until he signed off on the list. And the government couldn't provide transportation to move volunteers to their sites until he approved it.

Q: Was Bokassa a cannibal?

GRIBBIN: There was a real history of cannibalism in the Congo Basin in previous times, so the idea of it was not as outlandish even though it might be as repugnant to Central Africans as it is to us. Coupled with that was the phenomenon of ritual cannibalism that is not unknown in a lot of societies. The worst simile is perhaps Holy Communion.

Many Africans traditionally believed that if you killed somebody and took a bite of his liver or his heart, you took his power. Bokassa was not unaware of the aura that magic played in his hold on power. If people felt he had supernatural powers, that he could and would seize other people's life force, then he would in fact have more power. So there were always rumors of cannibalism going on. After Bokassa was ousted, there were reports that human remains were found in the freezer at his river house. I don't know what was real or what was rumor.

Q: But when you were there dealing with the CAR in Washington, wathere, outside of rumors, any particular interest in what was going on?

GRIBBIN: The coronation did draw a lot of attention. There was also an incident involving Michael Goldsmith, an AP reporter that Bokassa beat up. It turned out that Michael was a relative of Lady Bird Johnson's. Mrs. Johnson thru Liz Carpenter pressed the desk officer - that is, me - to get Michael out of prison. The incident arose when Bokassa concluded that Goldsmith was not properly respectful or subservient during an interview. Bokassa got mad and thumped Goldsmith on the head with his heavy cane. Bokassa's thugs then

Library of Congress

finished the beating and threw Goldsmith in jail. Bokassa's rationalas explained to our then Ambassador Goodie Cooke - was really that Goldsmith was not respectful enough. This was Bokassa's problem all along. He decided what was respectful or not. Any journalist worth his salt reporting on Bokassa would obviously not be respectful enough.

Q: Absolutely.

GRIBBIN: In any case, Bokassa beat up Goldsmith with his walking stick and his goons did a better job afterwards. Nonetheless, they were embarrassed about the affair and didn't know exactly what to do next. After several face saving days "to investigate," Goldsmith was released and even embraced by Bokassa in a departure interview. Ms. Carpenter told me that Laby Bird said that Lyndon would have welcomed the opportunity to crack a few journalists over the head. A final incident that led to Bokassa's downfall was his involvement in beating children which happened in 1979.

Q: Was that while you were on the Desk?

GRIBBIN: No, I had left the Desk.

Q: While you were there, with Goldsmith, for example, what did yodo?

GRIBBIN: From the desk in Washington, I explained the peculiar situation in the CAR to officials in the Department, plus we responded to an unusuafor us - number of requests for information. His run-in with the Emperor was bizarre, titillating and good copy. I drafted talking points for d#marches that were passed on to the ambassador in the field. And of course the AF front office called in the ambassador here for a round of d#marches as well. Obviously Goldsmith's being part of the international press corps raised a certain amount of mutual protection concerns on the part of other members of the corps. It all led to Goldsmith's release

Q: Did we try to use the French at all?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: In any case, we kept them advised of the situation.

Q: Well, then, turning to Rwanda-Burundi, what was the situation at this time? This is 1977-79.

GRIBBIN: They were both peaceful, little, very much out-of-the-way places without notorious leadership. Even so Burundi had suffered through what they called the "Events of 1972," which was a fairly large-scale ethnic massacre in which the Tutsi army killed 100,000 educated Hutus. That was a very hot issue in 1972 and 1973, but by the time of my tenure on the Desk, however atrocious the history, the government of that era had been replaced. Although Burundi remained firmly under control of the Tutsi minority, it was looking more progressive, trying to accomplish more nation-building, and so was a fairly peaceful place.

Rwanda too was very peaceful. It had conservative Hutu leadership. There didn't seem to be any major internal difficulties. President Habyarimana appeared to be a reasonable and effective leader. The U.S. had recently begun a small but growing AID program.

Q: Did gorillas appear on your...

GRIBBIN: Dian Fossey was in Rwanda at the time, and if anyone knew of Rwanda before the genocide, it was because of Dian. She brought useful publicity to the country. Dian, whom I met during my tenure on the Desk and got to know later on when I was posted out there, was a mercurial person herself, but by and large the attention she brought to Rwanda was favorable.

Q: What sort of ambassadors did we have in Rwanda and Burundi at that time?

GRIBBIN: Let's see, Bob Fritts and Frank Crigler were the ambassadors in Rwanda. David Mark followed by Tom Corcoran were in Burundi. I guess Frank was in Kigali most of the time I was on the desk.

Library of Congress

Q: So you didn't have what amounted to the care and feeding of political ambassador, which can absorb the Desk officer's time somewhat.

GRIBBIN: No, but I had three ambassadors, and I often backstopped Chad, Cameroon, and Congo, so there was always some ambassador somewhere who was not completely happy, and it was up to the Desk officer to straighten things out. The way the Department was organized, more so in those days, the channel to the Department was through the Desk officer. Nowadays, with the growth of functional bureaus, there are other points of contact, but in those days everything channeled through the Desk officer. So if the Desk officer wasn't on his or her toes, then things didn't always work. Rwanda, Burundi and the Central African Republic weren't at the top of anybody's priority list, so even if I could draw somebody's attention to an issue, I wouldn't always get the attention desired.

Q: This was during the Carter period. Was human rights an issue?

GRIBBIN: Human rights came to the fore. That was one of the interests that led to more and more focus, and ultimately action aimed at Bokassa. We wrote human rights reports on Rwanda and Burundi. Essentially Rwanda came off with a pretty good bill of health. Burundi was criticized for minority rule. Human rights reports of this era did not look so much at the democracy angle as they do now; instead we focused more on how people were treated, and neither of those countries was particularly abusive.

Q: And the Central African Republic? It must have been a runninsore, wasn't it?

GRIBBIN: We didn't have much in the way of leverage with the Central African Empire, so we could write about it and complain about it, but there was little that we could do to rectify the problems.

Q: I think this might be a good place to stop. I'd like to put at the end of this where we were so we can pick it up easily next time. So we're really at 1979. Where did you go?

Library of Congress

This is the 19th of July, 2000. Bob, in 1979, whither?

GRIBBIN: In 1979 I went out to be the DCM in Kigali, Rwanda.

Q: All right, I forget my Rwanda-Burundi. Which is north and which is south?

GRIBBIN: Rwanda is to the north. Burundi is the southern one.

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

GRIBBIN: From 1979 to 1981 this time.

Q: How did the job come about?

GRIBBIN: I was the Desk officer for Rwanda, Burundi, and the Central African Republic. Frank Crigler was the ambassador in Kigali and looking for a DCM. He suggested that I put in for it. I did, and was selected. Frank was leaving, though, and in fact I did not overlap with him at all.

Q: You were there from 1979 to 1981. Well, you arrived, then, moror less charg#.

GRIBBIN: When I arrived Larry Lesser was the charg#. Frank had left the week before, and Larry was leaving that week, and so we had a very quick handover. Bob Melone, who was to come out as ambassador the next month, got delayed by a medical problem of some sort, and didn't show up for another four months, so I spent my first four months as charg#.

Q: 1979 - what was the situation in Rwanda?

GRIBBIN: It was very interesting for me to go from the desk to Rwanda. Subsequently, as this chronology progresses, I went back as ambassador after the genocide. Rwanda

Library of Congress

in 1979 was under a Hutu majority government. It was ruled by an army general named Juvenal Habyarimana, who was a fairly conservative, reasonable man. The government was stable. There weren't any internal political tensions to speak of, or at least any that were outwardly or easily visible. A quota system was in effect, wherein the Tutsis, who were 15 percent of the population, got about 10 percent of the places in higher school, about 10 percent of the jobs in government and so forth. There was lingering fear or concern about Tutsi arrogance on the part of the Hutu majority, but nonetheless, there were a couple of Tutsi ministers. There were even some Tutsis in the army.

Quiet discontent, expressed cautiously by both sides, was ever present. Embassies like ours were criticized by some people in government, usually behind our backs, to the effect that we employed more Tutsis than the percentages permitted. Embassies and other foreign entities were the only organizations that weren't bound by quotas, so we could employ people on the basis of qualifications alone. We had a mixed staff ethnically including several excellent Tutsi employees.

Q: This often is the way that American embassies all over the world operate. We often pick up a staff that is not representative of the workforce, one case in point being, we usually employ far more women than most other places in positions that would be held by men within the country.

GRIBBIN: That's correct. But back to an overall look at the government, Rwanda had good relations with its neighbors. Habyarimana had particularly close ties with Mobutu, who in the late 1970s was an important political force in the region. Mobutu was to lose some of that stature in the years to come. Relations with Burundi were correct. Burundi was ruled by a Tutsi government throughout this whole period, but then relations with Uganda and Tanzania and Kenya were proper. They were English-speaking and rather distant in terms of political relationships. Zaire was the most important friend and neighbor, and of course, Belgium was the dominant international power present in Kigali.

Library of Congress

Q: As we saw it when you were there in 1979, what was the role of Belgium? One always thinks of how they pulled out of the Congo in the early 1960s without having done anything. Was Belgian rule a little more benign?

GRIBBIN: Historically, Belgian rule in Rwanda was more indirect. Rwanda was never a colony, as such, of Belgium, but was a mandate under the League of Nations and then a trust territory under the United Nations, so Belgium had to answer to the United Nations Trusteeship Council for its stewardship of Rwanda. Belgium had not carefully nurtured Rwanda. It let local institutions run the country, and the Church was the most important local institution. The traditional Tutsi king, the mwami was in power up until 1959, when the Belgians did a flip-flop in Rwanda, compared to Burundi, when it sponsored a referendum, a popular election, in which political power shifted to the Hutu majority. The Belgian governor of Rwanda made this happen. This was in contrast to the situation in Burundi, where the mwami assumed power as the head of state in the independent nation. So you had this disruption or social revolution as it was called in 1959 when the party headed by Gr#goire Kayibanda came to power. His political party was called Palipehutu, which means "up with the Hutus." Obviously, up with one group meant down with the other. Essentially, the change of ethnic power in Rwanda was a continuation of politics started in Rwanda earlier under the Belgian administration and under the Catholic Church and a reflection of inflamed and politicized ethnic divisions.

The rallying cry that Kayibanda used and that Habyarimana used was to be anti-Tutsi. If either had a political problem with so-and-so inside the party, it could be papered over by hollering "Let's watch out for the Tutsis, they're sneaking back in." Part of the seeds of the genocide, of course, were laid at this time in 1959. Election turmoil led to "hut burning," where Tutsis were burnt out of their houses on the hillsides and persecuted. Because of this, maybe as many as 300,000 to half a million Tutsis fled Rwanda in 1959 and 1960 and took refuge, some in Burundi because it was Tutsi-ruled and French-speaking, others in Zaire because it was French-speaking, but many from the eastern part of the country

Library of Congress

went to Uganda where they stayed in refugee camps for the rest of their lives. Their descendants became the core group that returned in 1990 and ultimately took over the government after the genocide.

Q: When you arrived there in 1979, you had been the Desk officer so you didn't need instructions. Were we carefully taking the Tutsi-Hutu temperature all the time in both places, or was it sort of considered, well, that's pass# or something?

GRIBBIN: We were much more concerned with the Hutu-Tutsi tensions in Burundi because in Burundi in 1972 there had been this massacre of 100,000 Hutu. Essentially the Hutu elite were wiped out by the Tutsi military in Burundi in 1972. Therefore, we felt that Burundi was much more volatile and that its Tutsi government would be quite prepared to do anything to stay in power. In Rwanda it looked like any election would bring a Hutu government to power. Hutus had 85 percent of the people, and since votes in Africa closely follow ethnic and tribal lines, they would get 85 percent of the vote. We hoped to see greater respect for the minority, but there wasn't the obvious threat of ethnic violence in Rwanda. Habyarimana came power in 1973 and put a stop to some of the virulent anti-Tutsi sentiment that was found among Kayibanda's partisans.

Q: *And the Rwandan military, was that pretty solidly Hutu?*

GRIBBIN: It was pretty solidly Hutu - there were some Tutsis in it - but more importantly it was pretty solidly pro-Habyarimana Hutu. The Hutus were also divided in Rwanda between the central/southerners, which were Kayibanda and his supporters, and the northerners, who were Habyarimana's kith and kin. In fact, by the time of the genocide, the army was almost 90 percent from two or three of Rwanda's 147 communes. Q: This is the genocide we're talking about in the 1990's.

GRIBBIN: 1994.

Q: *Well, at that point, when you arrived, what were our interests iRwanda?*

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: They were fairly minimal. We had one or two dozen American residents, one American investor in the tea business. We had Dian Fossey, the gorilla lady, who was studying mountain gorillas, and she attracted quite a bit of attention. In fact, if one mentioned Rwanda in the 1970s, most people would say, "Oh, Dian Fossey and gorillas." Rwanda was a stable little country in what was still a turbulent part of the world. Zaire had only recently coalesced into a more stable entity. Burundi was chaotic. Uganda, of course, was in flames in the 1970s. Tanzania was still undergoing its openly unsuccessful experiment in Ujama or socialism, and so Rwanda was there all by itself. We were interested in helping it stay stable. We had a very small assistance program. We started with an even smaller military assistance program, which mostly consisted of Caterpillar tractors. That was pretty much it.

Q: What was the role of the Belgians at that time?

GRIBBIN: The Belgians were still the colonial power. They provided the greatest amount of military assistance. They provided the training and support for the army and support for the university. They had quite an extensive range of developmental and governmental interest in the country, and there were a number of Belgian citizens there, not only in the private sector but also as priests and nuns throughout the country in the school system.

Q: How about the Catholic Church? What sort of influence did it have?

GRIBBIN: Outside of government, the Church was by far the most powerful institution in the country, and again when you go back and look at the roots of genocide, which happened later, and the roots of ethnic division, the Catholic Church had a certain responsibility for fostering that, even though it was mostly unintentional - the reason being that when they first got there, the missionaries were first attracted to the ruling elite, who were the Tutsis. When schools began, missionaries enrolled the sons of the aristocrats - the daughters, of course, didn't go - the sons of the aristocrats into school. Consequently they became the educated ones who went into the administration or went into private

Library of Congress

sector jobs as the economy modernized in the '20s and '30s and '40s. Thus the Tutsis had a monopoly, if you will, on education. Early on, racial theories were prevalent in European society, and one of the Belgian missionaries, one of the early bishops, in fact, decided that the Tutsis were descendants of Cain. He judged they were more European in outlook and culture and looks, and they went back in history differently racially than the “sons of Ham.” The bishop fostered division based on European racial theory that really was not applicable to the people of the area. But it was accepted, though, within the church. In the Catholic Church in Rwanda, most of the missionaries, but not all, were from Belgium, but those that were from Belgium reflected the political, linguistic and religious divisions of Belgium. Remember, Belgium is a tribal society itself.

Q: The Walloons and so forth.

GRIBBIN: In the '50s, finally, a number of social democrats who were Flemish fathers rebelled. They concluded, “We are the oppressed in Belgium. We need to help the oppressed in Rwanda, and the oppressed in Rwanda are the Hutus.” So they promoted Hutu education. Always in Rwanda were these complicating reflections of Belgian society. Every Belgian ambassador, for example, if he were Walloon, he had a Flemish DCM and vice-versa.

Q: Were you getting any reflections of Tanzania? Nyerere was doing his thing, which turned out to be really as close to a social and economic disaster as you can have, taking a prosperous country and playing around with it. You were involved, I guess, or certainly around, weren't you?

Had you seen any reflections of what was happening in Tanzania iRwanda?

GRIBBIN: There weren't many connections across that border. The part of Tanzania that borders Rwanda was virtually empty, and there was very little cross-fertilization of ideas.

Library of Congress

The problem with Tanzania when I was there was that it was involved in the war to oust Idi Amin, so there was a Tanzanian army in Uganda.

Q: Well, obviously, at that time we had no diplomatic mission iUganda.

GRIBBIN: That's correct.

Q: We sort of had to slip out of there very quietly, get the hell out before Idi Amin is considered sort of a crazy man. But were we doing anything to sort of monitor what the Tutsi refugees and all were doing in Uganda?

GRIBBIN: In the 1970s? No.

Q: That turned out to be a major source of coming back and -

GRIBBIN: Oh, it did, but once we got back into Uganda in 1984 or 85 - I'm not sure when we went back - but when Museveni took power in 1986, it became obvious as he came to power in Uganda that he was a loyal Ugandan. Remember that he had gone to the bush with 26 colleagues, and among these 26 colleagues were half a dozen or more Rwandans from the refugee camps in the south who became key people in his effort to take power in Uganda. Then once he did get power, they remained central players in the Ugandan military. However, once the U.S. was back in Uganda, the embassy in Kampala did monitor the refugee problem in southern Uganda. However, it was not an issue that we thought about much when I was in Rwanda in 1979 and 1980.

Q: 1979-81, when you were there, we saw the takeover of our embassy in Teheran, the attack and burning of our embassy in Islamabad, and other things. Were world events, terrorists, or anything else, reflected down where you were?

GRIBBIN: We were very much out of the mainstream. I remember once in February our telecommunications went down, and we didn't get a telegram for a month. And we probably didn't miss not having telegrams for a month. International mail took two to three

Library of Congress

weeks. The telephone didn't work externally except under very unusual circumstances. Of course, there were no satellite telephones or Internet or anything like that. So we were fairly isolated. We listened to the BBC and the Voice of America. In Rwanda itself, there was no newspaper. The radio was government controlled. There was no television at all. So we were really fairly isolated, and Rwandans liked it that way. They were not an outward-looking society. They were a mountain people. They were an inward-looking society. The language that everybody spoke was Kinyarwanda. The language of the educated people was French. Virtually no one spoke English, and only a few spoke Swahili. So it was a very isolated, inward-looking place.

Q: Did you find yourself occupied with Dian Fossey a lot?

GRIBBIN: Yes, I did. In fact, before I went out to Rwanda I had several sessions with leaders of the National Geographic Society, which was her sponsor. They felt that Dian had been doing gorilla research for, I think, about 10 years at that time. She had copious notes. She lived high on a mountain in a camp called Karisoke, which was about 10,000 feet in altitude. Dian smoked several packs of cigarettes a day. She developed emphysema. She always had been a somewhat difficult person to work with. She had very strong opinions about how things should be done, and she developed very strong opinions about people. .

The National Geographic thought it was time for Dian to come home, first of all, to put all of her notes into usable form so what she knew about gorillas could be known by the world, by the research community. She could write a book, organize her notes, and regain her health. The assignment given to me by the National Geographic Society was to convince Dian to do this. She didn't want to. She didn't want to leave her gorilla research group. She felt that they would be subverted by other researchers or killed by poachers or destroyed by human visitation. She firmly believed her mission was not only to learn about gorillas but also to save them from extinction. Some of Dian's tactics in that regard were counterproductive. In more than one case she took the law into her own hands. She

Library of Congress

apprehended poachers and had them beaten or confined. In once case, she kidnaped a poacher's children in order to get him to stop poaching. She skated very thinly on the law, and would irritate Rwandan officialdom to no end. In a way it became almost a race to see if we could convince Dian to leave before the Rwandans threw her out. If they threw her out, that would mean she couldn't come back or that coming back would be very difficult.

Ultimately the strength of all these arguments prevailed, and we convinced Dian to go home to the U.S. She went to Cornell where she wrote a book, *Gorillas in the Mist*, left all her notes in the library and regained her health. I had thought and hoped that this would be a process that would take several years. But Dian only stayed away for about 10 months. She came back. Meanwhile, some changes had been made in the gorilla protection mechanisms. The responsibility to protect gorillas was vested in the park authorities. Donors provided them the wherewithal - training, uniforms, guns, radios, etc. - to do that. Dian's research groups, as they were called, were safeguarded for her use and the use of her students, but other groups were habituated for tourists to visit. A consortium of U.S. conservation organizations sponsored a program to convince the villagers around the park of the monetary value of the gorillas to them. This was one of the first programs for conservation education and revenue sharing designed so that people would see gorillas as assets rather than as trophies or liabilities.

Q: How did she take to this new regime when she came back?

GRIBBIN: Dian was very irritated at it and at me for having been part of it. However, once she went back to her camp and resumed her work with "her" gorillas, she had some contact with researchers and other people who were involved in the changes. She gradually settled in. In fact, she began to actively cooperate with the conservationist who directed the anti-poaching operation. However, I don't think she ever spoke to several of the researchers who, she felt, even though they had not destroyed her work, had subverted it.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you get involved at all, I mean, were there American Protestant missionaries spilling over from Zaire into Rwanda, and then you had your Catholic Church doing its thing? I wonder if you got involved in any of that.

GRIBBIN: We had only a few American missionaries in Rwanda and most of them were Seventh Day Adventists or Methodists. Other English-speaking missionaries were British Anglican missionaries. We did provide the sorts of support that one would normally provide to missionaries, and we used to visit them. Missionaries in Rwanda, as was true in my other African posts, were always good sources for self-help projects. Through the ambassador's self-help fund the embassy would make a couple of thousand dollars available for putting a roof on a maternity unit or digging a well or whatever a local community wanted to do. Missionaries often proposed and supervised such projects. We knew the money would be spent for the designated purpose and that the project would be completed. I remember visiting missionaries at hospitals and schools around the country during this period of time.

Rwanda hosted a small Peace Corps program, and I was the Peace Corps director as well as being the DCM. Technically we were adjunct to Peace Corps Zaire. Zaire had several hundred volunteers, and we had five, all of whom were initially assigned to be English professors at the university, where the U.S. Government had posted two Fulbright professors. Together they comprised the English faculty at the university. Under my direction, we branched out a little. I shifted one PCV into a maternal health job and recruited another for an environmental education program that was being put together up around the Parc des Volcans concerning the gorillas. Undoubtedly the Peace Corps was a source of interaction and a great deal of confidence building between Americans and Rwandans, particularly at the university. Most Peace Corps volunteers, as I was myself in Kenya many years before, have contact with local people, which is very, very satisfying, but most local people don't go on to be heads of government and leaders of society.

Library of Congress

However, if you teach in an African university, you almost certainly come in contact with the leaders of tomorrow.

Q: Who became the ambassador after you had been there for some time?

GRIBBIN: Bob Melone.

Q: What was his background?

GRIBBIN: Bob had been the African watcher in Paris. He was a French expert. He had had other African experiences. I think he had been in Niger at one point. He was a very polished and cosmopolitan ambassador and became a very good friend. Of course, by the time he got there, I had been serving as charg# for four months, and I was convinced we didn't need an ambassador. Nonetheless, he came in and showed how useful it was to have an ambassador. There were things, of course, that he could do as ambassador that a charg# couldn't do, including particularly dealing much more forthrightly with the Rwandan Government.

Q: In some places where the French had been the colonial power, they took a rather proprietary regard later at the former colony - I'm thinking of Mali and Niger and what-have-you - and looked on Americans as interlopers and kept a wary eye on them. How did the Belgians do there?

GRIBBIN: I don't think the Belgians saw the Americans in Rwanda in those same terms. We had more of a collaborative relationship. The Belgians certainly had more irons in the fire and were more involved, but I didn't detect the sort of competition that you described. The French, however, were there as well, and the competition was between the French and the Belgians. The French were continually trying to pull Rwanda into the Francophone circle - and did so very successfully. Mitterand, who was the president at the time, and Habyarimana became close friends. Danielle Mitterand came to visit Madame Habyarimana on one occasion. There was a close personal relationship between

Library of Congress

the French president and President Habyarimana. The French were also involved in the Gendarmerie. This gave them an entr#e into the security and the political side of government that the French are fond of knowing about.

Q: Well, the Cold War was still in full bloom. Did that reflect itself at all, either with Eastern Bloc embassies or other things in Rwanda?

GRIBBIN: We had three Eastern countries represented in Kigali. The Soviet Embassy backed right up to the American ambassador's residence, but the Soviets were not very active. They would just stay inside and drink vodka. We played them once or twice in volley ball. I think they beat us soundly just once.

The Chinese had a more active operation. They were especially interested in keeping Taiwan out. That was one of their principal goals. Additionally China put some money in a rice project and a cement factory. The Chinese were cautiously friendly to us, but soon became deeply suspicious because one of our Fulbright professors from the university, the one in charge of the English Department, also spoke fluent Mandarin Chinese. He picked it up earlier when studying China. However, embassy officials were absolutely certain that this guy was a plant. Other than that, we got along fairly well with the Chinese. The North Koreans were also present, and of course, we had almost no contact with them.

Q: *The North Koreans were making these efforts. Were they doinanything there, or were they just there?*

GRIBBIN: They were just there. To the extent that the North Koreans and the Soviets did anything, it was to sell arms, but even at that the Belgians sold arms on better terms, so the Belgians were the preferred supplier.

Q: *How big was our embassy? What did it consist of?*

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: On the American side we had an ambassador and a DCM, a junior officer, and admin officer, two secretaries, one communicator, and a PAO.

Q: So it was not exactly a major establishment.

GRIBBIN: No, it wasn't.

Q: Did you find yourself courting Rwandans on UN votes and thinglike this?

GRIBBIN: Oh, yes, we held regular conversations with Rwandans on UN votes, but since their major partners, France and Belgium and the U.S., all saw the UN in the same way, whenever they could be helpful the Rwandans would. The problem in Rwanda, as in all of Africa, was that most of the African countries were bound together in the nonaligned movement grouping and tended to want to vote monolithically in that respect, which often meant that they did not vote the way we urged at the UN.

Q: Were there any events during this time that stand out, or was it just as you say, a quiet time?

GRIBBIN: It was a quiet time. I helped an American investor get his tea factory off the ground. In fact, it was already up and running, but the Rwandan Government agency that was his partner kept moving the goal posts and changing the rules. So the embassy, myself and my predecessors and my successors, even when I went back again fifteen years later, all were involved in helping this American businessman convince his local partners that the rules were there for a purpose. Rules were designed to provide some stability to relationships and some common measures for expectations, and they should be used for that.

Q: Well, then, in 1981, where to?

GRIBBIN: In the summer of 1981, I went directly to Mombasa, Kenya.

Library of Congress

Q: Aha. And you were there from 1981 to -

GRIBBIN: 1984. Ambassador Bill Harrop in Nairobi and his deputy, Bob Houdek were interested in establishing a consulate in Mombasa, principally because the United States had signed agreements with Kenya, Somalia and Oman for military access in the Indian Ocean. These defense agreements came in the wake of the Iranian hostage affair and reflected the possibility that the U.S. would need to deploy military force in that part of the world in the years to come. Mombasa, of course, was the preferred harbor of all of these nations. U.S. naval ships regularly visited, but the ambassador wanted to be sure that we had our finger on the pulse of the coast. If an officer were permanently posted to Mombasa, he could keep an eye not only on events on the coast but on other U.S. entities, including the U.S. Navy. Ambassador Harrop asked me to open a consulate and take on that responsibility.

Q: What was the situation in Kenya when you arrived in 1981?

GRIBBIN: President Moi had taken over from Kenyatta four or five years earlier. Kenya was a fairly stable country and very pro-American in some respects. It followed what we thought was the right path in terms of economic development. It focused on the private sector. Political cronyism and corruption were problems in Kenya under Kenyatta, and remained so under Moi.

Kenya was very much a going concern. The economy was growing, but growth was internal. Kenya's markets were limited to itself, Uganda and Tanzania. Industry was protected. Those who wanted to open up to the rest of the world were in the minority. But by and large, American relations with Kenya were excellent - positive and forward-looking. Kenya was supportive of our intent to deploy more military assets in the Indian Ocean.

Q: Why was it in the interest of the Government of Kenya to support our military buildup?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: We were one of Kenya's largest donors of development aid. Additionally, over time we had developed a considerable military assistance program. We had an F-5 fighter jet program, for example, in Kenya. So the access agreement was a logical step in the progression of our relationship.

Q: How did you find opening up a consulate in Mombasa? Was it consulate or consulate general?

GRIBBIN: It was a consulate.

Q: How did you go about this?

GRIBBIN: This was the third time America had a consulate in Mombasa. The first time occurred when the consulate in Zanzibar, which was opened in 1837, moved to Mombasa during World War I. It moved over in 1915 and stayed till 1919-1920 and moved back to Zanzibar. Then we opened a consulate again, I think, in 1942, primarily to buy war supplies - skins and hides and pyrethrum, which is a natural insecticide that was needed in the Pacific. That consulate stayed open until about 1952. When I opened again in 1981, it was also for strategic reasons, related to the troublesome situation in Iran and in the Middle East. Jim Mark, who was the admin counselor in Nairobi, and I went down to rent space, find housing and set things up. The U.S. already had a Navy office, in the sense that we employed a local shipping agent to buy up stores and fresh fruits and vegetables and to make arrangements for port calls. I worked out of Chris Soper's office for a while, but soon we found a building and leased housing. I advertised in the paper and hired staff. In the course of a couple of months I went from the Navy agent's office to operating a small consulate. I started alone. A secretary and eventually a communicator were assigned, but not for a while. My fiefdom grew. In addition to State Department employees, I was joined by a senior chief from the U.S. Navy, who was responsible for ship visits, and a naval construction team that spent \$50 million on various projects, mostly having to do with widening the harbor entrance, building ramp space at the airport and a parallel

Library of Congress

runway so we could use the airport without conflicting with regular commercial traffic. Finally, I added an associate Peace Corps director. We had a small American team, but spent a lot of money - \$50 million was a lot of money even in Mombasa. In the course of my tenure, about 60 American naval ships came for shore visits. Often they arrived in groups of 10 or 11 with up to 13,000 sailors.

Q: Good God! Well, having been in Athens and watched port visits there and all the problems, I'm thinking of what it must have been like. Did you have any particular problems with all these young men come ashore?

GRIBBIN: We did, we did. I think by and large our sailors acquitted themselves well, but then I have dozens of stories that relate to ship visits. Once we had a tender come in, and tenders, you know, travel independently of the fleet because they're not warships, they're support vessels. The Navy assigned the first women sailors to tenders. The first one in Mombasa with women aboard had about 200 on it, out of a crew of 1,000. The women were on shore leave and wandering around town in their uniforms and so forth, and the fleet was due in the next day or two. Rosemary, my receptionist called. She said, "Mr. Gribbin, there's a delegation out here to see you." I said, "Oh, who is it?" "Well, I can't tell you over the phone. Maybe you had better come meet them." I asked, "What's it about?" She replied, "It's about the ships visit." I said, "I'd be glad to see them." It turned out to be a delegation of prostitutes, who came to tell me it wasn't fair that we brought our own women. That was their job. I assured them that there would be plenty of business for everybody.

Serious incidents also occurred. During the visit of the battle group around the USS America, a prostitute died. The police decided that she'd been killed, murdered. Then pursuing a long chain of circumstantial evidence, they decided that the killer was a sailor off the USS America. In cooperation with the Kenyan police, the Naval Investigation Services screened men to find out who was ashore that night and where they might have been and so forth. Two witnesses might be able to identify the perpetrator of the crime

Library of Congress

outside the little hotel where the death happened. One was the night watchman, and the other a taxicab driver who picked up a man near the hotel and drove him back to the rendezvous point where he could get the bus down to the dock. The driver was paid - the guy didn't have any money - with a lighter with the insignia of the USS America. Armed with that evidence, the Navy agreed to do a walk past on the America. That was done, but the witnesses did not identify anyone. But as they were sitting in the ward room waiting to go ashore, the ship's executive officer brought in two or three young men who hadn't made the identification parade, but who had been ashore the night before. So asked, "Is it one of them?" One of the eye-witnesses said, "Yes, it looks like him." Which was less than a clear identification. Remember, these two witnesses were sitting there with two Kenyan cops, and they knew that if they went ashore without having identified somebody, they would be in trouble. The upshot of all of this was that this young man - his name was Tyson - was ultimately taken ashore, left in my custody when the fleet left, and then when properly charged and so forth, transferred to the Kenyan Police custody, imprisoned and tried for murder. In what would be amazing in any judicial system - the event happened in April - the trial got underway in late June. It was a fairly complicated trial in and of itself, but hanging over it all was the fact before I had gotten to Mombasa - sometime in 1978, on an earlier ship visit, there was a similar death of a prostitute killed by an American sailor. In that case the sailor admitted to the crime, and was convicted of manslaughter by a British judge sitting on the Kenyan bench. For punishment he was slapped on the wrist and told to go home and not do it again. People remembered the earlier case and so hanging over Tyson's trial were emotional issues of justice, racial equity, and kow-towing to the U.S. It was clearly politically important for Kenya to get a conviction. What was also evident to me and to others was that whereas someone from the USS America might have been involved in this crime, it was not completely clear how the girl had been killed. She was certainly dead, but it also appeared that she may have asphyxiated in her own vomit. Autopsy reports conflicted on that point. But it was clear that some Kenyans would be determined to get a conviction no matter what. Those of us who had gotten to know this young man and who had studied his alibi story strongly believed that he was

Library of Congress

innocent. The court heard all the evidence. Essentially the Kenyan prosecution did not try to refute Tyson's story; they just tried to add the murder event into the middle of it. This got fairly ridiculous, but it still seemed possible that Tyson could be convicted. There was no jury; but three assessors gave non-binding opinions. One wouldn't make a decision, one said that the American hadn't done it, and the other one said that he must have done it. The judge, this time a Kenyan judge, decided that the police had not proved Tyson's guilt. Therefore, although not acquitted, he was released. Tyson went back to America and then on to whatever he's done subsequently in his life. It was a learning experience for him. He admitted that he had not been serious about life, but he said there is nothing like a murder charge to sober you up and get your attention. So if anything good came out of this, Tyson emerged a changed man.

Q: How did the Kenyans, the shopkeepers and all, with all these people coming in? Did it seem to work fairly well with the Americans?

GRIBBIN: Ship visits were marvelous for the economy of Mombasa. 10,000 to 13,000 sailors came ashore. They bought everything there was to buy - tee shirts, jewelry, souvenirs, wood and soap stone carvings. The price of everything, of course, quadrupled or quintupled as soon as they hit shore. They ate in the restaurants, they rented cars, they drove up and down the coast and visited hotels. They went to the casinos, and out to the game parks. Everybody liked ship visits. The sailors also did some good works. They painted orphanages, visited schools, played local teams in basketball, delivered books, medical supplies and so forth. Except for the one or two negative incidents, ship visits were very popular events.

Mombasa was a cosmopolitan and tolerant place. It had been for centuries. It was a place where people of all races and religions met over the centuries and intermingled in the marketplace.

Q: What was the politics of Mombasa and the surrounding area compared to Nairobi?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Our concern was that the coast was Islamic, and so if we were looking at the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, and particularly of Shiite sects, and there were some Shiite groups in Mombasa, that we needed to understand their positions and that they needed to hear from us. I developed a good relationship with the MPs - members of parliament - from the coast, with the provincial commissioner who was the political representative of government at the coast - and his staff, the mayor and city councilors the police, and the Kenyan Navy. Even though I was a one-man diplomat in the consulate, I had a vast variety of people to deal with and interact with on a range of issues. Certainly one of the things I tracked was sentiment about the U.S. presence.

Q: Was there a feeling of growing Islam, greater Islam, at that time?

GRIBBIN: Yes, I did detect that. Yet, as I said, the coastal Kenyans were tolerant people. They had run into all sorts of people over the years, and were not generally attracted to the more militant forms of Islam. However, certainly some ascetic preachers came to visit and their ideas were heard and appealed to a radical fringe. If you recall the bombings in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi many years later, some of the perpetrators of those crimes were from the coast.

Q: Well, then, were there any other issues that you had to deal with?

GRIBBIN: I was the consul, so I had to deal with consular issues, and even though Nairobi issued visas, I would give advice on NIVs. However, the coast was my consular district when it came to deaths. In the period of time I was at the coast there was one death in the Nairobi consular district, which comprised the bulk of Kenya, and seven in mine. I got to be something of an expert in providing all the necessary mortuary and other certificates and making the arrangements for the return of bodies to the U.S., which occasionally was very difficult.

Q: Why were there so many deaths?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Three of the deaths were American merchant seamen who died of alcohol related illnesses. One man, in fact, died in Madagascar and had a death certificate from Madagascar, but his captain brought him to Mombasa in the ship's freezer. If you think it's hard to get a corpse out of the country, try bringing one in with the wrong papers.

I had one particularly tragic case of a young girl of 19 who was just out for the summer. She contracted cerebral malaria and died in about three days. And others were more predictable deaths, of people with illness or in accidents.

Q: Was there any reflection of the old Kenya - I should say, "Keenya" - where the "happy valley" and the-

GRIBBIN: They all lived in Mombasa.

Q: I was wondering about the old, dissolute British aristocracy, remittance-type people, who were sent to get the hell away from the family.

GRIBBIN: Mombasa was composed of many different groups, one of which was the resident white Kenyans, the British Kenyans. Most of them were people who had come to Kenya to settle, farm and raise their families. They had either been bought out or had retired and moved to the coast. Most of them had come to terms with independent Kenya. Still, there were some very, very colorful characters. Another interesting group was their children and grandchildren who had been born and raised in the more modern sector of Kenya's economy. They were what was called "Kenya cowboys." They were the guys that raced rally cars and tried to make a living as safari guides or entrepreneurs in the tourism business. Europeans from many countries were engaged in the tourist industry that catered to tens of thousands of visitors on package tours from Europe. A still different group of Europeans were in the shipping business and had lived in ports around the world. My colleagues in the consular corps, the honorary consuls - I was the only legitimate consul - were all in the shipping business. I had a foot in all of these different camps, not

Library of Congress

to mention the various Indian groups, the Arab groups, the Swahili groups, the up-country African Kambas, Luos and Kikuyus - who had come to the coast to work as government officials, and the navy. It was a fascinating place.

Q: Well, then, in 1984, you were taken out of this multi-cultural area, and what did they do with you?

GRIBBIN: I came back to Washington.

Q: You came back to what?

GRIBBIN: In 1984, I came back and I took an assignment as congressional fellow on a Pearson assignment.

Q: 1984-85.

GRIBBIN: Yes. I was on a Pearson assignment, and I was assigned to the office of Steve Solarz.

Q: So you worked for Steve Solarz from 1984 to 1985. I have finished a fairly long interview with Steve. Could you give me a...

GRIBBIN: Maybe I had better read Steve's interview.

Q: It's not transcribed yet, luckily. But anyway, would you talk about how you saw him at the time, because he is quite a major figure in foreign policy in Africa and the Far East and other things? But we're talking about 1984-85.

GRIBBIN: Congressman Solarz was interested in having somebody from the Pearson Program - he had someone previously - because essentially it was free labor. He got a presumably competent, older person who was much engaged in foreign policy issues that reflected his interests. The purpose of the program was to familiarize Foreign Service

Library of Congress

officers with what happens on the Hill and to provide cross-fertilization back and forth to State. At the time, Steve was no longer the chairman of the African Subcommittee, although he was still very much interested in African affairs. He was the chairman of the East Asia and Pacific Sub-Committee.

I wanted to do something other than Africa and I made that known before I accepted the assignment to the congressman's office, and he agreed. He thought he had Africa pretty well covered through contacts with the Sub-Committee staff. Steve was always interested in expanding his knowledge because he wanted to be a player in Democratic foreign policy circles. He had ambitions, certainly, for higher positions in subsequent administrations. One set of issues he felt he needed to work on, and asked me if I'd be interested, was NATO. Subsequently, we began a process where I did a lot of research and legwork about NATO and arms control issues, which was a real education for me. I wrote papers and briefed the congressman. He absorbed it all, refined and held forth with informed opinions and views on all the myriad issues. I learned about ABM, START, CTB treaties and where we should go with those as well as about NATO positions on this or that aspect of disarmament. During the course of the year, I accompanied the congressman and Stanley Roth, who was his Asia expert, on a trip to NATO capitals. We met with American embassy and host country personnel, NATO officials, academics and others to go over many issues. Congressman Solarz, as usual, had very articulate and informed opinions.

Q: A 24 hour a day person.

GRIBBIN: I remember one night in Brussels at one a.m. I was still taking notes on something. It was a hectic schedule. One comment I would make is that the State Department and Congress treat information in diametrically opposed ways. In the State Department, if you learn something, you classify it and you put it in a drawer and only people who need to know can learn about it. In Congress, if you learn something, you spread it around as fast as you can and make sure your name is on it so that you get credit for knowing it first and sharing it with other people who need to know it. We had

Library of Congress

completely different ways of operating, and it took a bit of adjustment to get used to the Hill. I could understand one group's paranoia about the other better once I understood how each thought about important information.

In addition to NATO matters, I inevitably got drawn into Africa, and the issue before the Congress in 1984 and 1985 was the Anti-Apartheid Act. Steve had been instrumental in drafting earlier versions of that bill and was active and instrumental in the bill that year, but he needed somebody from his personal staff rather than on the committee staff to track it. His staff member who had been doing that really wanted to hand it over, and I was the logical guy to take it on. Therefore I spent a good portion of my year involved in refining ideas, drafting and in negotiations designed to move the Anti-Apartheid Act forward. I was involved in negotiations not only on the House side with the various sponsors and their staff but also with the Senate so that we moved the same bill forward.

Q: What was the thrust of the act?

GRIBBIN: The Anti-Apartheid Act was an act of Congress which would impose sanctions on South Africa until it abolished apartheid. It imposed highly visible trade sanctions, for example, a prohibition on the sale of Krugerrands in the U.S., denial of landing rights for South African Airways and the like. This was a controversial action because it was a congressional attempt to levy sanctions against the will of the Administration. Remember we had a Republican administration whose policy was "constructive engagement" with South Africa, which meant business almost as usual, but using the leverage and the trust engendered to convince the apartheid state of the error of its ways. Chet Crocker was the proponent of that approach within the administration. Democrats on the hill, and certainly politics were involved, were convinced that constructive engagement hadn't worked and would not work. They felt the South Africans needed a wake-up call. Limited sanctions would be a wake-up call, but would not be a disastrous full embargo. Even so, there were Representatives who wanted a complete embargo. Since the U.N. previously imposed an arms embargo on South Africa, some sanctions were already in effect, but the Anti-

Library of Congress

Apartheid Act would be more demonstrative and purely American. The upshot was that the Anti-Apartheid Act passed. Steve graciously asked me to come down to the floor of the House for the vote. I'd been involved in answering questions, preparing position papers and doing a lot of the work for the legislation. I was pleased to see it pass. I was pleased to see the legislative process work. Just prior to the vote, I was involved in some meetings where some real arm-twisting went on. It was interesting to observe that as well.

Q: Just one second. Okay.

GRIBBIN: Another thing I learned on the Hill was that politics were politics. Throughout my career, I studied African politics. In Congress I had the chance to look closely at American politics, I found more similarities than differences. Our Congress really does represent the American people. Representatives were a pretty average group of folks. I wondered sometimes how people could get elected. I was surprised that only a handful of Representatives were really good speakers. Most were plodding speakers and some very poor, but they all certainly had the ego that went with the job. Additionally, they had the will to be elected, and they proudly represented their constituencies. Despite differences they all stood as equals and they treated each other very civilly and very carefully for the most part.

Q: Steve Solarz made trips all over the world, and every place he went he would make sure he would have appointments going from early morning to late at night, and he would talk to people all across the board. So probably no congressman was as well informed as Solarz, as far as different places. But did that translate, did you think? I mean, was he used as a resource by people who might have no idea of the thing? Steve, what do you think you ought to do on this thing, or something like that?

GRIBBIN: Very often, very often. I thought that was one of the strengths of the Congress, that members of the Congress would very often consult somebody who they felt was knowledgeable about something they didn't know about. Oftentimes the congressmen

Library of Congress

employed staff who were supposed to provide the expertise, but they would often cross-check or even usurp their in-office opinion by checking with a congressperson whom they felt knowledgeable in the area. Steve was often queried for his views on foreign issues.

Q: This would go across parties.

GRIBBIN: Yes, often on the merits of the issues, but also because sometime members wanted to know what somebody else thought because they wanted to think the opposite.

Q: Yes. Solarz said he came from a New York City district which was predominately [Jewish] at the time, and yet he didn't want to get himself just dealing in Israeli affairs. He spread himself all over the place, which was not a primary concern within his constituency.

GRIBBIN: In fact, Congressman Solarz took some flack from his constituents for not paying enough attention to Israeli affairs or social security issues or more immediate constituent issues. His constituency was an interesting one. New York was all gerrymandered at that time so that there would be ethnic, if you will, constituencies. Unlike most congressional districts, Steve's constituents didn't write to him. We didn't get as much mail as most other Congressional offices. Steve's constituents telephoned. They not only telephoned the Washington office; they walked into his district offices in New York. The Congressman's staff did a lot of business that others did by mail, over the telephone or in person.

Q: While you were working on the Anti-Apartheid bill, were your colleagues in the African Bureau saying, "Cool it, don't do this"? Were you able to sort of cut the ties?

GRIBBIN: I took the view that I had been assigned to work for the Congressman. Not unlike when administrations changed, I worked for the Secretary of State and the President whoever they were. On the Hill my assignment was to work for the congressman; his agenda was my agenda. I was not going to do anything that I was personally repelled by, but other than that I wanted to give it my best shot. I was discreor

Library of Congress

tried to be discreet in any case - and didn't flaunt what I was doing. I sought to be a good staffer and stay in the background and out of the limelight and make my contributions that way. Nonetheless, the Anti-Apartheid Act was an issue when I came back to the Department.

Q: What was your impression at this particular time of the congressional staff? It seems that this had become more and more almost a separate branch of the government. There's a lot of power there which has grown as time...

GRIBBIN: I met several powerful staffers who did know a lot and to whom congressmen would defer to on this or that issue. On the other hand most staffers were young and green and were not real experts. All of a sudden they were put into positions requiring expertise. One of the ways that people always have covered up lack of depth is by bluster, and I certainly saw that. It was an imperfect system. How do you staff congressmen? You will never get many experts, because you won't pay them enough to stay around long enough to develop the personal relationships needed. In fact, many on the Hill who possess in-depth knowledge of issues are folk- lobbyists is not the right word - but people who work for organizations that provide backstopping on technical and social issues. In the arms control business, for example, the Federation of American Scientists always had detailed and informed opinions. We didn't always agree with them, but I knew they provided a really a well thought-out point of view. The Congressional Research Service provides in-depth support on issues as well. But by and large I found many staffers pretended to know more about the subject at hand than they really did. Anyway, a lot of what happens in the Congress is politics rather than content. If a staffer did not know where his/her boss ought to be politically, he did not last.

Q: Did foreign affairs play much of a role in politics? Whoever was just there and grabbed the ball could run with it without much opposition?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: I think that was true. Most congressmen weren't interested in foreign policy, so Steve was a rare bird in that regard. He wanted to be on the International Affairs Committee. This was also true of a few others. Howard Wolpe for example, had quite specific interests in Africa. He was quite well focused and competent. Other members, such as Chairman Dante Fascell grew into the job and never moved on. Many got off the committee as soon as they could.

Q: Well, in 1985, had you blotted your copybook with the Africa Bureau, or what?

GRIBBIN: When I went back to the Department. I had to go up to set the assistant secretary.

Q: Chester Crocker.

GRIBBIN: Yes. I'd been proposed for the deputy job in East African affairs. There was also a position in the office of Southern African affairs. I told Secretary Crocker I didn't think I could take a job in Southern African affairs. That would be just too much about face. It would be difficult for me intellectually. It would also be difficult for me in terms of relationships with people on the Hill.. I explained my philosophy of supporting the policy of the administration I was working for. I pledged I would not do anything, once back in the Department, to disrupt policy. I certainly wouldn't speak out to criticize it, but that I didn't feel that it would be proper for me - all of a sudden - to be seen as a spokesperson for the policy of constructive engagement. We talked this through and I subsequently became the deputy director of East African affairs.

Q: East Africa consisted of what?

GRIBBIN: Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, Mauritius, Djibouti - that's it. Thanks for the map.

Q: Well, this is 1985 to when?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: 1985 to 1987?

Q: 1984 to 1985 you were a Pearson, I think, wasn't that it?

GRIBBIN: I must have stayed three years.

Q: So it would be 1985 to 1988?

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: Going around that, I guess Ethiopia probably was one of your busiest places.

GRIBBIN: Ethiopia and Sudan were major "accounts" - Ethiopia because it was involved in internal revolution and transition coupled with the tremendous drought. The drought equally afflicted Sudan which was also involved in various changes of government and the war in the south. Kenya was in pretty good shape, comparatively speaking, but Somalia was in the waning days, even then of Siad Barre's regime. It was a very strange place. Uganda had not yet pulled its act together. It was a troubled place. The Obote government collapsed, followed by the short-lived rule of Tito Okello, and then finally Museveni. Julius Nyerere presided over Tanzania, but his socio-economic experiment had not worked. Yet no one was quite willing to pull the plug. Madagascar was fairly stable place. Comoros had a coup every other week but with little outside notice. Mauritius was our democracy and economic success story in the region. The Seychelles was a little island nation whose economy was based on tourism and a U.S. Air Force satellite tracking station. Because of a recent coup there was not much hope for political pluralism.

Q: Djibouti?

GRIBBIN: Djibouti was unique in the sense that it was a patch of desert strategically located on the Red Sea. Although it had a government of very conservative old men, the French were the motor there.

Library of Congress

Q: What was the situation in - let's take Ethiopia first?

GRIBBIN: In Ethiopia the Mengistu government was in full flower. It was an Afro-Marxist, as opposed to a Communist, government, and was very oppressive. The Derg began a policy, partly in response to the drought, called "villagization," in which people were compelled to leave their family farms and move into villages. The policy was justified ostensibly so the government could provide better social services - which is a legitimate reason to do something like that, plus water and food during the drought emergency - but it was also done so as to solidify political control over the peasants. This became a very difficult issue. Even at the height of the drought, we questioned how we could provide support to a government, which coerced its people. Additionally, much of the villagization was long distance, that is farmers were not grouped near their original farms, but transported hundreds and hundreds of miles into virgin areas. There they were virtually dropped off and told, "Build a village," and abandoned. Beyond that the Ethiopian Government was a major abuser of human rights. They held many political prisoners, provided no due process and engaged in arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, and so forth. Since the Carter years, human rights performance had become a more important element in U.S. decision making, and Ethiopia was always in the spotlight for human rights abuses.

Q: Kagnew Station was long gone?

GRIBBIN: Long gone. The Falasha, however, were still there.

Q: You might explain what the Falasha were.

GRIBBIN: The Falasha were Ethiopian Jews, the community of people who traced their lineage back to the Queen of Sheba. They had been practicing - unbeknownst almost to the outside world - their variation of the Jewish religion in Ethiopia for centuries. The Falasha became an issue because they were the poor and downtrodden of that society, which was mostly Orthodox Christian, and so were discriminated against, but then they

Library of Congress

began to be targeted by the Mengistu government. Since Jews have the right of return, Israel was interested in helping out. Remember that Israel was not always a welcome partner in that part of the world, because the neighboring countries were all Islamic. Israel had enjoyed good relations with Haile Selassie, which made it poison in the eyes of the Mengistu government. During this period Israeli agents began a process of exfiltrating the Falasha people out of Ethiopia. They followed various legitimate and clandestine routes. Finally, when the Mengistu government fell in the course of the revolution and the war that followed, most of the remaining Falasha were evacuated to Israel. I think only a very few are left in Ethiopia today, if any.

Q: Were we supporting overtly or covertly the exfiltration of Falasha? I understand they mainly went through thSudan.

GRIBBIN: We did support the endeavor.

Q: Where was the money coming from?

GRIBBIN: I'm not sure where the money came from directly. I suppose most was American money given to Israel that was recycled for this purpose.

Q: It must have been difficult to maintain relations with thMengistu government, wasn't it?

GRIBBIN: Yes, the Mengistu government was a difficult government, and it was difficult to have contact with them. And when we did have contact, it was usually to air a complaint, whether it be villagization, human rights, treatment of the emperor (who was still alive at the time), or whatever. Whenever we had good news, we also had problems. For example, the U.S. provided all of this relief, all this food - a hundred million dollars' worth of food over a short period of time, helped to deliver it, worked with NGOs, etc. yet the government sought to control all aspects of the operation. We wanted to make sure none of the food was skimmed off for villagization, which we opposed, or for their war effort. The rebellion that ultimately ousted Mengistu was underway in the north.

Library of Congress

Q: Was the war with Eritrea or Tigre at the time?

GRIBBIN: Both. Two concurrent and occasionally joined revolts were ongoing.

Q: Were there any debates concerning whether should we support them or do something, or was it just sort of "let it play out?"

GRIBBIN: We were involved, of course. We sympathized with the rebels, but I'm not sure how extensively we engaged.

Q: Were there any developments during the time you were there in Ethiopia, Eritrean side, or was it just an ongoing thing?

GRIBBIN: It was an ongoing thing. I think the crystallization of the Eritrean independence movement didn't come until the two revolutions had joined hands and really moved against Mengistu to force him out. Subsequently a debt was owed by the Tigreans to the Eritreans for their support in that regard, and the reward was the independence of Eritrea, which the Eritreans had largely secured by that time anyway.

Q: What about Sudan? How did we view Sudan, and what were we doing with it at this time?

GRIBBIN: Sudan was always difficult. There were several changes of government about this time, and we had hopes that Sudan was going to turn itself around. Islamic fundamentalism was expanding, but fundamentalists had not yet taken over the government. The NIS had not yet taken over. The main issue in the Sudan continued to be the war in the south, which had resumed in 1982. Regionally, Ethiopia provided some quiet support and refuge to the SPLA and Garang, while Uganda and Kenya were very close-mouthed about their actions. Garang stayed in the bush-

Q: Garang is?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: The leader of the southern forces, the Sudan's Peoples' Liberation Army. It was difficult to know what was happening in the Sudan. For example, the drought that affected Ethiopia also affected Sudan. The afflicted area was right across the mid-part of the country, not the south, and the most unknown part of that area was Darfur, which abuts the western border with Chad. All of a sudden donors realized that hundreds of thousands, if not a million, people were at risk of dying in Darfur because they hadn't had food in months, and nobody knew that they didn't have any food because nobody was out there to report. Thus, the donors organized a major airlift into that part of the Sudan.

Q: Was Libya messing around in Sudan?

GRIBBIN: Libya was always messing around in the Horn of Africa, in Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. Indeed, every time there was a change of government in Sudan, one of the State Department's first concerns was what was the connection to Qaddafi? Who did he support? Who did he have contact with? How would he play the change? So we were always cognizant of those problems.

Q: And Uganda?

GRIBBIN: Uganda was nearing the end of the second Obote government in 1985. Following Idi Amin's ouster in 1979, Obote had been reelected in a rigged election in 1981. However, Obote had not made a success of his return from exile. His government finally fell apart under pressure from Yoweri Museveni. Obote was replaced in late 1985 by a short-term military government headed by Tito Okello who continued to battle Museveni and his irregulars coming up from the south. In January 1986 Museveni took Kampala and established his national resistance movement as the ruling entity. He launched a slow process of rebuilding and healing. It was evident from the first that Museveni was a different breed of leader, a different kind of man. He certainly had more vision than your average coup leader. In fact, it wasn't a coup. Museveni wasn't a military man. I asked him in later times, "Are you a military general?" He said, "No, I'm a revolutionary." That was

Library of Congress

indeed his approach - the system was rotten, the system had to be changed, it could not be done peacefully. Therefore, he had an obligation and even a responsibility to foster change and to do so through the only means available to him, which was to overthrow the government. Museveni sounded like he was reading from the American Declaration of Independence when engaged in this sort of discussions.

It looked like Uganda was turning the corner, but of course it was a country which had been prostrate since Idi Amin took over 15 years earlier and run the economy into the ground, thrown the Asians out, and neglected everything. Museveni was determined to restore order. Immediately some people who had fled from the earlier problems came back and sought to assert their claim- to political rights and a political stake, which they hadn't earned. That didn't sit right with Museveni and his team. So they ignored the interlopers and pursued their own vision - which ultimately worked out pretty well for Uganda.

Q: Somalia, at this point.

GRIBBIN: Somalia was not yet in the chaos and anarchy that was to come, but it was definitely headed in that direction. Somalia had always been a dark hole where anything that was given or granted, whether it be military aid or development aid, just disappeared without having made an impact. President Siad Barre was an old man who had strange work habits. One of his practices was to have his meetings about one a.m., so he would call our ambassador, Don Peterson, Frank Crigler, or whoever was there at the time - Bob Oakley, but that was later on - in the middle of the night for a chat. And the ambassador had to be ready to go. Barre ruled through a clan-based military government. He had alliances and political connections that, while he survived, kept Somalia more or less peaceful. Once he passed on, the state descended into the anarchy that we came to know so well. There didn't seem to be much anybody could do about Somalia at the time. Because of the abuse of foreign assistance, our programs were much reduced and we exercised little leverage. We just paused to see what would happen next.

Library of Congress

Q: For so long Somalia and Ethiopia had been playing cold war trade offs. The Soviets were big on one side, and we were big on the other. Had this game sort of run its course?

GRIBBIN: Even though the Cold War wasn't really over in Africa until 1989, it was clear even in the years before then that the Cold War was not generating the parry and thrust that characterized earlier years. The Somalis were not able to say, "If you don't do this, the Russians will," because the Russians wouldn't. Although still engaged in Ethiopia, Russia was increasingly involved in its own internal issues. It recalled troops from Africa. In fact, I think the Soviets pulled out of Ethiopia by 1985-86. They were gone from Angola in 1987, I think, even though the Cubans stayed on until 1989. But the Cold War, as seen in the African context, was coming to an end by the mid-1980s. Even though there was congressional concern about Communist influence in the Horn of Africa and the Cuban presence in Angola, the situations were less tense and less troubling than previously.

Q: *So we weren't trying to build up Somalia.*

GRIBBIN: We put hundreds of millions of dollars into Somalia, and there were still some residual monies going in, mostly on the military side, but overall we were less enamored of Somalia.

Q: *Then on to Kenya. Anything?*

GRIBBIN: Kenya complained of a double standard. President Moi made more of that as time went on, but essentially he was correct. We held Kenya to a higher standard, and do still today, than we have held many other African countries. That is because our expectations of Kenya - based on its viable political, economic and social institutions demonstrated that it should be held to a higher standard. Nonetheless, the Kenyan government chafed at U.S. criticism, which began in the mid-seventies, the declining years of President Kenyatta when corruption expanded. U.S. criticism

Library of Congress

on corruption and human rights issues continued on into the Moi era. Otherwise, we maintained an active AID program and a military assistance program.

Q: How about Tanzania?

GRIBBIN: I don't recall Tanzania figuring much on my screen. It was not yet the twilight years, but certainly the afternoon of Julius Nyerere's tenure. I don't think we had a USAID program at that time. The Scandinavians were the major donors. We didn't have any particular difficulties or problems with Tanzania.

Madagascar, a small, little country, underwent a bit of political reform and economic change, but nothing spectacular. Much American interest in Madagascar revolved around the wildliflemurs, tropical plants and such that are unique to Madagascar. We had a very small embassy in Comoros. Ed Brynn was charg#, with only one or two other Americans. The Comorians were involved internally in a dispute over the status of the island of Mayotte, which rejected independence and stayed with France. France permitted that to happen. Although this was a cause of agitation in the islands, it obviously was not our problem.

Q: I gather that Chet Crocker was pretty well engaged in the South African, Angolan, maybe some of the Zairean business, and that the rest of this...

GRIBBIN: David Fischer was my director for most of that period. David and I had lots of latitude in East Africa. The only things that really went upstairs for attention were Ethiopian issues and some of the Sudanese issues. On both we were talking big bucks on the relief side of the shop, and we were talking global politics on the political side, either Islamic or Communist connections. But for the rest of the countries, we tried to provide maximum support to the ambassadors, DCMs and their teams in the field.

Library of Congress

Q: When you left there by 1988, South Africa was not your thing, but what was the general feeling about Chet Crocker and his approach to South Africa? Did you see a change coming, or did you feel it was beginning to make some sense?

GRIBBIN: He started in 1981, but by 1988, we still didn't know what the outcome would be. The South Africans seemed very entrenched. They received much negative publicity. The Congressional sanctions had at least gotten people's attention and maybe had caused, created, or intensified a sense of isolation, a realization that South Africa was really behind the times. But South Africa did not begin to move out of its fortress stance until 1988 and 1989 with the Namibian agreement. That was a sea change in terms of relationships within southern Africa, because South Africa agreed that if the Cubans left Angola, they would grant independence to Southwest Africa as Namibia. South Africa's security would then be assured by cooperation with neighbors rather than by military dominance of them - which was an important transformation in how they achieved international security. That was the end, if you will, of the Cold War in Africa. Chet Crocker is due credit for helping this happen.

From that point forward the famous winds of change that Macmillan heralded thirty years earlier were finally blowing in South Africa itself. Political forces in South Africa had a chance to move forward to work for the transformation in the political system that we subsequently saw. But those changes did not occur until the late years of the 1980s.

Q: I realize you weren't dealing with South Africa, but when you left there in 1988, were you optimistic about Africa? It wasn't a very encouraging place.

GRIBBIN: One of my faults is that I'm always optimistic about Africa. I reckon that every time you see a place that's not doing well you can find one that's doing better. Ethiopia was beginning a major transition where it was evident that something different was going to happen - its imported dogma was going to be cast aside and whatever would come in its place would probably be more appropriate. There did not seem to be much hope for the

Library of Congress

war in Sudan, and I can still say that there still doesn't seem to be much hope. That is the most intractable conflict on the continent. I had hoped that subsequently when the Islamic government came to the fore there it would be so fundamentalist it wouldn't want to have anything to do with people who weren't Muslims and so they would just say, "Go your own way." I still think that is the solution, but partition will be much more difficult now that oil is being exploited in northern controlled areas of the south. Khartoum won't give back the oil that they've stolen free and fairly.

Somalia was going downhill then and certainly continued to do so. Maybe it has reached bottom now. Kenya looked okay, and I would argue that Kenya still looks okay. It's got a lot of problems, but its people have the skills to resolve problems. Uganda is a real success story today for which the foundations were well laid in the mid-eighties. Tanzania has turned a corner and is much improved. Madagascar too improved, but Comoros stalled. Mauritius is almost a First-World country. In the eighties the Seychelles was caught in the doldrums of a very small population and an economy based partially on revenues from the U.S. tracking station. The tracking station is now gone, but tourism and fishing keep the Seychelles going. As before, Djibouti remains dependent on the French military presence, but now that Eritrea exists, Djibouti emerged as the main port for Ethiopia. In sum, in East Africa, there were pluses and minuses.

Q: Well, this probably is a good place to stop now. In 1988, you left the African Bureau and whither?

GRIBBIN: In 1988, I went out to be the DCM in Kampala, Uganda.

Q: *All right, well, we'll pick it up then in 1988. Great.*

This is the 27th of July. Bob, 1988 you were in Kampala, Uganda, from when to when?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: I was there for three years.

Q: 1988 to 1991. What was the situation in Uganda when you werthere? Do you call it "Ooganda" or "Yooganda?"

GRIBBIN: People say both. Uganda had gone through its period of relative peace and prosperity just after independence in the 1970s, and then a military coup with Idi Amin at its head took power in 1971. Things deteriorated considerably internally in Uganda during Amin's reign. The U.S. embassy was closed in 1973. Amin was subsequently overthrown via a war with Tanzania that culminated in 1979. He went into exile in Saudi Arabia, and although he tried a very brief comeback to Uganda in 1986 or 1987, he has subsequently stayed in Arabia since. After Amin's ouster, instability in Uganda continued. There were a couple of interim presidents, then Obote came back as president and was more ineffective in his second term than he'd been in the first term. In response to Obote's stolen election, a young politician named Yoweri Museveni went to the bush and began a revolution. He started in 1981. This was a genuine revolution. Museveni's troops fought in rural areas. They solidified grassroots people against an increasingly corrupt inept government and its brutal army. Museveni took power in Kampala in January of 1986. Beginning at that point, he brought more stability to Uganda than it had experienced in years. However, remnants of the Obote era army retreated to the northern part of the country to fight on and even a much smaller offshoot of that force wages an insurgency still today. But an initial problem with the northerners manifested itself in Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement, which was a group of people motivated by this charismatic priestess - this happened in 1986. Her warriors felt they had religious powers and magic charms so as to turn bullets into water. In turn the Holy Spirit Movement attacked Museveni's army. There was a great slaughter outside of Jinja. Members of the NRA, the army, told me later they were terribly embarrassed to have participated in this conflict, but the warriors kept charging at them waving sticks and machetes as they fell before modern machine guns.

Library of Congress

In any case, internal security problems persisted in Uganda on into the 1980s and indeed into the 1990s and now into the 21st century.

But to go back to the scene, when I arrived in Kampala in 1988, Museveni had been in power for two years. Most of the country was at peace. By and large the rule of law was reestablished. The wreckage that Amin had done to the economy was being addressed. The government would soon ask Asians, whom Amin had expelled, to come back and resume economic activities. Some had already come back and others would come in the course of the time I was there. Museveni was a new broom, sweeping both politically and economically. With some tutelage and a great deal of shared experiences from the Western countries, the World Bank in particular but also USAID, the president learned about the economic reforms and policies recommended for countries like Uganda. Policies included privatization, getting the government out of the businesses that African socialism had gotten governments into, allowing markets to set prices rather than government commodity boards, floating the currency, adopting better monetary and fiscal policy, especially more realistic tax policies. When Museveni headed in that direction, the donor community, including the U.S. Government, began to provide essential resources to help push reforms forward. Once reforms underway were successful, even more resources flowed in. Politically, Uganda was historically torn by both religious and tribal strife that tended to follow the same cleavages in the society. Museveni himself had been stunned by a stolen election. He judged that partisan politics were based on tribal interests rather than individual or national interests. Therefore, his movement declared a non-party democracy whereby political parties still existed, but were forbidden to practice politics. Museveni formed a government of national unity, including people from those various non-active parties along, with his National Resistance Movement, as it was called, and began a substantial reform of the whole political system. Uganda established the National Resistance Council system wherein groups of ten families would chose a councilor. Ten councilors in turn would elect a councilor for the next level, and so forth up to level five,

Library of Congress

which was also Parliament. Essentially this system of pyramid government provided for indirect representation up to the national level.

This was a time of a great hope for Uganda, but when I got there in 1988 a lot of the hope had not been realized. There were still lingering hatreds and suspicions. An immature army controlled the country. Boys as young as 10 or 12, called kadogos, which means 'child' in Swahili, served in the ranks. Both Ugandans and diplomats were unsure of Museveni's credentials. He hadn't yet proved himself to be a democrat or a free marketer. He was known to have come out of the University of Dar Es Salaam, when it was in its Socialist Fabian phase in the 1960s. He schooled with revolutionaries in Mozambique who were Marxists, and so forth. No one was clear exactly what the new president's orientation would be. However, given the chaos that had been Uganda and the difficulties in the region, the United States was particularly pleased to see the turnaround. We appreciated the considerable hope that Museveni and his government offered for stability and regaining a steady path to the future.

Q: By this time, 1988, when you got there, Uganda had two neighbors who had gone somewhat different ways. You had Tanzania, where you had Nyerere, who drove the country into the ground in sort of benevolent dictatorship (or maybe not so benevolent), but you know I mean used the socialist thing to a fare-thee-well and destroyed a thriving economy; and you had Mobutu, who was just ruling sort of a kleptocracy with him at the head.

GRIBBIN: And you had Kenya, which was notoriously corrupt.

Q: And Kenya, which was corrupt as hell, and of course you had the north the Sudan, which was in a civil war.

GRIBBIN: Exactly. These were four distinct models that Uganda chose to eschew. Ugandans learned lessons from them, however. Looking at Tanzania, Uganda learned that the idea of Socialism, Ujama - national ownership of all of the assets of production, was

Library of Congress

not the way to proceed. In Kenya they saw that a system based on private enterprise could function well, but if the system got corrupted then the system became counter-productive. In Zaire under Mobutu Uganda witnessed the complete collapse of both the economy and the political system. And Sudan was bitterly divided by war and racism. None of these nations were good models.

Q: What was the tribal pattern in Uganda, and how did it fit into the mix in the area at that time?

GRIBBIN: Uganda has had internal tribal difficulties dating back centuries. Essentially, the Baganda live in the center of the country. The name Uganda comes from Buganda, Buganda had long been a distinct kingdom. In fact, under the British the territory was the Protectorate of Buganda and Uganda. Buganda had special status within the protectorate such that the king of Buganda, the Kabaka, was the chief of state of the whole country. One of the problems that Ugandans had to try to iron out after independence was whether or not Buganda should continue to have special status as a legal entity inside Uganda. There were three other historical kingdoms in Uganda that sought the autonomy that Buganda enjoyed. Another key cleavage is between the Bantu speakers, largely southerners and westerners versus northerners, the Acholi and Langi, who are Nilotics. President Obote was from the north. Idi Amin was from another section of the north that was not Nilotic but West Nilotic. He came from a relatively small group, and was a unique phenomenon in and of himself. Uganda's tribes are divided linguistically, culturally, religiously (the Buganda tend to be Catholic whereas northerners tend to be Protestant) and politically. Obote's party was the Ugandan People's Congress from the north, and the two parties in the south were the Democratic Party and Kabaka Yekka, which was the Bugandan royalist party. Since independence Uganda has harbored a very complex internal political situation.

Regarding Tanzania and Kenya, relations with Tanzania were correct and proper. Museveni did his university and revolutionary studies in Tanzania. When he fled Uganda

Library of Congress

in 1981 to form his rebel movement he went to Tanzania, which he used as a base of operations. Tanzania, of course, had provided the troops to oust Idi Amin in 1979 and Museveni had taken part in that operation. So relations with Tanzania were satisfactory. However, Uganda's relationship with Kenya was not very good. There was antipathy between President Moi and President Museveni. Moi apparently saw Museveni as a younger man who did not pay enough respect to his elder. Museveni, in turn, viewed Moi as an old dinosaur who presided over a corrupt regime and whose time to go was past. In contrast, Museveni viewed himself as a new type of revolutionary leader, a man of the people. Relations with Kenya were very cool. Even when the two leaders would meet, the atmosphere was one of forced civility rather than genuine warmth. Then there were incidents that hampered cordial ties. One involved Alice Lakwena, who received refuge in Kenya -

Q: She was the foreign minister?

GRIBBIN: No, she was the high priestess of the Holy Spirit Movement. Uganda wanted her back, to stand trial, and all of that, but Kenya wouldn't return her. So in turn, Uganda would facilitate the departure of dissidents from Kenya, including one case I was involved in. This involved a man named Barrack Mbajah who was the brother of Robert Ouko, the Kenyan foreign minister who was assassinated in 1989 or 90. The general view was that Ouko's murder related to State House politics in Kenya. Perhaps because of that, there was a concerted effort to pin the responsibility on others. One of the people being investigated for the crime was Ouko's brother Barrack Mbajah. He surreptitiously came across the border from Kenya and presented himself at my office to ask for help to get to the United States. I did help, but also thought it necessary to tell the Ugandans about what we were doing and solicit their support for it. They were supportive. But again, they did this not because they believed in this man's alib they weren't really concerned with facts - but because they knew his departure would irritate Kenyan authorities.

Q: Who was your ambassador when you went there?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: When I arrived in the summer, in August 1988, the ambassador was Bob Houdek. Bob was in the process of saying farewell, and left about two weeks afterwards. I ended up being the charg# for about three or four months before John Burroughs came. John was my ambassador for the rest of my tour.

Q: What was his background?

GRIBBIN: John had been the ambassador in Malawi, and consul general in Capetown, He came into the Foreign Service from a civilian Navy background.

Q: Well, now, during the time from 1988 to 1991, essentially you're really talking about the Bush years. What was the American interest in Uganda?

GRIBBIN: Recall that Uganda was in a disreputable neighborhood. Its neighbors were decaying, crumbling, fighting or tainted by corruption. So when Uganda began to emerge from its chaos, we looked to Uganda to become a model for the region. It was a country that had faced problems and found solutions that it was determined to pursue. We judged that those solutions were appropriate. President Museveni was one of the more complex and interesting people I have ever encountered. For example, he would stand up at public rallies and ask people to consider their problems - economic problems, not enough schools, not enough health clinics, inadequate prices for commodities, not enough availability of consumer goods, and he would ask, "How many people here are over 20?" And only about a third of the crowd raised their hands. Everyone one else was under 20. The president would ask, "Who is responsible for Uganda?" He would answer, "We've been independent for 30 years, so most of you never knew the British. This is not the British's fault. Poverty is our fault, it's our country, and if we're going to fix it we have to do it ourselves." That was the sort of straight talking that resonated in donor capitals.

Library of Congress

I think there was also an American recognition that the people of Uganda had suffered much over the years. Therefore, from a purely humanitarian perspective, we sort of owed them the opportunity to have a better chance at life.

Q: Well, the Cold War equation was just about dead, wasn't it, bthat time when you got there in 1988? I mean the Soviet influence.

GRIBBIN: It was dead in Uganda. The Cold War had never been much of a factor in Uganda, and it certainly was not a factor at all by the late 1980s. I was there when German unification took place, I recall my colleagues from the West German Embassy complaining of the difficulties of integrating their East German colleagues into their diplomatic operation. I don't really recall any other east/west issues, so they certainly weren't important.

Q: How does the president of Uganda do during this period. Obviously, everybody was watching him very carefully to figure out how he was going to operate. He had already been doing it. Did you see any changes in how he worked?

GRIBBIN: We saw progressive implementation of policies that were appropriate. On the political side, we saw grassroots elections take place in stages. In fact, Uganda was really creating a representative government. On the economic side policies and attitudes evolved. Asians were invited to come back and reoccupy their properties. Privatization, the selling off of government-owned businesses, went forward. There was real evidence, manifested in the growth in GDP, of improving prosperity for the man in the street. This occurred despite the fact that vis a vis security, Kampala remained fairly dangerous. The place was awash in AK-47s.

Q: Automatic rifles of Soviet manufacture.

GRIBBIN: There was shooting every night. The army was not well disciplined. In fact, gangs involved in criminal activities turned out to be composed of army and ex-army

Library of Congress

personnel. We lived on Kololo Hill. Most of the embassy houses were on one of seven Kampala hills. There was an army base on the top of Kololo. Every couple of weeks, if not more often, without fail, somebody would walk down to the perimeter of the army camp and spray a round of AK-47 bullets out over our house. This usually happened in the middle of the night. I would grab the kids out of their beds and we'd all hustle to the safe haven, lock the door and sit in there for an hour or so to see if anything more would transpire. We only had intruders on the grounds once or twice, and the house was pretty well fortified, so we didn't have other difficulties. But there were shooting incidents every night. I remember one morning our GSO got on the radio net - nobody had telephones that worked at the time - and told the RSO that she would not come to work that day because there was a body in the road in front of her gate. Until it was gone she would not be coming in. Sadly, those were sort of things we learned to live with. I was shot at directly once. About half-way into my tour, I was taking my morning jog. I often ran in the morning along the same route. One morning, from this same army camp, some bullets stitched into the road right in front of me. I dove into the ditch, and then people started hollering from up on the hill, "Mkosa, mkosa!" which means, 'It's a mistake.' Still I waited for some time before I got up and went home. I have never run since. I learned my lesson.

Q: You say they were firing from the army base - were these essentially young kids with guns?

GRIBBIN: Some young and some old, but essentially devoid of discipline. We had other security incidents - there were several. One day when the ambassador was playing tennis at the American Club, a hand grenade sailed over the fence and landed on the tennis court and blew up. Fortunately, the ambassador had just left the court. The hand grenade itself was an old one of Chinese manufacture and didn't have an enormous amount of firepower, but nonetheless, the incident galvanized Washington and Kampala security services. The result was to mount a local security detail for the ambassador, which I inherited from time to time when I was charg#. One time when the detail was with me, I attended an event at the International Conference Center. My bodyguard had to check his gun at the

Library of Congress

gate because the president was going to speak. And so he did. When I came out after the event and found my driver and the security man - his name was Steven - he said, "There's a problem. I can't get my gun back." I asked, "Why is that a problem? You gave it to them, you got the check for it, go back for it, they have to give it back to you." He told me that the guards were so impressed with the gun - it was one the U.S. Government had provided, a .38 police special, I think - that they played around with it, and one of the soldiers accidentally shot another in the leg. Consequently, their chief wanted to keep the gun for evidence for a court martial. Finally, we did manage to get the gun back. But this was the kind of poor discipline that existed in the army. Even soldiers assigned to important security details at principal establishments didn't have their act together.

Q: Were there any problems? You were there during the Gulf War, and there were reports that there were going to be Iraqi hit squads rolling all around. Did this affect you at all?

GRIBBIN: We had a solid relationship with the Ugandan intelligence organizations and stayed in close touch about those sorts of issues. I do not recall any specific alerts. The U.S. embassy was located in the back wing of the British High Commission building. We were tenants of the British. When we left in 1973 the embassy had been in an office building that we rented. When we returned to reopen in the early 1980s, it was no longer suitable for us. Since the British High Commission building was about the only secure structure available, the U.S. at the invitation of HMG - opened what was to be a temporary office in the back of the British High Commission. We were still there when I arrived in 1988. In fact, in 2000 we were still there, although with viable plans finally to move into a building of our own design and construction. So we shared security with the British High Commission, and we had very good cooperation from the Ugandan authorities.

Q: *I never remember which is on top and which is on the bottom of Burundi and Rwanda. Which is the top one?*

GRIBBIN: Rwanda is the top one and Uganda's neighbor.

Library of Congress

Q: What was happening there in the time you were there in Uganda afar as the Hutu- Tutsi problem was concerned?

GRIBBIN: During this time there were half a million or so Tutsi refugees in Uganda. And a certain number of them - about eight or nine - were core people in Museveni's rise to power, and subsequently key figures in the Ugandan military. Even so, Rwanda was a neighbor. President Museveni and President Habyarimana met periodically to discuss bilateral and regional issues.

The general presumption was that Museveni was more sympathetic to his Tutsi colleagues than he would be to Rwanda's Hutu leadership. In fact, Museveni had cordial relations with Habyarimana. In the months before the invasion from Uganda into Rwanda, he warned Habyarimana on several occasions of the restlessness of his Tutsi cohorts and underlined the need for Habyarimana to make accommodations so that refugees might return home. In response, the Habyarimana government announced some flexibility on visiting, but in the end decided overcrowded Rwanda just didn't have space for returnees and wouldn't take them back. All of this culminated on October 1st, 1990. But first let me tell you another story.

Museveni was quite interested in using our IMET (International Military Education and Training) program as part of an effort to improve military skills and to professionalize his army. I believe we had about \$400,000 for the program. We didn't have a military attach#, so it fell to the DCM to manage that program. I dealt with the chief of military training to select candidates for American military schools infantry, engineering, logistics, mechanics and the like. We finally wrangled a slot at the Command General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, which is perhaps the most senior military training opportunity that the U.S. Army offers. I took that to Museveni, who was also the minister of defense. So something like that would go up to him in any case. He decided that he wanted to send a general, a major general, Fred Rwigema, to the Command General Staff College. Now "General Fred," as he was known, was Tutsi. He was the senior of the Rwandan Tutsi refugees who

Library of Congress

helped bring Museveni to power. He was at that time the deputy army commander and also the commander of operations in the north. I passed this news to the U.S. Army. The reply noted that the U.S. Army didn't accept generals for training. Generals were deemed by their rank to have already been trained. CGSC welcomed fast track majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels. Museveni was insistent that none of his senior staff had had any military training except what they learned in the bush. He thought it was time for them to be formally trained and this was a good opportunity. Finally, the president proposed and the U.S. Army agreed that he would bust Rwigema back to colonel and send him off to Command General Staff College. I made the necessary arrangements in the summer of 1990. However, the day before he was to leave, General Rwigema showed up at my house just before midnight and he told me that he would not be going. He said he had convinced the President that on account of pressing family matters he couldn't leave Uganda at that time. After the hoops we had jumped through to arrange matters, I certainly didn't want to lose the slot. I insisted to Rwigema that someone take his place. He agreed. The next day the president's office called to advise that Lieutenant Colonel Paul Kagame would go instead. I rushed to process Kagame's papers and saw him off to Command General Staff College in early July 1990.

Rwigema's reasons for staying home became clear several months later. In September of 1990 Rwigema undertook to organize the national military parade, and rather than do it in Kampala - the year before I think they had done it in Gulu in the north as sort of a show of force - he decided to do it in Mbarara, which is in the southern part of the country. Rwigema began a process moving troops, equipment and such for the parade to Mbarara. In reality he was shifting men, Tutsis who were members of the National Resistance Army, Uganda's army, and materiel south in preparation for invasion of Rwanda. The attack occurred on October 1st, 1990. About 5,000 troops mutinied, took on the name of the Rwandan Patriotic Army and under Rwigema's leadership invaded Rwanda. They were initially fairly successful. They moved rapidly towards Kigali. They might have taken Kigali, and thus all of Rwanda had not the French and the Belgians intervened. Zaire also sent

Library of Congress

a few ineffectual troops. Thus reinforced the Rwandan Army pushed the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Army back to the northern part of Rwanda where the lines jelled. In the first or second week of this war, General Rwigema who was apparently standing in a truck surveying the front lines was hit by a bullet and killed.

Shortly afterwards, I received the expected phone call from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, reporting that Kagame had left, gone AWOL, if you will, from Fort Leavenworth. He advised that he would go to Uganda and Rwanda to take up the struggle. That's why General Kagame wears the label "U.S. trained," because he spent four months in the United States in the first phases of the Command General Staff College program. Kagame proved, among other things, to be a master strategist. In fact, his tactics were subsequently studied and commended by Americans at the War College. He accomplished his objective with a minimum loss of troops. He inflicted damage on the enemy, and did so without ever coming to a pitched or final battle. Kagame left his enemy a path of retreat.

President Museveni and President Habyarimana both happened to be at the United Nations in New York when the invasion happened. Since President Museveni was in the U.S., Ambassador Burroughs was there as well. I was charged in Kampala when all of this went down. There was a great deal of internal State Department discussion between Embassy Kampala and Embassy Kigali and Washington about whose responsibility this invasion was and how to stop it. We tried to assess whether and where we had leverage. We asked if Museveni were the architect of all this? If not, was he an unwitting accomplice or what? Museveni quickly returned home. I held a number of discussions with him, about what he knew and didn't know and when he knew it. He professed ignorance of invasion plans but owned up to understanding the Tutsi sentiment of wanting to return home. He also acknowledged that they might be justified in taking up arms to rectify wrongs that could not otherwise be resolved. I found that the president was a master of not knowing things that he knew he should not know, typically involving details of the invasion. Several difficult and tense months ensued, but Museveni held his ground. Outwardly, at least, he

Library of Congress

did take steps to deny rebel use of Ugandan territory and otherwise conform to requests to try to defuse the conflict. We had information that communicated to us that there was more going on on the Ugandan side than anybody would admit to. Of course, that was not unexpected under the circumstances.

Let me say something about Kenya and Zaire.

Q: Yes, would you?

GRIBBIN: Relations with Zaire deteriorated because there seemed to be an alliance or at least a common view between President Moi and President Mobutu about Museveni's arrogance and his non-respect for their longevity, wisdom and so forth. This began to manifest itself in terms of Kinshasa's support for anti-Museveni rebel groups congregated along the Zairian border. Vice versa there was Ugandan support for the anti-Mobutu groups deployed along the Uganda side of the border. I'm not exactly sure of the timing, but the Ugandan security services had picked up information that they considered valid to the effect that a plot existed between Kenya and Zaire, between the two presidents, to do something about Museveni. Obviously, this led to a great deal more suspicions about neighbors on the part of Uganda and to the intensification of border violence, particularly with Zaire.

I got involved because I was the French speaker at the embassy and tried to help the Zairians resolve issues with Uganda. The U.S. ambassador in Zaire persuaded Mobutu that the way to the resolve problem was to send a high-level emissary to Kampala, not just for a one-day trip, but to spend the time necessary to sort things out. Consequently, Mobutu sent, I believe his name was Mr. Ngabandi, who was number two in the Zairian intelligence apparatus, over to Kampala to be this ambassador. Ngabandi took over an empty and non-functioning Zairian Embassy, but he immediately came to the American Embassy for orientation. Ambassador Burroughs turned him over to me because I spoke French. I counseled and advised as to who to meet and what needed to be done in

Library of Congress

terms of convincing the Ugandans that Zaire did not harbor ill intentions towards Uganda, particularly towards its leader. Thus began a several months long exercise that defused tensions between the leaders of those two countries. It also avoided escalation of the border difficulties between them.

Q: This is an unclassified interview, but Zaire has always had the reputation that the CIA has had considerable influence there, although by this time I imagine it was changing. But did that cause any problems for you all?

GRIBBIN: I think one of the reasons the Zairian envoy came to us right away was because he was used to dealing with Americans. I was obviously on the diplomatic side rather than the intelligence side of the shop, but the crisis was one that we'd helped identify. The Ugandans had come to us with it because they knew we knew Zaire, in order to ask for ... not good offices - it was much less formal than that - but our help in addressing the problem. And that worked.

Q: What sort of things, as you were dealing with this, was it to geboth sides to stop messing around on the borders of the other side?

GRIBBIN: Ultimately that was it, but in the first instance we had to get them to gloss over this information - I don't have any idea how accurate it was - that there was some sort of plot. We had to get them to assure each other that it was not the intent of either government to destabilize the other. They needed to rebuild confidence so that messages of good faith and the desire for good relations resonated truthfully. Essentially this was a diplomatic problem. Part of our role was to show both sides that the U.S. took the issue seriously and seriously wanted it resolved. One way the respective governments showed their accord was to clamp down on exiles they could control. Both sides did that.

Library of Congress

Q: Speaking of rebels, a couple of years ago a bunch of tourists were taken up in Uganda by some sort of group, and I think a couple of them were killed. Were there sort of entrepreneurial guerilla groups out in that area going after ransom?

GRIBBIN: No, no one was doing precisely that. However, there was a history of kidnappings in Uganda during Amin's time, when Amin captured a planeload of American Peace Corps volunteer trainees on their way to Zaire and held them for a couple of days. That was ultimately one of the reasons why we broke diplomatic relations with Amin in 1973. The problem of tourists becoming victims of violence has been more common in Kenyan game parks where it was really just criminal violence. Laurent Kabila, in his early days, kidnapped some American students from Jane Goodall's camp on Lake Tanganyika and took them back to the Congo where he held them for ransom. That operation ultimately cost Ambassador Beverly Carter his job in Tanzania in 1975, I believe.

Q: He's now the president of Zaire.

GRIBBIN: Kabila, yes. The 1999 incident you referred to was organized by Hutu insurgents from Rwanda in Uganda's Impenetrable Forest, the Bwindi Forest. That came many years later and was directly linked to the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In the late 1980s, we had not yet experienced those sorts of problems in Uganda. There were not many tourists. A lot of the game areas, including Murchison Falls National Park, at least the north bank of the park, were out of bounds, and the parks in the far northeast were not safe. We just did not travel to the north where the local insurgency continued unabated. I only went up into the north three or four times, always with military escorts and once in a military helicopter. On one trip I visited Moyo, right on the Sudanese border in regard to Sudanese refugee issues. The day after I left Moyo, which is in Uganda, was bombed by the Sudanese Air Force.

As for resident Americans, there was an American religious sect that we worried about a lot. We feared it risked becoming a Jim Jones type organization, but fortunately it never

Library of Congress

became that bizarre. Even so, adherents believed that the dead should be physically preserved so that they could be resurrected. This was a strange practice that alienated many nearby Ugandans, so we kept an eye on the Americans. We didn't have a lot of what we called WTs - world travelers, young backpacking tourists - because the border with Zaire was very difficult to cross and Sudan's impossible. Trans-Africa overland traffic had essentially stopped. Nonetheless a few brave souls ventured into Uganda. Queen Elizabeth Park on the border with Zaire reopened. It had been devastated during the Tanzanian occupation from 1979-81. The 5,000 elephants were reduced to a herd of only 300. Other animals had been similarly wiped out. Kob and chimpanzees had suffered greatly. A single lodge reopened during the late 1980s. Neither were there facilities in Murchison Falls Park. In short the animals and the infrastructure needed for tourism were no longer there.

During the years of chaos, the American missionary community greatly diminished, but in the Museveni years there was a resurgence of missionaries. These were a new breed. Not people who came to Africa to stay for the rest of their lives, but ones that came with special talents - medical or educational or financial and accounting or things like that to help local churches develop expertise that they theretofore had not had. We were also beginning to receive American businessmen.

Q: What did Uganda produce, and how did they get it out to thmarket?

GRIBBIN: At the time of independence, Uganda was one of the richest countries on the continent. Its economy was essentially based on coffee, but tea, cotton, copper, cobalt and associated minerals were also exported. Exports went by rail or truck to Mombasa, Kenya and then on to the world's markets. These days Uganda grows vegetables and cut flowers that are air-exported to Europe every day. It has gotten into local manufactures, textiles, plastics, soap, and things like that. In the Museveni era the economy is becoming diversified.

Library of Congress

Q: I remember Idi Amin made a big thing about expelling the Asians from Uganda, and of course they were the small merchants and all. Were they being reinserted, or had Ugandans sort of picked up the merchant trade?

GRIBBIN: Both. Some of the Asians never left. Most of them did. I think 90 to 95 percent of the Asians left. Not only were they important in small commerce, but they were Uganda's big industrialists, owning soap and sugar factories and breweries and things like that. Some Asians came back as early as 1979, when Amin was ousted. Others, whose property was held by the Custodial Board, weren't sure of their rights. When Museveni's government began a process of returning properties to those who could make a viable claim, more returned. Additionally, if the property was not returnable or not wanted by the long departed Asian, then title was actually passed to the Custodial Board which in turn could sell it. For the first time since 1972, many properties, including houses and businesses, were transferred to new owners who put them to use.

In intervening years, much of the small trade had been taken over by Africans, by Ugandans, who were doing pretty well at it. Consequently, the Asians that came back operated bigger businesses. They were more oriented to manufacturing and production than to small commerce.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Ugandan Government?

GRIBBIN: We dealt with a wide range of people in the government. Our AID director Dick Podol and his successor Keith Sherper and deputy Fred Winch dealt with the Ministries of Finance and Economic Planning. The embassy dealt with the President's office quite a lot, the Ministry of Defense, the Security Services, and of course the Foreign Ministry. Despite the troubles of the 1970s, Uganda had a cadre of very well educated, very astute, and very smart people that we dealt with. Museveni practiced inclusion. For example, most of the time I was there, the foreign minister was Paul Ssemogerere. Ssemogerere was the head of the Democratic Party, the opposition party. Even so he was a member

Library of Congress

of the government of national unity. Ssemogerere was a very competent and capable man. Unfortunately, I think he's still waiting his time, which will now never come, to contest directly for the presidency. But he and his multi-party team of intellectuals at the ministry - deputy ministers, the permanent secretary and others were very effective. Uganda exceeded other African countries in involving women in politics and national leadership, not only as appointees in government but also in parliament. The National Assembly had reserved, I think, 60 seats - maybe it was 30 seats - for women, and those women were elected by women. So, in fact, women in Uganda were double-enfranchised. Not only could they vote for the regular contestants in parliamentary races, but they also had a second vote for the women's slot. That was a good idea. Women did bring a different perspective not just to issues of national reconciliation, but also to the establishment of priorities, particularly in education and health care.

AIDS was the enormous social problem.

Q: Had it already developed?

GRIBBIN: Although we were just beginning to learn about it, AIDS was well advanced,. The Ugandan Government deserves credit for being very forthright in looking at the problem and in devising ways to address it. Essentially, AIDS probably first broke into a pandemic in Uganda, in the district of Rakai, to the south of Kampala, near Lake Victoria. By the time I arrived in 1988, there were tens of thousands of orphans iRakai District who had lost one or both of their parents. Organizations like Save the Children were involved in trying to hold families together. A key problem was that no one was left to grow food. Grandmothers couldn't do it. They might have 15 children in their care when they ought to be free from such responsibilities and farm work. The AIDS problem was real, and was also afflicting the people of Kampala. The infection rate among the adult population in Kampala rose to almost 30 percent.

Q: What was said of the sexual pattern that was spreading this?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: AIDS in Africa is a heterosexual problem, not a homosexual problem. Homosexuality is - I wouldn't say unknown in Africa, but it is uncommon. In a heterosexually promiscuous society, which most modern African societies are, AIDS spreads rapidly. In Uganda it initially traveled along the truck routes, transmitted between prostitutes and truck drivers. Soldiers too caught the virus and brought it home. In the cities, older men would often seek out younger women or prostitutes. They would get infected and bring the disease home. The challenge in Uganda was to change people's sexual behavior. Concerned individuals and organizations began a very concerted program to do that. I remember seeing the minister of health standing in the streets of the marketplace holding up condoms and telling people what they were for. The blood bank was cleansed and national HIV testing offered. National organizations - one called TASO - I'm not sure what it stands for, was an AIDS survivors' organization. Survivors joined together for support and to counsel those infected.

In my spare time, I was a member of the Mountain Club of Uganda. The club grouped a few expatriates along with younger Ugandans - Makerere University students and graduates - who enjoyed rock climbing, mountain climbing and hiking. For example, each year we climbed to the highest peak of the Ruwenzori mountains. Of my friends in the Mountain Club, at least five that I could name right now subsequently died of AIDS. Sadly, they never had a life, never a career or a family.

Q: How tragic.

GRIBBIN: It was also tragic for the embassy. About a half dozen our FSNs died of AIDS in the three years I was there.

Q: Well, I would have thought then and today and tomorrow being in an area where AIDS is high has to make one quite nervous because we're talking about blood, and if you get in an automobile accident or need an emergency operation or what have you, you as a DCM, it's sort of your responsibility - was this difficult for you?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: I worried about AIDS. We conversed with medical personnel in the State Department. We adopted what was called a “walking blood bank,” where the participant's blood type was known. If your blood were needed, you'd fill out a questionnaire regarding your recent behavior. Your answers included or excluded you from being a blood donor. As DCM I was most worried about the Marines, and when we re-established the Peace Corps program, I worried about volunteers. In fact, we thought long and hard about re-opening the Peace Corps precisely because of the AIDS menace to volunteers. I used to call each newly arrived Marine into my office and give him the good old Dutch Uncle lecture, but you know, when you're 19 that may not always work. I kept a box of condoms on the safe in my office. I would tell the Marine. “There they are. Nobody's going to see you take some. When you're in here checking locks at night, help yourself.” I always had to keep filling up that box. That worried me, but it would have worried me more if the box were never touched.

We changed our local employee compensation plan, particularly the death benefits portion of it, because under Ugandan practice, by and large, when a male died, the man's family inherited his assets, not his wife and children. Presumably, one would die at a reasonably elderly age, so grown children would be capable of taking care of themselves and their mother. But if a man died at a young age, then no one took care of his spouse and the children. Additionally, the spouse was probably AIDS-infected as well and on her way to dying. At the request of our local employees, we modified the death benefits program. They knew that if someone died, oftentimes the man's family would clean out his house, take the family possessions and throw the wife and children into the street. It sounds callous, but in fact that's what happened. So our FSNs asked that we put together a system whereby the embassy would parcel out death benefit payments over time and only to the spouse and only in a manner whereby her husband's relatives could not get their hands on it. We made those sorts of adjustments. AIDS was a never-ending tragedy.

Library of Congress

Ugandans would jump at every hope. I remember a woman near Masaka, a town to the south, who announced to the press that her daughter was cured of AIDS because she had eaten clay from the back yard. In short order, convoys of cars and buses took dozens of people to eat the dirt from this lady's back yard. This went on for about three or four months until the lady's daughter died of AIDS. Then people concluded that the remedy wasn't effective. I asked people about this, intelligent people, even once somebody who did it. He said, "Well, it might work, you don't know." Victims clung to whatever hope they could muster.

In response to the AIDS epidemic, we had an American medical community resident in Kampala. They were AIDS experts, pediatric experts, cancer experts, epidemiologists all doing research of various sorts. We certainly had no shortage of American doctors if somebody happened to break an ankle or something like that. But, of course, they were there because of AIDS and, more than the rest of us, they saw the impact of AIDS. They dealt with patients who died from AIDS every day. For them it was an opportunity to study something that was unknown. They strove mightily to make a contribution, to try to figure out how to defeat AIDS.

Let me relate a story about Ugandans changing their sexual behavior. It was clear that part of the solution to reducing infections was to limit sexual partners. In that regard Ugandans became very fond of using the term, in public, in the media and in speeches by the president, of "zero grazing." As a cattle-keeping society they understood zero grazing to mean that one didn't go into somebody else's pastures, but the zero also came from the fact that to zero-graze a cow, you put a rope around her neck and tie her to a stake. She can only eat in a circle. That's her zero and she's always tied to the stake. Ugandans implicitly understood this metaphor right away and it quickly became part of daily discourse. I'm pleased to say now in 2000 that Uganda has made substantial inroads in changing people's sexual behavior. The incidence of new AIDS infection in Uganda is

Library of Congress

falling - the only place in the world where that's happening. Sadly, the people who were already infected either have died or will die as the disease runs its course.

Q: Looking at it in the time you were there, were you predicting what this would do, I mean looking at the rate of infection and figuring out these people are going to die in their most productive years, what this is going to do to the economy of Uganda?

GRIBBIN: Quite clearly it's already had an impact on Uganda. One of the things we the United States wouldn't do is we wouldn't send Ugandans to the United States for military training if they had AIDS or were HIV-positive. Initially, we had the military test them. The chief of training told me that he had to test 10 people so as to have three to choose from for the course. Even that didn't always work. We shipped one Ugandan back from South Carolina in a coffin when he developed full-blown AIDS during training. Due to AIDS Uganda lost the cream of the population in the flower of their economic productivity. Those folks had a higher rate of infection because they had money and were in the modern sector. In short, they were the most able to be promiscuous. The men had the wherewithal to buy beers and women. In rural areas, opportunities were fewer. Think of AIDS as a double whammy, not only do societies lose people in the flower of life, but they lose their best people.

Q: *You mentioned the Peace Corps. You were reintroducing them into Uganda?*

GRIBBIN: Uganda, before Idi Amin, was an excellent country for the Peace Corps. I would encounter people who remembered Mr. Smith or Miss Jones, who was their English teacher at such-and-such a school back when. Since I had been in the Peace Corps myself, I took on the responsibility of convincing Peace Corps Washington that we could re-launch a program in Uganda. The government of Uganda issued an invitation. I renegotiated the treaty that allowed the Peace Corps to be in Uganda. Jack Hjelt, former Peace Corps director from Tanzania, was assigned as director and set up a program.

Library of Congress

Volunteers arrived just a month or so before I left. They started in vocational education and subsequently added AIDS education and conservation.

Q: All this time we were involved in various negotiations down in southern Africa about the situation there, in Namibia and Angola and all that. Did Uganda play any role in this as a friend in the African court or anything?

GRIBBIN: As in most African countries, including Uganda, we kept the government, the Foreign Ministry and the president's office, abreast of developments, including the evolving situation in Namibia. Sam Nujoma came through Kampala from time to time, and we would always try to make sure that we had had a word with his hosts before he visited.

Q: *He was who?*

GRIBBIN: Nujoma was the head of SWAPO, who became the first president of Namibia. Southern African issues were not foremost in Uganda's sphere of interest. Even so, foreign ministry officials were interested in all of Africa and were interested in new leaders. We got involved a bit in Liberian/Nigerian issues, even over in Uganda, as there was an Anglophone connection to those west African states. Uganda's immediate foreign policy horizons were very much confined to its own neighborhood. Sudan was, of course, still in flames. Uganda had always provided some covert and some not so covert support to the southern liberation movement.

Q: From your perspective there, that Sudanese thing, I'm told, is probably one of the longest and almost one of the greatest world tragedies, but people can't get to see it. There's not a lot of TV there taking pictures of starving people. Were you getting any reflection of what was happening down there?

GRIBBIN: We did some reporting on what was going on in southern Sudan. We had some contact with the SPLA, but most American diplomatic contacts with the SPLA occurred in Nairobi. Nonetheless, there were thousands of Sudanese refugees in Uganda whom we

Library of Congress

supported via UNHCR. I went, on one occasion, and the consular officer went more often to visit Sudanese refugee camps. Also, while I was in Kampala, we had a great return of Ugandan refugees several ten thousands - from Sudan to the West Nile district. These people had fled Uganda after Amin's ouster in 1979. Afterwards the West Nile area of Uganda, which is in the corner adjoining the Sudan and Zaire on the western side of the Nile River was virtually empty because everybody was either in Zaire or in the Sudan. When the political leadership changed to Museveni, the UNHCR, the government of Uganda and donors began a program to convince refugees to come home. They did so, principally because they were confident that in a peaceful Uganda they would be treated kindly. Also conflict was heating up in the Sudan, so it was a good time to leave.

We flew food provided by the World Food Program and others to southern Sudan from Entebbe and from Kenya. Food was also trucked through Uganda as well as through Kenya. Normally, this operation ran smoothly, but I remember one incident that told as much about Ugandan Kenyan relations as it did about Sudan. The World Food Program regularly flew food from Lokichockio in northwestern Kenya via planes leased from contractors. One of these airplanes, an old C-117, with an American crew and an Isle of Mann registration but which belonged to a pair of Kenyan brothers I knew from Mombasa, got lost and made an emergency landing in northeastern Uganda at Kaabong. Because the airplane was of suspicious registry and was flown by Americans, the Ugandans were convinced that this somehow was part of a Kenyan plot. They arrested and mistreated the Americans. We got the Americans freed and although I didn't expend a whole lot of effort, I helped my Mombasa friends get their plane released as well. It was a misunderstanding, but the point was that that was the sort of misunderstanding that could have negative consequences. When we finally got control of the crew, one of them would not leave the lobby of the embassy until his international flight departed. He spent two nights there with the Marine guard, because he was just not going to leave until he could be put on an airplane.

Library of Congress

Q: Was Libya fishing in troubled waters around this time?

GRIBBIN: Very much. Libya sought to take advantage of the Muslim minority in Uganda, and it had money. In Kampala Libya would play on Muslim dissent to the Ugandan Government. Amin, you see, had been a Muslim, so his supporters had been Muslims, and even people who had not been Amin's supporters but were Muslims were identified as anti-government. It was fertile ground. Libyan-sponsored preachers and other operatives provided assistance to various Muslim associations and schools. Meanwhile, the Government of Uganda had a correct relationship, if you will, with the Government of Libya. Remember that Museveni fought against Libyans during the Amin era. Given that Museveni maintained proper, rather than warm, relations with Libya, Qadhafi meddled.

Q: Were Ugandan students, graduate students, going out of the country, and were they all going to the United States, or were they going to Great Britain?

GRIBBIN: People were going abroad to study, but many were also coming home. Uganda put a program in place called "Return of Talent" that identified Ugandans living abroad with skills that could be used for national development. They were encouraged to return. Their transportation was paid and a government job guaranteed.

Regarding students, many Ugandans preferred Makerere University. Others attended the University of Nairobi or the University of Dar Es Salaam. Overseas, Great Britain was a prime choice because of historic ties and also because it was usually cheaper, but interest in the U.S. expanded enormously. Consequently, we saw more and more Ugandans applying to American schools. Ugandans also went to India for higher education because the Indian Government gave scholarships. The result of all this educational travel was an increasing internationalized group of young intellectuals in Uganda.

Q: During this period things were really changing around the world. The electronic business, computers, communications, and all, changed the way people operate and all

Library of Congress

that. I would think that Uganda and some of the African countries would be a little better prepared for it because - this is what I gather from what you said about education - they were more educated, hard-working, and all that. Was that a fact?

GRIBBIN: It has become a fact, but when I was there, Uganda's infrastructure was decrepit. Even though Uganda produced hydro-electricity from the Nile at Owen Falls, the transmission system had not been maintained. On several occasions the four stabilizers in my garage blew up when what must have been a thousand volt spike came down the line.

In our 30 embassy households rarely more than one or two phones worked, so we used VHF radios for internal communication. We looked at the possibility of building our own telephone system because there was no hope that the Ugandan telephone system would ever be resurrected, but then heard about cellular telephones. Rather than run our own microwave system, we decided to wait. Today Kampala has about three competing cell phone systems. Clearly, cell phones are a marvelous jump ahead for places like Uganda that were unable to provide sufficient lines. They can skip the arduous process of installing poles, lines, exchanges, etc and go straight to towers and hand held phones. In this way Uganda benefited from being behind, if you will. However, electricity still has to go via a line.

But computers - we were in the dawn of the computer age in Kampala. We had some computers inside the embassy obviously, but they were not linked together nor to any sort of Internet. Today Kampala is very much a computerized place. And it's very much hooked into the Internet. You can look up Makerere University sites on the Internet from the U.S. and vice versa. Undoubtedly the information revolution has hooked African intellectuals into the world system. Even though it's still very much only the intellectuals, that is remarkable enough and will make a real difference.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover, or shall we move on?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: I think we have pretty well covered Uganda.

Q: So in 1991, whither?

GRIBBIN: I came back to the U.S. and was assigned to the Senior Seminar.

Q: *And you were there from 1991 to 1992, I guess.*

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: *How did you find the Senior Seminar?*

GRIBBIN: It lived up to its reputation in the sense that it was a marvelous year to share experiences with colleagues who served in other parts of the world and who had marvelous war stories. We also took time to look specifically at problems America faced at home, in terms of drugs, prisons, law and order, agriculture, a whole range of health issues and politics. We also studied relations with our neighbors in Canada and Mexico just as NAFTA came into force. It was just a great year that I much enjoyed.

Q: *Well, then, in 1992, what?*

GRIBBIN: In 1992, I was named to be the ambassador to the Central African Republic. I began preparations for that, but because my predecessor was not scheduled to leave post for a while, I was assigned to be the senior adviser for Africa to the U.S. Delegation to the United Nations for the 47th annual session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Q: *This was in 1992?*

GRIBBIN: 1992

Q: *How did you find the United Nations?*

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: The United Nations was a fascinating place. Delegations mushroomed when the General Assembly was in session. The session began with speeches by chiefs of state and foreign ministers, and then proceeded into more detailed work on various resolutions. The fall of 1992, though, was when the United Nations Security Council put the Somali operation in place. Ed Perkins was our ambassador, Irv Hicks one of his adjunct ambassadors and Bob Gray the political counselor. This team, assisted by me and others, helped structure the Somali Peace Keeping operation. Prior to mounting the Peace Keeping Force we passed a whole series of resolutions calling for respect for humanitarian operations, observance of political rights, human rights, etc. in Somalia. Ultimately, we judged that a UN force was needed.

Q: What was the situation in Somalia that caught the UN's attention?

GRIBBIN: Somalia was in the process of collapsing into chaos. Siad Barre had died, and clans were beginning to war, coupled with that was drought and famine. People were dying because of insecurity. The idea behind the Somali force was to insure that a humanitarian relief operation could function despite questionable security circumstances. So that's what we put together. As it ultimately transpired, this force grew into an animal that was different from that originally envisaged. The mandate changed into an effort to try to put Somalia back together again politically. That was when the operation began to experience the difficulties that finally led to its demise.

Q: At the time was there any concern that it might grow into this nation-reconstructing situation and saying, you know, maybe this is not a very good place to try to do this?

GRIBBIN: In retrospect, I reckon there were opinions all over the place. There was certainly leeriness on the part of some critics as to whether a force could be effective. But donor governments were under enormous pressure from the media, from the pictures coming out of Somalia, from our own NGOs and from our own humanitarian instincts to do something to save these afflicted people. Even at the time, I think there was recognition

Library of Congress

that we may not have fully understood the security implications of what was going to have to be done, but it was more as matters progressed that the dimensions of those problems emerged.

Q: Well, then, by 1993, was it, did you go out to the Central African Republic?

GRIBBIN: I went to Bangui in January of 1993.

Q: And you were there from 1993 to when?

GRIBBIN: To October 1995.

Q: In 1993 when you arrived, what was the situation?

GRIBBIN: It was my second tour in the Central African Republic. In some respects in the intervening years since I had left not much had changed. The country had not made much economic or political progress. The government was headed by General André Kolingba, who had taken over some years earlier. He was a Yakoma tribesman from the eastern part of the country who was under siege by democratic forces that wanted to transform the Central African Republic into a more modern African state. President Kolingba's ability to respond was terribly constrained by poverty and by government misrule and mismanagementsome of which he was responsible for. The French were still very much in evidence in the Central African Republic. They controlled and supervised some of the inner workings of government - one of the key advisors to the president was French and France controlled the currency. A French military force of close to 2,000 men was stationed in countr1500 at Bouar and 500 in the capital of Bangui.

Q: Again, what were American interests and what were we doing?

GRIBBIN: American interests in the Central African Republic were minimal. There were Americans to protect missionaries, conservationists, businessmen, travelers, NGO personnel and others. We had quite a thriving Peace Corps program. Perhaps surprisingly,

Library of Congress

but since independence, the Central African Republic was one of the best Peace Corps countries on the continent. Volunteers had very positive experiences and they made good contributions to local life. Apart from U.S. citizens, the CAR was located at a crossroads of Africa. It had fairly nasty neighbors in Sudan and Zaire and Chad, so it was a useful post from which to do some listening in the region. Additionally there was a vibrant international conservation interest, because the CAR had important fauna and florelephants, butterflies, gorillas and things like that. However, the CAR was certainly not very high on the African Bureau's list of priorities, and so one of the delights of being ambassador there was that I pretty well did what I thought best.

Q: Again, you mentioned crossroads. What about AIDS? Was this trucking crossroads?

GRIBBIN: No, not a crossroads in that sense because Zaire was impassable. It was, however, at the end of truck routes that linked the CAR to Cameroon and the sea. Although the CAR was not tied into East Africa where AIDS was rampant, AIDS was present in the Central African Republic. I talked about this issue with a couple of Central African doctor friends. I told them I had come from Uganda, where thinking about AIDS was much advanced both in the medical and public policy spheres, but in the Central African Republic I found it a very hush-hush topic to be avoided. I asked, "How do you counsel people when you find that they are HIV positive?" The doctors replied, "We don't tell them." I said, "What?" They said, "No, we don't tell them." I asked, "Why not?" They responded, "It's like we do with most terminal illnesses. If you tell somebody he's going to die, and then he dies, you're responsible for his death, so we don't inform our patients when they're terminally ill." I said, "Well, this must put a real constraint on medical ethics." They concluded, "Well, it's the way we have to do it." Clearly, with this sort of constraint doing something about AIDS was an uphill battle. We did have personnel from CDC in Atlanta trying to break the infectious cycle of AIDS via control of sexually transmitted diseases. In addition to treating STDs, the project focused on partner tracing, that is once

Library of Congress

folks with STDs were identified, an effort would be made to identify all their sexual partners because those people were going to be most vulnerable to HIV infection.

Q: Were there any particular issues you had to deal with while you were there?

GRIBBIN: My most important accomplishment was to bring democracy to the country. This was the culmination of popular Central African desires to become democratic. It reflected the winds of change that were blowing throughout Africa. The immediate task was to organize an election. This occurred in the summer of 1993. As my predecessor Dan Simpson had done, I met and counseled political aspirants for the presidential job, all of whom wanted the American blessing, which, of course, I wouldn't give. Beyond that they wanted the democratic credibility that flowed from such association. The election itself was a thorny problem. How to help a very poor country, which had never really had an open vote before, arrange a free and fair election? In addition to efforts to level the playing field, we were faced with organizational matters: how to ensure the wherewithal so that voting could take place, that ballots could be counted and they could be fairly judged. There were five candidates, or five principal candidates, and a number of lesser candidates, if you will, for the position, including the incumbent president. The key candidates were Kolingba, the incumbent president; Ange Patass#, a northerner who had been involved in the Bokassa government many years before; David Dacko, who had in fact been the first president of the Central African Republic and had been ousted first by President Bokassa and sent to rusticate in the jungle for 10 years or so. Restored to power by France, Dacko was ousted a second time by General Kolingba. The final notable aspirant was Abel Goumba, who was more of a '60s style revolutionary than anyone else. Kolingba may well have been the youngest of this group, and he was at least 60. We were talking about the old guard here. A few younger candidates put their names forward. However, in the tribal and political alignments that had grown up, the elders who rose to the top over the years were adamant that this was still their turn and probably their last shot to make a play for the presidency. With French and European Union monetary support plus smaller sums kicked in by the U.S. and by Germany bilaterally, we Western ambassadors forged an

Library of Congress

advisory group. We aided the electoral commission to craft the election. We provided training to poll workers and watchers. We authorized ballot boxes to be built and ensured that ballots were printed, properly controlled and distributed. Obviously, we were involved in the intimate details of the whole exercise, and indeed supervised the whole political process. We heard complaints from candidates about lack of access to the media and of harassment by opponentin and out of government. I used America's moral authority and my access to the local media to foster equanimity. Several of my staff members attended many political meetings as a demonstration that the U.S. took the process seriously. I spoke often with President Kolingba and his advisors to ensure that they did not use the powers of state to overly intervene or influence the outcome of the election.

President Kolingba had reigned in isolation for the last years. He was surrounded by a group of his fellow tribesman who had no ability, if you will, to take political soundings, but they knew what their president liked to hear. They told him that there was no trouble, that he was in good shape to win the election. If not, they would see to it that he would stay in power anyway, because after all, the military leadership was all Yakoma. Well, to cut to the quick, the president was ill advised. He was not very popular, and any pollster would have looked at the tribal breakdown in the country and realized he was in trouble. As president he never did much bad, but never did much good either. He didn't pay the civil service on time, for example, but he'd say that was not his fault. There was no money in the treasury, and so forth. When it came down to the election itself, there were two rounds of voting. The two top candidates would move on to the second round if no one won a majority in the first vote. Patass# led, Goumba was second, Dacko third, and Kolingba came in fourth with only 11 percent of the vote. It became evident in the last days of the campaign and then as the vote came in that Kolingba felt that he'd been railroaded by the West - by me and the French envoy especially - into this democratic process in which he would lose - and that we hadn't told him that he would lose. This was a fairly wrenching change for France because it could perfectly well live with Kolingba. Nonetheless, French policy in Africa changed to support democracies where they flourished. The CAR was a difficult test

Library of Congress

of new French thinking because in the French view Patass# was probably going to win. That was my view as well. However, Paris found Patass# an unattractive candidate for lots of reasons, but one of which had to do with his inside knowledge of relations with French politicians, including Giscard d'Estaing, during the Bokassa era.

Q: Diamonds.

GRIBBIN: Diamonds and that sort of stuff. They also knew that Patass# was a bit bizarre in his personal behavior, as were all of these candidates, I might add. But I got to know them all well, and I enjoyed my meetings with them. Patass# was absolutely certain that he was going to win. Kolingba never really accepted that he was in trouble until the very end, and he tried to talk me into letting him not go through with it. Dacko was a very pleasant old gentleman, but he had really had his day 30 years before. Goumba, who was the oldest of the old, was the feistiest and the one who really, I think, had the best programmatic ideas in terms of how to transform the CAR into a functioning state.

Anyway, I have two stories for you. Just a day or two before the voting, I was eating breakfast alone on my terrace, as I usually did. My wife had not yet come to post because our eighth-grader was finishing the year in Virginia. Next to the terrace was this beautiful fragrant flowering frangipani tree. I looked up from my toast, and I saw a huge snake in the tree. I called my houseman. He assembled the gardener and the security guards from the front gate, and they managed to get the snake out of the tree and kill it. It was a mamba, about eight feet long.

Q: Ooh.

GRIBBIN: By the time I came home that evening, the word all over town was that President Kolingba had been so dissatisfied with the American ambassador that he had sent a snake to kill him, but the ambassador's magic was more powerful. Instead, the Ambassador defeated the snake. This event enhanced my standing.

Library of Congress

The other issue, though, was really much more serious. As the ballot counting got underway, it became very clear that Kolingba was going to lose. We knew that. In addition to observers from overseas who came in for the elections, my embassy team was sent all over the country. I myself visited numerous polling places to watch the voting and then the counting. Officials and official observers crowded around a small table in the glow of one little kerosene lantern, all of these poll watchers very carefully and correctly counted 100 to 500 ballots and then properly certified their count. These ballots were transported to the Supreme Court. In public session the Supreme Court took the summary count out of each box and began the national tally. Matters got tense in Supreme Court chambers when the numbers began to run so strongly against the President. Late one mornin- I had been in attendance when the counting session opened and had been back once to watch- I got a call from the president of the Supreme Court, Edouard Frank, from his chambers. "Ambassador, I'm very frightened. I think they're planning to kill me this morning in order to halt the counting. Kolingba can then claim that the process is tainted and throw it all out." I talked to the judge for a while to calm him down. The man was terrified, so I said, "Sit tight and I'll come over." So I got my driver and went over. I went up to his office. It was about 11:30 or 12:00 or so. The session was supposed to start about then, and there were troops, of course, all around, but there always were. There was something of a crowd too, but no one looked particularly antagonistic or overly excited. Matters appeared normal. We got in touch with a couple of the other justices, who were willing to proceed. The chief justice agreed that he would go ahead if I would come with him, so I escorted him over to the chambers and sat down in the front row and stayed there for the next three days while the ballots were finally tabulated. I heard from a number of people afterwards that in fact something had been planned that afternoon; now whether it was an assassination or just destruction and seizure of the ballot boxes or burning of the Supreme Court or what was never revealed. But at least partly because I was present, the perpetrators felt they couldn't go through with it. The next move then, on the eve of the announcement that he had lost, President Kolingba exercised his presidential authority to pardon all the prisoners in the country - I mean all prisoners, 5,000 prisoners. They just opened the

Library of Congress

gates of the prisons, and the prisoners walked out, including Bokassa. Part of the idea in releasing Bokassa would be to whip up either anti-Bokassa or pro-Bokassa sentiment on the part of people that either felt negatively about him or who were his fellow tribesmen and felt positively about him. Violence on either score would then require, if you will, the implementation of martial law. But people were not aroused either pro or negative by Bokassa's release, but it was a very tense night. I was in contact with the French general, the French ambassador, and other colleagues in the diplomatic corps, trying to ensure that we would make it through okay. On the next day the voting results were announced, and we moved on to the second round with Patass# and Goumba. In that second round, then Patass# won. He now serves as president. Kolingba finally took defeat in good grace and even relief. I visited President Kolingba on several occasions after he retired to his villa, but one of his last acts was to award me the Central African Order of Merit. Incoming President Patass# would not be outdone by that. One of his first acts was to award me the same Central African Order of Merit. So within two weeks I received two Orders of Merit from the outgoing and the incoming presidents.

Q: Well, how does the transition work?

GRIBBIN: I think most Central Africans didn't notice. One government quickly replaced the other. Life went on pretty much as before. There was great hope that this change would generate additional resources from the outside. We were, in fact, able to get a little bit more in the way of democracy funding from the U.S., but we didn't resurrect a bilateral aid program. The European Community and the World Bank, which were the two major donors, and the French Government were all more concerned with macroeconomic policies and indicators. They needed broad reforms in order to move ahead with their programs. When the Patass# government introduced some reforms, new funds did flow, but none of it happened quite to the extent that the Patass# government wanted. Still this was a very positive experience. The CAR held a free and fair election. Patass# was legitimately elected.

Library of Congress

I was satisfied that he was elected because if defeated, he was perfectly capable of mounting some sort of insurgency or military opposition that would have been devastating. His victory was probably the best thing for the CAR at the time. Subsequently, the Patass# government did not prove to be terribly much better than its predecessor, particularly in terms of management of the economy and of government resources, although it was marginally better. Under Patasse the geographical locus of power shifted north to another tribal region. However, military leadership came from the east from the previous center of power. This meant that the new government did not trust its own military. In a year or two this led to difficulties which resulted in non-payment of military salaries and then several military mutinies. Subsequently regional and UN peacekeeping operations were established in the CAR when public order deteriorated.

But we didn't know all that was going to happen. In 1993 this flower of democracy bloomed, everybody was very pleased, we believed we had genuinely turned a corner and moved to more responsive government. During this period of euphoria, I invited the National Democratic Institute to do legislative training. NDI also did a program of political party training. The legislative training aimed at teaching new Members of Parliament about committee responsibilities, researching and writing bills, responding to constituents, etc. In short, the full range of things that our legislators and representatives take for granted but which were new for these officials. Many members had not yet carefully read their own constitution to see what their powers were. Among the items that National Assembly members learned from NDI was that they had the power to ask people or to compel people to come and explain themselves to National Assembly committees. Shortly after this training, members began to exercise this interrogatory power. Once they got up the gumption to call the prime minister in and ask him to account for some of his financial shenanigans. He was so embarrassed by the directness of questions which resulted in his disingenuous answers, that he felt compelled to resign. Members told me, "We didn't know we could do this. It was thanks to the American training that we learned." I said, "Now wait a minute, canning the prime minister was not my idea at all." No, but obviously our training

Library of Congress

revealed the mechanism for doing it. The idea that public officials should be accountable for their actions was a revelation.

Two other projects that I was particularly proud of in this epoch come to mind. I had some democracy and human rights money to allocate, which was a small pot of money administered by the African Bureau of the State Department that comes from AID. I concluded that there was an absence of democratic culture in the Central African Republic. Parenthetically this was true in most African countries, partly because the children were never taught about democracy. My team consulted with friends in the Ministry of Education where Simone Bodemo, the secretary general, was much enamored of this idea. She and her curriculum committee put together a book of about 100 pages aimed at sixth- and seventh-grade equivalent students. They used texts from the Central African constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or African literature to illustrate certain points. They structured the book so as to permit a sixth grade level discussion about the issue raised, but also that some of the words would be useful in vocabulary building. The whole book was designed to support democratic culture - education about civics, along with the necessary language, vocabulary, and thinking. I was able to get extra money from Washington and arranged to have the USIS printing plant in the Philippines print, I think, 52,000 copies, enough to put one in the hands of every two children in that age bracket throughout the whole country. It was the only textbook that was that widely available. It is still in use today and probably will be until the book becomes so completely tattered it can't be used. I thought that was a useful project that will have a long-range impact on sustaining democratic culture in the nation.

Q: That's one of the things you want to look back on being in the Foreign Service, doing something like that. You really have done. You've made a difference.

GRIBBIN: I think so. Another project was a similar one that we backed into, but which turned out to be very successful. Some friends from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where I grew up, contacted me to ask if their daughter, who was graduating from high school, could

Library of Congress

come to Africa, and do something useful. She sent me her r#sum# or CV or whatever you have in high school. It turned out that she had participated in Alabama's YMCA-sponsored Youth Legislature. I thought that's a good idea. I can link her up with our USIS assistant and we'll assemble a group of local high-school students during the summer to see what interest might develop in a youth legislature project. If that panned out, I planned to seek funding under the democracy program. We followed through, Jaynie Rogers Randall came for the summer and found a group of high school students and their teachers to be astonishingly enthusiastic about the idea. Jaynie laid it out, how it was done and what was required and so forth. But things went so quickly that this group of students decided that they did not want to talk about how to do this; they wanted to do it right then and there. They visited and watched the actual assembly, and then held debates, wrote bills and so forth. So they moved very quickly into sessions of a mock legislature. Later we proposed a more systematic program. We tapped this target of opportunity without realizing there was such willingness to become involved.

Q: You must have left there in 1995 with a certain amount of satisfaction.

GRIBBIN: I did. I thought that the CAR was coming along politically quite nicely. At minimum, it had gained more civility and was headed in a better direction. Economically it remained isolated in the middle of Africa, still one of the poorest countries on the continent, and one of the smallest in terms of population - probably not even three million people. It had diamonds as a principal export, but also timber products, huge logs half the size of this room in diameter. Uranium and gold deposits were known. There was plenty of land suitable for agriculture or cattle. There were all sorts of possibilities. Yet the country was never a going concern economically. These resources were either siphoned off by the special interests or failed to get into public coffers, where they could be appropriately used. The CAR never realized its economic potential, but I still had hopes.

Q: Well, this is probably a good place to stop. In 1995, where did you go?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: In 1995 I came back briefly to Washington and went direction to Rwanda.

Q: All right. Why don't we pick it up next time in 1995 when you came back briefly to Washington and then to Rwanda?

***Today is the 8th of August of the year 2000. Bob, 1995, how did things look, what happened?

GRIBBIN: I'd been asked to be the ambassador in Rwanda, a place where I'd served before. I spoke the languages. I knew a lot of the players in the new government from the time that they were in exile in Uganda. I felt I was well placed to be able to make a positive contribution to solving some of the enormous problems that had been visited upon Rwanda. Despite expressed sympathy from peers and colleagues about being named ambassador to Rwanda, I was very excited by the prospect.

Q: Let's put it in context. What had happened? Before you get outthere, let's talk about what the situation was.

GRIBBIN: Rwanda's genocide occurred in April of 1994. This genocide was a political crime. That is, it was a conscious decision by some of the ruling elite who were Hutu to solve their political problem, personal power problem and their economic problem by killing the opposition, and by this they meant not only the Tutsis, who were a minority in the country, about 15 percent of the population, but also political opponents who were Hutu.

Q: It wasn't just a racial thing.

GRIBBIN: Not just racial. Certainly, ethnic animosity generated the hatred necessary for this. There is a long history here, which I'll briefly recount. Prior to independence Tutsis were on the top of the social and economic pyramid. They had ruled and, in some ways, oppressed the Hutus for generations. At independence the tables were turned, the majority Hutus came to power and began a systematic repression of Tutsis, expelling some and

Library of Congress

killing others. Hutu leaders learned that they could make political hay by going after Tutsis. Before long this became an institutionalized part of politics in Rwanda. In 1990, a Tutsi exile army invaded from Uganda and tried to reclaim a national role. The invasion was thwarted by a combination of French, Belgian, and Rwandan troops. Ultimately the matter ended up in Arusha, Tanzania where a series of negotiations ensued designed to create power-sharing arrangements, which would give everybody a piece of the action. Well, most everybody - new internal political parties, the Tutsi exiles, and certainly the government in power were scheduled to get a role. However, there were no provisions for the "kitchen cabinet," the insiders, the men around President Habyarimana, who stood to lose everything - lose their position, lose their power and lose their ability to steal from public coffers, direct contracts their way, etc. They began to see, we think, that Habyarimana was selling them out in order to secure his position so that he might continue as president in the new power-sharing government.

Q: Well, what had happened to the kitchen cabinet?

GRIBBIN: This group was called the Akuzu, and they were essentially his brothers-in-law and other relations of Habyarimana's wife. They began then to think in terms of genocide. Actually they took a couple of practice runs at it. In 1991, and again in 1993 they organized pogroms aimed at Tutsi residents in particular areas. Those deaths did not generate much of an international reaction and no internal sanction. From there plans expanded.

Q: How did they do this? I mean, would they go out and stir up the people, use troops?

GRIBBIN: They used some militia in these practice runs, and then began the creation of a large secretive militia called the Interahamwe, which means in Kinyarwanda "those who fight together." The Interahamwe was composed of unemployed youths and so forth who were susceptible to the message of ethnic hatred. Army resources were diverted to this militia for the purchase of weapons.. Secret training camps were established. It appears

Library of Congress

that the French had some knowledge that training was going on, although they apparently did not know for what purpose these men were being trained.

In any case, by January and February 1994, Habyarimana was under intense international and internal pressure to implement power sharing decisions that had been negotiated and accepted at Arusha a year earlier. The president went to Tanzania in April of 1994 where he, in fact, agreed to implement the remaining provisions that would permit this power-sharing to go forward. Elements of it were already in place. There was already an RPA (Rwandan Patriotic Army) battalion in Kigali protecting the Parliament, where there were RPM (Rwandan Patriotic Movement) members of parliament. So some of the elements of the power-sharing were already in place. But in any case, Habyarimana agreed to complete the process. On the evening of April 6 as his plane was landing again in Kigali, it was shot down. The president and all aboard, including the president of Burundi, who was hitching a ride, were killed.

Q: Who shot them?

GRIBBIN: Who shot them down has remained somewhat of a mystery even today. There are allegations that the RPA shot them down. There are allegations that a Belgian mercenary unit shot them down as well as allegations that a French military unit shot them down. There's not a lot of compelling evidence in any respect, but the people who seemed to have, in hindsight, the best agenda for shooting down the president were in fact the Akuzu, his kitchen cabinet, who felt that he had betrayed them. Obviously the shooting down of the airplane became the signal for the genocide to burst forth. It started that night. The plane was shot down about 9 PM. Interahamwe militiamen were on the streets shortly thereafter with their lists, looking for in the first instance for Tutsi and Hutu opposition politicians who were in town - they were the most accessible - to kill. The killing started that night and as the Hutu opposition politicians were eliminated, the genocide expanded and took on a much more racist tone. Exhortations to kill Tutsis were broadcast over Radio Mille Collines, which was a popular "hate radio" station. The well-organized

Library of Congress

militia began systematically to slaughter Tutsi not just in town but also in rural areas. In face of the violence Tutsis began to gather at places of refuge such as churches or local government headquarters, where traditionally they gained protection of the priests in the case of the church or burgomaster, who was in charge of the district, or the pr#fet.

However, this time refuge did not work. Instead, local militia would ensure that a firm ring was set up to contain the Tutsis. Then they would call for the Interahamwe who would come, throw a few hand grenades into the church to panic and terrify everyone. Then the killers would wade in with machetes and clubs and kill everyone. Those who survived these terrible massacres were generally people who were wounded but who fell and stayed under the bodies of the dead that lay on top of them.

The genocide was organized to involve as many people from the Hutu community as possible in the crime. Thereafter, everybody would be implicated so no one would be able to call others to justice. By and large, this theory worked fairly well. It worked well because Rwandan culture had a strong tradition of discipline. People did what they were told. When leaders told them to take up arms and kill their Tutsi neighbors or turn them in or point out where they were hiding, promising in many cases their land or their goods or their women if they did this, they complied. There was enormous peer pressure to participate. Sanction even one's own death for refusing cowed all but the most resistant. Estimates are that maybe as many as half a million Rwandans participated in some fashion or another in the killings. The upshot was that this was a very efficient genocide - if you can use the term - more Rwandans died in a shorter space of time than the Germans had ever managed to kill during the Holocaust. In about six weeks or seven weeks, almost a million people were killed, and almost all of them at close quarters. When I looked at Rwanda after the fact, I saw intact buildings and intact houses - it didn't resemble a war zone whatsoever. However, plentiful evidence of genocide was found in the killing places where thousands of skeletons, desiccating bodies, skulls, and bones were stacked in profusion. A number of these gruesome sites have been preserved as memorials to the horror.

Library of Congress

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time, and what was our reaction - I'm talking about the American reaction? And then let's talk about the international community.

GRIBBIN: David Rawson was our ambassador in Kigali. David was an experienced African hand and an experienced Rwandan hand. In fact, he's the only American diplomat who speaks Kinyarwanda fluently because he grew up in a missionary family in neighboring Burundi.

Q: *How do you spell that?*

GRIBBIN: R-a-w-s-o-n. You ought to talk to him.

Q: *Where is he?*

GRIBBIN: He is retired and teaching in Michigan.

Undoubtedly David had inklings, as did other diplomats, that something was afoot, but something always was afoot in rumor rife Rwanda. The first Washington reaction to the violence was that this was a continuation of the civil war. The fact that the violence was directed at civilians was just another sad aspect of the civil war. When strife occurs and law and order breaks down, our first inclination is to evacuate, and so essentially over that first weekend, virtually all of the foreigners in Rwanda left, with the exception of a few United Nations peacekeeping personnel, which I'll talk about in a minute. Americans evacuated overland to Bujumbura on Sunday, April 9. French and Belgian troops arrived to escort their nationals to the airports. Belgians troops that were part of UNAMIR, the UN force, departed as well. In short, everybody was gone by Sunday or Monday.

Q: *You mentioned Belgian or French mercenaries. Who were these?*

GRIBBIN: There weren't really any formal mercenary units that I knew about. When I talked about shooting down the aircraft, it was more to show the rumor mill at work.

Library of Congress

There was, however, in compliance with the Arusha process, a United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda called UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda), which was composed of about two thousand five hundred men under the command of a Canadian general, whose name was Dallaire. The force was there to implement the peace accords, to supervise the cease-fire, to oversee the integration of the RPA into the Rwandan Army, and to ensure nationwide stability so the peace process could go forward. UNAMIR had a Chapter VI mandate, which made it a peacekeeping operation, with specific limitations on its use of force. The heart of UNAMIR was composed of about a thousand Belgian troops. Bangladeshis, Ghanians and others filled out the ranks. An incident on the first morning of the genocide affected UNAMIR quite strongly. The prime minister selected by the Arusha process was a woman named Agathe Uwilingiyimana. She happened to live, in fact, in the house next door to our DCM, Joyce Leader. Mme. Agathe was targeted, obviously, as an opposition politician by the g#nocidaires. They came to her house. I understand that she tried to get over the wall to our DCM's house, but was not successful. Her bodyguard of 10 or 11 Belgian soldiers from UNAMIR were not able to protect her. She was killed, and her family along with her. The Belgian troops, who surrendered on orders from their commander to the militia, were taken to the nearby army camp, where they were tortured and killed. When Belgium heard about that on Friday, the 7th, the initial Belgian reaction was to unleash its troops, take control of the city and bring the Rwandan violence to an end, punish the guilty and so forth. But within several hours the Belgian position changed - and it has never been clear to me exactly why it changed - instead Belgium decided to withdraw from UNAMIR and leave Rwanda.

Q: So often in these cases, and particularly we have been going through some of the same thing in Bosnia at this time, the hand of the United Nations was one of essentially passivity or doing nothing. It sounds like -

GRIBBIN: Well, part of the problem was that-

Library of Congress

Q: It sounds more like the United Nations at the spirit of the time than a military decision on the part of the Belgians.

GRIBBIN: No, the Belgian decision was not made by the Belgian commander on the spot, the United Nations commander or the Security Council. It was made in Brussels. In fact, UNAMIR chief General Dallaire argued throughout that he wanted an expanded mandate that would permit protection of civilians, including the use of force to do so. He wanted more troops and a revised mandate. He didn't get either. He didn't get support from the Security Council in part because the United States was among the members of the council that didn't want to expand the mandate. The perception in foreign capitals, including Washington, was that this was a civil war; this was not something that merited greater UN involvement. Belgium destroyed Dallaire's ability to do anything on the ground such as unilaterally reinterpreting his orders. With the Belgian contingent gone, UNAMIR had no capable armed infantry, because its other troops were mostly support troops or not reliable enough to operate in that environment.

So UNAMIR became toothless. Without a full complement of troops UNAMIR was not able to pacify the city, create points of refuge or protect civilians in the city. Notable exceptions were the Mille Collines Hotel, one of the hospitals, a church and one of the stadiums, where UNAMIR held off the rabble for a while. The strain of not being able to help was a terrible psychological burden for General Dallaire. Subsequently, he had a nervous breakdown. The question remains unanswered whether or not, if Belgian troops had remained, would they have been able to make a difference. My view is that they probably would have. I think that's the view of most people who studied the issue. 2,500 troops would have made a difference.

Q: Well-disciplined troops up against militias usually do.

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Exactly, although they may not have been able to take the battle to the militia, they would certainly have been able to defend key positions and probably pacify the city of Kigali.

Q: The feeling is that this came from the Belgian Government.

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: Because they would imagine, particularly having your troops tortured and killed, the Belgians must have been rip-roaring mad.

GRIBBIN: Yes, that's why I found the decision puzzling. The Belgian Parliament has looked at it, but they haven't, to my satisfaction, investigated that point sufficiently.

Q: Maybe they don't want to.

GRIBBIN: Maybe they don't want to. In any case, with the Belgian withdrawal, UNAMIR was gutted. Thereafter it was able essentially only to preserve itself and a few people. Nonetheless there were many heroic deeds done by remaining personnel, particularly in protecting the Mille Collines Hotel. Meanwhile, genocide swept the eastern part of the country but in the south the prefect, to show the power of officials, the prefect of Butare opposed the genocide, even though he and his team had been instructed to do it. There was no genocide in Butare Prefecture, or very little, despite exhortations from the center. However, the new central government that formed after Habyarimana's death was the pro-genocide government. It replaced the prefect and killed him. Immediately thereafter genocide started in that prefecture. Within the course of six or seven weeks even though genocide had not run its course, most easily available targets were dead. Killings happened at roadblocks. Rwandans carried identity cards, and if your card said you were a Tutsi, you were killed, but if you were a Hutu, you passed through. There are

Library of Congress

several books - Human Rights Watch, in particular, did an excellent summary of individual stories that chronicle both the heroics and the horror of all of this.

The RPA immediately engaged again because they recognized genocide and accepted the obligation to stop it. However, with the RPA moving out of its northern enclave and, with no western world eyes and ears left in Kigali, and with the genocide government decrying RPA perfidy even as it issued propaganda that all Tutsi were fifth columnists and needed to be killed, the explanation that the killings were civil war related made some sense. Remember also that the RPA was secretive revolutionary army that didn't have good public relations or make an effort to explain itself well to the outside world, In face of this uncertainty, the Western world paused while the genocide took place. Meanwhile, the RPA began to move through the eastern part of the country where it stopped the genocide, but its troops were too late, almost always too late. They came upon stadiums and churches that were full of corpses. Many Hutus, fearing the RPA advance, fled before them into Tanzania. Subsequently, the RPA army pivoted south of the city of Kigali and moved into the southwestern part of the country before finally closing in on Kigali itself. They took the city on the 4th of July, 1994.

Q: The militia was pretty good at killing unarmed people and novery good at war fighting. -

GRIBBIN: The militia did not put up much resistance to RPA soldiers, although there were elements of the Rwandan army that fought the RPA throughout. By July 4th the city had fallen; by July 17th the RPA had occupied most of Rwanda. Just prior to that the French Government - I can only characterize my views of the French Government action here - the French Government concluded that something needed to be done in Rwanda. If the United Nations were not going to respond, France would lead a coalition to respond. France mounted an intervention called Op#ration Turquoise, whereby French and French speaking African troops were inserted into the western part of Rwanda from Zaire. The idea was to halt genocide in that area. These troops secured the southwestern portion of the country, about a sixth of the country. The French operated under the presumption

Library of Congress

that reasonable people could come to reasonable solutions. France judged the violence to result from civil war, which required resolution via power-sharing, rather than reciprocal violence. Nonetheless, while France did provide some protection to Tutsis in its zone, some genocide continued there as well. Most importantly, the French occupation permitted the leadership of the Interahamwe and the leadership of the genocide government to regroup and to exit in a rather orderly manner into Zaire, from whence they would pose problems that I had to deal with during my tenure.

The French withdrew from Rwanda towards the end of August, and the RPA took over completely. Ambassador Rawson returned and reopened the embassy and began to deal with the new authorities. The country was devastated. Not only had a million people been killed, but two or three million had taken flight and sought refuge in Tanzania, Congo and Burundi. Another several million were displaced internally. Some of them returned home rather quickly, particularly from the Congo, but there was an overhang of well over a million refugees for the next several years. That also was a problem that I had to deal with during my tenure.

The situation when I arrived in January 1996 was that a very fragile government ruled with the political wing of the RPA in control. The RPM government implemented the Arusha Agreements in their entirety, with the exception of denying seats to President Habyarimana's party, the MNRD and its extremist right wing the CDC. They were all in exile in any case. The remnants of whatever political parties were left as well as the RPM constituted the parliament. So initially, from July of 1994, what you had in Rwanda - although certainly without question the government was controlled by the largely Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Army was a Hutu president, a majority Hutu cabinet, and a majority Hutu National Assembly. Suspicion on the part of outside observers throughout the next months, was that the Tutsis, coming as conquerors, would visit the same devastation on the Hutus. That suspicion drove or influenced policy decisions and perspectives in the West, including in the United States. There was no question that the new government wanted to be secure in its belief that genocide would not recur. It that

Library of Congress

regard it maintained a military machine capable of meeting any challenge, but there was never any public indication from the RPA that Rwanda would deviate from announced intentions to implement the Arusha plan. Even so, some Tutsi individuals didn't agree with the power sharing formula. Within the Tutsi there were differences of opinion, and also differences of experience. One group known as *rescapés*, which means 'survivors' in French, were those who survived the massacres. Typically their families didn't, and often one man or one woman or one small nuclear family would have lost dozens of relatives. *Rescapé* families bore the brunt of genocide. On the other side were new arrivals, that is those who came along with the Rwandan Patriotic Army. Remember that army came from exile. Their families came from exile too. Even though these Tutsis had many distant cousins who died in the genocide, their immediate families did not. These folks were the ones who assumed the leadership, and they were shortly joined by more returnees, exiles from places like Congo, the U.S., Belgium, Uganda, and Burundi - all of whom saw the chance to come back to their homeland and make a new start. So there were different groups.

When I arrived, the rump UNAMIR, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force was doing useful work around the countryside. UNAMIR had been beefed up again by the Security Council in June 1994, too late to intervene in the genocide. The United States provided armored vehicles later that year and additional troops - not Belgians but Ethiopians, Zimbabweans, and Gurkas arrived. UNAMIR had the country under supervision. Local institutions of government completely collapsed. The people who had manned them before were either dead or in exile. There were no courts. There were no police. There were no health services. There were no schoolteachers. All of those people were gone.

Q: Let's talk a bit before we get you actually in place about what you were picking up in Washington and perhaps the influence of Bosnia, because this was going on at the same time, was it not?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: By my time lessons learned in Rwanda were being applied in the Balkans, not the other way around. The U.S. was being more active in the Balkans, I think, in recognizing the need for immediate action, the need to act in terms of larger-scale forces with a broader political agenda. These were all lessons learned from Rwanda. They were lessons that should have been learned in Somalia. However, the Somalia lesson that was applied to Rwanda was to beware of involvement in a situation that you didn't understand because when it grew, there could be disastrous consequences. Consequently, the new administration was determined not to have that happen. This was a powerful consideration when U.S. policy makers first confronted the Rwandan crisis. So consequently after the fact, when the situation in Rwanda revealed itself for what it was, that is genocide, a number of people in the Clinton Administration - Secretary Albright who was the UN ambassador at the time, Susan Rice who was in the NSC, George Moose the Assistant Secretary for Africa, Tony Lake the NSC advisor all felt, certainly in retrospect, that more could have been done and perhaps should have been done. I found when I prepared for post that there was an element of guilt driving policy towards Rwanda. We, the United States, had not accurately recognized or responded appropriately to the genocide, but afterwards we accepted the responsibility to help put things right, politically, economically, and socially. That was part of the mandate I felt when I went to post.

Q: There was also the Clinton Administration, being a Democratic administration with much more affinity, you might think, to its black constituency in the United States - as I recall it, it was the whites moved troops into Bosnia and tried to stop that genocide there, but when there's even greater genocide in Africa you don't do it.

GRIBBIN: I believe that one of the reasons we were more active in Bosnia was because of lessons learned in Rwanda. Now clearly, some of the lessons were even more fully applied in Kosovo. But people who want to find a racist theme can usually find one, because in fact there was - I would hesitate to call it racist, as such - but certainly a

Library of Congress

ranking of priorities of what was important to the United States. Frankly, Africa doesn't rank as high on the scale as Eastern Europe.

Q: I agree with you, but it's hard... When you want to play thrace card, you can make a case.

GRIBBIN: As an ambassador in the field, I had to answer this sort of accusation from my African friends and colleagues over the years. Indeed, the charge made me squirm.

Q: Before you went out, could you talk a little about what you were getting from the normal consultation from the non-governmental organizations involved and from Congress and from the African Bureau and all? What were you getting?

GRIBBIN: There was enormous concern that we needed to help Rwanda. There was astonishing pressure on the administration from non-governmental organizations. They rallied to the humanitarian cause by the hundreds. In fact, when I got to Kigali there were 120 different NGOs on the ground, not all of them American. Clearly there were at least that many back here pushing the administration and pushing Congress to do more. Virtually nobody said, no, let's leave this issue alone. All assumed the U.S. had a leadership role to play, and that the resources to play that role would be made available. We had already made progress. We had rectified some of the problems of UNAMIR by expanding its mandate and force numbers. The unresolved issue at the time was the huge refugee populations in Tanzania and Zaire. Those in what I came to call the "humanitarian-industrial complex" had a vested interest in seeing that funds were available to support their work. On the other hand, I was more interested in seeing that attention focused inside Rwanda on problems there, not necessarily on refugees. At the same time, there was a hesitancy on the part of some in Washington that we not get too closely identified with the new government. This reflected acceptance of the argument that it was the Tutsi quest for power that, in fact, kicked off the whole round of violence. Therefore, they had brought genocide down upon themselves. Additionally those adhering to this line of thinking

Library of Congress

suspected that Tutsi hands were not clean in the aftermath. They credited accusations, particularly emanating from Hutu refugee organizations, to the effect that the Tutsi army engaged in reprisals, even reciprocal genocide. The argument put forward by Hutu refugee organizations was astonishing in its premise. While acknowledging genocide of Tutsis by Hutus, it then asserted a reciprocal genocide perpetrated by the Tutsis against the Hutus. The conclusion was that one genocide cancelled out the other; so return to the status quo ante was the solution.

Q: Was this sort of a matter of the refugees were mostly Hutu by the south and that this was the people who were feeding them, taking care of them, began to identify - I'm talking about non-government - began to identify with the Hutu?

GRIBBIN: Some NGO personnel in the refugee camps adopted the view that their charges were nothing but peaceful farmers who were roused from their homes and unwittingly involved in genocide. Those simple peasants really had not been supportive of genocide, but they risked now being murdered if they returned home or were left abandoned by the international community. There was certainly a pro-refugee constituency in the private sector, but also within the State Department. We have a Refugee Bureau, which focused exclusively on those sorts of issues. On the other hand, several NGOs judged that genocidaires controlled the refugees. Those organizations either refused to become involved or withdrew from the Zairian camps. I heard a variety of views in Washington.

One complication in Washington, if you recall the fall of 1995, was that the government stopped operating. I had already had my hearing and was confirmed by the Senate, but then the government stopped.

Q: *Any problems there, any questions?*

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: No, it was a very perfunctory hearing, as I recall. I was prepared to talk rather extensively about Rwanda, but it was one of those hearings where maybe one or two questions were asked. The confirmation came very quickly thereafter.

In the last month or so that I was in Washington, the U.S. government essentially didn't function. However, I was sworn in. I almost had to come in through the back door of the State Department to have that done. Tony Quainton, the DG, was gracious enough to do the honors.

Q: Not by candlelight, was it?

GRIBBIN: Almost by candlelight. I went out to post immediately after.

Q: The shutdown we're talking about there was a confrontation between President Clinton and a Republican Congress. Congress shut down the government, and thought it would be a splendid idea, which turned out to backfire very badly. But anyway, this was one of the most peculiar times in American politics.

GRIBBIN: As I went out, my mandate from Assistant Secretary Susan Rice and the higher-ups in the Department was to build good relationships with the new government, promote reconciliation, promote justice, rebuild, see to the welfare of the refugees and get the refugees safely back into the country. That was essentially what I set out to do.

Q: You were there from 1995 to when?

GRIBBIN: Well, I actually got to Kigali in early January, 1996.

Q: 1996 to when?

GRIBBIN: To the end of January, 1999.

Q: Okay, let's talk about it.

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: Okay. Let me talk about UNAMIR first.

Q: *Sure.*

GRIBBIN: UNAMIR came to the end of its mandate in December of 1995, just before I got to post, but had been extended for a month. The burning issue when I got to post was what to do with UNAMIR. The Security Council wanted to extend operations for another six months or a year. However, the Rwandan Government was adamant that UNAMIR played no useful role in Rwanda, so wanted the mandate terminated. This was, indeed, an enormous face-off between the Security Council, including the United States, and the Government of Rwanda. The Rwandan view was that UNAMIR had been there for the genocide, but had not stopped it. UNAMIR had only regrouped and come into a more prominent role in the countryside after the genocide was over, after the genocide had been stopped by the Rwandan Patriotic Army. The government conceded that during the latter half of 1994, when there was little administration in the country, UNAMIR played a useful role, but the government would never concede that UNAMIR helped secure the nation. By early 1996 the government felt that UNAMIR no longer had a mission so it was time for UNAMIR to close down and go home. The Security Council argued that UNAMIR represented an international presence in Rwanda that it provided needed stability and most importantly that UNAMIR's presence was conducive to the orderly return of refugees to Rwanda. The Council was interested in getting refugees home and off the international dole.

Rwandan leaders countered that refugees wouldn't come home as long as UNAMIR was there, because refugees would see the situation in Rwanda as artificial. It would not be until UNAMIR left that the refugees would see the situation as normal and then come home prepared to accept the rule and security provided by the new government. I went round and round on these issues with interlocutors. I held many conversations with the president, with the vice-president, with others in authority in Rwanda. I tried to find compromises such as limiting the mandate, restricting operations, and otherwise trying to

Library of Congress

find wiggle room. But the Rwandans were very tough negotiators. Ultimately they decided that they would just refuse.

Q: Was this a political calculation, or was there contempt for it? Where was this coming from?

GRIBBIN: It was both political and contempt. It was contempt in that initially the RPA had been supportive of establishing UNAMIR, because the RPA thought a peacekeeping force would help implement the Arusha accords. However, when the genocide intervened and UNAMIR proved impotent, the RPA concluded that UNAMIR was worthless. That point of view came forward quite strongly. There was also the political calculus that the Rwandan Government, the new government, which had already gained a certain amount of stature, was ready to operate solely on its own. Leaders feared they could never step into their mandate to run their country and to move ahead on their program of reconciliation as long as the United Nations military was there. Leaders did recognize that this decision would antagonize some of the permanent members, especially France. However, being great conspiracy theorists, they judged French support for keeping UNAMIR to be part of a French effort to retain influence in the area and perhaps bring a power-sharing government to power that would involve not only Hutu refugees, but g#nocidaires. RPM leaders were adamant on the point that if there were no UN presence, then that sort of agreement could not be struck. They wanted to be masters in their own house. That was the bottom line.

We managed to get the UNAMIR mandate extended for another two months, so that it could wind up and leave in an orderly fashion, but it left. Lo and behold, the situation inside Rwanda did not change at all. People adjusted very quickly to UNAMIR's absence. I personally regretted UNAMIR's departure because the UN had a helicopter fleet, which ambassadors from Security Council countries were able to utilize from time to time. I went from having helicopters available back to travel by Land Rover. However, in terms of the political situation, the Rwandans proved their point. Peace in the wake of UNAMIR's

Library of Congress

departure did, in fact, strengthen the confidence of people in the government. The government did not engage in policies of revenge, retaliation or retribution.

Q: Well, now, what was happening with these relief organizations? Were they pretty much in the surrounding countries?

GRIBBIN: Recall that by the time refugees arrived in Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi, the Rwandan genocide was on the world media map, but Rwanda itself was still very difficult to get to and difficult to travel within. All of a sudden in Goma, Zaire, right next to an international airport, there were a million refugees camping on volcanic rock. Then there was a massive cholera epidemic. All of this got on television, because the television crews could get there. Next western nations flew in water purification equipment, tankers and public health experts. The international humanitarian community organized and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) took over management of the camps and so forth. There was this enormous focus, both in humanitarian terms and in terms of media, on the refugees. This irritated the new government in Rwanda, survivors and the people who stayed behind - because after all, refugees were, if not perpetrators then clearly supporters of genocide. As it turned out, hundreds, even thousands of people who visited violence on their neighbors were hidden among the refugee population.

Even though refugees were taken care of by the international community, Tanzania in particular met its security responsibilities towards the camps, but Zaire did not. There was no security in Zairian camps. Remember, most of the g#nocidaire army and thlInterahamwe went to Zaire rather than to Tanzania. In Zaire the former government, the ex-FAR, the ex Forces Arm#es de Rwanda - Habyarimana's army - and the Interahamwe took control of the camps. They had free run in the camps. Although several of th"big fish," the planners of the genocide, stayed in the camps, most of them fled to Kenya and to other places around Africa. Even discounting them, essentially the international community sustained the supporters, friends and relatives of those who conducted genocide. This was a difficult proposition to deal with. Humanitarian experts, however, looked at the

Library of Congress

immediate task at hand. UNHCR from Geneva let contracts to run the camps and NGO personnel obviously wanted to do a good job. They did enormously good humanitarian work. So much in fact, that living conditions in refugee camps surpassed circumstances people previously enjoyed at home. This was especially true with regard to health care and education for children. Childhood immunizations reached one hundred percent in the camps and many children who had not previously attended school, did.

Q: I would imagine, too, with the genocide, as with any genocide, they must have destroyed a lot of political, educational, and other governmental infrastructure within Rwanda.

GRIBBIN: In Rwanda itself the infrastructure of buildings was still present, but the systems for providing education and health services were gone. Most importantly, the people who staffed them had either been killed or were in refugee camps doing their same work there. So back in Rwanda - remember most people didn't leave Rwanda. Rwanda still had a population after the genocide of about five million or six million the situation was grim. Additionally, Tutsi exiles returned from abroad and essentially replaced in numerical terms those who had been killed. Rwandans at home were not receiving the care that was being doled out in the refugee camps.

Because the refugee camps were controlled by the genocidaires, they began to clandestinely organize and train in order to sustain the insurgency - which was operating back in Rwanda - with the objective of finishing the genocide. Inside Rwanda those insurgents mounted terrorist attacks aimed at Tutsi families, including a refugee camp containing Zairian Tutsis. There were roadside ambushes, where insurgents would stop a bus and order everybody out. They would have the Tutsis line up on one side to be shot. Hutus would be released unharmed. Insurgents raided boarding schools and ordered the schoolchildren to line up by ethnicity, so they could kill the Tutsis. The schoolchildren, though, to their credit, on more than one occasion refused to separate according to ethnicity, so in that case the raiders indiscriminately killed either all or some of the children.

Library of Congress

Insurgents also targeted Hutus, local officials and government employees who were deemed to be collaborating with the new government.

We in the U.S. establishment tried to ensure that the army's response to these provocations was measured and appropriate rather than out-of-hand. At least initially the RPA response was very heavy handed. The army conducted "search and clear" operations in which it would sweep through an area in order to identify everyone. In the course of such operations, people were mistreated, beat up and there were cases of summary executions. I stressed to the Rwandan leadership, which readily accepted the point, that the RPA was supposed to be different. To be different the leadership had to ensure that their troops exercised discipline so that these sorts of abuses did not happen. Whenever allegations of abuses arose, I made a point of sitting down with the vice-president or the military leadership to insist that the army's code of conduct be applied. And it was. The leaders wanted to apply it, but it was a dicey thing. These were their boys; these were the boys that had fought the genocide. Many of them had family members who had been killed or massacred. It was easy for them to fly off the handle. Military commanders understood their troops, but they also understood the need for strict discipline. In fact, the army record of convening courts martials to hold soldiers accountable for their actions improved dramatically during the course of my time. The United States went an extra mile to help the Rwandan Army. We brought in the Naval Justice School from Newport, which conducted courses for magistrates, army investigators and human rights leaders. We helped develop a curriculum to support instruction in the code of conduct so that soldiers would know their responsibilities. These positive developments helped offset continuing criticism, supported very much by the still functioning g#nocidaire propaganda machine, to the effect that the RPA government was engaged in policies of retribution.

Q: You say you were doing this. What about the Belgian ambassador, the French ambassador, the British ambassador?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: The French in Rwanda were fairly well marginalized. They had two delightful men serve as ambassadors, but France was tainted by its previous close association with President Habyarimana. The French Ambassador's task was to maintain dignity in a situation when France was given the cold shoulder. The Belgians were also somewhat tainted in the eyes of the Rwandan Government, but nonetheless they had two very competent and capable ambassadors who overlapped with me. Belgium remained a key donor and enjoyed more latitude than France. The British ambassadors, again two while I was there, were much in the forefront, as were the two German ambassadors. There was good unanimity on the part of Western ambassadors on what the issues were and excellent cooperation in joint efforts to address them. We shared information and approaches, and often would try to ensure that our démarches were mutually supportive. Occasionally, as required by our capitals, we engaged in joint démarches.

The United States enjoyed special access to new government figures with whom we exercised an extra degree of influence. Our entrée arose from our superpower status, our obvious concern for Rwanda - the U.S. was deemed to be a friend of democratic evolution in Rwanda - and our relationship with the RPA dating from the Arusha talks and even before. For example, I knew some of the RPA leaders from Ugandan days. The U.S. had a great deal of access, but that did not always translate into influence. Still, I was always able to put our points forward for consideration and was able to engage in dialogue and discussion with the most senior Rwandan officials: President Bizimungu, Vice President Kagame, their close advisors, cabinet ministers - even on a daily basis when that was needed.

In part because I was identified as a friend of the government, I was threatened by the insurgency. Although its focus was on Rwandans rather than expatriates, nonetheless, the insurgency also took an anti-foreigner tendency. Several foreigners were killed. Belgian nuns, who were schoolmistresses, were killed with their children. In an attack on a house in Ruhengeri, three Spanish medical personnel were assassinated and a young American

Library of Congress

was badly injured. His leg was amputated, and we had to evacuate him. An expatriate priest was murdered nearby several weeks later. In a terrible ambush in the southern part of the country, five United Nations human rights monitors (none of whom were Americans) and their Rwandan counterparts were killed.

The insurgent group that operated in the southern part of the country called PALIR put a price on my head, a public price. I never felt there was a chance the bounty would be paid, but it did keep me looking over my shoulder more frequently than had been the case before. I limited the travel of my staff as well as other Americans we could influence into dangerous areas. Generally, I let my defense attach# have more access than others. He always went with a military escort and was usually in the company of senior army commanders. I scrutinized other embassy travel and usually required escorts. It was clear that the insurgency was supported from the refugee camps across the way.

Q: I would imagine that what media interest there was that you would find yourself trying to explain just what the real situation was, that this was an insurgency of the people who had been the “bad guys” trying to reassert themselves. But there would be a different story coming out of the refugee camps. Did you find yourself sort of trying to get the true picture across? How did this work?

GRIBBIN: I did try to get the true picture across. Additionally, we attracted the international press which reported mostly accurately. We had many visitors from Washington as well. I actively encouraged the Rwandan government to put together a better public relations operation. We provided some USIS training for this. The government launched a regular round of consultations with the expanded diplomatic corps and made senior figures available to talk to the press and to answer questions. Gradually the Rwandan side of the story began to come out. Rwandans were, nonetheless, very sensitive to criticism, even from Western capitals or by the Western press, of their shortcomings. Senior officials were always willing to play what I called the genocide card, which went. “We were victims of genocide; whatever this is it is not as significant as that. You should remember our real

Library of Congress

trials and tribulations, rather than focus on these little problems.” There was some validity in that point of view, but the card was overused. The Government became irate when criticism was based on untrue allegations, rumor or hearsay. I investigated, at least one incident, along with Ambassador David Scheffer, who was left behind by Secretary Albright for the purpose, to check out an incident wherein hundreds, even a thousand, Hutu civilians were supposedly massacred in a cave in the northern part of the country, near Gisenyi, by Rwandan troops. Ambassador Scheffer and I went to the cave accompanied by the regional army commander. The cave opening was at the bottom of a big sinkhole. The stench of death arose from the sinkhole, and we could see two rotting bodies fifty feet below. The local RPA commander explained that an insurgent ambush occurred on the nearby main road when a group of from five to 15 men shot up a bus and killed a couple of people. A RPA patrol heard the commotion and responded. They engaged the enemy and chased them. The insurgents ducked into the sinkhole/cave. The firefight continued and several of the attackers were killed. The soldier said his men had not gone down into the mouth of cave because they feared that it was booby-trapped. What evidence we could see tended to support his explanation. Residents of the immediate area, i.e. Hutu farmers, also agreed with this recitation of events. They noted that the cave had several back doors, which we also checked out.

This incident had been taken and blown into a huge story by a Hutu dissident who had formerly worked for Amnesty International in Rwanda, but was then resident in Belgium. It came out over the Amnesty International network as true fact. Unfortunately, Amnesty International accepted the story at face value, because this man had worked for them at one point. That pro-Hutu power advocate proved to be an astonishing fount of disinformation, which, in my judgment, the story ultimately proved to be. There were certainly some dead people in the cave, but there were not a thousand dead civilians in the cave. Maybe by now, someone has gone down to see how many skeletons there are.

Library of Congress

Q: Was there concern that the refugee organization was feeding Hutu army that was getting ready to come back?

GRIBBIN: Indeed. The Rwandan Government made that accusation on several occasions. Leaders pointed out that problem to me and to others in the U.S. Government. They warned us, very directly, in the spring of 1996 that if the international community did not get a handle on it, Rwanda would have to. I distinctly remember that message was delivered to me by the vice-president in March 1996. It was re-enforced obliquely on several other occasions afterwards. It was reiterated very, very directly by Vice-President Kagame to Secretary of Defense Perry in Washington, in August of that year. We were still unprepared, however, when we learned in October that military operations, attacks, if you will, were occurring against refugee camps in South Kivu, across the way in Zaire.

Let me back up just a minute to talk about the situation in Zaire. At this time the inept Mobutu government was crumbling. It had never exercised total authority in the Kivu provinces of Zaire, but certainly in the past few years, its writ had further weakened. . The influx of Hutu refugees exacerbated local ethnic tensions between the Kinyarwanda-speaking people that had been living in Zaire for generations, for hundreds of years, and their neighbors. The new Hutu arrivals brought with them the creed of ethnic hatred along with weapons. In North Kivu, near Goma, back in what are called the Masisi Hills, ethnic cleansing began. The Tutsi people of that area were chased away by Hutus, thHunde and the other residents of the area. These Zairian Tutsis, in turn - and now we're getting complicated - came to Rwanda for refuge. They formed a refugee community in northern Rwanda at the same time you had these enormous Hutu encampments in Zaire.

Another group of Tutsis historically resident in Zaire, called the Banyamulenge, lived in South Kivu. The Banyamulenge began to be targeted by an enhanced hatred propaganda machine in Kivu, which included the deputy governor of South Kivu. That official issued an ultimatum to the effect that all Banyamulenge would have to go back to Rwanda and Burundi whence they had come. Now the fact that these people had been living in

Library of Congress

Zaire since well before independence was immaterial to the perception that they were interlopers. The combined reality of Banyamasisi ethnic cleansing and the expulsion threat erupted into preemptive violence. Banyamulenge troops attacked government installations in South Kivu and then began a more generalized attack on the refugee camps in South Kivu, south of Bukavu. It became evident that the Banyamulenge uprising was supported by the Government of Rwanda as a clandestine operation. It became clearer over time that Rwandan regular troops, which had been seconded to this rebel organization, were involved in the attacks. From the Rwandan government's perspective, all they were doing was what the vice-president had promised: solving the refugee situation. Critics suggested that Kigali's solution would be to kill them all, but instead the Rwandan leadership demanded that the refugees return to Rwanda. That was their solution. The Rwandan leaders themselves had all been refugees and knew what it was like to be excluded from their country. They believed in the right of all refugees to come home. From a security/political point of view, the new leaders knew from their own experience that refugees at home were easier to watch and control than groups abroad. Rwandan leaders also knew that there were g#nocidaires among the refugees and that the only way to break the power of the insurgency was to eliminate their source of recruitment, their audience for rhetoric, their source of supply and so forth. Although initially denied, there was definitely a Rwandan hand in the operation. In short order the refugee camps south of Bukavu were emptied. I thought those refugees would come right back into Rwanda, but they did not. They sort of disappeared to the east of Bukavu and were reported moving en mass up the western side of Lake Kivu. This was a tense time. There was enormous policy interest, but not much information from the scene of events. I was in Rwanda and my team was in Rwanda. We offered to send people into Zaire to find out what was going on. Dan Simpson our ambassador in Kinshasa completely refused, and he and I engaged - we're very good friends - but we engaged in a sometimes heated policy discussion via cable traffic about what was going on, how the U.S. ought to cover it and what we ought to do about it. I still get comments about our exchanges from that period. Dan was adamant that coverage of Zaire should come from Kinshasa and not from a neighboring country-

Library of Congress

Q: Was he able to put officers into the field?

GRIBBIN: No. So the problem was, essentially, that we had almost no coverage of Kivu at all.

Q: How about the CIA? Were they helpful in this type of thing, or not?

GRIBBIN: The CIA was not very helpful in terms of internal African politics, never has been. It was not their mission and they weren't particularly interested in it. They got tasked with doing more as this process of ethnic conflagration continued. Apparently the CIA never had much presence in Kivu. Its efforts had been focused in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. They didn't have anyone in the Great Lakes region.

Back to the rebellion. The missing refugees headed up the western side of Lake Kivu, which is on the border between Zaire and Rwanda, and almost disappeared. Then we heard reports of military activity in the refugee camps in North Kivu, near Goma, on the northern Rwandan border. In fact, the big camp of Kibumba right on the border just disappeared overnight. Refugees were all shifting to the major camp, which was known as Mugunga. There was then a fairly large fight around Mugunga camp.

Q: Between whom and whom?

GRIBBIN: It wasn't clear. It seemed to be between those who controlled the refugees and the rebels, but no Rwandan regular forces that we could see had moved across the border from Gisenyi, and we had pretty good monitoring capacity for that. However, there was this major battle. On a Friday afternoon, I had two journalists in my office when I got a phone call from my man in Gisenyi, Rick Orth my defense attach# whom I had sent to the border crossing to see what was going on. Magunga was about 20 miles from the border, and Rick was in sporadic contact with NGO personnel there. He told me that they were coming. I said, "What do you mean that they are coming?" He replied, "the refugees are coming home." Soon Rwandan Government sources confirmed this. By Friday evening the

Library of Congress

first of the refugees reached the border. They were walking. In the course of the next four days, about 700,000 people walked across that border.

Q: Good God!

GRIBBIN: It became a river of people, astonishingly wide and unstoppable. The UNHCR had plans for an orderly repatriation, but was completely overwhelmed by the flood of humanity. The Rwandan Government quickly threw the UNHCR aside when that agency sought to set up camps and rest sites. Ephrahim Kabayji, the government's refugee czar, said, no, there was not to be any place for congregation. People would walk until they got home. They could stop and rest as needed. The government would provide some emergency health services along the way and some emergency rations. However, at the places where these things would be provided, people would not be permitted to stay. He didn't want internal refugee camps. Rwanda was a small enough place that good walkers, which Rwandans were, could get home within a couple of days. Most of the people lived within 60 to 150 miles of the border. As this stream of humanity poured across the border, Kabayji and Minister of Relief and Reconciliation Patrick Mazimpaka commandeered UN trucks (the U.S. provided the UN with a lot of trucks, so the parties had to get my assent to use them. I readily agreed.) Trucks picked up the weak, the small and the old and leapfrogged them to the front of the line or to their destination, while the rest of the people walked. That could only happen after the roads thinned out enough so that the trucks could move. For the first two days you simply could not move trucks.

Q: Here you had a major feeding operation and medical operations sitting in Zaire.

GRIBBIN: Much of it had been destroyed by the attacks on the camp and the destruction of the camps.

Q: Did they sort of move up with them?

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: No, only the refugees left. Humanitarian operations personnel stayed behind. The people came home because the control of the previous governmental authorities in the camps, the Interahamwe, ex-FAR, and the g#nocidaires, was broken, and the refugees saw both the opportunity to go home and the freedom to do so.

Q: So they, actually, in a way had been sort of -

GRIBBIN: They had been held hostages.

Q: They had been hostages, but had this been clear?

GRIBBIN: It had been clearer to some people than to others. There was an element of coercion in the camps, and again, like during the genocide, Rwandans were people who followed instructions. When their leadership told them to stay in the camps, they did. When that leadership was broken and destroyed and the new guy the RPA - told them to go home, come home, they did. However, the refugees were fearful. They were traumatized by months of ethnic hatred brainwashing. Many believed they would be killed. Apparently some thought they were marching to their deaths. The Kigali government decided it would let everybody come across the border un-harassed and un-searched, even if this entailed the risk of weapons being smuggled in. However, officials watched the passing parade and did identify out of this first group - sometimes individuals were denounced by the crowd - about 40 people who were arrested, quote, "for their own safety." Those persons were obviously identified as leaders of the genocide.

In the course of these next days - this was November 1996 - all these people came home. They walked as far as Kigali and beyond. We encountered them trudging along the roadsides throughout the whole country. Now as they got home, the local government in the communes they came from took charge of them. They re-occupied their houses or stayed with neighbors. If they found somebody in their house, they often shared their house with whoever it was. Even if the occupants were Tutsi returnees who were called

Library of Congress

“old caseload” refugees. The terminology referred to the '59ers, or the old caseload Tutsi refugees, who went into exile in 1959, as distinct from the new caseload Hutus who fled after the genocide in 1994. In any event, the massive returns were remarkable. They went very smoothly, much to the dismay of some of the humanitarian organizations outside of Rwanda. Humanitarian organizations inside Rwanda built up their capacity to assist in resettlement they provided a welcome home package of seeds and farm tool and otherwise began to beef up health and education infrastructure in rural areas. The thrust of resettlement was to reintegrate returnees into their home communities. By and large, it was an enormously successful undertaking.

The Zairian refugees were the first part of it. We still had refugees in Tanzania, and the refugees in Tanzania, I think it was on December 1st, a Sunday-

Q: Must be 1996.

GRIBBIN: This was still 1996. The others had come back in October and November, fairly successfully. This caused the Tanzanian Government to look at its refugee camps. Tanzania had been a reluctant but responsible host. However, based on the Zairian precedent authorities put wheels into motion for the dismantling of the Tanzanian camps. I had seen the other returnees, but was not on the border when they first came. On that Sunday my wife and I went down to the border where we met President Bizimungu. He and I plus several members of his cabinet greeted and talked to refugees as they began to come down the hill and across the bridge into Rwanda. They were an eerily quiet crowd. Although not sullen, they were silent. I could see the apprehension in their faces. They carried all their worldly goods blankets, pots and pans, a sack of food, a jerry can for water. Mostly the items were carried on heads or backs, but sometimes a heavily loaded bicycle was pushed. Children were often tethered via a rope or a string tied around his or her hand, and sort of dragged along behind parents, so that they wouldn't get lost. Having learned from the Zairian experience, sag wagons were readily available to leapfrog children and the elderly, but not parents, up the road to well marked holding areas. When

Library of Congress

the walkers got that far, they were reunited with their dependents. That Sunday morning it became clear to the president and me that we had better leave the border quickly or we would be engulfed. The flow of people became so dense that we were scarcely able to drive faster than people could walk.

These two massive returns ushered over a million people back into the country. They went to their homes, and reintegrated fairly easily - surprisingly easily, from what the humanitarian community had supposed - but the Rwandan leadership thought it would be easy all along. Donor nations rallied to support the reintegration effort. Housing was a priority. It was not that houses had been destroyed, but houses had been abandoned, and the abandoned houses had then been taken by the '59ers who came back. Therefore the new caseload returnees often found somebody living in their house. The government decided that the proper thing to do - there was some discussion about this, I must admit, that we were involved in as well - was to restore property to the most recent owner. Ergo, the new caseload returnees had rights to their houses and farms, and the old caseload people were supposed to move out. Where would they go? The donors and the international community began a program of village construction, essentially so that the old caseload refugees would have houses. The house construction program went on very successfully through the next couple of years.

It did, however generate controversy. The controversy revolved around whether the program was voluntary and whether it was being done for security purposes. In the wake of genocide, donors were reluctant to be involved in a program designed to improve the government's control of its people, i.e. Tutsi power over Hutus. Secondly, donors insisted that the program be voluntary. Well, the word voluntary was not a cultural concept that resonated with Rwandans. People were told that they were going to have new houses that they had to move to, and so they went. There was indeed a security dimension. Among the million people that came back from Zaire were insurgents - many more insurgents. Genocidaires were ready. They had weapons cached in various areas. So the insurgency became much more serious, much more difficult, particularly in the northern prefectures

Library of Congress

of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi. In those areas villagization was designed to group people into secure hamlets and thus deny rebels the support they enjoyed or could easily coerce from scattered homesteads.

The government beefed up its anti-guerilla or anti-insurgency operation, and since the RPA played by better rules now, it did a better job. The government integrated a number of soldiers from the ex-FAR into the Rwandan Patriotic Army. They made a point of searching among the returned refugees for military men, not Interahamwe, but former army personnel in order to place them in reeducation camps. Some of my European colleagues, skeptics in Washington and the international press objected to the camps because of "brainwashing." The Rwandan minister responsible said, "Sure it's brainwashing, but what we're trying to do is the reciprocal brainwashing of the g#nocidaires. Wash that evil out and put in a new sense of responsibility. Let these people understand what the rules are that they are now going to have to live by."

Q: It sounds like you or people on the government side were having to deal with real problems, and then a bunch of international nags were sitting there looking for faults and things like that.

GRIBBIN: I think that's a fair characterization of some of the problems. The upshot then, of these reeducation camps for the military - the Rwandan military ran most of the was that they judged which men they wanted in the army. Those who were reintegrated would often be assigned to positions of visibility and responsibility in the north. This process effectively undermined the insurgents' continued assertion that the Tutsi government was exterminating Hutus. Winning-the-hearts-and-minds began to make a difference. Captured insurgents revealed they operated on the belief that "we're near to victory" and "the genocide will resume" which was inculcated into them. In the field when they saw the reality of the situation, confidence in their leaders eroded and they began to ask why fight on? Resolution was not quickly done, in certain areas whole populations fled to the forests

Library of Congress

and there were some army - again, not unexpected abuses, which complicated matters, but generally the situation improved.

The insurgency really dried up because the refugee camps were dismantled. There were no rear areas, no source of supplies or weaponry and no easy source of recruits. This took a while to work through, but the death knell of the insurgency sounded. In the most troubled communes of the north, the government first instituted its policy of "villagization," which also had some land reform elements to it, but as I noted earlier essentially was designed to permit easy identification of people who did not belong in the area. On my recommendation the U.S. went along with this. One, the Rwandans were going to do it anyway. Two, if properly done (and it mostly was), it would reduce civilian casualties inflicted by insurgents as well as army excesses against civilians. Three, it seemed to be one of the few plans that had a chance to work. And in fact, it did. So by and large now the insurgency is over.

To return to Zaire, not everybody came home. Some of the Interahamwe forces plus groups from the refugee camps from south of Bukavu, which remained under the control of the g#nocidaire forces moved west into the dense jungle. Rebel forces, which were initially mainly Banyamulenge and Rwandan, were joined by Zairian rebels, with Laurent Kabila at the helm. These rebels had their own beefs against Mobutu. This combined army pursued the Interahamwe and the refugees as they climbed the wall of the western Rift Valley and descended into the great forest of the Congo Basin. They chased them through the forest, fighting off and on along the way, and finally herded them across the Zaire River, south of Kisangani. At that point the controllers of the hostage refugee population told the people they were on their own. Some of the Interahamwe disappeared further in to the forest. Others surrendered as did the bulk of the refugees. There were several incidents - at least one a fairly egregious incident - of massacres on the part of the pursuing rebel troops at the forest encampments south of Kisangani, and then later on another one near the town of Mbandaka. Once the refugees came under the authority or supervision of the humanitarian organizations, UNHCR in particular (and this was now in April of 1997), they

Library of Congress

were progressively flown home to Rwanda from Kisangani. Several thousand people, if not more, were repatriated in this fashion.

There was great apprehension during the chase across the Congo basin to the effect that the Tutsi government intended to exterminate these refugees, particularly since apparently by self-selection they were mostly Interahamwe and their families. When reports of killings at Biaro Camp surfaced and similar reports from Mbandaka shortly afterwards came to light, concerns seemed valid. Additionally part of the controversy revolved around the question of numbers; how many people were missing? The United Nations High Commission for Refugees had never done an actual census of the camps, at least not in Zaire. They had done estimates, but estimates were based on how many rations they thought they were providing. However, refugees tried to get as many rations as possible, and so there was clearly some double counting. The UNHCR carried on its rolls the number of 1.2 million people in the Zairian camps. If you subtracted the refugees who walked hominiially an estimate, but which later became quite accurate because they all went to their home communes where they were known and counted - and you subtracted the people that turned up at the end, either those who were repatriated from Kisangani or who marched on across Zaire, who went into Congo-Brazzaville, Central African Republic, or Angola, or who were still located somewhere and countable inside the depths of Zaire - according the UNHCR figure you were missing about 300,000 people. Charges were levied by Hutu refugee organizations in exile in Europe and by several humanitarian groups that the Tutsis had killed them all. I and my staff were clearly on record as thinking that the initial number was inflated, and in fact, if you counted up all the numbers, including a substantial number of people who died along the march and in the combat and in the massacres in Zaire, you came out fairly even with a more realistic initial estimate. In short, we weren't missing 300,000 people. It may be 30,000 had died during the course of this war in Zaire, but those numbers were known, and the circumstances were more or less documented. Even so, the United Nations subsequently demanded an investigation into what occurred in Zaire during that period of time. I supported such

Library of Congress

an inquest, but because of that first war in the Congo and subsequently because of the current war in the Congo, the investigation has not yet taken place. I suppose that by this time it would not turn up much to satisfy partisans of either view.

To back step a minute - before the refugees' massive returns when the specter of renewed ethnic bloodshed seemed imminent because of the clandestine Rwandan involvement in dismantling the refugee camps, uncertainties about Kigali's motives or intentions, and in light of the fact that the genocidaire government controlled the camps, western governments including the United States began the process of creating a multinational military force - not a UN, but a European-American task force called a Multinational Force- to assure the safe return of the refugees. Several hundred, if not 1,000, British, American and Canadian troops descended on Entebbe, Uganda which was to be center of operations and several dozen U.S. military personnel came to Kigali. However, events on the ground outpaced military planning. Especially, the refugees walked home from Magunga Camp. Meanwhile, I made the argument that there was no military role in Rwanda in terms of supporting a return of the refugees since Rwandans had that in hand along with humanitarian organizations already on the ground. There was no special expertise that western militaries could bring to hasten repatriation and resettlement. I conceded that military force might prove useful in Zaire in the context of breaking the stranglehold that the Ex-FAR and the Interahamwe had on the people in the camps and providing safe corridors for their return, but this could not be done unless the Multinational Force had a mandate to use force. Since nations contributing troops to the multinational forces insisted that the authority to use force would not be included in the mandate, I said that sending troops would be useless and strongly recommended against it. Based on those considerations, and of course the change in circumstances wherein the refugees came home successfully, we stood down the multinational force.

Q: Thing were really cranked up to get going. This was a bithing. I remember there was a conference here on multinationals.

Library of Congress

GRIBBIN: When the remnants of the refugees disappeared over the mountains along with Ex-FAR and Interahamwe regulars, the powers behind the multinational force were deemed remiss in not being present so as to stop the flight. Even though we never put active troops on the ground in Zaire, we did generate lots of overhead coverage. Satellites weren't much use, but the British had a surveillance aircraft that could get low enough to be under the clouds. It took pretty good pictures, even of people, in the dense forest. That was one of the ways we kept track of where the fleeing Interahamwe and their hostage refugees were.

Q: It seems like all along you were dealing with a European-American sort of media-NGO-organizations that were looking, were in away trying to put the worst case on for the government that was dealing with the problems in Rwanda.

GRIBBIN: That's correct. We also read the worst-case scenario often being advocated by our embassy in Kinshasa, which was part of Dan's and my lively discussions. This view held to the presumption that there was really no rebellion in Zaire. The conflict was between foreign armies fighting their war on Zairian territory. There was certainly some truth in that, but the Kabila rebellion was a real rebellion arising from long-festering grievances in Zaire. The surprising thing about the rebellion was the discovery that the Zairian political and military structure was a house of cards. All it took was a quick blow and it fell over. Nobody expected that. The Rwandans did not go into Zaire with the intent of overthrowing Mobutu. They went in with the intent of solving their internal security problem, which emanated from refugee camps. Then Kabila came along. He and his alliance provided a useful front for the Rwandan operation, but he proved to be much more than a stooge.

We in the embassy in Kigali became the point of contact for dealing with Kabila, not only when he was in Rwanda from time to time, but also one of my officers, Peter Whaley, was authorized to visit Kabila in Goma. We carried out instructions from Washington very correctly with regard to Kabila. We got him to agree to almost everything asked of him,

Library of Congress

the problem being, of course, that Kabila didn't have the command and control that he ought to have had. But nevertheless, we got him to agree to several ceasefires in the course of this period so that humanitarian efforts could move forward. Rebel forces took those opportunities to rearm and regroup - there's no question about that. I paralleled every d#marche made with Kabila with d#marches to the Rwandan Government. I assured that they had exactly the same message because it was clear to us that command and control of rebel military operations was not flowing necessarily directly from Kabila. At the same time, this was not the sort of a war that was controlled by a war room anywhere. It was very much a war under the command of the frontline commanders, who themselves, particularly as they moved further into Zaire, had very poor communications with rear echelons.

Q: What was the impression you were getting back and the reputatioof Kabila during this time?

GRIBBIN: Everybody outside of Africa seemed to think that Kabila was the embodiment of a great democratic patriot who had come to replace Mobutu and who would move Zaire into a new age. Furthermore, his association with leaders like Kagame and Museveni meant that he was one of that new breed of African leaders who was a real revolutionist, forged in battle, a populist and so on - when, in fact, Kabila was just another aspiring, corrupt Zairian politician. He never succumbed to Mobutu's charms, but instead was cunning enough to bide his time and seek to replace Mobutu. We piled expectations on Kabila; goals that he never professed. We expected respect for human rights, control of the judicial system, control of abuses by military troops, institution of democratic reforms and a move to popular constitutionalism. However, Kabila's response to "What is your program?" was, "We will oust Mobutu" then again "We will oust Mobutu." That was it. He never professed more than that, but he was, as I say, a man of some cleverness. He was a survivor in the Zairian political context, and he was determined. I did not find him to be particularly bright. He was stubborn, crafty, and stuck to his single issue, which was to

Library of Congress

take power, to get rid of Mobutu. Of course, he ultimately did get rid of Mobutu with the assistance of Rwanda, Uganda and Angola.

The tide turned with Kabila, if I can continue talking about him, after he took power. Others in the U.S. Government can talk more about the soft landing that we helped engineer so as to allow an orderly departure by Mobutu and his cronies. Those arrangements permitted Kabila to seize Kinshasa without a bloodbath. Kabila subsequently appointed James Kabarebe, the rebel military commander in the field, who was a Rwandan-Ugandan Tutsi, as his military chief of staff. Kabila put several Banyamulenge politicians in his government, including Bisima Karaha as foreign minister. The Banyamulenge played a prominent role because they had been at the forefront of the rebel movement, but also had the support of Rwanda.

Within a short period of time, Kabila became less enamored of his eastern support. He wanted to stand on his own feet, and so began to counter some of the deeply felt Zairian political concerns that he was a puppet of foreigners. He began the process of shedding contacts with outsiders, including with the Banyamulenge, who were Zairians. Kabila began to turn against them and to remove them from positions of power. Kabila was a very insecure man. Almost all his cabinet came from his home village, and so he didn't really reach out too much to the wider Zairian body politic. It soon became clear that he was just another incarnation of a Mobutu-like political leader. Kabila would not be the salvation of the country, which is what everyone had hoped.

Kabila turned against the easterners, especially the Banyamulenge, and reneged on his security commitments to Rwanda in terms of control of the Interahamwe, who were still in Zaire. In fact, he even began to recruit Interahamwe into forces that supported his government. He finally ordered all the Rwandan forces out of Kinshasa. The Banyamulenge knew that when the Rwandans and the Ugandans and the Angolans left they would be very vulnerable and again would be subjected to the sort of persecution that had started the conflict in the first place, but this time by Kabila, who had been their

Library of Congress

erstwhile colleague and leader. So, with support from Rwanda and Uganda, which were also disappointed with Kabila for lots of reasons, they organized a second attempt to take control of Zaire. They opted for a daring strategy. They flew dissident forces from the east and joined them up with ex-FAZ, the former Mobutu army, which they had retrained at the behest of Kabila, for the new Zairian army, but which had no loyalty to him. Rather than attack from the east and march all the way across the vast expanse of the Congo, the new rebels would attack from the west, from training bases on the lower Zaire River in order to take Kinshasa lickety-split. Kabila would be replaced with someone more pliant and problems would be solved. Initially, it looked like it would work.

Then Angola reversed what Kigali thought was acquiescence to the ouster of Kabila. It is not clear how this miscommunication came about. Angola earlier supported Kabila because Luanda felt he would be good for Angola. Angolan officials continued, apparently, to think that Kabila would be better for Angola than someone else. Therefore Angolan troops intervened and effectively stopped this new attack on Kinshasa. However, the rebels successfully extricated their forces from the west. They retreated to Goma in the east and began the hard push westwards. The new rebel movement enjoyed open support from Rwanda and Uganda whose regular troops were acknowledged to be involved in the fighting against Kabila's Congolese. On account of SADC connections Angolan, Zimbabwean and Namibian troops joined the battle on Kabila's side. Kabila also fielded several contingents of irregular force Mai Mai militia, Interahamwe and Burundian Hutu rebels. By the summer of 2000 the belligerents reached stalemate along a line drawn approximately halfway across the Congo.

I won't go into all the various efforts to sort this war out diplomatically, but from the Rwandan perspective it remained a national security issue. They were/are involved because they do not want the eastern Congo to be used to subvert Rwanda. They do not want the Interahamwe forces that are now in Kabila's service to be rearmed, be able to regroup, and to move back into the east whence they will be able to destabilize Rwanda. Until the issue of regional stability is addressed and until the issue of the Interahamwe

Library of Congress

presence in Kabila's forces is resolved, Rwanda has no interest and little incentive to do more than accept the stalemate that the war in the Congo has now become. It's not an economic drain on Rwanda. The war in the Congo is paid for by resources from the Congo. Now that is devastating to the Congo, but it's not bad for Rwanda or for Uganda. That's why pressures on them have not been particularly successful. Even so all the states involved in the conflict have agreed to a formula to end the war. The formula envisages a cease fire, disarming irregular militia and the withdrawal of foreign forces, including troops from Rwanda, Uganda, Angola and Zimbabwe. Concomitantly with the cessation of hostilities is a requirement that Congo adopt a new more inclusive political system. The formula is called the Lusaka Accords. Now (in the summer of 2000) we're in the process of putting together a UN observer operation to be followed by UN peacekeeping operations that will permit some of these provisions to be implemented. Everyone hopes that that moves forward. Once issues are addressed to Rwanda's satisfaction, I believe it will call its troops home.

Q: There's a word you haven't mentioned in this whole time we've been talking today, and that's Burundi. One always lumps the two together. Was there any Burundi role in this?

GRIBBIN: Burundi is also involved in the war in the Congo. It was involved during the first war and it's involved in the second as well. Meanwhile Burundi is struggling with its internal ethnic problems. Rwanda casts a very careful eye on what goes on in Burundi. There was great disappointment in Rwanda, which they readily shared with their Burundian colleagues, that Burundi apparently did not learn the lesson of Rwanda. Burundi has not learned the genocide lesson. Burundians have not learned that arrogance of power, ethnic discrimination and hatred are the seeds of division and destruction rather than a way forward. It puzzled Rwandans as to how Burundians could be so obtuse so as not to see what this did to their country.

Library of Congress

Q: What about the assimilation of all these refugees back into Rwanda. There must have been an awful lot of people who had killed Tutsis in that group, more than you could absorb by pointing and saying, "He did it."

GRIBBIN: I was much involved during my tenure in the issue of reconciliation. A key part of the reconciliation process, as seen by the Rwandans and accepted by the United States, was justice. After the genocide there was no court system. It collapsed. There were no magistrates, no lawyers, no police, no staff - no one. Even so immediately following the genocide, people identified as being involved in genocide were jailed. Over time others were identified and arrested. The process worked a little more properly as systems began to function again. Next there were among the returning refugees a number of people who were identified as g#nocidaires. In short order, the prisons of Rwanda, which were built to house about 17,000 people, contained almost 130,000 people. That number has come down a little bit now. The prisons were terrible places. There was no room to move not even enough room for everybody to sit down. Disease was rampant. The guards did not go inside the prison. The prisons were controlled from the inside by traditional authorities. Hutus from all walks of life were imprisoned. My cook's husband was jailed. Several spouses of embassy staff were in prison, including a doctor who was the director of medical services for the previous government. The papal nuncio told me once that he had stopped celebrating mass in the prisons, and I said, "Why, was it a security issue?" He said, "No, there are more priests in prison than there are outside." That was an overstatement, but there were certainly dozens of priests in prison. All of them, according to the prisoners I talked to, were innocent, unfairly accused, as is true of prisoners everywhere. But they were an enormous problem. The laws applicable to killings in Rwanda were the murder laws, and they were very explicit. They were drawn mostly from Belgian jurisprudence. Following those laws, individual murder trials would take a long time. Additionally, to prosecute cases under those statutes more evidence was needed than was generally available in terms of individual culpability in tying an act of murder to a specific victim. The evidence about genocidal acts that was available was less precise,

Library of Congress

but powerfully compelling. Therefore, the donor community, including the United States, stepped in and worked very closely with the Ministry of Justice to reconstitute the court system, retrain magistrates, educate lawyers, provide resources - even buy typewriters and typewriter paper, put desks back into courtrooms and things like that. In addition, we provided experts to help consider what might be done in terms of a new law. Although it reflected some outside advice, an essentially Rwandan genocide law was drafted, which categorized genocidaires into four groups. The first group included leaders and major perpetrators of crimes, the second people who participated in a substantial fashion. The third included followers who were less notorious, and the fourth people who may not have killed but who identified Tutsis, seized assets or things like that. Even though a new, quicker judicial procedure was set forth for judging people under this law, there were 130,000 people in jail. The court system was capable, maybe, of trying 15 people a week throughout the whole country. Do the math. It was going to take forever. Nonetheless, a start was made via the genocide trials. The numbers when I left in January of 1999 were that about 500 of the category one prisoners had been tried. Most were found guilty. Most received a sentence of capital punishment. A few were acquitted, others given lesser sentences. Ministry of Justice officials estimated there were about 4000 people in category one in custody and another four to ten thousand people in category two. The immediate objective was to try to move through those categories of prisoners. In April 1998 22 genocidaires were executed in public. Although many more have subsequently received death sentences, there have been no more public spectacles. The Rwandan government understands that it cannot execute 10,000 people.

Apparently, leaders felt they needed to execute some genocidaires to convey to the populace and the world at large not only that justice was going to be done, but that it was going to be delivered. Impunity was at an end. That message came out very, very clearly. One of the provisions of the law that U.S. advisors suggested to the Rwandans was a plea-bargaining provision, but it was not until after the executions that prisoners lined up to confess and plea bargain. That aspect of the genocide law subsequently moved forward

Library of Congress

steadily. I am pleased to report that the United States contributed several million dollars over the course of the years to help rebuild, restructure, and support the justice system.

More recently, the government of Rwanda recognized that tens of thousands of formal trials are not doable. It cannot try everyone. Instead Rwanda looked to traditional justice system called Gacaca, which was used historically to resolve civil disputes involving land, cattle, marriage, etc. Gacaca consisted of a long palaver following which a local committee meted out justice. Rwanda decided to adapt this system so that people in categories three and four could be sent to their home areas and have their cases decided by local courts. Punishments would include time served, community service, reparations or whatever. That process is moving forward. I'm confident that even though we have a long way to go in terms of justice, the three-part process is progressing.

The third leg of this process is the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which is a creation of the Security Council. The ICTR was established to bring to justice violators of the genocide and war crimes treaties. The ICTR is something that hadn't existed before. It runs concurrently with the Bosnian war crimes tribunal, has the same chief prosecutor and the same appeals court. It took a long time to get the ICTR in operation. The number of people in custody has now risen to about 34. The Tribunal accepted a guilty plea from the post-Habyarimana regime prime minister, and several other major genocidaires have been convicted via trials and sentenced to life imprisonment. The ICTR cannot mete out capital punishment. Clearly delivering justice in Rwanda to the medium-sized fish caught there requires that the big fish, that is those are truly responsible for the genocide, be held accountable for their crimes. When creating the ICTR, it was understood that those "big fish" would not be caught in Rwanda and would probably not be extradited by other nations back to Rwanda, but they might well be extradited to the international court. For example, the United States has extradited one individual to the ICTR for trial. When these planners; these masterminds, these conceivers of genocide are tried and convicted, it

Library of Congress

becomes easier for Rwanda to find other forms of punishment for the prisoners it holds. Justice is a big element in reconciliation.

I told Rwandans I'm from Alabama, where the key event in the United States in the 19th century was the Civil War. It took my ancestors generations before they reconciled with northerners, and they didn't have to live next door to them while they were doing it. Reconciliation in Rwanda is an enormous psychological task for the people involved. Survivors see people who killed their family every day. Relatives of those who killed may still live next door. Victims of genocide live in an environment where everyone knows exactly what happened. Most Rwandans that I spoke to were fairly understanding about the need for overall forgiveness and reconciliation when talking in the abstract, but when it came down to specifics involving people who killed their relatives, they did not want anything abstract, they want the exaction of punishment. That remains troublesome.

The society rallied around orphans. There were many orphans of the genocide. There were many lost children in the subsequent massive population movements. Most of those children have been reunited in some fashion or another with a member of their family. That is an astonishing achievement in many respects. The international agencies did enormous good work in tracing children, and so now only a few thousand children remain in institutions. There are several fine such orphan homes, including one that's run by Mrs. Rosmund Carr, an elderly American lady. However, most orphanages were closed after their clients were placed in extended families.

Churches, survivors' organizations, widows' organizations - there are many groups involved in reconciliation, trying to get people to talk to each other, trying to get people to lay out their fears, worries and so forth. A thousand flowers are blooming. Some undertakings are successful, and some are not. Some people don't want to participate; others are very anxious to do so. One of the phenomena of present-day Rwanda is that the established churches - the Catholic Church, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Anglican Church were tainted by the violence. People are going back to church, but often times they

Library of Congress

avoid those churches. Instead, they're going to a new group of Evangelical churches, perhaps because these churches permit the airing of emotions in a way that the traditional churches do not. Rwandans are reticent people, so worshipers at these churches find great release in such expressions. .

Regarding democracy, the government was set up as specified in the Arusha Accords, so the form for representative democracy exists. The political parties are not politicking on a national scale for the time being, but the 13 political parties represented in the government do caucus, meet and nominate members to the government. As ambassador I tried to push the envelope of democratic participation. I recognized that the survivors of genocide never want to be in the position where they think genocide will happen again. Nonetheless, there was a lot that could be done in terms of giving people a stake in their own society so they don't feel excluded. I felt the populace must harbor hopes for a better future, and indeed the hope that their children will live in a better place, because without such hopes, people become dispirited. Despite the pall of death, Rwandans by and large regenerated those sorts of hopes. I particularly tried to strengthen parliament as a representative institution so that it might counter balance the strong executive. I pushed (unsuccessfully) for political parties to be able to organize again. The Rwandan Government, with some urging from us but also because of its own needs, began elections of local counselors. They had always been appointed before. The government judged that one of the ways to pacify the north was, rather than having appointed officials running local affairs, to have the local people elect their officials. That way they could not say, "They are imposed on us by a faraway government." Elections have been instrumental in empowering local people and bringing peace to the insurgent areas of the north.

Elections in grassroots communities convinced and assured the people that they did indeed have a voice in government. This was an important step in permitting reconciliation to move ahead. I tried to find ways to bring American resources and expertise to bear on some of these issues, and did.

Library of Congress

Q: We've talked about the problems you have had with Dan Simpson in Zaire and with the media and the non-governmental organizations. There are a lot of perceptions there which were different perceptions. You had your perception. How did this play in the African Bureau and above? Susan Rice, I guess, was the assistant secretary during that time?

GRIBBIN: Yes.

Q: Did this get involved with the State Department?

GRIBBIN: No, one of the strengths of our Rwandan policy was that I had the full support, and vice versa, of my superiors back in Washington for our policies, from the President on down. President Clinton visited Rwanda while I was there. It was a very useful, very emotional, and very successful visit. The President apologized for not understanding the depths and the ramifications of genocide when it began. Madeleine Albright visited twice, first as UN ambassador, and then as Secretary of State. Susan Rice came on more than one occasion. I had various delegations of congressmen and senators, and Bill Richardson, when he was the UN ambassador, on two occasions. Dick McCall, the chief of staff of USAID, was a key supporter. Dick and Susan and the Secretary were staunch supporters of the sort of policies that we wanted to do in Rwanda in terms of reconciliation, in terms of justice, in terms of support for the return of refugees, in terms of support for the Government of Rwanda as it tried to implement policies of reconciliation and democracy. I never felt myself much in conflict with Washington over basic policy ideas. We had our disagreements certainly, but were able to work them out.

The U.S. disagreed on more than one occasion with positions taken with the Government of Rwanda, and it was my job as ambassador to go in and be very blunt with them about our differing perceptions. I pointed out how we thought this would rebound to their detriment or rebound to their advantage. They listened. They didn't always do what I asked, of course.

Library of Congress

Q: When the President came out, what was it one-day visit?

GRIBBIN: It was almost a non-visit. The President was planning a trip to Africa, where the First Lady had been earlier. When she was in neighboring Uganda, we sent a delegation of Rwandan women to meet her. She was very impressed by them and promised to bring her husband to Rwanda next time around. Rwandans were very hopeful that the presidential safari would include Rwanda. Even though the idea was that the President would come to the region and talk about genocide, Rwanda didn't make the second cut because of the perception by presidential handlers in Washington of what the security situation was. Howard Wolpe who was the special envoy for the region, Gayle Smith, who became the Africa chief on the National Security Council staff, were in Kigali at the time on a jaunt to brief chiefs of state about Clinton's upcoming trip. They and I discussed President Clinton's plans with President Bizimungu. He flat out said no, the U.S couldn't do it that way. If President Clinton was going to come to Africa to talk about genocide, he couldn't do it in Uganda; he had to come to Rwanda. We Americans all agreed with his point, but did our utmost to convince Bizimungu that a Kigali stop was not necessary. But he was completely adamant. We passed that word back to Washington. People there, including Susan Rice and, I think, the Secretary, agreed that Clinton really couldn't make the political point he ought to make regarding genocide if he didn't go to Rwanda. Ultimately, I understood, the issue went to the President himself. He said, "Let's go to Rwanda."

So we set up a visit to Rwanda. It happened on March 28, 1998. The security people were insistent, however, that Clinton wouldn't leave the airport. Since we were glad enough to get our six hours, we programmed a visit at the airport which included a meeting with President Bizimungu and Vice-President Kagame, followed by a roundtable with survivors of the genocide - seven very articulate people, one with a missing arm and a woman who had been raped repeatedly, and another who had her children killed before her eyes and things like that. They related poignant tales of what happened. Then we moved on

Library of Congress

to a couple of ceremonial events, capped off by a major address by the President in a completely redecorated airport arrival-departure hall for several hundred people. It was a major event and a major success. President Clinton made an absolutely terrific speech.

Q: How did that work there? Did you have any input into this?

GRIBBIN: To the speech?

Q: Yes.

GRIBBIN: I sent back some themes and ideas, so I recognized some of my points, but none of my language.

Q: Well, you left there, then, and retired, or what?

GRIBBIN: Yes, I left in January of 1999, after a very fulfilling period of time, and I felt a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. I'm threatening still to write a book about it.

Q: I'd encourage you to do that.

GRIBBIN: My wife and I then took two months driving around East Africa, where we had lived off and on for the last 30 years. We made our way slowly back to the U.S.

Q: What are you doing now?

GRIBBIN: I do some consulting and some part time work for the State Department. For example, I was the ambassador for Africa attached to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva in the spring and I leave at the end of August to do the same at the United Nations. I keep a hand in, and otherwise I enjoy building a cabin, sailing a boat, and playing golf.

Library of Congress

Q: *Well, great. Thank you very much.*

End of Interview