

AMBASSADOR FREDERIC L. CHAPIN

Interviewed by: Arthur Tienken

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Q: I am Arthur Tienken, and on behalf of the Foreign Service History Center of the George Washington University, I shall be interviewing Ambassador Frederic Chapin on his experiences in the early '60s at the time of the opening of the Post in what was then Fort Lamy, in Chad. If time permits, we will talk a little bit about his experiences in Ethiopia. It is March 22, 1988. Ambassador Chapin, if I may start by asking you something about how you became interested in the Foreign Service to begin with? Why in fact did you enter the Foreign Service?

CHAPIN: Well my father was a Foreign Service Officer and had a long career ending just about the time that I was opening our post in Chad. I had been around the Foreign Service all my life; I had not originally planned to come into the Foreign Service, as I had thought of entering the Episcopal ministry. On further reflection, I needed a job and so I started with the Marshall Plan in Paris in 1950 after graduating from college. I was very happy in that, but it was a temporary agency at the time, and I thought that a permanent career was desirable. I had also met the young lady who is now my wife and I thought that it was time to settle down. I came back here to Washington to take the examination and then came into the Foreign Service in 1952.

Q: Your experiences in living abroad with your family and with your father as an Ambassador didn't discourage you from joining the Foreign Service?

CHAPIN: No, in those days the Foreign Service was far less bureaucratic than it has become; it was a much smaller service. In 1960, it was the year that many of the ex-former French colonies in Africa were becoming independent, and at that time we were in the process at the State Department of attempting to staff a number of these posts. To do that, we asked for volunteers to serve in these various African posts and to open them.

Q: You, if I remember correctly volunteered. I wonder if you could tell us a little something about that?

CHAPIN: Well, I saw it as an opportunity to be in charge of my own post. We had been year and a half in Nicaragua, and it appeared desirable for personal reasons, for my wife to change her environment. I volunteered to go to Chad, which did not seem a vast leap into the unknown from a series of underdeveloped countries. Although I had never been to Africa before, I did speak French, and that was asset. So I did volunteer.

Q: You were then one of the very first, if not the first to proceed to Fort Lamy, is that correct?

CHAPIN: Well yes, I actually arrived in Brazzaville in the French Congo at the end of January, 1961. The three other members of my staff had already arrived at Fort Lamy and had taken up residence in the house which had been rented for me, or for us. It became the office and mess for the entire staff and was a rotating residence for all of us at one time or another.

Q: Was there at that time an office?

CHAPIN: No, there wasn't an office; what we did, when I arrived in early February; was that I had brought along a portable typewriter, and I brought along a French keyboard typewriter which I had borrowed from the AID agency in Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo. We set up office on the dining room table. The way it proceeded was that I would come over from the hotel around seven o'clock and all four of us would have breakfast; that was: the Administrative Officer, Walt Silva; the Administrative Assistant, Tom James; and his wife, who was the Secretary. We had a whole pile of administrative reports to do for the Department to get ourselves organized and to get our appropriate allowances. This was particularly important to the James's who had been in African countries before and were very well briefed on what was needed to get the maximum amount of money.

Q: What as it turned out were your most important logistic problems in opening that post?

CHAPIN: Well, we had problems in locating properties. There was only one property which had been rented by the advance team and that was the small house that we were occupying. It had no air-conditioning, and it had two bedrooms which were separated from the dining room - living room area, so that you had to go outside. It was not secure by any stretch of the imagination, but that was the office that we had to work from.

We subsequently hired a French-English lady who was the wife of a local French school teacher to come on board and use our French keyboard typewriter, and we persuaded the Embassy in Brazzaville to ship us up a filing cabinet/safe so that we could begin to receive one time pads. Those are the old style code pads so that we could transmit confidential messages through the Chadian telegraph system. That meant also that we could receive classified pouches and that a courier could come in.

The first courier to arrive was somewhat shattered to arrive around 10:30 PM and to be shown by Tom James to the house, where the safe was in the bedroom next to his wife, Doris James, who was sound asleep. The courier was quite uncertain that he wanted to leave classified material under such circumstances, but it was really the safest way. We were able to guard all the material personally, at all times. As I say, we operated very informally: the breakfast dishes would come off the table: the typewriter would go on. We would work until noontime, and then the secretary would go out - that is Doris James - and supervise the cooking. Then when lunch was ready, the typewriters would come off, the dishes would go on, and then we reversed that process after lunch. We got an amazing amount of things done. I find from my letters to my wife that I was able to cover the entire industrial reporting for the country - all five of the industries - in one report very early on, as I happened to run into the American representative of the Mobil Oil Company, which was supplying fuel oil to all five of the industries.

Q: At that time you were in charge, there was a nominal Ambassador however was there not, or had that not yet occurred?

CHAPIN: Yes, my supervising Ambassador was in Brazzaville some 1,500 miles to the south. An Ambassador for the Chad had not been appointed, and it took several months. By that time I had established good relationships with President Francois Tombalbaye who was the National hero of the liberation and had been a school teacher. He had also been a protégé of Houphouët-Boigny the leader of the Ivory Coast. The President had served for a brief period as Houphouët-Boigny's Secretary in Paris and we got along very well.

There were a number of issues concerning the possibility of economic assistance from the United States and a very curious group that wanted to come in from the Smithsonian to find rare specimens of bats, mice, and other small rodents in Chad. They were coming down with Randolph Churchill and his wife and eight British military on leave from a group in Libya, and I had to get clearance from the President of Chad to come in and try to arrange for them to have gasoline for their jeeps. The expedition later resulted in a book *The Great Saharan Moose Hunt* which was published in the United States and it was written by the wife of a USIA officer from Libya who accompanied this group.

On one of these occasions when I was talking to the President, I had also received word from Washington that President Kennedy wanted to appoint an Ambassador and I was given his name, Archibald Calhoun. We didn't have a biographical register; that had not been sent to us, so I didn't have a great deal of information about him, but I got some more in response to a telegram from Washington. I went to see Tombalbaye and Tombalbaye looked at me when I told him about the proposed appointment, and he said, "Do we want him, you and I?" I would really liked to have said, "No, Mr. President, we really don't want him," but I carried out my instructions and said that he was an absolutely marvelous Ambassador and that the President would be very pleased with him, which he indeed was. We did get an Ambassador just about the end of May, so I was in charge from early February until late May.

Q: Was there, if I remember right there was a period of time when the Ambassador in Abidjan was kind of a regional Ambassador. Was he also regional as far as Chad was concerned?

CHAPIN: No, I should be more exact and say that when I arrived at the end of January, I did nominally report to our Ambassador in Brazzaville and that is why I first went to Brazzaville before going to The Chad. There were Charge's in Bangui, the Central African Republic, and in Libreville who reported as I did initially to our Ambassador in Brazzaville. That lasted for three or four months but the Ambassador never came up to the Chad during the time that I was there and before the new Ambassador arrived.

Q: So Ambassador Calhoun arrived in May, is that correct?

CHAPIN: Yes, toward the end of May, just toward the end of May.

Q: Were there any other agencies at the post at the time of the opening besides the State Department?

CHAPIN: No, there were just the four people that I've mentioned, three of them were administrative, and I was the Charge'.

Q: During your tour did other agencies join the staff?

CHAPIN: The USIA sent us a representative toward the end of the month of May, and he was the Public Affairs Officer and set up a small library which functioned. Then we had a visiting AID mission that came out and tried to develop an AID program. In fact, the only instructions that I had when going out to Fort Lamy were to ask the government to ask us for economic assistance. This proved to be a little tricky, because the Chadian government staff was so used to working only with the French who told the Chadians what they were going to give them. It took some persuasion, and one of my frequent trips to Brazzaville as an excuse for action, to persuade the President that he should in fact ask us for aid. If Chad did not ask for aid, it would be the only central African country not to do so.

I had moved into a new house by then; it was the month of April, and there was just one room that I was able to occupy. There were two beds, and an old Israeli air-conditioner that had been left by the former owner which didn't work very well, but it was useful in keeping one glass of water cool so that one could have a drink when one came back from the office. I was stretched out stark nude on the bed one evening, and suddenly there were two white eyeballs looking at me through the utter dark of the Chadian night. It was a full-length French door - glass and there on the other side, when I recovered myself and put something on, was President Tombalbaye's personal assistant who told me that the President had lost the sample letter that Houphouet-Boigny had sent to the United States asking for economic aid for the Ivory Coast, and would I please make another copy so that they could get similar letter to me at the airport at seven o'clock in the morning before I took off for Brazzaville. By that time, our offices were located in some old offices of a construction company on the same property, and I was able to open the safe and get out the letter, type up a copy (no Xerox machines in those days) for the President and hand it to his assistant. Sure enough, I was greeted at the plane side in the morning by an emissary from the President with a request for economic assistance.

Q: When you went out, I understand from what you said that you did not have very specific instructions from the Department of State. What did the Department tell you they expected of you there, and what if anything were Department instructions as to what we should do by opening a post in Fort Lamy?

CHAPIN: Well, they relied entirely upon my discretion and experience as a Foreign Service Officer and AID officer from 1950 until the end of 1960. I got off the plane in Washington, my wife and young children went on to New York and I came into the Department to see you, Art Tienken - my present interlocutor - to see about the arrangements for my travel to Chad. I found that the supervising Ambassador in Brazzaville would not be there for several days, as he was touring the interior countries that were then part of his responsibility.

You offered to have the Department arrange a nice seven day transatlantic journey on the S.S. America because the Department didn't have any money to keep me on consultation in Washington in order to find out about Africa, to which I was going. That didn't seem to make any difference, since when I went to see the officer who was in charge of all of French Equatorial Africa, he said that they didn't really know anything about Chad. The only thing they did know was the annual report of the Chamber of Commerce, which had been done for 1960. He gave me that copy and said "Read this, that's all we know, get lost!"

I took a train to New York in a snowstorm, because there was no room the inn in Washington because it was the night before President Kennedy's inauguration. I did see the necessary people, I had travel orders, and I went by plane to Paris and on down to Brazzaville avoiding Chad, but flying over Douala and I got to Brazzaville on January 30.

Q: Chad of course was a former French colony and I assume and perhaps you could comment on that, that the French were in a very strong position yet in Chad. I guess I would like you to comment on that, and did you have any problems with the French?

CHAPIN: No, I spoke French quite fluently. I had lived in Paris when I worked in the Marshall Plan, that is where I started in 1950, and I had spoken French as a boy and studied French grammar and so on, French literature. I really didn't have any problem with the French at all. They were pervasive; there was only one Chadian college graduate in the entire country of about three million people. The President himself had maybe seventh, or eighth, or maybe ninth grade schooling.

The Foreign Minister was a man who had lived in Paris. He was however only there a short period of time and was then forced to resign and replaced by an Arab from Northern Chad who had only three years of Muslim religious education, and no other formal education whatsoever. I was at that time thirty-one, and he was twenty-nine but he had only about three years of education. The French controlled everything and prepared all the papers and the cabinet ministers simply signed off. I can tell you later about how we negotiated the first aid program for Chad, and you will see that everything was in French hands.

Q: Well, let me sort of develop a little bit more the actual political, economic situation on the ground when you found it there. Chad later, as you know, became a rather controversial problem in Africa because of a variety of things which I hope we can touch on later. When you arrived there, you had President Tombalbaye who was in firm control, but were there other elements that you could already detect that were likely to cause differences, or whatever?

CHAPIN: The country is divided essentially between the populous lower third, which is Sara and Bantu, not the normal concept of the Bantus as rather short, but that group of Africans which stretch across the entire continent who are tall and muscular and rather thin. That group dominated, and that's where Tombalbaye had developed his independence party. In the north, covering a large area, were the Arab and partially Arab groups, there were other tribes some of them were listed as white, who came under Muslim influence. The Muslims came down in that part of Africa up to the line where the tse tse fly reigned. The tse tse fly killed off the Arab horses, and at that point it was clearly demarcated as to where the Muslim Sara boundary lay. It lay right along the line of the extension of the tse tse fly. In terms of population, the Arabs and the Northerners, who now dominate the Chadian government, were a small minority, but there was always a group of them in the government, and Tombalbaye had a number of them, including his second Foreign Minister, during my time there, who were Northern Muslims.

Q: As events proved later, the Libyans had a role to play in Chad. Were they evident at the time that you arrived?

CHAPIN: There was a Libyan Consul who eventually came to call on me as charge', and eventually I was the Dean of the small Diplomatic Corps. That was virtually the American mission at one time, because the French representative was found to have interfered with local politics when somebody came over the wall of his compound and found one of his safes open and managed to read some documents about his support to opposition leaders to Tombalbaye. So he was declared persona non grata, and I became Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, and the Libyan came to call on me. We maintained correct relations, but he was always a rather aloof and mysterious force in the country and very active of course with the Arab northerners.

Q: At that point in time Qadhafi was not yet in power?

CHAPIN: No, he was not, by no stretch of the imagination.

Q: And therefore the Libyan attitude towards Chad may have been very different from what it was today?

CHAPIN: Well, they always had an interest in the Northern part of Chad which they believed was part of their territory. The border from their point of view was not properly demarcated and there has never been agreement as to where that boundary should be. There was at that time; although it has not resulted in anything concrete, there was at that time great speculation that there might be petroleum resources up in the northern part of Chad, directly below outcroppings in Libya.

Q: Some of the better known names in more recent history of Chad were such as Goukouni, Hassen Hsabri, and Tombalbaye. Were those people there and were they active when you first started?

CHAPIN: No, none of those people were known to me. There is an age difference, of course. Tombalbaye was just over forty in 1961 and by African standards someone over forty is an old man, and as I said the Foreign Minister was twenty-nine. I don't know off-hand because I haven't followed Chadian affairs, but I think that all the people that you mentioned are considerably younger. I happened to be in Fort Lamy in 1984 on an inspection trip, and I did find that my old friend the Foreign Minister was still alive, but he was said to be ga-ga at the age of fifty odd years. I did see and talk to one minister who had been the Minister of Finance who was still a minister at that time, Djidingar. I believe that the one Supreme Court justice who had been around, that had been Minister of Justice, was also somewhere in the country, although I didn't see him.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the French impact, about the French influence. It was the French who gave up The Chad so that it could become independent, they would have rather stayed to an extent. Tell me a bit more about it?

CHAPIN: Indeed, there were three thousand French in Fort Lamy, of whom about half were military. They had a big airbase and an extraordinarily long runway which was used for civilian purposes, and there was also a military portion adjacent to that. It was part of the lifeline for France going down to their atomic testing sites in the Indian Ocean, and the regular French military flights went through there.

The Chad had always been very dear to General De Gaulle because the Chadians were prominent in the liberation of Paris, the Chadians - both French and Chadians - went north and attacked successfully at Bir Hakim in Libya, and then they were given the honor of leading the French forces into Paris for the liberation of Paris. The French maintained a garrison of Infanterie de la Marine; they are not really like our Marines, but they are somewhat similar to those troops. They were an elite corps in Fort Lamy; it was not the Foreign Legion and so they had a substantial military presence and they dominated the school system.

The French had advisors to all the cabinet members who really did all their work, and only the President and a few of his ministers, Touragaba, the first Foreign Minister, were really able to deal on an international level.

Q: I take it that Tombalbaye and his government was accessible? You had no problem with seeing them?

CHAPIN: I had no problem whatsoever and often saw the President. We negotiated the economic aid program for the Chad, and the Ambassador came back from one of his trips abroad, and actually was present to sign the various agreements, but it had all been negotiated with the President and to the end referred to me as Monsieur l' Ambassadeur.

Q: Were there any other countries represented at the time?

CHAPIN: As I said, at one time the French high representative was declared persona non grata and we were the only ones. The Egyptians sent in a charge' who stayed for a few months, found it totally boring, too hot, and decamped and went back. The Sudanese sent somebody over from time to time: the West Germans eventually set up a mission, but that was after my time. They were there temporarily on and off on visiting missions. The British Ambassador who was responsible for all of Equatorial Africa and a large part of Africa toured through there. We even had an Australian ambassador come through, but very few people decided to set up a permanent representation. The Israelis were among the first to decide to do so, but they were just getting themselves installed, as I was leaving in July of 1962.

Q: Meanwhile back on the farm, namely life in Chad. What did you do for goods - food? Did you get things from outside, did you get them locally or what?

CHAPIN: Initially, of course, we had this informal mess for the four people who were there. First the family of Walt Silva came and they moved out to an apartment that I had originally taken, and when they came in, I turned the apartment over to them and went back to the hotel and had some of my meals at the mess. You could buy certain things locally - beets was one of the few vegetables you could get: you could buy some scrawny chickens; and you could buy anything that you wanted at Paris prices plus air freight to Fort Lamy.

The French community used to get a cargo plane in every Saturday. The French cheeses, everything, was available; particularly on Sunday. Sunday was a big day and the people would go off to the little properties that they had outside of Fort Lamy and gorge themselves on the food that they had brought in from Paris and paid for. There was a Greek grocer who had a variety of imported items and then eventually we got our effects and we received a shipment of food and some basic things for our children primarily, who didn't come out until early June. Anything you wanted, provided you were willing to pay for it, you could have in Fort Lamy.

Q: Meanwhile was it possible for you to travel? Could you get around in Chad?

CHAPIN: I did travel somewhat. I went down on one trip to Leopoldville and came back to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic by air. There our Embassy jeep had been shipped in to the river - head at Bangui and we picked up the jeep, two of us, and drove it fourteen-hundred miles into Fort Lamy. We went through the Central African Republic, past pygmy villages in the early morning light and reached the border of the Chad in the afternoon. I have an account of that I can perhaps bring up if you will just indulge me one moment.

At the border between the Chad and the Central African Republic it was one of the most desolate places I have ever seen. Inside the border, there was a barrier with one of the officials who was supposed to be tending the barrier, dancing around with a local girl to the music of a radio. I did manage to get one of the two officials at the border to hand me a form and I started filling it out, but it wasn't necessary to fill the whole thing out.

I told the guard at the border that I was the American Ambassador and they saw "Ambassador American" on the car transit document and they all broke out into smiles where it had been pretty sticky before, the couple even stopped dancing to express interest. I had to move the heavy barrier myself across the road and wait for my companion Mr. McIlvaine to drive through and replace it, lest they changed their minds. We did get through without any formal entry documents into Chad. It was very much the same when crossing from Congo Brazzaville to Congo Leopoldville on the ferry, I managed to do that without any formal documentation at all. In those days, security in Africa was not a big concern. Everybody was friendly, and it was just a question of what you could bluff your way into.

Q: This is side two of my discussion with Ambassador Frederic Chapin of his situation in The Chad. I would like to ask him about Chadian perceptions of the United States?

CHAPIN: Chadians really had no perception of the United States. One of the first indications of this that I had was with the Secretary to the President of the short lived National Assembly of Chad. He was a young man who had come from, was a son of one of the chieftains in the western part of Chad. We got to be rather good friends, we had lunch together and we talked about his aspirations and about the possibilities of some kind of representative government. Representative government had been snuffed out very early in my period in Chad. About a month and a half after I arrived, the National Assembly had been sent packing, and the staff had remained. He said to me, "You know you are the first European that I have been able to talk to," but I knew what he meant. I said, "I'm not a European, I come from an entirely different continent." What he had meant to tell me was that I was the first white with whom he had had any contact. For Chadians, whites were French, and Americans were some kind of concept which was beyond them because they had very little education, and very little understanding of geography.

Q: Did the Chadians even know that the United States even existed when you were there?

CHAPIN: President Tombalbaye certainly knew the United States existed and where it was, but it was very difficult to explain to him when we had problems with Cuba, what Cuba was and why Cuba was significant to the United States, as it was only a little island off a great continent of America and the United States. That was a formidable task.

Q: Did the French ever give you any problems?

CHAPIN: No, not really. When we were negotiating the aid program, the French had been so used to telling the Chadians what they would receive, I had to set up a procedure by which we could negotiate our own aid program. I suggested that the Secretary General of the Government be appointed as my interlocutor in these negotiations. When he came into the big cabinet room which was a huge room with a large mahogany table with forty seats around it, I had been there and was seated at one side of the table. The Secretary General came in, and I stood up, and he sat down immediately next to me. The room was otherwise filled with French advisors, and so we began to discuss the projects which had in advance all been cleared with the French advisors.

The French in their usual way, which I had previously experienced at NATO, began by saying "We agree in principle, but we have to edit these remarks a little bit, or these projects a little bit." Each one began to edit in a different style of French, some nineteenth century, some twentieth century, some even eighteenth century French. Their changes and corrections were all to the French texts - we had parallel columns in French and in English, they weren't interested in the English - they were only interested in the French which had been translated by our French-British secretary. I was glad to take all of their changes, as long as they didn't alter the sense of the English.

So the Chadians looked at this procedure and they watched how all this went forward. The next thing that happened, there were a couple of objections by the Ministry of Finance representative, a Frenchman, that Chad was not going to give privileges and immunities to any of the AID personnel that we might send there. I asked that this issue be reserved, and there were one or two other technical problems, and then I proposed to the Secretary General that we should have a "petite comitè½", or a reserved small group in which we could discuss these small disagreed items. I suggested that we meet in his office, which in due course we did, and the representative of the Finance Ministry was there and the meeting went along pretty well. I had known the representative of the Finance Ministry quite well and he said "Well there is a problem, there is an inconsistency in this document which is presented." I said "Yes, I am well aware of this inconsistency, I have telegraphed my government for corrections on this point."

The Chadians were absolutely amazed to see two white people disagreeing with one another, but civilly, over substance. We resolved most of the questions, but the issue of privileges and immunities was not reconciled. I said to the Secretary General, "I request that this issue be referred to the President, and I suggest that I have a meeting with the President to see whether we can resolve these issues. Meanwhile, I'm getting instructions." In fact, this was carried out, and the President and I met and resolved the few remaining issues, and I had the President sign the first one of our project agreements. Thus we taught the Chadians how to negotiate.

When we got to the signing ceremony for the aid agreement, the same Chadian Secretary General came to that meeting, and when we produced a small communique' which might be published by the official gazette of the Chadian government, the Secretary General said, "Oh we agree with everything in principle, but we have to edit it." So he proceeded to edit relatively good French into impossible Chadian French, and it was so published. They learned that the way to negotiate is to edit!

Q: While you were there did AID that is ICA, but it used to be what we call today Agency for International Development. Did they finally send people while you were still there?

CHAPIN: There was nobody permanently there I think, before I left. Their mission came and proposed a program, and wrote a report. I had to go down to Leopoldville to see the assistant ICA administrator, and I came up with an entirely different set of projects which could be implemented and filled in the spaces that the French could not take care of, and which were particularly appropriate because we had the skills and the knowledge to do them. They were very simple things. For example, we have very good date palms in California. The date is recommended by Mohammed as a particularly proper and nutritional food and is indeed a great nutritional food. While the pilgrims coming back from the journey to Mecca had brought back some cuttings of date palms and had planted some date palms in the few oases that there are in Chad, those palms had not been very fruitful. So, the program that we developed was to drop cuttings from California date palms by air in bags on the oases. We needed a delivery system and the low altitude drops do not damage the cuttings.

Similarly, the second most predominant Chadian export was the hides from the Chadian cattle, and these hides were going to Nigeria. They were only getting half the value of the hides because they were improperly dried and badly cut, so we had a program of establishing seven concrete slabs in regional areas where cattle were being slaughtered. We would then train people to use rotary knives to cut the hides so that they did not tear the hides, and to have proper drying sheds.

Sorghum is the basic diet food of Chad and we have sorghum in the United States, and we developed a program for hybrid sorghum. These were very simple things, the total program including the cost to the people and the training was less than one million dollars per year. This kind of program was carried out for several years after I left.

Q: Tell me a little something about the Ambassador himself? What was his style and would you learn something from the way he operated?

CHAPIN: The Ambassador had never operated before in Africa either. He was totally unacquainted with economic matters; he made no contribution whatsoever to the development of the aid program; and he was used during the time I was there primarily for missions outside of Chad. He really preferred to be in Greece, his previous post; and if not in Greece, than in Europe.

Q: Thinking back now twenty-five years later or more than that, what are your favorite memories of Chad?

CHAPIN: My favorite memories are of working with the Chadians and the French to develop an aid program which made sense. While very modest in financial terms, it was very technologically sound, it wasn't high technology, it was low technology. When I arrived in the Chad, seven years before, they had not had a single pair of yoked oxen. While the wheel was known, the wheel was known only in terms of the wheels that were driving French trucks that were operating on the roads, and the private cars.

One of our projects was to increase the use of yoked oxen, and increase the use of the wheel, because even when I was there, there were only thirteen pair of yoked oxen in a country of three million people! They were planting cotton, which represented ninety percent of their exports, with pointed sticks. They had no plows, and plows were not likely to be introduced very shortly. At least yoked oxen could be used to carry cotton or other heavy items from one point to another. It was a very simple basic economy, it was a stone-age economy, when I was there, other than what the French had.

Q: I'm afraid as you know that Chad has become a rather controversial country since you left. Could you detect seeds of that problem, the Libyan problem, the north and the south problem while you were there.

CHAPIN: You could always detect that Libyan imperialism was prevalent in terms of the northern areas that I had mentioned before. How much of Chad the Libyans thought was theirs was a matter of dispute. The seeds of disagreements between the Muslims in the north and the Sara in the south were clearly there.

The present government, which has been very successful in curbing or turning out the incursions of the Libyans, has, I think, left under-represented the Sara majority of the population which lives in the south.

Q: One last question on Chad. You commented much earlier that you had taken care of reporting on economic problems or whatever. Could you comment a little further on that? As I recall you did five reports.

CHAPIN: I prepared one report on the five industries, all of them quite small. One report was quite sufficient to cover the entire limited industrial base of the country. I'm told by someone that recently came back that there are only four industries operating today.

Q: Okay, maybe I can switch a little bit to Ethiopia. There you were Ambassador many years later. What did the Department tell you? Ethiopia had already been a problem. I myself was there as you know during a hectic period, I was very much in favor of sending an Ambassador of the United States to Ethiopia and you eventually became that Ambassador. There was another 'charge' between you and I. Without going into a lot of detail, would you share your reflections a little bit on your experiences there?

CHAPIN: The decision to send an Ambassador was based on an evaluation following a National Security team going out to Ethiopia and talking to the ruler of the country, Mengistu Haile Mariam. He indicated that he was prepared to receive an Ambassador. The issues that were front and center had not only been the forced draw down of the American presence which took place during your time, but the question of human rights had played an important part during the early years of the Carter administration.

Mengistu indicated that the human rights issue would be moderated and the question again was one of whether our aid program might go forward. We had serious problems with the Ethiopians because they had nationalized a series of small American enterprises and some of personal property, including airplanes of American missionaries. These issues had never been really sorted out. There was also an AID financed housing development which had run into some problems and that had been nationalized by the Ethiopian government. The issues were: would we be able to make a new beginning and would it be possible to go forward and have a meaningful relationship?

In the first meeting that I had with Mengistu upon my presenting my credentials, we discussed the possibility of going forward with a project which had been fully approved and staffed out of about \$4.5 million to provide a resettlement area in the western part of Ethiopia for people who were starving even then in the north and north central part of Ethiopia. As a result of that initial meeting, we were able within one week to sign an initial agreement which established this project and brought it up to date.

Almost immediately, the only two AID technicians of the United States who were in country were severely harassed by Ethiopian authorities. One of them, who was an expert on crops and was developing a series of fields in which crops particularly suited for Ethiopia were ripening, was prevented from going and carrying out his research because the Ethiopian officials were concerned about the radio that he had in his jeep which allowed him to stay in touch with headquarters located elsewhere in Ethiopia. They threw him into jail and denied him access to medications which he needed and shipped him up to Addis Ababa, the capital and refused to allow him to carry out the project for which we had spent a lot of money. The other technician in the extreme western part was encountering similar hostility.

I said to the government authorities that it was incomprehensible that we had just signed a four and a half million dollar project agreement which was going to require a number of technicians in country, and here they were harassing the only two technicians. We had to evacuate both of them. The Ethiopian Government was simply totally unresponsive. The result was that we never conducted our project, and we shut down our AID Mission. The Ethiopian Government had not provided any compensation during four years for the property that had been taken from American private citizens and corporations; and our laws, the Hickenlooper Amendment required we cease aid where there was no compensation or no effort to provide any such compensation.

I offered the Ethiopian government a whole series of imaginative solutions that would allow them to begin to compensate us in some form, including the addition of some part of the value of the missionary planes in the price that they were going to pay for two American Boeing aircraft. Ethiopia bought the Boeing aircraft, and I fought against the establishment in the Department to allow them to buy these two aircraft for Ethiopian Airlines, and I was successful in that regard. On the other hand I was equally successful in convincing the Department that since there was no give on the part of the Ethiopian government that they had to invoke the Hickenlooper Amendment. Before that, the matter really became moot because the Ethiopian government was in arrears over the period of a year with regard to debt service payments. Under the Brooke Amendment by being more than a year in arrears in debt service payments, all economic assistance had to be terminated in any such country. That is why even today, we are able to provide only humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, and we are not able to provide trucks to deliver food to the starving Ethiopians.

We tried. I made an effort for six months before I went back to the United States to have a second meeting with Mengistu. I was in fact, the only western Ambassador to be granted a second audience with Mengistu. Having outlined the problems to his ministers, I outlined them to him and said that while we had negotiated this \$4.5 million dollar AID project, we had not been able to carry it forward, and we were not going to be able to continue any economic assistance unless there was some progress with regard to the compensation for American properties. I'm happy to say that quite recently, about a year and a half ago, the Ethiopian government reached an agreement at about the figure that I was prepared to negotiate, namely seven million dollars as a lump sum payment - exactly one of the proposals that I had offered. This agreement still does not settle the aid problem, because the Ethiopians are unwilling to make any kind of a payment with regard to their military credits, thus curing the Brooke Amendment.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about Mengistu. He was a very controversial gentleman even when I was there. You had an opportunity to deal with him, what were your impressions?

CHAPIN: Mengistu is a very able individual. He has taken on all of the aspects of Ethiopian culture and assumed some of the prerogatives of the Ethiopian emperors. There is a great tradition in Ethiopia about space, and we had some anthropologists who were out in Ethiopia measuring the space between leadership figures and the next most important person.

As Mengistu grew in importance, he expanded space between himself and the other people. You could see and measure this during the time that I was there. There are pictures of your time when Mengistu was on a small box, and the entire group of his associates in the Derg or committee, were around him. Then, he was in an area where his immediate associates were gathered around him. By the time I left, there was enormous space in the stadium or reviewing stand. Only he and Fidel Castro were seated on chairs which had been taken from the Imperial Palace and there was at least twenty feet between them and the next closest person. This is a concept which the Ethiopians have always reserved for real leadership. Space is an important concept.

He was of course brutal, I never saw him shoot anybody across the table, but I'm told he did. He certainly was remote; the other diplomats never saw him except on their initial call when they presented their credentials. I saw him only on a second occasion when I insisted on seeing him on the question of whether we would have to invoke the Hickenlooper Amendment and terminate our aid program. I was declared persona non grata and, of course, I didn't see anybody on my way out. I was given forty-eight hours to leave and I left on the first Lufthansa plane in order to not leave on Ethiopian Air.

Q: Mengistu is a somewhat controversial character to say the least. There were those that say he is a confirmed Communist, there are others that say he is a confirmed Nationalist; what is your view?

CHAPIN: There is no question in my mind, and I was able to convince the Carter government that he is a convinced Marxist-Leninist. The evidence is as far as I am concerned, conclusive. Those who thought he was a Nationalist were arguing against us, and we had a prolonged debate within the Carter administration, and we won and we were able to document it.

Q: When you were there the Russians and the Cubans were a fairly dominant force. Did you have any relations with them? Did you converse with them, did you talk, could you do anything with them?

CHAPIN: Yes, I had formal relations of course with the Soviets. The first soviet Ambassador who had been Ambassador in Guinea with Sekou Toure was an experienced African hand and a very well traveled, internationally sophisticated individual. In my first meeting when I called on him, I said, "There are some who thought there were aspects of Chinese communism in the Mengistu government;" the Russian ambassador, surprised me by saying: "No, they can't have Maoism here and they can't really have a true communist party because you cannot socialize poverty. You must first create wealth, and then you can nationalize and communize. Until that time, we cannot have a communist state."

The Soviets were very reluctant to see Mengistu create a communist party, that came only very late during the time that I was there, and it was the first congress of the true Bolshevik party, but the party itself was really only an incipient party. They were reluctant to introduce Ethiopia to communism as such.

Q: Let me go back, Ambassador Chapin, to Mengistu. What was your own personal assessment of Mengistu?

CHAPIN: My own assessment was that he had sold out to the Soviets, he certainly was a nationalist and could have maintained a nationalist position, but he needed the Soviets for massive military assistance. The Soviets never provided any economic assistance. He thought that he could play the United Nations and the western powers for economic aid, and the Swedes went along with this, and the Europeans were willing to play along for quite a long time; the Europeans would provide the economic assistance for quite along time to keep Ethiopia going. We as a country did not provide economic assistance, but our coffee companies bought for some years the bulk of the Ethiopian coffee crop and thus provided them with the foreign exchange for the necessary commodities they needed to stay alive.

Famine is endemic in Ethiopia and was prevalent in the previous Imperial government. The waste of the hillsides, the erosion, the misuse of land for hundreds and hundreds of years is being reaped by the current inhabitants of that country. I don't think personally that there is any solution permanently other than massive birth control measures and a massive voluntary resettlement program. The problem is that Mengistu is trying forced resettlement of people in order to curb the various regional dissident guerilla movements which exist not only in the north, not only in Eritrea and Tigre, but elsewhere throughout the country. Ethiopia was an empire and the Amhara exerted their influence over a whole series of lesser peoples. Those peoples have resented the Amhara dominance, even though the Tigre and even Eritrea, have considerable Amhara influence. The famine which you see and have seen in recent years is nothing new. The country was never able to feed itself.

In the beginning, when the present regime threw out the emperor, the forced flow of grain from the countryside toward the capital of Addis Ababa stopped, but the people in the countryside were better fed. The problem is that this did not solve the basic problem, which is storage of any surplus which they maintained on the land to hold them over from one year to the other. The storage facilities were so bad that anything that was kept from one crop was virtually eaten up by rats and by spoilage, so that at the end of a season there was nothing left over to serve as a granary for any deficiencies that might come in the future.

That was the whole thrust of the AID program that we and the United Nations wanted to set up. We, the United Nations and the European donors were prepared to provide better facilities on the land, but the Ethiopian government's program of nationalization of the land, which initially provided the individual farmers with a better livelihood and more food to eat, was not followed up because they proceeded to try to collectivize the farms. Collectivization went against the grain of individual Ethiopian peasants, and they saw no reason to exert their efforts: to combat the various dissident groups who were in arms and were against the central government. This is something which has gone on for over a thousand years in Ethiopia. It depends on the strength of the central government as to whether it is able to impose its' will on various dissident and diverse religious and ethnic groups in what is described geographically as Ethiopia. I have no great hope for Ethiopia, and I think that the whole area is going to continue to see famines, and unless the world community is prepared to insist which I don't think they will or can - on extensive family planning projects that there will be too many mouths to feed and not enough food to go around, and the erosion will continue.

Q: When you went out there as Ambassador, which you were, the first Ambassador after a hiatus of several years, What did the Department expect you to do? What were your marching orders, in short?

CHAPIN: The Department really was not very specific. The effort, of course, was to reestablish good relations with Mengistu Haile Mariam, and to see if we could reactivate the AID program in a cooperative way, so that we could begin to work together to deal with some of the tremendous problems that Ethiopia has. Ethiopia has demonstrated since that it still has tremendous problems in terms of feeding itself. We also wanted to get some kind of solution to our nationalization problem that would allow us to go forward. I worked very hard on the question of nationalization, brought out some experts, offered a wide range of different possible initial steps so that we could say that they had begun to do something. The requirement was to show some forward progress. It was not necessary to reach a complete agreement, it was necessary to just show some forward progress. We couldn't find anything which would interest the Ethiopians, and as I have said before; at the same time that they were not making any forward progress, they were harassing the two workers that we had in the field.

Q: Who in Washington was calling the shots then? Who in the Department was there? Were there differences of opinion in Washington, or were they unanimous? Who was calling the shots to you?

CHAPIN: Well, in terms of the Hickenlooper Amendment, I came back several times, twice anyway. The first time the Carter administration was very reluctant to take any action, I went back and came back again. On these issues, Secretary Vance and Deputy Secretary Christopher were the people with whom I talked and I was finally able to persuade them. Deputy Secretary Christopher was very reluctant to invoke the Hickenlooper Amendment; on the other hand, he was very reluctant to approve the sale of Boeings to the Ethiopian Airlines, which had a balance sheet which showed profits. The airline was paying all its debts, unlike many African airlines and they were a good credit risk.

I thought that we should promote American exports and that we should sell planes to a company that was airworthy and that had been set up with a lot of assistance from TWA, was flying properly and had very good maintenance facilities. This was a way that we could demonstrate our continuing interest for something that was positive and meaningful. Finally, I was able to persuade Christopher to approve the Export-Import Bank loan. As far as I know, there has not been any default on those loans, and I think that it was worthwhile.

I simply believe that the government should honor its obligations in terms of the Ethiopian government, and that we should make sales and offer facilities where there is a reasonable interlocutor and person, or corporation in this case, that could receive and benefit from what they wanted to buy from us.

Q: You talked about the Hickenlooper Amendment, tell our listeners a little bit more about what the Hickenlooper Amendment was.

CHAPIN: The Hickenlooper Amendment had not been enforced for many years. It comes from a Republican Senator from Indiana, if I'm not mistaken, who was the author of this provision. It states that a country which nationalizes or appropriates property of American citizens and does not within a reasonable amount of time enter into meaningful negotiations to compensate them for property which has been seized should no longer receive American economic aid. We had gone for four years and had been unable to get the Ethiopian government - my predecessor as Ambassador, and you Art I think were also involved in these negotiations - made various efforts to get the Ethiopian government to consider some kind of plan. I had spent some time on various kinds of claims negotiations by Austria against the United States and by the United States against Austria, and so I spent some time before going out with our legal advisor in trying to frame something which might be acceptable, and trying to find minimum steps which would satisfy our law but none of those were acceptable to the Ethiopian Government.

Q: When you dealt with the Ethiopian government there were two tiers, namely the provisional military government with Mengistu, and the civilian side of the house which was the ministers. Whom did you deal with?

CHAPIN: By the time I got there, there was really only one government. The civilian ministers were totally under control of the provisional military government. It was all amalgamated and there was no real distinction. They were reporting to Mengistu. Naturally, I went through the ministers, but the ministers had no authority to say anything; they would merely listen, and there was an advisor to the President with whom I would make the case. That wasn't going anywhere. He seemed to understand the legal issues and had some legal training. I said "Were not getting anywhere. We have to have meetings with the only person who can deal with this problem who is Chairman Mengistu," and that is why I had the second meeting. I made the case to the Chairman and he seemed to understand the issues, but he gave no indication that he was prepared to budge and that is exactly where it was left. My decision was ultimately made that the Hickenlooper Amendment had to be invoked. That was really after the fact because the aid program had to be cut off earlier because of the failure of the Ethiopian government to make any payment on their debts, the Brooke Amendment. That amendment had already come in to force with regard to Ethiopia in February, 1979.

Q: You said earlier, Fred, that you were persona non grata, why is that?

CHAPIN: Well there were a variety of alleged high crimes and misdemeanors that I committed. The government of the United States maintained that all of those allegations were not true and supported my position one-hundred percent. I'm going to leave that to the historic record and statements made by both governments.

Q: Were you ever able to travel in Ethiopia?

CHAPIN: Yes, I traveled down to the extreme southwest to see the AID program where one of our AID project advisors was subsequently harassed. I went down there very early on, and I traveled also with the Diplomatic Corps. We went to Harare, we went down on the railroad on a trip, and I was able to see the Eastern part of Ethiopia. We were at the beginning very restricted in how far we could travel outside the city - all Westerners - it was not limited to Americans.

Then there was an opening and some Westerners went to Lalibela which is one of the big religious sites where they have the churches carved out of stone. It was a very expensive trip. We chose for various reasons not to do it; we were going to do it later on with our children who were coming out. We did travel by car and we organized an expedition with the Swiss Minister and his family, and with the wife of the Italian Ambassador. We had a jeep and our new vehicle and we went to Gondar. We went up to Lake Tana and came back. We went as far north on the eastern side as we possibly could, and then I took a trip also out to the coffee growing area from which our American coffee companies were buying a lot of coffee. This was the Kaffa province, which of course is the origin of coffee, coffee - Kaffa. Coffee originates in the Ethiopian highlands, and I went out there and visited a European Economic Community coffee development farm where there are three-hundred and one different varieties of coffee. On the other hand, in Brazil there are only three varieties of coffee, so that the Ethiopian claim to be the origin of coffee has a very solid basis, and we saw all different kinds of coffee growing there. I've served in five different coffee producing countries, and so I've spent a lot of time on coffee in my life.

Q: In the embassy itself how was the staff? Were you happy with it? Did it support you well?

CHAPIN: Oh, yes I had an excellent staff, it was very tightly knit. Much of the activity centered around the two tennis courts in front of the office building. The two tennis courts were in between the house that I lived in and the office and I walked by there and everybody played tennis, even people who had never played tennis before began to play tennis. We had a lot of people from the international community, and some Ethiopians who felt that they could still be in touch with us would come and play tennis; and we had quite a number of Africans who would come and play on our courts, that was the center of activity. We had a very good and very close, very small staff - very close knit group.

Q: When I left Ethiopia in 1977 there was no USIA, there was no Military Attaché^{1/2}, there was still aid. Had that been changed since you were there? Were there other agencies?

CHAPIN: No, no that had not changed. We had no USIA, and we had a very small AID agency representation. As it was a small program we phased it out. Aid of course has come back in the famine relief area, and we have emergency relief programs. Before I left, the Ethiopian government took us down to the extreme southwest to show us famine conditions. They showed us some tribes that were in really desperate straits north of Lake Rudolph. My acting aid administrator immediately sent off a telegram to Washington. I was entitled to call forward thirty-thousand dollars in immediate emergency assistance. We requested drought aid and rehydration packages for the people down there in the southwest. The US response was immediate. We brought in a plane-load from London, and the Ethiopian authorities kept it on the runway for twenty-four hours before we could ship it down and people could eat or be treated. The Ethiopian government did not want to have an immediate American response to even a project that they had prevented us so long from seeing.

Q: Were you ever able to go to Eritrea or to Tigre?

CHAPIN: No, I never was. The Italian Ambassador was allowed to go to Asmara, but I was not allowed to go there. The American Consulate General at Asmara was taken over by the Ethiopian government and became the naval training school. We never advanced in our claims discussions the official claims of the United States government. We were only advancing the claims of American citizens whose property had been taken. US Government claims remain to be discussed at a future date.

Q: Your feelings about Ethiopia itself, where is it going?

CHAPIN: Well I think it's going nowhere. I also have that same feeling about a large part of Africa. The population is increasing; birth control is not being advocated; there are large parts of Africa in which AIDS is rampant that may mitigate the population problem in certain urban areas, but it is going to kill off the intelligentsia. So far, it is not known and probably is the result of lack of information, whether AIDS has arrived in the urban population of Addis Ababa. What is known from the days of the League of Nations is that Addis Ababa has the highest percentage of prostitutes of any country and any city of the world.

It is documented in League of Nations issues that predate by many, many years any question of ideological concerns. So it is likely that AIDS once introduced into Addis Ababa will spread quickly and far. It has already reached the intelligentsia of many of the countries that I am about to visit; Zaire, Burundi, Rwanda, and it is an extraordinarily serious problem because it can destroy the efforts to create an intellectual elite. It is a tiny minority. It appears that AIDS does not spread along the ordinary rural areas of Africa as fast as it does in the urban areas where the use of prostitutes is widespread. So, you have serious erosion over centuries if not millennia in Ethiopia, a progressive deforestation. You have no adequate price incentives for peasants to produce crops; you have no adequate storage facilities to store your surpluses from one year to carry you through lean years of famine years. There are progressive cycles of famine which have been documented historically, and you have a disincentive for foreign donors to provide substantial external resources. So I think that the prospects are dim.

Q: One last question. You have been there, you have had your difficulties with the Ethiopians. What do you think our own United States relations are, or can be with the Ethiopians in the future?

CHAPIN: Well, I think we have to find some kind of common ground. So far we have had difficulty finding common ground. I think the settlement of the claims of American citizens, which should have been settled much earlier, is a step forward, but I don't think that the Ethiopian government is prepared to work with any international donor in a really confidential, meaningful way. That is, when I say confidential, I mean having confidence in their programs and working together in a real spirit of cooperation. The Ethiopians are very reserved, extremely nationalistic. It is probably correct for them to ultimately control the policy.

If they are not willing to cooperate and find meaningful joint goals I think that it will be very difficult for everybody, whether it is the United Nations, whether European countries, whether the United States, to work with Ethiopia.

The Soviet Union and its block countries have been totally unsuccessful in providing, and unwilling to provide, meaningful economic assistance to Ethiopia to deal with its fundamental agricultural and population problems. Those are the two issues.

Q: The Ethiopians, I recently asked you a question, but I will ask you one more. The Ethiopians recently declined to participate in the 1988 Olympics in Korea, even though the Soviets have. Do you have any thoughts about this?

CHAPIN: Well I don't have any. The Ethiopians with their high altitude have turned out some marathon runners, some long distance runners who would be great competitors in the Olympics and I am sorry that they are not going to be there.

Q: Good, Ambassador Chapin thank you very much. I appreciate all of your time and all of your candor, good luck.

End of interview