

EXTRACT

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR JAMES R. BULLINGTON

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Initial interview date: July 31, 2001
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These extracts from Charles Stuart Kennedy's interview with James R. Bullington focus on his work from 2000-2006 as Peace Corps Country Director for Niger and include a Peace Corps-related anecdote from his assignment as U.S. Ambassador to Burundi (1983-1986).

In his Foreign Service memoir, *Global Adventures on Less-Traveled Roads*, Bullington writes:

The six years I spent as Peace Corps Director in Niger were professionally and personally gratifying, better even than my two tours of duty in charge of U.S. Embassies. Every time I went to the Embassy in Niamey and saw the Ambassador, I was reminded of how happy I was to have my job instead of hers. This was partly because the Peace Corps experience came at the right season of my life; partly because it liberated me from a stifling academic environment; partly because I was able to operate with a great deal of independence from Peace Corps headquarters in Washington; but mostly because of the satisfaction of being able to use a lifetime of experience to support the 435 outstanding American Volunteers who served under my direction in Niger in their efforts to help some of the work's poorest people.

Q: You're directing Peace Corps in Niger? How did that come about?

BULLINGTON: Peace Corps is something I had long thought about. I graduated from college in '62. That was the heyday of Peace Corps, which was created by President Kennedy in '61. I had decided to become a volunteer when I graduated, but to my surprise I passed the Foreign Service exam and became an FSO instead. As I was assessing job possibilities after being fired from the university [ed., Old Dominion University, fired for refusing to fire another employee under false pretense], I recalled that the current Deputy Director of the Peace Corps, Chuck Baquet, had been one of my [ed., Foreign Service] Senior Seminar students. After the Seminar he had become an Ambassador and then was assigned as Deputy Director of the Peace Corps. I contacted Chuck, and he encouraged me to apply for a Country Director position. I was able to get the job in spite of the fact that there is a great deal of suspicion of Foreign Service Officers (and particularly Ambassadors) on the part of most Peace Corps staff. They don't want anything hinting at a close connection between the Peace Corps and the State Department. But I was able to convince them, with Chuck's help, to give me the job of Country Director in

Niger. I've been there for two years and I've enjoyed it immensely.

Q: What is the Peace Corps doing in Niger?

BULLINGTON: We have about a hundred volunteers now, and we're going to expand the program in consonance with the President's [ed., George W. Bush] initiative to double the size of Peace Corps over the next five years. We're going to add a new sector and go up to about a hundred and thirty-five volunteers over the next two years. The volunteers currently are in agriculture, environmental protection, and public health, and we're going to add an education sector. They are some really outstanding young Americans, and I'm proud to be their leader.

Q: And how do you find your work with the Embassy?

BULLINGTON: There's no problem. Having had some experience in Embassies and having been an Ambassador, I feel pretty much at home, certainly not intimidated. After overcoming some initial suspicion by Peace Corps staff, I've had no problem with the cultural gap between the State Department and Peace Corps. In my view it's a hangover from the culture wars of the '60s and '70s, which should have been put aside long ago, but unfortunately has not been. I've done my best to bridge that gap, at least in Niger. I think I've been successful there, and maybe to a much smaller extent in Peace Corps generally. **As far as I know, I'm the only former Ambassador ever to have served as a Country Director in Peace Corps.**

From his time as U.S. Ambassador to Burundi (1983-1986)

BULLINGTON: In 1983, when I got there, Burundi was fairly calm, but it was only a calm imposed by the Tutsi military government. They held all the important levers of power, most importantly the Army. There were no Hutu army officers, none. There were no Hutus, except a few tame ones they had co-opted, at any significant level of government. The Tutsis ran things, keeping the country quiet, but suppressed. The government was paranoid. They saw enemies everywhere, particularly Europeans and Americans. They saw us as people who wanted to come in and organize the Hutus in a rebellion that would overthrow them...

The biggest crisis we had, however, was over our diplomatic pouches. The American government, unlike any other as far as I can tell, allows its personnel to use the diplomatic pouch for personal mail, including packages. Consequently the American pouches are physically bigger and more numerous than any other country's. This has been going on for a long time, but one particular pouch shipment came in that was especially huge. There were thirty large diplomatic pouch bags addressed to the U.S. Embassy. Because of their paranoia the Burundi government seized them and wouldn't let them out of the airport. They said 'This is surely a shipment of arms to arm the Hutus and overthrow us.' This led to a serious confrontation that lasted several months. We had no idea what was in those pouches. And the State Department couldn't tell us what was in them. They just came through the U.S. mail. Nobody had opened the boxes they contained. Nobody knew what was in those pouches.

Q: Was anybody in your Embassy waiting for something?

BULLINGTON: Not that we knew of. No one had ordered any personal mail of that bulk. But it was not only those particular pouches; they then blocked all the subsequent ones that came in. So that stopped both our official pouch mail and our personal mail. This was just before Christmas, November of 1985. So nobody got Christmas presents for the kids and other things we'd ordered. This went on for about three months. We didn't even get the checks that were in the pouches that were needed to pay the rents for our housing and salaries for our local employees. We didn't get medical supplies. We didn't get all these things that normally come through the pouch. This made it very difficult to operate the Embassy. Also, there's an important principle involved, the inviolability of diplomatic pouches, which could have repercussions far beyond Burundi. I was doing everything I could to try to get a resolution, but the government wouldn't budge. Finally, I wanted to begin gradually shutting down the Embassy, to say 'Ok, we can't pay our rents, we can't pay our salaries, we have to start laying people off, and eventually we'll just close up and go home.' I didn't think our interests in Burundi were important enough to justify caving in on the principle of inviolability of diplomatic pouches. The Africa Bureau took another view and said no, we should try to accommodate them, don't make any threats, just stick it out and eventually the problem will go away. Some parts of the Department whose interests were more focused on pouches and diplomatic procedures and the precedential implications of the situation seemed to share my view, but my instructions came from the Africa Bureau. They said no, don't do anything, just live with it. After three months I decided we couldn't live with it much longer, and we ought to do something one way or another. By interpreting my instructions, let's say, very liberally, the solution I came up with was to invite the Foreign Ministry to send their people into the Embassy along with the pouches that were at issue, and observe us as we opened them. I didn't know what was in them, but I knew damn well it was not arms or anything else that the government of Burundi had any legitimate reason to be concerned about. Whether or not the Department would have approved this procedure I'll never know, but anyway we did it. **The pouches were opened and the contents turned out to be seeds addressed to Peace Corps.** The Peace Corps director had gotten an offer from an American seed company that said 'we have some seeds we'd like to give to Peace Corps Volunteers to plant.' She thought she was ordering these little packages of seeds that you get at hardware stores. Instead of little packages, they were gross lots of five hundred packages. So that's what caused the diplomatic confrontation, pounds and pounds of Peace Corps seeds. Although the problem was solved, I don't think the Africa Bureau much liked me for resisting their instructions just to do nothing and wait it out.