

Perkins, Edward J. with Connie Cronley. *Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), pp 576. \$39.95 ISBN 0-8061-3767-3 hc

This intriguing autobiography of Dr. Perkins, in retirement from the Foreign Service at the University of Oklahoma as William J. Crowe Professor of Geopolitics and Executive Director of the International Programs Center, begins by recounting an event at the apex of a distinguished career—the surprise and bold appearance by newly appointed Ambassador Perkins at the South African treason trial of two black anti-apartheid activists (December 1986). By appointing an African-American foreign service officer as ambassador, the Reagan Administration (under congressional and other pressures to change from a failed policy of constructive engagement) was sending an unmistakable message. The President made a commitment which is unusual in modern U.S. diplomacy—giving his ambassador “carte blanche authority to make policy from the embassy. . . .” (p. 259). And Perkins delivered in spades, earning the respect of grassroots groups of all races in the Republic and in the words of former Secretary of State George Shultz, helping to “lay the groundwork for the end of apartheid” (Foreword). Altogether, about forty percent of the narrative relives events and personalities in South Africa as well as the extraordinarily successful negotiations leading to the independence of Namibia.

Edward Perkins, born in 1928 in rural Louisiana, was a “late-bloomer,” completing his formal education after two stints in the army and marine corps and two tours in East Asia as a government civilian

employee. He meets his wife, Lucy Cheng-mei Liu, in Taiwan and they elope against the wishes of her family. At age 44, he secures a difficult lateral entry appointment to the Foreign Service followed by a meteoric rise, securing his first ambassadorial appointment (1984, Liberia) twelve years later. (Only five per cent of officers become ambassadors, and then after averaging 20 to 28 years in the Service!)

Dr. Perkins is a meticulous and insightful observer as he recounts his career, progressing from a desk job in the Foreign Service's Office of Equal Employment Opportunity (where, with other black officers, he persuades Secretary of State Kissinger of the practical wisdom of making the Service a much more representative and inclusive institution), to a first overseas posting as political counselor in Ghana, a second as deputy chief of mission in Liberia, back to Washington as the Director of West African Affairs (in the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs), back to Liberia as Mr. Ambassador (for one year, before being dubbed ambassador to South Africa). (To his and my surprise, an interview with Mr. Reagan revealed a president fully focused and in charge!) (pp. 256-257). The highlight of both Liberian assignments was dealing with the chaotic transfer of power from the descendents of American slaves to the regime headed by Sergeant Samuel Doe. Ambassador Perkins is convinced that effective diplomacy requires both thorough knowledge of the local terrain and willingness to act as a revolutionary change agent.

Upon completion of the three year tour in South Africa, he was offered the prestigious director-generalship of the Foreign Service where an earned Ph.D. in public administration assisted in a general reorganization (against bureaucratic resistance), and broadening of recruitment and training of officers. Subsequently, the ambassador received the highest ranking appointment a foreign service officer can aspire to—U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, 1992-1993, under George H.W. Bush. At the UN, he engages in an acrimonious turf battle over control of the U.S. mission with none other than John Bolton, who at the time headed the Bureau of International Organizations Affairs! Major substantive concerns included Iraq, Somalia, China, and Cambodia. With President-elect Clinton's appointment of Madeline Albright as his UN permanent representative—to his extreme annoyance, Dr. Perkins learns of his replacement via the TV news—he

lobbies for, and receives a Clinton appointment to be Ambassador to Australia, 1993-1996, after which he “retires” to OU.

Dr. Perkins ascribes his success to grandparents’ high expectations (both grandparents were illiterate, but all their children attended college); support from a cohesive black community; moral discipline cultivated by evangelical Christianity (Most black families in rural 1930s Louisiana had two pictures on the wall—Huey Long and Jesus Christ!) and the marine corps; and a lifelong fascination with and study of Asian philosophy. Success was achieved despite obstacles, including often distant relations with mother and stepfather, and pervasive racism during early education and career. The latter was particularly obvious after moving from Pine Bluff, Arkansas to an integrated high school in Portland, and service in a yet to be integrated U.S. army—the train ride from Portland to basic training in Kentucky was punctuated by the segregation of coaches in Indianapolis! In the 1970s Foreign Service, young black officers at Washington social functions were sometimes mistaken for waiters!

In this very personal narrative, the reader will find neither a sustained justification nor criticism of U.S. foreign policy. At bottom, the author is an optimist, believing that America is a revolutionary society that is capable of continually reinventing itself. Its genius is a creative synthesis between unity and individualism. His career may be taken as vindication for this assertion. On the other hand, it took extraordinary personal dedication and skill to breach formidable barriers.

I find little to criticize in this book—arguably it could have been shorter and better edited; however, its detailed, almost encyclopedic, accounting of persons and situations is tremendously informative, and it holds the interest of the reader. I agree with the quote by columnist Georgie Anne Geyer—“Mr. Ambassador conveys what sophisticated and effective diplomacy is all about. A remarkable journey that should inspire, inform, and influence everyone it touches!” (publisher’s release)

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