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Estes, Ambassador to the Republic of Upper Volta (1961-1966), also accredited to Dahomey, Ivory Coast, and Niger, discusses his appointment as Ambassador and the role of Upper Volta in African politics, among other issues.

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Thomas S. Estes – JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS S. ESTES

March 18, 1971
Washington, D.C.

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MOSS: Let me start now and ask you to begin by recounting the first encounter you had with the then Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] in the Senate before he became President, just very briefly if you will.

ESTES: Well, I testified before the then Senator Kennedy and introduced myself because I was then a resident of Massachusetts –a very brief encounter. The next encounter was in the cabinet room at the White House, when my class of the Senior Seminar in Foreign Policy went over to meet the President and talk with him as part of the year's work.

MOSS: I have the list of appointments there which may help you.

ESTES: The President, after we had all been introduced to him, sat down and said, "Well, I wonder, after spending a whole year on this, what are you getting out of it?" He looked in my direction and said, "What are you getting out of this, Mr. Ambassador?" I turned around to look to see whom he was talking. He threw back his head and laughed. That was the first announcement to the class and others that my name was going forward in nomination as Ambassador to the Republic of Upper Volta.

MOSS: Let me probe that a little bit before you go on and ask how

this appointment came about? What were the factors that led to it? Do you have any insight into the appointment process in your own case?

ESTES: Very little because one's not told much about it. I suppose part of it stems from the

position I held before going to the senior seminar. I was the "house mother" of the State Department [United States Department of State], Deputy Assistant Secretary for Operations, which is sort of a world-wide logistics service, including communications for our entire diplomatic and consular operation. In addition to that, my then superior, Ambassador Loy Henderson [Loy W. Henderson], the Deputy Under Secretary for Administration, had charged me with the responsibility of getting the new State Department building built, which was in addition to my other duties—sort of a side issue. This meant setting up— preparing the budgets for it and testifying before the Congress as to the requirements. I'm very happy to say that we built it within the budget—below the budget, as a matter of fact—and on time. We're really quite proud of that. Also I had had something to do with the logistics problems, trying to solve the logistics problems, of opening up Africa, the new areas. I had been scheduled to make a trip out there –which I never made.

All I can think is that it was because so many new African countries were coming into being, and I was senior enough to be chosen. In fact, my concern was that I might have been too senior because the corridor word was that the new Administration didn't think very many people over fifty should be ambassadors.

MOSS: Yes, I wondered about that. I've heard that in one or two places. You get an appointment like Bill Attwood's [William H. Attwood] for instance, and this is supposed to be the new breed challenging the old—if you'll excuse the expression—stuffy foreign service stereotype. How were people reacting to that?

ESTES: Well, I think just as they react in all administrations. Interestingly enough, I think you'll find that the average knowledgeable career Foreign Service Officer not only accepts the fact that there should be 20, 30 percent appointments from outside the career service, in fact, those who are really knowledgeable encourage it for two reasons. One is because the service must always have new blood coming in from other than the bottom, that is, lateral entry or at the top. And secondly, to put it very bluntly, there are posts—there are embassies—that the average career foreign service office could not afford to take—London, Paris, and Rome being good examples. Freddy Reinhardt [Frederick G. Reinhardt], Ambassador Reinhardt, who died just the other day, was an exception to the rule. He did it pretty much on his salary, but he was given extra allowances.

MOSS: Yes. Did you have any expectations or reservations about the appointment to Upper Volta?

ESTES: None whatsoever. The reason, I suppose, is that in the senior seminar to which I'd been assigned had for the first time introduced a course in African affairs. We'd had no African Bureau [Bureau of African Affairs]; we had no African affairs; we had practically nothing on Africa. They wanted volunteers, so several of us very bravely put up our hands—Mac Godley [G. McMurtrie Godley] the present Ambassador to Laos, being one of them and Sheldon Vance [Sheldon B. Vance], the present Ambassador to the Congo, being another—we said we'd try it out. It was pretty slim pickings for background, research, books, and so forth, but we went ahead. We got a map of Africa, I remember, and we drew lots as which areas we'd study. The area I got was Nigeria, an English speaking area. Naturally, my appointment as Ambassador was to a French speaking area, about which I knew nothing.

MOSS: Okay. Let me ask you about the—you said there was practically nothing in the Department on Africa. Joseph Satterthwaite [Joseph C. Satterthewaite] was setting up something, and then...

ESTES: And Joe Palmer [Joseph Palmer, II] before him.

MOSS: Right. And then Williams [G. Mennen Williams] and Wayne Fredericks [Wayne J. Fredericks] came in—Governor Williams and Wayne Fredericks.

ESTES: Yes, this was the beginning.

MOSS: How do you remember the impact of those two coming in, on how the Department and particularly on the African affairs side of it?

ESTES: Well, I for one—and I think this was shared by a number of us who were on the African side—was terribly impressed by Williams' appointment, impressed by the way the President selected him and named him even before naming the Secretary of State. This made a tremendous impression on the Africans. There was a buoyancy in all of this, remember, quite aside from the flame and the rest of it. I am certainly convinced –I was before I ever talked with the President, simply from what I'd read, and even more convinced after I'd talked with him—that he believed in this wave of independence, of nationalism, that was sweeping Africa. This was part and parcel of "he saw a new world." And consequently, it spread to us, and Williams' appointment was symbolic of the way the President felt about it.

Williams himself was just full of enthusiasm and burning ambition to do all these things for Africa. Perhaps what

impressed those of us who worked in this area was that there was money for all of this. We have lots of wonderful ideas in the State Department, but very often the money is not available. You feel if it's not available, it is simply because there has not been enough enthusiasm or agreement or pressure from top side. In this case it was available.

MOSS: I wondered about that because the commonplace charge is that the Kennedy Administration came in with a great deal of ebullience, you know, and really didn't have the power to back up a lot of the enthusiasm that they had.

ESTES: Oh, I think, on the contrary, for the initial period, I would say, Mr. Kennedy made very sure that there were funds to back up this enthusiasm . I know for a fact of a certain amount of money that was set aside both for the normal operations—opening embassies, furnishing them, buying houses, renting houses, and so forth—for this sort of thing and also for some forms of assistance. Remember we didn't really know what kind of assistance we were going to give to these countries—primarily economic, of course, rather than military—but sums of money were set aside.

You mentioned Bill Attwood a moment ago. The first time I met him was when he came back from his post, Conakry [Conakry, Guinea], after an initial survey. He came back with a shopping list. He ran into a little bit of flak in the administrative side of the Department, but Bill just went over to the White House. I am certain he discussed it with the President, and I have a recollection that he did fairly well with his shopping list, Bill Attwood being Bill. If you know him, he's a wonderful, wonderful person.

MOSS: Okay, you had Harriman [William Averell Harriman] do a quick trip through Africa before the inauguration. You also had Edward Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy] make a trip to Africa. How much was the ground really prepared by this kind of thing, or was it more symbolic?

ESTES: I think probably it was perhaps more symbolic than substantive. It is simply impossible for people to make trips, of this nature at least, and either absorb a great deal of what the problems are in spite of our briefing books, or to do much about it afterwards because they're off to other things. But they do pay off, I think, in a long run. Remember Mr. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] also went out.

For example—when we were having the Congo problem—the problem of U.N. [United Nations] troops coming out of the Congo. Whose troops would replace them? Well, it happened that a colleague of mine, who is presently

Ambassador at his second post in Africa, was then working with Mr. Harriman, and my colleague and I had exchanged some thoughts on this. My idea was that the logical thing, if we wanted to preserve peace and order in the Congo or try to achieve peace and order in the Congo, with the UN troops pulling out, was to put in African troops who spoke French. There was a great surplus of such troops because the French were retiring and putting on pension the French-speaking Africans who had served eight, ten, twelve years in the French army. Apparently Mr. Harriman thought very well of this idea; to the extent at least that when we were on the state visit, he and my African President had a chat about it. Nothing came of it, but at least Mr. Harriman was receptive and understood what I was trying to propose.

MOSS: Right. Now let me ask you to describe, if you will, the visit you had with President Kennedy just before you took your new post.

ESTES: Well, as usual, you wait until the President has time to see you or until his appointments secretary can find fifteen minutes to squeeze you in. I remember so well. I walked into the Office and he was sitting behind his desk, and the first thing—again, you remember these things—he said, "Hello, Tom. How are you?" This was rather a shock, to think the President would remember your name or be thoughtful enough to call you by your nickname—and then said, "Excuse me if I don't rise. My back is hurting me terribly." Well, it never occurred to me the President would rise when I walked into the room. This, again, is a measure of this wonderful man. Then he said, in effect, "I have very little to say to you about your job. Tell them we're going to be their friends, we have no strings, are not asking for anything. We want to help in any way we can that is reasonable and logical, and we want to be friends. I need not add, in the event it should ever arise, we'll not be blackmailed into anything. " He flashed a smile because, of course, there was no indication of that in anything that had come out of this little country so far. I say little country—I have to say it's as big as New England with a four and a half million population, but Africa is so big, Upper Volta looks like a little spot on it.

MOSS: Yes, it's a rather curious country, too, sort of sandwiched in between everything else and left over from everything else, too, politically, isn't it?

ESTES: Only in the last half century. The French have chopped away at it. They tried to obliterate it a couple of times by making it part of the Ivory Coast administratively as a colony, and then it reemerged with part of its borders chopped off.

But the interesting fact, I think, is that in Upper Volta, the Mossi tribe, which numbers about two and a half to three million of the four and a half million population, has the last remaining emperor—legitimate blood line emperor—of the ancient kingdoms going back to the eleventh century. Recorded history from about the seventh century tells us of the Kingdom of Ghana, the Kingdom of Mali, and so forth, all of which rose and fell. The Mossi Empire was led by the emperor in Ouagadougou

[Ouagadougou, Republic of Upper Volta] and three other kings—of whom now only the emperor and the Yatenga Naba in the north are left. The present emperor is the thirty-seventh or thirty-eighth lineal descendant of the first emperor who led what was once a warrior empire. It was never a rich empire in spite of all the gold that characterized some of these kingdoms. Although it had some gold, in general the area was very poor and perhaps because of this, the kingdom survived, and survives to this day. I notice that the new prime minister of Upper Volta has proposed that all of the chiefs, including the Mogho Naba, that is, the emperor, and traditional chiefs, be incorporated into the civil service. The educated younger element want to abolish the entire system. They think this is a tradition which should be done away with. It would be, in my mind, a sad thing if they ever did away with it because this part of the great tradition of the African people, their respect for their elders and tribal authority.

MOSS: Let me come back just a moment to the meeting you had with the President. I believe, who, Leland Barrows was with you?

ESTES: Yes, Leland came over at the same time—he'd been waiting longer than I had.

MOSS: Did he see you together or separately?

ESTES: No, he saw us together. Leland was going back to his post, and this was in a sense a courtesy call. Normally a new ambassador doesn't go to his post until he's seen by the President. There was great pressure by the White House to get ambassadors out to their posts in Africa, but they couldn't quite mesh all this, so I think Leland and I proposed, "Why not two for one?" This seemed to work with the appointments secretary, so we both got in.

MOSS: Let me ask you—I've asked several other ambassadors this question, but would you say a word or two about the importance of seeing the President before you go to your post?

ESTES: Yes. The importance of seeing the President before you go to your post is partly symbolism, I suppose. The

substantive matters have pretty well been taken care of in your geographic bureau. The Assistant Secretary and the office Director have told you what the policy is and what they want to do, and you've read up and so forth. But it's terribly important when you go in to your new post and see the President at the presentation of credentials to say, "I bring you the greetings of President Kennedy. He told me such-and-such and such-and-such," because you are, after all, in the traditional practice, a personal representative of the President. It's almost intolerable to think that an ambassador would go to his post and not have been able to see the President.

MOSS: All right. Is this kind of personal credentials as easy to establish for a career Foreign Service Officer as for, say, a political appointee? Or does this never…

ESTES: Oh, no, I think it matters, yes, but I think that each has a certain advantage. The political appointee has a rapport of one kind. He may be well known to the President personally or by reputation—whatever the reason is, that's why he's acceptable to the President. The career officer is acceptable to the President because he is career. The President has received a briefing on his background, what he's achieved in the course of his ten, twenty, thirty years—whatever it may be—and the President knows he's a professional. The President, make no mistake, always has the final word in these things, and he will pick and choose, depending on what he wants done in a country. Now, obviously, in some countries a political appointee—I dislike that term, but that's the only one we have—

can do things that a career officer might not be able to do because he has this kind of rapport with the President.

MOSS: There's a kind of entrée that can cut across the channels, too, sometimes, isn't there? I think Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith]…

ESTES: Well, to a certain extent. I was just going to mention Mr. Galbraith. This isn't the kind that's particularly appreciated, I think, nor does it work very well. I certainly can't speak for any president, but our impression generally is that except for something of the most major importance, the President, regardless of his rapport with an ambassador—political or career—simply cannot afford to give attention to an unstaffed, undocumented report from an ambassador. Now, if he comes in and says, "Look, I've found out this, that, and the other thing; war is going to be declared," that is something else again. But the normal problems encountered in a country are seldom of such import that you should bother the President personally with them. When you stop to think of the demands on the President's time, the eighteen hours a day he puts in, it's a little bit presumptuous, I think, that you think your job—you

yourself, and your problem—is so important that you should bypass this entire hierarchy that's built in to solve these problems, or at least line them up according to priority. Now, if they are important enough to go to the President, they'll go. Each president works in his own way. The NSC [National Security Council] would now be the thing that would pick up something of such importance. But one should not…. Well, when we get to the last appointment, I'll give you an example of this sort of thing—a very good example.

MOSS: Okay. Let me shift gears here and ask you to describe your arrival in Ouagadougou and your impressions of the Foreign Minister and the President and so on—how that occurred.

ESTES: Well, we flew in one of the old four motor jobs from Paris. It took all night in those days. I remember we landed at Bamako in Mali about four o'clock in the morning for refueling. I'll never forget as I stepped out the door that sort of moist blanket of the tropical African air, which is particularly pronounced in Bamako because of the river. The city straddles the river so you get tremendous moisture, humidity. Then we flew on to Ouagadougou. At the foot of the ladder was an African I recognized, Cire Ba, a young press officer who had been in this country a month or so before on a trip. I'd met him and I'd had a chance to talk to him. So I saw one familiar black face. Another was Albert Balima, representing the Upper Volta government. Also, of course, there was our chargé d'affaires, Bob McKinnon [Robert A. McKinnon].

It was a Saturday as I remember it—I think I'm right. Being an old hand at this, I had not sent anything essential by air freight; I had carried everything I needed with me. By essential in this case I mean the first and only striped pants I've ever owned in thirty years of service, or a little less. I never owned a pair of striped pants, or a formal tail coat (what my son called my "Beatle jacket",) or a top hat. It was a good thing I carried these things with me because just after we arrived, an emissary came from the Foreign Office to say the Foreign Minister wanted to see me right away. This was either Saturday or Sunday. It was a holiday, and I can't at the moment recall which it was. Well, this caused some consternation because he said, the President will receive your credentials Monday morning. Now, normally it's a matter of four or five days. You get settled in and work on your speech and so forth. I had the outline of what I was going to say in English and had it checked with the Bureau to make sure it was in order, but I was going to fill it in and work on it somewhat in the light of what my staff had to say. Instead of that we had to turn to….

I went to the Foreign Office with the chargé. Lompolo Koné

was the Foreign Minister, a very fine person. He came with us on the state visit later. He's now the head of their school system, I think. I received a very cordial, a very warm welcome, a very friendly welcome, not at all protocol-ish. As he later told me, he said, "No, I'm not a government official. I'm really a school teacher. I'd rather be teaching school, but the President wants me to be the Foreign Minister, so I'm the Foreign Minister." I told him in about two hours I would have, I hoped, a copy of my remarks. You always give them the text in advance so they can prepare a reply for the chief of state. My French was terribly rusty. I hadn't used French since I had been a vice-consul in Quebec back in 1947. Happily, we had a very fine French lady—a French national—on the staff whose English was very good, and she could put in all the nuances. My problem was reading it in French, but we got through it.

The following day the chief of protocol called for me in the open car and we went to the palace—the presidential palace. It was really only an oversized villa. I use the word "palace" because that's what it was called. The French high commissioner had lived there and the President simply occupied it. It had two bedrooms—three bedrooms as a matter of fact—that's how big it was.

I was given a very cordial, warm reception. The President immediately demonstrated his knowledge of the history of the United States. He talked about President Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln,] the great hero of that part of Africa. I started out feeling that there was a real warmth for Americans in the country. As he said, Americans were no strangers because they had American missionaries in the country from about 1914, somewhere in there. But now that they were independent and had their official relations, they welcomed the first resident American ambassador. It was that, certainly, but it was more than rote. There was genuine pleasure that the United States had been among the first to recognize their country and to send a resident ambassador so soon.

MOSS: Did you have any holdover problems that struck you when you first arrived?

ESTES: No, this was really the beauty of this assignment. There's a great advantage in being the first. The chargé, Bob McKinnon, had done an excellent job of preliminary reporting what the President, the Foreign Minister, the Ministry of Economics hoped we would do for them, et cetera—what they needed and Bob's own interpretive reports of what they could actually absorb. Remember it was a brand new government. They had very little of the expertise required by our AID [Agency for International Development] mechanism to even ask the questions

of what they wanted, so a great deal devolved upon us to sort of interpret for them what it was we could do for them and put it in the terms acceptable to Washington.

MOSS: And so you had survey teams come?

ESTES: The survey teams came. There was the one before I got there. And again, these weren't terribly satisfactory because none of us—the technicians, neither the technicians nor the substantive people like myself —were at all prepared for what you find in a new nation in Africa. We had simply 90 percent ignored the—how shall I say – sociological, economic structure of a French colony. Now, we'd had a consulate general in Dakar [Dakar, Senegal], and the officer there had done a terrific job, but, you know, he had a territory as big as half the eastern United States, with dozens of tribes and entities. It's a wonder that we knew as much as we did. Obviously it was an agricultural based country; the needs were agricultural, to start with. We eventually came up with assistance for cattle raising and well digging or water surveys, this sort of thing. It took a while to get started. So certainly

there were no holdover problems as such. We were too busy getting established, as it were, to find even housing—there wasn't enough. They were just in the process of building western style housing in one part of the city where the embassy was.

No, the great advantage was the fact that when we recommended something, we did it with the assurance there was nobody back in Washington that knew any more about it than we did. It was a great help.

MOSS: What about the Peace Corps? How did you relate to that crowd coming in?

ESTES: In the first place, I had been briefed by and talked with the Peace Corps people before I went out. It was fairly clear at the moment that Upper Volta was not exactly at the top of their list of priorities for Peace Corps personnel. They had many other demands in bellwether countries like Nigeria and Tunisia and a few other places, and there simply wasn't enough money nor enough Peace Corps people to spread around. And quite frankly, I was not at all unhappy about this because I figured I had about all I could do to establish the embassy and set up a rational aid program—at least what I would consider rational—to get us off to a good start with this new government, for various and sundry reasons. I did not, in the next four years that I was there, see a real need for the Peace Corps. The government of Upper Volta was not particularly anxious to have one because they needed farmers, technicians, soil experts, this sort of person, and they

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didn't seem to be readily available. They needed teachers, but we just didn't have French-speaking young men and women who could teach in French period. This was the language required.

It was quite different in Ghana, where the Peace Corps kids did a tremendous job. They used to come up to Upper Volta in the summer, and teach English. We had a summer English school—oh, a tremendous job. We, AID, USIA [United States Information Agency] hired them. Instead of taking their leave, they'd come up and teach students from twelve French-speaking countries. That was one of the programs we established. My last year, the time seemed ripe and the Peace Corps seemed receptive. I'd talked to Jack Vaughn in Washington. We had started a cattle ranch in the north and this opened possibilities for some real Peace Corps assistance. To make a long story short, I negotiated the final agreement with the government and brought it back here so that it could go into effect for my successor.

After I submitted my resignation, I was assigned to the Naval War College. At the third global strategy session at the Naval War College, which is a big, bang-up end of the year discussion, I sat beside an admiral who was visiting, and he said, "Where were you, Ambassador?" I said, "A place probably you never heard of, Upper Volta." He said, "The hell I haven't. My son's in the Peace Corps there. He's going to do something about water on some ranch, some cattle ranch." You know, it's a small world.

MOSS: Yeah. On the question of aid to Upper Volta, all right, you have your study teams and you're setting up a rational program and so on, but a couple of things begin to happen. There is an increased U.S. interest in Ghana, for instance, that the Upper Voltans see, and they say, "Why are the people in Ghana getting this instead of us?" and a little disappointment in the people in Upper Volta. A chap named Koné [Bégnon Koné] in the assembly made a speech, I believe, to this effect.

ESTES: Koné was very critical of the United States.

MOSS: This is not the Foreign Minister?

ESTES: No, this is the Vice President and the President of the assembly. Yes, Koné was very sharply critical of the United States. My initial interview with him was not cordial, warm,

or at all friendly. He had been invited to visit the United States, and he procrastinated and procrastinated. As you know, these things are set up on a very tight schedule, and if one doesn't want to go, there are always ten who can be scheduled. So I went over

to see him, to call on him, very early on, and to urge that he accept the invitation and set a definite date. He just flatly refused to set a definite date. He was busy with this and busy with that, and I must say my nose was out of joint a bit because we had worked—or my chargé previously had worked very hard—to get this set up. There was a lot of competition for these trips. I remember that he made it very clear that he did not think that the United States had done anywhere near enough for his country. We discussed it at some length, but when I went back I recommended we just drop the invitation. I saw no point in toadying, going out of our way or offering any bribe, remembering very well what the President said: "We'll not be blackmailed into anything." I could not see going back and saying, "Well, look, you set the date and we'll fix it up, and what is it you'd particularly like us to do at the moment?" I just refused to do it.

MOSS: All right, now how substantial was the criticism? Were we being slow in reading Upper Volta needs, and why?

ESTES: Yes, I think we were slow, and I think it was pure bureaucracy. I just think it's the nature of the best to get started slowly. There'd been a survey team out there several months before I arrived. I read their reports; they were fair enough. Bu the process of translating a recommendation into a budgeted or programmed item—assuming that the budget is there, which it was in this case – takes time. I'm speaking now, specifically, of telecommunications. Well, it takes time to get contracts out and follow all the procedures of three bids for so many telephone poles, so many miles of copper wire of such-and-such, et cetera. I had tried to offset this. I sensed that this was going to be a long, drawn out process, and I was just able to persuade the AID people to let me have I think it was ten jeeps and maybe a couple of motorcycles—I've forgotten a few trailers and a water wagon, to have put on a hip that would arrive within a month or so after I arrived, or at least the earliest date. And I remember well within the month, I think, of my arrival, I was able to present these jeeps, water carriers and other items to the gendarmerie. This was not military assistance; this was a civic action sort of thing. As I tried to get across and did get across to the Bureau of African Affairs and eventually to AID, it was essential that I come with something. I couldn't come with just talk. They'd had a survey team, there'd been talk from November to June when I arrived, they wanted to see something, and if there as anything they would understand it was an American jeep. The fact is that out of those then little jeeps we probably go a million dollars worth of appreciation for a very small amount of money. This held us until some more things started to come.

Road building equipment was the next big one. Well, it takes a long time to get this equipment, to get the right equipment that will work in this kind of country, that can be maintained by these people. Remember that they had to set up in Dahomey a motor repair shop school to teach maintenance. The Africans learn very quickly, but they'd never seen an American vehicle. Those who were mechanics had only worked on French vehicles. So it's a long drawn out process of meshing everything together. I remember one piece of equipment we got was a post hole digger for telegraph posts. Now it worked fine in some areas here, but the composition of the earth there in places is a sort of a rotten rock. It's red dust; in early geological times it must have been stone. The post hole digger just didn't work well in this; it was designed to work in good brown earth. Well, it worked, but not as well as we expected. But we didn't do as badly as the Russians did when they sent tractors with enclosed, heated cabs to Conakry. The Africans really loved this. So it was simply a bureaucratic process.

The French were no exceptions, even though they had been there for a long time. In Bobo Dioulasso [Bobo Dioulasso, Republic of Upper Volta] there was a disgraceful dump of what had been Marshall Plan equipment: bulldozers, road scrapers, and all the rest – all American equipment that had been sent to France under the Marshall Plan and then had been passed down to the Africans. I guess there were probably forty or fifty pieces of equipment there, all immobilized by lack of parts, lack of maintenance, no oil or whatever it was. I was determined this wasn't going to happen to any of our equipment.

MOSS: Yes, I wondered how much two things enter into this, too. One is the relative priority of Upper Volta as a country on the scale of interests, and secondly, a tendency perhaps for the State Department to say, "Oh, well, the French are taking care of this kind of thing."

ESTES: To answer your first question, the priority of Upper Volta as such was relatively low, of course. It is a poor, inland country, economically very much behind. But its importance was based on its political situation. The Bureau, quite properly —the African Bureau people – looked not at Upper Volta alone but at the Entente, the four or five states aligned politically with Houphouet [Félix Houphouet-Boigny,] because the Ivory Coast was then, as it is now, one of the most prosperous nations in Africa, if not in the world, as far as that goes. If the United States had the GNP [Gross National Product] that the Ivory Coast does, we'd really be in clover in this country. The political situation in the French areas involved primarily two groups, the Senghor [Léopold Sédar Senghor] group and the Houphouet group, or the RDA [Rassamblement Démocratique Africain].

At that moment it was important, I think, to encourage Houphouet and the RDA which had pretty well permeated West Africa except Mali, Guinea and Senegal—Senegal for a different reason from Mali, of course, and from Guinea. Therefore, it was important to promote the already obvious pro-Western, pro-American attitude of the President, not just because of votes in the United Nations. I think until after the coup d'etat….

MOSS: This was in '66?

ESTES: In '66.

MOSS: Yes.

ESTES: …and the votes of Upper Volta had generally been with the United States and the west in spite of the African bloc. But after the coup d'etat the new Foreign Minister arranged to establish relations with the Russians. They started playing one bloc against the other. That's when I think the relationships between Upper Volta and the United States deteriorated.

MOSS: Okay. And on the second point with the reliance on the French interests.

ESTES: Peculiar situation there. There was not an attitude of relying on the French per se because it was understood the French were there and had the primary responsibility. There was no question of that. It was rather a question of: What can we provide that will supplement the French assistance, that's useful, that will raise the standard of living in this country? Yet, everything that we did had to meet that proof; that is supplemented the French effort, that it did not compete with the French. I was very careful personally, and my economic officers, my aid officers, all of us worked very closely with the French embassy's equivalent of our AID. I worked very closely and on a personal basis with the French ambassador to be sure that whatever we were going to propose fitted into the general aid

pattern. I must say that the French ambassador reciprocated—he generally told me what they were thinking of and recommending. We had a fine working relationship in that area. This wasn't true in all places, of course, because personalities enter into it. But definitely, to answer your question, the AID motto was never complete; supplement.

MOSS: Yeah. Okay. Let me ask you to talk about setting up the American delegation to the independence day celebration in December of 1961. As I read the material in the file, you tried early to set up a name delegation. You asked for Robert Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], and if not him perhaps Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson,] and perhaps Marian Anderson, Eleanor Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt], Congressman Diggs [Charles C. Diggs, Jr.]

one or two others. And what you wound up with was Luther Hodges [Luther H. Hodges]. How did this transformation take place?

ESTES: Well, first let me go back. As I say, you have the advantage over me a bit; you've read the files more recently than I have.

MOSS: Well, that is the only piece of information I've seen of the story so that I don't have that much of an advantage.

ESTES: Well, my feeling was, and in this I was certainly supported by my staff, that it was important to the United States to encourage this pro-American, this very obvious pro-American attitude of the government, because, remember, among other things there was still the question of Red China and the United Nations, and every vote was important.

MOSS: And there was the trade-off Mauritania [Islamic Republic of Mauritania] question.

ESTES: There was the Mauritania question that also came into this. I felt it was important that we do not appear to downgrade their first independence day. Maurice Yaméogo and his cabinet would understand if a ranking figure came. I can't say the people would because I don't think it'd make much difference to the average African peasant in the bush who came. However, for the thinking people —the traditional chiefs, the educated, the young elite—particularly the young elite, many who were being educated in Paris and living on the Left Bank, it was terribly important that we have a well-known person head the independence day delegation.

Having had some contact with this sort of thing when I was Deputy Assistant Secretary, I know that it's almost as easy sometimes to get a big name—and I don't mean big name in a snobbish sort of vein at all; I mean a big name important to the country. In this case I suggested people I thought would make an impression on the country, a reflection of the President's concern for their country, their feelings, and so on—and keeping the French in mind a little bit, too. Obviously the President' s brother would have been terrific. Happily, this turned out to be the case in the Ivory Coast. Eventually Robert Kennedy came there to attend their national celebration and made a tremendous impression in that part of Africa, not just in the Ivory Coast. It was the President's brother. So I recommended the President's brother and several other people whose names I thought would be recognized and understood by these people as being a compliment to them and to their nation. When I heard that Luther Hodges was coming, I must say I was completely flabbergasted. I didn't know Luther Hodges other than a name and I was damn well sure nobody in Upper Volta had ever heard of Luther Hodges. I should

add that someone from a southern state was not exactly the criteria I had in mind. I was quite disappointed, I must say. I felt we could have done much better. As for the delegation itself…. I never met any of those people because I came down with whatever I came down with and in spite of my opposition I was evacuated from the post.

MOSS: Some sort of sickness?

ESTES: I had a combination of hepatitis—at least they thought it was hepatitis but it was never proven, as well as malaria and gastroenteritis. The combination hit me all at one time. I had insisted I could stay in the residence and make the arrangements. I was sure I'd be well enough by the time of the independence celebration, but my staff apparently went behind my back and told the Department I was a damn sight more sick than I was admitting. Remember, my deputy, Bob McKinnon had died only six months or so before. It would have been terrible having the Ambassador also die at the post. He'd have to die somewhere else. [Laughter] So I never saw the delegation. I still had no deputy at that time since Bob had not been replaced. The Department sent up a very bright young lad named Jim Carson [James C. Carson] from Abidjan [Abidjan, Ivory Coast] to be chargé d'affaires and handle this. He had some wondrous tales of the visit of the delegation.

MOSS: What sort of things?

ESTES: Well, sort of personal things of how members of the delegation acted. Mr. Luther Hodges had some very firm ideas of how much time he was going to give this ceremony and that ceremony and had a tendency to say, "Well, it's time to leave," no matter what it was. The Africans are very sensitive about this sort of thing. They are quite aware of protocol.

MOSS: And if I understand it, too, in meetings they sort of like to play the thing out to its natural conclusion.

ESTES: It's quite impolite to say, "Well, now look, let's get down to business. We've talked long enough so I've got five minutes. Do you agree or don't you? This is not palaver. You discuss it. There is still the traditional respect for age: the elders should have a chance to make their views known before younger people speak up. And you're not hurried about this because there's always tomorrow. There was an atmosphere of "I've just got so much time; we've got to get this visit over." It was not a successful visit, period. I am sure that Jim Carson would bear this out. Tony Dalsimer [Anthony S. Dalsimer,] who was the

Third Secretary, and his wife bore a great deal of the burden. They're level headed kids and they were very unhappy. They loved the Africans, their French was absolutely fluent, both of them, and they were getting the feedback from the young people, the young Africans, you see. This was all reported to me after I returned. In short, it was not a successful visit.

MOSS: In the other direction, you spent a couple of years trying to get President Yaméogo over here and were rebuffed both in '62 and '63.

ESTES: That's why I was so surprised…

MOSS: When Johnson agreed?

ESTES: …When Mr. Johnson agreed. I remember I was in Spain. I'd gone up at the invitation of my air attaché on the regular six-month servicing of his aircraft. Believe me, you only go at the invitation of your air attaché. Happily, we were invited two or three times to go with ours. I'd been on the telephone with the State Department, taking advantage of the military service, to get some business done. I remember I got a call one day and a desk officer said, "Do you think President Yaméogo would accept an invitation to visit the United States no later than" whatever it was, thirty-five, forty-five days from then. Usually these things are planned six or eight months in advance. I said, "Would you repeat that? It just sounded like you said…" I said, "Yes, I think he will. I'm going back tomorrow and I'll confirm it but don't let this one out of your hands." Well, I went back and immediately sought out the President. He was down in the country I remember. I said, "President Johnson would like very much to have you come and visit him in the United States. Unhappily, he cannot give you the usual advance warning, but he hopes you will understand he's just been inaugurated and things are happening but he knows from what I have reported how much you would like to visit the United States and he hopes you can come, " bang, bang, bang, whatever the day was. I remember he looked at me, "Certainment." [Laughter] "Certainment!" He just grinned all over because, you see, politically this was a tremendous thing. He knew that President Johnson had just been inaugurated.

MOSS: Why was it difficult to get the trip in the earlier two years, in '62 and '63?

ESTES: Too many other chiefs of state who wanted to make the visits who had bigger and better reasons for being scheduled.

MOSS: Was Yaméogo putting pressure on you to get a trip or was this your initiative?

ESTES: No, no. He was very circumspect, very circumspect. I can't remember Yaméogo asking me directly for anything. We would discuss things, but he was a very, very circumspect person—very proud, very well-mannered. I'll give you an example. In my first meeting with him after the presentation of credentials he leaned over the desk toward me and said, "You know, I am not a diplomat, Excellence. I don't know how to speak diplomatically. If you will accept what I say as what I mean and if you will always tell me what you mean, we'll get along very well. But I'm just not a diplomat. I'm not used to this diplomatic procedure." I said, "Well, I've pretty much done business that way myself. I certainly appreciate your confidence," and so forth. Then some months later—several months later – he was getting very friendly with Nkrumah [Kwame Nkrumah] which in our view was contrary to the interests of the Voltaiques at that time. In my judgment and others, Nkrumah was just playing Yaméogo to his own advantages. Finally, I received an instruction from the Department that in effect said whenever in my judgment I felt that I might caution against too close a relationship at this period with Nkrumah for various and sundry reasons, that I would be free to do so. So I took what I thought was an occasion to suggest that perhaps he was moving a little too rapidly toward a trade agreement and a political relationship with Nkrumah, particularly in view of the latter's relationships with the Russians. I remember Yaméogo came up in his seat and leaned over and said, "I don't need you or any other ambassador to tell me anything about the ideologies of my country or my policies." I straightened up in my chair and I said, "Mr. President, I agree with you. You don't need me or anybody else, but if you will recall a conversation in this chair, you told me always to be frank and tell you what I meant. I've just told you what I meant and if you don't like it, fine. But at least you know how I feel, and I may say my government happens to feel the same way, it's not just my feeling." He looked at me and broke into a grin. "Ça va, ça va, ça va." He wasn't used to being opposed. He didn't really like "no" men around him. That's one of the reasons he was overthrown; he just didn't have enough "no" men around. But I never, from that day on, had the slightest problem of going to him with anything. I was privileged, as no other ambassador

was, to telephone him at any time day or night, in the city or at his country residence. There were always orders to put me through.

MOSS: In January 1963 there was a plot that was put down. Correct me if I can't pronounce the name correctly. Ouedraogo [Bougouraoua Ouedraogo]?

ESTES: Ouedraogo. Just like Smith.

MOSS: Had a tough time with it. What do you recall of the circumstances? It was put down rather rapidly as I get from the little bits and pieces of it I see in the file.

ESTES: Well, I'm trying to recall the circumstances. I think it was terribly exaggerated for one thing. If I recall, this was the plot involving the Minister of Economic Affairs. You're referring to the time the President stood on the balcony and said, "The comedy is finished?" Well, this took us all rather by surprise, and as I said, in my judgment it was rather exaggerated. I don't think that the Minister had the following. He was intelligent enough—a very intelligent man; he was impatient with the slow progress, slow economic progress of the country. But I don't think he really had the following—certainly not in the Army, of that I am convinced. I think Yaméogo was not above playing this to his advantage to show that he was really on top. "Don't any of the rest of you try anything because I know what's going all the time." The fact of the matter is, he didn't.

MOSS: At about the same time, just a little before, you had the recall of the Upper Volta Ambassador to the United States and the UN, Ambassador Guirma [Frédéric Fernand Guirma]?

ESTES: Guirma.

MOSS: Guirma. Primarily because of his financial problems. I notice that he was overdue in his rent on a New York apartment and things of that sort.

ESTES: Well, Frédéric was the first Upper Volta Ambassador to this country. He's a very interesting person, very interesting family. His brother is a priest and a highly accomplished musician. Frederic himself is an excellent musician. One of the things he took back to Ouagadougou with him was a Hammond electric organ. His brother, the priest, composed the first modern and traditional African mass. I had the privilege of hearing it recorded. An extraordinary family, and of considerable money I would suspect. Frédéric, of course being French-educated, wanted Upper Volta to have as fine an embassy and anything else as fine as anybody had. He never paid much attention to money personally and I guess he just didn't pay any attention to it officially. I don't think he ever pocketed a dime illegally. And he didn't pay much attention to instructions from anybody, including the President, when it suited him. I heard the President talk to him on the telephone a couple of times so I have some knowledge of this. Then Frédéric came back very, very suddenly. At least one reason for his recall was the overdue rent. I was receiving telegrams about this. It was most embarrassing to all of us. They instructed me to tell the President, "Your ambassador owes rent." A miserable thing to get into. Another reason Frédéric got into trouble is that he did not follow the President's instructions – something in the United Nations; I can't bring it to mind at the moment. But this I know because the President told me about it.

MOSS: Yeah. This was the real…

ESTES: This was the real thing.

MOSS: …the real consideration. Okay, let me just turn this tape over for a minute. [Interruption]

[SIDE II TAPE I]

MOSS: All right. On the sided side let me ask you to recount your last meeting with President Kennedy that occurred in November 1963 just before he went to Dallas. You and Ambassador Darlington [Charles F. Darlington] I believe, were the two who were…

ESTES: Again, this was a two for one deal. Darlington did not have an appointment and had been waiting. He was also leaving—resigning. Again we convinced the appointments secretary to take two for the price of one—let us in to see the President. This is for me a very emotional thing because of what happened. But I remember we went over and we waited and we waited. I began to think that something had come up and the best thing to do was to leave. I remember I talked about it to Miss Lincoln [Evelyn N. Lincoln.] She said, "Oh, no, just wait. Something has come up, but he'll still see you." In the meantime little John-John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] came in with—I've forgotten the name of the gentleman [David F. Powers] who was looking after little John-John. He pointed to a mounted sail fish on the wall and said, "My daddy caught that fish." He wanted to get up on the table. At that point the telephone rang and Mr. Powers had to leave so I…

MOSS: The big fish — this was the big sailfish?

ESTES: The big sailfish. Little John said, "My daddy, my daddy caught that." He was up on the table when Mr. Powers had to leave so I spent ten or fifteen minutes playing with John-John, holding him so he wouldn't fall off the table and talking about the fish. It was a wonderful experience. He was a wonderful little boy.

Just about the time Mr. Powers came back, somebody said, "The President is ready to see you now." Darlington and I went in. The President got up from behind his desk and sat in the rocking chair. He handed me his photograph, and he'd written a little something on the bottom of it. That is also an interesting story because I had actually originally asked for one for President Yaméogo. I also wanted one for myself but—you don't ask for it; these things come to you. Someone was thoughtful enough to propose that he give

me his picture. I figured the President would have to wait for his—the African President. Anyway, we sat down on the sofa; he sat on a rocking chair. A man was taking pictures. I was clutching this, afraid somebody'd take away my President's picture. Darlington gave an account of where things stood in Gabon. Then the President said, "Well, what's with Upper Volta these days and what's interesting? What's going on?" So I told him about the great vaccination experiment.

You'll recall that a year or so before that a new measles vaccine had been developed in Boston [Boston, Massachusetts] and had had such tremendous success here in this country. About six or eight months before this meeting, I'd been home and I'd been approached by the AID people and the public health people. They asked whether I would support a vaccination experiment in Upper Volta. The Minister of Public Health in Upper Volta had written to ask for help in eradicating measles. I did not initiate this project, but as soon as it got into channels it was brought to my attention for approval. They wanted to give this vaccine to three hundred children to see if it would work as well in Upper Volta. I

said, "Well, what if it doesn't work? There's the end of one ambassadorial appointment real quick, to say nothing of the adverse effects for the United States." But anyway they convinced me. I finally said okay, I would support it, it went into operation. We had a tremendous inauguration for this project which featured an air gun to inject the vaccine. President Yaméogo said, "This is the kind of gun the Americans bring to us and this is the only gun we want." It was a great event. Not a child died and not a child got measles in the epidemic measles season. The importance of this is that three out of five children on the average, between the age of six months and five years of age, died from measles every year, throughout this whole belt of West Africa. In any event, the three hundred lived and later another eight, ten thousand were inoculated.

I was telling the President about this, somewhat as I'm saying it now. The President stopped me. He said, "Now wait a minute. Go back over this again. How many children were inoculated? How any died before that?" He probed; he kept probing. Finally—I remember I was sitting to his left—he hit his leg with his hand, like this [SLAP], "Why don't I hear about these things?" I said, "Mr. President, I report these things to the State Department and to the AID people. Now how they get from them to the White House is beyond me." He said, "I don't know. I don't know. I understand that. But I want to know about this. Now, I have to leave in a few minutes but I want to know more about this when I return. This is tremendously exciting and important – saving children's lives. This is the sort of thing I like to hear about." I said, "Yes, sir, I'll pass this on." It was then getting on to quarter of eleven—ten minutes of eleven or so—and I

knew he was scheduled at eleven, but he said, "Now, I want to hear more about this." I finished the report and we made the usual farewells. I went right over to the African Bureau and told them they'd better have this material ready for when the President got back from Texas. I was leaving immediately for Maine on my home leave. In fact, I left that afternoon. I telephoned the next morning to make sure that the material was being gathered in case the President called for it—and I was sure he would. I drove into my driveway at one o'clock and a neighbor rushed out and said, "Turn on your radio the President has been shot." Everybody has his own reaction. What do you remember you did? I leaned against the car and cried. I just cried. It didn't seem possible, still doesn't.

This reaction—sure, we talked about other things; I've forgotten what they were—but his genuine interest in what we had started in Upper Volta was indicative of his nature. If he were alive today he would be interested to know that—what was it? —just a year ago, I think, the twenty-fifth millionth child was inoculated in Ghana. The twenty-fifth millionth child! The project is now being taken over by WHO [World Health Organization] and is a multi-nation thing. But hundred, thousands, and tens of hundreds of thousands of children will live in Africa because of what the United States did, starting in Upper Volta. He saw this right away. Of course, this brings up the question of food, increased population, and so forth. But this earnest, real interest, in the lives of children that he expressed is symptomatic. It goes back to what I said earlier; for a career ambassador or even a political ambassador, this isn't the sort of thing about which you write directly to the White House. But when the President is interested, then you send it in.

MOSS: Can you think of anything else that might be important to add to the record, or have we covered the ground?

ESTES: I think we've covered the ground for the limited extent that I had some participation in these events, except possibly as to the costs of this tragedy to this country. I'm afraid it is going to be another hundred years perhaps before we can really evaluate it in perspective, in true perspective. But as I am sure others will tell you or put into this research project, with all due respect to his successors and his predecessors, President Kennedy had a charisma, a way of transmitting to you his enthusiasm, his belief, his absolute desires to do something good for this world – for this

country, for our people, for this world—that you believed. And today, as we look around us, to believe is terribly important. I don't know of a single colleague of mine who ever met the President, who had anything to do with him, who didn't have the same enthusiasm. There was the same belief that after all these years of pushing papers forever lost in wastebaskets, all of a sudden we were doing something worthwhile. This was the greatest experience of my life. That's all.

MOSS: Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Ambassador.

ESTES: My pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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