

Pioneer, Bridge Builder and Statesman—A Conversation with Ambassador Edward J. Perkins

Edward J. Perkins was born in Sterlington, Louisiana, on June 8, 1928, and grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Portland, Oregon. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland and master's and Doctor of Public Administration degrees from the University of Southern California.

He served in the U.S. Army for three years and later spent four years in the U.S. Marine Corps. He worked for the State Department after the Marine Corps and joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1972.

Foreign Service Journal: President Ronald Reagan tapped you as the first Black U.S. ambassador to apartheid South Africa in 1986. What was your mission there, and how did you manage it?

EJP: When President Reagan interviewed me for the job, he asked me what I would want to accomplish in South Africa, and I told him that I would try to change the system using the power of his office. He asked me how I would do it. I told him that I would get to know the Black South Africans, as well as other South Africans. I told him that we didn't know Black South Africans well, that they were suspicious of the United States, and we needed to gain their trust. I added that we needed to work toward a peaceful transition in South Africa, and we needed to convince the Afrikaner government that their time was up. Finally, I told him that I would expect to speak on his authority, and that everything I would say would be on his behalf.

It was difficult and challenging because the Afrikaners were a small group of people who had come from Flanders to South Africa to start a new life; they felt people were trying to take away the lives they had built over hundreds of years. I told President Reagan that the denial of rights to the other racial groups in South Africa was untenable and could not continue, but that it would be my job to understand all the actors in the country, by meeting them.

FSJ: I read that when you found a totally segregated society in South Africa, you said: "Our embassy must be a giant change agent." Can you tell us about the significance of attending the Delmas Treason Trial and about your attempts to visit Nelson Mandela in jail?

EJP: The Delmas Treason Trial was the trial of 22 anti-apartheid activists, including three senior United Democratic Front leaders: Moses Chikane, Mosiuoa Lekota and Popo Molefe. The men used peaceful protest to let the country know that apartheid was wrong; the Afrikaner government accused them of terrorism and wanted to use their trial and resulting sentences as a lesson to others. The trial took place in the small village of Delmas, in northwest South Africa. I decided to attend but did not make my decision public.

At the last minute, the political officer and I got in the car and told the driver to take us to Delmas. The driver, who we knew was a government operative, tried to stall by telling me that he needed to change the oil. I told him to stay in the car, that he would not get the opportunity to tell the government of our movements. He was frightened but drove us to Delmas. When I walked into the courtroom, everyone went silent; by the time the court recessed, the three senior UDF members had made the decision to meet with me and had already outlined their requests related to their prison conditions on paper. For example, they wanted all of the Time magazines going back six months plus issues of The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. Delmas became well known throughout the world.

I let it be known to the government that I was trying to get inside the prison to meet Nelson Mandela. I sent letters to the Minister of Justice after attending the Delmas Treason Trial. I also called on him to ask permission to visit his most famous prisoner, and his response was always "it isn't time." I always replied: "Your time will never equal my time, so I will save my request till next week." Every week I sent a letter, and he sent the same response. During my last week as ambassador, I told him to talk to his president to give the U.S. permission to visit, noting that the minister did not want to be known as the person who barred me. He never vocalized the reasons for the decision, but his expression told me that it was out of his hands.

FSJ: Do you think that U.S. embassies and diplomats can still be change agents in the world? What advice do you have for today's FSOs?

EJP: Yes, I do believe that U.S. embassies and diplomats can still be change agents. When serving overseas, diplomats should strive to get access to all parts of host-country communities to make a difference. This means representing the United States at its best. American diplomats should also be a reflection of the various communities that we come from and make the effort to represent the best parts of our society. I would advise them to do what I did—learn to represent not just the State Department, but the heart and soul of the United States. To do this, you need to understand the Constitution and the various constituencies of our country.

FSJ: A 1987 Time magazine article, "Quiet Sting: A Diplomat Makes His Mark," described you as "cultivating a low profile, then discarding it at strategic intervals to issue carefully chosen shots." That sounds like an excellent strategy. Can you tell us about a time it worked well?

EJP: As part of my strategy in South Africa, I needed to get to know Afrikaners and visit the communities where they lived. I traveled to a couple of towns, but the one that affected me most was an Afrikaner village three miles from Pretoria whose population ranged from the very poor to the well off. We parked the car on the outskirts of town, and I walked up and down the streets and observed people of various ages; they also looked at me carefully, wondering what I was doing there. Finally, someone came up and asked who I was; they couldn't believe I was the U.S. ambassador. I talked to three Afrikaner women; it was my way of letting them know that I represented the United States in South Africa, and I was not going to become a myth by keeping myself apart from the people.