

Tales from the Congo

Alan W. Lukens

I was on the International Staff of NATO in Paris when a call came from the State Department Personnel Office in December 1959. "Our consul in Brazzaville has died of a heart attack. Will you take his place?" A few weeks later I headed for Brazzaville, then capital of French Equatorial Africa, the largest consular district in Africa. *Afrique Equatoriale Française* (AEF), as the French called it, was comprised of Congo, Gabon, the Central African Republic, and Chad, and the area was tightly governed by the French governor general in Brazzaville, who had four governors reporting to him.

In 1958, President Charles de Gaulle called for a referendum throughout French Africa to decide whether the colonies would consider remaining in "le Communauté." He campaigned throughout the area, calling for a yes vote. His most memorable speech in favor of this was made in Brazzaville, a city which de Gaulle held in the highest regard, as the AEF was the only group of colonies that had remained with the Free French in 1940.

Having rallied the French in Equatorial Africa, de Gaulle became known as "*l'Homme de Brazzaville*." The referendum turned out to be a stamp of approval by 99 percent of the population in French Equatorial Africa. Only Guinea chose to reject the plan to stay in the *Communauté*. It paid dearly for this decision that led to a scorched-earth policy by the French and an open door to the Russians.

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De Gaulle's approval of the plan in 1960 triggered the famous "Year of Independence" in Africa. In each French colony, the political framework had been put into place. A national assembly, a prime minister, and a cabinet were functioning—albeit under the sharp eyes of French governors and civil administrators. The Mali Federation, which soon split into Senegal and Mali, was the first colony to achieve independence. Togo and Cameroon followed in the spring of 1960. The French planned to delay independence for the four Equatorial African colonies and for the Entente states of the Ivory Coast, Niger, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), and Dahomey (now Benin). French administrators kept telling Paris that these colonies were not ready for independence.

Belgium's announcement that the Belgian Congo would assume its independence on June 30, 1960 sped up the independence process. The early years of "Congo ex-Belge," as it was known, are part of a different story, though its history was inextricably bound to that of "Congo-Brassaville." I was fortunate to be part of the U.S. delegation, under the leadership of Ambassador Robert Murphy and William Paley of CBS, that attended the independence day ceremonies of the Belgian Congo. We watched the parade on June 30, as King Baudouin formally turned the Congo over to the hastily-formed government of President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba. We winced as goose-stepping Flemish officers and non-commissioned officers pushed the Congolese troops of the Force Publique around, wondering how long that situation would last.

Across the river in my tiny consulate covering the four states of Equatorial Africa, the French governor general and

his many colonial civil servants acted as if the Belgian Congo's new status would never affect them. One week later I was awakened at 5 AM by a call from our new embassy in Leopoldville informing me that the Force Publique had mutinied against its officers and the Congolese were beginning to ravage the city. I was told to hurry to "le beach," arrival point for the ferries, to meet American dependents who were fleeing the city. Boatload after boatload arrived. There were few Americans but many Belgians and other Europeans carrying as many of their belongings as they could.

We found places in the consulate—on the floor mostly—for our American refugees, and fed them all with supplies we had brought from home that were intended to last us two years. Finally, the French officials reluctantly agreed to open up schools and other facilities for the horde of refugees. We sent one Pan Am plane off to Accra with Americans and managed to put others on charter flights to Europe. Washington ordered a large Air Force plane from Germany to carry helicopters to Brazzaville but forgot to notify the French. The French governor told me that he would not approve its landing, even though at that point it was only an hour away. I told him that such a refusal would cause a major hassle between Paris and Washington and that the French would be very embarrassed later. He finally gave in (though with little grace) in view of the fact that Njili, Leopoldville's airport, was closed and there was no other open airport within a thousand mile radius.

Once the Air Force team arrived with its helicopters, we began a large-scale evacuation exercise. The American missionaries in the former Belgian Congo

had been there for many years and could not believe that their neighbors would ever cause them harm. Unfortunately, this was not the case. There were a number of murders before we could evacuate everyone. Through the missionary radio network, we were able to alert the evacuees that the choppers were

asked for American help. All communication was cut off between Leopoldville and the outside world except via walkie-talkie from our embassy there and my consulate in Brazzaville. Thus, I was instructed to tell Washington that the Congolese wanted American troops as soon as they could come.

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In this operation, we rescued approximately 100 Americans plus many Europeans. We found two Americans who had not left their villages in the Congo since 1933, with passports dating back that far. The next problem we confronted was moving all the refugees on, after providing them with money and proper documentation. By this time, having faced similar problems evacuating French nationals, the local French authorities were being more cooperative.

In the midst of the chaos in Leopoldville, our new embassy there was trying to set up some sort of stable regime. The Belgians were so hated that there was no way that they could be called back. Other Europeans, especially the French, were not about to send troops, since they were afraid that the chaos might become contagious and spread to their colonies. Finally, the new Congolese regime under President Kasavubu

After some stalling the State Department cabled me to send word to our embassy in Leopoldville that we would not send American troops and to suggest that the Congolese ask for UN assistance. A few hours later, via the same walkie-talkie arrangement, I got an urgent reply: "Tell the Department to ask for the UN—we have the okay from the Congolese." I placed another urgent call to the Department, but by some fluke I ended up with a Mr. Olson in Minnesota, who must still be wondering why he was told that the Congolese were waiting for the UN. Word finally got through, however, and that was the genesis of the UN presence in the Congo.

Meanwhile, in Brazzaville, the political dynamics shifted quickly. De Gaulle knew that change was in the air everywhere in Africa and that he could not resist it. Independence had been granted to the Mali Federation, Togo, Cameroon, and now to the Belgian Congo. It became clear that the other French colonies could not be denied the same status. Several French political leaders rationalized that if the four states of West Africa that

formed the Entente would join together, the resulting union would be more visible than four separate entities.

The French governor general in Brazzaville, Yvon Bourges, who later became French minister of defense, pushed the idea of the Union de la République de l'Afrique Centrale (URAC) to an even greater degree; this also appealed to the political scientists at the Quai d'Orsay. Yet the idea never got off the ground. Each African chief of state wanted to be the leader and each wanted to have the national capital. The four states were too diverse. Gábon was the smallest and richest and did not wish to subsidize the others; Chad was too remote and partially Islamic, unlike the others; and neither Congo nor the Central African Republic had the resources—human and natural—to lead the others.

Thus, quite suddenly in early August, we heard that de Gaulle had decided to allow the four states in West Africa and the four in Equatorial Africa to assume their independence. Our embassy in Paris, as well as the British and German ones, learned that this was merely a "domestic change," and a "coming of age," and that the celebrations would only be marked by France and the eight states without outside support. We also learned that André Malraux, Minister of Culture, had been given the job of representing de Gaulle, and that every forty-eight hours he would first visit one of the four Entente states for an independence ceremony and then come to our consular district with its now four different countries.

It is worth remembering that this was the summer of 1960, when the Kennedy-Nixon campaign overshadowed all else. When told by the French that outside representation was neither needed nor welcome, the United States

and other countries readily agreed to just send their consuls to represent them.

I drafted messages to be sent from President Eisenhower to the four new presidents. After many days of silence, the Department finally approved the messages without any changes. I took these messages, translated them into French, and typed them on official White House stationery. At the ceremonies, the Africans had no intention of breaking ties with the French, especially economic and military ones, but having seen other African countries—particularly the Belgian Congo—achieve independence, they wished to follow suit. Their flags and national anthems became important symbols of their newly-achieved sovereignty. (When the Chadians asked me for a suitable tune for their anthem, I almost sold them on Princeton's "Old Nassau.")

We were told on very short notice that a ceremony would begin every forty-eight hours, starting August 11 in Chad and ending August 17 in Gábon. The French had two large planes—one for Malraux and the French bureaucrats, and another for the press. I asked the French governor general, "What about the foreign consuls? How should they get around?" When it became clear that the French were not going to help, and since no commercial flights were available, I asked my friend General Sizaire, commander of all French troops in Central Africa, for help. He kindly offered his DC-3 to the consular corps. I was the senior representative, since I had been in Brazzaville longer than the others, but the British, German, Portuguese, Belgian, and Republic of China officials came along as well.

The ceremonies were also arranged at the last minute. These included the lowering of the French flag at midnight and a patronizing speech by Malraux to the

effect that "now you are twenty-one and more mature, but don't break your ties to your parents even though you have grown up." After brief speeches by the African leaders and the playing of their national anthems, there was food, drink, and much dancing. In each case, I had a private interview with the new president, and I presented him with President Eisenhower's greetings. I begged Washington to have some sort of present for each president, but nothing was done. Eventually, the United States sent a mobile ambulance to each country as a gesture, but it was so late that the effect was minimal.

I became *chargé d'affaires* to each country instead of consul. I transformed our small consulate in Brazzaville into an embassy by borrowing an embassy seal from Leopoldville, carting it across Stanley Pool by ferry, and installing it on our building. Washington decided that the first ambassador would be in Brazzaville, with *chargés* reporting to him from Fort Lamy (now Njamena), Bangui, and Libreville. This arrangement did not last long, however, as each country wanted its "own" American embassy.

quickly signed with each country permitting French troops to remain and naming French colonial officials as advisors to the new African ministers.

The prime minister of the Congo who became president on Independence Day was Abbé Fulbert Youlou, a defrocked Catholic priest dressed in luxurious Dior caftans. Other Africans did not take him seriously, and the French humored him, knowing that they would continue to run the show anyhow. The president of the National Assembly, Alfonse Massamba-Débat, eventually pushed Youlou out in a bloodless *coup d'état*.

As the campaign at home heated up, Kennedy, deciding that notice should be taken of the new African nations, sent Averill Harriman on a tour of the region. As Harriman was not on an official U.S. mission, he came by himself, and each embassy along the way helped him as much as possible. In Brazzaville, we called on President Youlou and on Massamba-Débat. There, Harriman waxed at length on the American system, including separation

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The ceremonies were colorful and created high expectations among Africans that nirvana had arrived. In reality, however, little changed. French governors automatically became French ambassadors and respectively deans of the small diplomatic corps. They continued to occupy the same residences and the French troops remained. A *pro forma* agreement was

of powers, while I translated. Apparently, Harriman's message of democracy had not taken hold. Massamba-Débat took over the Congo in the aforementioned coup a couple of years later.

In October, the Eisenhower administration, showing belated Republican interest in the area, decided that the Harriman trip had to be balanced by an official one. As a consequence, Ambas-

sador Loy Henderson, then undersecretary of state, led a group from the State Department around the new African states. The Department had decided to set up a separate embassy in each of the four equatorial countries. For a while I would remain the sole American diplomat in the area.

Henderson knew what he wanted in each country. His routine, which I translated, was to ask each president, "Would you like an American embassy in your country? If so, would you like a team of five or six officers and their staffs?" Of course, the answer was invariably affirmative. After each visit, Henderson instructed me to send a cable to Washington that the respective president had asked for an American embassy with six officers.

Perhaps the most unique visit was in Chad when Ambassador Henderson asked President Tombalbaye of Chad if he wanted an American embassy. After he agreed enthusiastically, we took a ride with the twenty-five year old minister of defense in a wonderful open 1935 Rolls-Royce that had by some fluke arrived years before. As we drove along the Chari River, Henderson told the minister, "These twenty-five acres you will reserve for the American embassy." After receiving an enthusiastic "oui," Henderson cabled the Department to say that Chad had offered us a wonderful river site for the new embassy.

After enduring constant harassment from the Russian-sponsored left-wing Congolese regime, the embassy closed in 1965, but was officially reopened in 1980 by Ambassador William Swing. I returned as ambassador in 1984, finding, to my surprise, that my old apartment on top of the embassy bank building was now my office. At that point, the

foremost problem was to convince then-president Denis Sassou-N'Guesso that opening to the West and turning away from the Soviets was in his best interest. There were still 700 Soviet citizens there when I arrived, but their influence had decreased. The Congolese government was set up along Soviet lines, with a politburo, Communist party hierarchy, a hammer and sickle on the flag, and the "Internationale" as the anthem.

Gradually, the Congolese distanced themselves from Russia as they saw that their best interests lay with the West. When I left my post in 1987, Soviet influence was waning. It was not until 1992, however, that the Congolese threw off the remains of their Soviet-style political system, reverting to their original flag and redesigning their government along French lines. They dropped the title "People's Republic of the Congo" and became merely the "Republic of the Congo."

The late 1990s saw a period of destabilization and unrest. A new election was projected for 1997, but the different factions rejected the plan and ended up fighting each other. Most of the fighting took place in Brassaville. Almost all of the embassies closed down, most foreigners fled, and the economy was in shambles. Sassou has since regained power and is hoping to see the United States reopen its embassy. This will not happen, though, until reparations are paid to restore our damaged embassy buildings and security can be assured.

As the longest-serving American diplomat in the area, and as one who has closely followed developments there, I find the saga of the past forty years in the Republic of the Congo discouraging. The Congo is a nation

abundant with natural and human resources. If these were put to good use, the Congo could become one of the more viable countries in Africa. I can

only hope that the Congolese have learned the hard lessons of internecine warfare so they may begin to focus on the development of their country.