

CDC Ebola Response Oral History Project

The Reminiscences of

Alexander M. Laskaris

David J. Sencer CDC Museum

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Alexander M. Laskaris

Interviewed by Samuel Robson
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Interview 1 of 1

CDC Ebola Response Oral History Project

Q: This is Sam Robson. It is April 6th, [2017] and I have the privilege of sitting here with Ambassador Alex M. Laskaris. We're here talking about his part as US Ambassador to Guinea during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, 2013 to 2016, and this is all for our CDC Ebola Response Oral History Project put on by the David J. Sencer CDC Museum. Thank you so much, Ambassador, for being here. I appreciate your time.

Laskaris: Thanks for having me.

Q: Of course. Would you mind saying "my name is" and then stating your full name?

Laskaris: My name is Alex Laskaris, Alexander Mark Laskaris.

Q: Can you tell me what your current position is?

Laskaris: Right now I'm the Deputy to the Commander for Civil Military Affairs at United States AFRICOM [Africa Command] in Germany.

Q: If you were to describe to someone very briefly, like an elevator speech, three sentences or so, what your role was in the Ebola response as ambassador, what would you say?

Laskaris: The critical role we all played was getting Guinean government and Guinean civil society and Guinean moral leadership to adopt the right policies in the Ebola outbreak.

Q: Perfect, thank you so much. Backing up, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Laskaris: I was born in Monterey, California, on January 11, 1967.

Q: Did you grow up in Monterey?

Laskaris: No. My dad was a navy officer studying at Naval Postgraduate School.

Q: Did you move around a lot?

Laskaris: Moved around a lot all over the US and then overseas.

Q: Where are some places where you spent the most time when you were growing up?

Laskaris: Monterey; Livermore, [California]; San Diego, [California]; Norfolk, Virginia; and then my dad was a naval attaché at the US Embassy in Athens in Greece, so I lived there from '76 to '85. I went to the embassy-supported school and that's sort of how I knew what an embassy was and I knew what ambassadors and diplomats did.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your dad?

Laskaris: He was a Greek immigrant. He came to the United States after World War II in a program for unaccompanied minors displaced by the war. He was born in Thessaloniki in northern Greece. He came to the US to Idaho, where he had relatives. He had an uncle who had come over in the twenties and experienced a catastrophe in that culture: he had four daughters. Daughters required dowries, and daughters became the old age pension for the in-laws, so he needed male help. He sent for my father, and the plan was to go in '42 but the war broke out, of course, and then the Greek Civil War, so he ended up coming a little late.

Q: So from Idaho he ended up in California somehow?

Laskaris: He was drafted in the opening days of the Korean War, opted to go into the Navy because he had grown up as a fisherman, and he had just graduated from the University of Idaho and they offered to make him an officer if he'd stay an extra year, I think. So he did his service, then he got out, and then he was recalled to active duty

during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and decided that he liked the Navy and decided to make a career of it.

Q: When you were growing up, what kinds of things interested you?

Laskaris: Foreign language, foreign culture, anthropology, diplomacy, traveling. I grew up in a Greek-speaking house or a Greek and American-speaking house, so you always grow up knowing that there are two ways of saying everything and from that you understand there are two ways of looking at everything, and then when you go back to the mother country as a kid, you get the acute insights of an insider/outsider, of someone who is part of the culture but still has the ability to step back, and I think that gives you some insights in how you change culture. And at its core, what does a diplomat do? A diplomat persuades foreigners to do stuff. How do you insert yourself in the change dialog of a community or a society or a country, and the cross-cultural skills you learn growing up in a cross-cultural environment. It's a fairly—it seems intuitive because you don't remember learning it but it's learned behavior.

Q: What kinds of things were you talking to people about changing back then when you were going to school in Greece?

Laskaris: It was just looking at what were the internal debates of the day. The Greece I moved back to was emerging from right-wing dictatorship. The scars of the Greek Civil War were still open. Greece had just joined the forerunner to the European Union, had

just joined NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], and there was this great social debate as to identity. You get a sense of identity is both fixed and dynamic and I think you have to understand both of those elements to be effective. If you fast forward to Guinea, you have to understand what is fixed, what is set, what is hardwired into the cultural DNA of any country or any society and what is changeable, and as an outsider, what are the tools that you need to insert yourself constructively in the dialog of change?

Last night we were having dinner with the Peace Corps volunteers, and they learned this at the village level. They learned—so I now work for General Thomas [D.] Waldhauser, the Commander of US AFRICOM, a four-star beret general who is a remarkable guy, but every once in a while I say, “General, you’re just like a Peace Corps volunteer who we send to an African village, and he has this incredible burst of energy when he gets there, ‘I’m going to fix everything and I’m an American and my goodwill and my Yankee ingenuity and my elbow grease can fix every problem.’ And then you culminate and then the pendulum swings and it’s, ‘Oh my God, look at the magnitude and the scope of the problems, this is hopeless, we’re never going to make any progress.’” That’s your success point because at that point when you’ve gone through that pendular swing, you understand your strength and your limitations and then hopefully you understand enough about your community or the society or the country, okay, how do you effect change? And the answer is you do it slowly, marginally, and you do it in the context of respect with a keen understanding of the capacity of the society to change. You look at what’s going on in European politics today and I was just in Hamburg at a symposium on immigration. This is both the African migrant flow from West Africa across the Med

[Mediterranean Sea]. I think in Germany, certainly more acutely the Middle East Syrian-Afghan-Iraqi flow, and what's galvanizing the society is, how much change do we want? And these migrants—in the case of the Africans, economic migrants; in the case of the folks from the Levant, it's more political or violence related. They also have to go through this dialog that all immigrants do. What do we change, what do we keep? Then you get a sense of the United States, it was a far more gentle process. Immigrants had a little more freedom to choose that which they retained of their identities. I talk to—of all the weird skills of this world, I speak Kurdish. So there's a new housing development for Syrian refugees who are mostly Kurdish. It's about a mile from where I live and we use the same tram stops, so I'm always seeing them there and I chat with them and I ask them, why did you come? And the answer is, we didn't want to come. We had good lives, we were bombed out, we had no choice. So what's it like being in Germany? They say the German government is very friendly to us, the German people are not. If I ask that question to Kurdish refugees in the United States, I bet you they'd say the exact opposite. To get back to your original question, if you're sort of perennially an outsider, which an immigrant is, and a [United States] Foreign Service officer by definition is, you're always asking the question of what needs changing and how do you do it. The lesson of the last fifteen years of American diplomacy is you don't do it by force. It doesn't work. It doesn't endure.

Q: Did you go through all of secondary school in Greece?

Laskaris: Yeah.

Q: What happened after that?

Laskaris: I went to an American school in Greece. When I decided to come back to the States for college, I went to Georgetown [University] to the School of Foreign Service, which is almost a direct line into the State Department for a lot of people. That was in 1985.

Q: When you went to school and you were studying things, were there particular subjects or areas of the world that really caught your attention back then?

Laskaris: I went sort of thinking that the Middle East would be where I focused, and when I got to Georgetown, developed an interest in Latin America. This was the era of the Contra wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, very politicized, charged era. I was in a Jesuit school in the wake of the murder of the Jesuits in Salvador and the Maryknoll nuns, etcetera. And then Africa happened by accident. But most good things in life are accidental.

Q: And then Africa happened by accident. What does that mean?

Laskaris: I went to a lecture by a very famous South African playwright named Athol Fugard. I don't know if you've heard of him. He's written stuff like "*Master Harold*" ...and the Boys, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, [Statements After] an Arrest Under the Immorality

Act. He was an Afrikaans-speaking, English-writing playwright who sort of married culture, drama, with political activism. He started some of the first underground theater groups in the 1960s in apartheid South Africa. He did a talk on the Greek tragedy *Antigone* and how it affected his development, and he told a story about political prisoners on Robben Island, which was where Nelson [R.] Mandela was in prison, sort of the Alcatraz of apartheid South Africa. He did a talk on political prisoners on Robben Island performing scenes from *Antigone*, particularly the climactic scene where—I don't know if you know the story but Antigone defies the king to bury her brother with full funeral rites who rebelled against the king, and the king sentences her to be buried alive in a tomb. Her famous monologue is, I go to my death having honored that to which honor should be given. It's a mesmerizing speech by one of the great still-alive, living playwrights. This is also the era of divestment, the antiapartheid movement. So this was my senior year in college and lo and behold there's an old Jesuit who is the president of the university who sort of saw a bunch of young punk kids demonstrating on the green about we want to fight apartheid, and he called us on it. He said, "If you feel that strongly about it, I'll pay your way and you go teach in the Catholic school system of South Africa." Oh crap, you know, he called me on it. So a group of us, about ten of us, went down and I taught high school in '89 and '90 which was sort of the pivotal years of the South African transition. When I arrived, apartheid was the law of the land. There was a war going on in Angola. Mandela was in jail. Two years later, Mandela was out, campaigning, and it was clear that there was a real change happening. The important thing to me for that was understanding the role of moral leadership because when Mandela got out of jail, all the teachers in my school said, what's he going to tell us to

do? If he tells us to kill all the white people, we will. And he walks out of jail and his first public remarks were, no, everyone calm down, there's room for everyone, we're going to do this peacefully and we're all South Africans. It was literally an entire society turned on a dime because all my colleagues in the school, who I was one of only two white teachers, all my colleagues said, yeah, that's a good idea, we can do that, too. I've taken a lifelong lesson from that, that in crucial moments in our history, moral leadership matters. And if you want to convince people to do something, the two questions you have to ask when you get to a new country, where do you get your information and where do you get your moral leadership? So in Guinea the answer was FM radio and imams. Whereas in Iraq, I was in Mosul in northern Iraq, the answer was Arab satellite TV and tribal leaders. The clerics were marginal and reviled and were not terribly influential. It's just a question, and in other countries I've been in it's customary leaders. Very often it's clergy. But you just have to understand the role of moral leadership in a society, understand where it comes from. Again, you're trying to persuade foreigners to do stuff and the way to do that is to find the people who can do that for you, and it varies from society to society. But also when you ask someone, where do you go for moral leadership, you have to think about it. Kids it's easy. Kids, it's the parents or whatever, but adults, people don't sit around and talk about the moral leadership in their lives unless you drag it out of them. For Americans, the answer is almost always clerics. So it's just a question, every society is unique.

Q: So you were in South Africa from '89 to '90. What did you do after that?

Laskaris: I joined the State Department. I had taken the Foreign Service exam when I was in college and passed it and put it out of mind, taught for a couple of years, flew back to Washington [DC], was sleeping on a friend's sofa on Reservoir Road right across from Georgetown University, called the State Department and they said, oh yeah, we've been looking for you. This is pre-Internet, pre-email, pre-Facebook, almost pre-fax, and they said, yeah, we've been looking for you, we've got a class starting in six weeks. I said, yeah, sure. I needed a job. I was twenty-three or twenty-four, and so I joined the Foreign Service and they sent me to Liberia.

Q: They sent you to Liberia?

Laskaris: Yeah, that was my first tour.

Q: Oh my God, I didn't know.

Laskaris: '91 to '93.

Q: What did you do there?

Laskaris: I was the consulate officer during two rounds of the [First Liberian] Civil War, and that's sort of when I got my introduction to—having come from South Africa, which is the shining example of moral leadership and people deciding collectively “we want to do this the right way,” to the exact opposite. A society where the rule of the guns, the rule

of the warlords, the rule of the mob trumped everything. I remember it was a shock to my system to go from one polar opposite to the other. I really wanted to get back to that part of West Africa because I don't think I was mature enough to deal with what I was seeing, the violence and the suffering and the displacement, and I developed a thick skin, almost an exoskeleton, as a defense mechanism, shut myself off from the realities. So I was very happy to go back to Guinea and consciously say, I'm going to get out on foot, I'm going to get out on my bicycle. I'm not going to be stuck in an air-conditioned office and I'm not going to be deterred by poverty, dirt, or whatever. Mercifully, Guinea was not a very violent place, so my time in Guinea was very much sort of a repudiation of my time in Monrovia. My behavior, twenty-four years had passed so hopefully I was a little more mature, a little better equipped to deal with it. And to see—this is the beauty of the Peace Corps volunteers I was out with last night and Peace Corps in general is you put people into this society as peers and they see it as it is and they usually walk away liking the place. West Africa is such a friendly, open set of cultures.

[break]

Q: So Liberia for two years, and then where and what?

Laskaris: Botswana, which I had been living in a Setswana-speaking part of South Africa in Kimberley, so I spoke the language reasonably well. I think I probably speak it better in retrospect than I did at the time. But in terms of the culture and the civilization, going from the northern cape of South Africa to Botswana was pretty easy. Botswana is a very

different society from West Africa. It's a very taciturn, reserved society, but I was there in the early days of the HIV/AIDS [human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome] outbreak and I saw a society in complete denial. It had this reticence to discuss anything about sexuality from three sources. The Tswana are sort of by their national nature fairly reserved about it. They had a British, Victorian colonial experience and they had a very strong Afrikaans Dutch Reformed [Church] influence. So sort of a trifecta of prudishness, but very high rates of sexual activity. They were on major trucking routes from the port of Durbin going into Central Africa, so the combination of that plus the sort of prudishness of the society was toxic. For my two years there, well-educated Botswana in whom the government had invested graduate degrees abroad and whatever were dying, and "died after a long illness." Died after a long illness. That was an unspoken code for died of AIDS. This was pre-PEPFAR [the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief], this was still in the stigmatization days, and that experience very much shaped my initial Ebola thinking which was avoid stigmatization at all costs because that's the toxic, lethal, societal response to plague, to disease. It was a strange time to be there and the president, [Quett] Ketumile [Joni] Masire, just didn't want to talk about it. And Botswana was a democratic, peaceful, Western-oriented, liberal state. It was in many respects a champion of development of democracy at the top of all the indices of vital statistics in Africa, and they had made incredible strides from the late sixties to the nineties in life expectancy, education, and all the life expectancy was wiped away by HIV/AIDS in a single generation. And Masire, I ran into him years later. He was working as a special envoy for the Congo and he told me, yeah, I made a mistake, I didn't take it seriously and we lost a generation. So

Botswana, I was there as a political officer looking really at the South African transition. This was in '93, '95, looking at the end of the Angolan Civil War, which is on the border, and the post-independence development of Namibia. A lot of wildlife issues, a lot of domestic issues, but really it was a platform to look at what was going on in South Africa and how it affected the entire sub-region. But in retrospect, HIV was the big story that—I wouldn't say we missed it because we were aware of it and we were trying to talk—but we didn't sort of all-hands-on-deck. There was no CDC in Africa at the time. It just hadn't registered.

Q: I know that it was so prudish and maybe this is unlikely, but did you know anyone at the time who was living with HIV?

Laskaris: I knew lots of people who died after long illnesses. I knew lots of people who disappeared and wouldn't see their family and were sick, but yeah, I think I was part of the conspiracy of silence. It wasn't stand on the rooftops and say, hey, he died of AIDS. Culturally, that would have been not an effective way to change behaviors. I relearned this in the case of the Ebola outbreak in that there are two ways to change behavior in an outbreak. One is mortality and the other is education and it's inevitable that some people are going to have to die before enough people worry about it, but the goal is to get people sooner rather than later before it's too late. To do that you have to break a certain denial, and HIV in Botswana skewed upper class or middle class and educated. If you were a herder in the countryside or a farmer and you weren't on the trucking routes, you weren't involved in the migrant labor sector in South Africa, the mining culture, it wasn't

foremost on your mind. Also, it killed slowly. Botswana I think was developed enough to worry about a disease that can kill you in ten years. But the worst twelve-month period of the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, I think Ebola is the eighteenth leading cause of mortality. It's hard to get people worried about the eighteenth most dangerous thing out there. Number one was upper respiratory infections, two was malaria, and I think three was gastrointestinal or diarrheal disease. And also Ebola skewed older and female because you got Ebola from doing home healthcare and from preparing bodies for burial, which in that society, most Guinean society, is reserved for women. Public health, your hook is women and their children. So you tell women, okay, malaria is a threat to your kid, so use a bed net; vaccination is a threat to your kid so get vaccinated. You know, oral rehydration salts if the baby gets sick. Women are the sort of household coherence, so there's the social goods you want to produce in a young population—education, healthcare—perceived from getting to the mothers. So if you tell a Guinean woman, who I think on average survives five and a half live births, to worry about the eighteenth leading cause of mortality that really isn't going to affect her children—they'll say okay, that's very nice but I've got bigger fish to fry. So when you're dealing with disease, you've got to get people scared enough to take action but not so scared that you get a reaction or that they just clam up. You understand this in retrospect, but as I look back on my Botswana experience in particular, I think of all of the pathologies of pathologies that we missed, or that I missed I should say. That's not a criticism, it's just—again, it takes a certain amount of people to die before you start to learn. The goal of all the education mobilization is to reduce that. We were getting better in Guinea but we never cut it to zero.

Q: What happened after Botswana?

Laskaris: I went to Egypt for a year. I worked for the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai Peninsula. A change of pace. Basically we were the observer for a setup by the Camp David Accords to monitor the demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula, so we flew around and drove around counting tanks and artillery pieces to make sure that the Egyptians and the Israelis were respecting the terms of the Camp David Accords. It was an out-of-body—it was just—it was not, it was something I wanted to do. I was a little burned out and wanted to go do something different and it was the high water mark of the Middle East peace process, the Oslo peace process. I was actually there when Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. I watched it go downhill from there which, again, every day in AFRICOM we talk about the utility of a kinetic, strike-based approach versus a negotiated settlement, and I always quote Yitzhak Rabin saying no one ever made peace by talking to their friends. The question is, so-and-so bad guy, should we negotiate with them? And Rabin as a military man had done the heavy fighting but he also recognized that this was not a solution. So yeah, only [Richard M.] Nixon could go to China, only Rabin could've made peace with [Yasser] Arafat. I live this every day because frankly I find my military colleagues who've commanded divisions and brigades and battalions in Iraq and Afghanistan are by far the most liberal people involved in war and peace issues. They have no appetite for war. They're good at it, they're professionals, but they're looking for solutions that don't depend on the application of military force. So from that, again, Yitzhak Rabin, his death, just like Mandela walking out of prison put the process

in the right direction, I think Rabin's death shows what happens when you remove credible moral leadership from the stage because it went the other way. That was '96, so we're still twenty years—thirty years—no, twenty, my math is not very good—

Q: Yeah. Well, we've got to cover those years. [laughs] So after the Sinai Peninsula?

Laskaris: I went back to Washington. I was the Rwanda and Burundi desk officer in the State Department in the Office of Central African Affairs in the wake of the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the 1993 intercommunal violence in Burundi and the fear that there would be another genocide in Burundi. That was the panic period of, you know, we just emerged from this horrific genocide in April of '94 in Rwanda, thinking that it could happen in Burundi and wrestling with how do you stop bad things from happening. This was also in the wake of the Battle of Mogadishu and a general retreat of the US military from Africa and a retreat from the humanitarian intervention school. We still in the Command have talks about what, are we going to do in Burundi? What are we going to do in South Sudan, where the threat to our interest is minimal, if that, but the threat to our sensibilities is off the charts in terms of the number of people at risk and the scale of the human suffering. So you wrestle with it and say what do you do and how do you prevent the worst impulses of humanity from manifesting themselves and how do you—and the reality we deal with every day at the Command is, what do you do when your host government partner doesn't care about its people? How do you operate in that environment?

Q: So that was also—

Laskaris: That was '96, '97.

Q: Did you stay in Africa after that?

Laskaris: Yeah. I went to Angola. I went to the US Embassy in Luanda from '97 to '99, in the last year of the last peace process and the first year of the last war. It's sort of sad when you have to count wars and peace processes. When I got there—I don't know if the name Jonas [M.] Savimbi and UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] means anything to you. Anyway, there was still a civil war going on and we had supported the rebel side until '94 when—as a result—we finally got the parties an election, the rebel leader we supported lost, and they said, okay, you're now persona non grata, so we began supporting the same government that the Cubans were supporting in the Cold War and the Soviets. It was an interesting period to be in an embassy in a capital whose government we had spent fifteen years in the Cold War trying to overthrow. You learned a lot about diplomacy and how to operate in an atmosphere of some historical animosity for the United States. I worked in some of the most pro-American places in the world and a few anti-American ones—Mosul, Angola at the time—and the same concepts apply. How do you change behaviors? Except instead of starting on the twenty yard line you start on the half yard line deep in your end zone. But the same principles apply.

Q: And then after Angola?

Laskaris: I went to the US Mission to the United Nations in New York, working on African affairs in the Security Council. That was about peacekeeping. We set up what today is the largest peacekeeping mission in the world in the [Democratic Republic of] Congo. We set up the inter-positional force on the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. I spent a lot of time in Sierra Leone and Liberia in those years with the civil wars going on. We set up the peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL [United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone], and then the special court that ended up trying and convicting Charles [M.G.] Taylor. So we saw that the application of military force—UN [United Nations], British, Indian—did have a role in peace and development. There was a series of, I think, beyond the pale rebel movements for whom military pressure was a necessity for political progress. I'm not a pacifist. Military pressure has its utilities. I think the takeaway from that time was the mechanics of making peace. What are the mechanics of a peace process, of peace treaties, particularly internal insurrection? How do you integrate rebel leaders, rebel actors, into a political process, and how do you weed out the reconcilables and the irreconcilables? Because you never get everyone. The key is critical mass. How do you get a critical mass of people pulling in the right direction so you have the time and space to marginalize the spoilers?

Q: Could you be a little more concrete about which area and which people you're talking about?

Laskaris: Well, this was Sierra Leone in the late 1990s, and early 2000s in Liberia. There was a president in Liberia named Charles Taylor who had been a rebel warlord who desperately wanted control of the very rich alluvial diamond fields of Sierra Leone. He started a rebel group which is really an armed gang called the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. This was one of the most depraved group of mass murderers you've ever seen, and I've seen too many of them. At the same time he was fermenting instability in Sierra Leone to line his pockets, he was governing with extreme brutality and repression in Liberia. So a number of Liberian rebel groups sprang up and started to apply military pressure on him and this culminated in 2003 when he was forced into exile. He had a military insurgency advancing on the capital that was at the gates. It was called LURD, Liberians United for—Resistance and Development, I forget what it stood for [Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy]. And there were peace talks in Ghana and essentially the West African leadership, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, gave an ultimatum which was we'll send a plane for you or you can die in office, but either way you're going to leave head first or feet first. So he left voluntarily and then he was indicted by the special tribunal, tried and convicted and I think he's still in jail. I think he's incarcerated in the UK which is exactly where he belongs.

Q: Absolutely. Were you working on these issues in Liberia and Sierra Leone throughout that time?

Laskaris: Yeah, and the Congo. The Congo had been—then Zaire, then the Congo. The former president for life, Mobutu Sese Seko, was overthrown by a coalition of Ugandan,

Rwandan and Angolan and Congolese rebels in '96. The father of the current president, Laurent Kabila, took power and then he broke with his [unclear] allies in '98 and '99. They re-invaded, then Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia intervened on behalf of the government in Kinshasa. You essentially had Africa's first world war. The locus of this was what's called the eastern part—well, the key was the eastern region of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mineral rich, unbelievably beautiful landscape, but probably over the last twenty years the most violent place on earth, the area of the greatest humanitarian suffering. So there, the goal was probably the most dysfunctional of the modern African states. The territory of the Congo was given to King Leopold [II] of Belgium as a personal landholding, and it was defined as all the land drained by the Congo River. It's the Louisiana purchase of Central Africa. When [Robert de] La Salle sailed down the Mississippi [River] and claimed it for France, it was all the land drained by the Mississippi, so that's essentially what was given to Leopold as his private landholding. It was badly governed for decades by Mobutu with our support. So you're trying to build a state where no one had ever invested in statecraft, and I always compare this to the consolidation of the Italian state in the 19th century where [Giuseppe] Garibaldi famously said, we've made Italy, let's make Italians. People made the Congo but no one ever bothered making the Congolese. This was one of the saving graces in Guinea. The first president of Guinea, [Ahmed] Sékou Touré, socialist dictator with a pretty brutal streak, but like all the other communist leaders, socialist leaders in Africa, managed to implant a modern narrative and it was based on socialism. But they did some basic statecraft and there was a basic allegiance to the idea of the state in Guinea that frankly

didn't exist as much in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This was one of the things that helped us in the Ebola outbreak.

Q: When you were working in Congo, what was your role?

Laskaris: I was working in the UN Security Council for the late Ambassador Richard [C.A.] Holbrooke, deploying the UN peacekeeping operations, organizing, raising the money for the Sierra Leone special court, and in the act of deploying these operations, establishing the political endgames and the political demands for power sharing sanctions against Charles Taylor. This was the origin—it was called the Kimberley Process [Certification Scheme] which was trying to stem the problem of conflict minerals—in this case conflict diamonds. We wrote the resolutions that set up UNAMSIL, which was the UN assistance mission to Sierra Leone; MONUC, which was the UN Mission in the [Democratic Republic of] Congo, plus the inter-positional force on the Ethiopian-Eritrea border. That was '99 to 2002.

Q: At some point, somebody, maybe later in your life, I don't know, but we've got to do more oral histories with you at some point, Ambassador, because this is really, really rich and really, really important stuff that you were involved in. Okay, so 2002, what happens then?

Laskaris: September 11th. Walking to work one day, seeing a plane flying low and slower down to Manhattan, thinking that's an odd glide path for—if you live in Manhattan

you're used to LaGuardia [Airport] and you sort of know which way—you don't see an airplane—I was walking up Second Avenue a little late to work. I had been trying to get back to Washington [DC] for a while and that got me, okay, I need to look at some broader issues. I had been doing Africa nonstop and also I had been—I was getting a little cynical I think. I had been around too many lousy African governments and predatory military, so I said, okay, let me get back to Washington. So went back to DC in January of '02 to work on the State Department Policy Planning Staff in the run-up to the Iraq—well, the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan and then more particularly in the run-up to the Iraq War.

Q: Did you say that you were walking on Second Avenue in New York City when the planes hit the towers?

Laskaris: Yes. I think I saw the second plane. I heard sirens. You live in New York City, you hear sirens all the time, and I lived right around the corner from a police station between Second and Third Avenue on 38th Street. Yeah, I was walking up Second Avenue right by the Palm steakhouse which is 45th and Second Avenue, and you look up and you see an airliner flying low and fast. Again, if you live in Manhattan, you know the glide path of LaGuardia and when you see—you say that's odd. And then I walked into our building and the guards were sort of freaking out watching TV. I think I was late for a staff meeting or something so I didn't really focus. Took the elevator up to the 9th floor and then that's when I found out what had happened. So I think I saw the second plane just as it was going into the tower.

Q: That is some emotional stuff.

Laskaris: Yeah. I had a Greek American secretary, Sevasti, whose brother worked in the World Trade Center and she was beside herself. I don't know what I was thinking. I said, "Okay, we'll go down and find him." So we obviously evacuated the building, everyone go home, and so Sevasti and I started walking down Second Avenue. In the meantime you could see the towers on fire and the city was in complete pandemonium. She was freaking out trying to call him and I kept saying, "Oh no, we'll find him, don't worry, we'll find him." I don't even think I realized how irrational that was until we were down at Washington Square and the ash and the smoke was overwhelming. Then finally she got through to him on the phone and he had been late to work and he was stuck on the Brooklyn Bridge and he just stepped out of his car and walked back to Astoria in Queens. So, okay, now we can go home. So I walked her back up to her apartment and I just went home and turned on the TV and just sort of watched. I was sort of stunned.

Q: Did your witnessing of the event play into your involvement then in wanting to be part of the lead-up to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, or was it really just the cynicism you were talking about, about the—

Laskaris: No. Richard [N.] Haass, who was the head of the Policy Planning Staff, he's now head of the CFR [Council on Foreign Relations], and he was the first person designated to be the special envoy for Afghanistan. Every morning at eight o'clock he

would have everyone in the State Department who was working on Afghanistan in his office, and it was the very early days of trying to plan what do we do after the fall of the Taliban. I didn't know anything about Afghanistan but it was, okay, what can I do? I gradually got into a more regular response and DoD [Department of Defense] finally understood that we probably needed partners and so ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], the NATO force, was deployed. And it sort of reached a policy equilibrium. But just as that was happening, the really nasty internal debates and external debates over the Iraq War were heating up and so the Policy Planning Staff works directly for the Secretary of State, in this case it was Secretary [Colin L.] Powell, and there was a period of intense animosity, corporate and personal, between State and OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] and the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the political, the military, the civilians. Regardless of what side of the war question you were on, it was not our greatest hour as a government. It was nastiness and people saying accusations of fecklessness or a lack of patriotism on one side and accusations of stupidity and ideological blindness on the other. Again, I don't care what side people were on but it was an internal—so there was the rupture with some of our key allies, but what really struck me was the rupture within the government between—the uniformed military actually was, again, more liberal than the civilians and the Pentagon. Liberal not a contemporary political sense, but I would say less bellicose. The good news is we managed to patch that up, and one of the odd consequences of entire generations of State Department officers serving in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan and entire generations of military leaders serving in the field with the State Department is a divorce that happened in Vietnam of the military and the diplomatic—you know, got back together again for the

sake of the children in Iraq and Afghanistan. And I live this every day. My position, I think, is a product of that. In AFRICOM you have senior State Department and other civilian agencies integrated into the leadership, not as liaisons but as integral to the decision making, is what is the humanitarian impact of our actions, how do our military actions feed into or, God forbid, detract from a political strategy? I think my takeaway from that period was just how bad things can get when you've got that military-civilian divorce. A lot of us invested a lot of subsequent years in making sure that doesn't happen again, but it's been willing seller/willing buyer. I mean, our military colleagues want this as much as we do I think.

[break]

Q: So that period, we're probably talking mid 2000s or so.

Laskaris: This was 2002, 2003.

Q: What happens then? What do you do then?

Laskaris: I became Deputy Chief of Mission in Burundi. I decided I missed the field, decided I wanted to go back to Africa. A good friend of mine had been named ambassador and asked me to go out with him as DCM. So I did that for two years. At the time, Jim [James H.] Yellin was the ambassador and he was instrumental in getting the two main rebel factions out of the bush and into the political process. The president

today, a guy named Pierre Nkurunziza, was the main rebel leader at the time and Jim's personal diplomacy coaxed him out of the bush, coaxed the political establishment to accept the idea of a transition to majority rule of the Hutu in Burundi. It's been problematic ever since. The president keeps trying to extend his time in office, but it's better than most of the alternatives. It's not ideal, but the alternative was another round of genocidal violence, of which there had been two in Burundi's history. I always tell people that policy is the choice between appalling alternatives. It's never this is the right answer, this is the wrong answer, this is great—no, my policy prescription is mildly less appalling than yours. [laughter]

Q: So you were Deputy Chief of Mission there for how long?

Laskaris: Two years, 2003, 2005.

Q: And then what happened?

Laskaris: I was at a therapeutic feeding center run by an Irish NGO [nongovernmental organization] called GOAL, talking to an Irish nurse who was trying to do interventions in very young, under-five-year-old kids who had advanced malnutrition. Distended bellies, the sort of watery skin, the red hair. And looked up on top of a hill nearby and the speaker of the parliament had built this fabulous villa for himself and taken the entire road budget of the region to build the driveway up to his villa. And I sort of said, you know what, I've had enough of this, I need to do something else. So I spent a year

learning Albanian and I went to Kosovo. To me, learning a language is key to wherever you go and it's one of the great benefits of the Foreign Service that, hey, you want me to go to Kosovo? Alright, give me a year of Albanian.

I was in Kosovo for the independence process. Kosovo broke away from Serbia after the '99 NATO campaign. It had been sort of in a suspended animation since then and so my boss, the Ambassador Tina [S.] Kaidanow, went out with a pretty strong mandate from Washington and most of our European allies to move Kosovo down the road towards independence. The mechanics of how a country becomes independent is not something you get to work on every day. Maybe East Timor, South Sudan. It was fascinating to be there and watch a new country being born but also watch a new country being born with many of the same internal, unresolved fault lines that defined the conflict. So the tension between the Albanian majority and the Serbian minority and sort of role reversal from, we were top of the heap and now we're bottom of the heap. And the pathologies of lost power. This is something Americans don't understand very well because our history over two hundred fifty years generally has been the accumulation of power and wealth, so we don't quite understand the pathologies of people who feel that they are history's victims. The Serbs certainly have that. My mother's people were from Asia Minor and they were expelled in 1923 in the population exchanges, so they grew up with a sense of diminishment, that what had been theirs was gone, and that's a festering resentment. Dealing with humiliated people is a big challenge in diplomacy whether you're talking about the Palestinians, whether you're talking about blacks in South Africa under apartheid, and as Americans we don't understand this, but what strikes me is I think the

Black Lives Matter movement understands that. They understand what it means to be powerless in the face of power that isn't you. It's been sort of heartbreaking to be watching Ferguson and Staten Island and things like this from Africa because what I keep preaching to the Africans is, get your soldiers off the checkpoints, stop the behavior of police as arbitrary enforcers of whatever they want and whatever whim they have. It's been heartbreaking to watch a portion of the American population who view police through the same optic, not unreasonably.

So Kosovo 2006, 2008. And then I decided it was time to go to Iraq.

Q: You decided it was time to go to Iraq? [laughs]

Laskaris: Yeah. I was watching Ryan [C.] Crocker and David [H.] Petraeus testifying on the Hill. These are serious people, and for the first time we have people who are speaking truth to power, who are telling the American people and the administration this is not going well and we could fail, and we have not done a good job. I knew Crocker slightly from the State Department. I knew him enough to know that I respected him. So I said, okay, I don't know anything about Iraq but we're surging civilians in and they're starting up this thing called a PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team] and I've been in some pretty hairy areas. So I emailed the State Department and said I'd like to lead a PRT, and they came back a day later and said, how about Mosul? I said, sure, why not? Didn't know anything about it. Three months later I show up in Iraq, the senior civilian in Nineveh Province, the height of the insurgency, partnered with a division and a brigade. And

actually, the brigade commander was Gary [J.] Volesky who I used to talk to, he's now the I Corps commander in Seattle. He's been a friend ever since. I realized how in over my head I was and I had violated the State Department ethos of training and study prior to deployment. I went out to Iraq not speaking the language, didn't know anything about Iraqi history, Iraqi culture. I was told I did a good job and I got all the kudos for doing a good job but I don't think I did a good job. I was unhappy with—because I was making decisions that had impact on people's lives without the benefit of any understanding or knowledge. So I cut a deal with the State Department saying, if you give me a year of Kurdish, I'll come back and I'll open the consulate general in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and they said, yeah, okay. So I went back, I studied Kurdish for a year, and that's how you should do it. You need to spend a year of your life before you dare go to a foreign country and insert yourself as a historical actor in the case of—you know, sort of with the military we were. It's arrogant and stupid and tragic to do it without the burden of any historical knowledge or cultural knowledge or language. So I was a little mad at myself, okay, but I consider myself very lucky that I liked Iraq and I liked Iraqis, and because I was a civilian I was dealing with academics and lawyers and journalists and artists and antiquities—museum directors and archeologists and civil society leaders and liberal Iraqis whose message to me was please stop surrendering our country to armed men. And I live this every day in Africa Command. There's a certain—okay, he's got the weapons, therefore, he's the person we have to cut a deal with. You shoot your way to the peace table. The tragedy of South Sudan today is peace was defined as a resource split among warring men. The great peacemaking dilemma is, how do you integrate less reprehensible people who don't have guns, how do you get them a seat at

the table? If the US government wants to, in my experience, we can. The tragedy of Iraq was, the standard you ignore is the standard you accept. We watched our Iraqi partners do all sorts of horrible things—corruption, sectarian agendas—and we kept hoping if they could just cut a deal among themselves, things would work out, and I think history has proven that that didn't work. So as I get to Africa Command, I always think—the armed men are the ones who have to stop the violence so you can't ignore them, but you can't define power simply as who has the weapons. You have to find seats at the table for the unarmed, less indecent actors in the society.

Q: You mentioned when you initially went to Iraq, making these decisions that would affect people's lives. What kind of decisions are these?

Laskaris: Decisions about the political process and how political parties compete, how power is defined. To whom are we responding? Mosul was the heart of the sort of Sunni aristocracy of Iraq. Historically they had been the dominant constituency in Iraq. The invasion, the subsequent political process brought, justifiably, the Shia majority into power but, again, like with the Albanians, like with the Kosovo Serbs, how do you handle the former dominant minority in a vulnerable position now and how do you get the majority to not fall into the cycle of revenge and of sticking it to them because now you can? So there was this great tension. We're trying to build national political power, I think justifiably, saying the Shia have been the majority in Iraq all along, they have been marginalized and oppressed and murdered. Yeah, it is a Shia majority country, but how do you define power so it's not a zero-sum proposition? How do you carve out minority

rights, how do you carve out regional rights in the context of Iraq? Our policy at the local—where I was, was to build up the power of the province, to build up the provincial council, the provincial governor, the structures of local decentralized power. At the national level our policy was to build the national government. The national government didn't share our view of a federal Iraq, with three constituencies: the Shia, the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. So both in Mosul where I was dealing with the Sunni Arabs and in Iraqi Kurdistan where I was dealing with the Kurds, there was this, okay, we're a minority, what does that mean? That means in the case of the Kurds, sorry, you're part of Iraq, which most of them didn't want to be but our policy, I think correctly, was the indivisibility of the Iraqi state. Okay, what does that mean? Well, that means language rights, some local autonomy, local revenue. The founder set this up in the United States as a perennial competition arbitrated, thanks to *Marbury v. Madison*, by the courts. Essentially, the Iraqis were trying to do this without *Marbury v. Madison*, which is tough.

Q: When you went back after that year of training, of language, of trying to understand the history and the culture of the region, did you look back at some of your decisions differently?

Laskaris: Yes. Absolutely. Appalled and embarrassed. There was one specific case where we had been trying to effect a reconciliation between the leader of one of the great Sunni Arab sheiks of western Nineveh with the leadership of the main Kurdish political party, and I had been involved with our military colleagues trying to get the sheikh and the Kurdish, the Barzani family or government together. I realized that I was talking to a guy

whose father was murdered by the other guy's grandfather. That's when you just feel stupid. And I wasn't the only one to do that. I mean, I was the only one who confessed after the fact about having known that, but I would've done the same thing. Again, it was in the interest of our policy of Iraq to effect the reconciliation, but to walk in there not knowing this, it's mortifying. I kept discovering things that I didn't know, and then I was embarrassed that I hadn't known at the time. For example, right now there's a Yazidi community, now Sinjar. The Yazidi are a very small, very persecuted minority sect of Kurdish speakers in northern Iraq, and I had always viewed them as monolithic, as Kurdish, loyal to the Kurdistan government. I learned subsequently no, they're not. It's very different. So the assumptions on which I was basing my actions, my analysis, my reporting, were false. Therefore, every decision you made was suspect including the key decisions of who's legitimate, who speaks for these people. If you think they're loyal to—if you're wrong about to whom they're loyal, you make the mistake of empowering the wrong people to speak for them. That's why, again, when I went to Guinea I asked that question, who speaks for you? And you've got to know something about the culture, you've got to be able to speak the language, otherwise history—I keep telling people history didn't begin the day you arrived. [laughter] As a historian you can appreciate that you work among a largely ahistorical people.

Q: Sure. [laughter]

Laskaris: And in many cases, as someone whose ancestors were overburdened by historical trauma, there is a certain benefit to ahistorical approaches to life. So it's—very Aristotelian.

Q: It's complicated.

Laskaris: You find the middle ground. [laughter]

Q: So when did you leave Iraq?

Laskaris: I left Iraq in July of 2012, having gotten an email about six months before saying do you want to be ambassador to Guinea.

[break]

Q: So you got an email in July 2012.

Laskaris: No, in January of 2012.

Q: January of 2012, sorry. What was in this email?

Laskaris: “Do you want to be ambassador to Guinea?” I had put my name—I had told the African bureau of the State Department that I'd like to be considered for a post and we

had kicked around a couple countries. Guinea was not one of them, actually. Then it sort of went up into the smoke and mirrors, sacrifice a chicken, see where the blood falls process by which ambassadors are chosen, and what got spit out at the end of this process was an email from Johnnie Carson, the Assistant Secretary of State, not the *Tonight Show* host, saying, would you like to be ambassador to Guinea? I said yes.

Q: I know you had spent significant time in Liberia and Sierra Leone; had you been to Guinea before?

Laskaris: I had been to the Liberia-Guinea border at the height of the refugee crisis, and I had gone once with the Security Council in 2000 but only for a day. So I really had no practical experience in Guinea, but I knew enough about it from having worked in the region to say, okay, I can do this.

Q: So what happened then?

Laskaris: I went back, spent a couple of months working with a French teacher who was from Guinea to try to get my French back up and through that—you know, language to me is culture, it's history, it's anthropology. Frankly, the actual French, conjugating the verbs, was less important than just beginning the process of learning, and I talked to everyone who knew anything about Guinea as much as I could. Three or four months later I thought, okay, I'm ready to start. So got confirmed and showed up in Guinea in September of 2012.

Q: Were there some important things that you learned in that process about Guinea that you think you carried with you?

Laskaris: Yeah. Before you're confirmed, you have to be very careful who you meet with because you don't want to prejudge the Senate. But after I was confirmed, I said I want to meet with the Guinean diaspora in the United States, which you know, diasporas matter whether it's Armenians or Greeks or Poles, whatever. And they said yes, but they wanted to meet with me as the Pular diaspora, the Malinké diaspora. So the first lesson there was they don't necessarily view themselves from the same historical narrative, and most of the Guinean Americans historically come from this group, the Pular or the Fulani, who left Guinea under very bad circumstances in a wave of really intense repression in the early 1970s. But also I spent time with a professor at the University of South Carolina who wrote about the Gullah people of the Coastal Carolina islands who are Baga-Temne speakers from the Guinea Coast and who were brought over because the rice culture of the coastal islands here and the coast of Guinea is the same. You had this sort of slave era of forced migration, diaspora, and then the modern diaspora certainly in my lifetime, maybe not yours. If you're going to be a diplomat of a foreign country, one of the things you have to do is you have to find the connective tissue, what binds us together, and what binds us together was the slave trade and these bizarre American families from South Carolina who landed on the Guinea Coast and set up multigenerational mixed race lineages of slave traders, but then also you have to understand the post-World War II African migration to the United States and what pushed these people out of Guinea, what

pulled them to the United States. So that sort of was a wakeup call that there's a national narrative and there are sub-national narratives, and the beautiful thing about Guinea was Guineans, I found them very comfortable in their identities. They were very easy to go from we have a postmodern state identity as Guineans, we have pre-modern ethno-linguistic identities or religious identities, and then even below that we've got clan, regional, customary identities. So it is a wonderful mosaic that is actually quite rich, but you just have to respect it but understand that Guinea, there's a national picture but there are sub-national pictures that are distinct and so you can't generalize one region to the other.

Q: Can you tell me about the early days of being ambassador?

Laskaris: Guinea had undergone a democratic transition. A vicious military dictator named Captain [Moussa] Dadis Camara had been chased out of power in 2010. A longtime political oppositionist who had done time in the dungeons named Alpha Condé had been elected president. He was in his second year of power, and he's still the president today. He was president throughout the outbreak. A fascinating guy who had started out as a youth activist, Marxist, anti-imperialist, anti-French, anti-American, but had mellowed with age and who was a surprisingly modern guy that had a much more sophisticated view of the world, I think, than other African heads of state. It's interesting, he had lived in Paris for thirty-five years teaching at Sciences Po.

I got there and there was a logjam on legislative elections that was part of the democratic transition process that had been delayed. My mandate from the State Department was do whatever you can to get the legislative elections carried out and successful with a minimum of violence or with no violence. And we actually succeeded pretty well in that, so that in—legislative elections were in October of 2013. We sat the first democratic election national assembly in Guinea in January of 2014. This had consumed my first nine months at post. This was all I did. I was in the negotiations process constantly trying to broker deals with the opposition and the government. So we inaugurated the national assembly in January of 2013 and my deputy and I were at the ceremony like, okay, what are we going to do now? We're going to have a boring tenure here because there's nothing—this is the one issue that everyone's cared about, so we're just going to work on our tennis games. That was January. In March 20-something, 27th or 28th, I got a phone call from [US]AID [United States Agency for International Development] saying there's a case of Ebola in Guinea Forestier. That was the first time we'd ever heard about Ebola in Guinea, first time we ever thought about it. And Pierre Rollin showed up about seventy-two hours later.

Q: Do you remember much from that phone call?

Laskaris: Yeah. It was my embassy nurse practitioner calling me and saying they had spoken to someone at MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] who had told them we have a confirmed Ebola case in Guinea Forestier in a very remote area on the Guinea-Sierra Leone border. Let's have a meeting, we'll call it the emergency action committee at the

embassy. Let's all get together and talk about what this means for us. So my PA [physician assistant], a guy named Peter Lindland, said nobody's in a panic. Ebola is hard to get, every other Ebola outbreak in history has started and then finished in the same village. Haven't had it here, but it sounds like Ebola cases in Zaire and Uganda and other places, so no need to worry, no need to panic, no need to do anything. I said, okay, I'll just tell people that there's an Ebola case in this region of Guinea Forestier but no reason to panic and CDC is on the way. And Pierre shows up two or three days later. I had also called the president, [unclear] we heard this, "Have you heard of CDC Atlanta?" "Oh yeah, of course I know CDC Atlanta." "Well, they're sending a team and I'll bring them to see you when they get there." So Pierre Rollin, who is really one of the most incredible people I've ever met in my life, shows up and he's a native French speaker. Okay, "Pierre, we're going to go see the president." So off we went and Pierre said, "Yeah, this is my seventh or eighth Ebola outbreak and here's what you do, it's all about clinical care, contact tracing, social mobilization, and this is what we're going to do." And President Condé said, "Okay, that's exactly what we're going to do," and so he called his minister of health in my presence and said, "I'm sending you Dr. Pierre Rollin and he's going to tell us exactly what we need to do to respond to this." That began a two-year process where about once every week I took the head of CDC to see the president, just the three of us, and it was Pierre, Ben [Benjamin A.] Dahl, and Mike [Michael H.] Kinzer who is now the head in Senegal. Mr. President, here's what's going on and here's what we need. To his credit—I mean I respect Alpha Condé, he's a brilliant organizer and motivator—not a brilliant manager. Also, he's a strong personality. Can be a bit of an intellectual bully at times. But the key is get him in a small meeting and hold your own.

Ben and Pierre and Mike were just brilliant at giving him very, very calm assessments: here's what's going on and here's what we need to do to respond. The frustration was not, what do we do? The frustration is, how come we can't do it? The weakness of the Guinean state, and the initial tension—Alpha Condé was presiding over—he's head of a country but not a state. Previous governments had allowed the state to sort of wither on the vine. He said, look, I want to do this through the state, I will do whatever you say, we'll do the right public policy, but I need to get my health system into the game and need to use the structures that I have. And unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone who the war had destroyed the state and the societies, the Guinean society was intact. The state was more intact than the other two. And he had never worked in an NGO humanitarian environment and he viewed sort of MSF, CRSs [Catholic Relief Services] of the world with a lot of hostility and a lot of suspicion. Who are these people? Why are you paying them more than I'm paying my civil servants? They all want to work for you and not for me. You're all doing press releases about how much money you're giving to Guinea, but really you're paying the per diem at the Palm Camayenne Hotel, Land Cruisers, and high-end consultancies. He said, "My people hear that the EU [European Union] pledged a billion dollars, they think I get a check for a billion dollars and I steal it like all my predecessors did." And he was right. So I laid down the law that we're never going to talk about how much money we're spending, we're going to talk about the effect we're trying to produce. But he was very hostile to the idea of civil society, of NGOs, and we actually had a couple of shouting matches, which is not a career move for an ambassador, but we had a good relationship and so he would let me get away with it.

Q: Can you tell me about one of them?

Laskaris: We were doing early IPC [infection prevention and control] training through Catholic Relief Services of health workers in the prefectural-level hospitals and we contracted Catholic Relief Services to do it. I think it was like \$3 million. He had asked for—give me a spreadsheet of your program. So I gave him a spreadsheet of some of the early OFDA-funded [Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance] response programs and CDC, okay, US government, I got it. Let me see CRS. Guinea is about 85% Muslim. He's a secular—he had no hang-ups with Catholics but he goes, "Who are these people?" I said, "Catholic missionaries." "Okay but why aren't you training us to do this? You should be funding—look, I realize that you don't trust us to spend your money and you shouldn't. You can sign every check but I want government people doing this because we are the state and we have a responsibility." That's sort of not how humanitarian response works. Liberia and Sierra Leone had been wards of the international community for twenty-five years and so they were used to the NGO sector being the de facto social service provider. Guinea had no experience with this except in the refugee movements in Guinea Forestier, but people in Conakry didn't have the white Land Cruiser culture. They didn't know that these groups would just come in and essentially take over entire sectors. So he said, "I'm going to call the Catholic Archbishop of Conakry and tell them to stop this." "Mr. President, CRS works for the Catholic Bishops Conference of the United States and if you want to pick a fight with them, you're going to lose and I'm not going to sign with you, so I highly recommend against this because if you start persecuting CRS, they're going to call Tom [Thomas R.] Frieden, they're going to call Raj [Rajiv] Shah,

who are trying to help Guinea.” And Dr. Frieden came six or seven times in the first year, Raj Shah came and I took them always to see the president and they kept saying, “Mr. President, we will do everything in our power to help you.” So the relationship was quite good. I said, “But if Raj Shah starts getting calls from the Secretary General of the Catholic Bishop Conference of the United States, they’re going to side with him and not with you.” And he had also picked a fight with MSF because MSF brilliantly did the clinical care. They made it very clear, guys, we do clinical care, we do it our way, we’ve got our funding, the rest of you shut up and let us do our jobs. So we never had the problem in Liberia or Sierra Leone where patients were turned away. We never ran out of beds. We got close once but what really got the disease out of control in Monrovia is when people went to seven different clinics and were turned away. And MSF said, look, we got this, just get out of our way. The president, he was very close to Bernard Kouchner through the Socialist International, but it got very bizarre and he was picking fights with MSF and I said, “Mr. President, MSF is a global brand, you’re going to lose, and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the United States—” it’s awkward to tell a president you’re not that important, but I sort of had to say, “Mr. President, in the United States context the Catholic Bishops Conference is more important than the President of Guinea.” And to his credit—he was not terribly happy, but the neat thing about Alpha Condé was, he was mad at me, he’d call me back in a week and say, okay, we’ll do it.

[laughter]

But Ben and Pierre and Mike were critical in this because unlike the Liberians, Guinea never went the security-based route of forced quarantine and he was so frustrated because

every time we'd wipe out Ebola in one village, it'd come up in another village and in the meantime his economy is tanking, foreign investment is drying up, the mining houses are closing, so he's suffering massive macroeconomic damage, you know, GDP [gross domestic product] contraction of about 3% instead of 4% growth. So he would get just livid, angry, and call me and say, "Goddamn it, I'm going to call General [Ibrahima] Balde," who was the gendarmerie commander, "and tell him to quarantine the village and arrest anyone who's not cooperating with us. Anybody who hides a sick or hides a body, we're just going to arrest them."

"Okay, Ben, we've got to go see the president."

"Mr. President, it's not a good idea."

"Okay, we're not going to do this."

Then, "Okay, we've got to close the weekly markets."

I remember Ben saying, "Mr. President, weekly markets are really not a vector for transmission and it's really the best platform we have for education."

"Okay, we're going to use the weekly markets as platforms for mobilization and education."

There's a standard reflex in Guinea to close schools all the time. So the Ebola outbreak came and the first response was, okay, close every school in Guinea. All the CDC people said this isn't necessary. Ebola doesn't strike kids and the schools are great platforms for training and awareness. And I knew this but I had bigger fish to fry so I sort of ignored it, and then some of my local staff came to me and said, Mr. Ambassador, we're about to lose the entire school year and no one is listening to us, can you please persuade the

president to reopen the schools? So I took Mike Kinzer in and said, “Mr. President, we’d like to reopen the schools.”

“Are you crazy? If I get an outbreak in a school, that’s it, I’ll never get control of this outbreak and everyone will blame me.”

And Mike said, “Mr. President, look, schools are not the problem.”

[The president] said, “Can you give me a memo to that affect?”

“Okay.”

So we write a memo saying why CDC thinks on balance we should reopen schools. He said, “Also it’s got to be countrywide, I can’t leave some closed. But I need ThermoFlash thermometers, washbasins and soap in every school in Guinea.” I think it was like fifteen thousand or something, I forget the total number. The principal can’t just go to the market and buy this stuff and submit the receipt. It’s got to come from plastic basins. You can buy cheap plastic basins at any market in Guinea but, no, they had to be centrally procured. So OFDA working with UNICEF put a washbasin, soap and a ThermoFlash thermometer in every school in Guinea and Martin Luther King Day of ’15, ’14, I forget which year, was the school opening day. So I took three of my marine security guards and we went on an eight-hour hike in the countryside outside of Conakry, found some kids, and said, take us to all the schools you know. I walked into every school completely unannounced, hey, can I see your washbasin, can I see your thermometers, and more importantly, what do you do if a kid comes in with symptoms? And it worked. Every school principal had been briefed on what to do and every school had a washbasin, a bar of soap, and like one ThermoFlash thermometer for every two hundred students—I forget what the ratio was. But we got the schools open because CDC basically had the courage

to tell the president what no one else would and then had the programmatic resources to make this happen.

Q: Did you find that there were other organizations, other governments, who kind of did the opposite around the president? Who were kind of yes men who would not be frank?

Laskaris: The problem was internal to the government with a couple exceptions. Sakoba Keita was brilliantly subversive in the sense that we had to follow the president's orders but every time the president told him to do something that was really, really dumb, he would call me or call Ben or Pierre and say, hey, can you go talk to the president?

Q: Like what are we talking about?

Laskaris: So what finally ended up sort of working was the encerclage. The president, in the waning days of the outbreak in Basse Côte or other towns of Forécariah and Benty, the president was beyond impatient. A cop had been killed, burned in his car, there had been some acts of violence against some [unclear] from panicked communities, and the president was just beyond furious that, you know, this has gone on for too long, the economic damage to my country, and these people, for God's sake, it's been two years, we should not have to explain to every single new affected village what is Ebola. Ben and I and others had been going out to every single village affected by Ebola by helicopter. I got my embassy boat into the action, and so Ben and I were traveling in the tidewater country of Basse Côte. So finally he said, that's it, I'm calling Sakoba Keita, I'm calling

General Balde, the gendarmerie commander, I'm going to tell them to quarantine every village where there's an Ebola case in northern Basse Côte. Sakoba called me and said, "This is a bad idea, what do we do?" So he and I, and I think it was Lise Martel, flew out to two of the villages the next day and we sort of came up with this encerclage, which I called a semi-permeable membrane, which was you put up checkpoints but you let women go to the markets, you let men go to the fields, you let kids go to school, you send in massive amounts of food. It was Ramadan so you send in meat, anything you can and make this such a good proposition that other villages will say, hey, we want this too. So that's what we did and we told the president, yes, we've quarantined—and it was sort of a lie told and a lie accepted. As they say in French, tu protocol observé, all formalities obeyed. But yeah, so his guys knew that this was a bad idea but they couldn't stand up to him and they knew that CDC could. CDC's brand was twenty-four carat from day one and it only got brighter. End of the day, MSF was doing good work, the Institut Pasteur was there, Sakoba was doing good work, but the ace in the whole was always Ben, Pierre or Mike could get to see the president and get him to do the right thing. Many times the president said, okay, if this is what CDC recommends, that's what we're going to do. CDC kept a consistent line from day one: clinical care, contact tracing, social mobilization. And no criminalization of fear-based behavior.

We had this sort of gallows humor. We had the *Weekend at Bernie's* phenomenon. I would say the one thing that Alpha Condé said I cannot do, he said every public health measure you recommend I will do but there's one thing that if you ask me to do, I'm going to have to say no even if it's a catastrophe, and that is not to allow Guineans to

bury their loved ones in their native soil. There's a very strong—Guineans are a far-ranging people. Pierre said famously even dead Guineans travel. If you die, you must be buried in your ancestral home and this is how—again, it's gallows humor—called the *Weekend at Bernie's* phenomenon. Someone died and they just propped them up in the backseat of a taxi with sunglasses and said, that's just Uncle Sesay, he's asleep.

But other than that, the president ultimately did every public health measure recommended by CDC just because of his respect for Tom Frieden but really his main points of contact were Ben, Pierre and Mike. We saw the president once a week for two years, just me and the CDC chief. The president was a bit of a bully and a lot of his guys didn't want to tell him bad news because he had a tendency to fly off the handle at bad news. There was a horrible case of an ambulance had transported two Ebola victims in the same ambulance—a horrible violation of protocol—a woman and a young kid to the ETU [Ebola treatment unit] in Kindia. I get angry just thinking about this. They got to the ETU, they took the woman out but they didn't realize there was a two- or three-year-old patient in the back of the truck so they left her there and she died. The truck drove all the way back the next day to the community of origin and infected a whole bunch of people. I was so distraught when I heard this, a) just thinking about this poor girl in the back of the truck and b) what a stupid, careless, horrific mistake. I was actually seeing the president the next day about something else and I was in a really foul mood and he said, “Mr. Ambassador, what's wrong?” I said, “There was this horrible case yesterday.” And nobody had told him because no one had the courage to tell him. He hit the roof and he called Sakoba, he was shouting, “I want them all arrested!” I was like, aaugh. So I

learned early on—I always found Alpha Condé reasonable and I assume Ben and Pierre have told you the same stories about in private getting him to do the right thing, but in public he could be a bully and so people were afraid to give him bad news. And the beauty at CDC was a) they all spoke really good French, they had all been Peace Corps volunteers—well, Pierre was not—they were comfortable working with Africans, and they had no reason to sugarcoat anything. Ultimately, Alpha Condé respected that, but that was a unique relationship. That was based on the reputation of CDC, the well-deserved reputation of CDC.

Q: When you describe how President Condé advocated for the government to do more, for the state to do more and was kind of distrustful of all these other organizations, do you think that that standpoint of his might have increased the state's capacity overall in a way that might have been a longer term benefit to the country?

Laskaris: Yes. That's what he wanted and that's what we wanted. Very early on when the outbreak got past the villages, when it got to the cities, when it became a tri-national issue, all of us said the same thing which was, okay, we need to respond but at the same time we need to turn this response into permanent capacity building in Guinea. He felt the same way. He comes from a French sort of left-of-center socialist background where the state has a higher role in the society than you would have in an American context or whatever, and so he's got a state-centric approach but no illusions about the quality of the state he was leading. He viewed this as an opportunity to build the capacity of his health sector, which it was and it should've been.

Again, nobody in Guinea—you send white Land Cruisers into Liberia and Sierra Leone, people know that they're bringing food or relief supplies or medicine, and they know that good things, protection, lifesaving—no one in Guinea had that experience because Guinea had not been awarded the international community. So when Ebola hit Basse Côte, they were talking about things that in Iraq I wish I had known. The good news was because I spoke Susu, I had spent two and a half years learning the language of Basse Côte just because I—very few people in Guinea spoke French. So I hired a Peace Corps language teacher come to my office three days a week, and so when Ebola hit Basse Côte, I said okay, I'm not an epi [epidemiologist] but what can I do? I can go talk to these communities in their language and find the imams and the sages, the old men, and listen to them and then try to work them through their fear. There's a road that goes along Basse Côte between Conakry and Forécariah into Kambia and Guinea and then everything south of the road is sort of tidewater rice country, it's rice culture. That tells you it's a mix of communal and private, so the land is privately held but worked communally. So when it comes time to fix the levies that ensure the proper [salinity] of the water, it's a community effort; when it comes time for planting and harvesting, it's a community effort; but everything else in individual. Culture is a reflection of the relationship of people to the means of production. This is semi-private, semi-communal rice farmland, so you've got to deal with people on the basis of individual families but also collective communities or villages. North of the road was all marijuana, marijuana and very low level artisanal diamond mining. The Peace Corps volunteers all knew this, obviously, through intense academic study.

Every village said the same thing, we don't like the white Land Cruisers. Okay, how about people on foot? That's fine. So I parked my car about a kilometer from every village, I'd send in a Guinean on my staff and one of my security guys, hey, the ambassador is out here, he wants to walk in, is that okay? And if you send the old people to meet him at the entrance of the village—absolutely. So you walk in, you sort of lower the threat. Guinea, it is very important that culturally you have to acknowledge that you're in someone else's space. You have to come in, you have to make eye contact. The ritual is you find the sage, the old men of the village and you pay your respects. In the old days they actually gave kola nuts, but now the prix de kola just means maybe a dollar or two dollars as a token of respect. The act of giving respect means you get it and the act of showing that you acknowledge that you are in someone else's space means that that triggers the hospitality reflex. Okay, you can work, you can be with us. If you come in in a Land Cruiser, screaming motorcade, tinted windows, chickens flying out of your way, you're coming in disrespectfully. Okay, fine, we're just going to walk in. Then you notice that every village smells like the high school art teacher's office. What types of people don't like dudes in vehicles spraying their fields? Marijuana growers [laughs] from what I've heard.

But the other thing that was going on was, this had been a very low level artisanal diamond area and historically, village headmen had the right to give four meter by four meter plots to people in the village on a part-time basis to dig for diamonds the old-fashioned way, you know, pans, water. The mineral system changed to one-hectare plots

that could be divided and sold and resold, so you had the introduction of the middlemen class who paid people to work their concessions in return for a share of the product, and thus began this incredible cat and mouse game of the owners of the concession spying on the workers to make sure they weren't stealing. What did they drive around in? White Land Cruisers. And what did they do if they caught people taking more than their share? I mean there was hell to pay. So you've got to take the time to understand—all the humanitarians were like, wait a minute. Even the Guineans who were not from that area said, what's wrong with these people, we're here to help. I saw soldiers in Iraq shouting at Iraqis, goddamn it, don't you know we're here to help you? The impulse was genuine. Our soldiers did sometimes use foul language, understandable, but even the humanitarians are like, what, are you stupid? Are you crazy? What's wrong with you? Why don't you realize that we're here to help? But wait a minute, guys. Talk to people and you understand that the imagery you project in those communities does not come across as helpful, it comes across as threatening. When people feel threatened, that's when they tell their young people, go man the barricades with machetes. The key is lower people's threat levels. Hey, we're here to help. And the key then is to listen, not to talk.

Alpha Condé to his credit understood that his state had lost all credibility in the rural areas and the state had been a non-presence and the state only showed up to campaign for office. I would always tell him, Mr. President, I travel all over your country and I ask people in villages—because I would go by bike and by foot and they haven't seen a préfet, a county commissioner, in a generation. The state is a non-presence. And to his credit, he accepted that and he said that we have got to get the state as a credible actor on

behalf of people's welfare into the countryside. Alpha Condé was a complex guy and in many cases could be quite combustible, but he was a smart, reasonable guy who was trying to govern a country decently that hadn't been governed decently before. You just had to go into these communities and listen, and the Guinean state had lost the ability to listen. But to his credit—and we found young Guineans—we call them volunteers, we were actually paying them pretty good salaries by Guinean, you know, ten dollars a day, whatever—and we started introducing a generation of urban Guineans back to their rural areas. That got you into the pathologies of—a lot of Guineans aspired to leave the village to go to the city and they sort of looked at the village as backward, rube, whatever. We had some horrific community resistance, young Guinean Red Cross workers treating dead bodies with a lack of respect. We had a big riot in the town that really got nasty. Red Cross guys went to pick up a body, put it in an, unfortunately, black colored body bag, sort of threw it unceremoniously in the bed of a pickup truck and then took off their PPE [personal protective equipment] and threw it in the bed like garbage. And the family started a riot. Again, I don't blame them because you don't offend the rituals of death. This is just because some young punks forgot that they have to respect their country cousins. So we had to do some crash courses on—a little odd, Americans teaching Guineans on respect for African Muslim traditions but, hey, whatever you have to do. Also the spraying. You have people go in to spray homes with the Clorox water solution. Guinean women are pretty proud of themselves as housekeepers and I never saw a Guinean kitchen that wasn't immaculately clean even if it was a dirt kitchen because they know that if you leave food waste, you attract vermin and so they get this. So someone coming in and saying your house is filthy, I want to spray it with Clorox, that's saying

that you're a lousy mother, a lousy provider. So every community, the resistance, there was no consistent resistance. In some cases it was women, in some cases it was the young people, some cases it was the imams and the sages. So you just had to go into every one and find out, okay, who's causing the problems here? Then usually you found that there was some perceived slight or disrespect to ritual. Americans tend to not be a ritual society except our military. The thing I learned working with the military is they believe in ritual and if you disrespect ritual, you are disrespectful. So what are the rituals that matter? Death, marriage, birth and food, and if you're a Peace Corps volunteer, you understand that you have to eat the food, you have to go to the weddings, you have to go to the vigils and you have to go to the naming ceremony. A lot of it was reminding Guineans that you can't disrespect particularly the rituals of death, and this is where the imams became, I think, our best allies.

We were doing an Ebola sensitization in a neighborhood in downtown Conakry and we had one of the very first Ebola survivors, Marie Claire Tchecola, who Dr. Frieden met and we actually sent to Washington to meet the First Lady. So this young imam came up to me and said, "Hey, I'd like to help, can I speak?" Yeah, sure. Turns out he was an imam but he was also a medical doctor trained in France, a Guinean. He got up and gave a long speech about how the Holy Quran says that people who die of plague need to be treated differently from other deaths and he said, "Look, no one in the time of Prophet knew anything about viruses, didn't know anything about disease, but they had eyes and they saw that people who died of plague, their bodies were dangerous." He said, "Our taboos are based on the observation of smart people who didn't have the benefit of a

medical education. So when the Americans come to your village and say you have to bury Ebola victims in a special way, you have to understand that that is exactly what the Quran says.” And like, whoa, holy cow. So we enlisted him and he and I traveled all over Basse Côte with the grand imam of Conakry speaking in mosques. And Guinea is such a wonderful place in terms of religious openness that I went to Friday prayers. They wouldn’t let me speak in the mosque, but in the courtyard afterwards they would always let me speak and I’d always have the head imam with me and nodding, and I would speak for five minutes in sort of school boy Susu and then they would go on for forty-five minutes in this very, you know, we are your moral leadership and here’s what you have to do. People listen to moral leadership, and so when the imam of a village, the old people of the village, said this is what we’re going to do—and then sadly when there’s enough mortality to reinforce that message, you start to change behaviors and things that were unthinkable become acceptable and then become commendable. If someone dies, okay, before you take the body to the mosque, call the Red Cross, let them prepare it. But at the same time we’re going to make sure that there’s always the family nearby and the body will be treated with respect. Guineans are practical people. You just have to accept that, hey, I acknowledge that this is your community, I acknowledge that this is your loved one, whether it’s a patient or whether it’s a dead person, but here’s what I want to do. Phrase it like that with a little bit of respect, eventually people come around.

[break]

Q: It's cool listening about how active you were going out to villages and speaking with people. I don't know if that's something that all ambassadors do or not.

Laskaris: My counterpart in Liberia did a lot. My counterpart in Sierra Leone was sort of overwhelmed. He had a smaller staff and he ended up losing a lot of his people. I mean they were evacuated.

Q: Did you talk to those two?

Laskaris: Yeah, a lot. Particularly—Guinea Forestier was a two-day drive from Conakry but a five-hour drive from Monrovia, and so that was a little hard but the second wave of the outbreak in Guinea was in Basse Côte, which it was essentially the Conakry to Freetown road, so it involved a lot of cross border. I just sat around and asked, okay, where do I add value? Guinea is an incredibly pro-American society and so when the American ambassador shows up, there is a built-in deference, the American ambassador is here. That has nothing to do with me personally, it just has to do with the perception of the United States in Guinea. I think the act of showing up on foot was powerful, and speaking their language. Not many people who are Peace Corps volunteers or missionaries bother to learn any African language. Certainly an American ambassador who could speak to them in—not great, but frankly none of my American colleagues spoke Susu so they thought I was pretty good. [laughs] And the Guineans—I could've been the worst Susu speaker in the world but the mere effort got me an A. The word was out that Alex is fluent in Susu. Not exactly true, but the good thing about having a private

tutor—and her name was Mariama. Mariama, I'm going to go talk about this issue today, let's work on the vocabulary and let's work on—what's underneath language? You can teach me a word but let's break it down into its component parts so I can understand exactly what it is I'm saying. So you go out there and you speak their language and first there's this, oh my God, is he speaking Susu? And then there's this sort of laughter, okay, I've never heard Susu with an American accent before. But then there's okay, let's hear what this guy has to say. Again, it goes back to the original point of how do you insert yourself as a change agent, and the more respect you show, the more respect you command.

Q: When you look back, is there a certain village that you remember going to that you can describe for me, one that stands out to you?

Laskaris: There's so many villages. Yeah, there was one near the town of Benty on the Sierra Leonean border that—it was in the early days of the encirclement so it is already sort of semi-permeable membrane quarantine. There were two checkpoints on the road leading into the village and I got out at the first checkpoint and started walking with my entourage. Guinea is such a wonderful place, if you smile and make eye contact, bonjour, Salaam-Alaikum, [unclear], people will just be nice to you, and so you can walk into schools or clinics or people's houses. I would just start asking random people, have you heard of Ebola, and what do you know about Ebola? What was fascinating was the outer sort of periphery, the second checkpoint, oh, there's no Ebola here, it's over there, don't talk to us about it, there's no Ebola here, we're okay. Then as you got closer, yeah, I

know what Ebola is, there's Ebola there, yeah there are humanitarian workers running around or there's MSF here. And as you got closer to the epicenter, more and more people knew what Ebola was. The village knew I was coming and so they had prepared under the mango tree, sort of the traditional open area where the village's business is done. The old men sitting in a row, the women standing behind, the kids all around and very hierarchical—they were ready for me and they knew exactly what I was there to talk about, and I didn't have to do anything because they said, Mr. Ambassador, we know your message, your message is [French phrase], which is if the fever burns, go to the hospital. I had a whole list of eight or nine principles and they had been on the radio, and we had opened Radio Rural Forécariah for the first time in ten years. We were putting out Ebola messages 24/7 [twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week]. It was interesting because the people in the village said, yeah, we know someone who has Ebola. Two old men stood up and said, I had contact with them, and the UN is taking my temperature twice a day. I had been to so many villages that were still in denial, that had to be persuaded, and I sort of knew—this was very close to my departure, this was maybe in like August of '15. That's when I said, okay, this is going to end, because I had never been in a village—the time from the first case to the old men saying, yes, we have a problem, I think it was three days. In the early days the outbreak in Guinea Forestier, it was a couple of months. The very first we had twenty-six they called “reticent” villages and it took two months to get back in and by the time we got back in there were dead bodies everywhere. Two years' worth of social mobilization, training, reduced the initial shock to acceptance from two months to two and a half days. That tells me that this is working, whether it's the contact tracing, whether it's the safe burials, finally we're

getting through because we had been reinventing the wheel with every single village. I remember I was doing a weekly phone call with Dr. Frieden and I was getting frustrated. I said, “Tom, how does this end?” He says, “Alex, this ends when you and Sakoba and Ben go to every single village in Basse Côte.” We didn’t quite go to every single village but I think we got pretty close. I’m trying to remember the name of this village, it was near Benty which is the sub-prefectural capital, but when we got to the village and the old men had the answers already and the imams—actually one of the imams said that he was being surveilled twice a day. He was like on day fourteen. Okay, my work here is done.

[laughter]

Also by the way, the other village, it’s actually a town called Téliimélé, which was the only Pular town in Guinea that had an Ebola case. It’s in what’s called the Fouta Djallon, sort of central mountain range of Guinea. A trader had come up from Monrovia, developed the symptoms in Téliimélé and died there. And I had been maybe two to three months before, and so the head imam of Téliimélé called me and he had heard Pierre Rollin on the radio and he said, “We have an Ebola case, I want to talk to Dr. Rollin to tell us what to do.” I said, “Okay.” So I had Pierre call him and Pierre said, “We’ll have a team there in twenty-four hours, in the meantime: clinical care, contact tracing, social mobilization.” Imam said, “Okay, got it.” Friday prayers, every imam in the community said the exact same thing from the mosque, and that was the easiest case, that was the easiest outbreak and it lasted only a single generation. The guy died. I think his wife and daughter contracted the disease. I think one died, one survived, but no subsequent infections. Everyone was traced. But among the Pular community, obedience to clerical

authority is actually quite high and so when the imams give very, very firm, clear instructions from the pulpit—or from the mosque—people listen. This was always very vivid in my mind, which is people respond to moral leadership. You just have to find it and get it to say the right things. They're moral people—they are moral leaders, therefore they are moral people and they don't want people to die. You just have to find and empower, sometimes magnify, but always recognize.

I was in Mali with Colonel [George S.] Murphy three weeks ago, two weeks ago, and driving through a town and see this beautiful mosque and decided, stop at the mosque and go see the imam. Unannounced. Find a kid on the street, hey, can you take us to the imam? Yeah, sure. So we go walking through the back alleys of the neighborhood until we find an eighty-five-or-so-year-old imam and I said I was with the American ambassador to Mali. Said, "Yeah, we were in your village and your town, we decided we wanted to pay respects to you." And he said, "The fact that you've come to show me respect means that I should respect you." It was this great moment of clarity that, yeah, you've got to give some to get some, particularly as an American, as an American ambassador. I wouldn't call it humbling myself because there's nothing humble about it, but the act of demonstrating that there is respect that is not of our government, of our power, of our wealth—it is just the respect of human decency for elders, for sage, the wise men. There's something electric about that. That changes the nature of your reception from interloper, invader, to welcome guest. The rules of hospitality are very strict, which is you acknowledge you are a guest and the minute you do that, then you are a guest with all the privileges that go—so to me that's sort of the great lesson of how to

persuade foreigners to do stuff, whether it's fight disease or fight Al Qaeda or adopt the right economic policies. It all comes down to that.

[break]

Q: You mentioned the importance in your previous work before becoming ambassador to Guinea of getting the right people a seat on the table. Can you talk about that in the context of Guinea, of making sure that the right people in the government or in the civil sector or in the United States were part of that conversation?

Laskaris: One of the great things that Tom Frieden did for us was he told the president, look, your minister of health can't do this because he's in a cabinet, too many people can get to him. You need a national Ebola coordinator who works directly for you and who can't be tasked by everyone else in your government. Alpha Condé thought about it and he gave us Sakoba Keita, who turned out to be a superstar. Getting that task organization right was critical, and that offended a lot of sensibilities, a lot of rice bowls, a lot of—and then we replicated that down at the prefectural level and the préfets and the DPS, the prefectural department of health director, they were the powers, and all of a sudden CDC and Americans come in and say this structure doesn't work, we're going to appoint someone over all of you. So we were fighting running battles throughout Guinea and the president was very good. If there was a préfet or a DPS who wasn't playing ball, Mr. President, you've got a problem and Macenta—actually, Macenta préfet was the best one—you've got a problem in Forécariah with the préfet, and the préfets work for the

president. He would pick up the phone and say, CDC is coming tomorrow with the prefectural coordinator, I don't want to hear any trouble. Getting that level of task organization was critical.

One thing the government didn't do and I pushed on, they never got the survivors into the game. We did unilaterally. We understood a) the trauma of stigmatization, people who thank God had recovered but who then couldn't go back to their villages because they'd had this disease. And I couldn't get the government to sort of—frankly, I couldn't even get them to meet with survivors. They were so afraid. But I couldn't get them to champion the survivors and their messages, so we did that on our own and we did it in communities of origin, but we didn't get the survivors a seat at the table nearly enough. The Guinean civil society—the imams—you know, civil society is split between sort of the pre-modern and the modern. The modern are the folks who have risen up because there's money to be had if you have an NGO in West Africa. The pre-modern civil society are clerics, customary leaders, whatever. They stepped up to the plate. I think the modern Guinean civil society movement—I don't think they did as much as they could have. The UN task organization started out very poorly. It got much better very quickly. There were a lot of traumas associated with WHO in the early days of the outbreak. Peter [J. Graaff], the UN Ebola coordinator, the Dutch guy—

Q: Oh, shoot. Peter—

Laskaris: He was quite good. He did a very good job of getting the UN family, wrestling them into some sort of coherence. The French were very good, very active through their embassy and through the Pasteur Institute. The Cubans did a very good job. MSF, they were heroes of the clinical care. But really what made the difference, and one of the reasons I was so happy to see the former Peace Corps volunteers last night, is—the problem we had in Basse Côte was we had no connectivity between the highly technical-skilled folks in the capital and the grassroots, the kids in the flip-flops on motorbikes doing the contact tracing. We had no one to manage it at the local level. So we reached out to half a dozen Peace Corps volunteers who had been evacuated and were quite bitter at the eighteen hours' notice they got to leave Guinea. We put them and others into field-level middle management to make sure that we had that sort of reliable, disciplined, data-driven approach to contact tracing, but staying in crappy hotels eating crappy food and living with—most of the responders wanted to stay in the Palm Camayenne and come to my house for dinner. The guys I had dinner with last night were out eating rice and sauce on the side of the road.

[break]

Q: Thank you so much, Ambassador Alex Laskaris.

Laskaris: Thank you.

Q: This is fantastic.

END