



Bob McCormack Studios

The Ambassador & Me

By CONNIE CRONLEY

Edward J. Perkins' Foreign Service career was a succession of non-stop challenges and accomplishments—and now he has written a book.

"Never travel with the man," his graduate assistant told me. "His schedule will kill you. He's the last one to bed and the first one up in the morning. He's still going at midnight and in the gym by 5:30 in the morning. And he never stops all day long."

The man under discussion was Ambassador Edward J. Perkins, William J. Crowe Professor of Geopolitics and Executive Director of the International Programs Center at the University of Oklahoma.

As the Ambassador's collaborator on his memoir, I did travel with him—twice. Once to Portland, Oregon, his hometown, and once to South Africa, where he was greeted like royalty.

The graduate assistant was right. Ambassador Perkins' schedule did almost kill one of us. We were so exhausted that on Day Five in South Africa, the youngest member of our party—a strapping young man in his 20s—slipped and fell, suffered a concussion and spent the night in a hospital. With our withering schedule, a quiet stay in a hospital looked inviting to me.

We were there, in part, to research Dr. Perkins' book, *Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace* (April 2006, University of Oklahoma Press).

The best description of the work is magnitude—of the man, his career and the book project itself. At the book launch in the Beird Lounge at the Oklahoma Memorial Union, President David L. Boren described Ambassador Perkins as "one of the most important diplomats of modern time." He has earned that acclaim for his work in the Angola-Namibia peace talks and his unparalleled assignment to South Africa, charged by Presi-

dent Ronald Reagan to dismantle apartheid without violence.

We started work on the book in December 1998. For the next several years he meticulously went through his diaries and official papers, which filled two rooms

manuscript for a 400-plus-page book.

From the beginning, we were determined to write his story for a general audience, to make it accessible to as many people as possible. I think we succeeded. The Ambassador has been described as "living history" and his life as "a role model for black youths in America." When author Colleen McCullough read the manuscript, she likened it to "a page-turning novel." One reader wrote the Ambassador, "Make it into a movie!"

The book has been targeted for niche markets with his personal addresses before professional organizations such as the National Security Studies program at Syracuse University, the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., and the State Department's Thursday Luncheon Group. For broad audiences, he has appearances scheduled at book festivals in Los Angeles, Memphis and Austin. Mass media marketing has included inter-

views with radio, television, newspaper and organizational publications.

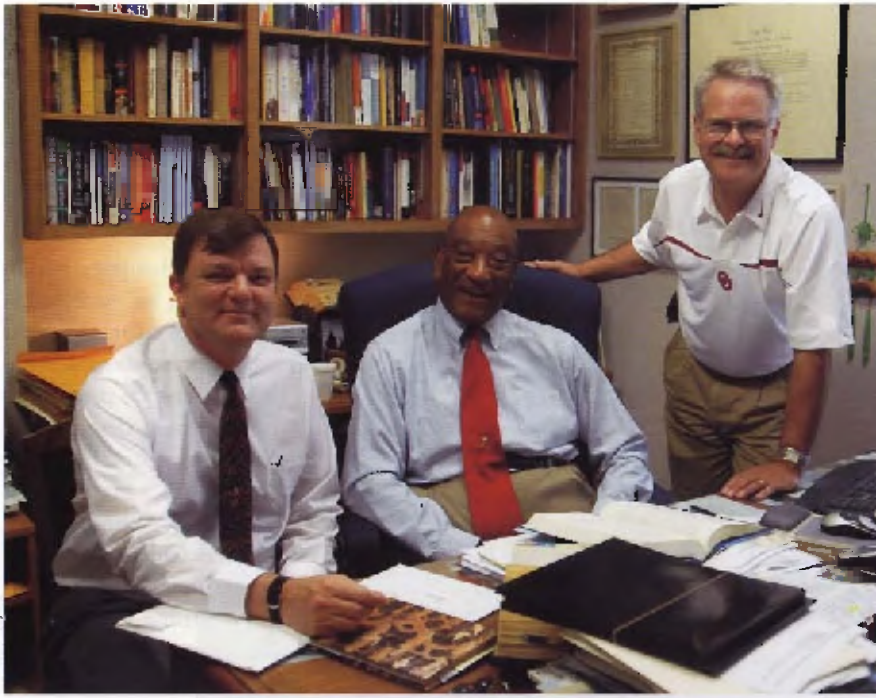
"I have the highest admiration for Director John Drayton and his staff at OU Press," said Ambassador Perkins. "The quality of the production of the book and the marketing materials, their efforts in promotion, and especially John's steady support and editing skills are superior. I am grateful to be associated with a press of this caliber, and I look forward to further association with this extraordinary group of professionals."

The experience was mutually pleasant for OU Press. "Edward Perkins is an inveterate teacher," Drayton said. "He teaches in his writing, in his conversation, even in his deportment. In every facet of his life he sets a high standard. But



■ When author Connie Cronley, right, agreed to collaborate with Ambassador Edward Perkins on the memoirs of his remarkable diplomatic career, it looked like an 18-month assignment. Eight years and 6,000 single-spaced pages of transcribed dictation later, they produced a page-turner of an OU Press biography written for a general audience.

of filing cabinets. When we met, as long as eight hours a day, he dictated accounts of his work and commentary on the documents. He is a consummate storyteller with a sharp memory for details and conversations. When these dictations were transcribed, we had 6,000 single-spaced pages to compress into a



■ Director John Drayton, left, and the book's principal editor, Robert Smith, right, headed the OU Press publishing team responsible for *Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace*, by Edward J. Perkins, center, and his collaborator Connie Cronley. Former Secretary of State George P. Shultz wrote the foreword, while the preface is by OU President David L. Boren.

he is not a pedagogue; the lessons are implicit. I always enjoy our times together. Always I am lifted.”

As a person, Drayton said, “Edward inspires confidence—not only in him but in oneself. Small wonder he found himself in positions of such trust.”

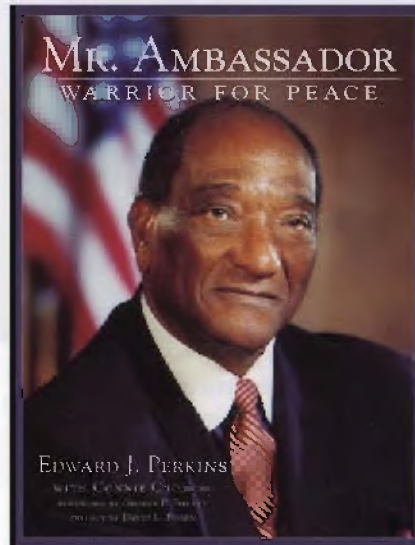
Drayton described the book as “an inspirational biography” and “a virtual handbook for those contemplating a career in the U.S. Foreign Service.”

For a capsule look at the man, his career and the book, following is an interview with the Ambassador:

Q&A with Edward J. Perkins

Q. Your book, which is the story of your life, has been described as a role model for young black males. Why is that?

A. I grew up during a time when the United States was entrenched in segregation. Furthermore, I spent my childhood in the South, a part of the nation where black citizens were disenfranchised and not accorded the full rights of citizenship. I decided early on never to let the issue of race stand in my way. And that is what I have taught my two daughters, who are



the children of an interracial marriage of my Chinese wife and me.

Q. You write in your book that you were raised on a Louisiana cotton farm by grandparents who could not read or write. From that beginning, how did you become a career Foreign Service officer—an ambassador to Liberia, South Africa, Australia and the United Nations?

A. I owe much of the career I have had to my grandmother who was born a slave

but who was determined that I get an education and always, in her words, “Stand my ground and hold my head high.”

I did get an education—a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California—but before that I acquired self-discipline, first by serving in the U.S. Marine Corps and then by beginning a lifelong study of Asian philosophy.

Q. Aren't those contradictions—military service and Asian philosophy?

A. Not at all. They both begin with the mastery of self-discipline. Only from the knowledge of one's self can we move on to knowledge of an enemy or an obstacle. The two books that are always with me are Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* and Miyamoto Mushashi's *A Book of Five Rings*. I have read them many times. Those two experiences—being a U.S. marine and a student of Asian philosophy—taught me the importance of comprehending the battlefield and the opponent. That can apply to almost anything that tests us, from a business deal to completing an educational course of study.

Q. You write that when you were appointed to be the first black United States ambassador to South Africa—which was a surprise to you as well as to the rest of the world—you went armed with what you call “an unusual quiver of tools.” Besides Asian philosophy and Marine Corps discipline, what else was in your quiver of tools?

A. A reverence for the Constitution of the United States of America, a copy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and a commitment to the oath of office I had taken as an officer of the U.S. Foreign Service. I was well trained in the art of diplomacy. That's why my book is titled *Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace*. The objective of diplomacy is to achieve peace without war; the lessons of Sun Tsu is to win without fighting. Yet war is a tool of diplomacy, too—the ultimate tool.

Q. You spent 35 years in the Foreign Service and rose to be the director general of the Foreign Service, the top office. As a black man, was that professional climb difficult?

A. So much so that when I joined the Foreign Service, it was considered impossible. At that time, the Foreign Service

was popularly viewed—and rightly so—as an elite, East Coast-oriented, white organization. It has changed now, and I am deeply gratified that I have been able to help make that change, but for decades it was a struggle for minorities and women to receive equal consideration in the Foreign Service. I believe that change began when a few other young black Foreign Service officers and I proposed to Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State, that the Foreign Service might be more effective if it better represented the cultural face of the United States. He agreed. Still, there were often times at social functions

South Africa Movement and other citizens of the United States spoke for the world when they clamored for freedom of the black citizens of South Africa, which was the majority population. While I was there, I often quoted Martin Luther King Jr. and said I was there because the law of that land was an unjust law and because the United States believed in equality as expressed in the Constitution.

I saw to it that the entire U.S. Mission in South Africa became an agent for change—we traveled across that large nation getting to know the blacks, the Afrikaners, the Coloureds and the white

unparalleled authority to make policy on the ground, unheard of for an ambassador.

Q. Your book is a panorama of contemporary history and drama—revolutions in Ghana and Liberia; the peace negotiations for Namibia; a life of travel around the world; and a stunning cast of characters: Winnie Mandela, Alan Paton, Samuel K. Doe, Boutris Boutris-Gali, Colin Powell, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, James Baker III, George Shultz and Lawrence Eagleburger; Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Gerald Ford,

Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. You are known as a man of great dignity, yet a humble person. One reporter described you as a “gentle giant.” With all the violence you have seen around the world, how have you kept your soul intact? And with all that you have accomplished, how have you managed to maintain such humility?

A. When I was growing up in Louisiana, every black home had two pictures on the wall—Jesus Christ and Huey Long. I have always remembered those pictures because they represented to me the bedrock for a useful life—faith and public service for poor people, black or white. I became, and I remain, a Roman Catholic, but my faith was certainly tested in places like South Africa during apartheid. I came

back from that assignment a different person. One of the things that affected me was the philosophy of some of the black revolutionaries I met. Some of them lost their lives in the struggle, and I was at their funerals to mourn them. Those who survived have taught me and the rest of the world about forgiveness and reconciliation.

As for humility, I have seen many a person stumble and fall over his or her own ego. I have always reminded myself that it is not Edward Perkins the man



Photo Provided

■ An official White House photo was in order when President Ronald Reagan, center, announced Perkins' appointment as ambassador to South Africa—daughter Kathy at left with her father, daughter Sarah at right with her mother, Lucy. Perkins was surprised at the president's knowledge of South Africa and the amount of authority he gave the ambassador to make policy on the ground.

when we black officers were assumed to be servants and asked by guests to fetch them a drink.

Q. You have been called a man who is “history walking,” and certainly a highlight of your career was your historic service as ambassador in South Africa. Your mission there was to eliminate apartheid without violence. How did you do it?

A. Apartheid was an established policy in South Africa by law and sanctioned by the Dutch Reformed Church. The Free

English-speakers; we met with revolutionists; we spoke out against the Nationalist government's arrest of children and the imprisonment of political prisoners; we urged the faith communities to get involved in the struggle. I was the first U.S. ambassador to go regularly into the black townships, and I requested repeatedly to be able to meet with Nelson Mandela, who was in prison. I was able to achieve what I did in South Africa because President Ronald Reagan gave me



Whenever the Secretary of State attends a session of the UN General Assembly, he assumes the permanent representative's chair. Here Secretary Lawrence S. Eagleburger sits at right next to Perkins.

who might be the recipient of praise or attention, but Edward Perkins the Foreign Service officer and public servant who is representing the United States and working for the common good.

We are not a perfect nation, but our Constitution allows us the right of civil disobedience as we evolve into a better nation. In recent history we have seen movements in this country for civil rights, labor rights, women's rights and now against the discrimination of sexuality. I have witnessed this. And I have witnessed over and over something we take for granted in the United States that is not common around the world, and that is the peaceful change from one government to another. My reverence for the U.S. Constitution is immeasurable. I have toasted it and sung its praises around the world.

I grew up when it was not unusual to see a sign in a public park or restaurant that said, "No dogs or coloreds allowed." I have sat at lunch counters and not been served. I have ridden on a segregated train as the only man in the black car while my

Army colleagues all rode in the white car. We are not that nation any more. I believe it is not only the right, but the duty of every citizen to be involved in the process of our becoming a more perfect nation, and that includes every citizen's being involved in the making of foreign policy. We are all ambassadors. And we can all be warriors for peace.

One value that we in the United States must always cherish is being a revolutionary society. As long as we remain that way, we will get stronger and be a better nation.

Connie Cronley, the collaborator on Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace, lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is the author of two books of essays, Sometimes a Wheel Falls Off (HAWK Publishers) and Light and Variable (OU Press, September 2006).

Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace (576 pages, \$39.95 hardcover) is available in bookstores or directly from the University of Oklahoma Press: 1-800-627-7377 and www.oupres.com.



On his first overseas Foreign Service assignment, Perkins' took his family—daughters Sarah and Katherine, wife Lucy and their dog Gabby, here with their cook and drivers—to a Ghana with a collapsing infrastructure and on the verge of a violent coup.