VOICES

By Christopher Connell

The Art of Winning Without Fighting

An interview with Edward J. Perkins, career diplomat and educator

SECRETARY OF COMMERCE HENRY A. WALLACE had just completed a speech at a civic luncheon in Portland, Oregon, in 1946, when a tall, square-jawed teenager named Edward J. Perkins approached to shake the former vice president's hand and inform him confidently—indeed, matter of factly—that he intended to become a U.S. ambassador one day. The serious-demeanored youth represented his school's International Relations Club. "I do not know what Secretary Wallace thought of a black teenager's chances of getting into the Foreign Service. I did not ask him; I just told him I intended to do it," Perkins later wrote of the brief encounter. "I had hitched my dream to the Foreign Service, and I never let go."

Perkins, raised on a cotton farm in the Deep South in the heyday of segregation, tells in his 2006 autobiography, *Mr. Ambassador: Warrior for Peace,* how he fulfilled that ambition, acquired four languages and a Ph.D. in international relations, and became the senior vice provost for international programs at the University of Oklahoma. He will be remembered for contributions he made toward dismantling apartheid as the Reagan administration's ambassador to South Africa from 1986 to 1989—an appointment that surprised and divided the U.S. civil rights community and came only after President Ronald Reagan abandoned his discredited policy of "constructive engagement" with the racist regime in Pretoria.

It was not the only high-pressure assignment that Perkins received in a storied career as a diplomat. He served twice in Liberia during the turbulent reign of Samuel Doe, the master sergeant who seized power in a 1980 coup and was tortured and killed by another strongman a decade later. His work in Liberia ended in 1986 with a summons back to Washington and an offer to tackle the biggest challenge of his diplomatic career: serving as ambassador to Pretoria when it still was uncertain whether apartheid would end in a bloodbath or by negotiation. Perkins became director general of the U.S. Foreign Service in 1989 and spent the final year of the first Bush administration as ambassador to the United Nations. He finished his diplomatic career as ambassador to Australia.

Perkins retired from the Foreign Service in 1996 and accepted the invitation of David Boren, the president of the University of Oklahoma and former U.S. senator, to help put Oklahoma and its international education programs on the map. They did so, building a robust International Programs Center and making the Norman campus a regular stop for world leaders, from Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher to Vicente Fox. The 79-year-old ambassador retired this summer as director of the International Programs Center. But he will still retain his close connection with OU and teach one course a semester and continue writing on international affairs while dividing time between Norman and the family home in Washington, D.C., where both daughters have pursued international careers. The University of Oklahoma was a 2007 winner of NAFSA's Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization; writer Christopher Connell sat down with Perkins to discuss his life as diplomat and educator.

Edward J. Perkins

IE: **Congress was preparing to override a presidential veto against sanctions when you were named ambassador to South Africa. What were President Reagan's instructions to you?**

PERKINS: The president and I talked one Saturday morning for a couple of hours. We talked about what we stand for as a nation and…agreed we must take a very positive stand against the apartheid system. Then he wanted to know what I would do about it.

I spoke about the importance of getting to know the people of South Africa, convincing them in no small way that the president of the United States did not stand for apartheid, and that he was not anti-black. We talked a long time and finally he said, 'You know, we don't really have a policy for South Africa and, if you go, we really can't make it from here. We can't tell you how to do it. So there are no instructions, except to try to bring about change, and please try to do it without violence if you can. We don't want a race war if we can help it.'

IE: **You couldn't have asked for more—or for less.**

PERKINS: No, none whatsoever. He and [Secretary of State George] Shultz were totally supportive during my three years there. Not everyone in the United States government was on my side. Every time I made a move in South Africa that seemed outside the normal bounds of diplomacy, the press would pick it up and then a question would be asked at the State Department briefing: 'Has the ambassador stepped out of bounds?' And either Shultz or the President would instruct the press person to answer the question with these words: 'Ambassador Perkins speaks for the American people and for this administration.'

IE: **The University of Southern California recently gave you its top alumni honor. It wanted you to make USC your academic home when you retired from the Foreign Service. Why did you choose Oklahoma?**

PERKINS: It was strictly knowing David Boren, whom I had gotten to know well when I was ambassador to South Africa. He was chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and he and Sam Nunn, the Defense Committee chairman, came to South Africa to see what I was doing; it was not then a place that many Congress people wanted to visit. Later, as director general of the Foreign Service, I worked with David on his language program [the National Security Education Program David L. Boren Undergraduate Scholarships and Graduate Fellowships].

He called one day while I was in Australia and asked that I think about coming to Oklahoma University and applying for a chair. Most of the people that I talked with endorsed the idea wholeheartedly. My family kind of had the deciding vote, my wife particularly, my (two) daughters, and sons-in-law. We agreed that coming to a university made sense if I wanted to continue to be involved in things and make a difference in communities or in the nation or to myself. I also wanted to go to a public university.

IE: **Some in Washington still wonder why President Boren gave up a secure, powerful seat in the Senate. They are convinced the real challenges are "inside the Beltway."**

PERKINS: He made a conscious decision that he wanted to leave something in Oklahoma, and the best way he could do that was through education. I think he also felt political life in Washington had become somewhat hollow; that's my term, not his. He was no longer satisfied with it…. My experience with politicians is that occasionally you come across one who really does have a soul and is committed to change and the things that the founding fathers talked about.

I always think about our country, our nation, as a society in revolution. I said this often in South Africa because I got a lot of challenges, people saying that this was a flawed society: 'Look at how blacks are treated in the United States,' and things like that. I said, 'Look, it is flawed. It is a society in revolution. And I feel good as long as it's in revolution because that means it gets better all the time.' I think David feels that way as well. He asked me to participate with him in bringing an international sphere to the university as well as to the community. He's done it very well.

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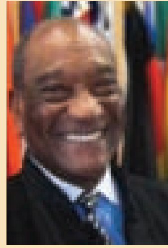
From Cotton Fields to Pin-Striped World Diplomacy



Edward J. Perkins was born in 1928 in Sterlington, Louisiana, a village on the banks of the Ouachita River. His grandparents, Nathan and Sarah Noble, were farmers and pillars of their community who sent daughter, Tiny Estelle, off to college to become a teacher. Instead, she married a revivalist preacher; they divorced when son Edward was three. The boy was raised by his grandparents after his mother married a second traveling evangelist. He picked cotton and helped his grandfather plow the fields behind a mule. His illiterate grandmother—he called her Mama—would dictate letters for him to write and “was adamant that I get an education. (She) had a granite faith in the power of education.” Indeed, when he learned all that he could in the local two-room schoolhouse, she insisted that her daughter let the youth join her in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

“To a raw boy just off the farm, Pine Bluff was Xanadu,” Perkins recalled, and the city’s black population—including dentists, doctors, and lawyers—“a glorious revelation.” Perkins soon was studying Latin and Shakespeare at all-black Merrill High School, “which had an exceptional black principal and cadre of black teachers.” When he wasn’t studying, Perkins was working at jobs from waiter to janitor to mill hand to red cap at the bus station. Relations with his stepfather were strained, and Perkins stayed behind for 18 months when his mother and stepfather moved to Oregon. But in August 1945, at age 17, he bought a bus ticket and made the three-day journey to Portland, sitting in the front all the way. “That was a dizzying experience,” he writes.

Perkins considers Portland his real hometown. It was not free of racism, but teachers at Jefferson High and a classics professor at Reed College mentored Perkins and urged him to greater heights. One day a history teacher brought in two Foreign Service officers to tell students about their careers. “They started talking about their life overseas—learning languages, opening doors—and I thought, ‘This is for me,’” Perkins said. “I don’t think they were really talking to me—but I listened.”

After graduation in June 1947, Perkins enlisted in the Army and soon was serving as a military policeman in a segregated unit at a depot outside Inchon, Korea. He wound up in Japan and stayed there after his discharge, working as a civilian for the U.S. military supply chain and pursuing his interest in learning the language and Asian philosophy, especially Bushido—the samurai ethic—and Sun Tzu’s The Art of War. “The seminal teaching from Sun Tzu is that the essence of war is to win without fighting,” he writes in his autobiography. In 1953 he returned home and enrolled in Lewis and Clark College, receiving credit for courses taken at a University of California campus in Japan. But he departed after a year to join the Marines, where he found the training both intellectually and physically rigorous. He studied U.S. history and the Constitution in Marine classrooms, read about great warriors and strategists, and heard his first discussion of Karl Marx’s Das Kapital. The Marines sent him back to Korea as a rifleman; soon he became a criminal investigator. Discharged in Yokohama in 1958, he became a civilian personnel officer with the U.S. Army and Air Force Exchange Services in Taiwan. There he met and wooed a colleague, Lucy Cheng-mei Liu, whose family had emigrated from southern China generations earlier. Against the wishes of her patrician father and family, they eloped. Eight years passed before her mother consented to see the couple. They celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary this fall.

Perkins earned a bachelor’s degree in public administration and political science at the Taipei campus of the University of Maryland. Perkins went to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Thailand. His duties included scheduling the embassy’s two airplanes on supply flights to help Thai forces fighting an insurrection along its border with Laos. Perkins, already fluent in Japanese, added French and Thai to his repertoire. He sped through a master’s in public administration at the University of Southern California and, at age 44, passed the Foreign Service exam. One examiner told him years later that after that hour-long grilling, “we took a bet about how long it would take you to become an ambassador.”

Perkins did it in 12 years. The discipline from his Marine days helped when he would rise at 4:30 a.m. to run five miles, or at 3 a.m. to work on the Ph.D. he received from the University of Southern California in 1978 (his dissertation was on how Henry Kissinger reallocated resources to better manage the State Department).

IE: What do you regard as your legacy as OU's director of international education?

PERKINS: Community leaders in small towns throughout Oklahoma, whether it's ecumenical groups or businesses or the YMCA or whatever, know that there is something called the International Programs Center at the University of Oklahoma. They don't know quite what it is, but they know it brings some famous people here to Oklahoma and 'they talk to us.' I'm proud of that. We've helped make Oklahomans aware that international relations affects everybody in the community, whether they are buying a pair of shoes or a pound of fish in the fish market.

I'm equally proud of the fact that we now have a School of International and Area Studies at the University of Oklahoma with 350 majors. The students love it. When we started this, we heard from some professors in political science, 'Oh, c'mon, don't be ridiculous. Anybody who wants to study international relations is going to go back East to study.' Well, that's not true at all. It's possible to study and teach international relations here in the middle of Oklahoma. We're sending more (graduates) to Washington than ever before. I get calls all the time from students who want to scope out possible careers in national security affairs, something they never dared do before.

IE: What lessons does the University of Oklahoma offer for other universities seeking to internationalize?

PERKINS: It's important for any university, but especially for a public university, to realize that it is a part of the community. That's what it is and why it's here. Together the public university and the community can go forward into lots of international markets. I remember asking the first class I taught, a graduate class, 'How does foreign affairs affect you as Oklahomans?' By and large, nobody thought that it did affect them. Then we began talking about the clothes they wore and about Oklahoma's energy and agricultural resources. I told them that I'd just come from Australia where I'd spent a lot of time negotiating with the Aussies over things like selling salmon from the Northwest in Australian markets…. I said, 'Your shoes are affected by (foreign trade). If you drive a car, chances are part of the motor was made someplace in Italy.' Before that class was over, they started to realize that almost nothing they owned escaped foreign policy or international relations. There's nothing esoteric about foreign policy, or there shouldn't be. It has to be a product of the community, not some high-flown bureaucrat like me who sits back in Washington writing a few paragraphs. **IE**

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