

Foreign Service Daze

A veteran diplomat recalls life in an obscure outpost

By James Gibney

WITH ITS GRAHAM GREENESQUE title, pastel-colored book jacket, and breezy prose, Richard Conroy's memoirs of Foreign Service life in 1960s British Honduras offer an enjoyable nostalgia trip back to the days when diplomacy still featured prop-driven DC-4s and typewritten dispatches. But based on my latter-day experiences with the State Department, what's most striking about Conroy's recollections is how little the Foreign Service seems to have changed. Roughly four decades, one Cold War, and several dozen State Department reorganization plans after Conroy first took up his tropical post, the day-to-day experiences of an American vice consul — especially in the Third World — remain a bizarre blend of Conrad, Kafka, and the Marx Brothers.

Conroy's story begins with his induction into the Foreign Service by way of jobs in the Social Security Administration and a federal nuclear bomb factory in his native Tennessee. Recruited as part of a larger effort by the State Department to go beyond the then-usual pool of Northeastern elites, Conroy quickly demonstrates that he has the right stuff. When his State Department examiners ask whether he would commit an illegal act to advance the national interest, Conroy replies that he would first find out that he had been "misinformed" about the act's illegality, commit the act, and then slap the highest possible classification on any records of what he had done. Although this anecdote rings a little too cute to my ears, few FSOs would deny that the ability to cover your ass is an essential survival skill.

Moreover, Conroy's depiction of his early days in the department is a classic illustration of what happens when smart people are forced to do dumb

OUR MAN IN BELIZE

By Richard Timothy Conroy

St. Martin Press, \$27.50

things. His first assignment is to reconcile personnel files and pay records in the personnel office. Bored out of their gourds, Conroy and colleagues set up an informal tea house where they spend their days composing limricks and spreading incendiary gossip. (One of the department's longest-run-

ning internal laments is that few FSOs are good "managers" — a legitimate concern that involves a complex mismatch between the people it attracts and the people it needs.) But this period is not a total loss: A teahouse patron later helps Conroy by derailing his assignment to Naha, Okinawa, in favor of the more desirable Zurich. Writes Conroy about his time in Switzerland: "If these years were in any way memorable, they were so because the consul general was a lovable alcoholic with a 70-year-old Polish mistress, my immediate superior insisted that all correspondence be prepared in the passive voice, and I had to use elaborate subterfuge to wrest control over the visa section from a local Swiss clerk who had delusions of grandeur." With the exception (perhaps) of the lovable alcoholic consul general, his description deftly distills many a first tour.

Conroy does not tell why he went from Zurich to then-British Honduras (now Belize), which is probably just as well. The State Department's assignment system continues to defy easy explanation, operating more on the basis of personal connections and personnel regulations than any internal logic or guiding intelligence. But as Conroy's new boss makes clear when he welcomes him and his family to "in back of beyond," his assignment probably isn't a reward for good behavior. I don't know what Belize is like today, but Conroy's vivid portrait of its sights, sounds, and smells in 1961 evoked some of my first impressions of Bombay, India, 30 years later, whether the funky hygiene, madcap drivers, or the local tendency to steal gas caps and windshield wipers.

After a shaky recovery from his welcoming cock-

JAMES GIBNEY, a foreign service officer from 1989 to 1997, is the managing editor of *Foreign Policy* magazine.

tail party, Conroy settles in at the tiny, two-person consulate. As the resident "Visa Mon," he sorts through a daily parade of dubious would-be travelers to the United States, including one 26-year old man who "wished to see his daughter graduate from Harvard, which he seemed to think was located in New Orleans." (Three of the top stories that dirt-poor Indian farmers used to give "Visa Wallahs" in Bombay were that they wanted to see: 1) Disneyland; 2) the "White Christmas" festival, usually in Texas; and 3) the Water Goddess, aka the Statue of Liberty.) Conroy also tends to the usual mix of good, bad, and ugly American travelers, keeps loose tabs on Belize's bubbling trade in illegal narcotics and stolen cars, and writes commercial reports that "the State Department had to provide if it was to keep [the Department of] Commerce from sending out its own field representatives." (A turf battle that State ultimately lost with the creation of the Foreign Commercial Service.) And, last but not least, as Conroy hilariously recounts, our man in Belize spends a lot of time at parties and receptions, getting bombed with the zany locals, fishing giant cockroaches out of his soup, and doing some compulsory dancing with the wife of the British Governor General.

Disruption to this more or less happy state of affairs comes in the form of Hurricane Hattie on Oct. 31, 1961. As the storm approaches, Conroy's boss Pruitt heads for the high ground (after first ensuring the safety of his sailboat). Conroy is left to secure the consulate and find shelter for his staff and that of the International Cooperation Administration (now the U.S. Agency for International Development, or AID). When Hattie hits with winds close to 200 miles an hour, it kills 400 people, shreds buildings, and leaves much of Belize covered with mud and without electricity or drinking water. Conroy sends the department the kind of cable that most vice consuls can only dream about: "Consul missing. Have assumed charge. Conroy." The first telegram the department sends back is "Department presumes that in view of the destruction caused by the recent hurricane, there will be no representation functions [i.e., parties] in British Honduras during the recovery period. All unobligated representation funds for this fiscal year therefore withdrawn from post's allotment."

Life lurches back to normal. Conroy returns to

his daily rounds, speculating that an enraged Pruitt has spiked his career after hearing about his take-charge telegram. The ICA mission withdraws in the face of bitter complaints from local officials about the U.S. failure to provide adequate post-hurricane aid. The Peace Corps arrives with 15 baby blue Jeeps "full of laughing, nubile couples on their way to who knows what youthful excess." Consul Pruitt leaves. In his place comes the by-the-book Consul Hausley, who lectures Conroy on what he calls his wife's "forward" behavior, noting that "if it was not corrected, it would have to be reflected in my performance report." (Readers will be pleased to know that the conduct of FSO spouses is no longer rated — at least not officially.) Then Conroy himself moves on to his next post in Vienna. Eventual-

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ly, tired of lugging his piano around the world and dealing with the department's restrictions on his journalist wife's writing, he arranges to go on permanent loan to the Smithsonian, from which he ultimately retires.

All bureaucracies are by definition doomed to a certain level of absurdity and inefficiency. Moreover, while just about every FSO I know can tell tales similar to Conroy's, mismanaged budget cutbacks — especially at the smaller posts — have largely ended the days when vice consuls sat around swirling their gin and tonics under the ceiling fans. Belize's trade in illegal drugs and stolen cars, for example, has gone from the quaint to the murderous, and at most Third World posts there is more likely to be a shortage of resources than of work. But as the State Department has come under fiscal siege, it must confront the contradiction between the demands of modern diplomacy and the dictates of its still almost-feudal bureaucratic culture. Thus, although it would be foolish to read too much modern-day meaning into Conroy's skillful burlesque of Foreign Service life, it would be just as foolish to ignore the persistence of the mindset behind the snafus and shenanigans that he so ably recounts. ●

Up From the Ghetto

How a boy from Southeast D.C. made it to the Ivy League

By Timothy Noah

FOUR YEARS AGO, RON Suskind published an extraordinary account of inner-city life in *The Wall Street Journal*. The angle was simple, but novel: to document the peer pressure and other difficulties faced by a black honors student in a tough ghetto high school where academic success was seen by other students as a betrayal of group identity — an affront to a prevailing culture that disdained any aspiration to rise out of poverty as “acting white.”

For his subject, Suskind chose Cedric Jennings, a 16 year-old would-be scientist whose father was a thief and a drug dealer and whose mother, a former welfare recipient, had dedicated most of her adult life to plotting her son's escape from the underclass. The setting was Ballou High School, “the most troubled and violent school in the blighted Southeast corner of Washington, D.C.,” an obstacle course where Cedric learned to avoid going to honors assemblies lest the prizes he accept incite violence against him.

The article turned Cedric's plight into a narrative of excruciating suspense: Would Cedric propel himself out of his poisonous environment, or would he fall victim to what's been tagged the “crab bucket syndrome,” in which those who show the effrontery to seek escape are dragged back down by jealous peers? At the end of the first newspaper story (a follow-up appeared some months later, and both stories eventually won the Pulitzer prize), Suskind provided a hopeful answer: Cedric, receiving an acceptance letter to a summer science program for minority students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, proclaimed, “My life is about to begin.”

Now Suskind has turned the next few years of Cedric's story — a disappointing performance at

A HOPE IN THE UNSEEN:

An American
Odyssey
from the Inner City
to the Ivy League
By Ron Suskind
Broadway Books, \$25

MIT, where his hopes for university admission were dashed; a perilous senior year at Ballou, where his MIT humiliation nearly caused him to give up; his turnaround acceptance to Brown; and the grinding struggle to integrate himself, academically and socially, into that alien, ivied campus — into a book. When newspaper series are expanded into full-length nonfiction

narratives, they often have a padded feel. *A Hope in the Unseen*, however, manages to enlarge the initial story not only by extending the narrative but by broadening its theme. Before, Suskind was telling the story of underclass barriers to success. Now, he's telling the story of affirmative action in the waning years of 20th-century America. The result deserves to win recognition as a classic of book-length narrative journalism.

A disclaimer: I worked for six years in the Washington bureau of *The Wall Street Journal*, where Suskind was a colleague and friend. (We've had almost no contact since I left the paper a little more than a year ago.) Perhaps this biases me in favor of *A Hope in the Unseen*. Those who have met Suskind, though, know him to be a cocky and ebullient soul — exactly the sort of person whose peers (including me) are loath to praise too highly, lest he become truly overbearing. In this case, however, there's no alternative, because the book is simply the best thing I've ever read about the confusing thicket of questions surrounding the preferential treatment of disadvantaged blacks.

That Cedric's path to the Ivy League was smoothed by special treatment is clear. He is not a pure, diamond-in-the-rough genius whose success, no matter what his environment, was guaranteed from birth. Such Einsteins have been known to exist from time to time, but obviously they're extremely rare, and their very freakishness guarantees that their stories wouldn't tell us much about the workings of

TIMOTHY NOAH is a contributing editor of *The Washington Monthly* and an assistant managing editor of *U.S. News & World Report*.