

A Tribute to Edward J. Perkins
By: Academy Fellows Norma Riccucci and Blue Wooldridge

Ambassador Perkins Biography (sourced from Wikipedia)

Ambassador Edward J. Perkins was born in Sterlington, Louisiana. He grew up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and graduated in 1947 from Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon. He earned his B.A. from the University of Maryland, College Park in 1967, and his M.A. and Doctor of Public Administration from the University of Southern California.

Ambassador Perkins became a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration in 1990.

After serving in the United States Army and United States Marine Corps, including stints in Tokyo and South Korea, he held numerous positions in the United States Department of State and United States Foreign Service. He was appointed ambassador to Liberia in 1985, and in 1986 as ambassador in the final days of apartheid in South Africa. He returned to the United States to serve in the State Department until 1992. “In his role as Director General of the Foreign Service, his commitment to a broadly diverse Foreign Service at all levels of the profession has been a lasting legacy to the quality of American diplomacy” (ISD). In 1992 he was appointed United States Ambassador to the United Nations and U.S. Representative to the United Nations Security Council. In 1993, he was appointed representative to the Commonwealth of Australia, where he served until 1996 before retiring at the rank of Career Minister in the United States Foreign Service.

He taught at the University of Oklahoma where he served as Senior Vice Provost Emeritus of International Programs at the International Program Center, and Professor Emeritus of the School of International and Area Studies. He was a member of the American Academy of Diplomacy. Perkins died on November 7, 2020 after a stroke.

Upon his death in Nov. of 2020, the Institute For the Study of Diplomacy said, (Ambassador Perkin’s) career represents a deep commitment to global public service and the profession. Ambassador Perkins continued his commitment to service until the very end of his life, including as President of the Association of Black American Ambassadors (ABAA) and through his involvement with other projects advancing the work of diplomacy. Ambassador James I. Gadsden, Director of ISD’s McHenry Global Public Service Fellowship Program — and a member of ABAA and former member of the ISD Board of Advisers — adds: “He meant so much to so many of us who can remember clearly how much he kindly inspired, advised, and helped us along our way. Ambassador Perkins was, quite simply, a towering figure of American diplomacy. He was a gracious strength and a defender of the best of American diplomacy and young, aspiring diplomats. He will always be honored, and deeply missed.

Reflections from Norma Riccucci

Ambassador Perkins was featured in NAPA Fellow Norma Riccucci’s 1995 book, *Unsung Heroes: Federal Execucrats Making a Difference* (Georgetown University Press). He was indeed an unsung hero who was very instrumental in helping to chip away at the racist policies of South

Africa. Ambassador Perkins was appointed by President Reagan in 1986 to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to South Africa. He was the first Black person to serve in this role. He was a career diplomat whose leadership, negotiation and communication skills helped to promote positive change in that country. One of his strategies was to work with everyone in South Africa—whites, Blacks and even the leaders of banned Black groups. This helped to develop clear and open lines of communication with everyone. It was a significant milestone for U.S. foreign policy in that no other U.S. ambassador before him was willing to work with the Black community in South Africa. Because of his willingness to reach out and listen to them, Black South Africans became receptive to Ambassador Perkins, and were willing to trust him. This strategy, needless to say, was not very popular with white South Africans.

Ambassador Perkins also lent his support to politically charged events in South Africa, including demonstrations against the government for its practice of mass detentions without a trial. His participation brought worldwide attention to his work. The New York Times ran an article at the time thanking and praising Ambassador Perkins for his actions. It read: “It’s finally possible—how long has it been?—for Americans to take pride in some Reagan administration conduct in South Africa.” A clear implication of the editorial was that the U.S.’s greatest weapon in dismantling apartheid was Ambassador Perkins.

Ambassador Perkins shared with Riccucci his experience of when he first met with the President of South Africa at the time, P.W. Botha. It was very incisive and will always be remembered. He pointed out that it was exceedingly strained, as Botha was very suspicious of Reagan’s motives in appointing a Black man to the post of Ambassador. Botha was much shorter than Ambassador Perkins, who stood over six feet tall and was very elegant and distinguished in this manner. Their meeting took place on a staircase, and Botha decided to stand a few steps higher than Ambassador Perkins to force the Ambassador to look up to him. Botha did not quite go high enough, and so it happened that the two found themselves making eye-level contact with one another. Ambassador Perkins did not avert his eyes and continued to look directly into Botha’s eyes. Unable to maintain eye contact, Botha looked down.

Ambassador Perkins conveyed to Botha that change was on the horizon and that the internal race policies of the government needed to change. He exhorted that Nelson Mandela needed to be released, that rival parties such as the ANC could no longer be banned and should be incorporated in the political process and the dismantling of apartheid and replacing it with democracy was eminent.

Ambassador Perkins will be remembered for his many accomplishments over the course of his career. But certainly, his role as Ambassador in South Africa will always stand out, as his persistence and resilience made it possible for him to contribute to the fall of the in his efforts to help bring an end to the brutal, inhuman, oppressive system of apartheid.

Reflections from Blue Wooldridge

On a more personal note. I first met and engaged with Ed. Perkins when we were both students in the Doctor of Public Administration program at the University of Southern California back in the early 1970’s (I can’t recall if we took any courses together!). Although we saw each other rarely after that, we did keep in touch. Not being one who is used to the higher levels of the Federal Government, I remember being in awe when Ambassador Perkins invited me to his office at the Department of State while he served as Director General of the Foreign Service. Considering Ed as a friend will always be a high light of my experiences.

Some of Ambassador Perkins' publications (as identified by Wikipedia) include:

- *Mr. Ambassador, Warrior for Peace* (memoirs,) published by The University of Oklahoma Press in 2006.
- *The Palestinian Refugees: Old Problems - New Solutions (Studies in peace politics in the Middle East)* - co-editor with Joseph Ginat, Sussex Academic Press, 2002.
- *The Middle East Peace Process: Vision Versus Reality (Studies in peace politics in the Middle East)* - co-editor with Joseph Ginat, Sussex Academic Press, 2002.
- *Palestinian Refugees: Traditional Positions and New Solutions* = co-editor with Joseph Ginat, University of Oklahoma Press, 2001.
- *The seedlings of hope: U.S. policy in Africa*, U.S. Department of State, 1989.