

Interview with U.S. Ambassador Donald Yamamoto

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Nick Wadhams and Zoe Alsop traveled to Ethiopia in the winter of 2007 on a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting travel grant. For more information about this project, and to find related resources visit:

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Nick Wadhams: You had said in testimony (to Congress in 2006) that Ethiopia was at a crossroads, that it could go forward or become the type of government that has been consigned to history. We wondered where things are now. A year later, how do you see the government?

Ambassador Donald Yamamoto: First of all, Ethiopia is one of our cornerstone countries in the region. The reason why it's a cornerstone country is because a look at its size, look at its position and look at what we're trying to do together in a broad range of areas not just... you know, everyone's thinking Somalia, that's not the main issue. The main issue for us has to be stability of the country.

If you look at the things we're doing assistance-wise _ and I think assistance is a bad word, it's really investment because we're investing in a country's future and investing in this relationship which we consider important. They have most of their presidential initiatives here, PEPFAR, HIV/AIDS, malaria initiative, East Africa counterterrorism, the education and health care initiatives are all here because we feel that we can make a difference, but the other issue too is you don't have the rampant corruption that you have in other countries. You have a very dedicated workforce. And I'll give you a prime example, when we were looking at the Safe Skies Initiative, you need to have good expertise at the control towers, well if you look at the air control towers in the entire region, Ethiopia is by far number one as far as quality of service, dedication and training. Ethiopia Airlines pilots have probably one of the best records not only safety but skills and the problem with that is they're being pilfered at higher salaries by United Airlines, Delta and mainly Gulf Air and the other airlines, which I found incredible.

If you go to the airport they have the state-of-the-art simulators for training, so they're constantly training people, that's why Ethiopian Airlines is the best airline in Africa.

But the things we want to work with the Ethiopians on and the things that are of value to us _ and we're talking values _ is on human rights, is on economic development and reform issues, political reform developments and in those areas since 2005, which the elections in 2005 were probably the most historic, the most remarkable, the most open, the fairest elections, according to the Carter Center and even Ana Gomez in the EU they would admit that the opposition parties were able to get more airtime than the parties, the EPRDF, they were able to get their messages through, etc., and if you look at the

election, it was according to President Carter it was fairly open and fair election and that they stuck with the results.

There are some problems with run off, that we have some concerns about as far as on the conduct of those runoff elections but overall, the elections in 2005 were far better than 2000, when you went from 12 opposition members to 170-180 so that was remarkable.

The aftermath of the election was tragic but I think and then two years working with the government, looking at how we can go beyond this and build on it for the next election round which is the local elections next year in February, which really in many ways is more important because there is where they control the local constituencies, and that 's where you really affect peoples lives on services, budgeting etc, more so I think than the national parliament, unlike the US.

And right now I think they're on the right path again, they're coming back around toward three areas that we have made very concerted effort to help support. The three areas are the parliamentary reform package. Because what we've always said and we refer you to our statements from November 2005 and June 2005 and then 2006 which underscores that looking at a very open fair transparent parliamentary procedures and the speaker of the parliament made an announcement on a lot of the reform packages which in some ways complied to what we wanted to happen and in other areas it went beyond what we had mentioned.

They worked with the British, the Germans and the Indians, can you imagine in the United States our Congress working with a foreign government on implementing their parliamentary reforms? I thought that was remarkable.

One of the problems of course is capacity-building and other things. For instance I'll give you some of the reforms they've implemented. The speaker is freely elected, anyone can run for the speaker position, other issue is the opposition can now propose bills and items for the agenda, which they didn't have before, opposition members can sit on all committees, but the issue comes in _ How effective can the opposition be, how unified can opposition be?

If you look at the U.S. Congress, and I worked as a staffer on the hill, you take an average member of Congress or on the Senate side you can have up to 50 people working on staff, you have the Congressional Research Service providing you expertise, very neutral. If you look here, most members – not only do they not have staff, they don't even have an office space.

And so just some basic fundamental issues of finding office space, privacy, getting a staff and what we're working with other countries like India and the UK is, we want to develop a congressional research service which provides professional information to the members of parliament, because they're debating bills day in and day out and if you talk to opposition and party members they say, 'I don't know what background is but more importantly I don't know what consequences are of my vote.'

The second area is the National Electoral Board, and that is to professionalize it and to ensure that it's transparent and that it's open.

The other area is the media law – and of course to Americans if you say media law that's bad because it restricts. But I think what the Ethiopians have said is interesting that the United States is helping them with the media law, which may be an oxymoron but we are, what the Ethiopians want us to do is guarantee in writing and in practice what basic rights and freedoms are for journalists, but also of opposition groups, other civic groups, etc.

And we are struggling and this is kind of a debate we're having here. The more you define, is it the more you're restricting or are you able to open up the space? And that's something that we've brought in experts from journalism schools and journalists, et cetera because what you don't want to do is make the situation worse or restrict, have unintended consequences, so that's why we're going at it very carefully because we want to have the best type of laws and procedures on the book, but something that's enforceable that everyone's going to observe, respect and accept.

And so those three areas – parliamentary reform, NEB and the media law, are three main areas that we're working on right now but this is only the beginning. Because what you always want is political transparency and dynamism, where the political system is really reflective of every person, every constituents – that's really the bottom line.

Zoe Alsop: I wanted to come back to something that you said earlier and also what you were saying about every constituent being represented, the question of how effective the opposition can be. One thing that we've seen in our travels, particularly in Oromia, is that opposition parties are often equated with so-called, I don't know how the U.S. defines them, but with terrorist groups, with the Oromo Liberation Front. So even party members who you yourself have mention as opposition parties who are in parliament, people we spoke to who work with those parties, have been labeled OLF members. Probably the worst story I heard is one man who worked for a certain party and his 15-year-old daughter had been pulled from school, put in solitary confinement for five days and then taken out beaten, put back in jail and she was labeled as an OLF sympathizer. So my question is, I think Ethiopia is seen as – I know you're saying Somalia is not the only issue -- but Ethiopia a is seen as an ally in the War on Terror, and is there a danger that the line between supporting the fight against terrorism and supporting tyranny is getting too blurry?

Ambassador Yamamoto: You know, what we would like you to do – there's a lot of misinformation about Ethiopia, I mean it's amazing. Because I've worked the Horn area for 11 years and everyone has a very specific and in many ways very biased view of Eritrea, of Ethiopia, of the Kenyans, and Somalis, I'm not sure why but particularly the Ethiopians. A lot of things are very addressed in a very specific way for instance the common points they would always say is, well Ethiopia wants a divided unstable Somalia to dominate, which is wrong. It's a country that is completely dedicated to oppressing

certain groups which I think you can say well maybe that's opposition to this government by the diaspora or whatever, because even Eritrea the same way.

The problem comes in trying to divide or separate what is fact and what's fiction and trying to keep an open mind on every issue. And not saying that every country including Ethiopia or Eritrea or Somalia or whatever is all bad or good, I mean there are problems, and we're free to admit that and the Ethiopians are open to admitting that as well. But I think in the context of going back to your question is separating or dividing ethnic groups. I don't think one thing that this prime minister but more important is the government and what we in the United States are very sensitive about is not dividing groups along ethnic lines or religious lines.

And having worked four years in Congo, and earlier on the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide and Burundi problems one of the things that we are so sensitive and maybe me more than anyone because of my work in the Congo and Great Lakes area is ensuring that there is no problems with ethnic divisions or ethnic problems, and the other issue is religious problems, and that's something we've worked very closely and hard with all governments and particularly, and even here as ambassador to Ethiopia it's one area we've been working very closely on.

Alsop: My question was more just about this problem of opposition parties being equated with rebel groups.

Wadhams: In a lot of these towns we found for example that opposition parties were not allowed to open offices, that officials had told landlords not to rent offices to them or things like that.

Ambassador Yamamoto: One of the things we've been working with is the opposition parties. Lets look at the opposition parties right now the mainstream opposition parties and then go to the OLF, the ONLF and the others. But we've worked with the opposition parties here very, very closely in the context of saying you have a voice now in parliament, use it. You have the ability to unify yourselves to get a common message out, use it and the divisions that divide the CUD from the UEDF or from the CUDP and other groups, look beyond your divisions and look for commonalities. Because one of the problems, if you look at elections in 2005 – in many instances if you interview the people, they didn't vote for the opposition, they voted against the government party, so what kind of message are you giving? We said look at the Democratic Party after the 2006 elections is articulating and defining positions.

Well, have an articulated position, why would anyone want to support you? What's the sustainability in your position? If you're constantly bickering and divided... One example is the NEB (National Electoral Board). Everyone in the opposition agrees and the ruling party as well is that any member on the NEB will be agreed to by all the parties, everybody's agreed to that, that's great. But the opposition in some ways are divided and say well we want a short list, other people say we want a long list, we want

to make sure this person is elected and not that person, because that person supports our place and not this places.

And we said, if you agreed to an common agenda, go with it, live with it, be a part of the process, take risks, look at areas where you can unify yourselves.

Alsop: We just spoke with Beyene Petros ...

Ambassador Yamamoto: He came to the us several times, and we had long talks with him, and introduced him to staffers and members, that really influenced him. The other opposition members, only a couple have come to the US to understand, and a lot of them are still domestically oriented within their constituencies. Have a broader view, I know all politics are local, but have a broader view about a vision for the future.

Alsop: I agree absolutely with what you're saying about them perhaps needing to be more unified, but the question is much more basic. Even Beyene Petros said 'Well, you know, sometimes it's hard, I've been calling supporters to go out to elections and it's really hard then to feel responsible for what happens to these people afterwards.' My question is more, is there anything the U.S. can do about what's happening outside of Addis? There seems to be _ and I don't think it's misinformation because it's so widespread and well corroborated _ there does seem to be a persecution of supporters of opposition parties in the three regions we visited.

Ambassador Yamamoto: Gambella is a perfect example.

Alsop: Although there are no opposition parties left there.

Ambassador Yamamoto: The problem comes, in many ways that unfortunately it's ethnic divisions because of the refugees who are there in the camps coming over. It's in our human rights report as well, and it's one of the areas I need to get to fairly soon.

But then the other areas, Oromia, and the OLF, and the ONLF. I know that there are lot of questions about whether they are terrorist groups or not, and of course we have very strict standards about which groups are considered terrorists or not and groups that are placed on the terrorist list need to really reach a threshold. The other issue is that there are OLF members in Europe and in the United States so if they were a terrorist group they would not be able to operate, they would be under scrutiny, et cetera.

But our position is that the OLF and the ONLF and other groups et cetera right now is a domestic issues for the Ethiopian government. It's not to say that we as the United States and the international community are not going to be involved in trying to play a role in reconciliation resolving issues, finding areas we can move on.

When I was in the United States, yeah, we kept in close contact with OLF, not the ONLF but the OLF. And we talked to them. They had their recent meeting in December in

Norway and people from there called me, called everyone to present their views and opinions.

The U.S. position is always been clear – groups have to renounce violence as a tool for change. Second is they must adopt peaceful means within the constitution of the country to support reconciliation and mediation and three is working with the government on our side to see areas where there can be areas for reconciliation.

And given my years working in Congo and West Africa, I always see hope for reconciliation with all groups and during our tenure here for next three years, resolving and reconciling differences in the regions and I'm not saying just Addis, but the regions, is critical and important to the stability of the country, but more importantly to resolving any tensions between groups.

Wadhams: The thing that we really found, and maybe we're just not conveying it all that strongly... Across the regions, for example, we were followed, and in Jijiga we had a death threat from the police, and in Gode when we talked to the administrator, he warned people not to speak with us or they would be arrested. And then when we were in Jimma and other places several people talked about having been sent to prison and but in cells that were two meters by two meters and their hands bound. These were stories that were repeated by several people. Bulcha Demeksa for example not being allowed to go back to his home district because he's told they won't be able to guarantee his safety. When we talked to people they were very concerned that the American partnership with the government is emboldening the government. Some of the people could not believe that the United States was a partner, they actually refused to believe because of the difficulty they faced. So the real question for me is, are they on the radar screen? The opposition told us about a meeting with Sam Brownback and they said look at these issues that they face and they said he told them, listen guys, our priority right now is terrorism and being a partner to Ethiopia and this other stuff is a complication.

Ambassador Yamamoto: That's kind of a simplification because I was in the meeting. They also met with Senator Feingold and Congressman Payne and they're now the chairman of both the Senate and the House Foreign Relations Committee. And they've made it real clear that human rights issues are a fundamental area.

Let me tell you, each ambassador is very different, their background is different. My background is human rights, because I was a human rights officer in China during Tiananmen Square. I've worked with human rights reports for the State Department, I covered 21 countries. My only question is always, if you could report have you followed up on it? Number two is what have you done after you followed up? Have you raised it with the country? What are the follow up mechanisms?

The issue is not just Ethiopia but other countries. Our embassies are just overwhelmed. I'll tell you one example right now. We've had visitors every weekend, congressional delegations every weekend. The only time I can travel is one day fly out immediately to

an area and come right back. That's no way, you get a very superficial...what I want to do is A, get the visitors out of the way but go out and really talk and meet the people, because that's what I did as human rights officer in China, meet the people, understand what the situation is and follow up.

Our human rights report is coming out in March. The difference between a weak report and a strong report is can you verify the facts that have been stated. The issue for us is there are a lot of allegations, the allegations you've made are important.

The other allegations are what's happening that the government raised, the killings of Christians along the Somali border, and then the other issue of course is the ONLF and the OLF problem. Well, my job is to say fine, I want to go look into that, I want to find information, I need access to the area, talk to the people, follow up, and then next issue is raising with the government or raising with the local leadership.

So I can't say that I know the things that you've said are true or accurate, I don't know, but I need to know, and I'll find out.

Alsop: How will you follow up?

Wadhams: What action will be taken, it's obviously hypothetical.

Ambassador Yamamoto: No, it's not hypothetical.

Wadhams: We've heard, obviously allegations, but people talked about a prison outside of Ambo that doesn't actually exist anywhere on the map, so would that point to a web of secret prisons? Certainly those allegations are out there all over the place. What sort of pressure could you exert?

Alsop: I'm just curious to know, how does the embassy go about following up on this? And having worked in China, I think that's actually really interesting, coming into this, it seems that that would be a particularly difficult situation to be working in.

Ambassador Yamamoto: You obviously balance what your priorities and your relationship with the country. Can you move the country toward what they are on _ and the commitment I think is political and economic reforms but by taking actions are you going to stop those reforms? Or by raising these issues can you improve the situation? And yes, when I was in Washington we heard from the diaspora, and the diaspora is not the clearest thing and they said well, there are a lot of secret prisons in these areas and we checked several areas and there was nothing, I mean, we checked. If they raised ten things and maybe one is right well, it is very difficult, so rather than going on wild goose chases about the diaspora telling us what thing are. What we need to do is go into these areas where there are difficulties. And I think one of the areas is the Somali region, another area is the Oromo region and say what are the problems?

Alsop: Gambella, too.

Ambassador Yamamoto: Gambella has gotten a lot of high profile, and the government actually did convene a board of inquiry.

But then let's look at the other areas and say, can we work with them? And then look at the OLF organization. Are they a viable organization? Should we be negotiating with them? Or should we be taking a harder line with them? And there's a very strong division even in the United States and the international community.

That's why every information we get, from you, from NGOs _ NGOs are very good _ religious people, church leaders from the patriarchy. Getting from the OLF, and just following up on things, looking at preponderance and commonality of information and looking and saying what can we do? More importantly is looking at the causes of it because what you don't want to do is jump to a conclusion and it's the wrong conclusion.

And then after that following up and saying, here's a problem or here's an issue what are your views? Because you can't take a position and immediately condemn a local leader or the government and say, Oh you've done terrible, I think you need to really investigate and we have to be very careful. Because I think one of the killings, the example of the killing of the Christians on the Somali border, the issue was well it's the government that was engaged in it, and then we looked at it, no they weren't really engaged in it.

One thing that I think that a lot of people have said that is wrong, because I've seen it in the press, you're going to sacrifice human rights for the sake of common strategic views on Somalia. That's not right. You can't have stability in the country unless you have a commitment to not only to human rights issues, but also to reforms. If you're going to sacrifice those two issues because of strategic issues, then that's a problem.

I'll give you an example of what we did in Chad. Here's Chad. Why is Chad important? Because of oil. And the other thing is because it has refugees from Darfur. And the other thing is that it's holding the line against other elements that are opposed to Sudanese groups trying to form a peace agreement in Darfur.

And then I was asked by someone from the press, well you're going to look the other way on (President Idriss) Deby's interrogation and oppression of other ethnic groups, and the answer is, no we're not. We took the lead over the French and the other countries in working with Deby to look at how do we open the political dialog and space, and we moved the bar along. No other country did that, we did it.

And I think in Ethiopia we have a very special relationship with this country because of the things we share. Of the 21 countries I covered in the last four years, Ethiopia and the U.S. have a commonality of issues. And it's not only the War on Terrorism, I mean, that's only one of many areas. It's fighting poverty, it's poverty reduction, it's fighting HIV/AIDS, it's fighting malaria.

I mean, look at the problems that they have here. 130,000 people die each year from HIV/AIDS. But 270,000 die from malaria. That's a far bigger problem. And so those are commonality problems. The other issue is education and literacy, those are common problems.

But that's not to say that we're going to ignore human rights or political openness. Because, just look at the progress we've made since 2005 in areas of parliamentary reform, media reform and NEB reform. People are saying, oh it's not enough, yeah but it's better than it was two years ago, before 2005 there was nothing. And now we're on that path and so were going to push on that and then push on others, build on it, expand on it and that's what we need to do.

Alsop: Even the Voice of America journalist in one region I visited was working secretly and had to pass information, he had some information he wanted to give to me, he passed it to me secretly because he was so terrified to operate there. So how do you see the situation for the media to have improved, what improvements have there been since the crackdown post-election?

Ambassador Yamamoto: We're looking at the media law to open the dialog. Private press, privately owned radio stations, a more open engagement and discussion of issues.

Wadhams: Is that what you hope to achieve or what has already been achieved?

Ambassador Yamamoto: No, that's the goals and the objectives. Is this something we've talked to the government about? Yeah, of course we have, is it something the government opposes? No. Because if they opposed it they wouldn't be working on the media law. So there is an openness to engage. If there's an openness, let's take the opportunity, and let's go for it, let's do it. That's the issue. I think there's a profound feeling they have to open up. And I think their commitment to the WTO is a very important step. Because the World Trade Organization, I know a lot of environmentalists oppose it and other groups, but one thing that people can't forget is, what does the WTO do? The WTO makes it a requirement for countries to be a member to open up the political space, and part of the political space is media freedom and openness, and also electoral reforms and openness.

And if the government is committed to that, well then let's take them up on that, let's push on it, let's work on that and make it open. Because if we can't do that then I think the relationship is going to be very stilted. What we don't want is a stilted one-dimensional relationship, it has to be multifaceted, it has to be open.

Wadhams: The thing I don't understand though is that if the government were so committed to some of these things why did it do the crackdown in the first place?

Ambassador Yamamoto: There are a lot of theories and views and debates. The issue is that the crackdown was so recent in some ways and still overcoming those problems. I think rather than looking at what happened, right now is what has changed, what has

improved, but what needs to be imp? So there is improvement, maybe but there is still a lot more to do. And the government will be very open with you. Will you be meeting with Prime Minister Meles?

Wadhams: No, with Bereket Simon.

Ambassador Yamamoto: Bereket? Bereket gives it to you straight, unvarnished. They will be very open and tell you quite straight. They're very refreshing in the sense is they'll tell you what the problems are. They're not going to be shy about it, they're not going to hide it or try to sugarcoat it. They say yeah these are areas of problems, these are things we need to do. The prime minister's been very open about that on the press side, but more importantly with us and with other diplomats and leaders coming in and saying this is what we need your help on. They're not afraid to say we need help on capacity building, we need help on looking at different views or diff ways of looking at things. They're very open about that.

You say, well, does that transcend to the very lowest level? They'll say the same thing, capacity building, getting their message out down to the kebeles, that's the issue.

Also: Or are they trying to intercept these things on the lowest level?

Ambassador Yamamoto: It's like in China, the Iron Rice Bowl, the government made one thing, but the problem came in at the lower level. They said, no way. And that became the biggest challenge for the government.

Nick Wadhams. Is that what's happening here?

Ambassador Yamamoto: In many instances, you have to be very open minded, you need education, they need to be convinced of the benefits. There are a lot of people who are very afraid of change. The WTO, there are a lot of people who are not happy about opening because it's change, it's different.

But this prime minister and this government is saying we got to change, we got to open up. And if that's it, let's do it.

Nick Wadhams: I hope that's the case. It's difficult not to get swept up in taking up a pinhole view of what we saw, but having traveled, we really saw a police state. I know it's a cliché thing to say but it was, the censorship of the Internet, the fact that we were followed, the real terror that people felt.

Ambassador Yamamoto: Every ambassador, every person who works in the diplomatic corps, you want to make a difference. And after three years, you want to be able to look yourself in the mirror and look at the things that you've done and say you've made a difference in peoples' lives, you've made it better.

And that's a commitment we've made to this government, and this government has said, OK, fine, we'll work with you to make a difference. And the question is trying to make a difference not only on the macro level, the government level, but even down in the lives of people. And it really breaks your heart to see. You know, we went to an HIV/AIDS center just around the block here, and I was talking to this 13-year old child who was very small because of malnutrition. His mother was dead for two days and he was with that mom and then the friends that he was living with were left by the families underneath a garbage dump and the hyenas had eaten all the other kids, except this one, he was the only survivor.

And then you say, can you make a difference in that child's life, and the answer is, yeah we are going to make a difference, that's our commitment to make a difference in that child's life. Some basic things like fighting poverty, and the government says, yeah we're going to fight poverty.

Good, then let's make difference in raising the standards of living in health care and other things. President Carter was just here and we said yeah, that's what we want to do. And then you say political freedom, yeah sure, the freedom to be able to express yourself, to have a government that represents your views and issues. And that's why the elections are so critical and so important. And yes it's going to take time. But if we can make this election better than the last election, that's good, let's keep on making forward progress.