

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>The Chad Letters Chronologically</i>	xv
<i>Map of Chad</i>	xvii
1. LIVING THE LIFE AS AMBASSADOR TO A SMALL WORLD	3
Letters from Chad ... Or, More Than You Ever Wanted to Hear, <i>November 1, 1999</i>	6
Odds and Ends, June 5–19, 2000	13
A Day in the Life ..., July 14, 2000	24
A Quiet August, September 4, 2000	30
Méchoui, November 1, 2000	38
Happy Holidays from N'Djamena! Twelfth Night, January 6, 2001	46
It's a Good Thing I Showed Up, March 24, 2001	55
Being the Ambassador: Three Sides of a Coin, February 24, 2002	62
Jogging in N'Djamena and Giving Blood, August 8, 2002	69
2. THE COUNTRY: N'DJAMENA AND THE SOUTH	77
Driving in N'Djamena, or, a Tour of the City, February 2000	78
Jet-setting around Chad, December 6–9, 1999	89
The Waza Game Park, December 6, 1999	101
Zakouma and Sarh, March 26, 2000	112
The Midsouth, April 24, 2000	119
Waiting for Rain: A Last Swing South (and North), June 27, 2000	124
The Gong and the Lamido, December 15, 2000	136
Day Trips, October 31, 2003	147
<i>PHOTO GALLERY</i>	157

3. THE COUNTRY: LE GRAND NORD	181
Overland to Mao and Bol, March 5, 2000	182
The Ennedi, January 21, 2001	195
Old Haunts and New Territory, January 27, 2002	216
The Journey to the East, March 24, 2002	227
It Rains in Bardai, September 15, 2002	235
Visiting the Neighbors, May 30, 2003	243
Le Grand Nord, December 4, 2003	253
Life among the Nomads, December 14, 2003	260
4. POLITICS	267
A State Dinner in Chad, March 8, 2000	269
Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop—Perhaps, March 26, 2000	274
Africa Wars, May 20, 2000	281
Election Day, May 20, 2001	289
The Changing of the Guard—Or Not, September 2, 2001	296
Getting Off on the Wrong Foot, January 6, 2002	306
Summing Up—Again, December 26, 2003	315
5. THE ECONOMY AND SOCIETY	319
Is It Hopeless? January 1, 2000	320
The Adventures of Mr. Chidiac, January 12, 2001	326
The Roller Coaster, April 15, 2001, Easter Sunday	334
We Thought We Had All the Answers, But Guess What? January 20, 2002	340
Present at the Creation, May 19, 2002	348
Chadians at Home, September 27, 2003	356
6. CONTRASTS: INTERNAL, AND CHAD VERSUS AMERICA	365
Of Mud-Brick Huts and Polished French, November 11, 1999	366
Chad and America, April 19, 2000	372
A Trip from Heaven, August 12, 2000	380
Gaps, November 26, 2000	390
“The Events” from Afar, October 6, 2001	401
Dueling Values, December 30, 2001	407
The Sparrows Are Fat, February 2004	418

Preface

In the Guéra, in central Chad, sprout many odd rock formations. Out of the dry, pancake-flat land, hills and mountains rise abruptly, reddish-brown and gray piles that contrast as sharply with the beige soil of the wide Sahel as they do with the bluebird sky. As you roll along the rough dirt roads, you are tempted to stop and climb the lower escarpments, chimney-like formations that would warrant a national monument back home. Here, and again in a few miles, you will see one that seems to defy gravity itself, a huge flat boulder perched upon a slender spindle of stones, and you wonder that it does not fall. We might call them teeterstones.

Stark, barren, and windswept, the chimneys give nothing easily. The top-heavy superstructure thirty or forty feet up is built on a poor base and seems liable to tumble at any moment. There is no clue to what may, or may not, ensue. But somehow the rocks don't fall. We may climb among them and still our disturbance doesn't send them careening down. Whatever it is that holds them up is masked from us by the dark shadows the stones cast over their roots. It is hard to correct what nature has done half well, and perhaps we shouldn't try.

After four and a half years in Chad, these natural phenomena became for me a metaphor for the country itself. Riven by faults Chad itself endures, seeming also to defy gravity. The fissures are mainly North-South: Muslim-Christian, poorly and better educated, herder-farmer, Arab-Bantu ethnicity, Sahara/Sahel and moist climatic zones. The country almost always has an insurgency brewing. Factions fight over it, but no one wants to break it up. In over fifty years of tumultuous, conflict-ridden independence, a sense of

the Chadian has emerged and grown; yet like the chimneys, it remains precarious. Chad teeters precariously, but it doesn't break apart. Its pith is of hard stone.

The Letters

Ambassador to a Small World is my reflection upon nearly four and a half years spent as the US ambassador to Chad, a country in the heart of Central Africa, little known in the United States before the Darfur crisis. The book is a series of forty-five letters that I sent to a dozen close friends, roughly monthly, and one written a week or two after returning Stateside. They are not in any sense a history of the country's major political, economic, and social events during this period (1999 to 2004), though I touch on these frequently. Nor do the letters constitute a traditional memoir.

I'm not quite sure what I had in mind when I began these letters to friends. They started as travelogue mostly, an effort to recount my interesting experiences. Thumbing back through the early ones, I see that they try to convey some sense of the country, its sights, sounds, smells, and so on. But before long, the work began to take on a life of its own. The letters became more analytical, dwelling on a problem facing the country or on an aspect of life here. Ultimately, they became more introspective. Even before the last three or four wrap-up letters, I sensed that I was trying to convey to my readers what my experience here has meant to me, what I take away from Chad. They are my effort to understand and draw a word picture of the country and its people. Moreover, they encompass what the people of this indigent nation taught me during that time.

Thematically, the most obvious thread is what I've said above: The country holds together. Second, I became intensely fascinated by the contrasts I saw everywhere around me in Chad: the sophisticated elite, graduates of the best French universities, versus subsistence farmers and herders whose lives are little different from those of their ancestors three or four thousand years ago; the Mercedes dodging potholes on an unpaved street of N'Djamena, swerving to avoid a camel.

My third theme grew with time as well: how people with so little made so rich a life for themselves. My admiration for them

deepened as I traveled and received their meager, intensely warm hospitality in remote villages. We talked about their lives and needs as we ate from the common pot. I visited their strained and undersupplied schools, orphanages, and hospitals, and attended their wakes and public ceremonies in villages, towns, and the capital.

Last, everything is starker in Chad. The little that one really needs to exist, food and shelter, is all that most Chadians have. Death comes swiftly and unexpectedly. The gulf between rich and poor, ease and misery, is wide. In America, *Les Misérables* was a hit because it portrayed these things with empathy. In Chad, you live them.

I say in one letter toward the end that I began to feel like a voyeur as I studied these people. But more important, I began to see how much I had learned from them, and how much the West has to learn from poorer countries. To paraphrase the rite of Communion, we who are many are one when we share the same bread. I hope you will see through these letters what I came to value and respect in this country, small in population but large in geography and heart.

Even to those of whom I'm critical, I render a certain respect for coping with adversity. It didn't take long for me to see that all aspects of life are more barefaced here than at home—greed, poverty, hatred, disease, death, honor, friendship, and love. And more and more as time passed, beneath all my conclusions about political and economic development, I realized that the real fascination and lesson of life in Chad arose from that miraculous combination of good and evil that we call human nature. If these epistles convey to you a fraction of what I have seen and felt, they have been worth my effort.

I would ask the reader also to remember the original audience for the letters, my ten closest friends and relatives—hence the tongue-in-cheek signature “Ambassador Chris” and hence my directness. I speak frankly of my frustrations as an ambassador in a “presence post” and of the lack of aid resources that would have given me a stronger voice with the Chadians. I discuss as well the ways in which the ambassadorial lifestyle was not always the best fit for someone who deeply values privacy, and my decision not to seek a second ambassadorship. I suspect that many ambassadors

share my views of the often tedious nature of protocol, necessary as it is. I offer no comment on my critique of US policy toward Africa, and Western development policy in general. I believe that I was on target then, and adjustments in policy, especially development policy, in the decade after I left Chad support my views.

The letters are organized into thematic chapters. For anyone who may care to read the letters in the order in which they were written, a chronological listing follows this preface.

Chad in the Shadow of History

What should I tell you of Chad by way of introduction, for it is unlikely you know more than a quick glance at the map will tell? I could begin by saying that both nature and history have dealt Yarboroughs to Chad.

Nature's blow is easily seen. The country is isolated, poor in natural resources, harsh of climate. It is mostly desert and Sahelian scrub. The colonial French dismissed 90 percent of it backhandedly by referring to the southern tip as "*le Tchad utile*," or the useful Chad. But the balance isn't quite so lopsided, for Chad does have ample water in the rainy season, and now another precious liquid, oil, will flow as well. Neither attribute may be an ace, but both are face cards.

History's curse is less leavened. Here too we must begin with geography, for Chad's vast, flat plains, dead center in the continent, have made the country a crossroads, a land through which men moved and traded and raided slaves, but where the environment enticed few to settle. Those that did were remnants of many peoples, and only in the nineteenth century did population pressures push more people to try to make a life here. By then different parts of Chad were incorporated into three of Africa's great Sahelian empires: Kanem-Bornu, Ouaddai, and Bagirmi. It was not enough that these states were often at war, but slavers and raiders swept through periodically. Chad's nine million people today reflect all this diversity of origin. Among them are more than 120 languages from four of Africa's five language families. Sadly, the differences in origin and the long history of conflict imply tremendous ethnic tensions within the country's artificial borders.

The colonial era that limned those borders was also born in blood. One of three French columns of *tirailleurs* sent to secure Chad, this one led from Senegal by the sadistic French captains Voulet and Chanoine, was responsible for one of the most reprehensible episodes in African colonialism: The troops murdered, burned, and raped their way across West Africa until the exhausted native troops turned on their French officers and killed them in what is now central Niger. When the Lamy column, coming down from Algeria, finally reached the Chad basin, its first stroke was the defeat of the upstart local chief Rabah, in the Battle of Kous-série. The violence and bloodshed continued with the suppression of various revolts in the north and the forcible resettlement and introduction of cotton farming in the south, during the first decades of French rule.

Nor did Chad's independence in 1960 bring relief, for within five years revolt was brewing, and the country dissolved into civil war that continued off and on for nearly thirty years, until the current regime consolidated its power in the early 1990s. And yet, upon this wicked past the Chadians are beginning now to construct a nation.

What Chad Taught Me

A person learns so much from spending four and a half years in a foreign culture that it is nearly impossible to extract in a few lines the essence of those lessons. I will try, however, to highlight a few themes that may echo as you read through the letters.

At the most basic, I saw the stark contrasts in life more sharply here than at home. Poverty, hunger, violence, death—all are omnipresent and visible. There is not even a television screen between you and the suffering.

On the other hand, I was enormously impressed by how dynamic a life the Chadians made on their narrow resource base. Most still live in mud-brick homes that are hovels by American standards. But they have an amazingly diverse and dynamic culture, with rich religious beliefs, customs, and ceremonies that are like the teeter stones perched upon a narrow base. They also have leisure to rest in the torpid afternoon and time for social interchange, a comforting

routinized pace of life that eludes those of us married to cell phones and constant access.

On a more professional note, I saw how misguided much of the Western approach to economic and political development has been. Multiparty democracy, for example, cannot succeed if there is not enough of an economic base to support multiple, competing national parties. After a year in Chad, I was aghast when a senior State Department official (higher ranked now in the second Obama administration) told me with a straight face that we could expect functioning multiparty democracies in African countries within a decade without this economic foundation.

On the contrary, I believe we forget our own history. In America, democracy grew to its present strength over two centuries. We began with a narrow republican base that expanded gradually, with major blocs of people—women, people of color—winning the vote a century or more later. In fact, only with the enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did we have real democracy. Africa can move more quickly, but not overnight. We do it no service to push it faster than our own experience suggests is prudent.

Last, turning to economic development, I saw enormous waste and a bloated, expensive, top-heavy development industry. Most effective are those small projects, the self-help projects I saw and described in letters, that have grassroots commitment and contributions. These, to my mind, have more impact than all of the studies, capacity-building exercises, and expensive implementation schemes of most development projects. There are serious issues of scalability here, of course, but how much more effective the \$20,000 self-help efforts are than those dependent on \$250,000-per-year expat staff. The great exception may be road construction.

This only scratches the surface of what Chad and the Chadians taught me. Much more, I hope, will be evident as you peruse the letters.

THE CHAD LETTERS IN THEIR ORIGINAL CHRONOLOGY

- November 1, 1999* Letters from Chad ... Or, More Than You Ever
Wanted to Hear
- November 11, 1999* Of Mud-Brick Huts and Polished French
- December 6, 1999* The Waza Game Park
- December 6–9, 1999* Jet Setting Around Chad
- January 1, 2000* Is It Hopeless?
- February 2000* Driving in N'Djamena, or, A Tour of the City
- March 5, 2000* Overland to Mao and Bol
- March 8, 2000* A State Dinner in Chad
- March 26, 2000* Zakouma and Sarh
- March 26, 2000* Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop—Perhaps
- April 19, 2000* Chad and America
- April 24, 2000* The Midsouth
- May 20, 2000* Africa Wars
- June 5–19, 2000* Odds and Ends
- June 27, 2000* Waiting for Rain: A Last Swing South (and North)
- July 14, 2000* A Day in the Life ...
- August 12, 2000* A Trip from Heaven
- September 4, 2000* A Quiet August
- November 1, 2000* Méchoui
- November 26, 2000* Gaps
- December 15, 2000* The Gong and the Lamido
- January 6, 2001* Happy Holidays from N'Djamena!
- January 12, 2001* The Adventures of Mr. Chidiac
- January 21, 2001* The Ennedi
- March 24, 2001* It's a Good Thing I Showed Up
- April 15, 2001* The Roller Coaster
- May 20 and June 3, 2001* Election Day
- September 2, 2001* The Changing of the Guard—or Not
- October 6, 2001* "The Events" from Afar
- December 30, 2001* Dueling Values
- January 6, 2002* Getting Off on the Wrong Foot
- January 20, 2002* We Thought We Had All the Answers, But Guess
What?
- January 27, 2002* Old Haunts and New Territory
- February 24, 2002* Being the Ambassador: Three Sides of a Coin

March 24, 2002 The Journey to the East
May 19, 2002 Present at the Creation
August 8, 2002 Jogging in N'Djamena and Giving Blood
September 15, 2002 It Rains in Bardai
May 30, 2003 Visiting the Neighbors
September 27 and December 27, 2003 Chadians at Home
October 31, 2003 Day Trips
December 4, 2003 Le Grand Nord
December 14, 2003 Life among the Nomads
December 26, 2003 Summing Up—Again
Late February 2004 The Sparrows are Fat