Mr. Perkins Comes to Norman

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

During his nearly 40 years of government appointments starting in the military and ending in foreign service, Ambassador Edward Joseph Perkins sat himself down in some amazing places.

Since September 1, he has been seated happily in the William J. Crowe Chair in Geopolitics and at a desk in a University of Oklahoma campus office reserved for the Interim Executive Director of the International Programs Center.

He took those seats after standing down in August 1996 from his three-year post as U.S. ambassador to Australia and retiring from the U.S. Foreign Service with the rank of career minister. Before his final assignment in Australia, Perkins served as ambassador to Liberia and South Africa, as well as U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations. While his two chairs at OU might seem much less demanding than those he previously occupied, he is not resting on his laurels. He has come to Oklahoma with a populist mission, and his soft-spoken but intense dedication to fulfilling it illuminates all he says and does.

"I place a great deal of store in the role of the citizen," he says. "The more I learn about the United States, the more amazed I am that this experiment started more than 200 years ago has worked so well. No other country in the world subjects its officials to the kind of political vetting we do. That's a citizen's perk, and if this center adds just a little bit of knowledge to the citizens' understanding of their role in the political process and of the kind of

A distinguished career diplomat has put a University program on the international map.
Executive Director Edward Perkins, right, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Australia, Liberia and South Africa, launched OU's new International Programs Center with the most impressive Foreign Policy Conference of the year. Among the distinguished participants was CIA Director George Tenet, left.

country we live in, then it will do what it was created for."

Strategies for the best use of University resources to provide that understanding to faculty, students and the general citizenry occupy much of Perkins' time. That managerial reality both frustrates and fulfills him.

"Frankly, I don't have as much time as I expected," he says. "I planned to do research. I have a lot of papers from my many years of foreign service, and I want to collect them, to make sense of my experiences. I probably had an exaggerated view of the way things were in the academic world. If I had taken only the Crowe chair rather than both it and the interim directorship, I would have had more say over my time than I do. I doubt, though, that I would have been any more satisfied than I am now. I'm learning to make sure I make time for my own work.

"I had always had a kind of fascination with the academic life. It's a little different from what I thought, but nevertheless, it's wonderful to be sitting at a desk with a set of books in front of you and when an idea pops into your head to start writing about it, to research it. And it's wonderful to have the time to read. Right now I'm reading two or three accounts of Julius Caesar, a fascinating historical figure from a diplomatic point of view. But, of course, I must budget my time."

The budget is tight, no doubt. Perkins spends a significant portion of his time traveling to connect with foreign policymakers in Washington, D.C., and at other academic centers where foreign policy discussion is paramount. He also cites the importance of continuing to develop relationships with the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and the Pacific Council on Foreign Relations in Los Angeles. His duties include frequent teleconferences from his office in OU's Whitehead Hall—like a recent one for an international studies advisory council in which he discussed current issues with fellow council members in Canada, London and State College, Pennsylvania.

His office—beautifully appointed with Mission furniture and decorated with art from a variety of international locations—has also been the site of intense planning during the last year. Acting Associate Director of the International Programs Center Edwin S. Corr, Interim Director of International Academics Program Gary B. Cohen and Director of the Office of International Relations Millie Audas worked with Perkins and many other University community members for more than six months to present the successful September conference titled "Preparing America's Foreign Policy for the 21st Century." Drawing upon his own many friendships forged during his foreign service career as well as the political connections of OU President David Boren, Perkins helped generate a gathering of renowned scholars and world-famous political policymakers.

The conference roster was unheard of for a university in the middle of the country far from cities normally considered international policy centers.

"When President Boren asked me to assume the interim directorship, I thought that having such a center in what is nearly the very center of the country made sense," Perkins says. "My personal view is that the great public universities have an outreach responsibility on almost all subjects. I'm a foreign policy wonk, and I feel that foreign policy is no good unless the American people play a role in it. International relations is an activist activity, and the University must be an activist place if it is to deal with that area.

"When I was director general of the foreign service, I tried to send foreign service officers into as many corners of this country as possible to get a renewal and to help them understand whom we were representing when we were abroad."

The importance of the center's location in the heart of the country and at a public institution are populist themes that wind their way through the story of Perkins' journey from foreign service in Australia to domestic service in Oklahoma.

"I came here as a result of having met President Boren when I was ambassador to South Africa and he was chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," Perkins explains. "He came to South Africa with Sam Nunn (former U.S. senator from Georgia) on a congressional tour at that particularly powerful moment in our history when the Reagan administration was..."
at odds with the Congress because our policy toward South Africa to that point had been rather benign. We were interested in helping to bring an end to apartheid and to support the country in becoming a multiracial democracy.

"Then Senator Boren visited black townships and met with revolutionaries and became an effective interlocutor with both President Reagan and President Bush. He was not just another senator, but one who was truly interested in the changes taking place. I have known only a very few like that in my career: Nancy Kassenbaum (former U.S. senator from Kansas) is one; Dick Lugar (U.S. senator from Indiana) is another. Boren and Nunn were in that class.

"When I was trying to decide whether to accept Boren's offer to come to Oklahoma, which I had visited briefly only twice before, I asked my family and others whose judgment I respect for their advice. Henry Kissinger was one I turned to.

"He said, 'Look. You can go to any university in the country if it's just prestige you want. If you really want to do something, though, go to a public university.' Now I don't know whether those two got together to talk about this or not, but I do know they had vacationed on Martha's Vineyard to gether just two months earlier."

Whether Perkins ended up in Oklahoma as a result of a small-scale conspiracy seems irrelevant. Relevant are the insight, experience and energy he and his colleagues are investing in the development of the International Programs Center, whose 44-member Board of Visitors reads like a Who's Who of foreign policy and international business. That stellar group is chaired by Admiral William J. Crowe Jr., former ambassador to Great Britain and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The board includes 12 former ambassadors from three countries, three former secretaries of state and five assistant secretaries, intelligence experts, authorities in international business and finance, attorneys, journalists, economists, political scientists, historians and civic leaders.

The center's mission statement summarizes its lofty goals: "The mission of the International Programs Center is to assist the president in internationalizing education at the University of Oklahoma and to reach out to the state, national and international communities to enhance the University's role as a regional leader in our nation's international relations. To that end, Perkins and his colleagues have defined three areas of concentration for their efforts: academic activities, international educational exchange programs and outreach.

"The academic component takes the most time, which is how it should be since the main concern of the University is with its students, and students need a curriculum in international relations that is multidisciplinary," Perkins explains. "We're working hand in glove with various areas on campus to gain acceptance for this interdisciplinary approach. We want the ideas of as many community members as possible. Gary Cohen heads up that outfit. He's my ambassador to the rest of the University. He knows well how this particular system works and keeps me out of needless trouble."

The year 2000 is the target for the possible creation of a degree-granting program that includes both a master's and a doctorate in international relations, Perkins says. As another element of the academic component of the center, Perkins wants to oversee a yearly seminar focusing on world problems and bridging the economy, environmental concerns, politics and social issues. He envisions the seminar as a three-to-four-week affair designed as a graduate level course and open to those in business and government service.

The educational exchange component works through the Office of International Relations, directed by Millie Audas. This office currently coordinates exchange agreements with more than 90 universities in more than 40 countries and ranks first in the Big 12 in student exchanges. Approximately 1,800 international students from 103 nations participate in programs on the Norman campus. Perkins wants to expand those numbers and to focus more time and money on faculty exchanges and research grants.

Outreach well may be the component nearest to the ambassador's populist heart. He talks easily and often of the famous—like his friend, the acclaimed Australian author Colleen McCullough, and well-known officials in governments domestic and foreign—but his most animated anecdotes concern the citizens he sees the center as serving.

"The impact of the conference was amazing," he says. "I've gotten responses from many people. Most satisfying have been those from Oklahomans. I had two particularly satisfying calls soon after the conference. The first was from a young professor on campus who said, 'Dr. Perkins, I called just to tell you how good the conference was.' She said she would surely like to talk about the experience." Perkins invited her to come by his office.

"The other was from a citizen not connected with the University, someone I'd met through an Oklahoman I had worked with while serving in Taiwan. She came by to sit for an hour; I didn't really have the hour, of course, but I gave it to her because I think it's important to make those connections. It's important to hear Oklahomans say, 'I'm pleased this center is here' or 'I'm glad that we can be involved.'"

Those walking the corridors of power in the political centers of the world might well consider it a downward move to go from the rank and status of ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary as the U.S. representative to the United Nations to just Dr. Perkins at a public university in the midlands. Not the man sitting in the Crowe Chair. He knows the value of his papers and books and the importance of his impact on those he considers the truly powerful—a body of informed, educated citizens.

The classic film, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," is a Frank Capra/Jimmy Stewart collaboration that details the efforts of a naive but ethical man of the people to infuse those in political power with a new sense of their responsibility to the citizens they represent. The David Boren/Edward Perkins collaboration now showing on the OU campus is the necessary reverse. Here a worldly but ethical man of the people is infusing the citizens represented by those in power with a new sense of their responsibility to understand and speak out on issues great and small.

Ed Perkins will not sit still for anything less.