

Ambassador Butler's interview with Lobi magazine

March 4, 2005

LOBI: Can you describe the differences between your expectations when you were going to come to Macedonia and the experience you have had during these three years as Ambassador to Macedonia?

Ambassador Butler: It is hard to remember what my expectations for Macedonia were because I came on very short notice. I had expected to have an additional six months to prepare; you may remember Ambassador Einik retired early and I was asked to come out here. What I was expecting to find was a country very much in transition, still dealing with the aftermath of the 2001 conflict. And that is exactly what I found in addition to a meter of snow, a very dense fog and newspapers writing about a spring offensive by the UCK. I had visions of ethnic Albanian guerrillas with long beards skiing down the Shara mountains with guns or some bad world war two novel. The reality of what I found was nobody had an appetite to resume conflict; there was a great deal of interest in seeing that the Framework Agreement could be transforming into something that will make difference in people's lives. And on top of that, and I guess what I didn't expect to find, was a political system or a government that was falling apart and robbing the country in broad daylight. That is what I didn't expect. I had never before in my life experienced daylight robbery by government officials; everybody knew that was happening, and nobody was doing anything about it. Whether it was Dragan Daravelski and the customs, who even tried to hold us up, or whether it was any of the other officials who were selling properties cheaply to their relatives or to themselves, or taking money from the Health Fund, or taking money from the ESM or taking money from some other government enterprises and putting it in their own pocket.

LOBI: Was that so obvious to you as a newcomer?

Ambassador Butler: Like the nose on my face. It took a month or two before it became very clear to everybody, and I think everybody in Macedonia knew what was happening. The hardest step that I have taken here was the first time that I publicly criticized the government for corruption, specifically the director of the customs.

LOBI: You came after September 11, and there were some stories in our media about relationships between our UCK with Al Qaeda. Did you ever find any links between the Islamic terrorists and our rebels?

Ambassador Butler: Until today I have seen nothing that would link the UCK, or anybody involved in the 2001 conflict, with Al Qaeda.

LOBI: Ever since the first ambassador to Macedonia, Mr. Comras and especially during your mandate, there are always comments about the role of the American ambassadors in a country like Macedonia. What is your personal view? What is American Ambassador in Macedonia; is he too powerful; is he too influential or not; is he involved in internal affairs?

Ambassador Butler: You asked me that question maybe about a year and a half ago, did I think I had too much influence in Macedonia. My answer then was it is now –No I don't think I have too much influence in Macedonia. American ambassadors in a country like Macedonia, a country in transition, in a difficult and complicated region, with relatively new and still weak structures can use all the help they can get. This is why a mature and a strong democracy like the United States feels obliged to provide support to other countries, other cultures, other people that share the same values and aspire to our resilience and our ability to deal with problems before the use of violence. This inevitably leads to discussion as to whether the American ambassador, any American Ambassador, too involved in internal affairs, which is incompatible with their functions page 310 of the Macedonian–English political and diplomatic dictionary, the new one. #Se mesa vo vnatresnite raboti na druga drzava#, I read it very carefully.

This question of being too involved and interference – if the American ambassador gets involved with helping to elect, or somehow undermining or distorting the internal political system where the will of people is expressed democratically in a ballot box– I think that is wrong. That's not something a foreign ambassador should be doing, that's gross interference. What I tried to do was to provide as much support to the elected government and to the opposition as I can, to help them make the Macedonian system of democracy as robust and as strong as possible. At the same time we also provided a great deal of support for the non–government sector, whether it was journalism, or the academic community, or the business community or the NGO community; to make civic society work the way it is supposed to. Democracy works best when citizens are actively involved in the government. That doesn't necessarily mean running of the candidate for the city council, it can also be buy getting a petition signed to repave the street in a particular neighborhood. There is a lot of work

that we've done and a lot more work, if asked, if given the opportunity, we are prepared to contribute to.

LOBI: Just to be clear. You don't think that you were interfering in our internal affairs?

Ambassador Butler: No. I was not interfering in your internal affairs. I was trying my best to provide assistance to your elected officials and to your political parties to achieve goals that are important to the United States— and I believe them to be shared by Macedonians — membership in NATO and eventual membership in the European Union.

LOBI: For example, what was your role in Kondovo or the so-called black list of court cases?

Ambassador Butler: The so-called black list or scorecard of court cases. In January 2003 I gave a speech in which I said that Macedonia cannot have a strong economy and attract foreign investment as long as it has corrupt officials who get in the way doing business. That was two years ago. Since then we've seen only two cases of corruption finish all the judicial procedures. I have a... file that I started a year ago of every court case that I found in the newspapers where the trial was postponed because the defendant didn't show up, or the judge didn't show up, or more often the lawyer didn't show up. Currently, in one of the trials that is going on, the lawyer of that trial is also the Rastanski Lozja lawyer and because Rastanski Lozja case is going on, he can't be in two places at the same time so the corruption trial is now pushed to the back while the Rastanski Lozja case goes forward. As an outsider I can say things that are obvious to everybody, but might get you in trouble locally. I'm not afraid of being thrown out of Macedonia if I interfere too much or get too far into it and the government feels it is unacceptable, they easily can ask Washington to distract Butler or something like that... I represent the American ambassador and potential American businesses in Macedonia, and the message I have is American businesses are not coming here if they think there is going to be a minister or a director of customs or a judge who can be bought or intimidated into delaying a trial to the benefit of somebody else. I have said something that, quite frankly, Transparency International, and the Anti Corruption Commission and Macedonian journalists should be saying and occasionally do say.

LOBI: What about Kondovo?

Ambassador Butler: The example of Kondovo was one where the Macedonian security forces, security services learned the lesson of Brest, Malina Maalo. You may remember a couple of guys with guns in November 2003, who were challenging the police, and the police went after them, and it wasn't a very successful operation. Fire started up in the hills, couple of kids got killed and the bad guys got away. Although eventually we were able to help catch them in Kosovo and bring them back to Macedonia.

Kondovo was a case where, for reasons that I still don't understand, a group of guys decided to play some kind of tough guys saying come and get us. And it would have been easy to go get them and destroy Kondovo. Why? I saw maturity in the political leadership in Macedonia to attack this differently. Instead of using violence use persuasion, use political connection, to get this group to disband and go away. And that was successful.

I have a problem with using violence, unless there is no other choice. Given the circumstances I praise the government and the police for having acted in a very mature manner at a very politically sensitive time. You may remember this case was during the referendum... I admire how this was done. I know that a lot of people wanted to see the army or the police go in there and arrest people.

LOBI: I don't want to put you in a position to comment some of the statements of President Crvenkovski but he had a few remarks about some of your declarations like the one regarding security of the American Embassy, or the remark about the last list you prepared, which he stated when he met

Ambassador Butler: President Crvenkovski and I have an excellent relationship, which is very open, we are very free in discussing with each other, expressing opinions and I value my friendship with him. I think Macedonia has a strong leader and I have no problem when somebody is criticizing me. This is a democracy and I'm a public figure. The President and I discussed my comments as they were reported in the press about the security of the Embassy and it was very clear that this embassy location is not secure. And the most secure location, of the ones available, was the one in Gradishte. Therefore we were very grateful for the decision of the Macedonian government to sell it to us. But that was one of about five reasons why we selected that site. There was a professional organization that came in to help us find it. In that case it was a lack of credit in my part in Macedonia at the time I was interviewed and the president then reacted to what he read in the reports in the press. We both agreed that this is the most appropriate site for the embassy, but there could have been potentially many other

places for the American embassy in Macedonia. I feel very safe as an American, and every American in this country feels very safe going anywhere in this country.

LOBI: When are you going to start the construction of the embassy?

Ambassador Butler: Everything is on track. We have a very tedious and very time-consuming process in Washington, before they finally allocate the 80 or 90 million dollars that's going to go in this project.

LOBI: Do you see a difference in the presence of anti-American sentiment before and after the official recognition of Macedonia's constitutional name by the U.S.? -

Ambassador Butler: I talked to you and some of your colleagues about your sense that there was growing anti-Americanism in Macedonia, but I didn't feel that. I spent a lot of time with the elites of this country here in Skopje and the bigger cities, and I spent a lot of time with ordinary people and I never felt anything less than full admiration and respect and wanting to be friends with the United States. What I detected, and this is something that I shared, was a frustration of ordinary Macedonians that Macedonia hasn't moved quicker towards integration with the rest of Europe. Upon leaving Macedonia one of my colleagues said he almost has a feeling that people in Macedonia feel like that they live on an island and Europe is a distant shore. The distance between the island and the mainstream Europe hasn't been bridged over fast enough. Whether it is visas, whether it is investments, whether it is unemployment still so high, and that the last year economy didn't grow as fast as was predicted and washed up, whether it was corruption, or the judiciary which continues to be a problem. We have to be angry at something, why not the Americans, because the United States is the most identifiable international community presence. As Henry Kissinger once said what's the number, which European do I get mad at; is it Finland, is it Luxemburg, is it San Marino, who do you get mad at. Clearly after the name recognition I got a sense that Macedonians had renewed sense of optimism and hope that this country is going to be fully integrated inside Europe sooner or later. It's a sense of optimism, a sense that things are not hopeless, that we are not isolated.

LOBI: Nobody was publicly thanking you for your role in the recognition. Was it hard to convince Washington for this step?

Ambassador Butler: It was complicated. Complicated by a great many things. One, our great affection and respect for our NATO ally Greece in concerns that this might be misinterpreted by Greece. This was not an anti-Greek measure. This was a pro-stability measure for Macedonia, enabling Macedonia to make some hard decisions that it has to make in order to become a member of the European Union.

LOBI: How can you describe your relations with Macedonian political parties?

Ambassador Butler: Probably complicated. I have tried not to get too involved in working with political parties. Clearly close relationships with political leaders, knowing who they are, hoping that they have confidence in me that they can tell me things, that I will not betray their confidence. That I can understand better and help shape our policy to support what they are trying to do here. One of my biggest frustrations here has been the lack of a credible opposition party. That's my biggest frustration.

LOBI: I'm asking this because the general view is that American Ambassador by default has a good relationship with the parties in power and bad relations with parties in opposition.

Ambassador Butler: That has not been the case. I have always had good relations with everybody.

LOBI: What about the main opposition party VMRO Narodna and their leader Georgievski and on the other side DPA and Mr. Xhaferi, not to mention Mr. Thaci?

Ambassador Butler: I see Arben Xhaferi on a regular basis. His insights are extremely valuable and useful to me and the Embassy to understand that very important party in Macedonia. We have some relationships and political contacts with every political party in Macedonia including VMRO Narodna, but not with Mr. Georgievski.

LOBI: Considering that you are going to stay in the region how do you see the future of Macedonia regarding the events that are going to happen this year in the region – the negotiation about the status of Kosovo, Bosnia and even Serbia. Do you see any danger for Macedonia in the present situation and any possible influence of these events?

Ambassador Butler: Macedonia for the rest of this year and in 2006 faces the same challenges that any other country in the region faces.

The questions are: what will become of Kosovo, what will final status look like, when will Serbia and its cooperation with ICTY reach a point when they are invited into partnership for peace and begin closer relationship with the European Union. The same goes for Bosnia. Those are uncertain issues. Certain issues are: the southern neighbor is a NATO member and member of EU, the eastern neighbor is NATO member and future EU member. Those are sources of stability and certainty. Serbia and Kosovo are sources of uncertainty but that does not necessarily lead to instability. What Prime Minister Buckovski together with Foreign Minister Mitreva and the Economy Minister Besimi did this week in Kosovo was a continuation of what we refer to as “the good neighbor policy.” . You can’t change your geography, and you can’t do much about the history. By proactively reaching out to local elected officials in Kosovo, by reaching out to the elected officials in Belgrade in creating strong ties, good friendships, and economic links – this is going to not only help Kosovo striving for standards, recommended prosperity and stability and improving democratic standards which can only be for a good outcome. Or you can sit back as some countries have done in the past and build a big wall. Walls don’t work. It didn’t work in China, didn’t work between East and West during the Cold War.

Strong exchanges, knowing the neighbors, giving them confidence that you are their friend and contributing to their economic development, helps eliminate the uncertainties. That’s not much Macedonia can do about Kosovo’s final status. Kosovo’s final status is not something Macedonians to decide, I said that couple of years ago. But it is Macedonia’s work to anticipate and prepare for whatever it is.

LOBI: What about the border and solving the problem before the negotiations start?

Ambassador Butler: The American position is that one cannot imagine Kosovo having final status without defined borders. Soren Jesen Petersen said that as part of the final status he will work very hard with Macedonian government to find a way to finish demarking of the border. It can take a while before all the formalities are done and both parties have agreed on precisely where the border goes. And this is the basic problem of your northern border because you never had a marked border not on the Serbian side, not on the Kosovo side. We’ve been working on this almost from the day I got here. We are trying to get the demarcation done in a way which respects the local interests. We are very determined and we are also very inventive in proposing ideas and finding ways to solve the local problems. As the atmosphere improves

it will create the atmosphere on both sides to complete the demarcation of the border.

LOBI: We know that you love to hunt. Do you discuss politics with local hunters?

Ambassador Butler: Absolutely! When I come back from a weekend with local hunters, sometimes it's with high-level persons, but more often it's with local citizens who provide a local wisdom that one doesn't get from the parliament or American Embassy. It's people who are trying to figure out how to put food in their plates, how to get their kids educated, how to get medical care, how to get a road repaired. The wisdom I take from them has helped me direct USAID projects, it has helped me in conversations with politicians and political leaders. I feel very comfortable that I have an OK sense (not perfect because I'm a foreigner) of their love for their home, the wish that there were more opportunities to express loyalty to the state, because the state is loyal to them.

And I heard this from a DPA politician up in the Lipkovo area, Husamedin Halili, that "when we feel we are part of the state, we are prepared to make more sacrifices." And that's not just ethnic Albanians; I heard the same thing in Mariovo, in Plackovica area.

LOBI: What will be your message for Macedonians now that you are leaving Macedonia?

Ambassador Butler: My message for Macedonia is: Macedonia has lost a lot of chances in the last 14 years. The U.S. is fundamentally different from Old Europe. We are risk takers; we are a huge country where one person's loss is not the death of a nation. The country makes the next opportunity more valuable. The municipal elections—first round is in a couple of weeks, on March 13th and the second round on March 28th—this is the last elections before the members of NATO sit down and decide one, if the next enlargement round will take place in next summer and if Macedonia is running for membership. These are the last elections before the EU sends back its response on the submitted answers to the questions. This in many cases is a final dissertation, which will have a huge impact on whether this country will find its external security issues dealt once and for all by joining NATO, and now it will have article 5 security guarantee. And it's been invited to enter the candidacy status for final entering into EU. The outside world, Brussels, and other capitals will be watching the conduct on the local elections. These elections will go well. The question is between just going well or exemplary? The message is going to be that attention

is very powerful. If there are a lot of mayor candidates, it's a tough race, but fair, without violence, without intimidation, without vote stealing. This will help Kosovo, because people will look at the Albanian majority areas of Macedonia and say local elections are normal. Kosovo's last elections were excellent and that sends a signal about the political maturity and the development of the ethnic Albanians wherever they may live. For the country as a whole it shows that democracy is mature not just at the national level, but also at the local level. These are key elections because the new mayors and municipal councils have greater responsibilities and powers to deliver services to the citizens. I'm not sure why anybody would want to be mayor in the next four years unless they are prepared to work very hard. Whether it's Risto Penov or Trifun Kostovski in Skopje, Hazbi Lika or somebody else in Tetovo... Their lives are hell when they walk out from their house to go to work. because the people who voted for them will say: "Mr. Mayor you promised!", because up until now they could blame it on Skopje.

The municipal elections are the latest final exam for Macedonia – and are important external and internal. The judicial reforms are actually critical. ABA CEELI, which is one of the projects going on in the last 10 years has invested 6 or 7 million dollars in supporting judicial reforms inside the country. We've seen results, technical results, but what we haven't seen are judges who would really stand up and self-police themselves. Are the people of Macedonia willing to accept judges, who are susceptible to intimidation, or being purchased, or have political ambitions, or are incompetent. Judiciary in our estimation is the weakest point in Macedonian democracy. It has improved a lot and there are some judges that are very good.

These are the issues for the citizens of Macedonia. You want Shengen visas, want to be member of European Union, want to be members of NATO, do not put up with mediocrity or corruption. And this is where foreigners can help – if you need help then point that out.

BOXES

LOBI: The case of Khalid el Masri is becoming a big story. One can say that New York Times is pro-liberal when they published the story, but Newsweek is not. And there are some TV magazines picking up the story in the U.S. like "60 minutes." This case is especially interesting for us because of our involvement in it and the mentioning of the CIA office in Macedonia. Do you want to comment on this?

Ambassador Butler: We have a long-standing policy, we do not comment on intelligence issues.

LOBI: Do you have any message for Albanians in Macedonia?

Ambassador Butler: The Albanian population in this country has proven to me to be among the most dynamic demographic sectors in Macedonia if not the most dynamic. I find the most entrepreneurial individuals, risk – takers. My challenge to Macedonian political body as a whole, and I mean this as an American where it's politically correct to talk about the inclusion, is to find any and every way you can to exploit the talent of every citizen of this country, and in particularly the Albanian population. The Albanian population in former Yugoslavia endured a great deal of discrimination and exclusion. During the conflict and leading to the Framework Agreement which settled that it is up to the citizens to use the rules as set up to advance their rights, to secure their opportunities. One thing that really annoys me is when people start talking about their rights. OK. Enough rights, go out and do something about this. Don't sit around and wait for somebody to hand it to you. This is not former Yugoslavia. Get out from the bed in the morning; send your kids to school to get the best education they can get. Learn every language you could learn– Macedonian, Albanian, German, English, French, Greek – whatever it takes to be successful in a rapidly integrating Europe. But there is no life for people who want to sit around their religious center, their café, or their home and waiting for somebody else to do it for them. That's a challenge and you do it by voting, identifying young men and women who can represent you, lead you, who create better businesses, who create better opportunity for everybody. Macedonia as a truly multicultural, multiethnic, multi confessional country is just about unique in this part of the Europe. I'm going to leave this country with the sense of optimism that I'm going to need when I go to Bosnia to finish the implementation of the Dayton Accord and get that country integrating into NATO and EU as a single state.

###