



## **Oakley, Robert B.: Files, 1986-1988**

### **Finding Aid Type**

White House Staff and Office File Collections

### **Subtitle/Office**

Near East and South Asia Affairs Directorate, NSC

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### **Record Type**

Textual

### **Biography**

## **Biography**

Robert Bigger Oakley was a blunt-spoken American diplomat whose 34-year career (1957–1991) as a Foreign Service Officer included appointments as Ambassador to Zaire, Somalia, and Pakistan, and in the early 1990s, as a special envoy during the American involvement in Somalia. He also served at the National Security Council under the Ford and Reagan Administrations.

Oakley was born in Dallas, Texas on March 12, 1931. He grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his father was an electrical engineer for a utility company. His colleagues commented that he retained a Louisiana drawl throughout his varied life.

Oakley was sent to South Kent School, a boarding school in Connecticut, where he graduated in 1948. He then attended Princeton University and graduated in 1952 with a degree in philosophy and history. Among his classmates were future Secretary of State James A. Baker III and future Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci.

Upon leaving Princeton, Oakley became a Navy intelligence officer in Japan, a job his wife, Phyllis Elliott Oakley, says kindled his passion for international relations. Leaving the Navy, Oakley joined the Foreign Service in 1957 and was assigned to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in 1958.

Oakley continued a round of assignments to American embassies alternating with stints at the State Department. He was assigned to Abidjan, Saigon, Paris, and Beirut. He was in Saigon in the mid-1960s and assisted the government of South Vietnam in writing a western-style constitution. Back in Washington, he served in the Office of United Nations Political Affairs.

In the early 1970s, Oakley was at the United Nations working on Middle Eastern issues while future President George H.W. Bush was the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. From there, Oakley began his first detail at the White House National Security Council staff, 1974-1976 under national security advisor Brent Scowcroft.

In February 1977, Oakley became Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of State (Richard Holbrooke) for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. He became Ambassador to Zaire in November 1979 and Ambassador to Somalia in August 1982. His time in Somalia would prove useful a decade later, when he returned as a special presidential envoy.

In September 1984, he was appointed Director of the State Department Office of Combating Terrorism. Serving in this position until 1986, Oakley headed this office in a period marked by a rise in hostage crises and state-sponsored terrorism in the Middle East and Libya.

He again joined the National Security Council staff on January 1, 1987, as Assistant to the President for Middle East and South Asia. He was asked by his old Princeton classmate, new national security advisor, Frank Carlucci to assist him in resetting the mission of the NSC after the Iran-Contra affair. In this role, he helped revive an "activist" policy in the Middle East after the debacle of the Iran-Contra affair and U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon. As part of this push, Oakley helped orchestrate a sizeable American naval presence in the Persian Gulf to safeguard Kuwaiti oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq war.

Oakley was heavily involved either at the State Department or at the NSC in many of the foreign policy issues of the 1980s including the Iran-Iraq War; the continued captivity of Americans in Lebanon; the passage of arms to the U.S. supported mujahideen in Afghanistan and the Soviet departure from that country; encouraging the restoration of democracy in Pakistan after long military rule; and maintaining the ever fragile peace between nuclear-armed archenemies Pakistan and India.

Given this experience, Oakley was named as the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan in August 1988, succeeding Arnold Lewis Raphel, who was killed in the August 17, 1988 airplane crash which also killed Pakistan's President Muhammad Zia-al-Haq. He was notified of this appointment by Secretary of State George Shultz on their airplane ride to Pakistan to attend the funerals of Zia and Raphel.

After retiring from the Foreign Service in September 1991, Oakley became associated with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). At USIP, Ambassador Oakley participated in a study group with Somali professionals in November 1992 that contributed to the Institute's first Special Report in January 1993, "Relief, Reconciliation, and Reconstruction in Somalia: Views of Prominent Somalis." He also published a book, co-authored by J. Lewis Rasmussen, *Conflict Resolution in the Middle East: Stimulating a Diplomatic Negotiation Between Israel and Syria*. He returned to the USIP after a special presidential assignment and published a book drawing on his experiences, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope: Reflections on Peacemaking and Peacekeeping*, co-written with John L. Hirsch. Both volumes were

published by the U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

Oakley stated that in late 1992, Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, lured him from retirement to serve as a special U.S. Envoy to Somalia for President George H.W. Bush. In December 1992, Oakley served there with Operation Restore Hope providing food and other aid to a country torn apart by civil wars between multiple warlords. He remained there until March 1993.

In October 1993, he was again named as Special Envoy for Somalia by President Bill Clinton. His past service in Somalia provided much needed background for this assignment. He was tasked with securing the release of helicopter pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Michael J. Durant who was captured by Somalis when his Black Hawk helicopter was shot down. The Somalis shot down two Black Hawk helicopters carrying Army Rangers. The Somalis killed 18 Americans and wounded 75. Video images showed Somalis dragging American bodies through the streets of Mogadishu. The incident became known as "Black Hawk Down."

Oakley spent two days negotiating with warlord, General Aidid. He was able to get the Somali leader to release the pilot, as well as a captured Nigerian soldier and to return the American bodies. This incident highlights many personal comments made by others about Ambassador Oakley's "bluntness" and "toughness." Ambassador Chester A. Crocker, a former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs has stated, "He (Oakley) didn't wind up in places like Copenhagen, if you get my drift." Oakley specialized in "rough duty, places where you spend seven days a week walking through a minefield of ambiguity."

His wife, Phyllis Oakley, has stated "of all his varied assignments, Mr. Oakley liked Paris the least. Speaking of the French, she said, "Their idea of a crisis was a stiff diplomatic note, whereas for Bob it was natives coming over the wall."

Ambassador Oakley remained in Somalia until March 1994. Returning to America, Oakley joined the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in January 1995.

During his service with the State Department, Oakley received numerous State Department awards including: the State Department Meritorious Honor Award, four Presidential Meritorious Service Awards, and the State Department Distinguished Honor Award. For his service as Special Envoy to Somalia, he received a second

State Department Distinguished Honor Award and the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service. On June 18, 1993, he received the Diplomatic Award for Excellence of the American Academy of Diplomacy. In October 2008, Oakley was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from Princeton in Africa.

Meeting in Khartoum, Sudan at his first posting, Oakley married fellow Foreign Service Officer Phyllis Elliott in June 1958. Elliott, who, under then-prevailing rules, was obliged to resign. She returned to the service in 1974, when the rules were changed. She became an assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research. She also served as a USIP board member (ex officio) when she was at the State Department, and she was a spokesperson for Secretary of State George Shultz.

The Oakeys have a daughter, Mary Kress, and a son, Thomas, and have five grandchildren.

Robert B. Oakley died in McLean, Virginia from complications from Parkinson's disease, on December 10, 2014, aged 83.

## **Scope and Content Note**

### **Scope Note**

The Robert Oakley collection consists of two series: SERIES I: Chronological File, and SERIES II: Subject File.

## **Series List**

### **SERIES I: CHRONOLOGICAL FILE**

### **SERIES II: SUBJECT FILE**

## **Last Modified Date**

2024-02-26

### **SERIES I: CHRONOLOGICAL FILE**

#### **RAC Box 1**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Chrons - January 1987 (1)-(4)

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Chrons - February 1987 (1)-(5)
CLOSED	Chrons - March 1987 (1)-(9)
CLOSED	Chrons - April 1987 (1)-(6)
CLOSED	Chrons - May 1987 (1)-(9)
CLOSED	Chrons - June 1987 (1)-(12)

#### **RAC Box 2**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Chrons - July 1987 (1)-(9)
CLOSED	Chrons - August 1987 (1)-(8)
CLOSED	Chrons - September 1987 (1)-(8)
CLOSED	Chrons - October 1987 (1)-(9)
CLOSED	Chrons - November 1987 (1)-(11)

#### **RAC Box 3**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Chrons - December 1987 (1)-(11)
CLOSED	Chrons - January 1988 (1)-(8)
CLOSED	Chrons - February 1988 (1)-(7)
CLOSED	Chrons - March 1988 (1)-(7)
CLOSED	Chrons - April 1988 (1)-(7)
CLOSED	Chrons - May 1988 (1)-(7)

#### **RAC Box 4**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Chrons - June 1988 (1)(2)
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Chron File - Ambassador Oakley 06/10/1988 Chrons - June 1988 (3)</a>
CLOSED	Chrons - June 1988 (4)-(7)
CLOSED	Chrons - July 1988 (1)-(11)
CLOSED	Chrons - August 1988 (1)-(5)

#### **SERIES II: SUBJECT FILE**

#### **RAC Box 4 (Continued)**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Appointment Book - 1987

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Conference Calls on Gulf (1)-(5)
CLOSED	Chemical Weapons
CLOSED	FMS (Foreign Military Sales) Debt - Whitehead/Mubarak Meeting
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Future U.S. Actions on Arab-Israeli Issues</a>
CLOSED	Geneva Talks with Soviets on Afghanistan and Gulf
CLOSED	Hassan Visit
CLOSED	Ambassador Oakley - Interviews
CLOSED	Ambassador Oakley - Speeches (1)(2)
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Iran Initiative</a>
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Kashossi/Ghorbanifar Letter</a>
CLOSED	Kuwait - Prime Minister Shaikh Saad Visit 07/12/1988
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Libya</a>
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between U.S. and Israel 04/21/1988</a>
CLOSED	Mubarak Visit 01/28/1988 (1)(2)
CLOSED	NSDDs
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Operation Staunch</a>
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Pakistan Nuclear Program</a>
CLOSED	Persian Gulf - Report to the Congress
CLOSED	Persian Gulf - Statements
CLOSED	Presidential and Other Statements (1)(2)
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">President's Meeting with Saudi Prince Bandar 03/08/1988</a>
CLOSED	Reimbursement of Iran
CLOSED	Security Council Resolution 598
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Shamir Visit 02/18/1987</a>
CLOSED	Speeches - Frank C. Carlucci

#### **RAC Box 5**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Stinger (1)(2)
OPEN / DIGITIZED	<a href="#">Terrorism</a>
CLOSED	Travel - Moscow and London 02/19/1988-02/23/1988

Status	Title
CLOSED	Travel – Robert B. Oakley
CLOSED	<i>Washington Times</i> Article (10/12/1987) and Correspondence (1)(2)
CLOSED	Sixth U.S.-Pakistan Consultative Group 05/19/1987-05/21/1987, Ambassador Robert B. Oakley, NSC (Binder) (1)-(4)
CLOSED	Eighth U.S.-Pakistan Consultative Group 05/24/1987, Copy for NSC Representative (Binder) (1)-(3)
CLOSED	Under Secretary Armacost’s Trip to India and Pakistan 07/24/1987-07/29/1987 (Binder) (1)-(4)
CLOSED	Under Secretary Armacost’s Trip to India 07/30/1987-08/01/1987, Ambassador Oakley (Binder) (1)-(3)
CLOSED	Under Secretary Armacost’s Trip to Pakistan 08/01/1987-08/03/1987, Ambassador Oakley (Binder) (1)-(5)