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Guide to the

Robert Van Lierop papers

1965-2001 [bulk 1971-1993]

Sc MG 373

Compiled by Heather Lember, 2017.

Summary

Creator: Lierop, Robert F. van

Title: Robert Van Lierop papers

Date: 1965-2001 [bulk 1971-1993]

Size: 36.96 linear feet (88 boxes)

Source: Donated by Robert Van Lierop in 1987 and 2006.

Abstract: Robert Van Lierop is a lawyer, political activist, filmmaker, and diplomat who served as Vanuatu's permanent representative to the United Nations. His papers date from 1965 to 2001, and chronicle his professional life and political activism. The collection contains correspondence, legal papers, research materials, and subject files compiled from various facets of Van Lierop's career.

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Creator History

Robert Van Lierop (1939-) is a diplomat, filmmaker, lawyer, lecturer, political activist, and writer. He served in the United States Air Force from 1956 to 1960, and is a graduate of Hofstra University (1964) and New York University School of Law (1967).

Van Lierop began his professional legal career in 1967, serving as assistant counsel at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he litigated cases on school

desegregation, employment discrimination, police brutality, and housing discrimination. In 1968, Van Lierop wrote a section of the brief in the case of *Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co.*, a landmark Supreme Court decision which banned racial discrimination in property rentals and sales. The following year, Van Lierop took a job as an associate at the law firm of Dornbush, Mensh & Mandelstam, where he worked on estates, corporate law, and commercial legal proceedings, while also continuing to litigate constitutional law cases.

Due to his ongoing commitment to political activism, Van Lierop travelled to Mozambique in 1971 to work on a film about the country's struggle for independence. *A Luta Continua (The Struggle Continues)* was released in 1972, and depicts Mozambique's revolution against Portuguese colonial rule. This was followed up with *O Povo Organizado (The People Organized)* (1976), about life in Mozambique after the revolution.

Upon returning to the United States in 1977, Van Lierop served as coordinator for the Mozambique Film Project. In this role he participated in a nationwide effort to raise money for the construction of a hospital and maternity clinic in rural Mozambique. Van Lierop arranged screenings of his documentaries, and travelled to high schools, colleges, churches, and community groups giving lectures about Southern Africa.

That same year, Van Lierop was appointed co-producer of WABC-TV's *Like It Is*, a news and public affairs show addressing issues relevant to African American communities in New York City. The program featured interviews with educators, activists, artists, writers, and politicians such as Michael Manley, Sidney Poitier, and James Baldwin. It also aired long-form programs, including documentaries produced by Van Lierop about such topics as Southern Africa and the United Nations.

Between 1977 and 1978, Van Lierop led delegations of African American activists to Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Cuba. He returned to legal work in 1978, becoming a founding partner at the New York City firm, Van Lierop, Burns & Bassett. The firm advised governments and large organizations on civil rights, constitutional law, and international law, as well as litigating in the fields of sports and entertainment law.

In 1980, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific that had recently gained independence, asked Van Lierop to be the country's permanent representative to the United Nations. Van Lierop accepted the job and spent the next decade campaigning against apartheid in South Africa, as well as advocating for the decolonization of a number of countries including East Timor, Western Sahara, and New Caledonia. In 1991, Van Lierop was awarded the Vanuatu Independence Medal by Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman.

Van Lierop served as Vice President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1988, and was the founding chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States from 1990 to 1994. He also worked as chair of the Special Committee on Decolonization, chairman of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, and co-moderated a United Nations conference on human rights in 1998. Having recognized the importance in combatting climate change throughout his tenure as an ambassador, Van Lierop was elected Vice-Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2012.

Van Lierop has written many articles related to his political work which have appeared in such publications as *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Southern Africa*, *Black World*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. He has also worked as a contributing editor to *The Review of African Political Economy*, and served on the board of directors of the Black Economic Research Center, the American Committee on Africa, the New York Civil Liberties Union, the National Lawyers Guild, and WBAI.

Scope and Content Note

The collection dates from 1965 to 2001 (bulk dates 1971-1993) and contains files chronicling Robert Lierop's legal career; his work in film and television; his political and community activism; and his service with the United Nations.

The Legal files are arranged chronologically by law firm or institution, and comprise files from early work he did as a student at New York University, as well as his tenures with the NAACP; Fleisher, Dornbush, Mensch & Mendelstam; and Van Lierop, Burns & Bassett. Van Lierop organized papers from each firm into alphabetical subject files, which hold correspondence, court papers, notes, and research. Of special interest are the files from Van Lierop's work on the *Jones v. Alfred H Mayer Company* case for the NAACP.

Van Lierop's work as a documentary director and television producer are detailed in the Film and Television files. These materials include items related to his documentaries *A Luta Continua* and *O Povo Organizado*; his work as coordinator of the Mozambique Film Project; and his production work on *Like It Is*. These files are arranged chronologically by project and hold contracts, correspondence, equipment inventories, financial information, film treatments, press releases, promotional materials, requests for funding, reports, reviews, scripts, and notes from speaking engagements.

Materials from Van Lierop's community and political activism are found in the Activism and Politics files. These items are arranged alphabetically, and contain research, drafts of Van Lierop's writing, and papers detailing his delegations to Cuba, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Also included are files from his service with Manhattan's Community Board 9, the New York City District 5 Community School Board, and the St. Vent Block Association.

Van Lierop's tenure as permanent representative to Vanuatu is chronicled in the United Nations files. These materials are arranged into alphabetical subject files, and hold agendas, conference papers, correspondence, meeting minutes, notes, research, and transcripts of speeches delivered by Van Lierop. Much of these files address Van Lierop's work on various committees and working groups such as the Alliance of Small Island States, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Non-Aligned Movement. There are also numerous notes and resources from United Nations General Assembly meetings, the Commission on Sustainable Development, Conference on Environment and Development, and the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission. Van Lierop also kept research files on many United Nations member countries, and corresponded with numerous ambassadors, diplomats, and world leaders. The United Nations files are notable for the abundance of research and discussion materials related to climate change and environmental issues.

Arrangement: File are arranged chronologically by topic or institution in accordance with Van Lierop's professional career. Most materials within each topic are arranged in alphabetical subject files.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American diplomats
African American motion picture producers and directors
Civil rights

Climate change
Constitutional law
Documentary films -- Mozambique
National liberation movements -- Mozambique

Occupations

Ambassadors
Lawyers
Motion picture directors
Political activists
Television producers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Legal files
Minutes (administrative records)
Research
Scripts

Geographic Names

Manhattan -- New York (N.Y.)
Mozambique
Vanuatu

Names

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
United Nations

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- b. 84 f. 13 Swaziland 1986
- b. 84 f. 14 Tanzania 1986
- b. 84 f. 15 Time Sheets 1991
- b. 84 f. 16 Togo 1986
- b. 84 f. 17 *Tok Blong SPPF* 1986-1988
- b. 85 f. 1 Travel Reimbursement 1993
- b. 85 f. 2 Trinidad and Tobago 1986
- b. 85 f. 3 Tunisia 1988
- b. 85 f. 4 Turkey 1993
- b. 85 f. 5 United Arab Emirates 1986
- Vanuatu
- b. 85 f. 6-14 1980-1988
- b. 86 f. 1-7 1986-1993
- b. 86 f. 8 Venezuela 1990
- b. 86 f. 9 War Crimes Commission (UNWCC) 1987
- World Coast Conference
- b. 86 f. 10-11 1993
- b. 87 f. 1-4 1993
- b. 88 f. 1-2 1993
- b. 88 f. 3 World Conservation Union 1993
- b. 88 f. 4 World Council of Churches 1987
- b. 88 f. 5 Yugoslavia 1989
- b. 88 f. 6 Zambia 1986
- b. 88 f. 7-9 Zimbabwe 1985-1991