

Iowa's man from 'foggy bottom'

By ROBERT HULLIHAN

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He neither looks nor acts like the man most responsible for steering Iowa into a kind of foreign policy of its own, expressed in the distant travels of Gov. Robert Ray.

Kenneth Michael Quinn looks like the mayor's nephew in a political novel — the man you would be sent to see if you were trying to collect a party debt and get your brother-in-law a job with the city sanitation department.

He has the almost fictional Irish face that is expected to hang in the galleries of big city political machines.

He has a kind of workman's habit of sweeping back both shirt sleeves as he talks, as though he is about to plunge his hands into some sticky de-

partmental problem that needs fixing.

These are simply gestures of conversation, idle enough in anyone else but unexpected in a Foreign Service officer of the U.S. State Department — which is what Quinn is.

The other unexpected element in Quinn is that he sits now in a basement office at the Iowa Statehouse as one of Ray's aides.

He is the man who has initiated or planned or made smooth much of Ray's increasingly frequent foreign travel — the recent China trade mission, the journey to Moscow.

Quinn came here last year on an exchange from the State Department. It is a program in which the department sends veteran Foreign Service

officers to work for a year in state governments.

"A kind of re-Americanization program for people who have been overseas for a long time," Quinn said.

Quinn worked in South Vietnam for 5½ years during the war. As a district senior advisor living in Vietnamese villages, he was one of the few State Department officers often engaged in combat.

He was responsible for protection of his village and for controlling the use of "American military assets" in his district. That came to mean 250 hours of combat assaults in helicopters and night ambushes in the rice paddies. He was wounded in a rocket attack on one of his villages.

With this background, it is curious

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Ken Quinn at work in the governor's office in the Statehouse.

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to hear Quinn say that he came to work in Iowa "looking for something new, exciting and interesting. I was personally attracted by Gov. Ray and Iowa's refugee program."

Extended Leave

He has extended his leave for another year and now will not return to the State Department until sometime this summer, if he returns.

If Quinn fails the look of narrow breeding and the air of essential distaste popularly associated with foreign service people, it may be because he was reared in Dubuque and graduated from Loras College there.

There was no "old family" or "old money" leverage for his "dream" of a career in Foreign Service.

"I can remember people bringing food to our house in the winter when I

was in high school," he said. His mother died at 48. His father suffered a series of business failures and job losses.

Quinn, 37, still seems to be faintly surprised that he has spent 12 years with the State Department and that he has gained a mid-level grade in the Foreign Service.

"I never thought people from Dubuque got into the foreign service," he said.

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance must have wondered about that, too, a couple of years ago when the secretary sat listening to Quinn tell

him that the State Department was suffering "declining excellence and drifting toward mediocrity."

Quinn was speaking then as the representative of 46 other junior Foreign Service officers, all of them unhappy with the state of affairs in the State Department.

Quinn won the Rivkin award for that encounter. The award is given by the Foreign Service Association — the State Department's "union" — for "intellectual courage and creative dissent."

By the time the award was given last year, Quinn was working in Iowa, "by choice," he said, not as punishment for speaking candidly to Cyrus Vance.

He has a long, friendly letter from Vance to prove that. It is framed, as are his letters from Dr. Henry Kissinger and former president Gerald Ford.

When he returned from Vietnam, Quinn worked under Kissinger as a member of the staff of the National Security Council in the White House.

He was also interpreter of the Vietnamese language for President Ford.

And he was one of several young Foreign Service officers involved in a so-called "conspiracy" to force the American embassy in Saigon to make plans to evacuate Americans and Vietnamese employees as North Vietnamese armies closed in on the city in 1975.

"I went back there in April that year," he said. "Nothing was going on in the embassy — no thinking, no planning for evacuation. I knew the city would fall in three or four weeks, that the situation was hopeless."

When he returned to the White House, Quinn became one of the junior officers who went ahead with evacuation plans without official approval. They operated beyond the rules, a territory not unfamiliar to Quinn.

"It was a question of seeing to it that the right thing was done," he said.

Sense of Loss

He watched the evacuation of the embassy in Saigon on television in the White House. He watched it with more sense of loss and tragedy than most Americans.

He had become deeply involved in the culture, religion and village life during his years in Vietnam. His wife is Vietnamese and they have one child, a 3-year-old son.

Twice he used the word "pageantry" in talking about his experience in Vietnam and twice recalled the word as "not quite the right word."

But it may be the right word for the Vietnam Quinn saw and cannot forget. It was a world and time in which he could both fight a known enemy and protect "the people." And he had the power to do "the right thing."

He has never been able to find that kind of a world again and, in a sense that he recognizes, he is himself a kind of Vietnamese refugee in Iowa.

When he first had gone to Vietnam years earlier, he had believed the

United States was pursuing a deliberate policy of destruction. "But soon after I arrived I came to feel we were playing an honorable role," he said.

Honor, Humanity

With Quinn the question of honor seems to merge, at some point, with individual humanity. The point is pain.

He remembered a night in one of his Vietnamese villages when a 17-year-old boy came home to see his mother. "For one reason or another, he had gone over to the Viet Cong. He'd been shot in the stomach in a night ambush. He lay there in his mother's arms, bleeding.

"Our medical helicopters wouldn't come for him. Nobody was doing anything for him. We were down to the last one — me." The wounded enemy youth lay outside the rules.

Quinn drove the boy to an aid station, 17 miles down a dangerous road at night.

"If you are talking about someone's life, yes, you bend or break the rules,"

he said. "I'm not a bleeding heart liberal, but when I'm face to face with pain and suffering I can't turn my back."

Quinn lived and worked for some time near the Cambodian border and wrote the first informed report on what was beginning to happen in that country several years ago.

He saw the results this year when he accompanied Ray on a trade mission to China and a side trip to a refugee camp of starving Cambodians. He and Ray and Mrs. Ray watched people die.

Now Quinn heads up for Ray an effort called "Iowa SHARES." Except for Quinn and a few volunteers, it is simply an appeal with a post office box number to which Iowans can send contributions to aid the Cambodians.

There isn't much precedent for this sort of thing in state government — if it is in state government — but, then, there isn't much precedent here for Ken Quinn, either.