

What would Ben Franklin do in Paris today?

THE U.S. AMBASSADOR & THE MODERN AGE

by James W. Spain

For the past half-dozen years I made my living as an ambassador. People have not stopped asking, "Just what does an ambassador do?" The question is something of an improvement on the one encountered by former ambassador to Great Britain, Kingman Brewster, as reported in *Newsweek* a year ago: "Do you think ambassadors matter any more?" Perhaps my acquaintances are simply kinder—or less sophisticated—than Brewster's.

Most of the classic books on diplomacy try to answer such questions by describing ambassadors as analysts, reporters, and negotiators. The American public favors another, simpler response. So do many top administrators in Washington—especially when they are new to office. They conclude that in this age of jet aircraft, instant communication, summits, and special envoys, ambassadors are mere post office boxes and innkeepers.

Both views are removed from reality. Foreign affairs is a big part of the U.S. Government's business, and American ambassadors carry on—well or poorly—varied and vital parts of that business. To the degree their horizons are limited, it is not by the nature of the job but by their own knowledge, skill, and personality.

THE REPRESENTATIVE

An ambassador is *the* representative of the United States in the country to which he is assigned. This role is today particularly important because most governments are concerned about what the U.S. thinks of them. They are almost equally interested in what is going on in the U.S. itself: what America considers important and how it is changing in thought and action.

Foreign governments may learn these things for themselves a few times a year in messages from the president, in mention (or nonmention) in his annual message to Congress, in a public statement from the secretary of state, or by way of a U.S. vote in the

United Nations. Of course they also get a picture of the United States (often exaggerated) from the American press.

Most of the time, however, other governments get their day-to-day feel for the U.S. through its representative, the American ambassador, who lives among them. Unlike his foreign counterparts in Washington, the American ambassador abroad is likely to see the president, the prime minister, and the foreign minister of the host country on a regular basis. He can discount a speech by a bellicose American general that has frightened that local government or he can reinforce a statement by an American Cabinet member on some aspect of U.S. fiscal policy. If no one else has pronounced on an issue of importance, the ambassador himself may do so.

Sometimes modes of representation are formal and antiquated. In Turkey I wore a morning suit to greet the president on the New Year in his palace. I did so according to a strict order of protocol: after the West German ambassador, who had arrived in Ankara a month earlier than I, and before the Chinese ambassador, who had arrived two weeks later. Between offerings of good wishes, I managed to assure the president that the U.S. security assistance program for that year would reach the agreed figure. In contrast, diplomatic approaches can also be casual and almost chaotic. In Tanzania, wearing a sport shirt, I dropped in on the president to have a beer in celebration of a step forward on the road to independence for Zimbabwe. I also managed to get in a few words about the non-threatening nature of U.S. military assistance to Kenya. The point is that in Turkey or in Tanzania, in cutaway or cut-offs, the work is the same: getting another government to understand and support U.S. interests.

The representation function involves more than merely verbal exchanges. No international lawyer ever probed his law books more or put more effort into advocacy for a corporation than did the series of American ambassadors in Turkey when negotiating what became in 1980 the Enforcement of Penal Judgments Treaty, under which American prisoners in Turkish jails may be turned over to U.S. authorities for the completion of their sentences. Few Pentagon

James W. Spain joined the Foreign Service in 1951, serving as Ambassador to Tanzania (1975-79) and to Turkey (1980-81). He is currently a Resident Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

strategists devoted as much time and imagination as these same ambassadors to designing and negotiating overflight, landing, and electronic facilities rights in Turkey, which were formalized in a 1980 Defense and Economic Cooperation Agreement.

Furthermore, the United States Government is one of the world's largest lending agencies. In Ankara, for example, the American ambassador is the branch bank manager who recommends and arranges the rescheduling of overdue loans. In Dar-Es-Salaam he is the friendly loan officer who selects a \$20 million food production program over a \$15 million industrial one.

THE ARBITER

When the ambassador is not representing the U.S. to other governments, he does plenty of arbitrating within it. The ambassador has the final word on how many people from various U.S. agencies will be stationed in his country. Is the right mix seven International Communication Agency and three Central Intelligence Agency, or seven CIA and three ICA? Three from the U.S. Agency for International Development and none from the Department of Agriculture, or three USDA and none from AID? Should the chief of the U.S. military assistance mission (who reports to one section of the Defense Department) be a general and the defense attaché (who reports to another) be a colonel, or vice versa? Or should both positions be combined and headed by a major? (No ambassador has yet been able to achieve the last.)

The personnel charts, of course, reflect broader matters of policy. USICA's wish to project an image of an honest and trustworthy America must be balanced against CIA's desire to acquire as much information as possible and by any means possible. USDA wants to sell America's surplus grain. USAID's aim is to help a country achieve self-sufficiency in food production. Where, in any given case, do American interests lie?

The primary aim of the Drug Enforcement Administration is cooperation with the local police to put all narcotics offenders in jail. The State Department Consular Corps is devoted to keeping or getting Americans out of jail. Which of them should be allowed to do what to or for whom? (In Turkey, one afternoon, I instructed the resident DEA agent in how to participate in an arrest and, on the following morning, met with the consular officer to discuss how best to help defend the accused U.S. citizen.)

THE PATER FAMILIAS

In most foreign countries the American residents (e.g., 200 in Tanzania; 10,000 in Turkey) have a sense of community. Those who are on the U.S. Government payroll and their dependents are willy-nilly part of the official family. Some "private" Americans—for example, missionaries in Tanzania and tobacco buyers in Turkey—have developed enough knowledge and self-confidence over the years to prefer taking care of themselves and not rely on the ambassador and his staff. Most, however, are still—and properly so—very aware of their status as Americans and of their rights and obligations, both social and official, to other

Americans and to their government.

To resident Americans in general the ambassador is like the mayor of their town or small city. He is obliged to show up when they give a party for a visiting board chairman, regional manager, or dean of their parent educational institution. He is expected at their community celebrations, and they expect to be invited to his—including the annual July Fourth party, which has nearly bankrupted more than one career officer.

For visiting Americans (a few thousand a year in Tanzania; several hundreds of thousands in Turkey) the ambassador has another set of functions. Not unreasonably, the famous or important expect a gesture of hospitality. The destitute expect—and often get—emergency funds or loans for their tickets home. Seamen who have missed their ships are entitled by the venerable U.S. "clipper ship" laws to transportation. If they are missionaries or educators, their right to preach or teach might need to be defended. If they are tourists caught without certified immunization during a cholera epidemic and consequently unable to leave the country, the U.S. embassy must find a doctor, serum, and needles to enable them to continue on their travels.

THE COMPETITOR

If the ambassador overseas is in a powerful position to moderate and control the competition among different branches of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, he himself participates in another kind of contest: the one with ambassadors in the same capital for access to and influence with his host government. The power and largesse of the United States and the usually high quality of the embassy staff and communications are the American ambassador's built-in assets. However, such advantages are sometimes balanced or even outweighed by other characteristics of the U.S. Government: its inability to keep a secret, its unpredictability on policy, its ever-changing top leadership, and its large and complex bureaucracy.

Thus the ambassador's main weapons in competing with his colleagues of the diplomatic corps are those traditional to diplomacy: knowledge of the country, its history, culture, and language; personal friendships and the bona fides established with members of the host government and influential private citizens; the ability to satisfy the host country's interests as well as the ambassador's own. (These can range from assisting in an Ivy League admission for the son of a cabinet minister to sharing a U.S. analysis of gold futures.)

Success or failure in this competition ultimately is reflected in policy, but it is often discerned in such matters as who gets three minutes rather than ten seconds with the country's president in the formal receiving line, who sees the foreign minister immediately and who must wait two weeks, and who gets invited to observe annual military maneuvers and who has to depend on newspaper accounts for his report home. In every diplomatic corps in every capital of the world there is an acute if unspoken ranking based upon such minutia. For all the power, prestige, and wealth that the American ambassador represents, he is not always near the top of the list.

THE MORALIST

The great moral decisions in foreign affairs—whether to enter the fight against Hitler, to effect an immediate weapons freeze, to admit millions of refugees—are made by the top political leadership in Washington. But American ambassadors abroad often must deal with smaller matters that involve questions of right and wrong.

On rare and spectacular occasions principled stands on matters of right and wrong lead to defections, resignations, or dismissal. More frequently, such questions are merely additional factors in decision-making, albeit of the sort that are disregarded at the cost of personal integrity. In Washington an interagency committee can confidently, even casually, place country X near the top of the Intelligence Priority List as things begin to heat up in that part of the world. It is the ambassador in country X who must live with the reality of that decision, with the fact that a stepping up of the covert collection of information means that more agents are exposed to danger, that there will be greater invasion of individual privacy and more corruption of official trust.

The ambassador, as diplomat, may be used to telling less than the whole truth to the foreign minister. But when USICA gets its orders from Washington and begins to gear up for a public campaign of what may be untruth—or at best propaganda—the ambassador has to decide how far he will let his public affairs officer go in the host country. Or, take an AID briefing, after which the ambassador recognizes that the proposed new small-boat project is designed to benefit overstocked U.S. manufacturers rather more than the impoverished peasants of his host country; he cannot but hesitate before placing his signature on the annual country development program.

If all of the above has done something to undercut the image of today's ambassador as a post office box, neither is he superhuman. (I knew one of that kind once, but it was a faraway country, and, besides, the wretch is dead.)

Even the best of today's ambassadors are ordinary, hard-working, often tired people who depend on their staff to carry out many of their decisions. The ambassador's official functions are shared with his DCM (deputy chief of mission), usually a career Foreign Service Officer likely to be an ambassador himself one day. The economic officer draws up the revised repayment lists for rescheduled loans. The defense attaché gets the aircraft clearances. The agricultural attaché samples the soil for agricultural programs. The political officers lunch with their foreign counterparts to find out how the U.K., USSR, or the PRC are doing with the host government.

In long-established Foreign Service tradition, ambassadors also depend on their families. They count on their children enrolled in local schools to be better mannered and more wary of liquor and narcotics than might be expected of them at home. They assume that their spouses will take visiting VIPs sightseeing while they themselves are visiting Americans detained in jail. They depend on State Department officials too, hoping for tolerance and trust when they delay or equivocate on their instructions. They depend on the secretary of state and the president for continuing that confidence by virtue of which the ambassador holds his job. But it is the ambassador who makes the decisions, and it is he, along with the president and the secretary of state, who is accountable to U.S. law and public opinion for American policy and actions in the host country.

By and large ambassadors earn their \$60,000 a year.

COMING

In September, our Third Annual Fall Books Issue, with WALTER C. CLEMENS, JR., on the world of V. S. Naipaul...ANDRE BRINK on the plight of South Africa's writers...RICHARD RAND on the new Library of America...JOHN BECKER on Northrop Frye and the Bible...NEWTON KOLTZ on seven futures for man...