

Low Humor in High Places

Diego C. Asencio

There are two common images of a Foreign Service officer. One is that of a dour, serious bureaucrat, constantly rushing from one stressful, high-powered engagement to the next. The other is the picture of a suave, always impeccably dressed individual, smooth-talking his or her way from one high-society function to another. As I was assembling material, papers, memories, and ideas for my memoirs, however, it struck me that neither caricature captures the full experience of working in the diplomatic corps.

As in any other field, serving as a diplomat involves hard work, but it also has its rewarding and more entertaining moments. In retrospect, I find three particular incidents to be not only humorous, but representative of the environment in which a Foreign Service officer operates. I hope that these events will help provide a different perspective on the seemingly mysterious life and work of a foreign policy professional.

Tempering Tempers

WASHINGTON, D.C., 1965

One of the most difficult, pressure prone, and incidentally most powerful jobs in the Foreign Service is that of a special assistant to an assistant secretary of state. This was precisely the position in which I found myself when I served with Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs/Coor-

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spent thirty-one years in the Foreign Service. He is former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia and Brazil and former Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs. He is now Executive Director of the U.S.-Spain Council. As Ambassador to Colombia, he was kidnapped along with other diplomats by the M-19, a terrorist organization, and held for sixty-one days.

dinator of the Alliance for Progress, Jack Vaughn, from 1964 to 1967. My work provided me with a marvelous window on the making of history but was by no means an easy task.

It was a rainy Washington evening in 1965—the equivalent of Snoopy's "It was a dark and stormy night." The phone rang and Secretary of State Dean Rusk said to my boss, Assistant Secretary Vaughn, "Jack, Bobby wants to go to

invite the senator and his staff to the State Department's Bureau of Inter-American Affairs for one final briefing. The all-star cast for the briefing included the assistant secretary, his deputies, and the country directors of areas on the senator's itinerary. I could hardly contain my excitement as I ushered the senator and his people into the conference room where the group awaited. As the senator and his group entered the

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Latin America. Please set it up for him and give him whatever he needs." Both the assistant secretary and I knew he was referring to the junior senator from New York, Robert Kennedy. The next morning, I was at the senator's door ready to put our resources at his disposal.

This began a period of constant visits to Capitol Hill. As your typical young, ambitious, starry-eyed political officer, I was delighted at this turn of events. I saw this as an opportunity and a career-enhancing move. I was the immediate State Department contact for someone who might be president of the United States one day. On each trip, I brought piles of briefing books, proposed schedules, policy papers, biographies, and other foreign policy data to help the senator and his staff prepare for what was to become an epic visit.

I orchestrated the paper flow and a parade of departmental experts on a range of subjects to the senator's office, and decided, as a *piece de resistance*, to

room and sat down at one end of the table, I could not help but notice the State Department staff brooding on the opposite end.

Disaster struck. Assistant Secretary Vaughn started the proceedings by politely asking, "Senator, before we begin is there any particular question you would like us to answer?" Senator Kennedy replied, "Yes, perhaps you can tell me why our Latin American Policy is so f—d up." Assistant Secretary Vaughn, a red-headed ex-boxer with a fiery temper, nevertheless coolly replied, "We have the same policy now that we had under your brother." Visibly irritated, the senator responded, "You do not have the same policy now that we had under President Kennedy." Vaughn bristled and said, "We have the same f—ing policy that we had under your brother."

The senator stood up and started towards the door. I quickly ran after him, desperately trying to douse the flames. The Senator turned to me,

stared hard, and said, "I'm gonna get that guy." One of his staffers brushed me aside, saying, "That goes for you too, you SOB." "There goes my career down the tubes," I thought. But I would not have time to seek alternative positions for myself—a soon-to-be jobless junior diplomat—as Vaughn was leaving on a trip of his own with me in his entourage.

We were high over the Andes when Deputy Assistant Secretary Bob Sayre called me on the plane. He read aloud the front-page headline story from *The Washington Post*. It contained an acid description of the senator's exchange with Vaughn. With a chuckle Sayre said, "Tell Jack that President Lyndon Johnson, who had been contemplating firing him, was so delighted with the story and his defense of the administration's Latin America policy in the face of the 'Kennedy Legend' that he has decided to keep him on."

Miscommunicating Communiqués CARACAS, VENEZUELA, 1976

It was a delicate moment in Caracas. The Venezuelan government was in the process of nationalizing the petroleum industry. The U.S. Embassy was heavily involved in ensuring that American oil companies got a fair shake, while avoiding confrontations and preserving U.S. national interests. At this timely moment, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger announced that he was coming for a three-day visit. As the deputy chief of mission, I worked laboriously with the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry on the joint communiqué traditionally issued at the conclusion of such visits. After an entire week of very careful negotiations and crafting, we finalized the document within only hours of the secretary's arrival.

Secretary Kissinger was giving a policy speech before a combined U.S.-Venezuelan blue-ribbon audience in the auditorium of a hotel. I went to Kissinger's suite, where he asked me to wait while he finished dressing, saying that he would read the communiqué on his way to the auditorium. He walked out of his dressing room at a fast pace, took the communiqué from my hands, and proceeded with me to a waiting elevator. He read the material as the elevator descended and continued reading as we walked across the lobby to the auditorium. At the door, he turned to me and in his inimitable Teutonic accent said, "I want the last paragraph first and the first paragraph last." He then walked into the auditorium to great applause, while I stood transfixed trying to figure out what to do, watching the doors close in my face.

I sent a bellboy to find the Venezuelan foreign minister, Escobar Salom, who was looking forward to the secretary's speech and was unhappy at the interruption. His response was, "Absolutely not. We took great pains in getting it just right. I want it the way it is." He turned on his heels and strode back into the auditorium, the doors closing once again in my face.

Meanwhile, the press attaché, looking disheveled, came running across the lobby, waving his arms. He informed me that he had about one hundred journalists after him, clamoring for the text of the communiqué, which we had promised to release that hour. Just then, I spotted Ambassador Harry Shlaudermann making his way to the auditorium. I rushed forward and tackled him with our problem. At the last moment, we came to a decision. We resolved that the Spanish version would have the first paragraph first and that the English version would have the

last paragraph first. Nobody noticed the difference—so much for the value of joint communiqués!

Years later when I was ambassador to Brazil, I had Dr. Kissinger, who was then a private citizen, as my guest. When I informed him of what I had done, he responded in mock outrage, with a twinkle in his eyes, "You defied an order of the secretary of state!"

Blame it on the Press

CARACAS, VENEZUELA, 1977

After Ambassador Shlaudemann left Caracas to become assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Ambassador Viron "Pete" Valky, a distinguished veteran of diplomatic wars, took his place. One of our most interesting crises arose from a *New York Times* article that said that the volatile and charismatic Venezuelan president Carlos Andres Peres had been on the CIA payroll when he was fighting the Cuban insurgency in Venezuela as minister of the interior.

Late one afternoon I received a telephone call from the minister of information, Diego Arria, who asked me to stop by his home for a drink. As I walked into his library, he handed me the telephone and President Peres's voice greeted me. "I have just instructed the Foreign Minister to expel both the overt and covert political sections of your embassy. The Foreign Minister is looking for you at this very moment."

I protested, saying, "Mr. President, if you do that, it will take years to get U.S.-Venezuelan relations back on an even keel. I was informed this afternoon that contrary to our usual policy, which is neither to confirm nor deny stories of

this type, there is a draft of a letter on its way to President Carter's desk denying the story." President Peres informed me that he could not back down, having issued the order. He suggested that I go down to the beach where no one would find me and have dinner. "By all means," he said, "don't go home."

Back in my car, I received a telephone call from the embassy duty officer, who informed me that the letter from President Carter was coming over our communications equipment. I dashed back to the embassy and was relieved to read an absolute denial of the *New York Times* story in a friendly letter to President Peres, signed by President Carter. I called Minister Arria, who asked me to proceed immediately to the presidential palace, and that he would handle everything else.

Ambassador Valky picked me up and we sheepishly entered the presidential palace near midnight in the face of a full media blow-out, with television cameras, microphones, and flash bulbs everywhere. The press corps followed us into the president's office, where we found President Peres, flanked by Foreign Minister Escobar Salom, looking stern with his arms crossed. Ambassador Valky and I sat amidst the explosion of flash bulbs and the full blast of the television lights.

The ambassador handed the letter to President Peres, who made a great show of opening the envelope and carefully scanning the letter. He then looked at the media with a radiant smile. After a few moments of picture-taking, he asked his aides and the reporters to clear the room. Once the press left, he handed the letter to the foreign minister and said, "Read it to me; I can't read English."