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Americans Aren't Ugly Now, and They're Alert

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WITH THE new Johnson Administration now formally inaugurated, there will be a number of new ambassadorial appointments and a reshuffling of State Department personnel of other ranks among our hundred-odd overseas outposts. Inevitably, some of these appointments will be determined by political considerations, but the continual need to improve our Foreign Service will also be served.

How is the Foreign Service doing these days? Is it still full of people who do not command the language of the country in which they live? Do they ever get out of the capitals? How do they compare with other American representatives, from the Peace Corps to the members of military missions?

Visiting 12 American embassies in Latin America and seven in Africa in the course of the last two years while I was engaged in a sociological study, I gathered the following impressions.

FEW PEOPLE realize that much of our information on the political life of other countries is obtained not by the hush-hush work of the CIA or the intelligence arms of the military services, but by the political sections of the embassies.

Each embassy I visited had such a section, sometimes one man, as in Guatemala; sometimes a whole suite of offices, as in Rio. The political section people collect and analyze "manifest" information: information that is available without any spying or other covert activity.

They read the newspapers of the host country religiously, meet as many of its well-informed citizens as possible and attend meetings at which they hide neither their identities nor their jobs. These men serve as the eyes and ears of the ambassadors and the State Department. They assess who is likely to win the next election, why the head of a party usually friendly to us suddenly denounces "Washington neo-imperialism" and what the popular reaction is likely to be if our monetary stabilization program fails.

Most of the political section men I met were young. The large majority graduated from Princeton, Yale, or Harvard. They all spoke fluently the language of the country in which they were stationed, if it were an easy Spanish in Mexico City or a difficult Amharic in Addis Ababa.

I rarely mentioned a name to them, be it of a social science professor I met in my professional capacity or a leading businessman I met on the flight, that they could not identify. If the name did not ring a bell, there was a small card catalogue on the desk that quickly settled the question.

Early in the morning one usually finds the political section boys reading local newspapers, especially if the country has several and they are not government controlled. (Even a slow reader will be done rather quickly with the newspapers of Zanzibar or Ethiopia.) In the larger embassies, there is usually a weekly conference in which the ambassador and members of other sections often participate. Lunch is often spent with a "contact," then back to the office, where there are endless reports to write for Washington and frequent demands from the ambassador for information.

IN MY JUDGMENT, 17 of the 19 members of political sections I met were well informed, but all but three or four were typical desk men. They spent about 80 per cent of their time in the embassy, reading, writing, participating in meetings.

When they went out, it was usually to lunch in the capital and back to the office. The people they knew personally ranged over a wide spectrum; a political section man in a major Latin-American capital helped me to meet a Communist leader, though the party there is half-illegal. Still, those "contacts" were almost without exception big-city people who had Western manners and were easy to communicate with.

One of the few exceptions was a political section man in Africa who was on social terms with a rather savvy gentleman believed to be the local paymaster of the Communist Chinese. The gentleman, it turned out, lived in a house whose windows and doors were reinforced with iron bars, had several native officers hanging around and looked more like a judo teacher than a political leader. Surely he was a man worth knowing.

THERE ARE more Peace Corpsmen in several countries I visited than men from all the other American agencies and services combined. Out in the bush and in cities other than the capital, the Peace Corpsman is often the most visible and most frequently encountered American ambassador.

Young, anxious to get to know the countries and regions in which they are stationed, Peace Corps members log much time-off mileage by foot, bicycle, horseback, mule and boat. On a trip from La Paz, Bolivia, to Cuzco, Peru, with five Peace Corpsmen, the train stopped in a small village a hundred miles from nowhere and a young American in jeans and a T-shirt got aboard. He was a Corps member stationed in the Dominican Republic and was tramping across South America during his 30-day leave.

During the two days and a night on the train, he tried to get by on one meal a day to save money to buy souvenirs for his three sisters back home. The other Corps members and I succeeded in getting him to improve his diet without neglecting his gift list.

It was on that journey, that I first formed the impression, later strengthened by meeting Peace Corps people in other countries, that the most important effect the Peace Corps will ever have will be on the United States itself. A returning Peace Corpsman will have a hard time forgetting the utter misery in which people in so many parts of the world live.

He might well be quite critical of some or even most forms of foreign aid, but he is likely to favor more and better sharing with other people. Having usually accomplished little himself and seen others achieve no more, he will have gained an understanding of the costs and difficulties of promoting social changes in other countries.

He will laugh at attempts to introduce democracy into the Dominican Republic on short order, or agrarian reforms in Chile by talking to the landlords, or social progress in Guatemala

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by collaborating with the generals. He will remember that, aping one of our worst habits, Latin Americans tend to call their opponents "Communists" whatever they really are.

When these matters are discussed in his community's church, newspaper or bar, he will declare with the authority of a man who was there—and who dirtied his hands doing a job—that we should help more and expect less. By the time 10,000 former Peace Corpsmen are spread over the United States, they will have a great liberalizing effect on American public opinion.

ONE OF THE saddest impressions I gained was that the Army is able to send better people to underdeveloped countries than the Agency for International Development (AID), which has some rather undersirable consequences. The problem was first called to my attention when I had a drink with a high-ranking Latin-American army officer who was in charge of the engineering battalions of his country. He said he found the AID engineers far inferior to those of the United States Army. I asked to meet with both.

The two AID engineers I met were tired men. They had been on the road in one underdeveloped country or another for close to 20 years. They hated the climate, feared the diseases and enjoyed the cheap servants. The conversation never really got away from the difficulty of servants to prevent them from stealing and the ways you could get good scotch for half its official price.

Both men were contemptuous of a local population that could not build a road or drive a truck "without forgetting to oil it," etc. They were uninterested in discussing their jobs and much more interested in finding out from me how far the recently announced cuts in the AID budget would go. They had more to drink during one lunch than I had during a long summer trip.

THE ARMY ENGINEER, against whom I was initially biased because he would not see me until I got the ambassador's secretary to tell him that I was "O K," received me in an office that had little in it other than austere Army furniture and a big map of the projects of which he was in charge.

He was a young, determined man. He swiftly gave me a detailed briefing about the schools he was building with the army of the host country, using AID money under what is known as "civic action." He answered all my questions without consulting any document other than the map. He talked in short, precise sentences, always answering to the point, never volunteering any extra information.

He would not budge from the "line" I knew the embassy favored, saying that he thought the host country was developing "just fine" both economically and politically. No, he had had no unpleasant experiences; yes, he did like his service there. We had only coffee, which he served himself.

I DID NOT like this officer; I found him cold, impersonal, too devoted to his cause and not particularly forthright. But I could see why the native leaders preferred to deal with him. In other encounters with AID and United States Army personnel in six Central and South American countries, I found the Army ahead by a country mile.

It is easy to explain why the Army does better than AID, but the undesirable consequences of this difference remain. These countries have overly powerful military sectors and weak civilian sectors. It is American policy to strengthen the latter over the former. This can hardly be achieved if our military missions are so much better than our AID missions.

In summary, many of the most conspicuous shortcomings of the Foreign Service described in "The Ugly American" are not to be seen today. Young, energetic, well-informed Americans seem to serve in most countries. If they are desk-bound, that duty might be reduced but can hardly be avoided.

Also, more than ever the United States is represented by other than Foreign Service men. The Peace Corps probably makes more contacts outside the capitals than any other American agency and the Army supplies more "Ugly Americans" than AID does.

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