

DO WOMEN MAKE BETTER AMBASSADORS?

STUDY OF 50 YEARS OF FEMALE ENVOYS
SHOWS GENDER CAN BE AN ADVANTAGE

BY ANN MILLER MORIN

Currently, 20 women are ambassadors at posts sprinkled throughout the world. This number, small though it is in terms of the 160 or more ambassadorial posts, represents a substantial increase for women, given that it took 43 years — from 1933 to the mid-1970s — for 20 women altogether to be appointed chiefs of mission.

For more than half a century, about two-thirds of women ambassadors were non-career and one-third were career. These percentages, however, were reversed during the Bush administration, and still hold today, with 65 percent of women ambassadors from the career Foreign Service.

Women ambassadors are now assigned to posts in all areas of the world, a significant departure from being sent to so-called “safe” European posts, the practice throughout former decades. At the same time, assignments for women traditionally have been and still are to the less-significant posts. Luxembourg, which has had five women ambassadors, holds the record, but countless countries like Nepal, Togo, Barbados and Denmark are where most women chiefs of mission are sent. Major posts,

such as London and Rome, and those highly prized, like Brussels and The Hague, have rarely gone to women, but when they have, invariably it has been to non-career women, a pattern that still persists. At this reading, women with choice assignments — Paris, Vienna, Dublin, the Organization of American States and the United Nations — are all non-careerists.

My recently completed study of U.S. women ministers and ambassadors, beginning with the first in 1933, through the 44th, appointed 50 years later, revealed important differences between those who rose to the top from the Foreign Service ranks and those who became ambassadors by political appointment. At the same time, the data showed clearly that the women (17 Foreign Service officers and 27 political appointees) shared many significant characteristics. A further — and unexpected — finding was that most believed being women brought them substantial advantages in the practice of diplomacy.

Statistics on marriage were surprisingly disparate for the two groups. They revealed that although 26 of the 27 non-career women married (several more than once), only four of the 17 careerists did. And of those four marriages, three involved women near or over 40 years of age. Only one FSO ambassador married in her 20s and is the only one to have had her own children. In sharp contrast, children were born to 22 of the 27 political appointees. Many careerists stated they had deliberately chosen career over marriage, convinced they could not have both, citing as evidence several women colleagues forced to leave the Foreign Service upon marrying. Such a

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constraint did not fall on the women in the other group, who had come from successful careers in fields as diverse as academia, politics, journalism, acting and law.

The study included interviews with 34 of the 36 ambassadors then still living, document research and interviews with more than 150 people familiar with the subjects: colleagues, supervisors, relatives, professional acquaintances. What, if any, characteristics did these 44 women share, and were there differences between career and noncareer ambassadors? What were the disadvantages to being a woman in a traditionally male institution, and what were the perceived advantages? How well did women function as chiefs of mission? What influence did they have on U.S. foreign policy?

Similarities among women, regardless of grouping, emerged immediately. Nearly all the subjects were endowed with a high energy level. Many were good athletes, active in both team and individual sports; indeed, it was surprising how many reported being tomboys as girls. The vast majority were taller than the national female average, and a quarter were around the six-foot mark. Most were physically attractive. Good brains went along with good physical endowments. Nearly all were scholastically outstanding; nearly all had been early readers who developed a lifelong interest in books and learning. A high percentage had written for their high school or college newspapers and yearbooks. Well over two-thirds had received at least part of their formal education at all-girl schools.

Position in family or number of siblings did not appear to be a factor to success since the distribution among "eldest child," "middle child," and "youngest child" was remarkably even, with the "eldest" category having only a few more than the other two. Four were only children, but more than half came from families with three or more siblings. It may be noteworthy that brothers were considerably more numerous than sisters, suggesting that many of these women learned early to hold their own with males.

They exhibited a high degree of enthusiasm for their work and a great curiosity about the world. They also shared strong ideals and a dedication to the democratic principle. Courage, both physical and moral, was a prevailing characteristic. Those who were the most successful were risk-takers. However, along with these traits ran a strong vein of pragmatism; these women did not tilt at windmills,

however abundant their courage, but rather used their high energy to devise solutions to problems.

The two groups were found to have distinctly different advantages and attitudes as ambassadors. In addition to being unaffected by the implicit institutional ban on marrying, non-career women often enjoyed the inestimable advantage of being able to go directly to the White House for advice or assistance. They also were more likely to improvise in carrying out policy and to use non-traditional approaches. They saw themselves as the president's emissary and were impatient with State Department restrictions. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of them had difficulties with staff, particularly with deputy chiefs of mission, who were in all cases FSOs. Too often an "us-vs.-them" mentality pervaded their posts, at least at first. In time, however, nearly all non-careerists came to admire the integrity and professionalism of FSOs on staff.

Careerists, on the other hand, were comfortable with their Foreign Service colleagues and most got along well with their deputies. They were often initially more welcome in host countries. There were several examples of host country officials letting it be known professionalism was deemed more important than the envoy's gender, and that therefore a woman FSO was more desirable than a political appointee of either gender.

Non-career ambassadors often spoke of their "Foreign Service family," and displayed a maternal concern about the well-being of younger staff, while careerists regarded their staff as colleagues and held them to a high standard of performance, promoting efforts such as intensified junior officer training. In other words, non-careerists worried about their staff's personal lives while careerists evinced more concern about professional development.

There was also a marked difference in emphasis regarding the three basic tasks of an ambassador — reporting, negotiating and representation — with careerists more interested in reporting and negotiating and non-careerists allotting more of their energies to representation.

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Probably the biggest disadvantage faced by these women, particularly FSOs, was not being given challenges commensurate with their abilities. Too many were sent to small countries far from career-enhancing action. Indeed, almost half of the 44 went to countries such as Luxembourg, Ceylon, Barbados, Togo or Nepal. Only two, both non-career ambassadors, went to Class One posts, and of the two who went to Iron Curtain countries, only one was a career officer.

At first glance, it would seem odd that very few were troubled by the ubiquitous discrimination against women that existed throughout this period, although interviews elicited tales of the same kinds of discrimination set forth in studies of women in other professions. This is less surprising when one remembers that these 44 represent the winners in the career stakes. And while most could recall instances that were annoying in retrospect, by and large discrimination was of minor concern to them as they pursued their careers. Although there was sympathy for the women's movement, no one but FSO Mary Olmsted put her career on the line for it, becoming the first president of the Women's Action Organization, a group at the State Department that played a major role in improving the status of women there.

The early appointments of women as chiefs of legations or embassies made headline news as such announcements were few and far between. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed the first one, Ruth Bryan Owen, in 1933 and there were only three others during the next 20 years. Perle Mesta, political hostess and the third woman on the list, became President Harry Truman's minister to Luxembourg in 1949. In 1950 she was ridiculed as a social butterfly, as portrayed by Ethel Merman in the Broadway and cinema hit, "Call

Me Madam." This depiction of a woman envoy caught the public imagination both here and abroad and was a severe setback to the acceptance of women as serious chiefs of mission.

Clare Boothe Luce, the fifth female U.S. chief of mission, was the first woman to go to a Class One post — Rome; such posts — now no longer classified this way — included some of the world's most interesting cities, such as London, Paris, Moscow and Tokyo. The year was 1953. Italian foreign office officials vigorously protested her appointment, complaining to U.S. diplomats that sending a woman would humiliate them, and within the U.S. embassy there was so much grumbling the incumbent ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, had to order the staff to stop. Part of the widespread resentment against her was that, as a very active — and vociferous — member of the House of Representatives as well as a famous playwright with a stinging wit, Luce was the antithesis of the soft-spoken, subservient woman then admired. Fortunately, she, like three others who preceded her, Ruth Bryan Owen (Denmark), Florence Harriman (Norway) and Eugenie Anderson (Denmark), carried out her mandate successfully, was a credit to the United States and was ultimately very popular in the host country.

Also in 1953, Frances Willis, first FSO and the sixth woman, was sent as ambassador to Switzerland, a country where women would not have the vote for two more decades. Willis was obliged to overcome an all-pervasive male chauvinism to become effective. She managed the feat skillfully, even to the extent of devising a black evening costume that closely resembled formal male evening attire, with a long black skirt in place of trousers, so as to be less conspicuous at diplomatic functions.

It is not unusual for any ambassador, man or woman, to be criticized

by the local press, but on occasion the criticism accorded these women had a gender-based edge to it. There was also a difference in the way they were treated by the press: Journalists usually wrote superficial articles about them for the women's pages, discussing domestic matters such as home decorating and favorite recipes. Such articles, if not balanced by substantive reports on the issues, trivialized the woman envoy and her work.

Husbands were also a problem. Most women FSOs, as we know, did not have them, and the four who were married seldom saw theirs. Rozanne Ridgway, newly married to a coast guard captain serving in Alaska when she went as ambassador to East Germany, reported that after the first few weeks, the two communicated almost exclusively by letters and cards because telephoning — hearing each other's voices — “hurt too much.” A lucky few non-careerists had husbands whose professions allowed them to accompany their wives, and one or two had husbands who set up offices in nearby countries to facilitate frequent visits. And having a husband in residence was not always a plus. Stresses on marriages were heavy, stemming from the world's perception that an ambassador's husband was an anomaly. Two women with accompanying husbands divorced shortly after completing their assignments.

Difficulties encountered included how to occupy the husband's time, finding his position in the community, and where to seat him at formal dinners — which is not as frivolous as it sounds. In contrast, the wife of an ambassador has an official role and her own set of mission responsibilities, and she takes her husband's status at social functions. Lacking a “wife,” a woman envoy often had to hire extra help or take on the responsibilities herself.

It was surprising how many said

their gender provided advantages in doing their job. The one most often cited was being able to speak bluntly to male officials without causing offense. This proved especially valuable to those serving in developing nations, as so many were from the 1970s on. As females, they were not seen as threats by male leaders with little diplomatic experience; indeed, many host country officials turned to them for advice. Given the universal fear men have of losing face before other males, this probably would not have happened had the ambassadors been males.

Another advantage pertained to what is popularly called “women's intuition.” This was described not as some mysterious gift, but as the ability to notice details and to listen carefully to another person: two skills that provided these women with more information on which to predict political outcomes. An anecdote by Margaret Tibbetts illustrates the value of this to a reporting officer. As head of the political section in a bilingual country, she needed to know how the issue of language would impinge on an upcoming election. Accordingly, she asked her three political officers what language was spoken at local markets. Not one knew. As an experiment, she telephoned their wives, and found every one of them knew the answer.

Being female affected the way they were appreciated in host countries. Just as American women politicians have been perceived as more honest and more genuinely concerned than men about many issues, so these ambassadors were seen as more caring, more approachable and more believable than men. And, as emissaries of the world's most powerful country, they were potent role models for host country women. Indeed, several were told their very presence had led to career advancement for local women.

Their gender also meant they could mix freely with women, a decided advantage in Islamic and other cultures where male diplomats are completely cut off from half the population. This allowed them first-hand knowledge of the whole culture and of social patterns and problems that impinged on government and politics.

With a few exceptions, these women performed to high standards. Although their goals were equal to those of male ambassadors, they achieved them in different ways. Their preferred management style was collegial, not hierarchical, and they strove for consensus at staff meetings.

Clare Boothe Luce, in a 1976 after-dinner speech, said: "Women have been skilled in diplomacy for thousands of years. ... (They) have been taught to use gentle words ... to learn how to get what they want in the interests of their family. Diplomacy is a feminine art." This study bears out her premise. A

clear majority of women were highly rated by colleagues and outside observers, and while true that a handful were judged poor, no woman actually harmed bilateral relations. None was declared *persona non grata* nor recalled for malfeasance. To the contrary, most had successful records, and were fondly remembered long after they left their posts. To borrow former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger's words about Melissa Wells, former ambassador to Zaire, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau/Cape Verde, these women envoys put a "human face on diplomacy."

As to women ambassadors' influence on foreign policy, the answer is less clear-cut. Obviously, their activities at the small posts where so many served did not affect the main lines of U.S. foreign policy, but when women had the opportunity to deal with significant issues at their posts, they played meaningful roles. Careerists sometimes

made greater contributions to foreign policy while serving in the department than they did at their embassies. One outstanding example is Rozanne Ridgway, who, as assistant secretary for the Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs, was chief negotiator at all the Reagan-Gorbachev summits. Only former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, however, was at the very top level of foreign policy as an ambassador. She alone had a place at the table with the president's top advisers as a member of the National Security Planning Group, the inner circle of the National Security Council. Of the 44 women noted, her influence on U.S. policy was unquestionably the greatest.

The second 50 years can be expected to offer women envoys more and better chances to create and implement American foreign policy. These first 44 pioneers prove that women can be first-rate ambassadors. ■