

Act One: Great Britain

Living It Up in London

My family and I arrived in London in early July 1986 for my first overseas assignment. We approached the rather forbidding London Embassy with some trepidation. The massive building, with the sculpture of a bald eagle protruding anomalously above the front entrance, sat in the middle of Grosvenor Square in London's West End. When I had first visited the Embassy on my way back to the States from Laos in 1958, I had no idea that twenty-eight years later I would be assigned there as a diplomat, albeit a low-ranking one. And even though as an academic I had made five trips around the world, the phrase "a Virginia farm boy in the Court of St. James's" kept going through my head, perhaps unconsciously paraphrasing Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

We were assigned to temporary quarters in an apartment in the elegant Mayfair section of London, near the Embassy, pending permanent housing. I remembered having been impressed in 1958 with the opulence of Mayfair and had taken pictures of the Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, and Jaguars that lined the streets. As I was busy moving our bags into the third-floor apartment, my ten-year-old son Christopher, who had been exploring the furnished apartment, came running down the steps, followed by three-year-old sister Samantha. He announced breathlessly, "Dad! There's something wrong with the TV!"

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"I can get only three channels," he replied.

The three channels were, of course, the government-supported BBC1 and BBC2 and ITN, the one independent channel. But we soon

found that the joy of intelligent and commercial-free programming easily compensated for the lack of multiple channels.

In theory, an officer arriving at a first-world post is given a housing allowance based on rank and family size and is responsible for locating his own housing, while at third-world posts, where locating suitable housing is more problematic, all officers are assigned to leased properties in the embassy's "housing pool." In practice, however, every embassy tends to have a number of properties under lease, and the trend seems to be toward accommodating all embassy personnel in embassy-leased properties. We spent the next couple of days looking at various properties. The DPAO (deputy public affairs officer), Jim Hogan, gave us a list of possibilities, among which was an eighteenth-century townhouse in Hampstead, a rather chic and upscale residential area off the spacious Hampstead Heath, just four underground stops from the Embassy. The house was part of a four-story mansion that had been subdivided into four vertical sections, in a street with the quaint name of Windmill Hill. I was not terribly impressed with it, as the kitchen was rather basic and the plumbing was showing its age, but my wife fell in love with it for its quaintness, and the kids liked the hide-and-seek potential of the numerous nooks and crannies resulting from its peculiar architecture. The next day at the Embassy, Hogan asked me how I had liked the Windmill Hill property. "Well, it's certainly an excellent location, but the house is pretty basic. I'd like to look at some other places before making up our minds," I said.

"Oh, really?" he asked with obvious disappointment, "I hoped you'd like it."

It turned out that the embassy had leased the house for another officer who had been sent packing by the ambassador shortly before my arrival, and had already paid the leasing fee for an entire year in advance. It finally dawned on me that what Hogan was trying to say, but was too diplomatic to say outright, was "I hoped you'd like it, because that's where you're going to live." So we moved there and were ultimately delighted with the choice. I later realized what a jewel the property was, both because of its eighteenth-century charm, and because of its proximity to schools for the kids, to Hampstead Heath where they could run and play, and to my office in the Embassy.

One aspect of the Foreign Service about which I have no complaint is the housing—one of the few remaining perks of the Foreign Service. Because of the need to locate embassy personnel reasonably close to their offices, embassy housing tends to be centrally located in areas one could never afford on one's own, especially in European capitals. This was certainly true of our lodgings in Hampstead. Likewise, in Paris, we were assigned to a spacious apartment just five minutes off the Champs-Élysées, and in Wellington, New Zealand, our house and gardens were equally impressive. In the third world, where there is typically no middle ground between slum housing and the upscale houses built specifically for Westerners, the only choice for diplomats is housing of the upscale category. For example, in Burma, our house was a British-built mansion with its own tennis court; in Morocco we had what was essentially a duplex, with a second unit where we could put up visitors; in Cambodia we had a five-bedroom house—one of many built to accommodate the influx of UN personnel during the 1992–93 UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia. The only post where housing was of a dubious standard was Chad, but more about that later.

After moving to the Hampstead house, we explored schools for the kids. We enrolled Christopher in the fifth grade at the admirably equipped American School of London in St. John's Wood, where over the course of the year he joined the Boy Scouts and took up the cello. My wife located a nursery school for four-year-old Samantha in the basement of a venerable old Anglican church nearby, where Samantha, with her incredible ear for languages, was soon saying such things as "Don't be silly, Daddeh" with an impeccable Oxbridge accent.

OK, What Do I Do Now?

Having dealt with housing and schools, I turned my attention to finding out what a fifty-one-year-old JOT (junior officer trainee) was expected to do. A large embassy, such as those in London, Paris, Bangkok, or Manila, typically houses representatives from twenty or so different U.S. government agencies, depending on our interests in a particular country. In addition to the political, economic, consular, and administrative sections of the embassy staffed

by State Department Foreign Service officers (FSOs), and the (now former) U.S. Information Service, staffed by USIA FSOs, a large embassy may also house personnel from the U.S. Agency for International Development (which in third-world countries can dwarf the size of the State Department contingent), the defense attaché's office (potentially including officers from the army, navy, and air force, not to mention the Marine Guard Detachment), the Foreign Commercial Service of the Department of Commerce, the Foreign Agricultural Service of the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Labor, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Customs, the Federal Aviation Administration, the U.S. Park Service, the U.S. Trade Representative, the Library of Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Coast Guard, the Peace Corps, the FBI, and of course, the CIA, which maintains the fiction that it is covert by using various pseudonyms, such as the Political-Military Section, or the Regional Assessment Office.

In a small embassy it is usually an open secret who these people are, but it is a crime to deliberately reveal it to either a colleague or a host country national (as we saw in the "outing" of CIA agent Valerie Plame by an official—or officials—of the Bush administration). Once during our tour in Paris my wife was invited to a coffee klatch for newly arrived spouses (all wives, it must be admitted) of embassy officers. Each woman was asked to identify herself and her embassy officer husband. My wife was working as an assistant in the political section of the embassy and was therefore personally acquainted with all seven political officers in the section. She listened in amazement as some twenty women identified their husbands as "political officers." (Interestingly, USIA never provided cover for CIA personnel, but nobody believed it, especially the Soviets, since KGB agents occasionally called themselves "cultural attachés.").

I was to be based in the U.S. Information Service unit of the embassy, headed by a high-profile public affairs officer named Robert (Bud) Korengold, who had joined USIA after a distinguished career in journalism, including serving as *Newsweek's* Moscow bureau chief. USIS was divided into a press section, headed by the IO (information officer) and a cultural section, headed by the CAO (cultural affairs officer); at a post like London, these were very senior

positions. Under the section heads were a number of AIOs (assistant information officers) and ACAOs (assistant cultural affairs officers). The entire USIS section included some ten American officers and maybe twenty-five locally hired British employees called FSNs (Foreign Service nationals; although they have more recently been baptized LES—locally employed staff—I will continue to use the designation FSN throughout the book).

In principle, a trainee was expected to be rotated through the various sections of the embassy in order to become familiar with the work of each section—the press and cultural sections of USIS and the political, economic, consular, and administrative sections of the embassy. During this rotation, the trainee is typically considered to be “over complement,” that is, not encumbering an actual position. However, perhaps because of my ripe old age and academic background, I was continually given rather substantive special assignments, some of which would not have been assigned to an ordinary twenty-something JOT. For example, when Robin Raphel, the Asia watcher in the political section, took unanticipated maternity leave (unanticipated at least from the embassy’s standpoint), they needed a temporary replacement, so they said, “Well, you know, there’s Huffman down in USIS, he has an Asian background, why not let him replace her?” So rather than looking over the shoulder of the Asia watcher during a stint in the political section, I *was* the Asia watcher, responding to queries and drafting cables in my own right.

This was about the time when the Irangate scandal broke, and Richard Murphy, the assistant secretary of state for the Near East and North Africa, decided to call together eight ambassadors from the Middle East for a damage control confab in the London Embassy. In a normal embassy, the visit of just one ambassador, let alone an assistant secretary of state and eight ambassadors, would demand the attention of the ambassador, or at least the head of the political section. But London was (and is) one of the busiest embassies we have, and high-level visitors were an everyday occurrence. Secretary of State George Shultz was a regular. At the time of Murphy’s visit, we had three cabinet secretaries visiting at the same time—Secretary of State Shultz, Attorney General Ed Meese, and a third secretary whose identity I don’t recall—

probably Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Preoccupied with the cabinet-level firemen, the head of the political section, Kim Pendleton, said, "We'll let Huffman handle Murphy's operation." So I went into action, made sure they had appropriate hotel and restaurant reservations, reserved the necessary conference rooms, and set up requested appointments with British officials.

In addition to Assistant Secretary Murphy, the group included U.S. ambassador to Israel Tom Pickering (who was later ambassador to the UN), ambassador to Saudi Arabia Walter Cutler, ambassador to Egypt Frank Wisner, and ambassador to Lebanon John Kelly. One day as I was ensconced in my (Robin Raphel's) office, looking very senior, one of the ambassadors came in and, assuming I was in fact a senior political officer, said apologetically, "I'm very sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could use your telephone to make a call back to Washington."

"Oh, sure, go right ahead, Mr. Ambassador; no bother at all," I said expansively, enjoying the moment. I've never been very good at role-playing, but in this instance I couldn't resist playing it to the hilt.

As the press section was two officers short at the time, I was in effect the acting AIO during my rotation there. Duties included arranging press conferences for visiting U.S. officials (such as SecState Shultz, Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson, Strategic Defense Initiative Organization director, and Assistant Secretary for Africa Chester Crocker), and inviting journalists to participate in "WorldNet interactives" (two-way audio, one-way video conferences broadcast from the USIA studios in Washington).

While in the press section, I had the opportunity to lead a group of six British academics on a tour to various NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) facilities around Europe. On this particular tour we visited NATO headquarters and SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) outside Brussels, both West and East Berlin, and the headquarters of AFCENT (Allied Forces Central Europe) in Brunssum, The Netherlands. These NATO tours were sponsored jointly by NATO and USIA to provide an inside look at NATO for journalists, academics, and officials with a view to enhancing understanding of, and one hoped, sympathy for, the NATO mission. And I must admit that the program appeared to

be rather effective in achieving its aims. British academics (like most academics elsewhere) tended to be rather liberal (to avoid the word leftist) and skeptical of all things military, but by the time they finished their ten-day tour of NATO facilities—where they were briefed by high-level military officials of various nationalities, able to ask any question and challenge any position they wished, given an inside look at NATO facilities that effectively “demystified” NATO’s activities, and treated to comfortable lodgings and free food at the expense of NATO and the U.S. government—their attitudes and comments had softened, or at least were somewhat less hostile.

“Two Countries Separated by a Common Language”

To further fraternal relations with the British press, we would sometimes have lunch with our counterparts from the print and electronic media for off-the-record discussions of bilateral issues. At one such luncheon we were comparing the broadcasts of the BBC with those of the Voice of America. VOA had the practice, and still does, of carrying editorials at the behest of the State Department, preceded by the statement “The following is an editorial that represents the views of the U.S. government.” After reading the editorial, maybe three minutes long, they intone, “The preceding was an editorial which represents the views of the U.S. government.” The purpose of these statements is to make a clear distinction between opinion and news reporting in an attempt to reinforce the idea that the VOA is an objective and independent news service—which in fact it is, to a remarkable degree.

The deputy director of the BBC World Service kidded us about these editorials, saying, “You know, you Americans, you’re constantly throwing it in the face of your audience that you’re putting things on there that represent the views of your government. So people think that you’re just a mouthpiece for the government. Now, at the BBC, we editorialize all the time but we just don’t admit it. You should quit doing that.” And I totally agree; I have always argued that these editorials hurt the credibility of VOA as an objective and autonomous news agency. We have to face the fact that the BBC is more prestigious around the world than VOA. It’s

considered the last word, the most unbiased, independent voice, and so on, but in fact I found in working with the BBC in various countries that they definitely had a liberal bias, with the freedom to put their own spin on things. I also found that they had more of a tendency to go off half-cocked on stories than the VOA did, sometimes reporting things a bit to the left on which they hadn't done the necessary spadework to verify the stories from various sources and which they sometimes had to retract.

BBC English remains the standard around the world, in spite of major inroads by American English. In fact, there is an absolute mystique that surrounds British English; foreigners frequently say they want to learn "genuine" — meaning British—English. British English is the standard for the American stage, and American corporations like to hire British secretaries to answer the phones for their prestige value. George Bernard Shaw famously said, "England and the United States are two countries separated by a common language." One cultural difference is that the Oxbridge pronunciation is consciously taught and transmitted to the elite of society, thus becoming a mark of sophistication and education. By contrast, Americans see language only as a medium of communication where any accent will do so long as communication takes place. I was once on an academic panel with three Americans and one British member. The three Americans made their presentations first, and when the Brit made his contribution, he sounded so confident and authoritative that the audience assumed he was brilliant, when in fact he was talking nonsense.

The truth, however, is that American English is much more homogeneous than British English. There is less dialectical variation in American English from New York to San Francisco than there is in Great Britain from London to Edinburgh. Thus a greater percentage of Americans than British speak "good" English. But I digress.

Striped-Pants Duty

One of the reciprocal duties of diplomats is to attend the national day receptions of all the other embassies in town. These are pleasant if not terribly useful occasions where you introduce yourself to the host and hostess (usually the ambassador and his wife), make

polite conversation with your counterparts and acquaintances from other embassies, and enjoy the usually quite good finger food and wine (except at receptions of Islamic countries, where wine is replaced by fruit juice and other nonalcoholic beverages). Because of the near impossibility of shaking hands with other diplomats while holding a wine glass in one hand and a plate of food in the other, I quickly learned the survival strategy of placing myself within arm's reach of the finger food, holding the wine glass in the left hand and leaving the right hand free to alternately reach for an hors d'oeuvre and shake hands when the occasion demanded. There is a decided pecking order in which the more important the country in question, the higher the rank of the officer(s) assigned to represent the embassy. Surprisingly for a junior officer trainee in an embassy of several hundred American officers, I was tapped to represent the embassy at the Thai, Burmese, and Bahraini national day receptions, perhaps, again, because of credibility conferred by my age and background.

The most enjoyable duty was attending the frequent receptions at Winfield House, the American ambassador's elegant residence in Regents Park and the second largest country estate in London after Buckingham Palace. The neo-Georgian mansion was sold to the U.S. government by Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton for one dollar and has been the residence of the U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James's since 1955. Whenever there was a reception at Winfield House, PAO Bud Korengold would insist that all USIS personnel attend the reception in order to deal with any unforeseen problems, make the proper introductions to the ambassador (especially those of our contacts whom he might not know), and in general smooth the wheels of diplomacy. But there was usually such a crowd of guests (typically in the hundreds) that if one steered clear of one's boss, one could schmooze with the frequently interesting guests while enjoying the excellent wine and hors d'oeuvres and the general ambiance of Winfield House.

On one such occasion the cultural section had arranged a concert at the ambassador's residence by the gifted Japanese-American pianist Megume Umene. During the reception that followed, I was congratulating the artist, when former prime minister Sir Edward Heath joined the conversation. Sir Edward was an accomplished

musician in his own right and had on occasion been invited to conduct the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. A USIS photographer snapped a picture at that moment, and I still treasure the photograph of me with Sir Edward.

On another occasion, one of the guests was Ambassador Kingman Brewster, Jr., who had been president of Yale University when I was an assistant professor there (1967–72) during the Vietnam War. Brewster had been U.S. ambassador to Great Britain 1977–81 (Winfield House was thus his former residence) and had later been appointed Master of University College at Oxford. Yale had managed to avoid the worst of the antiwar violence that had taken place on other campuses such as Berkeley, Columbia, and Cornell, where armed protesters actually took over the student union building. I introduced myself as a former member of his faculty and told him I had always admired the way he handled the student protests at that time. Brewster was a towering hulk of a man in failing health, had recently had a stroke, and had difficulty speaking, but in response he simply held up two crossed fingers, implying that he had been lucky. But I don't think it was luck so much as Brewster's skill in defusing the situation. Rather than calling in the gendarmes, he had managed to persuade the students that he was on their side, while at the same time no doubt telling a panicked Board of Trustees, "Just let me handle it, and we'll be all right."

The director of USIA at the time was Charles Z. Wick (formerly Zwick), whose monumental ego and fiery temper were legendary. When Reagan appointed him director in 1981, some of Reagan's staff questioned whether Wick, as a former musician and motion picture financier, had the qualifications to be director of USIA, but as Wick had raised \$15 million for Reagan's first presidential campaign, Reagan is quoted as having said, "He can have anything he wants."

Wick had a blacklist of people who were not permitted to serve as U.S. speakers abroad, a list that included Walter Cronkite, Ralph Nader, and Coretta Scott King. He had megalomaniacal ambitions for the overseas television network he set up, called WorldNet, with which he wanted to compete with government-funded operations such as BBC-TV and France-Inter, ignoring the fact that to do so he would have to compete with such U.S. private sector networks as

CNN. PAOs abroad were pressured to inflate the number of viewers being reached by WorldNet in their respective countries so that Wick could brag to the president that his network had an audience of twenty million or so viewers; but what this really meant was that they were the “potential” audience, if they had chosen to tune in. Once while Wick was in London, he was invited to a reception at Winfield House; mistakenly assuming he was the guest of honor, he proceeded to make a rather lengthy speech to the assembled guests. When he finished, a British member of Parliament whispered in my ear, “Who *was* that funny little man?” Little did we know that we would later be nostalgic for the reign of Charles Wick, who expanded the budget and power of USIA enormously through his influence with the White House.

During my year in London, I was given a number of writing assignments, such as preparing a background manual on NATO (useful in leading the NATO tour to Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands), writing letters for the ambassador’s signature, and writing speeches for the ambassador to deliver on various occasions, such as the annual British-American Ball, the dinner for Senator J. William Fulbright and Alistair Cooke, and the opening of the University Forum debates.

The ambassador at that time was the Honorable Charles H. Price II, a wealthy banker and businessman from Kansas City who had been appointed by President Reagan in 1983. (Note: Roughly 30–40 percent of U.S. ambassadors are noncareer, usually political appointees; the other 60–70 percent are drawn from the ranks of career Foreign Service officers. The most desirable posts typically go to wealthy supporters of the president; some wag actually compiled a list of countries and the cost of buying an ambassadorship in each of them. The prevalence of political appointees as ambassadors causes a lot of heartburn among senior diplomats who have come up through the ranks only to have their elevation to ambassadorships blocked by inexperienced political appointees. While it is true that political ambassadors can be like bulls in the diplomatic china shop, I have served under both good political appointees and bad career ambassadors. Conventional wisdom is that ambassadors to such high-profile posts as London and Paris need to be independently wealthy, since the meager funds provided by the State

Department do not cover the costs of the social obligations at such posts. Raymond Seitz was a notable exception. But I digress.)

Ambassador Price, who later served on the boards of directors for British Airways, the New York Times Company, Texaco, and Sprint, was perfectly capable of writing his own speeches, but when you have 1,000 employees at your beck and call, why bother?

Putting Words in President Reagan's Mouth

One of the most interesting things I did during my entire tour in London was writing a speech for President Reagan. The English-Speaking Union had requested that the embassy send an invitation to President Reagan to come over and address the English-Speaking Union in the famous old Guildhall on the fortieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan. We didn't have much hope that he would accept if it didn't fit his plans or if he didn't already have a European trip planned, but we had to submit the request to the White House anyway. We suggested as an alternative that he might be willing to do a speech on video, which could then be played on a huge screen in the Guildhall. And lo and behold he agreed to do that. Well, who was going to write the speech? So they said, "Let Huffman do it. He's a former professor of linguistics; he ought to be able to write a bang-up speech." So I settled down to doing the research on the background of the Marshall Plan, and I must say I was learning a lot of new stuff. I think it's an advantage when you're learning new material because it's fresh and exciting, whereas if I'd been a specialist in arms control in Europe and the Marshall Plan and so on, I'm not sure I could have brought the same spontaneity to the project. But when I learned that the United States had given over \$13 billion, or 6 percent of our national budget, for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II, this impressed me as an event of unprecedented generosity in the history of nations.

An amusing anecdote while I was writing the speech: We had a dinner party one night with some embassy people and some of my contacts in the cultural community in attendance; the phone rang, and my wife said, "Frank, it's for you; it's the White House calling." My guests were highly impressed.

"Oh, thanks. I'll take it downstairs," I said.

It turned out it was some young speechwriter in the bowels of the old Executive Office Building calling me to verify some of my figures and ask where I got them and so on, but of course I didn't point that out to the dinner guests when I came back up. I simply said, "I took care of that. Sorry about the interruption."

They sent us a copy of the video to hand over to the English-Speaking Union, and I must say it was an eerie experience to hear the president speaking my words. At that point I realized why Reagan was considered such a great communicator—he delivered the speech as if he were searching for the right terms and then he would come up, unfailingly, with my words, as if from the depths of his emotion.

The Olney Pancake Race

Great Britain is a treasure trove of forts, castles, cathedrals, abbeys, and historic houses that are a magnet for tourists, especially Americans. Our fascination with castles is easily explainable by the fact that we did not historically have any, except for several imported stone by stone from Europe (although the tracts of ostentatious "McMansions" that dot the countryside of Northern Virginia or Montgomery County rival the castles of Europe in size if not in taste). After exploring the fabled sites of London, such as Westminster Abbey, Parliament, the Tower of London, and St. Paul's Cathedral, we regularly used weekends to visit sites farther afield, such as the castles of Windsor (one of the most impressive castles in the world), Hampton Court, and Dover, the cathedrals of Canterbury, Salisbury and Lincoln, the country homes of Blenheim, Longleat House, and Haddon Hall, and the picturesque towns of Oxford, Cambridge, and Chester. But before we could get out of town, we had to get some wheels. Through a newsletter that listed diplomatic cars for sale, I bought a 1985 BMW 316 from a secretary at the German embassy. (The 316 was the smallest BMW, with a 1.6-liter engine; it was never exported to the States, as it was considered not powerful enough for the U.S. market.)

As she had brought the car from Germany, it had left-hand drive, which I thought might be a problem in England, but in the end I decided it was a definite advantage. Although I had driven on

the left in such countries as India, Thailand, and Malaysia, I found that having to focus on staying on the left, passing on the right, and turning right across oncoming traffic, in addition to having the gear shift and turn signal on the wrong side, sometimes caused a sensory overload, leading to such gaffes as turning on the windshield wipers when intending to hit the turn signal. By contrast, having the steering wheel, gearshift, and turn signals where you are accustomed to having them allows you to let your subconscious reflexes do the driving while you focus only on staying on the left side of the road. Besides, I intended to take the car with me to my follow-on assignment in Burma, where they drive on the right. (It is not quite clear why Burma, having been a British colony like India and Malaysia, nevertheless drives on the right—maybe just a finger in the eye of their former colonial masters.)

Because I had developed a bit of a reputation as a speechwriter and speaker, I was from time to time asked to represent the embassy as a speaker at rather low-level events that did not merit the presence of a higher-ranking officer. Some of the venues were the English-Speaking Union in the town of Chester, the Daughters of 1812 in London, the Hemel Hempstead Middle School, and the Junior Officers Association of Lakenheath Air Force Base.

One of the strangest events I attended was the Olney Pancake Race. This race, run every year on Shrove Tuesday in the little town of Olney, reputedly dates back to 1445. It requires young ladies, married or single, dressed in traditional costume, to run a distance of 415 yards carrying a skillet and flipping a pancake. No one knows quite how the race originated, but one story tells of a harassed housewife who, hearing the church bell for the Shrivings service, dashes off to the parish church still clutching her frying pan containing a pancake. Following the race, the contestants and townspeople, along with large crowds of tourists, pour into the parish church for the Shrivings service, after which the day is given over to celebrations and merriment on the last day before Lent.

The race became an international event in 1950 when the town of Liberal, Kansas, decided to compete with the runners in Olney, and times are compared through a transatlantic telephone call; Olney usually wins. Apparently it was decided that this was an event that could adequately be covered by a junior officer. I note that the

London Embassy Web site features a visit by an embassy officer to the 2006 running of the pancakes.

The Special Relationship

For speaking venues, I had written a speech titled “The Special Relationship: Fact or Fiction?” As can be surmised, it sets up the straw man that maybe the special relationship is in some danger, then in the end puts everyone’s mind at ease by claiming, after considerable discussion, that it is still strong and healthy. It is an easy case to make:

- As a former colony of Great Britain, we inherited our language, traditions, legal and educational systems, and philosophy of government from the mother country.
- The U.K. is our strongest ally in the area of security, having sided with the United States in every war since the unfortunate events of 1812.
- Forty percent of the U.S. population traces its ancestry to the British Isles. (According to the 2000 census, while people of German ancestry constitute the largest ethnic group in the U.S., the U.K. wins if you combine the English, Irish, Scots, and Welsh.)
- We share a commitment to democracy, rule of law, human rights and freedoms, free enterprise, free trade, and the dignity of the individual.

The very obviousness of this common heritage can be misleading. There are rather striking differences in our respective value systems. We have some mutually negative stereotypes of each other. Americans generally admire the British as sturdy, self-reliant, stoic, “stiff upper lip,” and so on, while at the same time feeling that they are, as a people, cold, reserved, and somewhat arrogant. Conversely, the British generally admire the fact that Americans are open, direct, optimistic, practical, and hard working. At the same time we tend to strike them as loud, uncultured, naïve, aggressive, and materialistic. Though some of these stereotypes are oversimplifications, where there’s smoke there’s fire.

It was my job to refute such stereotypes, or at least try to explain them, which I did in the following ways: The charge is frequently

made, especially by the British, that Americans are a bit naïve in the conduct of world affairs and that, compared to the old countries of Europe, America is too young and inexperienced to bear the burden of being, by default, the world's only superpower. It is usually implicit in this criticism that Britain could really do a better job of it. It's true that Americans tend to believe that every problem has a solution; thus it might be kinder to call them "optimistic" or "positive" rather than "naïve." These characteristics derive, quite naturally, from our colonial experience—the early settlers were faced with a set of entirely new problems that demanded original solutions. They were a self-selected population of "doers" rather than "thinkers." Faced with a hostile environment and the exigencies of survival in a strange land, they had little time for a class of philosophers, scholars, or literati. Daniel Boorstin, former director of the Library of Congress, has even claimed that Americans represent "the triumph of naiveté over learning," and that they succeeded in a whole range of endeavors precisely because they hadn't read the theories of the European philosophers who said it couldn't be done.

It's true that Americans are compulsive problem-solvers. There's a joke that goes as follows: Three men had been condemned to death by guillotine—a Frenchman, a German, and an American. The Frenchman went first, but there was a malfunction and the blade failed to fall; on the principle that it would be inhumane to subject him to such a trauma again, the authorities decided to let him go free; his reaction was a Gallic shrug and the comment, "*C'est la vie.*" Next it was the German's turn; he placed himself on the guillotine with Germanic stoicism, but again the machine failed to function, and the German was released, exclaiming "*Gott sei dank!*" When the American placed himself on the guillotine, he looked up at the blade and said, "I think I see the problem; if I had a screwdriver I could fix that." But Americans' naiveté—or rather their "can-do" attitude—has produced impressive achievements in science, technology, and the arts; to insist that we do it with style and panache is perhaps to apply one society's values to another.

A criticism that I frequently heard in Great Britain was that Americans are "materialistic"—not to say "moneygrubbers"—that we sacrifice quality of life for financial success, and that in the

United States class is based solely on money and wealth. I wouldn't undertake to deny such a charge, but here again there is a historical explanation: the earliest colonists came from the middle ranks of merchants, artisans, and planters. There was no aristocracy—and certainly no royalty—on which class distinctions could be based. On the other hand there was no limit to what one could achieve through initiative, resourcefulness, and hard work, so status was in fact based to a large extent on financial success. This is still true; the “self-made” man or woman is still very much the ideal in twenty-first century America. (Unfortunately, the predominant role of large corporations and lobbyists in influencing political campaigns and legislation has led some pundits to claim that the United States is becoming a “plutocracy” rather than a democracy.)

Some British claim that America is a nation of workaholics—that we are compulsive about work and don't take time to smell the flowers. As the product of a background in which industriousness was next to godliness, if not a bit better, I am the last person to be able to deny this charge. In fact, statistically Americans work more hours per week than any other nationality except the Japanese. American diplomats are known around the world as drudges—when other diplomats are already out on the tennis courts, the Americans are still beavering away at the office. My wife, a European, complains that Americans take a vacation only in order to work more effectively, while Europeans work only to take a longer vacation. It is true that vacations in the United States are typically much shorter than in Europe, where vacations of a month to six weeks are standard. To an American, it seems frivolous and unproductive to take a month's vacation; a European considers it his right.

I frequently heard the charge that Americans are too competitive—that the free enterprise system as exemplified in the United States is a cruel system of cutthroat competition, of the survival of the fittest, and the devil take the hindmost. It's true that Americans believe in harnessing the tremendous power of individual initiative, and understand that the right to succeed entails the right to fail—in other words, the market system cannot work without the failure of the uncompetitive aspects of the economy. There is, admittedly, a delicate balance between that level of social services required to protect the less fortunate of society and that level of

government spending that stifles individual initiative. Just where this point on the continuum should be is essentially the crux of the debate between the two major parties in the United States. It also mirrors the debate in Great Britain, where society tends to be even more polarized between the radical right and the “loony left” than in the United States.

In spite of these cultural differences, it is significant that it would take far longer to discuss the similarities between us than the differences—such things as common language and traditions, Anglo-Saxon common law, the dignity of the individual, and a shared philosophy of government. I have never heard it said, but I suppose that the mutuality of political and economic interests between the United States and Great Britain is one of the reasons that we have only one USIS post in Great Britain (London), while in Germany we had, as of 1986, six USIS posts—in Bonn, Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Munich (although Bonn and Hamburg have since been dropped). No doubt, Cold War considerations played a role as well. As I write this, the “special relationship” is perhaps at its lowest ebb in recent memory, with a great majority of the British people opposed to the Iraq war and to the British government’s support for that war. But there is a historic tendency in American politics for the pendulum of change to swing back in the opposite direction when things have gotten off track, or have swung too far in one direction. I used to tell my audiences, if you don’t like current American policies, just wait awhile and they will change. (I fervently hope that this is true. The mandate of the U.S. Information Service was to “tell America’s story to the world.” It is fortunate that I reached mandatory retirement from the Foreign Service before the election of George W. Bush, as I would have had difficulty defending America’s story under that disastrous administration. But I digress again.)

All in all, London was an excellent entrée into the Foreign Service, both because it is a large and comprehensive embassy, and because I was given substantive assignments throughout the year. And London is a fascinating place to live and work. My family and I look back on our London tour with great nostalgia (but I find that the longer a posting retreats into the past, the more nostalgic one tends to feel about it).