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Llewellyn Thompson

(Continued from page 5)

toward his career; rather they have fostered it. "In college I had no idea of becoming a diplomat," he says. "I studied economics and thought about going into the import-export business. That would have satisfied my desire to see more of the world. I went to Seattle to talk to some export-import people, and after listening to what I wanted, they told me I was heading in the wrong direction. Try the diplomatic service, they said. I did, and it was good advice."

In considering careers, the one that got no consideration was ranching. The incessant demands of the land, vagaries of the market, and the invasion of "drylanders" (farmers who took over public grazing lands) had embittered Thompson's father toward ranching. "He wanted us to look for careers with broader horizons and more opportunities than he had," the ambassador says.

Diplomatic service intrigued young Thompson because it offered both travel beyond his small-town horizons and also a chance at "responsibility and decision making." Both came more quickly to him than to most diplomats. Ordinarily, he would have been transferred routinely from his first post in Colombo, Ceylon, after two years, but in those lean times the State Department could not afford the move. Instead, he was placed in charge of the consulate as a compensation, and he considers this a lucky break because it put him in a decision-making role long before most of his contemporaries.

"Integrity and good judgment make a good diplomatic officer," Thompson says. "But how does a young man develop good judgment? Part of it is inherent, some comes from education—but experience is the real proving ground for good judgment. Nowadays, with the speed-up in world affairs, experience may come fast. But it wasn't always so. A desk man now (a desk man is chief of a geographic section), for example, handles more decisions in a week than the Secretary of State did in a month 20 years ago."

While Thompson's professional life matured in that much slower world of yesterday, he made the most of every opportunity. In 1933 he was transferred to Geneva, Switzerland, and a two-year assignment dragged out six years, again partly because of budget problems. Thompson didn't care. He found himself working under the man who he believes influenced his career more than any single person—the late Prentice Gilbert.

Dot Your I's; Cross Your T's

Gilbert had an obsession for accuracy, not only in a diplomat's observations but in his official reports to Washington. Each word and comma he cabled home was checked and rechecked by every assistant on his staff. In Washington, Gilbert insisted, they must be able to read our reports without fear of misinterpretation or misunderstanding. The reason was obvious: a vague, careless cable about a delicate foreign situation could lead policy-making Washington into an embarrassing decision. Today, in a city drowning in gobbledegook and bureaucratism, Thompson's reports are renowned as models of brevity (Gilbert was forced to equate words with cable charges in the '30s) and precise, direct English.

Thompson's stature as a Russian expert is based not only on knowledge of the Soviet but also on the Russians' own respect for his integrity and firmness. This respect was born in the winter of 1941 while Thompson was on his first assignment to the U. S. embassy in Moscow.

With German patrols advancing within six miles of the capital, foreign embassies packed up and fled with most of the Soviet officialdom. But Thompson recalls: "President Roosevelt wanted accurate information on the progress of the war and that could only be obtained in Moscow. Besides, he needed somebody to deliver his messages to Premier Stalin, so I stayed."



The President's special advisor on Kremlin affairs, Ambassador Thompson has served in posts from Ceylon to Moscow.

In an embassy short of food and encircled by tank traps, Thompson and a skeleton staff joined the Russians in a bitter siege. Thompson won the State Department's Medal of Freedom for his valor "at risk of capture," but, possibly more important, he won Russian admiration that was especially evident later in Nikita Khrushchev.

With peasant bluntness, Khrushchev often exhibits impatience with the diplomatic corps (including his own) and bypasses some ambassadors for direct contact with their superiors. Thompson, however, spent more time with the Premier than any other diplomat in Moscow.

The two came closest to a falling out at a cocktail party after the Francis Gary Powers U-2 flight. Although, earlier, Khrushchev had absolved Thompson of any responsibility, he suddenly changed his attitude and began berating the ambassador in a rage. Thompson's slightly stooped shoulders straightened and his sharp jaw clamped hard over any reply: he is known for a wry wit that can turn subtly caustic at provocation.

Before any incident could occur, Mrs. Thompson stepped up to the men. "Now let's not talk about this any more," she said, smiling. Khrushchev turned to her, first in surprise, then in approval.

"You are right!" he shouted and the subject was dropped.

The Four Skills of a Diplomat

The Russians admire firmness and undoubtedly this, too, contributes to their appreciation of Thompson's talents. They first met the Thompson firmness in the Austrian peace negotiations in 1955. For 10 years the Russians had blocked a treaty and then, with Stalin dead, decided to seek out an agreement—but on their terms. Thompson talked, listened, and bargained through 379 meetings, and the final treaty he helped hammer out proved a major triumph for the West. For his "firmness, patience, negotiating skill, and good judgment" in these negotiations, Thompson won the State Department's Distinguished Service Award.

Above his desk today hangs a color picture of the signing of the Austrian peace treaty. "It was presented to me by the head of the Austrian government when I left my Vienna post," he says with obvious pride. "The treaty was the highlight of my career." Perhaps as he arrives at his office at 8:40 each morning, Thompson looks to the picture as a reminder of his philosophy on contemporary diplomacy.

"The important thing," he says, "is for governments to keep open channels of communication. Circumstances, attitudes, and people change, and what may seem insolvable today may be solved tomorrow. For a representative to a Communist country, the important thing is not to give up because no answer to the problem is at hand, but to maintain communications so that if a change does occur he will recognize it and act upon it."

Seemingly interminable negotiations are part of a world divided between East and West; so, apparently, are such overnight crises as Cuba. In either case, Ambassador Thompson can expect a call:

"The President urgently requests your presence."