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The Education of a Non-Career Political Ambassador

Max M. Kampelman*

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is not a primer for those who aspire to a career in diplomacy. It is instead a report by a lawyer–political scientist who was called out of private life and into public service. It is not unusual in our country for American ambassadors to be selected from private life. Indeed, there is a continuing competition underway between the State Department, which looks to advance the careers of its professionals, and the White House, which seeks to reward the President's supporters and friends.

I was appointed in 1980 by President Jimmy Carter, and later reappointed by President Ronald Reagan, to serve as a United States ambassador and negotiator for the Madrid meeting of the thirty-five nation Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (“CSCE”).1 The Madrid meeting was convened in 1980 under the terms of the Helsinki Final Act, an agreement signed in 1975.2 I was informed that the meeting would last two to three months. It lasted three years. A previous CSCE meeting in Belgrade in 1977 ended in short order without an agreement and after much internal strife.3 The Madrid meeting ended with an agreement that strengthened Europe’s

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1 The Madrid Meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: A Report to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Comm Print, 97th Cong, 2d Sess (1982).


3 The Belgrade Followup Meeting to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: A Report and Appraisal Transmitted to the House Committee on International Relations by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Comm Print, 95th Cong, 2d Sess XI–XIII (1978).
commitment to human rights, and was considered by many European leaders as
the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF CooperATING WITH CONGRESS

Soon after my appointment, I learned that an influential Congressional
Joint Commission had been formed which did not trust the State Department’s
commitment to the human rights provisions in the Helsinki document. I
arranged to visit the Commission Chairman, Representative Dante Fascell,
whom I knew. By then, I learned that his staff had a significant grasp of the
details of the agreement, more so than the people at State who kept rotating
from job to job every few years.

I told Representative Fascell that I wanted to include his people on our
delegation staff. He agreed, if I would select his staff director as my deputy. I
had earlier decided upon Warren Zimmerman, a career diplomat (later to
become our last ambassador to Yugoslavia), to serve as deputy. I explained to
Representative Fascell that I felt our deputy should be a career foreign service
officer with access to the State Department and a familiarity with its methods.
Representative Fascell’s staff director therefore became our number three
person. I also asked Representative Fascell to serve as Vice Chairman of our
delegation, along with his colleague, Senator Claiborne Pell.4

Our delegation’s intimacy with Congress worked extremely well. Involving
the Congressmen as observers in our negotiations when they were in Madrid
meant that, at the conclusion of the three-year meeting, I had no problem
persuading the Congress that we had done a good job of representing the
national interest of the United States.

Similarly, President Reagan, who in 1985 asked me to return to
government service as our chief negotiator with the Soviet Union in Geneva on
nuclear arms reductions and missile defense, authorized me to negotiate a
Congressional “observer” plan with the leadership of the Senate and the House.
These bipartisan members of Congress took the lead in persuading their
colleagues that our Geneva agreements with the Soviets were in our national
interest. The two treaties we negotiated there, which for the first time reduced
our long-range nuclear missiles by 50 percent and totally eliminated all of the
intermediate range missiles that were in our arsenals, were easily ratified.

III. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER DeLEGATIONS

The Madrid meeting began with a preparatory session in September 1980.
We had no diplomatic contact of any kind with the Soviet Union after the

4 Cooperation within the US diplomatic community is also important to a successful
dlegation.
Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. On my first day in Madrid, I had arranged to have lunch with the Romanian ambassador, whom I met during his brief visit to Washington and who spoke English. At the end of the lunch, he said that he had to tell “uncle” about our meeting. I told him that I assumed he would be required to keep the Soviets informed. That afternoon, he called to say that the head of the Soviet delegation, who was also the ambassador to Spain, wondered whether he and I could meet. I agreed, much to his surprise, and suggested we meet for lunch the next day wherever he chose. A bit later that afternoon, a chagrined Romanian called to say that the Russian wanted me to choose the location. I explained that I had just arrived that morning and did not know the city or its restaurants, but that the Russian obviously wanted it to appear that the initiative for the lunch was mine rather than his. “Fine,” I said. “Let’s make it at my hotel apartment.”

Warren and I met with him and his number two in command, a KGB general, who spoke English. Our meeting lasted for three hours. The general called Warren that evening to suggest we meet again the next evening. I asked Warren to inform him that the Jewish high holidays began the next evening, and that I would be at the synagogue, but would be pleased to meet again after the holidays. The opportunity to make this point about my Jewish heritage pleased me, and it made the rounds of the delegations.

The meeting we had with the Soviets served another purpose. I had learned that at the prior review meeting held in Belgrade in 1977, the NATO caucus was divided. We wanted the NATO caucus in Madrid to exist and to be effective. Warren knew the head of the United Kingdom delegation. Our British friend doubted the French would agree to an active NATO caucus, but he offered to initiate an opening meeting at his mission, pointing out that the United States followed alphabetically and could call for a second meeting, although he did not expect the French to accept our invitation.

During the first meeting at the British embassy, I informed our allies that I had responded to a Soviet initiative and had agreed to have lunch with the Soviets the next day. If, however, our NATO friends thought it unwise for us to meet, I would cancel the lunch. They urged me to attend. I then announced that, since the US followed the UK alphabetically, I would invite them to a second NATO caucus at the US embassy the next afternoon, at which I would report on our meeting with the Soviets. They agreed, and the French attended the meeting, as I suspected they would. Some days thereafter, I approached the very capable French ambassador, who spoke English well, and he unexpectedly agreed, given my inability to speak his language, to speak English and not French at the NATO caucus meetings. We were clearly on our way to becoming, and in fact remained, a solid NATO caucus, plus Spain. Spain was not a member of NATO at the time, but Spain’s membership in our caucus was later followed by Spain’s entry into NATO at Brussels.

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IV. TAKING A STRONG STAND AGAINST SOVIET OPPRESSION

One of the divisive issues in the prior Belgrade meeting had to do with the US decision to name Soviet victims of oppression. Our allies would not join us. My Madrid instructions, and indeed my strong wishes, were to name names. When I explained our intention to the Germans, I was informed that they had obtained the release of fifty thousand Germans from the Soviet Union the previous year and had done so quietly. They did not intend to change their approach. I stated that I did not want to be party to any approach that would keep even a single German in the Soviet Union who might otherwise have been released, but I said that we must work like an orchestra. Sometimes the piano is quiet, and sometimes it is loud. The flute is always soft. The drummers and the saxophones are louder. The important task is to make music together. This was passed on to the foreign minister, Mr. Genscher, who frequently referred to that analogy in his meetings with me.

In that same vein, before the Madrid formal meeting began in November, I told the Swedish ambassador that I intended to raise the name of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish citizen captured and imprisoned by the Soviets for his work in saving the lives of Jewish refugees. I explained that although I did not wish to embarrass the Swedish delegation, the US Congress had made Mr. Wallenberg an honorary American citizen. He appreciated the information and said that he would pass it along to his foreign minister. The Swedish minister referred to the Wallenberg case in his statement on the opening day. His was the first delegation to name names. By the end of the Madrid meeting, it is my recollection that more than twenty of the thirty-five countries mentioned the names of victims of Soviet oppression, and it is my recollection that the US mentioned more than two hundred names, many of whom were released from prison and permitted to emigrate as we ended our three year meeting. The scars of the Belgrade tensions disappeared.

I had been advised by a State Department official that I would be provided a suggested draft of my opening remarks for the Madrid session. It did not arrive. With one day to go, I became anxious, summoned my secretary, and dictated the speech I wanted to give. It was a tough speech, with an emphasis on Soviet ideology and behavior, drawing on my earlier Ph.D. dissertation and my experience as a teacher of political theory. I discussed Marxism and Leninism, dissecting the Soviet system and its violation of human rights. My staff was immensely pleased, and one of them proudly told a Reuters correspondent that I had written it myself the previous day. As a matter of fact, the idea of clearing it with the State Department never entered my mind.

That afternoon in Washington, at the Department's daily briefing, the Washington Reuter's correspondent, noting that my talk was the toughest he had heard from anyone in our State Department, asked if my talk had been
cleared. The spokesman, believing that all such statements had been cleared, said that it was. The correspondent knew otherwise, and asked to see Roz Ridgeway, the Counselor at State. Roz called me to learn what it was that I had said. I explained, and said that the talk had been cabled to the Department immediately following its delivery. After reading the talk, Roz called again to say that she liked it very much. During the three years of our meeting, I was never asked by the State Department to clear my remarks with them.

Following my first-day lunch with the Romanian in Madrid, he asked if I would appear on Romanian television. I agreed and began the interview by noting that both of my parents had been born in Romania in an area, I noted, now “unfortunately” a part of the Soviet Union. A few days later, he told me his President was excited about the interview and wanted me to visit with him in Bucharest. What had I said? I was uncertain. He tracked it down to the word “unfortunately.” It was only after Washington asked me to go to Bucharest that I met with President Nicolae Ceausescu for a rather long conversation about my lineage and the potential threat to his country from massive numbers of Russian troops on his border. Three years later, during the last week of our meeting, the Romanian ambassador announced that President Ceausescu had instructed him to support a disputed proposal by NATO, the first and only open breach in the Warsaw Pact alliance.

V. THE FORMAL MEETINGS AND RELATED SUCCESSES

At the Madrid preparatory meeting, a divisive issue arose related to the formal agenda to follow. At the meeting in my apartment with the Soviet delegation, I suggested that we simply accept the inadequate Belgrade rules and save our inevitable arguments until the real issues were discussed. The Soviets declined, much to their later regret.

My staff, some of whom had been in Belgrade, recalled and provided me with Warsaw Pact statements made then, which were completely contrary to what the Warsaw Pact was now urging. At the appropriate time, I began the potentially embarrassing contradictory disclosures, one of which included a statement by the Hungarian ambassador, who sat across from me. As I spoke, he was visibly uncomfortable. On the spur of the moment, I decided not to mention his name. That evening, as I returned to my hotel after dinner, I found a case of Hungarian wine, no card. The next morning I approached the Hungarian very seriously and said that he had made life difficult for me. Embarrassed, he expressed regret and wondered why. “We have a State Department rule,” I explained, “that we cannot accept any gifts that we cannot consume within a matter of hours. It has been a very difficult night for me!” Finally absorbing my comment, he burst into laughter. He proved to be a helpful friend.
At one point, following a rather tough but detailed presentation by me at a formal plenary session, as I walked along the corridor, a Warsaw Pact ambassador walked beside me and asked for a copy of my presentation. He said he wanted to send it to his seventeen-year-old son.

Early in our main meeting, the number three person in the Polish delegation came to see me. He said he had been raised as a child by nuns at a convent, who told him at the end of the war that he was Jewish and his parents had been killed. He explained to me that, as a Jew, in spite of his excellent training, he was unable to join the Polish Foreign Service, though he was now pleased to have even a limited role. We became friends, and he is today an internationally known authority on international affairs.

Shortly thereafter, his friend and classmate, the delegation deputy who was part of the Foreign Service, came to see me with a problem. His wife and son were quietly working with Solidarity and he was concerned about their safety and his future. I made some suggestions and later some arrangements, including a period of time in New York. When President Lech Walesa took over the government, I wrote on my friend’s behalf to the new Polish Foreign Minister, whose release from prison I had urged in Madrid, vouching for my friend’s loyalty. My friend and colleague is today one of Poland’s leading ambassadors.

Whenever I spoke at the Madrid plenary meetings, I arranged for a press conference to follow at which I distributed the text of my talks. I began this during the first week of our sessions. When the Soviet delegate became aware of this practice, he took the floor to protest and to insist that I be silenced on the grounds that I was violating the pattern of “confidentiality” which, he asserted, was an integral part of the understanding among the participating states. I immediately responded by asserting that I had not and did not intend to disclose to the press what any other delegation was saying or doing at the plenary sessions. I declared, however, that as a representative of a democracy, the American people had a right to know what their representatives and diplomats were doing and saying in their name. I understood why this would seem strange to a representative of the Soviet Union. This ended the discussion and I noted that about a week later the Soviet delegate began holding press sessions.

As we moved along, I gathered from the Soviets that they partially attributed their inability to stop the deployment of Pershing and Cruise missiles by NATO to the bad publicity they were receiving in Europe from the Madrid meeting. I informed Secretary of State George Shultz and President Reagan of my belief that the Soviets would give us all that we wanted in order to end the meeting, but that I was no longer satisfied with asking only for words and not deeds. I was authorized by the President to engage in quiet diplomacy on this question, even though I knew it meant changing the rules in the middle of the game.
We were able, without publicity, to obtain the release of a few hundred victims of Soviet repression, including all of the Pentecostals hiding in our Embassy and their families in Siberia. My negotiation was with the KGB general. Two years ago, he wrote a book about his experiences in Germany, where he headed up the KGB prior to Madrid. The coauthor of the book was the man who headed up the CIA in Germany during the same period. I have an autographed copy of that volume with his inscription, which reads: “To my friend Max Kampelman, who taught me the importance of democracy and human rights.”

After Madrid and the Cold War, I had the privilege of meeting Vaclav Havel in his presidential office in Prague. He thanked me for championing his cause and the cause of Charter 77, which he led. It was also most satisfying to meet in Washington with Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek. He knew that upon his arrest by the Communists, I had immediately spoken out about him in Madrid—about his intellectual strengths, his commitment to human values, and his service in Washington as a scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center when I served as its Chairman. What also impressed me immensely was learning after Madrid that the Jewish and other human rights leaders imprisoned in the Soviet Union would later refer to things I had said during the meetings, saying in effect, “We in the prisons, we knew. Our friends had radios.”

VI. SUCCESSES IN ACHIEVING UNPUBLICIZED OBJECTIVES

There were two other private, vital, and unpublicized assignments given to me for Madrid. The first was the suggestion, not contained in any written “instruction,” that I try to be helpful in bringing Spain into NATO. Fortunately, I quickly found that the Spanish ambassador to our meeting, Javier Ruperez, Spain’s current ambassador to Washington, strongly favored his country’s entry into NATO. I was able to persuade our NATO colleagues, as a matter of courtesy to our host country, to permit the Spanish ambassador to join our caucus, thereby making it a NATO plus one, or a Western caucus. Ruperez then arranged for me to meet, on occasion, with his superiors, where we discussed NATO. Shortly thereafter, Spain did join NATO and Ruperez became the Spanish ambassador to NATO in Brussels.

A special highlight of the Madrid experience was the occasional opportunity I had to meet privately with King Juan Carlos of Spain. Those meetings were extraordinarily helpful to me as we discussed the Middle East, other international affairs, NATO, the historic role of the Jews in Spain, and Israel. The informality of the meetings was demonstrated, near the end of my stay in Madrid, when the King told me he had a very good joke he wanted me to pass along to President Reagan. I did.
The second unwritten instruction was for me to help guide the official Israeli CSCE observer. Israel was one of the “nonparticipating” Mediterranean states that had a nonvoting relationship with the CSCE. Israel’s representative was Spanish speaking, having served Israel in Latin America. I introduced him to many of our NATO colleagues. Associated with that task was the suggestion that I be sensitive to our government’s hope that Spain would enter into formal diplomatic relations with Israel. That was eventually worked out, with the Israeli CSCE observer later becoming Israel’s first ambassador to Spain.

VII. CONCLUSION

As I close, I recall that during my early preparations for the Madrid CSCE meeting, Ronald Reagan, as candidate for President, questioned whether we should send our diplomats to Madrid given our decision, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, not to send our athletes to Moscow for the Olympics. As President of the United States, he and Secretary of State Shultz were immensely supportive of what we were doing in Madrid. Indeed, it was President Reagan who urged me to persuade the Soviets that they release Jews and human rights advocates from their prisons and permit them to leave Russia if Russia’s relations with us were to improve.

Similarly, I had been urged by some friends not to accept the Madrid assignment because the CSCE was an original Soviet proposal and the Soviets did not intend to conform to its human rights provisions. Yet, I was later awarded the Presidential Citizen’s Medal by President Reagan and the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton, in part for my role at the Madrid meeting in promoting human rights through diplomacy. During a White House event three years ago honoring the recipients of the Medal of Freedom, former President Ford, also a recipient of the Medal of Freedom, approached me to thank me. Back in 1975, President Ford was criticized even by many of his friends when he made the United States a party to the CSCE by signing the Helsinki Final Act. He thanked me for making him look good in history.

When I opened this article, I said it was not intended to be a primer for aspiring diplomats. Nor is it a sermon designed to influence behavior. I trust that it will, however, launch discussions of value in developing new insights, not the least of which is my assertion that, as a registered Democrat who did not vote for Ronald Reagan when he ran against Jimmy Carter, I consider my service to President Reagan as having provided me with one of the greatest satisfactions of my life. It has always been my view that the President of the United States, Democrat or Republican, was my President, deserving of my respect and support.

I have one final observation on the issue of food and diplomacy. My records show that while in Madrid, I had more than 400 hours of private conversation
with the Soviets, the details of which I shared with our NATO colleagues, and practically all of it took place in private luncheons and dinners. In Geneva, private luncheons and dinner talks with Soviets, without interpreters present, also lent themselves to understanding and movement in our negotiations.

Secretary of State James Baker later asked me to return to the Helsinki process for one-month sessions during each of 1991, 1992, and 1993. The 1991 meeting was in Moscow. Early in the month, I met the American manager of the brand new McDonald’s restaurant in Moscow. As the month came to a close, it became our turn to host a diplomatic reception for the thirty-four other delegations. I called my friend at McDonald’s and persuaded him to rent me his entire restaurant for an evening, to which I invited not only all thirty-four ambassadors, but also all the secretaries, spouses, children, conference staff, interpreters, and security personnel. More than three hundred people showed up that evening with the complete typical McDonald’s menu offered to them. We also found a small Russian band that could play American music. It was a great success. Diplomacy is, after all, a human event involving human beings.