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STUFFY, SERIOUS AND SUPERCILIOUS

The Foreign Service Officer Goes to the Movies

By Michael Canning

For some 90 years, American movies have covered most aspects of our national life--at least superficially. And superficial is the word for its historic depiction of most American institutions. Hollywood's (and America's) primordial need has been for individual heroes (and villains), personalized symbols of good and evil to root for or revile, be they John Wayne or Boris Karloff. Large institutions, especially government bureaucracies like the State Department, hardly supply such figures, and the very nature of their work rarely offers the starker drama movieland requires. Unable to plumb the arcana of an outfit housed in (the appropriately named) Foggy Bottom, American moviemakers do what comes naturally: they display stereotypes.

Not that Hollywood has ever treated foreign affairs personnel overmuch, as discovered in researching the films discussed in this article. In the earlier days movies, diplomats were, on the rare occasion they appeared, portrayed in the rawest terms. In the isolationist environment of the times, most Americans had little sense of what diplomacy was about. Moreover, they didn't quite trust foreigners, and those who consorted with them--such as diplomats--were also not quite to be trusted. Diplomats, if they had any public personae at all, were likely seen as over-educated, elitist prigs with no connection to the hoi polloi.

Take a primitive example called *Ambassador Bill* (1931), starring Will Rogers as an Oklahoma hick named ambassador to the principality of Sylvania. This movie not only crudely satirizes the proverbial "political appointee" but mocks the world outside, with Sylvania a silly ministate buried somewhere in Europe. The country suffers weekly revolutions and is led by a dorky boy king whom Bill introduces to baseball and roping. Even more telling is how U.S. film, even in this neanderthal phase, views the professional Foreign Service. The Embassy regulars, the "secretary" and his assistant, are prissy snobs who plot decent Bill's removal by trying to enlist the support of a sympathetic U.S. Senator (of all things)!

Ambassador Bill's Sylvania is in the spirit of--if hardly as funny as--the Marx Brothers' loopy land of Freedonia in the classic *Duck Soup* (1933). The "diplomats" of both films are the vaguely continental, inconsequential, overdressed stereotypes which became a staple of Hollywood films for decades. Real Americans could hardly be professional diplomats: they just weren't stuffy enough!

Most movies of the 1930's were too frothy--or too gritty--to deal seriously with the complications or intrigues of foreign affairs. The War Years certainly concentrated Hollywood's mind on events overseas, but these were made manifest principally through the derring-do of the lone GI. In a multitude of war flicks, drama was again

individualized, while our diplomatic service was simply not heroic enough for U.S. filmmakers' tastes. Besides military men, those deemed truly intrepid were spies (like Cary Grant in *Notorious*), journalists (Joel McCrea in *Foreign Correspondent*), or just tough eggs (Bogie in *Casablanca*).

In the post-war period, those motion pictures which deigned to touch the diplomatic life gravitated to the facile stereotypes of the popular culture. Typical was *Call Me Madam* (1953), based on the Irving Berlin Broadway hit. Here we find another cute principality, Lichtenberg, standing in for Luxembourg, where the real "hostess with the mostes'," Perle Mesta, served as Truman's representative. Perky Ambassador Sally Adams from Oklahoma (where else?) was incarnated by leather-lunged Ethel Merman, who falls for a Lichtenbergian general. True to how the film industry saw career Foreign Service personnel, *Madam* offered comedian Billy De Wolfe--all striped-pants up-tightness--with the very Waspish, "diplomatic" name of Pemberton Maxwell.

Easy stereotypes of glamorous diplomatic life abound in *The Ambassador's Daughter* (1956), wherein heroine Olivia de Havilland becomes enamored of a wholesome GI after the two paint the town. The town they paint is at least Paris, rather than some imaginary kingdom, but the usual canards are present. The sweet young thing's father is another common ambassadorial stereotype (to go along with the hayseed): the pompous stuffed shirt, played by veteran stuffed shirt Edward Arnold.

The films of the 1960's were hardly rife with the real business of foreign affairs, although there was an explosion of espionage and "secret agent" films, sparked by the Bond films and their imitators. Typical of these was *Charade* (1964), a caper flick with Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. Here the Embassy "security" officer (Walter Matthau) is the villain masquerading under the lovely ambassadorial name of Hamilton Bartholomew. Cary turns out to be a U.S. Treasury official who somehow finds time to chase bad guys and woo Ms. Hepburn all over Paris (again). The one look we get at Embassy staffers is *Stereotype City*: two bespectacled, uptight white breads talking cattily in the elevator about "the Boss" (the Ambassador).

Even in the Sixties, though, the dippiness of diplomacy stayed in vogue, as in *Romanoff and Juliet* (1961), written and directed by and starring Peter Ustinov, reprising his play of the same name. Ustinov heads Concordia, yet another tiny state tucked into Europe, and his country--at the height of the Cold War--is being wooed by the U.S. and the USSR. The cutesy plot, a variation on Shakespeare, has the daughter of the American Ambassador and the son of the Soviet Ambassador falling in love, thus producing their own version of the Thaw. Our ambassador sports the usual ostentatious, super-Wasp name--Hooper Moulsworth--while his character was described by *The New York Times* critic as "the British farce writer's idea of the back-slapping, Bourbon-drinking, tooth-picking American." In other words, a return to Ambassador Bill.

One Sixties' film, *Seven Days in May* (1964), in which a harried President fends off a coup by a right-wing general, actually has an Embassy officer who is a hero of sorts. In a tiny bit part, the U.S. consul in Madrid provides a crucial plot element when he discovers, among effects in a Spanish crash site, a White House aide's cigarette case containing a vital message. He even gets (implausibly) whisked to Washington to present his evidence to the President himself. In an even smaller bit in one of the

decade's many spy spoofs, *Our Man Flint* (1966), an American diplomat in Rome is chewed out by the head of U.S. intelligence who, when the enemy's lair disappears, utters a threat to curdle the blood of any State officer: "Great intelligence work! Your next post will be Peyton Place!"

The same decade did have one film built around the figure of an American ambassador, but it was far more serious than *Call Me Madam*. *The Ugly American* (1962), based on a best seller, was wholly a Marlon Brando project, a vessel into which he could pour his liberal musings. Brando plays the very ambassadorially named Harrison Carter MacWhite, not a career man, but an intellectually arrogant publisher made envoy to the fictional Sarkham in Southeast Asia. A well-meaning dogooder, he hopes to revive a friendship with an old Sarkhamese comrade representing progressive forces in the troubled state. Seen from the perspective of 30 years hindsight, the film is an ungainly attempt by Hollywood liberals to define a "Third Force" between America's crude capitalism and the crude communism of the Third World.

Critically, Brando's performance has not worn well. His biographer Richard Schickel felt he portrayed MacWhite "as an Ivy League twit--all drawling nasality and condescension in his hearing room appearance, all false self-confidence when he arrives in Sarkham and attempts to shore up his weary and cynical diplomatic staff, all false bonhomie when he tries to reestablish his friendship." Such a catalog summarized how most moviegoers probably still viewed their representatives overseas.

The Ugly American did try, however laboriously, to deal with real issues of international politics and to feature American diplomats who were other than caricatures from some Ruritanian romance. With growing U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia came at least a modicum of American awareness of the wider world, and with our Vietnam commitment came some cognizance of the true complexity of foreign affairs. With crises and wars in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, an American public perception of diplomacy as necessary beyond Europe's comfortable confines began to develop, even if the understanding of its practice could hardly be called sophisticated.

It took some years (and a British production) to come up with a movie in which Foreign Service staffers were at least competent if not well-rounded. In the obscure *Embassy* (1972), the Americans very much in charge of our troubled mission in Beirut were led by Richard Roundtree of *Shaft* fame. This was, given the times, hardly a tale of visas and GSO work orders. It is standard spy stuff, with the Embassy hosting an defecting Soviet agent who is thwarted by another Russian impersonating a U.S. Air Force colonel. These Foreign Service types are hardly authentic but they dress better than most, especially Roundtree, who represents the first Afro-American diplomat in the movies.

Still, it wasn't too long before the cartoons came back. In *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), the filmmakers resorted to proven stereotypes in telling the true story of a kidnapping of an American family by an Arab bandit in Morocco in 1904. The movie offered plenty of gun and sword-play, some windy cross-cultural speculation, and lots of vulgar flaunting of America's "Big Stick" policy. The fun came in the hammy performances from actors in on the joke, like Sean Connery (as the Arab Raisuli) and

Brian Keith as a much-larger-than-life Teddy Roosevelt.

The Foreign Service officers in *The Wind and the Lion* are a bald reversion to diplomatic type, made of equal parts Ambassadors Bill and Moulsworth. The consul general in Tangiers is seen overdressed in a morning coat, speaking in a yokel's gravelly voice, and appearing to be vaguely drunk. Even worse as an American representative is his vice consul, who, with pith helmet and Southern-fried accent, incarnates the bombastic "Big Stick" policy. The movie's credo is delivered by Keith's TR: "The world will never love us, but it will respect us--may even grow to fear us. We have too much audacity." So do the dips in this movie.

In recent years, U.S. movie makers have pictured the American diplomatic service more often and more realistically because their audience's knowledge of that service has changed. Many more Americans now have traveled or lived overseas, either as Peace Corps volunteers or students, as businessmen or tourists, and have a sense of how actual Embassies function and how they are staffed (often with people like themselves). While the Foreign Service has hardly become central to basic Hollywood concerns, some of the worst of the old stereotyping has faded and something closer to real people is being shown.

U.S. movies have also adapted to how our national media was treating diplomacy and its practitioners. Starting with Henry Kissinger as a viable--if not exactly photogenic--national celebrity, the mass media, especially television news, began depicting an idea of the State Department which filmmakers had to match or at least approximate for verisimilitude's sake.

The expansion of news outlets and talk shows--like "Nightline" or "The McNeil-Lehrer Newshour"--allowed real diplomats to address the latest foreign policy conundrum. Through the one monster story of the Iran hostage crisis, a vast public was introduced to genuine Foreign Service people (the hostages and their families), and our foreign affairs efforts were made "up close and personal," a sine qua non for much of what TV does. With new cable services like C-SPAN and CNN, millions of new viewers now had some idea of what an individual State officer was like, if only via the steady parade of figures at the televised noon briefing.

Yet even as the feature film grew more realistic, even as our diplomatic service acquired a more human face, Hollywood held with its stance of the heroic individual, typically confronting the System, or Big Government, or the bureaucrats of every (pin)stripe. This controlling myth of our filmmaking has meant that the Dream Factory remains consistent in its delineation of our diplomats, mired in the Fudge Factory. Members of the Foreign Service, even if more realistically portrayed after the 1980's, are rarely central to the action. More significant, they are not only peripheral, they remain profoundly ineffectual.

Take the poor sap in *Midnight Express* (1978), a consular official who can do nothing to affect the drastic sentence passed on the hashish-carrying Billy Hayes by a Turkish court. The film sets up the audience for a spineless State Department by showing Billy's father as a dutiful believer in the USG. But the very presence of the consul--a skinny, balding, bespectacled weenie--gives the game away. Final evidence of the consul's (and symbolically State's) impotence is when he tells Billy the bad news that he has been sentenced to life for drug smuggling. What happens? Billy tries to strangle the dweeb! Isn't that the way all American citizens treat their hapless

bureaucrats?

A consular officer who gets no more respect has a bit in the horror-comedy *American Werewolf in London* (1981). Called into a British hospital to see a young American mysteriously mauled in the North England moors, the officer irritates the attending physician and is asked to leave. Played by Frank Oz (one of the Muppet masters), he is--guess what--skinny, balding and bespectacled, the Milquetoast of the breed beloved by screenwriters. He at least gets a good parting shot in a line legions of consular officers might think if not actually utter: "These dumb-ass kids...they never appreciate anything you do for 'em!"

The Foreign Service is no more effective in an espionage piece called *The Amateur* (1982). Terrorists take over the U.S. Consulate in Munich, seize the consul general's office, and murder a female hostage on television. The brooding U.S. ambassador in Bonn can only intone: "I cannot bargain" with terrorists. The hostage's boyfriend, a CIA cipher whiz, then avenges his love--utterly solo, of course. Our ambassador to Algeria is no more effective in the Chuck Norris macho vehicle *Delta Force* (1986). Every time he appears, he is asked to leave so real work can be done by Commander Lee Marvin.

A Foreign Service type has a key role in a bonbon called *Protocol* (1984). In fact--gadzooks!--he's the love interest. Ransome is State's "Middle East Desk Chief" assigned as minder to a dippy but good-hearted waitress, Sunny Davis (Goldie Hawn), who saves an Arab dignitary from assassination and is rewarded with a job in State Protocol. When Sunny is duped by the Administration, she resigns, and Ransome, acting on principle (unheard of from a government official), follows her lead. The smart ones know when to get out, you see. One earnest line from Sunny sums up what honest American folk can expect from the regulars in the bureaucracy (including the State Department): "Professionals, well, they don't always care, you know."

In *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), a consular officer journeys to an obscure Saharan outpost to retrieve the lost Catherine (Debra Winger) and shepherd her back to Tangiers. Uniquely among these films, the officer is a woman, but, paralleling the look of her male counterparts in other movies, she is tall, matronly and wearing a hat a couple of sizes too small. In other words, a fuddy-duddy. She also proves no more capable with her charge: Catherine sneaks off to lose herself in a local cafe.

The 1980's equivalent of the British Embassy was the Israeli-produced *The Ambassador* (1984), starring Robert Mitchum as the U.S. envoy to Israel. The plot is among these movies' most improbable: the ambassador tries to serve as go-between in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is finally disowned by the President--while all the time his boozing wife is having an affair with a PLO activist! While *The Ambassador* doesn't exactly fit into this survey of Hollywood movies, it still tends to confirm filmdom's overall view of our diplomats as fundamentally inept--unlike Lone Rangers--in resolving conflicts that matter.

Perhaps the one major Hollywood film which represents regular State Department personnel most realistically was the one which also seemed to offer them the greatest calumny: the controversial *Missing* (1982). Based on the case of young Charles Horman, who was seized and killed by Chilean authorities during the 1973 coup, it featured performances by Jack Lemmon (as Horman père), and Sissy Spacek

(as Horman's wife). Its key message was to show just how dissembling U.S. officialdom can be, a message delivered through the growing disillusionment of Lemmon's character.

Missing proved a cause celebre, and was strongly objected to at the time by the State Department, which said it grossly distorted the facts of the case. Two Foreign Service officers, the ambassador and the consul at the time (along with the chief of the U.S. Naval Mission in Chile) filed suit for libel in U.S. District Court against the film and the book upon which it was based, charging that parts were "false, unfair, inaccurate and defamatory." (The AFSA Governing Board contributed \$2,500 to the suit).

The surprise is that the State officers depicted are quite believable. The consul, an angular, studious sort, seems to really want to help the Hormans even though he appears to be in on an Embassy cover-up. He is the one, after all, that finally informs Ed Horman that his son has been positively identified. The vice consul is a young, simpatico fellow who accompanies the Hormans on their grimmest quests to find the young man. These are sincere officials doing the dirtiest kind of "American interests" jobs. At bottom, of course, no matter how personable or committed these officers are, they remain fundamentally ineffectual.

Which brings us to a final example of a Foreign Service type who, for once, is not ineffectual. In *White Nights* (1985), the intricate plot concerns a defected Russian ballet star Nikolai (Mikhail Baryshnikoff) being held against his will in Leningrad by Soviet authorities. The dancer's agent goes for help to the U.S. Ambassador, but the real bureaucratic heroics are provided by a prototype Embassy staffer--lanky, nerdy and with horn rims--who proves to be a key insider in springing Nikolai.

How the good guy is saved is unique in movies treating diplomatic business. The consul helps the ballet dancer escape to the Consulate in Leningrad, where U.S. diplomats, hosting a reception, are able to slip the relieved Nikolai past surly KGB officials through the Consulate gates to safety. For once, for once, the Foreign Service acts boldly and creatively to safeguard an individual American citizen. *White Nights* is hardly a great film, but it does put a reasonably competent, human visage on the cinematic U.S. diplomat.

In the spirit of this review of the movie treatment of American diplomats, mention should be made of network television's one attempt to portray a U.S. Mission. I'm speaking of the TV movie pilot *Embassy*, produced for ABC-TV in 1985 in Rome. Conceived as a drama with varied episodes occurring within an ongoing institutional context, *Embassy* was to be a diplomatic *Hill Street Blues*. It was to feature, among the running characters, an ambassador, a press officer, a consular official, and--of all things--a DCM, a Frank Furillo-type around whom the stories and characters revolved. The producers, sure that the innards of a mission housed any number of great stories, went out of their way to consult with Embassy officers (including the author, press attaché in Rome at the time), aiming to get the details right. Success would mean an exciting window on the yet-to-be-discovered world of international affairs--and a long-running money-maker. So what happened? *Embassy* aired on the ABC network in late 1985. It disappeared without a trace.

Which doesn't mean, of course, that there is no excitement, no drama, and little of importance that happens in the life of an Embassy; it just has to be marketed the

right way. Think of the possibilities... an under-the-gun Mission in a cool Mediterranean locale led by grizzled veteran Ambassador Clint Eastwood, backed by the stolid, smooth careerist DCM Kevin Costner, who resents the hyper, plugged-in political officer Michael Keaton, stuck in a dying affair with the lovely personnel officer Julia Roberts, who has eyes for the new, extremely green consular officer Tom Cruise, who's worried about AIDS infection after a one-nighter with a luscious immigrant visa applicant, Michelle Pfeiffer, who is carrying the baby of the phlegmatic, henpecked security officer Sly Stallone--all set against a ripe local government scandal which involves the sleazy local Mafia-type cabal who are running drugs and arms to.... Now all we need is a script.
