

THE ART OF DIPLOMACY: MAKING FOES INTO FRIENDS

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ABSTRACT

My Fulbright at Sciences Po in Paris enabled me to research how France and North Vietnam, which had been at war for years until France was defeated, were able to rebuild their relationship into the strategic and economic partnership it is today. The principal conclusion I drew was that negotiation between belligerents can produce surprising results if both sides are willing to understand the other's perspective and compromise even if it hurts. This is a lesson which has guided my professional career as a US Government official and an academic, as well as in my personal life.

Keywords: diplomacy • compromise • Vietnam • France • Fulbright



MY FULBRIGHT SHAPED MY LIFE

My Fulbright at the Paris Institute of Political Studies, better known as Sciences Po, has shaped my life both professionally and personally. My research there grounded my emerging conviction that diplomacy could solve just about any problem, whether transnational or personal. What was required were foresight, patience, understanding of “the other’s” perspective and compromise. These qualities are at the core of the Fulbright experience.

During my Fulbright, I came to realize that diplomacy was the career embedded in my DNA. I have long been fascinated by languages and other cultures. As a child, I listened to my grandmother’s broken English, not understanding why she didn’t speak it perfectly. And I remember her speaking Czech to my mother, the first language for both of them. Of course, I knew they were talking about me, so I mastered a few words but felt inadequate when I couldn’t communicate with my great-grandmother who spoke only Czech. Was this where my love of the world that I did not know was born?

Then came Latin at parochial school, soon to be followed by French, which became, in my still small world, the quintessence of sophistication and civilization. Off to university and Italian came into my life, now dominated almost entirely by studying the literature written in these languages. I did the honors program in French....a year early....and the honors program in Italian, also a year early.

EDUCATION AND FULBRIGHT

But close to finishing my undergraduate work, I experienced an intellectual crisis. As important as languages are, one has to have something useful, and hopefully important, to say. So I began to think beyond the acquisition of languages to the broader world out there. By now it was the late 1960s and the world was consumed with the Cold War and the war in Vietnam. The latter led to my growing fascination with what was then called Indochina ; that is, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (the US military was in all three countries, not just Vietnam). Anti-war and pro-war advocates swirled around me as did conscientious objectors who often fled to Canada to escape the draft. I was trained to think of the USSR as the principal threat to US. security so why were we in Vietnam, a country struggling to extricate itself from centuries of colonization and come into its own?

I spent the first year of graduate school at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy center where I was studying US-European relations and Europe's strongly-voiced opinions about the US war in Vietnam. So it was perhaps inevitable that I would decide to do my degree with a focus on Southeast Asia and a particular emphasis on Indochina.

As the war dragged on and the government of my beloved France became increasingly critical of US policy towards Vietnam (with the French president calling for the US to end the war and withdraw), I began to wonder what was shaping the French government's views. After all, France was a staunch NATO ally and itself had been badly defeated by a communist insurgency in North Vietnam. It appeared that France was trying to re-build its relations with North Vietnam, in spite of the bloodshed and the brutal defeat it had endured. I realized there were some lessons to be learned. That is, would it be possible for the US to some day, somehow re-build its relations with Vietnam as the French appeared to be doing?

The most efficient way of proceeding was to research, research, research. I applied for a Fulbright to study at Sciences Po in Paris and it shaped my professional future. Unfortunately, many of the documents I had hoped to study had not yet been declassified but I managed to gain access to some of the French government officials shaping that country's policy towards Vietnam. My conclusion was that even the most complex problems can be solved via negotiation. The Fulbright changed my way of thinking about seemingly impossible-to-fix challenges facing the US Government. And it gave me hope, if not certainty, that I could make a difference if I persevered, no matter how awful the odds, and effectively argued my point-of-view. That perspective, based on my research, was and is today, that the US must make every effort to achieve and maintain peace, no matter how distant that goal might be and how many compromises must be made. If the French could do it with North Vietnam, why could the US not do it with the USSR, the People's Republic of China, Cuba and later Venezuela, Iran, North Korea,

Sudan, Libya, and Mexico and Central America? I know ... this is a strange grouping of countries but they have much in common: anger at the US on the one hand and, on the other, miserable governance with political and economic models that deliver for the elite but not for the populace.

DIPLOMACY IN A TIME OF TURMOIL

In practice, that is to say in terms of policy, the US must make concessions with governments it dislikes or even disdains if it wants those governments to make changes in their policies. This is, in essence, the art of negotiating. I had ample experience doing this in my first job in the US Department of State when I was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for American Republic Affairs (now Western Hemisphere Affairs). This was during the administration of President Jimmy Carter who was the first president to put a priority on human rights. There was considerable push-back from career Foreign Service Officers who argued that the US Government had to work with the government in power and not the government the US wished were in power. There was massive negotiating with my own colleagues at State as to what specific steps the US Government should or should not take in the quest to promote human rights. I often felt that I spent more time negotiating with my own Department of State colleagues than I did with foreign government officials! But it was my job to press for acceptance of the president's views and press I did.

As the US ambassador to Barbados, Grenada and other countries in the Eastern Caribbean, I early on encountered another professional challenge. The first coup d'état in the history of the English-speaking Caribbean had taken place in Grenada a few weeks before I arrived and US-Grenada relations had begun to deteriorate sharply. The dilemma I faced was what should US policy be towards the new far-left government in Grenada and the growing Cuban and Soviet influence in that country? Drawing on my instincts to negotiate, as shaped by my Fulbright, I made major efforts to work with the new Grenadian government, as difficult as that was. However, Washington overruled me and, in essence, told me to cut off contact with the Grenada government. I was convinced the US Government was wrong to prohibit me from exploring how to improve the US-Grenada relationship. I still regret losing that policy battle. Washington later invaded Grenada and the government is now democratic; but did it require an invasion to accomplish that?

I then went as a Fellow to Harvard University's Center for International Affairs where I continued the research I had begun on my Fulbright. By then, France and North Vietnam had established diplomatic relations and I longed to be able to get into the weeds...that is, the details...of how they did it...but Paris was far away...

PUBLIC SERVICE A SECOND TIME

On my return to public service in the Clinton administration, I constantly drew on the lessons I had learned studying the French-North Vietnamese rapprochement: negotiate, negotiate, negotiate and do not despair if at first you do not succeed. In this case, I was head of the bureau of global programs at the US Agency for International Development where I had a staff of 500-550 Foreign Service and Civil Service Officers and an annual budget of roughly one billion US dollars.

The days were filled with constant challenges, primarily of a development nature. We wrestled with myriad complex and perhaps unanswerable questions: should the poorest countries be the priority for US foreign aid or the more advanced developing countries on the verge take-off, which would soon no longer need assistance? Should the priority be countries of strategic importance to the US? Should the focus be health or education? Or food security or economic reform? Democracy strengthening or a clean-up of the environment? Etc... As rebuilding broken diplomatic relations requires patience and compromise, so does development. In grappling with these questions, the lessons learned as a Fulbrighter were always on my mind.

I might add that I married William Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence, who had been the CIA's station chief in Saigon and in a second tour ran the CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support) program in South Vietnam. He was entranced by the country and its culture so I was proud of my ability, thanks to my Fulbright, to season our many conversations about Vietnam with my own perspectives.

After his death, I went back to Paris as Deputy Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). With 30 member countries ranging from Germany to Japan and from Mexico to Australia, the name of the game was compromise with the OECD's leadership. It was a never-ending search to find agreement among the representatives of the wide range of political cultures represented there. I never stopped thinking about a victorious North Vietnam and a defeated France trying to find common ground. As I said earlier, I would constantly remind myself that, if they could do it, we could get the Turks and the Greeks, the Germans and the Poles, the Japanese and the South Koreans, inter alia, to come to an agreement, imperfect though each might consider it.

Following my posting at the OECD, I moved to Mexico City to head an anti-corruption project for the Government of Mexico that was financed by the US Department of State. Given the long history of animosity between the two countries and the pervasive corruption in Mexico, I knew I had to proceed with extreme caution. I surmised that the French felt this as they began to reconnect with North Vietnam, which had been occupied by France for almost a century. And certainly the North Vietnamese would be uncertain about the reaction of the government they had defeated so badly at Dien

Bien Phu in 1954. But these two erstwhile foes worked slowly and carefully as did I when I recommended some fundamental and possibly unacceptable changes to Mexico's governmental institutions. One has to keep the end goal in mind and always be willing to compromise, if necessary.

FRUITS OF EDUCATION: MY FULBRIGHT

Returning to the US after my assignment in Mexico, I began to teach at American University's School of International Service. All of my courses focus on US foreign policy. I delight to point out, as does the wonderful book on the subject titled "How Enemies Become Friends" by Charles Kupchan, if a government wishes to, it can make friends with the most unlikely former enemies. The US, which fought a long and nasty war with North Vietnam, now has excellent diplomatic relations with that country and even an increasingly close security arrangement. The long fraught US-Mexico relations have morphed into an ever closer partnership thanks in large part to the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, a free trade pact among the three countries. Let us not forget that in World War II the US fought Japan, Germany, and Italy, who are now among our staunchest allies. So enemies can become friends, if there is the will.

CONCLUSION

The world tends to focus on the problems it faces but so many problems have been solved or on the way to being solved. My Fulbright helped me understand the importance of looking at countries' accomplishments and not their mistakes. France and Vietnam, once bitter enemies, will this year (2023) celebrate a half century of normal diplomatic relations with an important strategic partnership strengthening the bonds between the two countries. It is a bit difficult for me now to wrap my head around the long journey these countries undertook since my Fulbright research was focused on the negatives; that is, the stratospherically high level of grievance, the lack of trust and the myriad doubts that anything positive could come from negotiating. But diplomacy worked and this taught me a vital life lesson. Never lose hope when one faces a seemingly unsolvable problem. Go for it. Talk with the other side, then talk some more and then talk again. Surprising changes occur as "the other" begins to understand your point of view and you theirs. The result may not be 100 percent satisfactory but it is inevitably better than no result at all!

My Fulbright helped me understand the importance of looking at countries' accomplishments and not their mistakes.

NOTES

1. There is a rich, fascinating literature on this topic of making foes into friends. This includes Charles Kupchan's *How Enemies Become Friends, the Source of Stable Peace*, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth's *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, and Adam Kahane's *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust*.

BIOGRAPHY

Ambassador Sally Shelton-Colby, currently a professor at American University's School of International Service, has held a number of senior positions in the US Government, international organizations, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. She was Deputy Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris, France. Prior to that, she was Assistant Administrator for Global Programs at the US Agency for International Development, US Ambassador to several countries in the Eastern Caribbean, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Vice President of Bankers Trust Co. and Legislative Assistant to Senator Lloyd Bentsen (later Secretary of Treasury). She has served on the boards of directors of numerous non-profit organizations and multinational corporations, and has taught US foreign policy at Georgetown University, Harvard and universities in France, Mexico, South Korea and Chile. She earned her MA at The Johns Hopkins Nitze School of Advanced International Studies and was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to the Institut des Sciences Politiques in Paris, France, 1968-1969. She can be reached at sshelton-colby@gmail.com
