

The Decline of the Department of State

THE FIRST WORLD WAR, MORE THAN THE POLITICAL machinations of Secretary Bryan, created fissures in the Department of State that were ultimately to develop into yawning cracks. Indeed "the Great Commoner", in retrospect, does not appear as one of the least competent secretaries. His efforts to maintain the traditional American policy of neutrality, to bring the war to a close by negotiation, and at least to preserve peace for the United States, were little short of heroic. President Wilson, in an observation that seems more biting as to subject than object, said of Bryan: "He is absolutely sincere, that is what makes him dangerous."¹

The net effect of World War I, and the personal diplomacy of President Wilson which the Senate repudiated by failing to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, was to increase both the psychological and physical strains on the Department of State.

Its career service had been largely liquidated by the spoilsmen, while the demands on the trained personnel that remained were greatly increased, not least by the multiplicity of new and highly unstable governments brought to birth in Europe under the Wilsonian policy

¹ Quoted, Stuart, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

of self-determination. All these new sovereignties, in what a contemporary English writer (H. N. Brailsford) called "Balkanized Europe", required additional American diplomatic representation, to say nothing of our delicate and anomalous relations with the repudiated League of Nations. Meantime the dominant isolationism made it more difficult to secure the funds essential to reorganize the department for its enlarged responsibilities. Of 788 employes, foreign service excluded, on December 1, 1919, only 353 had permanent status.²

Obviously the first step was to equip the department to cope more adequately with its post-war tasks. Robert Lansing, Counsellor under Bryan and Wilson's wartime Secretary, saw the need of this. On January 21, 1920, three weeks before his resignation, Lansing wrote to Representative John Jacob Rogers, of Massachusetts, saying:

"The machinery of government now provided for dealing with our foreign relations is in need of complete repair and reorganization. . . . American agents in the foreign field must broaden the scope and intensify the nature of their work in order that the Department of State may have at its disposal knowledge of the actual facts of every development or turn of events."³

Representative Rogers, like many of his colleagues of both parties, possessed a keen awareness and understanding of the departmental needs. With the change of Administration and the appointment of Charles Evans

² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

³ Committee on Foreign Affairs *Hearings*, 68th Congress, 1st Session, pp. 30-31.

Hughes, who was to President Harding much like Secretary Fish to President Grant, it was possible to get action from the Republican Congress. On May 24, 1924, the Rogers Act came into effect.

It established a Foreign Service in which the merit system would govern from vice-consul up to Ambassadorial level. It integrated the heretofore separate consular and diplomatic services, making the officers of both interchangeable. It provided for the return of foreign service officers from the field, for three-year assignment at departmental headquarters in Washington. In short the Rogers Act re-established, regularized and legally confirmed American diplomacy as a reliable professional career, wholly non-partisan and largely outside the grasp of political patronage. There would have been a better case for the bipartisan foreign policy if the spirit and letter of the bipartisan Rogers Act had been maintained.

For a time this was the case. Under Secretary Hughes, as with Secretary Hay before him, economy itself produced efficiency. The departmental payroll was cut from 714 in 1921 to 590 in 1923,⁴ yet the elimination of deadwood markedly improved morale.

This upward trend became more pronounced when President Coolidge, by executive order of June 7, 1924, authorized establishment of a Foreign Service Personnel Board, to recommend promotion on a basis of attested efficiency. There was justification for later charges that those with consular service suffered discrimination at the hands of this board. But those complaints, brought out by healthy Democratic criticism, were met by recom-

⁴ Stuart, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

mendations made binding in the Moses-Linthicum Act of 1931.

It was also asserted, with perhaps a little justification, that a tendency towards snobbishness and caste began to develop in the Foreign Service as its status became more secure and its prerogatives recognized. Ceremonial undoubtedly was more emphasized, especially after the Division of Protocol was established by Secretary Kellogg, in 1928.

The present writer, however, worked in close and often intimate journalistic contact with many foreign service officers, in Europe from 1928 to 1931, in Washington from 1931 to 1940. Seldom, if ever, was the "high-hat" attitude offensive, even when occasionally perceptible. Snobbishness does not thrive in the American climate. And rarely has it been knocked down more effectively than by Elihu Root. It was suggested to that outstanding Secretary that American diplomats should be uniformed in satin knee breeches, silk coats and frills *à l'Anglais*. Root took care of the proposal by advocating one additional asset: "that a sprig of mistletoe be embroidered on the coattails."⁵

During the Hoover Administration, "more than four-fifths of the posts abroad were filled by men named from the career service".⁶ And State Department morale was fortified in many other ways under the direction of Henry L. Stimson. It "must be strengthened and supported as the great arm of our government dedicated to

⁵ Philip C. Jessup: *Elihu Root* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company; 1938) Vol. II, p. 107.

⁶ Stuart, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

the organization of peace", said Mr. Hoover on Armistice Day of 1929. For the following fiscal year, 1930-31, Secretary Stimson requested a departmental appropriation of \$17,097,426 and Congress trimmed it by only \$77,000, thus demonstrating that executive and legislature can work co-operatively when there is mutual trust. In retrospect, the decade from 1922 to 1932 stands out as a luminous period in State Department history. But it was one of Indian Summer.

On November 23, 1932, Assistant Secretary Wilbur J. Carr, then a veteran of over forty years of State Department service, was able to tell Congress that: "Our organization now, we think, at least is the best we have ever had; I mean as to business organization and as to quality of personnel."⁷ Yet only two years later Mr. Carr felt it necessary to tell another Congressional Committee (House Foreign Affairs) that: "The distress in the Foreign Service today is greater than at any time within the memory of those of us in the Department of State."

Something had happened, between the morale peak of 1932 and the valley of 1934.

2.

ON MARCH 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt began his twelve-year tenure of the Presidency, gave 54 words to foreign policy in his Inaugural Address and promptly

⁷ *Hearings*, Dept. of State Appropriation Bill, 72nd Congress, 2nd Session, p. 52.

scuttled the London Economic Conference. Secretary of State Hull accepted this affront to his planning, as he did many other rebuffs during a period of office almost as long as that of the President, in fact the longest ever held by any Secretary of State. Mr. Hull's success, unfortunately, is not measurable by the length of time that he nominally directed the department in charge of American foreign policy.

There is no question that Secretary Hull personally desired to maintain the standards and traditions of the foreign service. He urged President Roosevelt to make at least half of his diplomatic appointments from the professionals available and actually nine out of seventeen Ambassadors, seventeen out of thirty-five Ministers serving in 1935, were career men.⁸ Moreover, by no means all of the political appointees were unsuccessful. One of them, Mrs. Ruth Bryan Owen, as Minister to Denmark, simultaneously honored the "Great Commoner" through his daughter and catered to Mr. Roosevelt's pleasure in breaking precedents by creating the first woman envoy plenipotentiary in American history.

The new divisions initially established were also competently directed, that of Trade Agreements by Dr. Henry F. Grady; that of Research and Publication by Dr. Cyril Wynne; that of International Communications by Thomas Burke; that of Cultural Relations by Professor Ben M. Cherrington of the University of Denver; that of Controls, growing out of the office of Arms and Munitions Control established under the neutrality

⁸ Benjamin H. Williams: *American Diplomacy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company; 1936), p. 459.

legislation, by its former chief, Joseph C. Green. Through this and other expansion the departmental expense was pushed up, though not excessively. In 1940, as the war got under way in Europe, the State Department still had only 971 employes in Washington.

Nevertheless there were intimations, long before the Nazi invasion of Poland, that the Department of State was losing its grip as a responsible agency in the direction of foreign policy. In various ways President Roosevelt showed a contemptuous attitude towards the professional foreign service, tending more and more to rely on his personal agents, or his own diplomatic appointees. This tendency, perhaps natural in the emergency, was greatly strengthened after the outbreak of the war and led to serious deterioration of State Department morale. The fact is apparent between the lines of Secretary Hull's *Memoirs*, in addition to much other evidence. The mission of Undersecretary Sumner Welles to Europe early in 1940, undertaken on the President's initiative but without the approval of Mr. Hull, "brought the latent antagonism between Secretary Hull and Undersecretary Welles into such an active state that they could no longer work together satisfactorily in the Department."⁹

⁹ Stuart, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

3.

THE ENTRY of the United States into the war seriously affected the Department of State, by reason of both internal and external pressures.

On the internal side the war brought into the department, burgeoning daily with new bureaus, offices and attempted functions, many hundreds of enthusiastic but largely unqualified employes. Especially prominent among these were college and university teachers of "political science", unfortunately to a large extent themselves deficient in the scientific attitude. Few of this type had any administrative experience whatever, but practically all were filled with a fine fervor for "international co-operation" and convinced that "isolationism" was of the devil.

As late as the end of 1946 one of this group felt it appropriate to describe "the true isolationist" as a "usually naive" person who believed that: "the United States would through its own might and wisdom be able to direct its high destiny independently of the fate of the outside world." This professor, with teaching experience on the faculties of Harvard, Princeton and Pennsylvania, then Chief of the (new) Division of Training Services, Department of State, concluded sagely that: "The impact of events has so shattered this type of outlook that it no longer finds expression in any significant political grouping."¹

¹ Dr. William P. Maddox: "The Foreign Service in Transition," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 1947.

Since the career service owed its entire being to rational faith in the ability of the United States "to direct its high destiny independently", the swing to lyrical internationalism, soon to be punctured by Stalin, increased the confusion and demoralization of the trained State Department personnel. With the end of the war the career men, frustrated and sick at heart, began to resign at an alarming rate. No matter: more professors took their places. And very few of these gave up their \$10,000 wartime jobs to return to lecturing at a competitive rate of half that sum, or less.

4.

THE MOST ambitious example of amateur statecraft during the war period was the wholly laudable, but in the upshot pathetic, attempt to plan a neatly packaged postwar world. A detailed official account of this effort is available in the 700-page volume entitled *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation, 1939-45*, released by the Department of State in February, 1950.² Its introduction says that the volume "originated in the desire expressed on April 19, 1946, by President Harry S. Truman that a record be written of the structure and conduct of the extraordinary preparation of our postwar foreign policy as made in the Department of State during World War II."

² Publication 3580; General Foreign Policy Series 15.

“Extraordinary” is the *mot juste*, for nowhere in this encyclopedic volume can one find any indication of any State Department preparation for what actually happened—the triumph of the will of the Soviet over huge areas in both Europe and Asia.

The report does quote the skeptical attitude of the Moscow government towards the Atlantic Charter as voiced by the Russian Ambassador to Great Britain on September 24, 1941: “. . . the practical application of these principles will necessarily adapt itself to the circumstances, needs and historic peculiarities of particular countries”. But the State Department editor, Mr. Harley A. Notter, somehow interpreted this equivocal statement as “Soviet . . . agreement with the principles of the Charter.”³

On March 21, 1942, to pick a date almost at random, “four subcommittees . . . reported their progress.” Mr. Sumner Welles presided and reported that:

“. . . the Subcommittee on Political Problems envisaged three stages of action after the conclusion of hostilities by surrender of the enemy: a short stage lasting not more than a year after the armistice, during which an armistice would be signed and action taken on immediate problems connected with the end of the war, then a longer transitional stage of indefinite length leading to the third stage, namely the beginning of definitive permanent peace.”⁴

Following this prescient forecast “a chart of problems thought to fall within these three stages” was read. Dr. Isaiah Bowman, then President of Johns Hopkins Uni-

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

versity, reported for the territorial subcommittee and said spacioously that:

“. . . It would consider the forces operative upon governments of states, conditions and activities prevailing within states, resources and relative geographic position of states, and problems of boundaries, resettlement, and nationalities.”⁵

At this same meeting there was “a recognition of the need . . . promptly to bring the Soviet Union and China into the exploratory discussions of postwar problems”.⁶

Judging by the number of eventually reputed or suspected Communists who took part, at one time or another, in these secret State Department talks, the Soviet Union was in effect already in.

5.

WHILE the thousands of man-hours spent in this round-table procedure did finally produce the Charter of the United Nations, in its present highly unsatisfactory form, it also drew heavily on the time of well-trained, hard-headed career officials who were brought in to report to the dilettantes on “specific fields of work”. Soon the career men were swamped by the influx from under the academic elms. “By the end of 1943 almost one hundred specialists were preparing special studies and advising on political problems which seemed likely to need considera-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

tion for the establishment of a just and permanent peace.”⁷ Many more than that number of stenographers and clerks typed the drafts, typed the revisions, indexed the material, labelled it “top secret” and filed it away.

When President Roosevelt went to Yalta, early in 1945, State Department employes hopefully loaded huge cases of these precious recommendations aboard the cruiser *Quincy*, for executive consideration during the long sea voyage. As forthright Jimmy Byrnes tells the story, nobody in the Presidential entourage paid the slightest attention to the mountainous compilations.⁸ At Yalta itself, Stalin was even more disrespectful to “the extraordinary preparation of our postwar foreign policy as made in the Department of State”.

Nevertheless there was some method in all this madness. The aim of Dr. Leo Pasvolsky, an economist who came to head the “Division of Special Research”, seems to have been to develop State Department control over foreign economic, as well as political, policy. “Complete handling of the problems by a single organization was clearly necessary.”⁹

Accordingly, on September 12, 1941, Dr. Pasvolsky “proposed that the President be requested to authorize the creation of an advisory committee for preparatory work on all phases of postwar foreign policy. . . . its membership would include Vice President Henry A. Wallace and a number of prominent persons outside the Department [of State] as well as a number of officials of the Department.”¹

⁷ Stuart, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

⁸ *Speaking Frankly*, p. 23.

⁹ *Postwar Foreign Policy Preparation*, p. 58.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

This Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy was approved by the President shortly after Pearl Harbor and began to co-ordinate other government agencies, including selected members of Congress, soon after. The meetings grew more and more complicated—and fatuous. For instance, Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress, joined the Committee on January 2, 1943, “taking part especially in the consideration of political problems”.²

Here was a decidedly extra-curricular activity for the pleasant poet who had become Librarian of Congress. Before long, however, the political interest of Mr. MacLeish made him Assistant Secretary of State in charge of Public and Cultural Relations, in which connection he arranged a series of public broadcasts. One was entitled: “It’s Your State Department”, which would have been fair enough if it had been beamed exclusively to the White House.

6.

THE PASVOLSKY PROJECT failed partly because of poor organization, but even more because the Department of State was neither equipped nor designed to handle the vast program of foreign economic activities that mushroomed out after Pearl Harbor. Trying to keep pace with all this development, let alone direct it, soon placed

² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

an impossible external pressure on the department. The hopelessness of its floundering has been concisely defined by James Grafton Rogers, Assistant Secretary of State in the Stimson regime, in the foreword to Mr. Wallace Parks' interesting study of *U.S. Administration of Its International Economic Affairs*. Says Mr. Rogers:

"It was clear that State could not operate all this flotilla of foreign maneuvers. It pretty soon became clear to some of us that it could not operate any of them very efficiently because its basic approach, namely its function of developing considered and consistent lines of policy, was incompatible with executive efficiency, drive and specialization."

The Hoover Commission, on which Mr. Rogers served as a consultant, carefully considered all the complexities of the subject and concluded that:

"The State Department as a general rule should not be given responsibility for the operation of specific programs, whether overseas or at home.

"The State Department should continue to discharge its traditional responsibilities of representation, reporting and negotiation."³

Unfortunately, by the time this report was published (February, 1949) the Department was all snarled up, by the blanketing in of other agencies, by the resignation of many of its best men, by its staggering misjudgment of the Russian attitude, by the belated revelations of subversion and incompetence in its own staff, by the effort devoted to singing its own praises and most of all by general hypertrophy of function. Whatever Secretary Ache-

³ *Report on Foreign Affairs, Recommendations Nos. 7 and 8.*

son's virtues, it soon became clear that he was not the man to get the swollen organization deflated and on its feet again.

As pointed out in the Hoover Commission's *Report on Foreign Affairs*, "the Congress should appreciate that leadership in the conduct of foreign affairs can only come from the executive side of the government". Equally, however, "the executive branch must appreciate the role of the Congress and the propriety of its participation in foreign affairs where legislative decisions are required."⁴

Such is the present internal confusion and hopeless complexity of the Department of State that fundamental legislation, clearly defining function and locating the authority now scattered between this department and the new executive agencies in foreign economic undertakings, is plainly and urgently needed. The Department can no longer be expected to reorganize itself out of the existing morass. Most of its immediate post-war attempts to do so were not even worthy of serious attention. The sensible establishment of an Executive Secretariat and a Policy Planning Staff do not and cannot of themselves meet the problem of co-ordinating all the multifarious overseas commitments into a single intelligible policy.

Definition of State Department function must precede effective reorganization. And legislative definition of the area of appropriate State Department activity is essential because of the enormous complexity and cost of the operations this agency has been endeavoring to direct. Since Congressional action was required to establish the Depart-

⁴ *Report*, p. 8.

ment of State, in 1789, it follows that Congressional action may at any time modify or clarify the statutory authority of this executive agency. It is not only necessary, but also constitutionally proper, for Congress to undertake this task.