

Nostalgia Tip

Were We Really Ambassadors Abroad?

Growing up or living abroad, to impress upon us good behavior in the hosting nations we lived in, we were told in so many ways that we were each *ambassadors* of the United States. But were we really?

After all we didn't get the official recognition nor get the pay or privileges ambassadors normally get for their service.

We actually were ambassadors. Here's why.

At the end of World War II, for the first time in U.S. history, large numbers of U.S. military and others such as U.S. businesses, realized that the families would have to be sent abroad as well. To prepare for such an onslaught of American communities abroad, the U.S. military published booklets to distribute to those families providing guidance on how to conduct ourselves abroad, encouraging us to get out and meet the locals, learn some of their language, and participate in their rituals and customs. What a change there had been in just a few years, because during World War II a very negative image was painted of U.S. enemies, and now we were supposed to call them friends?

But even though we may have not had rank or stature in the military or government service, we certainly were seen that way by the host nation peoples we lived among.

Each of us - in our daily lives - which for the most part meant just going to school, had much greater impact on the host nation people that we might have understood, then and now.

How is that possible? Let's examine what both the U.S. government and what we did individually.

Previously in history any occupying or conquering force would throw host nation people out of their homes. Instead, for the first time in the history of the world, temporary American

communities popped abroad that provided housing for Americans, and now there has been a major reduction in U.S. forces abroad, those housing areas are providing housing, schools and space for local businesses.

Also, a conquering force would usually deprive a surrendered people of food. Instead another dramatic change in the world - not only did the U.S. feed its own people abroad, through a variety of government, business and religious affiliations, the U.S. began to feed and provide health care to host nations.

Last but not least, a conquering force would have their leaders (usually dictators) impose their will on the governments of the conquered people. For the first time in the history of the world, the U.S. said to the host nations, "Let your people have their say."

Too, for the first time in the history, an occupying country did not impose their media or press forcibly upon the conquered nations. Not only did the U.S. strongly suggest they create a free press, but we brought our own media (*The Stars & Stripes & American Forces Radio & TV Service*) which would have a huge impact on many nations.

Then came us. And we probably had the *biggest* impact of all.

Each day we had some individual contact with at least a couple host nation people. Maybe it was the bus driver or someone who sold us something or host nation people we passed on the street. To be sure, these may have been just a couple encounters a day, but when they saw the genuine people we were, wanting to get to know them and trying to speak some of their language (albeit it might be just a few words or a simple expression of hello or good morning), that had a *huge*

impact on those nations and other nations close by.

Now multiply just your doing a simple act or two a day or kindness/personal encounter with one or two people times hundreds of thousands then times 30 to 40 years and what do you get? Something *incredible!*

Japan and Germany - who both lost World War II and were devastated by the war, where U.S. forces occupied them and had communities of Americans among them, became two of the *strongest* economies in the world!

Examine any other nation that had a U.S. military presence and their families present, and you will also see thriving nations.

English became one of the most desired languages to learn and became the international language of commerce and diplomacy.

Then came the cracks in the Iron Curtain. Specifically uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. And finally the *biggest* cracks of all beginning with the *Solidarity* movement in Poland in 1980 and finally the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989 and the end of Soviet Union in 1991.

While U.S. forces did act as deterrents around the globe during the Cold War, in the long run it was our being *individual American Ambassadors* living whenever and wherever that ended one of the longest wars in history where *everyone* became the *victors* - something that has *never* happened in history!

