

Behind Embassy Walls: The Life and Times of an American Diplomat

Brandon Grove

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If modern diplomacy is “the peaceful means by which governments conduct their relations,” then the author, who offers this definition, was a player in many important Cold War and post-Cold War events that defined America’s global standing. Grove, a career ambassador for thirty-five years, who presently lives in Washington, D.C., served nine presidents and twelve secretaries of state.

The author’s father, a geologist for Exxon/Mobil, and his family lived in Germany from 1935—1938. This experience gave young Brandon, born in 1929, an appreciation for foreign travel and an awareness of the evils of Hitler and Nazism. This memoir mostly recounts the author’s diplomatic experiences in Africa, Latin America, the Soviet Union, Israel, India, and Germany. Along the way Grove worked—and sparred—with many foreign leaders and diplomats, and he tells fascinating, if somewhat sketchy, stories about them.

Chester Bowles, Kennedy’s under-secretary of state, whose contempt for the president’s Bay of Pigs adventurism led to his being fired, is remembered warmly by the author. Robert Kennedy is described as overbearing but the most caring politician about that poor whom Grove knew. Also included are glimpses of John Sherman Cooper, America’s first ambassador to the Communist-controlled German Democratic Republic and his imperious wife, Lorraine. Philip Habib, head of President Reagan’s negotiating team, which tried to dislodge the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon, is praised highly.

Grove is generally an engaging writer, especially when he shares anecdotes about his personal life, or when he relates such events as the 1978 Jonestown tragedy, which resulted in the poison suicides of more than 900 Americans.

The most illuminating episodes tell about the author’s three postings to Africa. Recalling his time as ambassador to Zaire, he discusses frankly his frustrations with President Mobuto Sese Seko, who plundered the country before being overthrown. Grove’s last assignment in 1992 was as head of a State Department task force on Somalia, a country that had suffered civil wars and 300,000 deaths from disease and starvation by the time Grove was appointed the task force head.

Although the author may be faulted for lapsing too frequently into dull bureaucratic language when he discusses the responsibilities and duties of ambassadors, the book succeeds in its important goal: to provide valuable guidance for future foreign- service professionals. Also, the accounts of diplomatic power politics will interest any reader fascinated by world affairs.

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