

Bonn to Washington

(1993-94)

Life is lived forward, but understood backward.

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

AN UNEXPECTED ASSIGNMENT

MY PHONE RANG IN NEW YORK AT 6:45 in the morning. It was June 8, 1993. Since the Inauguration, I had kept in sporadic contact with various people in the Administration, but not on Bosnia, an issue that was placing great strain on the new foreign policy team. In January, Peter Tarnoff, calling on behalf of Christopher, had asked if I wished to be considered for Ambassador to Japan, a country to which I had made almost one hundred trips. I would be honored, I said, to let my name go forward. I heard nothing further on the matter for almost five months.

There had been one exception to my disengagement from Bosnia. In February, soon after Tarnoff called to discuss Tokyo, I asked for a private meeting with Tony Lake. I felt obliged, almost compelled, to offer some unsolicited thoughts on Bosnia.

Tony and I ate lunch, served by a Navy steward from the White House mess, alone in his office in the West Wing. I urged him to press for a greater American effort to stop the accelerating catastrophe in Bosnia. He protested, arguing that while people were still dying in large numbers, "you don't know how many more people would now be dead if it were not for our efforts." I replied that this was true but irrelevant. Even if, as Tony claimed, the situation was better than if the Bush Administration were still in office, it still fell far short of what it should be, and of what the world had been lead to expect by Governor Clinton's campaign rhetoric, which he was once so proud of having written. Agitated, Tony said he was doing his best and asked me to be patient. The meeting ended coolly and inconclusively.

A few weeks later, Warren Christopher went to London, Paris, and Bonn

with a proposal to lift the arms embargo and conduct air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs—"lift and strike," as the idea was termed. The European reaction was, predictably, negative. The Administration began to reel, destabilized by this rebuff and troubled by the deteriorating situation on the ground. As the chances of American involvement visibly declined, the Serbs became bolder. Croat attacks on Muslims also increased. Soon a war-within-a-war between Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims broke out at Mostar and other multiethnic towns. Meanwhile, the press was flaying the Administration for its weakness. Although no one wanted the United States to get involved in a ground war in Bosnia, public opinion was divided over what to do. Deeply frustrated, Christopher publicly referred to Bosnia as "the problem from hell."

After Tarnoff's call in February I heard nothing but rumors about the Embassy in Tokyo. A delay of several months on appointments was not uncommon in the Clinton Administration, but it was disconcerting, and increased the chances of leaks. In April, Walter F. Mondale turned down an offer to become Ambassador to Russia and indicated to the White House his interest in Tokyo. On June 4, with the issue still undecided, Elaine Sciolino wrote a front-page article in *The New York Times* describing the awkwardness of a situation in which "two old friends and allies," one of them a former Vice President of the United States, the other a former Assistant Secretary of State, had been cast as "reluctant warriors in an unseemly contest that pits political eminence against diplomatic experience." Mondale, one of the most decent people I ever worked for, called me immediately to let me know how much he regretted the whole business. He ended by saying, "We'll all get through this thing."

"I have good news and bad news." I was still half-asleep when Christopher began the conversation on June 8 with uncharacteristic mischievousness. "The bad news is that the President has asked Fritz Mondale to go to Tokyo. [Pause.] The good news is that he would like you to go to Germany."

To say I was stunned would be an understatement. The idea of serving in Germany had never entered my mind, and no one had ever mentioned it as a possibility. "I know this is rather sudden," Christopher said, "but we need your decision as quickly as possible." In tongue-tied astonishment, I was able to ask only one question: "Chris, how did the President reach this decision?" "I have no idea," Christopher replied. Then, with apologies, saying he had to board a plane, he hung up.* Thus began a sequence of almost accidental

* More than three years later, while I was researching this book, Sandy Berger told me that when the *Times* article appeared, Sandy knew immediately that the long uncertainty over Tokyo was about to end with the choice of the former Vice President. Hoping to see both of us serve the new Administration, Sandy suggested to the President that he send me to Bonn, which was still open.

events that would lead me, via a convoluted and rocky path, back to the Bosnia assignment for which I had once volunteered.

Curiously, even though it was only one hour by plane to the war zone, Bosnia rarely came up during my year in Germany. The issue was handled entirely by Charles Redman, a senior Foreign Service officer who had replaced Ambassador Bartholomew as the Bosnia negotiator. Although I welcomed Redman each time he came to Bonn, I stayed away from the process, barely glancing at the endless telegrams on the situation in Bosnia. I now felt detached from the issue, knowing I could do nothing further about it, and was immersed in my fascinating new job.

But all was not well in Washington. Bosnia was beginning to damage American foreign policy throughout Europe. The press was merciless in its coverage of the Administration. The pressure reached into the highest levels of the government, and in the fall of 1993, to my great pleasure, Warren Christopher promoted Strobe Talbott to Deputy Secretary of State as part of a dramatic reorganization that greatly strengthened the State Department's management. At the same time, less happily, Les Aspin was forced out as Secretary of Defense, ending a brief and difficult tenure in the job that he had dreamed about for such a long time. Tragically, his forced departure from the Pentagon turned out to mark the end of his impressive career; he died less than two years later from a brain clot. As Frank Wisner wrote me from India, despite his enormous achievements, Aspin's life was unfinished. His many friends could not think of Les—his clothes always rumpled, his quick mind always asking questions, his cheerful mood masking deep uncertainty and loneliness—without an immense feeling of sadness.

By early 1994, stories were circulating widely in Washington about growing problems in the Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs. In the spring both Tarnoff and Talbott called and asked if I would consider leaving Bonn to take it over. I told them that, having served as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs fifteen years earlier, I was not interested in returning to Washington for a similar job; I loved my job in Germany and wanted to stay at least another year. But Peter and Strobe kept calling.

Finally, in May, Talbott played his ace: both the Secretary of State and the President wanted it to happen. This dramatically changed the nature of the request; I believed strongly that if the man who had given me the assignment on the Rhine wished to take it away, it was his prerogative; a presidential appointee owes the President his complete loyalty in such matters.

After a private meeting with Christopher in Rome, I agreed to take the job on one condition: that I could choose all my deputies. I asked to delay my return long enough to complete a full year in Germany and participate in President Clinton's trip to Bonn and Berlin.

Talbott and Tarnoff had listed three priorities for the new job: revitalizing the European Bureau, shaping a coherent policy on the enlargement of NATO, and Bosnia. I told Strobe I had one major concern. There were about thirty people in the State Department with the rank or equivalent rank of assistant secretary; this level of government no longer carried the authority it once had. But, in order to succeed on such contentious issues as Bosnia and NATO, I would have to operate in a rather assertive manner. If I were to operate in a routine manner, putting process ahead of substance, I might make fewer enemies but would have less chance of accomplishing their goals.

When I laid out this "lose-lose" dilemma to Strobe, he laughed. "We assume you will be aggressive," he said. "That's why we need you. We'll back you up." This time it was my turn to laugh. "How long have you been in Washington?" I asked, amused. "Anyway," Strobe said, "I'll back you up—and you'll finally be part of *our* team."

The President Visits Germany. Ambassadors dream of a presidential visit during their tenure. Although it is a logistical nightmare, the security requirements beyond any outsider's imagination, it can make a huge difference to policy. It is an unforgettable experience; ambassadors can dine out for the rest of their lives on tales of chaos and near disaster, their own brilliance in preventing some terrible calamity, and their moments with the President.

At the time of President Clinton's trip to Germany in July 1994 I was still in Germany, awaiting Senate confirmation hearings for my new post. The highlight of the trip—and one of the highlights of my government career—was President Clinton's visit to Berlin on July 12. He was the first U.S. President to visit Berlin since unification, and I proposed that he and Chancellor Kohl walk through the Brandenburg Gate from West to East as a symbol of the new Germany. Once inside what was once East Berlin, the two men would address as large a crowd as we could assemble.

The plan worked perfectly. On a nearly cloudless day, Clinton and Kohl and their wives walked together through the gate and into a roaring crowd of over one hundred thousand people, many waving small American flags, supplied for the occasion by local businesses. President Clinton's speech was short and eloquent. Gigantic video screens, something unimagined in Kennedy's day, carried his face as well as his words deep down Unter den Linden. I saw Germans, including two ministers, with tears in their eyes as the President spoke in his passable German. It was probably the last great American moment for the people of Berlin, a city with an open love affair with the United States, which had given us some of the most memorable moments of the last fifty years: the Berlin Airlift, the Wall, the confrontation between Soviet and American tanks at Checkpoint Charlie in 1961, Ronald Reagan's "Mr. Gorbachev,

tear down this wall" speech, and above all, John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" address in 1963.

As the speech ended, the President characteristically plunged into the crowd, but the security lines broke down and almost caused a friendly riot. The Secret Service went into high alert and tried to rush the President back to his car, where Mrs. Clinton was already waiting, but he was enjoying himself hugely. Once back in the car, he said that Berlin had been one of the best experiences of his presidency, "the second-largest crowd, after the Inauguration, since I became President."*

"Well, then you'll let me stay," I said jokingly.

"No way," he replied amicably. "We need you back home. Anyway, you can't top this."

During the drive from the airport to the hotel in Berlin, and again the next morning, I spoke directly to the President about my new assignment. He made the usual comments about doing well, but he added something no one else had mentioned. "When you come back, I want you to get out there with the press a lot," he said. "You're good at it, and we are in real trouble." Hillary Rodham Clinton later told me the same thing in even more explicit terms.

Driving to another meeting in Berlin that day, I mentioned my conversation with the President to Warren Christopher, who said he agreed completely. But despite Christopher's comment, I expected difficulties. No question was more sensitive in the government than how to deal with the press. It was, in a sense, another lose-lose situation: keeping a "low profile" was good policy within the bureaucracy, but without public support for a controversial policy it would fail, and public support required making oneself available to the press. The risk was of being accused of seeking personal publicity, sometimes by the same journalists who had sought the access.

The European Bureau. After a routine confirmation hearing, I was sworn in as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs on September 13, 1994. I passed up the large ceremony and reception that normally goes with such an event in favor of a very small event in the large front office of the Secretary of State, with just a few friends and family, and went directly to work after the ceremony.

Selecting the right personnel is 50 percent of the decisions one makes in a job. Do it wrong, and you will pay for it for the rest of your tenure, in ways both tangible and invisible. By then I had chosen Bob Frasure. I had to make

* This number was later passed on a few occasions, most notably during his extraordinary trip to Ireland in December 1995.

one more important personnel decision: choosing a senior deputy. Since assistant secretaries have to spend a great deal of time on the road, the senior deputy has to have the confidence of the Secretary of State and his senior aides. After some thought, I offered the job to John Kornblum, then the State Department's senior European hand.

Kornblum became my indispensable alter ego, able to take over issues I did not have time for, and an articulate spokesman for the Bureau's point of view when I was out of the country. John steadily gained the respect of the Secretary and his inner team, and when I left the government in 1996, the President and Secretary Christopher selected him as my successor. Later, they appointed him Ambassador to Germany.

My first meeting after being sworn in was on Bosnia, as was my last, seventeen months later. In between I worked on many other problems, some of which—like NATO enlargement, the Baltic states, Albania, Cyprus, Turkey, Ireland, and the turmoil in Central Europe—were both interesting and important. But there was rarely a day when Bosnia did not overwhelm every other issue, never a day when we did not feel that we were, at best, only one more disaster from the abyss. At that first meeting, both Warren Christopher and Strobe Talbott had said that they felt we were heading into a terrible new phase of the Bosnia crisis. They were right.