Alumni profile Nancy Powell: A ringside seat to history, Northern Iowa Today, Summer 1997

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A Ringside seat to HISTORY

From the routine duties of helping American citizens with visa applications, to the glamour of organizing a stateside visit for the king of Nepal, to the danger of being holed out in the U.S. Embassy in Togo during military terrorism, Nancy Powell (B.A. '70) can almost plan on a new adventure somewhere in the world every three years. Her position with the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service takes her continent jumping as she serves her country in various capacities.

Powell reluctantly gave up her secondary social studies teaching job in Dayton, Iowa, after five years. While she enjoyed what she was doing, she felt "opportunities in education in the mid-1970s were limited and administrative roles for women were very rare." Her decision to follow her international relations and travel interests coincided with her summer program visit to Pakistan where 25 teachers spent eight weeks traveling around the country. There she met Foreign Service officers who encouraged her to take the State Department test and, soon, her own history with that agency began.

Although most of her undergraduate and summer school courses were in East Asian studies, her Foreign Service career has been primarily in South Asia: Nepal, India, and now as acting ambassador to Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) where she's been since 1996.

Powell explains that her career has been pretty typical, although probably not at all like teaching social studies in an Iowa high school.

"I was consular officer in both Canada and Nepal which involved helping American citizens and adjudicating visa applications," she explains. Her more than 20 years with the Foreign Service later took her to Pakistan as political officer where she reported on and analyzed domestic political developments and Indo-Pakistan relations. Later as head of the Political Section in India, she was more personally involved in the United States' bilateral relations, including non-proliferation issues. And, in Calcutta, India; Togo, West Africa, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, she's served in management positions supervising all of the embassy's activities. Plus, two tours in Washington, D.C., saw her as desk officer for Nepal as chief of protocol, organizing the first U.S. visit for the king of Nepal, and as refugee officer responsible for the protection programs for refugees in Southeast Asia.

About every three years, State Department personnel receive a different posting. Powell's parents, Maxine and Joe Powell of Waukee, Iowa, and now as acting ambassador to Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) where she's been since 1996.

Powell says she took German in high school and college which helped prepare her for full-time study of French, Nepali and Urdu, the language of Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the midst of all of this moving, it's amazing that two Northern Iowa alumni have twice been assigned to the same post. When Powell was Nepal desk officer in Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s, Steve Eisenbraun, (B.A. '69) was also posted there as India desk officer. And, the two currently work together in...
For anyone, life in the Foreign Service sometimes provides a ringside seat for watching history unfold and a chance to meet some of the key actors—at least in your corner of the world. Not only did Powell organize the king of Nepal's state visit in 1983 but she also organized Hillary Rodham Clinton's India visit in 1995. She's met and worked with the presidents and prime ministers of Pakistan, Togo, India and Bangladesh.

Her overseas experience has been in developing countries where she says America remains highly respected and maintains a significant influence despite the cutbacks in embassy staffs and funds. "Particularly in Pakistan, Togo and Bangladesh, I have witnessed the U.S. government's attempts to support efforts to further the democratization process. We have had a variety of activities to encourage development of political parties, more effective parliaments, broader observance of basic human rights, a freer/more responsible press, and more tolerant society."

For example, a current program in Bangladesh, Powell explains, aims to bring down the fertility rate and improve maternal/child health care, improve food security and support democratic institutions. "The embassy has also been very active in efforts to end child labor in the garment industry and to combat women and child trafficking." Success appears to be on the political horizon in Bangladesh as well, according to Powell. Although fraudulent one-party elections occurred in February 1996, followed by an abortive coup in May, in June free and fair elections were held with very high turnouts and great interest. Powell believes much of this was due to the hundreds of agencies working creatively in villages to provide credit, education and voter education to thousands of people, particularly women.

However, life in the ringside seat of history is not always the glamour of shaking hands with presidents or watching a successful program unfold. Powell relates that when she was consular officer in Nepal, providing services to Americans meant serving as undertaker to 12 who died there. "The embassy has the only mortuary freezer in town and had to prepare bodies either for return to the U.S. or for local cremation."

Dangers and disappointments must also be met when you're in the State Department. Although Powell jokes that the greatest danger most State Department staff face is from very unsafe driving practices in some of these countries, she has been in countries in the middle of terrorism and violence. For example, in Pakistan the U.S. ambassador and military adviser were killed in a plane crash that also claimed the life of the president of Pakistan and his aides. And Powell spent three days holed up in the U.S. Embassy in November, 1991, in Togo as the acting ambassador, unable to return home while soldiers terrorized the new government and people into reform efforts. "A few days later the same soldiers shelled the home of the prime minister, a close contact and friend. Although they did not kill him, the efforts for democracy were effectively ended—at least for now."

With her ringside seat into history and its key actors in some parts of the world, Nancy Powell must be prepared to move to another post when she is assigned. While she's served in South Asia for several years, other continents may beckon and draw on her skills in languages, administration and human relations to support United States government programs and the democratization process around the world.

—Carole Shelley Yates