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"Women are not Adapted to This Sort of Work," or Are They?
The First American Women Diplomats, 1924-1940

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Diplomat Joseph Grew had a problem. As Chair of the Washington, D.C.-based Foreign Service Personnel Board in March 1924, he was now responsible for contacting his good friend Hugh Gibson, the American Minister at Berne, Switzerland, with some bad news. Under sustained pressure from various women's groups in the wake of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, the Foreign Service Personnel Board had decided, in an effort to avoid additional "bad publicity" and charges of discrimination against newly enfranchised woman, to admit a selected number of American women to the Foreign Service examinations. Lucile Atcherson, of Columbus, Ohio, had passed these exams and had now been appointed to an overseas post. She was going to be the first American woman diplomat. She was going to Berne, and Joseph Grew had to break this news to Hugh Gibson.

Grew knew that Gibson would be particularly displeased by this decision, partly because Gibson tended to be generally displeased by most State Department directives, but partly because Gibson shared the reservations of so many State Department officials who remained adamantly convinced that women were "not fitted to discharge the exacting and peculiar duties of a Foreign Service Officer."¹ So Grew attempted to soften up the career diplomat by appealing to his better angels. He assured Gibson that he was the "the best possible Chief for [the] first foreign assignment" of an American woman and insisted that Gibson would find Atcherson to be "a very sensible and reasonable

person,” who would “probably prove to be a quiet, dignified and hard-working member” of his staff.

Grew should have known better. Gibson wanted no part of this “experiment” and launched an extensive lobbying campaign against Atcherson’s appointment, outlining his concerns about how the presence of a woman in the corps would upset diplomatic protocol.² Gibson shared with other diplomats the certainty that female diplomatic representatives would be unable to maintain the “personal contact” work of diplomacy that depended on “what they do when out of the office” rather than “what they do at their desks.” After all, diplomats spent much of their time engaging in what we might now call “social diplomacy” -- Outside the office, at the cafe or bar, or at dinner, in sex-segregated environments, over drinks, talking about the state of the world, making jokes and making deals, playing games -- the give and take of information-gathering, what would later be called intelligence-gathering. How, Gibson wondered, would women be able to “develop intimacies” with male diplomats in order to “[extract] information?” How would they compensate for being unable to participate in “the [male only] club life of [male diplomats]” where “friendships are made over wine and cigars?”³

Gibson was on a roll, so he invented a variety of hypothetical uncomfortable and awkward situations for the woman diplomat: “Where would her place be at official dinners? Should she remain at the table over a glass of port [with the men] or retire to the drawing room [as women usually did after dinner] alone and wait until the [host] rose and said, ‘Gentlemen, shall we join the lady?’”⁴ Though Gibson could be accused of a tendency to exaggerate, it is quite clear that most, if not all, American diplomats in 1924

agreed that “a woman cannot go everywhere a man can go.” There was no established social place for a female Foreign Service officer.⁵

Even if a woman possessed the “technical qualifications” for the job, would they be able to perform the actual work of representation? “Inevitably,” one American diplomat in London remarked, women “would fail to command [respect] in the foreign communities.” This observation provided the State Department with the perfect rationale for resisting the appointment of women without appearing openly biased against women (in the challenging post-Nineteenth Amendment political climate of the early 1920s). After all, it was only practical that the State Department would have to “bear in mind the state of opinion in the countries in which its officers are stationed,” when making appointments.⁶ Officials would be able to congratulate themselves for considering the appointment of women, only to be thwarted by the “custom and convention” with respect to “women in public positions . . . prevailing in many [other] countries.”⁷

American women already filled important roles in the Foreign Service—as wives of male diplomats.⁸ Foreign Service wives performed many quasi-official duties overseas, but if women wanted to serve as official representatives, their ability to “work” in other parts of the world became highly suspect -- *especially* if a woman diplomat were to marry and have children. One Consul General concluded that such a situation would “bring the whole arrangement into ridicule, destroy [the woman diplomat's] usefulness and render the position of her husband intolerable.”⁹ There was simply no such thing as a Foreign Service husband. What officials presumed was at stake here was two-fold -- the reputation of women, already endangered by the changes occurring in American society

now that "feminism" had appeared, and the reputation of the Foreign Service, where a "Foreign Service Wife" was not only appropriate, but desired, but a "Foreign Service Husband" would potentially undermine U.S. prestige in diplomatic posts around the world. Initially, State Department officials charged with recruiting and examining applicants to the Service and making assignment and promotion decisions, adopted the paternalistic and predictable language of "protecting" women from diplomatic positions. They attempted to discourage women from applying to the Service by arguing that even a highly qualified woman would be frustrated, even "hopelessly handicapped" in her career. But they also subtly shifted blame for what would be a disappointing or "frustrating" career for women to the other, "less civilized" parts of the world where female diplomats would not be tolerated. As one official explained, the female diplomat would be "unable to overcome the practical disabilities which her sex would impose on her in accomplishing the work of a foreign service officer in the face of *adverse customs and social restrictions* [my italics]." Head of the Consular Service Wilbur J. Carr concluded sympathetically that any woman in this position would "ultimately . . . suffer disillusionment and disappointment."¹⁰ If only women would come to the logical conclusion that the Foreign Service was not a good career for them . . .

So, who was Lucile Atcherson? Born and raised in Columbus, Atcherson attended and received her degree from Smith College in 1913. From 1914 to 1917, she served as the Executive Secretary of the Franklin County Woman Suffrage Society in Ohio. In 1917 she went to France, where she stayed until 1921, to work for war relief.

She then set her sights on the U.S. Foreign Service. Once she passed her exams, she waiting for an overseas appointment while biding her time at the State Department.¹¹

The appointment to Bern finally came through in 1924, and that's when the fun really starts -- for the historian. What we get is two very different versions of Atcherson's diplomatic service.

According to Gibson, when Atcherson had first arrived in Berne, he immediately "had a frank talk" with "the young lady" about her position at the Legation and told her that she should "avoid public attention, particularly until people got used to the idea of women diplomats." Gibson was therefore miffed when Atcherson gave "an informal talk in Berne on the 'Position of Women in Diplomacy,'" and was even further provoked when Atcherson agreed, without consulting him, to make a speech in Zurich at the "big Fourth of July banquet in that city."¹² But *according to Atcherson*, when she arrived in Bern, she "could not have fallen into the hands of a pleasanter group of people" and gushed to her family in the U.S. about how "the people at the Legation are just as kind to me as anyone could possibly be." She described Gibson as "pleasant, too" but noted that she didn't see much of him or Mrs. Gibson since they were spending the summer away from Berne, at a resort town.¹³ As for the Fourth of July speech in Zurich, Atcherson claimed that the American Consul General in Zurich suggested that she be invited to give the speech and that she had "the Minister's approval, so all is well."¹⁴

According to Atcherson, in fact, she didn't see much of Gibson at all, since he was often absent from Berne, attending conferences, on leave, traveling. By 1926, Atcherson

was left in charge of the Legation in Berne -- and that is officially documented in State Department records. She noted, with some pride, the "considerable comment amongst the diplomatic corps and elsewhere over the fact that the Department was willing to leave a woman in charge of its affairs in Switzerland, even if only for a few weeks."¹⁵ During another of Gibson's extended absences from the Legation, Atcherson noted, "I haven't heard a word from the Minister since he left."¹⁶ But Gibson continued to go to great pains to document Atcherson's "lack of judgment and indiscretion" on a variety of matters.

Until I can conduct more research, what I've got here is an utterly fascinating "he said/she said" story.

Gibson and his colleagues were a notoriously gossipy bunch, and they were also the ones responsible (on the Personnel Board) for promotion decisions, assignments, etc. He concluded in a letter to one colleague that "Lord knows we have done our best to give her a sporting chance," a questionable assertion at best, and furthermore worried that "it would be rather demoralizing to some of our hard working young men if she were to be promoted."¹⁷ Gibson remained politically astute as to the possible larger political implications of simply "dropping" Atcherson from the Service. "If I had it to do," he concluded, "I should give her an assignment to some more difficult post, with a chief who while just, would not shield her, I think she would demonstrate pretty clearly her unfitness for the service, so that she could be dropped with less risk of charges that she was being badly treated because she was a woman."¹⁸

Coincidentally (or not) in 1927, the Personnel Board (having received numerous dispatches from Gibson) transferred Atcherson to the American Legation in Panama City

-- considered a fairly undesirable, uncomfortable and potentially difficult post. She submitted her resignation to the State Department shortly after taking up her post, and several weeks later announced her engagement to Dr. George M. Curtis, a surgeon at the University of Chicago.¹⁹ Presumably there was some celebrating at the State Department. But Atcheron's papers reveal that she did in fact agonize over this decision - - she did not want to quit the Foreign Service, even with the transfer to Panama City. But she was in love and wanted to marry Curtis -- and when the directive was passed to admit women to the Foreign Service it was passed with the stipulation that only unmarried woman could serve and if a woman married during her service, she was obliged to resign. If Atcheron wanted to marry, she had no choice but to resign.

To add further insult, when she submitted her resignation to the Department, Assistant Secretary of State William Castle, on behalf of the Personnel Board, thanked Hugh Gibson for documenting her performance at Berne in such detail because, he concluded, "she is the kind of lady who will probably, when she gets back to America, say that she resigned because she was not appreciated and was not promoted even after doing magnificent work."²⁰ The State Department had cleverly avoided charges of "discrimination" by allowing a limited number of women to serve under very limited conditions, but remained entirely determined to erect as many roadblocks as possible in order to ensure that those women would not be successful and would probably not have long careers. Their success in these "under-the-radar" endeavors is revealed most notably by the fact that less than a dozen women served as diplomats in the 1920s and 1930s -- the numbers only start to slowly increase with the "manpower" needs, even in the State Department, of World War II.²¹

¹ Wilber Carr, Minutes of Foreign Service Personnel Board Meeting, 6 Nov 1924, General Records of the U.S. Department of State, RG 59, Stack 250, National Archives, College Park, MD.

² Homer Calkin, Women in the Department of State: Their Role in Foreign Affairs (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1977), 91-92; Joseph Grew to Hugh Gibson, March 25, 1925 and Hugh Gibson to Joseph Grew, 6 April 1925.

³ *New York Times* 11 Oct 1925, p. XX3.

⁴ Quoted in Calkin, 92.

⁵ Calkin, 94.

⁶ Skinner quoted in Calkin, 72-73; *New York Times*, 11 Oct 1925, XX3.

⁷ Calkin, 72-73

⁸ Calkin, 81a; *New York Times*, 11 Oct 1925, XX3.

⁹ Calkin, 72-73.

¹⁰ Calkin, 82.

¹¹ *American Consular Bulletin*, vol. V, no. 1 (Jan 1923), 13; *New York Times* Sep 21, 1922, 1; *New York Times*, 4 Sep 1927, 16.

¹² Hugh Gibson to Fred Dolbeare, 1 Aug 1926, Box 1, William Castle Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

¹³ Lucile Atcherson to family, 24 July 1924, Box 10, Folder 12, Lucile Atcherson Curtis Papers, Schlesinger Library.

¹⁴ Atcherson to family, 14 June 1926, Box 10, Folder 9, Lucile Atcherson Curtis Papers.

¹⁵ Atcherson to family, 25 May 1926, Box 10, Folder 9.

¹⁶ Atcherson to Family, 21 May 1926, Box 10, Folder 9.

¹⁷ Gibson to Dolbeare, 26 Oct 1926 and Gibson to Castle, 23 Aug 1927, Box 1, Castle Papers, Hoover Library.

¹⁸ Gibson to Dolbeare, 1 Aug 1926, Box 1, Castle Papers, Hoover Library.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, 4 Sep 1927, 6 and 20 Sep 1927, 26.

²⁰ Castle to Gibson, 7 Sep 1927, Box 1, Castle Papers, Hoover Library.

²¹ Calkin, 95 and 102.