Politics of the Past

Eugenie Anderson: Held her own in smoke-filled rooms

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SUBMITTED IMAGE: MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Eugenie Anderson, the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Denmark, leaves the Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen in December 1949 after presenting her credentials to King Frederick IX. When she resigned three years later, Frederick decorated her with the Grand Cross of the Order of Dannenborg, the highest honor ever given to a woman in the nation's history.

In October 1949 the post of U.S. Ambassador to Denmark had been vacant for half a year, and President Harry S. Truman was eager to fill it.

He had flirted with the idea of appointing Perle Mesta, a buxom socialite known for hosting well-catered D.C. soirees, but the Danes rejected her as frivolous, complaining they didn't want Copenhagen to turn into "Perle Harbor."

So Truman turned to Eugenie Anderson, a calmly capable political operative from Red Wing, Minnesota. Neither famous nor rich, Anderson had navigated the ideological minefield of the post-war DFL — outmaneuvering isolationists and Communist sympathizers, orchestrating Hubert Humphrey's successful campaign for Senate and rising, in just a few years, to the highest echelon of the party's leadership.

Truman's staff arranged for an informal meeting between Anderson and the Danish ambassador to the United States. Over lunch at a New York restaurant, she impressed him with her deep knowledge of Denmark's history and emphasized her Nordic heritage by introducing him to her two children, Hans and Johanna.

Anderson's intellect and work ethic contrasted with the popular perception of women in the Foreign Service. Referring to "Call Me Madam," a Broadway satire inspired by the socialite Mesta, an American news magazine wrote that Anderson "is no musical-comedy diplomat." The Danish ambassador agreed, and wired a message back to Copenhagen: "No Perle; a pearl!"

Soon after, Anderson was sworn in as the United States' first female ambassador.

"Truman nominated me," she said, "as a symbol of his own belief in the abilities of women in public life … to work for the public good, not simply as women and mothers, but as citizens and as people."

'A very sharp gal politically'

Helen Eugenie Moore was born in Adair, Iowa, in 1909. Her father was a Methodist minister with progressive leanings and internationalist convictions. Anderson emulated him from an early age. ("Eugenie has been a diplomat since she was in pigtails," a childhood friend remembered.) But in her teens and 20s, her life path hewed closer to that of her mother, a homemaker with an abiding love of music.

After high school, Anderson studied piano at several Midwestern colleges, including Carleton College, where she met John Pierce Anderson, a young art student whom she quickly agreed to marry. The son of the inventor of puffed rice cereal, Anderson had a serene, cerebral disposition and, through the years, would play a supportive role in his wife's turbulent career. "He has a wonderful sense of principle and also of humor," she once told an interviewer. "His very detachment has always been particularly helpful to me."

The Andersons made their first home on John's 400-acre family farm, near Red Wing, and began a life of bucolic idyll. John devoted himself to modernist art. Eugenie helped him manage the farmstead and continued practicing piano. She later said she "wanted to be a Bach expert more than anything else," and she named her daughter, Johanna, after the composer.

The couple interrupted their tranquil life with a trip to Europe in 1937. Hitler had by then annexed the Rhineland, stripped Jews of citizenship, and remade the education system as a tool of party indoctrination. Drawn to Germany by a morbid curiosity, Anderson watched as a parade of 5-year-old boys wearing Nazi military uniforms marched a goose step through the streets. "I was sickened [and] frightened," she said, "when I saw those little tykes being prepared for war."

The 27-year-old was indelibly marked by her glimpse of the Third Reich's manic depravity. Returning to Red Wing, Anderson sought to educate herself on global politics by joining the League of Women Voters, where she became a fierce advocate of the nascent United Nations. She would remain a hawkish supporter of foreign intervention even after the war in Vietnam.

In 1944, as American soldiers sailed across the Atlantic to war, Anderson listened with fury to the isolationist speeches of her Republican congressman, August Andresen. He was a "fraud" and a "dumbbell," she thought, and she found herself motivated to enter partisan politics. Looking for advice, Anderson reached out to Humphrey after hearing him speak on the radio.

The future vice president was on the precipice of fame. Though still drawing his paycheck from the Macalester College political science department, Humphrey had engineered the merger of the state's Democratic and Farmer-Labor parties and, within a year, he would be elected mayor of Minneapolis. Recognizing Anderson's talent, he counseled her on how to raise money and amass influence.

Anderson easily became the DFL chair in the GOP-dominated 1st District. She waged a losing battle to unseat Andresen, but the campaign served, nonetheless, as a valuable political education. Within a few years, she had earned herself membership in Humphrey's so-called "diaper brigade" of young liberal leaders like Eugene McCarthy and Walter Mondale.

Anderson watched with shock in 1946 as a small, pro-Soviet faction of the DFL used a duplicitous electoral ploy to wrest control of the fledgling party from Humphrey and place it in the hands of the socialist former governor Elmer Benson.

The bureaucratic insurrection strengthened Anderson's resolve. "I had not realized that this was even possible in a democratic country," she said. "First we had to learn to recognize Communist tactics … and then we had to learn how to outstay and out-organize and out-idea them."

Humphrey and Anderson eventually won back the DFL by launching a grassroots organizing campaign focused on town and county committees. "They went to every precinct caucus held in every little red schoolhouse," a journalist wrote. It took less than two years for the diaper brigade to regain power. By 1948 Humphrey sat at the top of the state party and Anderson had been elected national committeewoman.

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Eugenie Anderson is pictured here in 1951, more than a year into her tenure as the U.S. Ambassador to Denmark. She worked hard to become a people's ambassador — touring countryside villages, learning to speak Danish and dismissing other diplomats as "dried prunes and stuffed shirts."

Then as now, women were underrepresented in party leadership, and even Anderson's admirers tended to speak of her accomplishments in gendered terms. "Not many women are emotionally constituted to be on the prime firing line and to be totally effective," the future governor Orville Freeman said. "She held her own very well in the smoke-filled rooms, she kept her cool and she also remained a lady."

Anderson never forgot that she worked at what she called "the man level of the party" and she once told a group of female students to "use your intelligence, but don't ignore the one great advantage you have over men — your feminine charm."

At the 1948 Democratic convention, she won the respect of party insiders with a daring maneuver, a mixture of both charm and guile. Anderson suggested Humphrey add a line to his speech praising President Truman for taking a "courageous stand on the issue of human rights." In fact, Truman had been far from courageous and, despite giving vague assertions of support, had said it was "crackpot" to alienate Southern Democrats by adding the issue to the party platform.

Humphrey was disinclined to defy the president, but Anderson's rhetorical sleight-of-hand gave him cover to follow his principles while maintaining the appearance of loyalty. After Humphrey's speech, the convention erupted in applause, the human-rights plank was adopted and the Democratic Party moved permanently to the left.

"The inclusion of Truman's name made it impossible for some delegates to vote against us," the Democratic activist James Loeb said. "Eugenie is really a very sharp gal politically."

Anderson barnstormed Minnesota throughout the fall election season, helping secure a Senate seat for Humphrey and a re-election victory for Truman. Humphrey showed his gratitude by lobbying Truman to give her the Danish ambassadorship.

While initially "astonished" by the offer and "hesitant" to move so far from home, she ultimately decided to accept the post. With NATO but months old and the Cold War still in its infancy, Denmark held great strategic importance for the United States. Soviet military bases in Eastern Germany stood just 100 miles to the east of the Danish Archipelago by land and 30 miles by sea.

Anderson believed in the United States' self-appointed post-war mission: to rebuild Western Europe, to spread democratic institutions, to battle the scourge of communism. She was convinced she'd have "no trouble in getting [the Danes'] cooperation."

'Auntie Anderson'

Anderson arrived in Copenhagen with her family in December 1949 on the Danish freighter Jutlandia. She saw the job of ambassador as a sort of public performance, a grand display of American benevolence, and she played her role with an easy warmth, captivating the people of Denmark with gestures of goodwill.

She sent her children to Danish schools and toured villages in the countryside. She took language lessons for six months so she could give a Mother's Day speech in Danish. She dismissed other diplomats as "dried prunes and stuffed shirts," and she invited to her first party in Copenhagen only the painters, plasterers and plumbers who had worked overtime preparing her family's 37-room official villa.

"The ambassador of a democratic country," Anderson said, should "be continuously and intimately in touch with the decisive majority, and not just the ruling few."

Her efforts yielded a cross-class admiration. "She made it clear she likes us, all of us," said Sigvald Christensen, a Danish Foreign Ministry official. "Stop anyone on the street and ask who the American ambassador is. They will know." The Saturday Evening Post tested this assertion by randomly polling six Danes on a stroll through Copenhagen and found that four of them could, in fact, produce Anderson's name. A thankful businessman once accosted her on the street and so fervently kissed her hand that, according to an Anderson family newsletter, her glove was "literally damp from his hand-kissing." The Danish press dubbed her "Auntie Anderson," and U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson extolled her as "the ideal ambassador."

Anderson's mass appeal translated into meaningful influence with the Danish government. Amid panic that the Korean War would spread to Europe, she pressured Denmark into taking a more active role in NATO. In 1950, she became the first American woman ever to sign a treaty — a

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pact to increase "commerce and friendship" — and, the next year, she negotiated the more significant Greenland Treaty, giving the U.S. access to strategic Danish air bases. Truman, pleased with his pick, thanked Anderson for her "wonderful and efficient service" and called her the "finest human being I know."

The Andersons' high-profile life helped them realize unlikely dreams. Eugenie invited to Denmark the acclaimed concert singer Marian Anderson, and John befriended the Nobel-winning physicist Niels Bohr.

But the glare of the limelight could be unpleasant. The Danish press, discomfited by the couple's unorthodox gender roles (glamorous wife, introverted husband), cracked emasculating jokes and proposed John adopt the title "Mr. Ambassadress." One cartoon, showing John's sleight figure attending a state banquet on the well-muscled arm of a uniformed general, was captioned, "Sometimes a man is superfluous." John brushed off the ridicule, for the most part, and spent his days creating wood-and-wire sculptures. He told an interviewer he was happy to stay in Copenhagen "so long as Eugenie feels she can do a useful job here."

Eugenie was able to circumvent many barricades of mid-century chauvinism, but an undercurrent of sexism is evident in the attitudes of embassy staff toward their female boss. Her deputy chief of mission, Edward Sparks, a Foreign Service careerist, concealed personnel issues and derided Anderson's efforts to learn Danish as a "waste of time." Even staff members who respected her relaxed-but-professional leadership style could still display substantial gender biases. "Just in principle I don't like working for women," said Vivian Phillips, her personal secretary. "Mrs. Anderson turned out to be different. It's like working for a very nice man, and she's a lot calmer and less temperamental than a good many men I've worked for."

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Eugenie Anderson (right) with Gov. Orville Freeman (center) and Eugene McCarthy, her 1958 opponent for Senate. Party insiders gave the DFL nomination to McCarthy, even though he polled worse than Anderson against the Republican incumbent.

Behind the Iron Curtain

Anderson resigned her ambassadorship in January 1953, the day before President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration, and returned to Red Wing. For the next nine years, she kept active in politics and government. She served on the Minnesota Fair Employment Practices Commission and advised Adlai M. Stevenson on foreign policy during his presidential campaign.

She sought elected office for the first time in 1958: a longshot run for U.S. Senate. Voters found her appealing, but party insiders gave the DFL nomination to Eugene McCarthy, even though he polled worse than Anderson against the Republican incumbent. She said the snub gave her new insight on "the problems of being a woman in politics, which I had not really felt previously." It also left her hungering to find a new outlet for her talents.

In 1962 she accepted President John F. Kennedy's offer to serve as ambassador to Bulgaria. The appointment gave her the chance to play a major role on the global stage, but it required harrowing personal sacrifices. For American diplomats, life in the Soviet satellite state consisted of constant surveillance and permeating boredom. A State Department report described the country as a "dismal, isolated … police state" where envoys are subjected to "the usual attempts at penetration and compromise." Eugene Istomin, an American pianist Anderson invited to perform, said Bulgaria was "a den of Stalinists, anti-Americans galore!"

Anderson took up residence in a large, dilapidated red-brick building that bore an eerie resemblance to a crumbling prison. "When I first walked into it, I felt like crying," she said. Assuming the place was bugged, she talked freely with John only on walks in the country. Staff conferences needed to be held in a cumbersome "safe room," a plastic cube encased in crackly white noise. Anderson checked her "sturdy Red Wing boots" for listening devices and communicated with her secretary only by written notes, which were later shredded. She said she developed an "intense feeling of horror and hatred for the inhuman, stupid, cruel system."

But despite the difficulties, Anderson devoted herself to her work. As in Denmark, she saw her role as both hard-headed negotiator and cheerful cultural emissary. She studied the country's difficult Slavic language so she could deliver a speech on the Fourth of July. In visits to collective farms and schools, she defended Bulgarian youths' right to dance the Twist, though she'd asked her own children not to perform the racy pelvic gyrations. When the Bulgarian president denounced the United States' "piratical actions" during the Cuban missile crisis, Anderson walked out of the room, prompting the Washington Star to praise her for "upstaging a vulgar Bulgar."

A major triumph came at a trade fair in the city of Plovdiv. The Bulgarians had given Anderson permission to distribute brochures, but after seeing the colorful pamphlets, featuring JFK's pearly-white smile, officials worried the material portrayed America too favorably. Police intimidated crowds waiting outside the doors of the exposition center and tried to seize the pamphlets from fairgoers as they left the building.

The thuggish tactics backfired, provoking a frenzy of interest in the blithe little leaflets. Anderson stayed in Plovdiv for the fair's duration, handing out many of the 150,000 pamphlets personally. "You would have thought we were passing out dollar bills," she said. The Bulgarians conceded the skirmish to the ambassador. "We underestimated the determination of your minister," Bulgaria's minister of foreign trade told one of Anderson's staffers. "We didn't know the Americans could be so tough."

But paper diplomacy did little to relieve the tensions between the two countries, and in December 1963 the pressurized rancor found a release. Allegations that the CIA had bribed a Bulgarian U.N. delegate led to a mob of 3,000 rioters swarming the American Embassy. Staff were roughed up, cars overturned, windows smashed. Anderson was out of the country during the rampage, but she responded firmly, telling her staff she wouldn't capitulate to violence and ordering the windows be repaired as often as they were broken.

Anderson stayed on as ambassador for another year before deciding she'd had enough and submitting her resignation to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Her stay in Bulgaria had been remarkable in a number of ways. She was not only the first female envoy sent behind the Iron Curtain, but she was also one of the few civilians. Service in Eastern Bloc countries was traditionally restricted to career diplomats.

When she resigned, George F. Kennan, the much-lauded architect of communist containment policy, broke another State Department tradition — a norm constraining Foreign Service professionals from commenting on their colleagues' job performance. Kennan wrote that Anderson "has shown not only common sense but exceptional shrewdness and courage."

A stalwart hawk

Anderson was just 55 when she returned to the United States, and her services were in demand.

She became the first woman to represent the United States on the U.N. Security Council and she served as a top adviser on Humphrey's successful campaign for Senate in 1970 and on his unsuccessful bids for the presidency in 1968 and '72.

The Johnson administration wanted to hire her as an assistant secretary of state, but she was rejected after Sen. William Fulbright, the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, made it clear he "was not interested in either a woman or a negro." Instead, Johnson sent her on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam.

Public opinion was increasingly turning against the war in 1967, with protests drawing crowds in the tens of thousands. But Anderson's moral compass had been calibrated in the time of Hitler and Stalin, an age of strong ethical poles, and she saw the stakes in Vietnam as similarly Manichean. She praised the "absolutely superb caliber of performance of the Americans, both military and civilian," and spoke of America's commitment to a people struggling "against outside aggression and internal subversion."

Her support for Johnson's Vietnam policy alienated many old liberal friends, who felt her anti-communist convictions were too rigid and dogmatic for the murkier realities of the late 1960s. But Anderson told an interviewer that her fight against Minnesota socialists and her time in Soviet-backed Bulgaria gave her "a deeper awareness than most people who haven't had these experiences."

In her later years, she felt the Democratic Party moving away from her on foreign policy and, a decade before her death at 87, she endorsed a Republican for the first time. She wanted Rudy Boschwitz to keep his Senate seat because he opposed a U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms deal. "We can never be secure," she said, with "policies of weakness and vacillation."