

Coming of Age in Casablanca

by

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Early in 1966 President Lyndon Johnson said, “We’re going to turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley.”

Yes, he really did.

However that was only the long-term plan. In the short term, he was dropping eight hundred tons of bombs a day on Vietnam, causing President de Gaulle to call for the withdrawal of American troops and Buddhist nuns to burn themselves to death in Hué.

By midsummer, when I arrived in Casablanca as a newly-appointed junior officer for the United States Information Service, my duty as a public diplomat was clear. When, as it often did, the conversation turned to Vietnam I would say, “How about them Red Chinese, huh? What the heck *is* a cultural revolution, anyway?”

As far as I could tell, almost every overseas USIS officer in those days did something similar. Mr. Johnson might even have approved. After all, the only president we had was fond of saying, “You can’t shine feces.” Those would be his exact words, except for one.

I knew because this particular Johnsonism had been edited out of a profile of the White House press secretary which I

had done a year earlier for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Those were gentler days in journalism.

My new boss in Casablanca, Thad McDowell, had been an artist and sculptor before he discovered government service. He agreed with me a hundred percent on the feces–shining thing. “All that Vietnam junk goes straight to the storeroom,” he told me when a batch of it arrived from Washington a few days after I did. “If anyone asks, everybody loved the exhibit and we just took it down last week.”

Thad and I devoted ourselves instead to the propagation abroad of America’s rich cultural heritage, a task which lacked urgency. “You chaps in USIS remind me of a man rushing about in the monsoon with a watering can,” a British businessman had told me during my welcoming reception at Thad’s villa.

And so the two of us let the days slide pleasantly by. Casablanca had no tourist attractions to speak of and it was an inconveniently long drive from the embassy in Rabat. This meant we had few official visitors from the capital. Thad thrived on the neglect, and so did I.

My dedication to the serious business of Cold War public diplomacy was as incomplete as his. Back home in Arlington my wife and I had been stuffed into a two-bedroom apartment with four sons, three of them still in diapers. (Don’t bother doing the arithmetic; two of them were twins.)

I was barely scratching along as a free-lance magazine writer when I was assigned to do a profile of a high-powered Washington lawyer named Leonard Marks. I turned the piece in to *Esquire* a few weeks before one of his clients, Lyndon Johnson, appointed him to head the United States Information Agency. When I went back to Mr. Marks to update the story, he asked me if I had ever thought of working abroad.

I began immediately to do so, particularly since I had once visited a cousin of mine who worked in our consulate in

Marseilles. There he lived in a swell big house overlooking the Mediterranean and had a cook and a gardener and a nurse to help his wife with the kids.

And now here I was in Casablanca with my own big house and a gardener and a cook named Aisha who insisted on taking care of the kids as well, and life should have been sweet. But I had brought my own serpent with me into the garden. After Thad left for a new assignment in Upper Volta, leaving me in temporary charge, I couldn't help thinking that I ought to be doing something for my money.

As the Brit had pointed out, selling our culture was redundant. Selling our war wasn't fit work for a morally-grown man and would have been hopeless in any event. What then? What defensible use of the taxpayer's dollar could I make at Dar America, the USIS cultural center in Casablanca?

Well, there was nothing to stop me from promoting our national ideals, as distinct from the loathsome policies into which they had degenerated by then. And we had a free library where those original ideals were still to be found, intact.

True enough, there were no waiting lists at Dar America for the books of Tom Paine or Henry David Thoreau or James Madison. Still, a possibility existed that some future Gandhi might one day stumble upon their works. And who knew? A spark might fly on ready tinder.

But for this to happen, people had to come to Dar America's reading room. And they didn't. The center was lost on a side street so narrow that two cars couldn't pass. We needed a stand on the midway.

A few blocks away on a principal avenue stood Casablanca's Municipal Theater, neglected and usually dark. What if I rounded up the gang and dug some costumes out of the attic? Hey, we could put on our own show!

Only it couldn't be much of a show, since we didn't have much money. Maybe it could be a show *about* shows. As it

happened, I had a fair number of musical comedy records at home. And so I made an appointment with the theater's director.

He turned out to be perfectly willing to loan us his lobby for an exhibit on the American musical theater. But as he didn't want to offend the Soviet Union, he would have to offer the space to the Russians as well. This was fine with the United States, I told him. Let every flower bloom.

Washington sent out photographs. We assembled most of the music locally, from my own collection and from other Americans at the consulate. We already had a sound system at Dar America that we could hook up in the lobby. We built the displays and lettered the captions, and recorded in French and in Arabic a historical commentary to go along with the songs. In a couple of months, at a cost of a couple hundred dollars, we were ready.

On opening day and thereafter we played music over speakers outside the theater. In the entrance I stationed Khadija el-Fekkak, a young and pretty member of the staff at Dar America. Her job was to draw visitors in and steer each one politely but firmly to a table where a librarian offered free membership cards. As a barker, she was a great hit.

Fourteen thousand people visited the exhibit during its two-week run. Right away our library began to fill up and any one of those unemployed youths now crowding the reading room might just turn out to be Morocco's Attaturk—

Not long afterward the country public affairs officer happened to come down to Casablanca on his way to Marrakech. Before his posting to Morocco Ned Roberts had been one of the top officials in the agency—an associate director or assistant director, perhaps. I no longer remember the title, but he had been responsible, I believe, for all USIS operations in Africa.

He had never served abroad, though, and was therefore assigned to an overseas tour. After a suitable marination in the field, it was expected that he would return to Washington to resume his high place in the bureaucracy.

The PAO visited briefly with the local staff of Dar America, and then took me for coffee to a nearby café. “Terrific report on the musical theater exhibit,” he said when we were settled. “I wanted to see what you’d think about one or two small changes, though.”

As a former newspaper man, I had of course anticipated this. No urge known to the human is so strong as the one to edit another man’s copy.

“Down here near the end you mention that the Russians had trouble getting their exhibit together.” the big boss said. “Tell me more about that.”

I explained that the Russian cultural affairs man had taken up the theater director on his offer of equal time, but hadn’t gotten his exhibit together until after ours had closed.

“How was their show?” the PAO asked.

“Pretty lame. They had these old photos thumb-tacked to the wall. Long shots of the Bolshoi Ballet on stage. The Soviet Army women’s choir on a flatcar, entertaining the troops. That kind of thing.”

“How was attendance?”

“Whenever I went by, the place was empty.”

“Good, good,” the PAO said. “So it wouldn’t be inaccurate to say we were in a race with the Russians and we blew their doors off?”

“Well, our exhibit was ready first, that’s true. I wasn’t thinking of it as a race.”

“Believe me, they were.”

“Even if they opened first, Ned, nobody would have gone. They didn’t have any music to bring people in.”

“Don’t forget to make that point.”

“Okay.”

“What I thought we might do is play up the whole horse race side of it a little more, if it’s all right with you. Maybe even start off with that instead of the library attendance.”

“I just thought since attendance went up seventy percent right off the bat and it’s staying up—”

“And you and I both know that’s the really important part. But let me tell you what’s going to happen to your report when it gets to Washington...”

(Ed. note: Despite its natural, realistic flow, this conversation is not a verbatim transcript of our conversation. But it is, as we say in the writing game, reality-based.)

“...Every Thursday morning at eight-thirty, the eleven deputy directors are sitting around a big oval table when the director comes in and sits down. Then the guy on his left has three minutes to tell the director what’s new in his area. Then the next guy gets three minutes of the director’s undivided attention, and so on. Now what kind of thing do you think the director is going to remember after he walks out of that meeting?”

“Not library attendance, huh?”

“Right. Library attendance is what you want the *other* guys to be stuck with. What you want to hand the director is a little story he can take up to the Hill at budget time. That’s when he gets *his* three minutes, and he’s not going to forget who gave him something to say.”

“Me?” I said, hardly daring to hope.

“Of course not. The Assistant Director.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“But the Assistant Director won’t forget the Country Public Affairs Officer.”

“Who in his turn—”

“Exactly,” said the Country Public Affairs Officer.

“Do you want to make the changes up in Rabat?” I asked.
“Or should I do it?”

“You’re the writer.”

When I got back to Dar America there was the usual good crowd in the library. “Young influentials,” I think we called them in our monthly statistical breakdowns. Unfortunately none of these future leaders seemed to be reading *Common Sense* unless it was hidden inside a copy of *Life*.

But somehow none of that seemed to matter any more. Tom Paine was just another old, dead white man and I was a live young one who had recently handled himself rather well, thank you, in a skirmish of the Great Game.

