

 **Article REVIEW**

Molly M. Wood. “‘Commanding Beauty’ and ‘Gentle Charm’: American Women and Gender in the Early Twentieth-Century Foreign Service.” *Diplomatic History* 31:3 (June 2007): 505-530. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00629.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00629.x> .

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Molly M. Wood begins her discussion of women in the Foreign Service with the not-so-shocking revelation that elder statesmen such as William Howard Taft and Elihu Root were moved to promote foreign servicemen based on the feminine charms of their wives. That diplomatic wives such as Lucy Wilson and Hallie Wheeler were inclined to use their girlish wiles to further the professional lives of their husbands likewise does not surprise. But Wood casts a wider net than the scrutiny of Foreign Service spouses. Her aim is to explore the ways in which gender has shaped foreign policy and American representation abroad. In the early 1900’s the American government, by use of personnel assessments, formalized the unpaid service of diplomatic wives, not only in furthering their husbands’ careers, but also in enhancing the prestige of their country in the eyes of foreign governments. The reports that were generated form the foundation of Wood’s study.

As is often the case in women’s history, females playing supporting roles appear infrequently, if at all, in records pertaining directly to U.S. foreign policy. To do this kind of scholarship, historians must glean the private correspondence of officials, in addition to the few diaries and memoirs written by the spouses of diplomats. Wood’s examination of private correspondence opens windows into previously obscured aspects of American Foreign Service, including the influence of marriage partners on specific State Department policies.

Wood’s choice to explore the impact of women on foreign relations at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century was expedient, since the U.S. began its incursion into global affairs at full throttle after the Spanish American War. As the nation acquired overseas territories, the government sought to professionalize the Foreign Service. While “good breeding” sufficed before the 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt instituted an examination system for potential officers to insure that American representatives were not only socially refined, but educated as well. At the same time, new appointees could expect their work, and also their homes, to be scrutinized for “efficiency” and high social standing. In addition, officers’ wives were measured for their beauty, refinement, and ability to entertain.

In researching State Department reports on the domestic lives of diplomats, Wood discovered the extent to which gender intersected with race and class in U.S. foreign relations. In a comment evoking Vice President Richard Nixon’s encounter with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the 1959 American Exhibition in Moscow, when the two gentlemen agreed that “we can all drink to the ladies,”¹ Wood states that “officials assumed that western female beauty, charm, charisma, and ‘pep’ knew no geographic boundaries” (513). The government seemed convinced that everyone, everywhere

¹ Quoted in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 18.

applauded American beauty as the gold standard of feminine appeal; the one factor uniting the world was female subjectivity. But American women were far from mere recipients of men's compliments. Diplomatic wives became imperial missionaries as they endeavored to teach "backward" women the benefits of civilized methods of cleaning and caring for families, and they boasted the benefits of western material progress in their homes. Indeed, diplomatic residences had to project an image of prosperity, so as to cull the anticipated respect of the foreign dignitaries the diplomats hosted.

Foreign Service officers expected their wives to ascertain local "gossip," illustrating the importance of informal networks to the workings of high level politics. But there was "good" gossip and "bad" gossip, according to the Foreign Service. While the State Department generally encouraged its officers to wed, it discouraged unions with foreign women, finally banning the practice without special permission in 1936. Disguised as a measure to reduce the red-tape that transporting a foreign wife anywhere in the world might entail, some surmised that the government worried that foreign wives would be unable to keep state secrets.

Control of sexuality became an important aspect of State Department oversight of its personnel with the new regulation. In addition to curtailing its officers' choices of sexual partners, the State Department also required its few female Foreign Service officers (the first was hired in 1922) to remain single, signaling that only a woman could perform the functions of a diplomatic spouse.

While Wood spends most of her time on the intersections between women and the Foreign Service, she also discusses men and masculinity. Men were encouraged to marry, since single officers might indulge in vice, which could become an embarrassment to the U.S. and hinder its prestige. In addition, Foreign Service inspectors worried about the masculinity of their employees as representatives of the U.S. government. Sought-after qualities assumed to be "manly" included initiative, originality, leadership skills, and aggression. Effeminate qualities to be extinguished in a young officer were passivity, blind obedience, and motherliness. Married men were told to "handle" wives that were too aggressive and strong-willed. Gender norms for both men and women were an important tool the Foreign Service used to measure the success of U.S. representation abroad.

The detail of Foreign Service marriages that Wood provides extends through the 1930s. As she sifts through diaries, letters, and State Department reports, readers come away with a sense of the timelessness of the feminine qualities—commanding beauty and gentle charm—that officials found desirable in men's helpmeets. Those characteristics, at least in the minds of elite men, were both geographically and temporally unbound.

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