John Freeman, 1969-71

John W. Young

At less than two years duration, the ambassadorship of John Freeman was the shortest covered by this volume.[1] It took place, too, in a singularly uneventful period in Anglo-American relations, between the dramas of 1967-68 - when the devaluation of Sterling and Britain's decision to withdraw from East of Suez were swiftly followed by the Tet offensive – and the 'Nixon shocks' over Sino-American rapprochement and trade control in 1971. Yet it was a controversial ambassadorship, a political appointment by Labour premier Harold Wilson that was heavily criticised from the outset. Freeman was lucky even to arrive in Washington in March 1969. He had been selected for the post over a year earlier, when the incumbent Lyndon Johnson or, when he withdrew from the race, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, was expected to win the 1968 race for the Presidency. Few could have predicted that victory would in fact fall to the Republican Richard Nixon, who had lost the 1960 election and then failed to win the Governorship of his home state, California. After the California result, Freeman, then editor of the New Statesman had written Nixon off as 'a man of no principle whatsoever except a willingness to sacrifice everything in the cause of Dick Nixon.' According to Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, the new President 'swore that he would have nothing to do with Freeman,' a view reinforced by former President Dwight Eisenhower, who argued that the appointment was an insult to the Presidency itself.[2] 'Ike' had just read an article in Newsweek that suggested Wilson's very choice of Ambassador was designed to

downgrade the 'special relationship' with Washington.[3] Although Freeman did take up his post, George Brown, the Foreign Secretary under whom he was appointed, later declared the decision a 'mistake'.[4] Yet, despite such inauspicious beginnings, the evidence on Freeman's time in Washington suggests a highly successful ambassadorship, in which contact with the White House was excellent and the Anglo-American relationship, if not as 'special' as it had once been, was in good health.

A Controversial Appointment

A political appointee to a key post Freeman might have been. But he was not the first and he was not unique at the time. The same batch of new ambassadorial appointments saw a Conservative politician, Christopher Soames, sent to Paris where it was hoped his connections and status as the son-in-law of Winston Churchill would help smooth the way for British entry to the European Community (EC). Freeman and Soames replaced professional politicians, Patrick Dean in Washington and Patrick Reilly in Paris, who were felt to have wielded less influence than British policy demanded. Lord Chalfont, Minister of State in the Foreign Office, said as much to Alasdair Hetherington, editor of The Guardian. The criticism was harsh. Dean and Reilly were professional diplomats, highly competent at their jobs and, as Chalfont acknowledged, neither had been favoured by circumstances in their respective posts. While Reilly had been in Paris at the height of de Gaulle's Presidency, Dean had had to deal with Lyndon Johnson, whose relationship with foreign officials was notoriously frosty.[5] Although both outgoing ambassadors were approaching retirement age, they resented the manner in which they were replaced. Dean was especially annoyed that the announcement was made nine months in advance.[6]

Actually, Brown had begun to consider future top level appointments as early as September 1967, eighteen months before Dean was due to leave Washington. It was essential to do some advance planning because so many retirements were due in 1968-69 and a decision on any one could have implications for others. The Chief of the Diplomatic Service Administration, Colin Crowe, suggested a professional diplomat, Denis Greenhill, as the best candidate for Washington but Brown had already pencilled in the latter to become Permanent Under-Secretary.[7] Freeman was noted as 'a possibility for Washington' at a meeting on 14 September 1967 and, although Wilson and Brown only confirmed the appointment, alongside a string of other posts, in February 1968, it is clear that Freeman was long seen as a possible replacement for Dean. The newspaper editor Hugh Cudlipp had been told by Wilson in May 1967 that Freeman was likely to go to Washington or Moscow.[8]

While his background might be described as privileged – the son of a barrister, educated at Westminster School and Oxford – Freeman had joined Labour in 1933 and was elected an MP in 1945.[9] As a politician he was best known as the minister who resigned alongside Wilson and Aneurin Bevan, the champion of the Left, in April 1951 over high defence spending, helping to precipitate the demise of the Labour government. Compared to the others he was still, despite his early promise, a minor player, a mere Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Supply.[10] Within weeks of this drama, however, his ambitions turned from parliament to journalism. He became the assistant to Kingsley Martin, editor of the left-wing New Statesman, and in 1955 left the House of Commons. When Martin finally retired in December 1960, Freeman took over the

editorship.[11] By then he had also become an able television performer, interviewing leading figures on the BBC series Face to Face, for which he won the title 'Television Personality of the Year' in 1960.[12] He then took a leading role in the ground-breaking current affairs programme Panorama. David Frost acknowledged him to be 'a role model and a seminal influence… he had an immensely imposing physical presence… as well as… awesome surgical skill with words…'[13] Throughout this time, however, he remained a supporter of Harold Wilson and, when the latter became party leader in 1963, wrote, 'I should not be surprised if one day he is counted among the great.'[14] In February 1965, thanks to Wilson's favour, Freeman became High Commissioner to India, a large diplomatic mission in the world's most populous democracy. He was aware in early 1967 that his success there might be followed by a still more prestigious post.[15]

In the second half of 1968 it became clear that Nixon could become President, casting doubt on Freeman's ability to fulfil his principal objectives as Ambassador, which included maintaining friendly relations, encouraging an internationalist outlook by the US and keeping the British government informed about American policies. But Wilson, though he was a convinced Atlanticist who always sought a close relationship with the White House, stuck doggedly by his choice. The British felt their relations with the prospective President were good enough to stand the strain.[16] Besides, even some Americans recognised Freeman's abilities. David Bruce, the US Ambassador to London under Kennedy and Johnson, met him at a lunch in July 1968 and was favourably impressed: 'He is undoubtedly attractive, and reputed to be intellectually brilliant. Those who dislike him charge him with being arrogant and supercilious, but as a table

companion today there was no trace of such defects.'[17] In the weeks following Nixon's triumph newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic raised questions about the appointment. 'US call to drop Freeman', read one headline.[18] But Bruce remained one of Freeman's defenders, writing disparagingly of the 'foolish demands that he announce his intention of giving up the Washington post.'[19] By early December the storm seemed to have passed and a dinner was given for the ambassador-designate at The Savoy hotel, hosted by Lord Harlech, another former political appointee to Washington. A Cabinet minister, Richard Crossman, who had also edited the New Statesman, proposed a witty, some said malicious, toast ranging over his colleague's career. It argued that, whether as an MP, television personality or diplomat, Freeman always liked to face new challenges and meet success; with Nixon he could again start at 'square one'.[20] Malicious or not, Crossman was one of those who predicted success for Freeman, who always determined to master a situation and had already cultivated the habits of a diplomat: 'He will do well because he is like an officer who stands erect under enemy fire.'[21]

In the New Year, a fresh problem presented itself when Nixon, instead of inviting Wilson to visit Washington as had been expected, proposed coming to London as part of a European tour. This would take place in February, before Freeman took up his post, but the British wanted him to be present at key functions, including a dinner at Downing Street. Those close to Nixon approached the occasion 'with trepidation.' The National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, while believing Wilson had made an 'extraordinary misjudgement' in appointing Freeman so far ahead of the US election, was impressed by the Prime Minister's courage in standing by the decision. Kissinger was keen to reassure

Wilson that bilateral relations would remain close under Nixon's tenure. But the President might yet decide 'to make Freeman's ambassadorial tenure as difficult and awkward as possible.'[22] According to one Nixon biographer 'one or two macho remarks' by the President led 'an over-zealous aide' to inform London that Freeman must not attend the Prime Minister's dinner. The aide has been variously identified as John Ehrlichman or Kissinger. If it were the latter, then subsequent events seem ironic, since he was to work closely with Freeman. Even a few days before the President flew in, David Bruce feared that a 'petty' snub was being planned that would mean trying to exclude the ambassador-designate from events. The Secretary of State, William Rogers, was drafted in to persuade Nixon to prevent any such action.[23]

Nixon arrived in London on 24 February for two days and Wilson did everything to impress him, including a meeting with the Cabinet and a reception at Buckingham Palace. It was at the dinner on the 25th that, as Wilson later put it, the President made 'an elegant and generous speech welcoming' the Ambassador-designate to his new post and finally 'eliminated a lot of silly comment about [his] alleged unacceptability.'[24] Bruce recalled that Nixon made: 'a most felicitous short speech about Freeman, welcoming him as Ambassador… Freeman was almost reduced to tears, and a profound satisfaction was apparent throughout the room… I have never known anything more courteously or magnanimously done. The PM… fairly glowed with pleasure.[25] 'After all', Nixon said in brushing aside the Press furore, 'he's the new diplomat and I'm the new statesman.' Kissinger's account describes the impact of this as 'electric', confirms that the 'usually imperturbable Freeman was close to tears', and adds that Wilson scribbled a note to

Nixon saying, 'That was one of the kindest and most generous acts I have known in a quarter of a century in politics…You can't guarantee being born a Lord. It is possible – you've shown it – to be born a gentleman.'[26] During the dinner Michael Stewart, who had succeeded Brown as Foreign Secretary, took the opportunity to convince Rogers of Freeman's suitability for his post, arguing that too much emphasis had been placed on his journalist days; he had broad experience, was intellectually gifted and highly professional. The Secretary of State needed no convincing. He was familiar with Freeman's qualifications and predicted he might even start with an advantage in Washington in that, given tales of their past antagonism, Ambassador and Nixon would 'lean over backwards to be friendly' to one another.[27] Sure enough, when the new ambassador presented his credentials in mid-March, although there was no substantive business to discuss, Nixon chose it as the occasion to inaugurate a new practice. The ceremony took place not in the President's office, as had previously been the case, but in the residential part of the White House. He thereby signalled that the United Kingdom was still a 'special' partner. In his formal remarks, Nixon also signalled that he planned to work closely with him: 'Let me assure you that you are most welcome in Washington. Your impressively versatile career is well known to us. I was delighted to meet and talk with you in London and anticipate seeing you often in the future.'[28]

The Embassy

Freeman arrived in Washington just as a report was being drawn up, under the chairmanship of Sir Val Duncan, on the future of Britain's overseas representation. This was carried out in light of both the need for spending restraint, following the devaluation

of Sterling in November 1967, and the need to match diplomatic representation to a reduced world role, following the January 1968 decision to withdraw from bases 'East of Suez.' Whatever the atmosphere of retrenchment in British diplomacy, the Washington embassy was in a privileged position and the Duncan Report had little effect upon it, although numbers in some sections were reduced. 3100 Massachusetts Avenue was easily the largest British mission in the world. The total number of Diplomatic Service staff in the US was 182 at the end of 1968, and this did not include locally-recruited employees or those from other ministries in Whitehall. This was a relatively large proportion of the 3,000 UK Diplomatic Staff serving overseas: there were only 270 in all the rest of the Americas and 214 staff in the whole of Eastern Europe.[29] The Diplomatic Service list for 1971, at the end of Freeman's period, gives an idea of how work was shared around the embassy: apart from the Ambassador and his deputy, there were twenty-three political staff, six officials in the economic-financial section, seven in commerce, eight in consular work and two information officers (the British Information Services headquarters was in New York), plus eleven civilian attaches for such issues as civil aviation, shipping and petroleum. In addition to the Washington staff, there were about twenty consulates and trade offices scattered across America.[30] There was also the British Defence Staff (BDS). In 1968-9, this was in the process of being reduced from 211 to 198 staff. These included 67 service personnel and 131 civilians. There were 99 defence-related staff in the US outside the BDS, stationed alongside American forces or handling equipment purchases, making a grand total of 297 in the defence field.[31]

Freeman seems to have had a limited role in the administrative side of the Embassy. One point that did involve him, however, was the number of ministers and other eminent persons, including MPs, who wanted to visit Washington, often at short notice, expecting practical help from the Embassy and likely to be disappointed if they could not meet some senior member of the administration. Such visits, Freeman argued, needed to be properly timetabled, given good notice and planned with a realistic view of what could be done.[32] In this he was echoing long-standing complaints. Patrick Dean, had also protested about over-frequent visits from ministers who often arrived with no clear objective in mind, expected to be entertained and accommodated, and had inflated expectations about media appearances and meetings with US officials.[33] The creation of a 'Ministerial Visits Committee' in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office failed to tackle the problem. Washington was simply too tempting a destination for the ambitious minister.[34] Despite his political background, Freeman's staff respected him. John Boyd, who served in Washington for most of the ambassadorship, thought him 'an admirable figure', intelligent and approachable, who set 'a good example… for the younger officers.'[35] Another junior diplomat, Andrew Wood, who had been in Washington since 1967 commented that, despite the controversy surrounding his appointment, 'I don't remember anyone feeling that John Freeman was not one of us… he settled in very quickly.'[36] And David Burns, who arrived as a First Secretary in 1969, found him 'a good man to work for.' Freeman once told him that being an Ambassador was like being an editor except you had to write more.[37] Looking at his personal messages to London, as opposed to the routine telegrams that merely went out under his name, Freeman's focus

seems very much on fulfilling his main role of establishing close links with the Nixon administration, a task in which he was eminently successful.

Dealing with the Nixon administration

When George Brown wrote of the 'mistake' in appointing Freeman, it was Henry Kissinger who sought to correct the impression, insisting that it was 'one of the wisest decisions you made. Starting out his assignment under somewhat of a cloud, John has moved with great skill and charm to gain the admiration of all of us here.'[38] There was no greater admirer than Kissinger himself who set up a close relationship with Freeman, similar to the better-known 'back-channel' to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin. In Freeman's early months in Washington, Nixon told him more than once that it was important for them to keep in touch on all problems affecting world affairs and to 'plan ahead together.'[39] It also soon became clear that Kissinger was 'thinking in terms of establishing a direct working relationship with the Ambassador.'[40] This was significant. The British had quickly realised that the White House, rather than the State Department, would have primacy in foreign policy making under Nixon. Before leaving Washington, Dean believed 'we have established excellent relations with Kissinger and his staff… we could therefore benefit considerably…'[41] and Freeman reported in August 1969 that, while 'Kissinger is beginning to make enemies for himself in the administration and in the press, I have no doubt that his position is becoming stronger and that the President relies on him increasingly for advice on foreign policy matters.'[42]

By fitting in with the way the Nixon administration operated and, in particular, by seeing the primary importance of the National Security Adviser, Freeman was able to carry weight, ensure top-level relations were good and learn secrets the State Department did not know. Writing his Annual Review for 1969, a year that had started with those reports of the end of the 'special relationship', Freeman could only talk of 'a pretty good year of Anglo-American relations.' Perhaps even more surprising, this was partly thanks to his connection with Nixon, who 'has repeatedly made clear to me in terms I can no longer doubt that he regards his Administration as having (and needing) more intimate relations with Britain than with any other foreign country…' Freeman added that, 'in terms of close and candid consultation… we have been treated exceptionally – probably uniquely – well.'[43] And the President seems to have been quite happy to leave issues in the hands of the National Security Adviser and Ambassador. In October 1970, when the dates for a summit were being discussed, Nixon told Kissinger, 'Don't bug me during the Goddam election. You and Freeman fix it.'[44] The intimacy of the Kissinger-Freeman relationship can be traced through the documentary record. To give just a few examples: in June 1970, discussing Arab-Israeli tensions with Freeman, Kissinger criticised the State Department's penchant for 'playing word games' at the UN and outlined the White House preference for a deal between the Superpowers that could then be pressed on the region[45]; the following month Kissinger gave Freeman an outline of White House thinking on Vietnam peace talks[46]; in September, at the height of the Jordan crisis, when Syria threatened to invade, he made a point of telephoning the Ambassador to inform him of a message from King Hussein before telephoning Downing Street with the same information[47]; and in October, after saying he regretted having to keep secrets from

Britain, Kissinger provided Freeman with a detailed explanation of what had happened during the Cienfuegos crisis over Soviet submarines in Cuba.[48]

However, as revealed in an analysis at that time, it was not simply a case of focusing attention on one man. True, Nixon, who had a deep interest in international issues and was distrustful of the Washington bureaucracy, relied heavily on Kissinger. But this pair only concentrated on certain key issues, their attention shifting from time to time in a way that could seem baffling to outsiders. This meant that, for the Embassy, 'the huge bulk of our business' was still with the State Department, on mundane issues that did not trouble the lofty minds in the White House. Freeman himself was determined to keep the State Department happy, not by-pass it, and to limit dealings with Kissinger to selected points. The situation was 'complicated, and admittedly not very satisfactory', in that the White House kept secrets from the State Department and the two institutions said different things on the same question. London was sometimes at a loss to know which part of the US government to approach. But the Ambassador was adamantly opposed to the idea of complaining to Nixon about the confusion. The important point was to learn to live with realities within the administration and to expect the same in return: more than once, Freeman had had to tell Kissinger that there could be no 'back-channel' direct to Downing Street that by-passed the FCO.[49] While quickly recognising that Rogers, the urbane Secretary of State, could end up as 'an attractive dilettante', Freeman was reluctant to write him off completely.[50] He told Wilson, when they met in November 1969, that Rogers remained a close confidante of the President.[51] And the

Ambassador was careful to consult him over details of the Prime Minister's January 1970 visit.[52]

Freeman always insisted on the need for the 'strict protection of Kissinger's confidence' when reporting conversations with him to the FCO. But revelations about a particularly frank exchange caused a media stir when the record was released in July 2004. On 3 June 1970 the National Security Adviser, while praising the President himself to Freeman as 'a good man', described those around him as 'a gang of self-seeking bastards', adding, 'I used to find the Kennedy group unattractively narcissistic, but they were idealists. These people are real heels.' If nothing else this revealed just how trusted Freeman had become. Denis Greenhill, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the FCO, to whom Freeman personally addressed many of his most sensitive reports, considered it 'a very considerable triumph to have got on such good terms with a man who appears, at least to me, somewhat less than attractive.' The same meeting revealed that the trust actually ran to Nixon himself: when Kissinger told Freeman that the President had been annoyed by Michael Stewart's 'patronising' manner on a recent visit, the Ambassador promised to warn London; but then he received a personal call from Nixon who wanted to make clear that Stewart's behaviour had done nothing to damage the Anglo-American relationship. The ambassador was astonished to be contacted in this way.[53]

Ambassador under Wilson

Despite the desire of Nixon and Wilson for a close relationship, Freeman did not always find it easy to keep relations between the pair on a positive basis. The US was too

powerful in the world and Britain, after the devaluation and East of Suez decision, too reduced in circumstances for Washington to deal with London in the way Churchill or Macmillan had known. But Wilson could be touchy about the way he was treated. In October 1969, for example, he was upset to discover that Britain had been asked by Washington to urge North Vietnam to take peace talks seriously, but only as one of a group of countries, some of whom had never supported the US on the war. The Prime Minister remarked that this was worse treatment than he had received from LBJ! Freeman was at pains to defend the administration, however, and was able to demonstrate 'special' treatment for Britain when Kissinger handed over an advance copy of Nixon's 30 November speech on foreign policy.[54] Issues also inevitably arose that needed careful handling between the two sides. Freeman was especially anxious in conversation with Wilson in November 1969 to preserve the British government's verbal support for the US war in Vietnam (when revelations of the My Lai massacre stirred up concern) and to explain British policy towards the EC (since Washington was currently reassessing its policy towards the Community).[55] It did not help that, by this time, Wilson's first visit to Washington was deferred several times. Nixon expressed the hope of a Washington summit when Freeman presented his credentials, but it proved difficult to settle a date. The Prime Minister was unable to go to Washington in June because of pressing problems at home.[56] In August, on his way back from Romania, Nixon made a brief stop at Mildenhall airport in Britain and met Wilson. This was the second time he had been in Britain in seven months and stood in stark contrast to Johnson, who had never ventured over at all. But for the British it was no substitute for a full summit.[57]

By November Wilson had, for some reason, come to sense a 'lack of consideration' in the Nixon administration. But he himself rejected the idea of a pre-Christmas summit, because a general election was looming and the he did not want to seem to endorse the President's Vietnam policy. At this point Freeman insisted that relations with Washington were perfectly good, that 'there is no effective substitute for personal contacts' at the top level and that Wilson ought to accept some new dates for a summit that the US had offered. The Ambassador also stroked Wilson's ego with a report that the President predicted a Labour victory in the general election that was widely expected in 1970.[58] Freeman's pressure succeeded and Wilson accepted the US proposal for a meeting in late January. The ambassador and Kissinger planned it carefully, ensuring that their chiefs had plenty of time to get to know each other.[59] The two-day visit proved a great success, mainly involving a review of world affairs on the political side but including, as a mark of honour, Wilson's attendance, along with Stewart and Freeman, at an NSC meeting. Only Australia's Harold Holt, who had troops fighting in Vietnam, had attended one before. Wilson came home declaring it 'by far the best visit I have had to the US.'[60] Reporting on the summit, Freeman noted that there had been no pressing issues to discuss and that it had confirmed Nixon's view that he could deal with London on the basis of trust. However, the Ambassador did not obscure the fact that the American public now treated visits from a British premier as little different from those of any other European leader. In this instance, Wilson's visit came after Germany's Kurt Kiesinger, who had been over in August, and before France's Georges Pompidou, who was due in February.[61]

Events a few months later confirmed that the British could not take their standing in Washington for granted. They received limited advanced warning of the US incursion into Cambodia in April 1970, Freeman remarking that he had 'never seen Kissinger in such a sombre mood…' when he told the Ambassador about the operation. The administration knew the decision would be unpopular with public opinion at home and abroad but wanted to shock Hanoi into talking. The timing could hardly have been worse from Wilson's perspective: he was planning an election for June and the US action inevitably rekindled opposition to the Vietnam War in parliament and the Cabinet. But, as always, Freeman hoped that London would support the invasion: 'Our good relations with the Nixon administration stem largely from the President's appreciation of the understanding he has received from HMG, often in difficult political circumstances.'[62] Then came Stewart's visit to Washington and the apparent difference with Nixon who, according to Kissinger, felt 'patronised'. Freeman had requested a Presidential interview for Stewart when dining with Nixon on 11 May. The President had clearly been impressed with the Foreign Secretary's readiness to defend the invasion of Cambodia in parliament and agreed to meet him. But when Stewart arrived a few days later he struck, according to Freeman, a 'schoolmasterly' tone, telling Nixon he should reiterate his commitment to reduce US troop levels in Vietnam and allow NATO to pursue détente in Europe. Kissinger, who was present for most of the meeting, was clearly irritated and Freeman feared 'that my welcome, the next time I have to go to the White House, may be cooler than usual.'[63] The FCO itself had not been happy about the line Stewart planned to take with the President. Concocted in talks with Wilson, it seemed more calculated to help the Labour Party's election fortunes than transatlantic relations.[64] But on reflection

Freeman felt that the problem lay less with Stewart and more with the 'ungenerous' Kissinger.[65] Neither the Ambassador nor the Foreign Secretary had sensed any animosity from Nixon. Reflecting on the reports, Greenhill too was inclined to blame Kissinger for exaggeration, dismissing him as a 'type of European-born guru who is absurdly jealous of other influences on his chief.'[66] Certainly the episode did not put an end to Kissinger's frank conversations with Freeman. Indeed, more than a year into his Ambassadorship, he seemed to be doing surprisingly well. Tony Benn, making an official visit to Washington as Minister of Technology, found his host 'still inscrutable, very smart… and hard to get through to' but clearly 'enjoying being Ambassador… immensely. But, with a Conservative victory possible in the upcoming election, Freeman was already wondering what his next job should be. He did not expect his services to be retained by Edward Heath.[67] A letter to Stewart suggested that he might even leave Washington if Labour were returned to power.[68]

Heath and Europe

The Conservatives won the election in June and Freeman met the new Prime Minister for the first time a month later, when the main subject was planning for a summit. An early meeting in America was discussed, with Freeman suggesting that it might be held at Camp David or San Clemente where the pressures on Nixon were 'less intense and he was more relaxed.'[69] But, as under Wilson, timing proved difficult. The two sides eventually opted for a full, two-day summit in December, split between Washington and Camp David. However, it was the President's brief visit to Britain in October 1970 that got their relationship as leaders off to what Freeman called 'a good start': Heath invited

the President to Chequers and Nixon emphasised the value of personal encounters to the 'special relationship'.[70] At the more substantial, second summit in December 1970 Heath preferred to speak of a 'natural relationship', so as not to offend other countries with the idea of an exclusive Anglo-US alliance; but the talks were friendly enough, Nixon was grateful for Heath's support on the Vietnam War and Freeman, about to be succeeded by Lord Cromer, considered it a great success.[71] Heath, while he had put membership of the EC at the centre of his foreign policy, was clearly determined not to let this undermine relations with America. True, he did not want to rekindle suspicions in France about the 'special relationship'. But he recognised the central significance of the United States to British security. One revealing paper the FCO argued that, 'our European commitment must now have priority but so far as possible we should try to eat our cake and have it' by maintaining the US link.[72] This need to dovetail the American and European elements in British policy increasingly came to dominate Freeman's time in Washington.

Long before Heath took office in fact, Freeman had been aware of the need to tread carefully where British entry to the EC was concerned. He had raised the problem in June 1969, when there were indications that the new French President, Georges Pompidou, would be more open to enlarging the Community. It was important not to alienate the US through schemes for European integration, especially in such delicate areas as nuclear co-operation or aircraft manufacture. It was also vital to maintain Nixon's personal support for European integration, which went back to his experience as Vice-President in the Eisenhower administration, especially at a time when some parts of the US government, not least the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture, were

becoming critical of EC policies. It was unlikely that Washington would suddenly turn completely against the integrated Europe it had done so much to foster. But even in the State Department the enthusiasm for the EC that had characterised earlier presidencies was waning, because the Community seemed, through its Common Agricultural Policy and its preferential trade agreements with less developed countries, to becoming a threat to the US and the global system of liberal trade. Europe and America were becoming competitors rather than partners. There were calls in some quarters for cuts in US troop levels in NATO, and sectors of American industry were complaining about European practices, even though the US trade surplus with the EC burgeoned to more than $2 billion dollars in 1970.[73] Potential differences over Europe were one reason Freeman had wanted a full summit between Wilson and Nixon.

In the Spring of 1970 there was a review of US policy towards Europe by the National Security Council that provoked some concern in London but, in May, Nixon publicly reaffirmed his support for the EC while Harlan Cleveland, Economics Minister at the US embassy in London, told the FCO that he felt his role was 'to keep us off your backs'. It was at that point that the Conservatives came to power and Freeman lost no time in drafting an analysis of the US attitude towards enlargement. His despatch of 20 June acknowledged signs that 'the United States is weakening in its traditional support for closer European unity', but noted that Nixon had always been consistent in his support for it, that the President had emphasised this to Congress when it began work on a new Trade Bill, and that the State Department 'took every opportunity' to make known its support for British entry. True, it did so in a low-key way, but that was because it did

not want to inflame French suspicions of the 'Anglo-Saxons'. As the talks on enlargement got underway, Freeman expected the American agricultural lobby and some elements in the administration to become more vocal in their criticism of the supposed restrictive trade practices in the EC. There was the possibility of counter-measures being included in the new Trade Bill and indications of a growing general fear 'that in the long-term the EEC may develop into a gigantic trading area which will effectively discriminate against United States interests…' But the Ambassador believed America's strategic and political motives for backing the EC outweighed any economic fears and that any US action would be directed against specific European policies rather than against the existence of the Community itself. The British themselves could help reduce the dangers of a shift in US policy, by emphasising London's support of the EC as a force for political (not just economic) co-operation, giving assurances that Britain would minimise the damage to US interests from Community policies and backing further efforts at global trade liberalisation.[74]

Freeman's optimism on the European front was borne out as entry negotiations were pushed forward under Heath. In London in the second half of 1970 there was continuing concern about the likely contents of the US Trade Bill, worry about America's reaction to preferential trade arrangements that the UK wanted for some less developed Commonwealth countries and deep concern when, in October, a dispute blew up with Washington over Britain's own system of agricultural import levies – a dispute not settled until March 1971, after Freeman left Washington. This combination helps to explain the alarm that struck in late December when a US embassy official expressed

objections to the FCO about the proposed association of Commonwealth countries with the EC. It led to a meeting on New Year's Day between Harlan Cleveland and Con O'Neill, the official in charge of Britain's EC negotiations. While O'Neill argued that Washington had known since 1961 about the UK's intention of seeking special arrangements for Commonwealth countries, Cleveland pointed out that London was well aware of Washington's dislike of such deals. Since he also said that there would be no US 'campaign' on the issue, and since Nixon had personally reassured Heath of US support for British entry only a few weeks before, the incident was unlikely to scupper the prospects for EC enlargement. But, when the Americans took up the point with the EC member governments, London decided 'to rub in our first reaction even more strongly' by having Freeman take the question up with William Rogers. The Ambassador did so during his farewell call on the Secretary of State, on 12 January 1971, finding that the US approach to EC members had been authorised at a low level, being intended as no more than a routine statement of known opinions. It is testament to the strength of the administration's commitment to EC enlargement that this was the worst moment that US actions created during the successful entry negotiations.[75]

When Freeman left the Washington embassy he was well aware of potential clouds on the horizon, with potential differences over trade protection, the Middle East and the future of the EC but he felt relations were 'extremely good.' They had been healthy enough under Wilson, but Nixon had been delighted to have the Conservatives in office and told Freeman, in their farewell meeting of 5 January that 'he regarded London as his closest and most trusted ally', not only because of historical ties and shared

challenges but also because Britain 'knew her way around' in the world. To Freeman, in his valedictory telegram, this seemed to confirm Heath's belief in a 'natural relationship' between the two countries, a relationship in which the two would consult closely about joint problems, 'minimising the risks both of unnecessary friction at sensitive points and of catching one another by surprise in an unnecessarily exposed position.'[76]

Conclusion

In a study of diplomacy published in 1960 Charles Thayer wrote, 'Every political generation produces half a dozen or more individuals capable of making a distinguished contribution to diplomacy without going through the long and arduous training of the professional service. If they are familiar with government practices and particularly foreign problems and have demonstrated their political sense, their appointment to diplomatic posts not only puts their talents to valuable use but also serves to refresh, reinvigorate, and inspire the career personnel.'[77] Freeman might have preferred to return to a career in the media, becoming Chairman of London Weekend Television from 1971 to 1984, but he fits Thayer's description perfectly. He adapted to the world of diplomacy easily as High Commissioner to India, won the respect of professional diplomats and proved a success in Washington despite the worst possible start to his ambassadorship. He was an astute observer of the Washington scene and realistic about the influence London could wield there. His ambassadorship provides ample evidence of the way in which key officials could keep the 'special relationship' in a healthy state even when its overall significance was declining. In a basic brief prepared for Nixon's October 1970 visit, the FCO acknowledged the deterioration in bilateral relations over the past five

years. But this was due to Britain's relative decline in world affairs, its poor economic performance, the withdrawal from East of Suez and the resurgence of other powers, particularly Germany, France and Japan. On a personal level, relations with the Nixon administration were excellent.[78] When, within months of Freeman's departure, bilateral relations underwent a marked deterioration, Denis Greenhill blamed this in large part on 'the US Administration's method of work (Kissinger et al)', which was 'worse than I ever remember.'[79] But Freeman had mastered that 'method of work', manoeuvred carefully to maintain British influence and recognised that personal ties could have a real impact: 'any clouding of the very cordial relations we have thus far enjoyed with the Nixon administration could have serious consequences for a whole range of important interests…'[80]

Henry Brandon, the Washington correspondent of the Sunday Times, recognised that the key element in Freeman's success was the close 'the extraordinary intellectual relationship he had succeeded in establishing with Kissinger', the most important figure in US foreign policy making.[81] Kissinger called him 'one of the most effective ambassadors I ever dealt with': Freeman might be 'very formal' when on official business, reluctant to turn his Embassy into a glittering social centre and unwilling to stoop to flattery in his personal dealings; but 'he was a man of superb intelligence and utter integrity', with 'a shrewd geopolitical mind'. Such judgments may have been influenced by the friendship that grew up between the pair, but Kissinger discussed issues with Freeman that were beyond the Ambassador's official responsibilities, even showing him drafts of Presidential statements.[82] Yet Freeman was not in awe of the National

Security Adviser and, in messages to London, could express grave doubts about Kissinger's judgement: after their June 1970 talk about the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, the Ambassador declared, 'I consider some of the views he expounded, though not completely irrational, both naïve and romantic.'[83] Neither did Freeman cultivate the National Security Adviser to the detriment of other power centres in Washington. Instead he was careful to treat William Rogers with respect and include the State Department in consultations. He was also successful in building a friendly relationship with Nixon, who wrote to him at the time of his departure, that the Anglo-American relationship 'has prospered during your stay in no small measure due to your sharp perception of the American scene and your forthright presentation of British views.' By 1971 the President and Ambassador had developed a mutual respect that allowed a particular frankness to creep into Freeman's farewell audience when, perhaps inevitably, memories of their past differences crept back into the limelight. Freeman, recalling the 1962 article that had so overshadowed his arrival in Washington, apologised. He did so 'not for my manners but my judgment. I got you wrong.' Nixon, not to be wrong-footed, replied, 'Well, you couldn't have said that before without browning your nose.'[84]

Notes

[1] I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for financing the study leave that allowed me to complete this chapter and to Andrew Holt of the University of Nottingham for gathering materials in the US National Archives.
[2] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (London, 1979), 95.
[3] Stewart Alsop, 'Death of an Alliance', *Newsweek*, 6 January 1969; and see Bruce Geelhoed and Anthony Edmonds, (eds), *The Macmillan-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1957-69* (Basingstoke, 2005), 400 and 425-7.
[4] George Brown, *In My Way* (London, 1971), 131.
[5] British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, Hetherington papers, 14/11, record of meeting with Chalfont (14 February 1968).
[6] David Bruce diary, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond (13 June 1968).
[7] The National Archives (TNA), Kew, FO800/984, Maitland to Crowe and reply (5-6 September 1967).
[8] FO800/984, Maitland minute (14 September 1967) and letter to Brown (7 February 1968); Cecil King, *The Cecil King Diary, 1965-70* (London, 1972), 125-6.
[9] Stuart Thomson, *John Freeman*, at http://www.startthomson.co.uk/books/biography/freeman/
[10] But Freeman might have been on the brink of promotion to the Cabinet: Ben Pimlott, *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton* (London, 1986), 537.
[11] C. H. Rolph, *Kingsley: the life, letters and diaries of Kingsley Martin* (London, 1973), 310-11, 315-16 (quote from 316) and 333-42.
[12] Rolph, *Kingsley*, 333-4.
[13] David Frost, *An Autobiography: Part One, From Congregations to Audiences* (London, 1993), 264.
[14] Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), 168 and (quoting *News of the World*, 17 February 1963) 261.
[15] Frost, *Autobiography*, 258-65 (quote from 264-5).
[16] TNA, PREM13/2158, brief on 'United States' (covering note 26 July 1968).
[17] Bruce diary (3 July 1968).
[18] *Sunday Telegraph* (11 November 1968).
[19] Bruce diary (12 November 1968).
[20] Bruce diary (2 December 1968); Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Volume III, 1968-70* (London, 1977), 280-81.
[21] Henry Brandon, *Special Relationships* (London, 1988), 321.
[22] Kissinger, *White House*, 95; US National Archives and Record Administration, Nixon Presidential Project (hereinafter NPP), National Security Files, box 763, Kissinger to Nixon (3 February 1969).
[23] Jonathan Aitken, *Nixon: a life* (London, 1993), 380-81; Bruce diary (22 February 1969).
[24] Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-70* (London, 1971), 621.
[25] Bruce diary (25 February 1969). See also Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries, 1964-70* (London, 1984), 607.
[26] Richard Nixon, *RN: the memoirs of Richard Nixon* (London, 1978), 371; Kissinger, *White House*, 95.
[27] TNA, FCO73/39, 'Michael' to Maitland (25 February 1969).
[28] FCO73/40, Freeman to Stewart (18 March 1969); NPMP, White House Central Files, box 79, briefing memorandum (undated) and 'President's Reply' (17 March 1969).
[29] *Cmnd. 4107, Report of the Review Committee on Overseas Representation, 1968-9* (London, 1969) [hereinafter *Duncan Report*], 173.
[30] *The Diplomatic Service List, 1971* (London, 1971), 98-104.
[31] *Duncan Report*, 138-41.
[32] FCO73/40, Freeman to Maitland (6 May) and to Graham (28 October 1969).
[33] FCO73/10, Dean to Maclehose (22 June 1966).
[34] FCO73/40, Graham to Freeman (11 November 1969).
[35] British Diplomatic Oral History Project (BDOHP), Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge, John Boyd interview.

[36] *Ibid.*, Andrew Wood interview.
[37] *Ibid.*, David Burns interview, 26-27.
[38] Kissinger to Brown, (7 November 1970), reproduced in Brown, *My Way*, 280.
[39] FCO73/40, Freeman to Stewart (26 June 1969).
[40] To ensure Freeman's centrality to Anglo-American relations Wilson tempered his use of the 'hot line' teleprinter link to the White House: PREM13/3010, Tomkins to Palliser (14 March 1969, including quote), Palliser to Wilson (18 March), and Wilson's handwritten minute (undated).
[41] PREM13/3018, Dean to Greenhill (5 February) and Tomkins to Hunt (14 February 1969).
[42] PREM13/2874, Washington to FCO (8 August 1969).
[43] FCO7/1803, Freeman to Douglas-Home (20 January 1970).
[44] Or so Kissinger told Freeman: FCO7/1807, Freeman to Greenhill (28 October 1970).
[45] FCO73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (6 June 1970).
[46] FCO73/132, Millard to Greenhill (20 July 1970).
[47] Kissinger, *White House*, 623-4.
[48] FCO73/144, Freeman to Greenhill (29 October 1970).
[49] FCO7/1807, Greenhill to Freeman (15 October 1970) and reply (28 October).
[50] FCO73/40, Freeman to Graham (12 September 1969).
[51] PREM13/3022, Youde to Graham (24 November 1969).
[52] FCO7/1430, Washington to FCO (11 December 1969).
[53] FCO73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (5 June 1970); FCO 73/132, Greenhill to Freeman (9 June 1970); Jonathan Brown, 'Kissinger said Nixon aides were "self-seeking bastards",' *The Independent* (23 July 2004).
[54] PREM13/3030, note for the record (31 October) and Freeman to Greenhill (1 November 1969).
[55] PREM13/3022, Youde to Graham (24 November); and see PREM 13/3552, Freeman to Greenhill (15 December 1969) on Vietnam.
[56] PREM13/2874, Freeman to Stewart (18 March) and FCO to Washington (23 April 1969).
[57] PREM13/2874, *passim*.
[58] PREM13/3428, Wilson to Freeman (5 November) and reply (17 November 1969).
[59] NPMP, Henry Kissinger telephone conversation transcripts, box 3, conversations of 6 and 21 January.
[60] Castle, *Diaries*, 759.
[61] It is clear that Wilson read Freeman's report thoroughly, picking up on factual errors: PREM13/3546, records of meetings (27-28 January 1970), Freeman to Stewart (10 February) and Moon to Graham (3 March).
[62] PREM13/3081 Washington to FCO (30 April 1970).
[63] FCO73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (15 May 1970).
[64] FCO73/132, Greenhill to Freeman (9 June 1970).
[65] FCO 73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (5 June 1970).
[66] FCO73/132, Greenhill to Freeman (19 May 1970).
[67] Tony Benn, *Office without Power: diaries, 1969-72* (London, 1988), 264 and 269-70.
[68] The original letter has not been found in the TNA or the Stewart papers in Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge, but is referred to in FCO73/132, Greenhill to Freeman (9 June 1970).
[69] PREM15/161, record of meeting (23 July 1970).
[70] PREM15/714, record of meeting (3 October 1970), and Freeman to Armstrong (8 October).
[71] PREM15/161, records of meetings (17-18 December 1970); PREM 15/711, Freeman to Douglas-Home (8 January 1971).
[72] PREM15/712, memorandum attached to Graham to Moon (5 November 1971); FCO 7/1839, memorandum on Anglo-American relations (23 September 1970); FCO 7/1840, Steering Brief (11 December 1970).
[73] FO73/40, Freeman to Stewart (26 June 1969); and the official history by Con O'Neill, *Britain's Entry into the European Community: report on the negotiations of 1970-72* (London, 2000), 297-9. See also FCO7/1427, Cradock to Holland (14 November 1969) for a Planning Staff analysis of the implications of Community membership for Anglo-US relations.
[74] FCO30/582, Washington to FCO (20 June 1970), reproduced in O'Neill, *Britain's Entry*, 369-73, and see 299-300.
[75] FCO to Washington (1 January 1970), reproduced in *ibid*., 384-7, and see 300-01.

[76] FCO82/42, Freeman to Douglas-Home (8 January 1971), doubling up as the 1970 annual review.
[77] Charles Thayer, *Diplomat* (London, 1960), 252.
[78] FCO7/1839, NV(70)C1 (23 September 1970).
[79] FCO73/133, Graham to Greenhill (9 September) and Greenhill minute (15 September 1971).
[80] FCO73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (8 May 1970).
[81] Brandon, *Special Relationships*, 322.
[82] Kissinger, *White House*, 95-6.
[83] FCO 73/131, Freeman to Greenhill (6 June 1970).
[84] NPMP, White House Central Files, box 80, Nixon to Freeman (7 January 1971); Aitken, *Nixon*, 381, footnote, citing interview with Freeman.