

PROSPECTS OF HONING YOUR SKILLS IN SWAHILI, MAGYAR AND TAGALOG ARE DIM INDEED BUT . . .

by Tony Halliday

Tony and Pippa Halliday have just left for Chicago where he will be Consul General. Right in the middle of all the pre-posting frenzy, he was asked if he could possibly share with us some of his thoughts on the U.S. He willingly complied and offers for us here a wry glance at the "friendly natives" to our south and north-west, the Americans.

News of your imminent posting to the United States will, likely as not, evoke the sympathy of friends and colleagues. Perfunctory references to the importance of the bilateral relations and the vital challenges you will face will not obscure the underlying tone of commiseration.

Your posting points to the fact that your luck has run out.

Although unwelcome, such reactions can be comprehended. They reflect the fact that the U.S. is totally familiar and consequently short on exotica. For the culturally eclectic, it has little to offer. There will be few opportunities to augment your collections of Batik prints, African masks or menus of memorable French meals. Equally, prospects of honing your skills in Swahili, Magyar and Tagalog are dim indeed.

The undoubted deprivations of a U.S. posting are not, however, entirely uncompensated. Only the unshakable ascetic will scorn the ease of access to those services so essential to material and spiritual well-being: supermarkets, fast food chains and major league sports (live or televised).

Culturally, the cities offer rich and varied possibilities. Internationally renowned theatres, museums, art galleries and orchestras abound and every opportunity exists to pursue your particular interests, however arcane.

Equally important, is the ease with which you can communicate with and enjoy the natives. South of the Mason-Dixon Line and across the East River, intonations can be challenging — but, except for the more inaccessible hollows of the Ozarks, not insuperable. Conversations with Americans in all walks of life can be a mutually illuminating experience.

Canadian media coverage ensures that all of us are well informed on the minutiae of the U.S. scene, economic problems and lifestyles. Accordingly, all Canadians (not least those who instruct from Ottawa) assume total up-to-date expertise on the U.S. scene.

Nevertheless, direct exposure to the citizenry of the Great Republic will reveal subtle and unsuspected aspects of the American way of life. For example, it is widely accepted that the United States, in contrast to Canada, is a "melting pot" where ethnic and regional distinctions are fused into a homogeneous undifferentiated society. Closer observations, however, would suggest that ethnic and geographical distinctions persist. Moreover, social and political attitudes will be found to diverge sharply. Ideologies are strongly held. The dichotomy between the free market and state intervention arouses ardent passions absent in the more pragmatic Canadians. Appreciation of Washington in, say, Bosman, Montana ranks only with that of Ottawa, in, say, Lethbridge.

You will also observe that away from the Northern Tier states, your American friends will generally be blissfully unaware of Canadian geography, history and political institutions. Most consider that Japan, and not Canada, is the United States' largest trading partner — a misconception not without value in these protectionist times. Few Americans seem to have even heard of Ottawa, but fewer would venture to nominate an alternative capital. The extensive Canadian Studies Programs throughout the United States will, in time, rectify this incomprehensible educational neglect. In the meantime, however, you can enjoy a concomitant advantage; you will appear interesting and even somewhat exotic to your American friends.

Add it all up. Ready access to your family and to your Gatineau cottage, all the modern comforts, easy communication with friendly and very hospitable natives, a complex and vibrant culture to dissect and a chance to promote Canada's own vital interests. Who indeed would want to serve anywhere else.

Quotable Quotes

"Canadians are generally indistinguishable from the Americans, and the surest way of telling the two apart is to make the observation to a Canadian."

Canada: The Uneasy Neighbour (1965), by Richard Starnes.

"Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast...one is affected by every twitch and grunt."

Pierre Trudeau, the National Press Club, Washington, March 26, 1969.



Buffalo? Marvellous. Mother can come and visit every weekend from Toronto.