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**The Astronaut and Foggy Bottom PR:
Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Michael Collins,
1969-1971**

by

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Abstract

Michael Collins was one of the three astronauts in the historic Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969, although only Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon. Participating in that feat made him a hero and celebrity. Upon his return, he agreed to become Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, despite lacking a background in public relations, journalism or diplomacy. His main assignment was to reach out to the college generation that was protesting the war in Viet Nam. Collins served in the sub-cabinet for 15 months, resigning to head the nascent National Air and Space Museum. This article recounts his

experience as the top PR person for the State Department, assesses it and concludes with Collins' own views on the experience, 35 years later.

1. Introduction

The US State Department was the first federal cabinet department to have a sub-cabinet position dedicated to public relations, although it didn't become a 'pure' staff position until 1953. In late 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt nominated poet Archibald MacLeish, who was stepping down as Librarian of Congress, to a newly created assistant secretary position in the State Department. (Foggy Bottom is a nickname for the State Department's headquarters in Washington, DC, due to its location in a low-lying neighborhood near the Potomac River that was often shrouded in fog.) His title was Assistant Secretary of State for Public and Cultural Affairs (*Congressional Directory*, 1945, p. 334). In Washington parlance, public affairs was one of the benign euphemisms used for public relations, necessary due to the 1913 Congressional ban on hiring "publicity experts." His successor during the Truman Administration, William Benton (of the Benton & Bowles advertising agency fame) shortened the title by dropping "and Cultural Affairs" (Hyman, 1969, p. 323). The streamlined title has continued to the present (Assistant Secretaries of State, 2006).

One of the most unusual occupants of the position was astronaut Michael Collins. In July 1969, Collins was part of the three-person crew of Apollo 11, the first landing on the moon. While Neil Armstrong and Edwin 'Buzz' Aldrin were in the lunar module that landed on the moon, Collins piloted the mother ship that remained in orbit around the moon. The mission made heroes and celebrities of all three, given the space race (and larger Cold War) between

the US and the Soviet Union. The lunar landing was viewed as a win for what was called the Free World. Upon their safe return to earth, the three astronauts were feted in the capital, around the country and then went on world tour of 23 nations in 35 days. In late November 1969, just a few weeks after returning from their international tour, President Nixon nominated Collins to be Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. The Senate confirmed him in December and he took office in January 1970. However, in February 1971 the President announced Collins' plan to resign to become head of the nascent National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. Collins officially stepped down in April after 15 months in the position.

Collins was neither a Foreign Service Officer as some of the occupants of his office were, such as his immediate successor Carol C. Laise (1973-75), nor was he a journalist as many were, such as national network news reporter Bernard Kalb (1985-86). Lacking either expertise in foreign affairs or in public communications, the natural curiosity is how did he do? This article is the first historical effort in an academic forum to review Collins' service as the top public relations officer of the US State Department.

The methodology for this case study was historical research. This particular inquiry necessitated correlating information from multiple independent primary sources, including a written interview with Collins, original documents of the Nixon Presidency at the National Archives, published and unpublished Congressional hearings, and official materials from the State Department and White House. Secondary sources were contemporaneous coverage in newspapers, especially the ProQuest historical newspapers database (*New York Times*,

Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal and Christian Science Monitor), NewspaperARCHIVE.com and from the *Washington Star* morgue at the District of Columbia Public Library.

2. Appointment

After being debriefed and released from quarantine (due to concerns about possible infectious materials on the moon's surface), the three astronauts came to Washington, DC. At a joint session of Congress on September 16, 1969 each addressed the audience. Collins spoke briefly, but eloquently and patriotically. He began by emphasizing that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had not given him a speech to read, rather that his comments were his own. He said that he spoke as “a free citizen living in a free country and expressing free thoughts.” Besides stating appreciation for the comprehensive national effort that led to the moon landing (including “political leaders”, i.e. Congressional funding), he focused on the impact of seeing earth from one direction and outer space from the other. Yes, America had serious domestic problems such as “poverty, discrimination, or unrest.” But, he disagreed with the suggestion that those problems needed to be resolved before the US would engage in further space exploration:

Such logic 200 years ago would have prevented expansion westward past the Appalachian Mountains, for assuredly the eastern seaboard was beset by problems of great urgency then, as it is today. Man has always gone where he has been able to go. It is that simple. He will continue pushing back his frontier, no matter how far it may carry him from his homeland. Someday in the not-too-distant future, when I listen to an earthling step out onto the surface of Mars or some other planet, just as I listed to

Neil step out onto the surface of the Moon, I hope I hear him say, “I come from the United States of America” (Joint Meeting, 1969, p. 25610).

His listeners ate it up. In the audience that day, with the rest of the Cabinet, was Secretary of State William Rogers. During a subsequent world tour, Collins’ behavior was “articulate and diplomatic” (Down to earth, 1969). On November 5, the trio participated in several events in Washington welcoming them back home. That day Rogers asked Collins if he had written his speech to Congress and was “relieved and pleased” that the answer was yes. Hearing that answer, Rogers promptly asked Collins if he would like to serve in the State Department (Collins, 1989, p. 456). Collins, not wanting the rest of his life to be an anti-climax to the moon mission (Wilford, 1994), said yes, looking forward to a new challenge (and higher pay than that of a colonel in the Air Force). The position of assistant secretary of state for public affairs was vacant, still unfilled even though the new administration began in January.

According to Collins, Rogers then oddly suggested that Collins should mention Rogers’ idea to President Nixon when the group would be welcomed at the White House later that day. A more conventional approach would have had Rogers clearing this personnel matter with the President or his staff. (This might have reflected the distant relations that Nixon had with his Secretary of State, preferring to work closely with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.) Nixon loved the idea (Collins, 1989, pp. 456-57). As a sub-cabinet position, appointment to the office required nomination by the president and confirmation by the Senate. The details were quickly worked out and two weeks later Nixon announced it (Nixon, 1969). The news was timed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, while Nixon was

vacationing in Key Biscayne (FL), as a way both to feed the White House press corps during a slow news period and to give the impression of a president at work.

Later that day, Rogers and Collins met with the press at the State Department. Rogers made two important announcements. First, unlike some of his predecessors and successors, Collins' responsibilities would not include that of the press spokesperson. Instead, as the head of the Department's Bureau of Public Affairs, Collins' role would be to strengthen communications with the public-at-large. Second, Rogers wanted Collins especially to focus on improving the Department's relationship "with the youth of the country in recognition of the unprecedented attention young people have directed to the nation's foreign policies" (Astronaut to head, 1969). Rogers was referring, diplomatically of course, to the anti-Viet Nam war movement that was rocking the country at that time, especially on college campuses.

In fall of 1969, those dissenting from the war felt like it had now become Nixon's war, as he had been president since January and the end of the war seemed no closer in sight. (One reason for the campus basis of the anti-war movement was that some students were motivated by not wanting to be drafted to serve – and possibly die – in the war.) On October 15, they had organized a national day of "moratorium" to express opposition to the war. It was widely covered, sympathetically, in the media. Two days of protests, a "mobilization," were scheduled for mid-November. Preemptively, in early November, President Nixon gave a nationally televised speech calling on the "great silent majority" to voice its support for his Viet Nam policy and its disagreement with the anti-war movement. In the short term, the

speech was a success. It let the steam out of the anti-war protests by demonstrating that those opposing the war did not speak for a majority of Americans. Indeed, the protests in Washington in mid-November were somewhat dominated by more violent protestors who said their goal was to shut down what they called the war machine. The Nixon Administration responded with a law and order strategy, arresting large numbers of people to prevent the protesters from successfully blocking entrance and exit from such key buildings as the Pentagon.

Collins' appointment was viewed as "a direct response to the Oct. 15 and Nov. 15 antiwar demonstrations here [in Washington, DC] and around the country" (Associated Press, 1969, p. 16). According to the *New York Times*, Nixon considered the college-based anti-war movement as "the single most difficult problem in the Vietnam situation." Now, with the appointment of Collins, internal disagreements in the administration about how to handle the protest movement were becoming visible and tangible. Rogers, representing the moderate wing, wanted to lower the decibel level and communicate with the college age protesters. Hard-liners, such as Attorney General John Mitchell, wanted a tougher public tone, explicitly disagreeing with the dissenters' position on the war and ruling out the possibility that "crowds in the street" would succeed in changing the Administration's Viet Nam policy. In Rogers' more conciliatory approach, Collins was not identified with the war, in fact had no foreign policy experience. (One of his few links to foreign policy was that his father, as part of his Army career, had served as the Military Attaché at the US Embassy in Rome.) Appointing "a national hero as a spokesman the young people might accept" was a

gesture of reaching out to the college generation, rather than the administration turning its back on them (Halloran, 1969).

Collins spoke only briefly when he was introduced to the press by Rogers on November 28. There was some nervousness by departmental officials if he indeed had the right stuff for the job. To the press, Collins said that “If we can talk very clearly from a distance of a quarter of a million miles in the space program, I would hope that some of that expertise or technique might be carried over towards opening up the lines of communication which we presently find somewhat constricted, particularly in regard to the youth of America” (Astronaut to head, 1969). But, reporters pressed him for a more substantive comment regarding how he would approach the goal of communicating with youth. He said,

In my opinion, most of the dissenters about the war in Viet Nam are poorly equipped with the facts, and I think part of my job would be to make those facts more readily available. I think for one reason or another they have oversimplified the conflict and in many of their minds Hanoi is good and Saigon is bad, and they have that very simplistic approach to it. I think that’s far from the truth. And delving back into the history of our presence in Viet Nam, there are direct contradictions to that point of view (Yuenger, 1969).

Collins was making clear that notwithstanding the mission that he readily accepted of reaching out to the college generation, he was still an official spokesman for the administration and he would explicitly support its Viet Nam policies. In general, he had proved his mettle dueling with the press. Previously nervous “departmental peers smiled

approvingly” (Marder, 1969, p. A4). Still, a member of the *Washington Post*’s editorial board wrote a column suggesting it was naïve to think that the fierce anti-war college protesters would be impressed, let alone influenced, by an astronaut with no foreign policy experience – let alone one explicitly supporting the President’s war policies (Ungar, 1970).

President Nixon officially submitted the proposed appointment to the Senate on December 2 and it was referred to the Foreign Relations Committee (*Journal*, 1969, p. 802). Committee chair J. William Fulbright (D-AR) quickly scheduled a meeting for December 12 to consider the nomination. Collins “appeared visibly nervous” at the hearing (United Press, 1969) and with good reason. Fulbright was a fierce opponent of the war and often used confirmation hearings (including for all ambassadors) to argue with them about the administration’s war policy. Also, the same week that the appointment was received in the Committee, Fulbright was delivering a series of major speeches on the floor of the Senate that were later compiled into his book *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*. He did not like public relations, at least as practiced by the Defense Department. But Fulbright chose not to make Collins’ appointment a cause célèbre. He gently asked about Collins’ qualifications for the job and the scope of responsibilities of the position. Collins tried to stick to generalities. The chairman pointedly asked if, as an Air Force officer, Collins had ever served in a public affairs position? Collins’ answer was no, saving him from a Fulbright condemnation of military propaganda. Fulbright then asked how Collins would explain US policy in Southeast Asia? His answer showed his diplomatic instincts:

I think our presence in Southeast Asia is a complicated entity, one that has its roots over many years, and it is not something that can be explained in a sentence or two

sentences. I would just simply hope that all avenues of communications with the American public would be completely open and that queries which they have would be fully and honestly answered by our department (US Congress, 1969, pp. 4-5).

Collins seemed to win a grudging compliment from Fulbright in this final exchange:

Fulbright: Is that your primary responsibility, to make speeches? I gathered from the beginning of this hearing that would be it?

Collins: I certainly hope not, Mr. Chairman.

Fulbright: Don't you like making speeches?

Collins: Not especially, sir. I'd rather listen than talk.

Fulbright: You would. That is very unusual (US Congress, 1969, p. 5).

Other Senators on the committee were more openly supportive. Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-MT) suggested that Collins' lack of experience in foreign affairs could be viewed as an asset, pointedly reminding the committee that earlier in the year it had approved Rogers' nomination as Secretary of State even though he, too, had no foreign policy experience. (Rogers had been Attorney General during President Eisenhower's second term.) Mansfield made only one request of Collins, that he give serious consideration to accepting a speaking request already submitted by a group in his home state.

(Understanding that small things can be made big problems by legislators, Collins did go to Montana, speaking to the Missoula Chamber of Commerce on March 14, 1970 [Bureau activities, 1970, April].) Senator Albert Gore, Sr. (D-TN), father of the future vice president, congratulated Collins on the "brave service" he had already provided the country as an

astronaut and said, “I hope you will perform as bravely as well” in the civilian position. With that the hearing was over and the committee promptly voted unanimously to recommend approval of the nomination. Later that same day, the Senate confirmed the appointment (*Journal*, 1969, pp. 816, 840).

Generally, the appointment was well-received on Capitol Hill. However, there was some criticism. A Congressman from New York, Richard Ottinger (D), said the nomination was an advertising-style ploy by the administration, was a “terrible injustice” to Collins and “an insult” to college students. He inserted in the *Congressional Record* an editorial from a local newspaper also opposing the appointment (Ottinger, 1969). In January 1970, after the Committee had acted on the nomination, Senator Fulbright took an indirect shot at Collins by inserting in the *Record* an article from *The Progressive* that criticized the appointment and then segued from Collins’ military status to praising Fulbright’s efforts against military PR (Fulbright, 1970). (When he joined the State Department, Collins resigned his air force officer’s commission and became a civilian.)

3. In office

Collins was formally installed in office on January 6, 1970. Normally, the installation of an assistant secretary in Washington would not be considered news and would be attended only by family members. But in this case, the attendance at the swearing-in ceremony was “in far greater numbers than protocol demanded” (Grose, 1970) and was covered by the *Washington Post*, which sent its venerable society reporter, Dorothy McCardle (McCardle, 1970a). In officially welcoming him to the department that day, Secretary Rogers cogently

described the logic of the seemingly unusual appointment: “As a space-age celebrity, Mike, you will have an advantage that some of us do not have: an ability to capture a wide audience.” Collins’ response reflected an intuitive understanding of modern public relations theory. He committed not only to conveying the Department’s message out to the public, but equally to listening to the citizenry – especially the youth – and conveying their views back to the department. Here was a clear conceptualization of two-way communication. Collins also zeroed in on a key difficulty that he needed to focus on overcoming. “The moon voyage, of course, enjoyed one great advantage in that it was a very well defined and finite goal” (Mr. Collins becomes, 1970). Success was tangible and could be measured. On the other hand, measuring achievement in his public relations assignment would be much more difficult since it was so amorphous. In general, his plain-spoken sincerity came through in his comments.

Just three days after being sworn in, Collins made his first public appearance, before an audience of high-school tennis teams from 32 countries (Bureau activities, 1970, February). The next week, he spoke briefly to the annual conference the Department organized for editors and broadcasters from around the country interested in foreign affairs (National foreign policy conference, 1970, p. 113).

Collins’ in-house responsibilities related to running the Bureau of Public Affairs, with a staff of about 115 and an annual budget of about \$2.5 million, \$1.8 million of that for salaries (Cohen, 1970, p. 808). The bureau had four major units, each focusing on a different public relations activity:

1. Answering queries received in the mail from the public relating to foreign affairs (some forwarded from the White House mail room).
2. Producing lay-oriented publications and audio-visual materials relating to foreign policy.
3. Arranging for departmental speakers to appear before audiences throughout the country and bringing groups to the State Department for briefings.
4. The Historical Office was responsible for issuing the scholarly and authoritative *Foreign Relations of the United States*. The Bureau also issued the weekly official *Department of State Bulletin* and the monthly in-house *Department of State Newsletter*.

Part of his early months on the job involved becoming informed on departmental operations and its policy positions as well as participating in a broad variety of in-house obligations. But he was game to try just about anything, wanting to do a good job. Settling in, he met with Foreign Service Officers who were participating in the Bureau's diplomat-in-residence program on college campuses (Diplomats-in-residence, 1970), spent a day at the UN being briefed on the department's work there (New York, 1970), addressed a class of foreign service officers who were in a training program to improve their public speaking skills (Department now offers, 1970), spoke at the kick-off of the US savings bond drive for departmental employees (Bond rally, 1970) and chaired the first meeting of the new inter-departmental (i.e. with members from other departments and agencies) Group on Foreign Policy Information (Bureau notes, 1970). As would be expected in a diplomatic role, at times it was hard to separate the professional from the social in his job. He attended the

farewell reception for his predecessor (With best wishes, 1970), met with the son of a former secretary of state who had been a high school classmate (Former classmates, 1970) and was the guest at a luncheon of the American Foreign Service Wives Association (Old and new, 1970).

Characteristic of his openness and lack of guile, he frankly admitted to a reporter that the first few months were tough for him. In an interview he gave in the summer, after being on the job for half a year, he said:

I had some difficulty in the first two or three months...Any time one changes jobs and scenes it's a little new and strange. It's not always easy to start things slowly, particularly when you're dealing with the media. You're thrust into this thing full-blown whether you like to be or not. But I'm now at the point after six months that I feel quite comfortable (Benedict, 1970).

There were what must have seemed like endless events honoring him for his participation in Apollo 11, including an award presented by Vice President Agnew on behalf of the National Geographic Society (Hubbard medal, 1970), a plaque from the Argentine government (Argentina honors, 1970), an award from the National Association of Broadcasters (Buck, 1970), another award from a football coaches association (United Press, 1971), an event in Missouri's capital on the first anniversary of the flight (What's news, 1970), the unveiling of a portrait of the three astronauts at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (Smith, 1970) and giving the Prime Minister of Italy a personal tour of the Manned Space Center in Houston (Bureau notes, 1971).

Wherever he went, he was surrounded by people. Attending the Department's annual book fair for staff and their families, he "could hardly budge from a circle of autograph hunters" (It's a family affair, 1970). At a reception for senior Air Force personnel in the capital, he was the star, getting more attention than other dignitaries. The "Air Force officers clustered around [him] proudly, if not protectively" (Radcliffe, 1970). After giving a short speech at a foreign policy conference in New Orleans mostly to an audience of high school students, many approached him and he "autographed a few dozen programs" (Robertson, 1970). In (then) South Viet Nam, while traveling with the Secretary of State, he "was stealing the show," with kids pushing forward to shake his hand, ignoring the Secretary. "I'm embarrassed," he was overheard saying to Rogers (Vietnamese mooning over, 1970). In an official NASA oral history interview in 1997, he said one of the hardest parts of his post-Apollo 11 life was still trying to convey spontaneous excitement about his historic role when speaking about it for the 1000th time and years later. People would be disappointed, even angry, if he seemed bored, blasé or just plain tired of it (Kelly, 1997, p. 35).

As a diplomat holding the fourth highest protocol rank in the State Department, he did his share of foreign travel. In early March, he flew to Japan as part of an official delegation (Bureau activities, 1970, April) and in July he accompanied Secretary Rogers on a trip to the Philippines, South Viet Nam and Japan. When Fiji obtained its independence from Great Britain, President Nixon designated Collins as his personal representative for the event (Davis, 1970; Fiji attains independence, 1970). (The White House maintained tight controls over such matters, not only approving the proposal to select Collins, but also reviewing the

suggested choice of the gift that Collins would present to the first prime minister of the new country [Mosbacher, 1970].) Back home, there were also scores of diplomatic events to attend, such as a formal dinner at the Italian embassy (McCardle, 1970b) and a performance by the Mexican folklore ballet (Morisey, 1970).

Mostly he talked, in Washington and around the country. Collins' main assignment was as the out-of-house person, meeting with groups and organizations, presenting the administration's policy, listening and providing feedback to the department. While Secretary Rogers asked him to focus on college-age youth, his duties extended to organizations and audiences of all ages and interests. For this role, Collins' strengths were simultaneously his weaknesses. He was a relatively quiet person, known among astronauts – not a talkative bunch – as taciturn. (Famously, he was so quiet orbiting the moon during the lunar landing that NASA Mission Control finally broke the radio silence and asked, “Apollo 11, this is Houston. Are you still up there?” [Robertson, 1970].) He was plain spoken, modest, sincere and uncomplicated. His verbal style was direct and to the point. He was not the typical grab-the-spotlight style politician. But he also was known for his sense of humor (State Dept. PR post, 1969) and ability to use language in “a picturesque” way (Stanford, 1969). He was quick to say that he was not an expert in foreign policy. Given the gotcha style of journalism that was emerging, he was understandably reluctant to give interviews or to risk speaking too spontaneously. That contributed to some early bad press (Sherrod, 1970, p. 2). Declining interviews, of course, opened him to being criticized from the other direction by the media. For example, during one of his first trips to give a speech, the *New York Times* reporter pointedly noted that he was “refusing all interviews” and that “he seemed tense and uneasy”

giving his speech (Robertson, 1970). It was the typical no-win position that the US media can put anyone it chooses into.

In the first eight months on the job, he received 250 speaking requests (Sherrod, 1970, p. 1). Invitations from the greater Washington area, costing only mileage, were relatively easy to accept, as were out-of-town luncheon speeches in nearby cities that also could be done without an overnight stay. But he also did his share of travel around the entire country. Available public records document at least 44 appearances before various American audiences. In his 15 months in office, that was about three speeches a month. Including prep time and travel, it was a significant proportion of his time.

His early public talks were gawdawful. The first full-fledged speech he made was to the National Association of Secondary School Principals on February 11, 1970 (Collins, 1970a). It had 11 footnotes of relatively obscure sources he was quoting, such as a 1964 study by the National Council for the Social Studies on teaching world affairs, not his natural reading material. It read more like a term paper of someone trying to prove something. The prose was turgid and could have been delivered by any suit. A few weeks later, an after-dinner speech to the Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association was a dull and methodical summary of President Nixon's foreign policy (Collins, 1970b).

But, gradually, he found his voice. By May, when he was scheduled to deliver several commencement addresses, his remarks were more personal, relevant and poignant. He talked about his visits to college campuses and the wide range of views he was hearing, not

just revolutionaries and radicals. To put some perspective on the impatience of youth for improving the world, he linked the history of the space program to their own lives. As 22-year-olds, when they had been in kindergarten, no person had ever flown in space. By the time they were in high-school, Collins was taking a space walk. During their junior year in college, Armstrong walked on the moon while Collins orbited overhead. It was an effective technique of demonstrating how much progress had indeed been occurring, even during their short lives. Then, he suggested parallels between the work of the space program and their future careers. For example, he said, you need a tangible and concrete goal, then apply everything you can to accomplish it, and plan for all eventualities (Collins, 1970c).

The next day, Collins spoke at another graduation. Instead of delivering the identical speech, he used some new material. He suggested that the times might eventually be known as “an Age of Optimism, and I say this not as a starry-eyed idealist but as one who considers himself a fairly hard-bitten pragmatist. Everywhere I look I see small steps backward and large steps forward.” He referred to bigotry and prejudice against blacks in the South, but progress that was being made in civil rights. Similarly, he noted harmful pollution of the environment by industries, but progress with new environmental policies and controls. Regarding the tone of the country at the time, he suggested that the shrillness of voices seemed to be partly because “Farmers speak to farmers, students to students, business leaders to other business leaders, but this intramural talk serves mainly to mirror one’s beliefs, to reinforce existing prejudices, to lock out opposing views” (Collins, 1970d). Part of their challenge as graduates would be to break out of such natural confines, to hear other voices and see the larger world. It was a fresher way for an adult to make an old fashioned

point and without a heavy-handed Nixonian criticism of the students protesting the war in Viet Nam.

4. Relations with the White House and Capitol Hill

As a member of the administration, Collins had only modest contact with the President, understandable given his sub-cabinet status and Nixon's reclusiveness. Still, with his unique background, Collins had more interactions with the White House than a garden-variety assistant secretary. He was the 'house astronaut' for whenever space-related issues arose. In April 1970, when there was an accident on the Apollo 13 flight to the moon, Collins served as the President's liaison with mission control in Houston. He briefed the President on developments (Nixon, 1970), "translated space jargon" for him during a briefing at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland (Nixon in close touch, 1970), briefed the White House press corps both on the situation as well as his dealings with the President (Nixon, 1971a, p. 365), and was with Nixon during the tense re-entry and splashdown (Kilpatrick, 1970, p. A1). The president's military aide consulted with him whether to hold a White House event relating to the anniversary of the lunar landing (Hughes, 1970). Collins counseled against and the advice was taken. During the Apollo 14 moon mission in February 1971, he offered a prayer for the safety of the astronauts as part of a Sunday prayer service at the White House (Nixon, 1971b; Associated Press, 1971).

The only glitch in his relations with President Nixon occurred in January 1971. As part of his special assignment, Collins' office had arranged for a group of editors of college newspapers to come to the State Department for a give and take session. During that visit, at

the last minute, Collins called over and wondered if Nixon would meet with them? That would be a way for him to demonstrate his continued personal commitment to reach out to college students, especially in the aftermath of the Cambodia invasion protests. Nixon assented. White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman was present and described what happened:

In the late morning, the P[resident] agreed to let a group of twelve college student editors come over. This was a group that was visiting the State Department for the day under Mike Collins' Public Information Program. The P greeted them in the Oval Office, then chatted with them a little there and had E[hrllichman, senior domestic policy adviser] give them a quick rundown on the revenue sharing and other domestic program points from the State of the Union [address]. They were totally bored with that entire presentation and the P, unfortunately, gave them a chance to ask a question. The bearded guy immediately jumped on Cambodia and the fact that we had troops in there. ...the P moved in and made a very clear and complete statement of our position on Cambodia. I don't think he convinced the students, but at least he covered his point with them.

He spent most of the afternoon coming back to that session because it clearly bothered him. I think that part of it may have been good because it will make him think a little about the public information aspects of the actions we're taking in Cambodia (Haldeman, 1994, p. 240).

Despite that event, Collins continued to be in good standing with the White House on the subject of reaching out to the younger generation. A month later, when Haldeman met with Nixon about planning a “youth meeting,” Haldeman listed Collins as one of the expected participants. Nixon agreed to include Collins’ in the upcoming meeting (Nixon Tape, 1971b).

Besides his confirmation hearing, Collins’ official contacts with Congress were the routine ones an assistant secretary running a bureau would have as part of the annual appropriations process. On February 20, 1970 – his second month in office – Collins was back on Capitol Hill, this time on the House side, to present the proposed budget for the Bureau of Public Affairs for Fiscal Year (FY) 1971, which would run from October 1, 1970 to September 30, 1971. (The Constitution requires that all funding bills start in the House of Representatives.) He was presenting a budget request he had not prepared, but that he would be administering once the funding was appropriated. Collins was accompanied by two staffers who handled the Bureau’s administration and budgeting.

The chair of the House Appropriations Committee’s subcommittee for the bill that funded the State Department was John J. Rooney (D-NY). He had been first elected to Congress from a district in Brooklyn in 1944. Rooney was a conservative Democrat, generally parsimonious with public funds, but especially for such effete activities as diplomacy and foreign aid. He also cultivated an image of a populist and curmudgeon, unimpressed with the high and mighty. Collins would need to demonstrate that he was well informed about the budget request, even though he had just assuming office. (The departmental budget requests

would have been submitted to the Office of Management and Budget in the preceding fall – a year before the start of the fiscal year being planned for.) Rooney gave Collins the full treatment:

Rooney [typo in published transcript says Collins]: I believe this is the first time that you have appeared here?

Collins: Yes, Mr. Chairman, it is.

Rooney: What is your background?

Collins: Well, sir, I came to my present position from the space program. I was educated here–

Rooney (interrupting): You were one of the fellows who went up to the moon?

Collins: No, sir, close to it. I didn't quite make the full trip. I started out here in high school in the District [of Columbia], went to college in New York State and went into the Air Force as a career–

Rooney (interrupting): Where did you go in New York? [Rooney's home state]

Collins: West Point. Went into the Air Force as a career and after a number of years of flying and administrative jobs–

Rooney (interrupting): This is the place that was left unfilled for how long? How many years? [Hinting that maybe this was such an unimportant office that it would not be missed if permanently abolished.]

Collins: Less than a year, Mr. Chairman.

Rooney [showing his mastery of the subject, it had been vacant from January 20, 1969 to January 6, 1970]: Pretty near a year, wasn't it? (US Congress, 1970, p. 206)

Rooney had made his point, breaking in another insignificant bureaucrat, astronaut or not. Then, he put Collins through the usual paces about the budget request. Every year he wanted to know how many of the speeches that State Department personnel gave around the country in the previous fiscal year were paid for by tax funds and how many were underwritten by the host groups. As far as he was concerned, no tax funds should finance such appearances and he continually pressed the Department to maximize travel paid for by others. Collins was ready with the information. Then, he reviewed the budget request for the upcoming year and was pleased to report that the Bureau was planning to reduce its staffing by three full time permanent positions. Rooney asked Collins for more information and Collins was prepared. He carefully explained that he was planning to reorganize the Bureau but that the details were not yet worked out. Therefore, he could not yet say precisely which three positions would be abolished. Rooney was satisfied and went on to the next quivering bureaucrat-diplomat, the head of the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs.

A year later, Collins was back presenting the budget for FY1972. Now it was the opposite situation as the previous year. He was testifying about a budget request that he had participated in preparing, but – with his imminent departure for the Smithsonian Institution already announced – would not be administering. Predictably, Rooney was not going to cut him any slack. On the list of expenses for speakers, he zeroed in on one. He questioned why it was listed in two separate places, one as spending \$431 and the other as receiving reimbursement for \$504. Collins demonstrated that he had mastered the confusing details of federal accounting, smoothly explaining why a reimbursement from a host group for federal funds already expended by a departmental guest speaker did not appear in the same account.

(For a regular governmental account, as opposed to a revolving fund, once monies were disbursed, they were irrevocably so listed, even if later reimbursed.) Rooney also complained about a speaking engagement for the Kansas Republican State Committee (that had been fully reimbursed by the host organization):

Rooney [sarcastically]: Do these fellows [going out on speaking engagements] do card tricks, too, such as the one you sent to the Kansas Republican State Committee?

Collins: I don't believe so, Mr. Chairman.

Rooney: No prestidigitators?

Collins: No, sir.

Rooney: Where to we find the Kansas Democratic State Committee? On what page is that shown?

Collins: (No response) (US Congress, 1971, p. 288).

Rooney also said that he wanted to reduce the staffing of the Bureau from 114 to 100. When it was over, Collins was happy to be moving on to the new Smithsonian job and not have to do this again. (For reasons logical only to Congress, funding for the Smithsonian was part of the annual Interior Department appropriations bill. That bill was handled by a different subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, not Rooney's.)

5. Cambodia and Kent State, May 1970

Collins took seriously his portfolio to engage the country's youth, especially college students. He had a policy of spending at least one full day a month on a college campus, doing as much listening as possible, not just talking at students (United Press, 1970). Of the

44 formal meetings and speeches during his tenure in office, over half related to this demographic: 18 meetings with college students, four with high school students and three with educators. Administratively, Collins created a new full-time position for an advisor on youth in the Public Affairs Bureau, appointing a 32 year-old to the job (Sinick, 1970), and inaugurated a youth participation program (Pedersen, 1970, p. 721). He issued a new brochure to all departmental staff urging them to accept speaking engagements in the US and providing assistance and training for those events (Need for more, 1970). He sought to expand the program called diplomats-in-residence, when Foreign Service officers would spend lengthy periods of time on one campus – up to a full school year – instead of the fly-in-meet-fly-out approach. He also sought to change the kinds of activities that State Department personnel would engage in while on campuses. Instead of delivering a lecture to a passive audience of college students, he encouraged visitors to seek opportunities for small discussion groups so that a give and take conversation could occur.

For those living in the United States, the most intense period of 1970 occurred in May when, in rapid succession, President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia to attack Viet Cong sanctuaries there, triggering an uproar by the anti-war movement against the expansion of the war including mass protests on college campuses, and culminating in the fatal shooting of four students by the Ohio National Guard when mobilized to restore order on the campus of Kent State University. Influential TV network anchor Walter Cronkite said the country was experiencing “a national nervous breakdown.” Many students descended on Washington to protest. One night, unable to sleep and seeking to lower the crisis atmosphere, Nixon spontaneously decided to visit the students camped out near the Lincoln

Memorial. He awkwardly tried to engage them in conversation, despite their substantive disagreements.

For Secretary of State Rogers, this was the ultimate moment to push for the softer approach he had been advocating within the administration regarding those dissenting against the war, including his idea to name Collins as assistant secretary. This was also Collins' moment, given his assignment to reach out to America's youth. Working with Rogers, they established a policy that every college group seeking to meet with a State Department official, even if simply turning up at the front door, would be given such an opportunity. And they did not want the students shuttled off to meet with low-ranking flunkies. They sought to clear the calendars of all high ranking officials for those meetings. In a period of two weeks, 70 such meetings occurred. Rogers set an example by meeting with five groups. Besides coordinating the effort, Collins met with six (Department spokesmen, 1970). It was a department-wide effort to demonstrate that it was listening to the college generation, not seeking a confrontation as others in the administration were advocating.

After an intense and tiring month, Collins conceded that the effect of Cambodia and Kent State had been to radicalize students who previously had been moderate. "Last month has seen a great shift among the students toward the radicals, but I don't think it is irreversible. The radicals are still in the minority," he said. One of the problems was that, even though the Department was doing a better job of hearing the message of the students, "they want something to be done right now. It's this...attitude which is the difficult one. It took us years to get into Viet Nam. And it may take us years to get out" (United Press, 1970).

An indication of the continuing hostility on campuses occurred at the beginning of the 1970-71 academic year. In the fall, Collins' office sent letters to the 1,648 accredited colleges and universities in the US. In it, he was offering to send a State Department representative to each campus to conduct dialogues with students about foreign policy. Five weeks after sending the letter, his office had received only 272 replies, all from relatively small schools, saying they welcomed such a visit. None came from the large and prestigious institutions of higher education with national standing (Associated Press, 1970).

Furthermore, the limitations of his small bureaucratic empire became increasingly obvious as a result of the Cambodia crisis. Realistically, there was just so much he could accomplish with the tools given him. In the scale of the federal government, a staff of about 115 was puny, especially compared to the counterpart activity in the Defense Department of about 6,000 public affairs officers.

6. Denouement

As 1970 wore on, Collins increasingly became aware that he was not enjoying the job. It was not a good fit for his skills and the Cambodia crisis had put even more pressure on him. It was hard enough to try to develop lines of communication with the younger generation in face of the anti-war movement, but Cambodia made it even worse. Collins began to think of his job as a "plush purgatory" (Collins, 1989, p. 458).

His thinking crystallized by focusing on a key difference between his NASA experience and being at State. The space program had a definable and tangible goal, declared by President Kennedy as landing on the moon and returning safely. It was relatively easy to mark progress towards the goal. It had a beginning, middle and end. Public relations work at the State Department was just the opposite. This was a continuing and amorphous activity, nearly impossible to ever measure progress, let alone success. And there was never a moment when one could declare the job done. Ironically, it was Congressman Rooney, at the FY1972 budget hearing, who actually voiced what Collins was thinking, but could not say out loud:

Rooney: We realize the importance of it [Collins' bureau] but we do not see the results. If you would dwell more on the results than the importance of it we would appreciate it.

Collins: I think results in terms of changing people's minds, Mr. Chairman, are very difficult to measure in quantitative terms (US Congress, 1971, p. 286).

Also, the inextricable link in diplomacy between the working side of the job and the social aspect was not appealing to him. After a (relatively routine) two-hour luncheon, "I wobbled out like a stunned ox, vowing to change jobs before I acquired gout and a faintly British accent" (Collins, 1989, p. 458). Collins liked to get things done. Long and perhaps boozy luncheons did not give him that feeling.

Luckily, just at that time, the long stalled idea of adding an air and space museum to the Smithsonian's complex of museums was finally picking up momentum. It needed a director

to shepherd the concept to reality. Collins would be a perfect fit for the job, not only because of his air and space background, but also because it was a tangible goal: get the approvals from the needed agencies and boards, get the funding from Congress, build it, open it. And, his astronaut star status was a perfect fit for the job, unlike his position at the State Department.

But White House approval was needed. John Ehrlichman brought the subject up at a meeting with President Nixon on February 16, 1971. Going over a long list of possible appointments with the President, he reached Collins on his list:

Ehrlichman: We have an astronaut at the State Department named Collins. Well, he would like to become the head of the Smithsonian's Museum of air-space. You have no objection to it?

Nixon: No, that's great.

The two then discussed choreographing the appointment. Ehrlichman said that the Smithsonian would love it if the announcement came from the White House, "because they'd like to upgrade the museum with that guy. We can handle it." Nixon approved that, too (Nixon Tape, 1971a). The smooth White House machinery took it from there. On February 22, 1971 the White House announced that Collins was changing jobs (Nixon, 1971c, p. 384). In a public exchange of letters (unusual for a sub-cabinet position), Nixon declared he was accepting Collins' resignation from the State Department "with strong regret," a regularly used code phrase that meant Collins was not being fired or pushed out and that the President continued to have high regard for him (Collins leaving, 1971).

Collins' last day at the State Department was April 11, 1971, slightly more than 15 months after starting.

7. Collins' self-post-mortem, 35 years later

In mid-2006, Collins graciously agreed to look back and assess his experience as the head of State Department PR. He felt that he had made some modest, but concrete, improvements to the operations of the Bureau of Public Affairs, including that he “got the Bureau a bit more money, hired some extra historians... Also, healed some internal personnel wounds.” He also helped operationalize two-way communications by “quite frequently” helping interpret public opinion to State Department policy-makers. But, generally, he did not feel he was a good fit for the job, largely because “I missed a more tangible product than diplomacy.” Also, it was difficult to be an official spokesperson for a government agency.

“Fundamentally, all (well, almost all) spokesmen are doomed to failure eventually, but going into the job it certainly helps to be a journalist.” Still, despite his lack of journalistic background, he felt that the coverage of his activities was “Very fair, probably better than I deserved.”

Certainly, the assignment of reaching out to the college generation was particularly tough in the context of in the Viet Nam war and then Cambodia. Given that “My main task was to defend our policy in Viet Nam...[it was] Not pleasant!” The hardest part of the job was

The tenor of the times. I recall the bulletin board of one CA College I visited. The world map was divided into “countries that have recent revolutions, countries that

haven't had revolutions for awhile, countries that need a revolution now," and so on.
I should have had a Che Guevara t-shirt to give my speech.

However, even if the war had not been going on, he believed he still would not have thrived in the job. "I would have left before long anyway" (Collins, 2006).

8. Conclusions

Collins was operating under several other severe handicaps that were no fault of his own. He had the bad luck of poor timing, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had the nearly mutually exclusive duties of defending the war publicly while simultaneously reaching out to improve communications with the (largely) anti-war college generation. Those opposing goals reflected the conflicting cultures of two key policy makers: the moderate approach of Secretary of State Rogers and President Nixon's more sharp-featured and unapologetic tone.

Public relations is not as easy as it looks. Externally, long term trends, already underway in 1970, such as the fractioning of audiences, the multiplicity of venues of communication, instant communication, and hyperbolic rhetoric, made it even harder. Internally, public relations was maturing as a profession and discipline, with such factors as training, education and experience becoming increasingly important as key elements contributing to success. While Collins had successfully engaged in public relations as an astronaut, that had been a very small part of his job and was in a very different context than at the State Department.

Collins seemed to come straight from central casting. He was of the Gary Cooper archetype: lanky, laconic, plain-speaking, modest, and with a get-the-job-done orientation. He had committed his life to traditional values of patriotism and public service. No wonder he was not a good fit for diplomatic PR. The luck of the country is that he survived and escaped a job he was not made out for and switched to one tailor made for him. That gave him an opportunity for another lasting legacy to the country: the National Air and Space Museum.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgment to Michael Collins for his willingness to submit himself to what must have felt like the millionth interview of his career. Also, my thanks to Dr. Roger Launius, Chair of the Division of Space History at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum for assisting me in contacting Mr. Collins. Similarly, appreciation to professors Howard McCurdy and Harry Lambright for their helpful suggestions at the beginning of this inquiry. Finally, my thanks to the staff of the Nixon Presidential Materials Project at the National Archives II in College Park (MD), who patiently helped me locate relevant archival material.

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