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John Pederson

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“A Lioness for Denmark”?—Ambassador Eugenie Anderson and Danish American Relations, 1949–1953

by John Pederson

On the basis of your thorough knowledge of Danish conditions you stood up in public in the United States like a lioness for Denmark’s case.

Danish Foreign Minister Ole Bjorn Kraft

If you seek the ideal ambassador, I say to you, look at your guest of honor.

United States Secretary of State Dean Acheson

Thus did the respective Foreign Service leaders of Denmark and the United States assess Eugenie Anderson’s tenure as America’s ambassador to Denmark. Danish Foreign Minister Ole Bjorn Kraft made his remarks at the farewell dinner for Ambassador Anderson at Christiansborg Castle in 1953. Going from Red Wing, Minnesota to Copenhagen, she had served throughout most of the Korean War. The trappings and glamour of an ambassador’s power and rank are seductive, particularly for political appointments. In extreme cases some ambassadors become as much an advocate for the country where they are stationed as the one they serve. In Anderson’s case, however, she had the praise of not one, but both countries. Acheson wrote his comments for a dinner Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey held for Anderson upon her return. Besides serving during a turbulent part of the Cold War, Anderson also deserves attention as the first woman ambassador of the United States. To evaluate the accuracy of the ringing endorsement of Anderson’s ambassadorship from both Danish and American officials, this paper examines her arrival in Denmark, her first Fourth of July there, a speech she prepared for broadcast in the United States, the Korean War, and American assessments of Danish defense preparations.
Overall, she improved the American image in Denmark and enhanced relations between the two countries.

Anderson’s Arrival in Copenhagen

A trip with her husband to Europe on the eve of World War II sparked Anderson’s political involvement. Returning home to Minnesota, she joined a core of talented individuals who coalesced around Hubert Humphrey, (including Eugene McCarthy, Orville Freeman, and later Walter Mondale) in the Democratic Farmer Labor Party, and actively participated in the 1948 Presidential campaign. After Harry Truman’s election, India Edwards, executive director of the Women’s Division of the Democratic Party, told Truman that she wanted “a lot of jobs for a lot of women.” Anderson’s name was one of the first that Edwards suggested. The initial speculation centered on Anderson going to the Netherlands. One of her supporters, Harvard Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote to her that the then current ambassador was “notable chiefly for his activities in pinching Dutch ladies.” Schlesinger added, “It would be interesting as an example of reverse lend-lease to have an ambassador now who would bring out the same impulses in Dutch men.”

4 A woman ambassador would certainly set precedents, requiring a careful selection of the appropriate candidate as well as the country.

So why did she end up in Denmark? The Scandinavian countries were known for their progressive welfare states, the strength of Social Democracy, and an advanced attitude toward gender equality. If this was the reason, than the Truman Administration’s view of Denmark may be considered flattering. Or, perhaps, Denmark’s small international role made it a relatively “safe” place to have a woman ambassador. In this case the Truman Administration’s view of Denmark would be less flattering—if a mistake occurred here it mattered little.5 Nonetheless, when the Danish government realized that the United States might send a woman as its next ambassador, especially when Washington socialite Perle Mesta was thought a leading candidate, it expressed concern. Consequently, Secretary of State Acheson arranged for Anderson to meet with the Danish Ambassador, Henrik Kauffman, in New York prior to her appointment. Afterwards Ambassador Kauffman reported about her back to Copenhagen, “No Perle,
The Danish press discussed Anderson's appointment with interest. The independent Danish newspaper *Information* provided a striking example, as it explicitly advised Anderson, publishing an open letter to her in English. This caught the attention of American officials as well as the Danish public. The Cold War alliance between the United States and Denmark, according to the letter, presented Anderson a great task. "It may not mean much to the average American. But it is deadly serious to all Danes," declared the letter. *Information* warned Anderson about focusing on social circles of the diplomatic community, telling her the importance of meeting "the Denmark that really matters, not the insignificant high-society sets." This advice she appeared to heed.

The first party Anderson held in Copenhagen was for the Danish workers who had restored the official residence, Rydhave. She invited some forty-five families of carpenters, plumbers, electricians, masons, painters, bricklayers, and apprentices. Rydhave's next big event, a cocktail party reception for Copenhagen's entire diplomatic community, also impressed the Danish public. Rydhave was too small to host everyone on the invitation list, requiring the party to be held over two days. Rather than invite the most important people one day, and the less important the second, she did it alphabetically, surnames A-L the first day, M-Z on the second.

**A Danish Fourth of July**

Few countries outside the United States celebrate the Fourth of July as much as Denmark. In 1950 Danish Prime Minister Hans Hedtoft spoke at the annual Danish-American Fourth of July festival.
in Rebild. He welcomed Ambassador Anderson and expressed gratitude to the American people and government for their wartime sacrifices and magnanimous postwar aid to Europe.11 During this occasion of Danish-American solidarity, however, Hedtoft described not only the ties between the United States and Denmark, but also a distinct Danish identity, one that differed “from both west and east.”

We are a people who for more than a thousand years have had our own culture, but we have always been anxious to become familiar with culture and life of other countries. America has always attracted sons and daughters of Denmark. . . . We miss those who have migrated to America, but we are delighted that they contribute to strengthening bonds between the two countries. Industriousness, endurance, feeling of mutual belonging and respect for their fellow men are among [the] qualifications that make them best representatives that we might wish for Danish-mindedness.12

“Danish-mindedness” also included peace. Hedtoft asserted that all the NATO countries had defensive objectives only. Otherwise, he argued that Denmark would not have joined.13

Then Anderson rose to give her first public speech in Danish. After her arrival the previous December, she had begun studying Danish. On Mother’s Day she had already given a brief radio address in Danish, but that had been prerecorded. She worried that the crowd of 30,000 would not understand her. Her theme was the interdependence between the United States and Denmark, stating “the preservation of our Independence depends upon the mutual recognition and acceptance of our Inter-dependence - one on the other.” Alluding to the Danish tradition of cooperation, she said that Denmark and the United States shared a community of values with the other NATO members. The crowd responded favorably when she endorsed the United Nations involvement in Korea. After applause that she regarded as deafening and heartwarming, she thought that she was “off to a good start.” Indeed she was.14

Essayist Peggy Lampson contends that, “If the Danes had opened their hearts to her after her first embassy party, they gave their hearts to her outright after the Fourth of July.”15 Many American observers in Denmark agreed. Not only was Anderson’s address broadcast on radio across Denmark, most Danish newspapers
prominently reported it. Some Danish papers printed its entirety, others had extensive quotations. An unidentified American newspaperman expressed astonishment to embassy officials at the attention and space the Danish press gave to reporting those festivities.\textsuperscript{16}

The Korean War

Anderson was also off to a good start with prominent American political figures. Eleanor Roosevelt visited Copenhagen as part of the American Legation to the United Nations. She wrote to Anderson, "I was delighted to hear so many fine things about you, and as a woman, it makes me very proud."\textsuperscript{17} Just a couple of weeks latter Truman sent a brief typed note thanking Anderson for supporting his policy actions in Korea. At the end of the note he added in his own handwriting, "I hear nothing but good reports about the Ambassador to Denmark. It makes me happy and proud."\textsuperscript{18}

After the beginning of the Korean War, many Danes and other Europeans worried the hostilities would spread to Europe. Anderson was also concerned as she and her husband talked almost nightly about whether or not to send their two children back to the United States. To do so, however, may have implied that the ambassador was anticipating war in Europe or at least considered it possible. The children, who had learned Danish themselves and were enjoying attending Danish schools, stayed.\textsuperscript{19}

During the September 1950 Danish national election campaign, the governing Social Democrats downplayed the need to increase defense spending. A rising standard of living was the priority; therefore, they argued, defense burdens "must be divided according to the capacity of citizens" without impairing national social and cultural standards.\textsuperscript{20} American officials observed that the need for more defense spending was not a campaign issue and the Social Democratic platform was "so formulated as to appeal to the pacifist elements."\textsuperscript{21}

As 1950 ended, Danish attitudes disappointed the United States. Besides opposing the pursuit of Communist forces north across Korea's 38th parallel, Anderson reported that a "vigorous spirit of self-defense" was lacking among the Danish people and their Danish
leaders. Only a few former resistance leaders, some journalists and politicians, urged action to meet the present threat. She thought that fatalism and skepticism dominated Danish thinking. In her mind neither the Nazi occupation of World War II nor a potential future Soviet occupation had reversed these attitudes. She observed that the “Danes have taken no steps toward industrial mobilization to back up [the] Allied defense effort.” Economic and fiscal problems appeared to have more urgency than defense issues. Hopes that new Liberal-Conservative government that replaced the Social Democrats would pursue defense issues with more vigor had not materialized. Two positive factors she saw for the United States were the enormous prestige in Denmark of General Dwight Eisenhower, the new NATO commander, and the healthy effect the Norwegian example exercised on the Danes, particularly Social Democrats.

The Silent Speech

In 1951 Anderson and Danish Foreign Minister Kraft each recorded a speech for a nationwide radio broadcast in the United States. They spoke about Danish defense efforts and the importance of aid to Denmark. For some reason, air time for the two speeches was never obtained and thus they were not heard by the American public. Such a broadcast might have been unprecedented.

Anderson’s two-page single-spaced typed address had encouraged the continuation of military aid, appealing to public opinion rather than directly to the government officials. She described America’s interest in the “five hundred sparkling little islands” and the Jutland peninsula that constituted Denmark. Any real estate agent would have recognized the answer—location, location, location. The Danish straits might serve as the passage for enemy submarines into the Atlantic, and Denmark’s colony, Greenland, located along the polar air route, was essential to America’s air defense. The third, and supposedly most compelling, reason for American interest in Denmark, though, was the Danish people themselves. “I have come to feel at home here—to respect and cherish the Danish people,” proclaimed Anderson, because they were “so much like us Americans, in so many ways—kindred spirits.” The Danes had created a “sturdy democracy” with “an
admirably high standard of living” and had done so “largely through their own efforts.” She mentioned the Grundtvigian ideal of Denmark, a society with “few people who are too rich and still fewer who are too poor.” While the Danes were as skilled and highly trained as any people in the world, nevertheless, she admitted that Denmark “could not possibly develop—on its own—effective defense forces.”

Anderson addressed concerns about the Danish spirit of neutrality, providing several examples of values Denmark and the United States shared. She mentioned freedom, a love for peace, and opposition to dictatorship and aggression. Denmark, she said, “tried in the past to maintain a policy of neutrality as we did.” [author’s italics] World War II thoroughly discredited that policy for both countries, on December 7, 1941 for the United States, and April 9, 1940 for Denmark. She characterized Danish defense efforts as “serious and wholehearted.” Continued aid would enhance the courage to defend Danish soil against an attack. Anderson contended such aid would not be wasted because the Danes “would use well, whatever help we give them.”

While that speech was not heard in the United States, a Saturday Evening Post article a month later, in May, featured Eugenie Anderson with the headline “Denmark’s American Sweetheart.” The next line declared, “Pretty Eugenie Anderson, a small-town housewife, went adventuring at the age of 40—and a whole country fell hard for our first woman ambassador.” Senator Humphrey informed Anderson of a September evening he spent at the Danish embassy in Washington, D.C. “I can well understand why you love Denmark after having spent this pleasant social hour with some of the Danish people,” he wrote. During the evening he found many Danish admirers of the American ambassador. “In fact,” reported Humphrey, “every person at the dinner party spoke in glowing terms about Eugenie Anderson... I basked in your glory.”

Military Assessments

The United States needed Anderson’s popularity to help smooth over Danish resentment of being criticized. Brigadier General George Olmsted, director of the Office of Military Assistance, testified before a sub-committee of the Department of Defense's
House of Representatives Appropriations Committee on September 28, 1951. His Congressional testimony concerning the Mutual Security Program and Danish defense efforts was printed in a government publication in October, and these published comments provoked a strong reaction in Denmark. Danish Ambassador Henrik Kauffman presented to the State Department an aide memoire that specifically cited two portions. General Olmsted had told the congressional committee, “that Denmark is making very slow progress in achieving the limited defensive posture commensurate with her potential.” Furthermore, he insisted that “strong leadership and continued pressure will be needed to overcome her present apathetic attitude.” Olmsted remained pessimistic, believing that, the prospects of Denmark meeting her NATO commitments are poor, as there is a general unwillingness on the part of the people to sacrifice their high standard of living, a strong will to resist is not evident and a sense of urgency is lacking.  

The Danish aide memoire stated that those remarks created “a most unfortunate impression” that would “unavoidably be interpreted as an unjustified interference in Denmark’s internal affairs. The Danish Government therefore views what has occurred with serious regret.” The State Department released a press statement insisting that the United States recognized that the Danish government decided the extent of Danish defense efforts and that the United States had no intention currently or previously to pressure the Danish government. The United States simply sought constant consultation regarding their common defense efforts.  

Meanwhile, Anderson was taking her first trip back to the United States since she had come to Denmark as ambassador when all this uproar occurred. Whether or not Anderson’s comments influenced views in the United States, the Danes appreciated her support. The Danish press reaction was widespread, as was its coverage of Anderson’s speaking positively on Denmark’s behalf. A Politiken editorial said Anderson’s immediate objections to the criticism of Denmark’s military participation in NATO was “a good thing” and that her authority came “through her first-hand knowledge of Danish affairs.” General Olmsted’s knowledge of Denmark, however, was minimal. Politiken regarded American vigilance against Communism as a fear that “sometimes borders on hysteria.”
Hence, the irony of the United States ignoring how fertile a country’s soil was for communism. The Danes knew best as to how much they could carry. Social Demokraten contended that Anderson was in a better position to understand Danish conditions than those in the Washington D.C. defense establishment and she had countered their criticism. A Social Demokraten editorial asserted that fighting communism required, “an internal defense consisting in the preservation of the highest possible standard of living.”

Anderson’s remarks in many ways reiterated her recorded, but not broadcasted speech. The Danish press covered her statements to the press wire services and American television. While not all Danes fully realized the urgency of the current situation she said that neither had people in the United States. Once the Danes make a decision, she asserted that “they will act and keep their promises.” She considered current Danish efforts “encouraging” despite the long way ahead for all in NATO. Because of all she had witnessed while in Denmark she said, “I am definitely not downhearted.” On American television, Anderson stressed Denmark’s willingness to participate in the free world’s defense, mentioning Denmark’s vulnerable proximity, “about fifty kilometers from the Danish border and barely one hour’s flight from the beautiful capital of Copenhagen, lies the Soviet Union.” Reports also cited Anderson’s appeals in Washington to immediately abolish restrictions on Danish cheese imports. While she mentioned shortcomings of Danes and Denmark, she also pointed out shortcomings of Americans and the Western alliance overall.

Anderson proved her diplomatic skill in public while revealing her analytical skills in private. The most effective way to influence Danish policy, she contended, was through consensus among the NATO countries rather than the United States unilaterally dictating programs. The Danes were well aware of their smallness, yet considered their role important and desired respect. Anderson recommended against U.S. sponsored public opinion surveys. The Danes were not only “very literate” but also “hypersensitive” and United States government sponsored surveys would be judged “improper and offensive.” A 1949 survey conducted in Denmark created strong criticism since the United States was soon recognized as its source. Anderson’s goal was to build up the Danish will to
resist the Soviets to the “level of [the] Finns in 1939 when they took on Russia single-handed with [a] handful of obsolete war planes and only four AA guns.” 38 This required working within the NATO framework, trusting that the Danes would make the best use of American aid without the United States telling them how. American pressure would only create Danish resentment while reducing their zeal and self-respect. 39

Apparently American officials thought the Danish record of determined military resistance paled by comparison with its neighbors. The tenth anniversary celebration of Denmark’s liberation, thought some American observers, overstated the role of the Danish resistance movement. Compared to what had actually occurred during World War II, an embassy report contended that the Danish celebrations were,

an orgy of self-heroics largely fostered by a national inferiority complex stemming from Denmark’s poor example compared to that of neighboring countries as Norway and the Netherlands. 40

Indeed, in an assessment of the Military Assistance Program for Denmark, the team assigned to Denmark had several critical conclusions regarding the previous five years (1950-1955). Among them, that Denmark “was capable of a greater defense effort” failing to make a defense effort commensurate with its potential, just as General Olmsted had earlier suggested. Furthermore, the Danish military had failed to improve commensurate with the spending the United States had made. The Danish government had not taken effective action to increase the Danish military’s capability. 41

These harsh assessments were not made public and diminished neither Anderson’s popularity among Danish officials, nor her overall view of her service in Denmark. Kraft credited Anderson with helping to maintain and develop Danish confidence in the United States. She was “a close and dear friend” who had stood like a “lioness” for Denmark in the United States. When Anderson advocated Denmark’s case, Kraft insisted she was also best serving the interests of the United States and the entire NATO community. Kraft stressed the common interests between the United States and Denmark. Her cooperation with the current and previous Danish governments was, according to Kraft, “a model of how cooperation
between allied states should be conducted.”42 King Frederik conferred the Grand Cross of the ancient Order of the Dannebrog to Anderson, the first woman ever to receive that distinction, and she was the first woman outside the Royal House of Denmark to have her coat of arms hung in the Frederiksborg Castle church.43

She had not fundamentally altered either Danish or American policy, but her practice of diplomacy was successful. The Danes liked what they saw of Anderson. Her style was appealing, but the style also had substance, from speaking the language, to sending her kids to Danish schools, to establishing personal contacts with prominent and ordinary Danes in every walk of life. While Danes considered her a “lioness for Denmark” she continued to provide the United States with a skeptical, if not critical view of Danish defense efforts. Eugenie Anderson was indeed an effective ambassador for the United States in Denmark during a challenging time. She was a lioness, not just for Denmark in the United States, but for the United States in Denmark.

1 Danish Foreign Minister Ole Bjorn Kraft, February 2, 1953 as reported in American Embassy in Copenhagen to Department of State, General Records of the Department of State, National Archives of the United States, Record Group 59, decimal file 759.13/2-17, College Park, Maryland. Henceforth cited as NA followed by file number.
3 For several examples of political appointments of ambassadors that were not beneficial to the interests of the United States see Nancy Holmes, “The Business of Being Ambassador,” Worth, October 2002, 92-97.
4 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to Eugenie Anderson, January 19, 1949, Box 1, Folder Correspondence regarding ambassadorial appointment, Anderson Papers, Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul Minnesota. Henceforth referred to as Anderson Papers, Box number and Folder name.
5 This is not to imply that Denmark was an undesirable post. In 2002 Copenhagen was ranked eighth on the list of most desirable embassies in the United States foreign service out of more than 150 possibilities. See Holmes, 95.
6 Ernest Leiser,, “Denmark’s American Sweetheart,” The Saturday Evening Post, May 5, 1951, 31, 123 Indeed, of the three previous instances of a woman leading an American diplomatic delegation, though not an ambassador, the countries were Norway, Denmark, and Luxembourg.
7 Ibid., 123.
8 Lamson, 165-175. For the Invitation List for January 21, 1950, reception at Rydhave, see Box 1,Folder Embassy parties, Anderson papers.
9 Leiser, “Denmark’s American Sweetheart,” 31, 123.
10 For evidence of this tradition continues see the Associated Press story on the celebration of Rebild Festival, “Fourth of July has deep roots in Denmark,” Fargo Forum, July 4, 2002, C6.
11 Copenhagen to Secretary of State, July 5, 1950, NA 759.00/7-550.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Copenhagen July 21, 1950, Anderson papers, Box 4, Visits folder. I happened to be in Copenhagen on 4 July 1997 and heard some brief remarks in Tivoli by an American official—they were in English.
15 Lamson, 176.
16 Copenhagen July 21, 1950, Anderson papers, Box 4, Visits folder.
17 Eleanor Roosevelt to Eugenie Anderson, June 22, 1951, Box 3, Folder Eleanor Roosevelt, Anderson Papers.
18 Harry Truman to Eugenie Anderson, July 7, 1951, Box 4 Folder Truman, Anderson Papers.
19 Lamson, 177-78.
20 Copenhagen to Secretary of State, August 15, 1950, NA 759.00/8-1550.
21 Copenhagen to Secretary of State, August 16, 1950, NA 759.00/8-1650.
22 Copenhagen to Department of State, September 29, 1950, NA 759.00/9-2950.
23 Copenhagen to Secretary of State, December 29, 1950, NA 759.00/12-2950.
24 Copenhagen to Department of State, April 16, 1951, NA 759.5/4-16.
25 Copenhagen to Department of State, 2 enclosure, April 16, 1951, NA 759.5/4-16.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 30.
30 Hubert H. Humphrey to Eugenie Anderson, September 11, 1951, Box 2, Folder Humphrey, Anderson Papers.
31 Department of State to Copenhagen, October 16, 1951, NA 759.5/10-1651.
32 Ibid.

Translation of Social Demokraten editorial, October 13, 1951, Anderson Papers, Box 1 folder 4.

Translation of reports in Politiken and Nationaltidende October 13, 1951, Anderson papers, Box 1 folder 4.

Translation of reports Berlingske Tidende, Politiken, Nationaltidende, October 15, 1951 and translation of Information, October 13, 1951, Anderson papers, Box 1, folder 4.

Copenhagen to Secretary of State, April 24, 1951, NA 759.00/4-2451.

Copenhagen to Secretary of State, June 15, 1951, NA 759.5/6-1551.

Ibid.

Copenhagen to Department of State WEEKA (Psychological), May 5, 1955, NA 759.00(W)/5-555.

International Cooperation Administration to Robert Barnes, April 12, 1956, NA 75905 - MSP/4-1656.

Amembassy Copenhagen to Department of State, February 2, 1953. NA 759.13/2-1753.

Ibid.