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The American ambassador

Hid from our eyes

William Farish may not be immortal, but he is certainly invisible

ALL ambassadors to the Court of St James are officially designated extraordinary, but William S. Farish, the ambassador of the United States of America, may be the most extraordinary of the lot: he is invisible. So, in large measure, are the 120 or so diplomats in his embassy.

Being invisible does not mean you are not doing your job, if you consider, as the embassy does, that the projection of America's foreign policy to the British people is not part of it. But the British media naturally look to the embassy when they want an official American spokesman to appear on their programmes, and never more than when America's foreign policy is as controversial as it is today and senior members of the administration seem reluctant to leave Washington. How often has the ambassador appeared on the two most influential current-affairs programmes, BBC Radio's early-morning "Today" programme or BBC Television's "Newsnight"? Once, on September 12th 2001, he gave a short statement on "Today", but he has not risked a "Newsnight" appearance. He has, however, entertained over 1,600 guests at his residence in Regent's Park since he arrived three years ago.

American ambassadors to Britain are usually chosen more for their generosity to the president's campaign coffers than for their political acumen or ability to project policy. The real work in the embassy is often done by the deputy chief of mission, a career diplomat. One such, Raymond Seitz, performed so well in that role in the mid-1980s that he came back to London as ambassador in the 1990s, setting high standards in both jobs. So how does the present incumbent, David Johnson, compare?

Mr Johnson, an expert on Afghanistan perhaps chosen for the British job because of his knowledge of tribal politics, is certainly more active than his boss. With plenty of opportunities to stand in for Mr Farish, he sometimes entertains in the ambassador's residence, rather than his own. But he does not often appear on radio or television, or indeed in other public forums. Like many others in the embassy, he is a quiet American.

American residents in Britain who believe their government's policies in Iraq are not being adequately presented bemoan the "thunderous silence" emanating from the embassy. The topic took up a large part of the conversation recently at a private lunch in London for a senior White House aide. One neo-conservative believes it reflects partly a belief that shutting up makes life easier for Tony Blair, partly some diplomats' hostility to the administration's policies, partly orders from officials in Washington, including those in the National Security Council, to keep quiet. The NSC's "communications counsellor" reportedly passed through Britain a couple of weeks ago without publicly communicating anything to anyone.

As is usual at this time of year, nobs and snobs gathered this week at Ascot, for the smartest fixture in the horse-racing calendar. It is the sort of occasion at which Mr Farish, whose keen interest in bloodstock is said to have made him a friend of the queen's, is usually to be found. But no, he was in the United States. ■