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ENT: Entrevistas



Entrevistado: ***Mr. Matthew T. Harrington***
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Dia: 24 de Outubro de 2006, 13h30m

Local: Embaixada dos EUA, Av. das Forças Armadas, Lisboa.

Duração da entrevista: 20m45s

MSG (Maria Sousa Galito), MTH (Matthew T. Harrington)

MSG: *Good afternoon, Mr. Mathew Harrington. Would you like to make some first remarks about economic diplomacy? Please do.*

MTH: «One thing is to write about what's happening in Portugal, politically and economically, so that US policy makers can figure it out in their policy making. Second, we advocate in behalf of US interest, so if we're going to have a certain position on a multilateral organization, we will talk to our allies, so that they join us in certain initiatives or vote in our favor, and that sort of thing.

«We have a foreign commercial service office here, which is an oversee office of the Department of Commerce; and they are here, specifically, to do commercial diplomacy. They encourage US companies to invest here. »

MSG: *According to Mr. Matthew Harrington, with the end of Cold War, are we more focused on economic issues than before? States are investing more in Commercial Diplomacy Departments lately?*

MTH: «Yes, I think there's been a change; in the Cold War, we were probably more focused on political issues. I've been in the Foreign Service for fifteen years and what changed, in this period, was the ambassadors' list of priorities that now include more promotion of Foreign US business. That was not necessarily the case fifteen years ago.

«American services need to feel that when they exploit opportunities in a particular country, the embassy is going to support them. That's a good change. »

MSG: *Mr. Matthew Harrington, do you have the idea that diplomats used to put commerce on second place? I mean, inside embassies, economic offices were seen by diplomats as a step to politico-strategic offices?*

MTH: «I don't know if that's the case, necessarily. But promotion of trade is much more a part of what we do now. It's been prioritized by Administrations; certainly going back to the Clinton Administration.»

MSG: *Is Economy at the service of Diplomacy, or is Diplomacy at the service of Economy?*

MTH: « (Laugh) Say that again? »

MSG: *At what point can State and diplomats interfere in the economy, even when helping multinationals or smaller companies in their international activities? Or should embassies just watch and let companies do their job?*

MTH: «No. Diplomacy serves Economy more, that's more accurate; even though that might be different for different countries. France, in its former colonies takes a different approach than we do, generally.

«Let me give you an example. If there's a government contract to build a certain infrastructure and there are several US companies betting on this project and a number of European companies, than the embassy, working at the behalf of the US Government, can't go and say: we're going to chose the American company A or B; but American companies should have a fair chance, and more so if the American companies have a better technical proposal and offer cheaper services.

«We have a very good relationship between the two Governments – US and Portugal. »

MSG: *That helps? Having that good relationship between the US and Portugal?*

MTH: «Well, I don't know. We have a very good relationship, we cooperate, and we're NATO allies. I must mention one negative thing: the bilateral commercial relationship it's too low; it's about three million dollars a year. We trade much more with other countries – for instance, with Jamaica – then we do with Portugal, and that's too bad given the long ties between our two countries. That's something in which we have to do a better job.

«We do have a concern. In some situations, European companies are more looked at than American companies; even when the proposal of the American companies was technically more appropriate and cheaper. »

MSG: *Mr. Matthew Harrington, do you think there's a hidden barrier to commerce here?*

MTH: «I think I've seen a bit of that here, sure.

«But the Portuguese Government can create the kind of conditions for companies to come and invest. »

MSG: *There's perhaps a European preference in the EURO Zone, you say? But the US companies don't prefer to trade in the European market, perhaps more standardized than before, when companies had to come to very different markets, with very different rules and different currencies?*

MTH: «Yes and No. European Union has twenty five member countries. Coming down to any consistent decision in the EU is very difficult. Things take a long time. It depends.

«For example, there's a new European Chemicals regulation (REACH), adopted after December 2006. The EU has worked on legislation to control chemicals that are imported or manufactured anywhere in Europe and there's concern that requirements, before you're coming to market, you will have to do all this research and fulfil all this paperwork in all different aspects; and the costs for US companies go way up. Potentially there is a concern at this point.

«So, dealing with the EU can be problematic too and take a lot longer, particularly if you're working on something that requires very urgent action; in that case, we would prefer working bilaterally, I think. »

MSG: *You would prefer to work more bilaterally or more multilaterally?*

MTH: «Depends on the issue, it really does. »

MSG: *What about economic intelligence? It's still important nowadays – considering the possibility that it was before? Should intelligence be more concern with political and strategic matters than with economic issues?*

MTH: «I'm just trying to understand the question. Could you give me an example of what you mean? »

MSG: *For instance, if embassies have economic intelligence, they may know or hear about business opportunities for, in this case, US companies, before that information reaches common knowledge*

MTH: «I don't know. That seems more conspiratorial than I think it actually is. »

MSG: *But aren't other countries investing in economic intelligence? For example, doesn't France do a lot of that?*

MTH: «I think they do. (Laugh)

«What the US tries to do is keep an eye for opportunities in areas where I think US businesses may do well. We alert some US companies in certain sectors, absolutely. But I don't know exactly how they do it. »

MSG: *About US diplomats, about what they do...*

MTH: «We implement the foreign policy determined by the White House. »

MSG: *Ok. What should be the limits of a diplomat? Should he/she follow a previous plan – strictly I mean – or should he/she be more concerned with goals while choosing his/hers means of action according to the country in which he/she's involved in?*

MTH: «Diplomats have to play an active role. Foreign Policy is fluid, there's a general framework; as long as you work on that general framework, there's flexibility.

«The WTO negotiations weren't a great success because of differences on agricultural issues between the US and the EU.

«The EU has twenty five countries and some agricultural interests; for example, France has perhaps more than other countries in the EU, like Portugal. Diplomats have the responsibility to report to Washington DC Portugal's priorities; that information will be considered in the decision process.

«At the same time, Portugal may speak in the EU, if they agree with us in a particular issue. »

MSG: *Can Portugal be an ally in the relations between the US and Brazil, or between US and African countries that speak the Portuguese Language? Or the US clearly prefers to negotiate directly with them? Is there a possible diplomatic triangle here or not – always in an economic perspective?*

MTH: «We deal directly with those countries, because we have diplomatic relations with all of them.

«US have a strong presence in Africa. In Angola and Mozambique we have a very strong presence. At the same time, we recognize that Portugal has a long standing History as well as linguistic ties.

«Thus we are talking to Portugal authorities about things we might do together in Africa; and specifically in African countries that speak Portuguese. So, we are thinking about opportunities in Mozambique and Angola. That cooperation is trilateral. »

MSG: *That relationship it's useful because US companies face some linguistic or cultural barriers in these countries that speak Portuguese? Or because Portugal is a State-member of the EU?*

MTH: «Sometimes, American companies don't need help at all. A big company will hire good people on the ground, and they will not need Government help at all. It's free market working.

«Sometimes, if they don't understand local laws or culture, at least they will touch bases with us, and see what we can be of assistance.

«Companies look for business wherever they can find it. »

MSG: *Let me see, there are more sub-national agents that act more freely and establish links with people and other companies whenever and wherever they are, in a way that they need the State less and less?*

MTH: «Sometimes we don't hear about companies at all; they hire they're own people in the ground to do market surveys. Other times, companies may come to us for help, because they don't have the kind of resources to do it. They can come to an embassy, to a foreign commercial service and ask about markets they're interested in. It varies according to resources or with long standing connections in a particular country.»

MSG: *Nowadays do we demand more from States? Do States have to fulfill more and more needs? States are more in a condition of negotiators, instead of leaders and decision-makers? Perhaps this isn't a good question for an US diplomat, considering the power that US have in the world, but are States loosing power in favor of international organizations or sub-national agents, like multinational companies?*

MTH: «In terms of Economic Diplomacy, specifically? »

MSG: *Yes.*

MTH: «Well, yes. In the US we believe in the market system. For example, when companies like General Motors (GM) close their plants in Azambuja, we don't have anything to say about that. That's a private company making its own decisions based on a bottom line.

«The Government of Portugal can make it more attractive to GM to maintain the plant open by providing tax reductions and other incentives. But we can't tell GM to keep its plant open. »

MSG: *What about Economic Diplomacy's future?*

MTH: «I think it will continue to grow in importance. It is at the very top of the list of what embassies are supposed to be doing. For example, the US ambassador here in Portugal, spends a lot of his time promoting US business.

«There was this company selling cars in Portugal, for instance. We had to display things in the back of the embassy to make a big reception. That's the sort of thing we do here all the time.

«There's this other company that sells biometrical software for safety reasons, and was trying to do business with the Portuguese Government, consequently we invited the Minister to our embassy, and the company did a demonstration about how their software worked. »

MSG: *As Mr. Harrison was saying before, embassies have to play an active role, right?*

MTH: « (Laugh) Yes, a very active role. And the US ambassador is a business man himself. He built a very successful business in Florida. In the US, there are political ambassadors who are career diplomats, like I am.

«Usually, those career diplomats are the majority of the career people in our embassies, but we also have people who have been a success in the private sector. So, our ambassador has real interest and experience promoting US businesses. He also led a group of Portuguese thinkers from Universities, from the Portuguese Government and some business people to Florida in September. They all spent a week in Florida, traveling and visiting Universities and other research centers to promote this idea of innovation and business connections between the two countries. Government can in fact play an active role in encouraging those connections.»

MSG: *Obrigada. Thank you, very much, Mr. Matthew Harrington for this interview.*