



«He had a twinkle in his eye when he saw me»: US President Ronald Reagan, Ambassador Faith Whittlesey, Geneva 1985.

## Madam Switzerland

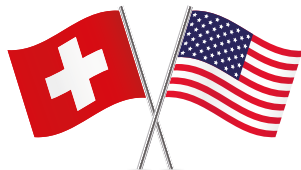
No one has shaped the friendship between the US and Switzerland in the last decades more than Faith Whittlesey. As an ambassador and close friend of Ronald Reagan, she defended Switzerland even in its darkest hours. The Ambassador passed away in Washington at the age of 79. She has left an invaluable legacy to our country. *By Urs Gehriger*

On a winter morning, a woman in Philadelphia is boarding the train to Washington DC. She does it reluctantly. She would rather be at home with her three children. She does not know that this journey will change her life – and the lives of countless people in America and Switzerland.

The woman on the train is Faith Whittlesey: 42 years old, a widow, and a single mother.

When a new president takes office, normally, politicians, donors and lobbyists compete for the important diplomatic posts. Faith had no interest in the circus. But the newly-crowned president – Mr. Reagan – insisted on seeing her, personally.

Faith tells me that, «Ronald Reagan tried to change my mind over the phone and then he



sent me a train ticket.» Faith finally agreed to come. To serve as ambassador to Switzerland – where she spent many memorable days with her husband and children.

When Faith met Reagan for the first time in 1976, she knew instantly that he had the makings of a president. She told me, «the man had an enormous amount of charisma and charm and intelligence. He had studied the issues and was very well informed. He knew how to win people. He was tall and handsome, and athletic in his build and movements, and I also believed in what he stood for.»

When Reagan ran for the White House in 1980, Faith led Reagan's election campaign in her home state of Pennsylvania as leader of a small team. She helped Reagan achieve his

landslide victory. And Reagan knew who was at the heart of his victory. He made sure the woman who delivered Pennsylvania – who was with him from the beginning – stayed on his team.

Whittlesey, certainly, was not the first US ambassador to Switzerland (Eisenhower had sent Frances Willis to Bern in 1952), but she was the first to occupy the post twice. And she is the ambassador who cultivated the strongest relations between Switzerland and America since the Second World War.

«The importance of Switzerland far exceeds its size,» Whittlesey told the New York Times before traveling to Bern. During her tenure, high US officials stayed in her residency such as Vice President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State George Shultz. In 1985, she helped organize the disarmament summit with Gorbachev

and Reagan in Geneva. And she made sure that the Swiss Federal Council had a direct line to Washington.

On Whittlesey's arrival in Switzerland the Cold War was far from a thaw. Reagan described the Soviet Union as the «evil empire» and was committed to a military duel with the communist archenemy. In Europe, the «Hollywood president» - like Trump today - was despised as a «war monger» and a «cowboy».

«There were demonstrations almost weekly,» Whittlesey explained to me. «The district around the embassy was smeared with graffiti. Once I was caught in a demonstration in my car.

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If they had recognized me they would have turned the car over.»

Despite the tensions, Whittlesey did not barricade herself behind the embassy walls. She saw it as her main task to reach out to her Swiss hosts. To do this, she traveled to every canton, visited newspaper offices, gave lectures and invited entrepreneurs, authors, professors and every day Swiss citizens to the American embassy. And she had a method when engaging in diplomacy,

First, she would inquire about the opinion of the other person. She would then listen with sincere and genuine interest, inquire, and then proceed to share the politics and policies of her boss, President Ronald Reagan.

«I explained that his policy was fact-based. Once facts were on the table, everyone could form their own opinion.»

«It was her outgoing, open personality» which earned her respect, recalled Egon Zehnder, founder of one of the world's largest recruitment companies, which connects corporate executives with companies and other large organizations, such as the World Bank. «Faith came across as very down-to-earth. She was interested in people, interested to exchange opinions. She had enormous emotional intelligence.»

In just a few months, Faith built an effective public diplomacy based on mutual understanding. And scored a key success in a delicate matter. Faith negotiated that the US government would agree «not to assault banking secrecy.»

In the White House, her political commitment did not go unnoticed.

Two years after the call that took her from Pennsylvania to Switzerland, her phone rang again. On the line was James Baker, Reagan's chief of staff. He asked her to come back to Washington, «immediately!» Reagan wanted her at his side. The president made Whittlesey

## Farewell

### «Say hello to my father»

#### Friends, colleagues and companions from the USA and Switzerland remember Faith Whittlesey (1939–2018).

##### **Michael Reagan, son of Ronald Reagan**

«RIP my friend. You helped make my father President and as his Ambassador you helped make him a better President. I will miss your voice and your insight as we all will. God Bless and say hello to my father.»

##### **Adolf Ogi, Swiss federal councillor**

1987–2000

«Ambassador Faith Whittlesey has left her mark for the USA in Switzerland and for Switzerland in the USA. She loved and appreciated our country and knew it like no other American ambassador. I was able to confirm this impression during a meeting in Bern a few months ago. She stays awake in our memory, in gratitude.»

##### **James A. Baker III, White House Chief of Staff 1981–1985, Treasury Secretary**

1985–1988

«Faith Whittlesey was a fine ambassador, staunch conservative and true Reaganite who reflected President Ronald Reagan's values and beliefs with clarity and intensity. She possessed an ability to communicate President Reagan's policy agenda to leaders in the United States and across the world. As a result, I liked having her on my team when I was Reagan's White House chief of staff and she was Assistant to the President for Public Liaison. In that position, she strove to elevate the role conservative religious believers had in the American political process and national policymaking.»

##### **Larry Kudlow, Director of the National Economic Council under US President Trump**

«It was my honor to know Faith from the Reagan White House days and ever since. Faith was a woman of grit, grace and patriotism who valued her country and her faith, family and friends foremost. Dealing w/ life's challenges, she was an eternal optimist. Her unwavering support for preserving the lives of the unborn, and her great love for children everywhere, were a great example for her thousands of friends and admirers. May God watch over her. RIP.»

##### **Johann Schneider-Ammann, Swiss federal councillor**

«Ambassador Faith Whittlesey worked tirelessly for good relations between the US and Switzerland. With the Swiss American Foundation she created a forum that convinced hundreds of young leaders of the importance of exchanges between our countries. Ambassador Whittlesey always stressed

the similarities of the two sister republics and built bridges even in stormy times. These bridges are important - between two self-confident and successful countries that are in particular economically linked as trading partners, through employers and investors. I personally appreciated Faith Whittlesey. Let's carry on her legacy - Switzerland and the US will benefit.»

##### **Martin Dahinden, Swiss ambassador to the USA**

«The death of Faith Whittlesey made me very sad. I will remember her as a great friend of Switzerland, who remained steadfast in our country even when Switzerland was criticized in the Uni-



«Tireless»: Faith Whittlesey, 1985 in Geneva.

ted States and subjected to severe attacks. Personally, I am grateful to Faith for many inspiring conversations and exchanges over the years. The American Swiss Foundation and the outstanding network of Young Leaders will be her lasting legacy.»

##### **Ed McMullen, US ambassador to Switzerland**

«Her name alone spoke volumes of who she was. Ambassador Faith Ryan Whittlesey... Faith. Her thousands of friends from Switzerland and Liechtenstein to the United States of America, and everywhere in between, had great faith knowing our old friend would always be there to build the bridges of friendship, family, business and politics. She advised Presidents then built the American Swiss Foundation Young Leaders into a group of thousands of ambassadors building lasting bonds between our two countries. As the beneficiary of



nearly 35 years of her friendship, mentoring and motivating insights I will miss my dear friend Faith. We can all take heart and have faith that our dear Ambassador Faith Ryan Whittlesey is with the Lord she loved and served...the one and living God who gave us his special servant, our friend we will all miss.... Faith.»

**Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist**

«To many in Washington DC Ambassador Whittlesey was Switzerland. She was a tireless promoter of the ties that bind our two countries, especially future leaders.»

**Markus Diethelm, Group General Counsel of UBS**

«The salient feature that I will always remember about Faith is her gift of bringing together like-minded people for years. What distinguished her was her deep-rooted patriotism and her belief in republican values as a true blue person, an ability I admire. By explaining things in a clear and structured way, uninfluenced by trends and popular opinions, she was able to bring in her subtle sense of humor purposefully and pointedly, often with her legendary wink. Her comments always hit the bulls-eye, and her humor made critical remarks bearable



«Motivating»: with McMullen, Emmental, 1995.

and even uplifting for dissenters. She was able to fully enjoy life to the last, never forgetting the importance of being faithful and standing by her convictions. She was full of curiosity and never prejudged, which presumably was not easy for her.»

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«Stroke of luck»: with swiss federal councillor Furgler, 1985.

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**David Vogelsanger, Swiss ambassador to New Zealand**

«For me Faith Whittlesey remains the brave fighter of the Reagan Revolution, the able ambassador of America in Switzerland and a faithful friend over the years and continents. When the Clinton administration put itself at our service during the smear campaign against our country, it energetically, unlike some faint-hearted local politicians, stood up for the truth about Switzerland in the World War. For a quarter of a century, she brought together young Swiss and Americans with tremendous human commitment and taught them what the two oldest democracies have in common, despite all adversities.»

**Suzi LeVine, US ambassador to Switzerland 2014-2017**

«Serving as Ambassador is like being in a relay race where you receive the baton from your predecessor and hand it off to your successor. While she wasn't my immediate predecessor, the baton I received still had Faith's deep fingerprints and impact on it – especially with the work she did even after she finished her official service. The American-Swiss Foundation's Young Leaders program, in which Swiss and American young leaders come together for a week, will continue to strengthen US-Swiss relations for decades to come. While her voice is now silent, her spirit will live on in all of those whom she's touched throughout her life. #RIPFaith»

**Carlo Jagmetti, Swiss ambassador to the USA 1993-1997**

«Ambassador Faith Whittlesey was a great diplomat with strong political opinions to which I always listened with the greatest interest. We frequently talked about Switzerland, its political structure, its place in the family of nations. Her interest and her knowledge about the small Sister Republic were most impressive. She was extremely helpful in developing the relationship between Switzerland and the United States and in explaining Swiss views and conceptions in America. Switzerland will not forget her competent, friendly and engaging attitude. Faith will always be remembered with admiration and deep gratitude.»

**Edwin Meese III, Reagan Attorney General, chairman of Heritage Foundation's Center for Legal and Judicial Studies**

«Her personal charm and gracious manner enabled her to be a successful leader in her political and philanthropic endeavor... she was a good friend and a dedicated patriot (gave) invaluable service to President Reagan as a strong advocate for conservative principles and as a respected diplomat.»

**Pat Buchanan, White House Communications Director 1985 - 1987**

«Faith Whittlesey was heart and soul a Reaganite and a battler. She never quit. When others tired, Faith persevered. She was fighting to the end. When I came into the White House more than thirty years ago, after Reagan's first term, she was just departing, going to Switzerland as the US Ambassador, where she hosted us there in the 1985 Geneva summit with Mikhail Gorbachev. She filled me in on who were the true believers in the

*White House and who were the time-servers. Her life serves as an example to those who would make the betterment of their country their life's cause.»*

### **Doug Sears, Vice President Boston University, former staff US-Embassy in Switzerland under Ambassador Whittlesey**

*«An element of the story that is likely to be overlooked or addressed a bit too delicately is how she stepped up to be an advocate when Switzerland (especially the banks) was getting a lot of hostile attention in the US over the Holocaust accounts, gold, etc. She wasn't afraid to be a friend (what I would call a foul weather friend) and to be seen as such. Others were temporizing and equivocating and, certainly, advising Swiss accommodation. She was tirelessly making the case for Switzerland and its many virtues—and she didn't do it apologetically or half-heartedly. She was as we say here 'all in'.»*

### **Elisabeth Kopp, Swiss federal councillor 1984 - 1989**

*«Faith Whittlesey and I immediately got along. It was a stroke of luck, because at the time the traditionally good relations between Switzerland and the USA were clouded as a result of the US action in the case of Marc Rich. Switzerland regarded the US action as a violation of Swiss sovereignty and was unwilling to accept it. So I traveled to Washington on behalf of the Federal Council. After tough negotiations with the US Attorney General Edwin Meese, I reached the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, in which the United States promised to take legal action in the future. Back at the residence of Swiss Ambassador Klaus Jacobi, I found an invitation from US President Ronald Reagan to visit the White House. I felt sure that Faith Whittlesey had made this unusual gesture in the background. Needless to say, this gesture restored the good relations between Switzerland and the United States. What failed on the diplomatic way, was fixed by two women.»*

### **Ed Feulner, President The Heritage Foundation**

*«Faith Whittlesey was a person of deep convictions: she loved her country, and she was especially devoted to building a strong and close relationship between our two nations. Her leadership in reminding Americans why Switzerland is such an important friend to us has been the bedrock of our relationship for 30 years. May she rest in eternal peace.»*

The obituaries have been written upon request by DIE WELTWOCHTE for its exclusive publication.

head of Public Liaison, and installed her in the office in front of the Oval Office.

«He had a twinkle in his eye when he saw me», Whittlesey told me. «We both had Irish roots and the same sense of humor, we got along swimmingly.»

She had a special chemistry with the president. From conservative values, a determined anti-communism, fiscal policy, and to the protection of the unborn: they shared the same values.

And as Reagan discovered, he also needed a media flank of protection. When Whittlesey took her place in the Oval Office on his senior staff, the approval for the president was at a low of 35 percent.

She held firm. She advocated to America, as she did in Switzerland, tirelessly championing Reagan's agenda. In 1984, Reagan returned to the White House, stronger than ever. He won virtually every state.

Faith was the only woman among his 18 key figures in the White House. Chief of Staff James Baker and his deputy, Michael Deaver, had planned to assign her specifically to women's issues. Whittlesey, however, found their plan «completely sexist».

As a professional and single mother of three children, no one knew better than Faith how much pressure women were under in politics. But as a conservative, she persistently refused to be defined by «women's issues.» She believed women could lead policy as thinkers and patriots.

She famously described her own situation with reference to the Hollywood dance couple of the 30's: «Remember that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did – only backwards and in high heels.»

It could be said that Faith's favorite stage was Switzerland, and her favorite partners were the Swiss, whom she had quickly taken to heart. In 1985, she asked President Reagan to return her to Bern as an ambassador, where she cemented the foundation of American-Swiss relations that still thrive, today.

In 1988, when she expressed a desire to devote herself to her private life and to her children, President Reagan only accepted her retirement from public service, «reluctantly.» He wrote to his Pennsylvania warrior: «I've missed you since your return to Switzerland.» He also told her, «I'm sure the Swiss will miss you, too.»

Reagan was right. Whittlesey never let her friends down. She returned at least once a year - with the Young Leaders Conference, a program of the American Swiss Foundation (ASF), whose presidency she presided over for many years.

With «motherly instinct» (as she put it), she took care of her young leaders. And while she never made a secret of her staunch conservative convictions, she always made sure to select talented young people with care to profes-

sional and ideological balance. Liberals, conservatives – she strove to choose the best to share with the best of Swiss counterparts.

1200 alumni, including the current US ambassador to Bern, Ed McMullen, reflect her vision of bilateral relations.

Switzerland is very popular in the world. But less well known: In crisis, one learns who a true friend is. When our country came under heavy fire in the 1990s in connection with dormant accounts of Holocaust victims, Whittlesey took a protective approach to our sister republic. «She was a foul weather friend,» says Doug Sears, vice president of Boston University, who worked at the Embassy in Bern. «And she didn't do it apologetically or half-heartedly. She was as we say here 'all in'.»

Faith rarely talked about her personal sufferings. In 2012, her eldest son Henry, suffering from severe depression, took his own life, as had his father before him. Yet, Faith always kept moving ahead, even when dealing with her own health challenges.

In 1994, she was diagnosed with a malignant tumor in her right eye. Doctors gave her a small chance of survival. Without hesitating, this petite woman who always valued having perfect appearance, removed the eye (and later part of her lungs) and fought for her life. «You can't wear her out,» said a longtime girlfriend, «She believes what she believes, and she will act on it until the day she dies.»

A few weeks ago, Whittlesey learned that her body was afflicted by cancer, again. This time the illness won.

In the presence of her ten grandchildren, she silently said goodbye and undertook her ultimate journey.

«There is no experienced diplomat in the US with a historical memory who understands Switzerland,» she said to me, when, in 2009, the Obama administration was launching full force financial and legal attacks on Switzerland.

Faith Whittlesey was that memory, and that person.

The gap left by Faith cannot be filled by one single person alone. However, even now, she does not let Switzerland down.

The network of the Swiss American Foundation, on both sides of the Atlantic, bears new fruit every year. They are Ambassador Whittlesey's legacy. They are invaluable to Switzerland. They are that young woman on the train, from Philadelphia to D.C., answering the call the service, and embarking on a lifelong journey.

\* The quotes are from numerous discussions between the author and ambassador Whittlesey between 2009 and 2018, as well as from the biography: Thomas J. Carney, «Walking Backwards in High Heels», Casemate, 2012, 368 pages.