

Thomas E. Whelan

AN AMBASSADOR IN SHIRTSLEEVES



By Patrick McMahon



IF you should happen to spend a few days in Managua, Nicaragua, this year, it is almost certain that sooner or later you will notice a ruddy-faced, genial-looking man in a battered Panama hat and shirt-sleeves, walking briskly along the streets, or through the lobby of the Gran Hotel.

You will notice him because he will look for all the world like a moderately prosperous farmer from the Middle West (which indeed he is) and you will wonder what in hell a moderately prosperous farmer from the Middle West is doing in Managua, Nicaragua.

You will notice him particularly, because wherever you chance to see him, he will be greeted by a chorus of hails from bootblacks and politicos, bellhops and bankers, army officers, truck drivers, laborers and women of all ages, the shabbily as well as the expensively dressed.

"*Buenas Dias, Señor Tomas!*" "*Allo Señor Tom!*" "*Como esta mi amigo?*"



And if you chance to ask some bystander who the gentleman in the battered Panama hat is, regardless of the particular bystander's station in life, the answer is sure to be something like this:

"That is Señor Tomas W'ay-lan, el Embajador Americano. 'E is my var-r-ry good fran'."

In those last six words, your informant will have summed up, as graphically and as accurately as an entire magazine article can do, the peculiar brand of diplomacy of U. S. Ambassador Thomas E. Whelan — a brand of diplomacy that has proven most effective in one of the critical and strategic areas of the world. He not only has won the confidence of the Nicaraguan government, but he also has convinced Nicaraguans of all classes that he, and the people of the United States whom he represents, are their "var-r-ry good fran's."

During his two years in Nicaragua, Tom Whelan has not confined himself to diplo-

matic functions and official activities — although he is equally effective in both. He has gotten down to the grass roots, as the politicians like to say, and mingled with the people of every strata; with laborers, businessmen, students, professional people, women's groups, and particularly with farmers.

Farmer Whelan enjoys chatting with the Nicaraguan farmers — the humble peon as well as the prosperous planter — in farmer's language; discussing farm problems; swapping information about farm techniques; telling them how they do it up in North Dakota, and hearing from them how they do it down in Nicaragua.

In the predominantly agricultural country of Nicaragua, Ambassador Whelan's knowledge of farming and his interest in all phases of agriculture have proven more valuable to U. S. interests than ever could the diplomatic adroitness of a Talleyrand or a Machiavelli.

As a result partly of Tom Whelan's brand of diplomacy, and partly of the unswerving friendship of President Anastasio Somoza, Nicaragua today is one of the few places in the world where the United States not only is respected for its might, but also is sincerely admired and cordially liked.

LIKE many a successful diplomat, Thomas E. Whelan comes from Irish stock, though he is as typically Middle Western as the wheat of

his native state. He was born in, bred in, and still lists as his legal residence, the town of St. Thomas, North Dakota, where he and his brother, Louis, have a small but prosperous wheat farm and a grain elevator. He obtained a law degree from the University of North Dakota, although he never practiced, concentrating on farming and North Dakota politics, instead. At the time of his appointment by Democratic President Truman, Tom Whelan was the State Chairman of the Republican Party.

Tom Whelan's venture into diplomacy came about through a curious set of circumstances, with high political overtones. The senior Senator from North Dakota, William Langer, long a thorn in the side of the orthodox wing of the party, had frequently jumped the partisan fence to support President Truman on controversial issues. Mr. Truman was a man who recognized, and paid, his political obligations. He asked Senator Langer, one day, what he wanted. The Senator replied that as far as he knew, there had never been a U. S. ambassador from North Dakota. He wanted an ambassador. Truman said O.K.

But Senator Langer is a political foe of his Republican colleague from North Dakota, Senator Milton R. Young. After months of bickering, the only man in all North Dakota upon whom they could agree was Tom Whelan, whose principal qualification at the time

was the fact that he and his wife had recently made an extended tour of South America. Thus Whelan became Ambassador to Nicaragua.

When Tom Whelan reported at the White House, just prior to being sworn in, Democrat Truman smiled at him sourly and remarked, with typical Trumanesque bluntness, "I don't know why in hell I'm giving *you* this job when there are so many good, deserving Democrats who would like to have it."

Whelan grinned back, "I don't know why in hell you're giving it to me, either, Mr. President."

However sound his reasons for making it, President Truman's appointment of Whelan as Ambassador to Nicaragua proved to be one of the most fortunate appointments in his tenure of office. For, although few officials in the State Department realized the fact, the Communist program for taking over all of Central America and Panama was already well under way. They had achieved complete control over the government of Guatemala, in the north. Their plans for gaining dominance in Costa Rica, at the extreme southeast, had been mapped out (and are now rapidly being effected). Red agitators and propagandists were flowing from Guatemala into Honduras and El Salvador, daily, hammering away at weak spots in those two countries. Whelan quickly sized up the situation, evaluated it correctly, and decided that the one strong point in Central America

that could check the Communist advance was Nicaragua, and its vigorously anti-Communist, pro-U. S. president, Somoza.

FROM the day of his arrival Whelan liked the Nicaraguans and the Nicaraguans liked him. A very, very lucky thing, for at the outset the fledgling ambassador was confronted with an extremely delicate problem, which if bungled, could have had disastrous consequences.

Whelan was preceded in Nicaragua by the State Department's new Point Four program. Thirty U. S. officials were already on the spot, some of them able men, some of them a bit on the dreamy side, and all of them filled with eagerness and enthusiasm. Plans had already been approved to expand the number to sixty. Two-thirds of the space in the largest office building in Managua had been leased. Interpreters, bilingual secretaries, stenographers, typists, clerks, messengers and chauffeurs were being hired right and left. More than fifty projects were in the works, and many of them, Whelan quickly decided, were so visionary in nature that they were far more likely to create disillusionment than good will.

Moreover, the whole approach was wrong, in Whelan's view. Our people were coming down to Nicaragua, setting up their own show, and preparing to do the things they believed were necessary to raise

the living standards of the “backward” Nicaraguans.

The crux of Whelan’s problem was this: Throughout the post-war years the United States had been handing out, freely, huge slices of its financial cake to Europe, and to a lesser extent Asia and the Middle East. To Latin America we scattered a few crumbs. Just about the smallest crumbs of all were the few we tossed to Nicaragua, the country that has been our most consistent supporter in international disputes. And one of the biggest crumbs that we gave to Nicaragua was the Point Four program, which has varied from \$300,000 to \$600,000 a year (less than we have been spending in some countries every few hours).

So Whelan was faced with the alternatives of either allowing ill-advised projects to be continued, or, by suspending them, cutting Nicaragua’s tiny crumb in half—at least temporarily. If he decided on the latter course, the greatest danger would be that of an unintentional slight to sensitive Latin American pride.

Whelan wasted no time debating the two alternatives. He was a practical farmer and a practical politician. He chose the practical course, the one most likely to pay lasting dividends in the long run. Using a judicious mixture of Middle Western bluntness and Irish charm, he set about convincing the Nicaraguan officials of the need

to cut out the boondoggles and concentrate on the basic, worthwhile projects. He met almost daily with the President and various Cabinet officers—sometimes with the entire Cabinet in official session. He pointed out that Nicaragua was matching U. S. contributions dollar for dollar and that Nicaragua could much less afford to waste its funds than could the U. S.

EVEN more important, Whelan reorganized the whole Point Four approach in Nicaragua, by eliminating unnecessary personnel, abandoning the broad-scale program technique, and getting a Point Four business manager to supervise remaining personnel and screen proposed projects. Now every project that has been approved is being administered and effected by the Nicaraguans themselves. When U. S. know-how is needed, an expert is brought down from the States. But instead of setting up his own program, he is assigned to the proper agency of the Nicaraguan government as an adviser, to help them carry out the job. Sometimes it is necessary for the U. S. expert to organize a new agency to undertake the task, sometimes he must help re-organize existing agencies, to improve efficiency. But the point is, the real work is being done by the Nicaraguans, and when the experts complete their assignments, or when the Point Four program terminates, the local agencies will

have acquired the necessary know-how to carry on the work.

It is axiomatic in the Foreign Service that about 50% of an ambassador's success or failure depends on his wife. In that respect Tom Whelan has more than his share of Irish luck. Mabel Stewart ("Mibbs") Whelan is as peculiarly fitted to be the ambassador's wife in Managua, Nicaragua, as her husband is to be the ambassador. She is a lady with great natural charm and dignity and a complete lack of stuffiness. And she is as much at home in the beautiful U. S. Residence in Managua, as she was in her North Dakota farmhouse.

One of the nicest things that can be said about Mrs. Whelan is that she not only is popular with the ladies of the official and diplomatic set, but she is immensely popular with the girls at the U. S. embassy as well.

There is also another very nice thing that can be said about Mrs. Whelan that has won a host of friends in Nicaragua for herself, her husband and for the United States. Throughout the hot, dry season, when the searing tropical sun turns Nicaragua's roads to powdery dust, she sets aside one day a week to bring groups of 75 to 100 orphans from the institutions near Managua to the Residence to splash and frolic in the swimming pool. After the swim she serves them luncheon, and after lunch, puts them to bed for their siesta. Then, another swim, and games.

NEXT to his wife and his farmer background, Tom Whelan's greatest asset in Managua is the fact that he is the chief of the volunteer fire department of St. Thomas, North Dakota. Nicaragua is a country of volunteer fire departments. Each is made up of a democratic collection of lawyers, doctors, mechanics, truck drivers, farmers, public officials, bankers, union leaders and even an occasional priest. When the fire alarm rings, those on duty dash wildly to the scene, donning helmets and gear en route, and once there, they attack the blaze with typical Latin recklessness and enthusiasm, and with a truly surprising degree of efficiency.

Well, it seems that one night the lads of the North Dakota Volunteer Firemen's Association were in a somewhat festive mood, and they wrote their colleagues of the Nicaraguan Volunteer Firemen's Association to be sure and take good care of their boy Tom. And a few days after Tom's arrival in Managua, a serious grass fire threatened to engulf the U. S. Residence. But in the proverbial nick of time, the Managua fire-laddies arrived, quickly got the blaze under control before any serious damage was done. Then they courteously refused the donation that the ambassador wanted to make to the Managua Fire Department, and just as courteously accepted his invitation to drop in for cocktails a few days later.

The evening of the cocktail party, the entire Managua Fire Department, in full regalia and with every piece of apparatus, came roaring up the hill on which the Residence is perched, with sirens screaming and bells clanging. They took turns spelling each other in the radio car, keeping in touch with headquarters while the party was on. Then, at the conclusion, Managua Fire Chief Joachim Vigil (a prominent Managua attorney) presented Ambassador Whelan with a gold-plated badge, making him an honorary chief of the Fire Department.

This year Tom returned the courtesy. On his return from Washington he presented Managua *Jefe* Vigil with a badge and a scroll, making him the first honorary fire chief in the history of the Washington, D. C., Fire Department.

And it is really surprising the effect that little things like that can have on frequently complicated political problems that arise between two friendly countries.

HOWEVER, there is a great deal more to the Whelan diplomacy than just being a good fellow. He is a good listener, and a shrewd political analyst. Through his many friends in the diplomatic missions, he keeps close track of events in every country in Central America, particularly the moves of the Communists. For two years his cables

have been accurately forecasting the Communist program in Central America.

It is pretty generally known in Washington that Ambassador Whelan does not always see eye to eye with the State Department on policy matters. But whatever the differences may be, you will hear nothing of them from Whelan. He does not believe in publicly disputing the decisions of his superiors. Whatever he has to say is said directly to the responsible officials in Washington. There are reports that it is sometimes said with considerable vigor and an occasional flash of Irish temper. More often, though, it is with that same blunt affability that has won him so many friends in Managua.

So, if that gentleman in shirt-sleeves and the battered Panama hat, hurrying along the streets of Managua, does not quite come up to your preconceived idea of a diplomat — striped pants, oxford jacket and black Homburg, oozing dignity and distinction all over the place — do not be too disturbed. He is doing the job he was sent here to do; protecting the interests of his country, and drawing tighter the bonds of friendship that bind us with a neighboring nation.

And he is doing that job in a way that has won the respect even of the old pros in the State Department back home.

THE SOVIET “PEACE OFFENSIVE” IN THE ARTS



By Egon Hostovsky

GREAT CHANGES are taking place in the “face” of Soviet propaganda. Malenkov has applied a thick coat of pancake makeup to the “peace offensive”—and the good little culture peddlers of Russia and the satellite states are pushing it for all it is worth. The same ugly features are behind the new makeup—but the West isn’t supposed to know this.

Recently, Ilya Ehrenburg wrote an article for a literary magazine, the *Literarni Noviny*, chief organ of the Czechoslovak writers’ union, reversing the line on Western culture. Until then, the Soviet cultural press had been full of attacks on “bourgeois decadent art” while lauding the superlative nature of “Socialist realism.” Anything short of the “Marxist-Leninist line” in literature, music, and painting was anathema—and an invitation to the slave labor camps of Siberia.

Ehrenburg, who has been called the cultural “pace setter” of the Soviet Union, thrust all this aside

by sharply criticizing the rigidity of the once highly-touted Marxist product. He admitted, with Socialist caution, that Soviet literary art was lacking in both form and content. And he even conceded that there were some non-Communist writers in the decadent West who deserved respect from Communists.

Backtracking energetically, he wrote what just a few months ago would have been considered rank heresy. “Every society, in the course of its development, eventually reaches a period of artistic flowering—a period both of victory and of harmony. Such epochs can be considered as the high noon of a culture’s growth. Soviet society is only now just passing through its earliest dawn. From a historical viewpoint, a few decades are after all only a very short time indeed. That is why our Soviet writers are not more than pioneers and also why we have not produced any Pushkins and Tolstoys as yet.”

This is surprising talk from the