

HIST 134: Yale and America
Professor: Jay Gitlin

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Harrison Monsky

Selling Dentifrice from New Delhi: Chester Bowles in India, 1951-53

by Harrison Monsky

I. Introduction

“It is at least clear that the State Department has an Ambassador who is an Ambassador in India,” wrote an admiring Walter Lippmann in 1951 to America’s new man in India, Chester Bowles.¹ That Lippmann, then a widely read columnist for the *Herald Tribune*, delivered this praise was not only a testament to a former advertiser and politician’s ability to woo the press and define his brand, but also to Bowles’ strongest trademark as arguably America’s most famous Ambassador to India.² In a new guide he drafted for incoming Foreign Service Officers at the Indian Embassy in 1952, Bowles pointedly asked, “Are you honestly interested in why things in India are as they are, and why Indians feel as they do?” “Are you doing your part to convince them that America respects their new freedom as much as they do?”³ Throughout his stay in India, Bowles seemed to be answering his own questions, even if his answers were met with deaf ears in Washington.

This paper does not attempt to provide an entirely comprehensive account of Bowles’ first tenure as Ambassador to India from 1951-1953, of which the intensity and productivity are

¹ Walter Lippmann to Chester Bowles (hereafter CB), 19 December 1951, Box 88, Folder 115, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, Chester Bowles Papers (hereafter CB Papers).

² Bowles’ substantial correspondence with Lippmann shows a concerted effort by Bowles to sell his views and promote his work as Ambassador to India. See Folder 115, Box 88, CB Papers.

³ CB, “India will Judge America Through You: How Will You Pass the Test?” 1952, Box 115, Folder 535, CB Papers. Quoted in Mark Iscoe, “Chester Bowles in India: An Ambassador’s Agency Under Three Presidents,” in *A Dialogue on Presidential Challenges and Leadership* (Washington: Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, 2010).

evident in the extensive documentary records Bowles donated to his alma mater. Rather, it will consider how Bowles' unique strengths as a diplomat—his ability to empathize, forge relationships and negotiate between the vastly different realities of Asia and Washington—caused him to clash with the same establishment he was charged with representing. Where Bowles was, in fact, interested in why Indians felt as they did, Washington was only interested in where Indians fit in the Cold War jigsaw puzzle. Bowles' willingness to fight Washington despite this fundamental difference in outlook perhaps foreshadowed the disappointing end to his career in government.

II. From New Haven to New Delhi

How did Bowles—a bluish-blooded New England liberal—find himself in the heat of Nehru's New Delhi in December 1952? Bowles began his journey in Connecticut. Born to conservative, well-to-do parents in Springfield, he attended three of the state's most elite schools: Roxbury in Cheshire, Choate in Wallingford and Yale in New Haven. In what he later considered an “academic accident,” he enrolled in Yale's Sheffield Scientific School rather than its more prestigious Liberal Arts College.⁴ Still, Bowles took advantage of the campus' thriving social life, captaining the Golf Team, joining the Book and Snake society, and earning highly respectable “Cs.”

A career in advertising followed. After a botched attempt to break into journalism, Bowles spent four years as a staff copywriter in New York before founding the firm of Benton & Bowles with William Benton, a fellow Yale alumnus, in 1929. The duo found enormous success, pioneering the use of consumer surveys to design advertising campaigns, which would become an industry standard. In a precursor to his conversations with the street dwellers of New Dehli on

⁴ Howard B. Schaffer, *Chester Bowles: New Dealer in the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.

American foreign policy, Bowles himself was known to go door to door interviewing housewives about their preferred household brands. Benton & Bowles became even more famous for its innovations in the young field of radio advertising. Bowles broke new ground by packaging weekly, hour-long radio programs that integrated advertising into scripts, plots and titles.⁵

Despite Bowles' personal financial success, the Depression profoundly affected his personal philosophy, turning him into an ardent supporter of the New Deal and laying the foundations for the liberalism that would famously guide his approach to foreign policy.⁶ The World War II turned Bowles to politics. When a bad ear ruled out active duty, Bowles became an administrator for the Office of Price Administration, eventually rising to its top job. A mixed career in Connecticut politics followed; Bowles was elected governor in 1949, but lost his reelection bid. In search of a post-election job, Bowles leveraged his contacts, including Averell Harriman, then director of the Mutual Security Agency, to angle himself for an overseas diplomatic appointment. When Bowles managed to secure a meeting with Truman, the President asked where he would like to go. Bowles later recalled that he didn't know why he answered, "India," but that Truman responded, "Well, I thought India was pretty jammed with poor people and cows wandering around the streets, witch doctors and people sitting on hot coals...but I did not realize that anybody thought it was important."⁷

III. Ambassadorship

⁵ Schaffer, 10-11.

⁶ For a more thorough treatment of Bowles' worldview as relates to Foreign Policy, see Richard P Dauer, *A North-South Mind in an East-West World: Chester Bowles and the Making of United States Cold War Foreign Policy, 1951-69* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2005).

⁷ Shaffer, 37.

When Bowles arrived in India on October 10, 1951, National Security Council directive 98/1 had already spelled out the official logic behind United States Policy towards India. Entitled, “General United States Policies with Respect to South Asia” and marked Top Secret, the document invoked the dominating logic of Cold War domino theory to call for renewed efforts to improve relations with India. For American strategists, the forecast in Asia looked bleak: China had turned to communism, invaded Tibet, and enabled “reverses” in Korea. Consequently, “the loss of India to the Communist orbit would mean that for all practical purposes all of Asia will have been lost.” In addition to its symbolic and strategic importance as a democratic buffer to communism’s march, India also had “certain strategic materials of importance to our national defense.”⁸

Two of the report’s laundry list of policy recommendations would prove particularly significant for Bowles’ tenure as Ambassador. First, the report noted that the leaders of India in particular “posses great prestige, throughout the whole of Asia,” and called for more aggressively courting those leaders. Their investment in American values and interests could prove critical in influencing other Asian governments and supporting the United States in the diplomatic theatre of the United Nations. Second, though the United States wished to avoid “assumption of responsibility for economic welfare and development,” it called for economic assistance that while admittedly inadequate, would help reverse “the trend towards economic deterioration and of improving the western orientation of India.” A caveat was that this aid would help facilitate on the part of India “the transfer to the United States of materials needed for stockpiling...related to national security.” In other words, the United States would increase aid only to the extent that it saw vital U.S. security interests directly fulfilled.⁹

⁸ General United States Policies with Respect to South Asia, *FRUS, 1951*, Vol. 6, 1650-53.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Bowles made his own assessment after his first weeks in New Delhi, which he laid out in a memorandum to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in December 1951. Even in the very early stages of his Ambassadorship, Bowles challenged the conventional thinking at home in Washington:

We must also re-examine our objectives in India and our concept of India's role in world affairs. We have all regarded India as a country which, by all odds, should be a full partner of the western World in the struggle against the Communist bloc, but which for some perverse reason refused to support the Free World Countries in their efforts to deal with the aggressor powers.¹⁰

In Bowles' eyes, this logic was deeply flawed. Short of a third world war, he argued, India would not openly support the "free world" in any way that might set it against China. "Any aggressive effort to pressure India with a different position will be ineffective," he went on, "and eventually may alienate a people and a government which are now basically sympathetic to our objectives and opposed to totalitarianism."¹¹

Bowles' years of experience in advertising were evidenced by his ability to perceive and explain Indian attitudes and mindsets. By his own account, Bowles had conducted in his first weeks a kind of rolling focus group, drawing conclusions from conversations on the street and over tea with other ambassadors, foreign service officers, peasants, urbanites, journalists and politicians. Bowles' cabled back to Washington a mixed picture. Most importantly, he saw opportunity where the Soviet's position had slipped. While most Indian leaders had only a few years earlier admired Russia's material economic achievements and ignored its more brutal methods, Indian elites now increasingly viewed the USSR as an aggressive instigator of the Korean War and an irresponsible steward of peace. Still, Soviet propaganda remained "alarmingly effective, particularly among young people." Bowles' assessment was consistent

¹⁰ CB to Dean Acheson, 6 December 1951, Box 93, Folder 222, CB Papers.

¹¹ Ibid.

with that of British diplomats, whose ability to influence the U.S. government's understanding of India is apparent in State Department documents detailing the policy process in Washington.¹² In this respect, Bowles also drew on his advertising background in proposing the expansion of U.S. propaganda efforts under the banner of the United States Information Service (USIS). He believed that problematic Indian attitudes could be broken down "with a surprising speed" if only U.S. positions were presented more convincingly.¹³

Bowles next turned to US-Indian relations more generally, explaining differences between the two nations in the context of the prevailing psyche of the Indian leadership. For Bowles, Indians held an "illogical," if subconscious, sense of security, owing to a deep connection to its historically protective geography: two oceans and the tallest mountain range in the world. What was more, the enormous domestic problems facing leaders of a former British colony "induces them to rationalize away the danger of a Russian attack, and to tell themselves that the present conflict is at least partly created by our fears and inexperience." But Indians were also "intensely sensitive" about their new independence when it came to accepting U.S. aid and the requisite strings attached, fearing any move back towards colonial dependence that would hinder its sense of integrity. Related to this fear was uneasiness about the racial prejudices many Indians believed still plagued the United States. "Perhaps the greatest success of the USSR in India," Bowles stated, "is the fact that many Indians are convinced that Americans can never accept the colored races as equals."¹⁴ Bowles' keen and nuanced understanding of the Indian mindset in 1952—a potent and contradictory mixture of history and geopolitics, a false sense of

¹² Memorandum of Informal US-UK Discussions in Connection with the Visit to London of Donald D. Kennedy, Deputy Director, Office of South Asian Affairs, *FRUS, 1951*, Vol. 6, 1653-59.

¹³ CB to Donald Kennedy, 27 December 1951, Box 95, Folder 265, CB Papers.

¹⁴ CB to Dean Acheson, 6 December 1951, Box 93, Folder 22, CB Papers.

security in some areas and a heightened insecurity in others—would be a critical means of forging a bond India’s top leader, Jawarharlal Nehru.

Bowles’ ability to forge close personal ties to Nehru translated into a major strategic advantage for the United States. Arguably the most respected and revered Indian political leader since Gandhi, Nehru’s personal attention was a highly valued commodity for foreign diplomats.¹⁵ Bowles clearly used his charm and personality to his advantage; official correspondence between the two men is speckled with personal touches. One letter from “a grateful” Nehru in October 1952 thanked the “exceedingly good” Bowles for taking the trouble to recover Polaroid photographs the two men had taken on a trip together.¹⁶ Earlier correspondence between Bowles and his staff reveals that Bowles did in fact go through some trouble to locate the films.¹⁷

Soon after Bowles’ arrival, a series of frank conversations with Nehru helped him paint a clear picture of Indian views on American strategy towards the Sino-Soviet threat. Nehru argued that from his perspective, the Cold-War paradigms that dominated U.S. foreign policy rhetoric were problematic. Nehru offered three main recommendations. His first complaint was racial; the United States should aim to “accept the colored nations of the world as full equals with the white” and should also not appear to support colonialism. Second, he felt that the Soviets had more successfully “copyrighted” the word “peace,” and suggested the United States focus on making public commitment to disarmament. Third, he argued that the United States’ statements about China in particular and Communists in general were far too violent; Nehru argued that this only helped the Russians persuade the Chinese that the Americans were hell-bent on destroying them, making Chinese aggression more likely.

¹⁵ Schaffer, 45-47.

¹⁶ Nehru to CB, 15 October 1952, Box 98, Folder n.a., CB Papers.

¹⁷ CB to J. I. Krene, 16 October 1952, Box 98, Folder n.a., CB Papers.

Though far from a hardliner, Bowles held on to serious fears about India's security and unpredictable communist dictators like Mao. On the eve of his departure from New Dehli in March 1953, Bowles sent a final memorandum to Nehru on the potential dangers of the "unsettled political situation" in South Asia. "I am taking the liberty of again opening up this complex and crucial subject," Bowles wrote, "because you have always made me feel that I could talk to you frankly and as a friend." With the death of Stalin earlier that month came the possibility of an emboldened Mao, and the potential for "a Chinese move into the tempting vacuum of 'Indo-China,' a conquest requiring few troops to win much rice. Because he understood Nehru's sensitivity to patronizing attempts to scare India into closer alignment with the west, Bowles turned to early American history and its early policy of neutrality towards European affairs begun under Washington and cemented by Monroe. Likening India's relationship with the countries of Indo-China to the United State's connection with South America, Bowles suggested Nehru offer a stronger security guarantee to vulnerable states like Burma.¹⁸

But if Bowles' bond with Nehru grew stronger until the day he left, his frustration with Washington rose to a fever pitch mid-way through his tenure. Shortly after his return from a trip to Nepal in February 1952, Bowles got word that officials at State had not approved his recommendations for aid to India for the 1953 fiscal year; although he had requested \$157 million, only \$90 million was earmarked in the proposed budget.¹⁹ In addition, Washington had also decided to cut off grain shipments to India 250,000 tons short of the amount Bowles had asked for.

¹⁸ CB to Nehru, 22 March 1953, Box 95, Folder n.a., CB Papers.

¹⁹ CB to Harriman, 8 February 1952, Box 93, Folder 228, CB Papers.

Bowles was furious, and he appealed directly to President Truman's General Counsel, Charles Murphy. "In my opinion, this represents a shocking breach of faith," Bowles wrote. He continued, with a sense of urgency that was palpable in his prose:

Anyone who has traveled at all extensively through India can have no doubt about the need. In a recent thousand mile, nine day automobile tour through South India, I saw many tragic evidences of malnutrition. Indeed, the grain which is expected from us only enables the Indian Government to maintain an average daily diet of 1800 calories, which is substantially below the amount of food required by any reasonable dietetic standard...²⁰

That the bureaucrats in Washington would only provide enough food aid to the extent that it would prevent mass starvation and the Soviets from getting an upper hand was symbolic of a larger gap between Bowles' view and that of the foreign policy establishment. While critics would later paint Bowles and his contemporary Adlai Stevenson as "soft," in disposition and in policy, Bowles saw aid to India not only as a humanitarian calling but also a strategic necessity. In a letter to Averell Harriman on the subject, Bowles set the question of aid to India in dramatic terms. "Time is of the essence," Bowles explained. India was in its second year of a five-year effort to increase food production. If it failed, political unrest could ensue. There was a real danger that the Indian Communist party could successfully ride the issue to an overwhelming political victory. But most importantly, "a demonstration that democracy works in India would be of inestimable value in offsetting propaganda from China about the successes of the communist regime in improving the economic position of its people." In other words, the aid could be crucial in preventing Communism's rise in India.²¹

In fact, Bowles was so determined that he also contacted the President himself: "If Indian democracy was going to survive over the next several years," Bowles later recalled telling Truman, "we would have to take bold steps to help them." But bold steps involved significant

²⁰ CB to Charles Murphy, 23 December 1951, Box 93, Folder 228, CB Papers.

²¹ CB to Harriman, 8 February 1952, Box 93, Folder 228, CB Papers.

aide packages that the bureaucracy was not willing to part with. A keen student of personality, Bowles attempted to appeal to Truman's "record for facing up to critical situations as they came up and going ahead and taking action no matter what the reaction was likely to be." At Truman's prompting, administration officials upped the aid figures, but still did not meet Bowles' initial request.²²

When the Embassy's own operating budget was also reduced, Bowles sent a stern letter to Donald Kennedy that decried the larger problem with Washington—a disengagement with the facts on the ground when it came to public diplomacy in particular and relations with India in general:

Sometimes I think we tend to forget that there is much more to India than just to Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The country is almost as big as the United States and just as varied. If we are to keep up with the current developments and not rely entirely, as we have too much in the past, on newspapers and cocktail parties for our information, we simply must get out into the country.²³

Bowles realized that the fundamental problem was in part a basic and unchangeable one: the sheer distance between Washington and New Delhi. "In Europe, you, and Averell Harriman are able to shuttle across the ocean almost as easily as you can go to Chicago," he explained to Dean Acheson, while policymakers who visited India "are those who have the time to take a round-the-world trip. Most of them spend only a day or two picking up a few quick impressions, then pass on."²⁴ Bowles' tendency to become verbose and repetitive about his personal views with Acheson and others was evident throughout his protests of State's funding cuts. According to Bowles biographer Howard Shaffer, the trait was a holdover from Bowles' advertising days that did not win him friends. As Schaffer points out, "to derisive critics at the State Department and

²² Conversation Memoranda, February 1952, Box 98, Folder n.a., CB Papers.

²³ CB to Donald Kennedy, 15 October 1952, Box 95, Folder 267, CB Papers.

²⁴ CB to Dean Acheson, 23 April 1952, Box 93, Folder 228, CB Papers.

elsewhere...he sometimes seemed to be marketing foreign policy as if it were a breakfast cereal or a dentifrice.”²⁵

While memorandums of Bowles’ conversations with Nehru and outlines of his policy recommendations for Washington show that he at least understood the rules and norms of buttoned-down diplomacy, his correspondence also reveals how Bowles’ previous experience in advertising influenced his less conventional Ambassadorial activities. Tours and cocktail parties were not simply opportunities to shake hands, force laughs and make toasts; they were also opportunities to survey, query and observe. In the information and propaganda wars with China and the USSR, Indians were consumers whom Bowles’ clients at the State Department failed to fully understand.

Bowles’ letters to Donald Kennedy, the Director of the South Asian Affairs desk at the State Department are filled with anecdotal incidents that reveal truths on the ground Bowles believed were overlooked in Foggy Bottom. In 1951, Bowles wrote to Kennedy the he had “run into a startling indication of Russian propaganda throughout the East on the race question” at a cocktail party at an upscale club in Madras for Indian officials and businessmen. The toastmaster, whom Bowles identified as “definitely pro-American,” stated in his speech that Indians were deeply bothered that America had been “willing to drop the atomic bomb on “the Asian Japanese but were unwilling to drop it on the white Germans.”²⁶

The notion that American war tactics were brutish in nature and prejudiced against non-whites was not only a common suspicion held by Indian elites, but also a focus of Chinese and Russian propaganda efforts against the United States. By his own account, Bowles constantly had to counter these propaganda efforts. In a letter to Nehru in January 1953, he singled out a

²⁵ Schaffer, 4.

²⁶ CB to Donald Kennedy, 28 December 1951, Box 95, Folder 265, CB Papers.

three-inch thick book by a so-called “International Scientific Commission,” widely distributed among Indian politicians, that claimed to contain evidence “to prove beyond question that the American Government and the American people were guilty of dropping germs throughout North China.” The report alleged that America’s goal was “to create an epidemic disease and to bring death to millions of Chinese.”²⁷ Bowles pointed to numerous other such examples of patently false and comically ludicrous claims that littered the Indian mainstream press, including a local newspaper article describing how “Americans beat children before their mothers’ eyes.”²⁸

Bowles’ determination to be America’s ears in India also extended beyond elites in the government and media. In 1951, Bowles visited the state of Travancore-Cochin, touring a series of villages on the eve of a local election day. When Bowles grew alarmed by the fact that the villages were covered with Communist Party flags, with only a handful supporting Nehru and his Congress Party, he was calmed after talking to the villagers, who “seemed to know very little about Russia or take any particular interest in the Cold War.”²⁹ When Bowles inquired about who owned the local farmland, the villagers explained that a small group of landlords held a monopoly on farmland and typically took 60-75 percent of each year’s yield as a fee. “In rural India,” Bowles went on to explain to Donaldson, “the Communist appeal...is almost entirely based on the land problems, and when the conditions are as we found them in this area the appeal is frighteningly successful.”³⁰

Though his schedule was often packed with meetings to sell America to Indian journalists, Bowles still made time for Yale Daily News. When the then-Chairman of the Yale Daily News, James C. Thompson Jr., asked Bowles to write a piece for the newspaper’s seventy-

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Draft Letter, 1952, Box 98, Folder n.a., CB Papers.

²⁹ CB to Kennedy, 28 December 1951, Box 95, Folder 265, CB Papers.

³⁰ Ibid.

fifth anniversary issue in 1953,³¹ Bowles sent a kind reply in the affirmative, albeit a month later and on stationary far plainer than that of the news. Thompson sent a follow-up letter that emphasized that the News was still “counting heavily” on Bowles’ participation, but had taken the precaution of securing a back-up writer from another alumnus, a “distinguished Negro jurist” in New York. It was not until Bowles received a business-like telegram that simply read “OCTOBER FIFTEEN FINAL DEADLINE—JAMES THOMPSON CHAIRMAN YALE DAILY NEWS,” that work on the article commenced. That same day, Bowles tasked the lead Public Affairs officer for the South Asian Affairs desk at the State Department to draft an article discussing “the problem of racial harmony in winning acceptance of American foreign policy in Asia.”³² Even the busy Bowles took a deadline seriously when it came from the Chairman of the News.

IV. Conclusion

Bowles ended his larger career in 1969 with long list of prestigious government positions spanning four presidents—head of the Office of Price Administration, Governor of Connecticut, Congressman, Undersecretary of State, and twice Ambassador to India—and yet he is popularly remembered for having ended his career in abject failure.³³ Though his pedigree made him a de facto member of the eastern establishment that dominated American government and industry in those years, he was ultimately cast as an outlier of the Cold War foreign policy establishment that came to control the Kennedy administration and Washington at large. He abandoned any of his own presidential ambitions to serve as John F. Kennedy’s foreign policy advisor during the 1960 presidential campaign with the hope of getting tapped for Secretary of State. But once

³¹ James Thompson to CB, 5 July 1952, Box 93, Folder 22, CB Papers.

³² Edward Logue to S. Shepard Jones, 16 December 1952, Box 93, Folder 22, CB Papers.

³³ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (Greenwich: Fawcett Crest, 1969), 18-30.

Kennedy had absorbed the liberal constituency over which Bowles and his contemporary Adlai Stevenson held sway, his views were painted as soft on communism and his influence in the administration was marginalized; he ultimately resigned out of frustration.³⁴

Historians have characterized Bowles' sweeping vision of America's role in the world³⁵ as a natural outgrowth of a New Deal liberal, implicitly guided by a naïve disregard for the crude but natural laws of power. But this characterization does not do justice to the way Bowles related the nuts and bolts of his Ambassadorship to what he considered wider American goals. He was more accurately a strong proponent and shrewd projector of what the political scientist Joseph Nye now calls "soft power." Nye argues that where hard power involves great power politics, soft power involves convincing others to "want what you want."³⁶ While this concept may have been counterintuitive for Cold Warriors like Acheson and Harriman, it came naturally to Madison Avenue men like Benton and Bowles; it was undoubtedly Bowles' years as an advertiser that informed his intense desire to convince, rather than coerce, everyday Indians that they fundamentally shared much more with the United States than with the Soviet Union. Bowles' faith in the value of America's trademark products—capitalism and democracy—was never in doubt. He just knew he could sell them better than anyone else.

³⁴ See Halberstam.

³⁵ See Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941-1969* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

³⁶ See Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

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