

A U.S. Diplomat With an Extraordinary Global View

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PORT OF SPAIN, [Trinidad](#)

AS chief of the political section at the American Embassy here for the last two years, Avraham Rabby has had the job of surveying Trinidad's political landscape for Washington.

The fact that he has not actually seen the Caribbean island — or any of the places on five continents where he has been posted — has not stymied him.

“I necessarily listen more than a sighted person would,” he said. “If I’m walking along a street, I can tell there is a building next to me because of the echoes of my feet or my cane. A blind person sees the world differently from a sighted person. Our impressions are no less valid.”

Mr. Rabby, who lost his sight at the age of 8 because of detached retinas, is the State Department's first blind diplomat. It is an achievement he fought for in the 1980s, passing three written entrance exams and two oral exercises along the way. But even then, the State Department barred him from the diplomatic corps.

“You don't ask a blind person to drive a bus or be a bank teller,” George S. Vest, who was the personnel director for the Foreign Service, explained in a 1988 interview. “There are jobs which are dangerous or unsuitable for them. And in the Foreign Service, we're full of jobs like that.”

The department contended that diplomats, blind ones included, had to be able to work anywhere in the world and to work with confidential documents without any outside aid. In addition, State Department officials said, diplomats had to be able to pick up on nonverbal cues,

such as winks or nods, which can sometimes have more meaning than the words being uttered.

But Mr. Rabby illustrated another essential quality of diplomats: perseverance. “No international treaty has ever been decided on the basis of a wink or a nod,” he retorted, after hiring a lawyer and challenging the State Department’s policy, which dated from the 18th century.

Aiding Mr. Rabby’s effort was a federal law barring the government from disqualifying prospective employees because of disabilities. Eventually, after the news media and Congress found out about his case, the State Department reversed course. The new policy would consider disabled diplomats on a case-by-case basis. Mr. Rabby became case No. 1.

In 1990, he was off to London, where he was posted at the embassy there as a junior political officer. He moved next to Pretoria, South Africa, where [Nelson Mandela](#) had just been freed from prison and where Mr. Rabby witnessed the country’s first free elections. “It was one of the most stimulating experiences in my life,” he said, noting that he was one of the embassy’s election observers.

“People ask me how I can assess a political rally if I can’t see it,” he said. “I tell them that I listen to the crowd and to the speakers. You can sense what is going on.”

He spent time in Washington at the State Department’s Bureau of Human Rights, and in postings in Lima and New Delhi. During a stint at the United States Mission to the [United Nations](#), he helped write resolutions dealing with literacy, global health and the rights of the disabled.

His final posting — he retired at the end of June at the mandatory retirement age of 65 — was to Port of Spain, where he became an expert in Trinidad’s political system, which has long been divided between

parties, one predominantly Afro-Trinidadian and one Indo-Trinidadian.

When journalists descended on Trinidad recently in search of information on the suspected plot to set off a bomb at a fuel line at Kennedy International Airport that was traced back to this Caribbean island, he became one of the officials to talk to.

“A diplomat does a lot of writing, a lot of reading, a lot of thinking, a lot of talking and has to attend a lot of meetings,” he said. Thanks to technological advances and a full-time assistant, Mr. Rabby could do all of those things too.

He wrote his cables to Washington using a machine that wrote in Braille. He then read them back to his assistant, Rhonda Singh, who typed them up. He also had a computer with a speech program that allowed him to listen to his e-mail messages.

As for tracking news developments, Ms. Singh, an American citizen who lives in Trinidad, read him the local papers. “I was basically his eyes,” she said.

BORN in Israel, Mr. Rabby, who is known as Rami, was sent to live with an aunt in England at the age of 10 because his parents believed there were better schools for the blind there. A Hebrew speaker, he quickly mastered English at Worcester College for Blind Boys.

“I remember the headmaster used to go out and speak to groups about the school, and he used to say that we teach our boys to stand on their own two feet and, if necessary, to step on yours too,” Mr. Rabby recalled.

He went off to Oxford, where he studied French and Spanish. Finding a job after college proved a challenge. “Time and time again I met recruiters who felt that a blind person could not work in management,” he said in the British accent that he has never lost.

Eventually, he joined Ford Motor Company in Britain, where he worked in human resources. After about a year, he moved to the United States and earned an M.B.A. at the [University of Chicago](#).

After graduation in 1969, he sought out a management training program, but had few offers after “dozens and dozens, if not hundreds” of interviews.

He finally landed a job with a management consulting firm, Hewitt Associates, and later moved to Citibank. He also spent time as an independent consultant, writing a number of employment guides, including one giving advice to blind job seekers.

“One of my problems in my working life, after a few years I get a bit tired of what I am doing and I want to change,” said Mr. Rabby, who became an American citizen in 1980.

It was while living in New York that he decided to make the jump into international relations, a longtime interest. The State Department’s regular rotations of its diplomats proved a perfect fit.

His fight to join the Foreign Service has helped others along the way. There are now four blind Foreign Service officers stationed around the globe, the State Department said, among about 170 disabled Foreign Service employees overseas.

MR. RABBY said blind Foreign Service officers had recently been restricted from adjudicating visa applications because of their inability to verify photographs and signatures of applications.

Mr. Rabby, who attributes the decision to the increased restrictions after the Sept. 11 attacks, said he did visa work at the start of his career in London, with the assistance of a reader, who verified documents for him. He asked the questions and assessed the responses.

“The State Department is not yet completely on the side of the angels,” he said. A State Department official disputed that there was a policy in

place restricting the assignments of blind diplomats. Decisions on assigning personnel, the official said, are made on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the law.

Even before Mr. Rabby headed out into the world as a diplomat, he was already testifying before Congress on his quest for the job. He said back then that he did not want to be put in a pigeonhole as a blind diplomat.

“Blind people are as different from one another as sighted people,” he told members of the House Foreign Affairs and Civil Service Committees in 1989. “There is no such thing as a category labeled, ‘blind.’ ”