



HOME ABROAD

Charles Rivkin, with son Eli, daughter Lily, and wife Susan Tolson, behind the ambassador's residence in Paris. On Charles and Eli, Ralph Lauren Purple Label. On Lily, Ralph Lauren Collection. On Susan, Ralph Lauren Black Label.



EMBASSY SWEET

From their breathtaking residence on Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré in Paris, American ambassador Charles Rivkin and his wife Susan Tolson demonstrate what it means to be model diplomats.

By SUZI PARKER

CHARLES RIVKIN WAS STRAPPED INTO A PARACHUTE, and he didn't let strong winds deter him as the helicopter hovered over Normandy. The occasion was a mass jump with the U.S. Army's Golden Knights to commemorate the 68th anniversary of D-Day, last June, and it was the ambassador's first free fall.

Some jumpers landed in trees and were injured, but not Rivkin. Twelve thousand feet later, he came down on France's coast and became the first American ambassador to participate in the yearly event.

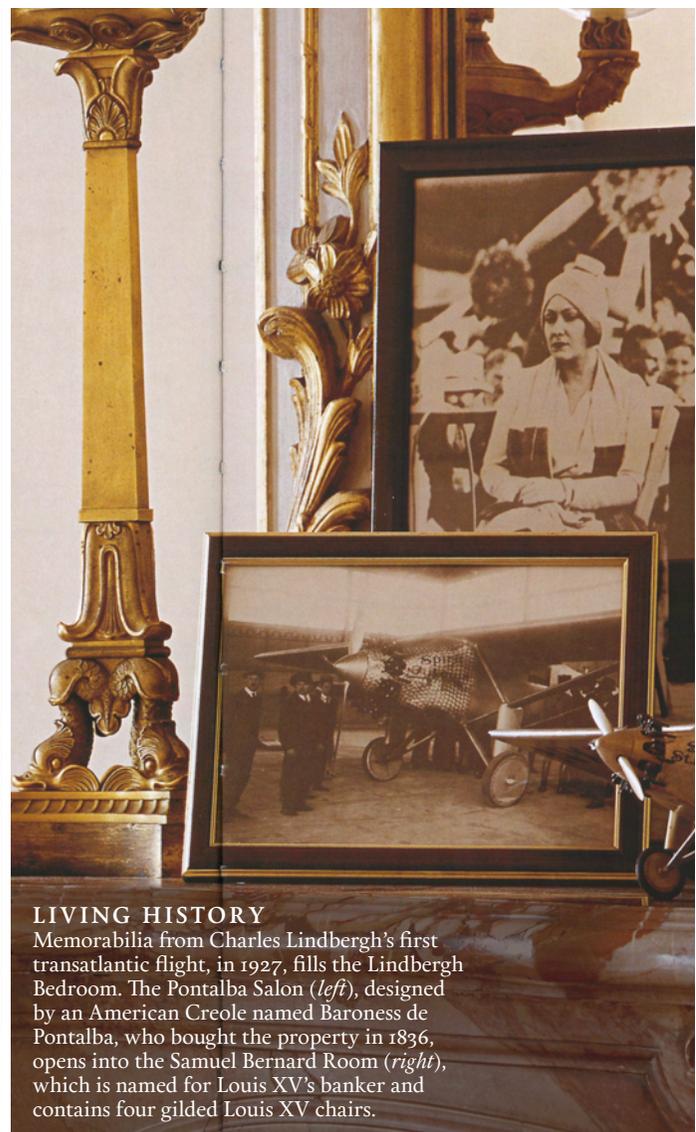
"An unforgettable memory, but I think the State Department would prefer that this particular initiative does not become an ambassadorial tradition," Rivkin says.

It was all in a day's work for a man who has seamlessly made the transition from managing Muppets to managing international relations. The former CEO of the Jim Henson Company was appointed United States ambassador to France and Monaco by President

Obama in 2009, at age 47, and since then Rivkin and his wife Susan Tolson have become a dynamic duo at the historic Paris embassy. They are known as impressive hosts and are sought-after guests at Paris's most spectacular events. They are also the parents of two teenagers, Eli and Lily.

"This is the first time in a generation that teenagers have lived at the U.S. ambassador's residence, and it is something that they will never forget," Rivkin says. Their current home, the Hôtel de Pontalba, on the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré, is a mansion that was owned by the Rothschild family from 1876 until World War II, when it was occupied by the Nazis. After the

Photograph by JONATHAN BECKER



LIVING HISTORY

Memorabilia from Charles Lindbergh's first transatlantic flight, in 1927, fills the Lindbergh Bedroom. The Pontalba Salon (*left*), designed by an American Creole named Baroness de Pontalba, who bought the property in 1836, opens into the Samuel Bernard Room (*right*), which is named for Louis XV's banker and contains four gilded Louis XV chairs.

“I’M FORTUNATE TO SERVE AT A TIME WHEN FAVORABLE VIEWS

war the Rothschilds sold it to the U.S. government. “Susan sometimes describes our house as a combination three-star restaurant, hotel, and conference center. We receive more than 15,000 visitors here each year, and we’re hosting or attending an event almost every night.”

With his connections to Hollywood, Rivkin has placed American culture at the forefront of his embassy’s mission. Last year Warner Bros. installed a digital screening room with 3-D technology in a former ballroom to promote diplomacy via film. Last July, on the eve of a Paris concert by Tony Bennett, Rivkin and Tolson hosted a screening, in honor of the singer, of the documentary film *The Zen of Bennett*. “Films can be some of our best cultural ambassadors,” Rivkin says, “and we have established regular screenings at our house of some of Hollywood’s best movies as a great way to bridge our two cultures.”

Tolson, a former money manager at the Capital Group in Los Angeles, often sits in the front row at Paris’s fashion shows, and she and her husband have hosted a dinner for Ralph Lauren, as well as Woody Allen and Clint Eastwood. During Paris Fashion Week in 2011 the couple gave a garden dinner for 200 guests to celebrate Michael Kors’s 30th anniversary in fashion, with Mary J. Blige performing.

Rivkin, who speaks fluent French as a result of years spent studying and working in France in his youth, realizes that celebrity can mend fences, too. Early in his tenure he invited Samuel L. Jackson to speak to a group of aspiring film students in the Paris suburb of Bondy, which is home to many African Muslims often overlooked by French politicians. “In many ways, as ambassador you are America’s chief salesman, and the ability to speak French and connect with French people from all walks of life is essential,” Rivkin says. He admits, though, that his task could be tougher. “I’m fortunate to serve in France at a time when favorable views of America in this country are at an all-time high.”

The pair have made youth outreach a main component of their work. Rivkin says his wife is very proud of the organic garden she created at the ambassador’s residence, in partnership with a local horticultural school. The project is modeled on Michelle Obama’s White House garden. Tolson has also initiated a project, *Maison pour Tous*, that helps at-risk youth.

The U.S. embassy under Rivkin is the first in the Foreign Service to have a fleet of electric cars. “At the embassy we’re very conscious of our environmental footprint,” he says. And for the first time in the embassy’s history, the “Art in the Embassies” program features American

ARNAUD CARPENTIER/CONNAISSANCE DES ARTS (3)



OF AMERICA IN THIS COUNTRY ARE AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH.”

photography, mixing 18th-century architecture with modern art. Rivkin hosted an event last November to honor the centennial of the birth of African-American photographer Gordon Parks.

Many diplomat watchers say that Rivkin, who raised more than \$500,000 for President Obama's reelection campaign, is the embodiment of what an ambassador in a friendly country should be: fluent in the language, savvy about diplomacy, and well connected among the cognoscenti, both diplomatic and indigenous. Which is not surprising, perhaps. His father William R. Rivkin was ambassador to Luxembourg under President Kennedy and also served as ambassador to Senegal and Gambia under Lyndon Johnson. The younger Rivkin says he was “temporarily speechless” when Obama appointed him.

“I was deeply humbled by the president's call, because I knew that it would make me the youngest U.S. ambassador to France in nearly 60 years, at a time when we are working closely with France on all the major international issues of the day,” he says. “Whether it's transferring security to the Afghan people and winding down the NATO mission, saving civilian lives in Libya, or coordinating a firm response to the Iranian nuclear weapons program, France is a vital partner.” ●

THE AMBASSADOR'S ADDRESS BOOK

Charles Rivkin and Susan Tolson's favorite Parisian spots.

La Cigale Récamier, famed for its sweet and savory soufflés.
4 Rue Récamier, 33-1-45-48-86-58

The cozy **Voltaire**, near the Eiffel Tower, which serves some of the city's best traditional French cuisine at intimate tables in a dimly lit, wood-paneled space.
27 Quai Voltaire,
33-1-42-61-17-49

Bofinger, a 145-year-old brasserie serving endless quantities of French onion soup and foie gras, and towers of seafood. It's where François Mitterrand celebrated his election as France's president, in 1981. 5-7 Rue de la Bastille, 33-1-42-72-87-82

L'Avenue, a favorite of the fashion and celebrity crowds, near the Plaza Athénée. 41 Avenue Montaigne, 33-1-40-70-14-91

The **Musée d'Orsay**, where Ambassador Rivkin dedicated the original prototype of the Statue of Liberty last July. 5 Quai Anatole France, 33-1-40-49-48-14

Le Duc, a discreet bistro serving fabulous seafood. 243 Boulevard Raspail, 33-1-43-20-96-30

The walk from the **8th Arrondissement** to the **Marais**, or as far as **Bercy**, where the couple like to admire some of the city's most historic architecture.

PLUM POSTS

The pricey path to the most coveted positions in government.

IN 1993, PAMELA DIGBY CHURCHILL Hayward Harriman shipped her renowned art collection, including Van Gogh's *White Roses* (which she had received from her last husband, Averell Harriman), to the American ambassador's residence, on Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré in Paris. Days later the English-born socialite, famed for her meticulous elegance and her unparalleled ability to charm powerful men, arrived to take her position as the ambassador to France, appointed by President Clinton. Except perhaps among the Democratic Party insiders for whom she had raised millions and

plotted campaign strategy, Harriman, who always kept the embassy awash in fresh orchids, was known more for her hosting abilities than for her deftness in trade talk and diplomacy.

In the aftermath of the killing of Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, Libya, last September, it's clearer than ever that the title "ambassador" connotes two very distinct jobs, with two wholly different candidate pools. When it comes to posts in Central America, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, or Haiti, deep pockets and chumminess with the commander-in-chief are incidental, at most, and usually irrelevant. (China and Mexico can fall into that category too, depending on the political climate.) Career diplomats are sent to those places, and they receive hardship allowances and danger pay to live in often perilous conditions and keep tabs on impending political uprisings, human rights abuses, and potential threats to America and its interests.

Then there are the jobs in Western Europe—particularly France,



Italy, and the United Kingdom—and other always friendly places such as New Zealand, Japan, and many Caribbean countries, where maintaining the status quo, through attending social functions and cultural events, is the bulk of the job description. These ambassadorships are hung like bait for wealthy and influential friends of would-be presidents.

"Cash for cachet" has been going on since this nation's early days, when the Founding Fathers appointed well-heeled friends to overseas posts. Since then influential nondiplomats have regularly been rewarded with the best embassy jobs. FDR made Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. ambassador to the U.K.; former child movie star

Shirley Temple Black served in two ambassador posts under two different presidents; playwright, congresswoman, and socialite Clare Boothe Luce (wife of publisher Henry Luce) was ambassador to Italy under Eisenhower; and actor John Gavin served as ambassador to Mexico under Ronald Reagan. But more than fame, it's campaign donations that can seal an appointment. In 1971, President Richard Nixon told White House chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, "Anybody who wants to be an ambassador must at least give \$250,000." Haldeman agreed, according to released recordings, stating, "I think any contributor under \$100,000 we shouldn't consider for any kind of thing."

In the wake of Watergate, President Jimmy Carter signed the 1980 Foreign Service Act into law, which states that an appointed or assigned chief of mission should know a country's language and have a deep "knowledge and understanding of the history, the culture, the economic and political institutions, and the interests of that country and its people." The act also says, "Contributions to political campaigns should not be a factor in the appointment of an individual as a chief of mission."

OBAMA'S NEXT PICKS?

Since ambassadors come and go at the president's will—or step down on their own after a few years, eager to return home—new appointments will surely be made during Obama's second term. Here are some contenders.

JAY SNYDER

The pharmaceuticals heir and financier raised more than half a million dollars for Obama and is a member of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.



ANNA WINTOUR

The *Vogue* editor and annual Met Ball hostess raised nearly \$3 million for Obama's reelection, and publishing insiders have whispered about an eventual ambassadorship for years. Last fall several papers brought that speculation out into the open, reporting that Wintour could be in line for the London or Paris post when either current ambassador steps down, though cooler heads insist that the speculation alone is her reward for her support.



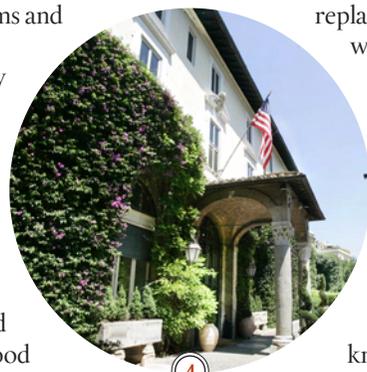
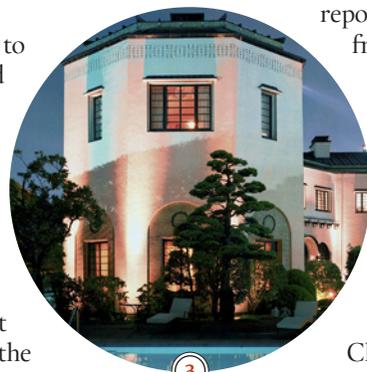
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: U.S. EMBASSY LONDON; D. DIPASUPLI/WIREIMAGE; BRYAN BEDDER/GETTY IMAGES

RESIDENCES, FROM TOP: © DESIGN PICS INC./RM CONTENT/ALAMY; ELIZABETH E. GILL LUI © 2001; PIER PAOLO CITTO/AP PHOTO; PEOPLE, FROM LEFT: BILLY FARRELL/BFANYC.COM; ANDREW HARRE/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY TYLER DRISCOLL/DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE; MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE

It's a piece of legislation that no president since has had any qualms about ignoring. In part this is because wealth is an essential requirement for being an ambassador, at least in such high-profile posts as London and Paris. Campaign donations aren't the end of the spending spree; they're just the beginning. Not only do ambassadors abandon their private sector professions to serve, they inevitably use personal accounts for entertaining, decorating, and dressing like a diplomat, because Congress appropriates enough funds for embassies to operate, period—not operate stylishly. Pamela Harriman reportedly spent between \$120,000 and \$180,000 a year entertaining in Paris on behalf of her country.

If history is any indication, Obama's ambassador to the United Kingdom, retired Citigroup banker and megadonor Louis Susman, will have entertained more than 25,000 people when he steps down from his post at Winfield House, the ambassador's residence in Regent's Park, which he reportedly intends to do this year. (He hosted Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, Prince Charles and Camilla, and an array of athletes during the London Olympics last summer.) The associated expenses come on top of the funds that Susman's wife Marjorie already spent redecorating the 35-room neo-Georgian mansion in a manner that highlights late-20th-century American art on loan from museums and from the couple's private collection.

Former ambassadors tell stories about how they routinely wrote checks to staffers to entertain their foreign peers. Connecticut businessman Thomas C. Foley, who served as ambassador to Ireland under President George W. Bush, used \$500,000 of his own money to refurbish Deerfield House, the ambassador's residence in Dublin. Walter H. Annenberg, whom Nixon chose as ambassador to the U.K., and his wife Leonore paid for the renovation of Winfield House by Hollywood decorator Billy Haines, who created the residence's magnificent Green Room using hand-painted 18th-century Chinese wallpaper. The expense paid off; Leonore Annenberg became an admired hostess in London, especially in royal circles, and Queen Elizabeth made Walter Annenberg an honorary knight, only the



second American ambassador to receive the title.

"One of the justifications often given for political appointees is that they have the ability to dip into their own pockets," says Dennis Jett, a former ambassador to Mozambique and Peru who now teaches international affairs at Penn State.

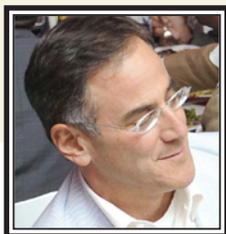
That was a hard and unexpected lesson for Obama's pick to Luxembourg, Cynthia Stroum, a Seattle heiress and campaign bundler who resigned in 2011 amid damning allegations that she had made unapproved expenditures, using public funds for a queensize bed, liquor, and a trip to Switzerland to search for a chef. (The State Department's report on the matter also stated that Stroum had "a confrontational management style." Many members of her embassy staff requested transfers to Afghanistan or Iraq.) She was swiftly replaced by Florida real estate developer and major Obama campaign contributor Robert A. Mandell.

That said, money is not the sole qualification of most appointees to desirable posts. And even if their duties are hardly as serious as, say, those of their counterparts in Kabul or Cairo, some of them turn out to be top-notch diplomats; many cite Charles Rivkin, or one of his predecessors in France, Lazard Frères bigwig Felix Rohatyn (who, incidentally, replaced Harriman's French modernist art in the embassy with modern American works curated by his daughter-in-law, Upper East Side gallerist Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn). And in the end Harriman—the queen of dinner parties and marrying well, whose appointment stirred no small amount of controversy—didn't just charm the French with her style, she helped negotiate the details of major peace and arms treaties. She died while serving in the post, in 1997, and the next day career diplomat Richard Holbrooke was asked to describe her performance. "I knew every ambassador in France for the last 30 years," he said, "and she was quite simply the best." **S.P.**

THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE IN:
[1] The United Kingdom. **[2]** Ireland. **[3]** Japan. **[4]** Italy.

MICHAEL SACKS

The CEO of a big Chicago hedge fund bundled at least \$500,000 for Obama, and he's already an ambassador of sorts: Mayor Rahm Emanuel appointed him his city's chief corporate ambassador.



BLAIR EFFRON

Co-founder of private equity firm Centerview Partners, Efron is already a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution.

JANE STETSON

The IBM heiress and national finance chair for the Democratic National Committee is a natural successor to Rivkin. Stetson attended the Sorbonne while her father Arthur K. Watson was ambassador to France.



GEORGE CLOONEY

Okay, this one isn't exactly rumored yet, but considering that deep pockets, sophistication, presidential allegiance, and shmoozing capabilities are key attributes of 21st-century ambassadors (to friendly countries), why not appoint a debonair star with a nice little Lake Como villa to the Rome post?

