

Dancing with the Queen

The two most exciting public events of my life occurred before I turned forty.

In the spring of 1953, when I was only twenty-five, I was invited to attend the opening of the new American Embassy residence in London. My father had been appointed ambassador by President Dwight D. Eisenhower two years before, and my wife Elizabeth and I had enjoyed the privilege of attending Queen Elizabeth's coronation and all the preliminary festivities. Even so, I was only somewhat prepared for what happened at this embassy event.

Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip had been invited to the embassy party and had accepted, as had Sir Winston Churchill, who had recently been returned to service as prime minister for the second time.

The morning of the Big Day was devoted to preparing me for the ordeal of dancing with Her Majesty. My wife, my four sisters and their husbands were all there, and there seemed to be a general assumption that I would goof up somehow.

I was shown a small line on the floor of the ballroom where I was to be stationed as soon as my father danced once around the floor. When the moment arrived, I dutifully oozed into place and watched as my father and Her Majesty smoothly danced around and approached me.



Taken as the Queen arrived for the ball at the Embassy in Regent's Park, the night we danced together. She is being greeted by my father, the Ambassador. Photographer unknown.

"Ma'am," he said quietly to her, "may I present to you my son, Alexander?"

I do not remember her reply, but it must have been affirmative, and I placed my arm around her waist. I was frightened out of my wits, but immediately noticed how small she was, and how beautiful her complexion.

We danced a slow, two-step fox trot once around the floor, and by some miracle I managed to avoid breaking her or stepping on her foot, while making unremarkable small talk the whole time. She danced beautifully.

As we completed the mandatory single circuit of the floor, there was former Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge standing on the place from which I had started. I had a sudden impulse to go right on by, but instead I stopped dancing, turned to the queen, and said "Ma'am, may I present to you Ambassador Lodge?"

She smiled prettily, thanked me for the dance, and was whirled away.

The entire event must have lasted for about ten minutes. Sadly, from the moment the dance ended, I could never remember anything either of us had said.

What I do remember was what happened next. I stood near the dance floor watching other people dancing for a while, and suddenly noticed I was standing next to a short, chubby man who was lighting an absolutely colossal cigar. He could only be Sir Winston Churchill.

I tossed aside my knowledge that British protocol frowns on speaking to someone to whom one has not been introduced, took a huge breath and said,

"Sir Winston I am the Ambassador's son Alexander and my wife and I live right around the corner from your mother's house in Brooklyn!"

He finished lighting the cigar, removed it from his lips, leaned over to me in a conspiratorial fashion and said. "I gave them a plaque!" Then he turned and walked away.

So, I had danced with the queen and chatted with Churchill. Would I ever again do anything more interesting?

The answer to the question above is an emphatic "yes!"

I also marched with Martin Luther King Jr., all the way from Selma to Montgomery, and that was even more interesting, lasted for more than a week, and was quite a lot harder to do.