

P-ISSN: 2986-3686

E-ISSN: 2798-4427

JGSS

Journal of Global Strategic Studies

Vol. 3 No. 2 December 2023

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Navigating Indonesia-United States relations, 1967-1969:

President Soeharto's Australian Whisperer

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Individuals not holding formal positions are often overlooked in studies of international relations, where the focus is generally on Heads of State, foreign ministers and accredited professionals attached to diplomatic services. Indeed, it is an anomaly for an individual, and certainly a non-national, to act as an envoy for one government, and for that intermediary to be attached great importance by another foreign government. Such an abnormality was Clive Williams, President Soeharto of Indonesia's Australian Whisperer. Williams has never been mentioned in a single diplomatic, political or historical account of United States-Indonesia relations. But as shall be seen, he was an extremely effective and indispensable intermediary for both countries as they moved towards closer relations in the late 1960s. The practice of a non-national assisting a national leader in international affairs is a fascinating concept.

In 1966, United States Ambassador Marshall Green had a major diplomatic obstacle to overcome in Indonesia – 46-year-old General Soeharto, the man effectively running the country, was proving to be inaccessible. Ambassador Green then discovered Clive Williams, an extremely close confidant of Soeharto and his inner political and social circles. It was revelatory - Williams was not just an English tutor to Soeharto, he was an impossibly close insider. Soeharto's Australian 'whisperer' would become an indispensable intermediary for the United States Embassy as the General rose to the Presidency in the ensuing years.

Born in Geelong, Australia in 1921, Clive Williams was just a few months older than Soeharto. After little over three years as a Jehovah's Witness missionary in eastern

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Indonesia, Williams moved to Semarang, Central Java in 1955 where he established a private English course. The local army commander Colonel Soeharto and his wife Tien were among his earliest students, and they developed a very close personal bond. Williams was a good English teacher and was wise and knowledgeable about the outside world - he had travelled to London and New York! To the inward-looking Javanese couple, Williams was a revelation.

Soeharto's outlook on the world had been confined to his humble, rural Java upbringing and domestic experience as a field soldier and military leader; he had little interest in issues of international importance. This was clearly evident as he rose to national leadership through 1966 and 1967, when the Australian Embassy observed, *"There has been evidence that he requires more schooling in international affairs, particularly insofar as the relations between foreign policy and economics is concerned. In this area he has shown himself to be somewhat naive"* (Australian Embassy, 1966).

As Soeharto's position consolidated in Jakarta, Williams was brought in from Semarang eventually settling adjacent to the family compound in the leafy suburb of Menteng. Soeharto was not an intellectual, but he was shrewd, and knew what he did not know. He certainly wasn't following international affairs; Clive Williams was doing that for him, as the Australian Embassy eventually discovered: *"Williams reads, and summarises, the foreign press for the President, prepares English language tapes for Soeharto's continuing English instruction, delivers to the President oral preces of books which the President does not have time to read, handles some English language correspondence both for Soeharto and for his wife... and more..."* (Australian Embassy, 1968a).

Apart from a lack of actual knowledge about international relations, Soeharto had several personal and political shortcomings that were hampering his conduct of international affairs. Firstly, Soeharto was suspicious of politicians and intellectuals, preferring to have domestic-focused army officers as his advisors. Secondly, he was uncomfortable around diplomats and foreigners, both personally as well as for the purpose of projecting the impression that Indonesia was neutral internationally and he not captive to any side of the ensuing Cold War struggle - *"It is hoped that America will not try to orbit us as an American satellite"*, said Soeharto in 1966 (Time, 1966). Thirdly, Soeharto was fairly inaccessible to all but his closest friends, who tended to operate as go-betweens and intermediaries to the various political and economic stakeholders he needed to manage.

It was in this context that non-Indonesian Clive Williams would be of invaluable service to Soeharto. Williams could provide independent assessments and analysis of international issues, separate to those that Soeharto was receiving from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his personal international operatives like Ali Murtopo. Williams too, unlike Soeharto's army officer advisors, could give neutral, uncomplicated advice and encouragement. And Williams could, as a trusted intermediary vis-a-vis foreign governments, give confidence and validation to Soeharto's first steps into the world of international diplomacy. Notably how this happened was more through circumstance than design.

The Revelation

Soeharto had begun his ascent to power in October 1965 when he was appointed Army Commander following a coup attempt that saw his predecessor and much of the army leadership murdered. Gradually his power, and that of the armed forces, strengthened to the point that by mid-1966 he was able to largely appoint his own Cabinet, in effect becoming a de facto Prime Minister or Premier under President Sukarno.

Overseeing day-to-day government affairs was a new Cabinet Presidium. Officially made up of five members, in practice the Presidium was a triumvirate consisting of Soeharto (Chief Minister of Defense and Security), Adam Malik (Chief Minister of Political Affairs/Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX (Chief Minister of Economics and Finance). This trio was presented popularly as Indonesia's new, refreshed leadership, as described by *Time* magazine:

Soeharto works in league with two civilians, the Sultan of Jogjakarta and Adam Malik, who with him form a triumvirate that combines the best of power, brains, and traditionalism—with a maximum of dedication and a minimum of personal ambition. Soeharto provides the power of army backing. Malik, a Sumatran with practical diplomatic experience, provides the brains. And Hamengku Buwono IX, the Sultan of Jogjakarta, adds the traditionalism and prestige (Time, 1966).

The Sultan was the traditional ruler of Jogjakarta, to whom authority was considered cosmological or mystical rather than political. He was influential in Indonesia's revolutionary independence struggle against the Dutch in the late 1940s, was Western-educated, and considered a possible successor to Sukarno. Adam Malik, a former journalist, was a skilful politician who was quick to switch allegiance from Sukarno to Soeharto, often defying the President in meetings (such as over the end to

konfrontasi with Malaysia) while Soeharto kept silent. The concept of the triumvirate though was somewhat of a misnomer, as American historian Ruth McVey explained: “*Real power lay entirely with Soeharto, but the Sultan symbolised stability and respectability and Malik both pragmatism and the revolutionary past*” (McVey, 1985).

By early 1967, Soeharto was emerging as the front-runner to replace President Sukarno, but it was by no means a sure thing. It is at this point that Clive Williams enters the broader picture of Indonesian political life. The earliest known mention of Williams in the US diplomatic archives is from January 1967, when Major Tan Jauw Khoen (Johanes Hartanto), spoke on two separate occasions to Embassy officers. Tan was accompanied by Williams and the Embassy clearly knew exactly who he was, referring to him as “*Soeharto’s long-time Australian friend and English teacher*” and as an “*Australian resident in Semarang who has been a close friend of General Soeharto for the past twelve years.*” According to the report,

Major Tan, who was aware of Williams’ contact with Embassy officers, asked Williams to introduce him to a political officer so that he might give the Embassy a better impression of Soeharto’s way of thinking which he was able to provide from six years experience as Soeharto’s family doctor... Tan, on whom Soeharto has now bestowed the Indonesian name “Hartanto”, now spends his working hours in Soeharto’s home and eats most meals with the General’s family (U.S. Embassy, 1967a).

At the time, Soeharto was particularly busy with political manoeuvres in the lead up to the Provisional People’s Consultative Assembly (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Sementara* or MPRS) session that would decide both incumbent President Sukarno’s fate, as well as the ambitions of Soeharto. The US Embassy was keenly following events:

Australian Clive Williams has given us account of his conversation yesterday with General Soeharto on forthcoming MPRS session. Soeharto described transfer of governmental authority as interim step but said he expected MPRS would confirm arrangements set forth in presidential announcement. Soeharto said Sukarno would thus remain President in name only until elections. Soeharto said he planned assume Sukarno’s ceremonial as well as substantive functions but did not want title of Acting President.

When asked how [political rival] Nasution had reacted to this plan, Soeharto merely laughed and said Nasution had heavy task in MPR session... Williams believes that Soeharto’s comments may constitute only his first negotiating position and that he may later settle for compromise under which MPRS would go further than mere rubberstamping of transfer of authority (U.S. Embassy, 1967b).

As it turned out, Sukarno was stripped of his Presidential powers and Soeharto was named Acting President by the MPRS on 12 March 1967. American Pulitzer prize-winning journalist John Hughes described Soeharto's rise:

If Soeharto showed a necessary directness in the economic sphere, he has blended it with caginess and deftness on the political front that have served him well. Eighteen months it took to remove Sukarno, and during this time the pace of Soeharto's advance was often under attack. On several occasions it looked as though Bung Karno had slipped from Soeharto's gentle grasp and was bouncing back to power. Yet the Soeharto way succeeded, and the country was not plunged into the civil war that might have been. Soeharto skilfully juggled different groups and factions. Despite Sukarno's ploys and struggling, the toppling of the national leader was accomplished with a certain grace and dignity. During it, Soeharto established a reputation for constitutionality that undercut criticism that Indonesia had been seized by a military dictator (Hughes, 2014, p. 317).

Clive Williams had been absolutely correct in his account of how the Parliamentary session would play out, and it bolstered his standing within the US Embassy as being a straight-shooter and reliable interpreter of Soeharto's thinking. The US Embassy soon envisioned Williams becoming an invaluable intermediary and began to cultivate their relationship with him. But why the need for an intermediary in the first place? Wasn't there a foreign ministry and foreign minister? Weren't there diplomatic protocols to follow? And how could a foreigner like Williams be more trusted by the Acting President than his own top officials?

At the time the US Embassy outlined a number of reasons for employing a non-traditional diplomatic approach to communicating with Acting President Soeharto. In particular Marshall Green was coming to keenly understand Soeharto's preference to do things "through intermediaries and by indirection" (U.S. Embassy, 1967c). For instance, in July 1967 the US Embassy wrote a detailed analysis explaining "*some of the psychological and institutional differences between the two nations, to point out the problems which they may cause and to suggest general approaches we might use in dealing with them.*" Edward Masters wrote:

Javanese behavior patterns, which stress outward harmony rather than clear communications, prevent "thrashing out" problems with Indonesian leaders and often impose the use of intermediaries...One does not have "heart to heart talks" or "thrash out problems" with a Javanese. Outward harmony in

personal relationships receives a much higher priority than clear communications. In the case of Javanese leaders, who must make decisions yet preserve “face” in personal relationships, this means that intermediaries are usually employed to sort out areas of agreement and exclude conflicts before the principals meet (U.S. Embassy, 1967d).

Masters’ analysis was crisp and very observant. It was clear to the US Embassy that if it wanted to achieve agreement with Soeharto on important issues, it needed to first sound him out through an intermediary. But up until this point, Green had been extremely exasperated by the unorthodox methods of diplomacy employed by Soeharto, and he outlined his concerns and frustrations to Washington, so that his superiors knew what he faced. Among the key points were:

- “[S]uharto's lack of accessibility, his use of go-betweens and his dependence upon a group of personal staff officers who are, by and large, a pretty poor lot.”
- “Soeharto usually declines to meet any group or individual (except his old Army friends) until soundings by a third party has established that the meeting will be agreeable and without conflict.”
- “Direct contact with Soeharto is accordingly reserved for selling an agreement or acquiring an understanding that has previously been worked out between intermediaries.”
- “Soeharto is visibly ill at ease with most foreigners. He rarely receives diplomats...” (U.S. Embassy, 1967a).

William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, offered some sage and comforting advice to Green: *“It is always a little lonely at the apex of power, and drawing in behind a screen of cronies is a very natural reaction. Then, of course, he has an unfamiliar and tough job, and I can understand his disinclination for polite exchanges with the Diplomatic Corps”* (U.S. Embassy, 1967b). As Bundy would note, these were the *“subtleties of the diplomatic art as practiced in post-Sukarno Indonesia”*. Importantly Bundy gave Green the go-ahead to use intermediaries.

But in addition to the issues of Javanese culture and the Acting President’s style and means of communicating, there was one more reason to use a trusted intermediary, and that was the need to have someone assist in interpreting the subtleties of what Soeharto was actually saying. Edward Masters explained that President Soeharto had four ways of saying ‘yes’:

He never said 'no' - there were four yes's. One really meant yes... One meant 'maybe', one meant 'I hear what you're saying'. This would be, kind of, as you're talking, he's saying 'yes, yes'. That doesn't mean he agrees with you. And the final yes means 'it's a dumb idea, forget it', but he says 'yes'. So from the context, and the body language, and maybe knowing how the guy thinks, you've got to figure out which 'yes' you're getting. And that... I found sometimes is tricky... Where I had any doubt, I would go to an intermediary, and say, 'What did the President really mean?' (Masters, 1989, p. 14).

So, US diplomats could either sit and study Soeharto's body language and ponder the context and reactions among people around him to figure out which 'yes', they were getting. Or, as Masters admitted, they could go to an intermediary, and ask, 'What did the President really mean?' It was in this context that the US Embassy became cognizant of the importance of Clive Williams as a reliable conduit to Soeharto.

Confidants and Confidence-men

The US Embassy certainly did have other options for an intermediary. The Acting President was actually surrounded by dozens of official and semi-official advisors, and in Williams' specific case, one non-official advisor. At the centre of Soeharto's team were the SPRI (Personal Staff or *Staf Pribadi*) which had been created in August 1966 to assist Soeharto with managing the processes of government. Headed by Major-General Alamsjah Ratu Perwiranegara, it was made up of army officers, among them Brigadier-General Sudjono Humardani (Economic Affairs), Colonel Ali Murtopo (Foreign Intelligence Affairs) and Lieutenant-General Sudharmono (General Affairs).

Soeharto trusted his SPRI, and it made sense that the General brought in help from those he knew and could trust as he consolidated his power. The SPRI had Soeharto's ear and key members like Murtopo and Sudjono were regularly consulted by Soeharto for advice. But it also had the effect of giving the SPRI unprecedented power, and they became controversial for their almost unrestrained non-bureaucratic approach - some dubbed them the "invisible cabinet".² Australian historian John Legge noted, *"In a regime where constitutional procedures were only vaguely defined, the informal influence of a*

² The SPRI included Major General Alamsjah Ratu Perwiranegara (Coordinator), Brigadier General Sudjono Humardani (Economic Affairs), Colonel Ali Murtopo (Foreign Intelligence Affairs), Brigadier General Yoga Soegama (Domestic Intelligence Affairs), Major General Surjo Wiryohadiputro (Financial Affairs), Brigadier General Sunarso (Political Affairs), Brigadier General Abdul Kadir Prawiraatmadja (Social Welfare Affairs), Brigadier General Slamet Danusudirdjo (Trade Affairs), Lieutenant General Sudharmono (General Affairs), Brigadier General Jusuf Singadikane (General Election Affairs), Brigadier General Nawawi Alif (Mass Media Affairs) and Major General Isman (Mass Movement Affairs).

group of this kind with regular and easy access to the President became more important than the influence of those holding formal government office” (Legge, 1977, p. 168).

Accompanying the core group of army-dominated SPRI, there were two teams of civilian advisors, a political team including Sarbini Sumawinata, Fuad Hasan and Sulaeman Sumardi and an economics team including Widjojo Nitisastro, Mohammad Sadli and Emil Salim. In addition, Soeharto had a range of other semi-official advisors he consulted. Many were anti-Sukarnoist intellectuals and politicians, like his neighbour Mashuri, and others were old friends and acquaintances from Semarang.

By this time Soeharto was also exerting more control over his potential political rivals. Soon after he became Acting President, his partners in the triumvirate, Malik and the Sultan, lost stature – Malik was no longer in charge of political affairs, just the foreign ministry, and the Sultan became coordinator of the economics ministries. We shall see how Soeharto exerted influence over Adam Malik and foreign policy below. But how the acting President handled Sultan Hamengkubuwono is illustrative of Soeharto’s detached managerial leadership style; essentially, he created a web of official and unofficial connections between he and his Ministers. The Australian Embassy discovered this from one of the Sultan’s staff:

According to this Indonesian official, the unofficial economic team either create economic plans ab initio, or considers and reports on problems referred to it from official sources. When it has reached a considered position, it takes the results of its deliberations to the Ministry of Finance, where the matter is considered by government experts. The role of the Sultan himself was not described in this account. The resultant, modified position is then taken by Widjojo’s people along to Soeharto’s private staff, where it is scrutinized by the economic members and further modified before submission to Soeharto or the Presidium for decision. An unspecified percentage of decisions is taken at staff level, without reference to Soeharto. The discussion with Soeharto’s staff is not normally joined by officials from the Ministry of Finance, and according to our informant, neither the Sultan, the Minister of Finance, nor Ministry officials see Soeharto except at Presidium meetings” (Australian Embassy, 1967).

The civilian political team was soon set aside of official importance - some of them would become critics of Soeharto’s emerging regime – while most of the economics team would go on to become Ministers. But these civilian advisors had their own challenges, one being that they themselves often required an intermediary to communicate with Soeharto. Sarbini Sumawinata told the US Embassy that he dealt with Soeharto primarily by memoranda submitted through intermediaries and found this the most effective way of getting his views across:

“The best intermediary is Brig Gen Sudjono Humar Dani (sic) referred to by Sarbini as the ‘hot line’. However, Sudjono, like his boss, is also somewhat limited in what he can absorb” (U.S. Embassy, 1966a).

A second challenge for the civilian advisors was that their neutrality and administrative influence was being curtailed by army officers being placed inside every public service department. A US Embassy appraisal of the new senior bureaucrats appointed across the public service found, *“There appears to be a higher incidence than was first apparent of career experts and technicians... It also is striking to note the incidence of Army influence; every department has at least one officer as Secretary General or Director General...”* (U.S. Embassy, 1966b).

By 1967 the civilian advisors were out of the picture (except on macro-economic issues) and the SPRI were the Acting President’s primary advisors and gatekeepers. But the SPRI themselves did not have exemplary credentials. Australian academic Harold Crouch explained that not only did they play a major role in determining appointments in the military hierarchy and the government administration, but they were involved in the opening of business opportunities for Soeharto’s ‘patronage machine’ (Crouch, 1978, p. 308).

Alamsjah, for instance, was heavily involved in corruption, while Sudjono and Murtopo were known by the US Embassy to extract commissions from US trade and investment contracts – the US Embassy referred to them as “Five Percenters” in a briefing to Vice-President Hubert Humphrey (U.S. Embassy, 1967e). In a conversation with the US Embassy, General Nasution recounted a story that Alamsjah and Murtopo had divided a two-million-dollar credit allocation between themselves. Nasution made clear that he did not believe that General Soeharto condoned misuses of authority but that *“Soeharto stubbornly trusts these members of SPRI who have been ‘close to him for a long time’ and, consequently, ‘will not listen’ to ‘outsiders’ who attack them for corruption”* (U.S. Embassy, 1967f).

Foreign Minister Adam Malik was a closet critic of the SPRI – he was sometimes at loggerheads with them over who directed foreign policy, but mostly kept his opinions to himself. Malik lay blame for the Government’s mistakes principally at the door of the SPRI, which he said were practically running the country:

They let Soeharto know only as much as they want him to know and consequently Soeharto is losing touch with people. Generals around Soeharto ‘have power but not responsibility’ and this is wrong. Soeharto should not assume sole responsibility for the wrongs of the country, as he did

recently when students protested over rice price. This would undermine Soeharto's position. There must be corporate responsibility, and if imposition of private staff between Soeharto and his Ministers made this impossible, then Soeharto should make them Ministers, give them responsibility and be done with it (U.S Embassy, 1967g).

The SPRI were not in any way a united group, and over time divisions became very apparent. Clive Williams had his own views on the various SPRI and revealed one of them in a conversation with Joe Harary of the US Embassy: *"Williams said that the struggle between General Sudjono Humardani and General Alamsjah had intensified in recent weeks. Sudjono used to refer to Alamsjah as 'Napolean' but now he calls him 'Quisling'. It was the opinion of Williams, who does not like Alamsjah, that the latter would soon be removed from his position as State Secretary"* (U.S. Embassy, 1969a).

Williams was clearly aligned to Sudjono Humardani's camp - they had known each other for over a decade, and Williams had been staying in Sudjono's house when he visited Jakarta from Semarang until fairly recently. But Williams wasn't representing Soeharto's thinking on this occasion. Indeed, Sudjono had told a US Embassy source almost two years prior that he would publicly *"refuse to obey Alamsjah's orders' if Soeharto were not standing behind him"* (U.S. Embassy, 1967f).

After his discussion with Williams, Harary noted, *"This is not the first time that information has come to our attention regarding the possible removal of Alamsjah from his position. About a year and a half ago there were strong intimations that Alamsjah would become an ambassador. At that time Alamsjah himself felt that his position was insecure. However, nothing happened. Unless the Embassy receives much more definite information which would confirm Williams' assertion, it is suggested that his statement be taken with a grain of salt as expressing wishful thinking on his part and that of Sudjono rather than Soeharto's intentions"* (U.S. Embassy, 1969b).³

The SPRI would be disbanded on 9 June 1968, essentially removing their policy authority, or coordinating functions over Cabinet. The US Embassy noted, *"The staff's abolishment constitutes definite progress toward moving government business into overt, official channels and reducing the "green wall" of military cronies who some have accused of isolating Soeharto in the past"* (Howard Palfrey Jones Papers, 1968). But Soeharto simply replaced the SPRI with ASPRI (Personal Assistants or *Asisten Pribadi*) and Ali Murtopo (political)

³ Alamsjah was State Secretary from 9 February 1968 to 8 April 1972 and would later serve, after a spell as Ambassador to the Netherlands, as Minister for Religious Affairs (29 March 1978 - 19 March 1983) and Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare (19 March 1983 - 23 March 1988).

and Sudjono Humardani (economic) were appointed to manage “day-to-day matters”, essentially to protect Soeharto by maneuvering behind the scenes against perceived political threats to the President as well as directing financial resources for his use for patronage. Most of the other SPRI did not lose influence and were appointed to a range of high-level positions.⁴

Which brings us back to the question why the US Embassy had such close dealings with Clive Williams as an intermediary when they had so many other options to choose from. And it doesn’t simply follow that they didn’t have a great number of viable options. Sudjono, Murtopo and others may have been extracting commissions in their business dealings, but they were effective. As Marshall Green noted, “*five-percenters frequently earn their five percent*” (U.S. Embassy, 1967h).

Partly the answer lies in serious doubts the Americans had that Soeharto was obtaining accurate information about the United States from Sudjono and Murtopo, not necessarily because of any intention to misrepresent but because of ignorance of the outside world. For instance, their associates such as Jan Walandouw and Bob Hasan were roaming the world with ‘hunting licenses’ to seek business deals, foreign loans and aid, and the US Embassy was told, “*These promoters bring back false and exaggerated reports which get to Soeharto with proper screening*” (U.S. Embassy, 1967i).

Sudjono was eventually invited to the United States in July 1967 - in a plan hatched by concerned Indonesian intellectuals/bureaucrats/politicians (led by Umar Kayam) together with the US Embassy - for Sudjono “*to receive a high-level civics lesson in Washington*”. It had mixed results - during a major briefing, “*Sudjono listened in typical Javanese fashion – cigarette in hand, his eyes staring off into the middle distance*” (U.S. Embassy, 1967j). While the Americans felt that Sudjono gained a better understanding about the United States and the merits of a conventional approach to their aid and other support, they were told that Murtopo was still “*resorting to any kind of shenanigans to shake additional money out of the U.S*” (U.S. Embassy, 1967k). Clearly, Sudjono, Murtopo and their associates were never going to be reliable in negotiations; State Department officials described their style as a “*freewheeling attempt at sub-summit diplomacy*” (U.S. Department of State, 1967a)

⁴ Yoga Soegama was appointed as head of the state intelligence body, BAKIN; Alamsjah was appointed to Cabinet as State Secretary; Sudharmono became Cabinet Secretary; Nawawi Alif became Deputy at the Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (KOPKAMTIB); Sunarso became Ambassador to Singapore; and Slamet Danudirdjo became Deputy Chairman of the National Development Planning Board (Bappenas).

However, a secondary objective of Umar Kayam and his colleagues (including incidentally, Probosutedjo, Soeharto's younger half-brother) was "*to convince Sudjono (and through him Soeharto) that the only productive way to deal with the United States was through Ambassador Green and the executive branch agencies, and not through special secret representatives that attempted to bypass these agencies*" (U.S. Department of State, 1967b). They apparently put their own argument directly to Soeharto that uncoordinated, 'out-of-channel' approaches confused the US Government and didn't work.

Second, it appears that Soeharto became cognisant of this and was swayed to change tact, for it was he who nominated Williams to take on an intermediary role. Williams would often turn up on the doorstep of a US diplomat's house at the behest of the Acting President. The US Embassy though also carefully chose Williams for reciprocal assignments. And that is because Clive Williams was very different from other intermediaries. For one, Williams was non-political, incorruptible, and simply not interested in money.

Third, Williams understood Soeharto's nuances and communication style; he could read Soeharto's mood and could tell whether he was angry or prevaricating or anxious, and he could anticipate Soeharto's thinking and reaction to an issue. Fourth, Williams was a native English speaker, as well as fluent Indonesian speaker, ensuring there were no linguistic or cultural misunderstandings.

For the Americans, Williams would be a crucially important intermediary over the next couple of years, interpreting Soeharto's wishes and thoughts on a range of issues. A senior State Department official who worked in the US Embassy in Jakarta at this time, and later served as Ambassador elsewhere, described Clive Williams to me as Soeharto's "Australian whisperer" (Confidential author interview, 14 May 2020).

The Australian whisperer

The years of 1967 and 1968 would be significant for Soeharto, as the General emerged firstly as Acting President and then President in his own right (U.S. Embassy, 1967l). There were essentially three main challenges for Soeharto at this time. On the economic front, Soeharto needed to make badly- needed economic reforms, despite the short-term consequences in terms of price rises, while also dealing with dire food shortages. Politically, Soeharto had to make a set of decisions about the constitutional arrangements through which he would obtain the Presidency and hold on to it.

And in international relations, Soeharto needed to establish a foreign policy that was 'free and independent', especially with regards to its relationship with the United States. It is particularly interesting to view these major challenges and events through the lens of Clive Williams who divulged vital information that would have a significant influence on US foreign policy towards Indonesia.

The revival of the economy was one of Soeharto's principal concerns. The economic policies on which he had embarked were heavily deprivational for the majority of the population. Then in late 1967, a very serious rise in prices due to a shortage of rice threatened to up-end the economic stabilization program. Soeharto desperately needed foreign financial assistance and food aid, but he seemed very unsure about the position of the US and other donors. Primary carriage for these discussions was the preserve of the Sultan and Adam Malik, but Soeharto was concerned enough to conduct his own diplomacy.

In late January 1968, Marshall Green heard from Clive Williams that Acting President Soeharto was increasingly concerned about growing rice shortages and the effect they were having on food prices. Williams stressed that Soeharto wanted rice and economic assistance, and quickly. The Acting President was to face the MPRS again in just a few weeks, and they would determine whether he would become President in his own right. Green sent the following message to Washington:

1. *Recent rise in rice and other prices and students' subsequent agitation has apparently hit Soeharto hard. His Australian confidant Clive Williams, who now visiting in Acting President's home, reports that he has never seen Soeharto so depressed or distracted. According to Williams, Soeharto stares into space during meals, oblivious to conversation except that touching on rice shortages.*
2. *His current worries may be causing Soeharto to see impediments which do not exist. For example, Soeharto complained to Williams that US not responsive to Indonesia's bulgur requests... We reassured Williams on this score, providing him with latest info regarding bulgur arrivals and other aid in store, which he said he would pass on to Soeharto.*
3. *Williams strongly recommended that I personally reassure Soeharto of our efforts to assist his Govt in overcoming food crisis but believed it better to have some new information in hand. Final approval of \$60 million package will be great help in this respect. However, Soeharto's immediate concern, as Williams pointed out, is next three months and bulgur will only enter picture in April. I am convinced that the most strategic assistance we could render to Soeharto's Govt at this*

junction would be the provision of additional rice immediately, from whatever source possible... (U.S. Embassy, 1968a).⁵

This portrayal of Soeharto's mood is very vivid, and extremely rare. One can visualize Soeharto, sitting at the breakfast table with his untouched meal, shoulders drooped and eyes staring into the distance. Most significantly, as their discussion continued, Williams pitched to Green that the food situation in Indonesia was so grave that the US needed to act promptly. Green was listening; he hastily arranged an additional US food aid package, helping avert a food crisis and further economic pain, and bolstering Soeharto's economic credentials!

As important as the economy was, one of Soeharto's main tasks was to make a set of decisions about the political arrangements through which he would obtain the Presidency, and hold on to it. For instance, he needed to identify an existing, or create a new, political party or coalition that could hold a majority in Parliament and support him. Australian academic Herb Feith wrote about Soeharto's political predicament at the time:

In the months before March 1968 the questions were 'Who will be our partners in power?', 'To whom shall we accord the right to participate in representative and electoral politics, and to whom shall we deny this right?' and 'How far shall we allow ourselves to be tied down by civilians, by constitutional prescriptions concerning elections, the powers of representative bodies, freedom of the press, assembly and demonstration, and so on?' (Feith, 1968).

In November 1967, Ambassador Green spoke to Foreign Minister Adam Malik about Soeharto's plans to hold elections, and the political parties which might contest them. Malik was very critical of "*creeping militarism and how Soeharto was letting the political situation drift along without reaching firm decisions on organization for elections... Malik regards it as essential that Soeharto act before it is too late to establish new parties and perhaps a mass support group for the government*".

In reporting the conversation to Washington, Green added additional information, "*According to Soeharto's Australian confidant Clive Williams, Director-General for Higher Education Mashuri made a similar pitch for a new party structure to the Acting President and now claims to have obtained Soeharto's agreement*" (U.S. Embassy, 1967m). Mashuri, who was now a close friend of Williams, was a member of a group of anti-Sukarno

⁵ In April and May 1968, Soeharto faced political attacks from various quarters – students, Parliament, religious organisations – over a further series of price rises, including rice and petroleum. Soeharto told Williams that he expected demonstrations but "*did not plan to break them up at the beginning*" (U.S. Embassy, 1968b).

intellectuals who created an “*independent group*” which they hoped would develop into a political party behind Soeharto (U.S. Embassy, 1966c).

And then two months later, Williams provided new advice - that Soeharto had changed his mind. “*Soeharto’s Australian confidant Clive Williams told EmbOff January 18 that Soeharto definitely indicated to him that he will not approve formation of Independent Movement*” (U.S Embassy, 1968c). Distrusting of civilian politicians, Soeharto would turn to Ali Murtopo to create a new electoral machine, known as Golkar (*Golongan Karya* or Functional Groups) out of a federation of professional and social organisations. Under Soeharto, Golkar would portray itself as non-ideological with a focus on ‘economic development’ and ‘social and political stability’. He would also encourage civil servants to vote for it as a sign of loyalty to the regime.

In addition to keeping political parties in check, Soeharto was concerned about the upcoming session of the MPRS of 27 March 1968, which was made up of old politicians, his own appointees and representatives of the armed forces. With the threat from Malik and the civilian politicians now diminished, Soeharto’s main rival for the Presidency was General Abdul Haris Nasution, former Army Chief of Staff and Minister for Defence.

Soeharto had maneuvered Nasution into the chairmanship of the MPRS, where he had supported measures to appoint Soeharto as Acting President in 1967. But it left Nasution with some potential autonomy to flex the semi-independence of the MPRS, and Soeharto was wary. The US Embassy noted: “*Soeharto’s Australian confidant Clive Williams told EmbOff that both Nasution and Subchan are still causing trouble and that Ali Murtopo and other members of Soeharto’s Personal Staff are working night and day to sell their MPRS program*” (U.S. Embassy, 1968d).

Despite being appointed as President by the MPRS in March 1968, Soeharto and his close circle remained highly suspicious of Nasution because he had also attempted to introduce a bill which would have severely curtailed Soeharto’s presidential authority. At one point Ed Masters reported, “*According to Acting President’s Australian friend Clive Williams, Soeharto has in recent days criticized Nasution with unprecedented explicitness*” (U.S Embassy, 1968e).

Nasution was emerging as the most strongly identified muslim (the largest of the country’s religions) of the senior generals, and with an interest in the strength of the legislative branch. Williams told Green of his private conversation with Soeharto about this very issue, and Green was quick to clarify the US Government’s connections, or lack

thereof, with Nasution to avoid any perceptions that it was somehow supporting Nasution:

According Williams... Soeharto is, we believe, genuinely worried that Nasution's ambition will lead him to exploit and deepen divisions within nation. Moslems have now quite clearly lined themselves up in opposition to Soeharto Government on virtually every important issue and they are able to exploit volatile religious emotions of rural masses. Nasution frequently sings along with traditionalist Moslems and is able to give impression that Army not fully united behind Government....

We suspect that bad relations between Soeharto and Nasution will continue to be key element in Indonesian politics for some time to come without, however, becoming all out power struggle. It would not be in character for Nasution to precipitate show-down, and Soeharto brushed off suggestions by Williams that Nasution be sent overseas, indicating that Nasution's punishment will be 'left to God'....

We do not intend to... [get involved] in this most sensitive political feud. We shall, however, be careful to limit our currently very infrequent contacts with Nasution camp in order to allay Soeharto's suspicions, which William's confirms, that Nasution has some American support. We have been pointing out to lower level, personal contacts such as Williams that Moslems have also falsely accused us of fostering Christian-military alliance (U.S. Embassy, 1968f).⁶

Since his ascension to the Presidency, Soeharto had been very wary to ensure that Indonesia be seen to be non-aligned, and that especially came to relations with the US. From time to time, Clive Williams was advising the US Embassy about who they should avoid aligning with, like Nasution, but he was also relaying information normally the domain of diplomats or intelligence operatives.

In June 1968, former US Secretary of Defense and now President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, visited Jakarta for talks with the newly official President and his economics team, in particular to find ways to support the Soeharto government's economic stabilization measures. The Australians were told McNamara "*Had been highly impressed by the calibre and purpose of the economists advising the Indonesian Government and by President Soeharto's obvious determination to stand behind these advisors. On the other hand, Mr McNamara had not been led up any garden path by Indonesian blandishments, and had, for instance, regarded what had been told to him by a group of generals that he had met as 'hogwash'*" (Australian Embassy, 1968b).

⁶ Soeharto had Nasution removed from his position as MPRS chairman in 1969 ahead of the 1971 legislative elections and forced his early retirement from the military in 1972.

Ambassador Green would report on the visit, “*General Soeharto’s Australian confidant Clive Williams said President ‘liked McNamara very much’ and expressed appreciation in particular for latter’s support of GOI [Government of Indonesia] economic policies in remarks McNamara made to students and political parties*” (U.S. Embassy, 1968g).⁷ McNamara returned home convinced of the urgent need to support the Soeharto government, and soon established the Bank’s first permanent mission in a developing country in Jakarta.

It was one thing to accept US food aid, or the support of the World Bank, but another to allow a US program like the Peace Corps to operate in Indonesia. On 10 August 1969, Clive Williams approached Joseph Harary, Counsellor (Commercial) at the Embassy, to discuss a range of important bilateral issues that were on Soeharto’s mind. Williams’ main focus was the President’s concern about the possible return of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers, which had been withdrawn from Indonesia after former President Sukarno had told the US Government “*To hell with your aid*” in January 1965.

According to Williams, Soeharto was not supportive of the return of the Peace Corps and wanted to stress that this position over-rode any views or impressions that Foreign Minister Malik may have imparted. Soeharto was right to be concerned because when the Director of the US Peace Corps was seeking approval for a Peace Corps program in Indonesia, he gained what Marshall Green recorded as “*the distinct impression from his conversation with Malik that the latter approved the idea.*” Green later wrote of Malik, “*The only problem I ever had with this superb diplomat was the way he would nod his head and smile, suggesting agreement with what I was saying. This was not an untypical Asian way of implying understanding of the point you were making, but not necessarily agreement*” (Green, 1990).

In Harary’s detailed memorandum of their discussion about the Peace Corps, Williams also revealed certain internal politicking within the Indonesian Government - the President’s continued anxiety about Nasution, and Soeharto’s distrust of Foreign Minister Adam Malik. Joseph Harary reported to Francis Galbraith, Green’s successor as Ambassador:

Mr. Clive Williams came to my house last evening a little before 6 p.m. and said that he had an important matter to discuss... He said that he had come to see me at the specific order of President Soeharto and that the President hoped I will pass on to you the information given. This involved the following two points:

⁷ In a similar vein, US Senator and Senate Majority Leader Michael Mansfield visited Jakarta in August 1969, and the US Embassy reported to Soeharto, via Williams, the Senator’s impressions (U.S. Embassy, 1969c).

1. *The President believes that a return to Indonesia of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers is untimely at present, could strengthen his opponent's accusation that he is veering towards the U.S. and the West, and that it would give grist to the mill of the 'anti-American group' in Indonesia. He implied that General Nasution belonged to that group. Soeharto is most anxious to maintain what he considers the very friendly relations between the two countries... He is afraid that further official discussion of the Peace Corps question could have an unfavorable effect on the above.*
Williams said that Soeharto had specifically instructed Malik to express the above view to the American side and to reiterate the Indonesian position during his meetings... However, Soeharto is not certain that the Foreign Minister expressed his views with sufficient strength and clarity. That is why he had asked Williams to contact me on this point. Soeharto would like to be informed 'unofficially' (read through Williams) whether in view of the above the USG [US Government] has for the present put aside consideration of the question of the return of the Peace Corps to Indonesia.
2. *Soeharto told Williams to stress that he is deeply interested in seeing "U.S. bilateral aid" increased without delay... Soeharto feels that this aid would play a vital role in strengthening his own political position and would have a desirable and long-range effect on stability in Indonesia as well as this country's social and economic development...*
Comment
 - a. *As you know, Williams has been used in the past to convey from Soeharto to the Embassy messages which the President did not want to transmit officially. The latest such occurrence, to my knowledge, was Williams' intervention with Mr. Lydman [Jack Lydman, Minister-Counsellor, US Embassy] to express Soeharto's desire that the substance of your two-hour private evening meeting with him be conveyed to President Nixon prior to his arrival here in order to save time and make sure that the discussions between the two Presidents would be more fruitful.*
 - b. *It is unfortunate but generally true that Malik has detractors among some members of Soeharto's entourage, particularly the military. Because of the above the President feels that sometimes Malik's public statements on issues do not necessarily mirror exactly Soeharto's position. Williams implied that this causes Soeharto not to be "absolutely certain" that Malik does not color both his public statements and those made privately to diplomats to suit his own opinions, which might be at some variance with those of the President on the issues discussed (U.S. Embassy, 1969d).*

Ambassador Galbraith was sufficiently convinced by the President's overtures through Williams that he informed Washington accordingly, "*I am more convinced than ever that Peace Corps under whatever name is nonstarter in Indonesia at present time and that low profile policy we have attempted to follow is sound one and should be continued*" (U.S. Embassy, 1969d). Curiously a second version of Harary's Memorandum contained an additional

paragraph, in which the US Government's position is made known to the President at a subsequent meeting the next day between Harary and Williams:

As per instruction of the Ambassador, I contacted Williams the next day and told him that discussions between Indonesian and US officials had concerned US-Indonesian cooperation in the establishment of an international voluntary, Peace-Corps like, operation in Indonesia. Minister Malik had made clear that he did not feel that the return of Peace Corps Volunteers to Indonesia was timely at present. The Ambassador had asked that Williams inform Soeharto that the question of sending Volunteers to Indonesia is no longer under active consideration by the USG. Williams appeared pleased with the above and stated that he would pass the Ambassador's message to the President immediately (U.S. Embassy, 1969a).

The information provided by Williams led to an almost immediate policy shift by the US Government, affecting bilateral aid decisions and continuing the non-activation of the Peace Corps in Indonesia. Williams was clearly an extremely important intermediary between Soeharto and the United States Government. The examples above offer irrefutable evidence that Williams was providing information of significant policy importance but also clarification about the President's views on a wide range of topics - his suspicions about his own Foreign Minister Adam Malik, his reaction to economic challenges, and his attitude towards political parties and potential rivals (General Nasution in particular).⁸

From a more Machiavellian political perspective, the episode also illustrates clearly how Soeharto was exerting his influence and control over potential rivals as well as allies. From Williams' discussions with the US Embassy, we have seen how Soeharto circumvented Adam Malik in his role as Foreign Minister, and removed any ability for him to act independently, such as over the return of the US Peace Corps volunteers. Meanwhile, Soeharto was, through Williams, negotiating food aid and financial assistance, both the remit of Sultan Hamengkubuwono and his economic teams.⁹

Soeharto was also making it perfectly clear to the US Embassy that Nasution was a rival with a potentially undesirable religious political base, and that any support for him from the Americans would be frowned upon. As it turned out, Soeharto removed Nasution from his position as MPRS Chairman in 1969 and soon after forced his early retirement from the military.

⁸ On Williams providing Soeharto's views on muslim political parties, see (U.S. Embassy, 1968c)

⁹ In fact, Soeharto was sending out teams in all directions. For instance, Sudjono dispatched Lim Bian Khoen (Jusuf Wanandi) and ASPRI Major Harjo (Surjo Wiryo Hadiputro) to Australia to seek food aid. (Australian Embassy, 1968c)

Several points though stand out about United States diplomacy in Indonesia over this period. And these are important to understanding Williams' role as an extremely valuable but strictly non-official representative of the Indonesian Government. Firstly, the United States was conducting secret discussions with the Acting Indonesian President through Williams but was not running secret foreign policy negotiations. This is an important distinction. The two sides simply used intermediaries to size up each other, to reach understanding ahead of formal meetings, and to avoid public debate.

Secondly, the United States' formal diplomatic structures and procedures were maintained throughout. The Embassy in Jakarta transparently explained its methods to Washington which, in turn, gave the green-light to pursue the use of intermediaries like Williams. This was not so in Indonesia, where Soeharto kept secrets away from the formal political and bureaucratic structures, such as the foreign minister, and publicly away from anti-US constituencies. Incredibly, Williams has never been mentioned in any of the diplomatic, political and historical accounts of this period of United States-Indonesia relations. Williams' individual role, until now, has not been known.

The paradigm of Indonesian President Soeharto and his Australian confidant Clive Williams is a very rare phenomenon in international relations. International affairs are largely conducted by Heads of State, foreign ministers and the accredited professionals attached to their home country's diplomatic services. It is an anomaly for a single individual, and a non-national to boot, to act as an envoy for a government, and for that intermediary to be attached such great importance by another foreign government. So why and how did it work so effectively? It is important to stress that the episode was neither accidental, nor was it by deliberate design; it came about through fortuitous circumstance and was extremely effective for the period of time it was in place.

Soeharto needed someone to trust in his dealings with Indonesia's largest financial donor and, given his anti-communist outlook, most natural superpower international ally. Williams was the only native English-speaking (and fluent Indonesian-speaking) advisor close to Soeharto, and thus the only one, in terms of the Americans, with whom there would be no language barriers, no issues of missed nuance or cultural misunderstanding. When Williams stated what Soeharto was feeling or desired, the US Embassy got the message very clearly. Williams never acted independently, always spoke and acted according to Soeharto's wishes, and never had any other political or financial motivations. It turned out to be a highly effective arrangement.

Furthermore, the US Embassy's contact with Clive Williams was a tightly-held secret. Within the United States Department of State, only a few very senior American diplomats - the Ambassador, DHOM and Counsellors (Economic and Political) - and their Washington-based superiors had contact with, or knowledge of, Williams. On the Indonesian side, Williams was little-known outside his Semarang friends and acquaintances, and Soeharto's family; the public 'English teacher' moniker cleverly downplaying his role and proximity to Soeharto.

In addition, the entire arrangement turned out to be transitory in nature. Soeharto was extremely mistrustful of everyone throughout his rule, but no more so than in the early days when he was Acting President. In that respect, the faith and trust that Soeharto placed in Clive Williams was simply enormous; a true measure of their deep friendship and bond. It was only when he became President in 1968 that Soeharto largely disbanded his personal assistants and advisors and began trusting his own formal diplomatic and bureaucratic structures. At that juncture, the role of Williams as a diplomatic intermediary with the United States soon declined.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of a non-national assisting a national leader in international affairs is a fascinating concept. For President Soeharto of Indonesia though, it seemed natural that he would engage his closest confidant Clive Williams in his most sensitive dealings, regardless of his place of birth or nationality. Williams, in fact, would be assigned new roles by Soeharto – including playing a backchannel role vis a vis the Australian Government - and was still living adjacent to the Presidential family compound three decades later (he passed away in 2001).

In the only known video-recorded public mention of Williams, Soeharto told a group of visitors to his cattle ranch in September 1995, with a twinkle in his eye, a warm smile and in an affectionate voice, "There is one special advisor who has been living here a long time, about 45 years, an Australian by the name of Clive Williams, and he provides advice as well as guidance to the farm staff. But there are no foreigners involved here whatsoever."¹⁰ It is telling that Soeharto never considered Clive Williams anything but part of the intimate fabric of his world, and certainly not 'foreign' in any way.

¹⁰ Soeharto was responding to a question whether the people involved in his cattle farm were Indonesian, or whether foreigners or overseas-trained people were used. See Soeharto's response to the first question in Temu Wicara Presiden Soeharto dg BKMT di Tapos, 19 September 1995, *Youtube*.

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