In May 1977, only months after coming to power, the Prime Minister Jim Callaghan faced a political storm after the recently appointed Foreign Secretary, David Owen, decided to recall Peter Ramsbotham, Britain’s Ambassador to Washington. Owen had caused the furore by replacing an experienced and distinguished diplomat with Peter Jay, economics editor of The Times, and more significantly, Callaghan’s son-in-law. Three weeks earlier, Peter Ramsbotham had received a personal note from Michael Palliser, the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), advising him of his recall to enable ‘a new relationship’ to be forged with the US government. Owen informed Cyrus Vance, the US Secretary of State, that the Ambassador was being replaced as part of a bid to address the negative perceptions of Britain that the Foreign Secretary ‘constantly’ encountered on his American visits. Owen’s private belief that the Ambassador did not enjoy the confidence of the Prime Minister, as well as a desire to establish his own personal link in Washington that would bypass FCO mandarins, had reinforced in his mind the need for a change in Britain’s representation. When Owen announced the decision to the diplomatic press corps on 11 May, the response was one of disbelief, giving way to derisory laughter. In a desperate bid to justify the decision, the Downing Street Press Secretary, Tom McCaffrey, intimated to journalists off-the-record that Ramsbotham’s diplomatic style was old-fashioned and inappropriate for a relationship with the new, youthful Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter, a message that was soon being pithily conveyed to the public under such sensational headlines as ‘Snob Envoy Had To Go.’

For Ramsbotham, the consequences of this event were long-lasting. In spite of a telephone call from Callaghan conveying satisfaction with his work in Washington and a plethora of letters from his peers and
former superiors paying testament to his abilities, the Ambassador left Washington in July 1977 haunted by the decision to recall him. Having been offered the Governorship of Bermuda by Palliser on Owen’s instruction, Ramsbotham spent three years overseeing the fortunes of this Caribbean colony before retiring to Britain, where he would seek to forget the trauma of his recall. In analysing his ambassadorship and examining the criticisms levelled at him in 1977, this chapter focuses on Ramsbotham’s efforts to enhance relations at the highest level, his promotion of British economic interests and his role in reducing transatlantic differences over strategic issues. It will reveal that, whilst he may not have enjoyed the personal friendship with the Prime Minister of a Cromer or a Jay, he was one of the best-prepared British envoys to Washington in terms of intellect and experience. Moreover, his modest and understated approach to the conduct of diplomacy helped to preserve Britain’s unique relationship with the United States amid the politico-economic challenges of the 1970s and protected British interests in spite, rather than because, of the actions of his political masters.

Appointment to Washington

Unlike his two predecessors and immediate successor, Ramsbotham was a career diplomat. The son of a Conservative Cabinet Minister, born in 1919, he attended Eton and then Oxford where he studied History, a subject that would become central to his diplomatic philosophy and approach. Determined throughout his career in the diplomatic service to encourage mutual understanding between nations, Ramsbotham would later explain that for a diplomat ‘a knowledge of the history of other countries is a great help towards a better understanding of what is happening and what are the significant influences.’ Like many diplomats of his generation, his education was cut short by the Second World War, in which he served in the Intelligence Corps where he would encounter his first experience of transatlantic co-operation through his close collaboration with US officers. The end of the war found Ramsbotham involved in the reconstruction of Germany as a regional political and intelligence officer. Joining the Foreign Office (FO) in 1949, he was posted to Berlin for a year before heading the oil section of the FO’s Economic Relations Department (ERD), where he became acutely aware of Britain’s post-war economic weakness and the threat posed to the country’s overseas assets by Middle East nationalists, in particular Iran’s Mohammed Mossadeq. His tenure at the ERD and