

Ambassador Jefferson Caffery (1886-1974): Latin American Posts

Introduction Life Before Ambassador El Salvador (1926-28) Colombia (1928-1933)

Cuba (1934-37) Brazil (1937-44)



Introduction

From the United States presidential administrations of Taft to Wilson to Harding to Coolidge to Hoover to Roosevelt to Truman and to Eisenhower, Jefferson Caffery continuously retained his ambassadorship positions despite numerous changes in presidential administrations (The White House; University of Louisiana at Lafayette). From 1911 to before his first appointment as Ambassador to El Salvador in 1926, Caffery was considered a tenured member of the United States Consular Service (Dur 11). Once a member of the consular service is promoted to that of ambassador, their career only lasts as long as the presidential administration that appointed them (Dur 11). As a result of this constituency, many

consular service members decline ambassadorship appointments because of the unstable job security (Dur 11). Although this is often the case, Caffery not only accepted his first appointment as Ambassador to El Salvador but he also continued to serve in ambassadorships throughout 8 different presidential administrations, which is something no one has ever been able to accomplish since (Dur 11; University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Caffery's success in conducting diplomacy on behalf of United States interests both at home and abroad is wholly unprecedented.

Caffery wasn't officially appointed as a United States Ambassador until his assignment to El Salvador in 1926, but he began his diplomatic service 15 years earlier in 1911. Previous to his appointment as Ambassador to El Salvador, Caffery's assignments took him all across the globe to places such as Sweden, Venezuela, Spain, Greece, Persia, and Tokyo (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Caffery's assignments spread him across twelve countries and five continents with a majority of his service in Latin American countries (Dur *vii*). To this day, Caffery is the longest serving Ambassador in the history of the United States Diplomatic Service with a total of twenty-nine years in Ambassadorships to six different countries (University of Louisiana at Lafayette; Dur *vii*). By the time Ambassador Caffery attained his third Latin American ambassadorship in Cuba, Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs Sumner Welles began referring to Caffery as a Latin American expert and was often called upon for advice pertaining to Latin American affairs, even by his superiors (Dur 20).

Caffery's career began in 1911 and did not come to an end until his retirement in 1955. Throughout his career, Jefferson Caffery served as Ambassador to El Salvador 1926-1928, Ambassador to Colombia 1928-1933, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs 1933, Ambassador to Cuba 1934-1937, Ambassador to Brazil 1937-1944, Ambassador to France 1944-1949, and Ambassador to Egypt 1949-1955, before eventually retiring to Rome with his wife, Gertrude McCarthy Caffery, in 1955 (Office of the Historian). Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson Caffery married on November 20, 1937, in Rio de

Janiero while Caffery was serving as Ambassador to Brazil; Caffery was fifty years old at the time and Gertrude forty-two (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). The two bore no children (University of Louisiana at Lafayette).

One major testament to Caffery's success can be observed during his final Ambassadorship to Egypt, where Secretary of State John Foster Dulles believed Caffery was "an irreplaceable man at the time" and begged him to remain at his post three years past the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five; Caffery was sixty-eight years old when he finally retired (Dur *vii*). As Caffery along with his colleagues described him, Caffery had a natural ability for "getting things done" (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Caffery also received many awards during and after his service. Before Caffery could leave his post in France, the French government presented Caffery with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor in 1949 (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). In 1954, The University of Notre Dame presented Caffery with the extremely prestigious Laetare Medal, and additionally, before Caffery was able to leave his last post in Egypt, the Egyptian King Nasser presented Caffery with the Cordon of the Republic in 1955 (New York Times; University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Though, Caffery's awards and honors did not end there.

Upon his retirement in 1955, Mr. and Mrs. Caffery moved to Rome where Jefferson Caffery served as an honorary private chamberlain to Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI (Dur 75). Mr. and Mrs. Caffery also traveled back to their hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana, as much as they could; Jefferson Caffery's family still remains in Lafayette to this day (Dur 75). Both of Caffery's alma maters, Tulane University and the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette (formerly Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute), revered him with honorary degrees in 1968 and 1971 (Dur 75). Furthermore, the American Foreign Service Association and the Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired presented Caffery with the Foreign Service Cup in 1971 (Dur 75). In 1973, Mr. and Mrs. Caffery moved back to Lafayette where Mrs. Caffery passed

away that year; Mr. Caffery followed her just months later (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). The two are buried at St. John's Cathedral cemetery in Lafayette, Louisiana (Dur 75).

Jefferson Caffery served as Ambassador during very trying times for the United States and the world: negotiating Brazilian neutrality during World War II, surviving assassination attempts while in Cuba, and preventing wars from erupting in Colombia. Caffery faced immense pressure at nearly every post he was assigned to, yet he regarded "this worldwide instability as both a challenge and an opportunity" (Dur *vii*). Not only did he continue to serve during such perilous times, but he also left each country better than it was before, rerouting each country's history for the better. Upon Caffery's retirement in 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, with whom Caffery had worked with in previous administrations when Eisenhower was a war general, honored Caffery's unprecedented longstanding service stating that Caffery was "responsible for many solutions to many serious problems" (Dur *vii*). Described in the press and by his colleagues as a "trouble shooter," the "diplomat's diplomat," and "Ambassador of Revolutions," Caffery left a significant mark on world history; a mark that often goes unnoticed today even to the individuals of his hometown (Dur 75). In 1977, Caffery's hometown of Lafayette renamed one of the city's major streets after him to "Ambassador Caffery Parkway," yet Lafayette residents are still completely unaware of whose name they are actually speaking of on a regular basis (Dur *vii-viii*; Dur 75). Ambassador Caffery is much more than just a street name; Ambassador Caffery changed the direction of the entire world through his service. It is time we start acknowledging and learning from Caffery's unprecedented service and aspire to change the world just as he so effectively and successfully accomplished.



FEATURE
STORY



Ambassador
Jefferson
Caffery

FACES OF OUR PAST
**AMBASSADOR JEFFERSON
CAFFERY**

He was a Lafayette native, a Catholic convert and one of the most distinguished diplomats in our nation's history. This is but a glimpse into the life of Ambassador Jefferson Caffery.

Born on Dec. 1, 1886, Jefferson Caffery was the son of Charles Duval Caffery and Mary Catherine Parkerson. He was a member of the first class at Southwestern Industrial Institute (now known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) and later graduated from Tulane University in New Orleans in 1906, before going on to study at The Catholic University in Washington, D.C., prior to qualifying for the Foreign Service. In 1911, he entered into diplomatic service for his country when he was appointed to serve as diplomatic secretary in Caracas, Venezuela. From that point forward, his career would span an impressive 44 years, with more than half of that time spent as the head of an American mission in various foreign countries, including Cuba, Brazil, France and Egypt. When he retired in 1955 at the age of 68, the *New York Times* quoted the following statement from President Dwight Eisenhower:

"Ambassador Caffery, just now retiring from the diplomatic service, holds the American record for length of time as head of a Mission. Twenty-nine years he has been head of an American Mission in some foreign country, has been responsible for many solutions to many serious problems ... and leaves with a brilliant record."

Indeed, Ambassador Caffery's diplomatic career was well-honored through the multitude of decorations he received in his lifetime. Shortly after his death in 1974, this collection of medals and ribbons was presented to UL (USL at the time) as part of his bequest to the university. In 1995, the university agreed to loan the decorations to the Cathedral Museum for display in its Ambassador Jefferson Caffery exhibit. Five of those decorations were awarded to Ambassador Caffery—and/or to his wife, Mrs. Gertrude McCarthy Caffery—by governments to which he had served as minister or ambassador.



1 Ambassador Caffery during a Papal Audience with Pope Paul VI

2 Order of Malta Knighthood awarded to Ambassador Caffery in 1957

3 Ambassador Caffery exhibit at the Cathedral Museum



VISIT THE AMBASSADOR JEFFERSON CAFFERY EXHIBIT AT THE CATHEDRAL MUSEUM

Artifacts from the life and time of Ambassador Jefferson Caffery, including several of the prestigious medals and awards with which he was honored, are on display as part of a special exhibit at the Cathedral Museum in Lafayette.

The Cathedral Museum is housed next door to the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist (914 St. John St., Lafayette), inside the Cathedral Center. Hours of operation are 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. (closed during the noon hour) Monday-Thursday, and 9:00 a.m.-12:00 noon on Friday. Pre-arranged guided tours of all museum exhibits, as well as the cathedral and its grounds, are available by contacting the museum at 337.232.1322 at least two weeks in advance to schedule your visit. Additional information is available at www.saintjohncathedral.org.



was undoubtedly further solidified by his relationship with Miss Gertrude McCarthy, a devoutly Catholic woman from Evansville, Ind., who graduated from St. Mary's College (Notre Dame, Ind.) with a

degree in music in 1913. The two were married in Rio de Janeiro on Nov. 20, 1937. Jefferson was, by then, 51 years old.

It should also be noted that during the years which he served as ambassador to France, Jefferson Caffery became close friends with Archbishop Roncalli, dean of the

representative at that time. He would later become a member of the St. John the Evangelist parish. The friendship between the two men led to the future of the parish. A way for Jefferson Caffery private secretary for three years of Pope St. John XXIII and Pope Paul VI—moved to St. John the Evangelist in 1955. After his death, Jefferson Caffery was buried in the St. John the Evangelist parish in Lafayette, La. He became a member of the parish after his death and Gertrude and Jefferson were buried next to one another in the Cathedral Cemetery.

In 1978, the city of Lafayette named a newly improved roadway in honor of the late Ambassador Caffery. Similarly, the Diocese of

Lafayette honored the memory of Ambassador Caffery's legacy by naming a portion of today's Immaculata Center Caffery Hall. It was, in fact, largely due to a generous bequest from Ambassador Caffery's estate that the diocese was able to fund the extensive renovations that were needed to convert the former seminary facilities into the office space that is still in use today to house the diocesan central offices. †

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