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The man who proved the headlines wrong

A job well done, Harry!

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Treated with incredulity three years ago, Harry Schwarz played a major role in swinging US opinion on South Africa. **Peter Fabricius** reports from Washington.

FORMER Democratic Party MP Harry Schwarz wasted no time in putting his stamp on the job when he arrived here in March 1991 as South Africa's Ambassador to the United States.

As he stepped off the aircraft, Mr Schwarz was ushered towards the ambassadorial transport used by his predecessor, Piet Koornhof — a gaudy white Cadillac limousine with red upholstery. He refused to get in, insisted on travelling in a more modest car and soon sold the Cadillac.

His chauffeur was relieved. He had been suffering for some time the scorn of his fellow ambassadorial chauffeurs who had dubbed it "the white racist car".

Mr Schwarz aggressively set about sweeping out the cobwebs of

the embassy's old extravagant style, firing highly paid lobbyists and terminating right-wing contacts and beneficiaries of old South African taxpayer largesse.

He also cracked the whip inside the embassy, driving his staff hard to make direct contact with a whole new range of the Americans whom he thought really counted.

Mr Schwarz, who leaves the job to become a legal investment consultant, leaves behind much more than he found — an impressive dossier of thousands of new-found South African friends in the administration, Congress, state legislatures and in boardrooms of companies from the Fortune 500 down.

He has a reputation in Washington and beyond for thoroughness, dedication and skill in promoting South Africa's political and business interests — and leaves behind a state of US/South African relations better than it has ever been.

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Much of that, of course, is also due to the fact of a democratic government. But Mr Schwarz has worked tirelessly to exploit the opportunity.

Ruth Harkin, head of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, is probably not the only one in the administration who rates him one of Washington's best ambassadors.

It was different when he arrived. The Washington Post dubbed him "South Africa's Most Unlikely Ambassador".

Randall Robinson, executive director of Transafrica, probably spoke for many anti-apartheid activists when he voiced suspicion that then President F.W. de Klerk had appointed Mr Schwarz to topple sanctions without making real changes and to drive a wedge between American Jews and blacks, traditional allies in the fight against apartheid.

In an interview conducted in his office last week among packing

crates, Mr Schwarz conceded that some of this early scepticism about his credibility hurt.

Commerce Secretary Ron Brown asked him the other day by confessing that he had "not believed a word" of what he told him when he arrived.

Mr Brown apologised for doubting him and Mr Schwarz now feels vindicated. "Because I turned out to be right, my credibility is probably higher than it has ever been," he says with some satisfaction.

His credibility was helped by "telling it as it was" - such as criticising Mr de Klerk's government when the Goldstone Commission revealed third-force activity. He also decided off his own bat to fly the embassy flag at half-mast when Chris Hani was assassinated.

Concrete evidence of support now includes the \$600-million-plus aid package, the instructions to all departments to help South Africa where they can, the preferential

trade treatment and the several trade, aid and investment missions to South Africa.

Mr Schwarz's likely successor will be Cape Technikon principal Franklin Sonn, tipped to arrive here on December 1.

What of his own future? Most men his age would be happy to try a little gardening.

But he has already announced that he will be starting a new career as a consultant to a high-powered Washington law firm which will assist business to invest in South Africa.

He has also placed all of his salary since he was sent here and his parliamentary gratuity into a foundation for disadvantaged children. Even that is not enough and he is still hankering to make another contribution to public life.

The indefatigable Harry Schwarz isn't ready to fade away. As he is fond of telling audiences here: "Like a Texas cowboy, I'm going to die with my boots on."

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