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Passport Chief, 70, May Just Go On and On

By LINDA CHARLTON
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Francis G. Knight is probably not immortal, it just seems that way. But there are very few people in Washington who would be prepared to state absolutely that the 70-year-old head of the Passport Office won't go on for ever and ever.

This group includes Miss Knight herself, who won't commit herself about retiring from the job she has held for 20 stormy years, won't even talk about "when" she retires, but only "when and if." Her predecessor held the job for 28 years.

Miss Knight turned 70 this week, which would have meant mandatory retirement for almost anyone else. But for her it meant a one-year written extension, sent to her in a frame on Monday by Secretary of State Kissinger's office. And after next year, who knows?

"I've got to outlive the opposition," she said in a birthday-week interview. The "opposition" in this case—it has varied over the years—are members of Congress who see dangers in the proposed travel document and issuance system that she has been working for six years.

'Lack of Understanding'

She calls them the "nervous nellys," because they believe that a new machine-readable passport—with a strip of magnetic tape embedded in its back cover—is a potential invasion of privacy. But that belief comes from a "lack of understanding" she said, adding with a flicker of a smile, "I'm being very Christian about this."

Miss Knight, a crisp woman with short, curly blond hair and pale blue eyes, does not have the reputation of accepting opposition gracefully. Or, indeed, of accepting it at all. She generally ignores or demolishes it. There was, for instance, the defeat in 1966 of Abba P. Schwarz, administrator of security and consular affairs, and Miss Knight's theoretical boss.

Mr. Schwarz and Miss Knight clashed on passport policy. Mr. Schwarz wanted Miss Knight removed and, in the end, it was Mr. Schwarz who was reorganized out of his job.

"He was meddling in mat-



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Frances G. Knight outside her Washington office

ters in which he had no experience," Miss Knight said crisply. She said that he was a lawyer and added, "Lawyers are not administrators. Most lawyers are notoriously bad at running an office. Mr. Schwarz was not an exception. Fortunately, I won most of my battles with him."

Backed by Senators

Frances Knight, it can be seen, does not call a battle a slight disagreement or an adversary a good fellow. And she can afford not to. When it was rumored that she might be transferred from the Passport Office—after she criticized liberalized passport regulations—all nine members of the Senate Internal Security subcommittee wrote to the Secretary of State to protest.

The regulations, which made it easier for people once politically suspect to obtain passports, stayed in force. But so did Miss Knight.

There are probably very few members of Congress who do not owe Miss Knight a favor or two, very few who have not called her on behalf of a constituent who needed a passport in a hurry. One can be obtained quickly, and when it is, Miss Knight sends a letter—in duplicate—to the member of Con-

gress.

The letter says something like, "In accordance with your request, we have issued a passport to . . . and ends with the hope that the constituent had an enjoyable trip. The second copy of the letter is for the Congressman to send to the constituent to remind him, at election time, of accounts receivable. The original performs the same task for Miss Knight.

'A Little Stroking'

"A little public relations," she said with a smile, "a little stroking."

What no one disputes is that the passport operation has become vastly more efficient under Miss Knight, even as it has expanded. True, its equipment still includes six clothes irons in headquarters here for affixing photographs to passports, but for most people getting a passport now is a matter of days, not weeks.

The disputes that have surrounded her have been about what her critics see as her successful desire to influence passport policy in line with her own conservative views. She denies that this has been her aim, or that she has been anything more than the implementer of policy.

There was the furor over the Passport Office's involvement with the overseas surveillance of a Harvard history Professor in 1966.

"The Passport office has never engaged or assisted in surveillance," she said.

"It's none of our business."

We do have a 'lookout' list. This we have to do with court orders. We don't deny the passport, we simply advise the court."

There were allegations that Miss Knight in the nineteen-fifties made decisions denying passports to persons of suspected or known Communist sympathies. "Obviously, that's absolutely untrue," she said. "You can ask anybody in the shop. We never made that type of decision."

She could not make that kind of decision, she went on to say, because her office is "Pretty far down the line, at a considerably lower echelon than in most other countries." In countries such as England, she said, it is the person in her job who does make the decision, but not she, not here.

'Very Clever Woman'

"She's a skilled bureaucrat, a very strong-willed woman with definite opinions," said a onetime State Department colleague. "Of course, she's a policymaker, and a very clever woman—don't sell her short."

There have been a few battles that she has not won issuing passports through postoffices, for instance. She was dead set against that, but it happened. Also, withdrawing the requirement that a citizen swear an oath of al-

legiance to the United States to get a passport. That practice ended in early 1967.

As for her cherished new passport system, that is

blocked—for the moment. When Representative Wayne L. Hays of Ohio got a prohibition on the use of any funds for this proposal, she said, "There was a furor." She smiled and said, "I wasn't any part of it, but I heard."

Miss Knight, who has been criticized above all for an allegedly political view of the passport, for seeing the document as a privilege and not a right, says now that a passport is "a document of identity and citizenship, that's all it is, all it ever should be."

Some unspecified day, she may retire to the house in Washington, or the one on Hobe Sound, that she shares with her husband, Wayne Parrish, the millionaire magazine publisher, to work at her hobby of repairing things, especially clocks. But she is not saying when, this woman who says in a cool high voice, "As I get older, my fuse gets shorter."

Meanwhile, she is running things as she has been running them, chuckling dryly as she recalls that there have been "close to 30 studies and investigations of the Passport Office" during her reign. "Some of these people," she said, referring to those appointed to do the investigating, "ought to be selling ties at Garfinckels."