

Charles A. Gillespie Jr., 72; Diplomat served in Grenada, Colombia and Chile

By Elaine Woo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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Charles A. Gillespie Jr., a career diplomat who opened the first American embassy in Grenada and later served as ambassador to Colombia and Chile, died of cancer Friday at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla. He was 72.

Gillespie was a specialist in Caribbean and Latin American affairs during a three-decade career in foreign service. He was often assigned to countries in turmoil, including Grenada during the American invasion in 1983 and Colombia from 1985 to 1988 during a crackdown on cocaine trafficking.



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In the latter posting, he received daily death threats from members of the Colombian crime syndicate, particularly after a cocaine lord was captured in a shootout and extradited to the United States.

His last ambassadorial assignment, from 1988 to 1991, coincided with the last years of the Augusto Pinochet regime in Chile.

Gillespie was born in Long Beach on March 22, 1935. He graduated from UCLA in 1958 and later studied at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Public Affairs and the National War College in Washington.

He served in Europe as an Army officer from 1958 to 1962 before beginning his U.S. Foreign Service career in 1965 as regional security officer at the American embassy in Manila. He was later posted to Brussels, the U.S. NATO mission, Mexico City and Managua,

Nicaragua.

From 1983 to 1985 he was deputy assistant secretary of state for the Caribbean and deputy for operations in the State Department's Inter-American Affairs Bureau. In that capacity he established the first American mission on the island of Grenada in 1983.

He was involved in planning the October 1983 invasion of Grenada by the U.S. and several other nations that resulted in the overthrow of a military government that had executed Grenadan Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. About 100 soldiers and civilians, including 19 members of U.S. forces, were killed in the operation, the first major military operation by the U.S. since the Vietnam War.

In 1993 Gillespie led a State Department task force to garner congressional support for the North American Free Trade Agreement, a trilateral treaty involving the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

After retiring from government service in 1995, Gillespie became a principal member of the Scowcroft Group, an international business consulting company founded by former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft. He also co-wrote, with Harry W. Kopp, "Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the U.S. Foreign Service," which will be published in October by Georgetown University Press.

Gillespie's wife of 45 years, Vivian Havens, died in 2003. He is survived by his children Charles and Kristin, both of San Diego, and three grandchildren.