

The Value of Fortress Embassies

BY NICK PIETROWICZ

The December *Foreign Service Journal* focused on a timely subject: embassy security and the ongoing efforts to modify the New Embassy Compound concept.

Often labeled “fortress embassies” by detractors, NECs are seen as projecting an image of America as heavy-handed and imperialistic. Observers bemoan their tall walls and say the demeanor of NEC guards limits openness and interaction.

Yet U.S. diplomacy continues to function in these settings. Foreign Service personnel host visitors, interact with locals outside the walls, and provide citizen services, all despite the allegedly inaccessible nature of these facilities. That record suggests that the actual appearance of these buildings is at most a minor problem for residents of these countries, and one adequately addressed by existing and planned Department of State policies.

It also indicates that identifying the true sources of hostility against our diplomatic missions is more complex than the current debate suggests.

The Importance of Image

For many U.S. diplomats, the greatest fear while working overseas is not anti-American violence, but the possibility that their embassy or consulate might project

the wrong image to local residents.

It is true that our diplomatic missions can appear daunting. The requirements of the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999 establish a clear perimeter between the embassy and the world outside. In addition, many posts have worked with host governments to put in place protocols restricting photography near embassies.

As a result, some claim that NECs look more like sterile military outposts than inviting diplomatic facilities. I believe most of this anxiety comes from the idea that, despite our best diplomatic efforts, a fortress embassy will indicate to host-country nationals that America is intimidating.

Some of this concern may also stem from the comments of third-country diplomats, a population well-versed in the subject of embassy design. But for a nation as large and important as our own, the appearance of an embassy is hardly the only factor to consider when interacting with other diplomats.

When local officials raise complaints about fortress embassies, we do have an obligation to listen. After all, host governments are the ultimate protectors of diplomatic facilities. But in my experience, most local officials would prefer to work



Exterior view of Rocca Scaligera, a fortress in Sirmione, Italy.

with a secure embassy over one which is open and unimposing, but vulnerable. Having a U.S. embassy or consulate attacked is a disaster for the host country. Leaving aside the ramifications for bilateral relations, local residents are statistically far more likely to be killed or injured in such an attack than diplomats.

For all these reasons, an intimidating but safe building might generate gossip in local diplomatic circles, but little discussion among the host-country population. Indeed, I haven't encountered many people outside Foreign Service ranks who actually worry about the way our embassies and consulates look.

That may be because most impressions of the United States and its citizens still

Nick Pietrowicz, a State Department Diplomatic Security Special Agent since 2002, is the Regional Security Officer in N'Djamena, Chad. He served previously as RSO in Chisinau (2008-2011), and as assistant RSO in Kabul (2006-2007) and Port-au-Prince (2003-2005). He was a State Department representative on the AFSA Governing Board from 2007 to 2008. The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of State or the U.S. government.

AFSA Dissent Award Nominations

“Approximately one-third of A-100 classes have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen or Pakistan. There are plenty of FSOs open to personal responsibility regarding risk; they understand the world is a dangerous place, but they accept it and are willing to volunteer.”



—Joshua Polacheck, William R. Rivkin Award 2012

AFSA's Constructive Dissent Awards recognize Foreign Service colleagues who work within the system to improve policy and performance. Colleagues may express dissent in meetings, e-mails, memoranda, telegrams or other formats. An AFSA dissent award recognizes concerted and ongoing efforts to promote change.

Numerous agency awards already exist based on superior performance, but no other government-related association offers an award for dissenters. This award recognizes individuals who demonstrate courage and integrity to challenge the system, ask tough questions and offer alternative solutions.”

Please help AFSA continue to honor and recognize honesty and independent thinking by nominating a colleague of any rank or agency for one of the awards listed below. Dissent awards may be may be conferred for dissent regarding either foreign policy or management/personnel issues.

- F. Allen “Tex” Harris Award for a Foreign Service Specialist
- W. Averell Harriman Award for a junior officer (FS 6-4)
- William Rivkin Award for a mid-career officer (FS 3-1)
- Christian A. Herter Award for a senior officer (FE/OC-FE/CA)

NOMINATION PROCEDURES

Information on nomination procedures and guidelines can be found at www.afsa.org/awards. Here you can also find a list of previous dissent winners.

The deadline for nominations is February 28, 2013.

Questions may be directed to Perri Green, Special Awards and Outreach Coordinator, at green@afsa.org; (202) 719-9700; or (202) 338-6820 (fax).

originate in Hollywood and Silicon Valley, not the local post. So long as U.S. facilities in a host country are secure, the physical appearance of our embassies is unlikely to significantly influence popular opinion.

Lots of Talk, But Few Actual Problems

Just how fortified are U.S. embassies? It depends on who's speaking.

We hear often of the fortress-like appearance of our embassies in Baghdad and London, to cite two examples of cities with a history of serious terrorist concerns. But visiting the other 270-odd diplomatic facilities around the world reveals potential vulnerabilities in many of our buildings.

I still recall one mid-sized embassy where I worked a few years ago. It was so close to the street that visa applicants waiting outside could look into our offices and read our e-mail. And the chancery in one small island nation is so unprotected that I once overheard some U.S. tourists remark, “That’s it? The McDonalds at least has armed guards.”

During my first few weeks in Kabul in 2006, I regularly fielded complaints from colleagues that the embassy was overly security-conscious and we were too isolated from the public. Then one morning, the concussion from a suicide bombing at the front gate cracked the blast-resistant window in the room below mine—a sobering reminder of the value of the setback requirements imposed by the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act. The complaints stopped for a few weeks, but resumed when new staff arrived.

Whatever the security situation in a given place, U.S. diplomats need to leave their offices to meet with contacts, learn about the host country, visit assistance projects, and carry out the many activities

of today's Foreign Service. And yes, there are several countries where getting past the walls to do so is particularly difficult. But blaming the appearance of these facilities for such restrictions makes no sense. Secure embassies are not a direct obstacle to conducting U.S. foreign policy with a host country. Rather, those barriers originate in the post's security policy.

Perhaps there is an argument to be made that enforcement of such restrictions at certain embassies is too strict, just as it might be overly permissive at other posts. But in and of itself, I don't believe that the outward appearance of an NEC is a meaningful obstacle to the ability of diplomats to conduct U.S. foreign policy. A deficit of off-compound travel should not be used to argue for weaker buildings.


The Design Excellence initiative appropriately addresses what are often exaggerated complaints about the appearance and accessibility of U.S. diplomatic facilities.

Some observers speculate that our embassies are not just frightening to look at, but deter visitors. But it is impossible to know how many contacts decline meetings in our facilities simply because of their appearance. Moreover, such concerns ignore the reality that some of our most secure facilities are in places where members of the local population are

already accustomed to stringent security measures.

I once watched a former host-country official being stopped at a checkpoint while entering our embassy. As I started to apologize for the inconvenience, he interrupted me: "I went through four roadblocks to get here today—at least you have air conditioning!"

CORPORATE HOUSING
in **Washington, DC**



Stay with Confidence.
We have certified corporate housing providers on staff.

CAS Corporate Apartment Specialists
Throughout Metropolitan Washington, DC

www.CorporateApartments.com
(800) 914-2802 | F: (703) 979-2813 | sales@corporateapartments.com



THE
WHITE MOUNTAIN
SCHOOL

We are what high school should be.

- Average class size: 10
- AP and honors courses
- Individualized college counseling
- Team & individual sports
- Off-campus field courses twice a year
- Independent study/senior electives
- \$15,000 sustainability scholarships



Bethlehem, NH ~ 603.444.2928 ext. 26 ~ www.whitemountain.org

