



Testimony of Susan Rockwell Johnson  
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Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the  
District of Columbia  
Chairman Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI)

Hearing on:  
*A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language  
Challenges Facing the Foreign Service*  
September 24, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Senator Voinovich, and distinguished subcommittee members, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) welcomes the opportunity to speak before this subcommittee on the subject of diplomatic readiness. These substantial staffing and foreign language challenges confront the entire Foreign Service that AFSA is proud to represent, which encompasses employees not only of the State Department but also of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Foreign Commercial Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service and the International Broadcasting Bureau. We are grateful to you for again convening a hearing on this important issue.

The question of diplomatic readiness goes to the heart of building a strong, professional Foreign Service that will equip the United States to lead an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

In this regard, there must be a clear recognition that diplomacy is the primary tool for anticipating, containing and addressing tension, instability and conflict. While it does not always succeed, experience shows all other approaches, including military intervention, are considerably more costly and complicated, and less likely to work.

The prerequisites for a strong State Department and effective diplomacy start with a corps of professionals available for worldwide service. These individuals should possess a range of skills and abilities including foreign language proficiency, advanced area knowledge including history, culture, politics and economics, leadership and management, negotiating, public diplomacy,

project management and job-specific functional expertise. They should be able to provide expert advice to the president, Secretary of State and our political leadership.

## **PERSISTENT UNDERINVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND RESOURCES**

### ***Staffing and Experience Gaps***

AFSA has long held that the Foreign Service is underfunded and does not have the necessary tools to perform its mission, as two recent Government Accountability Office reports point out. Quite simply, we lack people. The staffing issues at hardship posts clearly reflect the results of neglect on the one hand and significantly expanded missions on the other.

Over the past two decades the Foreign Service has been facing increasingly serious personnel shortages. The tremendous increase in the scope of its mission caused by critical staffing demands in Iraq and Afghanistan brought the situation to a head. The Foreign Service is proud to serve, but the demands of these two war-zone countries have put enormous strain on the rest of the State Department, compromising its ability to produce language-proficient personnel. Yet until recently, little was done to provide funding or authorization to hire new personnel, leading to the global repositioning initiative that left gaping vacancies at posts around the world.

Foreign Service hiring at State and USAID is finally on the upswing after years of flat funding during which new mission requirements vastly outstripped staff resources. The Fiscal Year 2009 omnibus appropriations bill provided for 500 new positions at State (and 300 at USAID), and the House-passed version of the FY 10 State foreign operations appropriations bill will fund an additional 1,000 new positions at State and another 300 new positions at USAID.

This continued expansion is badly needed. The American Academy of Diplomacy documented the need for 2,848 additional State positions for core diplomatic functions and a training complement, as well as for 1,250 additional USAID positions, by Fiscal Year 2014 in its report, "A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness." Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich, I recognize you both for serving on the advisory board of this initiative. Achieving the ambitious goals of the report will require a sustained commitment from Congress to authorize and fund an average of 450 new positions at State and 160 new positions at USAID each year for the next five years, a commitment we were pleased to see meet and exceeded in FY 10.

I would also like point out that AFSA sees a strong case for expanding the Foreign Commercial Service and the Foreign Agricultural Service, which were not looked at in either of these reports. Both these entities are comprised of many dedicated and patriotic Foreign Service personnel, yet their critical functions are sometimes forgotten and overshadowed by State and USAID.

As the GAO reports highlight, understaffing often leads to the use of upstretch assignments at hardship posts, thereby, diminishing diplomatic readiness and effectiveness in critical-need

countries. AFSA concurs wholeheartedly with this concern. Increased workloads, increased need for supervision of inexperienced junior personnel, and a general lack of institutional knowledge are all aspects that must be addressed. Persistent and recurrent staffing gaps undermine the ability of overseas personnel to focus on their primary responsibilities. They are already impeding our effectiveness in some of the most important areas of the world.

In a 2007 survey conducted by AFSA, we asked what factors would motivate, and deter, Foreign Service members from serving in Iraq, where all positions are designated for unaccompanied service. While that case does not necessarily fit the many posts of greatest hardship that State struggles to fill, there are some reasonable correlations. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said that extra pay and benefits were the main motivation; 59 percent identified patriotism and duty as their main motivations. The two main deterrents were separation from family (64 percent) and security concerns (61 percent).

The issue of greatest importance to the Foreign Service, and one that is affecting morale, recruitment and retention, is the overseas pay gap. This inequity was inadvertently created by the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 which added to the base pay of almost all federal employees a "locality" adjustment that represented the cost of attracting talent in a given geographical area. Since Washington, D.C. is where Foreign Service members are hired, initially posted and frequently reassigned, their locality pay is based here. However, the law unfairly excluded overseas Foreign Service members from receiving this standard component of base pay. As the Washington, D.C., locality pay rate has risen from an initial 4.23 percent to 23.10 percent in 2009, Foreign Service personnel continue to see their compensation shrink.

This overseas pay gap represents a major inequity, has a serious impact on compensation, and often negates traditional hardship and danger pay allowances. Thus, junior and mid-level Foreign Service members now take a pay cut to serve at 183 of 268 overseas posts (68 percent) including 20-percent hardship differential posts such as Damascus, Tripoli, Libreville, La Paz and Ulaanbaatar and even danger-pay posts like Amman, Bogota and Tel Aviv. Losing the equivalent of one year's salary for every four or five years served overseas poses serious long-term financial consequences for all Foreign Service personnel across the U.S. government, particularly in these times of economic trouble..

AFSA is pleased that the first step in resolving this issue has been taken, but the difficult effort to ensure fair compensation for the Foreign Service is still ongoing. The FY 2009 supplemental contained a provision giving State the authorization to begin to close the locality pay gap, and has recently begun implementing the first one-third of the 23.10-percent. Additionally, the House passed version of H.R. 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, contained the required authorization language to close this disparity once and for all. We hope that the Senate will soon introduce its version of the bill.

However, this authorization expires in just a few days, at the end of FY09. New language is required to allow State to close the final two-thirds in FY10 and FY11 Failure to implement this authorization would be a tremendous blow to the Foreign Service. As a key player in forging

movement on the first historic steps to begin eliminating this inequity, we very much appreciate the special efforts made on our behalf by you both, Mr. Chairman, and Senator Voinovich. We respectfully urge all members of this subcommittee to encourage your colleagues on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to see to it that a foreign relations authorization bill is signed into law -- and that the appropriators ensure that each agency has the funds necessary to rectify this unintended inequity.

### ***Language Gaps***

Foreign Service members pride themselves on performing their duties as capably as possible. Accordingly, when requests for language training cannot be accommodated, at least partly due to staffing gaps, this is a great source of frustration.

As the GAO rightly points out, there are many instances where officers overseas do not have the required level of linguistic proficiency to accomplish their mission. They cannot converse with their counterparts in that country to establish key contacts or function well in society. They cannot communicate the United States position on important policy issues. And they sometimes have to hope that they correctly understood a foreign applicant's responses during a visa interview.

Despite valiant efforts to close the language gap at overseas posts and to fill vacant language-designated positions, the Department of State continues to struggle with mounting personnel demands, without any increase in resources. To cite just one statistic from the GAO report, there was an "overall increase of 332 overseas language-designated positions between 2005 and 2008, many of which are in hard and super-hard languages."

### **GAO REPORTS**

The two GAO reports prepared for this hearing – "Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Language Shortfalls" and "Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts" – identify continuing problems facing the Foreign Service. They also make helpful recommendations.

Statistics documenting the problems:

- Higher staffing gaps at hardship posts: As of September 2008, State had a 17-percent average vacancy rate at the posts of greatest hardship – nearly double the average rate of 9 percent at posts with no hardship differentials. (GAO-09-874)
- Significant shortages of mid-level officers concentrated in hardship posts: As of September 2008, about 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at posts of greatest hardship were filled by officers in up stretch assignments. (GAO-09-874)

- A sharp rise in number of unaccompanied tours: The number of positions in locations too dangerous for family members to accompany a Foreign Service member has shot up from around 700 in 2006 to more than 900 at the end of Fiscal Year 2008. (GAO-09-874)
- Overall staffing gaps: Approximately 670 positions have gone unfilled since 2005 due to the overall shortage of Foreign Service personnel and the high priority given to staffing positions in Iraq and Afghanistan. (GAO-09-955)
- Significant language proficiency gaps: As of October 2008, 31 percent of FSOs in language-designated positions did not meet either the foreign-language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions. (GAO-09-955)
- Critical language proficiency gaps in areas of high strategic interest: State continues to face serious foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest, such as the Near East and South and Central Asia. In those regions, about 40 percent of personnel in LDPs did not meet requirements. Gaps were particularly high in Afghanistan where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, where 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacked adequate language skills. (GAO-09-955)

#### **KEY GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

The GAO Report on “Additional Steps Needed to Address Continued Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts” recommends that the Secretary of State take two actions:

- (1) Take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of at-grade, mid-level officers to such posts a priority.
- (2) Develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments.

AFSA strongly endorses with these recommendations, and concurs with the State Department’s explanation that the continued overall shortage of Foreign Service generalists and specialists contributes to the difficulty in staffing missions and forces difficult choices. Until staffing levels meet needs, the department will have to continue to prioritize both positions and posts.

AFSA has long maintained that the Foreign Service is underfunded and understaffed. We are pleased that this dangerous neglect has now been recognized and that steps are beginning to be taken to rectify the situation. However, we would like to hear more specifics from State about how the new entry-level personnel will be allocated and according to what priorities.

AFSA understands that the department has been collecting and analyzing data on incentives for hardship-post assignments. We would like to see this study, as well, and have an opportunity to comment.

The GAO Report on a “Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls” recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan,

consistent with GAO and OPM work-force planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. It should include the following elements:

- Clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives for the language-proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy;
- A transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based on objective criteria that go beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language-designated and to set the proficiency level needed for each;
- A more effective mechanism within State that allows the department to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of foreign-language training to their jobs and the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical-needs foreign-language speakers.

The report also recommends that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its congressional budget justifications and annual reports to Congress on language proficiency.

AFSA welcomes the initiatives the Department of State is taking to address these recommendations. We look forward to learning more about specific responses.

## **CONCLUSION**

More basic language training should be provided to all Foreign Service personnel being assigned overseas to enable them to function more effectively in the host country, even if their position is *not* language designated. Training in critical-needs and hard languages should be more closely linked to assignment patterns and career planning.

We also strongly agree with the GAO that a full review of the rating system for language-designated position proficiency is badly needed. A standard rating across all positions or posts is not in the best interest of the mission of the Foreign Service.

Additionally, AFSA believes that language proficiency should enhance, not undermine, prospects for promotion. We are concerned about evidence in the GAO report that State Department human resources officials acknowledge a potential disadvantage for competitiveness for promotions for those in long-term training.

Much is being said about the 3 D's of Diplomacy, Development and Defense as the key pillars of US engagement abroad. It is fair to ask if adequate resources are being invested in diplomacy and development when according to reports, 96 percent of our investment goes to defense and intelligence, with only 4 percent for diplomacy and development.

A December 2006 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report, "Embassies as Command Posts in the Anti-Terror Campaign," notes that the 12:1 ratio of military spending to funding for civilian foreign affairs agencies encourages the further encroachment of the military, by default,

into areas where civilian leadership is more appropriate and effective. This growing imbalance does not bode well for the policy commitment of strengthening the State Department and other civilian foreign affairs agencies with Foreign Service personnel.

AFSA welcomes the growing recognition of the urgent need for increased investment in the Foreign Service as an institution. It is equally important that attention be paid to how this investment is used to build the high-quality, professional Foreign Service that our nation needs to maintain our leadership role in an increasingly complex, competitive and interdependent world.

To continue to strengthen the development of our diplomatic corps, State must do more than simply fill existing staffing gaps. The State Department and the Foreign Service are at a unique and critical crossroads seeing a vast increase in staff, and this opportunity must be treated as a marathon, not a sprint, to ensure that the Foreign Service has the right number of people with the right skills and experience, in the right locations to meet the challenges of 21st-century diplomacy and create “smart power.”

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. AFSA values your longstanding support of initiatives to enhance the diplomatic readiness of our civilian Foreign Service agencies. We particularly appreciate the leadership you have shown in convening this hearing, and we look forward to continuing to serve as a resource for you and your colleagues.



**BIOGRAPHY OF SUSAN R. JOHNSON  
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION**

Susan R. Johnson is a member of the Senior Foreign Service and a seasoned diplomat and manager. She was twice Deputy Chief of Mission, and served in Iraq as Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina as Deputy High Representative and Supervisor of Brcko District. Her Foreign Service career has integrated traditional bilateral and multilateral diplomatic work with assignments of a non-traditional nature including first Director of the Ambassador's Assistance Coordination Unit in Embassy Moscow, and first Director of the USAID funded International Executive Service Corps (IESC) in Central Asia, establishing programs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Earlier in her career she served at the US Mission to the United Nations in New York, and at the US Interests Office in Havana. In Washington she has served as senior coordinator in the Resources, Plans and Policy Office of the Secretary of State, as Special Assistant in the Office of the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, in the office of Senator Bill Bradley on a Pearson Fellowship, and on detail to the National Endowment for Democracy. She recently served as Senior Coordinator in the Front Office of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. She is an alumnus of the Department's 45th Senior Seminar, and received the Department's Deputy Chief of Mission of the Year Award. She speaks French, Italian, Russian and Spanish. She holds an M.A. degree in International Relations from SAIS and a B.A. in history from Principia College. Her term as AFSA President began on July 15, 2009.