



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *Rebranding the Foreign Service*

BY SUSAN R. JOHNSON



There is much talk about the weaknesses of the State Department: its eclipse by an ascendant Defense Department, a longstanding lack of money and people to do the job, confusion over what the job is, low morale, inadequate training, increased politicization, decreasing professionalism... The list goes on.

Articles, investigations and reports abound analyzing the problems and proposing fixes, yet no clear path forward has been identified, much less agreed upon. Many compare the huge investment that we have made in our armed forces with the paltry funding for our civilian diplomatic and development agencies, and point to the need to devote significant resources to rebuild these neglected institutions.

All of us support such efforts, of course. Yet it is strange how little has been said about the need for public recognition and appreciation of those who wield the instruments of soft power. Indeed, their image remains sadly out of focus and out of date.

It is time to transform the archaic public perception of the diplomat as a striped pants-wearing cookie pusher hanging out at official receptions, and the demeaning stereotype of the USAID bureaucrat who is more con-

cerned with “managing” the portfolios of fat-cat contractors than bringing about real change on the ground.

If we want buy-in from the American people and their elected representatives,

we need to foster greater appreciation of the dangers and sacrifices that confront thousands of dedicated Foreign Service members — whether from State, USAID, FCS, FAS or IBB — and their families each day in every corner of the globe.

Toward that end, here are two simple proposals, the first of which would cost almost nothing. Both would be highly effective means to rebrand the Foreign Service.

One place to start is in the speeches and testimony of the Secretary of State and the top political leadership, both in the White House and Congress. We regularly hear our president and elected representatives and senators from both parties publicly acknowledge the service of our military colleagues, as well as the sacrifices their families make. That is as it should be, but could not the following words be added to such plaudits: “and that of our diplomatic and civilian personnel deployed abroad”?

Regular high-level recognition of all the ways in which civilian employees of foreign affairs agencies contribute to our national security would help focus

public attention on the *real* Foreign Service.

A second important initiative would be the construction of a public memorial to the hundreds of diplomats and development workers who have given their lives in service to their country.

Since the earliest days of our nation, 231 civilian employees of the State Department and the other foreign affairs agencies have died in the line of duty. Two-thirds of them — 160, including seven ambassadors — have been killed since 1948, most in terrorist attacks.

The AFSA Memorial Plaques in the C Street lobby of the State Department, established in 1933, already bear eloquent witness to the sacrifices of these brave individuals. But that location also keeps them from achieving the visibility they deserve.

An outside memorial near State, accessible to the public, would not only pay fitting tribute to this honor roll, but would also help inform and educate the American public about the nation's diplomatic service. It would remind all who see it that there are thousands of unarmed federal employees around the world dedicated to promoting peace and development through civilized discourse and compromise, rather than through violence and coercion.

I welcome your thoughts on the pros and cons of these two suggestions, and ways to implement them. Please e-mail me at [Johnson@afsa.org](mailto:Johnson@afsa.org). ■

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*Susan R. Johnson is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.*