

AFSA Remarks
Wednesday, 14 October

Good afternoon. It's great to be with all of you. I am grateful to AFSA, whose leadership matters more than ever in these profoundly trying times. I'm grateful to Georgetown, whose inspiration of the next generation of public servants is so important. And I'm grateful for the chance to share the stage with a richly-deserving group of award winners – including our friends from AID, who did so much good for the world and our country over so many years.

I am honored beyond words to accept this award. The truth is that it is an honor that is only in small part about me. As I look around this room, I am filled with reminders of how lucky I have been – reminders of the family, friends, colleagues and mentors who have made my life in public service possible.

I peaked early in the Foreign Service. My greatest stroke of luck came on the first day of our entering A-100 class, some of whose remarkable members are here today. Through the magic of alphabetical seating, I was placed next to my future wife, Lisa Carty. Lisa has had her own exceptional career, and I owe her more than I can ever repay.

Our two amazing daughters, Lizzy and Sarah, grew up in the Foreign Service. Their two sons, 16 month-old Jack and 5 month-old Will, have made us the happiest grandparents on the planet.

I can't imagine a more fortunate ride in American diplomacy than the one that I had. At every step along the way, good fortune and good colleagues sustained me.

I often did a pretty fair job of concealing whatever professional promise I had. In my first post in Jordan, I managed to get detained while driving a truck across the desert to our interests section in Baghdad, by a particularly humorless and unsentimental group of Saddam Hussein's security personnel. Unmoved by my best FSI Arabic, they confiscated both my truck and the unclassified communications equipment that I was supposed to deliver. It was not exactly a rocket-propelled start to my career.

And yet, at every step along the way, I had the chance to contribute to events which shaped our nation's journey through an endlessly complicated world. I got some things right and some things wrong, but I always tried my best to uphold the standards of service and duty set by those extraordinary American diplomats whose impossibly large footsteps I sought to follow.

At every step along the way, I learned something new. Sometimes it was about classic diplomatic challenges as history was accelerating, like supporting Secretary Baker as the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union collapsed, Germany was reunified, the first Gulf War was won, and an unprecedented Arab-Israeli peace conference was convened in Madrid.

Sometimes it was about the slightly bizarre, like spending hours in a darkened desert tent with Moamar Qadhafi, eventually helping persuade him to abandon terrorism and nuclear weapons.

Sometimes it was about uncertainty, like navigating war-torn Chechnya in search of a missing American humanitarian worker.

Sometimes it was about diplomatic persistence and ingenuity, like the secret back-channel talks with Iran that led to the comprehensive nuclear agreement.

And sometimes it was about the unexpected, like becoming the first career diplomat to lead the CIA – a job and a workforce that I also loved – making well over a dozen trips to Ukraine to help blunt Putin's aggression.

At every step along the way, I never had any shortage of extraordinary colleagues and friends – people who showed me the value of honesty, integrity, compassion and good humor alongside diplomatic skills; people who enriched my life professionally and personally; people who made me look far better than I ever deserved.

At every step along the way, I learned from people who taught me to share credit and take responsibility ... people who taught me that you have to pick yourself up after you make mistakes, learn from them, and move on ... people who taught me that taking care of your subordinates and looking out for one another is the key to real success. And at every step along

the way, I've learned that the starting point for effective diplomacy is to understand the world as it is, not as you wish it to be.

Not a day goes by when I don't think with pride about my time as a career diplomat. Not a day goes by when I'm not reminded of the significance of American diplomacy on the most crowded, complicated and combustible international landscape in my lifetime. Fierce major power rivalry has returned, and a revolution in technology is transforming how we live, work, fight and compete.

The United States is no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block, but we still have a better hand to play than any of our rivals – if we play it wisely.

That's what I worry about today. We're corroding the network of allies and partners that sets us apart from lonelier rivals like China and Russia. We've even alienated the Canadians, which takes real effort. We're corroding institutions – from the Department of State all across the vast archipelago of national security agencies -- that have also set us apart, at least at our best.

Instead of a culture of apolitical career expertise – like the one in which I was so proud to serve six Presidents, three Republicans and three Democrats – we're creating a “looking over your shoulder” culture, where fear clouds the atmosphere. Where good public servants are thrown to the curb with little foresight, and sometimes gleeful indignity.

Instead of long-overdue reforms, we're focused more on retribution and cowing people and institutions, making it more costly to speak truth to power. The demolition of alliances and institutions, at this revolutionary moment in history, is a formula for major power suicide, that our rivals watch with barely concealed satisfaction.

I would be the last person to argue that the profession of American diplomacy was ever flawless. Far from it. While individual officers could be uncommonly resourceful, the State Department as an institution was rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. There is a difference, however, between fixing serious bureaucratic malaise and wrecking professional public service.

It will take time – not a single four-year political cycle but more like a generation – to repair what’s being broken. Our biggest mistake would be to simply assume that the clock can be turned back quickly to the way things were. We will have to rebuild trust among our allies—and trust in apolitical expertise—and that will be very hard.

But as a recovering diplomat, I remain an optimist at heart, despite a forbidding landscape. I don’t want Will and Jack – those two new grandsons I mentioned before – to inherit a world in which the United States has squandered the sense of enlightened self-interest that has brought us so far.

Many years ago, when I was finishing graduate school and trying to figure out what to do with my professional life, my father sent me a note. He was a career Army officer, and a fine man. I never had to look any further than my dad to find the best possible model of public service. And as my three wonderful brothers know, we also never had to look any further than my mother to find the best possible model of selflessness and human decency.

“Nothing can make you prouder,” my father wrote in that long-ago note, “than to serve your country with honor.” I spent four decades in public service learning the truth in his advice. I will always be extraordinarily proud to have been a Foreign Service Officer. And I will always be extraordinarily proud to have served with all of you.

Thanks so much.