



Study Guide for the 2025 National High School Essay Contest

# THE FOREIGN SERVICE'S IMPACT ON THE VIETNAM WAR



**Contest Deadline: March 1, 2025**

# Awards

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## First Place

- Educational Voyage with Semester at Sea
- Washington, DC visit for the student, one family member, and a teacher to meet with State Department and AFSA leadership
- Cash prize of \$2,500

## Second Place

- Scholarship to attend the National Student Leadership Conference's International Diplomacy Program
- Cash prize of \$1,250

## Honorable Mentions

- Certificate of achievement



*2023 Essay Contest Winner Justin Ahn and Secretary of State Antony Blinken*

# Introduction

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Since 1999, AFSA has invited students in grades 9 through 12 to explore critical issues and submit essays that address the Foreign Service and the role that diplomacy plays in advancing U.S. national security and economic prosperity.

The 2025 essay topic challenges students to critically assess what they believe to be the most significant effects of the Foreign Service's work during the Vietnam War on contemporary U.S. diplomacy.

## **In this guide AFSA will provide the following:**

- 1.** A breakdown of this year's prompt and its relevant contextual background (p.4)
- 2.** An overview of American diplomacy, including what it aims to achieve, the various tools used by U.S. Foreign Service officers, the different forms of diplomacy that exist, and the skills (p.5)
- 3.** A brief history of the American Foreign Service and its agencies (p.8)
- 4.** A list of useful resources for students to explore (p.11)
- 5.** The contest's rules and guidelines (p.13)

# 2025 Essay Contest Topic

In 2025, we mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, a conflict that left a profound impact on the United States and the world. As we reflect on this milestone, it is crucial to revisit the role of the U.S. Foreign Service during that era, which was instrumental in shaping the course of events and continues to influence U.S. diplomacy today.

Drawing in part from [The Foreign Service Journal's 40th anniversary coverage](#) of the end of the Vietnam war, *critically assess what you believe to be the most significant effects of the Foreign Service's work during the Vietnam War on contemporary U.S. diplomacy.*



Consider the following as you craft your essay:

- **Historical Context:** Reflect on the role of the Foreign Service before, during, and after the Vietnam War.
- **Long-Term Impacts:** How did these experiences influence the development of U.S. diplomatic strategies, the approach to conflict resolution, or the handling of humanitarian crises in subsequent years?
- **Contemporary Relevance:** Draw possible connections between the lessons learned by the Foreign Service in Vietnam and current U.S. diplomatic practices. How have these lessons shaped the way modern diplomats engage with the world today?

The Vietnam War, lasting from the late 1950s until 1975, not only defined a generation but also reshaped U.S. foreign policy and diplomatic practices. From this, the role of the U.S. Foreign Service emerged as a pivotal force, navigating the complexities of international relations during a tumultuous period marked by ideological strife, geopolitical tensions, and evolving public sentiment toward war. Through this prompt, we want to encourage students to think critically about how the legacy of the Foreign Service in Vietnam continues to resonate in contemporary U.S. diplomacy.

We encourage students to analyze the role the Foreign Service played in the Vietnam War and project how its successes and failures could influence the current and future diplomatic landscape. Students should explore the ways that diplomats can approach current conflicts using lessons learned from Vietnam.

This prompt underscores the importance of diplomacy in addressing global challenges. It acknowledges that diplomats play a crucial role in decisions on war and peace, supporting human rights, responding to disasters, and promoting joint prosperity.

As students begin this essay, they should keep in mind that there is a myriad of lessons to be taken from the Foreign Service's role in the Vietnam War. Consider the historical context of the Foreign Service and the nature of its involvement in the Vietnam War. Students should connect the identified lessons to current approaches to U.S. diplomacy and demonstrate an understanding of how current U.S. diplomacy has been affected by the Foreign Service's work in Vietnam.

# What is Diplomacy?

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Diplomacy is a fundamental means by which a country's foreign policy is implemented. In the United States, diplomatic efforts are led by the U.S. Department of State, whose [mission](#) it is to “protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive.”

## The policies of the State Department tend to fall into five main categories:

1. Protecting the United States and American citizens
2. Advancing democracy
3. Defending human rights
4. Encouraging economic growth and prosperity
5. Promoting international understanding of American values and policies

Diplomacy is put into practice by those working at embassies abroad — many of whom are Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) or Specialists, a professional career track. Members of the Foreign Service at the U.S. Department of State are assigned to one of five “cones”: consular, economic, management, political or public diplomacy. In *Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work*, AFSA provides snapshots of the important work each of these positions plays in embassies around the world:

1. **Consular Officers** serve as the public face of the United States in an embassy, determining which foreign nationals should — and should not — receive visas for legitimate travel to the United States for business, tourism or education. They also provide support to American citizens traveling or living abroad.
2. **Economic Officers** help anticipate economic trends and new opportunities for U.S. companies abroad. Their portfolio includes environment, science, technology, health and labor issues.
3. **Management Officers** enable embassies to function, handling human resources, budget and real estate issues.
4. **Political Officers** are subject matter experts who build relationships with local governments, media, non-governmental organizations and think tanks. They report back on events happening in the country and provide analysis of how developments might impact U.S. policy objectives.
5. **Public Diplomacy Officers** serve as the public relations team, delivering the story of the United States to people around the world. They must have awareness of all aspects of the embassy's work and be prepared to advise on the best way to message it to local media, officials, educators and people.

The professionals of the U.S. Foreign Service have developed a concrete set of tools that help them pursue U.S. policy objectives. The National Museum of American Diplomacy at the U.S. Department of State highlights some specific tools with definitions from the [Diplomatic Dictionary](#):

1. **Bilateral**: discussions, negotiations or treaties are between a sovereign state and one other entity, either another sovereign state or an international organization. The relationship between two nations is referred to as a bilateral relationship.
2. **Multilateral**: Involving more than two nations. International organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are multilateral in nature.
3. **Negotiation**: Discussion between the representatives of two or more parties intended to reach a compromise on a disputed topic of interest. Governmental negotiations can be bilateral (between two states or between a state and a non-state entity, such as an international organization or nongovernmental organization) or multilateral.
4. **Treaty**: An agreement or arrangement made by negotiation; a contract in writing between two or more political authorities, such as sovereign states, formally signed by authorized representatives and usually approved by the legislature of the state.
5. **Convention**: An assembly of persons who meet for a common purpose; especially a meeting of delegates for the purpose of formulating a written agreement on specific issues. The word also refers to the written agreement itself.

The National Museum of American Diplomacy's [Diplomatic Dictionary](#) also outlines the difference between formal and informal diplomacy, which play different roles in achieving America's diplomatic objectives:

1. **Formal diplomacy**: This is government-to-government diplomacy – also called Track I Diplomacy – that goes through formal, traditional channels of communication to communicate with foreign governments (written documents, meetings, summits, diplomatic visits, etc). This type of diplomacy is conducted by diplomats of one nation with diplomats and other officials of another nation or international organization.
2. **Informal diplomacy**: Informal diplomacy includes Public Diplomacy which involves government-to-people diplomacy and reaching out to non-executive branch officials and the broader public, particularly opinion-shapers, in foreign countries, explaining both foreign policy and the national context out of which that policy arises. Public Diplomacy is carried out by both diplomats and, under their programs and auspices, non-officials such as academic scholars, journalists, experts in various fields, members of non-governmental organizations, public figures such as state and local government officials, and social activists.

What do diplomats need in order to be successful? The National Museum of American Diplomacy highlights the [nine skills](#) that diplomats must have to be effective in carrying out their duties. These skills have helped diplomats and FSOs throughout history carry out successful efforts to prevent conflict, build peace, and ensure prosperity. The skills of diplomacy are:

**Informational Skills** are how a diplomat studies and begins to think about how to approach a situation or crisis:

1. **Analysis:** Study and think critically about situations.
2. **Awareness:** Respect different cultures and customs. Recognize when situations and circumstances are changing and adapt to meet that change. Be aware of what they do not know or understand.
3. **Communication:** Articulate their position and listen openly to others' positions. Determine where interests overlap. Confirm positions and use clear and appropriate language to avoid misunderstandings.

**Relational Skills** are how a diplomat works with their team and their counterparts:

4. **Leadership:** Take action and make decisions using what information is available. Keep the big picture in mind. Take steps to improve their country or organization's overall position and fill in knowledge gaps.
5. **Collaboration:** Incorporate the ideas of others and find common ground. Take cues from others when formulating responses and making proposals.
6. **Composure:** Work with others in a professional manner and calmly deal with the range of attitudes and behaviors exhibited by counterparts, difficult partners, and adversaries.

**Operational Skills** are how a diplomat executes a plan:

7. **Management:** Use the skills and strengths of their team members. Know what tools and resources are available to help meet their country or organization's goals and agenda.
8. **Innovation:** Formulate alternatives and be flexible in their responses to unanticipated circumstances.
9. **Advocacy:** Speak on behalf of the country or organization which they represent and pursue the goals and missions of that organization. Advocacy is also speaking up for and with others who may not have their voices heard.

For more insights into the work of the U.S. Department of State, be sure to explore the National Museum of American Diplomacy at <https://diplomacy.state.gov/>.

# **Brief History of the U.S. Foreign Service and its Agencies**

The U.S. State Department was founded in 1789 and has since carried out several reorganizations and created new bureaus to address evolving diplomatic challenges. More than 230 years later, the State Department and the entire U.S. Foreign Service continues to grow and develop through changing global landscapes. Below is a brief timeline of important dates and events in the history of the State Department:

## **Foundations and America's Expansionist Years (1775-1867):**

1. 1781: Department of Foreign Affairs begins under the Articles of Confederation.
2. 1789: James Madison proposes a Department of Foreign Affairs, later renamed the Department of State in 1789.
3. 1803-1823: Plays a role in westward expansion.
4. 1833-1836: Reorganized with the introduction of bureaus.
5. 1853: Authorizes the position of Assistant Secretary of State.
6. 1860: Overseas missions increase to 33.

## **Rise to World Power (1867-1913):**

1. 1872: Consular Service problems lead to an investigation that found corruption and fraud.
2. 1893: U.S. upgraded its envoys, who were known as "ministers" to the rank of "ambassador."
3. 1898: Spanish-American War elevates the U.S. to a global power.
4. 1905: President Roosevelt introduces competitive exams and merit promotions for all diplomatic and consular positions.
5. 1909: The Department was reorganized to address policy changes and increase in U.S. international commitments. The bureau system was expanded to organize diplomacy by distinct geographic regions—Western Europe, the Near East, the Far East, and Latin America.

## **Challenge of Global Conflict and Institutional Reform (1913-1945):**

1. 1917: U.S. enters World War I. The fundamental shift in foreign policy led to the growth of the foreign services and an increase in public attention and praise.
2. 1924: Rogers Act reforms the foreign services by establishing a career organization based on competitive examination and merit promotion. Also, the Act unified the Diplomatic and Consular Services by creating a single organization performing both functions.
3. 1932-1934: The size of the Foreign Service was reduced by 10% due to the effects of the Great Depression
4. 1941-1945: When the U.S. entered WWII, the size of the Department grew at an unprecedented rate and by 1945 its staff had more than tripled (3,767 employees).
5. 1944: Department Order 1301 concentrated similar functions in the same office and related offices under a senior official, either the Under Secretary or one of six Assistant Secretaries and created several new entities.



## The Cold War and the Collision of Superpowers (1945-1981):

1. 1946: Foreign Service Act of 1946 aims to strengthen and expand the Foreign Service.
2. 1950: State Department reviews U.S. strategic and military policy.
3. 1969-1971: President Johnson pushes for diversity in the Department.
4. 1976: President Carter's term emphasizes the foreign service and human rights.

## End of the Cold War and New Global Problems (1981-1992):

1. 1981-1988: The State Department faced financial strains, with budget cuts under the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act exacerbating its worst modern budget crisis.
2. Reagan's administration prioritized Soviet and European diplomacy amid strained relations, led by Secretary Schultz.
3. Despite the Foreign Service Act, Reagan appointed both political and Foreign Service ambassadors, sparking controversy.
4. 1980s Challenges Abroad: U.S. embassies experienced violence and spying, with a significant death toll and attacks such as the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing. A \$1-billion program addressed security concerns globally.
5. 1989-1992: The State Department tackled new global challenges:
  - a. 1989: The U.S. condemned the Tiananmen Square crackdown in China.
  - b. The African Bureau fought apartheid in South Africa and contributed to ending the proxy war in Angola.
  - c. 1990-1991: The First Gulf War saw U.S.-led diplomacy and "Operation Desert Storm" expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait in a 100-hour land war."

For more information on the history of the State Department and the Foreign Service, visit the Office of the Historian's website at: <https://history.state.gov/>.

## The U.S. Foreign Service is composed of six agencies:



**The Department of State** protects and promotes U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive.



**The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)** is the world's premier international development agency and a catalytic actor driving development results. USAID's work advances U.S. national security and economic prosperity, demonstrates American generosity, and promotes a path to recipient self-reliance and resilience.



**The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS)** links U.S. agriculture to the world to enhance export opportunities and global food security.



**The Foreign Commercial Service (FCS)** is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration and serves American interests abroad by offering companies a full range of expertise in international trade.



**The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)** protects the health and value of America's agricultural and natural resources because healthy and profitable American agriculture provides food and clothing for countless people worldwide and is a key pillar of our economy.



**The U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)** aims to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

# Useful Resources

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Here are some additional resources that might be helpful as you start your research. Also, keep an eye on the AFSA social media accounts (@afsatweets on Twitter, @afsagram on Instagram, and @afsapage on Facebook) to view resources that might provide further insights. Be sure to check out [AFSA's website](#) as well for more resources and information of the U.S. Foreign Service and diplomacy.

## ***Inside a U.S. Embassy: Diplomacy at Work***

This AFSA publication shows you what it is like to work in an embassy through profiles of actual members of the Foreign Service and their experiences around the world.

## ***The Foreign Service Journal***

This journal covers foreign affairs from an insider's perspective, providing thought-provoking articles on international issues, the practice of diplomacy, and the U.S. Foreign Service.

## **The National Museum of American Diplomacy**

NMAD provides a variety of useful resources including online [exhibits](#) and [educational resources](#). Be sure to check out the museum's [historical diplomacy simulation program](#) to learn more about the practice of diplomacy and the contributions of the State Department and FSOs in the context of a historical event.

## **The Office of the Historian**

To learn more about the history of the U.S. Foreign Service and American foreign policy visit the Office of the Historian's website. Their website includes useful [educational resources](#) and reading material as well as a detailed [history of the State Department](#).

## **The Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training**

ADST has the world's largest collection of U.S. diplomatic oral histories, as well as podcasts, videos, books, publications, and a "Moments in U.S. Diplomatic History" online series.

## **The American Academy of Diplomacy**

AAD has a useful collection of materials to learn more about the practice of diplomacy, including various [publications](#) and [podcasts](#).

## United States Institute of Peace

USIP's website can provide further information on peacebuilding approaches and tools and examples of international partnerships on peacebuilding initiatives around the world.

## Council on Foreign Relations

CFR's [Academics Program](#) offers a wide variety of resources to learn more about U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy. Their website offers reports, publications, and discussions on global affairs, as well as podcasts and webinars.

## The MLA Style Center

Per the essay contest rules, your citations and bibliography should follow the MLA Style. The Modern Language Association's website has a quick guide to works cited, guidance on using notes, and sample papers using MLA Style. This study guide follows MLA guidelines on parenthetical citations, end notes, and bibliographies.

# Contest Rules

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## Eligibility

This contest is open to high school students in grades 9-12 who meet the following criteria:

- You must be attending school in any of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, or be a U.S. citizen/lawful permanent resident attending high school overseas.
- You may attend a public, private, or parochial school. Home-schooled students are also welcome to participate.
- Previous first-place winners and immediate family members of AFSA, Semester at Sea, and National Student Leadership Conference directors or staff are not eligible. However, if you've received an honorable mention or been a runner-up in the past, you are still eligible to enter.

## Word Count

- Your essay must be between 1,000 and 1,500 words. The word count does not include your list of sources.
- Essays that do not meet the required word count will not be considered.
- When submitting your essay, be sure to include the word count on your submission.

## Deadline

- March 1 by 11:59 p.m. EDT. Any submissions we receive after this time will be automatically disqualified. There are no exceptions to this rule.

## Content and Style Guidelines

- Entries must be typed, double-spaced, in 12-point font with a one-inch margin on all sides of the page.
- Your essay should follow the content and style rules from the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and should include a bibliography. Criteria includes:
  - a. Proper citation of sources.
  - b. Correct formatting for your list of works cited.
  - c. Following MLA rules for margins and indentation.
- Your essay should draw from a variety of sources such as academic journals, news magazines, newspapers, books, government documents, and publications from research organizations. Make sure at least three of your sources are primary—documents, speeches, or materials created during the time you're studying.
- As the prompt specifies, you must cite [The Foreign Service Journal's 40th anniversary edition](#) at least once.
- General encyclopedias (like Wikipedia) are not acceptable sources. If you use them, your essay will be disqualified.
- Websites shouldn't be your only source. If you do use online sources, make sure they're properly cited.

## How to Submit Your Essay

- Fill out the registration form. All fields on the online form are required, including uploading a Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) file of your original work with a title. You must also include a comprehensive list of sources consulted. And don't forget to include the word count of your essay in the submission.
- Registration forms must have a teacher or sponsor name. That person may review the submitted essay and act as the key contact between participants and AFSA. It is to the student's advantage to have a coordinator review the essay to make sure it is complete, contains all the necessary forms, is free from typographical and grammatical errors, and addresses the topic.
- Do not place your last name or your school's name on any of the pages of the essay. Only the registration form should include this information.
- Do include the word count of your essay as part of the submission.

## Video Submission Guidance

- To counter the use of AI in contests like this, we're asking each student to include a brief on-camera video submission along with his or her essay.
- Videos must be no shorter than 30 seconds and no longer than 1 minute. You must answer the following questions in your video:
  - » State your name at the beginning of your video.
  - » Why was this topic of interest to you?
  - » Why did you participate in this contest?
  - » Give a brief overview of your essay and what you learned.
- Videos must be uploaded to YouTube, TikTok, Vimeo, or Google Drive. Make sure your video is not set to Private and that judges will be able to view it through a URL link. You may set it to "Unlisted" on YouTube.
- Submissions that do not meet these requirements will not be considered.

## Judging and Criteria

- Your essay will be evaluated based on the depth of analysis, quality of research, and the clarity of writing, including style and mechanics.
- To be successful, your essay must fully address every part of the prompt and show a strong understanding of the Foreign Service.
- All qualifying essays will go through several rounds of blind judging, meaning the judges won't know the identity of the writers.
- The judges' decisions are final.

## Prizes

- **Winner:** The winner receives \$2,500; a trip (airfare + hotel for student, one parent, and his/her teacher) to Washington, D.C. to meet with diplomatic officials at the U.S. Department of State; and a fully funded educational voyage with Semester at Sea.
- **Runner-up:** The runner-up receives \$1,250 and a full scholarship to attend the National Student Leadership Conference's International Diplomacy program during a summer session.

Please note that once submitted, your essay becomes the property of the American Foreign Service Association and will not be returned.

Thank you for your essay submission and good luck!

***PRIVACY POLICY:*** AFSA collects your information for this contest and for AFSA partners. You may be signed up to receive updates or information from AFSA and our partners. You may receive a message from our sponsor regarding their program offerings, with the option to opt-out. You will be notified if you are the winner, runner-up or an honorable mention in June 2025. The names of the winner, runner-up and honorable mentions will be posted on the AFSA website in June 2025 and will also be shared across our social media channels.

# About the Sponsors

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The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), established in 1924, is the professional association and labor union of the United States Foreign Service. With close to 17,000 dues-paying members, AFSA represents more than 31,000 active and retired Foreign Service employees of the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), Foreign Commercial Service (FCS), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Learn

more at [www.afsa.org](http://www.afsa.org).



Semester at Sea is a multiple country study abroad program open to students of all majors emphasizing comparative academic examination, hands-on field experiences, and meaningful engagement in the global community. A wide variety of coursework from 20-25 disciplines is integrated with relevant field studies in up to a dozen countries, allowing for a comparative study abroad experience that is truly global. Colorado State University is the program's academic partner.

Learn more at [www.semesteratsea.org](http://www.semesteratsea.org).



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