

THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

FOREIGN SERVICE



PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION

JULY-AUGUST 2024

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July-August 2024 Volume 101, No. 6

Focus on Mental Health Support



20

Mental Health Support at State: No Shame, No Penalties
An FSJ Q&A with Under Secretary for Management John Bass

29

Mental Health First Aid for Foreign Service Families
By Lia Miller

25

Addressing Mental Health Needs at USAID
By Clinton D. White and Randy Chester

33

Can Happiness Make Us Better Diplomats?
By Amelia Shaw

38

Resources: Where to Turn When You Need Assistance

Features

39

The FS at 100— What Does the Future Hold?

Inside Diplomacy: A Discussion with Director General of the Foreign Service Marcia Bernicat



44

The Ideal Foreign Service

By Josh Morris,
FSJ Centennial Writing Competition 3rd Place Winner

Straight from the Source

46

Modernizing Foreign Service Assessments: The Move to Virtual Platforms

By Patrick T. Slowinski

THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

Perspectives

7

President's Views

Mental Health in the Foreign Service

By Tom Yazdgerdi

16

Speaking Out

Workplace Conditions at State:
Change Is Coming

By Stacy D. Williams

64

Off-Road with the Foreign Service

Swimming with Whales in Tonga

By Tom Armbruster

75

Reflections

Diplomats, Firecrackers,
and a Checker Cab: The Opening
of U.S. Embassy Beijing

By Don Hausrath

78

Local Lens

Kulikalon Lake, Tajikistan

By Alex Noppe



Departments

9 Talking Points

60 In Memory

67 Books

Marketplace

69 Real Estate

73 Classifieds

74 Index to Advertisers

AFSA NEWS

THE OFFICIAL RECORD OF THE AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION

- 49 AFSA Celebrates Foreign Service Day
- 50 State VP Voice—Countering Mental and Physical Burnout at Work
- 51 FAS VP Voice—Ushering in the Next Chapter
- 52 FCS VP Voice—Building a Strong Foundation
- 52 AFSA Governing Board Meeting, May 15, 2024
- 53 Retiree VP Voice—Preserving the Annuity Exception
- 55 AFSA Hosts 50th Memorial Plaque Ceremony
- 56 The AFSA Exhibit Travels to Presidential Libraries
- 57 100 Years of the Foreign Service at NMAD
- 57 AFSA Welcomes New FS Cohort
- 58 Podcast—“100 Years Old and Still Kicking It”
- 59 AFSA Good Works—*The Foreign Service Journal*



Mental Health in the Foreign Service

BY TOM YAZDGERDI

It is gratifying to see *The Foreign Service Journal* devoting this edition to the issue of mental health in the Foreign Service. For too long, seeking mental health resources has been the province of stigma and fear—of losing one's security clearance or of being seen as weak and unable to handle Foreign Service work.

Back in the day the response was “suck it up, buttercup” to anyone who evinced the need for help. Although more must be done, we are thankfully getting beyond that mindset, which was clearly not the way to address mental health in the Foreign Service or anywhere else.

Thank you to those who contributed their thoughts and stories to this edition. I am particularly heartened to see Acting Under Secretary for Political Affairs (and Under Secretary for Management) Ambassador John Bass emphasize that “seeking and receiving treatment actually is viewed favorably in the security clearance adjudication process” and “in and of itself is not, and will not be, a reason for a negative security determination—full stop.”

Under Secretary Bass also relates his own need at difficult times in his life to reach out for help. Seeing our department leaders speak openly about protecting their mental health gives confidence for others in the workforce to do so, as well.



Tom Yazdgerdi is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Our profession, while rewarding and satisfying, is one that has a lot of unique stressors. It takes a toll moving every two to three years, having to be essentially on duty 24/7 when working overseas as a representative of the American people, often living in inhospitable and dangerous environments, dealing with all manner of crises, and sometimes being separated from family and friends for long periods.

I am certain most, if not all, of us have experienced times in our careers when things seemed overwhelming. For me, one of those times was when I served as the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) leader and then the consul general in Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2011-2012.

The work was incredibly interesting, but being subject to rocket attack three to four times a week and living in spartan conditions on a desolate Iraqi airbase, I could sometimes sense our team coming apart at the seams. This was particularly true when, in early 2012, one rocket attack tragically killed two young U.S. servicemen who lived only 150 meters from us. They were there to help train the Iraqi army.

Mental health resources were not as available then as they are now, but I was grateful that a regional mental health professional came out to Kirkuk regularly to check on our well-being. Although I admit to being a bit skeptical at first, these visits proved enormously helpful.

This individual, who is still with the Bureau of Medical Services (MED), spoke to nearly all of us one-on-one and gave me

ideas on what I could do to alleviate the stress for myself and my team. Being able to talk with a trained professional about the struggles we were all going through made us feel better.

As attitudes have evolved about addressing mental health issues in the Foreign Service, AFSA has fought for hiring more mental health professionals and for more and better access to mental health services for our members. Section 6222 of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) deals with improving mental health services for the Foreign Service and Civil Service.

Section 6222 says the Secretary shall seek to employ no fewer than 10 additional personnel in MED. It requires the department to produce a report on the accessibility of mental health care providers at diplomatic posts and in the U.S. along with steps to improve such accessibility.

While this provision is a welcome development and has the force of law, it is dependent on sufficient funding to be fully implemented. As you may know, the FY24 department budget has in effect been cut by 6 percent, making these increased mental health resources uncertain. AFSA will continue to follow up with department leadership to make this funding a priority because it is so desperately needed.

Please let me know your thoughts at yazdgerdi@afsa.org or member@afsa.org. ■

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Nominations and Confirmations Update

Since our last update in the March *FSJ*, there has been significant progress in the confirmation of nominees for ambassadorial and other high-level positions in the foreign affairs agencies. Most of the 20 who have been confirmed by the Senate since mid-February are career members of the U.S. Foreign Service.

These include ambassadorships to Haiti, Peru, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, the Marshall Islands, Indonesia, Cabo Verde, Ecuador, Nigeria, Burundi, Somalia, Turkmenistan, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Timor-Leste, and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.

Career FSO Steve Lang was confirmed as U.S. coordinator for State’s International Communications and Information Policy (CIP) division. And Senior FSO Raymond Greene was appointed to take the helm at the American Institute in Taiwan, which acts as a de-facto U.S. embassy in Taipei, beginning in summer 2024.

Political appointees were approved for ambassador positions at three international organizations: UNESCO, OECD, and the U.N. Food Agencies in Rome. The crucial position of State Department Inspector General was filled after being vacant since 2020. Political appointee Cardell Kenneth Richardson Sr. was confirmed May 2.

Multiple Foreign Service promotion and tenure lists have been confirmed since March.

AFSA continues to advocate for swift confirmation of all career nominees and FS lists, particularly a group that had been held up for confirmation for more than a year.

According to AFSA tracking, 23 countries still had no U.S. ambassador as of late May, 12 of which had no nominee.

Contemporary Quote

“We are not an administration or a department that twists the facts, and allegations that we have are unfounded.”

—Vedant Patel, State Department principal deputy spokesperson, in response to allegations by former State Department official Stacy Gilbert that the department falsified a report on Israel’s complicity in blocking food aid to Gaza, on May 30.

Six senior positions at State and USAID remained unfilled: one under secretary position, two assistant secretary positions, the legal adviser, the chief of protocol, and USAID’s assistant administrator for the Middle East. Four of these positions have nominees at various stages of the confirmation process.

Stay updated on the status of ambassadorial and senior-level foreign affairs nominations and confirmations with AFSA’s Ambassador Tracker, found at <https://afsa.org/ambassadorlist>.

Senate FS Day Resolution

On the 100th anniversary of the U.S. Foreign Service, Senators Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), who co-chair the Senate Foreign Service Caucus, introduced Resolution 678, designating May 3 as United States Foreign Service Day.

The resolution honors the dedicated men and women who have served in the Foreign Service, acknowledging their vital role in advancing U.S. interests abroad.

The resolution reads, in part: “Whereas it is both appropriate and just for the United States as a whole to recognize the dedication of the men and women of the Foreign Service and to honor the members of the Foreign Service who have given their lives in the

loyal pursuit of their duties and responsibilities representing the interests of the United States and of its citizens: Now, therefore, be it

“Resolved, That the Senate—

“(1) honors the men and women who have served, or are presently serving, in the Foreign Service of the United States for their dedicated and important service to the United States;

“(2) calls on the people of the United States to reflect on the

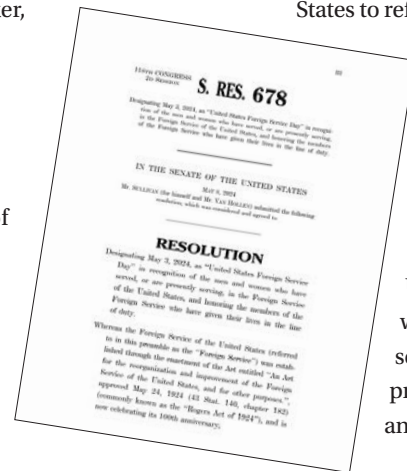
service and sacrifice of past, present, and future employees of the Foreign Service of the United States, wherever they serve, with appropriate ceremonies and activities; and
“(3) designates

May 3, 2024, as

‘United States Foreign Service Day’ to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Foreign Service of the United States.”

District of Columbia Passes Foreign Service Resolution

On May 7, the Council of the District of Columbia issued a ceremonial resolution commemorating the centennial of the U.S. Foreign Service.



The resolution honors the establishment of the Foreign Service in 1924 by the Rogers Act and acknowledges the contributions of nearly 17,000 Foreign Service professionals working across various U.S. agencies both domestically and internationally.

The resolution was championed by at-large Councilmember Anita Bonds and co-introduced by Councilmembers Matthew Frumin, Christina Henderson, Trayon White, Robert C. White, and Kenyan R. McDuffie.

It will take effect immediately upon publication in the District of Columbia Register.

D/MR Verma Testifies on Modernization Effort

In a hearing on May 16, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee welcomed Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma to discuss the State Department's modernization efforts and various challenges facing U.S. diplomacy.

Senator Ben Cardin (D-Md.) opened the discussion by reflecting on the significant changes since the Rogers Act of 1924, emphasizing growth and technological advancements within the diplomatic workforce, which comprises more than 75,000 employees.

Verma highlighted the State Department's focus on building new capacity in emerging mission areas through the creation of new bureaus, such as the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy and the Office of Critical and Emerging Technology.

The modernization agenda includes expanding training opportunities, recruiting a diverse workforce, and leveraging innovative technologies. Verma noted the implementation of paid internships, a new employee reten-

tion unit, and the first-ever department-wide retention plan.

Senator James Risch (R-Idaho) criticized the department for slow implementation of critical reforms, particularly the Security Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA). Verma assured that final guidance for SECCA would be issued within weeks, acknowledging the complexity of balancing security with operational needs.

Verma reported notable progress in passport and visa processing, with processing times returning to prepandemic levels. The implementation of the GRATEFUL Act and the Foreign Service Families Act has also seen success, with 1,500 visas issued to local staff of U.S. embassies under the GRATEFUL Act and increased employment opportunities for eligible family members.

The hearing also addressed the competitive landscape of global diplomacy, particularly citing China's extensive

network. Verma reported progress in opening new embassies in Vanuatu and Kiribati and emphasized the need for a larger budget to support the effort to expand U.S. presence in the region.

Verma stated: "The challenge that we are facing is showing up and getting our people out. Secondly, it is a budgetary challenge as well. I really appreciate now that we have new tools like the Development Finance Corporation; we have old tools like the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

"But, again, look at how State Department funding for this year is going to be cut by 6 percent. We have this staffing gap. We have the confirmation challenges, so there's a lot we can do. Frankly, we are a national security agency. I think we ought to be funded and treated like a national security agency; and I think that would actually help us compete a lot better."

Listen to the full hearing at <https://bit.ly/SFRC-Verma-on-Modernization>.

Podcast of the Month: *Majlis* (<https://www.rferl.org/majlis-talking-asia-podcast>)

In this biweekly podcast, host Bruce Pannier welcomes guest experts to discuss political developments and pressing social issues affecting the nations of Central Asia.

Produced by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the *Majlis* podcast aligns with RFE/RL's mission to promote democratic values through accurate, uncensored news and open debate in regions where free press is under threat and disinformation is widespread.

Pannier is a seasoned journalist with experience in Central Asia. His background includes leading sociological projects there and contributing to publications like *The Economist* and *Oxford Analytica*.

Recent episodes have covered topics such as the Tajik government's crack-down in Gorno-Badakhshan, religious freedom in Central Asia, British Foreign Secretary Cameron's visit to the region, and the plight of Karakalpak activists.

The appearance of a particular site or podcast is for information only and does not constitute an endorsement.



State Launches International Cybersecurity Plan

On May 6, the United States released the “International Cyberspace and Digital Policy Strategy: Towards an Innovative, Secure, and Rights-Respecting Digital Future.” The strategy emphasizes “digital solidarity” to enhance global technology diplomacy and cybersecurity.

Unveiled by Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the RSA Conference, an international meeting on cybersecurity, in San Francisco, the strategy focuses on building international coalitions to maintain an open, secure, and resilient internet while countering cyber threats from countries like Russia and China.

The strategy includes partnerships to set global cyber norms and collectively address cyberattacks. It also supports the semiconductor industry and invests in global internet infrastructure.

U.S. Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy Nathaniel Fick highlighted the importance of coalition building to establish broader cyber norms and collectively challenge adversaries. Despite ongoing tensions, the strategy also encourages diplomatic efforts to engage adversaries in dialogue and stresses holding allies accountable for misusing technologies.

Fick acknowledged the possibility of a change in administration coming out of the November 2024 presidential elections but was confident that the main goals of the strategy will likely remain in place.

“It is so important in the world that the United States be a reliable, consistent partner. We’re trying to ensure that we have maximal continuity beyond November,” he stated. “And it’s certainly something that we’re trying to make clear to allies and partners when we engage with them.”

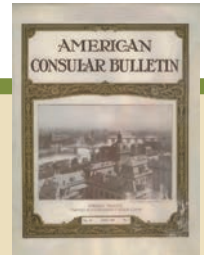
100 Years Ago

The Secretary’s Statement

Through the passage of the Rogers Bill the serious limitations and inadequacies inherent in our present Foreign Service adjustment have been removed, and a substantial basis of reorganization achieved. The date of its enactment marks the birthday of the new service broadened in the rewards which it offers to men of ability, permanently stabilized by statute, coordinated by amalgamation, rendered mobile by interchangeability, democratized and Americanized through a scale of compensation and representation allowances which eliminate the necessity for private incomes, and definite in its assurances that men who have spent their lives in the service will not be left devoid of resources when the age of superannuation arrives.

Through this salutary legislation young men of ambition are offered a career of almost unparalleled opportunity and attractiveness, and the country receives its best assurance of security and substantial achievement in the future conduct of its foreign affairs.

—Charles E. Hughes, U.S. Secretary of State, in American Consular Bulletin (precursor to the FSJ), July 1924.



SIGAR: Afghan Aid Siphoned to Taliban

On May 19, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released its newest audit report on U.S. activity and expenditure in Afghanistan.

The audit was conducted in response to the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s March 13, 2023, request to determine the extent to which U.S. taxpayer dollars are benefiting the Taliban.

Since the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, the U.S. has provided more than \$2.8 billion in humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan.

The objective of the report was to assess the extent to which U.S. funds intended to assist the Afghan people are instead

benefiting the Taliban and to evaluate the oversight provided by U.S. agencies on these funds.

According to the report, 58 percent of 65 responding implementing partners reported paying taxes, fees, duties, or utilities to the Taliban-controlled government, totaling at least \$10.9 million.

In addition, SIGAR reports that the Taliban has pressured these implementing partners to divert aid and recruit

Taliban-approved individuals, and that State and USAID did not consistently enforce foreign tax reporting requirements, resulting in incomplete reporting of taxes, fees, duties, and utilities paid.



Heard on the Hill: Centennial Edition

A Salute to the U.S. Foreign Service

America's Foreign Service officers are tasked with promoting America's interests, strengthening national security, and assisting U.S. citizens in the far corners of the globe. For 100 years, the Foreign Service has served a critical role in leading American diplomacy. Today, we salute the courageous, dedicated members of the United States Foreign Service and reaffirm our commitment to providing this crucial diplomatic corps with the support they need and deserve.

—Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), in a May 23 press release celebrating 100 years of the U.S. Foreign Service.

Representing the U.S. with Honor Abroad

On the centennial anniversary of the Foreign Service, we celebrate all the past and present members of our diplomatic corps who have represented the United States with honor abroad. These men and women play a critical role on the front lines of our diplomatic missions—sometimes at great personal risk and often with little fanfare—protecting and promoting America's global interests.

Not only are their efforts vital to our diplomacy—they also provide critical support to Americans in need of assistance. We're committed to supporting our Foreign Service members and their families, which is why we've fought to pass legislation like our bipartisan Foreign Service Families Act. As we look ahead to the next 100 years, we reaffirm this commitment and our gratitude for the efforts of these public servants as they continue working to strengthen our standing on the world stage.

—Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), in a May 23 press release celebrating 100 years of the U.S. Foreign Service.

Unwavering Commitment

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the 100th anniversary of the U.S. Foreign Service.

Over the past century, Foreign Service officers, many of whom call Virginia home, have worked tirelessly around the globe to help maintain the global leadership of the United States.

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of working alongside many Foreign Service officers. These Americans display an unwavering commitment to our diplomacy and our national security.

As we celebrate 100 years of modern American diplomacy, let's pause to reflect on the invaluable contributions made by these public servants on behalf of our country, even while facing threats and working far from their hometowns and, oftentimes, their families.

I stand here today to express my profound gratitude to these officers, as well as to honor the hundreds of members of our Foreign Service who have given their lives in service abroad.

To recognize this important centennial, I encourage my colleagues to support the bill to mint a commemorative coin celebrating 100 years of the U.S. Foreign Service.

—Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-Va.), in a floor speech on May 22.



Furthermore, implementing partners did not always comply with the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) five-year recordkeeping requirements for transactions with blocked entities.

As a result, SIGAR recommended an expansion of foreign tax reporting

requirements to all U.S. award agreements in Afghanistan, requiring responsible officials to collect the required foreign tax reports and ensure they are implemented in all future award agreements.

State and USAID generally concurred

with SIGAR's recommendations but raised concerns about feasibility and applicability.

SIGAR will follow up with State and USAID within 60 days to identify any actions taken in response to the recommendations.

Back to Work Act Introduced

A new bill limiting telework for federal employees, the Back to Work Act (S. 4266), was introduced on May 7 by Senator Mitt Romney (R-Utah) and co-sponsored by Senator Joe Manchin (D-W.Va. at the time, now I-W.Va.).

The bill would limit telework to no more than 40 percent of days within an employee's pay period, allow flexibility and waivers for certain positions, and require agencies to monitor telework productivity and report on metrics and potential negative effects.

A press release introducing the bill cited an October 2023 Government Accountability Office report that found many federal agency headquarters buildings largely vacant.

The Office of Personnel Management's 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey found that the majority of federal employees are still teleworking at significantly higher levels than before the pandemic, according to a report at FedSmith.com.

The bill is part of a broader effort, supported by President Joe Biden and other lawmakers, to increase in-person work among federal employees following the pandemic.

Other legislative efforts include the Telework Transparency Act and the Utilizing Space Efficiently and Improving Technologies (USE IT) Act, both aiming to scale back telework and better utilize federal office space.

Tech Diplomacy Academy at State

The State Department has become the first organization to adopt the new Tech Diplomacy Academy platform launched by the Purdue Krach Institute for Tech Diplomacy, according to an April 30 report in FedScoop.

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This online platform aims to educate enrollees on emerging technologies, their commercialization, and the associated foreign policy risks and opportunities. The State Department will use it to train officials in public diplomacy and cyber and digital technology.

The Krach Institute was founded in 2021 by two former State Department officials: Keith Krach, former under secretary of State for economic growth, and Mung Chiang, former science and technology adviser to the Secretary of State.

State Department's Anti-Bullying Policy

On March 26, the State Department announced a comprehensive policy to ensure a respectful, civil, and professional environment for all its employees.

The anti-bullying policy, spelled out in 3 FAM 1540, applies to all Foreign Service and Civil Service employees, including paid family members and locally employed (LE) staff. Supervisors must address and prevent bullying, holding violators accountable.

Under the policy, bullying includes any significant incident or pattern of behavior not related to EEO protected classes that creates an intimidating, hostile, or abusive work environment.

Examples of such conduct include physical intimidation, personal space invasion, repeated interruptions, derogatory remarks, personal insults, exclusion from necessary communication, and interference with personal property.

In accordance with the policy, employees should report bullying to their chain of command or appropriate officials. In cases of immediate threats, employees should contact law enforcement or security personnel.

The State Department is committing to take prompt action on bullying reports, ensure confidentiality, and prevent retaliation.

The new policy is part of a series of steps to address workplace well-being, starting with the decision to fund the Office of the Ombuds (S/O) to staff the Workplace Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center for the first time since it was created a decade ago.

Another step, the Bureau of Global Talent Management's "Focus on Accountability" initiative, discussed by Director General Marcia Bernicat in an interview with *State Magazine*, aims to address broader cultural and structural issues essential for fostering a professional workplace.

The initiative strives to build trust in the department's ability to hold employees accountable for their actions. State data shows that 65 percent of Foreign Service generalists, 60 percent of Foreign Service specialists, and 37 percent of Civil Service employees believe the department fails to hold employees accountable.

"If you are working in a toxic environment today, and you have reported it, please trust that we are working on it by counseling, investigating, and—where appropriate—disciplining those responsible," Bernicat told *State*.

For more on these developments, see "Workplace Conditions at State: Change Is Coming," by Stacy Williams, on page 16.

U.S. Soldier Detained in Russia

Army Staff Sgt. Gordon Black, 34, was arrested on May 2 in Vladivostok, Russia, for alleged theft from a woman he was visiting.

Black, previously stationed at Camp Humphreys in South Korea, was sup-

posed to travel to Fort Cavazos, Texas, but instead flew to Vladivostok for "personal reasons." His mother revealed he went to visit a girlfriend he met in South Korea, who was deported to Russia after a dispute with him.

The U.S. Army is investigating whether Black was lured to Russia by intelligence services and noted he did not have official clearance to travel.

This incident occurs amid heightened U.S.-Russia tensions, with increasing arrests of Americans in Russia. Moscow is already holding journalist Evan Gershkovich, Paul Whelan, and Marc Fogel, formerly a teacher at the Anglo-American School of Moscow.

Gaza Update

U.N. staff member Waibhav Anil Kale, 46, was killed while traveling in a marked U.N. vehicle from Rafah to the European Hospital in Khan Younis on May 13.

Kale, an Indian national and U.N. security service coordinator in Gaza, was the first international U.N. casualty since the conflict began on Oct. 7.

The Israeli Defense Forces stated that they were not informed of the vehicle's route, while the U.N. deputy spokesperson confirmed that all convoy movements are communicated to Israel. The incident is under investigation.

Kale's death adds to the 191 U.N. workers killed in Gaza since Oct. 7, almost all of whom were Palestinians. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called for a humanitarian cease-fire and the release of all hostages.

The incident occurred shortly after a State Department report suggested that Israel may have violated international law in its Gaza campaign. The 46-page unclassified report was ordered by President Joe Biden under a new

national security memorandum, “NSM-20: Safeguards and Accountability with Respect to Transferred Defense Articles and Defense Services,” issued in early February.

Secretary Antony Blinken submitted the report to Congress on May 10 to address two key questions: whether Israel is restricting humanitarian aid and whether Israel has violated international law while using U.S. weapons.

The report did not formally conclude that any violations had occurred, stating that the U.S. lacks “complete information” on whether U.S. weapons were used in these actions.

The report notes that the aid reaching Palestinians remains insufficient.

Stacy Gilbert, a senior adviser in the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, who worked on the original draft of the report, resigned in protest following its publication.

Her resignation, tendered hours after the report was published on May 10, was fueled by her belief that it contradicted the consensus among State Department experts that Israel was indeed blocking humanitarian assistance to Gaza. Gilbert asserted that subject matter experts were removed from the report’s final drafting phase.

“When the report came out on May 10, and I read the conclusion, especially the conclusion on—that Israel was not blocking humanitarian assistance, I decided I would resign, because that was absolutely not the opinion of subject matter experts in the State Department, USAID, the humanitarian community, organizations that are working in Gaza,” Gilbert said in a PBS interview.

In another Gaza-related resignation, Alexander Smith, a contractor with USAID, said he was given the choice to

resign or be fired after his presentation on child mortality among Palestinians was canceled by USAID leadership.

On May 27, in his resignation letter to Samantha Power, Smith criticized USAID for treating the Gaza conflict and Palestinians differently from other humanitarian crises, failing to uphold international humanitarian principles, and avoiding acknowledgment of Palestinian rights.

The administration is under extreme pressure to balance its support for Israel with the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and concerns about potential violations of international law. Biden dispatched CIA Director Bill Burns to the region on May 3 for another round of negotiations in an effort to reach a deal to cease the violence and free Israeli hostages.

President Biden has paused some arms transfers and threatened further suspensions.

Amid mounting international scrutiny of Israel’s military actions in Gaza, on May 20, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court sought arrest warrants for Hamas and Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, over alleged war crimes during the seven-month conflict. The U.S. has objected to the ICC charges against Israeli officials.

As this edition went to press, Secretary Blinken was on a four-country Middle East tour, planning to visit Cairo, Tel Aviv, Amman, and Doha, at each stop urging world leaders to push Hamas to accept a Biden-led peace deal. ■

This edition of Talking Points was compiled by Mark Parkhomenko.



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Workplace Conditions at State: Change Is Coming

BY STACY D. WILLIAMS

I was quite pleased to read *The Foreign Service Journal's* April 2024 edition. Finally, there was a conversation focused on the State Department's problems with bullying and incivility, showcasing the need for the department to identify immediate-, medium-, and longer-term solutions to the challenges employees are facing within the workplace. These issues must be addressed as Secretary Antony Blinken pursues his goals of modernizing U.S. diplomacy.

As chair of the employee organization Balancing Act, I am all too familiar with these issues. Over the last three years (and in another sense, the last seven), the State Department, like the rest of the country, has experienced a period of great turbulence and imbalance.

The immediate need is to bring equity front and center as the means to “rebalance” our efforts to establish a collegial, collaborative, and inclusive work environment, one in which we all have the opportunity to be seen, heard, valued, and respected at all levels.

Top Challenges

Overwork, impossible deadlines, varied working conditions, lack of sup-

Survey results found that the number one factor causing employees to consider leaving the State Department was poor supervisors.

port, and high levels of professional and personal risk are the kinds of stressful challenges diplomats have always faced to one degree or another, as the State Department deals with budgetary and policy decisions, leadership quality, and the general political climate.

In recent years, and in particular during and following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, State employees have experienced a significant increase in workload with no additional staffing or resources. Lingering effects from the January 2017 to May 2018 hiring freeze at State made matters worse.

The pandemic upended work routines as well as family life. Department employees were compelled to do even more with even less. The increased workload produced shorter deadlines and eroded the demarcation between work and personal life. It was as if we

were in the trenches with no air support, or other reinforcements, and relied on each other and employee organizations to talk through these experiences as coping mechanisms to safeguard our mental health.

Many employees reported their concerns to Balancing Act about deteriorating supervisor/employee relationships, with no effective mechanisms to resolve these increasingly uncomfortable situations. Some supervisors were routinely requiring Foreign Service and Civil Service employees to work beyond normal business hours and on weekends, without allowing for the legally authorized overtime or compensatory time off for Civil Service and nontenured Foreign Service employees.

Based on these findings and the challenges in interpreting complex overtime regulations, Balancing Act leadership worked with the Bureau of Global Talent Management in 2022 to pull together a cable, 22 State 107214: “Taking Care of People: Overtime and Premium Compensation Policy Guidance and Reminders.”



Stacy D. Williams is chair of the employee organization Balancing Act. He began his State Department Civil Service career as a Presidential Management Intern in 1997 and was deputy director in the Office of Haitian Affairs. He has served as president of the Thursday Luncheon Group and established the Diversity and Inclusion Council in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Despite the cable's release on Sept. 28, 2022, there is still no mechanism to reinforce this directive or promote a leadership culture of compensating and rewarding eligible employees for the additional work done to meet the needs of the department.

In February 2023, the department released the results of a Stay Survey pinpointing the commitment to mission as a positive factor in motivating employees to remain within the department. Conversely, however, the survey results found that the number one factor causing employees to consider leaving the State Department was poor supervisors.

Turning the Corner

Throughout 2022 and 2023, workload and workplace conditions repeatedly dominated department leadership town halls. The unanswered question (then, as now) was: How will the State Department put into place adequate accountability measures to address these shortcomings in order to protect and retain our most valuable resource, our people?

In 2024 department leadership agreed to provide resources to the Office of the Ombuds (S/O) to staff the Workplace Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center for the first time since it was created about a decade ago. This was a welcome step. But given that, according to the announcement, it is step one of a three-step process, it is too early to tell if the new effort will succeed.

On March 28, the S/O announced a new anti-bullying policy that officially defines bullying behaviors so that everyone has a full understanding of what to look for and can state in writing or orally that such behavior is unwelcome [see the *FSJ*'s April 2024 Straight from the Source, "Office of the Ombuds Takes on Bullying at State," by Brianna Bailey-Gevlin]. For

this process to work effectively, the system has to build in support mechanisms to ensure that the employee's concerns are heard and adequately addressed through their chain of command and the Executive Office. Hopefully, the Foreign Service Institute will incorporate the anti-bullying policy throughout its leadership and management curriculum.

In addition, Director General Marcia Bernicat announced the Bureau of Global Talent Management's "Focus on Accountability" programming to raise accountability awareness in the April 2024 edition of *State Magazine*. The initiative took into account results from the Stay Survey as a first step to try to address workplace condition issues and hold those responsible for disrupting the system accountable.

Leveling the Playing Field

In March 2020, State established a Manager Support Unit to assist managers and supervisors in dealing with employee performance and conduct issues. This was a logical step. However, today some employees contending with managers who exhibit bullying behavior lack the knowledge or resources to effectively navigate these difficult situations.

The Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) added a new Retaliation Prevention Provision (Section 6211) restricting supervisors from writing an evaluation on an employee who has a discrimination, bullying, or harassment case against that supervisor in process. This is a small but significant development.

Along these lines, the State Department should establish an "Employee Support Unit" to serve as a clearinghouse on equal employment opportu-

Speaking Out is the *Journal's* opinion forum, a place for lively discussion of issues affecting the U.S. Foreign Service and American diplomacy. The views expressed are those of the author; their publication here does not imply endorsement by the American Foreign Service Association. Responses are welcome; send them to journal@afsa.org.

nity (EEO) issues, filing of grievances, officially reporting cases of bullying, managing curtailments, and understanding the role of unions, among other areas of support.

Such a unit would also serve as a tool for tracking inquiries and the timeliness of responses. The employee experiencing unwelcome situations could write to the Employee Support Unit, where the department could review the case, assign it to the appropriate department office, and alert the employee of the actions to take.

Currently, the burden is placed on the employee to identify the correct office and be aware of time limits and other requirements of the particular process. To appreciate the implications of this burden, one can look to notable employee experiences from the last few years.

Implementing Accountability Measures

Leadership. It is as important now as ever to select managers who are self-aware, empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and great communicators, among other attributes. Once we recruit and hire them, State must invest in them, ensuring they have the tools to keep pace with changing workloads and hybrid work.

These types of managers routinely prioritize building up the workforce, meeting the team where they are, and doing the necessary to adequately resource and advocate for the team.

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Many of these individuals never receive the necessary feedback and corrective training and present the same negative behavior at assignment after assignment.

These attributes are clearly prescribed in State’s Leadership and Management Principles (see 3 FAM 1214) and should be exhibited by employees, supervisors, and managers alike. Both employees and supervisors should be held accountable when they fail to adhere to these principles.

Support for managers before problems arise. Mandatory leadership training, which Secretary Colin Powell introduced, was only a first step in building strong, accountable leaders. The Manager Support Unit provides a tool kit for navigating difficult management challenges.

But what about long before those problems arise? There is no commensurate place for managers to find a tool kit of tactics for managing hybrid teams, building rapport when a team member is on domestic employee teleworking overseas (DETO), or for tracking employees’ tasks, managing information flow from several different systems, or simply keeping pace with email.

Some managers and subordinates are fortunate in picking up tools along the way from talented colleagues. More training and resources for managers on how to build and sustain healthy teams, including an online repository of strategies to apply, is a clear first step.

360 reform. The 360 process is used in the Foreign Service to solicit input from references to support an employee’s bidding process for upcoming

assignments. This normally occurs every two to three years. Traditionally, the process allows members of the Foreign Service to select those individuals who will provide a positive assessment.

In its current form, this process leaves out vital voices who can give honest feedback on the employee’s performance, how they treat others, and whether or not they should be given greater leadership responsibilities.

To mandate that the employee include a broader set of colleagues familiar with them would—eventually—change behaviors, because decision-makers would be able to see the whole person based on a broader set of voices.

Employee evaluation report (EER) reform. State has made some changes in evaluating FS employee performance and leadership capabilities. The department’s workforce has changed over time, and expectations and a postpandemic reality have changed our workplace, but we still use the same measurements to identify and promote leaders.

The EER rightly captures an employee’s accomplishments, ability to effectively lead teams, and ability to achieve overall results. But as leaders, employees have to manage teams under sometimes challenging circumstances, which requires the full tool kit of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Therefore, there is a need to take into account the whole person and, in some way, the results identified in the 360 process.

In current practice, even individuals who have been identified as detrimental to an office or post make the promotion list in time, which rewards and emboldens poor managers. Many of these individuals never receive the necessary feedback and corrective training and present the same negative behavior at assignment after assignment.

This is demoralizing to those who are going about their work in alignment with promotion precepts but do not make the promotion list.

The department has solicited ideas to enhance the EER, and *The Foreign Service Journal* has published several articles, including an April 2023 Speaking Out by Virginia Blaser, "Why Our Evaluation System Is Broken and

What to Do About It," and an April 2020 feature by Alex Karagiannis, "Evaluation Reform at State: A Work in Progress," highlighting this need.

We do hope that the department will consider incorporating those ideas in the process for improvement.



In closing, there is a foundational scene in the blockbuster movie "Oppenheimer," where the leading character meets renowned physicist Niels Bohr, and during the encounter Bohr asks Oppenheimer, "Can you hear the music?"

Bohr saw Oppenheimer's potential and was trying to get him to fully understand the deep and intuitive

mathematics involved in physics. The advice spurred Oppenheimer to pull the puzzle pieces together to do what had not been done before in that critical discipline.

Separately, a mentor of mine once stated: "When a group of people fully understands the system, the group is then able to make changes to the system to benefit the institution."

At this critical moment in the State Department's history, we need to "hear the music" of a changing workforce in order to build and promote a workplace culture of civility, accountability, and balance. We should pool all our resources, talents, and energies for the good of the institution. That time is now. ■

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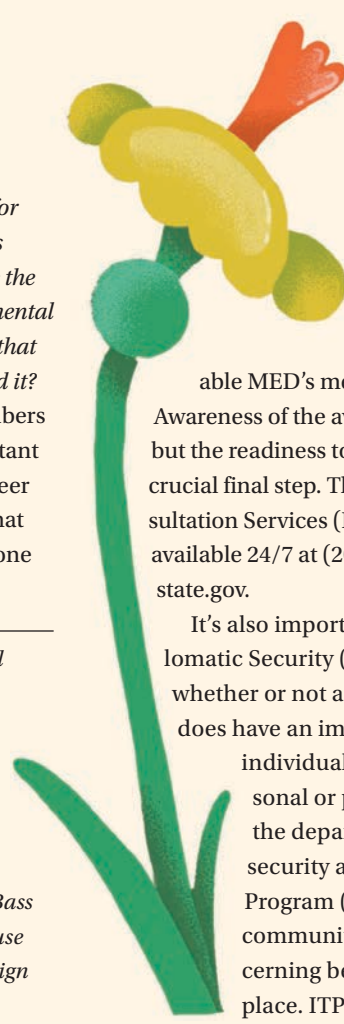
An FSJ Q&A with Under Secretary for Management John Bass

Foreign Service Journal: In your role as Under Secretary for Management, you oversee both the Bureau of Medical Services (MED) and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS). These are the two bureaus with the most influence on whether people seek mental health care and the impact of that care on their careers. From that position, how do you ensure the most access for those who need it?

U/S John Bass: Ensuring our workforce and family members have access to quality mental health services is more important than ever, and I take that responsibility very seriously. A career with the State Department involves normalizing activities that are quite stressful—starting with regularly changing where one lives, works, or goes to school.



John Bass is Acting Under Secretary for Political Affairs. He was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on Dec. 17, 2021, as the Under Secretary for Management. A career Senior Foreign Service officer, he has served as U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Türkiye, and Georgia. He began his diplomatic career in 1988 and has also served in Iraq, Italy, Belgium, and Chad. The son of a public servant and a U.S. Air Force officer, Bass was born and raised in upstate New York. A graduate of Syracuse University, he speaks Italian and French. He is married to Foreign Service Officer Holly Holzer Bass.



This career often entails times of great difficulty, distance from family, even acute crisis. I've spoken quite openly about my own challenges dealing with stress and trauma, and how indispensable MED's mental health services were and are to me.

Awareness of the available services is, of course, important; but the readiness to take advantage of those services is the crucial final step. The State Department's Employee Consultation Services (ECS) is a great place to start, and they are available 24/7 at (202) 634-4874 or via email to MEDECS@state.gov.

It's also important to note that the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) does not play a role in deciding whether or not a person needs, or receives, care. DS does have an important role, though, in ensuring that individuals experiencing difficulties in their personal or professional lives do not unwittingly put the department, their co-workers, and national security at risk. The Office of Insider Threat Program (ITP) supports the Department of State community by providing a platform to report concerning behaviors employees witness in the workplace. ITP is focused on supporting the workforce

BETH WALFROND

by engaging with partners across the organization to find effective resolutions to problematic behavior. Individuals can raise these concerns anonymously on the intranet page or by emailing InsiderThreatReporting@state.gov.

FSJ: *What services does the State Department provide to support employee and family member mental health? Can you tell us how access to mental health care services works overseas? Who has access to these services at posts? Are the services available to all employees of all agencies at post and their family members? Do locally employed staff also have access to these services?*

JB: Let's start by recognizing that asking for help can be hard. I've experienced this hesitation myself and shared my experiences of asking for and receiving help during some trying times. I strongly encourage our department family to explore and utilize the mental health care services provided by MED (or by private providers if that is your preference). MED has an expert team of psychiatrists and social workers who are available to anyone under chief of mission authority. Our MED colleagues are there to support us and do so with compassion and understanding.

We also have adjusted to ensure that locally employed staff are provided access to the department's Employee Consultation Services at times of crisis or during acute events. This can include one-on-one counseling or virtual support groups.

FSJ: *Many FS members express concern that they will lose their security clearance if they seek mental health services. We understand that the security clearance renewal process can be held up for this, which disincentivizes getting help when most necessary. Are these valid concerns? How often does this happen?*



Can you provide any data on the impact of seeking mental health care on security clearances?

JB: Not only is there no shame in asking for help, there is no penalty in the department either. I want to emphasize that getting treatment is a sign of strength, not weakness. Seeking and receiving treatment actually is viewed favorably in the security clearance adjudication process. Undergoing mental health counseling in and of itself is not, and will not be, a reason for a negative security determination—full stop.

Like other departments and agencies, State adheres to the National Security Adjudicative Guidelines in determining whether individuals should have access to classified information. These guidelines acknowledge that certain psychological conditions that affect behavior may negatively impact an employee's ability to protect national security information. If information gathered during an employee's background investigation indicates that there may be an emotional, mental, or personality condition that could cause a significant security concern—including or emphasized by alcohol and/or substance abuse—DS consults with MED.

MED assists the DS adjudicative team by offering a professional medical opinion as to whether the individual has a condition that may impair judgment, stability, reliability, or trustworthiness, particularly in the context of their ability to follow rules and properly safeguard classified or national security information, or to perform sensitive duties.

FSJ: *As part of the security clearance and renewal processes, does DS have to ask whether someone has sought mental health care, and is DS required to act on "yes" responses?*

Undergoing mental health counseling in and of itself is not, and will not be, a reason for a negative security determination—full stop.

JB: Yes, to some degree. The questionnaire for national security positions (Standard Form 86) is used across the federal government and does include questions relevant to psychological conditions. These questions are focused on psychotic disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, delusional disorder, bipolar mood disorder, borderline personality disorder, or antisocial personality disorder, and others that could have a substantial adverse impact on judgment, reliability, or trustworthiness, particularly if left untreated.

FSJ: *Can you or anyone else in leadership say unequivocally that seeking mental health care in and of itself will not have a negative impact on a security clearance?*

JB: I want to be clear: seeking mental health care, in and of itself, will *not* have a negative impact on a security clearance. It's important to emphasize that unchecked actions or behavior, even those stemming from a mental health condition, are the primary concern from a national security standpoint. Even employees with diagnosed serious psychiatric conditions may hold a security clearance if there is evidence that treatment, including medication, effectively addresses the condition such that the employee's judgment, stability, reliability, or trustworthiness are not impaired, and the individual has demonstrated ongoing and consistent compliance with the treatment plan.

FSJ: *What is the State Department doing to ensure seeking mental health support is not stigmatized? Does this require a cultural shift, and is that happening?*

JB: Like many aspects of how we operate around the world, our approach to mental health care is evolving. We've come a long way, but we still have some work to do. Asking for help is especially difficult in an organization of "can-do" people whose careers are centered on finding solutions to global problems and serving others.

My overseas assignments have often been to countries that have suffered from conflict and terrorism. I've had a few

close calls. I also felt deep grief when my first wife and fellow FSO died after living with cancer for many years. I've wrestled with fear, with doubt, and with survivor's guilt. And several times, I reached out and asked for help from mental health professionals.

Early in my career, I had to look outside the State Department, and I didn't talk about it with colleagues. But over the past 15 years, I found support from the dedicated professionals in MED. The department's mental health care professionals not only understand how traumatic experiences affect our mental and emotional health but also the particular challenges and stresses of a career serving our nation far from home.

When I look across the department and our overseas missions, I see the stigma long associated with mental health care services declining—not uniformly everywhere, but to a much greater degree than 10 or certainly 20 years ago. I think this reflects a larger cultural shift that's underway in our society.

We've taken a number of steps to try to accelerate and reinforce this cultural shift within the department, including to benefit colleagues from other foreign affairs agencies. For MED, that means prioritizing personal well-being without fear of repercussion, and reforming its clearance protocols to emphasize education, counseling, and collaboration. MED is also strengthening its collaboration with DS to promote a culture of openness and support. Through joint educational initiatives, both bureaus are working to dispel the notion that seeking medical or mental health assistance will affect the security clearance process.

Over the last two years, DS has ramped up messaging on this issue, encouraging potential applicants (and the workforce as a whole) to seek treatment and look out for their mental health without fear of security clearance implications.

FSJ: *Today, with what many see as a crisis in adolescent mental health, we hear frustration from members trying to get adequate mental health care for FS kids overseas. What is the department doing to help families access the mental health services their kids need?*

JB: We are acutely aware of the need and have prioritized securing additional funding, even in a tight fiscal environment, to provide additional services. MED is working hard to be responsive. Our regional psychiatrists provide equal time and services to children and adolescents as they do for adults, but the needs exceed the capacity of those regional personnel. MED is working hard to assess and review local resources, as available, and build a robust database of virtual services that can supplement department services.

Of course, there are some parts of the world where specialty resources are simply not available on the local economy and/or difficult to access virtually. In those circumstances, we strongly encourage parents to reach back to MED to discuss their challenges and explore options together.

FSJ: *How is the department dealing with the increased demand for mental health services accompanied by a shortage of providers? Is State adding mental health provider positions to the 21 psychiatrists who serve overseas posts? Is the pilot program to bring on providers in addition to psychiatrists (licensed clinical social workers, for example) happening? Can you update us on those plans?*

JB: We are continuously exploring innovative solutions to meet the growing demand for mental health support overseas. We're actively engaging in preventive projects to better prepare and equip individuals before their assignments, ensuring they're both well informed about available resources and mentally equipped for their postings. For instance, we're providing insights to future ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission to help them understand the stress experienced by their staff and its long-term effects so they can have the tools to support their mission.

The pilot project to deploy mental health practitioners to posts beyond a small collection of designated locations is underway. The inaugural position will be established in Doha this June. Although additional full-time equivalents haven't yet been allocated for further expansion due to budget challenges, posts will soon have the flexibility to fund mental health practitioners' positions and coordinate with MED for candidate selection.

FSJ: *What will budget cuts mean for mental health resources? Will the State Department have to cut back on its planned hiring of additional mental health professionals?*

JB: We are still evaluating the impact of this year's budget cuts, but I anticipate it will take us longer than planned to further scale the program to the extent leadership had envisioned. MED is no stranger to working with such constraints, and we are going to continue working to ensure the department has sufficient resources to provide the excellent services our community expects—and deserves.

FSJ: *The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying rising demand for mental health services also led to expanded options for telehealth for mental health care. This would seem to be an*

I see the stigma long associated with mental health care services declining—not uniformly everywhere, but to a much greater degree than 10 or certainly 20 years ago.

especially helpful change for the Foreign Service. What has State done to make telehealth more accessible for FS members?

JB: I think there are ample opportunities for us to build on MED's experience with telehealth. For more than a decade, MED has been providing video health services through Health Units, and many of our regional psychiatrists rely heavily on telehealth connections to regularly conduct private, high-impact sessions. There is every reason to expect that telehealth services will become more prevalent and common in the coming years, a fact that is reflected in MED's modernized medical clearance process.

MED's mental health team is actively curating a list of virtual therapy clinics and mental health professionals around the globe, and I encourage your readers serving overseas to explore those opportunities by connecting with their respective regional medical officer psychiatrist.

FSJ: *As part of the FSJ focus on mental health care for the Foreign Service in the January-February 2016 edition, we reached out to FS members worldwide for their input on their own experiences with mental health care in the Foreign Service and asked for their recommendations.*

My editor's letter summarized what we heard: People want (1) a clearer understanding of what services are available and how those can affect clearances, both medical and security; (2) assurances of privacy; (3) confidence that they will not be penalized for seeking help; (4) a destigmatization of mental health care; and (5) relief from toxic bosses and unrealistic workloads.

That was eight years ago. Where are we today on these five asks?

JB: Some of this was touched on earlier in our discussion—we've come a long way but still have some work to do. We've made great progress in modernizing the clearance process for individuals going overseas, including for mental health conditions. MED and DS strive to destigmatize their procedures, enhance the available information, and expand support provided

MED's mental health team is actively curating a list of virtual therapy clinics and mental health professionals around the globe.

to the workforce, ensuring that mental health conditions do not hinder overseas clearances.

We need to continue seeking ways to sustainably expand services, especially for children, adolescents, and emergency cases. At the same time, our medical professionals personify agility and reliability in the care we currently provide to our overseas community.

Mental health care is integral to overall medical care, and MED operates with an interdisciplinary approach in our Health Units, which comprise physicians, nurse practitioners, physician

assistants, registered nurses, psychiatrists, and laboratory technologists. Together, they remain steadfast in championing health care for our diplomatic community abroad.

FSJ: *What's your advice for colleagues who are struggling but afraid to get help?*

JB: Taking that first step—asking for help—can be really difficult. Please try to realize that you're not alone. I've been there myself, as have many, many of your colleagues. Please think about the support structure you have, and use, when you're faced with a difficult situation or need to make a tough choice, and consider leaning on one or more of those people to help you take that first step.

Reaching out for support was one of the best decisions I ever made for myself. MED's mental health team are understanding, nonjudgmental professionals. They listen. They can offer valuable guidance. They can help you navigate difficult times. ■



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Addressing Mental Health Needs at USAID

USAID strives to build a healthier workplace to ensure mission readiness, at home and abroad.

BY CLINTON D. WHITE AND RANDY CHESTER



Clinton D. White serves as counselor for the United States Agency for International Development. He has more than 20 years of experience in the public sector and is a member of the Senior Foreign Service.



Randy Chester is the current USAID AFSA vice president representing more than 1,600 USAID FS staff. He has more than 20 years of experience, 17 of which were overseas, and he is one-half of a USAID tandem couple.

In 2022, as our nation eased its way out of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released his 48-page “Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being.” In it he wrote: “We have an opportunity and the power to make workplaces engines for mental health and well-being. Doing so will require organizations to rethink how they protect workers from harm, foster a sense of connection among workers, show workers that they matter, make space for their lives outside work, and support their long-term professional growth. ... Benefits will accrue to both workers and organizations.”

USAID will continue to strategically invest in employee assistance, work-life balance, wellness, and organizational resilience programs.

Well before Dr. Murthy issued his framework, USAID leaders understood the significant role of the workplace in shaping the mental and physical well-being necessary for effective, productive work. Driven by various executive orders, congressional legislation, and federal regulations, USAID established the Staff Care program in 2012 to provide an array of stress-mitigating services that improve the mental health and well-being of its workforce while helping the agency achieve its foreign policy goals. Staff Care's suite of programs centers on supporting an environment where the workforce feels valued, each employee's physical and mental well-being is bolstered, and a healthy balance between work and life responsibilities is maintained.

Today, USAID is recognized as having one of the top staff care programs in the federal government, one that exceeds governmentwide benchmarks for employee engagement and satisfaction. In the 2021 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), for example, 78 percent of USAID's employees said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the agency's health and wellness programs, compared with 64 percent in other U.S. government agencies. In that same survey, USAID employees reported health and wellness program utilization rates at 10 percentage points above the governmentwide average.

Given the intense nature of USAID's humanitarian and development assistance work around the world and the stress of living and working in high-threat areas, USAID will continue to strategically invest in employee assistance, work-life balance, wellness, and organizational resilience programs to ensure the well-being of its employees and the effectiveness of its work.

Challenges for FS Employees

FS employees face mental health challenges due to their unique work and lifestyle. These challenges affect not only individual mental health but also the health of the agency.

USAID FS employees serve in complex and difficult posts, including conflict-prone areas such as Somalia and South Sudan and high-threat/high-crime posts such as El Salvador and Bangladesh. They face the ever-present threat of authorized and ordered

departures around the globe, including in Haiti, Niger, and Ukraine. And many are still coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These stressors are in addition to what regular Americans face in their daily lives as they struggle to find a balance between job demands and the needs of their immediate and extended families. Multiple deployments and frequent moves, exposure to threats, unprecedented workloads, accelerated promotions, separations from family, inadequate rest, and gaps in mental health support affect individual mental well-being.

Balancing life overseas and back home (wherever home may be) creates another challenge for FS employees as they manage the emotional toll of living away from family and friends while fulfilling diplomatic duties. The turmoil of managing professional responsibilities and personal relationships can result in feelings of guilt, loneliness, and disconnection, which then affect overall mental health.

The constant need to adapt to new environments and cultures, form new relationships, and build new networks of support can be emotionally draining. If the post is in a high-threat region, FS employees often find themselves in stressful situations, facing real or perceived security risks, which result in trauma-related issues. Ordered departures are traumatic for staff and their families.

The AFSA Mental Health Survey

In March 2024, AFSA teamed with USAID Staff Care to survey USAID members, exploring their current views on stress and mental health. The survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of stressors external to the workplace (environmental factors) and internal stressors within the USAID workplace. The response rate was 17.5 percent (280 out of an estimated 1,600 active USAID AFSA members).

Top-ranked external stressors included: working in a high-threat/high-crime post (64 percent), working in a conflict-prone area (54 percent), and experiencing traumatic events at post (45 percent). Respondents said terrorist attacks, accidents, violent incidents, or personal threats have had lasting effects on their mental health, citing anxiety, PTSD-like symptoms, difficulty coping, and fear for family members' safety.

Internal stressors were named with even greater frequency. Respondents cited excessive workload (80 percent), lack of leadership/management support (74 percent), long work hours (69 percent), and relationship difficulties with supervisors (49 percent). Many described "toxic" work environments that were related to anxiety, depression, panic attacks, mood swings, sleep disturbances, and emotional dysregulation.

Many also described a delayed processing of stress, where the full effect of traumatic events isn't felt until later. This can lead to emotional distress and cognitive or physical impairments, which contribute to unhealthy coping mechanisms. "Unaddressed stress can manifest in many ways that have the potential to affect employees' personal and professional lives," USAID Staff Care Director Tarshia Freeman told us in March. "The combination of unaddressed stress, increased work demands, and work conflict may all contribute to the overall mental health and well-being of staff. It is imperative that individuals adapt healthy coping strategies to help combat burnout, mental health risk, and chronic health issues."

Changing Attitudes

In recent years, we have seen a shift in the overall view of mental health, in part due to younger generations normalizing discussions about mental well-being and challenging long-held stigmas. The increase in mental health awareness includes an understanding of the problem, support for those dealing with mental health issues, and appreciation of mental health as a critical part of well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the demand for balancing personal and professional interests and mental health support. Additional factors specific to the Foreign Service, such as the 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal, the conflict in Ukraine, and the Israel-Gaza war, have also increased PTSD diagnoses and elevated awareness of the need for mental health support. Additionally, moral injury—psychological distress stemming from actions or inactions conflicting with one's moral code—is another challenge gaining increased attention.

Forty-three percent of AFSA/Staff Care survey respondents reported having sought counseling, demonstrating a high need and suggesting a changing attitude toward seeking support. The number of counseling clients served by USAID Staff Care rose from 307 in Fiscal Year 2013, the first full year of Staff Care, to 626 during FY21 amid COVID-19, when Staff Care counselors recorded the highest-ever number of clients. USAID Staff Care served 516 counseling clients in FY23; so far, numbers are level in FY24.

As FS employee demographics continue to change, there is a growing awareness of the specific and unique mental health considerations for the increasing numbers of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), multicultural families, LGBTQ+ individuals, and singles serving overseas. BIPOC FS employees often navigate diplomatic assignments abroad while confronting systemic racism, cultural differences, and identity-related stressors.

AFSA teamed with USAID Staff Care to survey USAID members, exploring their current views on stress and mental health.

LGBTQ+ employees face challenges related to acceptance and safety in countries with varying attitudes about gender and sexual orientation. Single FS personnel can experience feelings of isolation and loneliness as they struggle to form connections at post.

Some FS employees report feeling that they lack sufficient support from agency leadership. Recurring themes in the AFSA/Staff Care survey included discrimination, racial insensitivity and tensions, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. USAID's perceived unwillingness to hold offenders accountable further distressed and demoralized some survey respondents.

"Corridor reputation," an unofficial term used in diplomatic circles to describe an employee's character, qualities, and interactions based on informal colleague observations, remains a concern. FS employees may fear that acknowledging mental health challenges—or pushing for a healthier work-life balance—could tarnish their reputations within the tight-knit community of diplomats and thus jeopardize career advancement. FS employees also express concern that seeking mental health therapy might affect their security and medical clearances.

"Unfortunately, mental health stigma is a common concern that many individuals may fear due to unknown reactions or perceptions of others," says Staff Care Director Freeman. "Hesitation to seek help may exacerbate the very issues they seek to address."

Getting Support: A Holistic View

The USAID Staff Care program employs a strengths-based approach, placing mental health within a positive framework that emphasizes resilience, adaptability, and coping strategies rather than focusing on mental health as an illness. This holistic perspective recognizes that well-being extends beyond the individual to include work-life balance, social support networks, and organizational culture.

Staff Care provides a range of programs, services, and resources designed to bolster the well-being and work-life balance of USAID's entire workforce, regardless of hiring mechanism—in the workplace, at home, and in the community—and Staff Care services are available to all family members. Proactively promoting resilience among FS employees involves

FS employees may fear that acknowledging mental health challenges could tarnish their reputations within the tight-knit community of diplomats.

cultivating environments that encourage emotional well-being and providing tools to navigate challenges unique to the Foreign Service. Resilience is not simply an individual's responsibility. Employees work best and are healthiest when they are part of organized, functional teams, offices, bureaus, and missions.

When AFSA/Staff Care survey respondents were asked which of several organizational stressors had affected them negatively at USAID, 79 percent noted excessive workload, with lack of management/leadership support a close second. Even in high-threat environments, organizational stressors were more significant than external environmental stressors. Many respondents felt overwhelmed by the volume of work and the expectations placed on them, citing heavy workloads, long work hours, relentless deadlines, unrealistic expectations, constant pressure to perform, and the pressure to manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously. All of this leads to exhaustion, burnout, and difficulty in maintaining personal and professional interest, affecting physical and mental health.

Some respondents described toxic work environments where they experienced various forms of mistreatment or harassment, including bullying, discrimination, racial insensitivity, and sexual harassment that contributed to feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, and low morale. Some cited a lack of adequate resources for dealing with mental health issues, such as difficulty accessing counseling. And some felt undervalued or unrecognized for their contributions, leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, disillusionment, and reduced job satisfaction.

Organizational stress can impede both the individual's and the group's ability to bounce back and effectively tackle issues. The Staff Care Organizational Resilience Team specifically addresses this by working with units to help manage organizational stress. These services complement Staff Care's work with individuals by developing workplace environments with healthy teams and increased levels of employee engagement.

A focus on individual *and* organizational resilience is just one way that Staff Care uses a holistic approach to support USAID

employees. Traditional employee assistance counseling is offered not only to staff but also to family members. Critical incident response, psychoeducational evaluations, training, and support groups all address mental health and the multifaceted effects of trauma. Available services also promote physical health and work-life balance. Organizational resilience services include data-gathering on team functioning, resulting in interventions focused on team culture, change management, communication, and more.

A Continuing Priority

USAID has been a leader in prioritizing and understanding the mental health support needs of employees and their families serving overseas. The USAID Staff Care program and initiatives demonstrate to employees that not only does their work matter, but they matter as individuals.

Staff Care offers workshops through its U.S. direct-hire licensed clinical social workers. These social workers are assigned to Washington, D.C., and provide the full spectrum of employee assistance services, including case management. This support is designed to ensure the highest level of readiness by helping Foreign Service employees navigate challenging assignments, personal problems, Exceptions Committee requests for compassionate curtailment or curtailment for professional needs, medical clearances, and performance and conduct processes. The program offers workshops to help employees build knowledge, skills, and healthy habits for stress management, increased resilience, and improved well-being.

The wellness and work-life program connects the entire USAID workforce (regardless of staffing mechanism) and their family members with internal and external resources, services, and referrals to reduce stress. Those programs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- the Caregiver Action Network, a national organization that supports individuals who care for aging loved ones or family members coping with chronic health conditions;
- the Parent Encouragement Program, offering the USAID workforce and their family members access to parenting support programs;
- the USAID lactation program;
- a child-care subsidy for eligible U.S. direct-hire USAID employees based in the United States; and
- free legal and financial education and referrals.

Workplace mental health and well-being is critical to ensuring mission readiness across the U.S. government and within the agency. USAID will continue its work to improve and support the current and next generation of FS employees. ■

Mental Health First Aid

for Foreign Service Families

Here is a practical first aid kit for mental health for Foreign Service families.

BY LIA MILLER



BETH WALROND

Nearly 20% of children and young people ages 3-17 in the United States have a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder, and suicidal behaviors among high school students increased more than 40% in the decade before 2019. ... These trends were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic,” the National Library of Medicine reported in 2022.

These sobering statistics mean that many Foreign Service children and families are experiencing mental health challenges, or will. And that is without accounting for the unique stressors of the Foreign Service lifestyle, such as constant relocation, which can be trying even at the best of times.



Lia Miller, a career Foreign Service officer, has served in Armenia, Bolivia, Tunisia, Nicaragua, Oman, and Washington, D.C. She is a 2023 graduate of the Naval War College and currently serves in a faculty position focused on State Department–Defense Department foreign policy related to women, peace, and security. She is also an award-winning freelance writer.

As an MHFAider, you are taught to observe the signs, symptoms, and behavioral changes caused by mental health disorders and to act as a support.

While moving and beginning new life chapters is always novel and exciting, it can and does take a toll, and often those who pay the highest prices for the Foreign Service lifestyle are our children and trailing family members. For families, the transition involves more than just adapting to a new culture and environment; it also encompasses managing the emotional and mental well-being of each family member.

Being able to recognize and address mental health concerns, particularly in teens and tweens, is a crucial aspect of ensuring a smooth and healthy adjustment to your new life abroad or back to the United States if you are returning home after some time overseas.

What Is Mental Health First Aid?

According to the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) International website, MHFA is an evidence-based, early-intervention course that teaches participants about mental health and substance use challenges in adolescents.

It originated in Australia in 2001, when Betty Kitchener, a nurse specializing in health education, and Anthony Jorm, a mental health literacy professor, established Mental Health First Aid Australia, a national nonprofit charity focused on health promotion training and research. Later, Mental Health First Aid USA adapted the program and launched MHFA programs across the United States that have trained more than 15,000 MHFA trainers and some 3 million volunteers, including former First Lady Michelle Obama.

But what is MHFA exactly? The MHFA USA site explains: “Mental Health First Aid is a course that teaches you how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The training gives you the skills you need to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a crisis.”

What it means to me as a parent of adolescents and why I

proactively chose to become an “MHFAider” is that I wanted to develop the tools and resources to support and identify potential mental health challenges that my own children and their peers might face. Just as many parents go through standard first aid training, learning CPR, and what to do if someone chokes or is burned, it is equally important to develop the knowledge and skills to assist others when their injuries and challenges may not be visible in the same ways as a physical injury.

Many people may feel put off by the notion of becoming an MHFAider because, not being licensed mental health practitioners or clinically trained psychologists, they do not feel comfortable diagnosing mental health challenges and feel ill equipped or unable to assist. This is where the beauty of MHFA lies—there is no expectation that an MHFA volunteer is or acts like a licensed or clinically trained professional.

As an MHFAider, you are taught to observe the signs, symptoms, and behavioral changes caused by mental health disorders and to act as a support to someone facing a mental health challenge(s). In addition, you act as a connector, putting someone struggling with a mental health challenge in direct contact with trained professionals. As an MHFAider, you are not expected to diagnose, treat, or prescribe; your role is rather to be observant, supportive, and proactive.

Concerning Signs

Understanding mental health is the first step toward helping someone in need. Mental Health First Aid courses are available worldwide and are designed to teach people how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. These courses provide the skills needed to offer initial support to someone who may be developing a mental health problem and help connect them to the appropriate care.

Teens and tweens are at a particularly sensitive stage of life, even without the added stress of a major international move. The upheaval associated with relocating can exacerbate or trigger mental health issues. Here are some of the symptoms to watch for.

Changes in behavior. Look out for significant changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, or a decline in academic performance.

Withdrawal. An increased desire to be alone or a lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities can be warning signs.

Mood swings. While some moodiness can be typical in teenagers, severe or rapid mood swings may indicate underlying mental health concerns.

Feelings of hopelessness. Pay attention if your child frequently expresses feelings of worthlessness or talks about self-harm.

The Benefits of MHFA

For Foreign Service families, becoming a Mental Health First Aider is not just beneficial—it's essential. Here's why.

Early intervention. Early identification and intervention can make a significant difference in recovery outcomes. Being a Mental Health First Aider equips you with the knowledge to recognize early signs of mental health issues.

Reducing stigma. By educating yourself and your family on mental health, you contribute to breaking down the stigma associated with mental illness. This creates an environment where seeking help and talking about mental health are normalized.

Crisis management. In a foreign country, finding immediate mental health support can be challenging. Mental Health First

Aiders can provide crucial support and guidance during times of crisis until professional assistance is available.

Building stronger families. Open discussions about mental health strengthen the family unit, ensuring that every member knows they have support and understanding.

It is gratifying to know as an MHFA volunteer that there is a wide variety of support services and resources available through the State Department.

Resources at State

The Global Community Liaison Office (GCLO) offers on its public-facing website a comprehensive list of resources and services to support employees and their family members while on overseas and domestic assignments. Visit the GCLO List of Federal Agencies' Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) webpage or contact GCLOAskSupportServices@state.gov.

The list includes the **WorkLife4You** (WL4Y) program, a DoS paid benefit program, that GCLO describes as the



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By educating yourself and your family on mental health, you contribute to breaking down the stigma associated with mental illness.

Department of State's "24/7 comprehensive and confidential resource and referral service for employees and their family members." WL4Y provides free 24/7 education and referral services that help State employees and family members find the programs, providers, information, and resources they need to manage personal and professional responsibilities.

Counselors will help determine what services are needed and available and refer to appropriate providers. Call them for personalized assistance, read articles and educational guides on their website, order topic-related kits, engage in monthly live talks, watch webinars and listen to audio programs, or ask for a free in-person elder care assessment from a qualified professional care manager.

Another excellent resource is **Employee Consultation Services** (ECS) in the Bureau of Medical Services (MED). According to State's webpage, ECS "offers free, confidential counseling with professional clinicians to eligible Department of State employees and family members. They can assist with job stress, marital and relationship matters, parent and child dynamics, single parent and blended family concerns, school adjustment, elderly parent concerns, separation, loss and grief, acute and chronic medical illness, depression, anxiety, and other emotional or mental health challenges, financial concerns, life transitions, new career/retirement issues, and pre-post departure and reentry concerns." Additional information is available in this ECS video on suicide prevention. Contact ECS at MEDECS@state.gov or call (202) 634-4874.

MED also offers the **Child and Family Program**. The mission of the office is to work with parents to assure children's mental health and special education needs are identified and appropriately assessed, and that an effective treatment and educational plan is established in advance of and during overseas assignments. For more information about the Child and Family Program, please reach out to them at MEDCFP@state.gov.

For those abroad, a tremendous mental health resource is the **regional medical officer psychiatrist** (RMOP), who is assigned overseas and responsible to provide coverage in a geographic region adjacent to their home post. According to the RMOP webpage, the program was established at the time of the Tehran hostage crisis (1979-1981) and has now grown to 24 positions, the vast majority of these located at embassy health units. RMOPs are psychiatrists (medical doctors with additional training after medical school) who can provide consultations, medicating support, and some psychotherapy.

If your post is fortunate to have an RMOP, one only needs to make an appointment through the mission health unit. However, since RMOPs serve regionally and are not physically present at most posts, those in need of their services can either seek a referral through the local health unit, schedule an appointment when the RMOPs visit individual missions in their portfolio, or reach out to them via the "RMOP by Region Phone Book," found on the State Department intranet.

Practical Steps to Maintain Mental Well-Being

Open communication. Create an environment where family members feel safe discussing their feelings without fear of judgment.

Routine. Establish a stable routine to provide a sense of normality and security amid the changes.

Social connections. Encourage engagement with the local community, and seek out groups or clubs with shared interests to help build a new supportive network.

Self-care. Model and stress the importance of regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and sufficient sleep as foundations for good mental health.

Professional support. If in doubt, seek assistance from a mental health professional. Many offer telehealth services, which can be an excellent option for FS families posted abroad.

There are many causes for adolescent mental health challenges, including moving to a new country, which, while challenging, can also be a momentous occasion filled with opportunities for growth and learning. By prioritizing mental health, destigmatizing and normalizing mental health treatment and seeking mental health services, and becoming equipped to offer support as an MHFAider, Foreign Service families can ensure that this adventure is a positive and enriching experience for everyone. ■

CAN HAPPINESS MAKE US Better Diplomats?

The State Department has begun to recognize the need to improve the workplace environment. Here are some insights on the role happiness might play.

BY AMELIA SHAW



BETH WALBROND



Amelia Shaw is a Foreign Service public diplomacy officer who joined the State Department in 2014 and has served in Mexico, Laos, Ecuador, and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. In 2015 she was the recipient of AFSA's W. Averell Harriman Award for Constructive Dissent. Prior to joining the Department of State, she was a foreign correspondent for National Public Radio, the BBC, and CNN. The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely the author's and do not reflect those of the U.S. Department of State.

Is it ever too late to find happiness? Bestselling author and Harvard Business school lecturer Arthur Brooks doesn't think so, as he says in his latest book, *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*, co-authored with Oprah Winfrey.

Brooks often coaches business leaders on how to use happiness to increase productivity and reduce corporate burnout. "We are all entrepreneurs. We are all CEOs of our own lives," he says. "And happiness is the business of life."

When it comes to the State Department, Brooks thinks happiness may contribute to stronger diplomacy. In February, he was at the department, as part of the Secretary's Open Forum, to talk to diplomats in Washington and around the world about how creating happiness in our lives will lead to stronger leadership in the workplace—potentially increasing our diplomatic effectiveness. He got a warm reception from the nearly 200 State employees attending in-person and another 1,000 online.

Brooks' research suggests that the "macronutrients" for creating happiness are enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning—all of which are things in our lives that we can control.

Brooks presented a sobering view of today's workplace. "We are seeing declines in happiness around the world, and for diplomats it has been particularly acute," he said, citing causes such as the complexity of world events and a lack of appreciation for diplomatic engagements.

The State Department's 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey found declining confidence, satisfaction, and engagement among department employees, prompting the Bureau of Global Talent Management and leadership to take note.

"We need to figure out how to be happier as an institution," said Director of the Foreign Service Institute Ambassador Joan Polaschik in introducing Brooks at the event. "If we want to maintain our leadership status in the world—which

we do in part by maintaining our competitive advantage as an employer—then we need to address this."

It's More Than a Feeling

Brooks promotes a simple but novel idea. "Contrary to popular belief," he said, "happiness is not a *feeling* but a *skill*—one that if we practice, we can get better at." To hear Brooks tell it, creating happiness in your life is sort of like eating a balanced diet. "Think of it like food," said Brooks, "which is basically just protein, carbs, and fats. You need to balance these macronutrients to get proper nutrition. The same is true for happiness." His research suggests that the "macronutrients" for creating happiness are enjoyment, satisfaction, and meaning—all of which are things in our lives that we can control.

This means that happiness does not come down to genes or luck, nor does it depend on outside stimuli. Just like nutrition, finding the right balance for happiness takes intention, planning, and work to create healthy habits. But what does this mean?

Choose Enjoyment over Pleasure

Take enjoyment. Many people think enjoyment means just doing whatever you feel like doing—essentially chasing pleasurable experiences. The problem is that pleasure on its own is incomplete and can lead to addictive behaviors. You can't create true enjoyment if all you are doing is seeking pleasure. The trick, said Brooks, is to add people and memory.

Just look at how big companies market their products. "You'll notice that beer companies don't make commercials featuring some dude alone in his apartment pounding a six-pack," said Brooks. Instead, he said, they might show a guy in a living room watching football with his brother and his friends, jumping with joy as their team scores a touchdown.

"That's enjoyment," said Brooks: pleasure, plus people coming together to make a memory. "And you need enjoyment in your life, you need enjoyment in your work."

I Can't Get No ... Satisfaction

When the Rolling Stones released their 1965 hit "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," the song's iconic guitar riff and saucy lyrics became a near-instant global sensation. "But you know, I think Mick Jagger got it wrong," said Brooks. "You *can* get satisfaction. You just can't keep it." Put simply,



AMELIA SHAW

Arthur Brooks and Director of the Foreign Service Institute Ambassador Joan Polaschik at the State Department on Feb. 23, 2024.

satisfaction is the joy you get from struggling to achieve. You suffer through something for the promise of the reward. But once you get that reward, the satisfaction doesn't last.

In neuroscience terms, this is Mother Nature creating a "hedonic struggle": As a person makes more money or climbs the career ladder, their expectations and desires also rise. According to Brooks, this evolutionary mechanism prevents humans from simply giving up in life. Mother Nature wants us to keep climbing higher.

The problem is it also creates a "satisfaction dilemma," particularly among overachievers (which describes a sizable percentage of State Department personnel). The more our career treadmill speeds up, said Brooks, the more we want to go faster to reach the next milestone. But the satisfaction we get is fleeting, so we are never actually happier in the process.

This is a problem. To find a way to tackle it, Brooks traveled to a small town high in the Himalayas to ask an expert. "Every year as part of my work with Harvard, I go see the Dalai Lama. So I went to Dharamsala, and I asked him what's the secret to

lasting satisfaction." The answer had a lot to do with downsizing our desires and expectations.

"He said," Brooks recounted, "that you need to want what you have, as opposed to having what you want. You need to manage your wants." In other words, less is more, and gratitude is everything.

What Does "Meaning" Even Mean?

The third piece of the puzzle is meaning, the most complex piece. But it is one that can be boiled down into two basic questions, says Brooks: *Why am I alive? For what would I be willing to give up my life right on this day?*

"These are not easy questions," said Brooks. But answering them is critical to giving us humans a higher sense of purpose, one that revolves around an idea that most department employees are quite familiar with: the call to service. In fact, Brooks speculated that most of us in diplomacy are not short of a sense of purpose in our work. We understand our value as public servants committed to making the world a better, safer place.

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MICHAEL SMITH

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(Left) Arthur Brooks speaks at the State Department on Feb. 23, 2024. (Inset) FSO and event co-organizer Johanna Villalobos at the talk. Villalobos first met Brooks during her participation in the Secretary's Leadership Seminar, a joint program of FSI and the Harvard Business School.

The problem is that many employees let ambition and overexertion eclipse other parts of their lives, with miserable results. “When you are highly accomplished, it is very easy to become your job. But you are not,” said Brooks. “Probably most of you here were high achievers as kids. And now your burden is that you overindex your career, and you become success addicts.”

Turning that problem around is not so easy because, as Brooks pointed out, when you give overworked diplomats the chance to work less, they often ... don't: “They don't know how to not work.” This is a path that leads to burnout and may help, in part, explain the department's low FEVS survey results showing decreasing job satisfaction among diplomats. “In the end,” said Brooks, “the only thing that really matters for your work and your success is serving other people. Earning your success, a sense of accomplishment and value for your life—all of this comes from serving others.”

Making a Habit Out of Happiness

Brooks had succinct and actionable advice for diplomats. “You have to be open about your success addiction and be willing to bring others in to help you, so that you can give yourself a more balanced life.” And, in addition to your work, you also have to focus your daily habits around a few other key elements to bring you lasting joy—namely, family, friends, and faith—with some caveats.

Family. You don't choose them, and you may not always like them. But they are part of you and you of them, and it matters.

Friends. Invest time in your real friends, and not the “deal friends” you make in the halls of the department to get you

your next promotion. Remember that real friends are “useless” in the sense that they have no transactional value. But they love you, no matter what.

While this may sound simple, Brooks acknowledged that maintaining real friendships is actually pretty challenging given the FS pick-up-and-go lifestyle. “A lot of people who travel around in the Foreign Service,” said Brooks, who has moved around a lot himself, “make a mistake if they are not establishing relationships that transcend moving and work.”

Investing the time to forge deeper relationships that last throughout the years will directly improve happiness. “Every time you move, pretend you've been there for 10-15 years. Open the Bible study, start the book club,” he said. “Within two weeks, as soon as your house is stocked with pots and pans and furniture, invite people over for dinner. Don't wait for people to invite you.”

Faith. Faith isn't only about religion or God. Faith is the thing that pulls you out of your life and helps you transcend it, even for a moment. Maybe it's a walk in a forest. Maybe it's a Bach fugue. Maybe it's sitting 10 minutes quietly with your eyes closed without your phone. Or maybe it's church.

Whatever your faith is, you need to devote a little bit of time to it regularly, to help you transcend the antics of your day-to-day and get some peaceful perspective. “Take time to work on your interior life,” said Brooks. Otherwise our busyness can distract us from our true purpose—service to others.

Why It Matters

For many government employees attending, Brooks' talk resonated. For Melanie McIntyre-Pote, the discussion of work

addiction rang true, and she was grateful for the practical advice Brooks gave. “There are so many things in life we can’t control, like traffic,” she said. “But I understand now that I need to focus on the things I can change, like my own daily habits.”

Adam Meier from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs found the discussion of neuroscience insightful and is thinking about how to incorporate teaching happiness into his team’s work on academic exchange programs.

Peter Redmond, director of FSI’s Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs Resilience, came away inspired to explore more ways to tap into the science to promote greater meaning and happiness in State Department work from the top down. “There are natural corollaries between this research and our work at the department—particularly for our leadership. Now we need a broader embrace,” said Redmond.

There is growing interest in how happiness contributes to strong leadership, as FSO Johanna Villalobos laid out in her April 2024 *Foreign Service Journal* Speaking Out article, “The Surprising Secret to Powerful Leadership.” As research increasingly shows, happy people are more productive and innovative. They inspire others and, by doing so, have the potential to create real and lasting change. Villalobos, who recently completed a yearlong Cox Fellowship examining happiness and leadership, helped organize the Brooks event.

In fact, since 2021, State Department leadership has been increasingly willing to acknowledge the need for a better workplace environment. When presenting the modernization agenda, Secretary Blinken said, “We have a window before us to make historic, lasting change, and we’re determined to seize it.” Making good on this commitment, FSI’s Leadership and Management School invited Brooks to lead a session at the June Chiefs of Mission Conference, focusing on how senior leaders can use their unique positions to create a healthier organizational culture and improve workforce well-being.

Arthur Brooks’ parting words echoed this sentiment: Once we learn to balance happiness in our own lives, we should seize the opportunity to teach these skills and habits to others. “As a leader, you can create an ecosystem that makes it easier for people to pursue these skills,” said Brooks. “So, if you want to change the culture of your organization, then go out and be happiness teachers.”

And, he added, if we as diplomats succeed in this, the world will undoubtedly be a better place. ■

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Where to Turn WHEN YOU NEED ASSISTANCE

AFSA can help employees navigate where to find assistance for mental health or other support. See AFSA's Labor Management guidance page at <https://afsa.org/guidance>.

If you are overseas, EEO counselors and human resource officers (HROs) at post can be the right place to go for discussing workplace issues and mental health resources.

The **State Department Bureau of Medical Services (MED)/Employee Consultation Services (ECS)** offers a wide range of employee mental health programs including free short-term counseling by a licensed clinical provider, alcohol and drug use programs, and counseling and referral programs for deployment-related psychological issues.

Website: <https://bit.ly/MED-ECS>

Email: MEDECS@state.gov

Phone: (202) 634-4874

The **Global Community Liaison Office (GCLO)** is especially concerned with Foreign Service family member issues. GCLO lists numerous resources on their webpage, including support groups for adults with ADHD and groups for those struggling with grief, anxiety, elder care issues, and more. They also list resources specific to FS children.

Website (for crisis management): <https://bit.ly/GCLO-CM>

USAID Staff Care assists USAID employees and family members with wellness issues, providing access to counseling, support groups, and assistance with work-life balance issues.

Website: <https://usaid.gov/staff-care>

Email: support@usaidstaffcarecenter.net

Phone: (919) 645-4960

The **FCS Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** utilizes the Federal Occupational Health (FOH) program offering 24/7 access to support stress management, work-related issues, and work-life balance.

Website: <https://commerce.gov/hr/employees/work-life-balance/eap>

Phone: (800) 222-0364

FAS Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services include confidential counseling, elder/

child care referral services, critical incident stress debriefings, grief support, workplace issue consultations, and more. Archived webinars, news articles, and video clips are available through the federal program FOH4You (www.foh4you.com).

For 24-hour access to a certified counselor, call (800) 222-0364 (toll free) or (866) 829-0270 (if overseas).

OPM Employee Wellness Programs provide comprehensive information and data on wellness resources for federal employees.

A new OPM program, "Safe Leave," provides options and flexibilities for a variety of issues related to mental health care.

The **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Federal Occupational Health's FOH4YOU** provides resources for addressing personal and work-related mental health issues, overall well-being, and more.

Website: <https://foh4you.com/>

FSI's Center of Excellence in Foreign Affairs Resilience (CEFAR) is part of the Transition Center and offers courses, workshops, and webinars on managing stress and burnout.

Website: <https://state.gov/resilience-cefar/>

Email: FSITCResilience@state.gov

The **State Department Office of the Ombuds (S/O) Workplace Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center (wCPRc)** provides confidential services for informal and voluntary resolution of conflict in the workplace, including bullying.

Confidential email: ombuds@state.gov

The **State Office of Civil Rights (OCR)** oversees the State Department's Anti-Harassment and Equal Employment Opportunity programs and manages reports of discrimination and harassment.

Website: <https://state.gov/bureaus-offices/secretary-of-state/office-of-civil-rights/>

Email: SOCR_Direct@state.gov

Phone: (202) 647-9295 or (202) 647-9294

The **State DS Victims' Resource Advocacy Program (DS/ICI/VRAP)** provides assistance to sexual assault victims that includes counseling referrals, financial reimbursement for lost

property, relocation support, understanding of the judicial process, and accompaniment to judicial proceedings.

Website: <https://state.gov/the-dss-victims-resource-advocacy-program-empowering-victims-providing-worldwide-support/>

Email: vrap@state.gov

Phone: (855) 810-7878

U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) can be reached for discussion of "prohibited personnel practices."

Email: info@osc.gov

The **Office of Inspector General (OIG)/USAID Office of Inspector General (OIG)** conducts independent audits, inspections, evaluations, and investigations to promote efficiency and prevent and detect waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in the programs and operations of the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media. The Office of Inspector General at USAID serves a similar function.

Website: <https://stateoig.gov/>;

<https://oig.usaid.gov>

The **Bureau of Global Talent Management Grievance Office (GTM/G)** investigates grievances and prepares recommendations for the resolution of grievances and represents the State Department in cases appealed to the Foreign Service Grievance Board. GTM/G also oversees remedial action, as necessary, in resolving grievances.

The **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Helpline** is a free, confidential treatment referral and information service for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Website: <https://samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Phone: (800) 662-HELP (4357)

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** is a round-the-clock, free, confidential support for people in distress, along with prevention and crisis resources.

Website: <https://988lifeline.org>

Phone: (800) 273-8255 ■



The FS at 100

What Does the Future Hold?

**Director General of the Foreign Service Marcia Bernicat
talks about what's next.**

A FSA was delighted to host an “Inside Diplomacy” online conversation on April 8 with Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Global Talent Marcia Bernicat. A career member of the Senior Foreign Service, Ambassador Bernicat previously served as acting assistant secretary for the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs and concurrently as the senior official for the Bureau of Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment.

The virtual audience of 217 included members of the Foreign Service community, journalists, students, and the public at large. AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi facilitated the discussion along with Strategic Communications and Outreach Manager Nadja Ruzica. The following is excerpted from the transcript of the event. Find the entire discussion at https://bit.ly/Bernicat_Inside-Diplomacy.

AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi: *On May 24 this year, the Foreign Service turns 100. As we approach this milestone, we are taking stock of the state of the Foreign Service and also thinking about what the future might hold for this venerable institution and its people. And who better to discuss this than with today's guest, the Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Global Talent at State, Ambassador Marcia Bernicat, who assumed that role in May 2022.*

Director General Marcia Bernicat: Thank you, Tom, and AFSA, for working with all of us to make the Foreign Service better and stronger. I don't think we have ever had a better partnership between AFSA and the department, and I am so grateful to be your partner on this journey.

For me, to be Director General is a dream job, especially to be doing it at this point in time. We're at such an inflection point in our nation's history, in the history of the world. We are looking today at almost 14,000 Foreign Service employees. We serve over 250 missions around the world. If we go back a hundred years, the first class of Foreign Service officers was just 633 people. And when I joined 43 years ago, the Foreign Service

was about 5,000 people strong. We've grown significantly over time, not just in terms of numbers but especially in terms of the wide variety and diversity of skills and experiences that we have brought in.

So, I'm not only pleased with where we are today in terms of the talent we possess but also very optimistic about the future.

AFSA: *What are some of the biggest changes the Service has seen, in your experience?*

MB: I'm a fan of our being every place we can be—the universalist approach—but if you consider the history of the Foreign Service, you were really on your own. You had your letters of instruction, but any correspondence, any guidance was oftentimes far enough away in time and distance that you had to be able to think on your feet.

One of the common threads we have throughout all this time is that we still require that our Foreign Service personnel are able to think, act, and make good decisions without necessarily being able to call home. And it's true that we still face expeditionary challenges, most recently in opening our Pacific Island posts.

But as the last five or six years have taught us, we also have to develop a means by which we can track issues that have not traditionally been part of diplomacy. I'm thinking in terms of *emerging technology*. Five years ago, no one in this building was talking about AI. Now we're about to have our own custom-built ChatGPT inside the State Department.

Similarly, our work on *multilateral diplomacy*. How we build coalitions in what has become in many ways a more multipolar world will require a much greater expertise there. And *health*—who would have thought that a pandemic would have presented [challenges] to our national security and to our eco-



DG Bernicat with AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi at AFSA's Centennial Gala on May 21, 2024.

AFSA/SHAWN DORMAN

nomics security the way COVID-19 did? So we now have two new bureaus, one for emerging technology and one for health, that look at the diplomatic aspects of those issues.

AFSA: *As we reflect on the past, what lessons have we learned over the last 100 years?*

MB: We have learned over time to be far more agile.

People see those pictures of our predecessors, before and during World War II, sitting around in stately rooms having discussions. That

still happens, of course, but we are so much more field-forward than we used to be, and the responses to crises are demanding that we find ways to be even more agile.

We are not just simply diplomats out there on our own. We are supported by our families, families who are with us at post and sometimes families who are back here in Washington, who we are learning to employ more creatively and more flexibly to augment what is a constant staffing gap. We've learned to value what our family members bring to the job that we're doing.

AFSA: *The Foreign Service Officer Test is no longer the pass/fail test it used to be, and the Foreign Service Officer Assessment is going virtual. Those are big changes. Can you please comment on that?*

MB: We still have a written exam, but we came to realize that like every standardized test, there are some inherent biases that we worked hard to get rid of. We finally asked the right question: "Are we really looking for people who can take tests well?"

We haven't done away with the test; it's still a very important component. But rather than making it the first hurdle to over-

come, we have now taken that score plus the essays that applicants write known as the QEPs [Qualifications Evaluation Panels], and whatever background and experience and skills our amazing applicants are bringing to the table. We look at the whole person.

It doesn't favor you simply for being a good test-taker but rather also makes sure that we're giving due weight right from the beginning to foreign language skills, having lived and worked overseas, any number of other skills and experiences that our applicants bring to make sure that we're not losing them simply because someone may not score as high on the written test.

We are taking a leap that we took during COVID with Foreign Service specialists to have everyone take the assessment in a fully virtual format.

Imagine the number of people who can't afford to come to Washington and/or just can't afford to take that much time away from work. By offering everyone the assessment virtually, we are eliminating, again, another barrier to make sure that

we're getting the best and brightest candidates we can.

The other thing that really excites me is the fact that we are the first federal agency to offer all our internships on a paid basis. The ability to participate in an internship here in Washington or overseas was out of reach for so many people. Now we pay the round-trip fare, we pay a salary, and we provide housing because otherwise the salary would be completely eaten up in rent.

So we take all of that out of the calculation so that, again, we can get the most competitive candidates to come here, try us on. We get a chance to see what their skills are. I'm very excited about not only those two innovations but the fact that they are widening our ability to ensure that we're getting the best candidates possible.

AFSA: On the paid internships—AFSA was a strong proponent, because it really does make a difference. We support that 100 percent.



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MB: Thanks. And I'm sure, Tom, without AFSA's support, we would have never gotten the funding from Congress to make it a reality. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

***AFSA:** How does the Secretary of State's modernization agenda ensure that our diplomats have the new skill sets they need to be successful?*

MB: We have to start with recruitment and hiring. We had by the summer of 2022 a deficit of 27 percent in the Foreign Service alone that was a result of the hiring freeze in the previous administration. When we did start hiring, we were hiring at less than robust rates.

President Biden made it clear he wanted to strengthen the foreign affairs workforce, so we have been hiring faster than any other federal agency, and we have the results to show. I just swore in an orientation class that has tied the record of the last three classes before it [as] the largest class we've taken in. We're bringing in generalists and specialists together now; they begin their orientation together and then branch off for the different trainings that each one needs.

I use March 2020 as the benchmark because that's when we went into quarantine, if you will, as a nation. Twenty-one percent of all serving Foreign Service personnel today have been hired since March 2020. So we are a very young Service, seniority-wise, even as our average entry ages picked up slightly to 36. We've partnered with FSI [Foreign Service Institute] to expand the amount of training that's available as well as change the culture surrounding training. We started with getting from Congress additional, full-time equivalent positions to support a bigger training float to go well beyond foreign language.

FSI is busy expanding its course offerings, particularly for less traditional subject matter like cyber; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) issues; health; and climate expertise.

We also looked at what someone in the mid-level would need in terms of training and exposure in order to tee them up successfully, not only to lead as a mid-level employee but also to be competitive to get into the Senior Service. We worked with FSI on launching a mid-level training curriculum, a series of courses beyond mandatory training. Our leadership training remains mandatory.

But we knew we couldn't just offer more training. We also had to help change the culture. Too often people think of training as a wasted year, in that it's a year they don't have information to add to their EERs that will make them more competitive for promotion.

And so we introduced two things: first, a learning policy which urges supervisors to provide at least 40 hours a year of training time for their staff. I would say, let's expand this, make it 52 hours in the year, where people can either delve into a new subject matter or use 40 hours in one swoop to take a course they might not otherwise get to take.

They can use it to attend seminars in town or virtually, the idea being some time dedicated to voluntary learning that not only helps you expand your skills but also has the added advantage—and this is the best practice in the private sector—of taking you away from the daily grind of your work and giving you a chance to sit back, relax, and, in a stress-free environment, take on some additional learning.

Second, we have brought back multifunctional promotions. One of the activities that will count toward a multifunctional promotion will be long-term training. We want to give people some reward for taking time out of their career to expand their knowledge base.

I know it involves a culture change, but if we don't learn, if we don't keep adapting, as the Secretary has pointed out, we're going to find it increasingly difficult to do our work in such a dynamic world as we're living in today.

***AFSA:** Looking to the future, what change do you hope to have in place?*

MB: [We need] to make sure that we are bringing in the most diverse set of employees we can. We recruit for diversity, meaning I want to go to every corner of the country. We want to raise awareness but also spark the imaginations both of adults and students, that they, too, can represent their country overseas.

I want us to be an inclusive employer—always on merit but making sure that we're gathering the widest possible and most diverse set of employees, and that's from every aspect. Surely our race and our gender play huge roles in forming our worldview. But so does where we grew up, the schools we attended, our birth order. All those aspects of our diversity provide the kind of agility that we're going to need as the world becomes smaller.

[As far as technology is concerned,] the changes are coming faster all the time. I can't even imagine where we'll be a year from now, much less in 50 years, but I'm confident technology will play a huge role.

***AFSA:** What could we do better when it comes to raising awareness among the American public about what the Foreign Service does and why it is so vital?*

MB: I urge all our colleagues, active duty and retired: Don't stop talking about us. Go to your own organizations, volunteer to talk at other organizations and in our schools to explain what it is that we do and how we do it.

AFSA: *What is being done to retain Foreign Service members?*

MB: Historically, the State Department has had very low attrition rates. Currently, we have the third-lowest attrition rates in the U.S. government.

Our Foreign Service attrition rate is only about 3 percent, which is almost attrition for retirement. But when Secretary Antony Blinken came to office, he asked about who's leaving and why, which was the exact right question.

Because of his question, we set up a retention unit. We were able to track that our attrition rates were almost identical for men and women until about the 10-year mark, when the attrition rate would significantly increase for women. And to be honest, among women, the highest attrition rates are among women of color.

Many of our employees are being sandwiched between taking care of or preparing to put children through college while also beginning to take care of parents who are starting to age or becoming frail. And some of our employees from historically underrepresented groups may also come from families where there is less accumulated wealth, so they were also being sandwiched by siblings or other relatives who needed support.

The Googles and the Microsofts of the world come along and offer much higher salaries.

We have found that a number of people who went off to those private sector jobs are having buyer's remorse, and so we've stepped up our program that allows people to come back into the Foreign Service and be reappointed, because even though the salary was a lot greater [elsewhere], they believe that what they do [at State] contributes in a meaningful way.

AFSA: *What is your best advice to students who are looking toward a future in the U.S. Foreign Service?*

MB: I promise that whatever field of study you're interested in, we can use the skills you're going to gain from that field of study. Figure out again what excites you. Pursue that and then come to us. ■



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The Ideal Foreign Service

BY JOSH MORRIS

FSJ Centennial Writing Competition 3rd Place Winner

The United States has the world's largest and most dynamic economy, an almost unimaginably capable military, and a Foreign Service that has shaped the course of human history for more than a century. If the prognostications hold true, however, the bipolar-turned-unipolar 20th century will give way to a multipolar 21st century increasingly defined by strategic competition among states, global climate challenges, mass migration, and unforeseeable technological advancements. Yet despite declarations of the end of the "American Century," U.S. values, institutions, and people remain the greatest potential force for marshaling the global response to the challenges of the next century.

Political Analysis: Cribbing Kissinger

Realism, as articulated by Henry Kissinger, calls for understanding the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. Despite its simplicity, many, if not most, miscalculations in international

affairs stem from a desire (despite at times overwhelming evidence to the contrary) to see the world as we wish it to be.

Fortunately, just as the U.S. intelligence community (IC) begins many interagency meetings with a "stage-setting" assessment of the situation, so too can the Foreign Service provide interagency leadership with a realism-compliant accounting of a foreign nation's interests, motivations, vulnerabilities, and red lines. While the FS must maintain a clear distinction between its objective "ground truth" and any follow-on policy prescriptions (a challenge largely avoided by the IC), the dual role is essential to ensuring well-informed U.S. foreign policy.

Looking through the realism lens, the greatest threat the United States will face in the next century will not be authoritarianism, communism, or violent extremism. Such malign forces will certainly persist, and require redress, but will increasingly be understood as symptoms of a deeper failing of governance, public trust, and national cohesion. Indeed, the greatest threat—and principal charge of the Foreign Service—will be addressing both

To honor the 100th birthday of the U.S. Foreign Service—and AFSA's role as the "Voice of the Foreign Service"—the *Journal* held a writing competition for members with cash prizes, with third place sponsored by Christchurch School. The topic: Looking ahead to the next century, describe the ideal Foreign Service, as an institution and a profession.

We were thrilled to receive 65 submissions, and judging was challenging. Name-blind submissions were evaluated by

a volunteer panel on the basis of originality, cogent and concise reasoning, clarity, and applicability.

This essay, by Josh Morris, won third place; the first-place essay was published in the May *Journal*, and second place in June.

We congratulate Mr. Morris and extend sincere thanks to our judges.

—The FSJ Team

the root causes and crises emanating from governments rife with corruption and unable to meet the needs of their people. From the opioid crisis and historic levels of irregular migration to transnational criminal organizations and faltering economies, effective governance will be at the core of our foreign policy efforts.

Economic Diplomacy: George Marshall Meets MCC

Secretary of State George C. Marshall's proposal to help rebuild postwar Europe was based on the conviction that revitalizing national economies was the key to restoring political stability. Implemented in parallel with the Truman Doctrine's focus on security assistance, the tandem efforts facilitated the reconstruction of Western Europe and solidified the United States as a global leader committed to economic development and stability. A century later, U.S. leadership to advance prosperity and security—the enduring foundations of political stability—will be needed more than ever.

With U.S. foreign assistance totaling less than 1 percent of the federal budget, and fiscal constraints unlikely to ease over time, the next century will see an increased focus on U.S. economic assistance tied to objective performance benchmarks in recipient countries. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), in a modern context, embodies this approach, with a focused mandate to reduce poverty through sustainable economic growth, incentivizing recipient country reforms, and creating new markets for trade and investment, jobs, and opportunities for American businesses. While the broader foreign assistance mission of USAID will remain essential in providing humanitarian, health, and governance support, the respective funding levels (\$41.5 billion for USAID versus \$912 million for MCC in Fiscal Year 2022) will likely evolve.

Public Diplomacy: Better Branding

Despite most Americans recognizing the global impact of the U.S. economy and honoring the service and sacrifice of our military servicemembers, even our own families often have little idea of what we members of the U.S. Foreign Service do. The challenge stems from the foreign and discreet nature of our



Josh Morris joined the Foreign Service in 2004 and has served in Nouakchott, Sydney, London, Bamako, Rangoon, Manila, Mexico City, and various assignments in Washington, D.C., including his current role as deputy director for the Office of Andean Affairs in State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. He and his tandem spouse, Katie, have two children and the world's best Labrador.

work, but it also represents a failure to articulate how the Foreign Service directly improves the lives and livelihoods of Americans outside the Beltway. Beyond the awkward holiday conversations with Uncle Larry asking if we really work for the CIA, the lack of understanding blurs the perception of the Foreign Service (by Uncle Larry and Congress alike) as an apolitical service dedicated to advancing U.S. interests globally.

With foreign audiences, sincerity and common ground will remain essential. The United States works to defend democracy and democratic institutions, but we have also supported efforts to undermine democratically elected governments. We work to advance political and civil rights globally, but we struggle with issues of social justice at home. And while we promote peace, our military has been involved in more conflicts around the world than any other. These are difficult conversations, but avoiding them will not make them go away, nor will pretending we are something other than a 248-year democratic work in progress win the hearts and minds of those we seek to influence.

Powell's Legacy

My A-100 had the honor of being the last diplomatic class sworn in by Secretary of State Colin Powell. Over the past 20 years, we have seen the impact he has had on the department's efforts to foster leadership and promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility—concepts Powell embodied long before American society, or government service, caught up. After the swearing in, Powell lingered and spoke to our families. He told a story about how the U.S. Foreign Service has some of the lowest requirements to entry of any diplomatic corps: U.S. citizenship, 21 years of age, and worldwide availability.

Powell said he was occasionally teased by some of his more “sophisticated” foreign counterparts that U.S. diplomats didn't even need a college degree to join the Service. He went on to describe the pride he felt in leading a Service that prioritized talent and dedication over all else, positing the U.S. Foreign Service and armed services to be among America's best examples of meritocracy.

If the past 100 years have taught us anything, it is that the century to come will not be easy nor will the choices we make be free from controversy, criticism, or second-guessing. But we will face these challenges and opportunities from an enviable position of economic, security, and diplomatic strength. And while the American Century may have passed, its lessons will continue to inspire and inform “a career Foreign Service, characterized by excellence and professionalism,” as mandated by the Foreign Service Act of 1980. ■

Modernizing Foreign Service Assessments

The Move to Virtual Platforms

To compete effectively with the private sector and attract the best candidates, the State Department must continuously improve processes.

BY PATRICK T. SLOWINSKI

The Foreign Service Officer Assessment (FSOA), formerly the Foreign Service Oral Assessment, moved to a virtual platform in May 2024. This change represents the completion of a historic move from the long-established in-person assessments, which often required candidates to travel to Washington, D.C., at their own expense to complete the exercises in one day.

Reducing this candidate burden, and thereby expanding access to the Foreign Service career, was the primary driver in moving the FSOA online. The modification will increase the diversity of the applicant pool by leveling the playing field for candidates of all socioeconomic groups and geographic



Patrick T. Slowinski, Ed.D., Ph.D., is a recently retired career member of the Senior Foreign Service. His last assignment at the State Department was as deputy director for policy and planning at the Board of Examiners (GTM/TAC/BEX), where he led BEX's modernization and innovation efforts. He holds doctoral degrees in education administration and advisement as well as industrial and organizational psychology, and is an adjunct faculty member of psychology at Liberty University.

locations. It also modernizes the FSOA to align with best current evaluation practices.

The State Department competes with the private sector and other government agencies to attract candidates with the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to represent the U.S. government and its citizens overseas. To keep an edge in this competition, the Foreign Service Board of Examiners (BEX) must continuously modernize and improve Foreign Service candidate assessment processes and materials while maintaining the State Department's reputation as a gold standard in employee hiring assessments.

During the last two years, BEX has shifted that modernization into overdrive.

The Transition in Detail

BEX previewed the change from the in-person FSOA to a virtual platform in the October 2022 edition of *The Foreign Service Journal*. In the interim, BEX leadership, assessors, contracted industrial and organizational psychologists (IOPs), and other testing experts evaluated each step in the progression toward a virtual platform.

Experience with the Foreign Service Specialist Assessment (FSSA)—which has been virtual since 2020, an innovation that was prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic—was important. The successful transition of the FSSA from an in-person assessment to a virtual platform demonstrated that interruptions to the process were rare and the virtual platform worked reliably.

Correspondingly, specialist candidates voiced approval of the change in anonymous surveys, and their scoring patterns remained comparable to those in in-person settings. The feedback from the nearly 3,000 specialist candidates BEX assessed virtually has been overwhelmingly positive, including on the perceptions of fairness in the virtual process and the clarity of its presentation.

Building on the success of conducting thousands of FSSAs in a virtual environment, BEX endeavored to provide a similar experience for FSOA candidates. The FSOA comprises three exercises. Candidates complete the first part of the test, the case management exercise, separately, several weeks in advance of the second and third parts. The group exercise and the structured interview are completed later, both on the same day. Details for each exercise are available at careers.state.gov/downloads/FSOA.

BEX takes a data-centered approach to its regular review of assessment materials, procedures, and candidate accessibility. Preparing for the FSOA's move to a virtual platform gave BEX further opportunity to review materials and procedures to

Expanding access to the Foreign Service career was the primary driver in moving the FSOA online.

determine how they would mesh with a virtual platform and still fulfill their rigorous standards and best practices.

To achieve this modernization, BEX sought the vital feedback of current and retired Foreign Service Officer (FSO) and Specialist (FSS) assessors to review the “dimensions” (criteria) used to rate candidate performance. Since 2001, BEX had utilized 13 dimensions to evaluate the performance of FSO candidates and 12 dimensions to evaluate the performance of FSS candidates.

New, Common Dimensions

In October 2023, assessors began evaluating both FSOA and FSSA candidates using 11 dimensions, the same for both generalists and specialists. The current Foreign Service dimensions are critical thinking, cultural adaptability, experience and motivation, information integration and analysis, leadership, negotiation, objectivity and integrity, planning and organizing, presentation skills, teamwork, and written communication.

BEX modernized the dimensions to measure candidate performance on the three exercises based on comprehensive job analyses. The group exercise (in which candidates discuss the planning of various projects) is largely a measure of social/interaction skills, and candidate effectiveness is assessed based on the teamwork, leadership, and negotiation dimensions. The case management exercise (where candidates read a hypothetical case study, integrate information, and write their recommendations) is measured with dimensions such as critical thinking, information integration and analysis, and written communication.

Straight from the Source is the *FSJ* space for the foreign affairs agencies to inform the FS community about new policies or innovations in operations. What are your thoughts about moving U.S. Foreign Service assessments to a virtual platform? Please send your feedback as letters to journal@afsa.org or comment on *FSJ* LinkedIn.

Building on the success of conducting thousands of FSSAs in a virtual environment, BEX endeavored to provide a similar experience for FSOA candidates.

The structured interview measures nearly all the dimensions. Specialists are evaluated similarly on the same dimensions in their exercises. The revised dimensions and assessment materials improve the measurement of critical skills required for FS personnel to succeed at the start of their career.

These changes are part of the Secretary's modernization agenda.

Testing and Revision

BEX conducted six comprehensive FSOA pilot tests and several partial pilot tests before May 2024 to ensure that a virtual platform would allow assessors to accurately evaluate candidate performance related to the FS dimensions. BEX used the assistance of contractors who had specific experience transitioning other federal agencies—the Foreign Commercial Service and the Department of Agriculture's APHIS—moving their employee selection assessments to virtual platforms. They provided insight and training in line with best practices and standards for employee selection.

Data from the pilots indicated that candidates could demonstrate all dimensions on virtual platforms and assessors could assess candidate performance accurately. BEX also provided additional assessor and program assistant training to ensure their ability to administer and score the exercises accurately and without any potential for bias.

Together with its contracted IOPs, BEX regularly validates and revises all FSOA and FSSA assessment materials and procedures. BEX uses a content-oriented approach and a series of comprehensive job analyses to document the need for each FS dimension. BEX will continue this standard of excellence in evaluating the efficacy of the virtual assessments, making revisions based on data and statistical analysis.

To that end, BEX now has a full-time data analyst to track assessment material performance and ensure that procedures remain effective and limit adverse impact. (According to the Society of Human Resource Management, adverse impact refers to employment practices, including employee selection procedures, that appear neutral but have a discriminatory effect on a protected group.)

Acknowledging Concerns

An innovation of this magnitude did not come without its share of reasonable doubts and concerns. BEX focused on questions regarding internet bandwidth, test question security, and accessibility for candidates with disabilities (as with in-person FSOAs, candidates may request reasonable accommodations). Of particular interest across the foreign affairs community was: How will you assess group dynamics if candidates no longer gather in-person?

BEX acknowledges that candidate internet bandwidth and connection speeds will vary. To mitigate this, pre-FSOA testing protocols include candidates testing bandwidth on their devices, with BEX staff confirming connections before exercises begin. While BEX has committed to rescheduling candidates who lose connection during an exercise, we note that in two years of conducting the FSSA, bad connections and rescheduled assessments have occurred less than 1 percent of the time.

BEX feels confident in test security thanks to robust coordination with testing professionals and IOPs. All candidates sign a nondisclosure agreement, and BEX staff remind candidates that failure to keep assessment materials and procedures confidential risks canceling their candidacy. Further, BEX rotates test materials from a catalogue of options, and if any materials are leaked, those materials are immediately changed out.

Regarding group dynamics, the same rigorous standards and procedures will apply in the virtual context as used for the in-person process. Candidates will continue to be assessed according to the dimensions matching current Foreign Service job skills and that were developed to reflect the eventual implementation of a virtual process.

Long known as the gold standard in employee selection, the BEX selection process remains an exemplar for both public- and private-sector organizations seeking the best candidates. With the move to a virtual FSOA, our nation's future diplomats can participate in one of the most effective and rigorous employee selection processes without incurring additional cost or hardship and increasing accessibility to all candidates. ■

AFSA Celebrates Foreign Service Day

This May marked the 59th anniversary of Foreign Service Day and the centennials of the Foreign Service and AFSA. The association hosted a lively open house and invited members to stop by its headquarters to help celebrate Foreign Service Day. Over the course of the 4-hour event, about 200 Foreign Service members visited.

AFSA HQ bustled with activity on May 2 as association officers and staff welcomed active-duty and retired Foreign Service members and alumni for a day of networking and reconnecting with friends and colleagues. Attendees posed for professional headshots with photographer Joaquin Sosa before grabbing a spot in line for authentic Spanish flauta sandwiches from José Andrés' Pepe food truck. Guests beat the D.C. heat by enjoying free Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

AFSA staff were on hand throughout the day to answer questions and share information and materials about retirement services, membership benefits, advocacy, and upcoming centennial festivities. The brand-new centennial edition of *The Foreign Service Journal* arrived in time for sharing with visitors.

The day also marked the soft launch of AFSA's latest book, the centennial edition of *The Voice of the Foreign Service: A History of the*



Lunchtime at AFSA's Foreign Service Day reception.



AFSA opens its doors to celebrate Foreign Service Day.



FSJ publications team with copies of just-published centennial FSJ and book *The Voice of the Foreign Service*. Not pictured: Senior Editor Susan Maitra, Advertising Manager Molly Long, and Art Director Caryn Suko Smith.

American Foreign Service Association at 100. Books were for sale at a special member rate of \$20 at the

event, and author Harry Kopp was there to sign copies. (To purchase the new, must-read AFSA history book,

CALENDAR

Please check afsa.org/events for the most up-to-date information.

July 4-5
Independence Day holiday
AFSA offices closed

July 17
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board meeting

July 23
12-1 p.m.
Book Notes: *Behind the White House Curtain* by AFSA Governing Board member Steve Herman

August 21
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board meeting

September 2
Labor Day
AFSA offices closed

September 12
4:30-6:30 p.m.
AFSA Centennial Happy Hour

September 18
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board meeting

September 27
7:05 p.m.
FS Night at Nationals Park

visit <https://afsa.org/voice-foreign-service>.)

On the eve of the open house, Kim (Greenplate) Sullivan, AFSA's director of congressional advocacy, led the annual Advocacy Year in Review virtual event, joined by Sean O'Gorman, AFSA's policy analyst. Sullivan outlined AFSA's advocacy goals for the centennial year.

Continued on page 54



Countering Mental and Physical Burnout at Work

“Constant crisis mode.”
“Mentally exhausting.”
“Facing burnout.”

These are just a few of the words I’ve heard to describe how all of us feel at some point during our Foreign Service careers.

These experiences are particularly evident during the performance evaluations (EER), bidding, and summer transfer seasons that straddle March through November. We tackle these major internal management demands while facing global challenges such as the Israel-Hamas conflict, humanitarian crises, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, or global strategic competition.

As you read, I invite you to hold up your arms, hold each of your fists together, close your eyes, and pause, taking a long, deep breath. According to the department’s Employee Consultation Services (ECS), this is a great daily counter-burnout mental health strategy.

Knowing the Mental Health Crisis and Agency Response. I recognize these daily exercises are not a panacea. Globally, the World Health Organization says nearly 1 billion individuals live with a mental health condition.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) dedicates resources for mental health wellness, and the State Department has modernized the medical clearance process by increasing

transparency and broadening options for those facing mental health issues and those with dependent special educational needs. Several months ago, ECS launched a series of videos designed to “enlighten, inspire, and empower,” and there are support groups and other resources on Talent Care.

Defining Transformational Spaces. Meanwhile, there is a different space to challenge these thoughts and improve our mental health. It is akin to a “brave space” where there is open and respectful dialogue about challenging topics affecting us and the world around us. It is also a place where we encourage the sharing of perspectives without fear of judgment, exclusion, or discrimination.

It is simultaneously a mental and physical space, requiring all participants to be self-aware and intentional in all the modalities of listening, speaking, and responding to one another. I strongly believe all our overseas missions would be more effective, productive, and healthy if we were to begin the transformational process of co-creating these spaces on a regular basis.

Learning from a Breakout Leader. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, I was part of a group of young professionals creating local and global transformational spaces for dialogue and civic action.

Jessica Rimington, execu-

tive director of the One World Youth Project, trained our group of “breakout actors.” The spaces we created gave me some of my happiest memories and most creative times, particularly after I resigned from a mentally taxing job at a nongovernmental organization. More than a decade after she worked with us, Rimington embarked on an expansive journey interviewing some 200 CEOs and leaders of nonprofit organizations.

In 2022, Rimington published her findings in her book *Beloved Economies*, detailing lessons learned from companies and communities that practiced novel ways of working and team-building. She argues for management practices that would re-imagine our world from a loveless or extractive economy into one that is life-giving and sustainably activates breakout innovations.

Prioritizing Relationships. One of Rimington’s recommended practices—prioritizing relationships—is especially relevant to our Foreign Service work culture. Prioritizing relationships does not leverage internal or external relationships in a transactional way. Rather the practice calls for us to be countercultural in three dimensions: culture of care, brave conversations, and the cultivation of a relational worldview.

Breakout actors dedicate time for care and connec-

tion that is not about getting things done. For example, leaders can start meetings with check-in questions such as: “What is our weekend highlight?” We can also dedicate time to pull colleagues aside to share our appreciation for their work or other achievements.

The key is to activate these check-ins cumulatively without seeking to extract any other answers or resources in return. These small acts enable us to foster an ethic of daily care. Breakout actors are investing in relationships to achieve a deeper level of engagement that enables members of the group to respectfully challenge each other.

The connective tissue between a caring culture and brave conversations is a relational worldview. This is about rooting our work in the vast interconnectedness of all beings and forces, rather than our own ambitions, or, simply put, helping us break out of our “main-character syndrome.”

These tips may sound simultaneously basic and unfamiliar. Maybe you are always goal-oriented and find it hard to believe that decades from now, what will matter most is not what we achieved but how we treated others and ourselves. I challenge you to join me in co-creating these transformational spaces at our work every day. ■



Ushering in the Next Chapter

As I prepare to settle into my next assignment on the world's most populous island, Java, my tenure as FAS vice president is drawing to a close. When reflecting on the past two and a half years, I'm proudest of being a strong and diplomatic advocate for change at a time when such a voice was needed. For each of the following priorities, I ensured that AFSA's proposed solutions would provide long-term benefits to FAS and its FSOs.

Correction of payroll issues: After being elected, I quickly sought to address pervasive and complex payroll issues stemming from organizational changes at headquarters. As a result of AFSA's persistent advocacy, including to Secretary Tom Vilsack, FAS has reportedly resolved more than 100 complex errors affecting FSOs, with interest on back pay. In addition, FAS has implemented significant process improvements to prevent future payroll issues during FSO transfers.

Senior Foreign Service (SFS) pay: Based on member requests, AFSA requested and negotiated an agency directive with FAS that outlines how USDA's executive pay policy is applied to its SFS officers.

USDA's performance pay cash awards (only 33 percent of SFS officers can receive these by statute) are now decoupled from

performance-based salary adjustments, which allows more SFS officers to receive higher salary adjustment percentages. The agency directive is also a big step forward in transparency, allowing current and aspiring SFS members to understand the nuances of SFS pay.

Renegotiation of our collective bargaining agreement (CBA): Last substantively renegotiated in 1995, our CBA includes procedures on the key topics for FAS FSOs: assignments, selection boards, and time-in-class/service limitations. Reaching agreement to renegotiate the CBA was transformational; after so many years, changing the foundation of our system is monumental, divisive, and unmooring for many.

I negotiated the ground rules and portions to be reworked or created, including 37 articles and several agency directives. To ensure FSO viewpoints were incorporated, I formed FSO teams for the more contentious articles and provided regular progress updates. Ongoing negotiations continue to build upon this bedrock.

FS-designated positions: It is no secret that the biggest change AFSA is seeking through CBA renegotiations is the establishment of Foreign Service-designated positions at headquarters, as required by the Foreign

Service Act. In alignment with other Foreign Service agencies, this would reserve influential seats at the table for FSOs at headquarters and allow FSOs to bid on them in our annual cycle.

Most FSOs are temporarily assigned to Civil Service positions just before returning to HQ, which does not provide necessary predictability in our up-or-out system. Currently, there is also no mechanism by which FSOs can apply for a different headquarters position while stationed in D.C. These topics remain active areas of negotiations.

Future of the Foreign Service: Throughout my term, I have focused on protecting the long-term health of the FAS Foreign Service. My advocacy has spanned the FSO lifecycle, including diversity-focused recruitment, sufficient hiring via a rigorous and impartial assessment process, and multi-pronged morale and retention improvements.

In addition, when faced with unexpected Fiscal Year 2024 cuts, AFSA asked USDA leadership to prioritize increased budgetary flexibilities. Without sufficient personnel, funding, and other resources, we risk the doors we've opened to U.S. agricultural exports being slammed shut. These remain active topics of focus and engagement.

It has been an honor repre-

senting the small but mighty FAS Foreign Service. None of the above would have been possible without our member engagement to help me navigate these complexities while staying true to the goal of pursuing changes that provide long-term benefits to FAS and its FSOs.

Beyond FAS, it was immensely rewarding to chair the Legal Defense Fund, which provides financial support to members experiencing legal issues of significant institutional importance to the Foreign Service. I'm proud to have helped provide such assistance to several AFSA members unfortunate enough to need it.

Succeeding me will be Evan Mangino, a dedicated and experienced advocate who will maintain our momentum on these topics while tackling emerging opportunities and challenges. You'll be hearing from him in subsequent issues (which I may be reading as I sit in Jakarta's legendary traffic jams).

To all AFSA members, thank you for your membership and for your outstanding service safeguarding our nation's security.

In addition, many thanks to my fellow Governing Board members and AFSA's excellent team for your collaboration and support. Cheers to the next 100 years! ■



Building a Strong Foundation

In my first assignment with the Commercial Service, I had the honor to serve in one of our U.S. Export Assistant Centers (USEACs). We counseled small and medium businesses on the basics of exporting and doing business internationally.

It was a great role that allowed me to learn the core of our mission. Yet, having come from a hard-charging management consulting firm, the workload at the USEAC was a bit lighter than I was used to. So, with some additional capacity, my wife and I started a side hustle investing in real estate.

It was a wonderful whirlwind of contractors, architects, frustration, and elation. By the time we left for our first overseas tour, we had renovated 30 apartment units in 30 months.

Throughout nearly two decades of renovating homes since those early days, we've learned a good deal. One of the core tenets of any major renovation project is that you first bolster the foundation and "bones" of the property before tackling any other major work.

But does the same hold true for renovating an organization?

In mid-May, a long-planned modernized Commercial Service was launched by the secretary of Commerce and the assistant secretary of the Foreign Commercial Service. From

what I have seen so far, this appears to be a very promising step forward for our organization.

With a tremendous amount of energy and focus, teams within FCS have been working for more than a year on this rollout. It was done the right way, with input gathered from the field to foster stakeholder buy-in. And the secretary's involvement will ensure that these modernization efforts are here to stay.

Embracing cutting-edge technology, FCS will adjust its focus and processes for how we engage with businesses, enabling additional capacity dedicated to strategic policy moves. This effort, envisioned by our capable assistant secretary, and embraced by our outstanding team, has tremendous promise and should be celebrated.

So, what's not to like?

It remains to be seen if these shiny new tools and processes will lift or add to the burden of the already burned-out field staff. AFSA recently conducted a survey to better understand how budget challenges are affecting FCS officers serving overseas. The results were shocking, as members cited more than 30 percent reductions in staffing, a more than 100 percent increase in demand for services, and a lack of strategic organizational direction.

Embracing cutting-edge technology, FCS will adjust its focus and processes for how we engage with businesses.

This has led to a decline in the physical and mental health of our members and an inability to effectively compete with the People's Republic of China, which has 10 times more commercial officers in some markets than the United States.

According to an AFSA survey:

- 96 percent of officers indicated that budgetary constraints have affected their ability to perform their primary duties.
- 96 percent of officers indicated that budgetary constraints have negatively affected team morale at post.
- 93 percent believe that the budget cuts have led to a decline in the quality of the organization's work.
- 56 percent of America's

commercial diplomats are considering leaving FCS due to budgetary constraints.

• Additionally, basic training, including tradecraft and security, are no longer offered for officers, locally employed (LE) staff, or spouses.

The FSOs, Civil Service, and LE staff who work at USEACs and at FCS Washington, D.C., headquarters are the true foundation of our Service, but our foundation is crumbling. We are in dire need of a deep renovation. So, while I applaud the new modernized addition to our organization, I am hopeful that the same energy, attention, and budget will be invested into reinforcing what has always made us great: our people. ■



AFSA Governing Board Meeting, May 15, 2024

The Governing Board met on May 15, 2024.

While there were no items to vote on this month, the board discussed upcoming issues of interest, including final plans for the centennial gala on May 21. Additionally, each board member received a copy of AFSA's newest book, the second edition of Harry Kopp's *The Voice of the Foreign Service*. ■



Preserving the Annuity Exception

On Jan. 2, 1975, at the recommendation of White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld, President Gerald Ford signed a letter to a Foreign Service widow expressing the government's "deepest regret" at the circumstances surrounding her husband's death. The president also expressed his hope that corrective measures that "came about as a result of this tragedy will prevent reoccurrences of this kind in the future."

The tragedy was the suicide of FSO Charles Thomas. In 1969 Thomas was separated from the Foreign Service without a pension because he did not receive a promotion before the expiration of his time-in-class (TIC) at a grade equivalent to today's FS-2. He was 46 years old with 18 years in the Service—short of the age 50 and 20-year service requirement to qualify for an immediate annuity.

After his separation, Thomas despaired at not being able to financially provide for his family. He died by suicide in 1971. Problems were belatedly discovered with his file that several promotion boards reviewed. A highly laudatory Inspector's Evaluation Report had been temporarily misfiled in another officer's file. Thomas had not been allowed to see and rebut the single negative evaluation report in his file.

As documented in presidential briefing materials, now archived in the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, the State Department established the annuity exception as one of the corrective measures taken in or before February 1974 to prevent similar tragedies.

Currently found in 3 FAM 6213.6, the annuity exception provides that the TIC for a career member of the Foreign Service who is not eligible for voluntary retirement or for an immediate annuity will not expire until the member is eligible for an immediate annuity.

The policy applies to State Department FS-2s and below, excluding those separated for relative performance. FS-1s and above whose TIC expires retire on an immediate annuity even if they do not meet standard age and service requirements.

Had the annuity exception existed in 1969, Thomas could have worked until age 50 to qualify for a lifetime pension with a survivor benefit for his spouse and continued FEHB health insurance coverage for himself, his wife, and young daughter.

The annuity exception has now been in place for more than a half century. Its legal basis is the authority given to the Secretary of State by the Foreign Service Act to, by regula-

Those who reach their FS-2 TIC prior to age 50 would thus face separation without a pension were it not for the annuity exception.

tion, increase the maximum allowable TIC as the needs of the Service may require.

Nevertheless, in 2019, AFSA learned that some officials in the State Department's Office of the Legal Advisor were questioning the appropriateness of the provision. AFSA then sent the first of two letters to State officials detailing the historical background and stressing that the annuity exception continues to be a vital safeguard.

Boom and bust Foreign Service hiring and promotion cycles in recent decades have several times slowed promotions, leaving a large cohort of employees stalled at FS-2 who in other eras would have risen to FS-1. Despite serving well and honorably, they found their promotion opportunities limited during one of the recurring cycles of lower promotion rates. Those who reach their FS-2 TIC prior to age 50 would thus face separation without a pension were it not for the annuity exception.

AFSA's second letter noted that the U.S. military, on whose procedures the

Foreign Service "up-or-out" system has been modeled since the Foreign Service Act of 1946, has its own version of the annuity exception.

Military officers at grades O-1 to O-4 (equivalent to FS-6 to FS-3) who are passed over for promotion are kept in service for up to two additional years if needed to qualify for an immediate annuity. The Department of Defense obviously does not view that policy as violating the military's "up-or-out" personnel system.

After reviewing AFSA's letters and holding in-person discussions with AFSA, the department wrote to AFSA in 2020 saying, in part: "We are not contemplating any change of policy."

AFSA was able to draw on the deep institutional knowledge of its legal staff and its network of former AFSA presidents to highlight for the department the history and justification of the annuity exception to help preserve this vital personnel policy. ■

Continued from page 49

She also raised ongoing challenges with the pace of confirming promotion and tenure lists, ambassadors, and other high-level positions as well as budget constraints arising from cuts to the international affairs budget in Fiscal Year 2024.

O’Gorman shared the good news that because of AFSA’s focus on state-level advocacy for Foreign Service pension tax exemptions, mirroring benefits given to the military, some progress has been made in Virginia, Maryland, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Rhode Island.

Sullivan and O’Gorman reminded the audience that member outreach and engagement is crucial in advancing AFSA’s state-level initiatives. A recording of the event is available at <https://bit.ly/4allj53>.

Although Secretary of State Antony Blinken was attending meetings overseas on May 3, he reflected on the legacy of the Foreign Service in his prerecorded FS Day message, saying: “Many of the challenges we face today—from shaping the use of artificial intelligence, to tackling the threat of a warming planet—would have been unimaginable to America’s first diplomats, or even those who served a few decades ago. You’ve developed more specialties and served in more places,



Author Harry Kopp signing copies of the newly released centennial edition of *The Voice of the Foreign Service*.



Springtime revelry in the courtyard of DACOR Bacon House.

because that is what serving our nation today demands. ... So, wherever and however you serve, I’m grateful for

your hard work and I’m proud to call you colleagues.”

Foreign Service Day festivities concluded at DACOR

Bacon House, where 230 attendees were welcomed for an evening of music and refreshments. ■

AFSA Hosts 50th Memorial Plaque Ceremony

Each year in May, as part of its Foreign Service Day commemoration, AFSA hosts a memorial plaque ceremony at the Department of State's C Street lobby to honor those members of the Foreign Service who lost their lives in service overseas.

This year marked the 50th anniversary of the ceremony, a tradition inaugurated by former AFSA President Tom Boyatt in 1974. AFSA has been the steward of these plaques since they were first unveiled in 1933. Thankfully, no new names were added to the plaques this year.

AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi presided over this year's ceremony and delivered welcoming remarks. "As we reflect on the names on these pillars, we are reminded of the immense sacrifices made by our fallen colleagues—the Foreign Service members who answered the call of duty with courage and commit-



AFSA/JONQUIN SOSA

Deputy Secretary Richard Verma delivers remarks in front of the memorial plaques.

ment. They ventured into the unknown, often in perilous circumstances, to promote America's interests and values. Their devotion to duty exemplifies the very best of what America has to offer the world," Yazdgerdi said.



U.S. EMBASSY JUBA

U.S. Ambassador Michael J. Adler leads the moment of silence at U.S. Embassy Juba in South Sudan.



U.S. EMBASSY PRAGUE

The moment of silence at U.S. Embassy Prague.

The audience stood as Yazdgerdi welcomed the United States Armed Services Color Guard to present the colors. All attendees bowed their heads to observe a 20-second moment of silence, joining their colleagues in U.S.

embassies and consulates around the world.

Following his delivery of the keynote address at the State Department's Foreign Affairs Day ceremony in the Dean Acheson Auditorium,

Continued on page 56

Continued from page 55

Deputy Secretary Richard Verma gave remarks, opening with a quote by Albert Einstein: “The world is in greater peril from those who tolerate or encourage evil than from those who actually commit it.”

Verma pointed out the seemingly overwhelming nature of international challenges faced by the U.S., suggesting that it might be easier to walk away from a global leadership role. “But as this wall demonstrates, it is not in the bloodstream of foreign affairs professionals



U.S. CONSULATE CASABLANCA

A ceremonial wreath is laid at the U.S. Consulate General Casablanca.

to walk away from a challenge. ... Though we acknowledge the risks of this choice every time we pass this wall, our commitment to a more peaceful, just world prevails,” he affirmed.

As the wreath bearer placed the ceremonial wreath on the easel, Verma’s words echoed in the C Street lobby: “We honor them in our ceremonies and in our moments of silence, and we honor them by our efforts to build on the good they created during their too-short journeys.” ■



U.S. EMBASSY PARIS

The moment of silence at U.S. Embassy Paris.

The AFSA Exhibit Travels to Presidential Libraries

As part of the yearlong celebration of the Foreign Service and AFSA centennials, three presidential libraries are hosting an exhibit developed by AFSA Retiree Vice President John Naland.

The exhibit consists of panels showcasing the origin, development, and contributions of the modern Foreign Service. The goal is to increase understanding among the American people about the history and role of career diplomats and development officers.

Exhibits at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif., and the Richard Nixon Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif., are both running through September 2. The



JOHN NALAND

John Naland stands in front of exhibit panels at the State Department.

exhibit at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in College Station, Texas, is running through January 2025. ■



The AFSA exhibit on display at the Bush Presidential Library.

JOHN NALAND

100 Years of the Foreign Service at NMAD

Do you know the name of the person financing the expedition that led to the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen? Who invented the wireless system of telegraphy? And what general was noted for his defense of Verdun in 1917?

If you knew the answers to these questions, you had a good chance of becoming one of America's first Foreign Service officers following the passage of the Rogers Act 100 years ago.

On May 8, in commemoration of the centennial of the modern Foreign Service, the National Museum of American Diplomacy (NMAD) hosted a lecture by histo-

rian Dr. Alison Mann. Mann discussed the people behind the act and their motivations for reform.

The Foreign Service has its origins in the story of isolationism. Mann cited a variety of elements that prompted its creation: World War I, nativism, the Red Scare, the rise of the Republican party, and U.S. disarmament resulting from the 1921-1922 Washington Conference.

An alliance between Wilbur Carr, director of the Consular Service, and John Jacob Rogers, a Massachusetts congressman and WWI veteran, brought the issue of a professional Foreign



The Centennial Rogers Act exhibit at NMAD.

Service before Congress in 1924.

With the Rogers Act of 1924, the U.S. Foreign Service was established as career organization with employ-

ment based on merit and competitive examination.

More information about the NMAD and future exhibits can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3wDa4bA>. ■

AFSA Welcomes New FS Cohort

On May 7 and May 14, AFSA welcomed the April 2024 cohort of 230 newly minted Foreign Service professionals to AFSA headquarters. AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi introduced them to AFSA's history and advocacy efforts on behalf of the Foreign Service.

Close to 40 percent of the class have a previous affiliation with the State Department as direct-hire employees, contractors, interns, or eligible family members. Several members served as Peace Corps volunteers, and more than three-quarters of them

have prior U.S. government experience.

The class includes five presidential management fellows, seven former consular fellows, and six Civil Service fellows, and more than half have master's degrees.

Specialists comprise 58 percent of the cohort; 27 percent of them are female. In the generalist cohort, 56 percent are female.

Class members speak more than 45 languages combined, including all the official United Nations languages and languages spoken in all six geographic bureaus. About half the class



President Tom Yazdgerdi welcomes new FS cohort at AFSA HQ on May 14.

speak at least two foreign languages.

Many of these new hires joined AFSA during their visit to HQ, and AFSA hopes to welcome the rest to AFSA membership in the coming

months. Overall, about 80 percent of active-duty Foreign Service are AFSA members.

AFSA wishes those in this new class all the best as they embark on their global journeys! ■

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David L. Mortimer, CPA, has over 25 years of experience in tax planning and research, including developing tax minimization strategies, planning business/real estate transactions and audit representation.

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- Financial planning
- Practiced before the IRS



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FIRST CONSULTATION FREE

PODCAST
“100 Years Old and Still Kicking It”



AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi with podcast hosts on May 2.

On May 2, AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi joined the hosts of the *American Diplomat* podcast, Ambassador Pete Romero and Laura Bennett, to discuss the 100-year evolution of the Foreign Service and outline how it will meet the challenges of the future. The episode, “100 Years Old and Still Kicking It,” highlights the Foreign Service and AFSA centennial.

Produced out of Arizona State University, with ongoing support from AFSA, the *American Diplomat* podcast goes behind the scenes with diplomats whose experiences abroad have brought them face-to-face with newsworthy, historic events.

Yazdgerdi pointed to the pivotal role of the 1924 Rogers Act in establishing a merit-based system for the U.S. diplomatic corps. The act transformed an opaque, nepotistic system into an ecosystem of competitive exams and merit-based promotions. These structural shifts led to profound changes in the Service over the last century, such as the integration of women.

The podcast panel also discussed the challenges faced by the Foreign Service during politically turbulent times. They highlighted the financial support AFSA’s Legal Defense Fund gave to some of those called to testify before Congress in the Trump 2019 impeachment proceedings.

Yazdgerdi also emphasized the importance of adequately funding the Foreign Service to maintain global competitiveness.

Looking to the future, the participants touched on the need for the Foreign Service to adapt to modern challenges like cybersecurity and climate change by incorporating specialized training and expertise involving data science and quantum computing.

They also discussed the concept of a Diplomatic Reserve Corps, akin to a military reserve. This initiative, supported by AFSA, proposes a force of ready individuals, including retirees and those with specialized skills, who could be mobilized in times of crisis.

Listen to the entire podcast at <https://bit.ly/44MIK7f>. ■

Creating Space for Professional Debate *The Foreign Service Journal*

In March 1919, before the passage of the Rogers Act that marked the birth of the modern Foreign Service and before the founding of the American Foreign Service Association, a group of consular officers joined forces to print the first issue of the *American Consular Bulletin*—the precursor to today's *Foreign Service Journal*.



According to former Foreign Service Officer, *FSJ* Editorial Board member, and unofficial AFSA historian Harry Kopp, when the magazine was first published, “the State Department found the idea of an independent publication deeply unsettling and insisted on prepublication review [by the Secretary of State] of every issue.”

Excessive concern for offending State Department sensitivities generated such a sterile publication that State eventually relinquished its requirement for prior review. Still, it would be decades before the *FSJ* began taking on controversial subjects and publishing constructive critiques of departmental and Foreign Service management.

That began in the mid-to late 1940s and, notably, took the form of wartime essay contests on Foreign Service reform that were

seriously considered by then-Secretary of State Edward Stettinius Jr. “I can think of no more useful mine of information and recommendations,” Stettinius

wrote at the time. “All of us who are interested in these essays thank you.”

After changing course from being an “inspirational” publication and instead aiming for more educational goals, the publication quickly

came into its own as a serious venue for constructive discourse on the profession of diplomacy.

The founding editors might not recognize today's *Journal*, a professional publication with editorial independence. Each edition

includes an AFSA President's Views column and a separate section (of 8 to 30 pages) called AFSA News, which shares views and news from the association and its officers.

While AFSA News is overseen by the AFSA Governing Board, the rest of the magazine is guided by an editorial board and the *Journal's* professional staff. This structure allows the magazine to air a variety of perspectives, cover

controversial topics, and help carve a path forward for professional diplomacy.

As AFSA's flagship publication, the *FSJ* covers diplomacy from an insider's perspective, through the eyes of its practitioners. Published 10 times a year both in print and online, *The Foreign Service Journal* has a print circulation of 14,000 and has earned numerous industry awards. Its primary audience is AFSA's membership, the active-duty and retired diplomats and development professionals, and their families, from the foreign affairs agencies.

The *Journal* is also a resource for those outside the Foreign Service, from members of Congress to military personnel, to other members of

the interagency and foreign affairs community broadly, along with students and those considering a career in foreign affairs. AFSA deliberately makes each edition available online, with the aim of bringing knowledge and perspectives from the Foreign Service to researchers, policymakers, and the public.

The *FSJ* Digital Archive, available at <https://afsa.org/fsj-archive>, includes all editions back to 1919 and is

fully searchable. A gold mine for researchers, policymakers, and anyone interested in international affairs, the archive offers a detailed look at the issues of historical concern to colleagues who had a front-row seat at events now featured in our history books.

Shawn Dorman, a former Foreign Service officer, has been AFSA publications director and editor in chief of the *Journal* since 2014. She says that more than 100 years since its inception, “the *Journal* continues to provide a space for the foreign affairs community to discuss and debate what works in development and diplomacy today, and to offer ideas for building the Foreign Service of tomorrow.”

The U.S. Foreign Service has evolved since those long-ago days, but one thing remains constant: the *FSJ* still relies on practitioners to tell the story of the Foreign Service and to share important ideas and updates from their work on the ground around the world.

If you are interested in writing for us, please find our submission guidelines at <https://afsa.org/fsj-author-guidelines>.

—Donna Scaramastra
Gorman

AFSA's Good Works

Each edition during our centennial year, *The Foreign Service Journal* is profiling an AFSA program that advances the collective or individual interests of its members. This edition we feature ourselves!



■ **Robert Louis Barry**, 89, a retired Foreign Service officer and former ambassador, died on March 11, 2024, at his home in Newton, Mass., of vascular dementia.

Mr. Barry was born on Aug. 28, 1934, in Pittsburgh, Pa., to Louis and Margaret (O'Halloran) Barry. His father was a colonel in the U.S. Air Force; the family moved from base to base during World War II.

Mr. Barry graduated from Lansdowne High School outside Philadelphia, Pa., before attending Dartmouth College on a Navy scholarship. In 1956 he graduated with a degree in international relations and a focus on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

He then received a fellowship to study Soviet affairs at Oxford University. While there, he was so outraged by news of the Soviet crackdown in Hungary that he traveled by train to the country's border with Austria on his winter vacation, hoping to assist refugees leaving the country.

He reconsidered those plans when faced with a row of Soviet tanks but would spend most of the next four decades engaging with the Soviet Union.

Among his companions on that ill-fated trip to Hungary to assist refugees was his future wife, Peggy, a student at the University of Michigan who was working as a nanny for a French family.

Mr. Barry spent three years in the U.S. Navy before joining the Foreign Service in 1962. He recalled the Foreign Service oral examination as fearsome—one of the questions was, "Name all the international straits that would be closed if the territorial waters of states were increased from three miles to 12." But one of the examiners winked at him, so he knew he had passed.

His early postings introduced him to the nitty-gritty of diplomacy. As a consular officer in Zagreb, he managed the

case of a woman who fell off the Orient Express train in Slovenia and was found wandering in her nightclothes. From there, he was posted to Moscow and then to Leningrad, in the Soviet Union.

Returning to Washington, D.C., in 1974, he oversaw travel controls over Soviet diplomats in Washington and began the search for secure sites for embassies in Washington and Moscow. This was a losing battle: Work on the U.S. embassy building in Moscow halted suddenly in 1985, when it became clear that the entire building was laced with listening devices that had been built into the steel framing.

From 1981 to 1984, Mr. Barry served as the ambassador to Bulgaria. He then became a diplomat in residence at Dartmouth College. Later, he served as head of the U.S. delegation to the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe (1985-1987), where he would negotiate a treaty that for the first time allowed the U.S. and Soviet militaries to perform on-site inspection of military facilities, a building block for arms control agreements that followed.

As he was preparing to travel to Stockholm for another round of negotiating with the Soviets, Amb. Barry received catastrophic news. His 20-year-old son, Peter, a sophomore at Yale, had found work that summer on a salmon fishing boat in Alaska and died when it sank with all hands.

Amb. Barry traveled to Alaska to identify the body and, together with his wife, began a campaign to bring safety regulations to commercial fishing vessels. Three years later, these efforts resulted in passage of the Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act.

Amb. Barry's other diplomatic assignments included deputy assistant secretary for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

(1979-1981); deputy director of Voice of America (1988-1990); and special assistant to Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, coordinating assistance to Eastern Europe (1991-1992). His final overseas assignment was as U.S. ambassador to Indonesia (1992-1995).

After retiring from the State Department, Amb. Barry became head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1998 to 2001.

Amb. Barry is survived by his wife, Peggy; daughter Ellen; son John; son-in-law Kiya Wilson; daughter-in-law Edit Barry; and grandchildren Alice, June, and Nathaniel. His younger son, Peter, died in 1985.

■ **Peggy Blackford**, 82, a retired Foreign Service officer and U.S. ambassador, died in New York City on March 30, 2024.

Ms. Blackford was born in 1942 in Ewing, N.J., where she graduated from Ewing High School. Her parents were both active in civic affairs, and, in their memory, she established a scholarship fund that awards a yearly grant to a Ewing High graduate who has demonstrated a commitment to the community.

She received her bachelor's degree in international relations from Syracuse University and a master's in business administration from Pace University.

In 1972 Ms. Blackford joined the State Department as a Foreign Service officer, serving overseas in Kenya, Brazil, France, and Mali.

In 1995 she was appointed U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Guinea-Bissau. While there, she earned an award for her courage and leadership during the violent coup d'état that racked the nation in 1998.

Amb. Blackford retired in 2000, settling in New York City and continuing to accept short-term assignments with the State Department for several years. While living in New York, she pursued her passion for the performing arts, continued to travel extensively, and volunteered at an animal shelter.

Amb. Blackford is survived by her brother, Barry Lefkowitz of Lumberton, N.J.; two nieces, Tova Lefkowitz and Chava Lind, both of Chesapeake, Va.; and several longtime close friends.

Memorial donations may be made to the ASPCA or any animal shelter of your choice.

■ **Kenneth W. Bleakley**, 83, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on April 30, 2024, at home in Palmetto Bay, Fla., surrounded by his family.

Mr. Bleakley graduated from Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and held a master's degree from American University.

He joined the Foreign Service in 1963. During his 29-year career, he served in the Dominican Republic, Spain, Panama, Bolivia, and as deputy chief of mission in San Salvador. He was senior deputy U.S. coordinator for international communications and information policy during the first Bush administration and later served as director of U.S. operations in Central America and director of the U.S. International Refugee Program.

From 1980 to 1981, he was president of the American Foreign Service Association and part of the core AFSA team negotiating the Foreign Service Act of 1980. He was a member of Delta Phi Epsilon Professional Foreign Service Fraternity.

After retiring from the Foreign Service, Mr. Bleakley became a founder and

president of Fonemed LLC, which provides nurse advice services throughout North America and the Caribbean.

An avid skier, poker player, and boatsman, Mr. Bleakley lived a full life, with gusto and determination.

He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Jane Gibson Bleakley; daughters Karen (and spouse Kevin) Hatch and Monica (and spouse Steve) Corbett; six grandchildren; brother Fred R. Bleakley; and sister Veronica Steffen. He was buried in the diplomatic section of Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

■ **George Garrett Byers Griffin**, 89, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away on March 31, 2024, of injuries sustained by a fall in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Griffin was born in Istanbul, where his father managed American tobacco interests until WWII forced the family to leave Türkiye and return home to the family seat in Gaffney, S.C.

In 1957 Mr. Griffin graduated from the University of South Carolina with a degree in political science. After a two-year stint as a U.S. naval officer, he joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1959. His initial postings were in Naples and Colombo with his wife, Emmie Young, from whom he was later divorced. In 1969 he married his second wife, Christina O'Dunne, at the ambassador's residence in Kathmandu.

A decorated senior diplomat, Mr. Griffin had a wide-ranging career in the Foreign Service. Over a 40-year period, he served in 15 posts across Africa, Asia, and Europe, interspersed with home assignments, and won several performance awards.

His posts included deputy chief of mission in Kabul and Nairobi, acting assistant secretary for South Asia, and consul general in Milan. He helped

create the position of coordinator for business affairs and served as vice chair of the Foreign Service Senior Officers Association.

Mr. Griffin recalled career memories that included tracking the notorious mobster Lucky Luciano to his grave, being a lifelong anathema to the Soviet Union, and conducting sensitive negotiations with the fledgling government of Bangladesh.

He won awards for reporting in Pakistan and Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, and received kudos from American business leaders in India, Nigeria, and Korea.

After retirement in 1999, Mr. Griffin and his spouse created a home in a historic library in Blue Ridge Summit, Pa. There, he served on nonprofit boards including the One Mountain Foundation and the PenMar Development Corp. As board chair, he guided PenMar to turn Fort Ritchie, Md., into a mixed-use civilian community.

Mr. Griffin was a trustee of Rhino Ark in Kenya, a nonprofit dedicated to mountain rhinoceros and critical forest/water preservation. He was a member of Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired (DACOR), the Metropolitan Club, the World Affairs Council, Meridian International House, and the Monterey Country Club.

Mr. Griffin was predeceased by his parents, Harold and Mary Griffin of Gaffney, S.C., and two siblings, Makie Shell and Hal Griffin Jr., both of South Carolina.

He is survived by his wife, Christina Griffin of Washington, D.C., and Blue Ridge Summit, Pa.; his son, Sean (and spouse Cathy), and granddaughter Hartley, all of Isle of Palms, S.C.; and his daughter, Schuyler, of Kauai, Hawaii.

■ **Paul B. McCarty**, 100, a retired State Department Foreign Service officer, passed away on April 6, 2024, in Weymouth, Mass.

Mr. McCarty was born in Worcester, Mass., to Lawrence F. and Mary (McArdle) McCarty.

In 1943 he joined the State Department and spent nearly 38 years serving in countries including Iraq, India, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Syria, Vietnam, Sweden, Türkiye, and Ireland.

Mr. McCarty retired from the State Department in 1978 and became a founding member of the Foreign Affairs Retirees of New England.

Mr. McCarty was predeceased by his parents, Lawrence F. and Mary McCarty; siblings Helen Nadeau, Claire Butler, Marcella McCarty, Lawrence McCarty, and Mary Berry; and the mother of his two children, Christine Carmichael McCarty.

He is survived by his spouse, Carol Ann D'Arcy; children Paul C. McCarty and Christine S. McCarty; and nephews, nieces, and friends made over many decades.

If desired, a contribution may be made in Mr. McCarty's name to the Senior Living Foundation, <https://www.slfoundation.org/support.cfm>, 1620 L Street NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036-5629, or to a charity of one's choice.

■ **Maria Ifill Philip**, 78, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer, died on April 15, 2024, in Silver Spring, Md., from complications of advanced Parkinson's disease.

The third of six children, Ms. Philip was born in Barbados on Aug. 11, 1945. She immigrated to the U.S. in 1953 with her mother, the late Eleanor Husbands, and her brother Oliver, joining her father in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Her father, the late Reverend O. Urcille Ifill, a Panamanian immigrant who had migrated earlier, was an itinerant preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the family moved around New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania over the next 20 years.

Ms. Philip attended Buffalo East High School and later earned a bachelor's degree in history from Wilberforce University in 1967. Her early career included roles at the Social Security Administration in Cleveland, Ohio, and San Jose, Calif.

In 1980 Ms. Philip achieved her lifelong dream, joining the U.S. State Department as a Foreign Service officer.

During her 27-year career in the Foreign Service, she progressed through the ranks of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. She served at posts in Bogotá, Bridgetown (where she met and married her husband, Oliver), Suva, Lagos, Georgetown, and Washington, D.C.

After completing the Army War College strategic studies program in Carlisle, Pa., she took on a final assignment auditing consular affairs offices worldwide for the Office of the Inspector General.

Her consular responsibilities spanned the globe, taking her to Tonga, Gabon, Togo, Benin, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Niger, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, Germany, Türkiye, Cyprus, Greece, Korea, Haiti, Mongolia, Suriname, Canada, and China.

She received multiple commendations over her career, including a personal recognition from then-Vice President George H.W. Bush.

Ms. Philip was a three-time recipient of the Department of State Meritorious Honor Award, the Department of State Superior Honor Award, and the Secretary's Career Achievement Award for 39 years in government service.

After retiring in 2007, Ms. Philip devoted her time to music, volunteering with Aunt Hattie's Place, serving on Delta Sigma Theta committees, and enjoying leisure travel.

She developed a lifelong love of music from an early age, harmonizing with her parents and singing in church choirs. Her musical tastes ranged from the Beatles to Broadway tunes, barber-shop, and Beethoven. In retirement she was a stalwart member of the Sweet Adelines, participating in local, regional, and international female barbershop performances and competitions, including with the Greater Harrisburg, Clustered Spires, and, most recently, the Capital Accord Choruses.

Throughout her life, Ms. Philip was a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta sorority. She generously supported her alma mater as a president's club member of the Wilberforce University Alumni Association.

A vibrant, gregarious, and charismatic spirit, she created a loyal network of friends from around the world. She embraced spouse Oliver "O.N." Philip's children and grandchildren as her own, and they equally cherished her.

Ms. Philip was predeceased by her spouse, O.N. Philip; son Daniel Philip, who died in infancy in 1986; sister Gwendolyn; and brothers Oliver and Richard.

She is survived by her children Barbara, Joyce, Veda, Paul, Peter, Ray, Samuel, and David; 21 grandchildren, including Craig Philip, Joselle Royer, Wesley and Juliette Pluviose-Philip, Thabani, Ntando, Briya, Briyanna, Damani, Paul Joseph, Kara, Kayla, Darren, Thandie, Amina, and Ajani Philip; and her brothers, Earle and Roberto Ifill.

Donations in Ms. Philip's memory can be made to the Parkinson Foundation of the National Capital Area, www.PFNCA.org.



If you would like us to include an obituary in In Memory, please send text to journal@afsa.org.

Be sure to include the date, place, and cause of death, as well as details of the individual's Foreign Service career. Please place the name of the AFSA member to be memorialized in the subject line of your email.

■ **Christopher Wittmann**, 65, a retired State Department Foreign Service officer, died on April 8, 2024, in Arlington, Va.

A native of Washington, D.C., Mr. Wittmann graduated from Herndon High School and the College of William and Mary.

Mr. Wittmann was the first Foreign Service officer to attend the Command and Staff College at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Va., from which he earned an M.A. in 1995. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Mr. Wittmann was a law enforcement officer in Fairfax County, Va.

Mr. Wittmann had a 29-year career with the Department of State, including postings in Guangzhou, Harare, Bangui, Frankfurt, Pristina, Honolulu (with the

U.S. Pacific Command), Vienna (with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and New York (with the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in 2021, which he called “a very difficult time”).

During his Washington, D.C., assignments, Mr. Wittmann was responsible for various U.S. efforts to fight international terrorism as well as for overseas building management.

Mr. Wittmann retired from State in 2013; his last assignment was as director of the Resources Management Office of the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe.

His beloved corgis, Boo and Brat, accompanied him to Frankfurt, Honolulu, and Vienna; he used to say they could bark in seven languages.

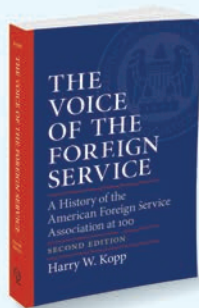
Mr. Wittmann was a patron of the arts, particularly opera, serving as a supernumerary in several Washington productions and giving generously to arts organizations and animal charities.

Mr. Wittmann was predeceased by parents Erwin and Rita (Fisher) Wittmann and brother Michael.

He is survived by his spouse of 27 years, Nicholas Klosz of Philadelphia, Pa., as well as many cousins, other family members, and friends. ■

The U.S. Foreign Service and the American Foreign Service Association were born together in 1924, the direct and indirect progeny of an act of Congress.

This is their story.



ON SALE NOW

“Marking the centennial of AFSA and the Foreign Service, *The Voice of the Foreign Service* is a must read for those who want to learn more about both.”

—**Ambassador Marie “Masha” Yovanovitch**

“Anyone concerned with reform of the State Department or American diplomacy needs to read this history of AFSA.”

—**Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann**

“This book makes clear the inestimable importance of AFSA and the reason it is imperative to support the organization’s efforts on behalf of the U.S. Foreign Service.” —**Ambassador Ruth A. Davis**

“Harry Kopp educates us all about the valuable work AFSA has done in the past century.” —**Ambassador Lino Gutiérrez**

afsa.org/voice-foreign-service

Swimming with Whales in Tonga

BY TOM ARMBRUSTER

Knowing the strict rules in place for whale watching in Hawaii, and the distance boats must maintain from the whales, I was a little unsure about swimming with them in Tonga. My plan was to see how respectful the crews were toward the whales and make a game-time decision. I did *not* want to disturb whales wintering in Tonga (to give birth and rest) after spending their austral summer in Antarctica.

One of six South Pacific humpback populations, the “Tongan Tribe” doesn’t mix with the humpbacks in Hawaii and are among the last whales to be hunted (although they were among the most affected by commercial whaling after World War II). They can grow to 60 feet long and weigh 35-50 tons. According to the Marine Mammal Center, less than 10 percent of the original humpback population remains worldwide.



Tom Armbruster served as a retired annuitant (REA) senior adviser during the establishment of U.S. Embassy Nuku’alofa, Tonga, and is now an area adviser at the United Nations. He retired from the Foreign Service as ambassador to the Marshall Islands (2012-2016), having served in Finland, Cuba, the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, Russia (twice), Mexico, and Tajikistan. After retiring, he led Office of Inspector General inspections to Denmark, Colombia, Chad, Mauritania, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and worked as a foreign policy contractor at Fort Meade, Maryland. He serves on the Board of Global Policy Insights.



Whale lookout, off the northern coast of Tonga.

At the time, my day job involved assisting on the opening of the U.S. embassy in Nuku’alofa. A Saturday on the water sounded like a good escape from looking for official residences, fielding consular questions, and advising Washington on plans for the Secretary of State Grand Opening of this new embassy.

There were eight of us that day, many from the British High Commission, a few Kiwi tourists, and me. I had already seen

turtles, rays, sea snakes, and sharks in the Tongan waters while snorkeling or on boats, but the prospect of seeing whales in their environment was thrilling. Tonga is one of the few countries where along with watching whales, you can jump into the water with them accompanied by a qualified Tongan guide.

Whales 9 o’clock!

“Group 1, gear up!”

Snorkels were donned, flippers strapped on, and shorty wetsuits zipped.

“Well,” I thought, “Group 1 will get a good look.”

They were dropped off a short swim from the whales, jumping off the stern and making their way, with their guide, Tomasi, in the lead. They came back laughing and chattering and checking their waterproof cameras.



BRYAN ARMBRUSTER

First encounter.

“Group 2, get ready!”

We had repositioned the boat and were close. Tomasi had given us a good briefing. Whale swimming is done on the whales’ terms. If they want to engage, they will. If they don’t, one

was horizontal in the water. He rolled 45 degrees, slowly, to look me over. Not just from my fins to my snorkel—but through the mask. The whale made eye contact. I can only imagine my eyes were the size of saucers.

In that encounter, I succumbed to the magic of the whales.

powerful downstroke of their tail and they’re gone. Tomasi knew the whales after years of studying their behavior on the surface and beneath it. He said the whales recognized boats by the engine noise and showed favorites.

“Group 2! Now! Go!”

We were off! The whale closest to me

Innocence, peace, and a benign presence was what the whale communicated. I hope I communicated awe and gratitude.

Then, the whale got playful. Just like a dog gets the “zoomies,” the whale took off, circled around, and made several more passes at us. I retreated toward the



BIBI VOYLES

Author (at left) and Tongan guide Uili Lousi on deck.

boat ladder to make sure I was out of the way and watched the show. Then, the whale ventured back out. That’s when it breached.



Closest encounter.

The photo of the whale towering over me caused a stir in the whale-swimming community in Tonga. Some said we were too close and never should have been that near the whale. We abided by the five-meter rule, but of course the whales did not.

In that encounter, I succumbed to the magic of the whales. You can't come out of the water unchanged by the experience.

It was also a real privilege to observe whales with Uili Lousi, an artist and climate activist. The special bond between indigenous people and whales around the world remains mysterious yet captivating. Uili is advocating for a whale sanctuary corridor to be established between Ant-

arctica and Tonga to avoid ship strikes.

Later, at a United Nations conference on establishing a Universal Declaration of Rights for the Ocean, I was fortunate to meet famed marine biologist and oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle, or "Her Deepness" as fans call her. I mentioned Uili's idea of a whale sanctuary corridor.

"Why just a corridor?" she said, gripping my forearm with both hands. "Why not the whole Southern Ocean!"

With so much threatening the marine environment, from global warming to deep-sea mining, the whales are a gentle reminder to us all that what is at stake is not just the economics of the seafood industry and the possible riches of deep-sea minerals. It is also the welfare of incredible, highly intelligent, sentient beings. ■



Coming aboard.

To be honest, my mask was a bit foggy, so I had the impression of a Mack truck-sized creature crashing down right in front of me, rather than a view of a whale with the fine details of its marking.

At some point, it became clear that the whales had a super awareness of the swimmers. Ever graceful, they are gentle masters of their domain. As swimmers, we get glimpses; then the visibility fails, or the whale swims out of range. Real, long-term encounters are rare.

Tomasi said our day with the whales was as good as it gets. Even in low visibility, the whales seem to know where we are. From that first day on, I trusted them.

A View from the Precipice

One Fine Day: Britain's Empire on the Brink

Matthew Parker, *PublicAffairs*, 2023, \$35.00/hardcover, e-book available, 624 pages.

REVIEWED BY ERIC RUBIN

In our current era of upheaval, instability, and dysfunction, historians can help us step back and examine how we got here. Matthew Parker, a British historian and TV commentator, has picked one particular year and one particular day as the pivot point that sets the stage for many of the world's most intractable conflicts and bloodiest battles. This book is a riveting and persuasive argument for why history matters.

The date that Parker has picked is Sept. 29, 1923, the day that Britain's League of Nations mandate over the former Ottoman territory of Palestine took effect and the day that the British Empire thereby reached its greatest expanse and greatest population: 14 million square miles, 150 times the size of the United Kingdom, and a quarter of the Earth's land mass, with 460 million inhabitants, a fifth of the world's population.

Parker's impressive argument, which takes about 600 pages to make but reads like a whodunnit, is that much of the world that current generations inherited is the product of the astonishing reach and achievement of the tiny island of Great Britain, the world's greatest empire.

The argument is by no means all positive: Parker is scathing about the racism, class consciousness, and hubris that led the British to make major mistakes, some of which haunt the world to this day.

Parker picks 1923 because it was not only the apogee of Britain's territorial reach (which of course would have been even greater if not for American independence) but also the year in which Britain's overreach, overcommitment, and inability to maintain all its commitments and obligations started to become apparent.

It is hard for Americans to grasp how devastating World War I was to the

U.K., France, Germany, and Russia, as well as the smaller countries that were damaged. We did lose several hundred thousand soldiers and then were hit hard by the Spanish Flu pandemic, but our fundamental stability, prosperity, and confidence in the future emerged intact after the armistice.

That was not at all the case in Great Britain, where the term "dysgenesis" was coined to describe the effect of losing so many of a country's future leaders, scholars, inventors, activists, and geniuses. Britain after WWI was victorious, but it was also broke, exhausted, and dispirited. The case for empire was often hard to make and, at times, was based on arguments for continuity rather than future progress.

Parker uses a series of case studies across the globe to capture the moment. From the Indian subcontinent to Mandatory Palestine, from the "White Highlands" of Kenya to the islands of the



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South Pacific, Parker expertly sketches the actions, successes, and mistakes that ultimately led to the end of the empire and its conversion into the loose and vaguely conceived Commonwealth of Nations.

He is scathing about the human rights abuses, mass killing, torture, and sheer disregard of native populations that characterize much of the empire's history, but he also devotes extensive discussion to its remarkable achievements.

Simply stated, the British Empire was far more successful in every respect than any other modern colonial empire, including America's in the Philippines, the South Pacific, and the Caribbean.

To this day, the cultural and linguistic legacy of the British Empire remains vivid

and important. And any serious consideration of the "liberal" side of British imperialism must recognize that, more than any other European empire by far, the British laid the groundwork for independence and mutual respect, despite the uglier moments that Parker does not shy away from discussing.

It is not an accident that much of the current U.K. economy, including most of its automotive industry and much of its retail sector, is owned by Indians descended from Britain's former subjects (Indian citizens, not British citizens of Indian descent, who also have been more successful overall than Britain's total population).

And while plenty of former British colonies have succumbed to dictator-

ship and misrule, plenty of others have remained parliamentary democracies with free elections and civil liberties.

The author also draws vivid and exciting portraits of the key players of the era, from Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin, and Winston Churchill on the British side, to Nehru, Gandhi, and Jinnah in South Asia, and many lesser-known independence leaders across the globe.

Matthew Parker skillfully captures a moment in time that proved to be pivotal in shaping the rest of the 20th century and our own current century beyond. ■

Ambassador Eric Rubin is a retired Senior Foreign Service officer who served as president of AFSA from 2019 to 2023.

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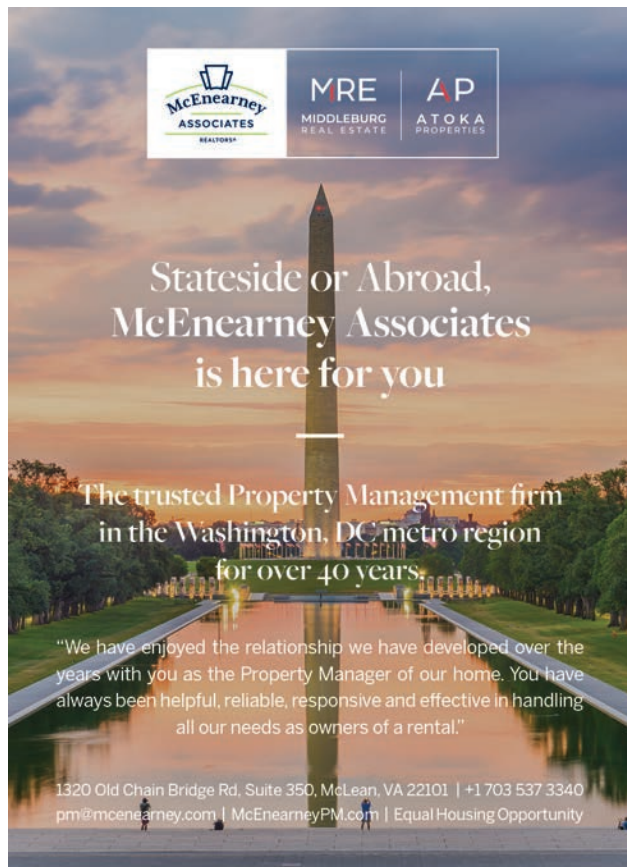


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AD INDEX

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Calling All Authors / 68
Centennial Merchandise / 4
Foreign Service Night at Nationals Park / Inside Front Cover
Look for 2025 Summer Camps & Programs / 72
PeaceCon 2024 / 37
The Voice of the Foreign Service, 2nd edition / 63

CLASSIFIED LISTINGS

Classifieds / 73, 74

FINANCIAL PLANNING & TAX SERVICES

David L. Mortimer, CPA / 58
Money By Lisa / 43
Windecker Financial Planning LLC / 58

INSURANCE

AFSPA – Dental / 13
AFSPA – Financial Health / 24
Clements Worldwide / 3
FEDS Protection / 15

MISCELLANEOUS

Body Harmony of Arlington / 37
Change of Address / 67
FSJ Digital Archive / 18
FSJ Gift Subscription / 35
Fund for American Diplomacy / Inside Back Cover
Inside a U.S. Embassy / 77
New Haven / 31

REAL ESTATE & PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

Chambers Theory / 71
Corporate Apartment Specialists / 71
FSJ Guide to Extended Stay Housing / 72
FSJ Guide to Property Management / 72
McEneaney Associates / 71
Peake Property Management / 19
ProMax Management / 70
Property Specialists, Inc. / 13
Richey Property Management / 69
Washington Management Services / 72
WJD Management / 70

RETIREMENT LIVING, PLANNING & SERVICES

AFSA Retiree Membership / 43
Senior Living Foundation / 41
Washington Retirement Planning Specialists / Back Cover

Diplomats, Firecrackers, and a Checker Cab: The Opening of U.S. Embassy Beijing

BY DON HAUSRATH

After some 45 years, I still find them turning up. Mementos the People's Republic of China airline had given us: small ceramic pandas, nail clippers with an airline logo, and lapel pins with a golden profile of Chairman Mao. I was awarded these gifts while commuting from Hong Kong to Beijing during the late 1970s. There was no American embassy in Beijing, just a tiny diplomatic enclave called a Liaison Office.

At that time, there were no direct flights between the two cities. You could take the train or the hovercraft on the Pearl River for the 40-mile journey to Guangzhou and then take a train or plane to Beijing.

On the flight a cheerful attendant in a baggy uniform poured tea from a large, dented, blackened metal kettle. She would return with your snack—stewed chicken feet, pickled cabbage, or a similar delicacy ... and the souvenirs.



The Liaison Office in Beijing (USLO) was a drab two-story structure about the size of a Denny's restaurant with a comparable staff. It did not look like



Don Hausrath entered the U.S. Information Agency as a Foreign Service librarian in 1971. He retired in 1995 with the rank of Counselor after opening U.S. Information Service libraries in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Russia.



Children of U.S. Liaison Office staff members sing "God Bless America" at the opening of U.S. Embassy Beijing on March 1, 1979.

the outcome of delicate negotiations between key players in the 20th century.

There had been many secret meetings before USLO was born. Henry Kissinger once "disappeared" for a weekend in Pakistan to meet in Beijing with Mao Zedong. Later, in 1972, came what my Tokyo paper called the Nixon Shokku.

Incredible at the time, Nixon and Mao had initialed declarations that the two nations would work together toward "normalization of relations." At a follow-up meeting, Chinese Premier Chou Enlai invented the concept of a "liaison office," which allowed a handful of American and Chinese diplomats to work in each other's capitals long before all the details

of the regular give-and-take between nations could be established.

Thus, two not-quite-embassies opened, both governments sending some of their most talented diplomats. These pioneers were to struggle for six years in a bureaucratic no-parking zone, eyed suspiciously by their host governments, spied on, phones tapped, and travel strictly controlled.

I commuted to USLO for a few years, still forbidden territory to all but a handful of Americans. I was there for a mundane reason. The now-defunct U.S. Information Agency I worked for believed the best way to work with a foreign country was to let its people

learn as much as possible about our government and our culture. I was helping Chinese librarians, long isolated from all things Western, gain access to U.S. information.



A white USLO Toyota van picked me up at the old Beijing airport and dropped me at the Peking Hotel. I did not have a choice. One did not go hotel or apartment hunting; housing needs were handled by the PRC's Diplomatic Services Bureau.

In their own good time, they would send someone to work for you or tell you where you could live. Many USLO officers waited in the Peking Hotel for weeks, or even months, during which a couple with several small children might be crammed into one room.

The Chinese floor attendant kept the key to your room at a desk on each floor. She would open your door, let you in,

and lock the door when you went out. But it wasn't *your* key. The hotel staff could, and often did, walk into your room anytime.

A young hotel employee once walked in on our USLO secretary. She was naked, heading for her bath. She shrieked. He yelled. The manager arrived. Our secretary was furious at this intrusion.

But the manager took the employee's side and chewed out our staffer for embarrassing an innocent young man.



The official limousine was a black-painted, Kalamazoo-made Marathon Checker cab. George Bush, as the first chief of the USLO, lobbied unsuccessfully for a more imposing car, but the State Department allocated perks by the rank of the embassy, and "USLO Peking," as it was referred to in official cables, was at the bottom of the list.

Bush gave up the fight and sent an exasperated cable stating: "Send Checker, remove meter." The pug-faced auto would also serve George Bush's replacement, Ambassador Thomas Gates, a former secretary of defense under Eisenhower. It passed on to Gates' replacement, Leonard Woodcock, a past president of the United Auto Workers, who toiled about the city in his non-union-made car.

The Chinese staff at the Liaison Office all came and went on bicycles. George Bush and wife Barbara took to sporting about the Forbidden City area on their "Flying Pigeon" bikes. Driving through town, you became accustomed to amazing things strapped to the back wheel of a bike: chairs, desks, small sofas, and the occasional grown pig in a custom-made rattan cage bouncing before you.

In the early days of USLO, besides the stampede of bicycles, you dodged

oxen, donkeys, and the occasional three-wheeled truck.



Finally, the big day came. Twelve children bundled in parkas followed their teacher, Evie Sylvester, wife of the political counselor, to the front steps of the Liaison Office, facing a crowd of about 150 people. Sensing the drama of the occasion, there were no smiles, no waves to parents, no giggles.

The iron-barred front of the compound was three deep in blue-coated Chinese, squeezed against the fence, watching the American flag rising up the pole, the first to fly over an official embassy in China since Dec. 24, 1949.

J. Stapleton "Stape" Roy, the chargé at the new embassy, along with a special representative from President Jimmy Carter, Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal, snapped a new flag onto the ropes.

Behind a massive brass lectern—its engraved Boxer rebellion history tactfully taped over—Roy stood before the children's chorus, two of the children his own. "I attended the last Fourth of July party at an American embassy in the People's Republic of China," he recounted. "That was in 1949 in Nanking."

The son of missionaries, Roy was born in Nanking and spoke fluent Chinese like so many at the ceremony. He introduced Secretary Blumenthal, saying, "I particularly asked him to speak in English rather than the Shanghai dialect."

Still, Blumenthal did, indeed, start off in Chinese. His was another homecoming of sorts. Born in 1926 near Berlin, he, along with his family, escaped one step ahead of the Nazis; they ended up as refugees in China for eight years. To help



COURTESY OF DON HAUSRATH

Chargé J. Stapleton Roy helps untangle the old flag at the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing so a new one can rise over the embassy, March 1979.

put food on the table during World War II, teenage Michael worked in a Shanghai chemical factory for \$1 per week.

It was minutes before noon on March 1, 1979. The children stood in a semi-circle and sang: "... for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain." Their small voices and those words touched us all.

It was a new start: The United States and the People's Republic of China had established embassies, an epochal event mostly overlooked today.



Standing in the crowd, I thought how far I was from what the gathering resembled, a sedate church picnic remembered from my Iowa childhood. But church picnics would not have had the leaning

bamboo poles heavy with firecrackers and an armed State Department security officer looking down from the roof.

And, of course, there would have been no foreign correspondents, a half dozen chatting it up with Hong Kong Press Attaché Bill Stubbs. Two People's Liberation Army guards were at our gate in their lumpy winter uniforms: We were still forbidden foreign territory to Beijing's residents.

But guards or no guards, the isolation of China was ending. Mao's focus on class struggle and his periodic campaigns against "spiritual pollution" were over. Chinese child prodigies no longer had to muffle their pianos with blankets, fearful of denunciation for playing a bourgeois instrument.

Within just three months of the ceremony, Bill Stubbs' staff had assisted in enrolling 3,000 postdoctoral and graduate students in scientific and technical specializations in American universities.

The opening of the embassy coincided with China's acknowledgment of the need to rebuild. The Roys would return to Beijing again in 1991, when Stape was named U.S. ambassador to the PRC, to find a cosmopolitan city bursting with construction. USLO was ancient history.

"For the most part," Sandy Roy confided to me later, "USLO was an adventure. It was definitely not Little League and ballet classes, but our family would not have traded our three years there for anything." ■

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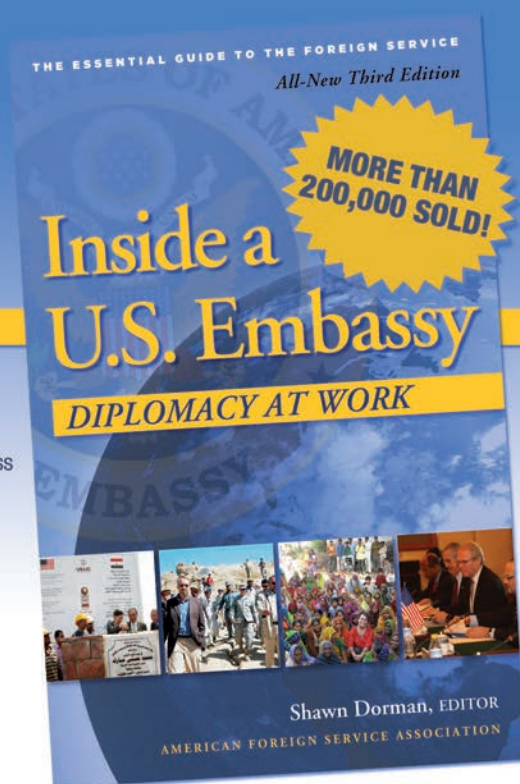
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Alex Noppe is a public diplomacy officer who has served in Istanbul and Dushanbe. He started a new assignment in Islamabad this summer. This photo was taken in 2020 with his iPhone X.

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