THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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FOCUS ON NUCLEAR SECURITY

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THE OFFICIAL RECORD OF AFSA

Thank You for Serving

As one way to let our colleagues who have recently left the Foreign Service know we see you and we thank you—and in the absence of *State Magazine*'s regular publication of lists of retirees—AFSA is now publishing names of colleagues who self-report their departures from the Service (see page 59). Please let us know if you would like to be on the next list by going to https://bit.ly/AFSAdepartures.

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Toward Common Goals

BY JOHN "DINK" DINKELMAN

I find writing these President's Views columns to be a daunting task, mainly out of concern for ensuring that my message hits the intended "feeling." After all, who hasn't heard the saying, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

I have found this adage to be true—especially in the Foreign Service. In our profession, words and actions are plentiful, but the end goal is to engender respect and trust on the part of our interlocutors, giving them reason to see Americans as credible and collaborative.

Unfortunately, this basic concept seems to be losing ground within the Foreign Service itself, where people are working under considerable strain trying to maintain their professionalism while faced with unreasonable demands.

In this edition of the *Journal*, you'll find several columns that get at current feelings inside our Foreign Service community. Unpleasant feelings, even. They offer a serious look at what's gone wrong in our profession over the recent past.

Please take time to read Ambassador Ron Neumann's "Our Professional Foreign Service Is in Danger," Ambassador Eric Rubin's "What's Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?," and AFSA State VP Ro Nepal's "The Erosion of Trust." Then give some thought to how you might be able to contribute to a more collaborative, inclusive discourse.

I am grateful to the FSJ Editorial Board for allowing the *Journal* to be used as a starting point for the discussion of this matter, which threatens to undermine the unity and cohesion of the Foreign Service. This is long overdue. I look forward to seeing where this earnest individual and collective self-examination can lead us.

And I'm glad that the *FSJ* will continue to provide a platform to examine the state of the Foreign Service and discuss the causes of this animosity and ill will that have arisen among and between large elements of the Foreign Service.

More importantly, I hope that through the exploration of what went wrong, we can start a dialogue that will begin to address and remedy what ails us. We need to acknowledge that our professionalism has been subordinated to disparate parochial interests.

Even more importantly, we need to understand how we can avert further division and restore the civility among ourselves that is critical to the successful performance of our duties. We need to renew our focus on diplomacy, to spend our days working for the American people.

Such exploration of what divides us, on the pages of a professional journal, can only go so far. If we truly intend to address these divisions, we need to come together in person, face to face, to find the common ground we seem to have misplaced.

I hope that through the exploration of what went wrong, we can start a dialogue.

I call on leadership to convene the various disparate elements of the Foreign Service community—including employee organizations and professional associations—and to take the lead on this effort while again acknowledging the vital role that diverse groups of well-intended professionals can play in achieving our common goals.

As always, AFSA will be here to support such efforts. And we welcome honest brokers to share their thoughts on the way ahead.

Join the Conversation.

AFSA is seeking input from employee organizations (EO) and requests that those in a position to speak on behalf of their EO please join in this conversation. Tell us what is (or was) the value of your EO, how your group is faring now, and what you see as the future for your organization and its members vis-à-vis the Foreign Service. Send your comments (up to 600 words) to journal@afsa.org.

John "Dink" Dinkelman is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Heartened by the Next Generation

I was thrilled to read in the January-February *FSJ* Noah Rose's Off-Road piece about an excursion into eastern Türkiye. The adventurous instinct, his engagement with regular Turks, and his use of Turkish—it's great to know that the newest generation of Foreign Service officers are doing this.

Stephen G. McFarland
Ambassador, retired
Vienna, Virginia

Encomium for Heroes

I just read Tom Boyatt's quite moving "remembrance" of Bill Harrop in the November-December 2025 *Foreign Service Journal*. His praise for Harrop is fully deserved, and the events he recalls need to be remembered.

Harrop—along with other AFSA heroes like Tex Harris, Charlie Bray, and, yes, even Tom Boyatt himself, although he was too modest to include himself in that pantheon—were the "young Turks" of their generation, the forebears of the modern American Foreign Service Association. They fought through the purchase of AFSA headquarters at 2101 E Street NW so AFSA would not be physically beholden to the whims and vicissitudes of political appointees at the top of the State Department.

Harrop and his colleagues also pushed through labor-management reforms that had been talked about for years but never acted on, and they gave real voice to the Foreign Service's relations with State management.

Boyatt lays out the impact of the reforms for which successive generations of Foreign Service officers have been the beneficiaries. With the changes in labor-management relations the Trump administration is pushing through (many of them being challenged in court), it's clear that many of AFSA's hard-won achievements are under threat. I listened to AFSA President John "Dink" Dinkelman run through them at a recent luncheon of the Foreign Affairs Retirees of Northern Virginia, and Dinkelman ticked off the challenges before us.

But for now, let's remember how we achieved the rights that were won for us by the generation that preceded us.

David Passage
Ambassador, retired
Washington, D.C.

Spreading the Word

On September 24, 2025, I wrote the following letter to the editor that was published in the *Wyoming Tribune Eagle*, a local newspaper in Cheyenne:

Are USAID funding cut decisions humane or efficient? I don't think so.

Three items in the September-October 2025 issue of *The Foreign Service Journal* both disturb and sadden me.

My husband worked for USAID for almost 30 years in Honduras, Panama, Pakistan, the Dominican Republic, and Ukraine. His career promoted humanitarian aid and fostered economic assistance to help countries improve themselves. It made me and my daughters proud to represent the United States at our overseas posts.

Page 12 from the [*Journal*] says, "Critics cite a new Lancet study projecting more than 14 million additional deaths by 2030 due to USAID cuts, including millions of children under the age of 5. In describing this new approach, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the U.S. is 'prioritizing trade over aid, opportunity over dependency, and investment over assistance.'" Is this humane?

Page 13 says, "The Trump administration has ordered the destruction of nearly 500 metric tons of emergency food originally purchased by USAID to feed malnourished children in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The high-energy biscuits, which are valued at $800,000 and capable of feeding 1.5 million children for a week, will be incinerated at a cost of $130,000 to U.S. taxpayers." Is this government efficiency?

Page 61 says the current administration has "pushed 80,000-plus people with AIDS into early graves, caused the deaths of more than 75,000 children due to malnutrition and the cessation of USAID food assistance and wasted more than $8 billion in a misguided, ill-prepared, illegal and unconstitutional shutdown of our beloved agency." Is this humane? Does it show government efficiency?

I often wonder if my letters to the editor affect anyone, but this time I have proof. On September 26, the following letter was published:

Carol Mathia's recent letter identifying the enormous degree of human suffering and deaths caused by this administration's USAID cuts was truly enlightening. She quoted [*The Foreign Service Journal*] and referenced a scientific study that anticipates more than 14 million deaths, including many children, as a result of this lost funding in the next five years!

After quoting Marco Rubio as stating this is "prioritizing trade over aid, opportunity over dependency and investment

over assistance," Carol asks, "Is this humane?"

Put me down as a NO! And I'd ask a question. Is this really what Americans want to be known for? [End quote.]

Carol Mathia
USAID FS family member, retired
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Working Through a (Literal) Storm

I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the former USAID Foreign Service officers and Foreign Service Limited officers who made the U.S. response to Hurricane Melissa a success.

Despite being illegally fired by this administration, you put aside your reservations and willingly assumed your same job with the State Department. Your work since Melissa devastated parts of the Caribbean is proof of the successful humanitarian assistance model that USAID implemented for decades.

Regardless of what Marco Rubio may say, we know that you are the reason this ongoing effort will succeed. USAID may be gone, but your work, your way of doing business, and your commitment live on.

Randy Chester
USAID FSO, RIFed/retired
Incline Village, Nevada

Our Selling Skills

Apropos of nothing or perhaps of everything, I, at age 95, would like to remind my fellow diplomats that our principal duty is to go abroad and do what is necessary to learn, interpret, advocate, and sell the policies of our government as well as to learn, interpret, and sell to our government what other governments and their people are thinking and doing that can help our government form its foreign policy.

When it comes to our serving in Washington, the emphasis is on interpreting and presenting what we have learned to our political masters who essentially control policymaking especially when the governing administration picks and chooses among options we present or others we do not. This is a case of exercising our sales skills at home just as we do with governments abroad. It often takes a special effort to achieve.

The world is constantly changing. But diplomacy remains the same—whether correctly applied or not. So let us concentrate on our selling skills and remember that we are diplomats at home as well as abroad and the sales skills we bring are essentially the same whether at home or abroad.

George Lambrakis
Senior FSO, retired
Brighton and Hove, United Kingdom

Corrections

In the November–December 2025 In Memory, the obituary for Julia Nelson Easley Mak misidentified Jean Doyle. She is the spouse of Emma C. Hersh. Additionally, the Virginia Declaration of Rights was incorrectly referred to as the Virginia Bill of Rights. We regret the errors.

Share your thoughts about this month's issue.

Submit letters to the editor: journal@afsa.org

TALKING POINTS

Ambassador Tracker

AFSA remains vigilant about tracking nominations and confirmations to ambassadorships and other senior positions at the foreign affairs agencies.

With the new Senate tactic of confirming large numbers of nominees en bloc, most of those nominated in 2025 were eventually confirmed. Only 12 ambassador nominees were returned to the president at the end of the year.

Ominously, the administration nominated only six members of the Foreign Service to ambassadorial posts in 2025: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. All but the nominee to Colombo were confirmed.

At the same time, 64 political appointees were nominated for ambassadorships. This 10:1 split is by far the most lopsided AFSA has ever seen and goes squarely against the Foreign Service Act's requirement that "positions as chief of mission should normally be accorded to career members of the Service, though circumstance will warrant appointments from time to time of qualified individuals who are not career members of the Service."

Thirty nominations have been made to senior positions at the Department of State since January 2025. Only three of those have gone to career diplomats: the positions of under secretary for management; assistant secretary for population, refugees, and migration; and coordinator for counterterrorism.

Mass Ambassador Recall Raises Alarm

No accounting of nominations and confirmations under this administration is complete without addressing the mass recall of career ambassadors that took place in the last two weeks of 2025. President Trump's decision to recall ambassadors from more than 30 countries intensified concern on Capitol Hill and within the diplomatic community about the erosion of U.S. diplomatic capacity.

According to reporting by the Associated Press and Reuters, the move leaves more than half of U.S. ambassador posts in sub-Saharan Africa vacant and adds to roughly 80 ambassadorial vacancies that already existed before the recall; once the recall is complete, there will be at least 110 ambassador vacancies around the world.

Those recalled face an uncertain future in the Service. By law, they will have 90 days to find an onward assignment or face involuntary retirement.

AFSA has expressed concern that this unprecedented and unnecessary recall may serve as a backdoor reduction in force of some of the department's most experienced and capable diplomats.

In an appearance on *PBS NewsHour* on December 23, 2025, AFSA President John Dinkelman described the mass recall as "unprecedented" and "not standard practice," disputing administration claims that the action is routine.

He noted that ambassadors had submitted resignation letters at the start of the administration, as is customary, but most of the resignations by career diplomats were declined, also customary, and those envoys remained on the job, only to be abruptly recalled nearly a year later. It is highly unusual, even unprecedented, for so many ambassadors to be removed a year into a new administration.

Dinkelman warned that the move amounts to "taking our star players off the field," weakening U.S. credibility and the ability to advance policy through sustained, on-the-ground engagement.

As of February 10, AFSA had confirmed the recall of 31 ambassadors.

Contemporary Quote

"The multilateral institutions on which the middle powers have relied—the WTO, the UN, the COP—the architecture, the very architecture of collective problem-solving are under threat. And as a result, many countries are drawing the same conclusions: that they must develop greater strategic autonomy in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance and supply chains.

And this impulse is understandable. A country that cannot feed itself, fuel itself, or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself. But let's be clear-eyed about where this leads. A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile, and less sustainable.

And there's another truth: If great powers abandon even the pretense of rules and values for the unhindered pursuit of their power and interests, the gains from transactionalism will become harder to replicate."

—Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, in a speech to the World Economic Forum at Davos, January 20.

Talking Points offers a snapshot of recent developments affecting the Foreign Service. The following items were finalized for publication on February 10, 2026.

Those recalled were serving in Algeria, Egypt, Laos, the Marshall Islands, Montenegro, Nepal, the Philippines, Slovakia, Somalia, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Only three posts had a nominee identified to succeed the recalled chief of mission.

Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee echoed AFSA's concerns in a letter urging Trump to reverse the decision.

Led by Ranking Member Jeanne Shaheen (D–N.H.), the signatories warned that the recall of so many career ambassadors could create a "vacuum in U.S. leadership" that threatens national security and the safety of U.S. citizens and businesses overseas.

The letter cautioned that the absence of ambassadors at more than 100 U.S. embassies could provide openings for adversaries such as China and Russia to expand their influence.

Critics argue that leaving key posts without Senate-confirmed chiefs of mission, alongside ongoing leadership gaps in Washington, risks politicizing a traditionally nonpartisan corps and undermining America's ability to project influence at a time of heightened global competition.

U.S. Withdraws from 66 International Organizations

On January 7, President Donald Trump directed the United States to withdraw from 66 international organizations, expanding on a February 2025 executive order that required a government-wide review of U.S. participation in multilateral institutions. The decision formalizes U.S. withdrawal from 35 non–United Nations (UN) organizations and 31 UN entities, with additional reviews still underway.

The memorandum directs executive departments and agencies to take immediate steps to effectuate withdrawal as soon as possible. For UN entities, withdrawal is defined as ceasing participation or funding to the extent permitted by law.

The list of rejected organizations includes major climate, development, and governance bodies, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, the UN Population Fund, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and the International Renewable Energy Agency, as well as the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the Peacebuilding Commission, and the UN Register of Conventional Arms.

Additionally, on January 22, the U.S. formally withdrew from the World Health Organization (WHO), following a January 21, 2025, executive order signed by President Trump initiating the removal process. This ended nearly 80 years of membership.

In a statement released on January 7, Secretary of State Marco Rubio called

Site of the Month: *Project Resource Optimization*

Project Resource Optimization

Amid sweeping disruptions to U.S. foreign assistance in early 2025, a new platform emerged to prevent lifesaving aid from disappearing overnight. Project Resource Optimization (PRO) was launched in February 2025 to help donors identify and sustain the most cost-effective global health and humanitarian programs placed at risk by abrupt USAID funding cuts.

Founded by former USAID economists Caitlin Tulloch and Rob Rosenbaum, PRO evaluates and analyzes aid programs and connects them with private philanthropy. In less than a year, the initiative has helped mobilize more than $110 million, sustaining nearly 80 projects across 30 countries and reaching more than 40 million people worldwide.

PRO focuses primarily on interventions with immediate, measurable impact, such as childhood immunization, treatment of acute malnutrition, and emergency health services in humanitarian crises. As Tulloch and Rosenbaum explained in an interview with *PBS NewsHour*, many of these programs had already procured vaccines or nutrition supplies when funding was cut, leaving lifesaving assistance stranded in warehouses just as needs were intensifying in places such as Sudan.

PRO draws on expertise from former leadership at USAID's Office of the Chief Economist and Development Innovation Ventures. Its analytical work is hosted by the Center for Global Development, reinforcing the project's emphasis on evidence-based decision-making and accountability.

Learn more about their efforts at https://proimpact.tools.

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

the organizations "redundant in their scope, mismanaged, unnecessary, wasteful, poorly run, captured by the interests of actors advancing their own agendas," or otherwise harmful to U.S. sovereignty and prosperity. He said the administration would end the flow of U.S. taxpayer funding and diplomatic support to institutions deemed inconsistent with U.S. interests.

Rubio added that the administration views the current multilateral system as having evolved into "a sprawling architecture of global governance," often driven by ideological agendas on issues such as climate and gender policy and detached from national interests. He said the United States would continue to pursue cooperation where it advances U.S. priorities but would disengage from institutions it considers irrelevant or counterproductive.

Critics have warned that the withdrawals could reduce U.S. influence in shaping global norms and standards, while administration officials argue the move aligns U.S. diplomacy and resources more closely with national sovereignty, fiscal restraint, and strategic purpose.

U.S. Suspends Immigrant Visas for 75 Countries

The Trump administration has suspended immigrant visa processing for nationals of 75 countries, a directive that began on January 21, 2025. The move is part of a broader administration effort to reduce both legal and illegal immigration pathways.

Under guidance issued by the department, consular officers have been instructed to halt immigrant visa applications while Washington reassesses screening procedures to prevent the admission of individuals deemed likely to become a "public charge."

The policy builds on a November 2025 directive that expanded financial self-sufficiency requirements and directed posts to apply more comprehensive vetting, including assessments of applicants' finances, health, education, skills, family status, and prior use of public benefits.

The suspension affects countries across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, the Balkans, and the Caribbean, specifically Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Somalia, and Nigeria.

Nonimmigrant visas for tourist and business travel are not affected; demand for those is expected to rise ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympics.

Secretary Marco Rubio said the action is aimed at preventing fraud and abuse of public benefits programs and ending what the administration describes as exploitation of the U.S. immigration system. A separate cable to U.S. embassies and consulates also directed officers to more closely scrutinize nonimmigrant visa applicants for potential reliance on public benefits.

Those critical of the directive argue that the pause significantly restricts legal immigration. The State Department has touted on social media that the administration has already revoked more than 100,000 visas since Trump returned to office and expanded social media and background screening.

A lawsuit against State and Secretary Rubio was filed February 2 by a coalition of immigration groups to overturn the order suspending IV approvals from the 75 countries.

Trump National Security Strategy Recasts Europe

On December 4, 2025, President Donald Trump released a new National Security Strategy (NSS) that marks a sharp break with decades of U.S. foreign policy, recentering national security around sovereignty, migration control, and regional preeminence rather than global leadership and alliance management.

The document warns that Europe faces "civilizational erasure" driven by migration and demographic change. It argues that European governments are pursuing unrealistic policies on Ukraine and Russia that do not reflect public opinion.

While reaffirming U.S. support

50 Years Ago

An Opportunity to Close a Tragic Chapter

Several weeks before, I had left Saigon on one of the last helicopters, anguished and angered over the failure of the embassy to extricate the majority of the Vietnamese who worked for us. Now, suddenly, there was an opportunity to participate in the last act of that tragedy, an opportunity to help in the resettlement of over 130,000 Vietnamese who had succeeded in fleeing to the United States. There was, in other words, an opportunity to help end this piece of history on an affirmative note.

—Foreign Service Officer Alan Carter, "The Indo-Chinese Refugee Program—A View from a Camp," in the April 1976 edition of The Foreign Service Journal.

for NATO, the NSS endorses limiting further alliance expansion and calls for "strategic stability" with Russia, diverging from prior bipartisan policy and earlier Trump-era strategies that explicitly identified Russia as a malign actor.

Critics note that the document largely omits references to Russian cyber operations, political interference, or influence campaigns, framing the war in Ukraine primarily as a European concern.

More broadly, the strategy formalizes the administration's "America First" worldview into doctrine. It rejects democracy promotion and the rules-based international order as organizing principles of U.S. policy, stating that the affairs of other countries warrant U.S. involvement only when they directly threaten core national interests.

Border security and demography are elevated to central national security priorities, with the document declaring that "the era of mass migration must end."

At the center of the strategy is what it terms a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 (aka the Donroe Doctrine), which argues that U.S. security depends on restoring U.S. preeminence in the Western Hemisphere. The NSS calls for reorienting military posture toward the region, expanding maritime and border enforcement, and limiting the influence of external powers—particularly China.

This new doctrine was manifested on January 4 when President Trump announced that the United States would place Venezuela under temporary U.S. control following a raid that captured President Nicolás Maduro and brought him to the United States to face drug-trafficking charges.

Trump said Washington would oversee a transition while U.S. oil companies moved to rehabilitate Venezuela's energy sector.

In the Eastern Hemisphere, China is framed primarily as an economic and technological competitor rather than an existential ideological rival. The strategy calls for rebalancing trade and reducing supply-chain dependence while maintaining a "mutually advantageous" economic relationship. It reaffirms long-standing U.S. policy opposing unilateral changes to the status quo regarding Taiwan.

The strategy also deemphasizes the Middle East as a central U.S. priority, casting the region as a place for investment and partnership rather than democracy promotion, and it treats Africa largely as a theater for commercial engagement and competition with China.

While not binding, observers say the document codifies a fundamentally different theory of U.S. engagement that favors sovereignty, spheres of influence, and transactional diplomacy over alliance-centered global leadership.

SIGAR Final Report and Oral History Project

A final report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), published December 3, 2025, finds that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan was a two-decade effort "fraught with waste" that failed to build a stable democracy despite nearly $145 billion in reconstruction spending from 2002 to 2021. The report attributes the outcome to corrupt partners, shifting strategies, and the absence of a clear plan.

Acting Inspector General Gene Aloise said corruption "affected everything," describing Afghanistan's government as a "white-collar criminal enterprise." He noted that SIGAR identified systemic weaknesses, particularly in Afghan security forces, years before the 2021 withdrawal, but key findings were increasingly classified.

While the report does not assess the withdrawal itself, it estimates the United States left behind about $38.6 billion in military equipment and infrastructure. Aloise said SIGAR was not consulted in the Pentagon's current withdrawal review ordered by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Established by Congress in 2008 and closed on January 31, SIGAR says it generated $4.6 billion in cost savings while identifying at least $26 billion in waste, fraud, and abuse: an oversight role Aloise said helped limit far greater losses to U.S. taxpayers.

This January, SIGAR also released video interviews and transcripts from the SIGAR Oral History Project, "Conducting Oversight in a War Zone."

That project consists of interviews with more than 30 SIGAR personnel about their experiences helping SIGAR identify, report, and prevent waste, fraud, and abuse in Afghanistan.

The interviewees include SIGAR criminal investigative agents who pursued fraud cases in Afghanistan, auditors who inspected and evaluated U.S. program and project sites there, as well as research analysts and other subject matter experts who tracked bigger picture issues for SIGAR's "Lessons Learned" reports.

The interviews contain case studies and internal insights from SIGAR's work overseeing reconstruction in Afghanistan and are offered by the organization as a resource for the education and training of future federal government professionals who may engage in related work.

The SIGAR Oral History Project Overview document provides brief highlights from each interview, and details about how to access the full edited interviews and transcripts, today and after SIGAR sunsets and ceases.

The archived version of the SIGAR.mil website is now available online through the University of North Texas CyberCemetery at https://bit.ly/SIGAR-archives.

For the oral histories, go to "News" and then "Spotlights."

State Department Rejects Fact-Checkers

A State Department directive issued on December 4, 2025, instructs consular officers to reject visa applications, particularly H-1B petitions, from individuals whose prior work involved fact-checking, content moderation, or other activities the administration considers censorship of Americans' speech.

The guidance, first reported by Reuters and reviewed by NPR, calls for findings of ineligibility where applicants are deemed "responsible for, or complicit in," restricting protected expression in the United States.

The memo operationalizes a May 2025 policy announced by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and directs officers to closely examine applicants' work histories, including résumés, LinkedIn profiles, and media references, for roles tied to misinformation or disinformation efforts, trust and safety, compliance, or content moderation, fields common in the tech sector.

Civil liberties groups and industry experts criticized the move, arguing it conflates safety work with censorship

and could raise First Amendment concerns. The department said it is defending Americans' free expression from foreign interference and, in a related step, has required H-1B applicants and their dependents to set social media profiles to public for review.

Nuclear Safety Rules Secretly Overhauled

The Trump administration has quietly rewritten a sweeping set of nuclear safety and security directives at the Department of Energy (DOE), sharing the revised rules with reactor developers while keeping them from public view, according to an investigation by NPR.

The changes, made over the fall and winter, cut more than 750 pages from existing requirements governing reactor security, environmental protections, worker safety, and accident investigations, replacing detailed standards with broader, more discretionary guidance.

The overhaul is tied to a DOE pilot program aimed at bringing at least three new designs online by July 4 and reflects the administration's push to fast-track experimental nuclear reactors, particularly small modular reactors.

In a statement responding to NPR's reporting, Union of Concerned Scientists warned that the DOE had taken a "sledgehammer" to core regulatory principles.

Edwin Lyman, the group's director of nuclear power safety, said the changes weaken safeguards developed in response to disasters such as Chernobyl and Fukushima and could extend beyond the pilot program to affect broader nuclear oversight.

While DOE officials defend the revisions as streamlining unnecessary regulation and say the directives will be posted publicly later this year, former leaders of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and outside experts caution that relaxing standards without transparency could erode public trust and increase risks as the administration accelerates nuclear development to meet growing energy demands, including those tied to artificial intelligence data centers.

2025 SOSA Awardees for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad

The U.S. Foreign Service community is celebrating the 2025 recipients of the Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad (SOSA), presented annually by the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW).

Established in 1990 with the encouragement of then–Secretary of State James A. Baker and his wife, Susan, the SOSA Awards recognize exceptional volunteer service by members of the Foreign Service community serving overseas.

Since its inception, the program has honored more than 100 volunteers from over 130 diplomatic missions whose projects demonstrate creativity, leadership, and sustainability—often continuing long after an assignment ends.

Awardees are selected by a panel representing AAFSW, the Global Community Liaison Office (GCLO), and State Department regional bureaus, with full profiles published annually in *Global Link*.

Each regional bureau winner receives a $2,500 cash award and a certificate signed by the Secretary of State.

Read about them at https://bit.ly/2025-SOSA-honorees.

The End of New START

On February 5, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) expired, ending the last legally binding limits on U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces. The treaty capped each side at 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers and allowed on-site inspections and data exchanges that built predictability and reduced worst-case assumptions.

Its lapse marks the end of a decades-long era of bilateral arms control. Without binding caps or verification, both countries are free to expand deployments, raising the risk of a renewed arms competition.

President Trump has called for negotiating a "better" and more modern treaty. Critics have long argued that New START did not cover nonstrategic nuclear weapons or Russia's newer "exotic" delivery systems.

Meanwhile, Russia has indicated it would consider observing New START's numerical limits for one year, if the United States reciprocates.

Beijing remains reluctant to accept formal limits but may be more open to discussions focused on reducing nuclear risks.

Priorities for any new treaty would include bringing back inspections and data exchanges, covering tactical and new types of weapons in future talks, clarifying what is allowed under the nuclear testing pause, and ensuring missile defenses and nuclear forces do not create new instability.

With New START's expiration, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) remains the only legally binding global nuclear restraint. Whether new guardrails can be built will depend on sustained diplomatic engagement. ■

This issue of Talking Points was compiled by Mark Parkhomenko.

Our Professional Foreign Service Is in Danger

BY RONALD E. NEUMANN

The professional, nonpartisan Foreign Service is in danger. America needs the best possible diplomacy to confront the challenges of a fracturing world, dangerous great power competitors, and transnational challenges. It needs diplomats with courage, skill, and experience, but the continued existence of such a corps is in trouble.

The immediate danger comes from the behavior of the Trump administration. The longer-term one stems from the intrusion of the country's partisan rancor into the ranks of the Service.

In the current administration, I have heard both political appointees and some Foreign Service officers (FSOs) say that the Foreign Service is too much a collection of elite-school graduates with left-leaning political and cultural attitudes disdainful of "regular" Americans and reluctant to execute the policies of the Trump administration.

They point to actions such as the leaking of dissent cables in the first Trump administration to show that too many FSOs, contrary to their oath to the Constitution, are neither loyal nor prepared to put full effort into executing the president's policies.

From this they appear to have concluded that a massive effort to reshape the Foreign Service culture and clean out its adherents is required.

> Without a nonpartisan and cohesive staff, the department would lose the skills and courage to contribute to policy or effectively implement decisions.

The cleaning out is evident. In previous administrations, 60 to 70 percent of ambassadorial appointments, on average, went to career diplomats. As of December 2025, the number was well below 50 percent. Only six out of 70 ambassadorial nominations and appointments in 2025 were from the career Foreign Service.

Of 30 other senior appointments in the State Department, just three went to career officers. The week before Christmas, some 30 career ambassadors were "recalled," informed they must depart their posts within a few weeks, signaling a further reduction in the career ranks.

While complaints about the attitudes of some career officers may be true, the policies adopted by the Trump administration to refashion the Foreign Service appear to go well beyond reestablishing nonpartisan norms of loyalty. Instead, the actions undertaken appear designed to politicize diplomacy and abandon the idea of a nonpartisan career Service as established by law.

I use terms like "seem to" and "appear to" because it is difficult to know how various policy pronouncements are actually applied. The administration has no obligation, and apparently no intention, to reveal the details of its actions without a recognized union to push for disclosure.

Efforts to Reshape the Foreign Service

Administration policies that appear to try to reshape the Service include the nontransparent alteration of promotion standards, the recomputation of scores from previous promotion boards to award additional promotions, an altered entrance exam about which little is known and much is rumored, as well as the new core precept and emphasis on "fidelity" of new FSOs without making clear whether this is to their constitutional oath or the values of the Trump administration.

There is a question of whether oral examinations for the Service will be politicized by adding examiners who will ensure that new entrants have the "correct" ideological and social orientation.

Recruitment is another area in which changes seem to echo the administration's long-term social goals. Statements by the administration directed an end to any so-called DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) outreach work. There is a less well-defined endeavor that suggests a belief that the FS is too reflective of social elites and needs more recruitment from the American heartland.

Ronald E. Neumann, the former U.S. ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain, and Afghanistan, is president of the American Academy of Diplomacy. These views are his own and in no way represent Academy positions.

Efforts by diplomats in residence (DIR), Foreign Service officers posted to universities around the U.S., could be redirected if they were not enlisting a sufficiently diversified social base. Instead, the DIR program has been closed.

New outreach seems to be limited to universities with a particular social and (Christian) religious orientation. I've heard stories that certain Christian universities have an advantage in providing preparation for their students to pass the Foreign Service exam, leading to suspicion that either they are receiving special information or even that the new tests have been leaked to them. The rumors are not substantiated and may be false, but without transparency suspicion flourishes.

As dangerous as these developments are, the growing politicization within the ranks poses a greater long-term challenge. The Trump administration has three more years in office. Many of its directives can be changed or reversed by the next administration.

AFSA has a good chance of winning its court battle and returning as the recognized union of the U.S. Foreign Service. In this event, it will have the opportunity to force negotiation of many policies affecting promotion standards, the composition of promotion boards, and other policies that touch on personnel actions.

But this would not necessarily fix the larger problem. If the politicization and divisions so prevalent in American politics become entrenched within the Service, the prospects even under future administrations for a nonpartisan and professional diplomacy are gloomy indeed.

Removals and Appointments

This issue did not begin with the Trump administration. Most new administrations remove senior officers they perceive as being too closely identified with the policies of the previous administration. Yet now, the tendency is growing by leaps and bounds.

The first Trump administration pushed out an unusually high number of senior career officers, including a disproportionate number of officers from underrepresented groups. At that time, I and many other retired FSOs urged Foreign Service members to remain and to loyally carry out the policies of elected leaders.

Yet when the Biden administration came into office, it overlooked several officers who had remained in acting senior positions. Some very capable and experienced retired officers were brought back, but comparatively few officers who had served in senior positions during Trump I were moved up to Senate-confirmed positions.

The current Trump administration has taken this practice of getting rid of serving officers in leadership positions to new heights, rapidly ending promising careers, including the dismissal of numerous senior minority and female officers, many with distinguished records of serving multiple administrations in difficult and sometimes dangerous postings.

Case in Point

Removals and appointments are now leading to growing divisions within the Foreign Service itself. The Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF) is a case in point. The friction surrounding it is an example of the larger problem.

According to its website and official statements, the organization is devoted to overturning policies of DEI and returning to what it calls merit-based principles without any form of discrimination. Its website states that it is "non-partisan and not affiliated with any political party." But many believe that, in practice, its objectives are more radical.

BFF members probably hold diversified viewpoints. Yet when the organization's chair characterizes a removal of career ambassadors never done on this scale by any previous administration as "just the speeding up of the [normal] turnover," he seems to be an administration apologist.

In further stating that the action reflects the corridor reputation of those removed as "opposition to Trump," he is moving from espousing a conservative viewpoint to one that is expressly partisan.

And when the BFF chair asserts that 90 percent of the Foreign Service leans Democrat and must be reshaped to reflect "a country that ideologically breaks 50-50" for Trump, he is calling for a major reshaping of the Foreign Service on a partisan basis.

BFF is open "by invitation only" to those who share its principles. The suspicion aroused by this secretiveness is reinforced by the presence of many fellows appointed as senior bureau officials. There is a perception that being a member of BFF gives preference in bidding, assignments, and access to senior State Department officials.

Franklin Fellows I have talked with say this is exaggerated. They do have access to senior officials but say they are often surprised by personnel decisions. They point out that BFF members are among those forced out of government by the July 2025 State Department reduction in force (RIF).

They argue that the Ben Franklin Fellowship simply gives a voice to conservative views that have been long marginalized in the Foreign Service. Yet they also note the difficulty of speaking

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frankly to an administration that confuses criticism with disloyalty. And the bitterness grows.

An Epidemic of Suspicion

Marco Rubio's State Department would be well served by establishing clear standards and clear processes for senior appointments. The leadership of the Ben Franklin Fellowship could come out of the shadows and argue publicly for practices that would demonstrate that its call for regional recruitment and "merit" is not a cover for limiting the Foreign Service to particular social and political views or returning to the bigotry in assignments and behavior experienced in the past by women and Black officers I know.

Beyond the BFF example, what concerns me is that the changes inside the department are leading to suspicions about any career officers appointed to senior positions in the current administration. Of course, there were very few such nominations in 2025. But I am seeing repeated assertions in emails and chats forwarded to me that such appointments, including those selected for some ambassadorships, are of unqualified individuals appointed only because of loyalty to political views and BFF connections.

Some of this may be true. Suspicions are fueled by the virtual abandonment of selection procedures that, if sometimes opaque, at least maintained a process involving senior career officers as well as political appointees and 360-degree views of candidates for senior-level positions.

The danger is that the door could be opened to regularly purging Service ranks each time there is a change in the party in power, as well as a long-term division into "them" and "us" within the Foreign Service. Highly qualified FSOs at the top of their game would be forced out along with the political appointees.

The damage to the State Department would be institutional. American diplomacy would be deprived of the experience and ability shaped by long service in multiple assignments for differing administrations. Repeated purges of career officers seen as part of the "other" party would weaken American diplomacy.

The existence of nonpartisan diplomacy would be a thing of the past. And without a nonpartisan and cohesive staff, the department would lose the skills and courage to contribute to policy or effectively implement decisions.

The Need for Dialogue

There is an urgent need for dialogue. For years, every FSO I know has told aspiring students that an essential element of diplomacy is listening; diplomats must understand friends *and* opponents to craft ways to advance U.S. national interests. Yet now FSOs, the nation's best diplomats, seem to have lost the ability to talk to one another.

Dedicated colleagues who have all worked in the nation's interest seem unable or unwilling to explore whether mutually claimed principles of merit and equal opportunity can lead to agreement on how to achieve these ends. We are becoming a dysfunctional family.

Whether the division within career ranks can be moderated I do not know. I do believe that officers who advocate going down a very partisan path, whichever side they are on, should reflect on the consequences and risks of the path they are choosing. Certainly, we must continue to push back against the tendencies of this administration to reshape the Foreign Service into political and social loyalists.

At the same time, it would be well to refrain from advance judgment of career officers appointed to senior positions. Let performance determine future judgments and avoid blanket condemnations and future collective purges.

Secretary Rubio and his team have a heavy burden to diminish suspicion and bring real transparency and nonpolitical processes to American diplomacy now riven by fear and suspicion. The leaders of the Ben Franklin Fellowship need to seriously consider the long-term consequences of their current identification that appears from the outside to merge a political with a policy orientation.

And AFSA, should it win its lawsuit, also will need to grapple with how to bind up the wounds inside the Foreign Service.

In his January-February *FSJ* column, AFSA President John Dinkelman wrote of the need to "address the increasingly divisive tone of discourse within the Foreign Service." He noted that the next generation entering the Foreign Service needs "to see a workplace where our geographic origins, race, gender, or even political opinions create a stronger whole."

He is right. There is already a great need for Foreign Service and Civil Service teamwork and energy to rebuild together from the current uncertainty. Our future as a professional diplomatic service that is the envy of the world depends on it. ■

What's Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?

BY ERIC RUBIN

A lot has changed at the State Department and in the Foreign Service since President Donald Trump was inaugurated in January 2025. One of the most significant developments is the rise of the Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF).

The fellowship was founded in 2024 by a group of retired and active-duty Foreign Service officers with the notion that the State Department, and specifically the Foreign Service, had become "woke" and that DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) efforts had led to a decline in meritocracy and the imposition of a liberal-left orthodoxy among career employees, both Civil Service and Foreign Service.

Initial funding sources for the BFF are opaque and unclear. We know that the BFF received a Heritage Foundation Innovation Award in 2025. Whether it has received additional funding from Heritage or from Heritage's billionaire donors is not publicly disclosed.

What is clear is that with the inauguration of President Trump for a second term in January 2025, the BFF moved forward with official sanction to become not only a major player inside and outside State but within a few months to become the *only* employee organization permitted to function at all: The Trump administration banned all other employee organizations and unions from operating at State.

> We must stand up for the vision of our Foreign Service being representative of our country in every respect.

The recall of at least 29 serving career ambassadors right before Christmas, with no public announcements and no explanation, leaves more than 100 U.S. ambassadorships vacant around the world, furthering the perception that it is no longer enough for senior career employees to (as always) avoid partisan politics and carry out the policies established by the president to the best of their ability.

While the administration has refused to acknowledge any kind of political test for career officials, it has added "fidelity" to the Foreign Service promotion precepts and encouraged the perception that only political supporters of the president will receive nominations to high-level positions.

Official Relationships Canceled

The Thursday Luncheon Group was founded in 1973 as a discussion group supporting Black Americans in the Foreign Service and the foreign affairs community. It was followed by more than a dozen other employee organizations, including the Disability Action Group (DAG), Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies (glifaa), Executive Women @ State, Hispanic Employees Council of Foreign Affairs Agencies (HECFAA), and the Christian employee group GRACE (the first faith-based group formed at State in 2018).

All these groups had official recognition and a modicum of support from State. When Trump took office for a second time, the administration pulled recognition for all the employee organizations and banned them from using any State Department facilities. Some have worked to continue their efforts "off-campus," and AFSA offered its headquarters for meetings.

Meanwhile, more than 50 years after their official recognition in bipartisan legislation passed by Congress and signed by President Richard Nixon in

Eric Rubin joined the State Department Foreign Service as a political officer in 1985 and retired in 2023. He served in Honduras, Ukraine, Thailand, Russia, and Washington, D.C., and as U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria from 2016 to 2019. He was president of AFSA from 2019 to 2023. The views expressed here are solely those of the author.

1972, the three officially recognized unions at the State Department also lost recognition.

With the stroke of a presidential pen, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA, for members of the Foreign Service), the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE, for members of the Civil Service), and the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE, for civil servants in the Bureau of Consular Affairs) were stripped of official recognition.

Left standing after the cancellation of more than a half-century of official arrangements and cooperation was the Ben Franklin Fellowship.

A Dramatic Rise

BFF has become the only de facto employee organization of the U.S. Department of State. A year after the president's inauguration, it functions as the equivalent of a Communist Party cell in Soviet government ministries.

Membership is not required to maintain employment, but those with ambition and aspirations for advancement may conclude that joining BFF is the ticket to future opportunities. The public endorsement of BFF membership for active-duty employees by Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau, a BFF member, has sent a very clear signal.

This was on display during the official 2025 State Department awards ceremony in May. DACOR was disinvited from presenting their annual Foreign Service Cup at the ceremony, a long-standing tradition.

Deputy Secretary Landau chaired the ceremony, where he proudly declared himself a member of BFF. He further urged active-duty employees to join BFF before introducing Philip Linderman, recipient of the department's highest award, the Director General's Foreign Service Cup. Linderman, a retired FSO, is a co-founder of BFF and its current chair.

In his speech, Linderman denounced the impact of DEIA policies on the composition of the Foreign Service and urged both active-duty employees and retirees to join the BFF. This has been accompanied by a series of highly partisan columns posted on the group's website, some by active-duty members of the Foreign Service and Civil Service.

Since then, State has hosted several joint activities with BFF, including recruitment events, significant in light of the fact that in 2025, State shut down the entire Diplomats in Residence program as well as the entire recruitment office in the Bureau of Personnel and Training at State.

Troubling Realities

There are many troubling and problematic aspects of BFF's rise to prominence at State and in the Foreign Service.

Political exclusivity. As noted previously, all employee organizations and unions lost recognition and were banned from State Department facilities. Only the BFF has been allowed to use department facilities for meetings and events. The Deputy Secretary of State and many other senior officials are proud members.

The message could not be more clear: If you want to survive and thrive at State, you should join the BFF and conform your personal politics to its partisan agenda, which tracks loosely with the Trump administration's agenda. This is historically unprecedented and represents a serious surge in politicization of the workplace.

Leadership complicity. I don't see how the Deputy Secretary and other senior officials can join BFF and then say that membership is voluntary and will

have no impact on career prospects and advancement. That is clearly not the case.

Politicization. Several senior active-duty officers who are members of BFF have published op-eds or columns praising and supporting President Trump's domestic political agenda on issues such as immigration enforcement. This is unprecedented. Examples include a currently serving career U.S. ambassador publishing an article denouncing DEIA and a currently serving career official publishing articles under a pseudonym calling for mass deportations and increased travel restrictions on certain countries.

Career federal employees have traditionally avoided involvement with domestic political issues, not just because of the Hatch Act but also because the Foreign Service has traditionally avoided domestic politics, which could complicate the obligation of career employees to work for every administration, which they take an oath to do.

Antimeritocracy. The BFF claims that "meritocracy" was harmed by DEIA efforts before January 2025. But in the new model, merit is overshadowed by political allegiance to the president and association with the BFF and its ideology. Our history going back to the 19th century reminds us that politicization is usually the enemy of merit and capability.

De-diversification. BFF members claim that they support a pure vision of meritocracy and represent everyone who shares it. But BFF membership is overwhelmingly white and male. It is not unreasonable for critics to say that the BFF's focus on "meritocracy" is really about returning white men to exclusive leadership roles.

Rejection of one's own institution. BFF members tend to be publicly dismissive of the U.S. Foreign Service and its legacy. To be sure, there is plenty of room for criticism of the status quo, and many of us have shared it.

But the overall tone and viewpoints of members of the BFF are rife with hostility toward the Foreign Service and its members. Turning one's back on the institution and the colleagues one has served alongside is neither constructive nor attractive.

Recruitment bias. This administration is unilaterally revamping the Foreign Service entrance process, without transparency on the process and without consulting with AFSA. State is requiring all candidates who had successfully passed all exams and were on the register before the change in the Foreign Service Officer Test (FSOT) to retake the new exam as amended. Candidates who have had the rules changed retroactively after successfully completing the application process will in many cases abandon their career aspirations with great disappointment and dismay. New applicants may well believe that there is a political component to applying to join the Foreign Service (whether or not there actually is).

Blurred lines. The long-standing tradition that career employees do not engage in partisan politics or endorse controversial political positions outside their work responsibilities was not only a response to the Hatch Act and its prohibitions.

It has long been understood that for career federal employees to maintain a long-term professional career, which provides our country with experience, knowledge, and demonstrated ability, it was essential that those employees avoid getting entangled in partisan politics.

The active-duty members of BFF have chosen to align themselves with the politics of this president and administration. When the administration changes, they are going to find themselves in a very awkward and disadvantaged position.

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What Now?

BFF and its current role in the State Department and Foreign Service is a reality, unlikely to go away before the end of this administration. That said, it is important for all of us to stand up and defend the nonpartisan, apolitical tradition of the U.S. Foreign Service, now 102 years old in its current form.

We must reject the notion that senior officials, from the Deputy Secretary of State on down, can urge career employees to associate themselves with one side of the political divide in our country in order to advance their careers.

We must stand up for the principles of diversity and inclusion, even while recognizing that some previous efforts went off track and provoked a backlash. In that regard, we must stand up for the vision of our Foreign Service being representative of our country in every respect.

And we must reject the notion that meritocracy somehow means restoring white men to their position of privilege and domination.

We also must do what we can to remind new members of the Foreign Service of the importance of staying out of politics and serving the administration in office without fear or favor. Let's have confidence in our integrity, our traditions, and our people. ■

FOCUS NUCLEAR SECURITY

THE NUCLEAR SECURITY SUMMITS

Keeping the World Safe from Nuclear Terrorism

A key player in the Nuclear Security Summits (2010–2016) explains what diplomats achieved then—and what more needs to be done to keep bad actors from accessing nuclear materials.

BY LAURA HOLGATE

Laura S.H. Holgate was a two-time U.S. ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations International Organizations in Vienna and to the International Atomic Energy Agency. As special assistant to the president for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) terrorism from 2009 to 2016, she led the preparation and execution of the four Nuclear Security Summits.

My path to leading the Nuclear Security Summits between 2010 and 2016 began in my undergraduate days, when I wrote a thesis on terrorism and marched against the 1980s nuclear arms race. It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union—and the sudden risk that thousands of nuclear weapons and hundreds of tons of their key ingredients, uranium and plutonium, could be stolen or diverted by rogue generals or nonstate actors—that these two interests converged into the very real threat of nuclear terrorism. I worked at the center of U.S. efforts to reduce these threats through direct cooperation with the nations that emerged from that collapse, initially at the Department of Defense and later at the Department of Energy and a nongovernmental organization, Nuclear Threat Initiative.

A combination of bureaucratic creativity, skillful diplomacy, and patriotic Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakhstani, and Belarusian individuals, who suddenly held the keys to the largest proliferation event in history, prevented the worst fears from becoming reality. A decade later, al-Qaida's attacks on 9/11 showed how vulnerable the world was to apocalyptic ideologues with extensive resources and disciplined operations. Another decade later, Anders Behring Breivik—the far-right terrorist responsible for the 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utoya Island in Norway—drew attention to his manifesto containing highly detailed descrip-

COURTESY OF LAURA HOLGATE

Laura Holgate (center right) with members of her "sherpa team" at the final National Security Summit, in Washington, D.C., in March 2016.

tions of how to carry out a nuclear attack. This screed, along with the dystopian novel *The Turner Diaries*, continues to inspire violent attacks around the globe.

Theft of actual weapons from the nine countries that currently have them would be extremely difficult, but hundreds of tons of uranium and plutonium exist in 22 countries, whether in weapons programs or as part of civilian nuclear energy fuel cycles or research facilities. These materials are often transported by land and water to and through other countries. Were terrorists to steal or divert even modest quantities of uranium or plutonium, they could fashion it into one or more improvised nuclear devices that could be delivered by truck or small boat into cities or critical infrastructure locations and detonated.

In today's interconnected world, even a single nuclear weapon could have devastating consequences, not only from initial blast and radiation effects that could kill hundreds of millions of people and decimate infrastructure, but also the political and economic consequences that would circle the globe along with the physical fallout. No matter where the attack took place, the global impacts would fall hardest on regions least capable of managing them.

The truth is inescapable: Terrorists are seeking the combination of public shock and physical devastation that even a crude nuclear weapon can provide, and no country can stop them alone.

Keeping America safe means working through multilateral bodies and with partners around the world to raise standards and improve implementation for securing nuclear materials.

The Summit Initiative

The United States has been a leader in the international response to these threats. The U.S. Departments of State, Defense, Energy, and Commerce have put in place domestic laws and export controls, delivered bilateral assistance, and supported multilateral treaties and institutions to build our own and other nations' capacities to prevent nuclear terrorism.

The Nuclear Security Summits, an initiative that I led from 2010 to 2016, is a good example of these efforts. The summit idea reflected President Barack Obama's intent to use and strengthen multilateral institutions to achieve U.S. policy goals. When I arrived at the National Security Council as senior director for WMD Terrorism and Threat Reduction in August 2009, I was handed a thin file labeled "NSS" and the responsibility to design this initiative. Working with a few talented experts from the relevant agencies, our group set as its first goal defining the objectives and participants in the summit: What outcomes would make it worthwhile to convene presidents, prime ministers, and kings?

We identified some 50 countries, from every continent and with a wide range of experiences with nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, and nuclear materials. While these countries hold more than 98 percent of the world's total weapons-usable highly enriched uranium and plutonium, participants were far from like-minded. President Obama wanted a group small enough and with enough at stake to have a meaningful discussion, which meant holding the summit outside existing multilateral structures.

COURTESY OF LAURA HOLGATE

The author (center) introduces her friend and sherpa team colleague Corey Hinderstein to President Barack Obama at the National Security Summit in Washington, D.C., in March 2016.

This ad hoc approach also allowed us to custom design a process that would avoid some of the negotiating pitfalls of traditional United Nations–based procedures.

The focus on convening leaders was driven by the recognition that the prescription for improving nuclear security was well understood, but what was lacking was the political will to take hard and often expensive decisions to do it. All leaders understood the need for international cooperation to combat the nuclear terrorism threat—when nuclear weapons material is only as secure as the weakest link, all countries must work together to prevent its theft, detect its illicit transfer, and make sure it is never used in a terrorist weapon.

We also recognized that even if these concerns were not top of mind for every attending leader, President Obama's "star power" would attract their participation and help extract meaningful commitments to increase security at nuclear facilities, reduce quantities of risky materials, build up detection capacity, increase cooperation with allies and neighbors, and take other concrete steps. These pledges became known as "house gifts," and in many cases, they were the outcome of extensive demarches from U.S. embassies and direct outreach by senior officials to their counterparts to offer technical assistance or simply political encouragement. These diplomatic touch points were evidence of the high priority placed by the U.S. government on achieving real progress on nuclear security.

Once the summit guest list was final, we began briefing D.C.-based embassies and attending relevant meetings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the G8 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction to explain our approach. Many diplomats feared the summit would distract from or compete with the existing multilateral infrastructure involved in preventing nuclear terrorism.

But the summit was explicitly designed to enhance, energize, elevate, and empower this complex network of institutions and processes to take meaningful steps to improve security of weapons-usable nuclear materials. This approach demonstrated pragmatism in assembling capable and willing partners to achieve specific outcomes, but also a broader commitment to institution-building, by connecting the can-do spirit of those coalitions to increasing the capacity and stature of associated international organizations.

Preparations for the summit were led by "sherpas" and "sous-sherpas"—terms borrowed from Group of Seven and Group of 20 summit processes that refer to senior officials who could speak authoritatively about their leader's intent and concerns and who could effectively coordinate inside their government to deliver on leaders' promises. Many of the sherpa meetings were absorbed with the mechanics of the summit itself: who would speak when, delegation size, seating arrangements. As the U.S. sous-sherpa, I led meetings with my counterparts that focused on the substance of a consensus communique, on identifying national pledges, and on topical briefings to create a common set of understandings about the threat of nuclear terrorism and the tools necessary to manage it.

The initial Nuclear Security Summit, held in Washington, D.C., in 2010, was followed by summits in Seoul (2012) and The Hague (2014). A decade ago, the U.S. hosted the final summit in this format.

Securing Nuclear Materials

The key to preventing nuclear terrorism is to keep the nuclear materials out of the hands of those who could use them for deadly harm. Securing nuclear materials includes a wide range of activities, from shrinking overall quantities to reducing locations where they are stored or used and increasing physical protection around these materials and facilities. It also involves monitoring staff for

insider threats, detecting and recovering stolen materials, determining the origin of intercepted nuclear materials or devices, and prosecuting those involved in nuclear theft or use.

At the heart of the summits' purpose was the strengthening of the structures that guide and support states in implementing their sovereign responsibility to secure their nuclear weapons, materials, and facilities against theft, diversion, or, worst of all, use. These structures include the United Nations (UN), the IAEA, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), and several treaties and initiatives involving government officials, nuclear industry, and civil society. Summit communiques and national commitments emphasized the strengthening of these components of the global nuclear security architecture. For example:

• The summits contributed to the 10-year extension, in 2011, of the only global, binding requirement that states secure their nuclear material: UN Security Council Resolution 1540, originally adopted in 2004.

• The UN, which also serves as depository for the International Convention on Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terror,

Hundreds of tons of uranium and plutonium exist in 22 countries, whether in weapons programs or as part of civilian nuclear energy fuel cycles or research facilities.

found that the convention's adherents more than tripled during the period of the Nuclear Security Summits, significantly strengthening the criminalization of nuclear theft, trafficking, and sabotage.

• IAEA, which has a central role among multilateral institutions on nuclear security, saw its nuclear security office elevated in status and its funding consistently increased based on summit pledges.

• In 2011, IAEA published its first update of nuclear security guidelines since 9/11 and is currently conducting a second update. More and more countries requested peer reviews of their

nuclear security procedures and practices through IAEA.

• IAEA held its first minister-level meeting on nuclear security in 2013, after the first two summits, and since 2016, it convenes once every four years.

• IAEA is also the depository for the Convention on Physical Protection. As a result of the visibility provided by the summits, ratifications of a 2005 amendment significantly broadening the application of this treaty quadrupled after 2009, allowing the amendment to enter into force in May 2016.

• INTERPOL also has responsibilities and activities on nuclear security, including training in forensics at nuclear crime scenes and posting international notices regarding nuclear smugglers. Their profile in the nuclear security arena was significantly lifted by the summits.

COURTESY OF LAURA HOLGATE

The author briefs Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz at the National Security Summit in Washington, D.C., in March 2016. Also pictured: Secretary of State John Kerry and National Security Advisor Susan Rice.

At the final summit, in 2016 in Washington, D.C., leaders agreed to a set of action plans that specified how they will work together, as member states of these institutions, to further strengthen their nuclear security efforts. This upgrade of the multilateral institutions was a major legacy of the summit process. By recruiting capable partners to take swift action, the summit process avoided the paralysis that can often afflict international organizations, but by explicitly engaging the international organizations in the solution set, and by executing necessary actions through and with them, the United States strengthened the legitimacy of its actions. The summit process applied the energy of the coalitions to increase voluntary contributions, on top of regular dues and assessments, to support these international organizations in playing their critical roles.

Challenges Ahead

Ten years after the last Nuclear Security Summit, the nuclear terrorism risk persists and evolves. With the summits and other programs, we have made enormous progress across the nuclear security agenda, but nuclear material holdings are still increasing, terrorism is on the rise, and national leaders have not given these efforts the political attention and resources they deserve.

Many of the 935 national commitments and institutional achievements made during the summits were irreversible and continue to contribute to reducing current threats, but global attention to nuclear terrorism has undeniably waned.

What outcomes would make it worthwhile to convene presidents, prime ministers, and kings?

Hopes that diplomats on the ground in forums like IAEA would reflect the consensus of their leaders have not borne out, and broader geopolitical trends have made multilateral progress even more difficult to achieve. Diplomatic efforts to use the IAEA nuclear security ministerials to continue the summits' "culture of deliverables" have foundered, and in 2024 delegations were unable to find consensus on a final statement.

The North–South divide on nuclear threat perception, which may have closed slightly during the summits, has since widened again. As long as the nonaligned states believe that nuclear security is a favor they do for the West, or that nuclear disarmament will eliminate the nuclear terrorism threat, nuclear security will be stuck in bloc politics. Active voices and organizations in civil society may be important advocates for the global nature of the threat, showing the need for global action.

In the context of rising interest in nuclear energy, the next great challenge of nuclear security is to embed it into the thought process and behavior of those national and private entities with nuclear security responsibilities. This includes incentivizing good security practices with benefits that are attractive to designers, builders, and operators of all types of nuclear facilities. As long as nuclear security remains an unpredictable externality to be resisted, it will be fragile. All nuclear actors have a stake in preventing nuclear terrorism. ■

FOCUS NUCLEAR SECURITY

NEGOTIATING NUCLEAR SECURITY

A View from the First Trump Administration

The role of diplomacy in setting the terms for America's civil nuclear trade with other countries usually gets scant attention. Here's why it's important.

BY CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

With the United States and Saudi Arabia having recently announced their agreement on a new framework for civil nuclear energy cooperation, we have a reminder of the importance of an aspect of diplomatic engagement that usually fails to get much attention: the role of diplomacy in setting the terms for America's civil nuclear trade with other countries.

This kind of diplomacy is especially important because Congress long ago made clear that Americans couldn't provide any nuclear technology to anybody just because there was a buck to be made—and that, despite the many benefits and advantages of such cooperation, the potential risks associated with nuclear technology were such that this trade had to be held to high policy standards of nonproliferation probity.

Specifically, under Section 123 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, no cooperation in nuclear energy development can be undertaken with another country unless we have in place an agreement with that country requiring that specified safeguards—including International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards—be maintained on all nuclear materials and equipment transferred, and that no such assistance will be used to develop nuclear weaponry.

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The 123 Agreements

Known as "123 Agreements," these pacts are negotiated by the State Department, with concurrence from the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), and submitted to Congress for review, after which they come into force if Congress doesn't act to disapprove them. We presently have 26 of these agreements in place with 50 countries.

Insisting on high nonproliferation standards is most critical, of course, when dealing with countries that don't already have nuclear weapons, and U.S. administrations have historically tried to negotiate protections that are as stringent as possible. Exactly what standards are possible to agree on beyond the statutory minimum set by the Atomic Energy Act will naturally vary with the circumstances.

The provisions set forth in the 123 Agreement reached with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2009, for instance, included the UAE's acceptance of state-of-the-art IAEA inspection authorities under the IAEA Additional Protocol as well as its promise not to develop uranium enrichment or plutonium processing technology. Such terms have become known as the "Gold Standard" for 123 Agreements, because under them, the partner country doesn't just accept the most effective sort of IAEA inspections to help prevent illicit nuclear weapons work but also flatly forswears developing or acquiring fissile material production capabilities that could in the future be diverted to the production of material for such weapons.

But it's not always possible to secure such promises. When I ran the State Department bureau that negotiates these agreements, the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, we tried repeatedly to get "Gold Standard" provisions into a U.S.-Saudi 123 Agreement, but the Saudis refused to accept the Additional Protocol and to forswear producing their own fissile material. Press coverage of the recent U.S.-Saudi deal, the Joint Declaration on the Completion of Negotiations on Civil Nuclear Cooperation, nowhere mentions either of these issues, so one can probably assume that the second Trump administration decided not to insist on such provisions.

Indeed, the focus of the recent deal, establishing what the White House describes as a "decades-long, multibillion-dollar nuclear energy partnership with the Kingdom," suggests that, if anything, the new agreement may encourage Saudi development of fissile material production. In its analysis of the new agreement, for example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies notes that Saudi Arabia's "uranium reserves uniquely position the kingdom to develop the nuclear fuel cycle, supporting its domestic energy strategy while opening the door to potential exports to the United States" to reduce our worrying dependence on Russia for nuclear fuel.

Managing Trade-Offs

Managing the trade-offs inherent in negotiating such agreements is always challenging. While it's obviously better from a nonproliferation perspective to get "Gold Standard" provisions, America's competitors in the market for civil-nuclear technology are less scrupulous about making such demands, which undercuts U.S. negotiating leverage. Nevertheless, even the baseline nonproliferation protections of the statutory minimum standards for 123 Agreements are still better than having no standards (and no 123 Agreement) in place at all—and it's also the case that nonproliferation is not the only value that U.S. negotiators may legitimately pursue.

In addition to the incentives to promote commerce that represent the "usual" values that must be balanced in such negotiations vis-à-vis nonproliferation, for instance, the recently announced U.S.-Saudi deal focuses on improving American energy and supply chain security. Those are hardly trivial concerns either, underlining the importance of 123 Agreements as instruments of statecraft and loci for complex arbitrage between competing policy objectives that are all important.

Nor does the diplomatic challenge lie only in negotiating with non-nuclear-weapon states. We also have 123 Agreements with some nuclear weapon possessors, the details of which are very important. While preventing new nuclear weapons development clearly isn't an issue with such partners, it still matters what they do with the civil-nuclear technology the United States provides them. And, as I discovered when last in office at the State Department, it is sometimes necessary to change course in our technology diplomacy as problems arise.

The Obama administration reached a new agreement with China in 2015, for example, that became a problem because it turned out that China was illicitly repurposing Western nuclear software design codes to support the People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval nuclear propulsion program. (U.S. nuclear reactor technology should absolutely not be used to help the PLA build ballistic missile submarines and aircraft carriers!)

Even before the Obama administration decided to share more civil-nuclear technology with China, in fact, hackers from the PLA had stolen technical and design information on U.S. nuclear reactor designs from the Westinghouse Electric Corporation and were thereafter indicted by the Obama administration in 2014. For some reason, this was not considered an obstacle to the new 123 Agreement negotiated in 2015.

When he submitted the agreement to Congress, President Barack Obama declared that it would "promote, and will not constitute an unreasonable risk to, the common defense and security." Indeed, U.S. officials—rather ironically, it would transpire—argued that the deal would "enhance our ability to manage and mitigate the risk of China diverting sensitive nuclear technology to its military programs or re-exporting it without U.S. permission." Commercial pressures, however, seem to have driven the decision. Industry trade representatives at the Nuclear Energy Institute believed that it would "clear the way for U.S. companies to sell dozens of nuclear reactors to China, the biggest nuclear power market in the world," as reported on May 10, 2015, in *The Washington Post*.

A Strategic Pivot

In reaction to Beijing's abuse of the Sino-American civil-nuclear cooperation relationship, however, the first Trump administration revised U.S. export rules for sending such technology to China in October 2018, imposing much more stringent conditions and establishing a "presumption of denial" for many transfers with which the Obama administration had previously been comfortable.

This was the opening salvo in the first Trump administration's decision to pivot the United States into a technology-denial competitive strategy with China, which picked up pace rapidly thereafter when we put the semiconductor company Huawei on the Commerce Department's "Entity List" as part of this technology strategy.

No matter with whom they're negotiated, 123 Agreements are key elements in any U.S. administration's national security strategy, and their negotiation is a critical function. As the China example shows, thoughtful statecraft is sometimes also needed in knowing when to back off from enthusiastic civil-nuclear cooperation efforts. This "123 diplomacy," therefore, can be a pretty big deal.

Beginning in the first Trump administration, we also developed an additional instrument of diplomatic statecraft in the civil-nuclear technology arena: Nuclear Cooperation Memoranda of Understanding (NCMOUs). These are not formal, legally binding instruments like 123 Agreements; and they aren't, in themselves, legally sufficient under the Atomic Energy Act to launch full-scale cooperation on something like a nuclear reactor project. Nevertheless, they can be valuable in helping partner countries get to the point at which they are ready for the kind of deep cooperation that a full, formal 123 Agreement can set in motion.

As I pointed out at the State Department when we first rolled out this concept, NCMOUs allow "a country weighing the possible development of a nuclear power program [to] use a less formal instrument to build strategic ties with the United States, its experts, industry, and cutting-edge researchers about how best to tailor future opportunities to its specific needs." These memoranda can "help states build their own infrastructure for the responsible use of nuclear energy and technology and adopt best practices in nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation, including independent regulatory oversight."

No matter with whom they're negotiated, 123 Agreements are key elements in any U.S. administration's national security strategy, and their negotiation is a critical function.

NCMOUs can thus contribute to establishing "the basis for a broader, strategic relationship between the United States and those countries considering civil nuclear energy," thereby "laying the foundation for making [these] partner countries fully prepared to take advantage of the emerging technologies and coming innovations in reactor design and other areas that are being pioneered in the United States, and to do so under the highest standards of safety, security, and nonproliferation."

So far, the United States has signed NCMOUs with at least 12 countries.

Vital Work

There are multiple facets to U.S. nuclear technology diplomacy, and it remains an important instrument of American statecraft. Our diplomats should be proud of the roles they play in this endeavor.

Despite the lamentable recent turn in American political life against professional expertise—and the degree to which our current leaders distrust those who have skill sets and experience one develops only "in the trenches" of real-world engagement on technically complex and multifaceted challenges in public service—it's worth remembering that U.S. national security still depends heavily on the talented civil servants and Foreign Service officers who shoulder the burdens of diplomatic engagement in our country's interest.

Nuclear security diplomacy is only one example of this, but it's a good one. ■

FOCUS NUCLEAR SECURITY

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S.-China Nuclear Diplomacy

The story of U.S.-China nuclear engagement illustrates how steady science and technology diplomacy benefit both countries as well as global security.

BY YANLIANG PAN

The United States is locked in a nuclear energy race against Russia and China—a race to control advanced nuclear technologies, markets, and supply chains; assert energy dominance in the era of revolutionizing artificial intelligence; and maintain global nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation norms. Or so goes the prevailing narrative.

It is true that the United States urgently needs to make its nuclear industry more competitive than it is today. Russia is dominating global civil nuclear exports. China is set to overtake the U.S. in nuclear energy capacity by 2030. For all the talk in America about advanced and small modular reactors, China is ahead in actually building them. In short, the competition is real. It is by no means, however, the whole story.

For nearly half a century following President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit, the United States and China cooperated, rather than competed, in nuclear technology and science—from fundamental nuclear and high-energy physics to fission and fusion.

The United States helped lay the foundation of China's nuclear safety, security, and nonproliferation governance. To this day, U.S. technology permeates China's conventional and advanced reactors—technology China acquired not through theft but through formal collaboration with U.S. companies and national laboratories under the Department of Energy (DOE).

What's more, there was a time when China's nuclear weapon establishment welcomed U.S. access to its most sensitive facilities for security, nonproliferation, and arms control collaboration.

Barring short episodes of friction, the story of U.S.-China nuclear engagement is one that illustrates how steady science and technology diplomacy could benefit both countries as well as global security.

Early Cooperation

The story began in November 1972, when the director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC), Wolfgang Panofsky, received a Chinese scientist by the name of Zhang Wenyu, the director of Beijing's Institute of Atomic Energy. The institute had contributed critical research, components, and fissile material feedstock to China's nuclear weapon program in the 1950s and

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An aerial view of operating Westinghouse AP1000 units and CAP1000 units (the Chinese version of Westinghouse's AP1000) under construction at the Haiyang Nuclear Power Plant in the Shandong province of China, 2024.

1960s. Zhang, however, was pursuing a different mission as he visited SLAC.

President Nixon's February 1972 visit to China had opened the door to bilateral scientific exchanges. In September 1972, Zhang received a directive from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to set up China's national scientific program in high-energy physics. His visit to the United States just two months later was aimed at establishing scientific exchanges critical to China's nascent high-energy physics endeavor.

From 1973 onward, Chinese scientists regularly visited U.S. national laboratories and leveraged U.S. help in conducting basic scientific research while designing the large particle accelerator that would jump-start China's experimental high-energy physics program. Panofsky provided critical input and was invited to join Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping at the accelerator's groundbreaking ceremony in Beijing. He would later become an important U.S. participant in Track 1.5 and Track 2 nuclear diplomacy with China.

U.S.-China Exchanges

In 1979 informal U.S.-China scientific exchanges culminated in the Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology—the first major agreement between the two governments following the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. Through successive implementing accords, cooperation under the agreement expanded from high-energy physics to magnetic fusion, and from nuclear physics to safety, security, nonproliferation, and energy sciences.

Exchanges, while civilian-focused, spawned relationships between the two countries' senior nuclear weapon scientists. Los Alamos National Laboratory Director Harold Agnew recalls meeting the deputy head of China's nuclear weapon program in 1979, when the latter visited the United States with a Chinese Nuclear Society delegation.

A separate delegation that visited Los Alamos the previous year included a Chinese nuclear physicist by the name of Yang Fujia, who later arranged for scientists and intelligence staff from the U.S. weapons lab and DOE to visit nearly all of China's nuclear weapon facilities, from research reactors deep in the mountains of Sichuan to the northwestern Lop Nur test site. The information they gathered about the geology and depth of the Chinese testing tunnels would later allow the United States to more precisely estimate the yields of China's nuclear weapons.

In return, the Americans offered their knowledge in fissile material accounting and control, as well as arms control monitoring and verification. The 1990s lab-to-lab exchange program spearheaded by then–Los Alamos director Siegfried Hecker aimed to help keep Chinese weapons secure while reinforcing the country's integration into the international nonproliferation and disarmament system.

China had been intensely skeptical of this system prior to U.S. engagement. Celebrating its first atomic bomb test in 1964, Beijing dismissed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty ratified by the United States, United Kingdom, and USSR the previous year as "a big fraud to fool the people of the world" and "consolidate [their] nuclear monopoly." Defying nonproliferation restrictions, China made nuclear transfers to countries outside the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards regime.

This continued until the United States convinced China, via diplomatic engagement, to embrace nonproliferation and

For all the talk in America about advanced and small modular reactors, China is ahead in actually building them.

export controls. In 1981 the United States began helping China build up its civilian nuclear safety regulatory capacity nearly from scratch. At the same time, diplomats began negotiating a bilateral agreement on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Paving the Way for Business

To satisfy U.S. conditions on a peaceful use agreement and on civil nuclear commerce, senior Chinese leaders committed their country to nonproliferation in principle. In 1984 China became a member of the IAEA. That same year, the DOE, with State Department support, began extending assistance to China in nuclear security and nonproliferation safeguards.

By the late 1980s, Chinese safety and security specialists were spending months, if not years, on training and research assignments at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and national laboratories. When they returned and took up senior posts in China's civil nuclear establishment, they brought back and implemented U.S. nuclear safety, security, and safeguards practices. It was with U.S. inducement and assistance that China implemented voluntary safeguards arrangements with the IAEA, acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), ceased its unsafeguarded nuclear transfers, and became a member of multilateral export control regimes.

In 1996, when information surfaced about China National Nuclear Corporation's unauthorized sale of ring magnets to Pakistan, Washington insisted that Beijing implement more robust export controls on nuclear and dual-use items as a precondition for allowing U.S. companies to engage in civil nuclear commerce with China. In the years that followed, U.S. experts advised China on its nuclear and dual-use export control regulations and offered enforcement training.

Nonproliferation diplomacy opened the door to civil nuclear commerce. In the decades following the 1979 Three Mile Island accident, U.S. civil nuclear construction all but ground to a halt amid market and regulatory challenges. As legal barriers to civil nuclear commerce with China were lifted, U.S.-based Westinghouse rushed to secure Chinese orders for its first-of-a-kind AP1000 reactor, which it had not had success marketing elsewhere.

In 2006 the U.S. government endorsed the reactor sale and technology transfer deal, thus making China the first country to construct the AP1000. Lessons learned from Chinese licensing and construction of the AP1000 informed the U.S. project at the Alvin W. Vogtle Electric Generating Plant in Burke County, Georgia. The two units that were completed there in 2024, 15 years after their construction was approved and with tens of billions of dollars in cost overruns, remain the only AP1000 units to operate outside China. Today, China operates more units of the U.S. AP1000 than any other country in the world—including the United States.

There has also been cooperation in advanced reactors. After the resolution of lingering export control issues in the early 2000s, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology became the first U.S. entity to receive DOE authorization to collaborate with China over nuclear technology—specifically, the technology of high-temperature gas-cooled reactors.

When the George W. Bush administration announced its Global Nuclear Energy Partnership in 2006, China became one of the most eager participants. Its Institute of Atomic Energy, which had been conducting civilian research since the 1970s, engaged national laboratories under the U.S. DOE within a bilateral action plan to advance fast reactor and fuel cycle technologies. Cooperation extended far beyond the Bush administration.

In 2014 the Chinese institute made its experimental fast reactor available to DOE for joint material testing. Meanwhile, the Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted joint research with Oak Ridge National Laboratory in molten-salt reactors and with Idaho National Laboratory in hybrid energy systems. In 2015 Bill Gates' advanced reactor company, TerraPower, signed an agreement with China National Nuclear Corporation to construct its first traveling wave reactor in China. That, however, was not meant to be. In just three years, the U.S. government's restrictions on civil nuclear cooperation with China terminated this partnership and others like it.

The Relationship Today

In 2018 the U.S. administration heavily restricted civil nuclear exports to China, citing technology theft and military diversion concerns and channeling a new strategic outlook of "great-power rivalry." According to the U.S. Justice Department, Chinese hackers had gained illegal access to Westinghouse technology and inside information in parallel with the negotiation of legal technology transfer. In 2016 China General Nuclear, a Chinese state-owned nuclear company, was indicted for acquiring U.S. nuclear know-how outside U.S. law and the U.S.-China civil nuclear cooperation framework.

These charges were intertwined with concerns that China would benefit militarily from U.S. civil nuclear technologies, whether legally or illegally obtained. At the time of the indictment, China General Nuclear was developing floating nuclear power plants that Washington believed might give the Chinese military an advantage in the East and South China Seas. There were also long-standing concerns that China could divert U.S. power reactor technologies toward naval propulsion or use civil nuclear infrastructure to produce fissile material for weapons. Amid China's nuclear and conventional military buildup as well as broader U.S.-China strategic rivalry, these concerns began to outweigh the perceived benefits of continued nuclear cooperation. Washington's 2018 policy shift was in part a reflection of this new reality.

Since then, rivalry has overshadowed the two countries' long history of partnership in nuclear energy and nonproliferation. Export controls—an area in which the two countries used to cooperate in order to mitigate regional proliferation threats—have become an avenue of geopolitical and technological competition. The United States has added an increasing number of Chinese entities to its export control lists. In response, China is leveraging its dual-use export control system to threaten rare earth restrictions on the United States. Few remember that China set up the system in the 1990s under U.S. diplomatic pressure and with U.S. technical help.

Nonproliferation diplomacy opened the door to civil nuclear commerce.

In November 2025, the Chinese Academy of Sciences announced that its prototype molten-salt reactor successfully demonstrated the conversion of thorium to uranium—a step that could extend available uranium resources. Commentaries regarding China's thorium accomplishment trace the molten-salt concept to Oak Ridge National Laboratory's pioneering work more than 50 years ago yet rarely highlight the much more recent U.S.-China collaboration.

The long history of U.S.-China civil nuclear cooperation should not be forgotten. Nor should it be reduced, as in some simplistic narratives, to a story of China stealing U.S. IP to race ahead in civil nuclear technologies. The real story is much more complex: The United States and China have engaged in legitimate and mutually beneficial civil nuclear cooperation while navigating real IP protection challenges and military diversion risks.

If China ends up winning the nuclear energy race, the United States should claim no small credit. China has benefited immensely from cooperation with the United States across nuclear energy technologies, safety, security, nonproliferation, export controls, and diplomacy—many diplomats in the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Department of Arms Control were trained in the United States. But the benefit was not unilateral.

U.S. nuclear engagement with China over the decades has benefited American public interests—by bringing China into the global nonproliferation regime, giving the U.S. nuclear industry access to the Chinese market, enabling China's transition to clean energy technologies, and improving the safety of Chinese nuclear power plants in the belief that a nuclear accident anywhere is a nuclear accident everywhere.

The United States is more secure when Beijing maintains full control of its nuclear arsenal and fissile material and is not inadvertently aiding weapons proliferation due to lax dual-use export controls. Equally significantly, science and technology diplomacy has built political bridges since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979 and has since given the United States transparency and access to China's civil and defense nuclear complex.

Ultimately, the United States never lost sight of its interests. Cooperation has never simply been for cooperation's sake. The United States could benefit further from a revived, yet cautious, civil nuclear partnership with China that takes IP and dual-use concerns seriously. The partnership could focus, for instance, on precommercial technologies where IP sensitivities are mitigated and potential military utility is limited. If U.S. policymakers decide to suspend the frame of competition, at least in the civil nuclear domain, there is yet the opportunity to restore and reap the residual goodwill from a half century of cooperation. ■

FOCUS NUCLEAR SECURITY

RESPONDING TO THE FUKUSHIMA NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

U.S. Assistance to Japan

There are lessons to be learned from the U.S. government's response to this megadisaster on the territory of a major ally.

BY STEVEN AOKI

March 11 of this year marks the 15th anniversary of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. This magnitude 9.0 earthquake—the strongest in Japan's history—created a tsunami that inundated 650 kilometers of Japanese coastline, causing more than 20,000 deaths and initiating a catastrophic accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The meltdown of three of the plant's reactors released high levels of radioactive material into the air and groundwater, initiating a crisis that lasted for weeks, required the evacuation of thousands of nearby residents, created billions of dollars in economic damage, and caused a loss of confidence in nuclear power generation.

The accident has since been the subject of multiple reviews by official Japanese government agencies, independent commissions, and international organizations. There are also lessons to be learned from recalling the U.S. government's response to this megadisaster on the territory of a major ally. Political will to help mattered, but success was possible because the U.S. had on hand both extensive, well-trained technical teams and a flexible interagency management system that was able to mobilize and deploy assistance on an unprecedented scale. Because it could quickly mobilize and manage these assets, the United States was able within days to launch a massive, integrated aid effort that saved lives, hastened recovery, and built lasting goodwill.

Key roles were played by the Embassy Tokyo country team, which coordinated across a sometimes disjointed Japanese government; the U.S. Department of Defense, which committed U.S. ships, aircraft, and service personnel to a massive assistance effort; the professional emergency responders in the U.S. Agency

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GIOVANNI VERLINI / IAEA

Cranes near Reactor Unit 3 at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on October 11, 2011, months after the megadisaster.

for International Development (USAID); and nuclear experts from the Department of Energy (DOE) and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

I was in Washington at the time of the accident, managing the flow of data from the DOE team deployed to Japan and reporting to the Secretary of Energy and the White House. I was also responsible for tasking our national laboratories with technical analyses to support high-level decisions, including on the level of risk faced by population centers in Japan and the U.S. itself.

A Catastrophic Nuclear Accident

When the tsunami struck the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant at around 3:30 p.m. on March 11, 2011, waves surged high over the seawall intended to protect the reactors. They flooded areas of the plant housing vital equipment, most notably backup diesel generators. The earthquake 40 minutes earlier had already disabled the facility's connections to the outside power grid, so the plant was now almost entirely without electrical power. Although automatic controls had safely shut down the three operating nuclear reactors, they still needed to run electric pumps to circulate cooling water to keep their nuclear cores at a safe and stable temperature. A prolonged electrical blackout would stop this active cooling, putting each of the reactors on a path to overheating and, eventually, to irreversible core meltdown.

Responsibility for containing this spiraling nuclear disaster largely fell to the operating staff of the reactor. With only limited communications with the outside, and confronting technical challenges far beyond those anticipated in their emergency operations manuals, operators improvised imaginative approaches to combat the accident. To relieve internal pressure, they allowed some radioactive steam to escape while using fire trucks to inject cooling water into the damaged reactor cores. As supplies of fresh water ran out, they shifted to injecting sea water.

Despite these heroic efforts, plant operators were unable to prevent core meltdowns at the three reactors, resulting in substantial releases of radioactive materials and hydrogen gas explosions that partially destroyed the reactor buildings. External power and reliable cooling were not restored to the damaged reactor cores until some two weeks after the quake, leaving 9,000 square kilometers of contaminated land, 160,000 people evacuated from their homes, and a decades-long problem of cleanup and recovery.

U.S. Assistance

The United States offered assistance to Japan almost immediately after initial reports of a major earthquake and tsunami. President Barack Obama called Prime Minister Naoto Kan on March 12 to offer all possible help, an offer that was quickly reinforced by Ambassador John Roos and Embassy Tokyo in their outreach to Japanese counterparts. Following well-established protocols for U.S. response to overseas natural disasters, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance within USAID dispatched a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to Japan to coordinate response activities by U.S. government civilian agencies. USAID's ability to offer an integrated and rapidly deployable package of assistance that was already certified to meet relevant international standards facilitated quick acceptance by a Japanese government that had few preparations in place to receive aid from other countries.

Success was possible because the U.S. had on hand both extensive, well-trained technical teams and a flexible interagency management system that was able to mobilize and deploy assistance on an unprecedented scale.

Because of the developing nuclear component to the disaster, the DART included technical experts from the NRC and DOE. As in previous earthquake-related deployments, it incorporated urban search and rescue teams from county fire departments. DART personnel arrived in Japan on March 13 and immediately joined Japanese counterparts in surveying damage, searching for survivors, and identifying structurally sound buildings that could be used as temporary shelters.

DART leadership joined Ambassador Roos in Tokyo to form a team of U.S. agency representatives; this team would go on to meet regularly with Japanese counterparts led by Goshi Hoshono, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Kan. They jointly reviewed the torrent of requests for information and assistance flowing between the two governments. High-level engagement drove greater interagency coordination and information sharing, particularly on the Japanese side, where important information about the nuclear accident sometimes failed to flow upward.

The Department of Defense (DOD) provided the largest and most visible piece of U.S. assistance to Japan. At the time, nearly 40,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed in Japan, and major naval, air, and ground assets were available to participate in recovery operations. Before the earthquake, U.S. military forces already worked closely with Japanese counterparts, sharing procedures and equipment. The United States was therefore well prepared to stand up a cooperative military response, "Operation Tomodachi," to support relief activities led by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces.

U.S. ships and helicopters brought tons of food, drinking water, and other emergency supplies to isolated survivors, while Japanese helicopters refueled onboard U.S. aircraft carriers. A specialized Marine Corps unit led efforts to clear debris and reopen Sendai Airport, and salvage experts helped open debris-clogged seaports. U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft surveyed tsunami-damaged terrain, while a Global Hawk drone and a U-2 spy plane safely overflew the damaged Fukushima reactors.

IAEA

On November 27, 2013, IAEA experts visit the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station in Okuma to view the fuel assembly removal process in Reactor Unit 4. The plant suffered a catastrophic meltdown in March 2011.

At its peak, the United States committed 24,000 service members, 189 aircraft, and 24 Navy vessels to relief efforts under Operation Tomodachi. DOD estimated the cost of the operation, for which it drew on its global humanitarian assistance authorities, totaled $88.5 million.

The U.S. also sent a team from the Department of Energy's Aerial Measuring System (AMS). The AMS team contributed equipment that was mounted on an Air Force helicopter and a fixed-wing airplane to measure the amount of radioactivity on the ground. Flying more than 100 survey flights between March 16 and May 28, the DOE/AMS team mapped the primary deposition zone stretching northwest some 80 kilometers from Fukushima. They also established that more densely populated regions along the coast had received significantly lower doses.

Americans on the ground received extensive support, much of it highly technical, from experts back home. NRC and DOE tasked scientists and engineers at U.S. national laboratories to run computer simulations of likely reactor accident developments and to estimate public radiation exposure under hypothetical worst-case scenarios. These "what if" analyses provided valuable context as political leaders discussed whether it would be necessary to evacuate as many as 80,000 U.S. citizens from around Tokyo and Yokohama.

Looking Back

In 2011 the United States was able to provide substantial assistance to a close ally in a disaster of extraordinary size and complexity. Successful execution of this humanitarian assistance mission directly helped the victims of the disaster; beyond that, the scale, effectiveness, and generosity of U.S. aid paid broad political dividends for the overall bilateral relationship.

Our success depended on training, planning, and specialized resources carefully maintained within the U.S. government. Military readiness, ranging from the individual unit level up to the global reach of our strategic airlift, was a visible example, but civilian agencies were similarly prepared. USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance was ready to launch a DART when and wherever needed, including by maintaining contracts with local public safety agencies to deploy their urban search and rescue teams. The DART, in turn, drew from conceptual approaches built into Department of Homeland Security planning for responses to major domestic emergencies.

The AMS team that the Department of Energy sent to Japan was one component of the emergency response system that would be called on in the event of a nuclear accident or radiological attack at home. (The team is also used routinely to survey high-profile events like the Superbowl to ensure there are no hidden radiation threats.) Embassy Tokyo and U.S. policymakers also tapped into the broad expertise of the U.S. scientific community. Across all agencies, the assistance provided drew on programs, plans, legal authorities, and contingency appropriations approved by Congress.

That said, there were certainly areas for improvement. Initial handling of assistance requests was often chaotic, and it took time to establish an orderly process. It was difficult to get Japanese agreement to the public release of radiation measurements, and the United States ended up acting unilaterally, with tacit Japanese concurrence. Federal agencies did not provide data on radiation transport to U.S. territory to their state and local government partners in a timely way.

Unfortunately, the natural and man-made dangers that arose following the March 2011 earthquake have not vanished, and we will no doubt face other equally complex situations around the world in the future. If there is a lesson to be drawn from our experience 15 years ago, it is that planning, readiness, and the practiced ability to manage cooperation across normal organizational boundaries will pay substantial dividends in any future crisis. ■

Is Nuclear Testing Needed?

An October 2025 social media post by the U.S. president instructed the Department of Defense to begin testing nuclear weapons. But is it really necessary?

BY MARK GOODMAN AND MONTE MALLIN

On October 30, 2025, President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social that the United States would resume nuclear testing. Though it came as a surprise to many, it was one of the recommendations in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 policy initiative, which in many ways has served as a blueprint for the Trump administration.

The president's announcement raised many questions about its intent, not least because it seemed to misstate several important facts. For example, the post asserted that the United States has more nuclear weapons than any other country, when in fact Russia is known to have a greater number overall, if nondeployed warheads are included. While China is increasing its stockpile by roughly a hundred per year, it is not, as Trump asserted, on the verge of matching the United States.

Mark Goodman is a nonresident fellow at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies. He retired in 1995 after serving for 30 years as a U.S. government policy expert and a leading practitioner of multilateral nuclear nonproliferation diplomacy at the Department of State, the Department of Energy, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, most recently in 2025 as senior scientist in the State Department's Office of Multilateral Nuclear and Security Affairs. Goodman has a PhD in physics from Princeton University and is a fellow of the American Physical Society.

Maurice "Monte" Mallin is a senior fellow at Sandia National Laboratories. In April 2025, he retired from 30 years of federal service as the director of policy for the National Nuclear Security Administration. Mallin also served at the National Defense University as the chair for nuclear security programs, as well as at the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. He was a key member of the team that negotiated the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, which opened for signature in 1996.

Of greater concern, however, was the substance of the president's social media message: The United States would resume nuclear testing.

Similarly, the announcement instructed the Department of War [*sic*] to prepare for a test, but the maintenance—and potential testing—of nuclear weapons is the responsibility of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA).

Of greater concern, however, was the substance of the president's social media message: The United States would resume nuclear testing. This was largely interpreted as a reference to nuclear *explosive* testing. The United States has not conducted a nuclear explosive test since 1992, when it declared a formal moratorium; since 1998, only North Korea has done so, in 2017, almost a decade ago.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which bans all nuclear explosive testing, was opened for signature in 1996, but has not yet entered into force because key states, including the United States, have not ratified it. Yet it has played an important role in creating a norm against such testing and in building an international monitoring system.

Some have suggested that the president's announcement should be read as a call for testing of nuclear delivery systems, the missiles and aircraft that carry nuclear bombs and warheads. The announcement referred to other countries' testing programs, and indeed Russia had tested new types of nuclear delivery systems in the preceding weeks.

U.S. Secretary of Energy Chris Wright sought to allay concerns with this explanation: "I think the tests we're talking about right now are systems tests. These are not nuclear explosions. These are what we call noncritical explosions." Secretary Wright went on to note that these tests would involve "the other parts of a nuclear weapon" rather than the nuclear explosive itself.

Despite these reassurances, exactly what the administration has in mind remains unclear. The benefits of resumed nuclear explosive testing are marginal, but the costs are clear: it would add significant instability to today's already precarious security environment. This is not 1996, when many countries were cooperating to reduce nuclear threats. It's a very different, and more competitive, world.

What's at Stake?

Of all the countries that possess nuclear weapons, the United States has the least to gain and the most to lose by a resumption of nuclear explosive testing. Russia has conducted fewer, and China far fewer, nuclear tests than the United States, and both countries have far more to gain from renewed nuclear explosive testing.

For decades, the United States has sustained an extensive science-based Stockpile Stewardship Program that ensures the reliability, safety, security, and effectiveness of its nuclear stockpile through advanced, highly sophisticated science and engineering programs. It encompasses multiple efforts across all NNSA laboratories, plants, and sites, including the NNSA nuclear weapons laboratories (Sandia, Los Alamos, and Lawrence Livermore).

This program ensures that the United States maintains a safe and effective nuclear deterrent *without* nuclear explosive testing. Every year, the directors of the nuclear weapons labs are required by Congress to certify that the program is meeting its objectives. This has occurred without fail since 1996. The certification was last completed on September 22, 2025, just a few weeks before the president's post. If something changed radically in the few weeks between the certification and the announcement, it would be a pretty big surprise (especially to the lab directors).

"Because of other countries' testing programs," the president's post read, the United States would resume testing of our nuclear weapons "on an equal basis." The reference to other countries seems to point to a 2021 report in which the State Department concluded that Russia, and possibly China, had conducted very low-yield nuclear tests that (unlike the subcritical tests Secretary Wright referred to) are inconsistent with the zero-yield standard set by the CTBT. A State Department official stated in February 2026 that China had conducted such low-yield tests.

According to former NNSA Administrator (and former Sandia National Laboratories Director) Jill Hruby, such low-yield tests would provide additional information but are not needed for stockpile stewardship.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to the Trump post in early November, stating that Russia would take "reciprocal measures," and has reportedly asked his security council

to draft options to resume such testing. Moscow had withdrawn its ratification of the CTBT in 2023, saying it sought the same status as the United States, but stated at the time that it would not resume testing unless the United States did so first.

The Wrong Signal

If the United States breaks its own moratorium, it sends a clear signal not just to Russia and China but also to other countries that testing could be a tenable option. India and Pakistan last conducted explosive testing in 1998 and have maintained test moratoria since then, but a resumption of U.S. testing would reduce constraints they may have with respect to a resumption of testing. This is an already volatile region, and the prospect of new nuclear arms racing, not just in South Asia but potentially in China as well, is not something the United States should encourage.

Though North Korea has not tested since 2017, the country remains ready to test. It does not have a formal, declared moratorium but has exercised some restraint in the past, and the United States has nothing to gain by opening the door to a resumed testing program.

More broadly, nuclear explosive testing would send exactly the wrong signal to the international community about the U.S. commitment to widely shared nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament objectives. Halting nuclear testing has long been a critical goal of efforts to prevent nuclear war and nuclear proliferation. The first multilateral disarmament treaty was the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited nuclear testing everywhere except underground and, in its preamble, expressed the goal of ending all nuclear tests.

The NPT Under Pressure

Nuclear explosive testing is a key step for any country seeking a nuclear weapon. Indeed, China's first nuclear test in 1964 was one of the factors that galvanized the international community to negotiate the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which entered into force in 1970, initially for 25 years.

The NPT recognizes five countries—the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and China—as nuclear-weapon states; all others joined the treaty as non-nuclear-weapon states, committing not to pursue a nuclear weapon. NPT parties committed to pursue good-faith negotiations to end the arms race and toward nuclear disarmament. The NPT preamble calls for "the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons for all time," which all parties recognized to be an essential step for both nonproliferation and arms control.

The United States has little, if anything, to gain from resuming nuclear testing and much to lose if it does so.

And when the NPT was extended indefinitely in 1995, the parties adopted the objective of completing CTBT negotiations in 1996. This commitment from the nuclear-weapon states to prioritize completion of the CTBT helped to secure the indefinite extension of the NPT.

But the NPT is already under pressure. Many non-nuclear states are frustrated with the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament and with the modernization and expansion of some countries' nuclear arsenals. Iran has threatened to withdraw from the NPT over the reimposition of United Nations sanctions. Saudi Arabia has said it intends to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran does, and others in the Middle East could follow suit. Politicians and advocates in South Korea, Germany, and Poland have questioned the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and advocated for or entertained the idea of acquiring nuclear weapons of their own.

A Prudent Approach

In short, the United States has little, if anything, to gain from resuming nuclear testing and much to lose if it does so. It would represent an abdication of U.S. leadership in nuclear nonproliferation and undercut long-standing U.S. commitments to nuclear restraint. It would open the door for others to follow suit in ways that increase risks of nuclear competition and confrontation around the globe. Rather than adding to the pressures on the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the United States should be reaffirming and reinforcing its commitment to nuclear nonproliferation objectives.

Secretary Wright's formula represents a prudent approach that would enable the United States to maintain its nuclear stockpile to the highest technical standards, thereby maintaining a safe and effective nuclear deterrent. It is a sensible approach to clarifying the president's intentions and would not undercut our long-standing leadership in advancing global nuclear nonproliferation objectives. ■

FEATURE

William Roebuck shakes hands with Suwar Civil Council Co-President Mushan Abdullah, in Suwar, Syria, August 26, 2018.

THE SECRET SHARER

The work of a political officer requires moral clarity in highly ambiguous situations and an acceptance of mortal risk and the personal costs of exile.

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

On a jet-black winter night the cold mud on the edge of the landing strip oozed over my ankles and seeped through my socks. It was January 2018 and my last assignment as a Foreign Service officer. A C-130 had just dropped me off in rural northeast Syria, where I would spend much of the next two years embedded with Green Berets and other Special Forces elements.

I quickly realized that I needed to put aside my current job title as a deputy envoy helping with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and go back in time rapidly, to a time before my previous assignment as ambassador in Bahrain and before I worked in the interagency trenches in Washington. I would need to go back to earlier days when I was a more junior political officer assigned to U.S. embassies and reporting on unrest and turbulence, elections and political maneuvering, in volatile places like Baghdad, Tripoli, and Damascus and their far-flung hinterlands.

The work of a political officer is said to be a kind of "secret sharing," to paraphrase the famous 19th-century writer Joseph Conrad. He had his own intentions for the phrase in his short story, "The Secret Sharer," with its focus on the personal costs of exile, the rewards of professionalism in a demanding vocation, and the requirements of moral clarity in highly ambiguous, sometimes even duplicitous, situations.

For me, secret sharing usefully describes my efforts in the field over the years, recording my sense of the realities, possibilities, and personalities, and sharing that with Washington. Secrecy is a function of the discretion needed, and I was sharing my observations and insights with a small circle of readers in

William Roebuck retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in November 2020. During a 28-year diplomatic career, he served as U.S. ambassador to Bahrain and completed postings in Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Tripoli; he also did political reporting in Gaza while posted in Tel Aviv. Ambassador Roebuck received the State Department Distinguished Honor Award for his work in Syria.

the State Department and another restricted circle of readers—"consumers" in proper bureaucratic parlance—in other U.S. government agencies.

As I ventured professionally far outside the confines of working in an embassy during that "Wild West" twilight assignment, I combed back through my Foreign Service career to draw on the fundamentals of my life's work.

No Ordinary Diplomatic Assignment

The night we landed, I had been held up in the cargo bay (aka seating area) of the aircraft, thanking the pilot for the safe landing, executed with only night-vision goggles and on-board navigational equipment, in the absence of any runway lights. The brief delay—and the impressive darkness—explained the mud I stood in: The few hardy souls who disembarked before me had already found their way, via a graveled path, to a forlorn light several hundred yards distant, marking the tent that served as the arrivals terminal.

Not seeing the circuitous path or anyone to show me the way, I had struck out directly for the light (hence, the cold mud around my ankles). Finally, I reconnected with the hard-packed—if still very wet—ground of the dirt runway and made my way to the tent-pole terminal.

Several grizzled U.S. Special Forces guys greeted me without ceremony; we climbed into roughed-up armored Land Cruisers and headed down a small highway to the inelegantly named Lafarge Cement Factory military base. It was past 3 a.m. when the plainspoken master sergeant/mayor, in charge of the ramshackle base's logistics, greeted me sleepily, gave me the Wi-Fi code, and showed me to my small trailer, delicately pointing out "the showers and the shitters" in the adjacent trailer as we passed by.

I lived on that sprawling, long-shuttered French cement factory complex. Its hulking, lifeless structures loomed above us as we made our way each day to the unpainted, plywood-walled, six-table café where we shared our meals. Some of us would also trudge to the still-dusty former storage depot turned weight room. Reporting logistics were similarly lean: I had a curtained-off cubby hole about the size of a broom closet, with a scuffed-up laptop, in a small warehouse-type facility retrofitted to sleep, at any given time, 10–15 hot-bunking special forces elements. The makeshift, spartan conditions served as a useful reminder that this was no ordinary diplomatic assignment: The U.S. had closed its embassy in distant Damascus years earlier and severed diplomatic relations with the Syrian government.

From that base, I radiated out on day or overnight trips. I visited Arab tribal chiefs in a remote farmhouse in the province of Deir a-Zour, near the border with Iraq, to check on recovery from the aftermath of war and urge them, despite war fatigue and frictions with other ethnic members of our local partner force, to continue supporting the U.S.-led fight against ISIS.

I spent time in the heavily damaged city of Raqqa with municipal officials who were working with a handful of State Department personnel to restore basic services, clear the tons of rubble in the streets left over from the titanic fight in the latter half of 2017 to rid the city of ISIS, and refurbish damaged schools and medical facilities.

Cold and Muddy Realities

On one such visit, as I walked the city's streets, assessing the appalling levels of damage to the city's homes and businesses, a local resident accosted me. "Why are you here?" he angrily demanded to know, as he eyed my security detail warily. Understanding I was an American diplomat, he followed up, rapid-fire: "Who did this?" He pointed to the vast destruction, adding: "Who will fix it?"

His barbed, rhetorical questions were not hard to decipher: He, like many locals, blamed the American side for a significant part of the horrific damage the city had suffered in the fight against ISIS. "The people of this city deserve respect," he spat out, again speaking somewhat elliptically but making clear he thought the U.S. and the broader international community were refusing to adequately fund recovery efforts.

I dutifully shared this exchange with Washington and tried to describe the catastrophic damage, hoping it might convince policymakers that the relatively limited levels of assistance we were providing were insufficient and risked creating grievances and a political vacuum that ISIS could exploit for a resurgence.

Throughout my career, I usually had three goals in mind for political reporting: generally, keeping the State Department and broader U.S. government informed; occasionally, feeding State its "broccoli"—getting it to consume information I felt was good for the health of U.S. foreign policy; and sometimes trying to

> I took refuge in the somewhat comforting corollary that information from the field and diplomatic realities on the ground help inform that policy.

COURTESY OF WILLIAM ROEBUCK

As invading Turkish-supported forces closed in in October 2019, a fire at the Lafarge Cement Factory compound, a U.S. military base in northeastern Syria, forced the precipitous withdrawal of all U.S. personnel. U.S. forces bombed the compound the following day to prevent its ammunition cache from being seized by the Turkish-backed forces.

strengthen one side in an interagency tussle.

I was regularly reminded that policy (made in Washington) trumps reporting. I took refuge in the somewhat comforting corollary that information from the field and diplomatic realities on the ground help inform that policy, while also recognizing begrudgingly that policy was as likely shaped by budget constraints, security considerations, staffing gaps, interagency turf jousting, and domestic concerns tied to congressional and media scrutiny—all centered back in Washington and aloof from the cold mud of Syria.

Nonetheless, I continued sharing the information from my many contacts across northeastern Syria with Washington. Among my most important interlocutors was General Mazloum Abdi Kobani, the self-made Kurdish commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who formed and molded the SDF into a formidable fighting force against ISIS in 2015–2016. By the time I arrived in early 2018, ISIS and its accompanying family members were on the run, falling back to the more remote towns of Deir a-Zour province farther east, and over the next year and a half the general and I met often.

The Feeling of Betrayal

But in the fall of 2019, Türkiye was on the verge of invading Syria's northeast, and General Mazloum felt betrayed and abandoned by the U.S. At our meeting in October, he was furious. Neighboring Türkiye's military, with a ragtag Syrian proxy force lending a hand, had invaded and was attacking SDF positions all along the northern border. I was delivering what I knew to be threadbare talking points, noting to Mazloum U.S. diplomatic efforts in Ankara for a ceasefire but offering no U.S. assistance to his forces under attack.

"You are leaving us to be slaughtered," he told me. "We partnered with you in good faith, and this is what we get in return?" I absorbed the blast of his anger in a couple of meetings. I had worked closely with the SDF leadership and knew in detail how valuable their contributions had been to the bloody fight against ISIS.

As it happened, there were other meetings. Tempers calmed, and the tough business of diplomacy and cold calculation took precedence for Mazloum. In the end, we weathered the storm. President Donald Trump decided against withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria, and those of us, military and civilian, who stayed behind were able to repair the relationship with the SDF relatively quickly once a U.S.-Türkiye negotiated ceasefire tamped the fighting.

Somewhere along the way, however, my conversation with Mazloum had been leaked, with a transcript ending up on CNN. The whole world could read of Mazloum excoriating me and the U.S. government. Separately, an informal dissent message I sent to Washington, objecting to what I perceived as a weak, inconsistent U.S. response to the Turkish military offensive into northeast Syria, was leaked and ended up on the front page of *The New York Times*. I made clear I had not leaked the message, nor had I made any public comment. The furor over my memo died down fairly quickly, as the relentless U.S. news cycle powered on by.

This was secret sharing taken to a new—and uncomfortable—level.

Empathy and Craft

While I liked General Mazloum and his commanders and the Syrian Kurdish politicians who supported him, it wasn't always a natural instinct to empathize, to try to see the world as they did and put myself in their shoes. They were heavily influenced by a rigorous ideology, termed "Ocalanist" after its original and still influential proponent, Abdullah Ocalan, the Kurdish founder of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) who had been imprisoned in Türkiye since the late 1990s. The ideology and the hermetic, somewhat cult-like bureaucratic practices it spawned struck most Westerners who saw it in practice as strange, even jarring. But I knew that empathy makes you a more effective political officer; it is a fundamental aspect of secret sharing.

I vividly recall experiencing this during a midcareer posting to Damascus. In a chilly, spartan apartment in Douma, on the outskirts of Damascus, in winter 2006, I was talking quietly with Yassin, a well-known Syrian dissident who had spent 16 years as a political prisoner of the Assad government. He was analyzing the brutal, organized, relentless nature of the Assad regime and making clear there was no serious difference between the rule of the father, Hafez al-Assad, and the son, Bashar, who replaced him when he died in 2000. In a matter-of-fact tone, Yassin

STAFF SGT. RAY BOYINGTON / U.S. ARMY

General Mazloum Abdi (center left), commanding general of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and William Roebuck (center right), deputy special envoy for the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, attend a liberation day ceremony marking the final surrender of ISIS forces in Syria at Omar oil field compound, Dayr al-Zawr, Syria, March 2019.

described the horrors of prison, including Tadmour, the infamous desert prison from which he was finally released in 1996. He noted he had been a medical student in Aleppo, with aspirations to become a doctor, when he was first arrested and sent away to the Syrian gulag, shattering his professional prospects.

What struck me, overwhelmed me even, when I left that first meeting, was a sense that I had been in the presence of a powerful moral witness, a dissident of high order, who had completely preserved his humanity, intellect, and modesty in a sustained confrontation with brutality and oppression. As the embassy driver ferried me home in the cold night, I sat quietly in the back of the car, shaken and humbled.

The meeting with Yassin brought out a sense of shared experience that emerged from the conversation and the charged effort afterward to write about it persuasively. The participation takes place on the level of empathy: active listening, a willingness to see the world from the perspective of others. The professional craft of good writing captures and shares that encounter so that it resonates for others.

I had already begun to identify empathy as a crucial quality in my very first assignment as a political officer, working out of the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem in the late 1990s. It was a schizophrenic reporting mandate: Jewish settlements and Palestinian political developments in the West Bank, territory Israel had occupied since prevailing in the '67 war. I visited settlers in Hebron one day and Palestinian activists, Fatah party politicians, and Palestinian Authority security figures in the tense southern West Bank city the next.

Feeling empathy with Palestinians was not that hard; the challenge was not to get overwhelmed to the point you couldn't report objectively. With the settlers, empathy was more challenging, but I strove to see their perspective and avoided the urge to argue. Washington wanted to hear their views and perceptions, not mine.

A Professional Commitment

Finally, the work of secret sharing requires a commitment forged in professionalism, a shared sense of mission, and pride of service because there can be costs involved, and they can be exacting. I learned this during a routine trip into Gaza in October 2003 as Gaza political officer.

After crossing from Israel into the territory in a small convoy of heavily armored Suburbans, there was an explosion just behind the lead vehicle in which I was traveling. We lost radio contact. We made a U-turn and looked across the median: Four tons of SUV steel had been flipped upside down and left in a crater in the road. Three members of my security detail were dead, and a fourth was seriously injured in the attack. It was a painful, permanently searing reminder of the risks—and human costs—at stake in continuing to be active out in the field as diplomats in the Middle East.

Now, in having worked my way back to the beginnings of my Foreign Service career, I realize that I learned my first lessons about secret sharing as a youth growing up in the South I loved and hated in the 1960s and 1970s: Keep your eyes open

MAHMUD HAMS

Political reporting from the field can involve serious risk. William Roebuck learned this very early in his career, when he was Gaza political officer, during a routine trip from Israel into Gaza territory on October 15, 2003. Suddenly, near the village of Beit Hanoun, there was a loud explosion just behind the lead vehicle in which he was riding. Radio contact was lost, and the driver made an immediate U-turn. This is what they saw: four tons of SUV steel flipped upside down in a crater in the road and piles of mangled parts and debris. Three members of Roebuck's security detail were killed, and a fourth seriously injured.

to the world, have some empathy, despise injustice and racism, and embrace reserve and a sense of modesty about one's own society.

Implicated in and increasingly estranged from a history drenched in racism, violence, and tattered remnants of Jim Crow, I eventually went abroad, joining the Peace Corps and teaching English overseas. It took some years abroad, an exile of sorts, and the opportunity as an FSO to forge that volatile mix into my vocation as a secret sharer. I'm not sure my political reporting ever changed the course of history, but I am deeply proud of my service to my country and feel that I have been repaid handsomely. ■

FEATURE

Peace Corps Response Volunteer Betsy Holtz trains Malawian wildlife reserve rangers in radio-tracking for elephants in 2016.

COURTESY OF PEACE CORPS MEDIA CENTER

Peace Corps at 65

Since its founding, the Peace Corps has been inextricably linked to the Department of State, and many of its volunteers have gone on to excel at the department.

BY BEN EAST

Sixty-five years ago, on March 1, 1961, President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10924, creating a Peace Corps within the Department of State. That was a logical home given one of JFK's stated purposes for establishing the agency. Stumping in San Francisco the previous November, Kennedy said: "The key arm of our Foreign Service abroad are the ambassadors and members of our missions. Too many have been chosen who are ill equipped and ill briefed. … Men who lack compassion for the needy here in the United States were sent abroad to represent us in countries, which were marked by disease and poverty and illiteracy and ignorance, and they did not identify us with those causes and the fight against them. … How can they compete with

Ben East retired from the Foreign Service in 2025 after three decades telling America's story to the world as a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV), educator, and diplomat. A detail to the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training in 2022 enabled him to research Peace Corps–Foreign Service connections. His nonfiction narrative, Profiles in Service*, covers 50 years of diplomatic history focused on ambassadors who started out as PCVs. He serves on the FSJ Editorial Board and can be reached at ben@beneastbooks.com.*

communist emissaries long trained and dedicated and committed to the cause of extending communism in those countries?"

Kennedy then proposed "that our inadequate efforts in this area be supplemented by a peace corps of talented young men and women, willing and able to serve their country in this fashion for three years, as an alternative or as a supplement to peacetime selective service."

From the beginning, the Peace Corps experience was intended to develop a new talent pool for a diplomatic corps JFK considered unprepared to face Cold War realities. One measure of the agency's success in this regard might be the number of returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) to enter government service in foreign affairs. One estimate suggests that roughly 10 percent of Foreign Service officers from across all agencies are RPCVs.

SALLY HODGSON / U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

In 2002 Consular Officer Michael Metrinko, an FSO and RPCV from Iran (right), administers the oath of office for Ambassador Robert Finn, an FSO and RPCV from Iran, at the chancery in Kabul as Executive Assistant Cheryl Helm (center) holds the Bible.

Another measure of the Peace Corps' contribution to Foreign Service talent is the number of RPCVs to reach the pinnacle of overseas representation. Eighty of the roughly quarter million Americans to serve as volunteers have gone on to become U.S. ambassadors, beginning with Parker Borg, who was nominated by Ronald Reagan as ambassador to Mali in 1981. Borg was a volunteer with the first group to arrive in the Philippines, in October 1961, a cohort that also included future U.S. Ambassador to Togo Brenda Brown Schoonover.

Testimonials from foreign leaders who got to know the volunteers in their local communities show the ways these volunteers spread U.S. ideals around the world over the last 65 years and give us hope for the next 65.

Household Names in Career Diplomacy

Most *Journal* readers will recognize the name Brian Aggeler, creator of the "Lying in State" comic series that once graced *State Magazine*. His cartoons were also a popular regular feature in the *FSJ* for about a decade. He and his wife, Angela Aggeler, U.S. ambassador to North Macedonia from 2022 until her December 2025 recall, served as volunteers in the Central African Republic. Aggeler himself headed the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2022 to 2025. (An unofficial accounting of all RPCV ambassadors appears at https://bit.ly/PCV-list.)

Two department spokespersons, the late Richard Boucher and Mark Toner, served as volunteers—Boucher in Senegal (1973–1975) and Toner in Liberia (1986–1989), where he also served as ambassador (2024–2025). Four others were ambassadors in their country of Peace Corps service, bringing unparalleled depth for interpreting and navigating local language, culture, and customs: Robert Gelbard (Bolivia), David Greenlee (Bolivia), Thomas Hull (Sierra Leone), and Kathleen Stephens (South Korea).

At least four RPCV ambassadors served as assistant secretary of State, including Christopher Hill (East Asian and Pacific Affairs), Johnnie Carson (African Affairs), Donald Lu (South and Central Asian Affairs), and Richard Boucher (Public Affairs). The four distinguished themselves in a total of 11 ambassadorships.

Four of the 52 diplomats held hostage in Iran for 444 days had previously been volunteers—three in Iran itself. Two went on to become ambassadors, including past AFSA President John Limbert, ambassador to Mauritania from 2000 to 2003 (and PCV in Iran, 1964–1966). Limbert would help Iraq National Museum personnel round up looted antiquities after the 2003 U.S. invasion.

Victor Tomseth served as ambassador to Laos from 1993 to 1996. Before that, as deputy chief of mission in Tehran during the 1979 hostage crisis, Tomseth used his aptitude for foreign languages, first acquired as a volunteer, to communicate in Thai with chef Somchai Sriweawnetr, evading eavesdropping and getting six Americans to safety inside the Canadian embassy.

As consular officer in Kabul, Michael Metrinko (RPCV Turkey 1968–1970 and Iran 1970–1973) administered the oath of office for FSO Robert Finn (RPCV Iran 1967–1969), the first post-9/11 U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan.

Other RPCVs have gone on to serve the country in various ways. Former U.S. Senators Paul Tsongas (D-Mass.)

and Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) served in Ethiopia and the Dominican Republic, respectively. At least a dozen RPCVs have served in the U.S. House, including currently John Garamendi (D-Calif.), who served in Ethiopia (1966–1968).

Foreign Leaders Weigh In

The Peace Corps Legacy Project hosts testimonials by foreign leaders on the influence volunteers have had in their communities. One particularly touching story came from former Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo (2001–2006).

In 1963, Toledo, a shoeshine boy from Chimbote, persuaded his mother to take in one of two volunteers despite an already full house of 16 children. Volunteer Nancy Deeds became for Toledo a focus of endless curiosity about the world. "She was part of the family," he says. "She shared the small table with the very precarious food."

Both Deeds and fellow volunteer Joel Meister taught Toledo English. They helped him apply for a scholarship to the University of San Francisco, where he taught Spanish at the Peace Corps training center. In 2001 they would attend Toledo's inauguration as South America's first democratically elected president of indigenous descent. One of his first decisions that year was to ask President George Bush to reinstate the Peace Corps in Peru, absent since political instability in 1975 drove the agency from the country.

"I'm the only child in my family, until now, who's gone to the university," Toledo told the Legacy Project in 2025. "Had I not met Joel and Nancy, I would have never gone. My life changed substantially thanks to a dream of the United States, to the wisdom of constructing a bridge between the United States and the world. To a large extent, thanks to the Peace Corps."

Toledo would lead Peru through strong economic growth, reduce extreme poverty by 25 percent, and foster democratic principles after the human rights abuses, corruption, and authoritarianism of his predecessor, Alberto Fujimori.

At his 1999 credentialing ceremony in Tegucigalpa, U.S. Ambassador Frank Almaguer heard unexpected candor from Honduran President Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé. Beyond earshot of either entourage, Flores leaned in and shared with Almaguer his concerns about having a U.S. ambassador with Peace Corps roots, saying: "Peace Corps people know the country better than we politicians do, and it is dangerous to have an ambassador from the U.S. who knows the country and its people so well!"

Almaguer, RPCV Belize (1967–1969) and a Peace Corps country director in Honduras (1976–1979), felt his heart pump with pride

From the beginning, the Peace Corps experience was intended to develop a new talent pool for a diplomatic corps JFK considered unprepared to face Cold War realities.

in what he considered the best investment the U.S. government made anywhere. Except for a bump to $430 million for 2025, the agency has operated on $410 million annually since 2016—slightly less than the amount allotted for U.S. military bands.

Presidents, Supreme Court justices, and important political advisers across Africa share similar stories. Current President of Ghana John Mahama remembers his high school science teacher, volunteer John Woodfin. Curious about spaceflight after the Apollo missions, Mahama and his classmates looked to Woodfin to understand the enormity of space. "Mr. Woodfin made a lot of us fall in love with science. And so many of my friends who continue to do science today are doctors and engineers, probably did so under the influence of John Woodfin," Mahama told the Legacy Project.

Afghanistan also proves rich in national figures with fond memories of specific volunteers. In 2002 interim Head of Finance and Foreign Assistance Ashraf Ghani told Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez and RPCV FSO Michael Metrinko about a volunteer named Tom Gouttierre. Ghani (also Afghanistan's fifth president, 2014–2021) could hardly be contained talking about "Mr. Tom" and other volunteers at Kabul's Habibia High School, who taught more than English, math, and basketball. They taught fair play, he said, and the meaning of democracy. He credited PCVs with his selection to attend an Oregon high school for a year, altering the course of his life.

After leaving Ghani, the delegation called on Sima Samar, interim vice chair and minister for women's affairs, and Minister of Higher Education Mohammed Sharif Fayez. Both shared similar memories of experiences in their youth with volunteers.

The Vasquez delegation was still in Kabul when President George W. Bush announced plans to double the number of volunteers to 14,000, to include possible site placements in

COURTESY OF PARKER BORG

Then-PCV Parker Borg with a carving knife at the end of Philippines training in 1961; to his right is future Ambassador Brenda Brown Schoonover; at center behind them is another future FSO and deputy assistant secretary of State, Richard Dertadian.

The agency's work is more exchange than development and by most accounts does more for Americans than for the populations it serves.

Afghanistan, during his 2002 State of the Union address. In attendance at the Capitol were Samar and future Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai—also a Habibia High School alum. Though security would prevent the agency from reestablishing a presence there, nobody could say Vasquez's visit hadn't demonstrated the program's worth.

The Next 65 Years

Peace Corps remained an independent agency under the State umbrella until a Nixon executive order (EO) in 1971 merged it with other volunteer programs, including Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), under a new entity called ACTION. A 1979 Carter EO moved it back within State, and legislation three years later gave the agency the full independence within the executive branch it enjoys today.

To hope the Peace Corps works itself out of a job in the coming decades is to miss the point. The agency's work is more exchange than development and by most accounts does more for Americans than for the populations it serves. Volunteers currently work across six sectors—agriculture, community economic development, education, environment, health, and youth in development—earning the gift of cross-cultural communication, natural adaptability, and resilience. They hone their classroom techniques, become green thumbs, build fishponds, and test entrepreneurial ideas. They learn how to integrate with an unfamiliar community, to lean on others and be leaned on.

The Peace Corps has evolved over the decades. A high of 15,000 served in 1966, fewer than 5,000 during the 1980s, and around 7,000 leading up to the pandemic, when all volunteers were evacuated. The numbers have recovered somewhat, reaching above 3,000 in 60 countries at present. To boost recruitment, the agency offers flexible ways to serve beyond the traditional 27-month commitment: a six- to 12-month overseas option and a virtual service commitment of five to 15 hours per week for three to six months.

Whatever other developments await, one thing seems certain. The Peace Corps' three goals, unchanged since 1961, will continue to steer its mission: to provide skilled human capital in countries that request it, share U.S. culture and values in communities abroad, and share volunteers' newfound understanding of the world with people back home.

In meeting these goals, the Peace Corps makes JFK's vision a reality and deepens the skills of our diplomatic corps. ■

Wolf Ladejinsky

A Public Servant's Case with Lessons for Today

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Wolf Ladejinsky

Many people know about the Red Scare; less well known, perhaps, is a case that helped bring an end to McCarthyism and its democratic backsliding—that of Wolf Ladejinsky.

BY MICHAEL CONLON

Over its 250-year history, the United States has struggled to live up to its ideals of democracy, including the belief that public service should be a public trust and free from political influence.

Many people know about Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare, a period in the late 1940s and early 1950s when hysteria swept across the country. During this time, fears grew that communists had infiltrated every part of American life, including the U.S. State Department and other government agencies. Thousands of U.S. government workers were caught up in this panic and lost their jobs.

Michael Conlon is a retired USDA Foreign Service officer with 36 years of global experience. He writes about international agriculture and diplomacy. This article was adapted from a longer piece, "The Firing of Wolf Ladejinsky," published in the online publication Quillette *on June 4, 2025.*

INTERNET ARCHIVE BOOK IMAGES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Japanese farmers worked by hand, with the help of oxen, at the time of the postwar land reform.

Less well known, perhaps, is a case that helped bring an end to the Red Scare and McCarthyism—the case of Wolf Ladejinsky. Ladejinsky was a Soviet émigré who worked as an economist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and, after World War II, became the chief architect of Japan's land reform, one of the most successful land reform programs in history, which provided poor farmers with land titles and stopped the spread of communism.

In 1954, USDA fired Ladejinsky as a security risk because of his Soviet origins.

This is his story and the lessons it offers today for fighting democratic backsliding.

Early Life and Career

Born in Dnipro in 1899, the son of a prosperous Jewish miller and grain merchant, Wolf Ladejinsky was forced to flee after the 1917 Russian Revolution unleashed pogroms throughout Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire. His elder brother was killed in the pogroms, and the family decided that he should flee; his sisters would stay back to care for their elderly parents.

Making his way to the United States, Ladejinsky worked odd jobs to learn English and then pay his way through school, graduating with a degree in economics from Columbia University in 1928 and becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen the same year. In 1935 he began working for the USDA and became an expert on Japanese agriculture, especially land tenure issues.

Small in stature with graying black hair, Ladejinsky was "soft-spoken, charming, with a continental manner and an intriguing Russian accent," and often smoked a pipe. One acquaintance noted that he had a "penchant for pessimism." Before being assigned to Japan, he had reportedly told a friend that he would never be an American official abroad with his Russian accent and birth: "They just wouldn't listen to me there."

Lucky for America and Japan, Ladejinsky was wrong about that. He was assigned to Japan and played a crucial role in the U.S. occupation.

Serving His Adopted Country in Japan

Because of Ladejinsky's expertise, in 1944 the U.S. military asked him to write the agricultural section of the *Civil Affairs Handbook: Japan*, which had been created to educate occupation forces on planning for postwar Japan. Early in the Allied occupation, General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Occupation Forces, decided to move forward with radical land reform based on Ladejinsky's ideas.

In December 1945, USDA sent Ladejinsky to Tokyo to assist in implementing the land reform. He became the main architect of the program, which gave 3 million farmers ownership of the land they tilled and dismantled the power of landlords who had long controlled Japanese agriculture, thus preventing the spread of communism in the country. According to Gen. MacArthur, "The land reform program did more to cut the ground from under the Japanese communists than any other measure taken during the occupation."

Novelist James Michener called Ladejinsky "communism's greatest enemy in Asia." With his achievements in Japan and

Wolf Ladejinsky's story demonstrates that democracy is never guaranteed and that defending it requires individuals willing to speak out.

growing international reputation, Ladejinsky became a highly sought-after expert on land reform in Asia. His efforts and ideas significantly contributed to the success of land reform programs in Taiwan and South Korea.

In 1950 USDA assigned Ladejinsky to the State Department to serve as the agricultural attaché in Tokyo. Like today, the attaché's job was to expand the Japanese market for U.S. agricultural products, and Ladejinsky excelled in this role. During his time as the agricultural attaché, Japan became a major importer of U.S. agricultural products.

Like many immigrants, he appreciated the opportunities his adopted country provided him. In a 1954 letter to James Russell, the farm editor of the *Des Moines Register & Tribune*, Ladejinsky noted: "I arrived in the states at the age of 22 without the knowledge of language, money, friends, etc. But I had the country to fall back on and all it has given to the generation of immigrants in the past. I have taken, and I have given in return to the best of my ability, with but one guiding thought in my mind—the welfare of the United States."

The McCarthy Era Scandal

On September 1, 1954, agricultural attachés were transferred from the State Department to USDA's newly created Foreign Agricultural Service, and Ladejinsky was set to return to USDA as the agricultural attaché in Japan. In early December, he attended a conference in Washington, D.C. Although he had recently received a security clearance from the State Department, USDA dismissed Ladejinsky during his visit to Washington. He was not given any notice of charges or a hearing.

Initially, USDA claimed that Ladejinsky was being terminated because he lacked a farm background in the United States and wouldn't be able to effectively represent U.S. agriculture abroad, despite having performed well in that role in Japan for several years. Later, USDA changed its explanation, stating he was being

He had reportedly told a friend that he would never be an American official abroad with his Russian accent and birth: "They just wouldn't listen to me there."

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Senator Joseph McCarthy chats with his attorney Roy Cohn during Senate subcommittee hearings on the McCarthy-Army dispute, 1954.

dismissed because he was perceived as a security risk. Ladejinsky had worked as an interpreter for the Soviet's Amtorg Trading Company in New York for several months in 1931, visited Ukraine in 1939, and the fact that he had family in the Soviet Union could make him susceptible to blackmail.

News of his firing broke just before Christmas 1954, and the public reaction was swift. On December 18, Clark Mollenhoff, an investigative reporter for the *Des Moines Register & Tribune*, published a series of articles about the Ladejinsky case, which remained on the front page of newspapers across America for several weeks. Influential figures from all parts of the political spectrum, such as Congressman Walter Judd (R-Minn.) and Senator (and later vice president) Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), came quickly to Ladejinsky's defense.

Suddenly, he became one of the most recognizable figures in America and a symbol of the evils of McCarthyism. Though Joe McCarthy's influence was already in decline (on December 2, 1954, the Senate voted to censure him for conduct unbecoming a senator), the Ladejinsky case seriously undercut McCarthyism's broader appeal.

Embarrassed by the controversy, on January 12, 1955, President Dwight Eisenhower announced that Ladejinsky had been hired by the Foreign Operations Administration (FOA), the predecessor to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), to serve as an agricultural adviser in South Vietnam.

On January 18, Harold Stassen, the director of FOA, granted Ladejinsky a security clearance to work for his agency. Under pressure, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, an enthusiastic anti-communist, withdrew his "security risk" designation but maintained that USDA had acted correctly.

Later that year, on September 27, 1955, during testimony before a Senate subcommittee looking into the administration's security program, Benson admitted he had made a mistake in denying security clearance to Ladejinsky. Benson said the program had been overhauled as a result of the affair.

Ladejinsky's Importance for Democracy

Although agrarian reform efforts in South Vietnam met more obstacles and ultimately proved less successful than those in Japan, Ladejinsky spent the rest of his life working "in the field" on land reform issues in Asia with the Ford Foundation and the World Bank. Still dedicated to helping the rural poor in Asia at age 76, when others his age had long since retired, he suffered a stroke in India and died on July 3, 1975.

Ladejinsky was an extraordinary person. An immigrant who didn't speak English when he arrived in the United States, he started with nothing but, through hard work and determination, earned a college degree and rose through the ranks in the U.S. government and international development agencies.

His essential work on land reform lifted millions of farmers out of poverty in Asia, helped prevent the spread of communism in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and played an important role in a U.S. security case that contributed to ending the threat of McCarthyism.

Wolf Ladejinsky's story demonstrates that democracy is never guaranteed and that defending it requires individuals willing to speak out. At a time when civil servants again face suspicion, his story reminds us that justice, even when it takes time, is worth fighting for. As Martin Luther King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." ■

At the Breaking Point (Part II)

AFSA's study, "At the Breaking Point: The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025," generated much interest in the press—including *The New York Times* and NPR—and within our community when it was published in December 2025.

In addition to telling us what's going wrong in the Foreign Service at the present moment, members surveyed for the study spoke about what matters most in their FS careers and where they hope to see positive change.

AFSA is now starting the second step of our FS reform discussion: Where do we go from here, and what will the FS look like in the next several years?

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) delivers remarks during the Protect America's Workforce Act rally on January 14, 2026.

Make no mistake: The future of the Service is at risk. This administration has made its desire to undercut the institution clear. There are those whose goal is to fatally

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CALENDAR

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

March 12
12-1 p.m.
A Federal Employee's Guide to Financial Peace of Mind Webinar

March 18
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

April 15
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

April 30
Foreign Service Day Open House

May 1
AFSA Memorial Plaque Ceremony

Update on AFSA's Legal Actions

Over the past year, AFSA has been engaged in a broad set of legal actions aimed at defending the Foreign Service and the institutions that support U.S. diplomacy.

These four lawsuits stem from different executive actions, but they are unified by a common purpose: ensuring that changes affecting Foreign Service personnel, labor rights, and core foreign policy institutions comply with the law, respect congressional authority, and preserve the government's ability to carry out diplomacy effectively.

While court proceedings can be complex, the central questions in each case are straightforward. Who has the authority to make these decisions, and what protections do Foreign Service professionals have under the law? Below we give a brief summary of each lawsuit in which AFSA is involved.

American Federation of Government Employees, AFL CIO v. United States Office of Management and Budget (Northern District of California)

The most recent lawsuit addresses an immediate and concrete threat to Foreign Service members: reductions in force (RIFs) implemented during a period when Congress explicitly barred them. In early December 2025, AFSA joined a case brought by other federal unions challenging actions by the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, and several other federal agencies, including the Department of State. The plaintiffs argue that agencies moved forward with RIFs despite a Continuing Resolution (CR) prohibiting any such actions between November 12, 2025, and January 30, 2026, and requiring agencies to rescind RIF notices tied to that period.

For Foreign Service members, the case centered on halting planned separations by RIF scheduled for December 5. Within days of AFSA joining the lawsuit, a federal court issued a temporary restraining order blocking those separations, and the government subsequently filed declarations stating that it was complying with the court's order.

The case then moved into its next phase, with AFSA and the other plaintiffs seeking longer-term relief. Following oral argument on the plaintiffs' request for a preliminary injunction (PI), the court granted the plaintiffs' request to extend the protections in place while the litigation continues.

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The Erosion of Trust

Ambassadors Ron Neumann and Eric Rubin have laid bare the implications of the outsized role of the Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF) in today's State Department. In this edition's Speaking Out columns, they raise essential questions about politicization, the future of the Foreign Service, and how we might move beyond this difficult period. Ambassador Neumann argues for dialogue within the Foreign Service family, and some BFF members are seeking dialogue as well.

The painful truth, however, is that the conditions necessary for genuine dialogue do not exist today.

The State Department is now gripped by a culture of fear and intimidation created by arbitrary reductions in force (RIFs), unilateral changes to assignment and promotion processes, the mass recall of career ambassadors, and countless other actions that undermine the foundations of the Foreign Service and our apolitical, nonpartisan nature.

Most FS members are understandably afraid to speak out, fearful that leadership will deem any comment about the department's direction as disloyal and career-ending. As a result, the voices most essential to any meaningful dialogue—those of active-duty members—will likely be absent.

As AFSA State VP, I believe we need to speak frankly about the BFF, including its role in creating this environment. BFF members are no longer insurgents challenging a system they believed unfairly imposed diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) requirements. The BFF—and, by extension, its members—are now effectively in charge. The department has fulfilled the group's primary objective by unilaterally eliminating DEIA precepts and retroactively promoting those who were allegedly disadvantaged by their inclusion.

Many BFF members now occupy senior leadership positions. The widespread belief that BFF members received favorable treatment in the recent bidding cycle underscores the perception that the BFF is a preponderant force within State. Under these circumstances, it is fair for rank-and-file FS members to demand greater transparency about BFF's role and views on the sweeping changes that have shaken the Foreign Service since January 2025.

Why Invitation Only? Strangely, for an organization that claims to be leading an effort to "reform the U.S. State Department and the diplomatic service," the BFF has chosen to wall itself off, extending membership only by invitation. This exclusivity runs counter to the values of the Service, creates a stark insider–outsider divide, and fuels a growing sense of division in our ranks.

AFSA, by contrast, welcomes all FS members to join, participate, and run for office. Employee organizations (EOs, formerly called employee affinity groups) were similarly open—and were all suspended following the January 2025 executive order dismantling DEI programs in federal agencies.

Do BFF colleagues believe that restricting membership serves our shared interest in a unified and effective Foreign Service?

Reinstate Employee Organizations? A year into the administration, more than a dozen EOs that once provided professional development, mentorship, and support across Republican and Democratic administrations alike remain shuttered—while the BFF operates with the department's imprimatur and participation of senior leadership.

The BFF understands the important role such groups play; its own statement of purpose asserts that it "fills a need that is not addressed by any other existing academic or professional association, or by any specialized 'affinity groups.'" Yet the BFF has remained silent as the department dismantled those very associations.

Many fellows also belong to AFSA, but the fellowship has likewise said nothing about the stripping of collective bargaining rights and the protections those rights afforded all members of the Foreign Service.

Silence on the RIF? We are all proud of the Foreign Service commitment to merit. In our "up-or-out" system, that commitment is why we eagerly await promotion cables, meticulously document performance in EERs, and draft award nominations for deserving colleagues.

That is precisely why the July 2025 RIFs were such an affront. While the department has the authority to conduct RIFs when necessary, it deliberately changed the rules and conducted RIFs without any consideration of merit.

More than half of the 240 RIFed FS employees were placed in competition groups of one, simply because of the job they happened to occupy at the time. At least 10 of them were also recommended for promotion by the boards. In short, the RIFs made a mockery of merit.

Despite professing a commitment to "merit in federal government personnel matters," the BFF has stayed silent about these RIFs and the betrayal of merit principles they represent. This silence cannot be attributed to a lack of views on recent developments: The BFF has publicly defended the December 2025 mass recall of career ambassadors and attacked AFSA's advocacy efforts.

Without clear answers to these questions, it is difficult—indeed, unrealistic—to imagine meaningful dialogue between the BFF and those of us who are not in the club.

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By the People

Abraham Lincoln once implored our nation not to allow a "government of the people, by the people, for the people … to perish from this Earth." We rightly focus on "of the people"—Lincoln's defense of democracy.

But we are governed "by the people." This means we cannot distance ourselves from our government's actions by saying "they" did something.

When our government acts, it acts on our behalf. We bear a special responsibility as citizens to raise our voices when actions taken in our name are morally repugnant or strategically catastrophic.

In the past year, we have seen our government dismantle the very architecture of U.S. international leadership that has saved tens of millions of lives.

January 2026 marked one year since the beginning of the end for USAID. By April, the fate of the agency was decided—not through deliberative policy review, but through rushed cost-cutting exercises ("feeding USAID to the woodchipper," to quote Elon Musk) that ignored decades of evidence. The consequences of shuttering USAID after more than 60 years are as infuriating as they are devastating to witness.

This catastrophe should unite Democrats and Republicans. Some of the greatest proponents of international assistance have been conservatives, including religious groups who believe deeply in helping those in need. USAID didn't represent one party—it represented the goodwill of average Americans and our nation's foreign policy priorities.

Between 2001 and 2021, USAID-funded programs helped prevent more than 91 million deaths globally, including more than 30 million children under age 5.

The impact was dramatic: a 65 percent reduction in HIV/AIDS mortality (25.5 million deaths prevented), a 51 percent reduction in malaria deaths (8 million prevented), and substantial decreases in deaths from tuberculosis, malnutrition, and maternal complications. These weren't mere statistics—they were children who survived to adulthood, mothers who lived to raise their families.

The Trump administration's termination of 83 percent of USAID programs has reversed these gains with brutal efficiency. Forecasting models project more than 14 million additional deaths by 2030, including more than 700,000 additional child deaths annually.

Lifesaving medications expired in warehouses mere miles from dying children. A 7-year-old died less than four miles from the facility where his treatment was stored but access was blocked. In Nigeria, pediatric malnutrition surged 208 percent in the first half of 2025, and 652 children died from malnutrition in six months.

In Somalia, annual U.S. funding plummeted from $450 million to $128 million. There, the World Food Program now reaches just 350,000 of 1.1 million people in need. HIV/AIDS treatment through PEPFAR, a program that saved 25 million lives, faces severe cutbacks.

In Tanzania and Uganda, patients ration antiretroviral medications. Women seek unwanted abortions, fearing they will transmit HIV to their children without preventive medication. The President's Malaria Initiative, which saved 11.7 million lives since 2000, has been gutted, threatening up to 17.9 million additional malaria cases annually.

These cuts harm Americans, too. Farmers who supplied food aid, manufacturers who produced therapeutic nutrition products, and countless contractors and nonprofits have seen their income vanish.

Beyond the humanitarian crisis lies strategic failure: We are dismantling the international order our nation built after World War II faster than our adversaries could have hoped.

USAID wasn't charity—it was infrastructure for American influence and a bulwark against instability.

When programs ended in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region, ISIS launched an offensive, beheading dozens and displacing thousands. In West Africa, USAID investment maintained influence in countries with deep-water ports, preventing the basing of strategic adversaries. These self-inflicted wounds are surfacing across fragile states where USAID once provided U.S. influence and stability.

China and Russia watch this abdication with satisfaction. As we withdraw, they advance—not with better humanitarian programs, but with authoritarian development models. We're ceding ground to adversaries who will reshape the global order in their image.

These deaths, this suffering, this strategic retreat—they happened in our name, with our tax dollars, under our flag.

The consequences of silence are measured in millions of lives—and in the slow collapse of an international order that, for all its flaws, represented humanity's best effort to spare future generations from the horrors of the past.

To remain silent is to forfeit our responsibility as citizens in a democracy. ■

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Retirees Supporting AFSA's Mission

The past year has brought an assault on the professionalism of the Foreign Service, on AFSA, and on many of our individual members.

Despite the efforts to weaken us, we remain fully capable of representing our members, who continue to do the important work of giving frank opinion and analysis, delivering essential services to our citizens abroad, and promoting U.S. interests through steadfast diplomacy.

We have carried this out through conducting outreach to Congress, telling our story through the media, and representing our active-duty members facing difficult times.

Members of the AFSA Governing Board are profoundly moved by the number of volunteers who have stepped forward to help AFSA through its current crisis. In particular, our retirees have risen to the occasion to help fundraise and contributed to the AFSA Legal Defense Fund and other efforts that sustain our day-to-day operations and keep our fight moving through the courts.

Sometimes what doesn't happen is as important as what does. Thanks in part to our legislative advocacy team, Kim Sullivan and Sean O'Gorman, initiatives negatively affecting retirees never made it to a vote in 2025.

For the year ahead, expect continued court battles on AFSA's recognition as a union, the illegal dismantling of USAID and USAGM, and the State Department reductions in force.

The cost of these cases is staggering. We are also providing monetary and other support to USAID FS members who are appealing their RIFs to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB).

Fortunately, we have received significant pro bono legal representation in some of our lawsuits, and your contributions to the Legal Defense Fund have carried us through 2025.

In 2026 we expect a decision from the D.C. Circuit Court regarding our right to be recognized as a union while our case proceeds on the merits in district court. We also expect decisions in our other lawsuits and in MSPB RIF appeals. Should we prevail in any or all these cases, we expect the government to appeal. See page 55 for details on each of the lawsuits in which AFSA is involved.

We have alumni chapters spread throughout the country. If you would like to stand up one of these informal groups in your area, we would be pleased to help.

As a start, you might look at the 2025 alumni directory to see who else lives in your area. There are already active groups in Florida, Minnesota, California, Maryland, Virginia, and states in New England. For a full list of retiree associations, visit https://afsa.org/retiree-associations.

With the rewrite of the Foreign Service Act on the horizon, we will monitor the provisions that could affect FS retirees. We may call on you to contact your representative and senators to express your views on pending legislation.

To all my fellow retirees, all the best for 2026.

Webinar

Work for America

AFSA recently hosted a webinar with Work for America, featuring Stacy Igner of the organization's Civic Match team. The session, moderated by AFSA's Counselor for Retirees and Alumni Brian Himmelsteib, focused on helping federal employees and retirees explore career opportunities in state and local government.

Work for America is a nonpartisan nonprofit created to address the staffing crisis facing state and local agencies, where many employees are nearing retirement and too few new workers are entering public service. Its Civic Match platform helps bridge that gap by connecting professionals, especially former federal workers and contractors, with open roles across the country.

In addition to job listings, candidates gain access to virtual job fairs, résumé Q&A sessions, and partner resources such as free coaching and career-skills training. Igner shared success stories of candidates who moved into meaningful state-level roles through the platform.

Participants asked about age and retirement considerations, residency rules, and how to translate federal or overseas experience into language that resonates with local employers.

Igner emphasized tailoring résumés to specific roles, minimizing federal jargon, and clearly highlighting transferable skills. She also confirmed that Foreign Service spouses and federal family-member employees with prior government experience are eligible to participate in the Civic Match program.

Igner encouraged attendees to create or update their Civic Match profiles and take advantage of the platform's tools and events.

A recording of the webinar is available at https://afsa.org/afsa-videos.

FOREIGN SERVICE **DEPARTURES** FOR 2025

With this edition, AFSA begins publishing lists of recent retirements and other departures from the Foreign Service.

For many years, *State Magazine* announced the names of retired State employees, but since that publication has been on hiatus since May 2025, AFSA is now offering FS members the opportunity to self-report their departure from the Service (through retirement, resignation, or RIF) for publication in *The Foreign Service Journal*. This is one small way to honor your years of service.

AFSA has created a form for FS members who choose to self-report these events. This is entirely voluntary.

Please only report your own departure, and encourage your friends and colleagues to also send in the form.

If your last day of service was on January 1, 2025, or later, and you would like to be listed, please share your information by completing the form at https://bit.ly/AFSAdepartures.

We will include your name and agency under the month that you completed your service. Please wait until you are "departure official" before reporting your separation.

The following list reflects Foreign Service members from all the foreign affairs agencies who let us know they departed the Foreign Service in 2025. Names are listed by month, in alphabetical order within each month.

February

Ira Birnbaum—USAID
Alexander M. Laskaris—State
Rebecca Ross—State
Heather Schildge—USAID

March

Deborah A. Miller—State

April

B. Bix Aliu—State
Manu Bhalla—State
Bridget A. Brink—State
Todd Katschke—State
Sarah-Ann Lynch—USAID
Cynthia L. Plath—State
Stephen A. Rice—State
Jennifer D. Washeleski—State
Catherine J. Westley—State

May

Stephen B. Banks—State
Ramona S. Crippen—State
Kristine A. Herrmann-DeLuca—USAID
Dinah M. McDougall—FCS
David S. Meale—State
Linda Stuart Specht—State
Peggy J. Walker—State

June

Gloria Berbena—State
Rachel Herr Cintron—USAID
Anne M. Dix—USAID
Cheryl L. Neely—State
John A. Pennell—USAID

July

Joseph Eniola Adesuyi—USAID
Carl J. Anderson—USAID
Maura E. Barry Boyle—USAID
Megan Bartholomew—State
Robin S. Brooks—State
Dawn C. Carmin—USAID
Randy B. Chester—USAID
Tom DiVincenzo—USAID
Brian R. Ellis—USAID
Jesse Gutierrez—USAID
Beth A. Hain—USAID
John F. Hansen—USAID
Han Kang—USAID
Maty M. Keita—USAID
Yuri Lee—USAID
SiuSue Mark—USAID
Aurelia Micko—USAID
Aleathea D. Musah—USAID
Melinda Roberts—USAID
Bryn Sakagawa—USAID
Elia E. Tello—State
Jennifer J. Tikka—USAID
Tonia Waetjen—State
Carol J. Wilson—USAID
Brandy L. Witthoft—USAID

August

Linda A. Fenton—State
John Michael Nehrbass—USAID

September

Alicia P. Allison—State
Jennifer A. Baldwin—USAID
Steven C. Bondy—State
Morgan J. Brady—USAID
Javier O. Castano—USAID
Sara M. Craig—State
James P. DeHart—State
John L. Dunlop—USAID
Michelle S. Dworkin—USAID
Mary O. Edwards—USAID
Margaret Ehr—State
Brian A. Frantz—USAID
Alexander C. Gazis—State
Andrea Goodman—State
Jeff Gringer—State
Patricia L. Hoffman—State
Ashley B. Marcus—APHIS
Michael R. McCord—USAID
Victoria L. Mitchell Avdiu—USAID
Debi Mosel—USAID
Katherine A. Munchmeyer—State
Erin Nicholson—USAID
Amber B. (Brooks) Paulin—USAID
Leah M. Pease—State
Christian (Kit) W. Redmer—State
Wendy Rich-Orloff—USAID
Adele E. Ruppe—State
Christopher J. Sandrolini—State
Iulia M. Sandu—USAID
Sergiu Z. Troie—USAID
Carolyn L. Turpin—State
Diana M. Weed—USAID
Sara M. Werth—USAID
Jean T. Woynicki—State
Dinah Zeltser-Winant—USAID

October

Ronald D. Perkel—State
Jason Vorderstrasse—State

November

Elizabeth H. Alarid—State
Joyce F. Douglas—State
Lisa A. Johnson—State
Jean E. Manes—State
Deena J. Parker—State
Daryn L. Yoder—State
Marika R. Zadva—State

December

Eric Watnik—State

At the Breaking Point
Continued from page 55

weaken the Service, standing as it does as a force for independent advice, with strong norms for principled behavior and career professionalism. Meanwhile, congressional committees that want to leave their mark on the mechanisms of diplomacy have voiced their intention to institute "reforms" of the system.

In 2026 there is interest in change, and we want to be the ones to shape it. But any change will need to start on Capitol Hill. With the administration unwilling to engage on even the smallest of matters, any reforms will need to be legislatively driven. With this in mind, AFSA is focusing on what might come next, and our survey results gave us clues as to what our members want.

Top Concerns

First we asked members what concerns them most.

The dismemberment of entire agencies (i.e., USAID, USAGM), not to mention the wholesale attack on entire bureaus and hundreds of employees, is at the top of the list. But beyond these catastrophic events, other issues are of equal concern to our members.

Many changes to the rules governing harassment and a hostile workplace, RIF rules, appointments of senior officials, and other measures have been written into the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM)—without consultation with AFSA—and will be challenging to undo in the future.

Our members also indicated their unease with the new fidelity precept, which has been poorly defined to the workforce. How will notions of "fidelity" be used in future promotion board deliberations, and will politically appointed supervisors be able to use this against the career staff?

Another concern was the abrupt cancellation of detail assignments in summer 2025, which left almost 200 people without assignments. Just as seriously, the decision burned bridges with the host organizations—military, educational institutions, local governments, and private companies—costing them anticipated staff and students and undoing years of relationship building.

Finally, members also expressed concern about the elimination of the annuity exception, an important safety net for a small number of FS members who find their long-term career prospects stymied by hiring bulges or an assignment history that does not allow for rapid promotions.

Essential FS Fundamentals

Those were our members' main concerns in this dramatic year. But what aspects of the Foreign Service do they most value and want to preserve?

An incredible 98 percent of those surveyed said that nonpartisanship should be the bedrock of the Foreign Service. No surprises there. Second on the list (at 87 percent) was maintaining collective bargaining—a response we at AFSA found gratifying.

Next, in order of support, came opportunities to move up into positions of senior leadership, pretenure FAST training, the ability to frequently change assignments, and the preservation of the FS grievance process.

Other FS basics that received high scores include the ability to frequently change assignments, and have career mix of overseas and domestic tours, the ability to take short-term tours outside the department, the up or out system, and the tenuring process.

Unhappiness with the current employee evaluation process and the annual assignments season was thoroughly noted in respondents' written responses; clearly these are perennial pain points, no matter which administration is in power. But given the unlikelihood that the current administration would be willing to deal with these items in a way that benefits the workforce, these matters may be best left for a future administration.

In a year when so much was wrong in FS workplaces, our members also indicated what they valued the most. Any reforms need to maintain the main attractions of the FS, chief among them the commitment to public service and advancing U.S. interests and values (80 percent). Members also appreciate opportunities to move and change jobs frequently (57 percent) and the opportunity to use language and cultural skills (44 percent).

AFSA'S Advocacy Priorities

With survey results in mind, we are lining up our priorities for Foreign Service reform in 2026. In considering specific proposals, we need to keep in mind that Congress is most interested in reforms that create efficiencies and remain "revenue neutral." Congress also wants changes that can be described succinctly and are easy for voters to grasp.

What do our members want to see? Leading the way is protection of the FS career pathway, from FASTO through mid-levels to positions of leadership in the Senior Foreign Service (SFS).

In second place, we find protection of career positions in the face of political appointments. Forestalling cuts to the overall foreign affairs budget that would threaten the ability for members of the FS to do their jobs thoroughly and with proper support is next on the list.

Following that are two concepts with almost identical scores: upholding the EER/Foreign Service Selection Board process and protecting the integrity of the assignments process. Finally, preservation/pro-

tection of early retirement benefits is also a priority for our members.

Beyond the simple survey boxes, what do our members care about when they write to us? The same themes come up again and again: reversing the RIFs, reforming the EER and promotion system, updating the assignment process, protecting collective bargaining and union activity, lobbying for VERA and parity with military benefits, and obtaining that elusive last tranche of OCP.

With this in mind, here are some of the proposals AFSA is considering. Most are revenue-neutral—a congressional priority—or would entail only minimal funding considerations.

• Ensure that members of the Foreign Service who are RIFed or forced into premature retirement have rehiring rights for any vacancies in their specialty and at their rank.

• Restore and protect the annuity exception. This simple provision—which allows those who reach their time in class (TIC) to continue working for another couple of years until they reach the retirement age of 50 with 20 years of service. This only affects a small number of members every year but has an outsized impact on morale.

• Institute clear guidelines for RIFs, specifically whether they are necessary and whether they are based on worldwide competitive groups that take into account rank, cone, board results, and veteran status.

• Amend 22 USC 4132 to grant the Foreign Service Grievance Board jurisdiction to decide grievances of former Service members separated without notice. Grievances must be filed before separation from the Service, but this year has seen cases of Service members who have been separated abruptly and without an opportunity to bring a formal grievance.

• Institute time limits on Bureau of Personnel and Training disciplinary cases and Diplomatic Security security investigations, which can currently drag on for years.

• Safeguard the integrity of the FS recruitment process. Department leadership is disregarding 22 USC 2651.a, 3926, 3941, and not extending hiring offers according to rank order on the register. Identify criteria for those who should join the FS, and ensure clear and open application of the rules of the FS registers.

• Require State and other agencies to supply tenure and promotion lists to the Hill on a timely basis.

• Maintain the leadership and qualifications of the Director General. For decades, human resources policy at the State Department has been led by an individual of distinguished rank and experience. This position should be designated for a member of the SFS who would retain their traditional portfolio of overseeing State Department human resources policy.

• Enact a legislative mandate for the continuation of fellowship programs for entry into the FS. Currently, several dozen members of the Rangel, Pickering, and Payne cohorts have completed their education and internship requirements and are awaiting invitations for entering classes.

This list is not exhaustive. Our experiences over the past year have led to occasions where we considered other proposals as the need for them became clear, and we expect this trend to continue. Everything we do, however, is done with the aim of protecting and guaranteeing the integrity of the Service that we love.

—Lisa Heller, Director of Professional Policy Issues

Foreign Service Grievance Board Vacancies

Half of the 20 positions on the Foreign Service Grievance Board (FSGB) became vacant October 1, 2025, after Secretary of State Marco Rubio did not make the required appointments to fill the expiring two-year terms of 10 members. Under the Foreign Service Act, the Secretary of State is responsible for appointing board members based on recommendations from the foreign affairs agencies and AFSA when it was recognized as the exclusive representative.

The board was created by Congress under the 1980 Foreign Service Act to provide due process to Foreign Service members who believe they have been deprived of a right or benefit under law or regulation. It comprises retired Foreign Service employees and professional arbitrators and attorneys well known for their integrity who serve staggered two-year terms.

Until these appointments are made, the board's caseload will continue to grow, delaying due process for Foreign Service members and harming government efficiency. Prolonged delays can also slow decisions in cases that may result in employee separations or other disciplinary actions.

AFSA continues to monitor the situation but has no authority to compel the appointments.

Legal Actions
Continued from page 55

The government appealed aspects of the district court's PI order but later withdrew its appeal.

When the government subsequently indicated that it would not rescind Foreign Service RIF notices at the State Department as it did not believe the PI required it, plaintiffs requested an urgent conference with the judge. Plaintiffs argued that the CR required the department to rescind, not simply halt, the RIF notices. The judge, however, indicated that she did not agree with this interpretation. This case is ongoing.

AFGE et al. v. Trump

Another major case involves the administration's actions affecting the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), an institution created by Congress in 1961 and central to U.S. development and humanitarian policy.

In this lawsuit, AFSA joined AFGE and Oxfam America to challenge what they argue is an unlawful effort to dismantle USAID through executive action. Early in the case, the court issued a temporary restraining order blocking mass administrative leave and forced evacuations of USAID personnel overseas, providing short-term relief while the court considered broader claims. That temporary protection was later lifted when the court declined to issue a preliminary injunction, but the litigation continued on the merits.

After months of briefing, the district court dismissed the case in July. The plaintiffs have appealed that decision, and as of January 2026, the case is before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. AFSA and the other appellants filed their opening brief on November 26, 2025, asking the court to revive the case and allow it to proceed. As of this writing, an oral argument has not yet been scheduled.

Widakuswara et al. v. Lake

Concurrently, AFSA remains deeply involved in litigation challenging the shutdown of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) and the removal of personnel (from Voice of America in particular) without due process. That case began on March 21, 2025, when plaintiffs filed a complaint in federal court, resulting in an eventual temporary restraining order that blocked efforts to reduce USAGM's workforce, terminate grants, and curtail overseas operations.

After the case was transferred to Washington, D.C., the district court issued a broad preliminary injunction requiring the restoration of personnel, funding, and programming to ensure that U.S. international broadcasting could continue to fulfill its statutory mission. The government appealed immediately, resulting in a series of stays and partial stays as the appellate court weighed which aspects of the injunction should remain in effect during the appeal.

The case has since moved forward on two parallel tracks. In the court of appeals, briefing is complete and oral arguments were held in September 2025, with a decision still pending. In the district court, proceedings have continued regarding the government's compliance with portions of the injunction, including an order temporarily blocking further reductions in force at USAGM.

Since September 2025, the court has required the government to provide more information, allowed the plaintiffs to gather additional evidence, and permitted the case to move forward with new claims, as disagreements over compliance with the preliminary injunction and efforts to change it continued through the end of the year.

The defendants started the year off by filing a reply in support of their motion to dissolve or modify part of the preliminary injunction. The final ruling on this motion is pending. Defendants most recently (January 12) filed their opposition to plaintiffs' partial motion for summary judgment as well as their own cross motion for partial summary judgment on the merits.

AFSA v. Trump et al.

AFSA is also pursuing litigation on behalf of its members to protect collective bargaining rights across the Foreign Service. That case challenges an executive order that revoked collective bargaining rights at the Department of State and USAID.

In May 2025, the district court ruled in AFSA's favor and issued a preliminary injunction. That ruling temporarily restored bargaining protections, but the government appealed, after which the district court stayed the case pending resolution of the preliminary injunction by the court of appeals.

Since then, the litigation has continued both at the district court level, where AFSA has moved for summary judgment, and in the appellate court, where judges heard oral arguments in December 2025 on whether the injunction should be vacated (even though it is stayed). The appeals court also requested additional briefing on jurisdictional issues, with filings due in early January 2026.

Each of these cases is moving on its own timeline. Some have already produced tangible results, such as temporarily stopping unlawful separations and the immediate dismantling of key institutions. Others now rest with appellate courts, where decisions may take months but could establish lasting precedents.

As these cases continue to unfold, AFSA will keep members informed and will remain engaged in defending the integrity and effectiveness of the Foreign Service.

For detailed timelines with key dates pertaining to each case, visit https://afsa.org/afsa-lawsuit-tracker. ■

NEWS BRIEF

OPM Clarifies Remote Work Exceptions

New guidance from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides important clarification for Foreign Service families affected by return-to-office policies. Under the guidance, U.S. Foreign Service spouses who are already working under an approved remote work agreement due to a Foreign Service member's overseas assignment may remain remote, provided the arrangement is not a Domestic Employee Teleworking Overseas (DETO) agreement.

In addition, although not explicitly covered by OPM's February 12, 2025, memorandum, agencies may grant limited exceptions allowing employees with existing remote work agreements to remain remote if they are married to another federal employee working in the same geographic area as the remote worksite.

To view the full memo, visit https://bit.ly/OPMtelework.

FY26 NDAA Includes State Department Authorization Act for Fifth Straight Year

For the fifth consecutive year, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) includes a State Department Authorization Act, reinforcing Congress' continued engagement with foreign affairs policy and the Foreign Service workforce. The Fiscal Year 2026 NDAA became law on December 18, 2025, after receiving bipartisan support in both chambers.

This year's State Department Authorization Act is a significantly scaled-back version of the package originally advanced by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2025, which consisted of nine separate bills. Instead, the final product reflects a compromise between the Senate-passed NDAA and three bipartisan House bills focused on political affairs, management, and public diplomacy.

Given concerns earlier in the process that partisan executive actions could be codified into statute, AFSA generally welcomes this narrower bipartisan approach.

The legislation codifies key State Department bureaus and their corresponding under secretaries and assistant secretaries, as well as the schools responsible for training members of the Foreign Service. It also authorizes an assistant secretary for human resources, with statutory language clarifying that the role is not intended to conflict with or duplicate the responsibilities of the Director General of the Foreign Service.

AFSA strongly supports several provisions included in the final bill, including codification of the Veterans, Pickering, Rangel, and Payne Fellowships; extension of overtime pay authorization for Diplomatic Security protective services; and a fix to the HAVANA Act that moves eligibility for Foreign Service members back to September 11, 2001. This change, for which AFSA has advocated over multiple years, provides parity for the Foreign Service with other federal employees affected by qualifying anomalous health incidents.

The State Department Authorization Act includes numerous provisions directly affecting the Foreign Service. Members are encouraged to consult AFSA's policy update newsletter for detailed analysis. Key Foreign Service–related sections include:

- Sections 5133–5136: Authorization of the Veterans, Pickering, Rangel, and Payne Fellowships.
- Section 5172: Support for congressional delegations.
- Section 5173: Notification requirements for authorized and ordered departures.
- Section 5175: Establishing and expanding the Regional China Officer program.
- Section 5177: Notification of intent to reduce personnel at covered diplomatic posts.
- Section 5178: Extension of reporting requirements on Foreign Affairs Manual changes.
- Section 5201: Report on vetting of Foreign Service Institute language instructors.
- Section 5202: Secretary-level approval requirement for eliminating long-term training.
- Section 5204: Assessment of options for comprehensive evaluations.
- Section 5205: Job-share and part-time employment opportunities.
- Section 5206: Promoting reutilization of language skills.
- Section 5508: Reauthorization of overtime pay for protective services.
- Section 5602: Quarterly report on diplomatic pouch access.
- Section 5604: HAVANA Act payment eligibility date extension.

D.C. Rally for Rights

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA staff and members gather in support of federal workers' collective bargaining rights.

At a January 14, 2026, rally near the Capitol, hundreds of federal workers and union allies gathered to urge the Senate to pass the Protect America's Workforce Act (PAWA), legislation that would restore collective bargaining rights stripped from 1.5 million federal employees by a March 2025 executive order.

The rally followed a successful, national mobilization led by AFL-CIO that pushed the Republican-controlled House to pass PAWA 231-195 in December 2025, despite opposition from the Trump administration. With the focus now on the Senate, organizers encouraged the public to call their senators and press for action.

U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) both spoke at the rally. Van Hollen said: "By protecting the federal workforce, we also protect the American people and the good work that you do on behalf of the American people."

AFSA participated as part of a broad coalition of labor organizations, with the position that collective bargaining supports a professional, nonpartisan Foreign Service and strengthens U.S. diplomatic readiness.

The executive order that canceled collective bargaining agreements government-wide also voided AFSA's agreements with the State Department and USAID, leaving most Foreign Service professionals without key workplace protections.

At the rally, Randy Erwin, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, warned "We are in a dangerous place if the president thinks it is at his discretion to decide what rights Americans have." The right to bargain collectively is grounded in the First Amendment, Erwin argued. Actions taken by Trump and his former Office of Management and Budget director, Russell Vought, set a precedent that extends far beyond federal workers.

PAWA would reinstate those protections, restore canceled contracts, and reestablish due process safeguards. The bill now needs 60 votes in the Senate; supporters currently count 49 and are targeting persuadable Republicans.

As Erwin told the crowd, the fight is about more than labor law. "This is a constitutional issue," he said. "Senators, you have to protect the American people."

AFSA Welcomes New Intern

Melia Hathorne Klingler

Melia Hathorne Klingler joins AFSA this semester as the spring 2026 scholarships and membership intern supporting the membership team.

She is a senior at American University, where she studies international relations with a focus on peace, global security, and conflict resolution.

Melia has previously worked as an intern for the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington and the State Department Pakistan Office. She hopes to join the Foreign Service.

Melia is training for the Cherry Blossom 10-miler this spring, and in her free time you can probably find her running, reading, or baking.

Welcome, Melia!

Vote to Protect Unions

AFSA is closely watching the Protect America's Workforce Act (HR 2550), which would reverse a March 2025 executive order that stripped certain groups of federal workers, including Foreign Service members at the State Department and USAID of their collective bargaining rights.

In November, 218 House lawmakers signed a discharge petition bill, forcing a floor vote on the legislation. The discharge petition was called up in December, and bipartisan votes took place without leadership support. Both procedural votes passed, and HR 2550 passed by a vote of 231-195. Twenty Republicans voted for the bill.

While the Senate is not expected to pass the bill as a stand-alone measure, it could come up in future congressional negotiations, especially those related to government funding.

AFSA President on the Road

AFSA President John Dinkelman traveled to Florida in mid-January for a multiday outreach trip that included three speaking engagements with current and retired members of the foreign affairs community, as well as civic audiences interested in the state of U.S. diplomacy.

Dinkelman addressed audiences at a World Affairs Council program in St. Petersburg, an informal "Café con Tampa" discussion, and the annual general meeting of the Foreign Service Alumni Association of Florida.

Across all three engagements, he spoke candidly about the unprecedented challenges facing the U.S. Foreign Service, the erosion of institutional capacity across foreign affairs agencies, and AFSA's evolving role as both a professional association and a defender of the diplomatic workforce.

A central theme of his remarks was that diplomacy is ultimately carried out by people and that weakening the professional, nonpartisan Foreign Service has direct consequences for U.S. security, economic competitiveness, and the protection of Americans overseas.

Dinkelman highlighted AFSA's recent workforce survey and report, "At the Breaking Point," and the association's decision to pursue litigation to defend legal protections for the Foreign Service.

"When we talk about strong U.S. diplomacy, we often focus on strategy and geopolitics," he said at the World Affairs Council. "But diplomacy is carried out by trained professionals serving on the front lines. If that workforce is hollowed out, our diplomacy suffers, no matter how good the strategy looks on paper."

Speaking to alumni, Dinkelman emphasized the continued importance of engagement and advocacy beyond active service. "Even in retirement, you can make a difference," he said. "AFSA needs you now to show that the Foreign Service is still worth fighting for."

Dinner Event Supports AFSA Legal Defense Fund

On the eve of the January 25 snowstorm, 55 AFSA supporters gathered for a dinner in Arlington, Va., organized by a group of AFSA alumni volunteers. The event raised more than $16,000 in support of the AFSA Legal Defense Fund.

AFSA extends its thanks to the volunteers for their organizational and culinary talents, and to the guests who braved a cold winter night to show their generosity and support.

"It was heartwarming to see so many AFSA colleagues gather in support of the Foreign Service community. My thanks to the organizers and particularly the venue staff who volunteered their time on a Saturday night in support of AFSA. It was a perfect way to spend a winter evening," remarked FS alum Ambassador Jennifer Galt.

The alumni volunteer group plans to host additional social events this year to raise resources in defense of AFSA and the Foreign Service. They are also happy to share tips and ideas with others interested in organizing similar events in their communities.

To learn more or get involved, contact the volunteers at AFSAvolunteers@gmail.com.

For more information on the Legal Defense Fund, visit https://afsa.org/legal-defense-fund.

COURTESY OF SUE SAARNIO

AFSA supporters gather for a Legal Defense Fund dinner in Arlington, Va., on January 24, 2026.

AFSA Governing Board Meeting, December 10, 2025

The board accepted the resignation of Gunter (Eric) Schwabe as USAGM representative.

The board agreed to change the AFSA Employee Handbook by: (1) removing a paragraph relating to personal calls in the office; (2) removing the AFSA-paid Family and Medical Leave Act benefit; and (3) making other nonsubstantive changes for clarity, language, specificity, redundancy, or spelling errors, as detailed in the distributed draft AFSA Employee Handbook revision.

A Tribute to Ambassador Ruth A. Davis

COURTESY OF PATRICIA SCROGGS

From left: Ambassador Pamela Spratlen, Stacy Williams, and Ambassador John Bass at the event on November 19.

A celebration honoring the late Ambassador Ruth A. Davis was held at AFSA headquarters on November 19, 2025, bringing together colleagues, friends, and foreign affairs community members to reflect on her contributions to U.S. diplomacy and steadfast commitment to strengthening the foreign affairs workforce. The Phoenix Rising Committee, a group dedicated to advancing Ambassador Davis' vision, organized the event and will lead other initiatives inspired by her life and legacy.

Speakers underscored Ambassador Davis' dedication to investing in aspiring, emerging, and established leaders, while championing equitable access to opportunities, as essential to effective U.S. diplomacy.

The committee launched the "Friends of Ambassador Ruth A. Davis" network, designed to attract, train, and mentor the next generation of foreign affairs professionals. It also announced the establishment of an endowed scholarship, providing tuition support for students majoring in international studies at Spelman College, her alma mater. In Spring 2026, the committee will support an inaugural Ambassador Ruth A. Davis Lecture Series.

The committee reached its goal to endow the scholarship by late 2025 and will continue to fundraise to support more students.

To donate to the fund, visit https://bit.ly/Davis-donation.

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA staff greet new FS members at the January 28, 2026, open house at AFSA HQ.

AFSA Welcomes New FS Class

AFSA hosted an orientation reception on January 28, welcoming nearly 80 new Foreign Service members for drinks, light hors d'oeuvres, and an introduction to the association. The class included generalists, specialists, and Diplomatic Security agents.

AFSA President John Dinkelman and Director of Membership and Programs Christine Miele welcomed the group and highlighted AFSA's role as both a professional association and advocate for the Foreign Service.

AFSA Governing Board member Connor Ferry-Smith spoke candidly about early-career challenges: "You have the right to mentors and supervisors who will value and develop you, and where you don't have that, AFSA can step in."

Former Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security Greg Starr stressed the practical value of AFSA membership. "For a few dollars every pay period, you buy a hell of a lot of insurance for your career," he said, urging attendees to view membership as essential professional protection.

The evening concluded with an informal reception, allowing new officers to connect with AFSA leadership and one another as they begin their FS careers.

AFSA welcomes all new FS members to the community; go to https://afsa.org/membership to sign up for AFSA membership.

War on Labor Unions Webinar

SERVICE DISRUPTED

On November 20, 2025, AFSA hosted a virtual event examining the accelerating "war on federal labor unions" and its implications for governance, professionalism, and democratic accountability. The discussion brought together labor historian Joseph McCartin, AFSA General Counsel Sharon Papp, and AFGE Deputy General Counsel Thomas Dargan.

Together, they traced the evolution of federal labor relations to the present moment. Their discussion illustrated a deliberately bipartisan system designed to ensure stable institutional performance now under sustained pressure. Panelists stressed that federal unions were created not to obstruct management but to strengthen government by protecting professionalism and insulating public servants from politicization.

Speakers also warned that the erosion of these protections carries consequences beyond the federal workforce. Weakening collective representation undermines institutional memory, discourages candid advice, and ultimately degrades the quality and continuity of public service on which democratic governance depends.

A recording of the event is available at https://www.youtube.com/@AFSAtube.

NOMINATE A COLLEAGUE FOR AN AFSA AWARD

Honor the excellence of the Foreign Service and achievements in performance and constructive dissent.

DISSENT AWARDS

The W. Averell Harriman Award for an Entry-Level Foreign Service Officer
The William R. Rivkin Award for a Mid-Level Foreign Service Officer
The Christian A. Herter Award for a Senior Foreign Service Officer
The F. Allen "Tex" Harris Award for a Foreign Service Specialist

PERFORMANCE AWARDS

The Mark Palmer Award for the Advancement of Democracy
The Nelson B. Delavan Award for a Foreign Service Office Management Specialist
The M. Juanita Guess Award for a Community Liaison Office Coordinator
The Avis Bohlen Award for an Eligible Family Member
The Post Rep of the Year Award for an Outstanding AFSA Post Representative

Nominations are due March 27, 2026 via **www.afsa.org/awards**.

Winners will be celebrated at the AFSA Awards Ceremony in Fall 2026.
Select awards come with a monetary prize.
Learn more at **afsa.org/awards**.

Life After the Foreign Service

Diplomacy in Demand

University Students Are Eager to Learn from Practitioners

Students study international relations theory, but they want to know how the diplomatic sausage is actually made, this retired FSO found.

BY MARK C. STORELLA

When I retired from my three-decade career in the Foreign Service in 2020, I joined the faculty of the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University.

I was asked to apply for the slot as a Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy in part because of experience I had garnered in two stints as a fellow at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and dean of the Leadership and Management School at the Foreign Service Institute. Pardee reserves several faculty positions for practitioners from the worlds of diplomacy, development, intelligence, and security. No PhD required!

The application involved assembling a dossier of résumés, publications, teaching experience, and the like. Pardee then invited me to campus to teach a class, play speed dating in short interviews with a dozen faculty and students, and give a "job talk" to the faculty, who then subjected me to an impromptu thesis defense.

I loved all the scholars and students I met, and I was eager to move back to Boston, my hometown. So, when they made the offer, I jumped.

Still, I wondered what students would think of what a former diplomat had to offer.

Practitioners in Demand

Six years in, I am happy to report that diplomacy—and the experience former foreign affairs professionals can offer—is very much in demand among university students. Here are a few reasons why.

First, students are intellectually curious about our professions. They study international relations theory but are also eager to know how the diplomatic sausage is actually made. In courses on international negotiation and health and humanitarian diplomacy, students are thrilled to hear how diplomats use the tools available to practitioners to build a coalition to advance a resolution in an international organization. They are wide-eyed about how an embassy is run, what diplomatic immunity means

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COURTESY OF MARK STORELLA

The author celebrates with a former graduate student, Yuka Seto, now a Japanese diplomat serving in South Sudan.

"in the wild," and how diplomats protect their citizens from everything from terrorism to corrupt foreign practices.

Students are fascinated by our war stories about VIP visits, representational events, the dangers and rewards of dealing with the press, and our often minor roles in major events.

Second, they want to learn the real-life skills practitioners know best. In all my classes, I eschew formal research paper assignments in favor of decision memos and policy briefings based on State Department formats. Students love to try their hand at negotiation simulations. In the fall semester, my undergraduates negotiated a bilateral tariff deal between two fictional countries—a success—and peace between Ukraine and Russia in a multilateral conference—not so much of a success.

My graduate students role-played an interagency policy coordination committee to make recommendations to the president on how changes in Syria could herald new opportunities for durable solutions for Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons.

One of my students, who later landed a job in the prime minister's office of her home country, told me that she used the State Department memo formats she learned at Pardee to prepare her principal. She found her practice conducting "elevator briefings" in class invaluable when she had to brief her principal on the run. "That is what they actually do, and I knew how," she told me.

Third, university students today are laser-focused on getting their first job. Despite all the turmoil in our profession, these students are looking over the horizon and considering how they can establish a beachhead in a career they will grow into. They seek advice from practitioners on how to network and even introductions to prospective employers.

Finally, students are eager to meet our former colleagues in class or through speaking events.

In the last year alone, a senior UNHCR official, a former head of the USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, a former U.S. ambassador to Myanmar, and a senior civil servant who was a top expert on humanitarian assistance all addressed my classes.

While it can be humbling, my student evaluations often point to guest lecturers as the most exciting part of my courses.

Getting Started

For those of you who are contemplating academia as an encore to a foreign affairs career—whether in a faculty position or as an adjunct or guest lecturer—I urge you to jump in. Assemble ideas on the practical experiences you want to share. Consider the specific job skills you could teach. Think about how you could connect students with potential employers. And consider the great former colleagues who might dazzle young minds.

It would also be valuable to consider courses you would like to teach and begin preparing a syllabus. AFSA lists resources for teaching at https://afsa.org/teaching-diplomacy.

Also consider a job talk you might deliver to faculty or an existing class. For my interview with Pardee, I spoke to a class on great power competition in

U.S. EMBASSY LUSAKA

Ambassador Mark Storella (left), Zambian Minister of Finance and National Planning Situmbeko Musokotwane (center), and Minister of Health Kapembwa Simbao shake hands on signing the PEPFAR framework in November 2010. This photo appeared on the May 2017 *FSJ* cover.

Africa and delivered a (premature?) talk to faculty on the coming centrality of multilateral diplomacy.

If you seek a full faculty position, it certainly helps to have the title of ambassador, but it is not required. There are about a dozen universities around the country that explicitly employ former foreign affairs professionals as full faculty members. Among them are Georgetown, George Washington, Princeton, Davidson, the University of Colorado, Boston University, Simmons University, Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and the University of Virginia.

For more leads, please consult the article Jillian Burns and I wrote on the subject in the January-February 2020 *FSJ*. [Also see the January-February 2015 *FSJ* Focus on teaching diplomacy.]

You can also get your foot in the door through guest lectures and adjunct teaching (which is notoriously poorly compensated but may help you learn if you enjoy the work). With most universities facing increasing budget pressures, some are not filling vacated faculty slots and will need more adjunct faculty to teach classes. Taking the initiative to reach out to universities to offer your services may pay dividends in the current environment.

An easy way to get started is to speak to civic associations and the like. I recently delivered a talk called "The Diplomat: Fact or Fiction?" to the Wellesley Club in Massachusetts based on the popular Netflix series "The Diplomat."

In 2024 I was fortunate to receive the Gitner Family Prize for Faculty Excellence. In a sign of appreciation for what practitioners bring to the academy, one of the student nominations noted: "What sets Professor Storella apart is his commitment to go beyond conventional teaching methodologies. He seamlessly integrates his wealth of real-world experiences into his classroom, bridging the gap between theory and practice."

Despite all the turmoil in international affairs—and maybe in part because of it—students want to learn what we know, and they hope to do what we did. You have a wealth of experience to share that students and universities will value. ■

FROM AFSA'S ONE-STOP RETIREMENT SERVICES WEBPAGE

When to Apply for Social Security

One of the most important financial decisions facing American retirees is when to start receiving Social Security benefits. You can apply anytime between age 62 and 70. For every month you wait after your 62nd birthday, your monthly payment rises but you permanently forgo the skipped payments.

So, what is the best age to start? ... Here are factors to consider.

Are you still working? If you are earning significant income from a job or self-employment and you have not yet reached your full Social Security age (age 67 for everyone born after 1959), then you probably do not want to start Social Security yet because the earnings test before that age [in 2025] reduces Social Security benefits by $1 for every $2 in earned income over $23,400 a year. ...

What is your life expectancy? For every month you wait to start Social Security, your payment rises at an annual rate of 6 to 8 percent. That makes waiting to apply a relatively good investment, but only if you live long enough for the total value of the added monthly benefit to exceed the monthly payments that you skipped. ...

When do you need the money? If you are either financially strapped or just want to increase spending on things like travel while you know you are in good health, you may want to start Social Security early despite the downside of locking in a lower monthly payment for life. On the other hand, consider if you might need that higher monthly payment in late retirement to cover long-term care costs ...

The above is excerpted from AFSA's Retirement Services page at https://afsa.org/retirement, containing more than 100 documents and links with useful information.

AFSA Counselor for Alumni and Retirees Brian Himmelsteib is available to help AFSA members with retirement-related questions. If you hit bureaucratic snags with your retirement benefits or just do not know how to get a particular matter resolved, contact Brian at himmelsteib@afsa.org.

Frank Branch Crump, 89, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on December 26, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

Born on July 25, 1936, Mr. Crump grew up in the farming community of Enfield, N.C. He graduated, in a class of 20, from Enfield High School in 1954 and then attended Wake Forest College and the Russian Institute (now the Harriman Institute) of Columbia University.

In 1964 he joined the U.S. Foreign Service, launching a diplomatic career he found professionally and personally rewarding.

After his first posting, in London, Mr. Crump focused on Africa. After a posting in Lusaka, he completed a master's degree in international relations with an Africa specialization at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1971.

He then served as U.S. consul in Kisangani, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), from 1971 to 1973, before pivoting back to his original focus on Russia.

After working on nonproliferation issues in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Mr. Crump was assigned to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) as a Russia analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. His final assignment was to U.S. Embassy Riyadh.

After retiring in 1989, Mr. Crump worked at Embassy Moscow, where he and his wife interviewed applicants for U.S. political asylum during the dramatic period of the Soviet Union's dissolution.

From 1992 to 2018, Mr. Crump worked on human rights issues for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. He researched asylum issues for use by U.S. asylum officers and edited the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights.

In between, at age 70, Mr. Crump completed a stint as deputy head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Yerevan.

In 2018, at age 82, Mr. Crump retired for good.

Until his late 80s, he remained an enthusiastic tennis player and enjoyed research on his family history and choral singing.

Family and friends recall that he was a good-natured contrarian who both enjoyed and believed in the value of broad-ranging and open-minded discussion of politics, there was little he loved as much as discussing world events over a meal.

Mr. Crump was predeceased by his son, William (and spouse Deb); sibling Harriette (and spouse John) Partin; and his first wife, Anne Petersen.

He is survived by his wife of 47 years, Donna Newby Crump of Arlington, Va.; two daughters, Anne Avery of Fort Collins, Colo., and Catherine Crump (and spouse Bryson Bennett) of Berkeley, Calif.; and four grandchildren, Haley Avery, Corvus Crump, Nathan Bennett-Crump, and Theodore Bennett-Crump.

Betty Coxson Dols, 91, a Foreign Service spouse, died peacefully on December 17, 2025, at her retirement community in Alexandria, Va.

Ms. Dols was born in Littlestown, Pa., on April 8, 1934. In 1952 she graduated from Littlestown High School and in 1954 from Garfield Nursing School in Washington, D.C.

Ms. Dols met Emmett Coxson, an Air Force veteran and diplomat with the U.S. State Department, at Grace Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C. They married on Thanksgiving Day in 1957 and settled in Alexandria, Va. Shortly afterward, the couple moved to Ecuador for Mr. Coxson's first overseas assignment.

Their children were born at successive posts: Gregory in Ecuador, Molly in Sudan, Sue in Romania, and Andrea in Washington, D.C. Ms. Dols worked as an embassy nurse at several posts.

Following Mr. Coxson's death in Prague in 1972, Ms. Dols married Air Force veteran and Foreign Service Officer Richard Dols in 1974. They blended their families and moved to Wellington, New Zealand, for Mr. Dols' four-year posting, then moving to Alexandria, Va.

In 2002 the couple relocated to Midlothian, Va., and in 2020 Ms. Dols returned to Alexandria, taking up residence at Goodwin House retirement community.

Ms. Dols had many interests, but her enduring passion was flower arranging. She discovered Ikebana International while living in New Zealand and joined an Ikebana group and Garden Club when she returned to Virginia.

Ms. Dols won many ribbons for her arrangements and became a certified flower judge. She continued to arrange flowers for Goodwin House until she was no longer able to. She always carried secateurs in her walker.

Active in her church, Ms. Dols served in Circle, choir, flower committee, and outreach. She founded and served as president of a Parkinson's support group in Midlothian.

Ms. Dols was predeceased by her second husband, Richard Dols, in 2006.

Ms. Dols is survived by four children from her first marriage, Gregory Emmett Coxson, Kristin Marie "Molly" Gill (and spouse Tony), Susan Irina Stufflebeam, and Andrea Meredith Keum; three stepchildren from her second marriage, Sheilah Jean Lose, Richard Stephen (and spouse Steve) Dols, and Jonathan Reidy Dols; and 17 grandchildren—Gabriel, Michael, Daniel, Nathaniel, Kelly, Steven, Zachary, Jacob, Claire, Molly, Joseph, Julia, Kevin, Marcus, Corinna, Madeleine ("Maddi"), and Toril ("Tori")—and one great-grandchild expected in March.

Paul M. Fermoile, 73, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on October 20, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

He was the son of the late Marilyn and John D. Fermoile Sr.

In 1970 Mr. Fermoile graduated from DeSales Catholic High School and then earned his bachelor's degree in government, summa cum laude, from Georgetown University.

After stints with the U.S. Customs Service and Internal Revenue Service, he became a naval officer and spent 20 years on active duty and in the reserves. He received numerous awards and decorations, rising to the rank of commander.

In 1997 Mr. Fermoile joined the U.S. Foreign Service. He held consular posts in South Africa, Mexico, Chile, India, Panama, and Washington, D.C. He retired in 2017.

Mr. Fermoile embraced a variety of interests including travel, dining, reading, golf, dance, international affairs, voice acting, and aviation. In later years, he became an avid hiker, leading group hikes in Northern Virginia and even walking Spain's Camino de Santiago in 2023.

Friends and family members recall his curiosity, his sense of humor, and his zest for life.

Im Sun Fermoile, his beloved wife of 35 years, died in 2016. He was also predeceased by his brother, John D. Fermoile Jr., and sister, Diane Fermoile-McAvoy.

Mr. Fermoile is survived by his stepson, Cory (and spouse Stacy Fischer) Paige, and two grandchildren; brothers Marc (and spouse Colleen) Fermoile and David Fermoile; brother-in-law Jerry McAvoy; and nieces Kelly (and spouse Mike) Helmuth and Megan (and spouse Adam) Huczel.

Marjorie Ruth Harrison, 78, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on December 11, 2025, at her home outside Washington, D.C.

A native of Newton, Mass., Ms. Harrison graduated from Brandeis University in 1969, with a degree in American history.

After stints teaching English as a second language in the U.S., she joined the Peace Corps in 1974, served in Kuala Lumpur, and helped found the Boston Area Returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

She worked teaching English to foreign students and returned to the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst) to pursue a career in higher education, earning her doctorate in education in 1981.

She then moved to upstate New York for a position as the assistant dean of students at Colgate University. There she was involved in the local community, serving as the executive director of the Madison County Rape Crisis Service.

In 1984 Ms. Harrison relocated to Pittsburgh, Pa., as dean of students at Chatham College (now Chatham University). She was an active member of the Pittsburgh Area Peace Corps Association and served on the board of directors for the Pittsburgh Women's Shelter.

In 1992 Ms. Harrison left academia to join the U.S. Information Agency as a public diplomacy officer and served in the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Benin, India, Mauritius, and Malaysia.

Friends recall how she relished connecting people and learning from her local colleagues, qualities that fit perfectly with her work as a cultural affairs or public affairs officer, connecting artists and scholars across oceans and building kinship among people.

Throughout her career, Ms. Harrison collected beautiful arts and crafts, memories of her travels. Each and every puppet and piece of pottery came with a story.

A lover of fabric and fiber, she sought assignments in countries with a ministry of textiles and assembled a collection she planned to donate to the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C.

In 2010 she retired from the State Department after her second bout of cancer.

Splitting her time between Washington, D.C., and Cape Cod, Ms. Harrison continued to make art and travel until the pandemic, visiting every continent. In her professional and recreational travels, she met the Dalai Lama, swam with horses, cuddled koalas, and walked with penguins in Antarctica.

Friends and family members remember Ms. Harrison as a bon vivant, amused intellect, optimist, and generous and curious soul, who delighted in hosting Friendsgivings and seders for her communities.

She contributed to a wide range of charitable causes, particularly animal welfare, foreign aid, and education. She was rarely without a canine companion, including beagles Cassie and Annabel, Jake (an honorary beagle), and her beloved Chloe, who was at her side when she died.

Donations may be made in her memory to the Marjorie R. Harrison International Impact Fund, School of Education, at UMass Amherst.

Donald V. Hester, 83, a retired Foreign Service officer, died peacefully in his sleep on August 31, 2025, at Arden Courts Memory Care in Annandale, Va.

Mr. Hester was born on June 11, 1942, in Oak Park, Ill., to Vance C. and Lella B. (née Apple) Hester. After completing his bachelor's degree at American University, he pursued his lifelong passion for international relations, completing a master's degree in public administration from Syracuse University and a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1969 Mr. Hester married his wife, Ingrid, and in 1970, he began his 25-year career with the U.S. Foreign Service.

Together, the couple raised a family while serving overseas in Canada, Chad, Rwanda, Pakistan, and Liberia.

After retiring in 1996, he served another 10 years on the State Department's political-military action team.

Mr. Hester also remained closely connected to American University, serving as an adjunct professor, a founding member of AU's Friends of the Library, and a member of the Library Council.

A lifelong musician, Mr. Hester devoted 47 years of his life to the City of Fairfax Band as a euphonium player. He participated in countless indoor and outdoor concerts, as well as the Fourth of July parades. He enjoyed the camaraderie of his bandmates and relished providing the gift of music to his community.

Mr. Hester leaves behind his loving wife of 56 years, Ingrid (née Weiss) Hester; children Karen Abrams (and spouse Tim) of Washington, D.C., and Nicole Hester of St. Augustine Fla.; grandchildren Claire, Daphne, and Oliver; brothers Richard Hester of Coeymans Hollow, N.Y., and John Hester (and spouse Elaine) of Greenville S.C.; niece Katie; and nephews Erich and Jonathan.

Edward John Hinker, 84, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away peacefully on February 14, 2025, in Arlington, Va.

Born in Chamberlain, S.D., Mr. Hinker was the son of a family who valued education and community.

In 1963 he graduated from the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., with a bachelor's degree in German and a Minnesota Secondary Teaching Certificate.

Mr. Hinker then taught German language and culture, as well as U.S. and world history, in Minnesota junior and senior high schools. Even early in his career, he reflected deeply on the value of teaching.

In 1969 Mr. Hinker joined the U.S. Foreign Service. As a State public diplomacy officer, he served in West Germany at Bonn, Frankfurt, West Berlin, and Munich, where he became director of the Amerika Haus, a major U.S. cultural and information center.

There he organized lectures, exhibitions, and performances that brought together Americans and Germans with shared cultural interests.

He also arranged visits by individuals from around the world, including celebrities, orchestras, Apollo astronauts, and renowned opera singer Jessye Norman. During the 1972 Munich Olympics, Mr. Hinker invited U.S. track and field athlete Jesse Owens to speak about his 1936 Olympic experience.

Returning to Washington, Mr. Hinker served in the United States Information Agency's Office of Public Liaison. He coordinated the agency's public programs, media outreach, and awards; edited the USIA Newswire; and organized public briefings and seminars designed to help Americans understand the role of diplomacy in foreign policy. In 1997 he retired as chief of the Public Programs Branch in the Office of Public Liaison.

As a young man, Mr. Hinker had spent a summer crisscrossing Europe with his brother, Ron, in a Volkswagen. Later, through family connections and his Foreign Service career, he traveled to every continent, visiting destinations from Egypt's Valley of the Kings to China, India, Southeast Asia, Oman, Africa, and South America.

A favorite family memory was celebrating the new millennium on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, followed by adventures in Sydney and New Zealand. One of his final journeys was a photo safari in Tanzania.

At home in Arlington, Va., Mr. Hinker found joy in the company of friends, classical music, Shakespeare, live theater, cooking for others, and quiet afternoons on his garden patio with his beloved cats. An animal lover, he regularly volunteered at the local shelter.

To his family, Mr. Hinker was not only an uncle and brother, but a cherished companion and mentor. Christmas was never complete without Uncle Eddie's storytelling and his annual reading of *The Night Before Christmas*.

Mr. Hinker is survived by his brother, Ron; sister Kay; nieces Danielle, Liesl, and Devon; great niece Eloise; and great nephews Kyle, Garrett, and Oliver.

Because he requested there be no memorial, anyone who wishes to leave a remembrance may make a donation in his name to the Animal Welfare League of Arlington at www.awla.org.

Sheldon Krebs, 83, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer, died on August 12, 2025, in Washington, D.C., from the effects of a stroke.

Mr. Krebs was born in New York City on January 30, 1942, to Charles and Beatrice Krebs. Growing up in Brooklyn and Queens, where he attended primary and secondary school, he developed an interest in theater, books, and the arts, as well as following the Yankees.

He went on to earn degrees at Harpur College (now Binghamton University) in Binghamton, N.Y., and Cornell University Law School, in 1963 and 1966, respectively.

While at Harpur, Mr. Krebs applied to the Experiment in International Living and was placed for a summer with a family in Gdynia, Poland. After travel in Poland and Russia, he passed the Foreign Service exam before leaving law school.

In 1966 Mr. Krebs joined the Foreign Service. His first posting with the State Department was as a consular officer in Berlin from 1967 to 1969. He was then

given a directed assignment to Vietnam, as was the case for many young, single FSOs. As part of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), he was based in Nha Trang, where he managed a survey research program.

After Vietnam, Mr. Krebs was assigned to the Bureau of International Organizations where he focused on United Nations political affairs. With the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, however, Mr. Krebs was recruited to temporarily return to Nha Trang to do political reporting.

In 1975 he began Japanese language training for an assignment to Tokyo as executive assistant to Ambassador Mike Mansfield. He then went to Sweden as a political officer.

Drawing on his experience in Sweden, Mr. Krebs was subsequently assigned to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in Washington, D.C., in 1980. With the steady stream of Vietnamese "boat people" fleeing their country, there was an urgent need for U.S. assistance, and Mr. Krebs was sent to Singapore, then Jakarta, to help set up camps to house, feed, and process refugees.

In Jakarta, he participated in negotiations with the Indonesian government to permit the refugees to be temporarily settled on a remote island while they awaited resettlement in other countries.

He also took on TDY assignments in Thailand and Malaysia to deal with the flood of refugees leaving Cambodia to escape the Khmer Rouge.

Mr. Krebs then returned to Washington to become a China desk officer from 1982 to 1984. There, he was frequently called on to prepare speeches on China-related issues for senior administration officials in the department and the White House.

Following the desk assignment, Mr. Krebs served as senior watch officer in the Operations Center from 1984 to 1986.

From there, he moved to the Bureau of Legislative Affairs for two years, where he kept congressional committees informed about critical policy issues in East Asia.

Mr. Krebs then entered Dutch language training for an assignment to Antwerp as consul general from 1989 to 1992. After, he spent a year as political officer in Malaysia, before returning to Europe to be consul general in Zurich.

Upon retiring in 1999, Mr. Krebs settled in Hillandale, a community in Washington, D.C. He enjoyed getting in touch with his many friends in the area and making new friends among his neighbors through swimming at the pool, participating in a book club, attending concerts and movies, and traveling.

Mr. Krebs is survived by his brother, Alan Krebs, of Seattle, Wash.

Those close to him are grateful for his extraordinary caregiver, Tashena Taylor, and assistance from a special friend, Marsha Scialdo.

Christine Marthaler Kursch, 81, a Foreign Service spouse, passed away peacefully on December 19, 2025, in Washington, D.C., after a prolonged illness.

Ms. Kursch was born on February 4, 1944, in Bern, where she was raised and studied fashion design, including an internship with Christian Dior.

In 1966 she immigrated to Canada, later working as a model at EXPO 1967 in Montreal. Returning to Switzerland that year, she met her future husband, Donald Kursch, a U.S. diplomat on his first overseas posting, in Bern. The couple married there in 1968.

During her husband's 37-year career in the Foreign Service, Ms. Kursch accompanied him, serving in Budapest, Moscow, Bonn, and Brussels.

She became well known for her ability to reach out to the people of the countries to which we were accredited. In Hungary in 1987, she put together a gala fashion show event to raise funds for the new American School of Budapest, the first time this had been done in a country behind the then Iron Curtain.

During their postings in Washington, D.C., Ms. Kursch worked with couture fashion at Saks-Jandel, Garfinckels, Bloomingdales, and Elizabeth Arden, where she was the fashion manager of its Connecticut Avenue store.

Her warmth, kindness, and organizational talent touched many through her work as president of the American Women's Club of Bonn, the American Club of Budapest, the Stauffacherin (a Swiss American Women's Group in Washington, D.C.), and as an active volunteer at Annunciation Church.

Ms. Kursch is survived by her husband of 57 years; their daughter, Catherine, and granddaughters Zoe and Sasha of Kirkland, Wash.; her sister, Anne Marthaler, of Zurich; and her brother, Fritz Marthaler, of Bern.

Charles Harrison Frazier Meade, 97, a retired Foreign Service officer, died peacefully on October 11, 2025, surrounded by family, at his home in Newcastle, Maine.

Mr. Meade was born in 1928 in Charlottesville, Va., to Mary Frazier and Richard Hardaway Meade. He spent his childhood years in Miquon, Pa., and Crozet, Va.

Mr. Meade earned a BA in history from Harvard University. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he completed an MA in foreign affairs at the University of Virginia.

He joined the Foreign Service in 1954, beginning a career that spanned four decades. Overseas assignments included Malaysia, United Kingdom, the Philippines, and Haiti.

Before leaving for the Philippines, Mr.

To submit an obituary for In Memory, please send the complete text (up to 500 words) to InMemory@afsa.org.

Be sure to include the date, place, and cause of death, and details of the individual's Foreign Service career.

Submissions must come from, or be confirmed by, a next of kin or other family member.

Meade completed a one-year course at the University of Michigan to prepare him for the assignment.

One of his joys during his time in Manila was his daily bicycle commute to the U.S. embassy, a source of solace, independence, and exercise. He rarely used other transportation, even after powerful typhoons swept through the region.

Mr. Meade subsequently served in the Pentagon and at the State Department in Washington, D.C., on the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar desks.

In 1972 he took a sabbatical to study oceanography and underwater photography under the tutelage of renowned underwater photographer pioneer Cathy Church in the Cayman Islands. He later received an MS in oceanography from the University of Rhode Island.

In 1986 Mr. Meade retired from the State Department.

A lover of nature, he was devoted to his cats, Calico, Torte, and Jennyanydots, and relished snorkeling and scuba diving in the Philippines and Haiti. He also had a lifelong passion for sailing, rooted in childhood summers at his grandfather's cottage on North Haven.

During his final overseas post, in Haiti, Mr. Meade acquired a 38-foot sloop, *Fortuna*. After his tour ended, he embarked on an 11-day voyage through the Bahamas to Florida with friends and family, later sailing the boat to Chesapeake Bay and eventually Penobscot Bay. He even took up writing mystery novels with a nautical theme.

Mr. Meade's devotion to his wife, Susan, was unwavering. Overseas, she accompanied him through demanding social schedules and shared equally in recreation and play.

After his retirement, the couple lived briefly in Georgetown, S.C., and Richmond, Va., before buying a home in Newcastle in 1993. There, he became a dedicated driver for Lincoln County Friends in Service Helping (FISH) an all-volunteer organization in Damariscotta that offers free rides to people who need transportation.

He also tutored at Nobleboro Central School. A fluent speaker of French, he religiously scheduled an hour of online language instruction before lunchtime every day.

Together, the Meades founded the Haiti Fund at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Newcastle in 1998, raising funds through Haitian art sales to support a school in Figaro, a mountain village. After the 2010 earthquake, they expanded their work through the Lincoln County Ecumenical Committee for Haiti.

Mr. Meade was predeceased by his wife of 70 years, Susan, on January 11, 2025, and by his brothers, Richard Hardaway Meade and David Everard Meade.

He is survived by a brother, James Gardiner Meade; daughter Jennifer Meade; two sons, Andrew Meade (and spouse Lila Metres Meade) and Billy Meade; four grandchildren, Kristen, Lily, Elizabeth, and Nathaniel (and spouse Katelynn); and one great-grandchild, Evren.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Lincoln County FISH. Checks for FISH should be made out to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, with both his name and FISH in the memo line, and sent to LCFISH, c/o St. Andrew's Episcopal, P.O. Box 234, Newcastle ME 04553.

Condolences and messages for his family may be expressed by visiting www.stronghancock.com.

Robin Diane Meyer, 68, a retired Foreign Service officer, died in Washington, D.C., on December 24, 2025, from gastric cancer, surrounded by her family.

Ms. Meyer received her bachelor's degree from Grinnell College and master's degrees from Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs and the U.S. Naval War College.

She then worked at the Department of Justice on the resettlement of Cubans and Haitians who arrived during the 1980 Mariel boatlift and at the Department of Commerce on steel trade issues.

In 1988 Ms. Meyer joined the U.S. Foreign Service, serving in Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Ecuador, as well as the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York.

At the State Department, Ms. Meyer led offices focused on the United Nations and Central Africa. She received numerous awards for her work. In 1996, following her expulsion from Cuba by its government, a *Washington Post* editorial, "Our Woman in Cuba," praised her "personal courage and fortitude" in her contacts with Cuban human rights activists.

After 34 years with the Foreign Service, Ms. Meyer retired, volunteering as a mediator at a community mediation center and with voter protection organizations.

Ms. Meyer is survived by her beloved siblings, sisters June Meyer and Lindy Meyer, and brother Harris Meyer (and spouse Deborah Mihm), as well as her niece, Scarlet Levy, and nephew, Oliver Levy. She was buried in her hometown of Chicago, Ill.

The family will hold a memorial in Washington, D.C., for Ms. Meyer on her birthday, March 22, 2026, from 3 to 5:30 p.m. at the Edlavitch D.C. Jewish Community Center, 1529 16th Street NW. Friends and colleagues are invited to attend and share memories of Ms. Meyer and her work.

What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

To Lose a War: The Fall and Rise of the Taliban
Jon Lee Anderson, Penguin Press, 2025, $30.00/hardcover, e-book available, 356 pages.

Reviewed by Keith Mines

What sets Jon Lee Anderson apart as a chronicler of the U.S. experience in Afghanistan is the length and breadth of his reporting on the country. *To Lose a War* spans the fall of the Taliban in the winter of 2001 through their comeback in 2022, while drawing on earlier trips to the country during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.

Raised abroad as the son of a USAID official, Anderson is a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and has been a journalist and war correspondent for decades, reporting from Afghanistan, Iraq, Latin America, Africa, and throughout the Middle East. In recent reporting he gave a unique close-up look at gangs in Haiti. Previous books include *The Lion's Grave: Dispatches from Afghanistan* (2002), *The Fall of Baghdad* (2004), and *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (2010).

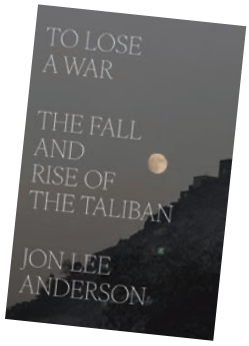
No other book that I'm aware of covers the entirety of the U.S. experience in Afghanistan as comprehensively as *To Lose a War*. It is in many ways a painful story to tell.

Anderson engages with Afghans and Americans at all levels—from the grunts in outposts to the generals in Kabul, from common Afghan citizens to Hamid Karzai in the palace, from local shuras to high-level meetings. He also covers all regions of the country.

Given the huge disparity in how Afghans perceived their national project, this breadth of interactions was important to understanding the country's dynamic and the challenge of forging a national spirit in a place Anderson describes as "more of a battleground of history than a nation."

With unsentimental but spirited and penetrating reporting and analysis, *To Lose a War* makes a major contribution to our understanding of the war and what went wrong.

Anderson told me it is his hope that the book shows "how the war was lost, over time, through a combination of wishful thinking, distractions [such as] Iraq, mixed motives and aspirations on the part of the successive U.S. governments that oversaw the war."



He laments that this loss occurred "in spite of the legitimate police action that took us there in the first place and also, tragically, in spite of the courageous sacrifices of thousands of Americans and their allies who served there—and countless Afghans as well." Anderson hopes that there are lessons to be learned and that his work will help cement those lessons for future policymakers and strategists.

Was It Inevitable?

One question that must be asked is: Could things have turned out differently? Anderson lets the reporting speak for itself without explicitly answering this.

He observes at one point that the challenge of "building a nation out of warring interests has for the most part proven overwhelming." In a report from southeastern Afghanistan, he refers to an area of "tribal intrigue, anti-American sentiment, and quickly shifting loyalties." And he writes that as early as 2012 the outside forces had outlived their welcome and were seen as toxic.

I do take some issue with this last assessment. While it may have been true in the south and southeast, in the nine northern provinces I covered as consul general during 2012–2013, it was not. There, governors still welcomed our assistance, and citizens were distraught when provincial reconstruction teams began to close down and NATO forces departed.

This is a heavy read, especially for those who served in Afghanistan.

Still, embedded in Anderson's reporting are hints of what might have gone differently even as he is clear about the trade-offs that would have been required. He reports, for instance, on how, after being shunted aside in 2001, the Taliban remained in the shadows, waiting to regroup—something I experienced and reported on from the Loya Jirga in 2002, but was put in the "too hard" box by officials in Washington.

Anderson accurately comments on the resistance Afghans have to outside intervention. And he explains how this bumped up against the need for foreign mentorship given the weakness of the new government's institutions, which he

rightly observes were often starting from scratch.

He captures the middle of the war accurately—a "reckless, almost casual affair" fought from U.S. bases that were a "surreal blend of primitive with futuristic." But he also reports on the success of special operations forces in counterterrorism operations, and elsewhere of the value of advisers to Afghan forces.

A lengthy and painful chapter recounts the unavoidable contradictions in anti-drug operations, an impossible mission from the start given the economic driver of drugs in impoverished regions.

With the wild mood swings of our force posture and strategy—from benign neglect to surge, and back to neglect again—one wonders from this body of reporting if a more consistent, Afghan-centric strategy might have yielded a better outcome.

The End of Nation-Building?

This is a heavy read, especially for those who served in Afghanistan. By the middle of the book one can see where the plot is going and precious few paths out of it. But one hopes we will not *overlearn* the lessons of Afghanistan and assume there is no place we can be helpful to a nation in such a crisis, as it seems we may be doing. A contemporary nation-building project with Afghanistan was Colombia, which was largely successful.

In a final chapter ("The End of the American Empire?"), Anderson references a conversation with British MP and Afghanistan expert Rory Stewart, who bemoans the total lack of continuity in America's post-9/11 world view and global position compared to the consistency of the Cold War.

"To see this lurch to isolationism that is so sudden that it practically destroys everything we've fought for together for 20 years is deeply disturbing," Stewart says.

Anderson concludes by noting: "The American era isn't quite over, but it isn't what it once was, either."

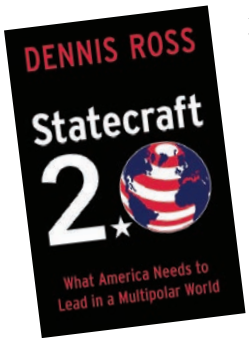
Keith Mines retired from the Foreign Service in 2019 after a 28-year career and served another five years as vice president for Latin America at the U.S. Institute of Peace. He did two postings to Afghanistan, in 2002 and 2012–2013. He is the author of Why Nation-Building Matters: Political Consolidation, Building Security Forces, and Economic Development in Failed and Fragile States *(2020), reviewed in the April 2021* FSJ.

Lessons in U.S. Foreign Policy

Statecraft 2.0: What America Needs to Lead in a Multipolar World
Dennis Ross, Oxford University Press, 2025, $21.95/paperback, e-book available, 496 pages.

Reviewed by Joseph L. Novak

Upset by misguided policies? Troubled by abruptly changing goals? Fed up with poor implementation? Fear not. Ambassador Dennis Ross' new book, *Statecraft 2.0*, provides a tutorial on how to align objectives with means in foreign policy. It also offers in-depth case studies in successful as well as failed statecraft, while analyzing current U.S. foreign policy challenges.



Ross is a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a professor at Georgetown University. A bipartisan figure, he has served in many national security positions, including as Middle East envoy during the Clinton administration and as director of policy planning at the State Department from 1989 to 1992. He has written several books; this one, his most recent, expands on his 2007 book *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.

The author defines statecraft as "knowing how best to integrate and use every asset or military, diplomatic, intelligence, media, economic, organizational, and psychological tool policymakers possess (or can manipulate) to meet their objectives." While somewhat unwieldy, the definition is serviceable, with Ross using it to assess what works in foreign policy terms and what does not.

As a former top diplomat, Ross understands that U.S. foreign policy is not made in a vacuum. Early on, he frames how Americans have traditionally looked at the U.S. role in global affairs by setting out the spectrum of realist, internationalist, and isolationist perspectives. Placing a spotlight on such scholars as Hans Morgenthau and Robert Kagan, he deftly sketches out how various schools and shadings of thought have shaped U.S. policymaking.

As a former top diplomat, Ross understands that U.S. foreign policy is not made in a vacuum.

U.S. Foreign Policy in Action

The section focused on illustrative examples of U.S. foreign policy in action makes up most of the book.

Ross correctly gives the George H.W. Bush administration high marks for how it managed German reunification. He explains how the administration "developed a clear objective" and "moved quickly to gain control of the agenda."

Condoleezza Rice and Philip Zelikow's *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (1995), a must-read on the subject, makes many similar points.

Ross expertly conveys the confusion that initially beset Washington as it wrestled with the consequences of the breakup of Yugoslavia. He describes how Richard Holbrooke took control of U.S. policy and orchestrated the Dayton Accords in 1995.

As the author relates, "The marriage of force and diplomacy was carried out masterfully." He also cites Holbrooke's memoir, *To End a War* (1998), which paints a vivid portrait of the Bosnia endgame.

With the good comes the bad, and the U.S. government has sometimes charted the wrong course while making other errors in judgment. In this respect, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 remains an object lesson in the risks of groupthink and inadequate contingency planning.

Ross' overall appraisal is stark but on target: "It would have been hard to practice statecraft more poorly than the George W. Bush administration did in going to war in Iraq."

On the positive side of the ledger, the Bush administration began to ask hard questions. This led to the surge, i.e., the deployment of more troops to Iraq in 2007. It was a difficult decision to make, but the move helped stabilize the situation. Ross is right to emphasize how "the objective and means were in sync."

In Ross' astute telling, Syria was another instance where U.S. policymakers were not up to the task at hand. In the wake of the Iraq quagmire, the Obama administration did not want to intervene in the civil war. With Washington stuck in neutral, Russia intervened in support of the Assad regime, and the refugee problem metastasized, sparking a backlash in Europe. *Statecraft 2.0* was in publication when insurgents suddenly toppled the regime in December 2024.

Ross also probes the U.S.-led intervention in Libya. The Obama administration initially claimed that the aim was "to save the Libyan civilian population," but the reality was more complex. With the downfall of the Qaddafi regime in late 2011, the United States disengaged while Libya's internal power struggle ramped up. Ross, an adviser to President Obama at the time, believes that the U.S. government could have done more to avert the turmoil.

The Value of Back Channels

The chapter on how to deal with China's expanding influence is persuasively written. The author notes the limits of the Cold War analogy, commenting: "The Soviets were a military threat but never an economic competitor."

He sensibly supports enhancing ties with governments that share U.S. concerns about China. While emphasizing that much will depend on Beijing's attitude, he makes a compelling case that we need to keep the door open to engagement.

Statecraft 2.0 is at its best when Ross details how he and other American negotiators worked closely with foreign counterparts in resolving knotty problems. He convincingly advocates the use of diplomatic back channels because they "permit the introduction of ideas or testing of possibilities in a way that formal talks simply preclude."

Ambassador William J. Burns' magisterial 2019 work, *The Back Channel*, is full of insightful examples of the type of creative and assertive diplomacy favored by Ross.

Unfortunately, *Statecraft 2.0* has a textbook-like quality. The author tries to enliven the narrative with anecdotes, but the prose is still a bit dry at times. Having said that, it is well worth the effort.

Ross has decades of firsthand experience in foreign affairs, and his voice is an authoritative one. His latest work presents a masterclass in how lessons drawn from the past can inform present-day policymakers and practitioners. ■

Joseph L. Novak is a writer based in Washington, D.C. He is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in London and a retiree member of the American Foreign Service Association. A former lawyer, he was a Foreign Service officer for 30 years.

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Did Wyatt Earp Smuggle a Puppy into Sweden?

BY BEATRICE CAMP

Celebrity visitors can be both a benefit and a hazard of Foreign Service life. Some are sponsored by the U.S. government (USG) to reach audiences abroad, while others fall into embassy laps for a variety of reasons and results.

Sometimes our role can feel a bit surreal, which I experienced escorting "Coal Miner's Daughter" actress Sissy Spacek to the decidedly not-glamorous Beijing Film Studio as part of our nascent cultural engagement with the People's Republic of China in 1985.

Some visitors are a delight, such as a pre-senatorial Tammy Duckworth, who passed around her prosthetic arm to an audience of children with disabilities at a school in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2019.

Some can be both irascible and inspiring, as Betty Friedan revealed on a USG-sponsored visit to Hungary in 1998. And some are trouble that requires embassy intervention, such as the time a consular colleague was dispatched to tell Elizabeth Taylor she had to relinquish the endangered gibbon she was transporting on the Forbes yacht docked on the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok in 1988.

And yet, who can resist a celebrity? As a childhood fan of the TV series "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp," based on the legendary lawman of the old West, I was thrilled to learn that the lead actor was coming to Sweden with a group of American students.

Hugh O'Brian, who portrayed Earp in the 1955–1961 popular TV show, was also the founder of the Hugh O'Brian Youth Leadership Foundation (HOBY), a nonprofit youth leadership development program for high school students.

After guiding a group of such students through the USSR in 1991, O'Brian had contacted the U.S. embassy in Stockholm for a briefing for the group. I quickly volunteered.

I was more than happy to talk to the high school students and meet my childhood hero. To prepare I subjected our clueless Swedish staff to renditions of the Wyatt Earp theme song.

And I bought bags of M&Ms and chips for the American kids I imagined would be starved for such tastes of home after their sojourn in the Soviet Union.

My offerings were indeed appreciated, and the late-afternoon briefing went well. After bidding the group goodbye, I changed into my biking-home clothes and unlocked my bike from the embassy fence. At that point my duty phone rang.

Arriving at the customs office—now in my role as that week's duty officer—I learned that my hero had been charged with smuggling a dog into Sweden, which had a strict six-month quarantine for any animals brought into the country. O'Brian contended that he had bought the puppy in question on the dock in Stockholm, after disembarking off the ferry from Tallinn in Estonia.

COURTESY OF BEA CAMP

Publicity photo of Hugh O'Brian as Wyatt Earp given to the author in 1991.

Given that Sweden is not a country with many stray animals, especially not ones for sale to someone stepping off a boat in Stockholm, this story was hard to credit.

While customs officials went to the hotel to interview the students, I sat in the office with O'Brian, who plied me with lipstick and pens, trinkets that the group had brought along to gift at meetings in the Soviet Union.

Did Wyatt Earp smuggle a puppy into Sweden? I don't know what the leadership participants told the Swedish custom officers, but it was agreed that O'Brian would leave the next morning with the students, the puppy, and no charges.

I recorded the incident in the duty book as assistance to an American citizen. Although my fanship suffered a blow, the theme song still rings in my ears.

Beatrice Camp's Foreign Service career took her to China, Thailand, Sweden, and Hungary, in addition to Washington, D.C., assignments at the U.S. Information Agency, the State Department, and the Smithsonian Institution.

LOCAL LENS

The highest mountain in the United Kingdom at about 4,400 feet, Ben Nevis derives its name from the ancient Gaelic language, meaning "mountain with its head in the clouds" (along with another, "venomous mountain"). Halfway through my ascent, the fog and rain at the base were beginning to lift, but the mountain behind was still shrouded in mist, affirming its name. ■

Aidan Gorman is a former Foreign Service family member who currently lives in Portsmouth, England. He took this photo last fall using a Sony A1 camera with 35mm lens.

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