

THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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MAY-JUNE 2026



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Plus

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International
Economy

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May-June 2026 Volume 103, No. 3

FOCUS ON AI IN DIPLOMACY

31 Leading from the Edge: How Diplomats Are Actually Using AI

By Paul Kruchoski

34 Beyond Borders: What U.S. Diplomats Can Learn from Global AI Innovation

By Virginia Blaser

37 AI Should Assist, Not Replace, U.S. Diplomats

By Mahvash Siddiqui

40 Transforming Diplomatic Productivity with AI

By Daniel Crocker

44 Are AI Consular Officers in Our Future?

By Ian Hopper

47 US(AI)D: What Launching AI Tools for Communicators Taught Us

*By Victoria Mitchell Avdiu and
Michelle (Staley) Swain*

50 At the Intersection of AI and Foreign Policy: A Q&A

An Interview with Kelsey D. Atherton

ON THE COVER:

iStockphoto/Nattapon Kongbunmee.



FEATURE

53 First Contact: Uncle Sam Meets Vladimir Putin

By Damian Leader

LIFE AFTER THE FOREIGN SERVICE

73 Beyond the Mission: Reinventing Yourself After Government Service

By Dawson Law

EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT

76 Education in the Foreign Service: Navigating Transitions, Neurodiversity, and Academic Pathways

By Evan Wilson

83 Education at a Glance

PERSPECTIVES

- 7** **President's Views**
A Trifecta for 2026
By John "Dink" Dinkelman
- 9** **Letter from the Editor**
It's the People
By Shawn Dorman
- 28** **Speaking Out**
Diplomats Required:
Shaping the New International
Economic System
By Alan Larson
- 105** **Reflections**
The Trembling Earth:
Guatemala, 1976
By Vincent Chiarello
- 106** **Local Lens**
Svalbard, Norway
By Noah E. Rose

DEPARTMENTS

- 10** Letters
- 16** Letters-Plus
- 22** Talking Points
- 89** In Memory
- 99** Books

MARKETPLACE

- 101** Real Estate
- 103** Index to Advertisers
- 104** Classifieds

AFSA NEWS

THE OFFICIAL RECORD OF AFSA

- 58** AFSA Welcomes Embassy Evacuees Home
- 58** Service Disrupted—One Year Later
- 59** State VP Voice—Strength in Numbers
- 60** USAID VP Voice—Taking Care of Yourself and Moving Forward
- 61** Retiree VP Voice—Retirees Are Still in Service
- 61** Legal Defense Fundraiser
- 63** AFSA Member Meetup
- 63** Read the Latest Press Releases
- 64** Rally Marks One Year Since USAID Dismantling
- 65** Foreign Service Departures
- 66** Changes at AFSA's Office of General Counsel
- 67** Court Rules VOA Firings Unlawful
- 67** MSPB Appeals Process Demystified
- 67** AFSA Governing Board Meetings, January 21 and February 18, 2026
- 68** Do Diplomacy and Development Have a PR Problem?
- 68** State Renames Personnel Bureau, Again
- 69** The Next Career Chapter
- 69** Reviewing Your Retirement Plan
- 70** Proposed AFSA Bylaw Amendments
- 72** USAID Memorial Wall Finds New Home

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A Trifecta for 2026

BY JOHN “DINK” DINKELMAN

On this Foreign Service Day, as we celebrate those who have served our nation, I offer up a “trifurcated” column: equal parts gratitude, concern, and cautious optimism.

Gratitude: In every organization, there’s at least one person who develops a reputation for reliability, stability, wisdom, and trust. They come to embody the ideals of the organization—which, in turn, benefits from their attributes as well as their service.

Such has been the case with AFSA General Counsel Sharon Papp, who, as this edition hits the newsstands, will be retiring after close to 34 years with the association. Sharon is well known for her honesty and integrity. Thousands of us in the Foreign Service have benefited from her dedication, passion for justice, and, most importantly, visible care for the work she did and the people she did it for.

The sadness we feel at AFSA contemplating working without her is (mostly) offset by the joy we feel for her decision to step into and enjoy a well-deserved new chapter of life. She will remain a prime example of how a professional life can be well lived while also being a stellar colleague. Congratulations and thank you, Sharon!

Concern:

Regarding the evacuations of thousands of Americans from the Middle East following the U.S. and Israeli

attacks on Iran, what can I say other than, “It should not have happened this way.”

While AFSA commends and thanks the hundreds of dedicated professionals—federal employees, contractors, and volunteers—who worked assiduously to support these evacuations in the face of increasing hostilities, I must continue to strongly protest the obvious disregard for the Foreign Service as demonstrated in both the planning and execution of the current war against Iran.

It is appalling that thousands of our fellow citizens, including our diplomats *and their families*, would not be moved out of harm’s way prior to the initiation of hostilities. The treatment of Foreign Service family members as pawns in a large-scale military campaign is the latest in a growing list of examples of the low regard in which leadership holds these loyal Americans who have chosen to dedicate their professional lives to the nation they love.

AFSA calls for responsible leadership to immediately conduct a full review of the decisions made and actions taken that led to our people being deliberately left in harm’s way.

AFSA continues to support those patriotic members of the Foreign Service who remain at their stations throughout the Middle East, conducting America’s diplomacy and helping their fellow citizens in anything but diplomatic circumstances. We wish them and their military counterparts safety and success as they work to bring this war to an expeditious resolution.

Cautious Optimism: I am grateful to the various employee organizations

(EOs) and other FS-adjacent groups that responded to my request for letters about their on-the-ground realities in the wake of the cessation of official recognition of EOs in 2025.

The responses demonstrate that there is much good work *not* being done to support our community—simply because well-meaning people feel stifled for fear of retribution. Even more revealing was some groups’ reticence to respond because association with organizations that have fallen out of favor is now risky. I don’t blame them—after all, emails sent to DEIA truth@opm.gov (established in January 2025 to collect reports of DEI initiatives) are not returned as “undeliverable,” are they?

Nevertheless, I remain cautiously hopeful that this initial attempt to shine light on the challenges our profession faces internally will enable us to move forward—hopefully together—in determining how the Foreign Service can advance in this new environment.

For this reason, I repeat my earlier calls for “affinity groups/employee organizations” to provide input to the *Journal* on their operational status. Write to journal@afsa.org.

And I call on leadership to unfreeze EO activity and convene all FS-affiliated groups for a summit of sorts, where all parties recognize that the present divisions detract from our ability to serve the nation we all love. Share your thoughts by emailing dinkelman@afsa.org or member@afsa.org. ■



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

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The Foreign Service Journal is now welcoming submissions for “In Their Own Write,” our popular November–December focus highlighting the literary talent of the Foreign Service community. Share your works of fiction and nonfiction in time for holiday shopping.

To be featured, your book must be published between July 1, 2025, and September 1, 2026, and be available for purchase by September 1, 2026. It must not have been included in a previous *FSJ* collection. Current and former members of the Foreign Service and their immediate family members are eligible to submit a book for consideration. AFSA members will be given priority.

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—The *FSJ* Team

It's the People

BY SHAWN DORMAN

Today there are troubling signs for the Foreign Service and diplomacy more broadly. Professional career diplomats have been sidelined.

Under the banner of “reorganization,” whole offices and programs were closed, diplomats pushed out. USAID was erased by DOGE, along with most of its lifesaving work and staff globally. USAGM/VOA faced a similar fate.

Litigation continues.

In December 2025, more than 30 U.S. ambassadors were sent packing without reason or warning. Most posts in the Middle East were without confirmed ambassadors when the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran began on February 28. The need to evacuate Americans from the region appeared to come as a surprise to the administration, putting thousands of U.S. citizens at risk.

Meanwhile, internally, employee organizations have largely been silenced due to the chilling effect of the administration’s efforts—through executive orders, Office of Personnel Management guidance, and Foreign Affairs Manual changes—to purge words, programs, and people related to or hinting at support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), collective bargaining, climate, immigration ... the list goes on. Dissent is not tolerated.

Our AFSA president has called on leadership to “convene the vari-



Shawn Dorman is the editor of The Foreign Service Journal.



“I'd like to hear the full range of perspectives.”

ous disparate elements of the FS community” for dialogue to address internal divisions. He asked for input from employee groups. Seven responses are in Letters-Plus. Some groups are absent due to fear of retribution.

One group that hasn't been silenced is the Ben Franklin Fellowship. In the March-April Speaking Out, Ambassador (ret.) Eric Rubin wrote “What's Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?” In this edition, you'll find a response from BFF co-founder Simon Hankinson in Letters-Plus.

Some of our readers may question why the *FSJ* would provide a platform for this exclusionary group. We hear you. But we did publish a strong critique of the BFF in the *FSJ*, and they deserve a chance to respond. The *FSJ* Editorial Board and staff stand by our commitment for the *FSJ* to be a forum for diverse views on issues of concern to the foreign affairs community.

It is our hope that airing differences will help spur productive conversation that can lead to a way forward, and that all voices from the many groups that represent the FS community will be welcomed again.

Related, I am thrilled to welcome back to the *FSJ* pages diplomat cartoonist extraordinaire Brian Aggeler with a new cartoon that fits this moment. Look for more from him in upcoming editions.

This edition's Focus on AI in diplomacy speaks for itself. Don't miss this set of articles by practitioner authors, each bringing a unique lens to the topic. A common theme emerges: While AI will be utilized in myriad ways across the U.S. government, it cannot be a substitute for human judgment and engagement.

We return to the foundational value of the Foreign Service: the people. Face to face, the last three feet, on the ground across the world. ■

Covering a Fraught Era

I would like to thank *The Foreign Service Journal* for its superb January-February issue honoring excellence and constructive dissent.

I appreciated the right-to-the-point frankness of AFSA President John Dinkelman and AFSA State Vice President Rohit Nepal's columns. Mr. Dinkelman's comment that there is "little hope that things will improve for the Foreign Service anytime soon" was certainly troubling, as was Mr. Nepal's remark that "it's been hard to wrap my mind around the damage and cruelty of the past year."

There is no sense in trying to white-wash what has taken place. Both are correct that the Foreign Service needs to persevere and play the long game.

I also want to flag the article focused on Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the recipient of the 2025 AFSA Award for Lifetime Contributions to American Diplomacy. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield's manifold accomplishments deserve full recognition. She has left a lasting mark in many areas and, without a doubt, is not done yet.

In the accompanying interview, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield correctly noted the trying times that the Foreign Service is going through. I could not agree with her more when she expressed her enthusiastic support for AFSA.

On a decidedly lighter note, the article by Dick Virden about an official trip he took to north central Thailand in 1968 was pleurably diverting. The fact that he was reimbursed for renting an elephant to clear a trail certainly reflected well on his admin unit.

We're living in a fraught era where many of our assumptions are being harshly challenged. The January-February issue is the latest example of

the *Journal's* consequential coverage of the evolving situation.

Joseph L. Novak
FSO, retired
Washington, D.C.

Honoring Moral Courage

Thank you for the January-February issue of the *FSJ*, particularly the "Posthumous Award for Dissent: Honoring Moral Courage in the Face of Injustice." If only everyone understood the dedication and sacrifices of those who chose the diplomatic life in service to our great country.

My grandfather Laurence Steinhardt, a U.S. Foreign Service officer and ambassador to six countries under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, used to say, "We must put our best foot forward. It is our obligation to God, humanity, our country, and each other"—more casually referred to in our clan as the three C's: Church (God), Country, and Community.

As philosopher George Santayana said: "He who does not study past history is doomed to repeat it." Never more applicable than currently.

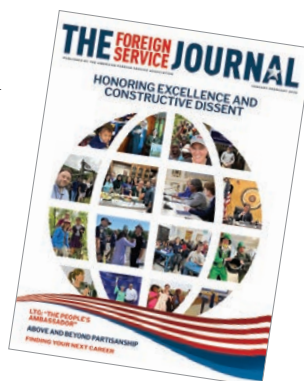
Please thank Associate Editor Mark Parkhomenko for this excellent article.

Let us hope and pray for our nation that we never again mint the U.S. presidential seal on our currency with the eagle's head facing a clutch of arrows rather than facing the laurel branch.

Laurene A. Sherlock
Granddaughter of U.S. Ambassador
Laurence A. Steinhardt (1892-1950)
Washington, D.C.

Resisting Injustice

With deep gratitude for your journal, I read the January-February edition on AFSA Awards in which you highlighted



the 2025 Posthumous Awards for Dissent. In a compelling article, you honored the 12 U.S. career diplomats who collectively saved thousands and thousands of lives during the Holocaust years.

The article challenges on a personal level: Would I have the courage to do today what these diplomats did? This article inspires the honesty to ask the question and offers the courage to remain steadfast in voicing constructive dissent to the situations in America today.

The Foreign Service Journal continually resists injustice and inhumanity in steady, quiet, and highly impactful ways. I am an "ordinary" citizen not affiliated with AFSA, but fortunate enough to have signed up for email links to the magazine. Thank you for your moral courage.

Mary Ellen Weir
Belmont, North Carolina

MIA: Leadership Culture

Ambassador Eric Rubin's article in the March-April *FSJ*, "What's Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?," fails to acknowledge the lack of a leadership culture at State. While it is unclear whether BFF's expanded role will ultimately strengthen the State Department, our organization suffers from weak leadership, historically dominated by self-interested officers, which leaves us exposed.

The minimization of State is a bipartisan effort. We have only ourselves to blame for our abysmal culture of leadership. The *Journal* has published volumes of well-researched, actionable strategies to strengthen State. Let's stop complaining until we have our house in order.

John Fer
FSO
Washington, D.C.

Dual Citizen FSOs

While Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann's defense of a professional Foreign Service ("Our Professional Foreign Service Is in Danger," March-April *FSJ*) is laudable, his article misses a far more active and concrete threat to our diplomatic corps: the current policy of hiring dual citizens.

Neumann's concern over graduates from specific universities focuses on a speculative, future danger that is contingent on a particular political outcome. He is, in effect, sounding the alarm about a potential leaky faucet.

This presupposes a collective bias that is not only unprovable but also overlooks that our recruitment process draws from hundreds of varied institutions, making a complete ideological capture highly unlikely.

Conversely, the issue of dual citizenship is the house fire happening now. This is not a speculative risk; it is a current State Department policy that sanctions a tangible, legal allegiance to a foreign power. A diplomat's loyalty must be undivided.

To grant the immense privilege of representing the United States to an individual who holds a legal obligation to another nation creates an immediate and undeniable conflict of interest. It is baffling that we would focus on a potential future problem while our policy actively permits a structural vulnerability today.

It is this tangible conflict of allegiance, not the speculative ideology of future hires, that poses the true danger to our fragile diplomacy.

Our focus must be on the singular

allegiance of our diplomats, because when they sit at the negotiating table, any hint of dual loyalty is a liability that skeptical nations can exploit, and an invitation for the diplomat's other country to undermine our efforts and dissuade cooperation.

Andrew Ford Ryan
FSO, retired
Burke, Virginia

In Appreciation of Robin Meyer

On Christmas Eve 2025, the Foreign Service lost one of its finest diplomats. Robin Meyer combined political and economic acumen with empathy,

dedication, humility, patriotism, and expert leadership, building bridges across nations and inspiring colleagues worldwide to excel.

News of her passing, shared on my LinkedIn page, drew more than 50 tributes from entry-level officers, former ambassadors, and locally employed staff alike. They praised her integrity, toughness, courage, mentorship, empathy, and wisdom.

"She taught me many of the foundational diplomatic skills that served me throughout my career." "A loss for the country." "There was no one more knowledgeable, smarter, or more thoughtful than Robin." "A light in the Department of State." These reflections capture the profound impact she had on both policy and the people who served alongside her.

Despite facing hurdles within the department and harassment and surveillance from foreign governments, she served with distinction and pride. Early in her career, Cuba expelled her for documenting human rights abuses.

Later successes, such as leading the embassy as chargé d'affaires in Ecuador and arranging the first U.S.-Ecuadorian presidential meeting in 17 years, advanced U.S. foreign policy even as they drew little attention at home.

Committed to ensuring the American public understood the work of its diplomats, Robin championed outreach through the department's "hometown diplomat" program and engaged directly with foreign and U.S. students and civic groups, both in person and on video calls.

After retiring, she continued to serve her community and used her diplomatic skills as a mediator, resolving conflicts and guiding people toward solutions.

She approached every issue and problem with an open mind, using her experience and that of others to guide discussion and decision-making. She then presented those decisions at every level—from students to journalists to presidents—with professionalism, credibility, and, sometimes, humor.

She remained humble about her accomplishments. Had she known I would write this letter, she may have tried to dissuade me, probably saying that others have done more than her. I write it anyway, because this reminder of what diplomatic excellence looks like is needed.

At a time of profound change within the Foreign Service, the Department of State, and the U.S. government, Robin Meyer's example endures. Her courage, care, commitment, and dedication to country, Constitution, and colleagues remain a model for all who aspire to be consummate diplomats.

Robin Holzhauer
FSO, retired
Orlando, Florida





Remembering Moises Mendoza

When we think of diplomats who will be remembered for consistency of integrity and moral courage, Moises Mendoza is one of our institution's giants. He passed away on February 12, 2026, a day after his 42nd birthday. He was the best of us.

He was the kind of FSO who sought out hard postings, from consular work in Matamoros to serving in Haiti as a political officer. Stateside, he served in the Ops Center and at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, both demanding jobs infamous for pushing people to their outer limits.

Before his sabbatical, he was already contemplating onward assignments to Juba or Port-au-Prince. Moises consistently put service over self, always wanting to contribute to something bigger than himself. He was the kind of public servant our nation was profoundly lucky to have.

He also had the courage to act when it mattered. As an entry-level officer in Matamoros, a post with no medical unit and unreliable emergency services, he became an EMT and CPR instructor on his own initiative, navigated bureaucratic resistance and liability concerns, and built a hospital partnership to sustain the program long after he was gone. The American Foreign Service Association honored him with the W. Averell Harriman Award for Constructive Dissent for this two-year effort.

His curiosity ran just as deep as his courage. Writing in *The Foreign Service Journal*, he documented what began as a simple question about Matamoros: Was it really the oldest continuously operating U.S. consulate? The answer required collaboration with the Office of the Historian and archival excavation at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and university collections.

What he found rewrote the official record: The consulate's true founding dated to 1825, not 1832, and the department's own records had long conflated two separate entries into one. For an article published in the April 2020 *FSJ*, "Discovering Our Consulate's History, We Discovered Ourselves," he recovered forgotten stories of heroic employees buried in declassified cables, and his work was folded into a Bureau of Consular Affairs effort to document the history of the consular service globally.

His path into the Foreign Service was itself a testament to his exceptional promise. As a Pickering and Rangel Fellow, he was part of one of the most competitive and prestigious pipelines into the U.S. diplomatic corps and remained deeply committed to the communities that shaped him through his involvement with the Hispanic and Latin Employee Council of Foreign Affairs Agencies and *glifaa*, organizations dedicated to diversity and inclusion within the Foreign Service.

Even while on sabbatical from the State Department, Moises never stopped serving, volunteering with the NYPD as an auxiliary police officer, applying to law school (and getting in), and exploring things well outside the boxes of our bureaucratic safety nets, like enrolling in a flight attendant program or joining an AI startup completely outside his comfort zone. His boundless curiosity and energy were so distinctly him. He always made the people around him feel like anything was possible.

He was a fixture in some of the most impactful networks in the foreign policy world, including the Council on Foreign Relations, Humanity in Action, the International Career Advancement Program,

and the British American Project. When Moises walked into a room, his authenticity and kindness brought out the best in everyone who met him.

Moises, you were a light. And the world feels darker without you. May your memory be a blessing, and your legacy a blueprint for all of us in how to live a life of purpose, generosity, and integrity.

Maryum Saiffee

FSO

New York City, New York

We entered the Foreign Service together in 2016. From the very beginning of A-100, Moises stood out not because he sought attention, but because he so naturally built community among us. With his warmth and humor, he began referring to our class as "special friends," a phrase that we all quickly embraced. It captured something essential about Moises: his instinct to connect people, his generosity of spirit, and his belief that our work was ultimately about relationships and service.

Many of us were just beginning to understand what it meant to be diplomats. Moises already seemed to carry a clear sense of purpose. He often spoke about wanting to make the world a little bit better each day. That aspiration was not abstract for him; it was something he lived.

Over the years, we watched with pride as he served in places like Matamoros and Haiti, in Washington, and most recently supporting the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. His work on some of the world's most difficult challenges reflected the same qualities we saw in him during A-100: integrity, compassion, and determination.

For those of us who began this journey with him, Moises will always be one

of our “special friends.” We are grateful to have known him at the start of our careers and inspired by the example he set for a life of service.

The 188th A-100 Class

Moises Mendoza was the epitome of putting others first, and his passion and commitment to doing what was right were unparalleled. As an active part of the glifaa community, he believed deeply in serving and supporting LGBTQIA+ employees and in harnessing the power of queer colleagues around the world to support local communities.

Several glifaa members met Moises when he was still at the beginning of his career. He initially came to them for advice, but it did not take long to realize that they were learning just as much from him as he was from them, and maybe even more.

He was a role model for selflessness and dedication, and over the last year, he continued to be active and engaged in supporting his colleagues, despite the challenges facing many in the glifaa community.

Moises asked the hard questions and made sure people lived the integrity they preached. Many in the glifaa community are better people because of the lessons he taught us. He will be deeply missed by those who were privileged to know him.

Jeff Anderson

FSO, former glifaa president

(2020–2021)

Washington, D.C.

With broken hearts, the members of the Hispanic and Latin Employee Council of Foreign Affairs Agencies (HECFAA) share our deepest condolences on the sudden passing of our dear friend, longtime member, and tireless advocate, Moises Mendoza.

This is such devastating news, and it is hard to put into words the loss we feel. Moises was one of the kindest people we have ever known—brilliant, generous, and endlessly giving of himself. A true “jack of all trades,” fueled by an insatiable curiosity about the world, he carried remarkable expertise across so many areas—diplomacy, journalism, technology, social justice, and human rights.

Yet above all his accomplishments, what defined him most was his extraordinary ability to connect with people. He offered support selflessly, uplifted others without hesitation, and dedicated himself fully to those who needed encouragement, guidance, or simply a caring friend.

He always pushed us—to think bigger, do better, be better. His intellect, compassion, and unwavering belief in others left an indelible mark on our *familia*. On the HECFAA Executive Board, Moises filled countless roles, including FS vice president, Hispanic Heritage Month communications lead, treasurer, innovation chair, in-house journalist, and storyteller.

His legacy is how he embodied what it means to lead fearlessly with love and integrity. Moises said, “It’s certainly my goal every day to make the world a little bit better.” And he did. Every single day.

That he passed close to his birthday and Valentine’s Day—*el Día de la Amistad*—feels especially poignant. On a day meant to celebrate love and friendship, we are reminded how deeply we cherish and miss our friend.

Even in our sorrow, we hold on to gratitude for the light he brought into our lives. He made this world better through his daily acts of service, kindness, and humble generosity.

He was an angel who deserves heaven, having given so much of himself

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to others. His legacy of love will continue to guide and inspire us always.

With love, prayers, and deepest sympathy from all of his *familia* at HECFAA.

The HECFAA Board

I first got to know Moises in January 2019 when he worked in Matamoros. During the “20/32” labor movement, Moises and the pol/econ team produced excellent reports on the first significant push for labor rights in a Mexican border city in decades.

These reports played a key role in informing the participants in the negotiations of what became the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which includes the strongest labor chapter of any trade agreement.

I greatly enjoyed reading Moises’ informative April 2020 *FSJ* article on the history of the Matamoros consulate, and we had many fascinating conversations about diplomatic history.

We also chatted extensively about our experiences at posts in Mexico and the Caribbean and as desk officers for Latin American countries. I also happily provided some small input for his “Mission Microhistories” article in the July 2023 edition of *State Magazine*. Not surprisingly, given his journalism background, he excelled at the written word.

I will miss him. *Hasta siempre, compañero.*

Jason Vorderstrasse

FSO, retired

San Diego, California

I had the privilege of serving with Moises Mendoza at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. I can’t remember exactly when I first met Moises, and I suspect that’s true for many people who knew him.

One day he was a stranger, and the next he felt like an old friend. Someone who made the mission warmer. Someone whose smile in the elevator could calm a stressful day.

Moises had one of the most demanding jobs at the mission. As the staff assistant to Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, he was responsible for assembling the ambassador’s daily briefing book.

It was far from glamorous work. But when the process ran smoothly—as it did under Moises—it was easy to miss how much judgment, discipline, and care it required.

Moises was like the air traffic controller of the mission—the person who kept everything moving smoothly and safely. But that only tells part of the story. Moises did more than keep things moving.

He ensured information coursed reliably throughout the mission. He helped decisions take shape and people stay connected. He rarely called attention to himself yet quietly set the pace and rhythm of the building.

Moises was the heart of the mission.

Later, as an officer in the political section, he fought to protect women and children trapped in conflict—and he represented the best of U.S. diplomacy: thoughtful, steady, and grounded in respect for others. He showed that real strength often comes quietly, caring for those most in need.

To Moises’s family: Please know that the kindness he showed, the heart he put into his work, and the powerful example he set—all of that lives on in the people he shaped and the standard of excellence he left behind.

Chris Lu

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations for Management and Reform (2022–2025)
Arlington, Virginia

The Pickering and Rangel Fellows Association (PRFA) mourns the loss of our friend, colleague, and brother, Moises Mendoza. Moises was an active 2014 Rangel Fellow, devoted PRFA board member, and a steady force behind many of PRFA’s key milestones.

Moises played a foundational role in shaping PRFA into the organization it is today. He led the effort to formally register PRFA as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, establishing the legal and structural framework that allows us to serve our fellows with integrity and sustainability.

As a steward of our finances, he ensured donor funds were managed responsibly and spent only in clear alignment with our mission. His diligence was never about recognition, it was about responsibility. It was about doing things the right way.

Moises served PRFA the same way he served every community he encountered, with integrity, enthusiasm, and deep respect for his team. He believed in people. He trusted the process. And he knew institutions matter because they both shape and protect lives.

His impact extended far beyond PRFA. Across foreign affairs spaces, Moises purposefully strengthened systems, supported colleagues, and moved ideas into action. He understood that meaningful change often happens in small, steady increments, in the daily discipline of showing up thoughtfully and acting deliberately.

Moises embodied President John F. Kennedy’s words: “One person can make a difference, and everyone should try.” Moises was one of those people. He was also never quiet in reminding each of us that we could be those people too.

Since taking the oath to serve as a member of the U.S. Foreign Service,

every policy Moises analyzed, every decision he made, every commitment he accepted was approached with care and intention.

Moises carried himself with a calm that many of us, especially in the diplomatic profession, admired and aspired to emulate. He modeled what leadership grounded in humility and purpose looks like.

Moises will be deeply missed by the PRFA community. We know his steadiness and integrity remain with us as we lead, serve, and build our community.

Moises made small impacts that added up to something enduring. With every life he touched, his influence will continue to ripple outward.

In this season of reflection and mourning, we invite our community to ask the question Moises so often asked: What should we do about it? The answer we choose will shape the ripple each of us leaves behind.

Pickering and Rangel Fellows Association ■

Correction

In the March-April Feature article "Peace Corps at 65," Ambassador Robert Finn was incorrectly identified as having been a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran. Amb. Finn actually served as a volunteer in Turkey in 1967-1969. We regret the error.

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about this month's issue.

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RESPONSE TO MARCH-APRIL PRESIDENT'S VIEWS CALL FOR INPUT

Employee Groups Weigh In

In his March-April 2026 column, AFSA President John “Dink” Dinkelman lamented the lack of discourse among different groups within the Foreign Service community and called for a dialogue to examine the state of the Foreign Service. For a start, he asked employee organizations (EOs), which were officially disbanded in early 2025 by the Trump administration, to join the conversation. He invited them to let us know “what is (or was) the value of your EO, how is your group faring now, and what do you see as the future for your organization vis-à-vis the Foreign Service.” Several agreed to share their thoughts.

The views expressed in all the notes below are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government or AFSA.

glifaa Advocating for the LGBTQIA+ Foreign Affairs Community

On February 1, 2025, glifaa began operating exclusively in its preexisting status as an independent 501(c)(3)-designated nonprofit organization, suspending operations as an employee organization with the State Department, USAID, and other foreign affairs agencies. The board is now led by former State and USAID employees, including alumni of both the Foreign Service and Civil Service.

Its long-standing mission continues: to advocate for human rights, dignity, and equal access to opportunities for all members of the LGBTQIA+ foreign affairs community. Over the 30-plus years since glifaa began, it has been a driver of positive change. Just as important has been the fellowship it has provided to our community.

Our members include employees, former employees, and their adult and child eligible family members (EFMs). We have provided support in a broad range of ways, including through in-person and virtual

social gatherings and information sharing.

For further information, please reach out to Board@glifaa.org.

—glifaa Board

Thursday Luncheon Group Supporting the Next Generation of Diplomats

Established in 1973, the Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG) has the distinction of being the Department of State’s oldest employee organization. It originated when two senior former United States Information Agency (USIA) officers urged their friends and colleagues at USIA, State, and USAID to consider what they could do to enhance the participation of African Americans in the development and conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

Over the years, TLG grew from a small group of friends and colleagues meeting informally over lunch to a 501(c)(3) organization with a network of almost 700 foreign affairs professionals whose advocacy for transparency, accountability, opportunity, and meritocracy benefited the broader foreign affairs community and advanced U.S. national interests. TLG members serve our nation



honorably, and many have risen to the highest ranks of the diplomatic corps.

Indeed, some of our most experienced and distinguished ambassadors were also TLG members, and several served as president of the organization, sharing their knowledge and expertise with the 7th floor while simultaneously mentoring the next generation. They include recently deceased Ambassador Ruth A. Davis, who was the first female senior watch officer in the Operations Center; the first Black director of the Foreign Service Institute, where she founded the School of Leadership and Management; the first Black female Director General of the Foreign Service; and the first Black woman to be named a Career Ambassador.

The late Ambassador Steven McGann also led TLG. He served as ambassador to Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, the Kingdom of Tonga, and Tuvalu, where he guided U.S. policy in the Pacific. He was also deputy commandant of the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy at the National Defense University (NDU) and became the first vice chancellor of NDU’s College of International Security Affairs.

Historically, the TLG Executive Board and its membership welcomed Secretaries of State and other agency leaders as honorary members, partnered with fellow EOs on topics of shared concern, and engaged with agency leadership on recruitment, assignments, employment practices, promotion patterns, training,

and other personnel matters. Engagement on these issues changed policies like assignment restrictions, improved the overall operating environment, expanded opportunities for professional growth for all employees, and nurtured future employees through stipends for interns and book scholarships.

TLG's greatest success is the community it has fostered for more than 50 years, and the executive board is committed to working in partnership with other employee organizations, to supporting members through in-person and virtual activities, and to encouraging and counseling the next generation of diplomats.

As always, TLG membership remains open to all, and additional information can be found at <https://thursdayluncheon.org>.

—TLG Executive Board

FirstGens@State Advancing Opportunity, Talent, and the American Workforce

FirstGens@State supports Foreign Service and Civil Service professionals who were the first in their families to obtain a college degree. The network includes more than 700 members across the State Department and interagency and works to strengthen recruitment, mentorship, retention, and professional development for first-generation college graduates and professionals. While the organization does not have 501(c)(3) status, it has partnered with several external organizations.

Members come from every corner of the country—rural and urban communities alike—and employee organizations like FirstGens@State help ensure the diplomatic service reflects the full breadth of American experience. In short, they represent every hill, holler, and street in the United States.

The concept of a first-generation college student—commonly referred to as a FirstGen—is rooted in the Higher Education Act of 1965, which defines the term as “an individual whose parent or parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree.” This law predates the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education and reflects long-standing egalitarian principles of equal opportunity.

These principles are complementary to meritocracy: They ensure that advancement is determined by talent, effort, and achievement rather than by immutable characteristics or economic circumstances at birth. This emphasis on merit and equal opportunity is consistent with enduring American values and with President Trump's executive actions that have reaffirmed merit-based advancement and equal access to opportunity across federal institutions.

Many first-generation college students come from working-class households, often facing financial barriers and limited professional networks on their path to higher education. Financial insecurity, limited familiarity with higher-education systems, and fewer professional networks create obstacles that persist long after graduation.

Yet they frequently demonstrate resilience and a commitment to service—about 21 percent work in government and roughly 62 percent are veterans. Ensuring these Americans are represented in the national security workforce strengthens both the legitimacy and effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy.

Professionals who grew up in rural towns and working-class households bring firsthand understanding of the economic anxieties, labor concerns, and community priorities that shape U.S. domestic policy. Their perspectives help ensure that diplomacy, economic statecraft, and international engagement

remain connected to the interests of U.S. workers and industries at home.

FirstGen professionals bring grit, patriotism, and practical problem-solving skills shaped by real-world experience, enriching policy discussions and helping address institutional blind spots. Their life experiences often mirror those of the “global majority,” enabling them to communicate more effectively with foreign audiences and better understand the social and economic realities that influence international partners.

My experience guiding FirstGens@State demonstrates the tangible value of such networks. Through mentorship programs, recruitment, and engagement with department leadership, the organization has helped create pathways for talented Americans who might otherwise view diplomacy and national security careers as inaccessible.

Because members come from a wide range of backgrounds, the network emphasizes shared American experiences—perseverance, equal opportunity, and service—rather than identity-based categories. Through targeted recruitment and by redefining existing fellowships, the State Department can identify and retain untapped talent from working-class American families often overlooked in the national security workforce.

FirstGens embody American ideals of hard work; love of country, community, and family; perseverance; and upward mobility. Drawing on this talent strengthens the department's connection to the American people while advancing policies that support U.S. workers, rebuild industrial capacity, and project the values of merit, opportunity, and resilience that underpin U.S. leadership.

—Ambassador (ret.) *Joey R. Hood,*
first senior leadership liaison
for FirstGens@State

Disability Action Group Support During Challenging Times

I was elected to lead DAG about a week before the Trump administration put all employee organizations on pause.

DAG assists employees deciding whether to disclose a hidden disability. Like it or not, there are managers in the Foreign Service who discriminate against employees with disabilities, and being open about one's disability can harm one's career. Is it worth the risk to receive the accommodation needed to perform at one's full potential?

When someone does decide to request an accommodation, DAG can walk them through the (often confusing) procedure and explain what specific words and terms mean. We can also provide suggestions on the best way to approach one's supervisor regarding these requests. Where does one draw the line between informing one's manager and a HIPAA violation?

DAG provides a network of people who share unique circumstances and a feeling of camaraderie. We learn from others' experiences. We support each other during challenging times. But folks are worried about gathering under our banner, which means that we haven't done much of anything for more than a year.

Since there is a federally mandated reasonable accommodation process at State, a support group addressing such a process should be allowed, especially for employees who gain a disability during their careers. These people (of whom I am one) have little to no understanding of their rights or of the various offices with which they should interact. But I must admit that I'm not sure where to focus my efforts toward getting DAG reinstated.

—Heather Pishko,
Disability Action Group

GRACE A Place for Christians

During my time serving on the Executive Board of GRACE, the department's first faith-based employee organization (EO) and the only one serving the department's Christian community, one of my most rewarding duties was routinely receiving requests from employees asking to join and to know that another Christ-follower had found their community at the department.

In 2018 colleagues and I started GRACE with a simple goal in mind: to connect and form a group of like-minded individuals in the workplace, giving us confidence to be open about our beliefs.

While freedom of religion is a basic founding principle in the United States, in the department (and across the government) there are countless stories of employees being openly discriminated against for their faith. The Office of Civil Rights has always had a mandate to check this discrimination, but without a community like GRACE, employees were often too intimidated to come forward.

Not long after our founding, GRACE was delighted to welcome EOs representing other faith communities, and we routinely coordinated with them to promote the issue of religious freedom. GRACE was working to change the culture at State, to make it more welcoming for Christians and all people of faith. By encouraging our members and educating them on civil rights and anti-discrimination regulations, we were chipping away at the anti-religious bias that still exists in an overly secularized workplace.

GRACE suspended operations in 2025 along with all other EOs, canceling our joint MLK speaker series with BIG (Blacks In Government), our mentorship ministry, our sponsorship of lunch-hour fellowship and Bible studies, and our

advocacy for educating managers on religious accommodations.

When, by God's good grace, new employees from a recent orientation class heard about GRACE and reached out, we remembered how much we missed welcoming new members and connecting them with our community of more than 300 members around the world. We thanked them for their interest but had to tell them our operations were still suspended.

Our hope is that we can once again offer an official community for employees of the Christian faith and partner with employees of other faiths to advance the ideals of religious liberty in the workplace.

Meanwhile, we continue to pray for our country, our leaders, and our colleagues, and we have confidence in God's promise that all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

—GRACE Board

AAFSW A Collective Response to Unpredictable Disruption

The foreign affairs community continues to operate in a prolonged period of unpredictable disruption. The Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide (AAFSW), founded in 1960 to strengthen the community through advocacy, outreach, scholarships, services, and networking, has worked to provide steadiness and help individuals and families adapt when official systems become strained or inconsistent.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East, including the recent escalation involving Iran, has placed significant stress on families across multiple agencies. Rapid evacuations, heightened security concerns, and prolonged uncer-

tainty have disrupted routines and created emotional and logistical challenges.

These experiences align with broader concerns about the weakening, and at times adversarial, nature of structures that once offered predictability to foreign affairs professionals and their families. In this environment, AAFSW has remained a reliable point of connection, helping families manage stress, access resources, and maintain community.

Domestic pressures compounded these global challenges. Some of our activities that previously operated with consistent schedules now require flexibility and swift adjustments. Our programs, including AAFSW's planned 2026 Women's History Month event, have been excluded from the accepted "new norm" because they are perceived as being linked to DEI initiatives. Collaboration with sister organizations and careful coordination have been essential in maintaining core activities, underscoring the stabilizing role community groups play when institutional processes feel uneven or unclear.

The cancellation of the 2025 Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad (SOSA) ceremony, a longstanding tradition honoring exceptional volunteer work overseas, demonstrates how even highly respected programs face interruptions. The delay in issuing certificates to awardees, despite the efforts of volunteers and staff, reflects broader operational strain across the foreign affairs ecosystem. While disappointing, it highlights the need for resilient networks that can adapt and continue recognizing service in meaningful ways.

Personal stories reveal how these pressures shape daily life: families displaced by conflict seeking clarity; spouses and partners reaching out during moments of crisis; our volunteers adjusting plans to support others. Noteworthy is the out-

The foreign affairs workforce already balances a demanding and often fragile equilibrium. Rapid shifts or uncoordinated decisions act as forcing pressures.

pouring of support, from virtual groups of more than 100 participants to volunteers greeting evacuees at Dulles Airport, that has been a powerful reminder of the community's strength and generosity.

As these disruptions accumulate, they raise an important question about whether the department understands the human impact on those who serve. The foreign affairs workforce already balances a demanding and often fragile equilibrium. Rapid shifts or uncoordinated decisions act as forcing pressures. They create volatility, fragment networks, and strain the community. Recognizing the cumulative effect of these pressures is essential to sustaining the people who sustain the mission.

—Celine Ford, AAFSW president

The views expressed here are solely those of the author.

Foreign Service Youth Foundation Protecting Family Members

Since 1989, the Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF) has worked to support young people across the U.S. foreign affairs community to thrive as they grow up in an always-challenging internationally mobile environment and to adapt as they transition between the U.S. and posts abroad. We are a mission-focused, independent, nonpolitical nonprofit that aims to encourage resilience, foster

camaraderie, and celebrate achievements in and among our Third Country Kids and to support their families.

This mission, like much else in the professional U.S. foreign affairs community, has been negatively affected by a year of abrupt transitions, unanticipated international moves, and policy and ideology-related concerns about job security affecting the families who are dedicated to serving the U.S. and the American people abroad.

Young people in those families often face some of the most difficult consequences of this situation, including abrupt, midyear school changes (often across continents), loss of local friends and peers, and anxiety-fueling uncertainty about the future.

There is no question everyone wants the most capable people representing the U.S. abroad, but to get the best out of any professional, it is essential that the welfare of their families—and especially their children—is considered and supported.

FSYF calls on the administration and foreign affairs leadership across the board to work together to more fully address the human and family consequences of personnel actions and policy decisions to enable those professionals to excel on behalf of all Americans.

—Paul Sutphin, FSYF president ■

What’s Right with the Ben Franklin Fellowship

BY SIMON HANKINSON

The Ben Franklin Fellowship (BFF) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association of current and former foreign affairs professionals. We aim to add depth to the debate about how the United States should interact with other nations as we begin our next 250 years. We have little interest in Washington-bubble spats. We seek to engage those who disagree with us in the hope of finding common ground and policies in the national interest.

The press coverage we have received ranges from merely critical to outright conspiratorial. Individuals supportive of the old Washington consensus have attacked us in the media, attributing to us a phantom influence reminiscent of conspiracy theories involving the Masons or the Elders of Zion.

So, who are we really? In 2024 three retired FSOs started the BFF with a common point of view, summed up in our eight basic principles. We wanted as wide a tent of opinion as possible consistent with loving our country and wishing it prosperity and strength. I encourage readers to decide for themselves what the principles represent. I’d summarize them as conservative and resistant to recent “woke” ideologies.

Our membership grew quickly, from among those who found the “progressive” turn of U.S. foreign policy and the bureaucracy that enacts it to be increasingly unrepresentative of Americans and

America’s core interests. The Washington establishment has long been left of center, but under the umbrella of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI), the State Department began by the 2000s actively to discriminate in favor of supposedly “marginalized” identity groups.

Meanwhile, State and USAID exported contentious social theories as if they were core American beliefs crucial to the building of prosperous democracies, rather than fringe ideas likely to disappear in time.

The recent attacks on BFF go beyond ideological disagreement and seem highly personal. In separate Speaking Out articles in AFSA’s *Foreign Service Journal*, Ambassador Ronald Neumann, president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, wrote that “Our Professional Foreign Service Is in Danger,” while Ambassador Eric Rubin, a former president of AFSA, asked, “What’s Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?”

On social media, Rubin posted the BFF logo with the caption “Know thy enemy.” Does Rubin genuinely believe that our roster of fellows, with collective centuries of public service, are enemies of this country? Does he seriously think that our members, many of whom are military veterans, are acting out of hostility to the United States?

The Myth of Nonpartisanship

The theme of those articles is that the BFF has taken a nonpartisan State Department and suddenly politicized it.

That is willful ignorance of Washington’s interlocking academic and foreign policy sphere, which uniformly cherishes “progressive” globalism.

Critics of BFF note that some of our members are in political positions at State, and they theorize that membership is required for success. They ignore that some BFF members were separated from the Service last year, nor accept that the great majority of political appointments at State are the fruit of relationships that predate or supersede our organization. The paucity of conservatives inside State would suggest that most jobs are still filled by career officers who voted for Harris/Walz.

Equity vs. Equality of Opportunity

One core belief of BFF is that hiring, promotion, and assignments should be based on merit. We lament any discrimination in America’s past as much as we reject it as “restorative justice” in the future. Unfortunately, the State Department went all-in on “equity” (which I define as equal outcomes regardless of variables in inputs) and attempted to balance past injustice by steering hiring, promotion, and assignments toward favored groups.

The Biden administration added a DEIA precept to the Foreign Service rating metrics, which clearly favored groups with “intersectional” cards to play. Under Trump, the department is trying to return to objective metrics by replacing the DEIA precept with a “Fidelity” precept.

For much of the past century, State Department hiring was meritocratic. The Civil Service had a competitive exam. For the Foreign Service, those who passed the written test went on to take the oral test.



Simon Hankinson served as an FSO from 1999 to 2022 in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Washington, D.C. He is now a senior research fellow at the Center for Border Security and Immigration at the Heritage Foundation. Hankinson is a co-founder of the Ben Franklin Fellowship and author of The Ten Woke Commandments (You Must Not Obey) (Academica Press, 2025).

Those who passed the oral test usually became Foreign Service officers. But this didn't produce equal outcomes, so the Civil Service exam was scrapped.

For the Foreign Service, the Board of Examiners inserted in 2007 a "Qualification Evaluation Panel" (QEP) as a filter between written and oral tests, which I believe was designed to accomplish the same "race-rigging" as higher education achieved through "holistic review."

The QEP essentially injected prototype DEI into the hiring process, allowing BEX to bypass lower scores in racially desired applicants through assessments of character, life experience, or other subjective measures. The result was as predictable as it was calculated: fewer white males were hired. AFSA questioned the practice at first but now criticizes the Trump administration for attempting to undo the damage it caused to innocent individuals.

What Rubin Gets Wrong

Rubin claims that "State has hosted several joint activities with BFF, including recruitment events." Yes, a few State officials have spoken at events sponsored by BFF, just as they do for countless other groups. That's called public diplomacy.

Rubin says BFF is "the only employee organization permitted to function at all." He laments that a host of identitarian employee groups are deprived of "official recognition" and the use of State Department spaces. I believe these private groups are welcome to do their thing, but like the BFF, none deserve support from taxpayers nor free use of government facilities.

Rubin charges that "senior active-duty officers who are members of BFF" have published articles "supporting immigration enforcement" and "denouncing DEIA," policies that he scathingly calls "President Trump's domestic political agenda." Really? Is it merely Trump's

agenda, not bipartisan duty, to support the enforcement of laws passed by Congress, including the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Rubin claims that "BFF's focus on 'meritocracy' is really about returning white men to exclusive leadership roles," insinuating racism and sexism. In fact, BFF is diverse in membership and open to all who accept our principles. But it is hardly surprising that fewer of the identity groups who reaped the benefits of DEI would seek to join BFF in championing equal opportunity.

Rubin doesn't criticize the Alliance for Diplomacy and Justice, a group founded by former Biden political appointees. Their agenda is "progressive" and globalist. All eight of their founding members are women—hardly diverse or inclusive.

Finally, Rubin claims "members of the BFF are rife with hostility toward the Foreign Service and its members." I don't know where he gets this. Our members are united in love of country and respect for the Foreign Service, of which we are often lonely defenders among conservatives.

Common Ground?

Despite Rubin's hostility toward our organization, there is common ground. First, we agree that U.S. ambassador positions should not be vacant. They should be filled with capable people who will follow directives from the Secretary of State. Trump should get on with nominating them, and the Senate should confirm them.

Second, Rubin has a "vision of our Foreign Service being representative of our country in every respect." So do we. Except Rubin doesn't seem to want diversity of viewpoint. Accept the progressive dogma or perish, he implies, warning that "when the administration changes, [BFF members] are going to find themselves in a very

The Foreign Service Journal is committed to fostering dialogue on issues of concern to the foreign affairs community. We believe it is important to provide space for differing opinions to be expressed and examined.

Publication should not be construed as endorsement, but rather as part of our broader commitment to open discourse and the documentation of the Foreign Service experience. The views and opinions presented here are those of the author and do not reflect those of the *FSJ* or AFSA.

awkward and disadvantaged position." Rubin may be right, since the environment at State remains one of left-wing consensus that punishes all other views.

Liberals greatly outnumber conservatives in the Foreign Service. As national demographics change, the only things holding this country together are shared values and fair competition. That is why the BFF is so adamant that reforms are needed to the Foreign Service's recruitment, retention, and promotions processes.

BFF members have argued that the majority of FSOs will do their jobs capably whatever their personal beliefs. We hope that AFSA shares our BFF principle that "the professional U.S. diplomatic and consular corps should, based on merit, recruit, select, assign, and promote Americans of all backgrounds from across the country, without discrimination or preference on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, or other immutable characteristics."

We welcome Ambassador Neumann's assertion that "there is an urgent need for dialogue" as to how to improve our nation's diplomatic service. AFSA President John Dinkelman recently wrote that "we need to come together in person, face to face, to find ... common ground."

In this spirit, perhaps AFSA and its allies would consider meeting and exchanging ideas with BFF leadership instead of devoting pages of *The Foreign Service Journal* to attacking them. We hope so. We'll be waiting. ■

Survey Finds Federal Workforce Demoralized

A report released this month by the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service (PPS) paints a stark picture of federal employee morale in the first year of the second Trump administration, with a governmentwide engagement and satisfaction score of just 32 out of 100.

The report, “Federal Public Service in Peril,” is based on the organization’s new Public Service Viewpoint Survey, which was conducted between November and December 2025 and drew responses from 11,083 career federal employees across government.

Having produced “The Best Place to Work in the Federal Government” rankings since 2003, PPS created this new survey after the Office of Personnel Management canceled the 2025 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) in August. That cancellation was a violation of the 2010 statutory requirement that agencies survey their workforces annually.

Only 7.5 percent of respondents agreed that political leaders generate high levels of motivation in the workforce, and 36.5 percent reported that their work units are providing worse quality services than the year before.

Agency-level scores varied but were uniformly low, with the State Department scoring a 20.1 out of 100.

The report notes that the survey results are not directly comparable with historical FEVS data due to methodological differences and should be interpreted accordingly.

Nonetheless, the findings represent the most comprehensive available assessment of federal workforce conditions during this period.

Visit bestplacetowork.org for the full report.

Contemporary Quote

“Look at the negotiations in just the last couple of weeks [with Ukraine and Russia, Gaza ceasefire, with Iran]. The Foreign Service was not present at any of those. Not just not in the pictures—not in the room. That has never happened before in 102 years.”

—Ambassador Nicholas Burns at a March 6 event hosted by the U.S.-China Education Trust and George Washington University.

State to Remove Pre-2025 Posts from X

The State Department will remove from public view all posts made on its official X accounts before President Trump returned to office on January 20, 2025, according to NPR reporting on February 7.

The deleted posts will be archived internally but will no longer be publicly accessible. Staff were reportedly informed that individuals seeking access to older posts would need to file a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

The directive applies to the department’s active official accounts, including those of U.S. embassies, ambassadors, bureaus, and programs.

Current and former diplomats and outside observers have raised concerns that removing years of posts that range from policy statements, embassy events, and cultural programming could make it harder for the public to trace the historical record of U.S. diplomacy.

Scrambling into Crisis Mode

The current military operation involving the U.S., Israel, and Iran has reshaped the operating environment for U.S. diplomats across the Middle East and beyond. It has also raised questions about the state of contingency planning at the State Department.

For members of the U.S. Foreign Service, the unfolding crisis highlighted the core responsibilities and pressures of diplomacy in wartime: safeguarding personnel, coordinating emergency departures, assisting U.S. citizens abroad, and maintaining mission operations under volatile conditions.

Yet as airspace closures, missile attacks, and protests spread across the region, U.S. embassies and consulates were caught up in the danger, with family members, including children, still at posts when the United States and Israel initiated hostilities.

Several embassies and consulates were hit in the early days of the conflict even as their employees were struggling to organize evacuations of their own family members and expatriates in their area.

According to a March 11 story in *The New York Times*, at least 11 U.S. government facilities were damaged, including embassies in Riyadh and Kuwait City and the consulate in Dubai.

Damage to both embassies is reportedly extensive, with structures being burned to the ground or severely damaged. Embassy Kuwait suspended its

Talking Points offers a snapshot of recent developments affecting the Foreign Service. The following items were finalized for publication on March 23, 2026.

operations, evacuating all diplomats and their families out of the country.

On March 14, in Baghdad, Iraqi security sources reported that missiles struck near the U.S. embassy compound in the heavily fortified Green Zone. The Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center at the international airport was attacked multiple times in late March by Iranian-backed local militias.

The State Department launched charter flights and ground transportation efforts to move Americans out of affected areas, though many stranded Americans complained they were unable to obtain support or even information.

In some cases, commercial flights were unavailable due to widespread airspace closures, forcing travelers to rely on overland routes or government-assisted departures. Americans in several countries were directed to shelter in place until safe evacuation options became available.

Officials confirmed that emergency funds, potentially totaling up to \$40 million, were authorized to support evacuation flights from the region. Meanwhile news outlets estimated the hostilities are costing the United States \$1 billion per day.

For consular sections across the region, the sudden surge in requests for assistance created intense operational demands, with tens of thousands of Americans contacting the State Department to seek guidance or evacuation assistance.

Americans in Israel reported reaching a voice recording at the embassy informing them that the U.S. government would be unable to support their departure.

The evacuation effort drew criticism from former diplomats who argued that contingency planning should have been activated earlier.



Heard on the Hill

The Value of the Foreign Service

The United States Foreign Service is one of our nation's most important strategic foreign policy assets. Foreign Service officers are on the front lines of diplomacy and serve in some of the most dangerous and complex environments around the world. They advance American strategic objectives, support U.S. citizens overseas, manage critical programs, and represent the United States and American values across the globe. Their work is indispensable.

—Representative Mike Lawler (R-N.Y.) in a March 5 House Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting, “Merit, Accountability, and Performance at State: Evaluating Promotion and Placement.”

The Work of Diplomacy

Our Foreign Service professionals carry out our nation's diplomatic efforts every year in every way they can. They work to free detained Americans overseas, assist families during evacuations and emergencies, and work with humanitarian causes, in addition to making sure that our people are safe.

—Representative Kweisi Mfume (D-Md.) in a March 5 House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing, “Merit, Accountability, and Performance at State: Evaluating Promotion and Placement.”

Several veteran Foreign Service officers noted that a major regional escalation, particularly one involving Iran, should have been expected to lead to immediate airspace closures and disruptions to commercial travel.

Earlier travel warnings or authorized departure orders, critics said, would have allowed more Americans to leave before flights were grounded.

Others pointed to staffing shortages and the loss of experienced personnel as factors that may have complicated the response.

In a public statement, AFSA warned that reductions in diplomatic staffing and expertise, particularly in crisis management, consular operations, and regional language skills, would undermine the department's ability to respond effectively to emergencies.

U.S. diplomatic facilities beyond the Middle East have also faced security threats potentially linked to the conflict.

In Karachi, protests on March 1 linked to the conflict turned violent

outside the U.S. consulate. Demonstrators smashed windows and clashed with security forces while police deployed tear gas to disperse crowds attempting to approach diplomatic facilities in other Pakistani cities.

In Oslo, police arrested three suspects following an explosion on March 8 outside the U.S. embassy that investigators believe was caused by an improvised device placed near the entrance to the building's consular section.

Authorities in Toronto began an investigation into a March 10 shooting at the U.S. consulate that officials described as a potential national security incident. No injuries were reported, but the attack prompted heightened security measures around U.S. and Israeli diplomatic facilities in Canada.

On March 17, *The Washington Post* reported that the State Department ordered all embassies and consulates overseas via cable to immediately review their security posture due to possible spillover effects from the war.

50 Years Ago

The Failure to Scrutinize Power

One would think that after the disasters of the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam, of bungled grain deals and the CIA's assassination plots, it might be prudent to focus a small corner of the spotlight on the national security decision process and the officials responsible for it.

Instead, we cling to the fiction of a decisive presidential father-figure, an omniscient and ubiquitous secretary of State, and a "dedicated" corps of public servants, thereby ensuring that the system and its personnel will never be subjected to the kind of scrutiny that exposes weakness and invites reform.

— Charles Maechling Jr., *Foreign Policy Makers: The Weakest Link?*,
in the June 1976 FSJ.



Ambassadors Criticize Iran Crisis Response

At a press briefing, "Crisis Management Protocols of the Department of State," convened by the American Academy of Diplomacy on March 19, five retired career U.S. ambassadors issued sharp criticism of the department's handling of the crisis following the outbreak of the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran.

The panelists, each with extensive experience in high-level positions handling emergencies, argued that the political leadership failed in two fundamental obligations: protecting embassy personnel and their families, and supporting U.S. citizens caught in harm's way.

Ambassador John Bass, a three-time U.S. ambassador and former under secretary for management, began by acknowledging the rarity of the event.

"Like senior military officers, we have a cultural norm in the Foreign Service that conditions us to be very reticent about speaking publicly as retirees about operational issues in which the State Department is involved," Bass said, adding that the group felt compelled to act given what he described as "the breadth and depth of the failings of the current State Department leadership."

Bass outlined a series of specific failures: The department did not activate existing contingency plans, failed to anticipate Iran's asymmetric responses despite decades of intelligence on the subject, did not give U.S. citizens advance warning that the region was becoming more dangerous, and left embassies largely without guidance when the conflict began.

Bass also noted that roughly 30 sitting career ambassadors had been removed from their posts in the months prior, including some from the region now at the center of active hostilities, leaving missions without experienced senior leadership at a critical moment.

Other panelists—Ambassadors Jeffrey Feltman, Alina Romanowski, Elizabeth Richard, and Yael Lempert, representing a combined 171 years of diplomatic experience—echoed Bass' assessment and said that operational planning and operational secrecy are not mutually exclusive.

On March 21, the assistant secretary for global public affairs, Dylan Johnson,

used his State Department X (formerly Twitter) account to attack the ambassadors for sounding the alarm, calling them "partisan hacks."

AFSA released a statement calling these personal attacks via a government account "profoundly unprofessional," noting these ambassadors all "spent their careers serving both Republican and Democratic administrations, advancing U.S. interests, and protecting American citizens abroad."

A recording of the AAD event is available at bit.ly/AAD-recording.

Munich Security Conference—Old Order Is "Under Destruction"

The 62nd Munich Security Conference, held on February 13–15,

convened in what organizers called a moment of "profound uncertainty," one shaped less by any single crisis than by a fundamental shift in how the United States relates to the international order it helped build after World War II—an order now being actively dismantled by the United States itself.

The conference's official report, "Under Destruction," identified President Trump as the most consequential driver of this change, because of not only his stated convictions but also the structural conditions of his second term, which it characterized as operating with fewer institutional guardrails, an ideologically aligned team, and a determination to act.

The report identifies three pillars of the postwar order now under strain: the U.S. commitment to multilateral



institutions and international law; its historic support for open trade and economic interdependence; and its promotion of liberal-democratic values as a strategic asset.

On all three fronts, the report argues, the current administration has not merely adjusted policy but broken with the underlying premises.

At the conference, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz announced that Germany had begun confidential talks with France about a European nuclear deterrent and called on the U.S. to “repair and revive trans-Atlantic trust.”

French President Emmanuel Macron argued that Europe must become a geopolitical power in its own right. And Secretary of State Marco Rubio described the trans-Atlantic relationship as facing “a defining moment” while reaffirming that the United States’ and Europe’s futures remain linked.

The report notes that China now surpasses the U.S. in the number of diplomatic missions worldwide.

High-profile negotiations, the report observes, are increasingly handled by special envoys operating outside the normal State Department structure. The report frames this reduced diplomatic footprint as a substantive U.S. retreat from global engagement at a moment when that engagement is most needed.

USAID Cuts Leave Global Media in Crisis

A report published this spring by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace finds that the elimination of U.S. foreign assistance to independent media has left news organizations across 41 countries in turmoil, with many on the brink of collapse.

Based on interviews and a survey of 168 media outlets, the report chronicles

Site of the Month: *Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network*

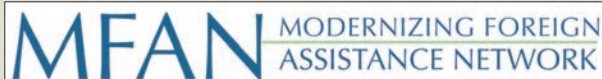
The Modernizing Foreign

Assistance Network

(MFAN) is a widely respected bipartisan coalition in Washington, D.C., dedicated to reforming and modernizing international assistance.

United around the principles of accountability and country ownership, MFAN brings together diverse perspectives and nonpartisan experts—including practitioners and partners with direct field experience—who understand development and humanitarian programs from policy through implementation.

At a time of uncertainty for international assistance, this network joins with its members and partners,



Congress, and federal agencies, to deliver practical, timely policy recommendations that elevate what works, strengthen impact where needed, and promote the effective use of taxpayer resources.

Recent publications include an operational road map for government-to-government assistance, policy commentary on aid in an era of disruption, and recommendations for strengthening international development expertise at the State Department.

To find out more about MFAN’s mission and efforts, visit <https://modernizeaid.net/>.

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

the fallout from the shutdown of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which was absorbed into the State Department in July 2025.

The U.S. spent as much as \$258 million on media development in 2024 through USAID and the State Department, funding journalism training, broadcasting infrastructure, and direct support to independent outlets in Libya, Ukraine, El Salvador, Zambia, and elsewhere.

The report argues the investment served both democratic values and concrete U.S. strategic interests, including countering Russian disinformation and undermining extremist narratives in the Middle East and East Africa.

With that support gone, the report finds, European donors and private foundations have not stepped in to fill the gap.

The report identifies one remaining source of institutional support: The National Endowment for Democracy, which is funded by Congress but operates independently of the executive branch, continues to provide roughly \$30 million annually in direct grants to media organizations facing authoritarian pressure or armed conflict, and has so far withstood administration efforts to claw back its funding.

Atlantic Council Survey: A Darker World Ahead

Global security experts expect the world to be worse off a decade from now, according to the Atlantic Council’s Global Foresight 2036 survey, published in February.

The survey polled 447 geostrategists

and foresight practitioners from 72 countries on their expectations for the next 10 years.

Sixty-three percent of respondents said they expect the world in 2036 to be worse off than it is today. Fifty-eight percent expect China will surpass the United States as the world's leading economic power within a decade, and 70 percent anticipate China will attempt to forcibly retake Taiwan.

More than 40 percent foresee a multi-front world war erupting before 2036.

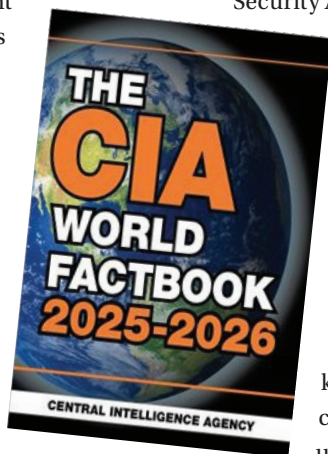
Seventy-one percent of respondents expect the United Nations to become less influential over the coming decade, with similar majorities forecasting declining influence for the World Trade Organization and other postwar multilateral bodies.

World Factbook Gone

On February 4, the Central Intelligence Agency announced that it has retired *The World Factbook*, one of its oldest and most widely used public intelligence publications.

First launched in 1962 as the classified *National Basic Intelligence Factbook*, the reference guide evolved over decades into an unclassified, public resource. It was renamed *The World Factbook* in the early 1980s and went fully digital on the CIA's website in 1997.

The site provided country-by-country data on geography, population, economics, government, and security, and included more than 5,000 copyright-free maps and photographs, many taken by CIA officers themselves.



The *Factbook* served as a reliable, centralized source for country statistics, often described as the “gold standard” for demographic and economic data.

Educators, librarians, journalists, and researchers voiced concern when it disappeared from the web. Teachers reported scrambling to adjust lesson plans, while newsrooms began searching for alternative databases.

Since then, all available data from the 2020 version of the website was downloaded, archived, and made available for public use by independent AI researcher Simon Willison at <https://simonw.github.io/cia-world-factbook-2020/>.

The CIA's announcement, “Spotlighting The World Factbook as We Bid a Fond Farewell,” offered a brief history but no detailed explanation for the end of this 60-plus-year institution. The agency did not indicate whether the content would be archived or replaced.

Unresolved Questions About Havana Syndrome

The death of Michael Beck on January 25 has renewed attention on anomalous health incidents (AHI) and their toll on U.S. government personnel.

Michael Beck, a former National Security Agency (NSA) counterintelligence officer, died on January 25. Beck is widely considered the first federal employee to report symptoms later associated with Havana syndrome, having experienced a sudden neurological episode during an overseas mission in 1996. Beck was 65.

He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at age 45 and continued working for the NSA until 2016, when he became too

ill to work. His workers' compensation claim was ultimately denied.

AFSA extends its heartfelt sympathy to Beck's family. Like many diplomats affected by AHI prior to 2016, Beck struggled to obtain relief under the HAVANA Act while continuing to serve his country. After years of sustained AFSA advocacy, legislation was recently enacted to extend eligibility to those injured before 2016.

The question of what causes AHI remains officially unsettled. A 2025 U.S. intelligence community assessment concluded it was very unlikely that a foreign adversary was responsible, but two of the seven agencies that reviewed the case reached a different conclusion.

This last March, the House Intelligence Committee chair called the assessment “flawed” and alleged a “cover-up,” and the director of National Intelligence, CIA director, FBI director, and heads of the NSA and Defense Intelligence Agency all agreed the assessment should be withdrawn.

A separate investigation by CBS News' “60 Minutes” reported that the Department of Homeland Security had acquired and tested a Russian-made directed-energy device, concluding that the microwaves it emitted produced symptoms consistent with those reported by affected personnel. The U.S. government has not confirmed those findings.

More than 200 U.S. government employees have reported AHI symptoms since 2016, including Foreign Service members serving at diplomatic posts worldwide.

AFSA continues to advocate for affected members. ■

This issue of Talking Points was compiled by Mark Parkhomenko.

Attention: Farmers, Landscapers, Groundskeepers, Gardeners, and Others Exposed to Weed Killers

**People Diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma (NHL)
Now or in the Future Could Receive \$6,000 to \$165,000 or More**

This settlement will affect you even without a cancer diagnosis — unless you exclude yourself.

The settlement includes people exposed to **Roundup** or other weed killers in the U.S. before February 17, 2026. Lawsuits claim an ingredient in these weed killers causes non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a blood cancer that takes 10 to 15 years to appear. Monsanto denies wrongdoing but has agreed to pay up to \$7.25 billion to settle these claims. The settlement will continue to pay claims for 17 to 21 years. Family members and representatives of deceased, minor, or incapacitated class members may also be included.

POTENTIAL SETTLEMENT BENEFITS

Claimant Type	Average Program Award (Based on age at diagnosis & NHL type)	Quick-Pay Option
Occupational Farmers, landscapers, groundskeepers, applicators	\$60,000 - \$165,000	Not eligible
Residential Home gardeners, others	\$20,000 - \$40,000	\$7,700 - \$14,500 Faster payment for some early filers
Diagnosed with NHL at age 78+	\$10,000	\$6,000

You may qualify for additional payments if you have extraordinary medical needs or heavy home use, or for faster payments if you have extreme hardship.

YOUR OPTIONS

The Court will hold a hearing on **July 9, 2026**, to decide whether to approve the settlement. Court appointed lawyers represent you and are paid from the settlement. If you wish, you or your own lawyer may ask to appear and speak at the hearing at your own cost.

Option	What To Do	Deadline
Get Benefits	If you have an NHL diagnosis: Register by January 5, 2027 (or 180 days after the Court approves the settlement, whichever is later). File a claim within 180 days after any appeals are resolved. If you get NHL later: No need to register now. File a claim within 6 years of diagnosis.	Varies
Exclude Yourself	The only way to keep all legal rights to sue Monsanto on your own. You get no money from this settlement.	June 4, 2026
Object to Settlement	Tell the Court why you don't like the settlement. The Court will consider objections before approval.	June 4, 2026

What You Give Up: If you stay in the settlement, you cannot sue Monsanto for any claims related to Roundup exposure. You give up the right to seek money to cover your losses (compensatory damages), for medical tests (medical monitoring), and to punish the company (punitive damages). If you are diagnosed with NHL but later qualify to exit the settlement—for example, you did not receive a payment within five years of eligibility, funding ran out before you were paid, or you rejected your award—you may sue for your losses, but not for punitive damages. If you are not diagnosed with NHL before the settlement ends, you get back all your legal rights. If you do nothing, you will be bound by the Court's decisions.

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Diplomats Required: Shaping the New International Economic System

BY ALAN LARSON

The collapse of the American-led international economic system is at hand. Or at least so say many renowned experts. If the experts' analyses are correct, and they may well be, State Department professionals should remember that their predecessors played leading roles in creating the most successful global economic system in history.

The architects of the new one will need unique capabilities: deep experience and expertise in dealing with China, a sophisticated understanding of the theory and practice of international economic policy, and the diplomatic skills to negotiate workable arrangements with other countries whose traditions and interests are not identical to our own.

State Department officers cannot accomplish this task alone. They will need to work closely as members of a team led by the president, Secretary of State, and other senior advisers. At the same time, no administration will be able to accomplish this task without the active involvement of State Department officers and their distinctive capabilities.



Alan Larson is a retired Foreign Service officer with the rank of Career Ambassador who served as under secretary for economic affairs, assistant secretary for economic and business affairs, and ambassador to the OECD. After retiring from the State Department, he advised businesses on their most complicated and consequential international challenges.

How It Was Done in the 1940s

Recall the construction of the last international economic system. In the early 1940s, Secretary of State Cordell Hull pressed the Roosevelt administration to prioritize postwar economic arrangements. Hull especially sought to avoid the protectionist economic policies by which one country would try to make itself richer by making other countries poorer. Such protectionist policies had led to the Great Depression and World War II.

Hull and Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles convinced President Roosevelt to include open trade principles in the Atlantic Charter, in which FDR and Winston Churchill set out a shared vision for the postwar world. Then Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs Dean Acheson pressed Britain to commit to an open, multilateral trade regime as part of the Lend-Lease Act and negotiated the establishment of the World Bank.

Future Under Secretary for Economics Will Clayton drew on business acumen and diplomatic skill to parry an unsound proposal of Britain's John Maynard Keynes. Acheson and Clayton were the administration's most credible witnesses before Congress on the Marshall Plan.

Clayton also was the principal U.S. negotiator for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the predecessor to the World Trade Organization. At a crucial moment in the negotiations, Clayton convinced President Harry Truman to veto a protectionist tariff on wool that would have undercut America's credibility in

advocating for a new international system based on more open markets.

Joseph Stalin was determined to disrupt an economic recovery in Europe. Foreign Service Officer (FSO) George Kennan's "long telegram" explained to Washington why the Soviets' pervasive paranoia and insecurities would impel them to undermine political stability and economic recovery in Europe.

Henry Kissinger, not one given to cheap praise, judged that no FSO ever shaped debate over the U.S. role in the world to such an extent as Kennan. Acheson, Clayton, and Kennan played crucial roles in developing the Marshall Plan and assisted Truman to make the case for it before Congress and the American people.

America's Leading Role

In 1991, during my stint as U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a retiring European ambassador shared an experience he had had nearly 40 years earlier in the very same room.

Back then, Averell Harriman, at the time the chief U.S. representative to Europe, had described to European diplomats, including my colleague, what the United States was prepared to do if Europeans would band together and develop a recovery plan based on reform and trade. For the first time in years, hope surged among the European diplomats.

Secretary of State George Marshall had made the case that "the economy of Germany must be rebuilt," a sharp contrast to U.S. policy after World War I.

Truman and the State Department pressed ahead with a reform of Germany's currency even though Stalin blockaded Berlin. The United States was so committed to economic recovery that it launched the first airlift of supplies to Berlin.

During the decades since the Marshall Plan, the U.S.-led international economic system needed maintenance and updates to remain vibrant. State Department officers stepped forward whenever the system was tested by unexpected trials.

- The first oil shock of 1973–1974, inflicted by the Organization of Arab Oil Exporting Countries (OAPEC), plunged the world into recession. OAPEC intended to pressure the United States to stop supporting Israel after Egypt attacked it in the Yom Kippur War.

Tom Enders, then assistant secretary of State for economic and business affairs, led efforts to establish a counter cartel of oil consuming countries, the International Energy Agency (IEA), that aligned consumers' policies and established a system for sharing oil when supplies are disrupted. The IEA proved its value in 1978, when the Iranian Revolution brought a second damaging oil supply disruption.

- During the Carter and Bush (41) administrations, State Department officers, working with the Department of Transportation, reinforced the global economic system by creating the "Open Skies" framework for international travel of passengers and cargo, laying the foundation for just-in-time delivery of

components for complex modern supply chains.

- State Department officers worked with the U.S. Treasury to prevent the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and similar financial crises in Latin America and Europe, from disrupting the global economy.

- State Department officers and the Justice Department negotiated the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention in 1997 to strengthen the legitimacy of the international trade and investment system.

Former Treasury Secretary and Secretary of State George Shultz often observed that officials in the State Department and Treasury intrinsically understand the vital importance of the global systems on which security and prosperity depend.

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

Not all presidents have this understanding. For example, Herbert Hoover and FDR: Though highly experienced in world affairs, each fumbled crucial opportunities to end the Great Depression.

Hoover plunged ahead with the protectionist Smoot-Hawley tariffs even after the steep stock market collapse and the onset of the depression. FDR sabotaged the 1933 World Economic Conference, ridiculing international cooperation while he adopted an uncontrolled dollar depreciation to boost U.S. prosperity at the expense of other countries.

What Is Required

Rebuilding a functioning international economic system is likely to be very challenging. The United States will need to formulate and skillfully implement an astute and comprehensive policy toward China, a more daunting economic challenger than the former Soviet Union was.

China and the United States each have sought to weaponize economic interdependence. China leveraged its stranglehold over rare earth minerals to pressure the U.S. policy. The Biden and Trump administrations have tried to keep sensitive semiconductor products and technology away from Chinese firms.

We will also need to test whether China will decide to destroy an international economic system based on broadly shared values or recognize that it can gain by collaborating with the United States and other countries on a system that works for all.

The United States will need to protect itself where we have economic vulnerabilities and maximize our economic strengths. We need to be the country in which the world's best and brightest want to study and work. We need to strengthen our world-class research capabilities.

We need to rely on competitive markets rather than state capitalism. We need to devote intellectual energy and resources to retraining and supporting those whose jobs and communities are disrupted by economic change.

Developing countries must have a place in a refurbished global economic system. A U.S. development strategy should recognize the centrality of economic growth, open markets, and foreign investment.

And the goal of development should be to expand individuals' freedom to live the sort of lives they value. Democracy, good government, reasonable health care, and education are all fundamental to development.

Coercive tariffs are major obstacles to a well-functioning global economic system. The costs of tariffs are borne mainly by the end-users of imported goods. The cost of tariffs on imported steel and aluminum, for example, are borne mainly by industries that heavily use steel and aluminum as inputs, notably producers of automobiles and farm machinery made in the United States.

And as every soybean farmer in America knows, when foreign countries retaliate against U.S. tariffs, such retalia-

tion inflicts an additional cost on the targeted industry.

Tariffs on imports also have economic effects that are nearly identical to taxes on exports. American import tariffs weaken America's most internationally competitive industries. High tariffs will make the U.S. economy weaker and less productive.

When the United States tries to use tariff policy to tip the commercial playing field in our favor, it creates an unstable international economic system. Our major trading partners will intensify economic relationships with each other and avoid economic relationships with us. The United States represents less than a quarter of world trade.

Over time, tariff policy can isolate the country.

Rising to the Challenge

The current international economic system may limp along for several years without a caretaker. But sooner or later, calamity will arrive, as it did for my parents' generation during the Great Depression and World War II.

For State Department professionals, the current era of disorder can be discouraging. Sooner or later, however, changed circumstances will permit a new international economic order to be created. When that time comes, America will need the skillful work of State Department professionals.

Large challenges have a way of summing greatness. America's "greatest generation" was not born into greatness, like entitled royalty. Rather, the pressure of difficult challenges hardened them into diamonds.

My hope and expectation are that the greatest generation of professional American diplomats has yet to arrive. ■

Leading from the Edge

How Diplomats Are Actually Using AI

Both individual diplomats and teams at State are building artificial intelligence into their workflows with tools they already have at hand.

BY PAUL KRUCHOSKI

Last fall, 10 teams of diplomats gathered for a six-hour hackathon. Their challenge: build AI-powered tools to solve real training problems. By day's end, they had produced 10 deployable solutions, including custom chatbots for negotiation training, a historical diplomacy tool, and an interactive briefing companion for officers heading to post.

This shows something important about AI adoption in U.S. diplomacy right now: The most consequential innovation is happening at the edge of the State Department, closest to the work. None of these innovations required developers. All of them run on tools the department already has.



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When I wrote about artificial intelligence for *The Foreign Service Journal* in June 2024, I argued that the problem wasn't technology but culture, that we risked fragmented systems and limited utility if we didn't address how we share data and collaborate across organizational boundaries. Two years later, this prediction is still partially right. The cultural barriers remain; but practitioners found ways around them anyway.

The Ground Truth

Across the department, diplomats are building AI into their workflows with tools they already have. Instructional designers use Google NotebookLM to create onboarding materials that let new officers interact with procedural guidance conversationally rather than hunting through static documents. One strategic communications team runs a full AI-augmented workflow: brainstorming campaign concepts with large language models (LLMs), generating visual materials, distributing through established channels, and then measuring impact with media analysis tools that track sentiment and reach in near-real time.

Beyond the teams, individual practitioners are building personal AI workflows combining tools for research synthesis, translation, and meeting preparation. One officer described using three AI systems to analyze reactions to a major policy speech, synthesize cable traffic, and draft strategic recommendations—several days of work compressed into an afternoon. If AI tools

The State Department's new self-service AI sandboxes managed by the Center for Analytics—Funhouse and Proving Ground—point in the right direction.

can shrink several days of analytical work into an afternoon, the productivity implications scale quickly. Even the modest 5.4 percent time savings reported by AI users in a St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank study translates to meaningful capacity—capacity that could address backlogs, reduce overtime demands, or focus outward on meaningful diplomatic influence.

Moreover, the tools enabling these gains aren't custom builds with seven-figure price tags—they're capabilities the State Department already has. One of the best investments is Gemini (Google's AI assistant) within the Foreign Affairs Network's Google Workspace environment, FAN.gov, which offers communication, collaboration, and productivity applications. The costs are modest: An undiscounted Google Workspace Enterprise Plus license runs \$36 per month. Compare that to a fully loaded overseas Foreign Service position exceeding \$350 per hour—or even a domestic Civil Service role at a fraction of that. Saving even a few hours of time every month suggests that widespread adoption of tools would be incredibly cost efficient.

I'm seeing similar dynamics at the Department of Defense. The highest-impact interventions aren't new multiyear, multi-million-dollar custom applications—they're prompt engineering, workflow integration, helping practitioners develop judgment about when and how to use what's already available.

Leading from the Edge

How do we help people use what they have? The examples above suggest an answer—and it's not the one the department usually reaches for.

A typical enterprise software approach emphasizes *replication*: Deploy standardized platforms across the entire organization, ensure fidelity to design, measure outcomes consistently. The other approach emphasizes *adaptation*: Innovation grows when practitioners remix ideas and tools for local contexts, building solutions tailored to problems they understand intimately.

In fact, both have their place. Replication works for standardized processes. Adaptation works better when success depends on tacit knowledge (i.e., local context, relationships, and workflows that can't be specified in a platform design). Today, AI adoption in diplomacy at the State Department is mostly the second kind. Knowing *how* to use AI well—crafting effective prompts, recognizing when output needs verification, integrating tools into established workflows—develops through participation and peer learning, not platform deployment. The tools that get adopted are the ones that fit how people work.

The examples I cite in this article are being used more and more widely. Staff going out to multiple embassies are already using the briefing companion. A new StateChat-based AI assistant for writing Civil Service position descriptions started in one office and is being adapted by several others—this is “spreading,” not “scaling.” Tracking progress is challenging for spreading approaches, unlike scaled applications where it is simple to monitor the number of users. Consistent with what one would expect in nascent practice, these tools are not for high-stakes use.

This points to a different role for department leadership: not controlling where innovation happens but creating conditions where it can happen safely at the edge. Govern the boundaries, resource the capability, learn from what works, document its use, and help it spread.

Platforms vs. Products

There's a reasonable counterargument here. Without enterprise coordination, you get fragmentation and security risks. Better to invest in centralized AI tools—purpose-built solutions with proper security review, consistent interfaces, and clear accountability.

But this conflates two different entities. Centralized *tools* are finished products: headquarters controls what they do and how they work. Centralized *platforms* are shared environments established by headquarters where practitioners can build, test, and share their own solutions within appropriate guardrails. Platforms beat products here. The hackathon teams built 10 deployable solutions in hours—not because Google built the perfect diplomatic AI tool, but because the platform let them build what they needed.

Centralized tools struggle with adoption because they can't anticipate every workflow. And when the enterprise is slow to provide options, practitioners don't wait. They find commercial tools on their own, outside State's environment

entirely. That's where the real security risk lies—not in sanctioned experimentation within FAN, but in work happening on personal devices and consumer accounts because official tools don't meet practitioners' needs.

The State Department's new self-service AI sandboxes managed by the Center for Analytics—Funhouse and Proving Ground—point in the right direction. They enable diplomatic practitioners to build solutions that stay close to the mission, while enterprise provides guardrails for stability and reuse. These opportunities have been circulated in department notices and internal cables over the last year, including instructions on how to gain access to them. The choice of different platforms for experimentation is a real benefit for practitioners as well.

The strategic question isn't *whether* to centralize—it's *what* to centralize. Invest in platforms that enable practitioner innovation within secure boundaries. Invest in governance and accelerated education. When a team builds something that works, celebrate it, harden it, make it available department-wide. State's Center for Analytics is already doing this. Their awards and recognition programs surface promising practitioner innovations and give them visibility. That's enterprise complementing edge innovation, not competing with it.

Where to Start

Find your people. The practitioners I spoke with didn't learn AI from training courses; they learned from each other. Find someone in your bureau who's already experimenting—not necessarily the loudest AI enthusiast, but someone whose work has gotten noticeably better. Ask what's working and watch how they use it. The knowledge that matters here is tacit; it transfers through observation and conversation, not documentation. The Center for Analytics is building support for this via networks of AI champions embedded in bureaus, pairing local credibility with enterprise support.

Write down how you actually work. Start a document that captures how you like to write, what you care about, and what workflows you like to use (e.g., the briefing structure you always use, the three questions you ask before every meeting, how you approach issue research). This is the tacit knowledge that makes you effective, and it's exactly what AI needs to work for you rather than generically. When you give an AI tool that context, it stops producing generic output and starts producing output shaped by your judgment. I keep multiple documents: key workflows, key facts, and my own work preferences. Your vault of documents can and will evolve with you, getting better each

time. Parts of that document also become a thing you can share with colleagues when they ask how you do what you do.

Build something, then share it. That document is a start—but the real momentum comes from building. Pick one repetitive task (e.g., meeting prep, talking points, cable summaries) and make something that helps. One task, one tool, one win. The confidence compounds. When it works, share it with a colleague. When they improve it, share that version further. Staff are stretched thin, and learning a new tool feels like a risk when you're not sure it'll pay off. A working example from a trusted peer changes that calculus.

How Will AI Change Diplomacy?

Today, it isn't a matter of whether AI will change diplomacy—it already has. The real question is whether the people closest to the work will shape these changes.

The structural constraints are real but addressable. Data quality remains the hardest problem—AI tools are only as good as the information they can draw on, and practitioners still build workarounds for systems that don't talk to each other. Shared data platforms (e.g., contact directories, cable archives, lessons learned repositories) would make every AI interaction more useful. Without them, we're asking people to use sophisticated tools with one hand tied behind their back. One of the surest ways to improve data quality is for people to actually use the systems connected to it. Data gets better when people see value in keeping it up to date as a shared resource.

Security concerns, while legitimate, are already addressed: The three platforms discussed in this article—FAN, Funhouse, and Proving Ground—all meet the State Department's existing security standards.

The more difficult question is what happens with the time AI gives back. The common critique is fair: In most bureaucracies, efficiency gains don't liberate people—they generate more tasking. Time saved on cable drafting becomes time spent on additional reporting requirements. The productivity dividend gets captured by the institution, not the practitioner.

But that outcome is a choice, not an inevitability. Whether freed-up time flows toward the core work of diplomacy—the relationship-building, the strategic thinking, the judgment calls that no algorithm can replicate—or whether it simply feeds the machine's appetite for more output, that is fundamentally what is at stake with AI adoption. The issue is not whether it will be adopted, but how and by whom the gains are used. That's what the bureaucratic incentive issue, too, is really about—who benefits and toward what end. ■

Beyond Borders

What U.S. Diplomats Can Learn from Global AI Innovation

If we are serious about AI-powered diplomacy, we need to look beyond our borders and learn from our strategic partners and competitors.

BY VIRGINIA BLASER

While many in Washington, D.C., still debate whether artificial intelligence belongs in diplomacy, other countries are already putting it to work. We are seeing AI developed for use in diplomatic operations worldwide—from chatbots assisting overseas citizens with emergency support to AI-driven policy planning tools, to massive cross-national data platforms modeling bilateral relationships.

Here’s the catch: Much of this innovation happens outside the United States.

If we are serious about AI-powered diplomacy, whether for national competitiveness, operational resilience, or global development leadership, we need to look beyond our borders—to not

only assess risk or benchmark ourselves but also learn how our strategic partners and competitors are managing the technology.

The Global Field Lab

Diplomacy remains a profession shaped by precedent. We read cables from prior posts, study past communiqués, and interpret protocol through the lens of tradition. But AI shifts the ground beneath that entire model. When data moves faster than deliberation, and the tools that sort, translate, and predict are built with black-box algorithms, relying solely on precedent will no longer suffice.

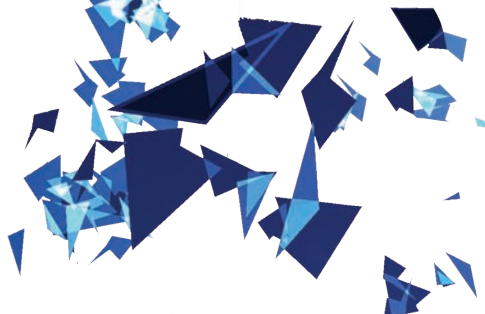
Fortunately, there is a field lab already running—with other governments doing smart, sometimes bold, often replicable, work. Here are just a few examples that deserve attention.

In Estonia’s “KrattAI” initiative, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pairs its digital infrastructure with AI tools for everything from real-time translation to document authentication.



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Editor’s Note: This article was originally submitted in 2025. Since then, AI adoption across governments has continued to accelerate. The examples below are intended as illustrative of broader global trends in the use of AI across diplomatic, consular, and humanitarian operations, rather than as news of the latest developments.



A national framework for interoperable AI assistants, the initiative is a model for how ministries can adopt shared bots for tasks like consular Q&A, identity verification, and cross-agency document workflows.

Similarly, India's "MADAD Portal" (MEA in Aid of Diaspora in Distress), run by the Ministry of External Affairs, digitized and automated the global management of consular grievances, allowing citizens abroad to file, track, and escalate cases through a centralized platform used by Indian missions worldwide. Internal reporting credits the system with improving response times by more than 25 percent. Across government, India has also begun incorporating AI-driven analytics into public grievance platforms such as the national Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS) system to improve case routing and resolution.

In North America, Canada's Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) department similarly leverages machine learning algorithms to sort visa applications, helping officers prioritize cases and detect fraudulent submissions. This allows for faster processing of straightforward applications, freeing up officers to focus on complex or sensitive files.

Several nations deploy AI for strategic analysis. For instance, Australia's "SmartGates" uses AI-powered facial recognition and biometric data for automated border control, reducing wait times and enhancing security at airports. Across the region, Singapore has integrated biometrics, automation, and AI-enabled systems into immigration and border processing, including passport-free clearance using facial and iris recognition and large-scale automated screening designed to streamline traveler processing and enhance security.

Croatia's "Bilateral Navigator," profiled in Sinisa Grgic's *AI Diplomacy: Insights and Innovations from the Bilateral Navigator* (2024), has been developed using dozens of datasets to map bilateral ties between 193 countries. This AI-powered platform combines economic, cultural, social, defense, and demographic indicators to generate real-time profiles of how two countries relate. With more than 18,500 pairings tracked, this tool gives even small foreign ministries strategic insight usually reserved for major powers.

Looking at international collaboration and humanitarian efforts, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) launched "La Chama," an AI-driven chatbot that is accessible via WhatsApp in Brazil, in 2021. A Venezuelan term meaning "young woman," La Chama provides Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Brazil, with reliable information on documentation, health services, and employment, demonstrating how AI can extend critical support in crisis regions.



Similarly, using a supply chain planning tool developed by researchers at ETH Zurich, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) optimizes the delivery of critical medical supplies in war zones, showcasing AI's potential to improve logistical efficiency in humanitarian diplomacy. The World Bank's Famine Action Mechanism similarly leverages an AI algorithm to spot areas at risk of food shortages and famine, enabling anticipatory action, further demonstrating AI's humanitarian potential.

China, meanwhile, takes a broader strategic approach. Through AI-enabled language translation tools and open-source platforms deployed in the Global South, China positions itself not just as a technological power, but as the partner of choice for countries looking to digitize their own governance. AI is embedded into China's public diplomacy strategy, development partnerships, and education platforms. This tech diplomacy now accompanies Beijing's physical infrastructure diplomacy, forming a combined soft power offensive.

These are not future promises—they are already deployed. Running and tested, not in Washington, D.C., labs, but in foreign ministries, at border checkpoints, and in refugee camps.

Should We Worry?

Some will argue the United States already possesses world-class technology, and that is true. But AI innovation inside the U.S. government is often fragmented, cautious, and heavily siloed. Meanwhile, other countries move quickly and collectively, often out of necessity.

What they build challenges the notion that only the biggest players can lead in diplomatic tech. It also raises uncomfortable questions.

- If smaller foreign ministries can adopt interoperable AI chatbots across multiple missions, why can't we?
- If AI helps triage and resolve consular emergencies in India and Canada, why do many U.S. embassies still manage cases by Excel spreadsheet?
 - With AI-powered policy modeling used from Tallinn to Zagreb, why are we reinventing tools deployed by others?
 - If AI can streamline critical humanitarian logistics for the ICRC or provide vital information to refugees via WhatsApp, what prevents us from adopting similar augmentations to our own extensive development and consular networks?

This moment matters for several reasons.

Operational pressure is real. As staffing levels stagnate and demand for services grows, U.S. diplomatic posts need technology that augments, rather than replaces, human capacity. AI can help automate repetitive tasks, surface trends across huge datasets, and

reduce the time it takes to respond to crises. If peer ministries use it now, we should too.

Geopolitical influence shifts. Many countries accepting AI tools from China, India, or Estonia are also U.S. diplomatic partners. If we do not offer our own tech solutions—or if we are offering outdated, one-size-fits-all platforms—we lose strategic ground. In some cases, we may unintentionally cede narrative power to rivals by failing to show up at all.

Learning beats duplication. Governments worldwide pilot consular AI, multilingual bots, procurement triage systems, and natural language processing media trackers. Replicating that work from scratch is inefficient and wasteful. Smart nations adapt proven models rather than rebuilding them.

AI norms and values are being set now. If the United States wants to help shape the ethical use of AI globally—especially in diplomacy, migration, and governance—it must first understand how others are already deploying these tools.

What's Blocking Us?

The U.S. is not asleep at the wheel. Dozens of excellent AI pilots are in development across the State Department and other federal agencies. But despite these efforts, three structural issues slow our progress.

Fragmentation. Tools built by one agency or mission often are not shared or accessible across the system. That lack of interoperability, due to policy, security, or bureaucratic caution, means even successful pilots struggle to scale. Federal AI initiatives frequently encounter significant hurdles due to a fragmented data infrastructure, where information remains locked in silos across systems and departments.

Mindset. Too often, there is a belief that innovation must come from Washington or from the U.S. private sector. However, the best ideas might originate from a field post in Nairobi or from a health ministry in Estonia. We need a mindset that rewards scanning outward, not just upward. Bureaucratic inertia and an administrative mindset often limit innovation to slow, incremental improvements, rather than embracing transformative potential.

Security overuse. While cybersecurity is nonnegotiable, too often it is used as a blanket excuse to avoid engagement with open-source tools or foreign-developed platforms. The irony is that other governments already embed these tools successfully, often with better vetting processes than we use internally. An overly cautious approach to cybersecurity and compliance can create significant friction for AI adoption, particularly in managing complex systems and the need for more flexible “allow by default” controls.

What Can Be Done—Now

This is not a call for massive investment or a moonshot initiative. It is a call for practical, near-term action. Here is what we can do today.

Map the landscape. Task an interagency team (with support from trusted outside partners) to track AI deployments across peer diplomatic services and relevant international organizations. The goal is to create a comprehensive dashboard of global best practices in consular tech, diplomatic modeling, multilingual support, and crisis triage, updated quarterly.

Reward adaptation, not just invention. Create a fast-track system for U.S. missions to test or adapt vetted foreign government tools for local use. This could include Estonia's chatbot templates, India's case triage design, or even Croatia's data mapping frameworks. We should specifically consider tools such as visa processing analytics used by partners like Canada; the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's consular inquiry triage; or AI-supported logistical planning used by organizations like the ICRC.

Fund a peer exchange fellowship. Piloting a six-month AI diplomacy fellowship that embeds U.S. officers into foreign ministries or multilateral bodies doing cutting-edge work would allow them to bring those lessons back and implement them directly.

Open up sharing inside the U.S. government. Many existing AI tools remain siloed or difficult to access across the system. We should inventory what already exists, assess where tools can be shared, and create protocols for internal distribution. This is about ensuring not only efficiency but also equity of access across missions.

Learning as Diplomacy

The global AI conversation is not just about technology. It is about values, norms, and leadership. If the U.S. wants to lead on responsible AI in diplomacy, it needs to show that it can learn as well as lead. This exchange must be reciprocal: If we expect to learn from the innovations of partner governments, we should also be willing to share our own tools, experiences, and lessons in return. We must be willing to listen to partners, to adopt good ideas—wherever they originate—and to scale them with integrity.

Some of the best diplomatic innovation today comes from unlikely places. From tiny ministries. From startup governments. From diplomats who see a gap and fill it—not with a grant but with a chatbot or AI agent.

We must learn from them. Because smart diplomacy does not always start in Washington. ■

AI Should Assist, Not Replace, U.S. Diplomats

The work of diplomats on the ground in foreign countries can be made easier with artificial intelligence. But the diplomats themselves cannot be replaced.

BY MAHVASH SIDDIQUI



Mahvash Siddiqui has served for more than 20 years as a Foreign Service officer in Germany, the United Kingdom, Iraq, Qatar, and India. Her roles have ranged from public diplomacy officer to acting consul general to alternate permanent representative to the International Maritime Satellites Organization and the International Maritime Organization. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of the U.S. government.

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized Iraq's Mosul Dam in 2014, the consequences could have been catastrophic. Analysts warned that a structural collapse might unleash a flood wave capable of

costing millions of lives downstream. At that moment, as the sole environment, science, technology, and health (ESTH) officer in country, and with no U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hydrologists on the ground, I became the de facto water-security adviser to the senior U.S. commander in Iraq.

Interpreting piezometer readings and translating technical risk into operational guidance is not typically in a diplomat's job description. Yet that was my reality. I relied on long-unused physics and calculus training to brief the commander daily on water manipulation and structural risk. A misread signal would carry enormous consequences.



U.S. ARMY

The Mosul Dam in Iraq, the fourth-largest dam in the Middle East, circa 2017.

In those moments, I often wished for an AI system capable of rapidly processing complex engineering data and converting it into usable assessments. Such a tool would not have replaced human judgment but could have reduced uncertainty, allowing decision-makers to focus on strategy and safety. AI tools designed to translate specialized scientific data into operational language could serve as force multipliers in crisis environments where expertise is scarce and time is critical.

AI as a Predictive Tool

In 2013, before ISIS dominated international headlines, I saw firsthand how fragmented signals can obscure emerging threats. Based on conversations with Iraqi counterparts, local contacts, and regional reporting, our team in Baghdad relayed unclassified warnings to the National Security Council about an influx of foreign fighters entering Iraq. Local Iraqi and Syrian news outlets were documenting the trend, but international coverage was largely absent.

The prevailing assumption in Washington, D.C., was that Iraq was stabilizing, reinforcing perceptions of safety that helped justify a reduced external presence. The warning signs existed; they were dispersed, however, across local sources and languages.

AI systems capable of aggregating and translating local reporting at scale could have synthesized those indicators into a clearer

Such a tool would not have replaced human judgment but could have reduced uncertainty, allowing decision-makers to focus on strategy and safety.

early warning picture. Predictive analytics might not have prevented the crisis, but it could have accelerated awareness and sharpened policy attention by anticipating destabilization before it became visible on the ground. The lesson remains relevant: The challenge is rarely a lack of information—it is the inability to assemble it quickly enough.

I saw the operational value of such tools while serving in the Iran Threat Directorate at the Global Engagement Center in early 2021. Our team used AI-supported analysis to map disinformation networks targeting Afghanistan and identified an 800 percent surge in coordinated narratives amplified by Iranian, Russian, and Chinese actors. The scale and speed of the activity would have been nearly impossible to quantify manually, but AI allowed us to measure how malign influence campaigns were shaping public perception in real time.

Yet technology alone does not guarantee action; institutional resistance prevented the operational response we proposed. Tools are only as effective as the institutions prepared to act on what they reveal.

AI is particularly well suited to computational tasks and large-scale pattern recognition. It can track disinformation flows, identify early indicators of instability, and automate repetitive administrative processes. Drafting templates, managing cable formats, and processing standardized reporting are logical areas for efficiency gains. Reducing procedural burdens would allow officers to invest more time in analysis, negotiation, and relationship-building—the work that defines diplomacy.

There is, however, a boundary that must remain firm.

The Human Element

AI cannot replace the eyes and ears of diplomats on the ground. It cannot replicate trust built through years of engagement or interpret the emotional dynamics of a negotiation. While serving in pre-Brexit U.K., I met hundreds of people across

professions, regions, and social classes. Many average Britons expressed frustration that European Union (EU) labor migration was straining public services and increasing job competition—concerns that were rarely reflected in the London press and yet would later lead to passage of Brexit.

Those face-to-face conversations revealed a political undercurrent that data alone could not have captured, and we used this information to caution State leadership to prepare for Brexit-related economic and political ripples to our trans-Atlantic relationship. Diplomacy depends on presence, curiosity, and empathy. Algorithms cannot walk into a pub, listen to a room, or detect social tension before it appears in polling data.

The national security implications of AI adoption are also significant. As AI platforms increasingly rely on private sector infrastructure, governments must confront difficult questions about data stewardship. Diplomatic reporting and analytic frameworks represent decades of institutional memory. Even unclassified systems contain sensitive patterns that, if aggregated or compromised, could expose vulnerabilities or distort policy. Concentrating diplomatic knowledge in proprietary private sector platforms creates dependencies that may not align with long-term American public interests.

U.S. government personnel operate under rigorous vetting and constitutional obligations to serve America first. Private firms such as Palantir and others, regardless of technical sophistication, are accountable primarily to shareholders. Their incentives and partnerships—sometimes with foreign actors—are not synonymous with national security priorities. A breach, acquisition, or shift in corporate direction could have consequences far beyond routine contractor risk. As AI systems become embedded in diplomatic workflows, the risks associated with external control of core infrastructure grow accordingly.

There is also a cognitive dimension. Overreliance on automated systems can dull analytical instincts and cerebral acuity. Good diplomats question assumptions, synthesize ambiguity, and exercise judgment under pressure. AI should sharpen those skills, not replace them. Systems that handle computation and data management should elevate human reasoning rather than encourage passive acceptance of machine outputs.

Careless use risks centralizing sensitive knowledge, weakening institutional memory, and encouraging misplaced confidence in automated conclusions.

Next Steps

The policy implication of such concerns is not to reject AI but to carefully shape its role. Thoughtful adoption can extend the reach of diplomats, accelerate analysis, and reduce administrative friction. Careless use risks centralizing sensitive knowledge, weakening institutional memory, and encouraging misplaced confidence in automated conclusions. Strategic judgment and diplomatic engagement must remain human responsibilities, with technology supporting statecraft, not redefining it.

U.S. diplomacy has always relied on officers willing to operate at the edge of their expertise. AI can serve as a technical partner in moments of crisis, augmenting our ability to respond to complex threats. But it cannot replace the relational foundation of diplomacy or the ethical accountability carried by public servants.

In an era of rapid technological change, preserving the human core of foreign policy is not nostalgia. It is a security imperative. Our diplomats remain the nation's interpreters of a complex world. AI can help us work faster and smarter, but it cannot see, feel, or understand on America's behalf. Ensuring

that it remains an assistant—not a substitute—is essential to the resilience and credibility of U.S. diplomacy. ■



COURTESY OF MAHVASH SIDDIQUI

The author (second from right) meeting with university students in London to discuss the possible impacts of Brexit on science and technology research, March 2016.

Transforming Diplomatic Productivity with AI

Judicious deployment of artificial intelligence could incentivize knowledge transfer and transform productivity at U.S. embassies.

BY DANIEL CROCKER

U.S. embassies and consulates have long relied on reporting to share actionable and relevant knowledge with policymakers in Washington, D.C. It is an arduous task, requiring meetings at post with emerging leaders, activists, and officials at all levels of the host government. Diplomats work to establish trust and write detailed reports about what they've learned from their contacts on the ground. But the process has often fallen short, especially when it comes to the fragmentation and transfer of information and the kind of continuity over time needed for effective diplomacy and mission achievement.

U.S. national interests are not served by, for example, having a Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) diplomat, who has relationships with leading private sector executives, or a Diplomatic Security agent, with contacts in law enforcement, keep that knowledge in their heads or in agency-specific data silos. Even in a small country like Panama, where I served as head of commerce from 2010 to 2013, more than 20 agencies are represented



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at the U.S. embassy, creating overlap of authority and balkanized reporting in service of multiple missions. To make matters worse, as Foreign Service personnel move to new postings, as frequently as every two years, that knowledge typically leaves with them, and their replacements have to start all over again.

A judicious deployment of artificial intelligence could disrupt this cycle and, if done well, transform the productivity of U.S. embassies. With the help of AI, we can build an outcomes-based culture with adherence to tight metrics. It will not be easy. Diplomats will have to be incentivized, as they are not currently, to transfer knowledge of individuals or issues to a digital format. Also, it could be poorly implemented, simply bolted on to existing operations or not adopted at all by some agencies at post, and that would be a costly but useless exercise. But it is worth trying.

No More Business as Usual

A fully integrated AI solution is possible with today's technology, but it is years away from implementation, simply given the cycle time of U.S. government procurement as well as user training and adoption for a globally distributed workforce. That is a feature, not a bug, for this simple reason: Proceeding



deliberately will result in more mature solutions for a fully AI-integrated customer relationship management (CRM) platform from Microsoft and Salesforce, among others. I base this observation on my experience leading a procurement and global implementation of Salesforce for the U.S. Department of Commerce—a process that took more than two years and required significant executive sponsorship, specific statutory language appropriating funds, and a team of seasoned field officials and tech contractors.

How can AI be helpful in the near future? Imagine having a team of people at post who speak requisite languages with fluency, who have the bandwidth to read every article and consume all public media, and whose job it is to generate relevant reports, receive and transcribe debriefs, and flag patterns and people of interest to U.S. diplomats who cycle through posts every two years. If an AI agent can do this, it frees our diplomats from the time-honored but questionable practice of translating news articles and sending them in as reports with a snippet of commentary. It enables them to focus on what an AI agent *can't* do—engage on a personal level to promote U.S. national interests and gather actionable, relevant human intelligence.

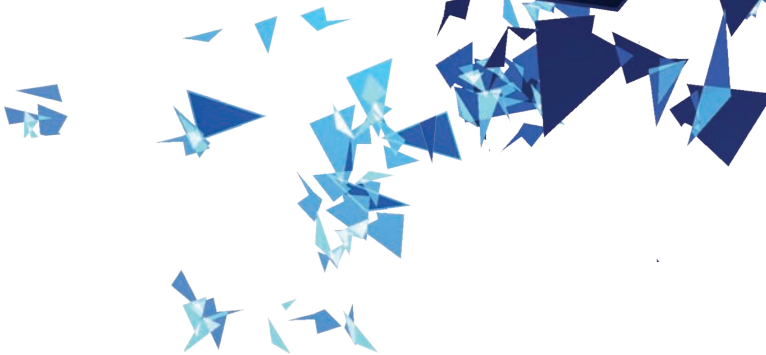
AI can already be deployed to read all public media and tag it for structured retrieval and synthesis. And since it feeds off public data, it could be implemented quickly as a pilot at a few posts. AI could also be used to derive reports, metrics, and prompts for action. Within Microsoft, such tools as CoPilot are already being deployed for writing at some U.S. government agencies (e.g., U.S. Export-Import Bank).

AI implementation would start with new standards for presence at post, established by the ambassador with support from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to insist that common goals drive collaboration between country team members on a common technology platform.

Incorporating the Human Touch

Of course AI cannot replace human intelligence gathering, the relationships that embassy officials develop. Yet such information needs to feed into the CRM platform, and this could be vastly facilitated by AI, via dialogue.

Most CRM implementations fail due to lack of user adoption. Users don't like filling in data fields and won't do so unless forced to; and if CRMs are not populated and maintained, they are useless. But what if an embassy officer went to a meeting with a contact and afterward simply initiated a conversational dialogue with an AI agent? The AI agent could be trained to elicit points that allow structured tagging to feed the CRM.



“Whom did you meet? Is this the right spelling of their name and title? Do you have contact information? What issues did you discuss? Are other countries getting involved in supporting unrest over this mining investment? What are the next steps? When do they need to be taken and by whom?” And so on.

This sort of conversation-to-text tool is now being used in the medical field to transcribe and summarize meetings with patients. And the capability is being developed by leading CRM platforms.

AI can also be used to stimulate proactivity. It can search CRM casework and contact profiles for gaps—a vice-minister who has no documented U.S. embassy contact, or a private sector executive who hasn't been contacted in three months, for instance. In concert with public news consumption, AI can create a prioritized listing of contact outreach for any embassy official. And it might be able to offer suggestions of important questions (e.g., “I saw that Brazilian firms may be in country seeking to assume that mining contract, can you confirm?”) based on those public sources and reporting from other embassy colleagues.

The same AI can generate any number of structured reports for officers to read or listen to even before they arrive at post (e.g., how investment is being treated in Panama, what labor unrest there is, who the key government contacts are and how to engage them). The beauty of AI is that it is dedicated to being responsive to natural language requests. If the data is accessible, then AI tools can already generate better summaries and points than most leave-behind briefs I inherited from my predecessors at post. Outgoing officers are typically scrambling to move, so briefing their replacements isn't high on the list of priorities. AI-generated reports will give newly arrived officers a head start on maintaining and deepening relationships of interest.

Shifting the Culture of Diplomatic Work

In conversation with reporting officers, I've often heard exasperation with a 1950s mentality of reporting (e.g., “Cables aren't saying much more than what I can find myself online”). How can we facilitate a shift in culture to acknowledge that the highest value added by reporting officers at post is offline human intelligence gathering and getting outcomes? What carrots and sticks need to be put in place, what sort of grading system?

Here the application of metrics might be tricky, but academia points the way. If AI is already capturing all public sources and feeding a CRM with the knowledge of an individual or ministry, then it can flag unoriginality in a reporting officer's submission (e.g., “This report is just a rehash of articles in the

AI cannot replace human intelligence gathering, the relationships that embassy officials develop.

local newspaper”). If, instead, that officer cultivates a relationship with a public official or mining executive and gathers original insights conveyed in the report, that is good. But how good?

One might imagine the creation of a grading system that rates any officer’s submission. If I do a report on a young, ambitious mining ministry official for whom there is little public source reporting, AI could be taught to rate that highly. And even more significantly, as AI synthesizes public sources and human intelligence from post that is then referenced by yet other reports on, say, the mining sector in Latin America, a grade for relevance based on number of citations could be added as well. Such a system is clearly possible with today’s technology.

This sort of grading would encourage officers to make longer-term investments in relationship-building that pay off for U.S. national interests well beyond the annual evaluation or departure from post. Imagine a scenario in which a relationship with a charismatic young labor leader like Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was developed and reported on—and paid off in dividends for years until he eventually became president of Brazil. AI could continue to flag the relevance of that initial relationship and ensure credits through a citations index for the officers who maintain the relationship as Lula grows in prominence.

The goal is to motivate reporting officers to get outside embassy walls and develop a wide array of relationships that are of national interest to the U.S., both in the short term (when, for example, a project calls for engaging them to block Chinese port investment) and in the long term (when a young private sector leader has presidential aspirations).

A CRM platform with a case management module would allow ad hoc teams to address a problem with the ability to document their work. Commerce’s well-established Salesforce CRM case module, used to capture hundreds of billions of dollars of U.S. business wins globally, serves as a useful prototype. More important than the technology is senior leadership’s insistence that measurable goals for outcomes be defined, developed, and captured on one platform, across all relevant

agencies. And that platform is logically where all profiles of individuals, companies, NGOs, and government entities are maintained and linked as needed to a case’s execution.

Commerce currently insists that its global workforce capture such information on its Salesforce CRM in order for anyone to get credit for their work. Ambassadors can make the same demand, and OMB can force agencies to use this common platform when at post.

What Could Go Wrong?

The State Department may not be ready. Changing the culture of reporting officers at State will not be easy. But after talking with multiple colleagues there, I firmly believe there is a newfound awareness that adapting or dying are today’s options. State’s senior-most leadership is telling ambassadors that there needs to be a change in business as usual and that they will themselves be held accountable for execution. And the report card approach—based on developing and documenting more relationships of interest, making original contributions, and finding relevance through citations—may focus the mind quickly if it is factored into evaluations.

AI may not be ready. If AI can’t reliably tag and structure the less-ordered intake of knowledge from, say, voice-activated dialogue, users will not embrace it. Early AI implementation in other U.S. government agencies has been met with considerable skepticism. And piloting an AI-dominant solution at a few posts will flag issues.

Other agencies must be on board. As the president’s representative at post, the ambassador will need to insist on participation—no more working in silos—and be willing to send agency reps home if they aren’t team players. When used widely, AI will become a more valuable resource for all agencies at post because its reports draw from a deeper well of knowledge.

Securing knowledge is tricky. It is almost certainly the case that profile management and methods for exerting leverage to win a mining concession need to be classified. That, in turn, may constrain some of the more innovative private sector solutions. And need-to-know protocols will have to be designed and implemented so that knowledge is compartmentalized and protected, but also available to those who need it. There may be pressure to have parallel systems, classified and unclassified, which will almost surely tank user adoption or, worse, result in leaks of knowledge that should be protected.

This issue needs to be hashed out thoroughly, but a simple if draconian approach would be to insist that the entire platform

be classified, even while intake, capture, and tagging of media sources may sit initially outside and be pulled in for better analytical integration. An unclassified version of the AI tool could “read” an article in a Panamanian paper, transcribe it into English with relevant data tagging to facilitate storage and retrieval, and then create a mirror copy in the classified system.

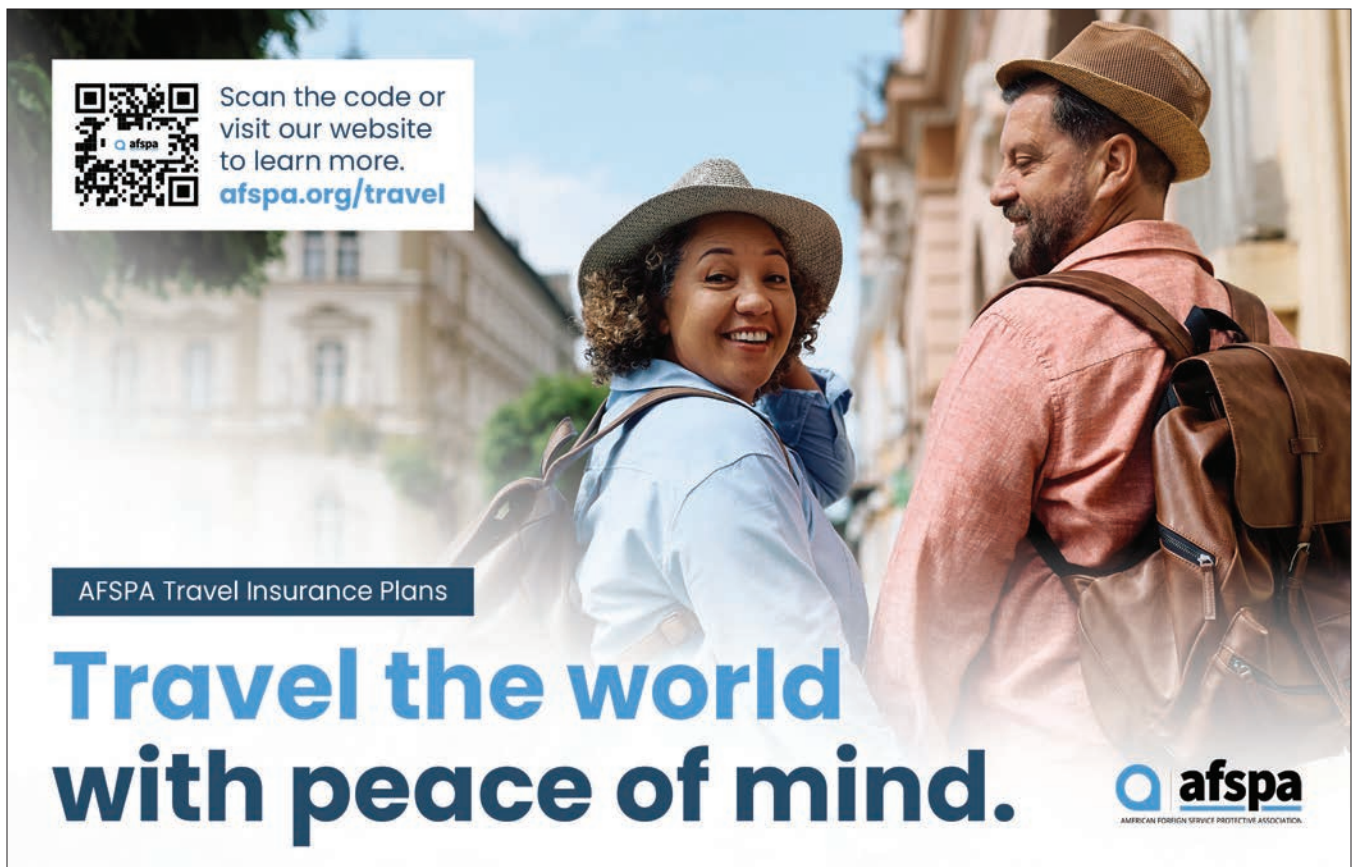
What Will AI Bring to Diplomacy?

There is no shortage of wild futuristic scenarios for diplomats. My favorite is the idea of wearables for the obligatory embassy receptions, where I’m guided to engage with key contacts. As I approach them, my bot reminds me of my relationship with them and their children’s names and hobbies, as well as giving me a prompt or two for the key intelligence gathering I ought to be doing—which, of course, is being recorded automatically and simultaneously translated if my language skills are rusty.

We’re not there yet. But I believe there has never been a better time to be a diplomat posted abroad. AI will soon facilitate speeding up the learning curve, staying briefed on all

As Foreign Service personnel move to new postings, as frequently as every two years, that knowledge typically leaves with them, and their replacements have to start all over again.


relevant news, building profiles of key contacts, and winning outcomes for U.S. national interests. For diplomats, whose currency is that of developing and maintaining human relationships that are then used to further the mission, AI is a powerful tool rather than a competitive threat. The career diplomats who adapt to this disruptive technology will thrive and, I am convinced, be recognized for years to come for their contributions. ■



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Are AI Consular Officers in Our Future?

As the derided “drudge work” of the Foreign Service, visa adjudication is often seen as the low-hanging fruit for AI replacement. But is it?

BY IAN HOPPER

Artificial intelligence (AI) companies predict that many entry-level professional positions will be replaced by AI in the coming years. As their stock prices continue to rise, underpinning much of the recent growth in our Thrift Savings Plan accounts, are we trading that benefit for a debt when AI takes over consular work? It’s hard to imagine AI handling significant parts of American Citizens Service (ACS) work: Who would want their loved one to get a

death notification from ChatGPT? But as the derided “drudge work” of the Foreign Service, visa adjudication is often seen as the low-hanging fruit for AI replacement.

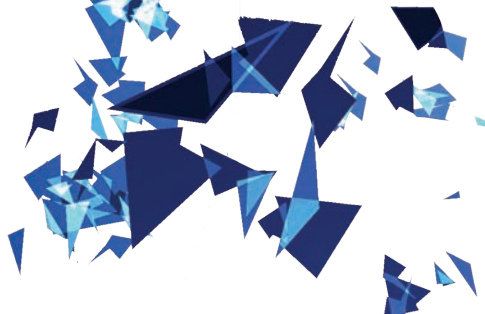
On its surface, it makes sense. Nonimmigrant visa (NIV) interviews have discrete outcomes: issuances, refusals, extra security clearances, and minor variations for limitations or annotations. They also involve a huge amount of data, even apart from the interview itself. But some issues remain, not least the fact that every visa decision is a national security decision with no room for error.

Studying the Case

The data load in visa adjudication is enormous. The visa applicant fills out an extensive application form, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) pulls security and law enforcement records, as well as a prior travel history. On a macro scale, we keep millions of records of prior visa



Ian Hopper retired from the Senior Foreign Service in 2025. He served in Manila, Lomé, Chennai, Amman, Frankfurt, Baghdad, and Toronto, mostly in consular roles. He now works as the government relations director at Philadelphia immigration law firm Green & Spiegel.



applications that could be sliced by nationality, profession, residence, age, gender, and scores of other differentiators.

Even better, we know prior outcomes of those applications in the form of validation studies. If a 25-year-old Indian entry-level employee from Chennai wanted to go to a trade show in Las Vegas, we could compare that application with prior issuances to see if people with that profile historically traveled well. Sounds straightforward and easy enough.

Further, AI is already widely used in legal contexts. A 2025 Thomson Reuters survey of legal professionals showed that 80 percent of respondents said AI would have a high or transformational impact on their work. Among users, most relied on it for document review, legal research, and opinion summaries. In the public sector, Estonia is using so-called “robo-judges” to dismiss simple cases based on procedural errors. Meanwhile, Chinese courts are using robo-judges for small claims, misdemeanors, and traffic violations.

But a 2025 University of Chicago study argues that while black-and-white or low-impact decisions are easier use cases, those involving human intent and experience are beyond AI’s capability. This study took real war crimes cases from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and let AI (in this case, GPT-4) read transcripts to make decisions. The AI decisions followed legal precedent, but a defendant’s character and explanations did little to move the needle. Even when it was instructed to consider sympathy—admittedly an odd request for a computer—GPT-4 dismissed human explanations as legally irrelevant. The authors said the AI’s decisions aligned with those found by law students but missed the nuance used by seasoned judges.

Rather than the popular belief that AI “thinks” or “reasons,” the study confirmed that large language models like ChatGPT just find the most appropriate word to follow the last word, all based on the training data fed into their algorithms.

Apart from the inability to replicate human reasoning, there is a concern of bias. A study from the *International Journal for Court Administration* noted that historical training data includes the bias in that data, and it is impossible to divorce the bias in the outcomes from the outcomes themselves. As the old programming adage goes: garbage in, garbage out. The process becomes a “vicious circle, since many machine learning approaches are creating their own algorithms based on the datasets in which they are trying to identify and recreate patterns.”

They take the pattern, regardless of the desirability of the pattern, as the norm. In one example cited in the paper, Amazon had to scrap a hiring tool because it would disqualify



We keep millions of records of prior visa applications that could be sliced by nationality, profession, residence, age, gender, and scores of other differentiators.

women applicants knowing that Amazon currently had few women in executive roles.

What AI Has to Say for Itself

But that’s the opinion of academics. What do AI models “think” about it themselves? To find out, I submitted the same three prompts to OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Anthropic’s Claude, and Elon Musk and xAI’s Grok—three of the most popular chatbots. The first part of the prompt asked it to explain the visa interview process generally to confirm its understanding of the question; the second part asked whether AI could replace the role of the consular officer.

ChatGPT’s answer was careful in all aspects, concluding that AI could not do the job fully or safely, at least not with near-term technology. “A machine cannot be held legally accountable. A consular officer can.” It noted that AI would struggle to assess honesty, eliminate bias and systemic discrimination, and cannot handle “outlier” situations like complex life situations. Luckily, no visa applicant has a complex life situation!

Claude said AI could possibly identify “very low-risk individuals,” without explaining what would make a person “low-risk,” and flag risk factors. But it was the most cautious of the bunch, stating that AI might be able to reduce variation in outcomes but will always lack human judgment about credibility.

Grok is well known for its odd “tweaks,” such as the recent one where it genuinely claimed that its owner, Elon Musk, would dominate every Major League Baseball hitter except, maybe, L.A. Dodgers phenom Shohei Ohtani. Grok was similarly confident when discussing consular work, stating that AI could soon easily take over visa decisions. It said that consular sections already use AI to flag fake documents and cross-check all NIV application data against every public record in the world in seconds during the visa interview.

No consular officer would argue that there isn't room for tech improvements.

Grok also cited a report showing that an unnamed AI model can predict final eligibility decisions correctly with 90 percent accuracy just from the NIV application answers and supporting documentation alone. What a surprise! Perhaps consular officers are already out of work.

When asked to justify its answers, Grok replied with “searching the web” for about two minutes. Finally, it cited public statements about future aspirations and small pilot programs as present-day routine, and confused U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s use of AI for immigration enforcement with visa determinations. And that 90 percent accuracy study?

It was actually just a guy in Pakistan who published his own article claiming his AI model could do it.

Vaporware?

With hopes dashed, perhaps AI will go the way of CA’s once-vaunted “ConsularOne” project to revolutionize consular applications, mostly ending up as vaporware.

No consular officer would argue that there isn't room for tech improvements. New and rapidly released policy pronouncements create more burden on the already-strained officer. Meanwhile, our Generation Z entry-level officers are left to figure out what the little 3.5-inch disk icon means in the Immigrant Visa application.

As in the rest of the workforce, the future role of AI in consular work is unnerving and largely unknown. Not only does our economy rely on the U.S. consular corps to keep humming, but every visa decision is, indeed, a national security decision. There is little room and less political appetite for error. ■



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US(AI)D

What Launching AI Tools for Communicators Taught Us

USAID tested the use of AI tools with a team of communications specialists around the world. The pilot's originators present the takeaways.

BY VICTORIA MITCHELL AVDIU AND MICHELLE (STALEY) SWAIN

When we launched ChatGPT Team access to USAID's development, outreach, and communications (DOC) specialists in September 2024, something we had never tried before, it felt new and ripe with possibility. This

was an unprecedented opportunity to test the use of artificial intelligence tools across a wide swathe of people performing the same job functions. We didn't have any specific outcomes in mind; we just hoped it might make these specialists' lives a bit easier.

At the time, at least 190 DOC specialists were in more than 100 countries. Unlike a State Department public diplomacy officer, who explains to foreign audiences how American history, values, and traditions shape U.S. foreign policy, the DOC specialist focuses on programmatic impact. A State PD officer might explain why the U.S. prioritizes global health, while a DOC specialist would show how a specific clinic funded by USAID changed a community. More than half of these specialists were locally employed staff members; they were often organized in small teams of three or fewer; and they had extremely limited budgets.

AI seemed promising for specific tasks: drafting, brainstorming, editing, and exploring ideas using nonsensitive content, searching through lengthy documents to summarize content and discover insights, compiling talking points, and drafting social media posts. We hoped it could save valuable time for more creative assignments.



Victoria Mitchell Avdiu is a writer, executive coach, and retired USAID Foreign Service officer. During her 16-year diplomatic career, she served in eight countries, including as USAID country director for Belarus. Her writing has appeared in The Washington Post.

She currently lives in Dijon, France.



Michelle (Staley) Swain is a consulting director at Reingold, a Foreign Service family member, and a former institutional support contractor with USAID, specializing in strategic communications. Michelle and her FS husband are currently enjoying their first overseas posting, in Mumbai.

Participants saw possibilities for minimizing time-consuming tasks and creating an AI personal assistant.

Planned to run for one full year, from October 2024 to September 2025, the pilot was cut short after just four months with the abrupt dismantling of USAID and the pending loss of almost all positions at the agency. Though this prevented us from evaluating long-term effects of the project, we did come away with some useful observations and lessons learned.

What We Built

The Legislative and Public Affairs DOC Team at USAID addressed the agency's most complex communications challenges by training and connecting DOC specialists worldwide, advising missions on communications structure, championing priorities with Washington stakeholders, and protecting USAID's brand equity. In September 2024, in response to requests for support and tools to assist with their heavy workload, we used remaining, expiring funds to acquire a limited number of yearlong ChatGPT Team subscriptions to share with the global DOC network on a pilot basis.

We notified the entire network, shared preliminary ideas for how ChatGPT could help, and asked those interested to fill out a simple online form. We provided clear rules for not using it for anything sensitive or unavailable for public consumption. Users had to agree to the rules of use before receiving a seat. A couple of months after the 82 seats were assigned, we scheduled a community of practice call to share what we had learned.

The senior DOC specialist with USAID/Benin, who had demonstrated command of the tool and a strategic eye for implementation, addressed the discussion. She described how she had begun by uploading USAID's style guide, her country's Country Development Cooperation Strategy (a non-SBU version), and USAID's branding and marking manual into her workspace. She then "taught the system" about the role of the DOC specialist. Finally, she shared examples of how the tool had helped her review partner-generated content submissions, synthesize talking points, simplify complex language into easy-to-understand phrases, and more.

Others shared how AI had helped them refine language to fit within character counts for social media platforms. The tool proved useful for brainstorming ideas or understanding options when facing an unfamiliar topic or task. It provided rough translations that could then be verified by human translators. Media monitoring, editing, and text refinement were other common applications. Participants saw possibilities for minimizing time-consuming tasks and creating an AI personal assistant.

A Cautious Approach

But at the same time, some practitioners were vocal about their ethical and environmental concerns, a tension that ran throughout the pilot. Overall, they were cautious in their use of AI chatbots in late 2024. The tools felt too new to overly trust; usage over time typically builds comfort. Some of the caution can be attributed to the fact that most participants had not been trained in how to use these tools or what their capabilities were.

Moreover, these tools are trained primarily on English-language internet text, which means they inherit the assumptions, cultural frameworks, and blind spots of the communities most represented in that data, which are predominantly Western, English-speaking, and relatively affluent. For foreign affairs professionals working across diverse cultural contexts, this is a significant limitation.

In addition, environmental concerns surfaced frequently. USAID supported projects focused on protecting the environment and on sustainable development, so we pondered how staff should handle the ethical dilemma of participating in a system that profoundly impacts fresh water and energy supplies. On the one hand, USAID missions had limited resources that AI could directly, positively impact. If staff could spend less time on routine administrative tasks that consume disproportionate time relative to their impact on mission goals, they would have more time for partnership and positive change in the communities they served. On the other hand, reports on AI's negative environmental impact were, and continue to be, stark.

Over the course of the pilot, there were also a couple of instances in which teams developed AI-generated images that were not in line with branding and marking guidelines. They were ultimately allowed to use those images, but for internal materials only. We hypothesize that constrained budgets might have pushed teams toward increased AI photography usage over time. Editing photography is time-consuming after

all. But some emerging AI editing software includes the morally gray capability of changing the gender or race of individuals in photos. The DOC role existed, in part, to connect with local audiences, so leaning on these capabilities seems improbable.

AI does not exist without ethical considerations. DOC specialists actively debated this during our community of practice discussion. We agreed on cautious, responsible usage. If AI could directly increase efficiency so you could spend time elsewhere, it was worth the exercise. It was wise, however, not to overdepend on or use the system indiscriminately.

The Bigger Picture

Where does human judgment and nuance matter most? Only a human, and particularly one who has grown up in the country, attended school there, and speaks the language, can truly understand the cultural nuances and political implications of certain communications. This is why the DOC specialists were so critical to communicating USAID's and the U.S. government's impact to local audiences.

Based on our experience, AI can be helpful for brainstorming ideas, refining and editing text, ensuring documents remain within word count, drafting content, producing rough translations, conducting media monitoring, and even assisting with public speaking practice. AI can do much more than rewrite an email; it is fundamentally shifting how strategic communications work. Communicators used to spend weeks on landscape analysis that AI can conduct in seconds. We also tested some AI tools to serve as a public speaking coach for rehearsing important speeches.

But if you are advising an embassy colleague who's considering using an AI chatbot for communications work, we would recommend several guardrails. Do not input any sensitive or personally identifiable material unless you are using an internal system developed for more sensitive information. Ensure that settings are enabled so that the model is not trained using your material.

We developed a simple framework: low-stakes, repetitive, time-consuming tasks can be delegated to AI, with a review by human eyes of course. Complex tasks where you will be refining the output are suited for partnering with AI. High-stakes decisions, sensitive communications, or anything with reputational risk should remain human only.

We also worry about the impact on entry-level professionals. In communications, much of the learning happens through the unglamorous work of drafting and redrafting press releases,

If we could give one piece of advice to Foreign Service communicators about AI, it would be this: Keep people in the driver's seat.

formatting talking points, and compiling media lists. These tasks teach newcomers how to think through the process, not just produce the product. If that work is delegated to AI, junior professionals may arrive at senior roles without the foundational understanding of what goes into the outputs they are overseeing. And while AI does open possibilities for professionals at all levels to focus on more creative, strategic work, we suspect the more likely outcome is that communications teams will simply be expected to do more with less, paradoxically increasing pressure rather than relieving it.

One Piece of Advice

If we could give just one piece of advice to Foreign Service communicators about AI, it would be this: Keep people in the driver's seat. AI tools will never replace the value of judgment, accountability, and human relationships.

Learn how to use these tools, keep up to date on changes, and experiment when you have downtime. The worst time to learn what AI can and cannot do is when facing a crisis or tight deadline. By experimenting today with routine drafts, background research, or internal documents, you will develop the judgment to know when to trust it, when to double-check it, and when to set it aside entirely. That instinct will serve you well when the stakes are high.

Our program ended before we could see its full impact. The lessons we learned, however, remain relevant. AI can meaningfully support Foreign Service communications work, but only when deployed with clear-eyed awareness of its limitations. The DOC specialists who participated in our pilot understood this instinctively. They brought healthy skepticism, ethical concerns, and a deep appreciation for local knowledge that no language model can replicate.

As AI adoption accelerates across the Foreign Service, human judgment remains the most valuable tool of all. ■

At the Intersection of AI and Foreign Policy

A Q&A with Kelsey D. Atherton

The *FSJ* interviewed a military technology journalist and expert on foreign policy to learn about the risks and rewards of AI in our industry.

Foreign Service Journal: What risks related to AI are we not seeing sufficiently? What are the consequences if we fail to account for those risks?

Kelsey D. Atherton: Automation makes what it automates opaque and then invisible. When the product works as intended, from automating a summary of an email to successfully navigating a vehicle down a city street, we don't notice if there are mistakes in the process. But when accidents happen or errors emerge, opacity in their creation and a lack of awareness from the human employing the automated process about the error carry outsized risk. One of the more novel threats is unexplained emergent behavior, where an automated process not only fails but fails differently than the way a human might be expected to fail.

Safeguards, safe evaluation of responses under adversarial conditions via red-teaming, and tools for forensic investigation are all needed to manage, reduce, and mitigate the odds of expected and unanticipated error. Without those doctrines and practices of accountability, we can expect AI-led automation to fail in new and novel ways, and be caught by surprise, without adequate preparation or guidance on how to proceed.



Kelsey D. Atherton is the chief editor at the Center for International Policy, where he commissions, edits, and publishes a journal on progressive foreign policy. Previously he worked for more than a decade as a military tech journalist, writing in outlets such as Popular Science, Slate, and The New York Times. His grandfather, Ambassador Alfred LeRoy Atherton Jr., was a career Foreign Service officer.

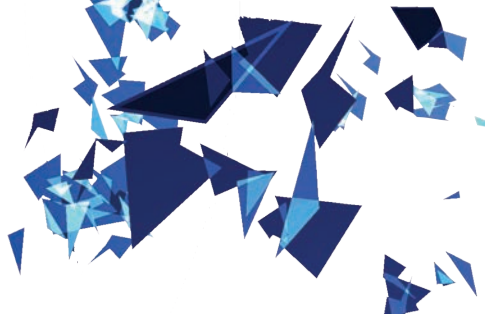
FSJ: What is the Pentagon doing on AI that is novel and innovative? Where have they failed? What lessons could the State Department learn from our colleagues in uniform?

KDA: Before I left the military technology beat full time in November 2023, the most compelling use of AI was profoundly boring—automated predictive maintenance and assessment, like using robots and data collection to predict where ships are rusting and need extra help.

One of the flashier ideas explored is synthetic training data, using AI to generate and iterate novel battlefield scenarios, ones that are important for a machine to recognize while likely to be lacking, or certainly lacking at high fidelity.

I think the biggest lesson from the Pentagon is to look at where off-the-shelf AI is already capable (e.g., data extraction, summary, coding) while also within the bounds of what a human can review, to ensure that the process is right. This is the boring work of logistics and personnel management, looking to ensure that systems are sustained and repaired before they break, which is equally important for everything from aircraft carriers to embassies.

I would also include a major word of caution, especially on experimenting with AI just to say you've done it. It remains to be seen if and when the Pentagon's full embrace of AI tools leads to



error that reflects known errors in the civilian version of the tools, like reflecting racial bias in word association, or underemphasizing information based on where in a document it's presented, but I would say that's a "when," not an "if."

FSJ: *How might AI change the job of defense attachés, political officers, and arms-control diplomats overseas?*

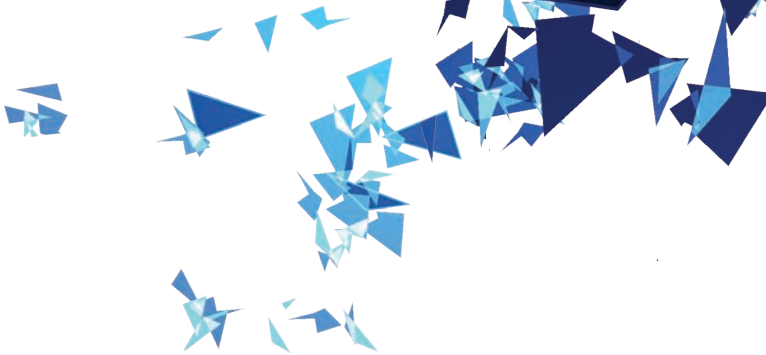
KDA: AI might lead defense attachés, political officers, or arms-control diplomats to believe they have more and more accurate information in hand than they actually do. The authoritative tone of AI reinforces this. While enterprise versions of AI products promise fewer errors, the genuine limits of large language models (LLMs) mean that lots of the text-analysis AI is doing is simple word association rather than processing and summarizing text the way a diplomat might.

With generative AI, especially as the fidelity of images improves, it is becoming easier to produce convincing fakes of everything from satellite footage to videos and photos. People working with sensitive information must learn to identify "tells" in AI imagery or other data and should become familiar with ways to verify images as genuine versus generated or modified.

There is also a danger in relying on LLMs as a translation and summarization tool. With automated communication tools in abundance, there's a real danger of meaning lost in translation services, and an added danger of the tool potentially being corrupted to intentionally produce miscommunication.

FSJ: *One of the most important things we do as American diplomats is speak on behalf of the U.S. government overseas. Our authenticity is what gives us our credibility. However, it's increasingly easy for anyone (diplomats and government officials included) to use AI to churn out content nonstop. Will such AI-generated content overwhelm audiences and lead to a loss of authentic voices? What implications could that have for governments and authorities who need to cut through the noise to reach audiences on topics involving safety and security?*

KDA: AI slop, and the fondness of AI-slop imagery as the in-house style of the Trump administration specifically, risks drowning out real information and authentic human experience. While AI slop will likely always be some part of the information ecosystem now, the best way to communicate is still in person. For events, it's helpful to create and store your own recordings as a check against AI distortions. And generally, when it comes to meeting people where they're at, "touch grass diplomacy"—getting out in the real world and meeting your interlocutors face-to-face—can be a breath of fresh air.



We can expect AI-led automation to fail in new and novel ways, and be caught by surprise, without adequate preparation or guidance on how to proceed.

FSJ: *A plethora of AI services and platforms is out there, and it can be hard to keep track of which AI platform, account, or service is needed for a specific task. How are the best private companies mitigating this AI traffic jam?*

KDA: I think the best way to manage competing services is to incorporate them with in-house IT and have program managers track and check in with staff if the AI tools are delivering the capability promised, or if they're just another box that needs checking and interferes with existing process. A good starting point would be to see how processes have been/are done before implementing an AI tool, and then check in three to six months after the adoption of a tool to see what has changed, if anything.


FSJ: *What's the deal with Claude? Can you explain the significance of the disagreement between the Pentagon and Claude's creator, Anthropic?*

KDA: As best I understand it, Claude is the name of the reclusive AI firm Anthropic's AI tool, a sort of high-end cousin to ChatGPT or their gutter relative Grok. All three are built on large language models and neural networks, where iterative training and inference based on word association plays out in a functional "black box" until the program spits out results that effectively match patterns, often to the point of impressing people as though they are interacting with a sentient being. (In this instance, I'd argue the human users are failing the Turing Test of artificial intelligence, more than the AI tools are passing it.)



As for Anthropic, Claude, and the Pentagon: Claude is aimed at enterprise users, businesses, and bureaucracies, including the Pentagon. As noted in a February 27 response to Secretary Pete Hegseth designating Anthropic a "supply chain risk," the impasse was reached after a request by Anthropic that their model not be used for "the mass domestic surveillance of Americans and fully autonomous weapons." Notably, other lawful uses were allowed and permitted by the company. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported on February 28, Central Command "uses the tool for intelligence assessments, target identification and simulating


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2026 ANNUAL MEETING



6/25 PLENARY
The United States in the World at 250: Global Perspectives

6/26 BERNATH LECTURE
Suffering and Sovereignty: Reflections on Humanitarianism, Human Rights, and Refugee Politics
Amanda Demmer, Virginia Tech

6/27 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
The U.S. in the World at 250: A View from a Bloody Borderland
Jay Sexton, University of Missouri

The Ohio State University
June 25-27, 2026
www.shafr.org/shafr2026

A good starting point would be to see how processes have been/are done before implementing an AI tool, and then check in three to six months after the adoption of a tool to see what has changed.

battle scenarios even as tension between the company and Pentagon ratcheted up.”

This debate hits at the heart of autonomy and culpability in action, and one of the long-feared and warned-about dangers of AI tools in military use specifically is that AI functions as a permission structure, possibly untraceable and likely unaccountable, for generated targets and effectively signing death warrants. Target selection is an inevitable part of war, and the laws of war account for humans operating under orders, issuing bad orders, and the flaws, hazards, and limits of bad intelligence.

But the danger of AI in targeting isn’t just a hypothetical: As +972 *Magazine* reported in April 2024, Israel used an AI target generation tool called Lavender to increase the tempo of authorized targets and attacks in Gaza, an automated process that inferred machine wisdom over the difficult and verifiable process of other intelligence gathering. The danger is real and realized: “The result, the sources testify, was that the role of human personnel in incriminating Palestinians as military operatives was pushed aside, and AI did most of the work instead. ... Lavender—which was developed to create human targets in the current war—has marked some 37,000 Palestinians as suspected ‘ Hamas militants,’ most of them junior, for assassination (the Israeli Defense Forces spokesperson denied the existence of such a kill list in a statement to +972 and Local Call).”

This is likely a long digression, but Anthropic was perfectly fine working within a broad set of lawful bounds for the military, and drew a line, I think, at least as much out of reputational risk and culpability on undeniable war crimes as anything else. This is a defense contractor looking to outlast the present administration and avoid being jailed for aiding and abetting its crimes, not necessarily a stalwart defender of human interests in the face of a new conflict. Given that the secretary has gone on to say the war will not be conducted with “stupid rules of engagement,” anyone hedging their bets on the potential for future consequences from these actions is likely to want to distance themselves from Operation Epic Fury. ■

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: ODIP, PREL, OVIP (GORE, AL)
SUBJECT: VP VISIT: FOLLOW-UP TO ALLEGED INCIDENT
ST. PETERSBURG AIRPORT

FEATURE

FIRST CONTACT

Uncle Sam Meets Vladimir Putin

Identifying future national leaders early is no simple task. Once-classified cables share U.S. diplomats' early views on a much younger Vladimir Putin.

BY DAMIAN LEADER

When Vladimir Putin returned to St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) from East Germany in 1990, there was little about him that caused the U.S. consulate general (CG) in Leningrad to identify him as the historic figure he would become. But U.S. interactions with Putin described in the CG's telegraphic reporting from 1991 to 1993 do give a sense of the man and his rising star.

Consulate officers described a man who, as chief of staff, quickly made himself indispensable to Mayor Anatoly Sobchak and was a key player in foreign investment and St. Petersburg real estate. Putin met visiting senior U.S. officials and traveled to the United States several times, but he was considered abrasive and corrupt.

Despite negative impressions of Putin among consulate staff, within Russia Sobchak's star was fading while Putin's only grew brighter. Putin first appears in a consulate report of



Vladimir Putin circa 1990 in Leningrad.



Damian Leader, PhD, is a retired career Foreign Service officer and former deputy director of Russian affairs at the State Department who later taught in New York University's graduate program in international relations. The opinions and characterizations in this piece

are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

Mayor Sobchak's inaugural reception in June 1991. The reporting officer details a side conversation with a Sobchak aide, who said: "Another real winner in the recent election was Sobchak's chief of staff Vladimir Putin. ... Putin has been a Sobchak aide dealing largely with foreign delegations since early this year. Previously

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DAMIAN LEADER

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TAGS: ODIP, PREL, OVIP (GORE, AL)
 SUBJECT: VP VISIT: FOLLOW-UP TO ALLEGED INCIDENT AT
 ST PETERSBURG AIRPORT

REF: (A) ST PETERSBURG 3921; (B) FBIS LONDON 231119Z
 DEC 93

1. (C) SUMMARY: IN A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION MID-DAY
 DECEMBER 22, MAYOR SOBCHAK TOLD CONSUL GENERAL THAT
 THERE WERE, IN FACT, NO MEASURES BEING TAKEN AGAINST
 POST'S DPO IN THE WAKE OF THE ALLEGED INCIDENT DURING
 THE ARRIVAL OF THE VICE PRESIDENT (REF A). SOBCHAK
 COULD NOT, HOWEVER, PROVIDE AN ANSWER AS TO HOW THE
 ISSUE WOULD BE TAKEN OUT OF THE PUBLIC EYE NOW THAT
 THE MAYORALTY HAD PUT IT THERE. IN THE MEANTIME,
 ARTICLES IN THE ST PETERSBURG REGISTER (DECEMBER 22)
 AND PRAVDA (DECEMBER 23) TEND TO SUPPORT OUR

A snippet of a 1993 cable sent by the U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg to the State Department in Washington, D.C. This cable and others cited were declassified as part of a systematic review of all cables after 25 years by the State Department Bureau of Administration's Office of Classification Policy and Declassification Review.

he worked as a foreign relations aide in the Leningrad State University rector's office, where he undoubtedly came to the attention of Professor Sobchak. He has traveled to the U.S. with Sobchak. He [Putin] says he speaks no English."

Putin's 1990 visit to the United States attracted little attention. The consulate issued him a visa as a member of Sobchak's 15-person delegation that came at the invitation of St. Petersburg College in Florida. The delegation also visited Washington, D.C., where they met with President George H.W. Bush, Vice President Dan Quayle, and members of Congress, and Sobchak spoke at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on October 29, 1990. I have found no specific references to Putin's participation in the Washington meetings, although as Sobchak's foreign policy adviser, he was almost certainly present.

Like hiding his knowledge of English in the early 1990s, Putin did not seem to want anyone to know what he knew. He never mentioned his U.S. visits to the Western press until 2000, in an interview with David Frost, when he said only: "I have twice been to the United States on very short visits, on business," without elaborating.

In the months immediately following the 1991 Moscow coup attempt and the impending collapse of the USSR, a succession of

senior U.S. officials visited the Soviet Union to show support for Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and promote U.S. investment as privatization increased. Putin participated in all the visits to St. Petersburg.

When Secretary of State James Baker visited that September, and the consulate was tasked with providing biographies of guests at a dinner Sobchak was hosting, it repeated earlier reporting and added: "Putin appears to be in his late thirties [he was 38]. He speaks no English. We have no information on Mrs. Putin."

In a telegram the next day the consulate filled in the birth date (1952), his degree date (1975), and that he was elected to the Leningrad City Council in April 1990, adding: "He is a legal specialist. Sobchak treats Putin as his key assistant on anything international, but Putin has grated on some foreigners here."

The draft schedule showed Putin at the working dinner hosted by Secretary Baker for Sobchak. Not all of Baker's party were included; those left out included future CIA Director Career Ambassador William Burns and future Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Shalikashvili.

Privatization and Business Potential

Interest by U.S. businesses in potential investments in Russia

grew during the twilight months of the Soviet Union. In late September 1991, Fred Zeder, president and CEO of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), planned a visit to St. Petersburg to discuss bilateral agreements. OPIC's advance message said Zeder was "well aware of ... Sobchak's interest in commodity-based trade expansion concepts. ... Post is requested to pave the way for meetings in St. Petersburg with the mayor and colleagues interested in private sector transactions (possibly including Vladimir Putin) to advance this process or U.S. investment in general."

In late October, when Deputy Secretary of Defense Donald Atwood came to tour Russian defense plants, Putin was again on the tarmac to greet the delegation. Agriculture Secretary Edward Madigan also visited and met with city officials, including Putin.

In early December 1991, OPIC sent a three-person working delegation to follow up. In an informal note to the consulate, they asked for help setting up meetings with "Mayor Sobchak, privatization expert Vladimir Putin, and/or anyone else they recommend." On December 8, 1991, Treasury Deputy Secretary John Robson came to discuss establishing a U.S. business school in the Soviet Union, but his meeting with Sobchak and Putin does not seem to have been a success. Sobchak spoke of the food crisis in the city and blamed problems on Ukrainian farmers and communist dead-enders. In the weeks prior, a Sobchak aide had given the consulate a readout of the chaos in the mayor's office. The aide said Mayor Sobchak was circling the wagons and taking counsel only from Putin and the new deputy mayor, Georgy Khizha, describing them as the two strongest influences on the mayor.

The privatization of state-run enterprises and real estate controlled by the mayor's office provided ample opportunity for corruption, and Sobchak and his staff took advantage of the possibilities. In those days of a relatively free press, none of this was a secret. In a television interview broadcast February 24, 1992, Putin said that he had not taken bribes in his current post but had found means to "supplement" his income when serving in previous positions. Putin editorialized that he could hardly be blamed for such behavior, given his meager government salary and the fact that he had two children to feed and clothe.

In a telegram sent four days later, the consulate reported: "A spate of articles have appeared in local newspapers detailing official allegations of corruption: both City Council deputies and high-ranking staffers in the mayor's office have been accused of conflict of interest and are under investigation. Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin ... and his deputy Oleg Markov are both under investigation for potential conflicts of interest in their involvement in a local tourism company."

Putin first appears in a consulate report of Mayor Sobchak's inaugural reception in June 1991.

A Rising Star

The consulate followed up on March 3, 1992, with a 36-paragraph analysis of Sobchak's performance and his Soviet leadership style, which it called opaque, secretive, and not very competent. Charges of corruption were laid, and Putin was included in the bill of particulars. The consulate did not find Putin easy to work with and a now-familiar picture of Putin emerged: "Another major player in the Sobchak administration is Vladimir Putin ... through whom all foreign contacts must pass (we manage to avoid him). Although a young man, Putin comes from an 'old guard' background: an admitted former KGB agent. ... Putin ... has brought his own cronies into the administration, most of them former communists."

The U.S. government had plans for a "Russian American Enterprise Fund" for the newly renamed Russian Federation, and when a team led by then-State Department official Liz Cheney visited in October 1992, Putin was the highest-ranking official they met. He recommended U.S. businesses remain in St. Petersburg to provide management and technical expertise to Russians. He argued that the enterprise fund should be headquartered in St. Petersburg rather than Moscow because it had more international business, closer links to Europe, and was less bureaucratic than Moscow. Putin endorsed Cheney's suggestion that enterprise funds be used for "spin-off" enterprises from former defense industries and encouraged U.S. government involvement in them. The enterprise fund could, Putin said, finance defense conversion and help economic development in the region.

It would not be smooth sailing for U.S. investors in post-Soviet St. Petersburg, however. In March 1993, the consulate sought Putin's help because organized crime was threatening the managers of a joint venture. The American staff had hired bodyguards. Putin promised to help, and the consulate reported they would be following up with him, adding that crime was becoming a leading issue for the American and Western business community.

Despite these concerns, official U.S. engagement with St. Petersburg only increased. In June 1993, the Coast Guard cutter *Gallatin* visited and hosted public tours for three days.

Like hiding his knowledge of English in the early 1990s, Putin did not seem to want anyone to know what he knew.

In August 1993, future Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta led a delegation to St. Petersburg that included six congressmen, Federal Highway Administrator Rodney Slater (another future secretary of Transportation), and an FAA representative. Putin, then acting mayor and described by the consulate as “in charge of foreign assistance programs in the city,” chaired a meeting for Russian counterparts. He “bemoaned the lack of U.S. business investment in St. Petersburg” and urged the U.S. to move from technical assistance to transportation infrastructure projects.

Putin said he was grateful for what the U.S. had done but called it “a modest beginning.” As any good deputy mayor would, he praised St. Petersburg’s tourism potential, its banking and communications role, and its unlimited possibilities as a “beachhead” (Putin’s word) for investors.

Putin described in some detail plans to modernize St. Petersburg’s port but also said Vyborg was his favored place for a new port. He explained that “some of the world’s richest deposits of natural gas are in the northwest region of Russia, and Vyborg is the most favorable port for processing and shipping this gas to world markets.”

The consulate observed: “Putin’s comments ... reflect ... the unrealistically high expectations, and resulting disappointments, that the many high-level USG and business delegations to this city have produced among city leaders.” (Putin’s dream was realized in 2011 when, as president, he oversaw the opening of the Nord Stream I pipeline from Vyborg to Germany.)

Coming into His Own

Relations with the mayor’s office, and with Putin in particular, reached a crisis point in December 1993 because of perceived U.S. protocol slights during a visit by Vice President Al Gore. After the visit, Mayor Sobchak’s protocol officer asked Consul General Jack Gosnell and his deputy to meet with Deputy Mayor Putin. They were told the meeting would involve “nothing terrible” but was an effort to find ways to avoid protocol problems in the future.



U.S. CONSULATE ST. PETERSBURG

The facade of the former U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The consul general signed a U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) grant to fund a feasibility study for automating customs procedures. The National Democratic Institute organized a conference on democracy and private enterprise, and Vladimir Putin gave the welcoming speech. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and USTDA co-sponsored a conference attended by representatives from more than 60 U.S. aviation and finance companies.

That was not Putin's intention. The Americans were brought into a formal meeting room with local press present to report the meeting. Putin began by saying the Gore visit was very positive for U.S.-Russia relations and for St. Petersburg in particular. There were some security and protocol problems, he said, but those were "purely technical in nature." He then added that there was one incident that did go beyond technicalities. It involved the deputy consul general allegedly pushing the Russian general who commanded the Leningrad military district out of the way during the airport arrival ceremony. The DCG would, Putin announced, not be invited to any city events in the future. The meeting, and the sanctions on the DCG, were widely covered by St. Petersburg media and made the front page of local newspapers.

Mayor Sobchak was out of town, and when the consul general tried to reach him, his private secretary knew nothing about the meeting. When told that it was Putin's meeting, she responded, "Oh, that explains it." After the mayor returned, he told the consul general that this incident was a misunderstanding and

the DCG would not be sanctioned. The incident was discussed a few days later when Sobchak met with Ambassador Thomas Pickering in Moscow. Pickering "regretted" the incident but did not apologize, and both agreed to move forward.

By the end of 1993, Putin had established an identity independent of his patron Sobchak. His distaste for Americans was clear, as was his use of perceived insults to portray himself in the press as a defender of Russian honor. Putin's business interests, his personal corruption, and his growing personal network were all clear.

What is particularly striking in retrospect is Putin's early exposure, although he was only a deputy mayor, to a parade of senior U.S. government and corporate officials. By the mid-1990s, Vladimir Putin was already an experienced interlocutor with senior members of the Bush and Clinton administrations. And when Boris Yeltsin picked him to be his prime minister in 1999, Putin knew a lot more about Washington players than they knew about him. When President George W. Bush invited him to the White House in 2001, it was not Putin's first time there—and would not be his last. ■



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AFSA Welcomes Embassy Evacuees Home



AFSALISA HELLER

AFSA President John Dinkelman, along with members of AFSA staff, greeted Foreign Service evacuees at Washington Dulles International Airport on March 5.

Staff and family members had been evacuated following the February 28 U.S. attack on Iran.

For the full story on the embassy evacuations, see page 22. ■

Vote on Proposed Bylaw Amendments. See page 70.

CALENDAR

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

May 1
AFSA Memorial Plaque Ceremony

May 20
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

May 25
Memorial Day AFSA Offices Closed

June 17
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

June 28
6-8 p.m.
AFSA Welcomes June Orientation Class

Service Disrupted One Year Later



As we approach the one-year anniversary of AFSA's Service Disrupted campaign, it is worth pausing to reflect on how and why it began, what it has accomplished, and where it is headed as the Foreign Service continues to navigate one of the most turbulent periods in its modern history.

The Service Disrupted public awareness campaign was created in response to attacks on the Foreign Service and public service by the current administration. Since 1924, AFSA has served as a nonprofit, nonpartisan, professional organization representing members across six foreign affairs agencies.

Through this campaign, AFSA set out to remind the American public and policymakers that a strong Foreign Service is indispensable to the nation's security and global leadership.

"The changes hitting the Foreign Service were unfolding both quickly and quietly, and we felt AFSA needed a vehicle to tell those stories," said Nikki Gamer, AFSA's communications and outreach director. "As the voice of the Foreign

Service, we took it upon ourselves to document the attacks in real time so the story would not be lost to history."

The campaign formally launched on May 9, 2025, in Washington, D.C., with a gathering of more than 200 members of the Foreign Service community and their supporters. Participants marched along two "solidarity walk" routes that wound past the Washington Monument, the White House, the Commerce Department, the State Department, and the Ronald Reagan Building, home to USAID's former headquarters.

The launch event at AFSA featured remarks by then-AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi and other members of AFSA leadership. Each speaker stressed the urgency of defending the integrity and mission of the Foreign Service amid sweeping workforce cuts, reorganization efforts, and aggressive executive actions that had begun to reshape the federal landscape at extraordinary speed.

AFSA launched the campaign website, <https://servicedisrupted.org>, which featured a widely viewed video message

Continued on page 62



Strength in Numbers

If you're reading this column, you likely already know that AFSA exists because of members like you: professionals who understand that a strong, independent voice is essential to the health of our institution. Over the past year, that voice has been tested. And it has proven its value.

You understand AFSA's importance. You took the time to pay your dues after the department, in an effort to silence AFSA, ended automatic payroll deductions.

During the year of relentless attacks on the Foreign Service that followed, your support—particularly when many of you understandably worry about job security amid great economic uncertainty—has been vital to keeping AFSA in the fight, pushing back as best we can for all our members. Thank you.

AFSA's strength has always rested in broad participation across the Foreign Service. Historically, more than 80 percent of State active-duty members have been AFSA members. Today, that number is closer to 60 percent.

Prior to January 2025, AFSA's State Department constituency comprised more than 11,000 members. Today, that number is just under 7,000. In practical terms, these missing members translate into an annual dues loss of more than a million dollars.

This matters, not simply for resources but for representation. When membership declines, so does the collective weight behind our advocacy at a moment when that weight is urgently needed.

The past year has placed unusual demands on AFSA. We have adapted, prioritizing core functions, focusing resources, and ensuring that we continue to deliver where it matters most: legal defense, advocacy, and member support.

The most effective way to strengthen AFSA is simple: maintain your membership and ensure that colleagues are members. Many may not realize that their membership has lapsed and that State ended automatic payroll deduction for dues payments.

A brief peer-to-peer conversation can make a difference. Membership in AFSA is both a benefit and a professional commitment to the institution we serve.

AFSA is at the front lines. Its legal action and advocacy staved off the July 2025 reductions in force (RIFs) of Foreign Service colleagues, stopping their separation from service and keeping them in administrative leave status.

And we will support these colleagues in the Merit Systems Protection Board appeal process should the RIFs move forward.

Ensuring we have the strength to fight is a shared responsibility across our ranks.

AFSA legal staff are representing members who are being hit with historically disproportionate disciplinary actions by the department and in grievances relating to their annuity calculation and denial of tenure and promotion.

Having our lawyers in your corner is critical in these challenging times. Even though the administration has illegally stripped us of our collective bargaining role—an action we're contesting in court—AFSA lawyers continue to file unfair labor practices cases and union grievances against the department.

These cases not only document this administration's undermining and politicization of the Foreign Service but also serve as blueprints for a future reconstruction and revitalization of our institutions.

AFSA continues to deliver as your professional association. Our Capitol Hill and local government advocacy are your voice when lawmakers are deciding our future. We've won important victories for members, securing in-state tuition for Foreign Service families and the ability to break residential leases like the uniformed military.

AFSA staff are pushing for income tax exemptions for Foreign Service pensions in several states, and we continue to seek other ways to address the unique challenges posed by careers in the Foreign Service.

AFSA scholarships have helped Foreign Service families fund college education. AFSA communications and, of course, *The Foreign Service Journal* keep you informed and in touch on the issues that matter to our community.

At a time when many on active duty are hesitant to speak out, AFSA's communications team ensures our voice is heard in the national media and online. And, in case you're wondering, AFSA never shares its membership list with the department.

At a time when the Foreign Service is threatened, AFSA is still here working for you. That has not changed. What has changed is the environment in which we operate and the stakes involved.

A strong AFSA is not optional. It is essential. Ensuring we have the strength to fight is a shared responsibility across our ranks, so please encourage your missing State Department colleagues to rejoin AFSA. ■



Taking Care of Yourself and Moving Forward

When this is published, we will be fast approaching the one-year anniversary of our individual illegal and forced separation dates. That life change added to the mental and emotional trauma inflicted on all of us by this callous and cowardly administration.

I have been inspired by watching friends and colleagues rise to new challenges by continuing or starting new careers. However, I have been saddened to hear stories of those who continue to struggle to make ends meet, process their emotions and frustration, maintain their mental health, and find community.

As my friend Chris S. said at the close of his “It Was Never a Job” podcast, it was never just a job. For many, including me, that is the biggest hurdle to overcome. Since this started, my own mental and emotional rollercoaster has taken me to extreme highs and maddening lows, sometimes in the span of hours.

The same questions play out in my mind: Who am I? What do I do now? Why me and not someone else? I have been lucky though. I have a close network that keeps me grounded and a life partner who, despite experiencing the same trauma, continues to support and believe in us. I am moving forward with their support.

The anniversary of the agency’s closure reopened wounds and trauma that, for many, have yet to heal. But there are resources to help and ways to channel that energy.

The anniversary of the agency’s closure reopened wounds and trauma that, for many, have yet to heal. But there are resources to help and ways to channel that energy.

You are not alone. There are communities out there to help you recover. New and old communities like Our USAID Community and USAID Alumni Association (UAA) offer opportunities to meet, share resources, and create new networks.

AFSA and UAA both have regional groups: Florida, California, and North Carolina have some of the largest and most active communities. If you cannot find a group in your area, I encourage you to start one.

If you need action, join Aid on the Hill, OneAid, Friends of USAID, your local community activist organization, book club, or garden group. Opportunities are there, and you don’t need to go far to find them.

If you continue to struggle, there are resources available to support your mental and emotional well-being. In addition to the groups below, you can also

search for local programs and community support groups through your state, county, and city government sites.

A Short List: Mental Health and Transition Resources

- **Well-Fed Wednesdays:** well-fed-wednesdays.com
Community-based gatherings offering connection and support for former development professionals.
- **Aid Transition Alliance:** aidtransitionalliance.org/mentalhealthwellness
Short-term mental health and wellness support for more than 10,000 USAID professionals and partner organization staff affected by recent workforce changes.
- **Federal Employee Education & Assistance Fund (FEEA):** feea.org/2025-resources-for-feds
Emergency assistance and resources for federal employees navigating financial and personal hardship.
- **FedSupport — Partnership for Public Service:** fedsupport.org/resources

Resource library and support services for federal employees, including mental health and wellness resources.

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** 988lifeline.org
Immediate, free, and confidential 24/7 support for people in distress, as well as prevention and crisis resources.
- **SAMHSA National Helpline:** samhsa.gov/find-help
Treatment referral and information service for individuals and families facing mental or substance-use disorders.
- **NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness):** nami.org
Education, peer support groups, and a national helpline for individuals and families affected by mental illness.
- **211:** 211.org/get-help/mental-health
Connects individuals with local mental health services and community support across the United States.
- **The Trevor Project:** thetrevorproject.org/get-help
Crisis support and mental health resources for LGBTQ+ individuals, including counseling and intervention services. ■



Retirees Are Still in Service

In our time in the Foreign Service, we all have faced crises, coups, and hostile environments. The challenges confronting our profession today are as great as any we've ever faced.

We alumni and retirees are at a small remove from the day-to-day strife our colleagues in the foreign affairs agencies experience. In our survey of active-duty members, many described the current environment as one of distrust, full of fear of retribution for speaking truth.

We need to rise to the challenge.

Just what might you do to help? First, reach out to your communities to illustrate how your Foreign Service career focused on service to our shared country.

Second, follow updates from AFSA, particularly those regarding activities in Congress that might affect the Foreign Service. Reach out to your representative or senator to express your views.

Third, engage fellow retirees and members of

the Foreign Service in your community.

Finally, consider hosting or attending a fundraising event to support our Legal Defense Fund or the Fund for American Diplomacy.

To get started, consult pages 9–13 of the 2026 AFSA Directory of Retired Members. There you'll find a list of associations across the country, with contact information for their coordinators.

Foreign Service retiree and alumni associations

are in Arizona, Southern California (San Diego area), Central California, Northern California, Colorado, Florida, Maryland, and West Virginia.

You'll also find USAID alumni groups, public diplomacy organizations, and DACOR in Washington, D.C.

If there isn't an association in your area, consider organizing one. Even hosting an informal get-together would be a good first step.

And thanks to all who have already done so much to protect our profession. ■

Legal Defense Fundraiser

On March 10, more than 120 supporters of the American Foreign Service Association gathered at the offices of DLA Piper LLP in Washington, D.C., for a fundraiser benefiting the AFSA Legal Defense Fund.

Hosted by a group of former ambassadors and senior foreign policy officials, the event brought together members of the Foreign Service community in a show of solidarity at a critical moment for the institution.

Former Deputy Secretary of State Tom Shannon opened the evening with remarks that framed the gathering as an act of civic purpose. "We are fighting for a great posterity," Shannon said. "We are fighting for

those beyond us and who come after us, and who are in the Service now." He called on attendees to embrace solidarity as a guiding principle, engaging with one another and with the world "with respect, kindness, and purpose."

Former AFSA General Counsel Sharon Papp gave an update on the Legal Defense Fund's work, detailing ongoing litigation on behalf of the thousands of Foreign Service officers affected by recent reductions in force at both USAID and the State Department.

She noted that the fund has raised more than \$500,000 since the start of last year and has already deployed \$450,000, includ-



The AFSA Legal Defense Fund's host committee, Washington, D.C., on March 10, 2026.

ing \$300,000 toward AFSA's case to restore collective bargaining rights stripped by executive order in May 2025. In addition, the LDF deployed \$25,000 in funds for AFSA's

case regarding the USAGM shutdown.

To support the AFSA Legal Defense Fund, visit <https://afsa.org/legal-defense-fund>. ■

Service Disrupted
Continued from page 58

from former Deputy Secretary of State and CIA Director Ambassador Bill Burns. Burns warned that weakening America’s diplomatic institutions would inevitably weaken the country itself, echoing the campaign’s central premise: The Foreign Service is a living institution whose health directly affects the nation’s ability to navigate crises, build alliances, and advance U.S. interests peacefully.

In each edition over the past year, *The Foreign Service Journal* has published a Service Disrupted collection featuring member stories from the front lines of the dismantling of USAID, the realities they faced at post as a result of RIFs, illegal firings, and the 43-day government shutdown in 2025, all of which made it harder to assist U.S. businesses and citizens overseas, halt disease outbreaks, and conduct other important work of the Foreign Service.

The campaign’s first live panel discussion, held on July 1, 2025, featured AFSA USAID Vice President Randy Chester and former AFSA Governing Board USAGM Representative and VOA Chief National Correspondent Steve Herman for a candid conversation about the human and institutional toll of the agency closures. Chester described the loss of development expertise as “generational,” while Her-



Members of the Foreign Service community gathered in front of the White House during AFSA’s May 9, 2025, Solidarity Walk.

man recounted how Voice of America’s 83 years of continuous broadcasting came to an abrupt halt in March 2025, leaving audiences in some countries wondering whether a coup had taken place.

Over time, *Service Disrupted* evolved into a sustained effort to explain, document, and challenge the accelerating disruptions facing the Foreign Service. The campaign framed these developments not as isolated administrative reforms but as part of a broader pattern of hiring freezes, sweeping reductions-in-force, dismantling of institutions, and executive orders that stripped away long-standing collective bargaining protections. AFSA recognized early that defending its members required

public engagement, historical context, and an honest accounting of consequences.

“From the beginning, we understood that these weren’t isolated events,” Gamer said. “When you look at the pattern of hiring freezes, dismantled agencies, workforce reductions—the cumulative impact on the Foreign Service becomes impossible to ignore. That’s why we felt it was so important to document what our members were experiencing and put real data behind those stories.”

On September 4, 2025, AFSA held its second *Service Disrupted* webinar, examining the July 11 mass layoffs at the State Department. AFSA President John Dinkelman, himself laid off after 37 years

of service, and AFSA State Vice President Ro Nepal described a process that was abrupt, arbitrary, and disconnected from merit.

The layoffs triggered a devastating brain drain of critical language skills and regional as well as technical expertise, compounded by a deepening culture of fear in which officers were increasingly reluctant to provide honest reporting for fear of being seen as disloyal. “It is one thing to try to repair things,” Dinkelman said. “It’s another to burn down the house in order to fix it.”

On November 20, AFSA held another virtual event exploring the accelerating war on federal labor unions. The conversation brought together labor historian Joseph McCartin, AFSA General Counsel Sharon Papp, and AFGE Deputy General Counsel Thomas Dargan, who explained how this bipartisan system, designed to ensure professional accountability and stable institutional performance, was strained to the breaking point.

AFSA’s advocacy extended beyond public programming. On December 3, the association released its landmark report, “At the Breaking Point: The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025.” The report documents the lived experience behind the headlines: collapsing morale, disrupted assignments, policy uncertainty, and mounting concern about whether the Service could continue to fulfill its mission.

The findings are stark. An overwhelming majority of respondents reported that recent workplace changes had undermined their ability to advance U.S. diplomatic priorities. Nearly all reported poor morale. Almost one in three had considered leaving the Service altogether.

The report quickly drew national media attention, from *The New York Times*, NPR, CNN, and others, and sparked conversations well beyond Washington, including an interview with former Ambassador George Kent on Iowa Public Radio. It gave voice to what many had been feeling privately and transformed that anxiety into a shared, evidence-based public narrative.

On February 10, AFSA hosted another webinar, “Do Diplomacy and Development Have a PR Problem?” Panelists argued that a “culture of invisibility” surrounding diplo-

macy and development has left many Americans unaware of the impact of U.S. engagement overseas. (See page 68 for more.)

On February 27, hundreds of former USAID employees, contractors, alumni, and supporters gathered at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., to mark one year since the agency’s dismantling and the dismissal of most of its workforce.

Organized by a coalition of groups including AFGE Local 1534, AFSA, and the USAID Alumni Association, the rally honored the tens of thousands of development professionals whose careers were abruptly disrupted in early 2025.

AFSA President John Dinkelman addressed the crowd, praising the resilience of the development community and reaffirming AFSA’s commitment to defending the Foreign Service community.

(See photos from the rally on page 64.)

“We have not and will not give in to the narrative that USAID is finished. I am inspired every day by the strength shown by this amazing group of people,” Dinkelman told the crowd.

Beyond its events, reports, and public programs, the Service Disrupted campaign has also helped build networks of cooperation among unions, advocacy groups, legal partners, and civil society organizations working to defend federal service and protect the rule-bound integrity of government institutions.

AFSA’s work with other labor allies, alongside public-interest law organizations and outside counsel, has strengthened its legal posture and its ability to communicate these issues to a broader audience. The campaign’s digital presence

and communications infrastructure continue to evolve.

The dedicated Service Disrupted newsletter has become a source of timely updates for members and supporters. AFSA also plans to expand the campaign’s visibility through branded merchandise and additional outreach tools designed to reinforce solidarity and spark conversation.

“The goal has never been simply to respond to disruption but to strengthen the community around the Foreign Service,” Gamer said. “By connecting people, sharing information, and documenting what’s happening, we’re helping ensure that the profession emerges from this period stronger and more visible than ever before.”

All webinar recordings are available at <https://www.youtube.com/@AFSAtube>. ■

AFSA Member Meetup

Approximately 80 members gathered at AFSA headquarters on February 25 for an evening event offering colleagues an opportunity to connect and strengthen community ties.

AFSA President John Dinkelman delivered brief remarks, reflecting on the importance of solidarity and engagement during a period of significant change for the Foreign Service. He thanked members for their continued support of AFSA’s advocacy efforts and encouraged ongoing participation in association programs and events.

The event was generously sponsored by the State Department Federal Credit Union. AFSA extends its sincere appreciation for their partnership and commitment to the Foreign Service community. ■

NEWS BRIEF

Read the Latest Press Releases

As the Foreign Service navigates an unprecedented period of change, AFSA has been a consistent voice for its members.

Recent statements from the AFSA press center have addressed conflicts abroad, sweeping State Department reforms, and the treatment of the Foreign Service workforce at home. From condemning attacks on former ambassadors to pushing back on policy changes, AFSA is tracking the issues that matter most to members.

Read all official statements at <https://afsa.org/press>. ■

Rally Marks One Year Since USAID Dismantling

On February 27, hundreds of former U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) employees, contractors, alumni, and supporters gathered at the 14th Street steps of the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., to mark one year since the agency's dismantling and the dismissal of its workforce.

The rally, organized by AFGE Local 1534, AFSA, the USAID Alumni Association, OneAID, Aid on the Hill, and Our USAID Community, concluded a monthlong commemoration honoring USAID's 10,000 development professionals and the hundreds of thousands across the foreign assistance sector whose careers were abruptly cut short in early 2025.

One of the first agencies targeted during the Trump administration's governmentwide downsizing effort, USAID lost approximately 97 percent of its staff within weeks. The layoffs affected Foreign Service officers, Civil Service employees, and thousands of contractors worldwide.

"It was disorienting, it was painful, and for many of us, it was also quite traumatic," former USAID senior civil servant Maria Price Detherage told the crowd. But, she said, the service continues: "An agency closed, a building closed, a chapter closed, but service did not close."

"This administration did



AFSANNIKKI GAMER

Hundreds gathered at the 14th Street steps of the Ronald Reagan Building on February 27 to mark one year since USAID's dismantling.

not just dismantle an agency; it targeted a workforce," said Laura Pavlovic of Our USAID Community, noting the abrupt lockouts, loss of email access for personnel overseas, and widespread terminations.

Despite the upheaval, speakers expressed hope that USAID's mission and values endure beyond the institution itself. "Let us be clear, these values did not disappear with the dismantling of USAID," said Chris Milligan, chair of the USAID Alumni Association. "They live on in people like you."

AFSA President John Dinkelman told the crowd: "I am inspired every day by the strength shown by this amazing group of people. You give hope to the ideals of USAID

and the values of America. Your dedication to public service and continued desire and focus on serving the American public is being noticed and will be remembered. This is not the end. We are in this fight for the long haul."

AFSA continues to stand with its USAID members and alumni, advocating for the protection of the professional, nonpartisan development workforce and supporting ongoing legal and legislative efforts related to the agency's closure.



AFSANNIKKI GAMER

AFSA President John Dinkelman addresses the rally as attendees hold AFSA and USAID flags and signs.

At the conclusion of the rally, Detherage administered the USAID oath of office to the crowd as a broader commitment to the Constitution and the principles behind service itself. ■

FOREIGN SERVICE DEPARTURES FOR 2025–2026

February 2025

Shawna Hirsch—USAID

March 2025

Chitahka Floore—USAID

April 2025

Donald Kilburg III—State
Carrie Muntean—State

May 2025

Croselle Harris—USAID
Holly Peirce—State

June 2025

Barry Collins—USAID
Lisa Gutierrez—USAID
Steven Herman—USAGM
James Kovar—USAID
Ruth Madison—USAID
David Mandis—State

July 2025

Minal Amin—USAID
Nina Bowen—USAID
Karen Brown—State
Michelle Corzine—USAID
Katrina Erdahl—USAID
Nancy Eslick—USAID
Sarah Henly-Shepard—
USAID
Chi-Poe Hsia—USAID
Briani James—USAID
Michelle Jennings—USAID
Miranda Jolicoeur—USAID
Adrienne LaNeave—
USAID
Clare Masson—USAID
Pauline Melvin—USAID
Taraneh Milani-Roohi—
USAID
Izetta Minko-Moreau—
USAID
Kira Mickie Mitre—USAID
Ryan Shelby—USAID

Rachel Sorey—USAID
Amy Southworth—USAID
Ananthy Thambinaya-
gam—USAID
Sherry Ward—USAID
Corina Warfield—USAID
Zachary Wehrli—USAID

August 2025

Linda Fenton—State

September 2025

Kitty Andang—USAID
Danielle Bash—USAID
Christina Beck—USAID
Lisa Brancheau—USAID
Sara Calvert—USAID
Alicia Contreras-Donello—
USAID
Scott Dobberstein—
USAID
Ana Duque-Higgins—
State
Christopher Foley—USAID
Roy Geiser—USAID
Luann Gronhvd—USAID
Scott Higgins—State
Amy Holman—FCS
Brooke Isham—USAID
Whitney Jensen
Rodrigues—USAID
Alexis Jones—USAID
Regina Jun—USAID
Ronit Kirshner Gerard—
USAID
Sara Krumm—State
Katelin Maher—USAID
Ashley Marcus—USAID
Guy Martorana—USAID
Susan McFee—State
Jeremy Meadows—USAID
Debi Mosel—USAID
Virginia Murray—State
Adam Norikane—USAID
Michelle Parker—USAID

C. Xavier Preciado—
USAID
Wendy Rich-Orloff—
USAID
Mariella Ruiz-Rodriguez—
USAID
Christopher Saenger—
USAID
Gregory Sanford—State
Rabab “Ruby” Shamay-
leh—USAID
Aabira Sher Afgan—
USAID
Richard Snelsire—State
Pamela Strong—USAID
Carolyn Turpin—State
Duncan Walker—State
Mark Wells—State
Dr. Felicia Wilson Young—
USAID

November 2025

Chelsea Bakken—State
Andrea Gastaldo—State
David Ranz—State
Thomas Selinger—State

December 2025

Bryan Hunt—State
Natalie Kolb—USAID
Monica Skinner—State
Siana Tackett—USAID

January 2026

Angela Bond—State
Brian Himmelsteib—State
William Paton—State

AFSA continues its ongoing series listing recent retirements and other departures from the Foreign Service, which began with the March-April edition.

AFSA is 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 report only your own departure; 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 included, 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.

This list reflects Foreign Service members from all the foreign affairs agencies who let us know they departed the Foreign Service in 2025–2026. Names are listed by month, in alphabetical order within each month. ■

Changes at AFSA’s Office of General Counsel

After almost 34 years with AFSA, General Counsel Sharon Papp retired on May 1, 2026.

This is a momentous change at AFSA, as the association long relied on Sharon’s immense historical knowledge and institutional memory of all things related to AFSA’s labor-management work. Sharon has been a wonderful colleague and mentor, and she will be greatly missed.

In great part thanks to Sharon’s dedication to fostering the next generation of AFSA’s legal talent, AFSA is proud to announce the promotion of two colleagues into senior roles in the Office of General Counsel (OGC).

Deputy General Counsel Raeka Safai will step into the General Counsel role and lead the association’s legal team. After almost 18 years with AFSA, Raeka has proven capable of assuming this responsibility. Succeeding Raeka as deputy is Neera Parikh, who serves as AFSA’s senior attorney adviser. She has been with AFSA for 26 years.

Further, AFSA Counselor for Alumni and Retirees Brian Himmelsteib will join OGC in the role of grievance counselor on a part-time basis, in addition to retaining his current portfolio, and therefore become a full-time member of the AFSA staff.



Sharon Papp

Raeka Safai: General Counsel

In her role as deputy general counsel, Raeka Safai has handled a broad range of matters: labor-management relations and collective bargaining with several foreign affairs agencies, complex individual member grievances, investigations, congressional inquiries, and



Raeka Safai

discipline and security clearance cases.

She also counsels AFSA leadership and Governing

Board members on policy matters affecting the Foreign Service workforce. Raeka is AFSA’s expert on social media policies, outside activities, and the effects of the Hatch Act on Foreign Service members.

Raeka is a Certified Information Privacy Professional focusing on U.S. privacy laws. She is a member of the Society of Federal Labor and Employee Relations Professionals and the Women’s Bar Association. She is barred in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

Prior to joining AFSA, Raeka was an associate at a Washington, D.C., law firm where she represented Foreign Service members in administrative, civil, and criminal matters. Raeka received her JD from the Catholic University of Amer-



Neera Parikh

ica, Columbus School of Law. A first-generation Iranian American, she speaks fluent Farsi and French.

Neera Parikh: Deputy General Counsel

Neera Parikh joined AFSA as a law clerk and developed an appreciation for the organization and its work. This led her to pursue an attorney position, and she has remained with AFSA ever since, her portfolio centered on individual client work.

She has advised and represented members with grievances; security clearance suspensions and revocations; Diplomatic Security, Inspector General, and anti-harassment (AHP) investigations; discipline matters; and financial issues.

Neera is AFSA’s expert on equal employment opportunity (EEO) matters including formal complaints, disability/workplace accommodation issues, harassment inquiries, and alternative dispute resolution.

Neera has also assisted with policy changes and updates related to anti-



Brian Himmelsteib

bullying, sexual assault/harassment, tenure precepts, and reconstituted board procedures. She served on the OGC team for collective bargaining negotiations on behalf of our Foreign Agricultural Service members and on the Discipline Working Group.

Neera earned her JD from the American University

Washington College of Law. She is a proud Detroitter and Wolverine who loves dancing, 90s R&B/hip hop, and coffee.

Brian Himmelsteib: Grievance Counselor

Brian Himmelsteib joined AFSA in 2025 after a 20-year career with the U.S. Foreign Service. His career focused on East Asia and the Pacific, with tours as head of the management section in Singapore, Laos, Osaka-Kobe, and Surabaya.

He served two tours in the State Department Operations Center, one as a watch officer, and one as a manager of the watch, as well as a tour on the Korea desk.

Brian's last assignment

was at the Foreign Service Institute as the deputy head of the School of Language Studies, where he helped shepherd major changes to the language exam.

He entered the Foreign Service with Chinese language and then learned Indonesian, Japanese, and Lao. He grew up in Northern New Jersey and graduated from Miami University in Ohio.

Congratulations to our colleagues on these well-deserved promotions. Watch for a tribute to Sharon Papp and her decades of service, including thousands of AFSA members assisted and dozens of careers saved, in the July-August edition of AFSA News. ■

Webinar

MSPB Appeals Process Demystified

AFSA recently hosted a virtual information session to help members better understand how to navigate appeals before the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB).

The February 4 webinar featured former MSPB Vice Chairman Ray Limon and retired Administrative Judge Rich Vitaris, who walked participants through the steps involved in filing and pursuing an appeal.

Vitaris explained what employees can expect after filing an MSPB appeal, including receipt of an acknowledgment order with important deadlines, participation in the discovery process, and preparation of prehearing submissions that identify witnesses and documents.

He emphasized the importance of carefully following MSPB procedures and meeting deadlines, noting that judges rely heavily on these submissions to determine

what issues will be considered during a hearing.

The speakers also discussed what typically happens at an MSPB hearing, how employees representing themselves can prepare to question witnesses and present evidence, and the potential outcomes of a case.

In some instances, they explained, a judge may reverse a personnel action outright, while in others the agency may be required to redo the process.

The session concluded with a Q&A discussion covering topics such as case consolidation, potential delays due to the high volume of appeals, and options for mediation or settlement.

AFSA plans to continue offering informational sessions and resources to support members navigating the MSPB appeals process.

A recording of the event is available at <https://afsa.org/afsa-videos>. ■

Court Rules VOA Firings Unlawful

A federal court ruling has delivered a major victory for Voice of America (VOA) journalists and the unions representing them, including AFSA.

On March 7, U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth ruled that Kari Lake was unlawfully appointed as acting CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, invalidating actions taken during her tenure, including the attempted reductions in force that would have eliminated hundreds of VOA positions.

AFSA joined a coalition of unions, journalists, and press freedom organizations in challenging the legality of the appointment and the resulting personnel actions. The court's decision confirms that those actions lacked legal authority and protects VOA employees whose jobs were targeted.

AFSA President John Dinkelman said: "Voice of America exists to tell the truth to the world—and in doing so, it represents one of America's most important sources of soft power. That mission depends on a professional, protected workforce and respect for the law. Judge Lamberth's decision makes clear that neither can simply be cast aside." ■



AFSA Governing Board Meetings, January 21 and February 18, 2026

At its January 21 meeting, the board agreed to discontinue parliamentary services as a cost-saving measure.

At its February 18 meeting, the board approved several amendments to the AFSA bylaws to be put to a vote. The proposed amendments are outlined on page 70. ■

Webinar

Do Diplomacy and Development Have a PR Problem?

On February 10, AFSA held a webinar as part of its Service Disrupted series, examining the relationship between storytelling, public perception, and U.S. foreign policy. Panelists discussed the dismantling of USAID and how diplomacy and development are often overlooked by the U.S. public.

Moderated by AFSA Director of Communications and Outreach Nikki Gamer, the panel featured Katherine Ntiamoah, a former Foreign Service officer (and current

FSJ Editorial Board member) who served nearly 20 years in public diplomacy assignments and now works at Indiana University's Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies; Jessica Jennings, a strategic communications executive and former USAID spokesperson and chief communications officer; and William Herkewitz, a journalist and communications strategist who served as head of communications at USAID missions in Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Panelists reflected on the one-year anniversary of USAID's dismantling and the sudden disruption of U.S. foreign assistance programs. Ntiamoah described a longstanding "culture of invisibility" among diplomats, noting that Foreign Service professionals have traditionally focused on foreign audiences and avoided domestic political attention.

While this approach protected the professionalism of the diplomatic corps, she said, it also left many Americans unaware of the work carried out overseas on their behalf.

Jennings highlighted structural challenges that have long complicated communications about foreign assistance. Limited resources, institutional divisions between agencies, and concerns about taking credit for locally led development efforts often made it difficult to communicate clearly with domestic audiences.

At the same time, she said, many Americans significantly overestimate the amount of federal spending devoted to foreign aid, which, in reality, accounts for less than 1 percent of the U.S. budget.

Herkewitz argued that the lack of public awareness created an opening for misinformation and political attacks. Successful programs that saved lives

or prevented humanitarian crises were not widely shared with or explained to the American public, leaving many people unfamiliar with the scale and impact of U.S. efforts.

The panelists stressed that from the start, communications should be embedded in diplomacy and development programs. They encouraged practitioners to focus less on funding levels and more on the real-world impact of programs, while also expanding outreach through local media, digital platforms, and community engagement.

The discussion also touched on the role universities can play in cultivating the next generation of foreign policy professionals. Despite recent disruptions, Ntiamoah said student interest in international affairs and language study remains strong.

Panelists concluded that rebuilding public understanding of diplomacy and development will require greater transparency and more active storytelling. They encouraged current and former practitioners to share their experiences and explain the value of U.S. global engagement to audiences beyond traditional policy circles.

Watch a recording of the panel at <https://www.youtube.com/@AFSAtube>. ■

NEWS BRIEF

State Renames Personnel Bureau, Again

The State Department has once again changed the name of its bureau focused on human resources issues.

The Bureau of Human Resources (HR) was renamed the Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM) in February 2020.

In 2025 it became the Bureau of Personnel and Training (PERT), but in March 2026 it returned to the original name and, once again, is the Bureau of Human Resources.

All cables, memoranda, taskers, and internal communications that previously referenced PERT now use "HR" as the bureau designation. According to a March 2 cable, updates to system URLs, application names, email addresses, and other references will be implemented in phases.

The bureau is now led by Senior Bureau Official and Acting Chief Human Capital Officer Sarah McKemey, who took up the position in December 2025 upon the departure of Lew Olowski. ■

The Next Career Chapter

On February 3 and 24, 2026, AFSA hosted a two-part career-search webinar featuring career coach Timothy Lo, founder of the firm Your Next Jump, and moderated by Brian Himmelsteib, AFSA counselor for retirees and alumni.

In the first episode, “Writing a Résumé That Gets Interviews,” Lo offered practical advice on building effective résumés for Foreign Service professionals exploring career transition.

He emphasized that résumés should function as marketing documents rather than simple records of job duties and encouraged participants to highlight results and measurable outcomes instead of listing responsibilities.

The session also focused on translating government experience into language

that resonates with private-sector employers by highlighting transferable skills such as strategic communication, data analysis, and program management.

Lo also discussed using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to identify key competencies from job postings and strengthen résumé content.

In the second webinar, “How Strategic Networking Unlocks the Hidden Job Market,” Lo pointed out that while online job postings remain a useful starting point, many roles are ultimately filled through personal connections and referrals.

Rather than applying broadly to positions posted online, he encouraged participants to focus on building relationships with professionals inside organizations

Outreach using concise, personalized messages requesting brief conversations can often lead to valuable insights and referrals to recruiters or hiring managers.

of interest, particularly those with shared professional backgrounds or affiliations.

Using LinkedIn as a primary tool, Lo demonstrated how job seekers can identify potential contacts by filtering for people who previously worked at the same agency, school, or organization and who now hold roles in sectors of interest.

Outreach using concise, personalized messages requesting brief informational conversations can often lead to valuable insights and, in some cases, referrals to recruiters or hiring managers.

In addition to networking

advice, Lo briefly touched on interview preparation and negotiation strategies, highlighting three qualities employers consistently seek in candidates: character, competency, and chemistry.

The webinar concluded with a short Q&A session, during which participants asked about networking follow-up, career transition into fields such as philanthropy, and whether returning to school is necessary for certain career paths.

For members who were unable to attend, a recording of the webinar is available at <https://afsa.org/afsa-videos>. ■

Reviewing Your Retirement Plan

AFSA Treasurer John Naland recently hosted a webinar reminding Foreign Service retirees that managing a retirement plan is far from “one and done.”

Drawing on his experience as a former director of the State Department’s Office of Retirement, Naland outlined key action items retirees should revisit periodically. Top priorities include keeping beneficiary designations current on FEGLI, TSP, and IRA accounts, since those forms, not your will, determine where the money goes, and updating wills and powers of attorney, especially after moving to a new state.

He encouraged retirees to review their FEHB plan each open season, noting that some plans offer an annual rebate of up to \$800 for Medicare Part B enrollees. On investments, Naland reminded attendees that a Foreign Service annuity already functions like a large bond, so holding a TSP

entirely in bonds may be overly conservative against inflation over time.

Practical tips included logging into Employee Express at least once a year to avoid losing access, briefing next of kin on survivor benefit procedures, and staying alert to increasingly sophisticated financial scams.

Naland also warned that congressional budget pressures could threaten federal retiree health benefits and urged members to maintain their AFSA membership, now requiring direct payment, to support advocacy on Capitol Hill.

A recording of the event, along with more than 100 retirement resources, is available on the AFSA website under Alumni & Retiree Services. For questions, contact AFSA Counselor Brian Himmelsteib at himmelsteib@afsa.org. ■

Proposed AFSA Bylaw Amendments

The Governing Board is proposing nine bylaw amendments to be voted on this summer. AFSA regularly proposes such updates to most effectively represent our members despite changing needs and environments.

The complete bylaw amendment procedures can be found in Article X of the AFSA Bylaws, which are available at www.afsa.org/bylaws. The AFSA Committee on Elections is responsible for conducting all polling on amendments.

The process requires notification to the AFSA membership on May 8 with a 45-day period for submission of statements in opposition to proposed bylaw amendments. Any such statements must be received by 5 p.m. Eastern time on Monday, June 22, and must be signed by at least 10 AFSA members in good standing. No two statements shall be signed by the same member.

Electronic voting on these amendments will commence on July 6, 2026, and will remain open for 15 days. All votes must be cast by 8 a.m. Eastern time on Tuesday, July 21, 2026. Paper ballots will be sent to members who do not have a valid email address on file with AFSA.

Adoption of a proposed amendment will require the affirmative votes of not less than two-thirds of the valid votes received and will be effective immediately.

The ballot will also include a referendum question asking members to approve a 5 percent increase in base dues to help AFSA maintain the staffing needed to defend the Foreign Service. This referendum question requires a simple majority of votes cast to pass.

Amendment 1— Election of Constituency Vice Presidents and Representatives

Amend Article V, Section 4(b) by striking: “The constituency vice presidents and representatives shall be elected from constituencies composed of the regular members belonging to the Foreign Service in each of the departments or agencies to which Chapter 10 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 applies, pursuant to Sec. 1003(a), and a single retired constituency for all former members of the Service from all such departments and agencies” *and replacing it with*: “The constituency vice presidents and representatives shall be elected from constituencies composed of the regular members belonging to the Foreign Service in each of the departments or agencies defined in Sections 103 and 202 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, and a single alumni constituency for all former members of the Service from all such departments and agencies.”

Justification: The bylaws currently define active-duty constituencies by union status. Given the uncertainty of AFSA’s future union status, the proposed amendment redefines active-duty constituencies by Foreign Service members in departments or agencies covered by the Foreign Service Act.

Amendment 2— Election of Constituency Vice Presidents and Representatives

Amend Article V, Section 4(b) by inserting at the end of the first sentence: “Candidates for election to active-duty constituency vice president and representative positions may also include former tenured members of that constituency who separated from the Service within five years prior to the start of the term of office.”

Justification: If AFSA has not regained union status prior to the call for nominations for election to the 2027–2029 board, potential candidates for active-duty constituency vice president positions will have no assurance of being able to fulfill the duties of those positions working 40 hours per week while drawing a government salary. The prospect of having to do all AFSA work after hours and on weekends could dissuade active-duty candidates from running.

In addition, some potential active-duty candidates for representative positions could decline to run due to a variety of personal concerns. Given the potential of having few or no active-duty candidates for those positions, it would be prudent to give voters the option of voting for a recently separated member from their constituency who might have more time to dedicate to the position.

Amendment 3— Governing Board Voting

Amend Article V, Section 5(b) by striking: “Board members required by Article V, Section 8 to participate via in-person residence may participate virtually two times in any 12-month period” *and inserting*: “Board members required by Article V, Section 8 to participate via in-person attendance may participate virtually six times in any 12-month period.”

Justification: A bylaw amendment three years ago authorized representatives from constituencies with fewer than 300 members to reside anywhere in the world and participate virtually in all board meetings because those constituencies often had too few domestic members to fill those positions.

That same amendment allowed all other board members to participate virtually in two board meetings per year

but retained the requirement for in-person attendance at the remaining meetings, because experience showed that discussion and decision-making are enhanced by in-person participation. This proposed amendment would allow those board members to attend up to six meetings virtually during any 12-month period.

Amendment 4— Board Vacancies

Amend Article V, Section 6 by inserting at the end of the paragraph: “However, if the board cannot find a suitable candidate, the board may appoint a former tenured member of the constituency who separated from the Service within five years prior to the start of the term of office.”

Justification: During the past year, resignations of elected board officers left vacant several active-duty constituency positions for which the board has been unable to find a member of that constituency to volunteer to fill. If that situation persists or recurs, this provision would allow the board to appoint a recently separated member from that constituency.

Amendment 5— Governing Board Attendance

Amend Article V, Section 8 by striking: “The president, secretary, treasurer, constituency vice presidents, and representatives of constituencies with more than 299 members shall participate via in-person

attendance at regularly scheduled meetings of the board within 60 days of taking office on July 15 or appointment to office thereafter, and throughout their term in office. If they are unable to participate via in-person attendance at regularly scheduled meetings of the board, e.g., because of transfer, they shall submit their resignations” and inserting: “The president, secretary, treasurer, constituency vice presidents, and representatives of constituencies with more than 299 members shall participate via in-person attendance at regularly scheduled meetings of the board within 60 days of taking office on July 15 or appointment to office thereafter, and throughout their term in office. Absent circumstances approved by a vote of the board, if they are unable to participate via in-person attendance at regularly scheduled meetings of the board they shall submit their resignations.”

Justification: While experience has shown that discussion and decision-making at board meetings are enhanced by in-person participation, events of the past year raise the prospect of unpredictable future circumstances preventing a board member from participating in-person at board meetings.

Amendment 6— AFSA President Responsibilities

Amend Article VI, Section 2 by striking “retirees” and inserting “alumni” in the list

of members represented by the AFSA president.

Justification: Given the recent increase in the number of AFSA members who separated from the Service prior to retirement eligibility, it seems appropriate to specify that the AFSA president represents all alumni members.

Amendment 7— Alumni Constituency

Amend Article VI, Section 6 by striking the entire section and replacing it with: “The Alumni Vice President. The alumni vice president serves as the primary advocate for former members of the Service and, in coordination with the president, takes the lead on advocacy and outreach on alumni issues. The alumni vice president is responsible for recommending to the Executive Committee and the board retired Foreign Service members to serve on and provide the Foreign Service perspective to the Foreign Service Grievance Board and the Foreign Service Labor Relations Board.”

Justification: AFSA’s retiree constituency has long included former Foreign Service members who separated prior to retirement eligibility. Previously, their numbers were small but increased significantly over the last year following reductions in force at USAID and the State Department. Changing the bylaws nomenclature from “retiree” to “alumni” makes the wording more inclusive. It does

not change AFSA’s services or support for either group.

Amendment 8— Appointment of Special Board Member

Amend Article V by adding a new Section 2 [renumber remaining sections] stating “Appointment of Special Board Member: Boards taking office in 2027 and 2029 may choose to appoint a special additional board member for a duration not to exceed that board’s term, to represent a specific constituency focusing on a specific set of issues. The appointee must be a regular member and the appointment must be by a supermajority vote of two-thirds of the board. This bylaws section will expire on July 14, 2031.”

Justification: Depending on future legal and congressional developments, there may not be an active-duty USAID constituency entitled to representation on the next AFSA board. There will, however, remain unique USAID issues meriting AFSA focus. As such, the board would benefit from having a Special Board Member to bring forward those issues for the next few years without meriting the creation of a permanent board position with that focus.

Amendment 9— Governing Board Composition

Amend Article V, Section 4(b) by striking: “In addition, each constituency shall be entitled to one representative

for every 2,000 members or fraction thereof, so long as the fraction is greater than half, as of the end of the month prior to the issuance of the call for nominations, provided that any constituency that for three consecutive months has a membership which would on that date have entitled it to an additional representative shall have an additional representative, who shall be appointed by the board” and inserting: “In addition, each active-duty constituency shall be entitled to one representative for every 1,500 members, not to exceed six representatives per constituency, and the alumni constituency shall be entitled to one representative for every 2,000 members, as of the end of the month prior to the issuance of the call for nominations. An additional representative is authorized

if membership exceeds the relevant calculation factor by greater than half. Between elections, any constituency that for three consecutive months has a membership which would entitle it to an additional representative shall have an additional representative appointed by the board.”

Justification: AFSA’s active-duty membership fell by more than 25 percent over the past year. Depending on the membership totals at the time of the next Governing Board election, the number of State Department representative positions could drop from six to three. Given the vital role of active-duty members in charting their future, authorizing one representative for every 1,500 instead of 2,000 active-duty members would preserve five State representative positions on the

2027–2029 board if current membership totals remain unchanged at the time for call for nominations.

Since alumni membership has not declined over the past year, leaving the alumni representative calculation factor at 2,000 would preserve the current three alumni board members if current membership totals remain unchanged. The board could potentially have a total of six alumni members if the positions of president, secretary, and treasurer are filled by alumni members as they are now.

Referendum— One-Time Dues Increase

Increase annual base dues by 5 percent, effective as of December 1, 2026.

Justification: The March 2025 Executive Order and subsequent actions precipitated a more than 25

percent drop in AFSA dues revenue. At the same time, more members are coming to AFSA for legal assistance and the need for AFSA public and congressional advocacy have increased.

While AFSA has reduced staff and slashed discretionary spending, additional resources are needed to maintain core staffing to defend the Foreign Service. A one-time, 5 percent dues increase would generate an additional \$200,000 in annual dues revenue at a modest cost to individual members. For example, annual dues increases would be: FS4-6 \$12.52, FS1-3 \$21.97, SFS \$28.17, alumni with \$75,000+ annuities \$13.10, alumni with \$50,000–\$75,000 annuities \$10.62, alumni with \$25,000–\$50,000 annuities \$7.79, and non-annuitants \$5.11. ■

USAID Memorial Wall Finds New Home



AFSANDIJA RUIZICA

The USAID Memorial Wall, which honors employees who died in service to our country, has been reinstalled in the State Department’s D Street Lobby following its removal from USAID headquarters in the Ronald Reagan Building. The move took place the weekend of March 28.

Created and formerly maintained by USAID, the memorial honors Foreign Service officers and Civil Service employees, Foreign Service Nationals, and personal service contractors.

With the recent addition of three names, it now commemorates 102 USAID-associated personnel. A list of the 99 names as of 2024 appears on page 77 of the May 2024 FSJ.

All Foreign Service honorees on the USAID memorial who meet AFSA’s criteria are also honored on the AFSA Memorial Plaques in the State Department’s C Street Lobby.

Although the D Street Lobby is not the memorial’s original home, its installation there ensures that the service and sacrifice of those it honors will continue to be recognized. AFSA extends its gratitude to USAID FSO (ret.) Dinah Zeltser-Winant, Ambassador Eric Rubin, John Naland, and others whose advocacy and persistence made the relocation possible.

A Foreign Service Day rededication ceremony for the installation was planned for early May.

For coverage, see the July–August 2026 edition of *The Foreign Service Journal*. ■

Beyond the Mission

Reinventing Yourself After Government Service

Whether you've chosen to leave the Foreign Service or had the choice made for you, these career transition tips can help you make the move successfully.

BY DAWSON LAW

I still remember the quiet shock of that first morning after my consulting job in London ended. I had made my grand exit from years in the Foreign Service and U.S. Treasury and sailed smoothly into a consulting firm. Suddenly, for the first time in years, I wasn't waking up to a calendar full of meetings, policy papers, or classified cables. Instead, I sat in my small London flat, wondering what came next.

Just months earlier, I had been deep inside U.S. Embassy London as U.S. Treasury's first representative to the United Kingdom, focused on sanctions and illicit finance issues, working closely with many State Department and interagency

colleagues on national security priorities. The mission was clear, the stakes were high, and the community was tight-knit. But I realized the Foreign Service wasn't a long-term fit for me, and transitioning to the private sector abroad seemed like the logical next chapter. When my private sector role ended abruptly due to layoffs, I was forced into the kind of reinvention I had always assumed would happen on my terms, at my pace.

Since the start of my career, my motto has been simple: I want to make a positive impact on the world. That motto carried me through, and it remains my compass now. What I've discovered is that life after government service is not

just about finding another job. It is about rediscovering your ability to make an impact on your own terms.

From Structure to Uncertainty

Foreign Service careers provide a unique rhythm. Your life is shaped by bidding cycles, assignments, and an overarching sense of purpose. Even in moments of frustration and change, there is comfort in the structure.

Leaving that world, especially early to mid-career, can feel like being dropped into a new country, but without a briefing cable or a welcome packet from post. The transition is not just professional; it is profoundly personal.

For me, the first adjustment was psychological. I had built an identity around being part of the national security apparatus. In the consulting world, not everyone understood the weight of state-sponsored disinformation, sanctions designations, or the



Dawson Law was a member of the U.S. Foreign Service from 2009 to 2019, serving in Khartoum, Warsaw, Hanoi, and Canberra. He also worked as a civil servant at the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence from 2021 to 2024. Law founded a geopolitical and compliance advisory, Conseil Global Advisors, and a career coaching practice, International Careers Coach.

Leaving that world, especially early to mid-career, can feel like being dropped into a new country, but without a briefing cable or a welcome packet from post.

intricacies of shadow tanker fleet networks. Suddenly, I had to translate my work into language that made sense outside government.

The second adjustment was the loss of certainty. Consulting felt familiar enough, the acronyms were fewer, but the work was adjacent to what I had done at State and Treasury. When the company hit turbulence though, I discovered how fragile private sector roles can be; entire teams can vanish overnight.

Yet even government service, once seen as a rock of stability, has shed much of that certainty in the past year. Hiring freezes, attrition-driven reductions, and reductions in force (RIFs) have touched colleagues across agencies. For many, the sense of permanence has given way to the same uncertainty familiar in the private sector. What once felt enduring now requires the same resilience and adaptability as any other role.

It helps to remember that this isn't unusual. Today's professionals can expect not just job changes but also career changes: Researchers estimate most Americans will go through three to seven distinct careers in their lifetime.

Lessons in Reinvention

Looking back, I see that period not as an ending but as the beginning of reinvention. Here are a few lessons I took away, ones that may resonate well.



The author on Flag Day in 2009, when he was assigned to Khartoum.

Adaptability is a superpower.

Foreign Service professionals are conditioned to adapt to new countries, languages, and crises. That muscle translates beautifully to life outside government. This adaptability helped me pivot quickly from a consulting setback toward entrepreneurship. The same flexibility that

once helped me navigate a meeting with militia members in Sudan could also help me design a business model in Europe.

Negotiation skills travel well. Years of persuading reluctant interlocutors or navigating interagency disputes leave you with finely tuned negotiation skills that apply far beyond diplomacy. In the private sector, I've used those same skills in client pitches and contract discussions. The context changes, but the underlying ability to find common ground remains invaluable.

Cultural fluency is an asset.

Foreign Service professionals know how to read a room, sense unspoken hierarchies, and adapt their tone depending on the audience. Outside government, this cultural agility sets you apart. Whether working with multinational clients, leading diverse teams, or entering a new market, your comfort with ambiguity and cultural nuance is prized.

Not everything translates.

In government, authority often comes with a title, a badge, or simply the weight of the institution. In the private sector, none of that is assumed. And while in

Washington it was sometimes enough to identify a problem, outside government you are expected to bring solutions quickly. There are fewer silos, less time for process, and far more emphasis on execution. It's a different kind of pressure, one that demands agility, accountability, and speed.

Top Tips for Career Transition

Even those who quickly find a role after being laid off may not have found their dream job. So how do you make such a big transition successfully?

Do an identity check. Find your new mission. Expect a feeling of loss when the official mission no longer defines your days. Be intentional about creating a new mission, whether through teaching, entrepreneurship, advocacy, or simply deepening personal pursuits. Ask yourself: What brought you to public service, and how will you translate that mission to a new professional vision?

Translate your skills. Speak a new language. Don't assume others understand the value of your Foreign Service work. Learn to describe your accomplishments in private sector terms. Instead of "drafted cables," say "produced analytical reporting that shaped senior-level decision making." Instead of "served as control officer," say "managed high-stakes visits under intense logistical and political pressure." Use numbers and metrics, not job descriptions with no clear results.

Continue learning. Curiosity and constant learning drew many of us to our careers in foreign affairs. Your intricate work knowledge will grow stale or become less relevant over time. Take the opportunity to continue learning and stay up to date on emerging issues like artificial intelligence.

Network widely. Relationships are the currency of reinvention. Reconnect with former colleagues, professional associations, think tanks, and mentors before



The author at the APEC Leaders Summit in Papua New Guinea, 2018.

you need them. Be clear in your asks, thank people for their time, always ask who else you should talk to, and follow up promptly. The AFSA community itself is a powerful network.

Experiment and pivot. Explore your options. Talk to industry contacts to learn about their work, company culture, and good supervisors. You may find yourself in a role that isn't a great fit, but each experiment builds clarity.

Know geographic focus matters. Decide whether Washington, D.C., should be your base. The capital may have jobs relevant to your experience, but it is saturated with talent, making you a small fish in a very large pond. Positioning yourself in a regional U.S. hub, university town, or overseas market can make you stand out. Consider opportunities in different locations. Nothing beats a networking trip to the places you are contemplating living.

Use your voice. When you leave the government, you'll be able to speak and advocate without clearance or institutional limits. Whether through writing, public speaking, or joining cause-driven organizations, you can build a public presence in ways that were not possible while you were in the Foreign Service.

Remember resilience above all. Careers after government service rarely follow a straight line. Layoffs happen, business ventures falter, opportunities vanish. What matters is the ability to adjust course. The same resilience that carried you through difficult assignments or overseas tours will carry you through this chapter too.

Finally, it's time for the long view. The one lesson I want to share with recently RIFed colleagues is this: Leaving government is not a downgrade. It is not the loss of relevance. It is an invitation to reinvent yourself, apply your skills in new ways, and rediscover what drives you beyond the mission.

That first morning in London, I feared my ability to make an impact on the world had ended with my government service. I see now that it was only the beginning of a career advising companies on how to integrate new geopolitical realities into their strategy, helping them comply with complex sanctions and export controls, and offering career coaching to foreign policy professionals making career transitions.

Your story does not end when you leave the Service. The mission continues. But now, you get to define it for yourself. ■

Education in the Foreign Service

Navigating Transitions, Neurodiversity, and Academic Pathways

Planning for three critical transition points can dramatically improve educational outcomes for Foreign Service students.

BY EVAN WILSON

ISTOCKPHOTO/OLEGSKNOW

Families serving in the U.S. Foreign Service experience extraordinary opportunities—global mobility, multilingual environments, and cultural immersion—but these advantages are paired with educational challenges that differ significantly from those faced by students who don't uproot and move to new homes in new countries every two to three years.

Frequent relocations, varying school systems, and inconsistent access to specialized educational services can create discontinuities that are especially difficult for students with learning differences such

as dyslexia, ADHD, or executive-function challenges. Beyond these, we struggle with medevacs, evacuations, curtailments, and so many other unexpected challenges, like wars and natural disasters.

In my own experience as a Foreign Service parent and through my work as the founder of an FS-focused educational services company, I have seen three transition points that are particularly consequential: the early elementary years (grades 1–4); the middle school period, when executive functioning demands intensify; and the transition into grades 11–12, especially in programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program.

Understanding these transition points—and planning systematically for them—can dramatically improve educational outcomes for Foreign Service students. The continuity across postings provided by FS family member–led educational services companies like mine serves as a model for helping our kids succeed.

Early Elementary (Grades 1–4): The Risk of Late Identification

The early elementary years are the critical window for identifying learning differences such as dyslexia and ADHD. For Foreign Service families, however, frequent relocations during these years often disrupt screening, observation continuity, and intervention services.

Sometimes, our kids begin grade 1 in one country, move midyear to another school using a different curriculum, and then relocate again before grade 3. Each move resets teacher familiarity, delays observation of persistent learning patterns, and postpones referrals for evaluation.



Evan Wilson has worked with children as a coach, tutor, mentor, and attorney for the last 20 years. As an attorney, he worked with children involved with the juvenile justice system—something he gave up to join the Foreign Service community as a spouse. He has worked with students from primary school to graduate school, both in the U.S. and abroad. Wilson has a BA in the history of science from Harvard University and a JD from the Washington College of Law. He is the founder of Ambassador Academics.



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In stable educational environments, teachers typically recognize early warning signs—persistent reading struggles, difficulty retaining phonetic patterns, inattentiveness beyond developmental expectations—and begin structured interventions. In contrast, internationally mobile students are often described in each new school as “still adjusting,” “new to the curriculum,” or “still learning the language of instruction.”

These explanations, while sometimes accurate, can unintentionally delay the identification of dyslexia or ADHD until academic demands increase dramatically in later grades. By the time formal identification occurs, the child may already have experienced years of avoidable academic frustration, erosion of

Internationally mobile students are often described in each new school as “still adjusting,” “new to the curriculum,” or “still learning the language of instruction.”

confidence, and widening achievement gaps.

Another complication is the uneven availability of psychoeducational evaluation services across postings. Some international locations have limited access to qualified evaluators or require families to travel internationally for testing, creating logistical and financial barriers that further delay diagnosis.

Even when identification occurs,

intervention continuity may be interrupted by the next transfer cycle, forcing families to rebuild support systems repeatedly.

Addressing this challenge requires systematic planning. Foreign Service institutions and international schools can help by implementing universal early screening protocols that follow students across postings, maintaining portable digital learning profiles, and

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ensuring that individualized learning plans (ILPs) are recognized consistently across international school systems.

Early identification is not simply a clinical milestone—it is a stabilizing educational anchor for highly mobile students.

Middle School: Executive Function as the Hidden Barrier

The middle school years introduce a new set of challenges, particularly for students with ADHD or executive-function deficits. Executive functions—planning, organization, task initiation, sustained attention, and time management—become central to academic success beginning around grades 6–8, when students transition from teacher-managed classrooms to multiteacher schedules,

Foreign Service parents can ensure that their family’s mobility is an unqualified advantage rather than an educational risk.


long-term assignments, and independent study expectations.

For Foreign Service students, this developmental stage often coincides with another international relocation, amplifying the difficulty. A student who previously succeeded with strong teacher scaffolding may suddenly face new expectations in an unfamiliar school environment, often within a different academic system (British, American, IB, or host-country curriculum).


The combination of environmental adjustment and rising executive demands can lead to a sudden decline in performance that appears to be academic but is fundamentally organizational and cognitive in nature.

Executive-function challenges are particularly difficult to support consistently across postings because intervention approaches vary widely by school. Some international schools provide structured


(Continued on page 84)




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■ ELEMENTARY/JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH													
Fairfax Christian School, The	78	330	50/50	15	20	PK-12	AP	N	Limited	3	Y	Y	60,100-68,150 ^{abdeg}
Ojai Valley School	85	300	49/41	25	12	PK-12	IB	Y	Y	90	Y	Limited	76,500 ^{bb}
Rochambeau The French International School	87	1295	46/54	NA	30	PK-12	AP/IB	N	Limited	12	Y	N	28,378-33,930 ^{ab}
TASIS The American School in Switzerland	80	730	45/55	33	90	PK-12, PG	AP/IB	Y	Y	45	Y	Limited	128,000
■ JUNIOR HIGH/SENIOR HIGH													
New England Innovation Academy	85	120	67/32	25	12	6-12	NA	Y	Limited	40	Y	Limited	45,500-73,000 ^{ab}
■ SENIOR HIGH													
Christchurch School	77	250	60/40	70	30	9-12	AP	Y	Y	50	Y	Y	71,000 ^d
EF Academy New York	79	292	48/52	93	89	9-12	AP/IB	Y	Y	40.5	Y	N	47,200-76,600 ^{ab}
EF Academy Pasadena	79	261	54/46	69	66	9-12	AP	Y	Y	32	Y	N	47,200-76,600 ^{ab}
Fountain Valley School of Colorado	87	220	50/50	70	30	9-12	AP	Y	Limited	80	Y	Limited	75,900 ^b
Foxcroft School	78	161	ALL GIRLS	70	16	9-12, PG	AP	Y	Y	43	Y	N	78,200 ^b
Madeira School, The	81	338	ALL GIRLS	51	13	9-PG	AP	y	Limited	14	N	N	77,100 ^b
St. Andrew's School	82	320	50/50	100	11	9-12	NA	Y	Limited	49	Y	Limited	66,400 ^{ddf}
St. Stephen's School	81	305	45/55	20	64	9-12	IB	Y	Limited	30	Y	Y	65,898 ^{abcf}
■ SPECIAL NEEDS													
Gow School, The	80	80	60/40	81	13	5-12, PG	N	N	Y	26	Y	N	90,500 ^{bh}
■ OVERSEAS													
Berlin Brandenburg International School	82	920	50/50	8	70	K-12	IB	N	Y	22	Y	N	52,500 ^c
EF Academy Oxford	79	125	42/58	100	100	11-12	IB	N	Limited	43	Y	N	84,500 ^a
Frankfurt International School	86	1800	50/50	NA	80	K-12	IB	N	Limited	12	Y	N	11,744-29,608 ^{bc}
Leysin American School in Switzerland	79	300	50/50	100	85	7-12, PG	AP/IB	N	Limited	75	Y	N	128,000 ^{abd}
■ OTHER													
AAFSW	88	Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide: Publisher of <i>Raising Kids in the Foreign Service</i> . A volunteer organization that supports Foreign Service employees, spouses, partners, and members of household. Visit www.aafsw.org and FSHub.org.											
GCLO	86	Global Community Liaison Office: Information and resources for Foreign Service families. Contact GCLOAskEducation@state.gov .											
FSYF	88	Foreign Service Youth Foundation: A support network for U.S. Foreign Service youth worldwide. Go to www.fsyf.org .											

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(Continued from page 80)

learning-support programs, executive-skills coaching, and advisory systems, while others rely primarily on classroom accommodations.

Families frequently find themselves renegotiating accommodations—extended time, structured assignment tracking, organizational check-ins—every time they move. This repeated reestablishment of support systems can create periods during which the student is academically unsupported, reinforcing the cycle of difficulty.

Effective support during the middle school years requires portability of services and expectations. A standardized executive-function support framework—shared across international school networks—would allow learning plans to

A student whose coursework changes mid-program—or who must switch from the full diploma to course certificates—may appear academically inconsistent despite a strong underlying performance.

travel with the student rather than being re-created from scratch at each post.

Additionally, explicit instruction in executive skills should be treated not as remediation but as a core developmental curriculum, benefiting both neurodivergent and neurotypical students navigating complex academic transitions.

Given the fact that these support structures do not exist at every post, delib-

erately connecting with online resources and management of these skills as a family can help improve outcomes.

Grades 11–12: High Stakes and the IB Diploma Challenge

Perhaps the most consequential transition for Foreign Service students occurs in grades 11–12, particularly in schools offering the IB diploma program.

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THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

The IB diploma is a two-year, highly structured curriculum that requires continuity of coursework, consistent academic records, and carefully sequenced assessments. Entering the program late—or transferring during the two-year sequence—can create serious academic and college-application challenges.

Foreign Service families are often assigned new postings on timelines that do not align with the IB structure. A student may complete grade 10 at one school before relocating to another country where course offerings differ or arrive midway through grade 11 without access to the exact Higher Level (HL) or Standard Level (SL) courses required to complete the diploma.

Even when the receiving school offers the IB, scheduling mismatches, subject availability, or language requirements can disrupt diploma eligibility.

These disruptions have downstream implications for university admissions. Colleges reviewing international applicants often rely heavily on predicted IB scores, internal assessments, and consistent transcript narratives. A student whose coursework changes mid-program—or who must switch from the full diploma to course certificates—may appear academically inconsistent despite a strong underlying performance.

Guidance counseling continuity is also frequently interrupted, complicating recommendation letters, extracurricular documentation, and application strategy.

To mitigate these challenges, Foreign Service education systems would benefit from clearer transition planning mechanisms beginning as early as grade 9. Families should receive forward-looking guidance on likely transfer windows relative to IB timelines, while school networks should collaborate to ensure subject alignment across postings whenever possible.

Digital academic portfolios that include coursework samples, assessment histories, and documented accommodations can also provide receiving schools with the context needed to maintain continuity. Unfortunately, however, this is often not a realistic framework.

Instead, our options might include adjusting professionally to avoid transitions, especially in the middle of the



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11th- and 12th-grade IB diploma program. Otherwise, approaching possible postings with clear questions about course availability at the schools there is essential. It can make or break a student’s chances of completing the program successfully.

Toward a More Continuous Educational Framework

Across all three transition points—early elementary identification, middle school executive-function development, and upper-secondary program continuity—the central challenge facing Foreign Service students is not curriculum quality (though many of us experience challenges here too) but continuity.

Highly capable schools exist across the global network, yet the mobil-

ity inherent in diplomatic life creates fragmentation that disproportionately affects students with learning differences or those entering structured academic pathways such as the IB diploma.

In addition, our families tend to bear more than our fair share of unusual disruptions related to geopolitics, natural disasters, and global health pandemics.

Several systemic improvements could significantly reduce these disruptions, many of which parents and families can, to some extent, implement on their own.

Early screening. Consistent literacy and attention-screening protocols across international schools serving Foreign Service families would reduce late identification of dyslexia and ADHD. Fortunately, many assessments have been moving

toward online or easily mobile versions, like the Vanderbilt Assessment for ADHD screening and online dyslexia screening.

Parents of children experiencing any educational challenges should strongly consider utilizing these assessments in grades 1–4, even when new at post.

Executive-function instruction as core curriculum. Embedding instruction on planning, organization, and meta-cognitive strategy into middle school programs would benefit all students while reducing the stigma associated with targeted interventions.

There is some progress here, but many international schools are resistant to breaking out executive function skills for specialized instruction.

(Continued on page 88)

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- Public and Private Schools in the DC Area

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Transitioning from School to School
gclo.state.gov/Schools

Global Community Liaison Office

A Parent's Guide to Psychoeducational Assessments

BY CHAD C. NELSON

Psychoeducational evaluation can help to answer many questions regarding your child, their learning, and their overall functioning. These questions include:

- What kind of learner is my child?
- Why is my child struggling in one subject but not others?
- Why does my child cry at the thought of school or doing homework?
- Why have my child's grades declined?
- Why do I have to repeat myself over and over to get my child to do something?
- Why is my child struggling to make friends?
- Why is my child misbehaving in class?
- Why is my child so nervous?
- Why does my child seem to be more emotional than their peers?

• Why does my child appear lazy and disinterested when I know they are not?

- What does my child need to help them become a happier and more successful student?
- Why is my college student struggling with the demands that are placed on them?

While evaluators may differ in what they include in an evaluation, psychoeducational evaluations often continue to involve six areas of questioning/evaluation:

1. Background information and developmental history.
2. Assessment of abilities (cognitive functioning).
3. Assessment of processing.
4. Assessment of academic functioning.
5. Assessment of attention/executive functioning.
6. Assessment of social/emotional functioning.

Excerpt from an article by Chad C. Nelson, PhD, a licensed psychologist in private practice in Baltimore County, Maryland, who specializes in the evaluation of learning, attention, and emotional disorders in children, adolescents, and young adults. This article is an update of his very popular FSJ article of December 2013, "A Parent's Guide to Psychoeducational Evaluations."

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(Continued from page 86)

IB transition planning. Formal coordination between sending and receiving posts during grades 10–12 could align subject pathways and minimize diploma disruptions.

Pressure from parents and the Office of Overseas Schools could help improve this coordination, which is often lacking and results in high-achieving kids spending a lot of time to help their new school understand where they are.

Centralized educational advising and portable learning profiles. A dream scenario might involve dedicated transition counselors who follow students across postings, providing the continuity that local school counselors cannot maintain.

A standardized international digital record that includes screening results, intervention history, accommodations, and academic progression would allow receiving schools to continue support immediately rather than restarting evaluation processes.

These solutions feel far away, but many independent educational services companies like Ambassador Academics do help address these areas.

Continuity Framework

Foreign Service students grow up with exceptional global awareness, adaptability, and resilience, yet the same mobility that enriches their lives can complicate their educational trajectories.


The most significant challenges are

not academic ability but timing: late identification of learning differences in early grades, insufficient executive-function support during middle school, and structural disruptions to high-stakes programs such as the IB diploma in the final years of secondary school.

By shifting from a location-based support model to a continuity-based framework—where evaluations, learning plans, and academic pathways travel with the student—Foreign Service parents can ensure that their family’s mobility is an unqualified advantage rather than an educational risk.

I am proud to be part of a growing group of FS family members who are seeking to make some of these improvements ourselves. ■


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■ **Todd H. Amani**, 71, a retired Foreign Service officer with USAID, died on January 26, 2026, in Swannanoa, N.C.

Born in 1955, Mr. Amani was raised in Dodge Center, Minn., where for many years he headed out at 5:30 every morning to deliver the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

He graduated from Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, in 1978 and Johns Hopkins School of International Studies (SAIS) in 1983. He married Mary Jo Felderman, a student at Wartburg College, in May 1979.

The couple served in the Peace Corps in Costa Rica from 1980 to 1981. Mr. Amani was injured during his Peace Corps tenure and from then on used a wheelchair or long-legged braces and crutches.

Mr. Amani worked as legislative assistant for Congressman Tim Penny (D-Minn.) from 1985 to 1986, and the next year, he shared a political science teaching position with his wife at their alma mater, Wartburg College.

In 1987 Mr. Amani joined the Foreign Service at USAID. He served as a program officer in Egypt, Nicaragua, Honduras (1988–2001); democracy, rights, and governance officer in Nicaragua, Washington, D.C., and Guatemala (1994–2004); deputy mission director in Guatemala (2004–2007); and mission director in Mozambique (2007–2012).

Mr. Amani retired from the Foreign Service in 2014 as senior deputy assistant administrator in USAID’s Africa Bureau. He then worked for four years as director of Safe Passage, a nonprofit providing schooling and family support for children in Guatemala City, and for two more years as chief of party for IREX’s Transformative Action Project in Guatemala.

The couple settled in Swannanoa, N.C., in the fall of 2019. Neighbors will miss his daily evening rolls in his wheelchair with his faithful dog, Saoirse.

Friends and family remember Mr. Amani as a natural teacher, who listened closely with curiosity. They recall enjoying his guitar playing, sing-alongs, chocolate chip cookies, sourdough bread, and kombucha.

And they celebrate his kindness, good humor, creativity, calm wisdom, perseverance in all adversity, and courage, especially in his final passage: He faced Alzheimer’s disease with quiet grace.

Mr. Amani was predeceased by his son Luke in 2015.

He is survived by his wife and soulmate, Mary Jo; daughter, Elisabeth; son, Liam (and spouse, Sarah); daughter-in-law, Cristina; grandson, Gabe; siblings, Scott (and spouse, Robin) Hanson, Mark (and spouse, Steph) Hanson, and Lynn Hanson; mother-in-law, Janet Felderman; and brothers-in-law, Bob (and spouse, Nancy) Felderman, Bill (and spouse, Wendi) Felderman, of Dubuque, Iowa, and Patrick (and spouse, Jeri) Felderman of Fla.

■ **Duane Clemens Butcher**, 85, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away at home in Arlington, Va., on August 17, 2025.

Born to Helen Clemens Butcher and Cecil E. Butcher and raised in Ponca City, Okla., Mr. Butcher was always proud of his blue-collar roots.

He attended the University of Idaho on a football scholarship, graduated from Oklahoma State University in political science, and received a master’s degree in economics from Princeton University.

In 1962 Mr. Butcher joined the U.S. Foreign Service, first serving in Adana and Istanbul, where he helped oversee the evacuation of U.S. citizens from Cyprus and saved a U.S. airman from an angry mob.

He was then assigned to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development in Paris, followed by tours in Bonn, Jeddah, Stockholm, Nairobi, and New Delhi.

Mr. Butcher’s stateside assignments included two years of university training at Princeton, a year in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, and a year in the Office of the Governor of Colorado under the Pearson Fellowship as then constituted.

Fluent in Turkish and German, he rose to the senior ranks of the Service even while speaking his mind with rare candor. Keeping his sights on long-term U.S. interests, he authored a record number of dissent cables, including urging a coordinated campaign to fight corruption in 1980s Kenya and challenging conventional wisdom about whether 1970s Sweden could be counted on in a confrontation with the Soviet Union.

While serving as shift coordinator on the Operation Center’s Kuwait Task Force, which was helping coordinate the U.S. diplomatic response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1991, Mr. Butcher declined to allow a senior foreign official, Israel’s former ambassador to the United Nations and soon-to-be deputy minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, dictate instructions for a U.S. démarche: “Mr. Ambassador, I take my instructions from the Secretary of State. You are welcome to call Secretary Baker.”

At an imposing six feet five, Mr. Butcher approached life with intellectual and physical vigor. An avid reader, he also enjoyed activities such as football, squash, scuba diving in the Baltic and Red Seas, cross country skiing, and even the Marine Corps Marathon at age 50.

Family members recall that Mr. Butcher, ever the great linebacker, inspired both his brother, Larry, and his son Duane Jr. to follow his lead into the U.S. Foreign Service.

In 1991 Mr. Butcher retired to Grand Junction, Colo., where he helped found the local chapter of the World Affairs Council, mentored students, and pursued his love of football, including as head coach at Battle Mountain High School in 2001.

After the couple moved back to Arlington, Va., in 2015, Mr. Butcher happily devoted his time and attention to his grandchildren. A few days before he died, his family gathered to celebrate his life.

Mr. Butcher is survived by his wife of 62 years, Barbara Needham Butcher; their sons, retired FSO Duane Jr. (and spouse, Nazilia) and Christopher (and spouse, Ali); grandchildren, Blaze, Kennan, Cameron, Eric, and Grace; sister, Donna Beville, and brother, retired FSO Larry (and spouse, Suzanne); and nieces and nephews across the United States.

■ **Steven Matthew Dyokas**, 57, an active-duty Foreign Service officer, died unexpectedly on December 26, 2025, after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage.

Born on October 12, 1968, Mr. Dyokas was an Illinois native. He graduated from Benet Academy in Lisle, Ill., and enrolled at the University of Notre Dame, earning a BA in history. He later received a JD degree from Loyola University in Chicago and became a member of the Illinois Bar.

After teaching English in Japan through the JET Program, Mr. Dyokas joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 2002. During the ensuing years, he met the love of his life, Junko Takahashi, and the couple married in 2005. Their son, Ken, was born in 2016.

At the State Department, Mr. Dyokas completed overseas assignments in Japan, China, Montenegro, and Australia, serving in the interims with the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the Bureau of Oceans and International Environ-

mental and Scientific Affairs, and the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs in Washington, D.C.

At the time of his passing, Mr. Dyokas was economic counselor in Vietnam.

Colleagues recall that he was a leader of rare caliber, who had the unique ability to build and motivate teams while remaining dedicated to the well-being of each individual member. His intelligence and quick wit made the most demanding days feel manageable, they recall, and he proved that performing high-stakes work for the country is best done with a smile.

Friends and family also remember Mr. Dyokas as a devoted father who spent many happy hours playing, reading, listening to music, visiting cultural institutions, and enjoying nature in the company of his child.

In addition to wide-ranging work obligations, he made time for recreational travel and took pleasure in bringing home souvenirs and treats from the many places he visited.

Mr. Dyokas was preceded in death by his father, Val Dyokas, and father-in-law, Ken Takahashi.

He is survived by his wife, Junko; son, Ken; mother, Mary Ellen Dyokas; mother-in-law, Masako Takahashi; sister, Maureen Stabile, her husband, Rick Stabile, and their sons, Pietro and Marco; a sister- and brother-in-law, Kyoko and Chris Filosa; and many cousins, colleagues, and friends.

Extended family members and friends are invited to commemorate Mr. Dyokas' life in the following ways. First, please join your state's organ donor registry. To know that his death will give life to others brings great consolation to Mr. Dyokas' immediate family.

Second, a gift may be made in his honor to St. Charles Catholic Church in

Arlington, Va., where his son, Ken, was baptized (<https://www.stcharleschurch.org/give>), or to Advocate Christ Hospital, where Mr. Dyokas received medical attention at the end of his life (<https://www.advocatehealth.org/foundations/advocate-aurora>).

A memorial will be held later in 2026.

■ **Cynthia Stone Ely**, 94, a Foreign Service spouse, died on December 30, 2025, in Oakland, Calif.

Ms. Ely was born in Cambridge, Mass., on June 28, 1931, to Emmy P. Stone, an artist, and Marshall H. Stone, a world traveler and professor of mathematics at Harvard University and other eminent institutions who received the National Medal of Science from the Reagan administration.

Her paternal grandfather, Harlan Fiske Stone, was named Chief Justice of the Supreme Court by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a point of pride throughout Ms. Ely's life.

She attended the University of Chicago Lab School for the last two years of high school and then went to Radcliffe College, receiving a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1953.

Ms. Ely worked in Washington, D.C., for three years at the CIA. In 1956 she married Foreign Service Officer M.E.C. Ely, and the couple served in Malaysia, Paris (twice), Algeria, Somalia, Canada, and Rome, as well as in Washington, D.C.

The Paris stints featured opera, fashion, people-watching, and sightings of glitterati like Francis Bacon and Rudolf Nureyev. During her stay in Rome, Ms. Ely reveled in classical antiquity, the city's soulful atmosphere, and of course delectable Italian food.

She retained a love of travel beyond the Foreign Service, visiting friends and exploring new destinations in the Middle

East, Europe, Latin America, and the United States.

In 1981, after her divorce, Ms. Ely testified before a congressional committee in favor of fair compensation for Foreign Service spouses and dependents. She then spent more than 20 years as the events coordinator at the Smithsonian Institution's Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, organizing conferences, dinners, concerts, and special events.

At the Wilson Center she worked to welcome and integrate fellows and academics, international business and political leaders, journalists, U.S. presidents, and cultural figures.

A Georgetown resident, Ms. Ely stayed plugged into the cultural and political life of Washington, D.C., and volunteered for several nonprofit organizations. Her home was a charmingly appointed center of legendary yet intimate parties, eagerly attended by friends of all ages.

In 2019 she moved to California, where she lived at the Lake Merritt residences in Oakland and at Albany's Belmont Village. She enjoyed exploring local museums (especially the Rosicrucian Museum in San Jose), viewing unusual architecture, and attending performances.

In particular, she sought out the weekly concerts on the Berkeley campus, world cuisine from local restaurants, and nearby gardens and natural areas.

Friends and family members remember Ms. Ely for her curiosity, style, and pizzazz-infused embrace of life and will miss her warmth, high standards, graciousness (especially as a host), and spirited flair.

Though hailing from a distinguished background, she was anything but stuffy, they recall, and fully transcended her "proper" origins with a sense of adventure and joie de vivre.

Cynthia Ely was predeceased by her son, Douglas, and grandson, Alexander.

She is survived by two daughters, Caroline of New York City, and Lydia (and spouse, Roderic) of San Francisco; grandchildren, Julia, Mimi, and Teo; and one loving niece and four loving nephews as well as their partners.

■ **Robert Arnold Flaten**, 91, a retired Foreign Service officer and former ambassador to Rwanda, died on December 21, 2025, surrounded by family in Oak Park Heights, Minn.

Mr. Flaten was born on May 21, 1934, to Evelyn (née Solberg) Flaten and Arnold Wangenstein Flaten in Minneapolis, Minn.

Growing up in Northfield, Minn., he participated in ROTC at St. Olaf College and graduated in 1956, a member of Phi Beta Kappa with a BA in mathematics.

That year, he married his college sweetheart, Carroll Jean Johnson. The couple raised four children together.

In 1961 Mr. Flaten joined the U.S. Foreign Service, after fulfilling his obligation to the U.S. Air Force and earning an MA in international relations at The George Washington University.

His first postings were consular assignments in France and Pakistan, where during the 1965 India-Pakistan war, he organized a heroic bus caravan to drive embassy families over the Khyber Pass to safety in Afghanistan.

In 1966 Mr. Flaten was economic officer and assistant USAID liaison officer in Israel. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the family was again evacuated, but Mr. Flaten stayed behind as duty officer.

Back at the State Department, he served as director of the Office of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh Affairs; the Office of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka Affairs; and later, the Office of

North African Affairs. He also worked in the Inspector General's Office.

From 1979 to 1981, Mr. Flaten was deputy assistant secretary of State for congressional affairs, and in 1982 he returned to Israel as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires. In 1986 he began a research assignment at the Foreign Service Institute.

Mr. Flaten was appointed U.S. ambassador to Rwanda in 1990. Actively involved in addressing the ethnic tensions there, he received Rwanda's highest civilian commendation, the Order of the Mille Collines.

At the end of his tour, in November 1993, Ambassador Flaten warned the State Department regarding the influx of Hutus from Burundi into Rwanda that would culminate in the 1994 genocide.

Upon retiring in 1994, he and his wife returned to Northfield, Minn.

In retirement, Amb. Flaten served as chair of the Executive Committee of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, lectured at St. Olaf College, served as vice president of the United Nations Association-Minnesota, and was a Minnesota representative of the Immortal Chaplains Foundation, as well as a member of the Minnesota International Center, AFSA Upper Midwest, the St. Paul-Minneapolis Committee on Foreign Relations, and Rotary.

He presented regularly in the Great Decisions study series and at the Elder Collegium of Northfield. In May 2001, he received an honorary doctorate from Luther College of Decorah, Iowa.

After his wife, Carroll, died in 2010, Amb. Flaten spent time at his beloved cabin in the mountains of Virginia, a unique rustic dwelling built by the family themselves.

In 2014 Amb. Flaten married Sharon Sherman-Akre of Calgary, Alberta,

Canada, after a whirlwind two-year friendship in Great Decisions classes. They lived in Northfield for several years, then downsized to Boutwell's Landing in Oak Park Heights, Minn., in 2021.

Amb. Flaten is survived by his wife, Sharon; children, Kristin, Karen (and spouse, Denny Jarosch), Sonia Mathew (and spouse, Paul), and Arne (and spouse, Rebecca); stepchildren, Kim (and spouse, Markus), Jeffery, and Kari Akre; grandchildren, Tasha Flaten, Lara Flaten, and Anjoli Mathew; step-grandchildren, Sarah Tillotson (and spouse, Jake), Brigid Halberg (and spouse, Josh), Rochelle, Caelan, Sebastian, Trisha, Kim, and Ryan; and many great-grandchildren.

Memorials may be sent to your charity of choice, an organization working for peace in the world, or Bierman, Benson, Langehough (www.northfieldfuneral.com).

■ **William J. "Bill" Garvelink**, 76, a retired member of the Senior Foreign Service with USAID who held the rank of Minister Counselor, died on August 23, 2025, in Falls Church, Va., after suffering an aortic dissection.

Born in Holland, Mich., on May 22, 1949, Mr. Garvelink grew up in a Dutch American community that shaped his sense of duty and belonging.

In 1970 Mr. Garvelink married Linda Arendsen, and the two supported each other through college and graduate school, moving around the country. He earned degrees from Calvin College and the University of Minnesota, then pursued doctoral work at the University of North Carolina.

In 1976 the Garvelinks arrived in Washington, D.C., where he was a congressional staff member for Rep. Don Fraser (D-Minn.). At a time when human

rights barely had a foothold in U.S. foreign policy, Mr. Garvelink was one of only two specialists on Capitol Hill.

In 1979 he joined USAID, beginning a three-decade career in which he responded to famine, war, and disaster across five continents. Throughout, his wife, Linda, was a partner in every sense of the word.

Early Foreign Service assignments include two years in the Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration with responsibility for southern Africa and four years as a program officer in Bolivia with USAID.

In 1988 Mr. Garvelink started in the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, where he served more than a decade and rose to deputy director. He led disaster assistance response teams in Somalia during famine and Rwanda during genocide and chaired U.S. task forces after the Indian Ocean tsunami.

In 1989, with Julia Taft, then director of USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, he helped launch Operation Lifeline Sudan, an unprecedented effort to deliver food across battle lines to starving civilians. That mission became a model for how America could act—not with bombs or threats but with bread and stubborn humanity.

In 1999 Mr. Garvelink was named USAID mission director in Eritrea.

In 2007 President George W. Bush appointed him U.S. ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. There he worked to stabilize a country scarred by years of conflict, pressing for reforms, supporting food security, and coordinating aid that reached people long failed by their own leaders.

Amb. Garvelink then turned to the problem of hunger. In 2010 he helped lead the Obama administration's Feed the Future initiative and became the first

head of USAID's Bureau for Food Security, carrying his practical wisdom from refugee camps into global policy.

Even after retiring in 2012, Amb. Garvelink never stepped away. He advised International Medical Corps, the same organization that had stood with him in Rwanda, Somalia, and beyond, and was a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Amb. Garvelink received six performance awards, two Meritorious Honor Awards, and a Senior Foreign Service Presidential Meritorious Service Award while at the State Department.

Yet, for his family and colleagues, his true honor is written in the lives he touched, the refugees who ate because a convoy arrived, the soldiers in Kisangani trained to serve a people and not just a regime, and the millions lifted by food security programs he helped shape.

They remember Amb. Garvelink as steady and principled, a problem-solver who could make the impossible happen when disaster struck, and an individual who never mistook power for purpose.

Amb. Garvelink is survived by his wife of 55 years, Linda.

■ **John Elwood Hall**, 85, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on January 31, 2026, in Sun City West, Ariz.

A native of Niagara Falls, N.Y., Mr. Hall joined the U.S. Foreign Service in September 1962 following graduation from Kenyon College with a major in political science.

His first assignment was in State's Bureau of Administration in Washington, D.C., which he realized ever after was as solid a grounding in the profession as he could have hoped for.

In 1965 Mr. Hall and his family transferred to Bordeaux where he served as administrative and consular officer,

and in 1967 they were sent to Reykjavík where he was consular and commercial officer.

Returning to Washington in 1970, he took the Foreign Service Institute's six-month economics course and was then seconded to the Department of Commerce's France desk for two years as deputy desk officer. In 1972 he earned a master's degree in monetary economics from the University of Oklahoma.

By 1972 Mr. Hill had command of the French, German, and Icelandic languages. That year he was posted to Bern as assistant commercial attaché and later, in 1976, to Wellington as the sole plenipotentiary commercial officer.

When the commercial function was moved from State to Commerce, Mr. Hill chose to remain with State and transferred to Washington, D.C., as deputy chief of the training and liaison staff in the Bureau of Personnel (PER). Two years later, he moved to the Bureau of African Affairs as deputy chief of the economic policy staff.

In 1984 Mr. Hill served in Monrovia as economic counselor, and in 1986 he went to Kingston, Ontario, as the State Department's student at the Canadian National Defence College. From 1987 to 1990, he was consul general in Toronto, and from 1990 to 1993 deputy chief of mission in Bern.

Mr. Hill then returned to Washington, D.C., as PER's director of recruitment, examination and employment. That was followed by two more years in PER coordinating the design and execution of a new Foreign Service job analysis.

In 1998 Mr. Hill retired from the Foreign Service, and he and his wife settled in Arizona.

In retirement, Mr. Hill remained an avid hiker and traveler. He helped found a lifelong learning program, serving as

an instructor there from 2001 until 2025. For several years, he was a consultant to ACT, the firm that prepared and administered the annual Foreign Service written examination.

Family and friends recall that he readily acknowledged he could not conceive of a more challenging and congenial profession than the one he had enjoyed, but also that it had changed dramatically since he left: His timing had been perfect, he would say.

Mr. Hill was predeceased by his beloved wife, Janet, in 2014, a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

He is survived by their three children, Jim in the New York outer suburbs, Julie in the Maryland suburbs, and Jeff in Bellingham, Wash., each a source of unending pride to their father. He is also survived by his dear companion Joyce, who entered his life in its closing phase and, family members recall, made the sun shine brightly and the world seem young again.

■ **Hugh Kenneth "Ken" Hill, 88**, a retired Foreign Service officer and former ambassador to Bulgaria, passed away on December 30, 2025, after a short illness, in Winchester, Va.

Born into poverty in segregated Texas on June 14, 1937, Mr. Hill was the third of four children. His father struggled to find work during the Great Depression until Standard Oil in Richmond, Calif., hired him during World War II.

Although his parents did not finish high school, both emphasized to their children the importance of an education. Mr. Hill became the first in his family to graduate from college, earning a BA in history at UC Berkeley in 1959.

Intending to become a minister, he attended the Berkeley School of Divinity for 18 months before changing his career plan.

While serving in the U.S. Army from 1961 to 1963, Mr. Hill married Yvonne Trout. Upon release from active military duty, he returned to UC Berkeley and earned an MA in history in 1964.

That same year, Mr. Hill joined the U.S. Foreign Service, and with their first child, Derek, in tow, the Hills went to Israel in 1965. Their second child, Jennifer, was born there in 1966. His next posting was Germany (1966-1971), where the couple's third child, Brian, was born.

After an assignment in the Washington, D.C., area (1971-1973), Mr. Hill was posted to Yugoslavia (1973-1976) and then returned to the D.C. area (1976-1982). Postings in Bulgaria (1982-1984) and Zambia (1984-1988) followed.

During their many years overseas, the Hills instilled in their children the values of education; openness and acceptance of diverse races, cultures, ethnicities, and religions; and the championing of marginalized communities, both abroad and in America.

Serving as U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria (1990-1993) marked not just the apex of Mr. Hill's Foreign Service career, family and friends observe, but a pivotal moment in world history that seemed meant for him.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Bulgaria's communist government fell, and its society opened up. The first U.S. ambassador in post-communist Bulgaria, he spoke publicly in fluent Bulgarian all over the country, reassuring Bulgarians that America was Bulgaria's friend and emphasizing American democratic and civic values.

Specifically, Amb. Hill "consciously and deliberately," as he later put it, called for the inclusion of all citizens in government and society, regardless of ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds and views, past or present. Bulgarians responded

enthusiastically, and he became famous and widely recognized in the country.

Before retiring in 1995, Ambassador Hill was a diplomat in residence at the new George C. Marshall Center in Germany for 18 months.

In retirement, he worked as a consultant for several organizations. The Hills lived in Gettysburg, Pa., Bradenton, Fla., and Strasburg, Va., before settling permanently in Winchester, Va.

Family members and friends fondly remember Amb. Hill's keen intellect, near-photographic memory, affinity for languages, and the empathy and work ethic that made him the consummate diplomat.

Tall, handsome, and impeccably dressed, he looked the part too, they recall, even though becoming an FSO, let alone an ambassador, may have seemed improbable given his humble beginnings.

Amb. Hill was predeceased by his wife of 62 years, Yvonne, in November 2024.

He is survived by his children, Derek, Jennifer (and spouse, Matthew Murphy), and Brian; grandchildren, Brianna, Sophia, Kenneth, and Alexandra; brother, Tucker (and spouse, Robbie Hill); and numerous nieces and nephews.

Please consider donating in Amb. Hill's memory to Protect Democracy (<https://protectdemocracy.org>), International Rescue Committee (<https://help.rescue.org>), or the American Foreign Service Association (<https://afsa.org>).

■ **Frances Dodd Howell**, 105, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away peacefully on January 8, 2024, in Asheville, N.C.

Ms. Howell was born on May 3, 1918, in North Carolina.

From 1939 to 1941, she worked in the private sector and then joined the State Department.

At State during World War II, Ms. Howell served as an office management specialist, a public opinion and foreign affairs analyst, and a foreign affairs research assistant, a position she held through 1953. She then spent a year in the historian's office.

Ms. Howell attended The George Washington University, earning a bachelor's degree in 1951 and a master's degree in 1954.

In 1954 she received her Foreign Service commission and in 1955 was assigned as a visa officer to London, where she served for five years.

In 1960 Ms. Howell was posted to Guatemala City and then transferred in 1962 to Winnipeg, as a consular officer. She was then posted to Lagos in 1965, Oslo in 1968, and Tokyo in 1971.

Family members recall that her many years of service as a diplomat produced wonderful stories of life overseas that Ms. Howell happily shared.

Her experiences of watching dog-fights, passing secret papers, and flying across the Pacific in black-out conditions during World War II; visiting London after the Blitz; having midnight picnics in Florence; and attending the opera with the King of Norway entertained generations of listeners. Hers was truly "a life well lived."

Ms. Howell is survived by many cousins, both old and young, who admired and loved her. She was interred with her parents at the Roseboro Cemetery in Roseboro, N.C.

■ **Franklin E. Huffman**, 91, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer, died on August 11, 2025, in Chevy Chase, Md., of complications from pancreatic cancer.

Mr. Huffman was born in Harrisonburg, Va., in 1934. He attended Mt. Sidney School in Augusta County and

then graduated in 1951 from Montevideo High School in Penn Laird, Va. In 1955 he received a BA in modern languages from Bridgewater College in Virginia.

From 1956 to 1958, Mr. Huffman served as a French interpreter for International Voluntary Services in Laos. He pursued graduate studies at Cornell University, the University of Washington, the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, and Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

In 1967 Mr. Huffman received a PhD in linguistics, anthropology, and Southeast Asian studies from Cornell University. An assistant professor at Yale University until 1972, he was responsible for instruction in Thai and Cambodian. He then became first associate professor and, later, professor of linguistics and Southeast Asian studies at Cornell University.

In 1985 Mr. Huffman joined the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), with initial overseas assignments in London (1986–1987) and Rangoon (1987–1989).

He served as director of the American Cultural Center in Marrakech (1989–1990) and director of programs in the U.S. Information Service in Paris (1990–1993) before returning to Washington, D.C., as a policy officer in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at USIA (1993–1994).

In 1999, after assignments as public affairs officer in Phnom Penh (1995–1997) and Wellington, Mr. Huffman retired from the U.S. Foreign Service.

Following this mandatory retirement at age 65, he served brief tours for the State Department in Chad (1999–2000) and Cambodia (2002).

During his academic career, Mr. Huffman authored nine books and numerous articles, including the first comprehensive English–Khmer dictionary.

He is widely considered an authority on Cambodian language and linguistics and donated his entire Cambodian-language collection to the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh in 2004.

In retirement, he published two books of general interest: *Monks and Motorcycles: From Laos to London by the Seat of My Pants, 1956-58* (iUniverse, 2004) and *Your Diplomats at Work: A Comedy in Seven Acts* (Memoirs and Occasional Papers Series of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 2010).

Mr. Huffman was awarded the Distinguished Alumnus Award from his alma mater, Bridgewater College, in 2007.

His post-retirement volunteer activities included teaching English to Hispanic immigrants and driving elderly people to medical and other appointments for local community organizations.

Throughout his life, Mr. Huffman had a strong interest in music. He played the piano and trumpet. In college, he performed as a soloist and toured the Soviet Union in 1960 with the Cornell Men's Glee Club. In retirement, he sang with the Washington Men's Barbershop Chorus. He also enjoyed bridge and tennis until the age of 90.

Mr. Huffman had a passion for road travel. In addition to the trip from Laos to London by land in 1958, he drove his family from New Haven, Conn., to Guatemala City in 1970, and he drove with his brother Bill in a pickup truck from Washington, D.C., to Costa Rica in 2004.

Over the course of his academic and Foreign Service careers, he traveled and worked in more than 120 countries.

Mr. Huffman is survived by his wife of 51 years, Sanda (née Iliescu) Huffman, whom he met at Cornell in 1972 while she was studying for her doctorate in Romance linguistics, and who accompanied and supported him throughout their

life together while pursuing her career as a conference interpreter. His first marriage, to Marcia Russell, ended in divorce.

He is survived by his brothers, Robert of Harrisonburg, Va., Donald of Lakeland, Fla., and William of Hillsboro, W.Va. He was predeceased by his half-brother, Glenn, in 2021.

Mr. Huffman is also survived by his children, Russell of Chapel Hill, N.C., David of San Francisco, Calif., Christopher of Brooklyn, N.Y., and Samantha of Washington, D.C.; and grandchildren, Maxwell, Spencer, Riley, and Mila.

■ **Carolyn Susan Jacobs**, 61, a retired Foreign Service specialist, passed away in her sleep at home in Arlington, Va., during the night of February 10, 2026, of heart failure.

Ms. Jacobs was born in 1964 in South Pasadena, Calif., to Vera Jacobs, a teacher of immigrant and multicultural children, and Don Jacobs, a corporate executive. Her mother instilled in her a strong desire for social justice, and her father imparted the knack for nurturing relationships and a love of travel.

From South Pasadena, Ms. Jacobs set off for Long Beach State University, completing a master's degree in 19th-century British literature in 1992. During college, she worked with the school's equal opportunity programs, where she could pursue her passions: promoting diversity and reading.

Her first overseas experience was a one-year stint in Colombia working with Colombian exchange students to prepare them in the English language and American culture.

In 1998 Ms. Jacobs joined the Peace Corps and was assigned as a volunteer university English teacher in Bishkek. She visited nearly every corner of Kyrgyzstan and is still considered a beloved

teacher and friend by the successful, strong Kyrgyz young women whom she taught at Arabaev University there.

The close friends she made during her Peace Corps years continued to explore with Ms. Jacobs for the rest of her days, grateful to be able to take part in her joie de vivre and openness in approaching the world.

In 2002 Ms. Jacobs joined the State Department, serving her country as a Foreign Service specialist for the next 23 years. She began her career as an office management specialist and later converted to a human resources specialist.

Ms. Jacobs' overseas postings included Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Bahrain, the Philippines, Zambia, and Senegal, where she worked with and befriended American and foreign nationals alike.

In Washington, D.C., she served at the Foreign Service Institute, teaching human resources tradecraft, and in other assignments. Throughout her years as a human resources professional, Ms. Jacobs helped many employees through policies and professional and personal situations in the workplace to find peace of mind, justice, and success.

Friends around the world remember Ms. Jacobs' love of laughter, her love of reliving the good times and reflecting on memories, and how she lived life in the best way she knew, putting effort into every relationship.

Ms. Jacobs is survived by her brother, Mark Jacobs of Alameda, Calif., and a nephew, Max Jacobs, as well as her godmother, Sharon Robison of Santa Rosa, Calif., and beloved Senegalese Laobé street dog, Christy.

Reflecting her love of people, human resources work, and social justice, Ms. Jacobs specified that much of her estate go to the Department of State's Foreign Service National Relief Fund, a program

that does not rely on appropriated tax dollars and that helps locally employed staff at our embassies during times of crisis.

In lieu of flowers, a gift may be made to this important relief fund in her memory (<https://www.pay.gov/public/form/start/55081682/>).

A memorial for Carolyn Jacobs will take place on July 10, 2026, at 3 p.m. EDT, at the American Foreign Service Association, 2101 E Street NW, Washington DC 20037. Please check Carolyn's Facebook page as we get closer to the memorial date for instructions to join the service virtually.

■ **James Alcorn Knight**, 77, a retired Foreign Service officer and two-time ambassador, passed away peacefully in his sleep on February 9, 2026, at his home in East Tennessee.

On September 7, 1948, Mr. Knight was born James Crosby Little III in Fayette, Ala., to James Crosby Little Jr. (aka Kimo Charteris Vian-Courtenay) and Perry Nell Carraway (Knight). At age 11, he was adopted by Roy A. Knight.

Mr. Knight earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in anthropology from Wichita State University. In 1970 he was commissioned in the U.S. Army through the Wichita State University ROTC program.

Mr. Knight served as a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army and as a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve. He fought in Vietnam and was awarded several decorations, including the Bronze Star. He believed deeply that all able-bodied citizens should serve their country in some capacity.

After military service, Mr. Knight earned a doctorate in anthropology at the University of Chicago. There he met his soulmate and the love of his life, Amelia Rector Bell.

In 1983 the couple married in Paris, where they began an incredible partner-

ship that would last 43 years. Both loved visiting foreign lands and getting to know people of different cultures. They especially enjoyed Paris and participating in the Parisian lifestyle.

During his studies, Mr. Knight developed a deep appreciation for the people and cultures of Africa and a desire to serve his nation on that continent.

Before joining the Foreign Service in 1991, Mr. Knight worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Niger and undertook academic research in Cameroon. He was fluent in French and Portuguese and a member of American Mensa.

His early Foreign Service assignments include overseas postings in Nigeria, The Gambia, Madagascar, and Ethiopia, as well as service as desk officer in the Office of East African Affairs.

Mr. Knight subsequently served as deputy chief of mission in both Cabo Verde and Angola, a provincial reconstruction team leader in Iraq, and director of the Office of East African Affairs in Washington, D.C.

In 2009 he was appointed U.S. ambassador to Benin. He then served as assistant chief of mission at U.S. Embassy Baghdad from 2012 to 2014, when he was named U.S. ambassador to Chad, his final assignment.

During his Foreign Service career, Ambassador Knight received numerous awards, including the Secretary's Career Achievement Award, multiple Superior and Meritorious Honor Awards, Senior Foreign Service Performance Awards, and the Expeditionary Service Award. He retired in 2016.

The Knights built their retirement home, KnightOaks, in East Tennessee and enjoyed blissful years amid the mountains, lakes, and cultures of their beloved state.

Amb. Knight is survived by his loving wife, Amelia Rector Bell Knight, PhD, and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

The family requests that remembrances be made in the form of donations to one or both of the following organizations: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, 1530 Wilson Blvd., Suite 550, Arlington VA 22209 (<https://www.vvmf.org>) or the National Infantry Museum Foundation, 1775 Legacy Way, Suite 220, Columbus GA 31903-3675 (<https://nationalinfantrymuseum.org>).

■ **William Bryant Milam**, 89, a retired Foreign Service officer and three-time ambassador, died peacefully in his sleep on February 17, 2026, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Born on July 24, 1936, in Bisbee, Ariz., to Burl Vivian Milam and Alice Vera (née Pierce) Milam, he was the eldest of four brothers.

In 1956, inspired by his uncle, newspaperman Ardle Pierce, Mr. Milam entered Stanford University intending to become a journalist. But a dynamic professor of modern European history, Gordon Wright, piqued his interest in history and the U.S. Foreign Service.

After graduating from Stanford in 1959 with a BA in history, he joined the Foreign Service in 1962.

Mr. Milam's first posting was a consular tour in Martinique. He was then assigned to Monrovia as an economic officer. The Foreign Service Institute's new economic training course inspired him to pursue more advanced university economic studies.

He served next as an economic desk officer for the African Northwest Country Directorate, working mainly on Mali, and then earned an MA in economics from the University of Michigan.

In 1970 Mr. Milam returned to Washington, D.C., as a desk officer in the Office of Monetary Affairs. He was then sent to London as an economic officer.

Returning again to Washington, as deputy director and then director of the Office of Monetary Affairs, Mr. Milam enjoyed his work as the U.S. representative at the Paris Club, charged with official debt rescheduling of developing countries. For this work, he received the James Clement Dunn Award in 1981 and a Superior Honor Award in 1983.

Mr. Milam was appointed deputy chief of mission in Yaoundé in 1983, his first experience in running an embassy, before returning to Washington in 1985 as deputy assistant secretary for international finance and development.

In 1990 he was appointed U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh, his first experience in South Asia. Amb. Milam was recognized by the State Department with a Presidential Meritorious Service Award in 1990, and he received the Presidential Award for Outstanding Service in 1991.

Amb. Milam subsequently served as special negotiator for the environment (1993–1995), chief of mission to Liberia (1995–1998), and U.S. ambassador to Pakistan (1998–2001).

In July 2001, Amb. Milam retired but was recalled to service after 9/11, spending nine months establishing an economic reconstruction program for Afghanistan.

The State Department again turned to his expertise in 2007, when he agreed to serve as the third chargé d'affaires to Libya as the United States reestablished official diplomatic relations and awaited confirmation of the first ambassador to the country since 1978.

Throughout these decades, South Asia continued to occupy Amb. Milam's

thoughts. When he retired, he had accepted a position as a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., which gave him time (and research assistants) to turn to writing.

In addition to columns for newspapers in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Amb. Milam wrote a book, *Bangladesh & Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia*, published by Oxford University Press in 2010.

Colleagues and family members remember him as a career FSO of impeccable integrity, a devoted friend, and a loving father, uncle, great-uncle, and grandfather, who never hesitated to voice his opinions, of which he had many.

Amb. Milam is survived by his brother, Carl; two stepchildren from a former marriage, Erika Lorraine Milam, of Princeton, N.J., and Frederick Kenneth Webster (and spouse, Becky) of Salt Lake City, Utah; and stepgranddaughters, Gracie and Lucy.

■ **Susan Rene Nance**, 74, spouse of retired Foreign Service information management officer Sidney Nance, died on June 21, 2025, in Virginia Beach, Va., after a long battle with melanoma.

Born on January 8, 1951, in High Point, N.C., she met Sidney Nance at a church picnic; they married on June 15, 1969. Together they shared a life of love, adventure, and deep faith.

Their Foreign Service journey took them around the world. They raised their family in England, Saudi Arabia, Papua New Guinea, Suriname, Tunisia, Zambia, the United Arab Emirates, the Dominican Republic, and Bahrain.

Since 2000, they made their home in Woodbridge, Va.

Ms. Nance, affectionately known as “Nene” to her grandchildren and to the

many children she cared for over the years, poured her heart into serving others. Whether caring for children in her neighborhood or at military base daycare centers, or supporting church communities, her nurturing spirit and steadfast faith left a lasting impression.

Family members and friends remember her as a devoted prayer warrior and an example of Christ's love, who lived with kindness, grace, and humility and left a legacy of compassion, patience, and unwavering trust in God.

Ms. Nance was preceded in death by her parents, Richard and Esther Byrd Lowe.

She is survived by her devoted husband of 56 years, Sidney; children, Amy Nance Ketterman, Bradley Nance (and spouse, Jennifer), and Kevin Nance (and spouse, Allison); four grandchildren, Braxton (17), Caden (13), Evangeline (7), and Ronan (2); and sister, Janice Tatum.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Compasses Hospice Angels Foundation.

■ **Suzanne Elouise Payne**, 84, a retired Foreign Service officer, died in Sarasota, Fla., on January 12, 2026, after a short battle with cancer.

Ms. Payne was born on October 23, 1941, in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised in Washington, D.C. She received her bachelor's degree at Howard University in psychology, followed by a master's degree in science and urban studies.

Before joining the Foreign Service, she worked for the City of New York.

As an FSO, she was among the first Americans to serve in post-revolution Havana. She also served in consular positions in Manila, Thessaloniki, Juarez, Santiago, Athens, and Quito.

While serving in the Philippines, Ms. Payne adopted her beloved son, Jay.

After retiring, Ms. Payne initially

settled in Maryland but in 2009 moved to Sarasota, where she threw herself into Democratic politics.

She was also involved in Howard University alumni activities and spent time traveling, attending musical performances, and pampering her dog, Rosie.

Ms. Payne is survived by her son, Jay, of Portland, Maine.

■ **Albert Leonard “Len” Pfeifer**, 87, a retired Foreign Service specialist, passed away on November 7, 2025, at Shenandoah of The Virginian in Fairfax, Va.

Born on May 5, 1938, in Pittsburgh, Pa., Mr. Pfeifer was the youngest of the late Albert and Elizabeth Heinlein Pfeifer’s four children.

At the age of 18, Mr. Pfeifer joined the U.S. Air Force, serving for four years as a communication specialist. After being honorably discharged, he began his career at the U.S. State Department.

His early Foreign Service posts were in the Far East and Middle East. He was then sent to Europe, with assignments in London, Frankfurt, and The Hague as a diplomatic courier.

After returning to Washington, D.C., Mr. Pfeifer was assigned to Brazil and Guatemala, where he retired from the Foreign Service in 1988.

In retirement, Mr. Pfeifer enjoyed playing on softball teams and in bowling leagues, umpiring Little League baseball, and volunteering with and donating to nonprofits such as Meals on Wheels in the Fairfax County area.

Mr. Pfeifer was predeceased by two brothers, Carl and Robert Pfeifer, and one sister, Eleanore Schriver.

He is survived by his two children, Christopher Pfeifer of Burke, Va., and Amanda Pfeifer of Oxnard, Calif.

A private burial will be announced for a later date at Robinson’s Run Cemetery in McDonald, Pa.

■ **Mary Theresa (Donegan) Stuckey**, 88, a retired Foreign Service specialist and FS spouse, passed away on February 5, 2026, near Winchester, Va., where she had been living with her son, David, and daughter-in-law, Caitlyn.

Ms. Stuckey was born on August 15, 1937, in Reading, Mass., one of 11 siblings and the youngest daughter of Maurice and Doris Donegan.

In her early 20s, she joined the U.S. State Department Foreign Service as a communications officer. Her first overseas assignment was Tegucigalpa, where her duties included picking up the embassy’s daily cable traffic from the Western Union office on her way to work. There, she met her husband, fellow Foreign Service Officer Robert “Bob” Stuckey.

Because of that era’s ban on marriage between members of the Foreign Service, Ms. Stuckey was forced to resign. The couple then served overseas for many years while raising three boys, with postings in Managua, Hong Kong, Moscow, Brasília, London, Kabul, Panama, and Amman.

Ms. Stuckey relished the opportunity to experience other cultures, haggling in the bazaars of Damascus and the shops of Delhi, exploring the ancient sites of Copan, Petra, Bamian, and Fatehpur Sikri, and sunning from Repulse Bay to Porto da Barra.

She especially enjoyed going for long rambles in the countryside to see an old stupa or a glacial tarn. Along the way, she built a wonderful collection of locally made art, rugs, and artifacts that are now in the homes of her children.



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.

Once the FS marriage ban was overturned in 1971, Ms. Stuckey rejoined the State Department Foreign Service, where her final assignment was in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. She retired in 1997.

The ensuing years found Ms. Stuckey doting on her grandchildren, tending her flower garden, and scouring flea markets for treasures. There were trips with young charges to zoos, parks, and museums, stories read and reread, and tummies filled with good things. Her children and grandchildren remember her as Queen of the Chocolate Chip Cookie, Toasted PB and J, and Banana Bread, and as Grammy, Mimi, and Mom.

Ms. Stuckey was predeceased by her husband, Bob, in 2016.

She is survived by her brothers, Tom and Bill; three sons, Robert Jr. (and spouse, Julie), David (and spouse, Caitlyn), and Matthew (and spouse, Angela); four grandchildren, Mary, John, Potomac, and Carson; and many nieces and nephews.

In lieu of flowers, a donation may be made to St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, P.O. Box 1000, Dept. 142, Memphis TN 38148. ■

Those Who Serve, in Their Own Words

Representing America: Firsthand Accounts from a Century of U.S. Diplomacy (1924 – 2024)

Robin Matthewman, ed., *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, 2025, \$29.95/paperback, e-book available, 374 pages.

REVIEWED BY P. MICHAEL MCKINLEY

Today the U.S. Foreign Service is facing some of the biggest challenges to its professionalism since its founding a century ago. *Representing America: Firsthand Accounts from a Century of U.S. Diplomacy (1924 – 2024)* comes not a moment too soon to remind every American of how much has been achieved by the generations of public servants who served (and still serve) overseas and at home, in war and peace.

This book should be required reading for everyone seeking to understand what the State Department and U.S. embassies do for national security and our economy, to promote our values, to respond to humanitarian crises, and to assist thousands of U.S. citizens every day.

Drawing on the wealth of roughly 3,000 oral histories compiled by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) since 1986, Robin Matthewman and her team have done a masterful job of compiling the personal experiences of 281 of our Foreign Service colleagues through the past century.

Part 1, titled “Diplomats’ Stories from Around the World,” features accounts by region; part 2, “Behind the Scenes of What Diplomats Do,” focuses on diplomatic workflows; and part 3, “Encore,” contains stories that are “too good to miss.”

In structuring the selections themati-

cally, Matthewman and her team have brought this important history to life in a way that is interesting and accessible.

The chapter on Europe, for example, includes vignettes of embassy officials helping evacuate citizens from Warsaw in 1920, defying orders to close down as Russian troops encircled the city, and of the creative ways a consular employee issued visas to Jews escaping Paris in 1939.

Some of the most moving entries are from officers engaged in assisting Americans who are overseas.

There is also a tour-de-force series by officers who were involved in the 1980s nuclear negotiations and the reunification of Germany.

The excerpts on Asia highlight the dangers of working under fire: closing Yokohama in 1941 while burning classified documents under threat of detention by the Japanese military; one officer’s extraordinary chronicling of the emerging atrocities of the Khmer Rouge in 1973 in Cambodia; the heroic individual decisions in Saigon in 1975 that saved hundreds of people without State Department support; and the dangerous onsite coverage of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests up to the moment the mass killings began.

In Latin America, the accounts include the 1980 Dominican embassy siege in Bogotá, where the U.S. ambassador, one of the hostages, was the key interlocutor with armed guerrillas. The central role of U.S. diplomats in negotiating peace between Ecuador and Peru in 1995, migration agreements with Mexico, and the Inter-American Democratic Charter on 9/11 are all recounted.

In addition, light is shed on the attempted coup against the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2002, which was assumed, wrongly, to have U.S. support.

Given current headlines, the Middle East section is a must read. From the 1948 founding of Israel through the stories of diplomats involved in the 1978 Camp David accords, the selections are riveting.

They include the experiences of the hostages in Tehran in 1979 and the survivors of the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing. The comments by ambassadors on the First Gulf War in 1990–1991 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq offer priceless insights into what went right as well as wrong.

The sections on Africa and South and Central Asia include efforts to slow Pakistan’s nuclear program in the 1980s and end apartheid in South Africa.

In the account of work during the 1994 Rwanda genocide, one officer’s statement—“I could have a clear bureaucratic conscience from Washington’s standpoint and still have a soul filled with shame”—embodies the contradictions of so much of diplomatic work.

We learn, too, that offices we take for granted had surprising origins. The Operations Center, for example, was the result of President John F. Kennedy trying to call Foggy Bottom after hours and not being answered.

And in the chapter on public diplomacy, where officers recount the formidable jazz diplomacy of the 1950s and other cultural initiatives, there is an

excerpt where our ambassador in Argentina recalls his experience promoting rock diplomacy with household name bands in the 2000s.

Some of the most moving entries are from officers engaged in assisting Americans. They shine throughout, from an ambassador's fight against implicit racism to evacuate Black Americans from Liberia in 1989 and the rescue of thousands of American children abandoned in Vietnam, to assistance for American women trapped in abusive marriages in Ethiopia and Iran in the 1970s.

Our ambassador in Tanzania in 1975 negotiated the release of four Americans



kidnapped by Congolese rebels only to be recalled for “interfering” with Zaire, whose support was needed in Angola.

As for national economic security, well, the Foreign Service has always been there. In 1930s Bogotá, an office manager took on economic work, and her description of what an economic/commercial section does could have been written today. The contributions of Foreign Service officers to negotiating global trade agreements are legion.

The book closes with a selection of fun or enlightening stories the team came across in assembling this book—from the whimsical (a State Department officer in

1942 explaining to the Joint Chiefs of Staff how to use elephants for logistics in Thailand) to the gut-wrenching (working the 2021 evacuation from Kabul airport).

Representing America reminds Americans of the rich diplomatic heritage we have as a nation. While this book does not gloss over our mistakes or faults, it allows us to celebrate the U.S. Foreign Service as it is—a selfless, dedicated, professional, informed, and deeply patriotic community. And that includes all of us, not just in the past but now and in the future. ■

P. Michael McKinley is a retired Foreign Service officer who served as ambassador to Peru, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Brazil, and as senior adviser to the Secretary of State before resigning in 2019.



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ANNOUNCEMENTS

AFSA Merchandise / 3
AFSA—Stand Up for Service / Inside Back Cover
Calling All FS Authors / 8
Foreign Service Night at Nationals Park / 15
Look for 2027 Summer Camps & Programs / 84
SHAFR Annual Meeting / 52
Support AFSA / 100
Weed Killer Class Settlement / 27

CLASSIFIED LISTINGS / 104

EDUCATION

Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide / 88
BBIS Berlin Brandenburg International School GmbH / 82
Christchurch School / 77
EF Academy / 79
Fairfax Christian School / 78
Foreign Service Youth Foundation / 88
Fountain Valley School / 87
FSJ Summer Camps & Programs 2027 / 84
FSJ Archive of Education Articles / 84
Foxcroft School / 78
Frankfurt International School / 86
Global Community Liaison Office / 86
Gow School, The / 80
Leysin American School in Switzerland / 79
Madeira School / 81
New England Innovation Academy / 85
Ojai Valley School / 85
Rochambeau French International School / 87
St. Andrew's School (Delaware) / 82
St. Stephen's School Rome / 81
TASIS, The American School in Switzerland / 80

FINANCIAL PLANNING & TAX SERVICES

State Department Federal Credit Union / Inside Front Cover

INSURANCE

AFSPA—Ancillary / 46
AFSPA—Dental (CIGNA) / 29
AFSPA—Life / 57
AFSPA—Travel / 43
FEDS Protection / 13
Gallagher (formerly Clements Worldwide) / Back Cover

REAL ESTATE & PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

Compass Realty—Rachel Toda / 52
FSJ Guide to Property Management / 103
Goldberg Group Property Management / 15
McEneaney Associates / 103
Promax Management / 101
Property Specialists, Inc. / 102
Richey Property Management / 102
WJD Management / 101



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The Trembling Earth: Guatemala, 1976

BY VINCENT CHIARELLO

Before my arrival in 1974, Guatemala, known as the Land of Eternal Spring, had been wracked by civil war, whose violence included the 1969 assassination of U.S. Ambassador John Gordon Mien and two U.S. military advisers. Ambassador Mien was the first, but not the last, U.S. ambassador on duty to be murdered.

When I arrived five years later as director of the Binational Center, referred to as IGA (Instituto Guatemalteco Americano), the center was functioning smoothly, and the country was relatively stable.

Then, suddenly, in the early morning hours of February 4, 1976, everything changed: A powerful earthquake registering 7.5 on the Richter scale hit.

The events surrounding that cataclysm have never left me, although nearly a half century has passed.

It is claimed dogs can sense the onset of an earthquake before humans, and unusual barking is one sign. I heard no barking, but at 3 a.m., I awoke after hearing a sound unlike any other—a high-pitched shrill that seemed to be coming from below the house.



Vincent Chiarello taught high school history before joining the Foreign Service in 1970. He served overseas in Colombia, Guatemala, Spain, Norway, Italy, and at The Holy See. Now retired, he lives in Northern Virginia. His reflection, "Holding History in the Vatican's Secret Archives," was published in the January-February 2023 FSJ.



From left: In Patzicia, adobe brick rubble is all that remains of the houses that lined the street. In Gualan, the quake bent rails. In Guatemala City, the Hotel Terminal buckled.

The floor began to sway and it seemed to no longer be under me; it was off to the side. As the house moved back and forth, I heard the crash of a glass mirror in our children's bedroom.

Thankfully, they weren't injured, and we all left the house in our pajamas until the noise ended, and the earth's movement ceased.

Hundreds of aftershocks, some quite strong, continued for weeks. To deal with the recurring danger, my wife packed clothing for our children in small suitcases left near the door in case a quick exit was required.

The embassy staff, with the State Department and other U.S. governmental agencies, responded with alacrity to the disaster. Fortunately, the airport had not been seriously affected, and embassy staff worked tirelessly to coordinate the arrival of flights from the United States and other countries bringing food and other supplies.

More than 20,000 people were killed, most in the mountainous regions, and many more suffered severe spinal problems requiring surgery when their adobe roofs collapsed on them. At the airport, I saw the arrival of army trucks full of corpses, the bodies of those who died

in the vicinity of the capital, stacked like cords of wood, for mass burial nearby.

Gradually the situation improved, and water and electricity were restored to the city. The embassy was only slightly damaged, but the IGA had serious structural problems and took nearly a year to rebuild.

Though the worst of the disaster was over, major problems still needed to be addressed and resolved. Overall, it was a dismal and discomforting time.

Yet for me, one bright memory remains. While I was on duty at the airport, a Guatemalan Foreign Service National told me someone, an American, wished to speak to me. I assumed it was a staffer connected to the relief efforts. As he entered the makeshift office, however, I noticed he was in a suit. He'd come from a plane that had just landed.

As it turned out, he had flown from San Francisco to Guatemala at his own expense. I recall his words to this day: "I'm an orthopedic surgeon, and I'm here to help." I brought him over to the field hospital set up at the airport, and he began surgery shortly thereafter.

When I checked later to see if he was still operating, I was informed that he'd stayed and worked for a week, leaving as quietly as he arrived. To this day, I wish I had asked his name. ■

LOCAL LENS



Near the end of a hike through Bjordalen Valley just outside Svalbard's main settlement of Longyearbyen, the setting sun cast a warm glow on the valley's lone house. Only minutes earlier our group—led by the rifle-wielding guide required for polar bear protection—had passed remarkably close to a herd of reindeer.

A mother and calf stood together and gently nuzzled. Svalbard reindeer are especially endearing: the smallest variant of the species, they grow to just three feet tall and five feet long.

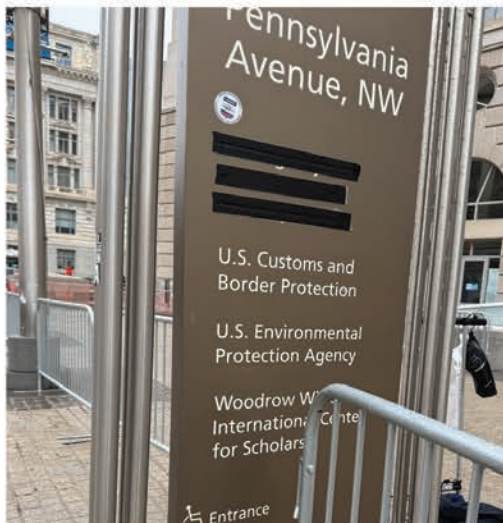
Though its High Arctic location is generally too far north to see the northern lights, Svalbard, an archipelago mainly composed of the island known as Spitsbergen, still offers wide and strikingly barren vistas that invite you to forget the rest of the world. ■

Noah E. Rose, a second-tour Foreign Service officer serving in Montreal, is looking forward to exploring the Canadian Arctic. He took these photos with a Nikon Z6III in October 2024.

Please submit your favorite, recent photograph to be considered for Local Lens. Images must be high resolution (at least 300 dpi at 8" x 10", or 1 MB or larger) and must not be in print elsewhere. Include a short description of the scene/event as well as your name, brief biodata, and the type of camera used. Send to localens@afsa.org.



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