THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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JULY–AUGUST 2026

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LET'S CONNECT

Calling All Foreign Service Authors

SUBMIT YOUR BOOKS BY AUGUST 21!

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.

Please visit https://bit.ly/ITOW-Author-Form to share all the details about your book. We will craft your ITOW entry based on your responses on this form.

We can feature only one book per author, so if you published multiple books last year, let us which one you'd like to promote and list the other titles in your bio note.

Please fill out the form and send us a copy of the book (either in print or, preferably, digital format) **by Friday, August 21.**

Digital books can be sent to journal@afsa.org, subject line: ITOW + Author Name.

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THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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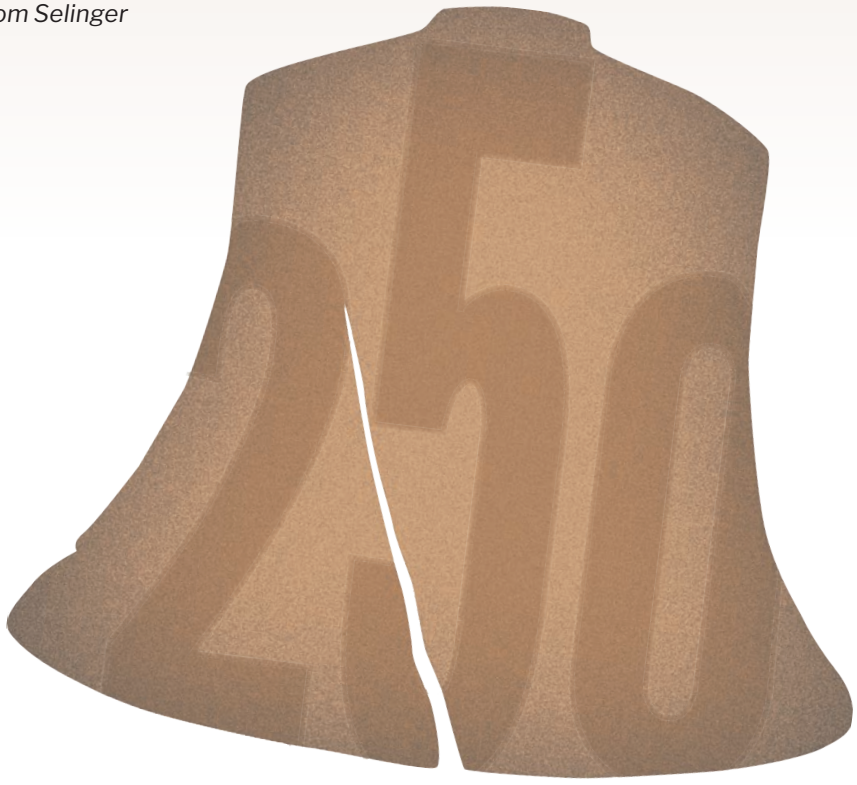
—The *FSJ* Team

THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

July-August 2026 Volume 103, No. 4

FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250



ON THE COVER: Design by Nathan Putens.

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AFSA NEWS

THE OFFICIAL RECORD OF AFSA

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A MEMBER IMPACT REPORT

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We've been doing this work a long time—**$6 million** recovered for members in the meritorious service increase cases alone, **1,450** colleagues made whole. And if you served at USAID—your agency was taken from you. Your association wasn't.

Six members had their annuity exceptions rescinded and would be separated in weeks without pensions. AFSA filed grievances. State granted interim relief, and all six are still on the rolls, working toward the retirement they earned.

That happened this year. It happens every year.

> *"Like lawyers, soldiers, and doctors, we don't stop being professionals when we retire."*
>
> —Steve Liston, FS alum

> *"After losing my dream job as an FSO with USAID, life felt pretty grim. But AFSA helps me to stay connected to a community and work that I loved."*
>
> —AFSA member

> "We're an insurance policy.
> And an inexpensive insurance policy."
>
> —Sharon L. Papp, former AFSA General Counsel

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Stand with AFSA

BY JOHN "DINK" DINKELMAN

This edition of the *Journal* marks the halfway point in my two-year term as AFSA president and one year since the State Department began the largest reduction in force (RIF) in its history.

I was one of the unlucky 1,350 taken off the job for no reason other than being assigned to the wrong office at the wrong time during the "reorganization."

While most of the July 11, 2025, RIF cohort was unceremoniously and expeditiously separated in early September, I am sure that none of us could have anticipated it would take almost 10 months for the department to cut the rest of us loose as they finally did on May 5.

Also, I could never have imagined that I'd be in such an adversarial, acrimonious, antagonistic relationship with the organization to which I had devoted my entire professional life.

Nevertheless, here we are. Like so much else over the past year, the unimaginable now seems to be the norm.

I sat down to write this column just after a phone call with a member of the State Department's exit interview team. I had the opportunity to sum up my 38-year Foreign Service career in a 10-minute call that will, undoubtedly, be of no interest to decision-makers who no longer listen to their workforce.

Kudos to my interviewer, however, who was prudent enough to skip the question on what I thought was the main factor leading to my departure. I suspect their team learned quickly that, at least in the case of an involuntary separation, such a question is best left unasked.

So it is that far too many important questions remain unasked in the present environment. Which is *precisely* why AFSA will ask them.

What We Will Do

AFSA will not only continue to serve as the voice of an increasingly silenced Foreign Service but will also continue to be the "adult in the room" and the "port in the storm" while the leadership we once counted on to defend the institution has now joined in the attack on it.

In addition, AFSA will continue to:

- call attention to an Employee Evaluation Report (EER) fiasco at State that is harming (almost) everyone in the Service;
- catalogue the effects of an opaque bidding process that—notwithstanding the tremendous loss of personnel from the Foreign Service ranks over the past year—seems to lack enough positions for those surviving the purges of 2025; and
- push for the changes that will best serve a professional, nonpartisan Foreign Service as efforts on the Hill to reform the Foreign Service Act of 1980 move forward.

Simply put, you can rest assured that AFSA will continue to say in the open what you can no longer say even in private. We will continue to stand *with* you and stand up *for* you.

Are You with Us?

The critical question now is: Will *you* stand with AFSA as we stand up for you?

When payroll and annuity deductions were discontinued in 2025, thousands of you stepped up to pay dues directly online.

Now, one year later, membership is up for renewal again. If you have not taken the step to "set it and forget it" through an automatic payment option, please do this now. Make the decision to stay with AFSA to ensure that we can support you and defend the Foreign Service—*our* Foreign Service. We are stronger together.

In addition, you all should have received notification of a referendum we are conducting. Among the items for your consideration is a request for a one-time increase of all member dues by 5 percent.

As our membership rolls declined, our expenses—including legal costs to fight off multiple attacks on our members and our Service—increased exponentially, and we need your support.

We must maintain AFSA's membership services and communication, congressional liaison, and public media engagement at present levels.

Ballots will go out on July 8, and I solicit your affirmative vote on this question by no later than 8 a.m. ET on July 21. By voting yes, you ensure an additional $200,000 for AFSA's budget each year, an average of about $16 per member annually.

We're in this for the long haul, folks. Rest assured that AFSA isn't going anywhere. With your support, we'll keep up this fight as long as needed. Stay with us!

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

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Diplomacy Beyond 250

BY SHAWN DORMAN

As the United States commemorates 250 years of independence, here at the *Journal* we turn our attention to a less celebrated but equally vital founding story: the birth of American diplomacy.

In 1776 the Continental Congress sent Benjamin Franklin to Paris to win the support that would be critical in securing the new nation's independence and establishing its place in the world. That mission launched a tradition of diplomatic service that continues today.

Here, we present an outstanding selection of articles from some of the best (now former) diplomacy practitioners that look at the state and evolution of U.S. diplomacy from various vantage points.

FS alum and FSJ Editorial Board member Katherine Ntiamoah opens the conversation with a Speaking Out on "Shaping the Next 250 Years of U.S. Diplomacy: Vision, Humility, and Action."

Senior FSO (ret.) Jennifer Davis leads the focus with a powerful piece on the challenges to democracy in the United States and elsewhere, and lays out why a healthy democracy is essential to effective U.S. foreign policy.

Newly retired Senior FSO Kelly Adams-Smith explains the evolution of the role of the National Security Council and its currently diminished position and staffing.

Veteran VOA reporter Elez Biberaj recounts the vital role of U.S. broadcasting and warns of what happens when it falls silent. Newly retired Senior FSO Steve Adams-Smith offers a brief history of and recent changes to the Foreign Service hiring process in "Are We Seeing the Reemergence of the Spoils System?"

Recently retired FSO Tom Selinger uses excerpts from the oral history collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) to illustrate the legacy of Benjamin Franklin through the diplomats who followed in his footsteps.

And, finally, James Graham Wilson and Lynette Evans-Tiernan from the State Historian's Office give us a glimpse into how U.S. diplomatic history is compiled in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) volumes.

This edition of AFSA News headlines a special May 1 event that the history books will undoubtedly recall as an unfortunate moment. It was the first Foreign Service Day ignored by the State Department, leaving AFSA to hold the annual memorial ceremony honoring diplomats who died in the line of duty at association headquarters rather than at the site of the AFSA Memorial Plaques inside the State Department.

History Notes

Looking back on 250 years and considering the future of diplomacy, you can discover the full history of AFSA and of the Foreign Service in our searchable FSJ Digital Archives that go back more than 100 years (www.afsa.org/fsj-archive).

In the Special Collections, we offer curated sets of articles from the archives on specific themes (e.g., humanitarian assistance, dissent, diplomatic tradecraft, FS families, China, Africa, climate, trade, public diplomacy, and reform). Read the story of U.S. diplomacy as told by those who were there, in the room.

AFSA's History Timeline, going back to 1776 and newly updated, was originally published in AFSA's history book, *The Voice of the Foreign Service*. Now you can find it at https://afsa.org/afsa-history-timeline.

Meeting the Moment

This is a time of turmoil for U.S. diplomacy, and the professional career Foreign Service faces unprecedented threats.

This is the time for every member of the Foreign Service community, past and present, to meet the moment and do what our AFSA president asks in his column: "Stand with AFSA."

AFSA is the primary organization looking out for you and your agency, throughout your FS career and beyond. Your membership is the number one contribution you can make to keep AFSA in the ring (not to be confused with the new eyebrow-raising State initiative "cage fights for diplomacy").

You can renew your membership (and update your mailing address) at https://afsa.org/membership. If you're not receiving your *FSJ*, that may mean your membership has lapsed since payroll and annuity deductions came to an abrupt halt following the anti-union executive order of March 27, 2025.

As always, we want to hear from you and add your voice to the conversation. Write to journal@afsa.org.

Shawn Dorman is the editor of The Foreign Service Journal.

The Legal Defense Fund Needs You

I joined the Foreign Service in 1969 and have been an AFSA member ever since.

The AFSA Legal Defense Fund's call for donations in the March-April *FSJ* prompted me to recall vividly a consequential personal encounter more than two decades ago with AFSA's General Counsel, Sharon Papp, and the fund.

It was summer 2000, and I was at the Foreign Service Institute preparing for an onward assignment overseas. Unexpectedly, Diplomatic Security asked me to come to their office, where two FBI special agents (female "good cop" and male "bad cop") were lying in wait for me.

Over three hours, they accused me of being a Russian spy, threatening to suspend my security clearance and cancel my career.

I knew I needed legal help and went immediately to Sharon Papp's office. Pointing out that the FBI had not yet acted against my clearance, Sharon explained that if my clearance were suspended, then the Legal Defense Fund could help me. In the meantime, she telephoned a lawyer specializing in security cases, and within an hour I was in his office.

At the lawyer's suggestion, the FBI agreed that if I passed a lie detector test, I could proceed to post. After the test, the polygraph technician commented that he had rarely seen such a flat lack of response to his questions.

Looking back, I remember that when I entered Sharon's office, I was dazed and bewildered about what to do next, but, thanks to her, by that evening I was confident about my plan of action.

Knowing that the Legal Defense Fund would help if my clearance was suspended also calmed my anxiety.

Since then, I have contributed to the AFSA Legal Defense Fund regularly, and I hope others will follow suit.

Frederic "Fritz" Maerkle
Senior FSO, retired
Vallabrix, France

Harbinger of Things to Come

Long retired from the Foreign Service, I was nonetheless interested (and dismayed) to read Ambassador Eric Rubin's March-April Speaking Out article, "What's Wrong with the Ben Franklin Fellowship?"

I share his concern about the BFF and the further "partisanization" of the Foreign Service that it seems to represent.

However, we should have seen it coming. In 1990 I was bidding on several deputy chief of mission (DCM) positions, one under a Republican political appointee.

Through my career development officer, I learned that the ambassador in question had some interest in my candidacy (I had previous DCM experience) but wanted to know my political affiliation before giving me further consideration.

How common that kind of questioning was I cannot say, but it was apparently a harbinger of things to come. (I ended up being assigned to another late-opening DCM post, under a different GOP political appointee who, fortunately, never asked anything about my politics.)

Jonathan B. Rickert
Senior FSO, retired
Bainbridge Island, Washington

Where Are the Resignations?

When President George W. Bush instigated a war with Iraq in 2003, many U.S. government employees, myself included, resigned in protest. In protest of the war against Iran, from what I have been able to gather, only two U.S. government employees have resigned. Is this correct? What has happened?

Has the cancer of fear become so rampant that government employees lack the courage to sacrifice their careers?

Are they and many others (e.g., educators, lawyers, military officers, news media officials) self-censoring out of fear of opening themselves to lifelong persecution for being considered an enemy of the current accepted thinking or administration?

Are we following the path of nonresistance leading to an authoritarian nation?

Gatherings for "No Kings" days send a message, and protests against U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's extrajudicial actions and un-American behavior are commendable.

That said, to assure a return to justice, current officials must be given notice that their actions are being carefully observed and fully documented and shall be subjected to future judicial review and appropriate punishment for any unconstitutional or illegal behavior.

No one is above the law, so every official—federal, state, and local—should understand in no uncertain terms that "We the People" are watching and you will be judged.

The United States of America inspired the world by its system of government, benevolence, decency, and willingness to help others, becoming the most admired nation in history.

We need to bring back the values that made us great instead of being viewed as

untrustworthy, self-serving, and uncaring about the health, welfare, and happiness of others.

John Drotos
DSS agent, retired
Newport, Rhode Island

Diplomacy or the Military?

I doubt I am the only one to have noticed how what we used to call diplomacy has morphed over the years into paramilitary execution. American diplomacy has been transformed into U.S. pressure aided more than before by the threat of U.S. military intervention.

I don't think it is un-American to suggest that the diplomatic process is a two-way, not just one-way, proposition. Admittedly that makes it more complicated, as the thoughts and desires of other world governments have to be taken into account. It's tougher than just turning to the military to impose our views.

I recall the days of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who believed in the imposition of American views rather than seeking the views of others. That approach certainly had the advantage of simplicity. Relying on senior thinkers in the White House, or closely attached to it, made it unnecessary to test other approaches that might have led to better foreign policy in the longer run.

It also guaranteed that American policy would be controlled by the direction of American politics—and the advantages of imposition by military might.

But that evades key questions: Do American domestic politics guarantee the best course for America to follow overseas just because American politicians with the ear of the president win the argument every time?

And what is our experience with simple imposition by military might? How well have we done over recent years by repeated military imposition of military might in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and elsewhere?

Speaking simply as a retired Senior Foreign Service officer (and the author of the 2019 book, *So You Want to Be a Diplomat?*), I ask: Who should bear the blame for our repeated mistakes in the Middle East and elsewhere?

The State Department is intended to lead with diplomacy. This always requires starting with "Getting to Yes" and only moving to the military when that is more likely to succeed.

Then, if circumstances do not lead to success, you either stop the effort or take a more discerning look at how much you need that success, what it will cost, and what penalty you risk if you go ahead anyway.

Will we ever learn?

George Lambrakis
Senior FSO, retired
Brighton/Hove, England

Lost Passport, Found Gratitude

As someone who has traveled to more than 50 countries, it was a consistent point of pride that I had never lost my passport. Until I did.

This past winter, I was flying within Norway up to the Arctic Circle to see the northern lights and absentmindedly left my passport in the netting of the seat in front of me. You know, the thing flight attendants tell you to check before you leave the plane? Well, I didn't (and blame perimenopause).

Realizing my gaffe (picture me as the figure in Munch's *The Scream*), I now had a very real problem to solve: How would I get back to the U.S. without my passport?

This is when the Foreign Service came through for me in a big way.

The morning after the flight, I emailed the U.S. embassy in Oslo, expecting I might not hear back for some time.

I had my answer within an hour: show up at the embassy the following Monday and I'd have an emergency passport issued that same day. And as promised, consular officers made it happen.

How lucky we are as Americans to have the Foreign Service there for us when we need them most.

Before I departed Norway, I did see the northern lights—greens and pinks pulsing across a vast Arctic sky. It was a humbling experience, and so too was the passport fiasco. The trip had been saved, and I was spared a probable drawn-out travel nightmare.

At a time when there has been so much disruption to the federal workforce, and not enough appreciation for what members of the Foreign Service do every day on behalf of all Americans, I want you to know that when I needed help, you came through. And for that, I'm immensely grateful.

It's one thing to advocate for Foreign Service members from behind a desk. It's another thing to need them when you're thousands of miles from home.

Thank you for getting me home.

Nikki Gamer
AFSA Communications Director
Baltimore, Maryland ■

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS
about this month's issue.

Submit letters to the editor:
journal@afsa.org

92 Percent: Political Ambassadors

The confirmation of U.S. ambassadors in the Senate continues sporadically. There has been little to report since our last update in March.

Seven ambassador nominees were confirmed in mid-May, all but one from outside the career Foreign Service for postings to ASEAN, Iceland, New Zealand, the Philippines, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

In addition, five nominees for senior positions in the State Department were confirmed: the assistant secretaries for the bureaus of African Affairs, Educational and Cultural Affairs, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, and Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, as well as the coordinator for counterterrorism, the only career FSO.

There has been some good news. In late April, the Senate confirmed more than 160 Foreign Service promotions. Much work is yet to be done on that front, but any movement on these lists is positive.

Fifteen ambassador nominees are awaiting either committee or Senate action. AFSA is tracking 109 vacancies at posts around the world. This is a staggeringly high number given that we are 16 months into a presidential administration.

This number can be attributed in part to the unprecedented recall of at least 31 career ambassadors at the beginning of this year. At the same time, five nominees for senior State Department posts await confirmation.

Not a single member of the career Foreign Service has received an ambassador nomination this year. The ratio of career versus political nominees in this administration stands at 92.5 percent political—by far the most egregiously skewed number in 50 years.

It is worth repeating, yet again, that the Foreign Service Act of 1980 is very clear on this issue: "Positions as chief of mission should normally be accorded to career members of the Service, though circumstances will warrant appointments from time to time of qualified individuals who are not career members of the Service."

AFSA views 92.5 percent as wildly inconsistent with any interpretation of the phrase "from time to time."

Contemporary Quote

"The national interest has never been defined so narrowly. The United States has been the world's leading nation, not because of military might or economic power alone. We have been a leader because we have been instrumental in creating a world order that is based on the rule of law and on humanitarian principles. While we have sometimes strayed, for the most part our presidents have seen it as their responsibility to uphold this rules-based international system."

—Former USAID Administrator and Under Secretary of State for Management Brian Atwood at a DACOR event, "State and AID—Building Back Better," on May 12.

Senators Press State on Stalled Fellow Onboarding

On March 19, Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) led 21 of his Senate colleagues in dispatching a letter to Secretary of State Marco Rubio raising alarm over the State Department's indefinite delay in onboarding Thomas R. Pickering and Charles B. Rangel Fellows into the U.S. Foreign Service.

More than 50 fellows from the 2024, 2023, and deferred 2022 cohorts remain in the onboarding pipeline, with only a small fraction having received orientation invitations. An additional 90 fellows will become eligible to be hired this coming September.

The senators argued that the delay "undermines U.S. diplomatic readiness, wastes congressionally appropriated taxpayer dollars, and directly harms these outstanding Americans while simultaneously discouraging future talent from applying to the Foreign Service."

The Pickering and Rangel fellowships, described by the department as "flagship initiatives for recruiting top-tier talent," have an annual acceptance rate of under 5 percent.

As of 2022, the two programs had increased the number of Foreign Service generalists from underrepresented groups by 33 percent and the number of women by 6 percent.

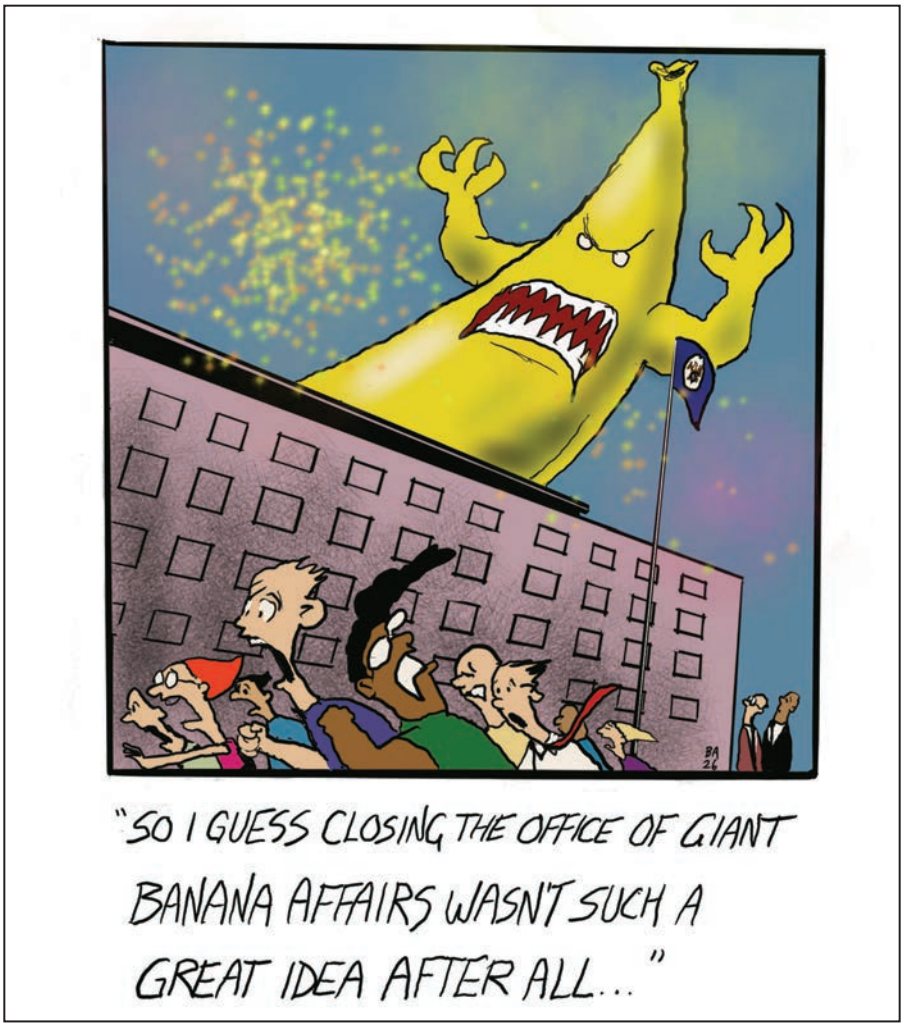
Congress reauthorized both fellowships on a bipartisan basis in the Fiscal Year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act.

The senators urged Secretary Rubio to include all remaining eligible fellows in the upcoming 2026 A-100 orientation classes and requested a response by April 19 to eight questions covering pipeline numbers, selection criteria, reimbursement obligations, and steps to prevent future delays.

As we went to press, the State Department had not responded.

The Deep End State

By Brian Aggeler



Foreign Aid in Historic Decline

Global foreign aid suffered its steepest annual decline on record in 2025, according to preliminary data released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on April 9.

Official development assistance (ODA) from members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and associates totaled just $174.3 billion, a 23.1 percent drop from 2024 and the second consecutive year of contraction.

The reduction was driven overwhelmingly by the United States, which alone accounted for three-quarters of the global decline. U.S. ODA fell by 56.9 percent compared to 2024. For the first time in history, Germany surpassed the United States as the largest DAC provider of ODA, contributing $29.1 billion.

Bilateral ODA fell by 26.4 percent, with grants dropping 29.1 percent. Funding for development programs, projects, and technical cooperation declined 26.3 percent, the largest drop ever recorded for this category.

Humanitarian ODA from DAC countries fell 35.8 percent to $15.5 billion. Bilateral ODA to sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries declined 26.3 percent and 25.8 percent, respectively, while net bilateral aid to Ukraine fell 38.2 percent.

The OECD projects a further 5.8 percent decline in DAC ODA in 2026, a figure that does not yet account for additional pressures from the ongoing crisis in the Middle East.

FS Engineer Honored with 2026 Sammie

Gharun Lacy, deputy assistant secretary of State for cyber and technology security, was recognized with a 2026 Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal presented by the Partnership for Public Service.

This year, the awards, better known as the Sammies, marked their 25th year of recognizing exceptional work in the federal workforce. The Sammies have honored more than 800 federal employees since the program's inception.

Lacy was honored for thwarting a sophisticated cyber intrusion into government email accounts.

One of only four federal employees honored this year, Lacy was joined by James Szykman of the Environmental Protection Agency; Jill A. Frisch, formerly of the Internal Revenue Service; and a team of researchers from the Department of Agriculture.

The 2026 program reorganized its categories into four simplified themes—"safer, stronger, healthier, and more

Talking Points offers a snapshot of recent developments affecting the Foreign Service. The items in this edition were finalized for publication on May 15, 2026.

Site of the Month: *Department of Government Waste*

Department of Government Waste

This ongoing documentary portrait project examines the personal impact of federal workforce reductions, contract terminations, and program cuts across the United States.

The project pairs formal studio portraiture with excerpts from recorded conversations, creating a visual and oral record of federal workers and contractors dismissed as "waste."

Each participant is photographed in a consistent studio format and paired with reflections on work, identity, purpose, and what it means to be told their role no longer has value.

Current and former federal employees, contractors, and others directly affected by recent workforce reductions or program changes are invited to participate. Sessions last approximately one hour and include a photographed portrait and a recorded conversation.

Participation is voluntary, and those who prefer not to be publicly identifiable may participate anonymously, including by withholding their name or appearing in silhouette.

Portrait sessions are currently conducted at Open Gov Hub in Washington, D.C., with additional locations possible as the project expands.

To learn more or inquire about participating, go to the contact page at https://www.departmentofgovernmentwaste.com/ or email hello@departmentofgovernmentwaste.com.

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

prosperous"—with one honoree per category.

The smaller cadre of honorees reflects a drop in agency participation. The four awardees were selected from roughly 140 nominations across 39 agencies and subcomponents, compared to more than 500 nominations and 25 finalists in 2024.

Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, attributed the decline to "upheaval" across the federal workforce under the Trump administration, noting that some agencies that typically submit dozens of nominations submitted none this year.

Despite the diminished pool, Stier emphasized the importance of recognizing federal employees who continue to deliver impactful work under challenging circumstances.

This year's ceremony, held at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., also fell during Public Service Recognition Week, which has commemorated public servants each May since 1985.

Limited-Edition Passport to Feature Trump Portrait

The White House has confirmed that a limited number of U.S. passports featuring a portrait of President Donald Trump will be released as part of celebrations for the 250th anniversary of

the Declaration of Independence in July.

According to a State Department rendering, an image of the president is surrounded by the text of the Declaration of Independence, the American flag, and the president's signature in gold.

An administration official told the BBC that the commemorative passports will continue as long as supplies last. The design will only be issued by the Washington Passport Agency. It is not yet clear whether applicants will be able to opt out of the design. Current U.S. passports depict scenes from U.S. history, including the 1969 moon landing, alongside national symbols such as the Statue of Liberty.

The passport is the latest in a series of initiatives associating the president's name and likeness with federal programs and public spaces, including a forthcoming commemorative gold coin from the U.S. Mint, Trump's signature on U.S. banknotes, Trump's name on the United States Institute of Peace and the Kennedy Center, along with the planned Triumph Arch (known as the "Arc de Trump") and other monuments.

New Questions for NIV Applicants

A State Department cable issued April 28 directs consular officers at every U.S. embassy and consulate to ask two new questions of every nonimmigrant visa (NIV) applicant as part of the standard interview: "Have you experienced harm or mistreatment in your country of nationality or last habitual residence?" and "Do you fear harm or mistreatment in returning to your country of nationality or permanent residence?"

Applicants must answer no verbally to both questions for the interview to proceed; an affirmative response or refusal to answer results in denial.

Heard on the Hill

In Our Best Interest

Foreign aid is not charity. It is critical for our national security. Our diplomats and development workers not only embody our values working in crisis zones to promote peace, health, and human rights, but promote stability and prosperity, reducing the risk of future conflicts requiring military engagement.

The provision of humanitarian assistance is not just our moral responsibility as the richest, most powerful nation in the world, but it is also in our best interest.

—Rep. Madeleine Dean (D-Pa.-4) in the House Committee on Appropriations hearing "Markup of Fiscal Year 2027 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Bill" on April 28.

Diplomacy as Prevention

USAID hollowed out, programs canceled, expertise pushed out the door, and now a weakened State Department is expected to carry out the full load despite the fact it was never built to do so. … This is a setup for failure.

—Rep. Lois Frankel (D-Fla.) in the House Committee on Appropriations hearing "Markup of Fiscal Year 2027 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Bill" on April 28.

Officers are instructed to document responses in case notes.

Issued by the office of Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the cable cites Executive Order 14161, which Trump signed on his first day in office in January 2025, directing agencies to enhance immigration screening and vetting.

The directive asserts that "the high number of aliens claiming asylum in the United States indicates that many aliens misrepresent this intention to consular officers in the visa application process and at U.S. ports of entry."

It also cross-references classified operational guidance held on internal department systems, meaning that the full scope of the policy remains unknown outside the department.

The directive places consular officers at the front of a new screening process affecting all nonimmigrant visa categories, from tourists and students to H-1B and L-1 workers. The State Department issued nearly 11 million nonimmigrant visas in Fiscal Year 2024.

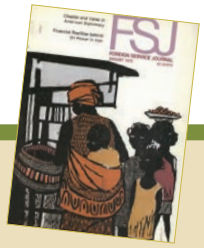
The policy arrives as the administration's broader immigration agenda continues to reshape consular work abroad, including a travel ban affecting nationals of 39 countries, expanded social media vetting for student visa applicants, and the cancellation of temporary protected status for migrants from 13 countries.

The cable was issued days after a federal appeals court ruled that the president's invocation of an "invasion" at the southern border to curtail asylum seekers was unlawful. The administration has indicated its intent to appeal.

AFSA Supports AHI Victims

On April 15, George Mason University's Hayden Center for Intelligence, Policy, and International Security hosted "Havana Syndrome: New Revelations on a

50 Years Ago



What National Defense Leaves Out

When "national defense" is promoted by presidents, congressmen, and media, it is invariably conceptualized in terms of military and economic, never in terms of diplomatic, resources. A strong "national defense posture" means a strong military, not a strong diplomatic establishment. Funds generously bestowed upon the military and intelligence agencies enable them to work with whole banks of computers while the State Department limps along with a handful and is not even certain as to how these can contribute to "diplomacy."

—Foreign Service Officer Smith Simpson in "Diplomacy: Some Professional and Political Perspectives" in the August 1976 edition of the FSJ.

Quiet War," a public program on anomalous health incidents (AHIs).

Moderated by retired CIA officer and Hayden Center Senior Fellow John Sipher, the panel featured investigative journalists Christo Grozev and Michael Weiss of "The Insider," whose recent collaboration with "60 Minutes" has helped reshape public understanding of these attacks, and Mark Polymeropoulos, a former senior CIA operations officer injured by an AHI in Moscow in 2017.

Grozev and Weiss presented evidence correlating the travel of Russian operatives with the timing and locations of cornerstone AHI cases in Frankfurt, Havana, Tbilisi, Vienna, and elsewhere.

The panel also discussed reporting that a miniaturized pulsed-microwave device is now in U.S. government possession and undergoing testing. Polymeropoulos described being denied medical care for years after his injury, and panelists pointed to a yearslong pattern of institutional skepticism inside the U.S. government that treated victims' accounts as unreliable even as the underlying evidence mounted.

Panelists noted that Foreign Service employees and their family members are among those affected, and that the State Department too often deferred to the intelligence community rather than taking responsibility for its own personnel.

The full recording, well worth watching, is available at https://bit.ly/AHI-panel.

AFSA is a named plaintiff in active litigation on behalf of Foreign Service members harmed by AHIs and continues to press department and other agency leadership to act without further delay.

The association is committed to ensuring affected members have clear, unobstructed access to medical care, without bureaucratic delay, without skepticism, and without having to prove themselves before receiving the attention they deserve.

AFSA will continue to advocate on behalf of AHI victims and their families until their needs are met.

Members of the Foreign Service community experiencing difficulty in accessing AHI-related care or navigating the claims process can reach AFSA at member@afsa.org. ■

This issue of Talking Points was compiled by Mark Parkhomenko.

Shaping the Next 250 Years of U.S. Diplomacy: Vision, Humility, and Action

BY KATHERINE NTIAMOAH

American diplomacy is at a pivotal moment. Rapid shifts in technology, global power dynamics, and societal expectations demand a Foreign Service that is agile and prepared for complex challenges.

As a member of the Foreign Service Journal Editorial Board, I am writing to share a vision for the future of U.S. diplomacy, one that requires ambition rooted in humility, creativity anchored in accountability, and innovation married to experience.

I have spent nearly all my professional career advancing U.S. foreign policy across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Along the way, I have advised ambassadors, briefed Cabinet-level officials, and represented U.S. policy to global audiences.

Now at the Hamilton Lugar School, I combine diplomacy and academia to shape the next generation of foreign affairs professionals.

I offer this context to frame my deeply held beliefs about who we are as a nation supported by one of the most capable and skilled diplomatic corps in the world.

> The real investment must be in the quality of our input: defining a rigorous standard of practice and fostering the moral courage to challenge failing status quos.

Beyond the Resource Trap

The next 250 years of American diplomacy need more than a wish list; they demand a blueprint for a professional class that can adapt, experiment, and ensure that U.S. engagement continues to protect, stabilize, and elevate the nation long after headlines fade.

It is a common refrain that U.S. diplomacy is chronically understaffed and underfunded. While true, resources alone are not the most salient variables of success. In the past, influxes of funding and staff have been diluted across competing mandates in the absence of a serious internal strategy—namely, the institutional discipline to prioritize core national interests and make the difficult trade-offs required to stop pursuing secondary objectives. Without such strategic discipline, new resources are simply absorbed by mission creep, leading to the same chronic shortfalls.

We must move beyond pointing to external constraints. The real investment must be in the quality of our input: defining a rigorous standard of practice and fostering the moral courage to challenge failing status quos.

The dismantling of critical U.S. humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding bodies has indeed constrained our capacity, but without a fundamental reimagining of our professional culture—including the institutional discipline to prioritize mission-critical objectives over a "Christmas tree" of peripheral mandates and a shift from bureaucratic risk-aversion to practitioner-led tradecraft—even the most innovative funding models will fail to produce sustainable impact.

We cannot simply fund our way out of an institutional deficit; we must intentionally restructure how we deploy our intellectual capital.

Strengthening the Professional Corps

The abrupt end of the Diplomat in Residence program last year highlighted the structural fragility of our outreach to

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future generations of professional diplomats. Relying on a minimal rotation of officers to serve as the primary engine for engaging a nation of nearly 350 million was always a vulnerability. As someone who began her career as a Charles Rangel Graduate Fellow, I know firsthand the power of early mentorship.

We must reimagine pathways into the Foreign Service that go beyond traditional pipelines, strengthening fellowships and regional hubs that connect aspiring leaders with the realities of diplomatic tradecraft.

We must scale proven models like the Diplomat in Residence program in the Midwest, which successfully bridged the gap between nontraditional candidates and elite fellowships like the Rangel and Pickering. By institutionalizing these pathways, we ensure that new entrants are equipped with the practitioner-led tradecraft required to navigate a fragmented global landscape.

Recruitment, however, is only the first step toward a more effective Service. The future of U.S. influence depends on our ability to retain expertise and build a corps that views complex problem-solving as its primary mandate. This requires a culture that moves past the "generalist" ideal toward a more specialized, high-performance model in which merit and strategic insight are the sole arbiters of advancement.

Our strategic reach is capped when our internal culture prioritizes traditional consistency over the innovative friction required to solve modern, nonlinear challenges.

Defining the Tradecraft

The practice of diplomacy requires more than individual policy expertise; it demands a standardized, rigorous tradecraft that can be consistently applied across diverse contexts. To support this, we must establish a common curriculum of diplomacy that ensures a baseline of professional competence bridging the gap between traditional reporting and modern analytical tools.

This begins with data-informed pattern recognition, a method that integrates qualitative, on-the-ground observations with structured data, such as economic indicators or mobility trends.

By synthesizing these diverse information streams, we can move beyond the limits of isolated reporting and develop the strategic foresight necessary to anticipate global shifts before they become crises.

It requires agile advocacy, equipping officers with the ability to translate national priorities into actionable, highly contextualized local strategies with speed and judgment. Crucially, this innovation must be coupled with institutional memory, a deep, humble awareness of our historical iterations that allows us to learn from past challenges and integrate lessons across regions.

Yet, mastering these skills requires time, a commodity the State Department rarely affords its people. Unlike the military, which utilizes a personnel "training float" to pull service members off the line for dedicated professional development, the Foreign Service has historically lacked the personnel buffer to allow for serious, midcareer upskilling.

We must be clear: For a modernized tradecraft to take root, the State Department must be fully staffed to accommodate this professional development as a core requirement, rather than a secondary convenience that is sacrificed to immediate operational demands as at present. This "stay-and-play" culture prevents us from building the deep expertise required for 21st-century threats.

At the Hamilton Lugar School, I have witnessed how academic spaces can cultivate these competencies, but State itself must build the capacity to continuously train its diplomats. Public service extends beyond embassies and capitals; it includes a commitment to creating pathways where emerging talent can navigate complexity with strategic insight and ethical clarity.

A Commitment to Credibility

U.S. diplomacy has weathered profound changes over the past two centuries. From industrial expansion to the Cold War and into the age of artificial intelligence, diplomats have adapted to shifting threats. This work must continue to evolve, guided by accountability and strategic vision.

The next 250 years of diplomacy will be defined not just by U.S. influence but by the credibility, trust, and competence of the Americans we serve. We must sustain global leadership by embedding humility, curiosity, and rigor into every decision. Our ability to stabilize crises, prevent conflict, and advance shared prosperity hinges on our willingness to prioritize both ethical and practical outcomes.

This is my vision for American engagement, offered in optimism and with recognition of the extraordinary people who carry this work forward.

FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

Unfinished Work: Why a Healthy Democracy Is Essential to Our Foreign Policy

The world is in a democratic recession. Can Americans work together to repair our democracy and fight back the global rise of competitive authoritarianism?

BY JENNIFER L. DAVIS

Jennifer Davis is the Knott Distinguished Professor of Practice at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a fellow at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, where she focuses on democracy and diplomacy. She retired in 2025 as a Senior FSO, having served in the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations; in Türkiye, Colombia, Belgium, and Mexico; as the executive assistant to Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry; and as the special assistant to Secretary Condoleezza Rice.

It is now 12 score and 10 years that our Founders "brought forth a new nation," as Abraham Lincoln put it at Gettysburg in 1863. That nation was dedicated to the idea that self-governance was possible, but only within the context of a carefully crafted system of checks and balances that placed limits on power.

The Founders were not naive about the fragility of democracy or the relationship between domestic health and foreign power. Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton shared a conviction that republican self-governance would be America's most durable strategic asset. They built institutions accordingly: not perfect institutions, but ones designed to outlast any single leader, resist any single faction, and carry forward the accumulated expertise and judgment that democratic statecraft requires.

Democracy in Peril

Two hundred and fifty years on, those institutions are under a threat of the kind our Founders feared most. For myriad reasons, the United States has become so polarized that we are now more likely to identify as members of one political side or the other than to identify simply as Americans, aware of the unique privileges such identity grants. Across the political spectrum, our leadership is more inclined to point out what divides us than what binds us together. A consistent and reputable body of polling data shows

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President Abraham Lincoln urges Americans to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the "unfinished work" of preserving the "new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" in his famous address at the consecration of the Gettysburg National Cemetery on November 19, 1863.

that many Americans do not trust their government and do not believe our democracy is working. Young people in record numbers feel pessimism, not hope, about the future.

America's democracy is not the only one under strain. The global order that emerged from the Second World War, led largely by the United States, allowed for an unprecedented 80 years of relative global peace and an increase in the number of electoral democracies in the world until 2000. In fact, a significant goal of U.S. foreign policy after that war was the promotion of democracy as the best form of government under the time-tested theory that democracies are far less likely to go to war with one another and more likely to have strong economies and lower corruption, allowing for greater stability and global prosperity.

But for the past two decades, the world has found itself in a "democratic recession," as Freedom House has termed it, in which the world's democracies have steadily declined in number and the health of the remaining democracies has deteriorated. While democracy has been on its back foot, autocracy and "competitive authoritarianism" have enjoyed a period of expansion. These trends are blamed, in no small part, on the internet, social media, and the foreign malign influence campaigns with which authoritarian regimes control and interfere with the global information ecosystem. Today, less than one-fifth of the world lives in a country that Freedom House would define as "free."

Competitive Authoritarianism on the Rise

"Competitive authoritarianism," a term coined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in 2002, describes a hybrid government in which leaders gain power through elections but then erode the established systems of checks and balances of their democracies to enhance their own power. It is recognizable to U.S. diplomats who have served in countries experiencing it and involves a familiar pattern: Leaders of competitive authoritarian countries attack the systems and sources of information that they fear may weaken their hold on power.

They attack the free press, free speech, universities and academics, the judiciary, and, importantly, nonpartisan career public servants, because each of these is a mechanism of accountability. Competitive authoritarians fear open and transparent information flow because they seek to conduct themselves without checks on their power by a well-informed citizenry. In fact, it is this very hubris and feature of authoritarianism—that its leaders decimate the sources of information that might help them avoid perilous errors of judgment—that has led to the eventual downfall of most such governments.

Once a healthy democracy descends into competitive authoritarianism, it is not doomed to that fate. Today, in countries such as Poland, Brazil, and now potentially Hungary following its recent elections, we have seen an engaged citizenry reverse some of the harm done to democratic institutions. But these reversals are hard fought and tenuous. Another feature of competitive authoritarianism that gives it its signature "frog in boiling water" feel is that citizens begin either to fear acting in defense of their democratic institutions lest they be singled out by authoritarian leaders or to feel apathy if they perceive that the harm to their democratic institutions is irreversible. This makes turning the authoritarian tide even more difficult.

However, democracies must reckon with another uncomfortable fact: Strongman regimes may be on the rise because of the inherent challenges that democracy faced in trying to

A consistent and reputable body of polling data shows that many Americans do not trust their government and do not believe our democracy is working.

deliver for its people. The Information Age has fueled truth decay and polarization, generating major swings in the U.S. political landscape between hardening progressive and conservative poles as the moderate middle seemingly disappears. Infrastructure projects are mired in regulation; social benefit and health systems have become so byzantine as to be impossible to navigate; and real crises like affordable housing are convenient to acknowledge but inconvenient to resolve.

With these challenges at home, it is evident why Americans have been frustrated with the conceit of our nation-building experiments overseas in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States and its allies pursued a seductive but ultimately flawed theory: that democracy could be delivered from the outside in, installed through military force, constitutional drafting, and elections held before the deeper cultural, institutional, and civic foundations that sustain self-governance had been laid. What followed were two decades of tragic miscalculation, in which we relearned the painful lesson that democracy is not an export. It is a living culture, built over generations through civic education, independent institutions, and the slow accumulation of trust between citizens and their government.

Democracy at Home, Diplomacy Abroad

The health of our democracy at home has inevitably affected our ability to conduct effective foreign policy abroad. In 1947, at the start of the Cold War, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asserted that "partisan politics must stop at the water's edge." Together, Vandenberg, a Republican, and the Democratic Truman administration forged bipartisan support for the Marshall Plan, the very foundation of the unprecedented 80 years of peace and democratic expansion that followed.

A year earlier, in 1946, George Kennan penned the Long Telegram to warn: "Much depends on the health and vigor of our own society. This is a point at which domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courageous and incisive measure to solve the internal problems of our own society … is a diplomatic victory. [T]he greatest danger that can befall us in coping with the problem of [authoritarianism] is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."

Over the past two decades, America's career nonpartisan diplomats have experienced the dangers about which Kennan warned. Certainly, the challenges to our democracy and our foreign policy are not the product of one party or one leader. They are myriad and deepening, although vastly accelerated in the past year.

For example, our government's budgetary challenges have negatively affected our foreign policy. The modern budgetary process began in 1976, but the past 15 years have witnessed far more frequent government shutdowns of much longer duration within a far more politically polarized context. During these shutdowns, our diplomats must focus on preparing for the confusion that ensues instead of on the diplomacy they would otherwise be conducting.

Our nomination and confirmation process for presidential appointees is sclerotic and largely broken, especially for nonpartisan career ambassadors. Long gone are the days when a panel of career diplomats with decades of service would sit before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for a speedy hearing and a timely confirmation. As well, the number of political appointee ambassadors has steadily increased to a percentage today most modern democracies find jarring.

This is not to diminish the contributions of extraordinary political ambassadors. It is simply to note that the balance between political and career appointments and the backgrounds of the political appointees has shifted in ways that have depleted the depth of experience that effective diplomacy requires. Today an unprecedented 100 or more U.S. missions abroad do *not* have a Senate-confirmed ambassador. And our strategic adversaries, China and Russia, are taking full advantage of that vacuum in U.S. leadership.

Most worrisome are the moments in which public servants are the subject of scorn for political gain. Phrases like "deep state" are as cynical as they are corrosive and a deliberate effort to delegitimize the very people whose expertise and integrity our diplomacy depends on. Nonpartisan public servants swear their oath to the Constitution and to the system of government it created. It is a dishonor to their sacrifices to suggest they want anything other than America's enduring strength, the cause to which they have dedicated their lives. For Foreign Service members, the gilded names in the Department of State's lobby of colleagues who made the ultimate sacrifice are a daily reminder of their dedication to our country.

America's Soft Power

On the global stage, U.S. "soft power" has allowed us to attract and persuade rather than to coerce. But soft power depends on an audience's belief that the exemplar is genuine. When democratic institutions visibly malfunction—when elections are violently contested, when government institutions are instrumentalized for political ends, when leaders are not committed to providing truthful information, when nonpartisan experts are prevented from serving—that credibility erodes.

Our adversaries do not simply take note. They weaponize the development. Russian and Chinese state media regularly amplify images of democratic dysfunction because discrediting the American model is itself a strategic objective. Every domestic fracture becomes a foreign policy liability for the United States.

Our democratic allies watch closely too, and what they see shapes their calculations. The network of alliances, international institutions, and norms that the United States designed was built on an implicit premise: that U.S. leadership was reliable, predictable, and underwritten by a durable domestic consensus. When that consensus frays, allies hedge. They ask whether U.S. security commitments and treaties will survive the next election cycle. They begin diversifying—economically, diplomatically, and militarily. This is not anti-Americanism; it is risk management in a fractured global disorder.

Finally, a dimension that is harder to quantify but impossible to ignore is America's moral standing to speak on behalf of democratic values. U.S. diplomacy has always blended realpolitik and idealism in an uneasy tension. The idealist strand, which insists that how governments treat their own citizens is a legitimate subject of international concern, has been among the most consequential contributions the United States has made to the international order. That strand depends on a moral standing that must be continuously earned. It cannot survive on historical reputation alone.

Unfinished Work

Given these realities, it is clear that in order for our Foreign Service to compete effectively, we, the American people, must strengthen and repair our democracy. It will not be an easy path, but there is no other path worthy of our Founders' vision. As Lincoln wisely counseled in the Gettysburg Address, it is "for us, the living, … to be dedicated to the unfinished work" that our Founders and those who have served our nation nobly advanced.

Leaders of competitive authoritarian countries attack the systems and sources of information that they fear may weaken their hold on power.

At Gettysburg, Lincoln did not ask his audience to be hopeful. He asked them to be *resolved*. In hope, one waits. In resolve, one acts. For America's diplomats, resolve means staying in the arena: writing, testifying, supporting AFSA and its right to serve as an advocate for the Foreign Service as outlined in the Foreign Service Act of 1980, and mentoring the next generation of officers who are watching to see whether a diplomatic career is worth the sacrifice.

For all Americans, resolve means understanding that democracy is saved in school board meetings, in local newsrooms kept alive by paid subscriptions, and in state legislatures where the rules governing free and fair elections are written.

Democracy is saved when we choose to listen to one another across our divides and seek out information beyond our own echo chambers.

Democracy is saved when we hold our leaders accountable for corruption and self-enrichment, or when we find the courage to demand that our leaders reject the politics of division, which serves them but diminishes us.

Democracy is saved when each one of us asks, "What can I do today to make my democracy stronger?"

Poland is slowly rebuilding its judiciary. Brazil is reclaiming its democratic institutions. Hungary finally rejected competitive authoritarianism in favor of something more hopeful for its people. They did not do so because conditions "became" favorable. They did so because enough of their citizens decided that the cost of inaction was higher than the cost of engagement. In his victory speech on April 12, the leader of Hungary's winning opposition party Péter Magyar harkened back to President John F. Kennedy when he said: "Today, we won because Hungarians did not ask what their country could do for them; they asked what they could do for their country."

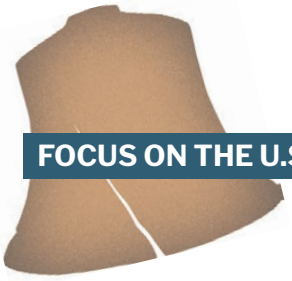
Lincoln did not promise that our union would survive. He exhorted us to fight for it. The unfinished work remains, and it is incumbent on all Americans to undertake it together. ■

Diplomacy is in danger.

Wear your support.

AFSAstore.org

Proceeds go to the Fund for American Diplomacy.



FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

A National Security Council Out of Balance

Over the past year, the NSC has undergone a significant reduction in expertise, staff, and responsibility. Here's why that matters.

BY KELLY ADAMS-SMITH

The Pentagon announces the review of a strategic military partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom, surprising the State Department, Congress, and foreign partners. The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) shuts down airspace over El Paso in response to uncoordinated deployment of new anti-drone technology by the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon. Thousands of frustrated Americans scramble to leave the Middle East after the United States and Israel launch Operation Epic Fury in Iran. U.S. officials offer multiple conflicting responses when asked about the strategy and ultimate aims of this war.

These missteps in early 2026 could all have been avoided with a rigorous interagency policy process coordinated by the National Security Council (NSC). Yet over the past year, the NSC has undergone a significant reduction in expertise, staff, and responsibility. The regular battle rhythm of interagency meetings has decelerated. And the national security adviser, Marco Rubio, serves double duty as Secretary of State, a dual-role structure not seen since the 1970s. Senior administration officials have brushed aside concerns about the current state of the NSC by suggesting

Kelly Adams-Smith retired from the Senior Foreign Service in 2026 after a 28-year State Department career. From 2011 to 2013, she served as deputy executive secretary of the National Security Council, where she managed the interagency policy process. She is currently an adjunct professorial lecturer at American University and serves on the FSJ Editorial Board.

COURTESY OF THE BARACK OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

Kelly Adams-Smith with President Barack Obama in his motorcade, 2011.

there is little need for interagency coordination when the Cabinet members responsible for national security "get along" and are all singularly focused on implementing the president's vision.

To Foreign Service veterans of demanding, last-minute NSC taskers and unrelenting meeting schedules, the current situation—a skeletal NSC headed by a dual-hatted Secretary of State—may seem ideal. It isn't. And here's why.

The Problem in Context

To appreciate the risks of the current situation, some history is useful. Congress created the NSC in 1947 to address deficiencies in U.S. national security policymaking that became evident during World War II. First, believing that a tragedy like the bombing of Pearl Harbor could have been prevented with better information sharing among various branches of government, Congress sought a mechanism that would break down informational stovepipes.

Further, Congress aimed to reduce insularity in presidential national security decision-making, which had characterized President Franklin Roosevelt's tenure and left Vice President Harry Truman uninformed on critical matters, including the development of the Manhattan Project. Finally, in recognition of the United States' leading post-WWII role in the world, Congress created numerous new national security entities, including the Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency. In the NSC, Congress established a mechanism that would allow the president to get the best advice and coordinated recommendations possible from this new and expanding national security enterprise.

The legislation establishing the NSC is barebones, allowing each president to tailor its structure to their specific foreign policy decision-making style, typically outlined in an administration's first national security–related policy directive. While the NSC structure adapts to the needs of each administration, over time the system we call the NSC has evolved into four distinct components: (1) the senior-level meeting of national security Cabinet officials when chaired by the president; (2) the formal interagency policy process from Sub-Policy Coordinating Committees (Sub-PCCs) to Deputies Committee (DC) and Principals Committee (PC) meetings; (3) the professional and expert NSC staff, mostly detailed from other executive branch agencies, including State, who manage the interagency process and staff the national security adviser and president; and (4) the intimate, informal circle of advisers, whether inside or outside government, who have the president's ear on national security.

Effective policymaking requires a balance among these four pillars: If any becomes too dominant or too weak, the system can break down, resulting in suboptimal policy outcomes, or worse.

The NSC in Action

In most administrations, National Security Council meetings chaired by the president are relatively infrequent and are usually the result of a long deliberative process about only the most consequential national security issues. Such meetings are serious business—for example, President Barack Obama held a series of NSC meetings in 2011 to discuss and ultimately approve the special operation that resulted in the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden. These meetings allow principals face time with the president and the chance to offer assessments, advice, and recommendations that reflect the expertise of their agencies. Principals raise objections, deliberate courses of action, and discuss risk.

When such meetings don't happen, are performative, or are dominated by one agency or official, decision-making procedures and policy outcomes suffer. Expertise isn't shared. Frustrated Cabinet officials may resort to getting their message to the

president and to the public in other ways, including via leaks and social media. A serious NSC meeting (and the process leading up to it) could, for example, have focused our leadership on the need to develop clear political aims for the recent attack on Iran; matched ways with means; established expectations with allies; evaluated costs and risks, including to U.S. citizens in the region; and resulted in clear, coordinated messaging about our actions and goals.

The multilevel interagency process leading up to a National Security Council meeting is just as important as the NSC meeting itself. From Sub-PCCs at the deputy assistant secretary level to PC meetings at the Cabinet level, this is where the rigorous analysis and debate of U.S. foreign policy options take place. Traditionally, decision-making is urged at the lowest level possible, and only intractable issues are elevated to the next higher level. It is this kind of informed decision-making that could have allowed the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security to deconflict use of new anti-drone technology while balancing the FAA's safety concerns. Of course, there is such a thing as too much process. If the cadence of meetings does not allow for adequate preparation or if meetings become a substitute for decision-making and action, the process overwhelms policy. Good policy demands a rational process.

COURTESY OF KELLY ADAMS-SMITH

Kelly Adams-Smith testifies before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during her confirmation hearing to become U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Moldova, May 9, 2024.

The NSC staff size fluctuates from administration to administration, based not only on the president's needs but also on how staff are counted. President Obama's NSC staff was relatively large at about 300 staffers, but this reflected the integration of the Homeland Security Council into the Obama NSC. Some administrations include Situation Room, records management, and administrative staff in their headcount. Others do not.

When the NSC staff becomes too small, too large, or is left without proper oversight, the policy system can break down. An NSC staff that is too small cannot develop the expertise or breadth needed to adequately coordinate among large specialized departments and agencies while also staffing the president and national security adviser. An NSC staff that is too large may tend to "over-coordinate," usurping responsibilities that might normally reside in the rest of the executive branch. An NSC that is left without proper oversight can "go operational," with dire consequences like the Iran-Contra affair during the Reagan administration.

The national security adviser, Marco Rubio, serves double duty as Secretary of State, a dual-role structure not seen since the 1970s.

Finally, while every president has a "kitchen cabinet" of trusted, informal advisers—some expert, some not—their impact on national security depends on the effectiveness and strength of the formal National Security Council process. If the other three pillars of the NSC are strong, the kitchen cabinet can serve as a helpful, additional sounding board for the president. But when informal "national security counselors" replace the formal NSC almost entirely, it undermines interagency coordination and results in uninformed, uncoordinated national security policy.

The gold standard of National Security Council structure and operation is widely considered to be the "Scowcroft model" created by President George H.W. Bush's national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft. The model consists of a "fair" national security adviser (NSA) who has the trust of the president and the respect of the other NSC members. The NSA serves as an honest broker, avoids the limelight, and is an unbiased coordinator of the various policy recommendations of agency representatives.

The NSA chairs a regular schedule of PC meetings, and the deputy NSA chairs a similar set of DC meetings. This process develops multiple options for the president, rather than

NSC from the Inside

There is no better way for a Foreign Service officer to get an insider's view of the interagency policy process than through a detail to the National Security Council.

Over the last several decades, hundreds of Foreign Service professionals on loan from State and other foreign affairs agencies have spent a year or two a stone's throw from the West Wing in the wood-paneled offices of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. They have served as policy directors and senior directors, as watch officers in the White House Situation Room, and as NSC spokespeople, among other positions.

From 2011 to 2013, I had the privilege of serving in the NSC Executive Secretariat as a deputy executive secretary. It was both the most difficult and most rewarding tour of my 28 years in the Foreign Service. In addition to ensuring President Obama had the information he needed to make foreign policy decisions by managing the interagency paper flow and the regular PPC-DC-PC meeting schedule, I had the chance to staff presidential calls from the Oval Office and serve as the NSC representative on Air Force One during domestic and foreign travel. The hours were grueling, the pace unrelenting. But the caliber of people the NSC traditionally attracts and the chance to see decision-making at the highest level made the long hours worthwhile.

The reduced size of the NSC in the second Trump administration means opportunities for State details are now extremely limited. This is a loss both for the NSC and State, which benefited immensely from the experience and knowledge its detailees brought back to Foggy Bottom. When NSC detail opportunities return in the future, State should be first in line to fill them.

—Kelly Adams-Smith

presenting a single NSC or executive branch view on a course of action. Having heard the best recommendations of his experts, the president is then free to decide on a course of action. Such a balanced, well-oiled system produced the broad international coalition that reversed Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait under a United Nations mandate. It also managed the U.S. response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

What Went Wrong with the NSC?

When Congress created the NSC, it assumed that the president would value a deliberative process and would welcome the best advice of his experts, even when that advice conflicted with his assumptions or desired courses of action. Each NSC member institution, including the State Department, has an important role in this process. They provide input on agendas and read-ahead materials, participate in meetings, negotiate recommendations, deconflict actions, and implement decided policy. Cabinet members who trust the national security adviser and the system, and know that their views are reaching the president, will not feel the need to subvert the system. Even in the most coordinated system, process fouls can and do happen, but outcomes on the whole are better coordinated. Such a system, when functioning well, is the envy of democracies around the world, and many of our allies have tried to emulate it.

Currently, there is an imbalance among the NSC's four pillars. National Security Council meetings rarely take place. If televised Cabinet meetings are any indication, if and when NSC meetings do happen, they are likely less a forum for debate than an exercise in groupthink, denying the president the expert advice that Congress established the NSC to give.

The interagency process itself is also broken. One outward expression of its dysfunction is the gutting of NSC staff. Another is the dual-hatting of the national security adviser and Secretary of State. Each role is more than a full-time job. Among other responsibilities, a Secretary of State must conduct our foreign policy with world leaders, requiring extensive time away from Washington; lead the workforce in Foggy Bottom and abroad; and represent State views and recommendations within the NSC.

The national security adviser must lead NSC staff, coordinate the policy process, advise and staff the president, and interact with other countries' national security advisers. No one person can do all this successfully. In addition, having the Secretary of State serve as NSA subverts the idea of the NSA being an honest broker among agencies, denies both State and the NSC the attention and leadership those institutions require, denies the president

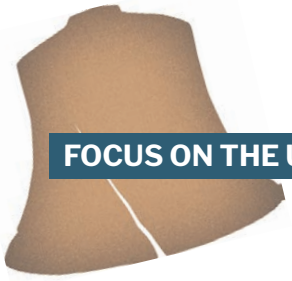
an additional strong, expert voice on foreign policy, and leaves foreign partners without a more readily available interlocutor.

The demands of this dual role make it unsurprising that Secretary Rubio has not (as of this writing) managed to address the department since his first day in office. He has stood by as those reporting to him carried out unprecedented reductions in force (RIFs) and the near elimination of foreign assistance as an instrument of U.S. power, a tool that he supported while in the Senate. Instead of elevating State's role, his dual appointment has diminished the role of both the department and the NSC.

As the primary three pillars of the NSC have been sidelined, the small and informal group of "national security counselors" has come to dominate policymaking. Alongside a tight circle of relatives, special envoys, and business advisers, Secretary Rubio plays a leading role in the president's kitchen cabinet. In this capacity, he seems to operate more as a personal adviser than as a representative of State Department or NSC institutional expertise. This shift toward informal advising at the expense of formal NSC meetings, expertise, and the interagency process has stifled coordination, leaving policy outcomes less predictable, less efficient, and less strategically sound.

This shift toward informal advising at the expense of formal NSC meetings, expertise, and the interagency process has stifled coordination.

America's 250th anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the past and to define both our future role in the world and the policy framework required to sustain it. To lead responsibly, the United States needs an interagency system that leverages the unmatched expertise and institutional knowledge of the U.S. national security enterprise. While a sound interagency process does not guarantee successful policy, a flawed or nonexistent one courts failure. ■



FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

When America Falls Silent: The Strategic Costs of Dismantling VOA

For millions, VOA was a beacon of hope and a window into America that no other institution could replicate.

BY ELEZ BIBERAJ

The United States is confronting the consequences of relinquishing one of its most enduring instruments of soft power a year and a half after the Trump administration dismantled the Voice of America (VOA). That decision, part of an effort to shut down the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), silenced an institution that had delivered independent, fact-based journalism into some of the world's most contested information environments and, through that work, embodied and conveyed America's democratic principles.

The U.S. retreat from the global information contest has eroded its capacity to shape global understanding and ceded influence to competitors who weaponize information. The damage has been profound, lasting, and corrosive to U.S. credibility and long-term national interests. At a time when information itself has become a strategic battleground, the costs of this retreat are too high to ignore, and a course correction is now essential.

For someone who spent more than four decades at VOA, the dismantling has been painful to watch—not out of institutional sentiment, but because of what the United States has forfeited: a trusted voice capable of explaining America accurately and with integrity, advancing its foreign policy objectives through credible reporting, and reaching strategic audiences at the very moment such engagement is most needed.

Elez Biberaj retired from the Voice of America in December 2023 after a 43-year career. From 2005 to 2023, he served as director of VOA's Eurasia Division, overseeing broadcasts to Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. From June to December 2020, during President Trump's first term, he served as acting director of the Voice of America. He holds a PhD in political science from Columbia University.

VOICE OF AMERICA

When U.S. Secretary of State James Baker congratulated the Albanian people on throwing off decades of communist rule in Tirana's Skanderbeg Square on June 22, 1991, Chief of VOA's Albanian Service Elez Biberaj, second from right, served as his translator.

Inside the Voice

I witnessed VOA operate at defining moments in modern history: the collapse of communism and the emergence of democratic systems in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the wars in the Balkans, the Orange and Rose Revolutions, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In each of these periods, VOA proved its worth. It delivered objective news and information, provided an unfiltered window into America's democratic discourse and institutions, and explained U.S. policy in ways that helped foreign publics understand the stakes of U.S. engagement. Today's global information landscape—marked as it is by disinformation, distortions of U.S. actions, rapid technological change, and rising authoritarianism—makes the need for such a voice clear. If VOA did not exist, it would need to be invented.

The Trump administration justified its action by asserting that VOA was politically biased, unaccountable, and vulnerable to foreign influence. No independent investigation or systematic content analysis was conducted; assertion replaced assessment; and unsubstantiated allegations stood in for evidence. Senior officials claimed that VOA had broadcast anti-American news and suggested that future reporting should reflect positively on the United States.

This framing fundamentally misunderstands journalism, treating accuracy and transparency as disloyalty and conflating the essential distinction between independent reporting and political control of VOA. By equating editorial independence with political defiance, the administration undermined an institution that had served presidents of both parties precisely by maintaining its nonpartisan integrity and fulfilling its statutory mandate.

My own experience contradicts the claims of systemic bias and foreign political influence. As director of VOA's Eurasia Division, responsible for coverage of Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, I oversaw journalism grounded in rigorous editorial standards and constant internal scrutiny. As acting director of VOA in 2020, I had direct visibility into the work of all regional divisions. Had systemic bias or foreign influence existed, it would have been immediately apparent. VOA had robust internal checks; U.S. embassies monitored our broadcasts; and VOA journalists themselves would not have tolerated political manipulation. Like any large news organization, VOA occasionally made mistakes, but these were isolated and swiftly corrected through established editorial processes—evidence of a journalistic culture, not institutional bias.

The absence of deliberation behind the decision to shutter VOA was equally troubling. There was no consultation with Congress, the foreign policy community, or American experts in international broadcasting. No one asked the essential question: What happens the day after? What replaces VOA's reach, credibility, and influence?

For decades, VOA was one of the most cost-effective assets in America's global engagement. With a budget of roughly $250 million, modest by national security standards, it reached hundreds of millions of people weekly in 48 languages. Its mandate, enshrined in the VOA Charter, was straightforward: to provide accurate, objective, and comprehensive news; represent America's diversity and values; and present U.S. policies clearly and responsibly. This dual mission was often misunderstood by critics, but it was precisely what made VOA effective. It was not propaganda; it was high-quality journalism practiced in full view of the public, and its credibility was the foundation of its influence.

The consequences of dismantling such a vital institution are visible across every part of the world where U.S. interests are at stake.

A Two-Track Legal Battle

AFSA, along with co-plaintiffs, filed a lawsuit (*Widakuswara v. Lake*, Case No. 25-5144) on March 21, 2025, in the Southern District of N.Y., which was transferred to the U.S. District Court for Washington, D.C., on April 4, 2025.

The lawsuit challenges the unlawful actions taken by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) following Executive Order 14238, which directed massive restructuring and elimination of non-statutory components of USAGM. Plaintiffs argue that USAGM's actions abruptly dismantled human infrastructure needed for its news networks without adequate legal or procedural basis, causing severe harm to both journalists and the public.

On March 17, 2026, a federal district court judge ruled in favor of the plaintiffs on part of the case—a significant win. But on March 31, a federal appeals court partially put that ruling on hold while the case continues. Specifically, the appeals court paused the requirement that USAGM return employees who had been placed on administrative leave back to work. The appeals court also consolidated the case with a related case (*Abramowitz v. Lake*, Case No. 25-5145 and Case No. 26-5086).

The legal battle is moving on two tracks (i.e., in the district court and the court of appeals) simultaneously. On April 6, the plaintiffs asked the district court to enforce an earlier order requiring the government to submit a plan for restoring USAGM operations by April 1, 2026. That same day, the government asked the district court to reconsider its earlier ruling in the plaintiffs' favor. On April 20, the plaintiffs formally opposed that request.

The appeals court set the following schedule for written arguments: the government's brief due May 11, 2026; the plaintiffs' response due June 10, 2026; and the government's reply due July 1, 2026.

—From the AFSA Lawsuit Tracker
https://afsa.org/afsa-lawsuit-tracker

The U.S. retreat from the global information contest has eroded its capacity to shape global understanding and ceded influence to competitors.

Case Studies

Iran offers one of the clearest illustrations of what has been lost. For years, VOA's Farsi language programming provided Iranians with comprehensive, multiplatform coverage that combined daily news, in-depth analysis, live call-in shows, and reporting on human rights and U.S. policy debates. That breadth and consistency created a trusted alternative to state-controlled information and enabled millions of Iranians to follow and understand U.S. actions in real time.

Since the February 28 start of the Iran War, in particular, the absence of sustained, authoritative reporting by VOA in Farsi and other languages has allowed narratives promoted by U.S. adversaries to dominate foreign public discourse. Despite a scramble to restore some programming, the result bears little resemblance to VOA's earlier presence: It reaches fewer audiences, lacks the depth and continuity that once defined VOA's reporting, and cannot counter the volume and velocity of state-driven anti-American narratives.

In Russia, where VOA once provided clarity and a trusted alternative to state propaganda, Kremlin-controlled media now dominates the information space unchallenged. After the Russian government forced VOA to close its Moscow bureau in 2022, we were still able to reach Russians on digital platforms. Now, however, with the termination of VOA broadcasts altogether, reliable information about the U.S. is much harder for ordinary Russians to access, and the loss extends far beyond U.S. policy explanation.

VOA offered what no domestic outlet could safely provide: sustained coverage of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian system, including the shrinking space for political opposition, pressure on independent media, pervasive corruption, and the manipulation of elections and public institutions. It reported on the harassment, imprisonment, and murder of opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny and Boris Nemtsov—stories state media distorted or ignored. With the silencing of VOA, Russians lost

one of the few outlets that helped them understand the political forces shaping their own society.

In Ukraine, VOA's silence has been especially damaging. VOA's Ukrainian Service provided verified reporting during a period of profound national crisis, offering something no domestic outlet could fully replicate: clear explanations of U.S. policy, debates within Washington, and the broader Western response to Russia's aggression. By silencing VOA, the United States eliminated one of the few trusted sources capable of conveying U.S. intentions directly to Ukrainian citizens at a moment when their survival depends on sustained U.S. and European Union engagement.

Across the Balkans and the Caucasus, the loss of VOA's reporting has opened information vacuums that authoritarian and illiberal actors have moved quickly to fill. In Serbia and Bosnia, Russian-backed outlets and local partisan media now shape public perceptions of the United States with almost no counterweight, amplifying disinformation that VOA's fact-based journalism once routinely challenged. In Georgia, where democratic institutions remain fragile and politics are sharply polarized, the absence of a trusted U.S. broadcaster leaves citizens more exposed to anti-American messaging and conspiracy theories pushed by Moscow and its proxies. Armenia, caught between geopolitical pressures and domestic instability, faces a similar surge of external propaganda. In all three cases, VOA's disappearance has weakened the broader information environment that underpins democratic resilience.

The same dynamics have appeared in other regions where information is tightly controlled, media ecosystems are fragile, or U.S. policy is routinely refracted through state-backed competitors. The circumstances differ, but the result is similar: Without a credible U.S. presence, adversaries' interpretations gain greater traction. Although VOA has resumed limited programming to China, the loss of full-scale coverage has left Chinese audiences with no alternative to state-controlled accounts of the United States. In the Middle East and Africa, the end of VOA's broadcasts has enabled regional state media and well resourced external actors to set the terms through which U.S. actions and intentions are understood, with few authoritative alternatives available. Across these regions, the role once played by VOA has been overtaken by Russian, Chinese, Iranian, and other state-backed outlets.

The Most Urgent Step

The cumulative effect of VOA's silence is a widening vacuum in the global information space. The United States is no longer a consistent participant in the conversation about its own intentions, values, and actions. Adversaries are now setting the terms of debate and, in many cases, deciding which audiences matter most and how those audiences should view American power and purpose. Addressing that trend requires a deliberate shift in course and a renewed commitment to sustained engagement.

The most urgent step is a targeted restoration of VOA operations in core strategic theaters. At the same time, the United States must pursue a broader reform effort grounded in strategy rather than politics, reaffirming the principles that have long defined VOA's credibility: editorial independence, accuracy, objectivity, comprehensive reporting, and a clear presentation of U.S. policy and the full diversity of U.S. perspectives. These are not obstacles to effectiveness; they are its foundation.

A bipartisan commission composed of experienced foreign policy and national security practitioners, prominent journalists, and regional experts should be established to review VOA's operations and articulate a renewed mission aligned with today's geopolitical challenges and global information demands. What must emerge is a revitalized, digitally agile, and strategically focused VOA, protected by strong guardrails that ensure its editorial independence.

For generations, VOA was a uniquely trusted instrument of American soft power, its strategic value recognized across administrations and parties. During his visit to VOA on its 40th anniversary in February 1982, President Ronald Reagan described VOA as "the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of democracy" and praised it for remaining "faithful to those standards of journalism that will not compromise the truth."

Nearly three decades later, President Barack Obama marked VOA's 70th anniversary by describing it as "a beacon of truth" that helps people "make informed decisions about their lives and their futures." That bipartisan understanding has not faded: On January 14, 2026, the House of Representatives voted 341-79, a veto-proof majority, to restore VOA funding—a contemporary reaffirmation of VOA's enduring mission and value.

For millions, VOA was a beacon of hope and a window into America that no other institution could replicate. Its silence has eroded the nation's capacity to communicate clearly, credibly, and consistently with audiences that look to the United States not only for reliable information, but also as a benchmark for democratic norms, the rule of law, and press freedoms; as a model of cultural openness and pluralism; and as a counterweight to authoritarian governance.

Restoring America's voice is now an urgent strategic imperative, not a discretionary choice. ■

FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

Are We Seeing the Reemergence of the Spoils System?

The rigorous and competitive process for becoming a Foreign Service officer is in jeopardy due to reforms instituted in 2025 and projected reforms being considered by State Department leadership.

BY STEVE ADAMS-SMITH

Historically, approximately 30 percent of ambassadorial nominations have gone to political appointees—campaign donors, friends of the president, and others with partisan affiliations. While political appointees have experience in business, politics, and other areas and often make important contributions to U.S. diplomacy, many are new to government service, lack foreign policy knowledge, and have never led large teams, especially teams of experts in diplomacy, commerce, defense, development, and intelligence.

Steve Adams-Smith is a retired Senior Foreign Service officer. During his 28-year career, he served in Brussels, London, Moscow, Sofia, and Tallinn, and in multiple positions in Washington, D.C.

By contrast, the Foreign Service, including career ambassadors, has long consisted of career professionals selected through a rigorous and competitive process that has included externally validated assessments based on job analyses that identify the key skills required in Foreign Service work. This process, studiously refined and improved over the last century to emphasize professionalism, is jeopardized by reforms instituted in 2025 and projected reforms being considered by State Department leadership.

The origins of the professional Foreign Service date to the late 1800s and the recognition that the then-predominant spoils system rewarded political allies but failed to provide the nation with a cadre of nonpartisan experts. The recent Netflix series about President James Garfield, "Death by Lightning," based on Candice Millard's book *Destiny of the Republic*, highlights the spoils system that staffed the government with loyalists until the late 1800s. Garfield began a transition toward a professional Civil Service, formalized in the 1883 Pendleton Act.

The 1924 Rogers Act, inspired by the Pendleton Act, prioritized merit-based hiring for Foreign Service officers, including

through what would become the State Department's well-known and widely respected written and oral exams. The Rogers Act started the department on a long journey that—with the exception of certain ambassadorships and other political appointee positions—abandoned the clubby and partisan networks of the spoils system in favor of a competitive selection process.

The competitive Foreign Service selection process is undergoing significant change. Rather than the norm of 30 percent of ambassadorial nominations going to political appointees, more than 90 percent of ambassadorships have gone to political appointees in the past year. In addition, a small, opaque, and ideologically aligned society of career officers and political appointees—the so-called "Ben Franklin Fellowship"—surfaced in 2025 to take up senior positions in Washington and overseas, appointments made outside prevailing competitive personnel assignment processes and without transparency. In 2025, for example, one Ben Franklin Fellowship member, an untenured FS-4, even served as acting Director General, a position normally filled by accomplished, multiterm career Foreign Service officers who have reached the rank of ambassador.

Finally, recently announced changes to the Foreign Service's written and oral exams are calling into question whether entry into the Foreign Service—through a rigorous, nonpartisan, evidence- and merit-based process begun more than a century ago—will remain competitive.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

While he didn't invent the spoils system, President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) normalized and popularized it during his presidency as this 1877 political cartoon by Thomas Nast, "Our Civil Service As It Was," indicates. Though merit system reforms took hold in the 20th century, political patronage remains a serious problem for professional diplomacy and the career Foreign Service.

A Brief History of the Foreign Service Exam

To understand the significance of these changes—specifically those to the Foreign Service's exam-based entry process—a brief review of the history is helpful. The first Foreign Service written and oral exams took place in 1925 and were administered by the Board of Examiners (BEX). Passing the written exam—and in recent years achieving a certain Foreign Service Officer Test (FSOT) score combined with other evaluative factors—was required to proceed to the oral exam. Of the 199 people who took the written exam that year, only 20 eventually passed both the written and oral exams.

The written exam questions were on topics related to economics, political economy, geography, U.S. history and government, the history of different regions of the world important to U.S. interests, and international, maritime, and commercial law. There were also an English composition and comprehension section and a modern language component, including French, German, or Spanish. The oral exam consisted of an interview in which examiners asked questions about general education, culture, current events, and practical experiences. In 1927 BEX authorized the practice of providing general information about the written exam to the public, principally by publishing previous exams as practice tests, something that continues today.

Over subsequent decades, the department responded to the United States' changing role in the world (especially after the end of World War II), the ongoing struggle to cast off the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, and the necessity to build on the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote with the related obligation to enable equal access to federal employment opportunities. Some notable markers include:

• 1946, when a new Foreign Service Act created the Office of the Director General, gave BEX statutory standing, and

More than 90 percent of ambassadorships have gone to political appointees in the past year.

reaffirmed the selection of Foreign Service officers based on merit;

• 1954, when lingering staffing challenges led Secretary John Foster Dulles to appoint the Wriston Committee (John Wriston was president of Brown University) to make recommendations to "strengthen the effectiveness of the professional service";

• 1955 to 1957, when department officials and Foreign Service officers traveled the country to promote interest in the Foreign Service, eventually giving written exams in 65 cities in the United States and abroad and the oral exam in 23; and

• the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s (and not concluding until the 2000s) when, in response to widespread criticism that the Foreign Service was overwhelmingly male and white, the department faced—and lost—class action lawsuits brought by women such as Alison Palmer and Marguerite Cooper and Black diplomats such as Walter J. Thomas.

A Truly American Foreign Service

In the latter half of the 20th century, the written and oral exams remained highly competitive but also imperfect. The department endeavored to bring more rigor and scrutiny to the exams and was acutely aware of the directives of the Foreign Service Act of 1980: "The members of the Foreign Service should be representative of the American people, aware of the principles and history of the United States and informed of current concerns and trends in American life, knowledge of the affairs, cultures, and languages of other countries."

The act reaffirmed admission to the Foreign Service through an "impartial and rigorous examination." The 1980 act also tasked the Board of Examiners with periodic review of the examination process to test for adverse impact against any population of Americans and called for examinations that are "valid in relation to job performance."

As the department tracked and analyzed successful applicants and received feedback from outside parties, the oral exam was partially "unblindfolded" during the George W. Bush administration and under the leadership of Secretary Colin Powell. Previously, examiners did not know the backgrounds of candidates. During the oral assessment, examiners began asking about candidates' experience and motivation to join the Foreign Service. Candidates cited military and Peace Corps experience, language proficiency, a commitment to public service, familiarity with different regions of the world, and knowledge about different cultures and religions.

The Gold Standard of Assessments

During this period, the Una Chapman Cox Foundation commissioned a McKinsey and Company study of the department's hiring process. McKinsey concluded: "The Department's oral assessment is the gold standard of interview processes. The Department is at the cutting edge; the Foreign Service sets a standard for anybody else wanting to conduct one of these kinds of screens." McKinsey's one criticism was the lack of a "total candidate review," including the candidate's education and work history. As noted, the hiring process had been blind to such factors following the Palmer discrimination suit, but the McKinsey recommendation further emphasized the need for the department to develop a total candidate review procedure. That review ultimately resulted in the Qualifications Evaluation Panel (QEP), which would assess candidates after the written exam and before they could move to the oral assessment.

In 2007 the new QEP helped determine the number of written exam passers (the written exam was now known as the FSOT) who would advance to the oral exam (the Foreign Service Oral/Officer Assessment, or FSOA). Because BEX had established a new hurdle in the exam process—in the form of the QEP—the quality of candidates taking the FSOA improved. Candidates with military service, business acumen, and relevant leadership experience were demonstrating that the FSOT and QEP vetting were delivering the highest-quality candidates with the most relevant Foreign Service experience and skills to the BEX assessors during the FSOA. Data also revealed that as those with more experience passed at higher rates, the average age of incoming Foreign Service officers increased.

In addition, the 2020s brought one final significant change to the FSOA. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, BEX initially halted all in-person assessments. Eventually, using lessons learned from numerous pandemic-necessitated adaptations, BEX moved the FSOA to an entirely virtual format, an innovation that also made the FSOA much more accessible by eliminating the requirement for applicants to pay for trips to Washington or other cities where the FSOA was conducted.

Evidence-Based, Competitive Entry Under Threat

Beginning with the Rogers Act, the State Department sought to perfect a merit-based entry process over the course of a century, using competitive exams and objective assessments to identify successful candidates. A written exam assessed a candidate's knowledge of economics, history, and English usage (and, until this past year, workplace situational judgment). The QEP examined candidates' backgrounds to identify those with relevant experience and skill sets for Foreign Service work, including foreign language and leadership skills.

The impartial and multifaceted oral exam looked at a candidate's experience and motivation, assessed responses to challenging hypothetical questions, and judged the ability to work under pressure with colleagues. The entirety of the exam was evaluated and regularly improved with input from industrial psychologists and, in the case of the McKinsey study, was validated as best in class. Exam questions were studied for effectiveness in terms of their relevance for successful Foreign Service work and regularly revised based on job analyses—workforce surveys—that provided up-to-date feedback on contemporary skills required of Foreign Service officers. Many Foreign Services officers are aware of and have participated in these surveys.

This rigorous, merit-based entry process changed significantly in 2025. While the extent to which changes to the FSOT and FSOA will alter the profile of incoming Foreign Service officers is unknown, there are troubling signs. First, despite the recommendations from McKinsey and industrial psychologists, department leadership announced in a brief September 2025 press release the elimination of the personal narratives, a part of the QEP in which candidates wrote essays about their background and experience and addressed six core areas of Foreign Service work. Second, the same press release described a new logical reasoning section of the FSOT—evidently modeled on the Law School Admission Test—without explaining why the format and substance of a graduate school admissions exam might have relevance in selecting Foreign Service officers. The announcement did not include information about a new job analysis or workforce survey to explain why these changes would improve Foreign Service officer selection.

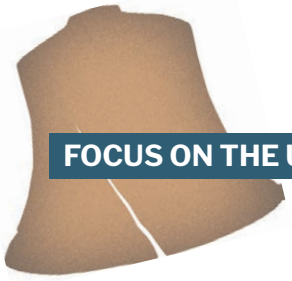
Third, while the department has yet to unveil what will be in a new FSOA or whether the FSOA will even change, it is reasonable to assume that the FSOT and QEP changes will also result in FSOA changes. When the department announced the FSOT changes in September 2025, it also announced, without explaining why, that all candidates who had passed the previous version of the FSOT needed to retake the new version to remain eligible for the FSOA. The department administered the new FSOT in October 2025.

While the extent to which changes to the FSOT and FSOA will alter the profile of incoming Foreign Service officers is unknown, there are troubling signs.

With the elimination of the personal narratives and, perhaps, the QEP altogether, will the department also eliminate the experience and motivation sections of the FSOA that were recommended by McKinsey to provide a whole-of-candidate review? If so, will the department explain why and provide evidence to support its case? Will time-tested FSOA elements such as the group exercise remain? If there are changes to the FSOA, will the department use, as it has for decades, information gathered from workforce surveys to indicate that the same level of detailed job analysis was done to identify skill sets needed by Foreign Service officers?

Perhaps most importantly, the Foreign Service Act of 1980 mandated in law that the State Department assess its exams for adverse impact on certain groups. The Palmer and Thomas settlements were also based on the department righting past wrongs in terms of discriminatory practices. Without rigorous analysis of the basis for any changes to the FSOT and FSOA and with the elimination of the personal narratives, it is unclear what the impact on candidates will be. Congress should insist that the department comply with the law and the settlements in class action suits and explain how it will monitor the FSOT and FSOA for adverse impact on certain groups.

Almost 150 years ago, the United States tested the spoils system and concluded that it was detrimental to American interests. Yet today, more than 90 percent of ambassadors are political appointees and the administration is selecting members of the Foreign Service who publicly affiliate with an ideologically aligned organization for senior-level positions. With these trends hinting at a return to the spoils system, the department has an obligation to prove that the career Foreign Service will remain nonpartisan, selection will be merit based, and the Foreign Service will represent all the United States. ■



FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

The Invention of U.S. Diplomacy

Modern diplomats are keeping Benjamin Franklin's legacy alive, as the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training's oral history archives show.

BY TOM SELINGER

Today's diplomats walk in Benjamin Franklin's footsteps every day, building on his achievements and echoing his tactics, perhaps without even knowing it. With this in mind, in 2012 the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) adopted "Cool Ben"—a portrait of America's first diplomat sporting shades—as an emblem of the organization and its mission: capturing, preserving, and sharing the experiences of America's diplomats. (Note that Cool Ben and ADST have no affiliation with the more recently created Ben Franklin Fellowship.)

ADST's oral history collection now includes interviews with more than 3,000 diplomats and covers a century of U.S. foreign relations. An independent, nonprofit, educational organization, ADST has honored Benjamin Franklin throughout its 40-year history as the model for a kind of diplomacy that values strong alliances, promotes cultural understanding, and leverages mutual interests in international relations.

Famous for countless inventions, from bifocals to lightning rods, Benjamin Franklin was equally brilliant as the inventor of U.S. diplomacy. Dispatched to Paris by the Continental Congress and its Committee of Secret Correspondence as America's first official envoy to a foreign government, Franklin crossed the Atlantic with few instructions and even fewer resources. His task was simply to secure outside assistance for the Revolution. The result was, as the celebrated biographer Stacy Schiff called it, "a great improvisation."

At age 70, Franklin was famous around the world for his writings and experiments with electricity. He found Paris enamored with Enlightenment ideas yet still trapped in monarchical traditions. Walking into Versailles in simple suit and fur cap rather than court dress and powdered wig, Franklin became a sensation as the representative American—a frontier philosopher who has shed the burden of European excess.

Without democratic republics to serve as role models for his diplomacy, Franklin followed his instincts over the course of nearly nine years in France and created something new. Rather than representation of a monarch, Franklin's diplomacy encompassed the full spectrum of our new nation's interests

Tom Selinger is a recently retired Foreign Service officer currently serving as a project manager at the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST). During his 27-year career, he served in five countries across three continents.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Benjamin Franklin, the first official U.S. envoy to a foreign government, is received at the Court of France in 1778, after signing treaties that established the two countries' alliance during the Revolutionary War.

through explaining our people and values, securing supportive allies, promoting our prosperity, and ultimately ensuring American freedom.

The following snapshots of Franklin's diplomatic brilliance in Paris are paired with accounts drawn from ADST interviews showing modern diplomats keeping his legacy alive, as they have been doing for generations.

Exuding Confidence

As the famous representative of a relatively unknown country, Franklin became adept at bluffing his way past obstacles. No one wants to support a losing cause, so Franklin portrayed the colonies as invincible, even as the Continental Army was outgunned in every battle. He insisted that General Washington commanded 80,000 soldiers when the truth was closer to 14,000. When told in 1777 that British General William Howe has taken Philadelphia, Franklin replied, "You are mistaken. Philadelphia has taken Sir William Howe." Franklin's words proved prophetic: Cut off from supply lines, the British abandoned Philadelphia some nine months later.

Rather than representation of a monarch, Franklin's diplomacy encompassed the full spectrum of our new nation's interests.

> *As U.S. deputy chief of mission in Fiji in 2000,* ***Ronald McMullen*** *was just as bold as Franklin. When armed gunmen took over parliament, holding lawmakers hostage in a botched coup attempt, "Embassy Suva went into crisis mode," McMullen recalls. "[We] went to authorized departure because of the unrest and rising danger. A few days later, an American journalist walked into parliament to interview hostage takers and was promptly taken prisoner himself."*
>
> *At the gates of parliament, McMullen managed to reach a senior insurgent on a cell phone and asked about the detained American. Here's what happened next, in McMullen's words:*
>
> *"'That's right,' the rebel said. 'We've got him here. He's now our prisoner.'*

Benjamin Franklin set the standard for modern diplomatic practitioners, and his wisdom continues to resonate.

"'Listen,' I said. 'You're up to your eyeballs in trouble. You do not want to mess with the United States of America. If that American citizen doesn't walk out the front gates of parliament in 20 minutes, all hell is going to rain down on your head.'

"And I hung up. It was a complete bluff. We had nothing—no resources, no plan B. Twenty minutes later, the American journalist walked free out the gates."

Fueling the American Economy

Franklin convinced both the French and Spanish to keep their ports around the world open to American ships, allowing our businesses to continue growing despite a British blockade. He negotiated the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France, which recognized American independence and established mutual commercial and navigation rights. As a printer, postmaster, and inventor, Franklin remained a proponent of free and open international trade throughout his life.

Lauri Fitz-Pegado *continued Franklin's work to promote American trade when she became director general of the U.S. and Foreign Commercial Service in 1994 and led a team that established new, stand-alone commercial centers outside embassy complexes to facilitate overseas access for the private sector.*

"It was a team that worked well together," Fitz-Pegado remembers. "We opened these centers in major commercial/business cities—Shanghai, São Paulo, Johannesburg. … When we traveled throughout the world, we took high-level business representatives involved in industries of importance to the country to meet with their counterparts: the trade ministers, the commercial people, companies, and presidents … decision-makers at the highest levels.

"We were traveling, seeing American businesses win where they hadn't won before. They were competing against the French and the Germans, and they were winning contracts, and businesses were excited, because a lot of companies said that they didn't really know what the Commerce Department could do for them. Well, now they knew, and now they had an advocate, and they had an effective one."

Formalizing an Alliance

While trying to throw off the shackles of one monarchy, Franklin operated inside the court of another. This unsettled his fellow American commissioners, but Franklin realized the need to work on Versailles' terms and at Versailles' pace. He also understood the fundamental truth of diplomacy: Countries act in their own best interest. France's greatest fear was reconciliation between Britain and the colonies, who together had defeated French and Spanish forces in the Seven Years' War, and Franklin exploited it.

He arranged covert shipments of arms and critical supplies for the Continental Army through fictional trading companies financed by the courts in Paris and Madrid, appealing to their thirst for revenge without forcing them to return to open warfare with Britain. When the British offered a peace proposal, Franklin was quick to reject it but still made sure the French Foreign Minister was aware, insinuating that a more generous offer from London might produce a settlement without more clarity on where France stood.

Franklin was so successful in convincing Louis XVI that America's victory was vital to France that it was the French who insisted on signing the 1778 Treaty of Alliance with the United States without delay. The treaty joined the two in a military alliance and guaranteed that neither side would consider peace until American independence was established. Spain's 1779 declaration of war against Britain added to Franklin's diplomatic triumph.

As U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) in 1990, ***Thomas Pickering*** *was operating, like Franklin, in an environment with its own rules and pace when he got word of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. He organized a late-night UN Security Council session to call for an Iraqi withdrawal, then headed to the White House for an emergency National Security Council meeting. He realized that the administration was exclusively focused on defending Saudi Arabia from a continued Iraqi advance.*

"I spoke up near the end of the meeting," Pickering recalls, "and said I thought the credibility of the president's foreign policy in the region hinged on our being able to make a commitment to liberate Kuwait. … We could not allow the creation of a precedent for a continued kind of Iraqi gobbling up of other states and territories in the region."

After inspiring a U.S. commitment to pushing Iraqi forces back, Pickering focused on creating the conditions to allow other nations to join the effort. This culminated with UN

Security Council Resolution 678 authorizing the international community to "use all necessary means" to restore Kuwait's borders.

Thanks to Pickering's efforts, 33 other nations joined U.S. forces in the liberation of Kuwait. "We had shown," Pickering remembers, "that the UN Security Council could be a force to support and strengthen American policy."

Negotiating Terms of Peace

When the United States finally defeated the British, Franklin joined the delegation that negotiated a just peace. He rejected proposals for reparations to British loyalists and smoothed France's ruffled feathers as talks proceeded without them. After the 1783 Treaty of Paris was signed and ratified, Franklin sent England's ratification back to Congress, writing: "Thus the great and hazardous enterprise we have been engaged in, is, God be praised, happily completed." America had gone from a rebellion to a republic.

***Miriam Sapiro**, a legal expert on the State Department's Policy Planning staff, joined the U.S. negotiating team at the Dayton peace talks in 1995. She helped craft an agreement to end the fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the challenge was daunting.*

"We knew there needed to be a new constitution. There needed to be elections. We needed to protect human rights. There would be refugee issues, displaced persons issues, national monuments. … We were really starting from scratch thinking about what could help end this conflict and make Bosnia a country that could one day succeed. That's what made it so interesting and challenging. We did a lot of drafting, redrafting, negotiating, redrafting, brainstorming, redrafting, negotiating."

After 21 exhausting days, the warring parties finally reached an agreement. But when representatives of the multinational Contact Group gathered to initial as witnesses, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov hesitated.

"He said, 'I cannot initial,'" Sapiro recalls, "'because it refers to NATO in Annex One.' And I said, 'Well, the cameras are rolling. It's a little bit late to raise that objection now. So I suggest you initial, and you can raise questions before the signing ceremony in Paris.' So he initialed, but wrote 'except for 1A.' It's ironic because if you actually looked at the annex, it talked about NATO states and non-NATO states cooperating. [The administration] worked hard to find a way for Russian troops to serve alongside American troops in Bosnia. And it worked."

ADST

In 2012 the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training adopted "Cool Ben," America's envoy in Paris sporting shades, as an emblem of the organization and its mission.

As America's first official envoy to a foreign government, Franklin crossed the Atlantic with few instructions and even fewer resources.

A Lasting Legacy

Benjamin Franklin set the standard for modern diplomatic practitioners, and his wisdom continues to resonate. In the same letter that accompanied the ratified peace treaty back to Philadelphia, Franklin left a prescient warning: "Our future safety will depend on our union and virtue. … If we do not convince the world that we are a nation to be depended on for fidelity in treaties, if we appear negligent in paying our debts, and ungrateful to those who have served and befriended us, our reputation, and all the strength it is capable of procuring, will be lost, and fresh attacks upon us will be encouraged and promoted." ■

FOCUS ON THE U.S. IN THE WORLD AT 250

The Past Is Never Past: How State Historians Tell America's Foreign Policy Story

Take a look inside one of the U.S. government's oldest, largest, and most significant responsible transparency undertakings.

BY LYNETTE EVANS-TIERNAN AND JAMES GRAHAM WILSON

Think diplomacy is all handshakes and summits? Think again. Behind the scenes, historians at the State Department are uncovering and preserving the real story of U.S. foreign policy through the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, a remarkable effort in government transparency and historical documentation.

On September 30, 2025, the State Department's Office of the Historian released the latest in this series, *Volume XXXI, START I, 1989-1991*, the second of two volumes on the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

"The past is never dead," as William Faulkner famously put it. "It's not even past." As we commemorate America's 250th birthday, nuclear arms have returned to the fore of U.S. national security and diplomacy—just as they were for the bicentennial in 1976. They pose difficult problems. Unlike 50 years ago,

Lynette Evans-Tiernan is a public affairs officer at the U.S. Department of State, where she serves as strategic communications adviser in the Office of the Historian. Over a 20-year career, she has worked across Washington bureaus and diplomatic missions overseas on a broad range of regional and thematic foreign policy issues. Her expertise includes strategic communications, digital engagement, and global campaigns advancing U.S. foreign policy with diverse audiences. She received a BA from the University of Virginia in 2006 and an MA from The George Washington University in 2013.

James Graham Wilson is a supervisory historian in the Office of the Historian at the Department of State, where he has compiled 10 volumes in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series. He is also the author of America's Cold Warrior: Paul Nitze and National Security from Roosevelt to Reagan *(Cornell University Press, 2024) and* The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War *(Cornell University Press, 2014). He received a BA from Vassar College in 2003 and a PhD from the University of Virginia in 2011.*

however, U.S. diplomats as well as anyone else with access to a computer can now draw on the decision-making and negotiating record of a treaty that reduced strategic offensive arms. Covering 1982–1991, the two START I FRUS volumes include 584 documents totaling 2,705 pages—a small fraction of the 310,000 documents available at https://history.state.gov/.

Following the book's release, I sat down with the compiler, James Graham Wilson, to learn how these volumes came together, why this work matters, and the surprising discoveries that can turn up in the archives.

—Lynette Evans-Tiernan

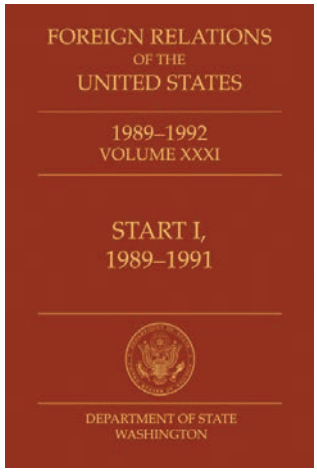
Lynette Evans-Tiernan: *For readers who may not know the Foreign Relations of the United States series, what is it, and what exactly does a compiler do?*

James Graham Wilson: Most people have never heard of FRUS, which is a shame because it's one of the biggest and most significant transparency projects the U.S. government has ever undertaken. We've been publishing FRUS since 1861, starting with the Lincoln administration, and today it runs to hundreds of volumes covering every presidency since, as well as a book on its own history. Anyone can read the series for free at https://history.state.gov.

It takes a lot of work to produce a volume. We have statutory access to official government records that are 20 years and older, meaning we look through hundreds of thousands of documents on a particular topic—in this case, internal U.S. deliberations and U.S.-Soviet negotiations on strategic offensive arms from 1989 to 1991. We go through unprocessed, still-classified records from not only the Department of State but also the Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, and Presidential Records including the National Security Council.

We select a few hundred of them, then annotate them as a volume in the appropriate presidential subseries within the broader FRUS series. The draft volume then undergoes an internal peer review process to ensure it meets the series' stylistic guidelines and the accuracy and completeness standards required by law.

We also have to send each volume out for declassification review by every government agency that has equities in the documents included in it. Declassification can take years; add on another year or two for editing, proofreading, and prepping for publication,



I think the fundamental challenge is trying to tell a coherent story while being judicious and fair to the individuals who lived it.

and you can see that it takes a host of people and a great deal of time to prepare the series.

Our mission is laid out in Section 198 of Public Law 102-138, which President George H.W. Bush signed on October 28, 1991: FRUS should be "a thorough, accurate, and reliable record of major U.S. foreign policy decisions and significant U.S. diplomatic activity." The origins of the mission lie in congressional requests to the executive branch for information, which by 1800 had become an established procedure, with allowances made for reservations to balance the public's right to know with the government's duty to protect.

LET: *Why does this work matter right now, as we mark 250 years of U.S. history?*

JGW: FRUS is an institution you can trust. And as Ronald Reagan would say, "Trust, but verify." We lay out in the preface to each volume the sources we consulted and our logic for crafting the volume or chapters. We also describe the stages of review and quality assurance. If we cannot locate a document, we say so in the annotations. If interagency declassification partners protect three lines of a document, we write: "three lines not declassified."

LET: *What's the most challenging part of compiling a volume like START I?*

JGW: I think the fundamental challenge is trying to tell a coherent story while being judicious and fair to the individuals who lived it. I hope that the 584 documents in the START I volumes add up to more than the sum of their parts. We have a strict page limit, and it's hard to leave things out!

Longtime State Department nuclear expert Ed Ifft led the State Department's declassification review of this volume. He had been an important member of the U.S. delegation in Geneva during the period 1989–1991, and

It's wonderful to hear a diplomat say … "I used FRUS in college, and it opened up a new world to me."

he was not happy that I had not included all the thousands of pages that he and others on the delegation had sent via front channels, and back channels, from Geneva to Washington. How could I leave all that out? Well, it's not easy.

LET: *What's the most rewarding part of the job?*

JGW: It's wonderful to hear a diplomat say some variant of "I used FRUS in college, and it opened up a new world to me." As we inch closer to the present with these volumes, more of the participants in them are still alive—and in even more instances the work of their mentors appears in the volumes. Let me be completely honest though: Seeing a volume appear in print and online is the single most rewarding part. It is deeply satisfying.

We have more than 40 volumes in the interagency declassification pipeline. That means my colleagues and I have selected and annotated all the documents, the volumes have gone through multiple internal peer reviews, and in many instances, the volume is 99 percent declassified. And it's that final 1 percent that can take a decade.

LET: *Do you have a favorite "hidden gem" from the START I research?*

JGW: Even though the latest volume formally covers 1989–1991, I found a really interesting document from September 1988, where Vice President George H.W. Bush meets with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze—during the height of the U.S. presidential campaign—and tells him that should he win, he would have to work very hard to win the support of conservative Republicans to ratify a START agreement.

It's a gem that shows Bush's private candor—what he said to Shevardnadze is not quite how he would have phrased things publicly.

LET: *How did you find your way into this career?*

JGW: I trace my interest in the Cold War back to watching the CNN documentary series about it in high school in the mid-1990s. I was in the Vassar College Main Library on the morning of September 11, 2001—everyone alive then remembers where they were. In subsequent years, I became moderately obsessed with the ideas, events, and people that brought about the end of the Cold War. From 2005 to 2011, I was fortunate to be writing a dissertation at the University of Virginia, with a wonderful adviser, Melvyn P. Leffler, on the latter years of the Cold War just as the transcripts of the summits of the Reagan-Gorbachev encounters were being declassified.

In 2011 the Office of the Historian was looking for folks with a background in the Reagan archives to keep digging into the documents and produce the FRUS volumes for the Reagan administration. They hired both me and Elizabeth Charles, who has been a dear friend and colleague. So, my career has featured cascading good fortune.

LET: *What's one FRUS volume you think every American should read, and why?*

JGW: My longtime colleague Kristin Ahlberg's *Foundations of Foreign Policy*, which is Volume I in the FRUS set on the Reagan administration [1981–1988]. Kristin reviewed several dozen Reagan volumes while also preparing that one; it covers the foundational documents of not only 1981–1988, but also important moments in Reagan's campaign for the presidency [1975–1980]. Kristin has played some role in virtually every FRUS volume the office has released this century. She's a national treasure.

LET: *Is there a particular period or policy area you find especially fascinating to work on? Why?*

JGW: I have spent much of the past 20 years focused on the end of the Cold War. I conceive of that period as roughly 1979–1991. What's fascinating to me is to discover the origins of a story that becomes really important and also the fact that there is always another angle to consider.

With respect to *START I, 1989–1991*, one such story is how the United States and Russia—after the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991—sketched out the follow-on negotiations that led to START II, which President George H.W. Bush and President Boris Yeltsin signed in January 1993.

START II was supposed to eliminate multiple independent reentry vehicles [MIRVs] on land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBMs]. While it never entered into force, it was a landmark achievement I think policymakers ought to consider when they are thinking about the long-term goals of any potential negotiations.

LET: *How do you hope students or the public will use these volumes?*

JGW: I hope that students will use FRUS volumes to write good papers. I don't just mean an "A" paper—though I certainly think FRUS provides an avenue toward achieving that. I mean that they will empathize with the humans who appear throughout the pages of FRUS volumes, and grapple with the dilemmas and trade-offs they face. How would you do it better? That question endures beyond grading. "Go to the sources" is the mantra I learned in college.

LET: *How do you hope policymakers will use these volumes? Asked another way, what role do you think historians play in strengthening diplomacy?*

JGW: I hope that readers actively working on national security and diplomacy will take consolation from FRUS. There's an evocative passage from a speech that then Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave at the Harvard Club in New York City in June 1946: "The problems that bedevil American foreign policy are not like headaches. With those, you take a powder and they are gone. Instead, they are like the pain of earning a living. They will stay with us until death."

That still resonates today, 250 years into American history. Policymakers sometimes presume that they are the first to encounter a particular set of challenges. They are not. Just peruse FRUS, and you will see that no one is the first. Nor did the so-called "Wise Men" of the early Cold War have it all figured out.

LET: *What do you wish more people understood about your work?*

JGW: It sometimes amuses me—though does not upset me—when people presume that FRUS volumes consist only of State Department documents. The proportion of agency documents varies based on the topic. For instance, in a volume I worked on that focuses heavily on nuclear strategy, *National Security Policy 1977–1980*, we included no more than a small handful of State Department documents. The documents are mostly from the National Security Council [NSC] and Department of Defense—with a smattering from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Also, if an NSC staffer sends a handful of papers to the national security adviser or the president, and one of them is from the State Department, and the staffer has written, "the State Department paper is bad," we print all that. We do not sanitize anything to put the State Department in a better or worse light. We include the material we think is most important. Redactions result from efforts to protect national security information, not because something might embarrass a particular U.S. agency.

Redactions result from efforts to protect national security information, not because something might embarrass a particular U.S. agency.

LET: *How has technology changed the way you do your job compared to earlier generations of compilers?*

JGW: Technology has made certain things—such as the retrieval of basic factual information—easier. For end users of FRUS, you can use the filters and keyword searches on the website to isolate particular episodes, for example the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. You can see everything else that happens in October 1962, including the war that breaks out between China and India.

In compiling the volumes, we are limited by the fact that we have an immense number of historical documents, and we need to abide by whatever classification they were given 40 years ago. That makes it difficult to scan everything into one repository that we can access from our desks. Still, we are doing our level best to incorporate generative AI into various parts of the production cycle to accelerate outputs.

But our "thorough, accurate, and reliable" mandate prohibits any margin of error. We can't have 99 percent Optical Character Recognition [OCR] accuracy of a PDF; we need 100 percent. We can't allow a single line of text or code that reveals classified information. So, here and everywhere else, we need to maintain constant human vigilance.

LET: *Any closing thoughts?*

JGW: *START I* doesn't offer a blueprint for every future endeavor, but it does show what sustained, serious diplomacy can achieve under real pressure. If the volumes help students, citizens, and policymakers see that more clearly, then all those hours in the archives were worth it. ■

FEATURE

Making Truth Travel Faster Than Lies

Public Diplomacy at the Front Lines of Migration

Creative public diplomacy plays a vital, leading role in combating illegal immigration at U.S. Embassy Mexico City.

BY ANDREA STANFORD

Foreign Service Officer Andrea Stanford is currently serving at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City. Over the past 14 years, she has served in the press office of the Western Hemisphere Affairs Bureau (WHA), at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in New York, in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), in the Foreign Press Center, and at Mission China.

She earned the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy's 2025 Ameri Prize for Innovation in Public Diplomacy, which recognizes U.S. officers whose creativity and leadership advance the practice of public diplomacy worldwide. The views expressed are her own, not necessarily those of the U.S. government or the State Department.

When I began my assignment at the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, migrant numbers were staggering. At the height of the crisis, more than 10,000 people reached the U.S.-Mexico border each day, many misled by false information. They were motivated but deceived by smugglers who had mastered social media better than we had. The smugglers' message was simple and dangerous: "Cross today. The border is open."

Countering illegal immigration drives Mission Mexico's work, and as the lead for the messaging—and an experienced public diplomacy officer—I made sure public diplomacy joined the policy conversation from day one. When we shape policy—not just communicate it—we translate complexity into clarity, turn skepticism into understanding, and transform information into action.

Those are the moments when public diplomacy does its best work. We don't just explain policy—where strategy meets storytelling, we make that strategy understandable, credible, and actionable for the people it serves.

A Policy Challenge with Human Consequences

Illegal immigration is one of our hemisphere's most pressing challenges. Our public diplomacy team found that immigrants often lacked clear, reliable information about U.S. policies and fell prey to false promises from smugglers. The U.S. government had few direct ways to share timely updates, allowing criminal networks to spread false information. The result was confusion and tragedy: Families sold their homes based on lies and risked

COURTESY OF ANDREA STANFORD

U.S. Embassy Mexico City launched the "Tortipapel" campaign to print important migration messages and QR codes directly on tortilla wrappers along with the embassy seal as shown here.

their children's lives after hearing "Come today, the border will close tomorrow."

We were uniquely positioned to understand the problem and respond. Our comparative advantage has always been listening—knowing what information people receive, how they interpret policy, and which messages move them to action.

We began with research, not rhetoric, turning everyday tools into strategic channels. Through more than 60 focus groups across Mexico, we asked migrants what they had heard and what would make them reconsider illegally immigrating to the United States. Those conversations became the backbone of our campaign.

The following describes how we used tools at hand to innovate at scale and launch effective campaigns to tackle the problem.

Tortipapel: Messaging on the Table

In Mexico, tortillas are universal—a daily staple on nearly every table. Recognizing their unmatched reach, we launched the "Tortipapel" campaign to print important migration messages and QR codes directly on tortilla wrappers. We distributed more than one million wrappers to tortilla shop owners in six strategically selected states—areas identified by the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency data as having the highest outmigration and recidivism rates.

Shop owners used the wrappers in their daily sales, reaching an estimated 2.5 million people. Phase One shared verified information about safe, legal options, while Phase Two warned that "The U.S. border is closed," urging migrants not to trust smugglers and to rely on official U.S. sources instead.

The campaign's impact spread far beyond the table. Local media covered the story nationwide. Tortilla shop owners—trusted figures in their communities—became informal ambassadors, correcting rumors and pointing customers to official channels. The project also strengthened our partnership with a Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) exchange alumnus who founded Tortipapel, a company that uses food-grade paper wrappers to deliver marketing messages.

The Tortipapel campaign became a true force multiplier—a cultural touchpoint carrying accurate information into millions of homes and conversations.

Proyecto Plantalla: Reaching Migrants Where They Are

We partnered with the International Organization for Migration to turn migrant shelter walls into projection screens, streaming real-time policy updates and Facebook Live sessions straight to migrants. The project reached more than 100 shelters across Mexico and connected with 70 percent of all migrants in transit who used the shelter network.

Migración USA: A New Digital Frontier

We saw the potential to reach migrants directly and built a messaging platform with funding from the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs' Public Diplomacy Office (WHA/PDA). With continued support from WHA/PDA and Global Public Affairs (GPA), we expanded it into the State Department's first official migration messaging network, spanning Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and a verified WhatsApp channel in Spanish. GPA helped brand and certify the accounts as official U.S. government platforms with .gov verification.

What began in Mexico quickly grew into a regional communication hub: The WhatsApp network expanded from 30,000 to more than 360,000 subscribers, while our other platforms grew from zero to roughly 600,000 followers across platforms. Together, they now reach audiences across the region and make up the U.S. government's largest direct-to-migrant communication network.

Facebook Live: A First

Embassy Mexico City launched the State Department's first monthly Facebook Live series from migrant shelters across Mexico, bringing our message directly to target audiences. In these sessions, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials answered individuals' questions in Spanish, ultimately reaching nearly a million viewers. Online, Mission

The most important lesson: Deterrence messaging must be human, immediate, and trustworthy.

Mexico also began directly engaging smuggler videos, posting corrective responses, and flagging viral falsehoods. Many social media platforms then independently removed the accounts for violating their terms of use. Together, these tools pushed one goal: to reach people before the smugglers do.

Results and Lessons

Public diplomacy rarely lends itself to concrete metrics, but in this case, the data spoke for itself. Daily encounters—once soaring above 10,000—fell to fewer than 200 as clear, consistent messaging, reinforced by strengthened U.S. and Mexican enforcement, helped puncture smuggler narratives and empower people to make informed, safer choices.

The WhatsApp platform grew by more than 1,100 percent in six months. The weekly DHS media series—with spokespeople rotating across consulates—generated a reach of more than 100 million and created more than 200 news stories clarifying enforcement and repatriation policies. Border reporting tours brought 65 journalists from 10 countries to observe conditions firsthand, resulting in more than 1,000 balanced news reports across regional and national outlets.

Collaboration deepened. With WHA/PDA funding and support, Mission Mexico used the Migration False Narratives Report to coordinate responses with Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE) and other partners. The report has become a shared reference tool, with SRE now using our data to counter false claims—a model of bilateral coordination.

Public diplomacy is often described as "soft power." But when policy and public diplomacy align, and the goal is to deter criminal organizations from exploiting vulnerable people, there's nothing soft about it. The tools may be cultural, linguistic, and narrative, but their effects are strategic and measurable.

The most important lesson: Deterrence messaging must be human, immediate, and trustworthy. People don't respond to policy language. Instead, they respond to people who sound like them, who meet them in spaces they trust, and who answer their questions in real time.

Building a Model for Our Hemisphere

To sustain this work, Mission Mexico—with WHA/PDA's partnership and support—hosted the first WHA Migration Messaging Conference in October 2024. The Mexico City event gathered more than 50 U.S. missions and interagency representatives to share lessons and align regional messaging, resulting in the first unified communications framework on migration for the Western Hemisphere.

The model, now replicated across the region, rests on three pillars:

- **Cultural proximity.** Messages resonate when they feel local—through tortillas, telenovelas (soap operas), or trusted influencers.
- **Digital agility.** Rapid feedback loops allow posts to adjust messaging within hours, not weeks.
- **Interagency integration.** When agencies speak with one voice, illegal immigrants listen—and smugglers do too.

The migration campaign reiterated a larger truth: Public diplomacy is policy. When people act on false information, the consequences reverberate beyond borders. In that sense, public diplomacy is as much a national security tool as a communication tool. This is why PD professionals are necessary voices at the policy table—including at the National Security Council. We are often the first to sense how a policy lands, the first to spot a misinterpretation, and the first to identify the narrative space our adversaries could exploit.

We built the campaign's success on collaboration, risk-taking, and agility. Public diplomacy professionals excel at building relationships over time, but today's information space moves in minutes—sometimes in three-second clips. We must act with the same urgency as those who spread falsehoods.

This work also demonstrates that innovation thrives at posts. Many of our most effective ideas—from the tortilla campaign to WhatsApp engagement in Spanish—came not from Washington but from local staff, exchange program alumni, and partners who understand their communities best. The State Department should continue to cultivate that field-driven creativity.

Our work represents a collective achievement, over time, of local staff, American direct hires, ECA program alumni, WHA/PDA, GPA, embassy leadership that encouraged creativity, and partners who believed that information can save lives and combat illegal immigration.

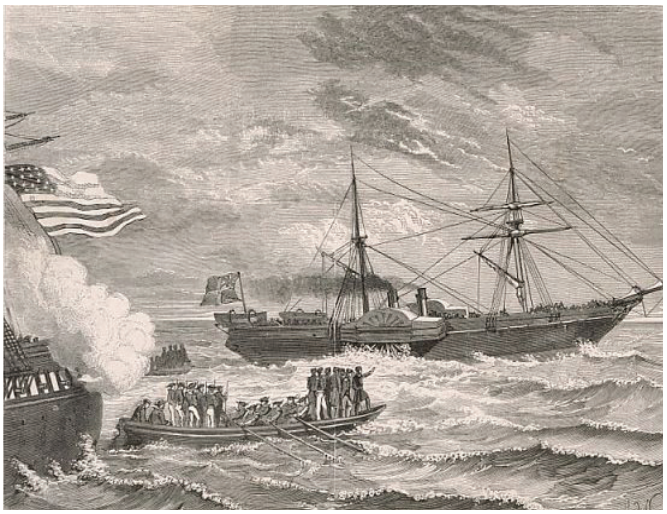
In the end, our greatest innovation wasn't technological. It was the simple act of listening—to migrants, journalists, and shelter volunteers—and translating policy into something human, immediate, and true. ■

FS HERITAGE

The *Trent* Affair
When *Diplomacy* Saved the *Union*

When a ship's seizure threatened to bring Great Britain into the Civil War on the side of the South, smart diplomacy averted the crisis.

BY RICHARD HINMAN



THE CHRONICLE

The Union ship *San Jacinto* halts the RMS *Trent*.

Rich Hinman is a retired Foreign Service officer who served in the Czech Republic, India, Jordan, Tunisia, Russia, and Afghanistan. He is also a retired Army officer, former Secret Service agent, and an avid outdoorsman and amateur historian.

Relatively few people remember the *Trent* affair of 1861–1862 or know the role that statecraft and diplomacy played in preventing a potentially catastrophic outcome in the U.S. Civil War.

U.S. boarding of the mail ship RMS *Trent* led the United States and Great Britain to the precipice of another conflict, one the Lincoln administration ultimately avoided with sound diplomacy and competent crisis management.

In late 1861, hoping for European recognition and even intervention in America's internecine conflict, Confederate President Jefferson Davis dispatched two envoys, James Mason and John Slidell, to Britain and France to press the Confederate cause. The Virginia-born Mason was a longtime advocate for slavery and secession who had helped draft the infamous Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 as a then U.S. senator. Slidell similarly represented Louisiana in the Senate until secession. He had previously served as President James Polk's envoy to Mexico during and after the Mexican-American War. To circumvent logistical challenges and avoid prowling Union warships, the pair went first to the Caribbean and subsequently booked passage to London from Havana on a British mail ship, the RMS *Trent*.

COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Confederate supporters James Mason and John Slidell are removed from the RMS *Trent* by Union captain Charles Wilkes on November 8, 1861.

The Union government caught wind of the diplomatic mission and ordered the fleet to intercept the duo. On November 8, 1861, Captain Charles Wilkes of the USS *San Jacinto*, having learned of the mission via Cuban newspapers, intercepted the *Trent* and boarded it. After some deliberation, Wilkes seized Mason and Slidell, deeming the pair to be "contraband of war." Wilkes permitted the *Trent* to proceed to Britain, but he brought the two envoys as prisoners to Hampton Roads, Virginia.

News of the seizure electrified both the United States and Britain, animating public opinion in both countries with righteous anger and patriotic fervor. Emboldened by the ambient Anglophobia of 19th-century America, the U.S. public praised Captain Wilkes. Congress unanimously passed a resolution saluting his conduct. Newspapers and public figures throughout the country extolled the Navy's actions. Even typically savvy and effective members of Lincoln's Cabinet welcomed war with Britain, harboring the delusional belief that the conflict would reunite North and South against a common foe.

When the news reached London on November 27, British opinion exploded in rage and indignation. Prime Minister Palmerston quickly came under pressure from all parts of the body politic to prepare for war with United States. In an era where "national honor" was a sacred totem to be defended even at the price of war, British papers were uncompromising in the early stages of the crisis.

Viewing Wilkes' action as an outrageous violation of neutral rights little short of piracy, European opinion largely backed London, although each state's reaction also incorporated its own geopolitical calculations. Tsarist Russia, for example, still recovering from its humiliating defeat in the Crimean War, backed the United States. Though opinion was still malleable at this stage in the conflict, the Civil War was even then assuming a central role in Europe's century-long social battle between autocracy and republicanism. Liberal opinion was tilting toward Washington, and it would break decisively so after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Public Opinion and the Practice of Diplomacy

For a diplomatic historian, the *Trent* affair marks one of the first instances in Western history in which public opinion played a crucial role in foreign affairs. Before the emergence of republican governments expanded the aperture of public participation in politics, monarchs and ministers enjoyed broad freedom of action in affairs of state. Advances in literacy, the rise of a bourgeoisie, and the growth of newspapers and journals, however, expanded the body politic. At the same time, rapid spread of the telegraph in both countries and the speed with which steamships traversed the ocean created a prototypical version of today's news cycle, with all the accompanying churn and drama. In 1861 public opinion and a media feeding frenzy was pushing both governments toward war.

Beneath the bluster, however, both sides were apprehensive at the prospect of fighting. For the Lincoln administration, conflict with Britain and possibly France presented a worst-case strategic scenario. European recognition of the Confederacy would be disastrous, and actual military intervention on its behalf would be worse. The Union government realized that customary international law contravened Wilkes' actions, and it now found itself defending actions that it had considered a casus belli against Great Britain in 1812. Wilkes' intemperate seizure of Slidell and Mason threatened to bring about the very purpose for which the Confederates had dispatched the pair.

Britain, however, was itself dismayed at the potential challenges of a major conflict with a rapidly mobilizing United States. Canada was virtually defenseless against a U.S. incursion, and London scrambled to find even a token force of 8,000 troops to

reinforce it from a putative U.S. invasion force many times larger. Though Britannia ruled the waves, the U.S. Navy was itself a rapidly growing rival. Furthermore, though there were hotbeds of pro-Southern sentiment in England, many Britons were appalled at the idea of a de facto alliance with a Confederacy fighting to maintain slavery.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams, served as ambassador to Great Britain during the Civil War.

The Diplomats Get to Work

As events unfolded, Britain and the United States were both exceptionally well served by their respective diplomats. In Washington, D.C., Lord Richard Lyons had established a solid working relationship with the government. Charles Francis Adams Sr., the scion of the Massachusetts Adams family (he was the son of President John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams), had likewise cultivated a web of prominent contacts and built mechanisms to gather information and influence British policy. Adams effectively communicated the depth of British outrage over the seizure, leaving Washington in no doubt over the gravity of the crisis.

The first break in what seemed an inevitable path to a lose-lose war came when Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, urged a slight softening of what was still a harsh letter from the British foreign minister to Washington, D.C., demanding an apology and the envoys' release. Albert's modified text allowed the possibility that Washington was unaware of Wilkes' plan and that it did not reflect U.S. policy. After presenting this communication to Lincoln's shrewd and effective Secretary of State, William Seward, Lyons adroitly

News of the seizure electrified both the United States and Britain, animating public opinion in both countries with righteous anger and patriotic fervor.

ignored the seven-day suspense stipulated in the letter for a U.S. response, allowing time for tempers to cool and for both sides to reconsider the cost of conflict.

Seward and Lincoln used the time and the modified text wisely. After weeks, public opinion pivoted to other matters, and seizing on Albert's added opening, Lincoln decided to deescalate the brewing confrontation with Britain, telling Cabinet hawks, that the United States should fight "one war at a time." Without explicitly disavowing Wilkes' action or issuing the abject public apology sought by London, the U.S. government nevertheless released Mason and Slidell and allowed them to proceed to London. Seward told Lord Lyons that Wilkes should have brought the ship to maritime prize court for disposition rather than seizing the two envoys.

A Victory for the Union

The *Trent* affair ended as quickly as it began, and bilateral relations resumed a stable—if uneasy—trajectory. The outcome was a crucial defeat for Richmond. Prime Minister Palmerston would again consider recognizing the Confederacy the next year, but that discussion was preempted by the Union victory at Antietam in September 1862. Even a hypothetical recognition at that stage would have been a far cry from the de facto co-belligerency that could have resulted from the *Trent* affair.

Slidell and Mason's best service to the Confederacy was probably their captivity by the Union. Once ensconced in London and Paris, they proved singularly ineffective. Although Slidell enjoyed a measure of access to French elites, he was unable to secure French recognition or meaningful support, although he did secure a loan for the Confederacy. In London, though Mason appealed to a "Confederate Lobby" among some merchant and upper-class circles, many power brokers were put off by his long-winded pro-slavery diatribes and constant chewing of tobacco. Although he would later facilitate covert purchases of Confederate warships from British shipyards, he never seriously influenced British policy.

U.S. Minister Charles F. Adams, however, proved to be one of the most effective American diplomats of the era. After skillfully helping avoid war over the *Trent*, Adams would later cultivate religious, labor, and abolitionist leaders, and he gradually forged a powerful pro-Union constituency in Britain. Just as public opinion was a factor in the Civil War that it had not been in Europe previously, it could also be said that Adams weaponized the abolition of slavery to orchestrate one of the earliest and most consequential public diplomacy campaigns in U.S. diplomatic history.

Lessons for Today's Diplomats

Out of this existential diplomatic scuffle in 1861–1862, several points still reverberate today.

Public opinion. This was one of the first instances in Western history in which public opinion had a significant impact on policy deliberations. It necessitated a more nuanced approach to political messaging and diplomacy than was previously the norm.

Communications. Although the advances in mass communications were far from uniform, even these helped create an early version of the media feeding frenzies that accompany modern crises. In the face of furious popular demands for action, both governments avoided feeding the media beast. They consciously took time to formulate a response and also allowed the other side time to reply with the cool light of reason.

International law. The Lincoln administration privately realized early in the crisis that Wilkes' seizure of Mason and Slidell was contrary to prevailing international law and that other neutral states were largely arrayed against the United States on the facts of the case. Then, as now, international law proved particularly useful in helping resolve disputes that both sides needed to settle but that also entailed confronting powerful domestic influences.

Appeasement. Now used almost exclusively as an epithet, appeasement was discredited as a policy by the experience of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it is sometimes a viable tactic to avoid a disadvantageous conflict. In this case, the Lincoln administration's decision to largely accede to British demands incurred some immediate editorial disfavor (though less than might have been expected), but it also helped both sides avoid a catastrophic lose-lose conflict. Policymaking by analogy is usually misguided, and despite the experience of Munich, appeasement is sometimes a canny approach.

The leadership of both sides in the *Trent* affair defused a spiraling crisis and kept their focus on broader national interests in the face of furious public moods. Both governments recognized that there is, after all, no real victory in a war one should never have fought. ■

AFSA Honors Fallen Diplomats on FS Day, Without State

On Foreign Service Day, May 1, AFSA held its 61st annual AFSA Memorial Plaque ceremony, honoring those who gave their lives in diplomatic service to the nation.

Sadly, for the first time, the ceremony was not held in the C Street lobby of Main State at the site of the AFSA Memorial Plaques, but at AFSA's own headquarters, after the State Department declined AFSA's request to co-host the traditional ceremony on the congressionally designated Foreign Service Day.

AFSA kicked off Foreign Service Day with a video message from AFSA President John Dinkelman, who then presided over the memorial ceremony at AFSA headquarters later that morning. That afternoon, DACOR held its annual Foreign Service Cup dedication and reception at DACOR Bacon House.

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA President John Dinkelman delivers remarks at AFSA HQ as part of the Foreign Service Day ceremony at AFSA on May 1.

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA President John Dinkelman leads procession of ceremony attendees to the State Department C Street entrance to gather for a moment of silence to conclude the memorial commemoration.

CALENDAR

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

July 3
AFSA Offices Closed in Observance of Independence Day

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

August 19
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

September 25
6:45-9:45 p.m.
Foreign Service Night at Nationals Park

Message to Members

The AFSA president's morning message went out to all members and outlined the effort AFSA had made to coordinate with the department ahead of the solemn day. He acknowledged the difficulties of

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AFSA Condemns May 5 Reduction in Force

On May 5, the State Department separated more than 200 Foreign Service members under the reduction in force (RIF) first announced in July 2025, even as the department continues to recruit and onboard new officers and specialists.

Those forced out include officers with rare language skills, specialists with decades of institutional knowledge, and crisis responders—at a moment when the United States is managing an active conflict with Iran.

We estimate that roughly 246 Foreign Service members and 1,070 Civil Service employees have been laid off across the broader reorganization, though the department has not provided an official tally to AFSA.

AFSA strongly opposes these separations and believes the procedures used to carry them out were legally flawed and inconsistent with the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

"The department has never adequately explained why it is removing experienced Foreign Service professionals

Continued on page 56

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Fidelity, Dissent, and Hypocrisy

Like many of you, I spent much of April and May trying to make sense of the new EER format. I won't complain about writing less, but the rushed, poorly organized rollout of such sweeping changes to our performance system raised immediate questions.

It's also worth remembering that the department made these changes unilaterally, without negotiating with AFSA. At a minimum, EER season would have gone far more smoothly if leadership had taken the time to consult the workforce before overhauling the system.

One of the biggest questions, and there are many, including the egregious pressure campaign on the numerical scores, is the meaning of the new "fidelity" precept. In my conversations across the department, fidelity has quickly become shorthand for something larger: a shift away from trusting the career Foreign Service and toward treating us with suspicion.

Fidelity is defined as "the quality or state of being faithful." But every one of us already swore an oath to uphold and defend the Constitution when we joined the Foreign Service. So why elevate something so obvious into a core promotion precept? What problem is this actually trying to solve?

To many of us, the answer feels obvious. The fidelity precept reads less like a call to professionalism and more like an attempt to enforce ideological conformity by discouraging views that diverge from the administration's line.

If you're serving today, you probably know the feeling: the sense that every email, comment in a meeting, or Teams message is being quietly evaluated to determine whether you're "with the program."

That is a dangerous instinct in foreign policy. Good policymaking depends on informed, internal dissent, especially on matters of national security. Strategic mistakes carry enormous consequences. Yet the message many officers hear now is that the department wants a Foreign Service that is seen but not heard—one that snaps to attention rather than raises uncomfortable truths.

This is not normal.

Throughout my career, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, I've disagreed with aspects of U.S. foreign policy. That's not insubordination; it's the natural result of being a member and a representative of a pluralistic democracy.

Those views were not universally welcomed, but no one suggested dissent itself made me disloyal or unfit for promotion, or that it would jeopardize my future assignment prospects. In fact, I continued to receive strong evaluations and support from colleagues and supervisors.

The fidelity precept points in a different direction. Its instruction that officers should resolve "uncertainty on the side of fidelity to one's chain of command" sends a clear message: Suppress your expertise and fall in line, even when your judgment and experience tell you otherwise.

Then there's the hypocrisy.

Department leadership now emphasizes obedience to the chain of command while simultaneously sidelining employees who faithfully implemented the previous administration's priorities. Many of us know colleagues who have faced professional consequences over the past 18 months—including losing their jobs—because they worked on DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) initiatives that were official policy priorities of the previous administration.

The department took the extraordinary step of retroactively promoting employees it believed had been disadvantaged by the DEIA precept. Yet the names of those who received those retroactive promotions have not been released.

Meanwhile, the rest of us are left wondering whether the DEIA work we documented in prior EER cycles, exactly as we were instructed to do, may now hurt our promotion prospects.

In other words, officers demonstrated fidelity to one administration's priorities and are now being penalized for it by another, all while being lectured about the importance of fidelity to the chain of command. The contradiction would be laughable if it weren't so consequential.

Finally, forgive a former lawyer for briefly venturing into constitutional law. The fidelity precept reflects an unusually expansive view of executive power. It directs employees to "achieve results for the Constitution of the United States by protecting and promoting executive power under Article II." This language echoes the highly contested, and some might say fringe, "unitary executive" theory and minimizes the role of checks and balances.

That may sound abstract, but it has real implications. Embedding this language in the promotion precepts effectively asks FS members to endorse a contested constitutional philosophy as part of their official duties. And in practice, a supervisor could rely on this precept to penalize an employee who refuses to withhold documents in response to a congressional inquiry or a court order.

Maybe that sounds farfetched. A year ago, a lot of things happening today would have sounded farfetched too.

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How to Represent the Foreign Service Now

Fifteen years ago, I joined USAID. In the years that followed, the U.S. government invested in me in ways that are not easily quantified. I learned two foreign languages. I represented the United States at high-level international summits. I managed up to $600 million in U.S. government resources in a single year. I received specialized training in leadership, interagency coordination, and the intricate decision-making processes that make U.S. foreign policy function.

I am not unique in this. Thousands of Foreign Service officers at USAID carried similar—often greater—portfolios of government-built expertise.

That expertise is now largely out the door. When a government discards, in a matter of months, capacities it spent decades and tens of millions of dollars building, that is not just a personnel decision. It is a waste of taxpayer investment.

For most of AFSA's history, representing the Foreign Service meant advocating for our members within the system: on hiring, firing, discipline, promotion, the terms and conditions of a career. That work is essential, and it has never been more contested than it is right now, with collective bargaining rights under direct challenge and the collegial coordination we relied on disrupted. That fight continues, and it matters.

But I don't think it's enough anymore.

Over the winter and spring, numerous discussions about foreign aid took place across Washington—at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and elsewhere—during which the administration's vision for the future of foreign assistance was on full display and the perspectives of career professionals were largely absent.

In some of those forums, senior officials made unchallenged statements about how USAID operated that career Foreign Service officers would immediately have recognized as inaccurate.

When experienced voices are absent from the table, flawed assumptions harden into policy, and the institutional knowledge we spent careers building disappears. We need to build the muscle of putting our people forward. This direct form of member advocacy will require more resources, not less.

Other unions, such as those of steelworkers and autoworkers, have faced analogous pressures—industries told that their workforce is expendable, their expertise replaceable, their institutional knowledge not worth preserving.

The most effective among them made a public argument for why the work itself mattered, and they fought to protect and expand the opportunities available to their workforce. Steelworkers tied their survival to national security. Autoworkers argued that keeping plants open in America was a strategic and economic imperative.

AFSA has not traditionally operated this way—not because the argument wasn't available to us, but because we never needed to make it. For most of our history, the Foreign Service enjoyed enough bipartisan support that we were protected from any attacks on public service.

Building public support in this way is a long-term project, and AFSA's resources are limited. But making the case to the American public is one of the most important things we can do for our members.

The attacks on the Foreign Service did not happen in a vacuum. They were made possible, in part, by a public that had little sense of what the Foreign Service does or why it matters. Public support is the most durable protection we can offer our members against this kind of assault happening again.

AFSA has begun to move in this direction. Last December's "At the Breaking Point" report—for which we surveyed more than 2,100 diplomats—received substantial coverage in mainstream, independent, and informal media, and has been cited in congressional hearings, demonstrating that we can make a compelling public case for the Foreign Service. And in May, AFSA endorsed the PATH to the Foreign Service Act, bicameral legislation that would create a formal pathway for former USAID officers to join the State Department's Foreign Service.

These are exactly the kinds of efforts this moment calls for. The question is whether we treat them as isolated responses to immediate crises, or as the model for a permanent expansion of what representing the Foreign Service means.

The old world we knew and operated in is gone. What replaces it is still being determined—and those decisions will be much harder to revisit once they harden.

So, what should AFSA do differently? My proposal: We need to be present, loudly, consistently, and proactively, in every forum where the future of U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance is being shaped.

We need to be honest with ourselves that this moment may require a different kind of ambition than we have exercised before.

I don't think AFSA can—or should—work out alone what that ambition looks like in practice. So tell us: What do you think we should be fighting for?

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Steadfast at 250

July 4 marks the 250th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and as we celebrate this milestone, we should remember that while we proclaimed independence in 1776, it was anything but. It took years until the Treaty of Paris, and another six years until we settled on a workable constitution.

Our country and U.S. diplomacy are now experiencing a rocky time. We stand steadfast in the face of these troubles. The nonpartisan and professional profile of our Foreign Service is diminished, in both fact and in attitude of leadership.

Only today I reviewed candidates for AFSA's Delavan Award, which recognizes outstanding office management specialists (OMS). Of the highly accomplished nominees, there were multiple serving in high-threat posts.

They risk their lives every day. They directly support our country's interests in fraught regions. And they do it willingly, with deep care in carrying out this vital work, as do their colleagues. We at AFSA appreciate what they do.

So, what has this to do with us retirees?

Now, as never before, we are the bulwark that protects our active-duty colleagues. Imagine sending a dissent cable. Imagine, as many of us have done, working with groups not basking in the sunlight of official blessing.

We retirees are able to do things our colleagues can't. We can warn against the dangerous trend of treating unwelcome information—the very information that leaders need to make good decisions—as unpatriotic. We can remind people that dissent is patriotic. We can talk to our members of Congress. We can inform our communities. We can get the message out on social media. The list goes on.

But the most important action is being an AFSA member. If you are reading this, you likely are. However, with the new system requiring direct payment of dues to AFSA, remember to pay attention to your renewal date so your membership doesn't expire, or, better yet, sign up for our autopay option.

But we also need to encourage other retirees to join. At this moment, retirees are likely the most effective element of AFSA membership. Without our dues, the engine that protects your interests would sputter.

As an example, last year's reconciliation bill in Congress initially contained provisions detrimental to AFSA members' interests. Those elements ultimately did not survive the legislative process.

But this is Washington, and more reconciliation bills could pop up this summer. You can only imagine what they could target. Our superb director of congressional advocacy, Kim Sullivan, and her staff are working with committee staff to track developments and protect your benefits.

Just as independence in 1776 was only the beginning of a long, uncertain effort, our work today is sustained by one member, one voice, one renewed dues payment at a time.

Two hundred fifty years on, the experiment still depends on people willing to stand up for it. Our FS retirees are among the best positioned to do exactly that. ■

RIF Statement
Continued from page 53

with critical skills while simultaneously hiring new personnel," AFSA said in a statement. "This is not sound workforce planning. It is a disruption to the career diplomatic corps at a moment when the country can least afford it."

AFSA expressed gratitude to the sponsors and cosponsors of the Protecting America's Diplomatic Workforce Act and urged Congress to pass the bill to restore the Foreign Affairs Manual guardrails that should have governed the RIF process from the start. ■

AFSA Opposes Proposed Government-Wide NDA

NEWS BRIEF

AFSA is concerned by the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) proposal to create a government-wide nondisclosure agreement (NDA) for federal employees.

AFSA urges OPM to withdraw or substantially revise the proposal to ensure that any guidance to federal employees is narrow, clear, consistent with existing law, and fully protective of employees' rights.

Read AFSA's full statement at https://bit.ly/NDAafsa. ■

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AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

Foreign Service Day ceremony attendees hold a moment of silence outside of the State Department's C Street lobby entrance.

the past year, adding: "We have faced marginalization, disruption, and attacks on our professionalism."

But he also spoke of the resilience that defines the community: "We are people who don't quit. We are professionals who keep showing up for America, and for each other." Closing his recorded message, Dinkelman affirmed AFSA's century-long commitment: "We are proud to stand with you as we have for more than 100 years—and for many years to come."


U.S. EMBASSY ALGIERS

Staff at U.S. Embassy Algiers gather to observe the 2026 rolling moment of silence on May 1.

A Plaque Ceremony Without the Plaques

The tradition of gathering at the memorial plaques on Foreign Service Day stretches back nearly a century. AFSA conceived of such an "Honor Roll," campaigned successfully for its creation, and has served as owner and steward of the memorial since the original tablet was unveiled by Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson on March 3, 1933, under authority of a Joint Resolution of Congress.

In the months leading up to this year's Foreign Service Day, AFSA reached out numerous times to department leadership but received no response from State about co-hosting the event as has been done for decades.

(As it turned out, following negative press about State's decision to deny AFSA access to the plaques for a ceremony, on May 1 morning, the State Department announced plans to host its *own* event at AFSA's plaques the following Monday. AFSA was not invited to participate in that ceremony.)

Dinkelman presided over the Foreign Service Day memorial ceremony at AFSA headquarters and addressed the shift in venue: "The institution entrusted with the United States Foreign Service

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FS Day
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chose not to prioritize a ceremony honoring its own fallen on their appointed day."

More than 150 members gathered for the ceremony. Photos were projected onto the wall showing the 321 names that are etched onto the plaques.

Dinkelman addressed the packed-to-capacity room, reaffirming AFSA's long-standing commitment to the Foreign Service community: "AFSA is hosting this ceremony because we still hold dear our commitment to the members of the Foreign Service and will not let them down. We will not allow the names of our dead to go unrecognized. This commitment has not changed. This commitment will not change."

JENNIFER MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHY

The DACOR Foreign Service Cup is bestowed upon Ambassador George Moose on May 1 at DACOR Bacon House. From left: DACOR President Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon, former DACOR President Angela R. Dickey, Ambassador George Moose, retired FSO Ray Ewing, retired FSO Paul Denig, and Ambassador Jim Dandridge.

USAID Memorial Wall Recognized

Dinkelman also called attention to the USAID Memorial Wall, which was removed from USAID headquarters after USAID was shuttered last year; it was installed in the D Street lobby of the Harry S Truman building in April. The wall honors 108 individuals—Foreign Service officers, locally employed staff, and contractors—who gave their lives advancing America's mission abroad.

Retired USAID Foreign Service Officer Nancy Eslick delivered remarks and read out the names of nine members of the USAID community who were added to the wall this year: Dr. Henry G. Bennett, Sarah J. Crites, Michael Dempsey, Ellen De Guzman, Susan C. Easley, Cheryl D. Hodge-Snead, Priscilla Sampil, Jacob Toukhy, and Dr. Edward Winant.

Dinkelman lauded the permanent placement of the wall while mourning the dismantling of the agency itself, noting that programs sustaining lives around the world had ended as a result.

Dinkelman closed the ceremony on a note of resolve: "Be it known by all that the American Foreign Service Association will continue to honor this workforce, both those who have given all and those who continue to carry the mission forward every day. We hope that someday soon, we will again be allowed to gather where we belong: in front of the plaques that bear the names of our honored dead."

Following the ceremony, Dinkelman, carrying the memorial wreath, led a procession of more than 100 attendees over to the State Department's C Street entrance for a moment of silence.

DACOR FS Cup Winner Announced

Later that afternoon, DACOR held its annual Foreign Service Cup dedication ceremony at DACOR Bacon House—like the AFSA ceremony, DACOR's awarding of the FS Cup, traditionally bestowed at an awards ceremony on Foreign Service Day, was also banned from the State Department this year.

The Foreign Service Cup is awarded each year on Foreign Service Day to a retired Foreign Service officer who had a distinguished career and has made significant post-retirement contributions to the field of foreign affairs.

This year's honoree was George Moose, former U.S. ambassador to Benin. Ambassador Moose was selected for his leadership in Africa, at the United Nations, and at the United States Institute of Peace.

For a recording of AFSA's memorial ceremony, visit https://www.facebook.com/watch/afsapage/.

Read more on the history of the memorial plaques and the criteria for inscription at https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/the-foreign-service-honor-roll.pdf.

A Lasting Investment in Diplomacy

AFSA is deeply grateful to Dr. Sushma Mahyera Palmer for including AFSA among the beneficiaries of her donor-advised fund, the Mark and Sushma Palmer Charitable Gift Fund: Advancing Global Democracy and Human Health.

Her generosity ensures that the Mark Palmer Award for the Advancement of Democracy, which she has long sponsored in honor of her late husband, will continue to recognize members of the Foreign Service who advance the cause of democracy abroad.

AFSA/JOAQUIN SOSA

Dr. Sushma Palmer presents the Mark Palmer Award to its first-ever recipient, Andrew Young (left), at the 2015 AFSA Awards Ceremony.

Dr. Palmer, an internationally recognized expert in nutrition and public health, served for many years as executive director of the Center for Communications, Health and the Environment, and previously directed the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences. Her career has been distinguished by a commitment to global health, human rights, and democratic development, values she shared with her husband.

Ambassador Mark Palmer, who died in 2013, was one of the most consequential U.S. diplomats of the late 20th century. A career Foreign Service officer who entered the Service in 1964, he served as principal speechwriter for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, helped organize the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit as the State Department's senior Soviet specialist, and served as U.S. ambassador to Hungary from 1986 to 1990.

The Mark Palmer Award for the Advancement of Democracy, established by Dr. Palmer to honor that legacy, is one of six AFSA awards recognizing exemplary performance and extraordinary contributions to the effectiveness, professionalism, and morale of the Foreign Service.

The award is open to Foreign Service members from any of the foreign affairs agencies, especially those at the early- to mid-career level, serving domestically or overseas, who have promoted U.S. policies advancing democracy, freedom, and governance through bold, imaginative, and effective efforts.

Dr. Palmer's bequest is a powerful expression of confidence in AFSA's mission and in the men and women of the Foreign Service.

Members who wish to follow Dr. Palmer's example and include AFSA in their estate planning are invited to contact AFSA Executive Director Ásgeir Sigfússon at sigfusson@afsa.org.

Bequests, charitable gift funds, and other planned gifts help sustain AFSA's awards, scholarships, advocacy, and outreach programs. For more information, visit https://afsa.org/fad. ■

AFSA Governing Board Meetings, March 18 and April 15, 2026

At its March meeting, the board approved nominees for the AFSA Lifetime Contributions to American Diplomacy and Foreign Service Champions awards.

At its April meeting, the board approved the following appointments: Mariama D. Crandall as the USAGM representative; John O'Keefe to the Awards and Plaques Committee; and Mort Dworken and Ambassador Tracey Jacobson to the Committee on Elections Appointments. ■

A Lifetime of Service

AFSA's General Counsel Leaves Lasting Legacy

When Sharon L. Papp interviewed for the position of legal counsel at the American Foreign Service Association in 1992, she was wearing a puzzle ring she had picked up years earlier in Saudi Arabia. AFSA State Vice President Joe Melrose noticed it and asked where she had gotten it. The conversation that followed, about a childhood spent in Dhahran among a community of expatriate kids who still call themselves the "Aramco Brats," turned out to be, in Sharon's telling, part of the reason she got the job.

It is a fitting origin story for someone who would go on to spend nearly 34 years quietly shaping the legal architecture that protects members of the Foreign Service. The small details matter. The accidents of biography matter. And nothing—not a puzzle ring, not a stray comment in a job interview, not a nearly-forgotten file in an offsite archive—is ever quite as insignificant as it seems.

Sharon was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, but the family did not stay there long. When she was 2 years old, her parents took jobs with the Arabian American Oil Company and moved the family to Dhahran, where they would remain for 18 years.

Her mother taught physical education in the Aramco schools. Sharon attended class there through ninth grade before heading to The Hun School in Princeton, New Jersey, returning to Saudi Arabia for every holiday.

Sharon Papp

Her childhood was tightly knit and worldly. Family road trips included an overland drive from Rotterdam to Saudi Arabia in a newly purchased car, a journey that nearly ended in disaster when the family got lost in the Iraqi desert and was rescued by a passing Mack truck driver who happened along on his biweekly route.

Vacations took the family to Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, and Hungary, the country of her parents' heritage. It was the kind of upbringing that taught a person to think internationally.

What it did not give her, curiously, was much exposure to the Foreign Service itself. The U.S. consulate in Dhahran had a restaurant where the family was occasionally invited to dine, but Sharon did not know any diplomats personally. That came later.

The Path to Law

Sharon attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, drawn south in part by a memorably brutal New Jersey blizzard during her boarding school years. She graduated with a double major in English, with a focus on 18th- and 19th-century British novels, and psychology.

Two experiences during this period pushed her toward the law. The first was watching a professor she admired denied tenure and lose a subsequent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sex discrimination case.

The second was closer to home: After 15 years teaching in the Aramco schools, her mother learned that the company classified married women as "casual" employees on one-year contracts, ineligible for pensions. Lillian Papp filed her own EEO complaint.

Sharon enrolled at The George Washington University Law School, gravitating toward employment and labor law. The connection to her mother's case proved consequential.

During an interview for a summer law clerk position at a small, plaintiff-side EEO firm, she mentioned her childhood in Saudi Arabia. The partner interviewing her replied that the firm was representing a Saudi Arabia client named Lillian Papp. "That's my mother," Sharon said. She got the job.

That summer clerkship became formative. The firm represented hotel and motel

COURTESY OF STEVE KASHKETT

AFSA leadership's first meeting with Secretary Clinton in March 2009, in her office, after she became Secretary of State. From left: Sharon Papp, AFSA State Vice President Steve Kashkett, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, AFSA President John Naland, and AFSA State Vice President Francisco Zamora.

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA's OGC team gathers to honor Sharon Papp (front right) in Washington, D.C., on May 7. From left: Zlatana Badrich, Ed White, Colleen Fallon-Lenaghan, Heather Townsend, Neera Parikh, Brian Himmelsteib, Papp, Erin Kate Brady, Raeka Safai, and Patrick Bradley.

workers in New York City in an Equal Pay Act case alleging that maids were paid less than the male char force for substantially similar work. Sharon spent days in the Waldorf Astoria and other hotels shadowing a job evaluation expert as he documented the comparison. It was a crash course in how labor law actually works on the ground.

Arriving at AFSA

By 1992 the firm where Sharon had clerked and later worked had dwindled to two attorneys, and the senior partner was preparing to retire. She answered an ad in *The Washington Post* for legal counsel at AFSA. The puzzle ring, the Aramco connection, and a thorough grounding in employment and labor law did the rest.

Sharon arrived at an AFSA in transition. The Labor Management Office had only five staff members: two attorneys and a handful of grievance counselors. Her predecessor had been let go and had filed an EEO case against AFSA.

A new executive director, Susan Reardon, would arrive shortly after Sharon did. Colleen Fallon, who would become a long-standing colleague and friend, had joined just months earlier. James Yorke, who retired in 2025 after nearly 30 years of service, had come on a few weeks before Sharon. It was, by any measure, a fresh start.

What followed was the kind of career that is built case by case, document by document, in archives and grievance hearings and late-night reviews of bargaining notes.

Building the Record

A defining early case involved the State Department's appointment of a Civil Service employee as deputy chief of mission (DCM) in Lima. AFSA argued this senior position belonged to a member of the Foreign Service.

The legal challenge was technical: DCM is a management position, outside AFSA's bargaining unit, and bargaining over how non-bargaining unit jobs are filled is permissive, not required. AFSA had to prove the department had elected to bargain over such issues in practice.

Sharon went to AFSA's offsite archives and began pulling boxes. She emerged with documentary evidence that won the grievance and established a precedent AFSA has drawn on ever since.

Subsequent challenges led to negotiated language in the Foreign Affairs Manual codifying the procedures the department must follow before assigning someone from outside the Foreign Service to a Foreign Service position. "I'm very proud of that," Sharon recalled in a 2023 ADST oral history. "I think that was pretty significant."

She brought the same approach to the meritorious step increase (MSI) grievances that began in 2013, when management declined to grant MSIs to officers recommended but not reached for promotion, citing budget sequester.

Sharon dug back through years of negotiated promotion precepts to demonstrate that management had never previously exercised a "zero option" and that the agreed-on language did not permit one.

AFSA won the 2013 case, lost the 2014 case on appeal in a decision Sharon still considers wrongly decided, and ultimately prevailed for the 2015 and 2016 grievants.

Quiet, Lasting Work

Some of Sharon's most consequential work has been the kind that members never see directly. She helped establish the AFSA Legal Defense Fund in 2007, naming it after the late Richard "Dick" Scissors, a beloved retired FSO who worked in the Labor Management Office. She drafted its standard operating procedures.

Years later, when Foreign Service officers were called to testify before Congress during the 2019 impeachment hearings on Ukraine, the LDF made it possible for them to retain the legal counsel they needed without going tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket.

She has worked alongside affinity groups including Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies (glifaa) and the Asian American Foreign Affairs Association (AAFAA) on issues ranging from security clearance practices to assignment restrictions, that eventually produced an appeals panel outside Diplomatic Security (DS), a defined timeline for decisions, and greater transparency for affected employees.

Sharon has negotiated MOUs governing how DS conducts recorded interviews, ensuring "recording in progress" signage, private rooms for AFSA consultations, and access to recordings in defined circumstances.

She has supported AFSA's work on the EEO class action that ultimately reformed the State Department's worldwide availability policy.

She has saved jobs at the Foreign Service Grievance Board, including one case in which an officer overseas

was curtailed and proposed for suspension based on what Sharon believed were ulterior-motive complaints. The grievance board agreed, restoring the officer's record and awarding back pay and additional compensation.

Sharon has also overseen the substantial growth of the Labor Management Office itself, from the five-person operation she joined in 1992 to a team that today has been rebranded as the Office of General Counsel (OGC) and includes five attorneys and four additional professional staff.

"Our entire legal team was built, year by year, case by case, in the trenches of some of the hardest moments AFSA has faced. I have watched them grow into extraordinary advocates, and I leave knowing that you are in the very best of hands," Sharon said in a farewell message to AFSA and its members.

Steering Through the Storm

The final stretch of Sharon's tenure brought challenges unlike anything AFSA had faced in its century of existence. Beginning in early 2025, the association became engaged in a series of coordinated federal lawsuits responding to administration actions affecting the Foreign Service workforce and the institutions that employ it. By the spring of 2026, this litigation encompassed five active federal cases affecting more than 14,000 Foreign Service personnel across the State Department, USAID, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

The matters at stake have been existential: the revocation of collective bargaining rights for 97 percent of AFSA's bargaining unit through executive order, the unlawful dismantling of USAID, the shutdown of USAGM, mass reductions in force, and challenges to the legal architecture that has long governed federal labor practice.

Sharon and her team have steered AFSA through every one of these challenges, coordinating with outside counsel, supporting affected

Reflections on Sharon Papp

One of the best experiences of my State Department career was a four-year daily collaboration with Sharon when I served as AFSA State VP. She displayed remarkable professionalism, resourcefulness, and unflappable determination in defending our service during one of the most challenging periods in our history. She always stood firm in protecting FS members from the frequent unfairness and capriciousness of the system, even when it required her to confront very senior officials. Sharon well earned her reputation as the legal champion of the Foreign Service.

—Steve Kashkett, AFSA State VP (2005–2007)

When I became AFSA president in 2003, Sharon provided tactful advice and guidance that was enormously helpful.

—John Limbert, AFSA President (2003–2005)

The list of her successes over her tenure could fill a hundred *FSJ*s, and the words of thanks and appreciation from current and former members of the Foreign Service could fill a hundred more. She's done more than earn our gratitude; she's become a friend to so many of us along the way. Sharon's work to support glifaa made it possible for LGBTQI+ FSOs and specialists to finally join the Foreign Service and serve openly. During my two tours as State representative, Sharon and I built on that support and helped expand benefits for same-sex spouses and partners.

—Ken Kero-Mentz, AFSA State VP (2017–2019), AFSA Secretary (2019–2021)

During her nearly 34 years as AFSA general counsel, Sharon Papp personally assisted over a thousand members with legal concerns, taking on some of the most difficult and time-consuming cases, especially in the areas of discipline and security clearance investigations.

Over those 27 years [working with AFSA], I saw firsthand the positive impact that Sharon had on individual members and on protecting the Foreign Service as an institution.

—John K. Naland, AFSA President (2001–2003, 2007–2009), AFSA State VP (1999–2001)

As AFSA president for four years, I came to appreciate the impressive mix of experience, commitment, passion, and caring that Sharon brought to her work. Her legacy is enormous.

—Eric Rubin, AFSA President (2019-2023)

Sharon Papp was devotedly committed to AFSA, the Foreign Service, and the concept of union democratic governance. Throughout her career, Sharon counseled hundreds of individual members as well as advanced the interests of the union and the professional association.

—Matthew Asada, AFSA State VP (2013–2015)

I felt like David against Goliath, but without a slingshot. In stepped Sharon with years of experience to advise me. She explained mitigating and aggravating circumstances, advised me to express contrition (even though I mostly felt anger!). I continue to pay AFSA dues in retirement and advise others to do the same. You never know when you might need help, and AFSA will be there for you.

—Phil Skotte, FSO (ret.)

Sharon helped me at a bracing moment. She was consummately professional—empathetic, thorough, and candid.

—Clayton Hays, FSO

At all times, she provided wise and calm counsel. I am sure she has done the same for others, especially in these harrowing times for the Foreign Service. She will be sorely missed.

—Ambassador Deborah McCarthy

As a member of the AFSA Committee on Elections, I repeatedly depended on Sharon's outstanding expertise and wise counsel as we committee members faced challenging questions and issues. Thank you, Sharon!

—Mort Dworken, Senior FSO (ret.)

Sharon and her team were vital lifelines over decades for me and many foreign affairs employees facing discrimination within government because they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex. Before there was glifaa, AFSA understood the human, moral, and legal justice underlying our cases, helping us prevail to serve the country as ourselves, not with targets on our backs.

—Bryan Dalton, FSO (ret.), glifaa VP, Co-Founder, and Former President

Compassion, expertise, grace, strength of purpose, consummate professionalism, and empathy. These are all words that describe Sharon. As a mentor, supervisor, colleague, and friend, she is, without a doubt, the best there is, and it has been a privilege and honor to be by her side.

—Zlatana Badrich, AFSA Senior Attorney Adviser

Sharon is a fierce advocate for her clients, the Foreign Service, and AFSA; a compassionate colleague; and a devoted mentor. It's for that last reason that we are not despairing over her well-deserved rest: She personally prepared the two talented women now taking the reins of our legal team.

—Ásgeir Sigfússon, AFSA Executive Director

I learned so much from her legal prowess and profound understanding of foreign affairs agencies' inner workings.

—Kim Sullivan, AFSA Director of Advocacy

members, and working to preserve the bargaining rights and statutory protections that generations of Foreign Service employees have relied on.

The Person Behind the Work

People who have worked with Sharon describe her in remarkably consistent terms: meticulous, principled, generous with her time, and genuinely cheerful about the work. She has spoken openly about why she went into law in the first place. It was the desire to help people.

She has been recognized formally as well. In recent years, she received the AFSA Special Achievement Award, for which she was nominated by longtime colleague John Naland, a former AFSA president and the current AFSA treasurer. Sharon was characteristically modest about the recognition, noting only: "It just makes you feel good to know that your work has been appreciated."

Not Quite an Ending

Sharon retired on May 1, after nearly 34 years at AFSA. She leaves behind a team substantially larger, more experienced, and capable than the one she joined, a Foreign Affairs Manual modified by language she helped negotiate, a Legal Defense Fund that has rescued careers, and a generation of Foreign Service members, many of whom will never know her name, who have been better protected because she went looking through old boxes in an offsite archive and found what nobody else thought to search for.

Raeka Safai, who has worked closely with Sharon as deputy general counsel, will succeed her. The continuity is fitting. So is the underlying lesson of Sharon Papp's career, which is that the most durable victories in labor law are usually built quietly, over decades, by people who pay attention to small things.

The Foreign Service is fortunate she paid attention to us. We wish Sharon a long and happy retirement full of great, new adventures. ■

AFSA Welcomes New Hires

AFSA/MARK PARKHOMENKO

AFSA President John Dinkelman addresses new FSOs at AFSA HQ on May 6.

On April 5 and May 6, AFSA hosted welcome receptions at its headquarters in Washington, D.C., for the two most recent Foreign Service orientation classes (once again called A-100).

The April event drew approximately 40 members of the incoming class, while the May gathering brought together around 50 new officers and specialists to connect with AFSA Governing Board members, staff, and alumni hosts.

Set up in an open-house format with food and refreshments, the gatherings offered new Foreign Service members an informal opportunity to connect with AFSA leadership and staff to learn more about the association's work in support of the Foreign Service.

AFSA President John Dinkelman opened the program at both events, which included brief remarks from former Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security Greg Starr, AFSA State Representative Connor Ferry-Smith, and AFSA General Counsel Raeka Safai, all of whom shared their perspectives on AFSA's advocacy, legal services, and member benefits.

While AFSA has been excluded from the official orientation schedule by current department leadership, these receptions provided valuable opportunities to welcome the new classes, hear how they are doing, and share AFSA's mission of protecting and strengthening the Foreign Service. Many of the attendees chose to join AFSA as members.

Those who were unable to attend are encouraged to reach out to AFSA at member@afsa.org to learn more about membership and upcoming events.

To sign up online, go to https://afsa.org/active-membership.

AFSA's Road Scholar Program Returns to D.C.

Each spring and fall, a group of curious, civically engaged Americans descends on Washington, D.C., for an immersive introduction to U.S. foreign policy.

AFSA has partnered with Road Scholar, the nonprofit educational travel organization, since 1996, when AFSA Retiree Representative Ambassador Bill De Pree and alumna Lillian "Petey" Mullin launched the program under its original name, Elderhostel.

The goal then, as now, was to raise public awareness of the Foreign Service and the case for strong U.S. diplomatic resources. Since that founding, the program has reached nearly 12,000 Americans from across the country through close to 280 programs held in Washington, D.C., San Diego, Tucson, Atlanta, Seattle, Colorado Springs, and other cities. Today, active programs continue in Washington and Chautauqua, New York.

This year's Washington program, titled "Inside American Diplomacy with the Foreign Service," ran April 12–16 at the Cambria Hotel in the Navy Yard neighborhood.

Participants, mostly retired professionals active in their communities, heard lectures from a roster of seasoned diplomats and foreign affairs specialists covering a wide range of topics.

Lisa Heller, AFSA's director of professional policy issues and a 34-year Foreign Service veteran, opened the week with an introduction to the U.S. Foreign Service.

Ambassador Sandra Clark drew on her experience as U.S. ambassador to Burkina Faso to walk participants through life and work at a U.S. embassy.

Chair of the Board of the Arms Control Association Tom Countryman, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer, led a session on nuclear affairs and Iran policy.

Phil Shull, a 31-year Foreign Agricultural Service veteran, discussed U.S. agricultural diplomacy.

Patsy Widakuswara of Voice of America addressed press freedom and international broadcasting.

Jay Carreiro, AFSA's current Foreign Commercial Service vice president, covered the role of the Foreign Commercial Service.

And retired USAID Foreign Service Officer Nancy Eslick rounded out the program with a session on the future of international development.

The week also included a visit to the Georgetown Institute for the Study of Diplomacy for a session with Ambassador Barbara Bodine, a tour of Embassy Row, and lunch at the DACOR Bacon House.

AFSA's Strategic Communications Manager Nadja Ruzica currently administers the program, which is open to all through Road Scholar.

To learn more, visit https://afsa.org/road-scholar.

AFSA Raises Alarm over EER Process Integrity

This year the State Department unilaterally implemented significant changes to the Employee Evaluation Report (EER) format, and AFSA is hearing growing concern from members about how those changes are being applied.

In an up-or-out system where promotions and careers hinge on accurate, well-documented performance records, the integrity of this year's EER process has been called into serious question.

AFSA has received reports that department communications are encouraging rating and reviewing officers to reduce numerical scores to meet arbitrary baselines, with supervisors directed to retroactively modify scores, sometimes without raters' knowledge, to stay within newly prescribed averages.

Some offices appear to be gaming the system to meet bureau requirements by lowering the scores of those not competing for promotion or nearing retirement so that others may benefit.

Compounding the problem, guidance arrived only a couple of weeks before EERs were due, and without the mandated counseling statements for poor performance, raters are unable to give 1s and 2s, leaving poor performance unrecorded and above-average performance downgraded.

In a May 5 press release, AFSA called on the department to eliminate the numerical rankings in this year's EERs and encouraged members whose scores have been unfairly changed to consider filing a grievance.

Under the Foreign Service Act (Section 1101) and 3 FAM 4412, Foreign Service members have the right to grieve any "inaccuracy, omission, error, or falsely prejudicial" information in their personnel record.

AFSA regularly assists members with EER grievances; email ogc@afsa.org with questions or to request assistance. ■

FOREIGN SERVICE **DEPARTURES** FOR 2025–2026

May 2025
Kirby Campbell-Rierson—State
Kristy Coom—USAID

July 2025
Alistair Baskey—State
Cullen Hughes—USAID
Nora Pinzon—USAID

September 2025
Pamela Fessenden—USAID
Paul Gormley—State
Marc Griego—APHIS
Chad Peterson—State
Dan Rochman—State
Bryce Smedley—USAID
V. Kate Somvongsiri—USAID

November 2025
Janelle Luna—State

December 2025
Bryan Burke—State
Chase Cavanaugh—State
Mary Frangakis—State
Stephanie Sullivan—State
Lucy Tamlyn—State
Eric Watnik—State

January 2026
Susan Stevenson—State

March 2026
Margaret Benavente—USAID
Joe Trimble—State

April 2026
Lee Belland—State
Shannon Farrell—State
Chapman Godbey—State
Kelly Lauritzen—State
Fatuma Sanneh—State
Wendy Stancer—State

AFSA continues its ongoing series listing recent retirements and other departures from the U.S. Foreign Service as a way to acknowledge and thank colleagues for their work.

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

AFSA is pleased to announce the eighth annual

Foreign Service Night
AT NATIONALS PARK

September 25, 2026 @ 6:45 p.m.

Nationals *vs.* *Mets*

Visit **afsa.org/nationals2026** for more information, including how to buy tickets.

This is a great way to reconnect with Foreign Service colleagues, especially those returning home from overseas service.

Gary L. Bayer, 84, a retired Foreign Service officer with USAID, died on March 16, 2026, in Cusco, Peru, surrounded by his family.

Mr. Bayer was born on March 8, 1942, near Neenah, Wis. The second person in his family to attend college, he joined his elder brother at Lawrence College in Appleton, Wis., in 1960.

Mr. Bayer began his adventures overseas as a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru (1966–1967).

He joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1967 and served until 1969 as a USAID refugee adviser in Vietnam, where he became adept at learning dialects and developed an appreciation for Southeast Asian cuisine.

In 1970 he married Nelly Arias, his companion for 56 years.

In Laos (1971–1975), Mr. Bayer regularly met with the Crown Prince and the Red Prince for cigars and brandy. He was even captured and held (for a few hours) as a POW by Pathet Lao forces.

Luckily, his family recalls, his knack for languages stood him in good stead and he talked himself out of captivity and across the river to safer ground. He was on the last Air America flight out of Laos to Bangkok after the Pathet Lao took control of the country.

Mr. Bayer's next posting was Botswana (1976–1978), where he taught agriculture extension at the Botswana Agriculture College and regularly invited his students to his home on weekends for lunch, lively discussion, and laughter.

Serving subsequently in Lesotho (1978–1980) and Bolivia (1980–1984), he would bring along his young son on field trips to project sites, thereby guaranteeing that another Bayer generation would join USAID.

He then served in Panama (1984–1987), the Canal Zone a great assignment for a Wisconsin kid who loved to fish for bass. In Sudan (1988–1990), he would drive across the desert and sail down the Nile, making friends among the locals wherever he went.

Posted to Uganda (1990–1994), he supported the establishment of Lake Mburo National Park and protection of the gorillas of Bwinde National Forest.

Sri Lanka was Mr. Bayer's final official USAID assignment (1995–1999).

Retirement, however, was short-lived. Mr. Bayer was soon off to Mozambique with World Vision, where he implemented the USAID agriculture portfolio (2000–2008). During this period, he took several epic road trips on the dusty roads of Kruger National Park, Namibia, and beyond.

In 2009 the Bayers settled in Cusco, where he is remembered by a large community of local inhabitants and civic groups who enjoyed his sense of humor, his willingness to lend a helping hand, and his overall love of life.

Mr. Bayer is survived by his spouse, Nelly of Cusco; son, Tom (and spouse, Marinyl), and grandson, Cyrus of Biliran Province in the Philippines; and brother, Melvin Bayer of Jensen Beach, Fla.

John L. Beahler, MD, 95, a retired Foreign Service medical officer, died on February 24, 2026, in Alexandria, Va.

Mr. Beahler was born in New Mexico in 1930 but moved with his family to El Paso, Texas, where he spent his early years and attended schools in the area, including the University of Texas at El Paso.

In 1951 he joined the U.S. Air Force (USAF) as a cadet and was commissioned as an officer, earning his wings as a navigator-bombardier, and was assigned to the 95th Bomb Squadron in Korea.

Following four years in the USAF, he returned to the university to complete his premedical education and was accepted into Southwestern Medical School of the University of Texas in Dallas. He received his MD in 1961 and completed his internship at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami.

Dr. Beahler joined the State Department's Office of Medical Services in 1962 as a regional medical officer. Posted to Thailand, he served as medical officer for the U.S. embassy staff. He was then assigned as regional medical officer to India, Nepal, Bolivia, Kenya, and the Dominican Republic.

During his 23-year career, Dr. Beahler also served in the Office of Medical Services in Washington, D.C., on two tours, became deputy medical director, and was later appointed senior deputy assistant secretary of State for medical affairs.

He retired from the Foreign Service in 1985 but remained in the D.C. area. He developed a quality improvement program for the State Department Office of Medical Services and became a medical consultant on medical clearances for the Fulbright Foundation.

Dr. Beahler later served as a medical adviser to Access America, a medical assistance and travel insurance branch of Blue Cross. In 1982–1983, he was elected president of the Federal Physicians Association.

Throughout his career and retirement, Dr. Beahler and his wife traveled extensively, visiting more than 125 countries.

The family is grateful to two people who were important to Dr. Beahler in his declining years: Will Edington, his neighbor and dear friend who helped him in so many ways, and Christine Robella Parisi, a physical therapist.

They recall fondly how Ms. Parisi and the Robella family "adopted" Dr. Beahler following the death of his wife and invited him to their family holiday dinners.

Dr. Beahler was predeceased by his wife of 48 years, Electra, in 2020.

He is survived by a nephew, Alan Abbott of Texas; nieces Aleen Ball and Patricia O'Leary of Oklahoma; and niece-in-law, Colleen Snyder of Georgia, and nephew-in-law, Steve Nearring of Delaware.

He will be interred with his wife at Arlington National Cemetery at a later date to be announced.

Martha Buck Binns, 91, a Foreign Service spouse, died peacefully on February 14, 2026, in hospice at her home in Tucson, Ariz., with her husband, Ambassador (ret.) Jack R. Binns, at her side.

Ms. Binns was born in Albany, N.Y., on October 24, 1934. She graduated from Ridgewood High School in New Jersey and from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa., in 1956.

She met her husband, a member of the U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1956, at a 1954 Navy–Notre Dame football weekend, and they married in July 1956 following their respective graduations.

Ms. Binns spent the first six years of her married life as a Navy spouse, accompanying her husband on assignments in Georgia, California, and Japan before he joined the Foreign Service in July 1962.

This transition marked a significant turning point in their lives, coinciding with the arrival of their two daughters, Katherine and Margaret (Mimi), and a shift in focus from military service to diplomacy.

Foreign Service assignments took the family to U.S. embassies in Guatemala, Bolivia, El Salvador, the United Kingdom, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Spain.

In each posting, Ms. Binns was an active volunteer, contributing to Food for Peace programs, serving as a hospital aide, working in a well-baby clinic, and teaching English as a Second Language (ESL).

She carried out these roles alongside her responsibilities as a diplomatic hostess and devoted mother.

Domestic assignments included time at Harvard University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Department of State.

During these years, Ms. Binns also held several professional roles, including ESL instructor in the Montgomery County public school system, staff member on the 1984 Gary Hart presidential campaign, and travel agent.

Following Amb. Binns' retirement in 1986, the couple remained in Washington, D.C., where she worked as a meeting planner for the National Planning Association.

In 1990, with their daughters settled in New York City and Washington, D.C., they relocated to Tucson, where they embraced life in the desert community.

After an initial period of retirement, Amb. Binns accepted a part-time role as public affairs director for a local Planned Parenthood affiliate—an experience that introduced them to an active established group with deep roots in the community that remained central to their social lives for more than three decades.

In Tucson, Ms. Binns became a leader in numerous community organizations, including the League of Women Voters, Welcome Wagon, and ladies golf groups.

In 1998, she was elected president of Skyline Country Club—becoming the first woman to hold that position. More than 25 years later, she remains the only woman to have served in that role.

Ms. Binns is survived by her husband of 69 years, Jack R. Binns, of Tucson; daughter Katherine A. Binns (and spouse, Peter B. Brandt) of New York, N.Y.; daughter Margaret M. (Mimi) Binns of Buderim, Queensland, Australia; and granddaughter, Luna Marie Morrow of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Joseph James "Joe" Borich, 81, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on February 23, 2026, in Edmonds, Wash.

Born in Duluth, Minn., on May 28, 1944, Mr. Borich moved to Sioux Falls, S.D., with his family when he was 10. He completed his education in South Dakota, earning both BA and MA degrees.

In 1967 Mr. Borich spent three months in Hawaii training for a two-year assignment in the Peace Corps (Group 18, Thailand). His proficiency in foreign languages led to his selection to address the welcoming Thai officials upon arrival in Bangkok.

This assignment was curtailed in 1969 when Mr. Borich's Selective Service status was reclassified. He was sent to Vietnamese language training, followed by service in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971 as an interpreter.

On a whim, he took advantage of a three-day pass to Saigon to take the written Foreign Service exam, which he promptly forgot about upon return to South Dakota after his Vietnam service.

The State Department pursued him, and Mr. Borich successfully completed the challenging screening and joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1972.

After a nine-month course in Mandarin Chinese, he embarked on his first overseas assignment, to Taipei (1973–1975).

Following domestic assignments in the State Department, Mr. Borich was selected in 1980 for the team that would reopen the American consulate in Shanghai, closed for 30 years after the Communist government severed relations with the United States.

He was present when the American flag that flew over the consulate in 1950 was presented to consulate officers in 1980, and served there until 1982.

Mr. Borich then returned to Taipei and the American Institute in Taiwan (1982–1986).

In 1988 Mr. Borich was assigned to Mogadishu as deputy chief of mission/chargé d'affaires. When civil war erupted in 1990, Mr. Borich, along with other U.S. and foreign diplomats, was evacuated in Operation Eastern Exit.

Back at State, he served as director of the Taiwan Coordination Staff in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs at State. In 1994 he returned to Shanghai, serving as consul general at a consulate that had grown significantly in size since he had helped open it.

After a 25-year career, Mr. Borich retired in 1997 to the Seattle area. There he became executive director and president of the Washington State China Relations Council, serving from 1997 to 2013.

Mr. Borich was fluent in Mandarin, loved music, and was a passionate cribbage player. Family members recall that from an early age, Mr. Borich chafed at confinement, whether in a crib, a playpen, or a fenced yard—it was a restlessness that foreshadowed his adult travels around the world.

Mr. Borich was predeceased by his parents, Joe and Elaine Borich.

Grateful for having shared his life are his wife, Hsiao-Hui; children, Grace Borich, Stephanie Smith (and spouse, Brad), and J. Zachary Borich (and spouse, Christie); former wife, Beverly Christiana; grandchildren, RaeAnne Smith, Brett Smith, Danielle Smith, and Jackson Borich; siblings Clare Becker, Marty Baxter, and Timothy Borich (and spouse, Jeanette); and a host of other relatives and friends.

Edwin Gharst Corr, 91, a retired Foreign Service officer and three-time ambassador, died on February 11, 2026, at his home in Norman, Okla.

On August 6, 1934, Mr. Corr was born in Edmond, Okla., to E.L. Corr and Rowena Gharst Corr.

He went to the University of Oklahoma (OU) on Navy ROTC and wrestling scholarships. Under Coach Port Robertson, he made the OU team at 130 lb. for two years.

Also at OU, he met his wife, Susanne, in a history class. They married in 1957.

Upon graduation, he entered the Marine Corps, attaining the rank of captain. He also wrestled for the All Marine Team, winning fourth place in the National Amateur Athletic Union Tournament in 1959.

In 1960 he returned to OU to earn a master's degree in history. While there, daughters Michelle and Jennifer were born.

Mr. Corr joined the Foreign Service in 1961. His first assignment was to Mexico, where a third daughter, Phoebe, was born.

He took a leave of absence in 1963 to serve for two years as a staff member for the Peace Corps in Cali and then went to Austin, Texas, for a year of Latin American studies, gaining a second master's degree.

In 1969 the family moved to Washington, D.C., where Mr. Corr was Panama desk officer at State and helped set up the Inter-American Foundation.

He then went to Thailand as mission coordinator, followed by Ecuador as counselor for political affairs, then deputy chief of mission, and finally, when the ambassador departed, chargé d'affaires.

In 1978 Mr. Corr returned to State as deputy assistant secretary for international narcotics matters. In 1980 President Jimmy Carter appointed him U.S. ambassador to Peru.

And in late 1981, President Ronald Reagan named him U.S. ambassador to Bolivia, where he served for four years. In 1985 Reagan asked him to go to El Salvador, where a civil war was underway.

Amb. Corr's final posting was as diplomat in residence at the University of Oklahoma. In 1990 he retired from the Foreign Service but continued at OU, where he helped establish international programs and the Energy Institute of the Americas.

He also published articles and books on foreign policy and was always willing to speak to groups on the subjects he loved.

Amb. Corr lived a life of deep Christian faith, his family recalls. Wherever he served, he was involved in a local English-speaking church, often teaching teenagers.

Family members also recall that one of his many honors after returning to Oklahoma was induction into the Oklahoma Wrestling Hall of Fame for his accomplishments off the mat.

Amb. Corr was preceded in death by his parents, younger brother Bill, and sister Jean Anne.

He is survived by his wife of 68 years, Susanne; daughters, Michelle (and spouse, David) Jones, Jennifer Ladd, and Phoebe Morales; grandchildren, Nathan (and spouse, Zulema) Ladd, Jessica Ladd, Rebeka Morales, and Austin Morales; great-grandsons, Robert and Elijah Ladd; twin brother, Dr. Bert Corr; niece, Cindy (and spouse, Don) Harrison, and nephews, Ed (and spouse, Debbie) Corr, Jim (and spouse, Kathy) Cochrane, and Bill (and spouse, Carol) Cochrane; and brother-in-law, Miguel Gomez.

Frank Jonathan Finver, 70, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer, passed away peacefully, surrounded by his wife and three children, at his home in Colorado on March 2, 2026, due to complications from Parkinson's disease.

Mr. Finver was born on July 21, 1955, in Glen Cove, N.Y., to parents Eleanor and Lester. In 1960 the family, including older sister Julie, relocated to Chevy Chase, Md.

The family was completed in 1963 with the arrival of younger brother, Paul.

Deeply committed to education and lifelong learning, Mr. Finver earned his undergraduate degree with honors at American University and went on to complete his master's degree in international affairs at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Although he made a cameo appearance as a postgraduate intern at the 1978 Camp David Accords, he officially began his government service in 1982 as an information officer in the Public Affairs Bureau in Washington, D.C.

In 1987 Mr. Finver entered the U.S. Foreign Service. During a nearly four-decade career, he served in Washington, D.C., and numerous overseas postings, including Zagreb, Tel Aviv, Moscow, Lisbon, Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Warsaw.

In Washington, D.C., he served in several bureaus, including Near Eastern Affairs, Economic and Business Affairs, and Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs.

While serving abroad, Mr. Finver held various positions, including political officer, spokesperson, general services officer, and public affairs officer.

In 2013 he was appointed a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, a distinction reflecting his experience, initiative, integrity, and leadership.

Mr. Finver's final posting was Warsaw, where he served as counselor for culture and press, until he retired in 2020. The couple settled in Colorado in 2024.

Beyond his professional accomplishments, Mr. Finver was a man of wide-ranging interests. He maintained a lifelong love of sports, and was an avid reader and lover of music. He found joy in connecting with close friends and strangers alike, in no small part due to his sharp and infectious sense of humor.

He also relished the loyal companionship of his beloved black Labrador retrievers, first Ziggy and then Bailey, both deeply loved members of the family and traveling companions.

Mr. Finver's life was marked by service, curiosity, kindness, and love. Whether representing his country abroad, mentoring the next generation of Foreign Service officers, spending time with family, or indulging in a cigar and a Scotch or Pilsner Urquell (his favorite beer), he lived with purpose and generosity.

His legacy lives on in the family he loved, the teachings he shared, and the friendships he nurtured across continents.

Mr. Finver is survived by the love of his life and wife of 43 years, Fay; children, Joshua, Jessica, and Pamela; grandchildren, Maya, Luna, Asa, Theodore, and Graham; and brother, Paul.

The family will hold a private memorial this summer.

Patrick Joseph Freeman, 69, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on March 6, 2026, in Olympia, Wash., of cancer.

Mr. Freeman was born on October 3, 1956, in San Francisco, Calif., to Edwin Sidney Freeman and Margaret Hyland Freeman, the last of their four children. He was 3 when his mother died, and 8 when his father died. He and his siblings then moved to Spokane, Wash., to live with an uncle's family.

At age 11, Mr. Freeman moved in with his 19-year-old sister, Maureen, who sought custody of her brothers, even though it meant she had to try to balance those responsibilities with college and a minimum wage job. (Having survived the boys' teenage years, Maureen later became an active member and leader in the foster parent community.)

In 1974, at age 18, Mr. Freeman joined the U.S. Marine Corps and served as a Chinese language voice intercept operator. He ended his tour with the rank of sergeant.

He graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1984 with a degree in Asian studies (Chinese politics) and then worked for a year at the National Security Agency.

In 1986 Mr. Freeman joined the U.S. State Department Foreign Service as a political officer, a job he learned requires specialized reporting and lobbying on topics of interest to the U.S. government, and frequent work as a tour guide for visitors of all ranks from Washington, D.C.

After a consular assignment in London (1986–1987), he worked as a political officer in Kuala Lumpur (1988–1990).

There he met his wife, Anne Wan, who, as friends and family members recall, humorously described herself as Mr. Freeman's most expensive souvenir of his time in Malaysia.

Following an assignment in Washington, D.C., at the State Department's China desk (1990–1992), Mr. Freeman was posted in Beijing (1992–1996), where the couple's son, Tim, joined the family.

He served next in Dhaka (1997–2000) and then Singapore (2000–2004), where their daughter, Rachel, was born.

Mr. Freeman's final assignment was Ulaanbaatar (2005–2007). He then retired from the Foreign Service, and the family settled in Moscow, Idaho, where his sister, Cathy, had long lived.

During his career, Mr. Freeman received two Superior Honor Awards and the Sinclaire Language Award. He achieved at least professional working proficiency in Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Bengali, and Mongolian.

From 2009 to 2016, Mr. Freeman worked for the University of Idaho as an administrative assistant in the Army ROTC military science program.

In 2017 the Freemans moved to Olympia, Wash., where they enjoyed the nearby hiking and camping opportunities.

Mr. Freeman was predeceased by his sister Maureen and brother, Kevin.

He is survived by his wife, Anne; children, Tim and Rachel; and sister Cathy (and spouse, Chick) Mabbutt.

At Mr. Freeman's request, no service will be held.

John Houston Hawes, 84, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away on April 3, 2026, at his home in Virginia of heart failure.

Mr. Hawes was born on May 23, 1941, and spent most of his childhood in Glen Rock, N.J. In 1963 he graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University with a degree in public and international affairs.

During his time at Princeton, he served as editor of *The Princeton Review*. Later in life, in 2001, he earned a master's degree in secondary education from George Mason University.

Mr. Hawes dedicated three decades of his career to the United States as a Foreign Service officer with the Department of State, joining in 1963 and retiring in 1993 as a Minister Counselor.

His distinguished service took him across the globe, including postings in Naples, Addis Ababa, Kolkata and New Delhi, Brussels (NATO), Vienna, Rabat, and Washington, D.C.

Mr. Hawes held a number of senior roles, including deputy assistant secretary of State for political-military affairs, deputy chief of mission in Rabat, and head of the 1992 U.S. Delegation to Open Skies Treaty negotiations with the Soviet Union.

He was also lead negotiator for the Azores Base Negotiations in 1996.

Following his retirement from the Foreign Service, Mr. Hawes began a second career, in education, teaching International Baccalaureate theory of knowledge and geography at Annandale High School in Fairfax County from 2000 to 2013.

A passionate and engaging educator, he was known for challenging students to think critically about the world and their place in it. He was nominated for Teacher of the Year in 2010 and was a dedicated supporter of the school's drama program.

He also taught at the Virginia Governor's School for the Humanities and Performing Arts, leading courses on topics such as the Crusades and Jihads as well as Diversity and Tolerance.

Family and friends remember Mr. Hawes for his deep intellectual curiosity, commitment to arms control, dedication to education and lifelong learning, and love for his family. His life's work reflected a belief in diplomacy, dialogue, and the power of ideas to shape a more equitable world.

Mr. Hawes is survived by his daughters, Fabrizia Hawes, Alessia Hawes Kirkland, and Christiana Hawes (with his first wife, Marisa Lambiase), and Chynna Hawes and Jade Hawes (with his second wife, Wendy Jean Chamberlin, a fellow Foreign Service officer whom he married in 1996); and grandchildren, Justin Kirkland, Lauren Kirkland, Tosca Lanfranconi, Tea Lanfranconi, Caterina Lanfranconi, Jordan Leonard, Jaslyn Leonard, Jack Gooch, and River Gooch.

Ravic R. Huso, 72, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer and former ambassador to Laos, passed away on February 21, 2026, in Kailua Kona, Hawaii, of natural causes.

Mr. Huso was born on July 22, 1953, in Milan, Italy, the son of a Navy officer who had joined the Foreign Service after World War II. As a child, he lived in various countries in Africa and Asia, including Thailand and Laos.

In 1973 he earned a BA in political science from the College of Idaho and an MA in international relations at the University of Virginia in 1976.

Later in life, in 1993, Mr. Huso attended the U.S. Army War College, obtaining a diploma in national security studies. He was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the College of Idaho in 2010.

Mr. Huso spoke French, Thai, and Lao fluently, as well as Bahasa Malaysia and Italian.

In 1980, after serving for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal, he joined the U.S. Foreign Service.

Early postings included Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Burundi, and Niger, where he was the deputy chief of mission (DCM).

Mr. Huso served on the Philippines desk during the Marcos-Aquino transition period, the Australia–New Zealand desk, and later as deputy director and director of the Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam desk.

Southeast Asian postings included Malaysia and Thailand (as DCM). He was named U.S. ambassador to the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2007, serving there until 2010.

Ambassador Huso also served as foreign policy adviser to the U.S. Pacific Command (2004–2007) and to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Transformation in Norfolk, Va. (2010–2013).

Amb. Huso received several honors and awards, including the Department of Defense Distinguished Public Service Award; the Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Award, presented by the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Order of the White Elephant, Knight Commander, presented by the King of Thailand; and

Superior Honor and Performance Pay Awards from the State Department.

After he retired in 2013, the Husos settled in Kailua Kona, Hawaii.

Amb. Huso played tennis very well and enjoyed basketball, softball, and horseback riding, including polo, as well.

In retirement, he became a U.S. Polo Association polo umpire and was an official on the field at the Mauna Kea Polo Club from 2013 to 2019.

Amb. Huso is survived by his wife, Barbara Huso of Kailua Kona; daughter, Natalie Huso of Clarksburg, Md.; and sisters, Renata Beck of Bend, Ore., and Manuela Huso of Corvallis, Ore.

Donations in his memory may be made to the Hawaii Parkinson Association or Legacies of War.

James Swan "Jim" Landberg, 89, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away peacefully on February 19, 2026, in Washington, D.C., with family members by his side.

Mr. Landberg was born on June 4, 1936, in Seattle, Wash.

The first in his family to attend college, he obtained a BA in political science from the University of Washington in 1960 and a master of public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in 1975. In 1979 he graduated from the National War College.

In 1963 Mr. Landberg began his career in the U.S. Foreign Service in Washington, D.C., where he met his beloved wife, Erika, at Augustana Lutheran Church.

From 1963 to 1987, the couple served in the Dominican Republic, India, and, finally, Bolivia, where Mr. Landberg was political/economic counselor and acting deputy chief of mission.

Mr. Landberg also served as a district senior adviser in Vietnam's Binh Dinh Province from 1968 to 1970.

His Washington, D.C., tours at the State Department included positions in the Office of Cuban Affairs; the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs' Office of Regional Economic Affairs; the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs' Office of Monetary Affairs; the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs; and as executive assistant to the U.S. representative to the Paris Club.

Mr. Landberg ended his career serving as deputy director and acting director of the Office of Mexico Affairs (1983–1987).

Following his retirement, he was a member of the U.S. Foreign Service Grievance Board for four consecutive two-year terms and served as an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Election Supervisor in Bosnia and Kosovo from 1997 to 2000.

Mr. Landberg was program director of the Conference Board from 1989 to 1999; an inspector at the Department of State Office of the Inspector General; and a consultant to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the law firm of Hughes, Hubbard, and Reed, and several other entities.

He also formed his own real estate group, the Saint George Corporation, and owned and managed properties in Washington, D.C., into his final years.

Mr. Landberg was a reader, a thinker, an Apple expert, an avid follower of politics and foreign affairs, a fan of classical music, and was known for his sense of humor and his delicious Swedish pancakes.

He conducted extensive genealogical research, tracing his family's connections to the Fairbanks family and presence in the United States to the 1600s.

Friends and family members recall Mr. Landberg as a man who knew when a calm voice was needed and when to be outspoken, a man who valued working hard to contribute and benefit others, and a man who loved his country and was tough in both stamina and in standing up for what is right.

Mr. Landberg is survived by his wife of more than 63 years, Erika; sons, Foreign Service Officer Christopher (and spouse, Amanda), and Washington, D.C., school teacher Stephen; grandchildren, Elias and Violet; sister, Judy; and many loving cousins and other relatives.

Moises David Mendoza, 42, a Foreign Service officer, died on February 12, 2026, in New York City.

Mr. Mendoza was born on February 11, 1984, in Los Angeles, Calif. He grew up in Portland, Ore., and loved attending Trailblazer basketball and Nighthawk hockey games with his dad and brother.

He enjoyed family camping trips and going hiking with the Boy Scouts. In high school, he participated in a competition with DECA, a nonprofit that mentors emerging leaders and entrepreneurs, and his team placed 10th in the nation.

Mr. Mendoza earned a bachelor of science degree in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, a master of public policy degree from the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, and a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University.

Before entering the Foreign Service in September 2016, he worked as a journalist in the United States and Germany.

During his first overseas posting, Mr. Mendoza provided consular services to U.S. citizens in Matamoros and documented the consulate's little-known history.

From this pioneering effort, he initiated a project at State to create a resource for other officers who want to pursue microhistories at overseas missions. The resulting "tool kit" is available through the Office of the Historian.

His second overseas posting was to

Port-au-Prince. There, he conducted political reporting and risk analysis on governance and labor issues and collaborated with civil society and governments across the region to advance human rights protections.

In Washington, D.C., Mr. Mendoza served in the State Department's Operations Center, worked on issues related to Central America, and oversaw coordination on a foreign assistance portfolio.

In his final assignment, from 2023 to 2025 at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (UN), he first supported the U.S. ambassador to the UN as a personal assistant and during the second year served as a lead U.S. Security Council negotiator on conflict-related sexual violence, gender, and children in armed conflict.

After this assignment, in July 2025 he took leave without pay to explore private sector opportunities in artificial intelligence and started work at an AI company in December 2025.

With a tireless commitment to bringing people together and leading with integrity, Mr. Mendoza also devoted his energy to the broader Foreign Service community.

He volunteered within the State Department with the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) and the Hispanic and Latin Employee Council of Foreign Affairs Agencies (HECFAA).

Mr. Mendoza was the 2019 winner of AFSA's Averell Harriman Award for Constructive Dissent by an Entry-Level Officer and received the Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide's Secretary of State Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad (SOSA) in 2020.

In 2022 Mr. Mendoza joined the AAFSW Board. As chair of the SOSA program, he took responsibility for organizing every aspect of it until his untimely death. He will be honored posthumously, in November 2026, with AAFSW's Lesley Dorman Award.

He also co-founded the Foreign Affairs Support Network.

At the April 11 memorial organized by AFSA, HECFAA honored Mr. Mendoza posthumously with a special award created in his honor, the Service Without Borders Memorial Award.

Friends and family members remember Mr. Mendoza for his dedication, generosity, steady commitment, and deep love and care for his family. (Tributes are published in the May-June *FSJ*.)

Mr. Mendoza is survived by his spouse of more than a decade, Hendrik Sy of New York, N.Y., and parents, Jeannette and Anthony Mendoza, sister, Viviana Mendoza, and brother, Isaiah Mendoza, all of Tucson, Ariz.

Esther Roberts, MD, 83, a medical doctor and member of the Senior Foreign Service, died on March 11, 2026, in hospice care in Fairfax, Va., following a period of declining health.

Born on November 9, 1942, in Little Rock, Ark., Ms. Roberts spent her formative years in segregated Nashville, Tenn. Her father, a psychologist, and her mother, a university librarian, brought the world to her in a home filled with literature, all genres of music, and art.

From an early age, Ms. Roberts was interested in reading and science, and developed skills as an artist and sculptor. She eagerly participated in community affairs affecting poor and homeless citizens and in sit-in demonstrations to reverse segregation.

As a teen, she entered a nationwide contest creating a plaster of Paris cross-section of the human eye, complete in every detail, including nerves and veins. She was disappointed in taking only second place.

Ms. Roberts determined early on that her professional path was in medicine. After graduating as salutatorian of her high school class, she majored in biology at Fisk University.

There, she served as student council president, was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa National Honor Society, and graduated summa cum laude in 1964.

In 1968 Ms. Roberts received her medical degree from Meharry Medical College followed by a residency in social and community psychiatry. She also earned an MS degree and a master of public health degree from Columbia University.

Dr. Roberts joined the Department of State Bureau of Medical Services in 1980 to develop a mental health program based on the value of having mental health clinicians with the ability to address both medical and psychological issues.

On January 20, 1981, when the 52 American hostages held in Iran were released and flown to Wiesbaden Air Base in Germany, Dr. Roberts was there as lead of the interagency mental health team for psychological debriefing and support for the American heroes.

Though she went on to become the deputy assistant secretary for medical services and had a long and distinguished career, she often spoke of her work with the hostages as the privilege and honor of a lifetime.

At State, Dr. Roberts oversaw the establishment of an employee consultation service for Foreign Service and Civil Service employee assistance.

These "in-house" services provided counseling and psychotherapy, as well as emergency support to Foreign Service personnel experiencing trauma overseas, such as the terrorist attacks in Beirut (1983) and Nairobi (1998).

During Dr. Roberts' stewardship, the program grew exponentially, with the

identification and selection of mental health professionals schooled in attributes she deemed essential to being able to respond to the needs of employees serving a worldwide community. It now has psychiatrists in posts in Europe, Asia, and South America.

Upon retirement in 2010, Dr. Roberts received the U.S. Senior Foreign Service Presidential Award for decades of outstanding service as director of the mental health program. She was a true pioneer in mental health services for members of the Foreign Service and their families at embassies around the world.

Family members recall that Dr. Roberts often spoke with pride of the many mental health professionals she hired and with whom she maintained a relationship.

The family is sincerely grateful for the calls received from colleagues during the final weeks of her life. To hear stories of her time and work in the Foreign Service was most comforting.

Dr. Roberts was preceded in death by her parents, Dr. S. Oliver and Marion Roberts.

She is survived by her daughter from a former marriage, Marion Velma Ashley (and spouse, Kevin Patrick Quinn); grandchildren, Aoife Ashley Quinn and Authur Ashley Quinn; nephew, Oliver R. Stone; sisters, Dr. Barbara Roberts and Dr. Kay Roberts; and a host of other relatives and friends.

William A. Root, 102, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on February 10, 2026, in East Lansing, Mich.

Mr. Root was born on September 20, 1923, in Hingham, Mass. He graduated from Colorado College in 1943 and then joined the U.S. Navy as a radar officer.

He served in the Navy until 1946, when he returned to the U.S.

In 1948 Mr. Root earned an MA in international affairs and a Russian Institute certificate at Columbia University.

He met his wife of 72 years, Connie, in Chicago where both studied at Northwestern, he in midshipman school at the Chicago campus and she in journalism at the Evanston campus. They married in 1945 and had four children.

Before joining the State Department in 1950, Mr. Root served in the International Activities Branch of the Bureau of the Budget.

He served overseas in Bonn (1952–1955), Copenhagen (1959–1963), Saigon (1969–1971), and West Berlin (1971–1974).

Between foreign tours, Mr. Root attended the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (1963–1964) and served in State's Office of East-West Trade, where he dealt with export controls (1964–1969).

After Berlin, he was assigned to the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (1974–1976) and then returned to the Office of East-West Trade (1976–1980).

After resigning in 1983, Mr. Root continued to consult and make public comments regarding regulatory changes in export controls until age 101.

Friends and family members remember him for his lifelong commitment to helping create a more peaceful world for all citizens.

Mr. Root was predeceased by his wife, Connie, in 2017.

He is survived by his children, Carl Root, Margaret Bruck, John Root, and Christine Root; seven grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

Lionel Alexander Rosenblatt, 82, a retired Foreign Service officer and champion for refugees in Southeast Asia and, later, around the world, died on April 11, 2026, after a lengthy fight against cancer.

Born on December 10, 1943, in New York City to Carol (née Blumenthal) and David B. Rosenblatt, a nuclear scientist at Brookhaven National Laboratory, Mr. Rosenblatt graduated from Bellport High School in Long Island in 1961.

He graduated from Harvard College in 1965 and attended Stanford Law School for one year before entering the U.S. Foreign Service in 1966.

Mr. Rosenblatt's first post was Sri Lanka, where he met his future wife, Ann Grosvenor. The couple married in 1971.

In 1967, after six months in Sri Lanka, he volunteered for an assignment in Vietnam and then worked with the Vietnam Special Studies Group at the State Department. During that assignment, he made several return visits to the country.

After his early and intense experience in Vietnam, Mr. Rosenblatt took a leave of absence in the early 1970s to decide whether diplomacy was the right career. He worked as a reporter at the *Bangor Daily News* in Maine, but returned to the State Department in 1973 as a special assistant to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and then Deputy Secretary of State Robert S. Ingersoll, becoming more involved in Vietnam.

While working for Ingersoll in March 1975, Mr. Rosenblatt sensed that South Vietnam's days were numbered. He helped organize a group of mid-level U.S. diplomats to meet daily to discuss the latest developments and push for an evacuation plan not only for Americans, but also for the thousands of Vietnamese who had worked with the U.S. over the years. (For details, see retired FSO Parker Borg's April 2015 account in the *FSJ*, at https://bit.ly/Borg-FSJ.)

Determining that the State Department was not working at the speed necessary, he and a colleague, Craig Johnstone, flew surreptitiously to Vietnam. There, without

being caught, they managed to smuggle some 100 or more Vietnamese through the departure maze and out of the country before the final April collapse.

Upon return to Washington, the two FSOs were sent to Secretary Kissinger for an anticipated reprimand. Instead, they were returned to their positions.

For Mr. Rosenblatt, that was the Interagency Task Force on Indochinese refugees, where he was the driving force in establishing the resettlement program.

The task force organized a transit camp in Guam and reception centers at U.S. military bases in California, Arkansas, and Florida; and stimulated nongovernmental organizations to develop refugee support programs.

The group was also instrumental in pushing through Congress the Indochina Refugee and Migration Act of 1975, which permitted the resettlement of the first 130,000 refugees to the United States.

Mr. Rosenblatt continued to work on the task force under Julia Vadelia Taft, the new director from the Department of Health and Human Services.

In 1976 he learned Thai and was posted to Bangkok as refugee coordinator. He served there until 1981, visiting the many Indochinese camps in the border areas and advocating for the admission of larger numbers of refugees to the U.S.

Mr. Rosenblatt served as U.S. consul general in Quebec City before retiring in 1988, after the State Department refused his proposal to create a special category of refugee officers.

In 1990 Mr. Rosenblatt became the president of Refugees International, which he headed until health issues forced him to step down in 2001.

His practice was to visit areas where conflict was creating refugees and publicize the plight of these individuals not only in Southeast Asia, but around the world, often to the irritation of authorities in the host country and in the United States. More than once, this produced news coverage of events that might otherwise have been overlooked.

After stepping down from Refugees International, Mr. Rosenblatt became a supporter, frequent visitor, and advocate for one group of Laotian Refugees in Thailand, the Mlabri.

Mr. Rosenblatt received the American Foreign Service Association's William R. Rivkin Award for Constructive Dissent by a Mid-Level Officer for his work rescuing Vietnamese refugees (1975) and the Government of Thailand Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant for his work with refugees in Thailand (1981).

He also received the Julia Taft Award for outstanding contributions to the humanitarian and development community (2009) and an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Concordia University for his work with indigenous people of Southeast Asia, especially the Hmong (2010).

He was the model for the fictional character Larry Rose in the 1990 made-for-television movie "Last Flight Out," which dramatized Mr. Rosenblatt's visit to Saigon in 1975.

Mr. Rosenblatt is survived by his beloved wife of 55 years, Ann Grosvenor Rosenblatt of Washington, D.C.; sister Sarah Rosenblatt; and brothers, Josiah and Nathaniel Rosenblatt.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made in his honor to Refugees International or the UN Refugee Agency (USA for UNHCR).

George Frederick Ruffner, 80, a retired Foreign Commercial Service officer with the rank of Minister Counselor, died on April 1, 2026, in Naples, Fla., after a short battle with pancreatic cancer.

Mr. Ruffner was born on October 9, 1945, in Orange, N.J.

In 1967 he earned a BA from Hobart College in Geneva, N.Y., then an MBA in 1969 and an MA in international affairs in 1972, from Columbia University.

From 1969 to 1971, he served honorably in the U.S. Army in Germany.

Mr. Ruffner joined the Commerce Department in 1973. There and at the State Department and, after 1980, in the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service of the Commerce Department's International Trade Administration (ITA), he dedicated his life to international trade promotion.

His overseas postings included Mexico City, Santiago, Amsterdam, Singapore (twice), Milan, Manila, and Berlin.

In 1993 Mr. Ruffner received the ITA Silver Medal for exceptional performance and notable contributions to trade. He retired in 2010.

Colleagues remember Mr. Ruffner as a witty associate and innovative trade promoter. He was known for his sense of humor, a liking of the finer things in life, and for living life to the fullest.

In his personal life, Mr. Ruffner was a passionate collector of historical artifacts, knives, and clocks. An animal lover, he volunteered at the Humane Society in Naples. He was an active member of his community, who was often seen working out and riding his bike.

Though his life journey spanned the world, family members will forever remember his gentle spirit carried in their hearts.

Mr. Ruffner is survived by his wife, Marjon, and sister, Nancy.

Nancy Morgan Serpa, 75, a retired Senior Foreign Service officer, died on October 29, 2025, in Tampa, Fla.

Born on June 15, 1950, in Hackensack, N.J., Ms. Serpa discovered early passions

for languages, public service, and global engagement.

In 1972 she graduated from Middlebury College with a degree in French and later, in 1980, earned a master of public administration degree from Harvard's Kennedy School, grounding her lifelong commitment to government service.

Ms. Serpa joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1973, beginning a distinguished career with numerous postings across Africa throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Her work on the continent—spanning political, economic, and administrative roles—shaped her deep expertise in African affairs and her reputation as a calm and highly capable leader who always told it like it was. She later served as deputy executive director of the African Bureau.

Her most consequential assignment was deputy chief of mission in Lagos from 1998 to 2001. Serving during Nigeria's transition from military rule to democracy, Ms. Serpa helped oversee the design and management of major security, economic, and humanitarian assistance initiatives.

She played a central role in supporting judicial reform efforts and guiding the growth of a complex multiagency mission in the newly democratic nation.

Returning to Washington in 2001, Ms. Serpa continued her service in senior human resources roles in a Civil Service capacity, including as director of the Office of Recruitment, Examination and Employment (2001–2005) and director of the Office of Performance Evaluation (2006–2007).

After retiring from federal service in 2007, Ms. Serpa served on the Foreign Service Grievance Board.

Following many years in Arlington, Va., raising three kids and sending them off to college, she eventually settled in Weeki Wachee, Fla., in 2019.

There she embraced a quieter life filled with her favorite pastimes: cheering for the Boston Red Sox, solving Sudoku puzzles on her lanai, watching "Jeopardy!" (anyone who knew her *knew* not to call between 7:30 and 8 p.m. on weeknights), hitting "genius" on Spelling Bee, and welcoming friends and family from near and far to the home she built.

Ms. Serpa was preceded in death by her husband, Louis Serpa, and son Matthew Serpa.

She is survived by her son Michael Serpa, and daughter, Kathleen Serpa.

Martha Moreno Snyder, 82, a Foreign Service spouse, passed away on March 11, 2026, in Annandale, Va., after a short illness.

Born and raised in Bolivia, she married U.S. Foreign Service Officer Gerald E. Snyder in 1963, became a U.S. citizen, and set about on a life of adventure and travel.

Together, the Snyders navigated the 1964 Bolivian military coup, the Colombian conflict, and, in the late 1960s, welcomed Cuban refugees in Miami.

While posted in the U.S.S.R. from 1975 to 1977, Ms. Snyder was given a top-secret security clearance and undertook valuable work for the U.S. embassy.

After their last major assignment, in Belgium from 1980 to 1983, the couple moved to Virginia, where they settled after Mr. Snyder's retirement in 1987.

From 1987 to 2016, Ms. Snyder was a top sales associate for Lord & Taylor in Northern Virginia.

Renowned among friends and family for her excellent cooking, she enjoyed spending time with her family and gardening.

Ms. Snyder is survived by her son, Gerald R. (and spouse, Lisa); daughter, A. Cecilia; grandchildren, Amanda and Gerald (and spouse, Kristina); great-granddaughter, Hazel; and sister, Sonia.

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.

Floyd Rudolph Spears, 90, a retired Foreign Service officer with USAID, died on January 31, 2026, in Miami, Fla.

Mr. Spears was born on September 5, 1935, in Clinton, La., to Frank and Olivia Spears.

In 1979 he graduated from the University of Maryland with an MA in urban management.

Mr. Spears joined the Foreign Service with USAID in 1968. He held executive officer posts in Vietnam, Senegal, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, and Jamaica until his retirement in 1996.

Settling in Miami in 2003, Mr. Spears remained active in retirement, holding contract positions as an executive officer in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Liberia until 2010.

Mr. Spears loved entertaining, traveling, reading, keeping up with international and local affairs, watching various sports, and, in earlier years, playing tennis avidly.

He also served as president of the board of his homeowner's association in Miami, Fla., and volunteered at local polling stations.

Mr. Spears will be remembered for his kindness, calm demeanor, supportive nature, and dedication to family and many friends around the world, with whom he maintained close ties throughout his life.

Mr. Spears was predeceased by two of his children, Floyd Jr. and Therese Spears.

He is survived by his wife, Cheryl; son Brian; sisters Hilda and Velma (and spouse, Manuel); brother, Frank (and spouse, Jean); and six grandchildren, nieces, and nephews.

Celebrating the Elegance and Craftsmanship of the Founding Era

Views of America:
The Diplomatic Reception Rooms at the U.S. Department of State
Virginia Hart, Bri Brophy, Lauren Brown, and Mark Alan Hewitt, with a foreword by Hon. Marco Rubio and photography by Durston Saylor and Bruce M. White, Rizzoli Electra, 2026, $65.00/hardcover, print only, 240 pages.

Reviewed by Harry Kopp

The seventh and eighth floors of the Department of State are home to 42 Diplomatic Reception Rooms, lovingly furnished with more than 5,000 pieces of fine and decorative art, dating from 1740 to 1840, all acquired by gift, without taxpayer funds. Although it is said that "the Diplomatic Reception Rooms belong to us all," the rooms are closed to the public and pretty much everyone else.

Unless you are escorting a foreign dignitary or attending an invitation-only event, the only way you are likely to see these spaces is by opening *Views of America* or the earlier *America's Collection* (2023), two excellent coffee-table books under the principal authorship of Virginia Hart, director and curator of the State Department's Office of Fine Arts.

Views of America covers some of the same ground as *America's Collection*, often with additional and highly engaging backstories. The rolltop desk on which the 1783 treaty that ended the Revolutionary War was signed belonged to David Hartley, the British commissioner, who brought it with him to Paris for the occasion. The desk now figures prominently in the Diplomatic Reception Rooms and is still used on ceremonial occasions.

The alabaster bas-relief profile of James Madison that hangs in the Madison State Dining Room was a gift to Dolley Madison from the sculptor, Giuseppe Ceracchi. He had intended to carve a full bust but found flaws in the stone, as he explained in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: "I tried to do it in marbre … but the block torned with spots … and didn't permit me to perform my proposition."

Porcelain dinner plates featuring the ribbon of the Society of the Cincinnati come from a set commissioned in Canton (Guangzhou) by Samuel Shaw, cargo master of the first U.S.-flag vessel to sail to China. Shaw intended to sell the set in the United States, where George Washington was known as "the American Cincinnatus," but he did not find a ready buyer.

Washington, who counted thrift among his many virtues, shrewdly waited a year until the price came down and then had his friend "Light Horse Harry" Lee buy the set of 302 pieces for $150 and deliver it to Mount Vernon.

Invaluable endnotes track the provenance of these and other items mentioned in *Views of America*, which also provides an extensive bibliography.

Along with Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson figure most prominently in the collection. Franklin, celebrated in *Views of America* and recognized in the Department of State as the father of American diplomacy, was for most of his long life the world's most famous American. In the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, he appears again and again as the subject of admiring portraits and sculptures by British, European, and American artists.

Along with Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson figure most prominently in the collection.

Jefferson's likeness also appears throughout the rooms in paint and stone; he is present also as the owner and designer of fascinating pieces, notably a writing box and an elaborate architect's desk. In an essay—one of several in *Views of America*—architectural historian Mark Alan Hewitt credits Jefferson with promoting a "classical vision [that] prevailed over competing concepts for public architecture." Jefferson's vision, he writes, "established the eventual character of Washington, D.C."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio contributed a foreword to *Views of America* that is notable mainly for its promotion of a MAGA myth. The United States, he writes, lacked diplomats of noble blood and therefore chose in its diplomacy to emphasize the new country's "classical inheritance," the "great tradition … of Christian Europe and Greco-Roman civilization."

But what was important about the American Revolution was not its debt to European traditions but its new ideas, its *revolution*. Americans in 1776 declared

themselves and all men to be born equal, with rights no one could take away. Government, they said, exists to secure those rights, and exists with the consent of the governed. These truths needed no proof: They were—they are—self-evident.

As Secretary Rubio notes, this strain of political thought has ancient roots, but as proclaimed by the American revolutionaries, and by America's early diplomats, it came as a thunderclap. A Europe still governed by monarchs and divine right was transformed by America, not the other way around.

Views of America, like *America's Collection*, invites the reader to spend time in pleasant contemplation of the elegance, beauty, and craftsmanship of the founding era, the very best work of a turbulent time. Like the Declaration of Independence—a rare copy of which entered the collection in 2025—the Diplomatic Reception Rooms reflect American aspirations and nobility of spirit. If only our diplomacy would do the same.

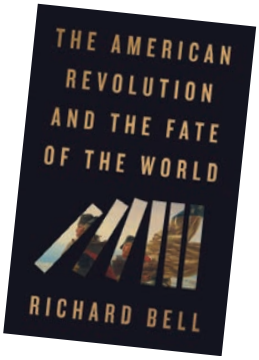
Harry W. Kopp, a Foreign Service officer from 1967 to 1985, was deputy assistant secretary of State for international trade policy in the Carter and Reagan administrations. He is the author of The Voice of the Foreign Service: A History of the American Foreign Service Association at 100 *(2nd edition, 2024) and co-author with John K. Naland of* Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the U.S. Foreign Service *(4th edition, 2021).*

One Revolution's Global Impact

The American Revolution and the Fate of the World
Richard Bell, Riverhead Books, 2025, $35.00/hardcover, e-book and audio book available, 406 pages.

Reviewed by Ásgeir Sigfússon

Was the American Revolution an event that sparked momentous geopolitical and societal changes far from our shores, as distant as India and Africa? That is the thought-provoking thesis of Richard Bell's new book, *The American Revolution and the Fate of the World*.



A professor of early American history at the University of Maryland, Bell addresses this book to a general audience. No stodgy scholarly work that some might find too dense to wade through, it is highly readable, despite the fact that Bell seems to have been the victim of an unfortunate trend in book publishing called "title bloat," where the corporate requirement for catchy and unnecessarily dramatic book titles sometimes overpromises on the cover but underdelivers in actual content.

This is not to say that this new work isn't worth reading—on the contrary, particularly for those with an interest in U.S. history. The problem is that Bell's overarching thesis struggles to come together into a coherent whole. For me, the structure of the book added to this difficulty.

Rather than writing one narrative that flows through the work, Bell has written 14 distinctive, separate chapters that focus on one country or area at a time, explaining how the revolution reverberated there, and positing that momentous events in each place might not have occurred without the contemporaneous conflict in the western hemisphere.

Although the material is well written, not much will surprise anyone who regularly reads the history of this period. Most would agree that the revolution did have effects in England, France, Spain, and the Caribbean, most obviously.

Bell opens the book with what I find to be its weakest chapter, an attempt to connect the revolution to China, because the tea that ended up in Boston Harbor originated there. This was a confounding beginning, but Bell follows up with several stronger chapters that shed light on lesser-known parts of this period.

The most compelling geographic chapters focus on Sierra Leone and India. The British colonies in Africa are generally tangential to accounts of the American Revolution, so the focus on Sierra Leone was both illuminating and informative. Pulling in a cast of characters from the deep back benches of history and telling their stories should always be a goal of new historical writing, and Bell succeeds in this chapter.

He does the same in the India chapter, which spotlights local rulers and endows them with agency, especially in the case of the former kingdom of Mysore. Bell also does a strong job of connecting the revolution to events in India, Ceylon, and the surrounding waters.

The reader can clearly follow the cause-and-effect history, made easier by the fact that some of the players in this particular drama also have significant

No stodgy scholarly work that some might find too dense to wade through, this book is highly readable.

roles on the American continent during the revolution. We all know about General Cornwallis and his surrender at Yorktown, but I had no real insight into his later career, where India features heavily.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, my favorite chapter is the only one that breaks the "one place at a time" mold and instead tells the story of the loyalists and their fates. Bell uses Benedict Arnold and his notorious wife, Peggy Shippen, as the "protagonists" of this chapter, but does so in a way that allows the reader to understand more fully the experience of the loyalists following the revolution, and just how challenging life was for most of them during those years.

Arnold's post-revolution career and life were rather unhappy, which was mostly new information for me. He often disappears from the narrative after attempting to surrender West Point to the British, but Bell provides a good amount of new context about the consequences of bad decisions, including (in Arnold's case) a very difficult time in the frozen winter of New Brunswick.

The American Revolution and the Fate of the World would make a great gift for the history buff in your life. Just warn them not to be taken in by the very dramatic title splashed across the cover. ■

Ásgeir Sigfússon is the executive director of the American Foreign Service Association.

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A Birth on the Shore of the Toliara Lagoon

BY FREDA WHITE-HENRY

Bang! Bang! Bang! Very early one morning as I slept in our tiny wooden cabin, isolated on the shores of the Toliara Lagoon in Madagascar, I was awakened by someone frantically pounding on the front door. Cries of "Ma'am, Ma'am," followed by an incomprehensible shower of words, catapulted me out of bed.

It was Notee, a fisherman and our cabin guardian, whom we paid to take care of the many issues that cropped up at our small house. He lived with his wife and young son in a circular thatched hut nearby. There was no mistaking, despite our mutual incomprehension: This was an emergency.

Grabbing a wrap, I raced after him, across the sand to his hut, where I ducked down to follow him in. There on the sandy floor lay his wife, Arwa, writhing in pain.

We knew Arwa was pregnant. My husband had agreed to drive her to the hospital when she needed to go, but he had already left for work that morning. I was alone. It was too late for Notee to undertake the perilous 20-kilometer journey to the Toliara hospital in his oxen-drawn cart.

There was no mistaking, despite our mutual incomprehension: This was an emergency.

From what little I understood of Notee's words, I knew he wanted me to take charge of Arwa while he went to the neighboring village, by oxen cart, in search of the village midwife. I ran back to the cabin to gather a pile of towels and my sewing scissors, just in case.

COURTESY OF ANJELA WHITE-HENRY

Freda White-Henry

They needed to be sterilized if I were to cut the umbilical cord. I lit the gas burner, put water in a saucepan, and dropped the scissors in, but almost immediately Notee was back again at the door, motioning for me to return. I grabbed the towels and the scissors and raced back to the hut.

Arwa was now howling in pain. I had no experience delivering babies—a fact I couldn't have shared with Notee even if I had wanted to—but had seen a program about the Lamaze method of childbirth several years before.

I knelt down beside her. "Everything is going to be all right," I said, smiling as calmly as I could, and demonstrated breathing as the instructors had done in that long-ago video.

"Breathe in," I said, taking a deep breath through the nose, followed by "out," releasing the breath by mouth. I smiled again, breathing in and out with her, while laying my hand on her abdomen, pushing gently with the "out" breath. When she had calmed down and was breathing rhythmically, I got up, took a towel, propped up her legs, and laid the towel on the sand beneath her.

I was shocked to see the baby's crown was already appearing. I continued to call, in rhythm: "Breathe in, breathe out, push." She relaxed as much as possible

Freda White-Henry served as a USAID Foreign Service officer from 1990 to 1998, with one posting in Mali, where she oversaw education and human resources development programs. Her pre–Foreign Service teaching and consulting work in Madagascar, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Nigeria laid the foundation for later service in Mali and informed her broader approach to international development. White-Henry passed away in November 2025; this story was shared by her sister, Anjela.

ELENA268/DREAMSTIME.COM

A view of the thatched huts along the coast of Toliara, Madagascar.

and gained confidence, as I did. I worked with her until the baby's head popped out, but it was slightly turned on one side with one shoulder appearing first. The other seemed to be stuck.

I wiped the baby's face, terrified it would not breathe. "Push," I repeated, over and over, as I tried to lift the baby a little to free the second shoulder. Arwa breathed and pushed as I held the baby's head off the towel. After an interminable amount of time, the baby slipped gently out of the birth canal. A little girl. She didn't utter a sound.

Concerned about the baby's breathing, I took her heels between my fingers as I had seen in the movies and held her upside down to gently smack her buttocks. She howled, opening her mouth wide. I was both relieved and delighted.

I gently wiped her little body and wrapped her up in a clean, fresh towel. I then pulled on the umbilical cord, still attached to the mother, so I could place the baby close to her mother. I laid the baby down on the mother's abdomen and smiled at the peaceful scene.

After a while I searched for the scissors and unwrapped the baby. I thought it best to leave more rather than less of the cord. I cut it, leaving a foot of cord attached to the baby. I wrapped her anew. The newly born baby settled comfortably, snuggling with her mother. All was quiet except for the gentle crashing of waves on the beach.

Sometime later I heard the creaking of the oxen cart outside. In came a dignified, matronly woman, accompanied by her assistant. I bowed to her, as was the custom. She smiled on seeing mother and baby together. I tried to demonstrate that I had cut the umbilical cord about a foot from the baby's abdomen.

She nodded and recut the cord with my scissors, knotting it expertly.

Since I had delivered the child, I was given a banana leaf, brought by the father to collect the placenta. It came simply with a little push. I collected the placenta, wrapped it in a leaf, and gave it to Notee, who buried the package in the sea.

All was now well with mother and child. With the completion of the traditional practices following birth, I was free to leave.

Every weekend thereafter, Notee knocked on our cabin door and presented us with a delicious, freshly cooked lobster, served on a tinplate. He often came to the cabin in the evening to sing and play on his homemade violin.

He continued to accompany us on sailing and fishing trips in our traditional outrigger sailing canoe, even offering me his paddle, a prized possession, when our tour in Madagascar was coming to an end.

What a magnificent time it was!

LOCAL LENS

Feral cats are a familiar presence across Central Asia's historic cities, weaving between the turquoise-tiled domes and bazaar alleyways that have drawn travelers along the Silk Road for centuries.

In Samarkand—a city of nearly 600,000—these cats occupy an unofficial but accepted role in daily life, tolerated and often fed by locals. Neither fully wild nor domesticated, they exist on the threshold between two worlds, much like the city itself.

Pictured here on a cold January morning, this stray feline leaped up on a bicycle seat immediately after the rider dismounted, surveying the ancient stones of Samarkand, presumably to secure a warm perch and look for an easy meal. ■

Michael Longhauser retired from the Foreign Service in 2021 and is now an eligible family member (EFM) whose wife is assigned to U.S. Embassy Tashkent. He took this photo with a Canon 5D MK2 and Canon 24-70 f2.8L lens. An earlier photo of his was featured in the January-February 2023 Local Lens.

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 **locallens@afsa.org**.

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