

STAYING DIPLOMATIC: THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL DURING CONTROVERSIAL TIMES

BY DMITRY FILIPOFF

For more than a hundred years, *The Foreign Service Journal* (FSJ) has been the professional publication for the United States Foreign Service, the nation's diplomatic corps. Over this long stretch of time, the *Journal* has covered topics ranging from foreign policy initiatives to the mainstay issues of managing the Foreign Service.

So how does the *Journal* navigate coverage when AFSA's members — America's diplomats — find themselves in political crossfire surrounding major world events and crises? How should the *FSJ* cover foreign policy issues that have boiled over into major political controversies? How can the magazine facilitate healthy discourse on



1924 marked a new name and mission statement for *The American Foreign Service Journal*.



The Foreign Service Journal celebrated its centennial in 2019.

heated topics without exposing itself to charges of partisanship?

These are the kinds of questions *FSJ* editors grapple with. Over time, they have been able to more consistently steer the publication through controversy by holding onto two clear operating principles: support for career diplomacy and editorial independence.

ESTABLISHING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

For a professional publication such as the *FSJ*, editorial independence adds value and legitimacy. The structure of *FSJ* helps: Each issue includes a monthly AFSA President's Views column and a separate section (of 8 to 30 pages) called *AFSA News*, which shares views and news from the association and its officers. *AFSA News* is overseen by the governing board. The rest of the magazine, "the white pages," is overseen by an editorial

board and the *Journal's* professional staff. This structure allows the magazine to air a variety of perspectives, cover controversial topics, and carve a path forward in leading the discourse on professional diplomacy.

The *FSJ* was not always the publication it is today. According to former Foreign Service officer, editorial board member, and unofficial AFSA historian Harry Kopp, when the magazine was first published in 1919 as the *American Consular Bulletin*, "The State Department found the idea of an independent publication deeply unsettling and insisted on prepublication review [by the Secretary of State] of every issue."

In 1924, the magazine became *The American Foreign Service Journal*, and a mission statement issued in tandem with the name change described the magazine's main purpose as "inspirational and not educational." In particular, according

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ABOUT *THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL*

The Foreign Service Journal (FSJ) tells the story of career diplomacy, which is by design nonpartisan. American diplomats, who serve in Washington, DC, and in 273 U.S. embassies and consulates around the world, take an oath to the Constitution, not to any president or administration. Career diplomats — unlike political appointees — are public servants. They serve across administrations, regardless of the party or personalities in charge.

Published 10 times a year and averaging 80 to 108 pages, the FSJ is the flagship publication of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA). Its unique role is in covering diplomacy from an insider's perspective, through the eyes of the practitioner. Its primary audience is AFSA's membership, the active-duty and retired diplomats and development professionals, and their families, from six foreign affairs agencies (Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, Foreign Commercial Service, Foreign Agricultural Service, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media).

The *Journal* is also a resource for those outside the Foreign Service, from military personnel to students and those considering a career in foreign affairs. Every month, AFSA deliberately makes each edition available online for free, with the aim of bringing knowledge and perspectives from the Foreign Service to researchers, policymakers, and the public. All 101 years of the *Journal* have been digitized and are searchable, serving as a record of U.S. diplomatic history.

As the union and professional association for career U.S. diplomats, AFSA defends, advances, and promotes the Foreign Service. In his April 2020 column in the *Journal*, President Ambassador Eric Rubin emphasizes: "We are passionate about our commitment to nonpartisan, nonpolitical service to our country. We will loyally serve whomever the American people elect as their leaders and work assiduously to ensure the success of the policies established by our elected leaders."



to the statement: "Articles of a tendentious nature, especially such as might be aimed to influence legislative, executive, or administrative action with respect to the Foreign Service or the Department of State, are rigidly excluded from its columns."

Excessive concern for offending State Department sensitivities and an explicit prepublication review process generated such a sterile publication that the State Department eventually relinquished its requirement for prior review.

Yet while the publication did become livelier, it would be decades before the FSJ could seriously take on controversial subjects and publish constructive critiques of departmental and Foreign Service management. The *Journal* began regularly publishing such content in the mid- to late-1940s. This notably took the form of wartime essay contests on Foreign Service reform that were seriously considered by then Secretary of State Edward Stettinius Jr.

"I can think of no more useful mine of information and recommendations," Stettinius wrote at the time. "All of us who are interested in these essays thank you." After changing course from being an "inspirational" publication and instead aiming for more educational goals, the publication quickly came into its own as a serious venue for constructive discourse on the profession of diplomacy.

Today, the AFSA governing board sets the operating guidelines for the magazine. The FSJ bylaws passed by the AFSA governing board in 2002 mandate that the magazine shall "advance the goals of AFSA" and be a "forum for lively debate of issues of interest to foreign affairs professionals by authors in the Foreign Service, the media, academia," and so on. Though the governing board has final authority as publisher, it has not gotten involved, except on very rare occasions, with the editorial process.

Appropriate governance structures are critical for safeguarding editorial independence. Carefully defined bylaws and established checks and balances between

ciation and union for U.S. diplomats, the *FSJ* team decided it was appropriate and necessary to openly side with the career diplomats under fire, explicitly defending their integrity and spotlighting their testimony to educate the public about what career diplomats do.

IN DEFENSE OF CAREER DIPLOMACY

In its December 2019 edition, only weeks before the House of Representatives met to formally vote on impeachment, the *FSJ* published a unique Speaking Out — “In Support of Professional Nonpartisan Diplomacy” (afsa.org/support-professional-nonpartisan-diplomacy) — a collection of statements defending nonpartisan diplomacy from lawmakers, other foreign affairs associations, and retired ambassadors. The piece concluded with AFSA’s plea to “honor and respect the nonpartisan, nonpolitical work of the dedicated public servants of the U.S. Foreign Service” and not allow that work to be politicized nor them to be dragged into partisan political battles.

The *FSJ* continued to share the words and deeds of the diplomats, who stayed true to their oaths and service to their country amid enormous pressure not to do so. When Yovanovitch was attacked by presidential tweet, the *Journal* called that out and shared her words, which reflected honorably on the entire Service.

Staunch defenses of diplomacy were also mounted in the AFSA president’s column. “We have all witnessed the courage and patriotism of our colleagues,” Ambassador Eric Rubin wrote. “We are nonpartisan, nonpolitical public servants who carry out our work and uphold our oath to the Constitution.”

The trials of McCarthyism scarred the Foreign Service for a generation. A year after McCarthy’s vicious attacks finally faded, George Kennan — one of the great luminaries of the Foreign Service — wrote of the “humiliation, bewilderment, and the deepest sort of discouragement to hundreds of [Foreign Service] officers.”

For the Foreign Service, the memory of impeachment has come to mean some-

REMAINING NONPARTISAN IN PARTISAN TIMES: LESSONS LEARNED

- Stay true to your mission.
- Keep your primary audience — the membership — in mind at all times.
- If you hope your publication can play a role in advancing the profession your association represents, keep outside audiences in mind and offer content that can help illuminate critical elements of the profession and the issues it addresses.
- Keep both feet on the ground, tread cautiously among media sources, and choose fact over spin.
- Have a governance structure in place that empowers editorial independence in alignment with association goals.

thing different altogether. As *FSJ* Editor in Chief Shawn Dorman wrote, the career diplomats subpoenaed as witnesses in the impeachment hearings “look more like superheroes standing up to share the truth. ... The Foreign Service ... feels a sense of pride in their dedication, professionalism, patriotism, and bravery, on display for the American public and the world to see.”

The *FSJ*, like these diplomats, had made its stand.

A PUBLICATION’S LEGACY

Navigating controversy is a part of the *FSJ*’s history. It took many editors who valued having a voice and understood what was truly important to their audience to make the *FSJ* a place for real debate. One indicator of the *FSJ*’s successful navigation of tricky political waters is that senior-level officials, both active-duty and retired, want to write for the *Journal*, adding their voices to the conversation we aim to foster.

Certainly, the *FSJ* has to know how to pick its battles. In guiding such decisions, the interests and roles of its audience, the U.S. Foreign Service, remain first and foremost. The magazine stood up for the Foreign Service during the impeachment because the integrity of nonpartisan professional diplomacy — a core principle of what the Foreign Service is and how it serves the nation — was under assault.

In the urgency of the controversial moment, wading into the fray seems fraught with uncertainty and difficulty. To see one’s way through, it is helpful to consider how future readers and association members will regard the choices a publication makes in using its voice. In time, the dilemmas will fade, new controversies will replace the old, and the next edition’s proofing will beckon. What remains is a standing record of decisions made, voices shared, and historical moments seized or skipped.

When future readers encounter silence in the record during times when controversy raged, they are left to wonder and guess at the omission. But when they encounter hard-charging debates, stances strongly argued, and editors proud to add their say, they find a publication unafraid of its own voice.

Archives hardly remember whether indecision was convenient at the time or whether some other influence is responsible for a publication’s choice of content. What controversy offers is much more than just a moment’s relevance. It offers a chance to be true to the tradition of editorial excellence. 



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