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# Hacks Are Destroying Professional Diplomacy

## We need experts to defend our interests

By Jack Perry

**T**HE AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC service is being underused, misused and abused. We are not getting out of it what the taxpayers are paying for and what the country needs.

The customary response to those assertions in Washington is, "What else is new?" The response elsewhere in the country is, "So what?"

But I would argue that if you look at the condition of American foreign policy today, you would be bound to conclude that more reliance on the professional Foreign Service would be in the country's best interest.

As a Foreign Service officer recently retired after 24 years, I believe that the state of our diplomatic service does matter, that the cost to the country of its misuse and neglect is getting higher, and that we ought to do something about it.

Let me say first off that I am not concerned about "image" and "respect" and "morale" and the like. The military have to worry about those things in order to get recruits and win budget battles. The Foreign Service has no difficulty attracting top-notch recruits, and budget battles are not its problem. As for morale, we are long since accustomed to hearing how it keeps going down and down, and we have heard all the tired clichés about "striped pants" and "the cocktail circuit" so often that they do not affect us. Images be damned. We are professionals, and our overriding concern is to get our diplomatic job done.

But there's the bind.

Somehow, in the heady years of power after World War II, we Americans decided that we could "do" foreign policy with one hand tied behind our back, changing our minds and our course when we wished, imposing our will on world events, enjoying the luxury of partisan politics and disdaining the discipline of consistency and professionalism in foreign policy. Knowing a country really well — whether the Soviet Union or Vietnam or Iran or whatever — became irrelevant

Policy came to be based on campaign promises, or ideology, or perceived "mandates," rather than on the hard facts of international affairs as seen by those who studied them most closely. And as part of these patterns we Americans seem to have decided that our career diplomatic service is ignorable, even expendable.

I say the record shows that you cannot "do" foreign policy that way, and that the Foreign Service is not expendable. But I have to acknowledge that today the career service is in a parlous state, for these most important reasons:

- Most critically, the Foreign Service does not enjoy the confidence of our presidents. When I was detailed to work in the executive office of the president (Council on Environmental Quality) during the Nixon administration, my boss told me, "Over here, don't mention that you're from State — they're not trusted." I fear that the same mistrust, in varying degrees, can be substantiated in every president from at least Franklin Roosevelt's administration.

Why? Because, presumably, presidents believe, or are persuaded, that career diplomats are not loyal to them personally but are loyal either to the opposition party or else to the diplomat's own idea of what foreign policy should be. This is a bum rap. Nearly everyone I have known in the Foreign Service since my entry in 1959 believed that foreign policy descended from the president. Not only did they not sabotage him, they did their best in nearly all cases to carry out his policies. It is often the political appointees, I have found, who despite professed ultraloyalty have their own personal axes to grind.

It is true that diplomats do at times have images of the national interest that vary from those of the president's closest advisers, and (to their credit, I would say) FSOs are known to speak out while policy is being debated. Once policy is set, I maintain, career diplomats try their best to carry it out.

But my defense is irrelevant. Presidents have not given the Foreign Service their full confidence, and that puts the service under a gigantic shadow.

- Ideology — what might be defined as professing the "proper" beliefs — counts more and more, although career diplomats are by training and tradition non-partisan and non-ideological (and ready at the drop of a hat to quote Talleyrand: "Above all, no zeal"). When I joined the service, during the Eisenhower administration, it was still punchy from the McCarthy onslaught. The sound of "all those communists in the State Department" is quaint to our ears today; but attacks against officers on ideological grounds is a current, not an historical, phenomenon, and some senators have held up or prevented many important assignments with charges not unlike those McCarthy leveled in the '50s.

I was in Sweden when the Social Democrats lost power for the first time in 33 years, and the new non-socialist government changed a total of about five positions in the Foreign Ministry. In our country, new administrations routinely clean house of senior career officers — not leftover political appointees, but career officers — as a first order of transition business. Friends of mine have lost jobs simply because they had held some middle-level position under a previous administration, or even because changing professional faces might deflect possible criticism.

Purges of those working in arms control are notorious. In my own area, Soviet and East European affairs, the old fraternity of experienced Russian-speaking specialists has been largely disbanded, with new assignments often going to those whose preconceptions about Soviet affairs are in tune with the people in office. In the Latin-American area,

some distinguished specialists (who were not considered "our people," in former Reagan aide Lyn Nofziger's telling term) were almost literally thrown out of their offices on Jan. 20, 1981.

No one challenges the president's right to name his own appointees. But Americans have to recognize that if we make a practice of bouncing experienced diplomats from their posts simply because they worked for a previous administration, then a coherent, continuing foreign policy becomes very hard to attain. This is abuse of a needed asset.

- Creeping politicization has corrupted Foreign Service professionalism. I am told that career officers being interviewed for higher-level jobs are now being asked outright if they are Republicans.

If the president's advisers assume that career people are not loyal, and if they have no regard for professionalism in diplomacy, they are likely to push non-career appointments not only to ambassadorships, but also to more and more of the jobs that matter in the State Department itself. Access to influential jobs for professionals becomes harder and harder to achieve.

The record on ambassadorships is fairly well known. At last count, 59 percent of the Reagan appointments to ambassador were from the career ranks, compared with 73 percent for Carter; 68 percent for Nixon and Eisenhower; 65 percent for Truman, 62 percent for Ford and 58 percent for Kennedy. But it is important to remember that the number of posts has grown, so that percentages look tolerable although most of the posts that "count" are increasingly in non-career hands. In Europe, an area of key American interest, only 41 percent of those named by the Reagan administration have been career ambassadors.



# Hacks Are Destroying

# Professional Diplomacy

Even more important is that policy-associated jobs in the State Department, once reserved for FSOs, go increasingly to non-career men and women. The top is being cut out of the career ladder. After serving a long apprenticeship with little responsibility, just as an officer reaches the peak of his powers and of his or her career, he finds he has nowhere to serve.

It remains true, of course, that we want "the best man for the job," career or non. All too often, however, political appointees lack the basic qualifications for diplomatic assignments — and the incompetents far outnumber the Harrimans and Bruces and Mansfields. So even if "political" appointments are individually justifiable — and alas, most are not — collectively the deleterious effect on the service is serious.

• The Foreign Service has increasingly lost its proud separate status and has been lumped in with the federal civil service. Pride in the diplomatic profession becomes harder to sustain. While the perquisites and rewards of the military have grown, the Foreign Service has been made to feel like an orphan — especially in an administration that seems to dote on disrespect for federal workers. For example, threats to stop pay during the several budget wrangles between the legislative and executive branches hurt Foreign Service self-esteem. Diplomats, like military officers, think of themselves not as "bureaucrats" or as pawns in a budget battle but as men and women who have enlisted for an arduous, hazardous career. The fact that the top State Department administrators, the undersecretaries for management, have seldom shown any identification with the Foreign Service, or great concern for its problems, makes it all the more difficult to build pride in the service as a separate institution. (The recent naming of Ronald Spiers as new undersecretary for management — the first Foreign Service Officer in that job in many years — is encouraging news.)

• Finally, career patterns are changing, raising new problems. One "problem" no one objects to is the rising attractiveness of the service to new entrants: in recent years well over 25,000 applicants have taken the entry examination while some 250 were admitted — a fantastic percentage of the best one out of a hundred. The problem starts when their expectations of useful careers soon start to run into obstructions — and the decline of good jobs at the top is affecting everyone.

**“ Presidents have not given the Foreign Service their full confidence, and that puts the service under a gigantic shadow. ”**

The number of senior officers without assignments, the "hall walkers," has become unconscionably large. Even keeping a good assignment once you get it becomes harder: aside from political purges, the senior officer finds himself the victim of very short assignment patterns and pressure to move on. (There has been a rule in effect in the White House, I am told, whereby every ambassador is put on the list for reassignment after he has been in the job for only eighteen months, unless there are good reasons, usually political, for not moving him.) The waste involved in all this is tremendous. And the upshot is that the diplomat's belief in the system, his confidence in pursuing a useful career, is declining sharply.

What are the reasons for the underuse and misuse of the Foreign Service?

First, the state of American foreign policy militates against reliance on professionals. The cry is for party loyalty, not for nonpartisan examination of what is best for the whole country.

Second, there is a persistent confusion of policy-making and diplomacy. In fact, the

Can anything be done to change the somewhat depressing outlook for the Foreign Service? Not a great deal, I fear. But maybe something.

I do believe more and more Americans are becoming concerned about how to improve our system of making foreign policy. We need to get some of the politics out and some more steadfast purpose in. If Americans start to look at the making of foreign policy in this serious way, perhaps they will see the importance of making better use of professionals. They may also conclude that not using the service is a waste of their money.

The Congress could do a great deal, if more key congressmen would decide that the Foreign Service merits their attention. Strange to say, more people and more money are not the need: The budget works tolerably well, and we have more officers now than we are making use of (and fewer in the ranks than we had 10 years ago). Congress needs to see that we use what we have. One thing it could do is simply enforce the law (Section 304.2 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which apparently no one is reading) where it says that ambassadorial appointments will "normally" go to career officers. Another is to examine candidates for ambassadorships and policy-connected posts more seriously. Some 20 years ago, John Kenneth Galbraith, in an address to the American Foreign Service Association, proposed that a committee be formed to pronounce on the suitability of ambassadorial nominees (just as the American Bar Association does for judgeships). This idea should finally be implemented, and Congress should pay close attention to qualifications for foreign policy jobs. Closer scrutiny would provide a boost to professionalism.

Within the State Department itself, many administrative measures are possible to increase pride in the Foreign Service and loyalty to it. Our administrators need simply cross the Potomac and study what the armed forces do. They would learn to treat FSOs as professionals and to provide the satisfactions that come from being part of an elite unit.

Finally, and this is just pious hoping, there might be renewed public interest in seeing that foreign affairs are conducted professionally, that politics are put after the national interest. In that kind of healthy environment, the Foreign Service would work best.

• Of all constituencies, the one that counts for governmental bodies is the Congress. But the Foreign Service, unlike the military, has never built up any significant constituency on Capitol Hill. One reason is that Dean Acheson centralized the various liaison offices into one central office of congressional relations, and this system remains, so that the various departmental bureaus do not for the most part have their own links with the Congress — and the chance for the Foreign Service to build its own institutional links with the Congress is lost.



But that is hoping. To be honest, I do not expect the situation to change greatly. Foreign policy itself has only a shifting, ephemeral constituency in our country, and the Foreign Service has no constituency at all. The harm of its neglect or misuse is real, but imperceptible to most citizens. And the advantages of politics as usual are bankable and real, to all sorts of people from the president on down.

Nor do I expect the Foreign Service to dwindle or die. The fundamental attraction of careers in international affairs will continue, and probably grow. In many respects, it will remain true that, in foreign affairs careers, "the Foreign Service is the only game in town." As a new professor, I will counsel my best students to try for it, and I expect the Foreign Service to keep on attracting some of the brightest and most devoted young Americans.

Personally I feel great pride in having been associated with such a fine group of men and women and with such a potentially great organization.

I only wish the country would make better use of it.

president (and his top aides) make policy; the diplomat carries it out. Career diplomats like to think that, as with the other superior diplomatic services in other countries, they are capable, when asked, of giving sound, dispassionate foreign policy advice. Yet most of the time the White House is not overly interested in policies the professionals ("the bureaucracy") suggest. And, although I am convinced it is largely fiction, the idea dies hard that "the State Department guys" have policies of their own that they are pushing in preference to the president's. So to keep FSOs from "making policy" they are carefully kept out of positions of influence.

Third, there is a belief around town that diplomacy is outmoded, so that it really does not matter what happens to the career service. Under this reasoning, ambassadorships are handy and harmless plums (better to know the president personally than to know anything about diplomacy), while what matters in foreign affairs should be reserved for the White House staff (where FSOs have been persona non grata).

This thinking is wrong and harmful. Diplomacy is still important. The best evidence of that is the diplomatic services of some other nations. Take a look at the steady work of the Soviets, or the patient job done by the Japanese, and then decide if diplomacy is dead. The countries that are serving their own interest most successfully today are those that invest in diplomacy.

Fourth, members of the Foreign Service are at fault for not giving enough loyalty to the Service and to each other. FSOs are loyal upwards. But it is a familiar charge that they are not "loyal downwards," that they do not look out for those under them. This criticism is partly deserved. To the extent it is, it is part of not being loyal enough to the Foreign Service itself as an institution. I think Foreign Service people should be as dedicated to their service as Marines are to theirs. Too often, that is not the case. If the Foreign Service is to be esteemed by the country, it must esteem itself.

Finally, the press and the public do not believe that what happens to the American diplomatic service is of any serious consequence. It's not newsworthy. It's such small potatoes in the grand national scheme of things that it is not worth public concern. That attitude, ultimately, is at the heart of the problem.