

**The
Foreign Service
of the
United States**

First Line of Defense

Andrew L. Steigman
Foreword by Carol C. Laise

Westview Press

THE FOREIGN SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES First Line of Defense

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FOREWORD

Although the position of the United States today as a global power with worldwide interests calls for an active and effective diplomatic role, there is remarkably limited public understanding of the diplomatic process and the organizational underpinnings essential to the conduct of that diplomacy. This situation is not helped by the fact that frustration over foreign policy problems and our seeming inability to tame them leads to public blame and critical analyses being aimed at those who execute the policy—the members of the Foreign Service. It is the old syndrome of shooting (or, at a minimum, reforming) the messenger if you don't like the message. In such an environment, it is small wonder that so many misconceptions about the Foreign Service continue to prevail. When I traveled around the country as assistant secretary for public affairs, it was not unusual to find people equating the Foreign Service with the Foreign Legion and something alien rather than an arm of the U.S. government.

The purpose of the present volume is to deal with this problem and to dispel some of the illusions, without at the same time diminishing the significance and challenge that characterize the more complex mission of the Foreign Service today. The author, himself a career officer, has served at home and abroad in senior positions and thus is well qualified to undertake this task.

The book lives up to the promise in the preface to provide a guidebook to what "the Foreign Service really is, how it got to be that way, and what its members do to justify their existence."

The special contribution of this book is to give a candid account (warts and all, at times) of what a career in the Foreign Service is currently like and the organizational environment within which the Service functions.

The author writes from an overview of the Foreign Service gained from having managed an embassy abroad and policy decisions at home, as well as from having managed the whole Foreign Service personnel system. To give his account color as well as greater realism, he develops cases and examples drawn from his own operating experience. The result is a lucid explanation of the sometimes complex Foreign Service system, its organization, and its functions. For this reason, the book is to be welcomed as filling a gap in current literature, and it should be especially useful to those who are contemplating a career in diplomacy. I salute my fellow laborer in the vineyard for being one of the few who has been able to synthesize the Foreign Service experience and share it with others in a succinct and intelligible manner.

Whether this candid look at the Foreign Service will serve to enlarge its constituency is another question, since there is always the risk that familiarity may breed contempt. After all, the prevailing mystique and all the public confusion and illusion about the role of the Foreign Service have not stood in the way of the profession's being widely regarded as prestigious. Nevertheless, the risk must be taken. Only by peeling off the glamour and the various misleading labels that have stuck to the Foreign Service like barnacles over the years can we get a true measure of what is needed to pursue the interests of the United States in its relations with other nations—a task that is, in fact, being performed with distinction by the relatively small but dedicated group that composes the Foreign Service of the United States. One hopes that a better understanding of the realities will lead to greater support for maintaining the kind of Foreign Service that will continue to give the United States the excellence and competence it both deserves and needs to advance its interests abroad.

Carol C. Laise
Former Assistant Secretary of State, Ambassador,
and Director General of the Foreign Service

PREFACE

The Foreign Service of the United States has been the subject of innumerable studies, histories, and descriptive volumes. Only a handful, however, have been intended to serve the purpose for which this book has been written. Just as a good guidebook leads a traveler gently through the country being visited, so this volume is designed to tell the reader just what this thing called the Foreign Service really is, how it got to be that way, and what its members do to justify their existence. The most recent book of this kind appeared in 1969. Much of what its author wrote then about the Foreign Service is still true today, but the intervening years have brought such changes to the Service and its world that a retelling of the story seems very much in order.

As is the case with any writer, a great deal of this book inevitably draws on personal experience, in this case over twenty-five years as a career Foreign Service officer, as an ambassador, and most recently as the number two in the State Department's personnel operation. The book also depends, however, on information and insights generously provided by the foreign affairs agencies and by many friends and colleagues in and out of the Foreign Service. Among this group, I am particularly grateful to Barry Fulton at the United States Information Agency, to Mary Frances Costantino of the Foreign Commercial Service, to Bill Sigler and Frank Kenefick at the Agency for International Development, to Tim Blackburn of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and to Larry Thomasson and Dick Welton

of the Foreign Agricultural Service for filling in the gaps in my knowledge about their agencies and for reviewing portions of the draft, and to Bill Bacchus and Art Tienken at the State Department for their willingness to read the entire manuscript and for the invaluable suggestions which resulted from their labors. Since I did not always take their advice, it is only fair to add that any errors of fact or interpretation are my sole responsibility.

I also owe much to the generosity of the State Department for a one-year Foreign Affairs Fellowship, which made it possible for me to devote full time to the writing of the book, and to that of Georgetown University and its School of Foreign Service for their hospitality and support during this period. Dean Peter Krogh and Ambassador David Newsom, associate dean of the school and director of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, made me feel at home at Georgetown while Charlie Dolgas of the school's staff proved an unfailingly cheerful source of good advice and logistic assistance. Ambassador Newsom also undertook the onerous chore of reading the full manuscript, and many suggestions based on his distinguished career are embodied in the final text. The Una Chapman Cox Foundation, through its Outreach Fund, provided a grant that greatly facilitated production of the final manuscript. The royalties from this book are being donated to the Scholarship Fund of the Association of American Foreign Service Women.

Thanks are also due to the editors who helped shape this book. In Washington, Dr. Ernest S. Griffith, consulting editor for the series of which this volume forms a part, reviewed the text at two different stages of its preparation and offered a number of constructive recommendations. Two thousand miles away in Boulder, Kellie Masterson showed great skill and patience in leading a novice author and his book through the editorial process; her encouragement, help, and sense of humor made the entire task far lighter than I would have believed possible. Once the draft had been completed, Libby Barstow and Megan Schoeck took on the task of putting it into fit condition for publication, and they too deserve much of the credit for its final form.

Finally, and most important, this book reflects the influence of my wife, Meryl, in a myriad of ways. It would not have been possible in its present form without her incalculable contribution, and it is only right that it should be dedicated to her. In addition to all we have shared at home and abroad, Chapter 8 of this book owes more to her wisdom and sensitivity than to any other source, and the entire manuscript has benefited greatly from her perceptive editing.

*Andrew L. Steigman
Bethesda, Maryland*

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INTRODUCTION

The art of negotiating with sovereign Princes is of so great importance, that the fate of the greatest States often depends on the good or bad conduct, and on the capacity of the ministers who are employed therein.

—Francois de Callieres, 1716

The Foreign Service has never been easy to explain. For years, its members often encountered a blank look from friends and acquaintances when they mentioned their profession for the first time. The Foreign Service was little known to people in the United States, and its work was neither understood nor appreciated. Most U.S. citizens never met a member of the Foreign Service unless they had trouble while traveling abroad and thus needed help from the nearest embassy or consulate. If they thought about the Service at all, it tended to be in terms of stereotypes—the “striped-pants diplomats” or “cookie-pushers” image of a bygone age. And as to what the Foreign Service did (aside from bailing out stranded tourists), they had even less idea, beyond the general impression that its members dealt, as Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts sourly put it two hundred years ago, “with those foreigners.”

To a considerable extent, the Foreign Service suffered from a general lack of understanding of diplomacy and its purposes. “The American people,” said one former ambassador, “have long looked on diplomacy as a mysterious activity on another plane.”¹ Even sophisticated commentators used the term “diplomacy” indiscriminately to indicate both the making of foreign

policy and its subsequent execution, although the career Foreign Service personnel were responsible only for the latter. There was little appreciation of the view—expressed repeatedly over the centuries by statesmen, academicians, and diplomatic practitioners—that “the diplomatic establishment, not the military establishment, is the first line of defense.”²

Then, beginning late in 1979, the Iranian hostage crisis suddenly and dramatically made the American people aware of the Foreign Service as they never had been before. By the time the 444 days of captivity were at an end, the United States had a new set of heroes—and the Foreign Service had a new image. The dangers and hardships faced by members of the Service had been vividly demonstrated in Teheran, and the courage of the hostages had earned new respect for the entire Foreign Service.

But who were these men and women who had shown such courage under pressure? And what was their job like under more normal circumstances? Did it consist entirely of the crisis and drama that prevailed in Teheran, or was there—as seemed more likely—a great deal of relatively routine work being done at posts around the world? The goal of this book is to attempt to answer these questions: to describe both the structure and composition of today’s Foreign Service of the United States and the kind of work its members do.

One of the difficulties in defining the Foreign Service lies in the fact that it has undergone considerable change during its lifetime of just over two hundred years. It began as the overseas arm of the U.S. government, responsible for carrying out the full range of the nation’s diplomatic and consular business beyond its borders. For nearly a hundred and fifty years after independence, the United States was represented abroad by a Consular Service and a Diplomatic Service, which were carefully kept separate and distinct. Until late in the nineteenth century, neither of these services had career employees in the modern sense, and all but a handful of their members tended to hold office only until the next change of administration. Through most of this period, U.S. representatives overseas were attached loosely to the State Department, and other government de-



A new image for the Foreign Service: Teheran hostages come home to heroes' welcome, March 1981. (Top) White House ceremony; (bottom) crowds cheer near West Point, New York.

partments needing help simply called on State's "man on the spot" to provide it.

As foreign policy grew in complexity during the twentieth century, the Foreign Service, as "the eyes and ears of the State Department," was supplemented by overseas representatives of other U.S. government agencies. The core functions continued to be performed by the State Department contingent abroad, which retained the responsibility for both consular services and the basic elements of traditional diplomacy. There were, however, new tasks to be performed, and these were largely undertaken by agencies other than the State Department. Even though some of the personnel of these agencies had career patterns that were not too different from those of State's representatives abroad, they were not formally part of the Foreign Service until after World War II, when several other agencies—most important, the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the International Cooperation Agency (later to become the Agency for International Development, or AID)—were authorized to appoint personnel under the Foreign Service system. In 1979, the Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) of the Department of Commerce came under the Foreign Service umbrella. The Foreign Service Act adopted the following year added the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) of the Department of Agriculture to the Foreign Service "family," and an executive order two years later extended the umbrella to include Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

As this thumbnail history suggests, the Foreign Service is not itself an agency of the U.S. government. Indeed, its career personnel belong to the five different organizations just named—State, USIA, AID, Commerce, and Agriculture—collectively referred to as "the foreign affairs agencies."³ There are, of course, other U.S. government agencies involved in foreign affairs, a number of which regularly assign employees abroad. The personnel of these other agencies, however, are not members of the Foreign Service; for them, overseas assignments in most instances are the exception in careers spent predominantly in the United States.

To the casual observer, the number of U.S. officials serving abroad might seem excessive. Several administrations, of both