

What Is the Foreign Service?

“Look,” he said. “What do we need them for? Especially so many of them.” He was talking about members of the U.S. Foreign Service. “What we need to know,” he said, “is mostly in the news. What we need to say should come from people in tune with the president, not from diplomats in tune with each other.”

The speaker was a businessman with international interests. His listener was a former foreign service officer. His question was serious and deserves a careful answer.

Why does the United States need its foreign service, professionals who spend the bulk of their careers in U.S. embassies and consulates around the globe? Does the work they do need to be done? And if so, could others do it better or more efficiently?

The United States is engaged in regional and global conflicts that are at least as political as they are military. Over 11 percent of our population, more than thirty-one million people, are foreign born. Foreign trade is one-quarter of our economy. Environmental changes, epidemic and pandemic diseases, even financial panics sweep across borders and cannot be controlled unilaterally.

We need to make sense of this world, and we need to make sure the world makes sense of us. We need to understand, protect, and promote our own interests. Whenever and wherever we can, we need to shape events to our advantage. That is why we have a foreign service.

The foreign service is the corps of more than twelve thousand professionals who represent the U.S. government in more than 260 missions abroad and carry out the nation’s foreign policies. Its members serve mainly in the Department of State, but also in the Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and wherever else the U.S. government requires civilian service abroad.

Like the army, the navy, the air force, and the marines, the U.S. Foreign Service is a true service. Its officers are commissioned by the president,

confirmed by the Senate, and sworn to uphold and defend the U.S. Constitution. Rank is vested in the person, not in the job. Members of the foreign service, with very few exceptions, are available for assignment anywhere in the world. On average, they spend two-thirds of their careers abroad.

The Mission

The foreign service has a triple mission. The first is representation. In U.S. government jargon, representation often refers to official entertaining, for which the government provides a famously small allowance. But diplomacy is not a dinner party, and representation, as used here, is a condition of foreign service life abroad. A member of the foreign service on overseas duty not only acts on behalf of the U.S. government but lives as a representative of the country as well. On behalf of the United States, the foreign service talks, listens, reports, analyzes, cajoles, persuades, threatens, debates, and above all negotiates. The foreign service reaches into other societies across barriers of history, culture, language, faith, politics, and economics to build trust, change attitudes, alter behaviors, and keep the peace.

The second mission is operations. The foreign service is on the ground, dealing every day with host governments and populations, running U.S. programs, executing U.S. laws, giving effect to U.S. policies, offering protection to American citizens, and supporting the full U.S. official civilian presence overseas.

The third is policy. Members of the foreign service, through their long engagement with foreign societies, are well placed to project the international consequences of what we say and do. They are the government's experts on how America's national interests, defined by our political process, can most effectively be advanced abroad. The service is the government's institutional memory for foreign affairs, able to place policy in historical perspective and project risks, costs, and benefits over the long term.

All three missions are essential. A foreign service that sees its mission as diplomacy, with no role for policy, will wait passively for instructions that may come too late, or not at all. A service that believes it should set policy as well as carry it out will lose the trust of the president and the Congress and become an irrelevant annoyance. A service that neglects hands-on operations will exhaust its energy in interagency meetings and cede its ability to act to more nimble and aggressive organizations.

Representation, operations, and policy are all essential to the grand task the country has asked its diplomats to perform. As soon as she was sworn in as secretary of state in January 2005, Condoleezza Rice spoke to a packed house in the State Department's Acheson Auditorium. "The Department of State is going to be leading a tremendous effort to use our diplomacy literally to change the world," she said. "We're activists in this effort to change the world. Yes, we'll analyze. And, yes, we will report. And, yes, we will come up with great ideas. But we also have to be able to really engage and to get it done. That's the new challenge for diplomacy."¹

Secretary Rice called this challenge transformational diplomacy. She said of America's diplomats, "We know from experience how hard they work, the risks they and their families take, and the hardships they endure. We will be asking even more of them, in the service of their country, and of a great cause." She set for American diplomacy "three great tasks: First, we will unite the community of democracies in building an international system that is based on our shared values and the rule of law. Second, we will strengthen the community of democracies to fight the threats to our common security and alleviate the hopelessness that feeds terror. And third, we will spread freedom and democracy throughout the globe."²

An Institution, a Profession, a Career

This book is descriptive, not prescriptive. Readers looking for polemics for or against transformational diplomacy, or for a program for reform of America's foreign policy, or for a reconstruction of its foreign policy establishment should go elsewhere. What we offer instead is a guide to the foreign service as it is, with a look back at what it was and a look ahead at what it may become. We treat the service in three ways: as an institution, a profession, and a career.

The Institution

The institution is the men and women—and their predecessors and successors—who serve the United States under the Foreign Service Act. But the people and the institution are not the same. Presidents often distrust the foreign service as an institution—President Nixon vowed to ruin it—even as

6 The Institution

they promote individual members of the service to positions of confidence. Yet the spirit and culture of the service shape its members and, in turn, are gradually shaped by them.

Seven events and decisions have played an especially large role in making the foreign service what it is today. In chronological order, they are

- the nineteenth-century split between diplomats, responsible for state-to-state relations, and consuls, who took care of commercial matters and citizens abroad;
- the reliance, until well into the twentieth century, on the well heeled and well connected;
- the wall, until the 1950s, between officers of the foreign service, who spent their entire careers abroad, and officers of the Department of State, who served only in Washington;
- the marginalization of the foreign service during World War II;
- the attacks, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, on the loyalty of the foreign service to the United States, and the absence of a robust defense;
- the rigor of the competitive entrance examination; and
- the control by existing members of the service of their own promotions and the admission of new members.

These factors have led to a service that, until quite recently, has been elite and clubby, hierarchical, cautious, strong in analysis but less so in operations, deeply patriotic, and deferential to the status quo and the weight of history. Over the past few years, the service has grown in numbers and become more diverse, more skilled in languages, less desk bound, and less obeisant to rank. The depth of patriotic feeling is unchanged.

The Profession

The profession of the foreign service is diplomacy. Among professions, it is an odd one, more like journalism than like law or medicine. It is open to all. Training in the field is available but not required. The skills needed to practice diplomacy at a high level are difficult to master, but they are not esoteric. They can be acquired in many fields, including politics, business, the military, and academia. Some of the best practitioners (and also some of the worst) are outsiders who start at the top.

Virtually every country that has a department of foreign affairs also has a professional diplomatic service, and almost none, save for the United States, employs amateurs in large numbers. Most governments recognize that diplomatic skills, though accessible in many ways, are most surely gained through diplomatic experience. A diplomatic service, with ranks gained by merit, also serves to identify the best talents and temperaments as it weeds out the worst.

Diplomatic professionals are skilled in negotiation, communication, persuasion, reporting, analysis, and management. They recognize ambiguity and dissembling and can practice both when necessary. They know foreign languages, cultures, and interests, and they have learned, for at least some parts of the world, how other governments make decisions and carry them out, and what motivates action and change. Equally important, they have learned how their own government works—its politics, laws, and bureaucratic processes. They know where diplomacy fits in the array of tools the nation can deploy to assert its interests, and they work effectively with military and intelligence professionals in pursuit of common objectives.

One need not be a member of the foreign service to be a skilled diplomat, or even a great one. Outsiders can bring new ideas and new energy. Most important in the U.S. system, outsiders can bring to diplomacy a relationship with the country's political leadership that nonpartisan career diplomats rarely attain. But gifted amateurs and revolving-door diplomats are not enough to do the work the nation demands around the world and around the clock. This book will show that the administration of U.S. laws and programs with international reach, the management of the official U.S. civilian overseas establishment, and the daily negotiation of relationships with foreign governments on matters large and small require a dedicated, professional service.

The Career

A foreign service career is like a good limerick: It has unpredictable content in a predictable form.

The content of a career is a function of specialized knowledge, personal preference, and luck. In the Department of State, the individual's knowledge and the needs of the service for particular skills place each officer in one of five tracks (political affairs, economic affairs, consular affairs, public diplomacy, and management), and each specialist in one of seven categories that cover nineteen kinds of jobs. Most if not all assignments for a particular individual

will be in the same track or category. Of course, regional knowledge and language skills heavily influence the location of assignment—except when they don't, and then it's the assignment that drives language instruction and the development of regional expertise. Members of the foreign service must be available for assignment worldwide. Two-thirds of a career is likely to be spent abroad—and more than that for foreign service officers in agencies other than State.

Within these parameters, there is plenty of room for surprise. The next post, the next job, the next boss are rarely predictable. Change is constant, but it is not random. The needs of the service impose constraints, but foreign service personnel make many of the choices that determine the progress of their careers. When you are in the service, you cannot control what positions are open when you are ready to move, but the preferences you express among them weigh heavily on the outcome.

The form or trajectory of a foreign service career has less variation: four or five years in entry-level positions, about twenty years in midlevel positions of increasing responsibility, and, for a few people, several more years in the senior ranks, until mandatory retirement at age sixty-five. Pay and benefits are fixed by Congress, with managers able to intervene only at the margins. The checkpoints for an officer's passage from entry level to midcareer to the senior ranks and eventual retirement are well established, though the requirements for passing through the checkpoints change from time to time and have recently grown more rigorous.

Foreign service takes over a life in a way that few occupations do. Where you live, the food you eat, the languages you hear and use, even the diseases you contract, come with the job. If you have a family, the service is a family affair. Children experience the benefits—and drawbacks—of frequent moves and exposure to many cultures. Opportunities for a spouse to work will be erratic. Hazardous duty is likely to impose a separation of a year or more at some point, or at several points, during a career. Nevertheless, retention rates are high. “In for two, in for twenty” is a fair summation, except when “in for three, in for thirty” is more appropriate.

The personnel system gives strong guidance to new recruits, but it has declining influence as a career progresses. After two or three tours, a member of the foreign service should know how assignments come about (this book will help), and should take responsibility for his or her career. The service is small. In all probability, once you have finished three or four tours, which will take about ten years, anyone interested in you will know you or will need no more than two telephone calls to find someone who does.

By 2008 the term *transformational diplomacy* had become politically charged. It may not outlast the administration that coined it. But in Iraq and in trouble spots around the world, members of the service are deeply engaged in the work of stabilization, reconstruction, and development. The center of gravity of the service has shifted—more missionary, less Metternich.

The shift can be exaggerated. American diplomats for a generation have worked, sometimes with marked success, to move foreign societies toward democratic government, the rule of law, respect for basic human freedoms, and provision of basic human needs. But the change, though some dispute it, is real. The stars of the service in the years ahead will be those who really master critical languages, serve (often without family) in hard and dangerous places, and get things done, not just written.