



PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

The Foreign Service as a Political Foil

By J. ANTHONY HOLMES

In my initial meeting with Secretary Rice on Oct. 27, I asked her to help AFSA defend the Foreign Service. I told her that in addition to “bread-and-butter” issues like Overseas Comparability Pay that we’d just discussed, AFSA members care deeply about the Foreign Service as a profession with a vital role to play in defending our national security and advancing U.S. interests. I noted that the Foreign Service continues to come under fire unfairly from certain quarters, including accusations of disloyalty, unwillingness to serve in difficult places and handle tough tasks, favoring foreign over American interests, and even compromising our nation’s interests in pursuit of “lucrative post-FS employment” (sic).



I pointed to Jim Hoagland’s Aug. 25 *Washington Post* column as an example of the slurs and distortions to which the FS is regularly subjected. Hoagland urged Sec. Rice to quell “the hotbed of rebellion” at a State Department dominated by FS “battle-hardened policy warriors,” whose “Olympian view of current events discounts an administration’s ideology and political needs” and whose “clientitis” leads them to favor foreign nations or “potential future employers.” She’d better watch her back, Hoagland concluded, because “the fire can come from any direction.”

J. Anthony Holmes is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.

I told the Secretary that, while AFSA puts out its own statements to respond to these “cheap shots,” a first-person statement or op-ed piece answering particularly egregious and inaccurate criticism and reaffirming her confidence in the loyalty, courage, and professionalism of FS employees would go a long way toward refuting our detractors. Everyone remembers how then-Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage’s “Newt’s off his meds again” quip made a mockery of the former House Speaker’s attack.

Foreign relations are too important to be left to a corps of ‘yes men.’

— Gerald Ford, 1974

The Secretary responded that she does not believe it effective to react to every slight. She regularly praises the Foreign Service in her speeches, she said. I noted that AFSA members had listened to such remarks with satisfaction. Unfortunately, though, this type of support has been articulated almost exclusively to in-house audiences at town hall meetings and swearings-in.

I’ve always been appalled by attacks like Hoagland’s and the seemingly willful ignorance behind them. We in the Foreign Service take an oath “to uphold and defend the Constitution.” Ever conscious that we need to work for whichever party controls the White House, the vast majority of FS person-

nel are studiously apolitical and would not dream of going beyond the rules of the game. We offer advice based on unparalleled experience and expertise, rarely dissent, even within the system (i.e., before the policy is set), implement the policies our political masters choose, analyze the results, and try to get them fine-tuned.

Both parties in Congress recognized the need for a professional diplomatic corps loyal to the nation, and not to political parties or individuals, when it passed overwhelmingly the 1924 Rogers Act that ended the spoils system and created the modern Foreign Service. As President Gerald Ford said on its 50th anniversary, “Foreign relations are too important to be left to a corps of ‘yes men.’ You must report without fear or favor what you actually see abroad, not what we in Washington want to hear.” The Foreign Service Act of 1980 consolidated this professionalism, again with broad bipartisan support.

Detractors like Hoagland make me wonder what they want. Is it results or just the immediate political splash and glitz of the initial rollout? Are they committed to success, or just the spin? Do they want pros who see the forest through the trees, or hacks who let short-term exigencies obscure long-term interests? Whatever motivates such attacks, I trust Secretary Rice will not allow slurs against the Foreign Service to become the perceived foil for her success. An occasional public defense of her troops would be highly appreciated. ■