



PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

Professionalism

BY JOHN K. NALAND

According to the dictionary, a profession is “an occupation requiring advanced education and training, and involving intellectual skills.” The U.S. Foreign Service certainly qualifies as a profession. Ours is a worldwide-available corps of professionals who possess unique knowledge, skills and abilities that are essential to foreign policy development and implementation.

One hallmark of any vibrant profession is self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Thus, while AFSA is quick to defend the Foreign Service against attacks by those who fail to understand the role of diplomacy (for example, see the Issue Brief in this month's *Journal*), we must not shy away from constructive criticism by those who know us well.

Consider this recent “tough love” reflection by Ambassador Chas W. Freeman Jr., a retired FSO and former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia: “Frankly, our Foreign Service, staffed as it is with very intelligent men and women, remains decidedly smug and amateurish in comparison with the self-critical professionalism of our armed forces. There are many reasons for this, including lack of training, professional standards and mentoring, funding and esprit.”

Without agreeing with everything he says, it is undeniable that the



John K. Naland is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Foreign Service has long been shortchanged on many of the elements that strengthen professionalism. For example:

- Compared to the career-long continuing education required of other professions such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and military officers, Foreign Service members typically race from assignment to assignment with little time for in-service training (see “Training America’s Diplomats,” October *Journal*). To close that gap, employees should proactively seek out training in order to strengthen currently needed skills and for general professional development. Too often, we become our own worst enemies by failing to take advantage of existing training opportunities.

- Many professions maintain a recommended professional reading list as a career development resource. For example, the U.S. armed forces have such lists, which are typically issued by the senior career officer in each service (for example, the Army chief of staff). The Foreign Service does not. To close that gap, AFSA is currently working with others to create a foreign affairs professional reading list. Once it is ready, Foreign Service members may use it as a resource for ongoing self-development.

- Members of many professions publish articles analyzing ideas and issues in an effort to further the continuing education and development of themselves and their col-

leagues. For example, military journals are full of thoughtful essays by mid-level officers. In contrast, relatively few career diplomats publish articles of professional interest — despite clearly possessing the necessary analytical and writing skills.

To close that gap, Foreign Service members should consider writing for professional publications such as the *Foreign Service Journal* and *State* magazine. The *FSJ* welcomes submissions to its “Speaking Out,” “FS Know-How” and “FS Heritage” departments, as well as longer analytical pieces on international affairs and professional issues. (See Steve Honley’s “Letter from the Editor” in this issue for submission guidelines and the 2008 list of focus topics.)

- The Foreign Service has been criticized as being an organization for which the whole is less than the sum of the parts. To the extent that is true, it is largely due to underinvestment in, and undercommitment to, career-long training, education and professional development. While it is a fact that Foreign Service members face institutional stumbling blocks hindering professional development, we must strive to overcome such obstacles to take advantage of opportunities to strengthen our individual and collective effectiveness.

America is counting on the Foreign Service to capably advance vital national interests in a dangerous world. We must continue to meet that professional challenge. ■