

A CHAT WITH THE DIRECTOR GENERAL: W. ROBERT PEARSON

AMB. W. ROBERT PEARSON BELIEVES THE FOREIGN SERVICE NEEDS TO DEVELOP ITS MOST VALUABLE ASSET — ITS PEOPLE — INTO AN INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY TO MEET THE MANY CHALLENGES OF THE POST-9/11 ENVIRONMENT.

BY STEVEN ALAN HONLEY

Ambassador W. Robert Pearson, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, class of Career Minister, was confirmed as Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources in October 2003, following three years as ambassador to Turkey.

Amb. Pearson has a broad background in European and security issues as well as wide management experience overseas and in Washington. As Deputy Chief of Mission in Embassy Paris from 1997 to 2000, he closely followed the evolution of the European Union and defense and security issues within the Atlantic Alliance and the E.U. He also actively promoted business ties between France and the U.S. and helped in the opening of five new American offices in France's regions.

Before that, he served twice at NATO, from 1993 to 1997 as Deputy Permanent Representative to the U.S. Mission (during the Balkan crisis and NATO's enlargement), and from 1987 to 1990 on the international staff as chair of NATO's Political Committee.

From 1985 to 1987, he served as Deputy Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, and was Executive Secretary of the Department of State from 1991 to 1993. He also served in Beijing as a political officer from

Steven Alan Honley is the editor of the Foreign Service Journal. An FSO from 1985 to 1997, he served in Mexico City, Wellington and Washington, D.C.

1981-1983, was staff assistant in the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau, and began his Foreign Service career with a two-year assignment in Auckland.

Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Amb. Pearson graduated from the University of Virginia Law School in 1968, and served in the U.S. Navy Judge Advocate General's Corps from 1969 to 1973. He is a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. He speaks French, Chinese and Turkish. His wife, Margaret, is also a career diplomat. The Pearsons have one son, Matthew.

Foreign Service Journal Editor Steven Alan Honley conducted the following interview in Amb. Pearson's office on Nov. 28, 2003.

Because we have been strapped for resources and personnel for so long, we've had to prepare people in the Foreign Service serially.

FSJ: *What is your vision for the Foreign Service personnel system, Ambassador Pearson?*

W. Robert Pearson: Well, I would begin by saying that my vision draws on ideas and proposals many of us share, so I think I'm saying things that others are saying, too. Thanks to Secretary Powell's initiative, the president's commitment, and Congress's support, we have brought the Foreign Service back to a state of health after many, many years.

FSJ: *You're referring to the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative?*

WRP: Absolutely. And at the same time Iraq, Afghanistan, and other issues present us with as serious an array of problems as we've faced in several decades. I think that we need to take the asset we have — our people — and

turn that into an institutional capability to meet those challenges by making the most of their talents. That will allow us to respond to future crises, to fill hard-to-fill posts, and to have better training for our personnel. Because we have been strapped for resources and personnel for so long, we've had to prepare people in the Foreign Service serially. You learn a language to go somewhere and do something. Then some other job comes up and you learn the skills to go there and do that. In a university, when you graduate, you're supposed to be capable in both your major and your minor. Why not have people in the Foreign Service, once they have developed areas of emphasis, keep current in those areas throughout the course of their careers? For generalists that might be language study, and for specialists it might be professional training or area studies. The department then would be able to organize a response more quickly and more effectively than it's ever done before.

FSJ: You mentioned the idea of having people who keep up their credentials and their current professional knowledge to be able to respond to sudden crises. Is that what you mean by the term "surge capacity"?

WRP: That's part of it. Another part is the key role for FSI, where people are going to receive additional training, particularly professional development. Much of this is really an extension of what the Secretary already has begun with leadership and management courses, and what FSI has done with its language continuum and professional development courses. It would help us to identify ahead of time a larger pool of people who could respond. They would have had the conversations they need to have well ahead of time, and would know they'd be on call. Finally, we'd have less concern about whether some bureaus could give up people so that

Thanks to Secretary Powell's initiative, the president's commitment, and Congress's support, we have brought the Foreign Service back to a state of health after many, many years.

the crisis-affected bureau could take advantage of their skills.

FSJ: We've touched on languages several times. I understand you have proposed encouraging all personnel to maintain fluency in at least two foreign languages.

WRP: Yes. The Foreign Affairs Manual only requires fluency in one foreign language. Why not have two? Our people are capable of it. When I came into office, I asked for a random survey of something like 200 to 250 employee records. Of those, 90 percent of the people had served in at least two geographic bureaus. Seventy percent of the public diplomacy officers in the sample were qualified in two languages, as were 60 percent of political officers, nearly 60 percent of the economic officers, 45 percent of the consular officers, and 30 percent of the management officers. It seems to me that we already have a fairly strong foundation and that many of the things that were already being done were going in that direction. So why not let our reach exceed our grasp a little and bring

ourselves up to the level of quality response that we're capable of? I've talked to some of my friends who are specialists, and from their standpoint they might prefer more intense professional training over acquiring a second language. All these things would have to be addressed, and I'm not trying to give people the answers as much as to raise the questions. But I think for the future we face, these are the kinds of aspirations that the State Department and the Foreign Service need to have.

FSJ: How would you counter the long-standing perception that time spent in language training is not "career-enhancing"?

WRP: Well, let's see. I had Chinese, French and Turkish, so I would cite myself, and a lot of other people with similar experiences, as evidence to the contrary. It's true that when I came into the Foreign Service I took two years of Chinese early on. Some people told me that it might slow me down in the promotion race. But, in fact, it didn't affect my career progress at all. I also would note that it helped me develop an interest, which I have maintained throughout my career. I think that when people prove during language or other studies at FSI that they are strongly motivated, it shows up in other areas of their lives as well. I think we need to get past the point where training is seen as something different from our careers. Training is actually an essential part of what we should be. And frankly I think that this is going to become more evident for us over time, just as it already has in the armed services and in some of the other agencies operating overseas today.

FSJ: How do you plan to work with AFSA in implementing your goals?

WRP: I already have raised infor-

mally some of these goals with AFSA, and I know, as a career-long AFSA member myself, that it is important to reach an agreement with AFSA in order to make things last. AFSA President John Limbert recently has come back from a tour in Iraq, so I think he has a very good understanding of the kinds of demands that are being placed on the Foreign Service and the State Department now and for the future. Without trying to preempt discussions in any way, I look forward to discussing all these issues with him and the AFSA leadership.

FSJ: *Let's turn to Iraq, then. One of the first trips you made after being confirmed as director general was to Baghdad. How do you assess the Coalition Provisional Authority's use of FS personnel there?*

WRP: Well, in the first month after the war, everything was happening at once. But there was an excellent response from the State Department. When I visited our colleagues there, they were at work in CPA headquarters and in the field. Some of them were embedded with military units doing various kinds of humanitarian assistance and political action. There were a number of untenured officers, including four people on their first tours. And I also should say that they included not only Foreign Service employees but Civil Service employees as well. These were people who responded to the call and were able to do jobs immediately and with considerable versatility. There were political officers doing economic reporting, and economic officers doing essentially political work. There was even one employee who was an Information Resource Management specialist but was refurbishing a building.

What we're looking at now is the next phase, where we're finding people and assigning them more in terms of the skills we need for the longer

***The war on terror
underscores the need to
develop a capability to
anticipate and to
respond to crises.***

term and for definitive periods of time: at first six months, subsequently a year, and moving on in an organized way. From talking to Ambassador Bremer and others in Iraq, I think the State team has done a magnificent job. I also might mention Pat Kennedy, a friend and colleague who served in Iraq for many months, who by all accounts has done absolutely splendidly.

FSJ: *Is the current expectation that an embassy will open in Baghdad sometime in the summer of 2004? Where do preparations for that stand?*

WRP: Well, we're working hard to be able to stand up an embassy on time. That's why we're focusing now on more organized tours of duty, more defined job descriptions and tasks, and getting the personnel in place. I'm happy to say we have a list of about 350 volunteers so far and are finding the people we need to fill the positions. We are adding 117 positions in Iraq to the bid list in January, and I am sure there will be more to come. Our goal there is to mirror the Secretary's commitment to have the right people, trained and supported, on the right tasks.

FSJ: *That raises a question a lot of people are asking. It sounds like you*

are operating on the assumption that people will continue to come forward to serve in Iraq. Do you have any sense yet of how many positions you will need when the embassy is officially unveiled?

WRP: I don't have an exact number now, but we obviously will have the traditional embassy sections and will provide the traditional embassy functions. The embassy also will have extraordinary functions to perform, like economic construction coordination and democratic development. Baghdad probably will be our largest embassy in the Middle East, and we'll have to be prepared to sustain that commitment for a long time to come. So, yes, the short answer is that I think we will have enough people to staff it, but at the same time we recognize that we need to look more generally at how we can build a State Department and Foreign Service that can respond readily and appropriately to crises.

FSJ: *Given the relative paucity of fluent Arabic-speakers in the Foreign Service, are there any plans to beef up language instruction staffing at FSI?*

WRP: Well, I won't try to answer for FSI, but I believe they are. I do believe it is important to develop an approach that allows us to train for language capability beyond the current system where you can't take a language at FSI unless you have an assigned position. That has held us back in the past, and I think everybody would recognize that it would be a good idea to train people for contingencies. But again, these are just ideas right now; they're not proposals, and they have to be thoroughly vetted with many others, including AFSA.

FSJ: *How much, and in what ways, has the war on terror changed the Foreign Service?*

WRP: The war on terror definitely has changed things for the Foreign Service. First of all, it underscores the

need to develop a capability to anticipate and to respond to crises. NEA has done a splendid job responding to needs for Iraq, but by developing a wider set of resources we'll be able to do an even better job in addressing crises in the future.

Second, I think the way people have been dealing with the danger of living abroad, with the effect that has on families, and with their own professional choices are all very admirable. In fact, I think morale within the Service since Sept. 11, 2001, has actually gone up. People understand that we're facing a serious challenge and they're prepared to respond in a positive way. And I found the same thing to be true in Ankara when I was ambassador there. I think that speaks very highly of the kind of people we have in the State Department as well as in the other agencies represented overseas.

FSJ: *One longstanding complaint about the open assignments system is the apparent ability of individual bureaus to "wire" assignments, both for active-duty officers and WAE appointments. Do you plan any specific steps to enforce fairness and ensure that when a position is on the bid list, it really is open to all qualified bidders?*

WRP: We have done two or three things that are useful along those lines. We agree that the more transparency there is in the assignment process, the fairer it will be. We asked bureaus to hold off on "handshakes" until all bids were due, and they responded very well. On some occasions we have asked bureaus to go back and get additional candidates for a position when we felt the number of candidates needed to be increased. We've especially tried to ensure that people who are bidding from Iraq, who might not have easy and current access to information, have been able to get their preferences and their dis-

*Why not let our reach
exceed our grasp a little
and bring ourselves up
to the level of quality
response that we're
capable of?*

cussion points into the process. I think all of us are committed to having a more truly open assignments process, and have made that point clear to the bureaus as well.

FSJ: *How can HR better enforce fair share bidding to keep so many hardship posts, particularly in Africa, from being filled almost entirely by untenured officers who may not know the bidding process well enough to keep from being sent there?*

WRP: Let me say something about those employees. Often, at least recently, those first- and second-tour employees have been bidding heavily on some of those hardship posts and have been enthusiastically doing so. That's one of the rather remarkably good things about the people we're taking into the Service. We have to remember that a lot of them entered since 9/11 and so they've come in with their eyes open. They understand what the world looks like now, and I think that's very admirable. They also are doing good jobs in these tough posts. And because we have so many relatively junior employees reporting directly to DCMs and ambassadors, we have talked with those ambassadors and DCMs extensively about the kind of

mentoring in leadership and professional development that we expect, and they're responding well.

On the fair share concept itself, as you know, for a fair share bidder, three of their six core bids have to be at differential posts, in grade and at cone. We believe in fair share, and we are enforcing it. And this year, we are looking at all the fair share bidders.

I also think that the vast majority of Foreign Service employees support the fair share concept. Finally, if we apply the fair share rule equitably, as we intend to do, then the truly humanitarian cases can be dealt with without confusing them with the core requirement of fair share bidding and fair share assignments.

FSJ: *Do you support AFSA's ongoing efforts to reduce the low-ranking requirement from 5 percent to 2 percent of all evaluations?*

WRP: AFSA and management both support such a change, and I also understand that some selection boards also have made similar recommendations. So it seems to me that there is a general consensus on that issue.

FSJ: *AFSA has also pointed out that last year, several individuals were recommended for tenure and low-ranked in the same year. How do you plan to address such anomalies?*

WRP: I agree that is something we ought to look at, and in fact we are planning to take a look at the tenuring system. I believe we can improve on the present process and, more importantly, so do many of my colleagues.

FSJ: *Might one option be to go back to the old system of having tenuring boards meet full-time instead of part-time, so they can review files more thoroughly?*

WRP: Yes, that is one option. Whatever we do, I think tenuring is one of the things we can make some improvements on.

FSJ: Secretary Powell has won enormous loyalty from his new troops, thanks in large part to his success in obtaining much-needed resources for State and reversing the negative trends that the Service had been facing. How can those gains be consolidated so they outlast his eventual departure?

WRP: Just about everybody I've talked to here in the department — Foreign Service and Civil Service alike — has told me that the most important thing I could do as director general would be to help consolidate the gains that Secretary Powell and his team have brought to the department. So that is what I consider to be my top priority. My second priority is strengthening the partnership between the Civil Service and Foreign Service in Washington and strengthening the capability of our excellent Foreign Service National corps overseas. My third priority is to continue to have our State Department and Foreign Service truly represent America by recruiting and retaining qualified minorities.

We're all in debt to the Secretary for what has been accomplished. But a debt, in a way, represents a loan that has been entrusted to us. Now we have to take that loan, if you will, and turn it into an investment, something that continues to pay off for the indefinite future. The only way to do that is to develop the potential of our personnel. It also requires people to renew their commitments. As Secretary Powell has shown us, we can't simply depend on what someone else does; it also has to be what we are willing to do.

After Vietnam, when the Army corps of officers — younger officers — developed the notion of land/sea/air combat planning as a reaction to what they perceived as the mistakes of that war, they carried that idea forward through a whole generation of military officers. I believe we

***We owe it to ourselves to
have a stronger Foreign
Service-Civil Service
partnership.***

can do the same thing in the State Department, and I think that's what we have to do.

FSJ: There has been some apprehension about the new EER form, currently being tried out on FS-1 and Senior Foreign Service officers, which calls for a personal essay from the rated employee. How would you respond to concerns that such a form would be particularly unfair if used to evaluate more junior officers?

WRP: This is still a pilot program so, of course, it's too early to tell. But one of the reasons behind the decision to change the form was the recognition, and I know this from my own experience, that Foreign Service employees agonize over the need to write a two-part evaluation, one part evaluation and one part potential, because there often is a lot of overlap. Secondly, when informal surveys were done, a lot of people admitted that on many occasions they'd been asked to write their own EERs.

FSJ: When I was an FSO, I had that experience more than once.

WRP: So why not allow the rated employee to express himself or herself first on what the performance was, and then let the supervisor consider that? After all, the employee knows the details and can express them. I basically think there is a certain responsibility associated with

drafting an EER for all concerned. So we'll see how this works at the O1 level and take a careful look at it. We're certainly not trying to make the process more difficult, but want to make it fairer and more accurate. I have been listening to those who have expressed concerns and we'll obviously see how the experiment goes. But there does seem to be a general consensus that the previous process wasn't working as well as it might.

FSJ: It hasn't been in the news so much lately, but last year there seemed to be signs that Congress was looking at taking away the visa function from State and assigning it to the new Department of Homeland Security. What would you say to consular officers who are concerned that DHS may be planning a gradual takeover of the visa function?

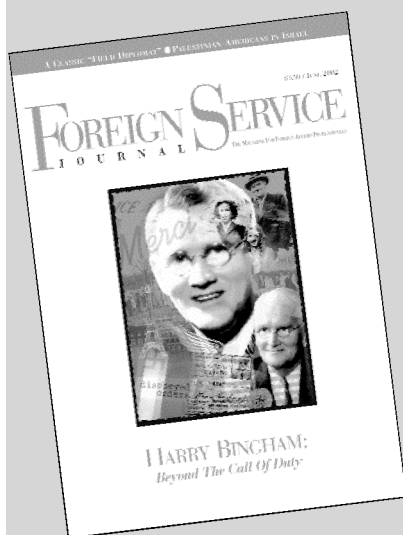
WRP: Secretary Powell and [CA Assistant Secretary] Maura Harty have the lead on this. But all of us in the State Department are committed to helping DHS do its job and to ensuring that State continues to perform the functions assigned to it by law, including the issuance of visas. I think a great deal of good work has been done on this and I don't have the impression the visa function is going to be leaving the State Department.

FSJ: Do you see any need to look at moving toward a unitary personnel system for State Department personnel, merging the Foreign and Civil Service structures?

WRP: I would not allow form to prevent us from taking advantage of any and every flexibility we might have. I believe 10 of the first 47 State Department personnel into Iraq were members of the Civil Service. So I just don't think we can do crisis management without planning for a Civil Service component.

There are ways for Civil Service

2004 AFSA AWARD FOR
CONSTRUCTIVE DISSENT



PASS
IT ON

“...I thank
you for
speaking
out, having

the courage of your
convictions ... that's what
my people are supposed
to do. I encourage all of
my people to stand up for
what they believe, speak
out, let us know what they
think.”

—Colin L. Powell
Secretary of State

FOREIGN SERVICE
JOURNAL

Make an awards
nomination. Go to
www.afsa.org/awards.cfm
Deadline: February 2004.
Give a one-year *Journal*
subscription to the school
of your choice.

***Rather than put a label
on something, let's just
concentrate on the
results we see as both
possible and extremely
beneficial to the State
Department.***

and Foreign Service colleagues to work more closely together even on substance. For example, neither the Foreign Service employee profile nor the Civil Service employee document, as I understand it, captures what people might have done before they came into the department. For example, if Foreign Service personnel in Washington have to respond to a crisis, why not have Civil Service colleagues with appropriate skills fill in behind them for a period of time? I think we need to look at all those flexibilities, and we owe it to ourselves to have a stronger Foreign Service-Civil Service partnership. Rather than put a label on something, let's just concentrate on the results we see as both possible and extremely beneficial to the State Department. The same thing is true for the indispensable contributions made by our Foreign Service National colleagues overseas.

FSJ: You've referred a number of times in this interview to the idea that individuals should be encouraged to build up and keep current a body of expertise on specific issues and parts of the world. Do you think that most people in the Foreign Service seek out

assignments that allow them to do that, or do you think the system needs to nudge them in that direction?

WRP: I think that by and large most people are self-motivated, for several reasons. One is that, in a full career, there may be times when a choice job in your primary area of interest just isn't available. And broadening your experience, managerially or substantively, helps you to develop professionally. I believe there is no reason for the system to try to manage those choices because I think the free choice of the employee is as efficient a way of doing this as possible. But I do believe that developing specialties in three or four areas probably does, in some cases, detract from the ability of the employee to compete with his or her peers. So I think that part of the commitment to professional development over a longer period of time includes guidance and support in finding those areas where a person would be happiest and most productive.

FSJ: Any final thoughts, Amb. Pearson?

WRP: Well, to summarize, I would say that having just come back from three years in Turkey and 10 years overseas, looking at the world as we see it today, the job of the State Department and for the Foreign Service is as challenging as it has been for quite some time. I think we're very fortunate to have the leadership of Secretary Powell at a time like this, but we absolutely cannot treat the input of new people as if it simply were a windfall. It has to become *the* asset for our future. This is the message not only for us, but also for Congress and for our colleagues in the federal service. That's the spirit with which I start my job. And finally, speaking as a career-long AFSA member, I look forward to working with the AFSA leadership on all of these issues, and