

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DISSENT?

Diplomats talk about assignments; they scheme for promotions; but they think about dissent. How do you make a contrary opinion known, and to whom, without blowing a hole in the bottom of your career boat? Is it smarter to illustrate an independent view or to practice the old adage, “If you want to get along, go along?” Or if you don’t agree with a policy, should you simply find mechanisms not to work in the area for the duration of your disagreement or the tour/administration of those with whom you disagree? In this regard, diplomats are hardly unique. The moment that one person is subordinate to another, there are differences of view. In private industry, issues are fought out in the marketplace; firms prosper or fail over differences of opinion, but the costs (and benefits) are primarily private. In government, however, the costs (and benefits, nebulous as they may appear) are public, and hence the manner in which dissent and dissenters are managed is a question of public policy, not private preference.

For a generation now, the Department of State has institutionalized dissent. Foreign Service members have the opportunity to write a dissenting opinion on an embassy telegram, send a policy-oriented dissent message directly to the secretary of State, or “take a footnote” on interagency intelligence assessments. In this

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regard, the department may be unique as a historical entity and government bureaucracy.

Our acceptance of institutionalized dissent has been the consequence of painful experience. As an organization representing a nation with far-flung, complex, and occasionally contradictory interests, State Department officials have grappled with foreign policies that have stimulated sharp differences of opinion at home and abroad. Not every policy difference has had collegial resolution or public acceptance. There are, for example, those who believe that the absence of recognized dissent “lost” China to the communists and led us to stumble blindly into the Vietnam swamp. Conversely, there are those who believed at the time and — although the years have thinned their ranks — still believe that the dissenters from our China and Vietnam policies, if not actual traitors, severely undercut U.S. policy at that time and contributed to its failure.

Although less desperately fought as questions of essential U.S. national interest, we have seen sharp policy disagreement in the past 25 years over policy toward the Shah of

Iran, combating apartheid in South Africa, contras and Castro in Latin America, the intricacies of managing the shards of what once was Yugoslavia, and the enduring struggle between Israel and the PLO. In the end, some Foreign Service personnel have resigned over policy differences, others have sought transfers to avoid carrying out policies with which they disagreed, and still others, having expressed their opinions vigorously, faithfully executed the policies of the day.

Nevertheless, we have not reached any Peaceable Kingdom in which the dissenter and the dissented against happily coexist. Talk to any Foreign Service member for

AFSA INSTITUTED ITS FIRST DISSENT AWARDS IN 1968, AND EXPANDED ON THEM THROUGH THE YEARS. WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE FIRST GENERATION OF WINNERS, AND WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE PROGRAM?

BY DAVID T. JONES

very long and chances are you'll hear stories of dissenters (either the speaker or a colleague) who have been punished for their views. In one bureau, for example, two mid-level officers vigorously opposed the views of the assistant secretary on elements of a report scheduled for publication. Not long afterward, their office director was unofficially discouraged from recommending awards for the dissenters.

Thus, the abstract principle of "dissent" begs the question of "What next?" Having dissented within the parameters of the Foreign Service paradigm, what are the consequences for individual Foreign Service officers (and specialists, since 2000)? Or, more colloquially, is there a career after dissent? As a mechanism for examining this question, the Foreign Service and AFSA have a rough calculus available. Annually since 1968, AFSA has presented awards for "constructive dissent," recognizing "individuals who have demonstrated the courage to challenge the system from within, no matter the issue or the consequences of their actions ... the willingness to confront or challenge conventional wisdom, intelligently and tenaciously, by asking the tough questions and coming up with some unconventional answers." These are: the Christian A. Herter Award for senior officers, the William R. Rivkin Award for mid-level officers, and the W. Averell Harriman Award for junior officers. (The Tex Harris Award for specialists was established two years ago, too recently to be discussed in this article.) Although the descriptive language has evolved over the years, AFSA is now clearly seeking "wave-makers," "boat-rockers" and "risk-takers." While the point is not emphasized, any Foreign Service employee (supervisor, peer, or subordinate) can make a nomination, thus introducing a wild card into the process.

Some Good Deeds Do Go Unpunished

In the 33 years during which the awards have existed, they have been presented to 103 individuals. In 1980 and 1981, they were presented corporately to "the Iran hostages" and to other groups of named individuals in a few other years. In 1983 no award was given in any category, and in other years there has been no deserving (or at

Talk to any longtime FS member and chances are you'll hear stories of dissenters who have been punished for their views.

least no rewarded) candidate for a specific category. Nevertheless, there is a wide enough range of specific individuals over a long enough time span to offer some observations on these dissenters and what has happened to them. In very rough terms we can say that:

- They are overwhelmingly male (91 of 103);

- Dissenters are willing to dissent again (four won AFSA awards as both mid-level and senior officers, and one has won three AFSA dissent awards); and

- AFSA award winners have often had highly successful careers.

Of course, "success" is often a matter of opinion and in the mind of the beholder. How many Foreign Service employees walk away from their retirement party satisfied that they had accomplished all they desired and reached the heights they foresaw when entering the Foreign Service? Lives affected, team accomplishments, and policies effectively implemented are often a measure of success that no bureaucratic rank or award can appropriately measure. Nevertheless, one achievement is regarded as a capstone of professional accomplishment in the Department of State: assignment as chief of mission to a "real" country. (Since winners of the Herter Award are by definition already senior Foreign Service officers, it would have limited analysis to just Harriman and Rivkin winners to make entry into the Senior Foreign Service the sole criterion for success by award winners.)

In this regard, dissenting senior officers have been most successful. Sixty percent (15 of the first 25) award winners through 1997 became ambassadors. (Seven of them either were or already had been ambassadors when they received the award.) The time necessary for those not already ambassadors to reach that rank after receiving the Herter Award ranged from one to five years and averaged a little less than three years. Of the 10 award winners through 1997 who were not ambassadors, one (John Paul Vann) died in mid-career, but a number of others were still on active duty at that point.

Of the 39 mid-level officers receiving the Rivkin

Award through 1997, nine (a little more than 23 percent) had become ambassadors. Two of these recipients also received the Herter Award for their dissents as senior officers. As would be expected for mid-level officers, there was a wide range (four to 15 years) between receiving the award and becoming ambassador, with the average almost 10 years. Substantial numbers of these officers are still on active duty.

In contrast, not a single one of the 29 officers identified for the Harriman Award has become an ambassador. Nor has any ever received a second AFSA dissent award. While by definition, junior officers have a long path in front of them prior to senior rank, this group has been

singularly unsuccessful to date. Perhaps that is why many of the first group of Harriman Award recipients quickly left the Foreign Service.

Dissent in Context

Indeed, dissent appears to be a rather fragile flower—or at least one that requires considerable fertilization. Despite energetic efforts by a high-powered AFSA Awards Committee and prestigious panels of judges, the number of nominations for the AFSA dissent awards has largely drifted downward over the past decade. (See table on p. 29.) AFSA has repeatedly attempted to stimulate nominations with a steady flow of announcements, indi-

COMMENTS FROM SOME PAST AFSA DISSENT AWARD WINNERS

“When I wrote my dissent, I was wryly assured that ‘at least four people will read it,’ although ... the ambassador’s executive assistant predicted accurately that my cable would test the system and that I would find it ‘wanting.’ Ultimately, I was informed that my tenure in Rome as press attaché would end with my departure on home leave, although I had originally been slated for home leave and return. ‘Am I being fired?’ I asked. The answer was, No, you’re just not being invited back ... I don’t think there was any lasting damage. One of the most enduring lessons for me is that if you want to provoke a dialogue about changing policy you should be prepared to lose. ... At the ceremony for that year’s AFSA Award winners, Secretary of State Kissinger was persuaded to attend. As I heard it later, when he arrived he asked, ‘Why am I here?’ The AFSA president answered, ‘We’re honoring all the people who disagreed with your policies.’”

— *William Lenderking, 1976 Rivkin Award winner*

“I really appreciated it because it was the only recognition I received for all the work I did conceptualizing and bringing to life the Family Liaison Office ... Did the award do anything for my career? I don’t think so, because I don’t think awards were really noticed or paid much attention to back then ... As the currency of awards has diminished in more recent times (although the financial rewards attached to many have grown), AFSA’s awards by their very nature and history have remained special ... Am I proud of the Harriman Award.

I won? Yes, I’ve always liked the part about intellectual integrity, and the record of the Family Liaison Office speaks for itself.”

— *Stephanie Kinney, 1978 Harriman Award winner*

“I received both the Rivkin and the Herter awards. ... Neither dissent affected my long-term career. ... In both situations senior officers in the State Department, if not in the White House, encouraged me to express my views frankly and forcefully. I was never reprimanded or castigated for my positions, although undoubtedly in both cases there were senior officers who thought I was wrong-headed and mistaken.”

— *Amb. Anthony Quainton, 1972 Rivkin Award and 1984 Herter Award winner*

“The AFSA Award and the subsequent Bill Moyers’ CBS television report saved my career.”

— *Tex Harris, 1984 Rivkin Award winner*

“The award came in the wake of the 1982-1984 U.S. debacle in Lebanon. ... I always have been grateful for the support I had from the bureau at a very difficult time. This was an instance in which dissent actually was rewarded.”

— *Amb. Ryan C. Crocker, 1985 Rivkin Award winner*

“In sum, the award was one of the best and most rewarding things that has happened to me in my 35-year career with State. I feel most fortunate to be a recipient.”

— *John D. Finney, Jr., 1986 Rivkin Award winner*

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A DECADE OF DISSENT: AWARD NOMINATIONS

	Herter	Rivkin	Harriman	Harris*
1992	4	9	6	—
1993	7	9	10	—
1994	8	12**	6	—
1995	3	10	4	—
1996	3	10	3	—
1997	5	7	2	—
1998	data not available	data not available	2	—
1999	2	6***	4	—
2000	2	7	4	—
2001	6	6	5	6
2002	3	7	6	4

* The Tex Harris Award was not instituted until 2000.

** (+ a group nomination of 13)

*** (1 with 2 names)

vidual letters and nomination forms to active members, director-general cables to the field, and AFSANET messages. At times the initial deadline has been extended. Nevertheless, considering the magnitude of this pump-priming effort and the respectable financial reward for winners (\$2,500), the harvest of nominations has been slim. From a high point in 1994, when there were a total of 39 individuals (including a group of 13 associated with dissent over U.S. Yugoslavia policy), nominations slumped to a total of 13 individuals in both 1999 and 2000 before recovering slightly to 17 in 2001. Only

“The most immediate benefit [of winning the award] was that I sat next to Pamela Harriman ... and had a fascinating conversation with her about politics (American) and policy (foreign)...few people at the time seemed aware of the underlying precept of ‘constructive dissent.’ Probably the greatest benefit came 10-plus years later, when I encountered a first-tour officer who demonstrated exactly the right combination of backbone and good judgment in challenging the inherited policy approach to an important issue. I nominated him for the Averell Harriman Award, and he won!”

— *Daniel Russel, 1987 Harriman Award winner*

“I received the Christian Herter Award in 1991. I was quite proud of this award, considering it more as an MVP award for senior officers rather than an award for dissent. But dissent was no doubt an important part of it. Although I made some enemies, I nevertheless managed to get an onward assignment as ambassador to Oman ... In retrospect, it was the best thing that could have happened to me.”

— *Amb. David Dunford, 1991 Herter Award winner*

“The Rivkin Award confirms people’s suspicions but is pretty career-neutral. The Service tolerates its modest number of nay-sayers and is happy to reward them with the remote and marginal postings they bid on.”

— *Brady Kiesling, 1994 Rivkin Award winner*

“In a very real sense, the award constituted acknowledgment/recognition of the challenges I faced, and told

me I wasn’t out there on my own. That makes a difference. It has given me the courage of my convictions to continue to float ideas, to try to make things better, even if only on the margins. That’s a plus. But, it’s hard to tell if it has helped my career.”

— *Janice Weiner, 1995 Rivkin Award winner*

“I can’t say that the award had much impact on my career one way or the other. While it opened up some opportunities for me, it also created some problems. In fact, in the original draft of my EER that year, the award was not mentioned until you reached the section on areas for improvement. ... I thought the entire episode was a great comment on the attitude of the Foreign Service toward dissent.”

— *Anonymous*

“The award wasn’t for dissent ... I received it because as a second-tour JO I spent six months as acting deputy chief of the NIV section. ... ”

— *Anonymous*

“I was impressed when the ‘Yugo-slaves’ received the Rivkin award that AFSA would publicly honor people who had the courage to speak up when they believed the system was morally wrong — and who were punished by the system for it. ... AFSA is alone in honoring such people. I have never felt that what I did to win ... compared in any way with the sacrifice made by those individuals...”

— *Anonymous*

once during the decade did either the Harriman or the Herter Award attract double-digit fields of nominees; indeed, twice the Herter Award had only two candidates, and twice only three.

In addition, a regular lament among some judges has been the dearth of candidates epitomizing creative dissent, with many nominations in all categories fitting the “great EER” mode more than expressing substantive challenges to policy. Even some of the award winners themselves believe they were primarily rewarded for their job performance. However, other winners say that being recognized for their dissent has been satisfying, inspiring and even professionally rewarding. (See sidebar, pp 28-29.)

In fact, all observers agree that we have seen official

dissent diminish across the board; witness the steady decline in usage of the State Department’s own Dissent Channel, which is 30 years old this year. (See table on p. 31.) Clearly, the intensity of dissent peaked during the Vietnam War — the political and social touchstone for the “boomer” generation — but the battle for Southeast Asia is now as historically distant for entering junior officers as World War II was for the boomers. Today’s JOs are no more interested in old Vietnam-era dissent stories than the generation of the 1960s was in the “Who lost China?” battle.

Generational differences seem to apply in another sense, as well. To the extent that they choose to take exception, senior officers have learned to dissent “within the ‘system’” — and their senior status may actually give weight, structure and credibility to such dissent. Furthermore, such outspokenness appears to have reinforced and in some instances may actually have accelerated the dissenters’ success. Yet, it is also clear that few even of the senior (and thus already successful and, by definition, talented) dissenters have reached the most senior department positions. One became a career ambassador, but you do not find dissenters in the ranks of under secretaries and only rarely as assistant secretaries.

As for newer officers, it may be that they have not learned (or appreciated) the intricacies of the department’s bureaucratic system or how to make their discordant views known and accepted. Perhaps, too, they are still “trying on” the Foreign Service for size, since many of them appear to have found it personally unsuitable and subsequently departed for other careers.

Alternatively, the rather nominal numbers and the circumstances of AFSA dissent award nominations and trivial Dissent Channel usage may suggest that State Department personnel have become supporters of U.S. foreign policy. If so, one must ask whether this tendency is reinforced by “careerism” and an astute appreciation that the much-vaunted “up or out” system makes it easy to “out” (so to speak) those who make waves close to the end of their time in class.

It is undeniable that across the board, recent dissenters have been far less likely to be professionally rewarded than their predecessors. Between 1991 and 1997, only one Herter Award recipient not already an ambassador crossed that threshold, and only one of the 20 Rivkin Award winners prior to 1997 became an ambassador by that date. Moreover, mid-level dissenters appear less willing to dis-

THE DISSENT CHANNEL

The State Department’s official mechanism for policy dissent, the Dissent Channel, dates back to 1971, when the department revised the Foreign Affairs Manual to give FSOs the explicit freedom to dissent. In the first three decades of its existence, the Dissent Channel has received over 250 messages, ranging from a high of 30 in 1977 to a low of three in 1997. Of the first 200 messages from 1971 to 1991, about 50 addressed general, non-substantive topics such as housing allowance policy. None of the other 150 or so messages can be credited with reversing existing policy; instead, at best, the dissenting viewpoint may have received some senior-level consideration.

At its peak, during the Carter administration, the channel logged almost as many dissent messages (75) in four years as under Reagan and Bush combined (84). During the past decade, annual totals of contributions have averaged in the single digits, even though State issued revised new Foreign Affairs Manual regulations in April 1998 governing the Dissent Channel. The revised FAM re-emphasized that the channel is to address only “substantive foreign policy matters,” but also tightened the security of channel messages and noted proscriptions against, and penalties for, interference with use of the Dissent Channel.

Although there was a blip of increased use in the channel in 2001 to 11 (up from two in 2000), an official monitoring the channel noted that a number of the 2001 messages still did not accord with the FAM regulations. There has only been one message during the first four months of this year.

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sent vigorously in subsequent years. Four of the initial decade's Rivkin Award winners (1968-1978) went on to win a Herter Award; their second awards came anywhere from six to 15 years after their first award. However, the last mid-level dissent winner who subsequently won a

senior AFSA dissent award won his Rivkin Award in 1978.

But perhaps the simplest explanation for the decline of dissent is this: There has been a corporate conclusion within the Foreign Service that while (gently) rocking the boat probably will not trigger obvious, overt retaliation, it also doesn't do any real good. After all, the evidence to date indicates that dissent seldom leads to substantive change; of the first 150 Dissent Channel messages that addressed substantive issues, for example, not one succeeded in reversing existing policy. And there is no reason to believe that subsequent dissent has been any more successful. (Or to put it another way, one can take some bitter satisfaction in martyrdom, but being ignored just makes the dissenter feel ridiculous.)

Still, while no one wants "dissent" to equal more creative whining, there is reason to believe there is more legitimate scope for substantive policy difference among Foreign Service personnel than is presently in evidence. ■

RECENT DISSENT CHANNEL USAGE

1994	9
1995	6
1996	6
1997	9
1998	8*
1999	5
2000	2
2001	11
2002	1**

*In April 1998 the FAM was revised to re-emphasize that the dissent channel was not to be used for "non-policy issues (e.g., management or personnel issues that are not significantly related to substantive matters of policy)."

** (as of April)

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