

WHERE WAVE-MAKERS CAN PROSPER

The Foreign Service differs from other categories of government employment in a number of ways. That does not necessarily make us any better or worse, just different. Opinions may vary markedly on the value or meaning of some of the specific differences, but there is one distinction that is as noteworthy as it is — unfortunately — obscure. For three decades, unlike everyone else, we have successfully facilitated, as well as actively encouraged and rewarded, efforts to challenge the system from within.

Consider that fact for just a moment. Doing battle with authority is certainly not a major facet of our public persona. When outsiders think of us at all, they tend to do so in terms of good manners, a carefully balanced approach, extensive use of the passive voice and, perhaps more than anything else, conflict avoidance. In the real world, however, only the Foreign Service, acting through AFSA, publicly commends members who are willing to risk standing up and speaking out against U.S. policy. Nothing similar takes place elsewhere, not in the military, quasi-military, or purely civilian agencies; just ours, all alone.

To be sure, there is State's own Dissent Channel and Grievance System (see more below). In addition to formal "hot lines" and access to the IG, government agencies have informal mechanisms for dealing with issues. There are no other award programs

for employees who do this, however, and this is what sets us apart.

The specific mechanism is AFSA's Christian Herter, William R. Rivkin, W. Averell Harriman, and Tex Harris Awards for Constructive Dissent, given to senior, mid-level and junior officers, and specialists, respectively. The low-key, stealthy manner in which we have historically handled them, however, is the one part of the overall exercise that does fit our image. Consequently, the awards, as well as their unique nature, remain totally unknown outside the Service, and largely unknown and therefore misunderstood even within it. That, in turn, is a principal ingredient in the dearth of nominations, particularly nominations that focus on the issue of constructive dissent.

To some extent at least, this may also be a result of the fact that the program is indeed unique. It is the only one, among the extensive lists of other estimable award programs at State, that is not performance-based. The AFSA

awards are not presented for doing assigned or volunteer tasks well, or even exceedingly well; after all, there are many other mechanisms for rewarding exemplary performance or achievement. To win an AFSA award for constructive dissent, you must be psychologically prepared to place your neck on the block — and then do it.

How We Got This Way

This article is primarily concerned with these "shin-kicker" awards. It may nonetheless be useful,

A PAST AFSA DISSENT-AWARD
WINNER ARGUES THAT,
CONTRARY TO POPULAR
OPINION, DISSENT MAY
ACTUALLY ENHANCE A
FOREIGN SERVICE CAREER.

BY EDWARD PECK

in the larger operational context, to make a brief reference to the fact that the Foreign Service (AFSA again) can also justify its claim of authorship of the formal mechanisms in the State Department for dissenting things.

In the late 1960s, when it was taken over by dissenters, the then-“Young Turks” AFSA changed from a traditional club to an activist employee organization, and subsequently won an interagency election to become the exclusive bargaining agent for the Foreign Service. AFSA fought for a number of very significant improvements in Foreign Service personnel management and utilization: securing the department’s grudging agreement to establishing the grievance system for resolving personnel and management concerns at the individual level, and convincing State to set up the Dissent Channel as a mechanism for individual officers to raise policy issues. AFSA also had an active role in drafting the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which codified both of these mechanisms into law.

Not long after taking office, the new leadership of AFSA became interested in establishing annual awards to recognize officers who were able to see things that needed to be changed and were prepared to undertake efforts to try to change them.

An FSO from 1956 to 1989, Edward Peck served in Gothenberg, Tangier, Tunis, Oran, Cairo, Baghdad, Nouakchott and Washington. In 1974, he won the William R. Rivkin Award for constructive dissent by convincing the Department of State to change the rules for joint caption telegrams worldwide, in order to clarify and protect the chain of command from the secretary of State to ambassadors. He may also be the only officer to win a grievance against the State Department and go on to an ambassadorship. For the past 12 years he has lectured at FSI for A-100 and other classes on the subject of “Advocacy and Dissent,” and has been a long-time member of AFSA’s Awards Committee.

***Only the Foreign Service,
acting through AFSA,
publicly commends members
who are willing to risk
standing up and speaking out
against U.S. policy.***

That objective coincided with the desires of families closely associated with the Foreign Service community who were interested in creating memorials, and willing to underwrite the monetary portion of the program.

Any Foreign Service employee can nominate any other. There is no requirement that foreign policy be the focus of the struggle, although it quite often is;

any kind of FS-specific issue will suffice. Furthermore, it is not necessary to prevail, or even to be right on the merits, to win the award — although those are obviously very important considerations. (In fact, nominators often overlook the sharp distinction between performance and dissent. Submitting a glowing EER will not — and should not — win the nominee a dissent award.)

The basic criterion for winning an AFSA dissent award is clear: you must take up the cudgels, but strictly within the system. Resigning eliminates any element of risk, and going public takes the issue outside the system. Either action therefore removes eligibility for an award.

Risks and Gains

The rationale that underlies the program is equally clear. The nation is better served when employees are encouraged to make all aspects of its international relations more effective. The individual desire to improve things is the driving force, but a program that recognizes and rewards those who undertake the effort helps create both a positive climate and a meaningful addition to the feeling of accomplishment.

There may well be a potential danger in speaking out. All organizations, and especially those like the Foreign Service, whose employees are part of a disciplined, professional career, tend to look askance at anyone who raises issues or challenges the status quo. The bearer of bad news, the one who asks the tough questions, is sometimes perceived as the source of whatever the problem is. This is why

F O C U S

Congress passed the Whistleblowers Protection Act in 1989 to attempt to protect those federal employees who call attention to governmental breakdowns, errors, oversights or idiocy.

On the other hand — and this is an important as well as a perhaps surprising point — taking constructive risks may actually be of benefit in a Foreign Service career. Perhaps wave-makers already have, or perhaps they develop, other characteristics that make them good at their jobs. It may very well be that speaking out helps them to stand out.

Whatever the reason, making noticeable waves apparently does not automatically damage the wave-makers' prospects for advancement. In fact, there are some exceptionally compelling statistics to support the concept of a strong reverse relationship. Consider the following numbers (bearing in mind that the Herter, Rivkin and Harriman Awards have twice been given to groups, and that in some years there were no winners):

- Of the 28 individuals who won the Herter Award (given to senior-level dissenters) from 1969 to 2000, 18 of them — a whopping 64 percent — have already served as ambassadors; others may yet do so. True, some of them were already ambassadors when they won, but that fact in itself is highly instructive. It indicates that high visibility does not always deter officers from challenging the system.

- Every one of the 22 mid-level officers who won the Rivkin Award from 1968 to 1992 (a reasonable cut-off date given the length of time normally required to make that move) was subsequently promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. Moreover, fully half of them have already served as ambassadors, and others can be expected to do so in time.

- The 22 junior officers who won the Harriman Award between 1968 and 1992 constitute a group whose subsequent careers are more difficult to evaluate. While many of them are still in the Foreign

GET YOUR
FINANCES IN
LINE WITH

SDFCU
ONLINE

 State Department
Federal Credit Union

You can depend on State Department Federal Credit Union for the ultimate in security and convenience with our new Internet banking service, SDFCU Online.

This **FREE** service allows you to access your Credit Union accounts via the Internet anytime, from almost anywhere in the world. Once you're signed up, simply get online, type in www.sdfcu.org, and click on SDFCU Online. Log in, and you can conduct the following Credit Union business:

- **Get Account Balances and Histories**
- **Transfer Funds**
- **Pay Monthly Bills***
- **And Much More!**

See just how easy SDFCU Online is! Visit us at www.sdfcu.org, check out our demo, print out the SDFCU Online sign-up form, sign it, and return it to us. If you're interested in becoming a member of State Department Federal Credit Union, give our Member Service Center a call at **703-706-5000**, or outside the D.C. metro area at **800-296-8882**. We can also be reached online at sdfcu@sdfcu.org.

SDFCU Online puts us at your service, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whenever you need us the most. Sign up today!

*The Bill Payer service is available for a low monthly fee of \$3.95 for 12 bills, and 50¢ for each additional bill.



F O C U S

Service, several resigned while still juniors. Resignations are more common early in a career and fighting with the system may act as an accelerator to departure. An additional factor is that constructive waves may be perceived as less confrontational when made by someone with relatively more experience. Nonetheless, while many have risen to become senior officers none have as yet become ambassadors.

• The Harris Award for specialists was created in 2000, and it is far too early to draw conclusions from the track record of the recipients.

The point to be made and remembered is that although neither systems nor people are likely ever

To win an AFSA award for constructive dissent, you must be psychologically prepared to place your neck on the block — and then do it.

to be perfect, people design and operate systems and can make them better — if they try. The Foreign Service in all its manifold configurations, albeit a small and impecunious organization, operates a system that has enormous, far-reaching implications for America and for the world. Ensuring that it functions at maximum effectiveness is a demanding and important responsibility that the Service discharges in a manner that merits praise. Challenging that system, with the objective of improving it, is an even higher calling, and all of us in AFSA can be proud of the contributions that we have made to the support of that process. ■



**Make Chicago,
Boston, Florida,
Or Washington, D.C.
Your Other Home Town**

Whatever you have to do, wherever you have to be in any of those cities, there's no better ending for a busy day than coming home. Smith Corporate Living will have a fully furnished, beautifully appointed apartment home waiting for you.

- Completely furnished apartments
- Fully-equipped kitchens
- All utilities included
- 25" color TV with VCR and basic cable
- Local telephone service with voicemail
- Government per diem honored
- No security deposit

Call Toll Free **888-324-4972**
or **703-769-1266**
SmithLiving.com

Charles E. Smith
corporate living
Just Like Home.

