

# AFSA NEWS

American Foreign Service Association • November 2005

WE ASKED, YOU ANSWERED

## Online Opinion Poll Shapes AFSA Agenda

BY STEVE KASHKETT, AFSA STATE VICE PRESIDENT

**E**very representative organization needs feedback from constituents as a reliable way to find out what its members are thinking. The new AFSA Governing Board, as part of the process of defining our priorities and determining our positions on key issues facing the Foreign

Service, conducted a Web-based electronic opinion poll of State Department active-duty members in August and September. Almost 2,000 of you completed the survey — a remarkably high response rate and a statistically conclusive sample of the views of the roughly

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## CALL FOR AFSA DISSENT AWARD NOMINATIONS 2006

BY BARBARA BERGER, PROFESSIONAL ISSUES COORDINATOR

**F**or 37 years, AFSA has sponsored a program to recognize constructive dissent and risk-taking in the Foreign Service. The AFSA Dissent Awards are unique, because they are based on integrity rather than performance. No other organization or agency in the U.S. government has a similar program. Each winner receives \$2,500, presented at a special ceremony in June in the Benjamin Franklin Room at the State Department.

AFSA's constructive dissent awards provide a way to honor those Foreign Service professionals who demonstrate the integrity, initiative and intellectual courage to challenge conventional wisdom, to question the status quo or suggest alternative courses of action. (The Dissent Channel at State, first proposed by AFSA, was created in 1971 as a formal mechanism for expressing dis-



agreement/dissent with State's established policies.)

Hiram ("Harry") Bingham IV was an FSO who granted American entry visas,

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FOREIGN SERVICE MEMBER  
KILLED IN IRAQ

## AFSA Mourns Loss of DS Agent

**O**n Sept. 19, State Department Diplomatic Security Special Agent Stephen Eric Sullivan, 40, was killed in the line of duty while serving on a protective detail in Mosul. (See obituary, p. 69.) Sullivan died along with three American security contractors when their vehicle was struck by a car bomb. He was the third Foreign Service member to be killed in Iraq.

AFSA is deeply saddened by the death of Mr. Sullivan. In a press release on Sept. 20, AFSA President J. Anthony Holmes stated: "This tragic loss underlines the mortal dangers faced by the men and women of the U.S. Foreign Service who are working under the most extreme circumstances to advance our nation's vital interests around the globe. On behalf of

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# AFSA NEWS BRIEFS



## Past Scholarship Recipient Gives Back

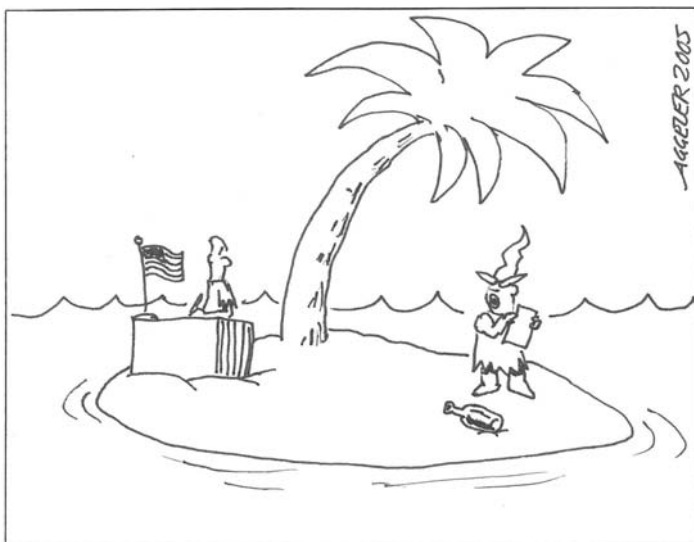
In September, Stephen Hubler, an AFSA scholarship recipient himself from 1979 to 1983, established a \$1,000 financial aid scholarship in memory of Dr. Annalena Tonelli. Tonelli founded and worked in a tuberculosis clinic in Somalia, and tragically died there in 2003.

Hubler has chosen to give back to the AFSA Scholarship Program because of the benefits he received as a financially strapped student. It is Hubler's hope that this scholarship will help a Foreign Service student whose career will have the same positive impact on the lives of others that Dr. Tonelli had. Hubler joined the Foreign Service in 1992 and is currently assigned to Embassy Skopje as political-economic chief. He previously served in Frankfurt, San Jose, Addis Ababa and Washington.

This award will be bestowed on a Foreign Service child for undergraduate study. For information on how you can establish a scholarship in your name, in honor of another, or to commemorate a special event, please contact AFSA Scholarship Director Lori Dec at (202) 944-5504 or [dec@afsa.org](mailto:dec@afsa.org).

## Life in the Foreign Service

■ BY BRIAN AGGELER, FOREIGN SERVICE OFFICER



*"It says here we should devote more of our post resources to public outreach."*

## Legislative Action Fund

Don't forget to make your contribution to AFSA's Legislative Action Fund. AFSA is the key organization working full-time to protect and improve Foreign Service benefits, for both active employees and retirees. Please mail your contribution to: AFSA Legislative Action Fund, PO Box 98026, Washington DC 20090-8026, or go to the AFSA Web site at: [www.afsa.org/lafform.cfm](http://www.afsa.org/lafform.cfm). Make checks payable to the AFSA Legislative Action Fund. Please support the LAF by giving generously.

## Katrina Relief for FCS Employees

The Commerce Department has established a fund for US&FCS employees affected by Hurricane Katrina. All staff were evacuated from New Orleans and some lost their homes and all of their belongings. The fund will be administered through the Federal Employee Education and Assistance Fund. For information on how to donate, go to [www.feea.org/give-transfer.shtml](http://www.feea.org/give-transfer.shtml) and then "Click here to continue to the online donation page" and choose "Commerce Employees Fund." Checks can be sent to FEEA Commerce Employees Fund, US&FCS participants, 8441 W. Bowles Ave., Suite 200, Littleton CO 80123-9501.

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Baldyga, Roger Dankert, Larry Lesser and

Gilbert Sheinbaum

## A Painful Family Quarrel

A FSA's electronic opinion poll has revealed a deep and painful divide within the Foreign Service family. A great many FS employees serving all over the world have sent us comments protesting that our colleagues who have volunteered to go to Iraq and Afghanistan are getting preferential treatment in promotions and onward assignments with little regard for their performance. Meanwhile, a handful of people currently serving in one of those two war zones have responded by arguing that they deserve every possible compensation and reward for living through the hell of being posted in those places, which, as we all know, feature daily hardships, deprivations and dangers that would get any other, less politically symbolic post shut down immediately.

At the same time, AFSA continues to detect disturbing indications of the tremendous pressure being placed upon the director general and the human resources system to fill all the vacant positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, by whatever means and at whatever cost is necessary.

We in AFSA have the highest regard for our colleagues who are willing and able to undertake this hazardous duty, and we believe there should be extremely generous rewards for those who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan. These rewards could and should include any number of creative ideas, such as substantial extra pay, special R&R arrangements, flexible accommodations for family visits and home leave, departmental awards and fulfillment of various career development requirements. AFSA will continue to press the department to increase these and other incentives, as well as to take immediate action to improve the security, housing and quality of life at posts in those countries.

What this hazardous service should *not* do, however, is hold out the promise to those people of special treatment for promotions and onward assignments at the expense of everyone else in the Foreign Service. We all compete for class-wide promotions on the basis of how well we perform over a multiyear period. AFSA annually sits down with management to negotiate the precepts for promotion — precepts that attach central importance to those leadership, managerial, substantive, interpersonal and foreign language skills that demonstrate one's ability to thrive at a higher grade level and one's potential to serve effectively as a more senior officer. Willingness and availability to go to Baghdad or Kabul for a year, while commendable, tell us little about the skills that should qualify an employee for promotion.

Giving special "promotion points" to those who serve in a few dangerous posts demeans the work being done by FS employees everywhere else. What about the person performing superbly at one of our many important hardship posts not quite as difficult

or as high-profile as Iraq and Afghanistan? What about someone doing brilliant work on vital policy issues in Cairo, Port-au-Prince, Moscow or even Washington, D.C.? Don't these talented, dedicated FS employees deserve an equal shot at promotion?

Whether we like it or not, the reality is that promotions are a zero-sum game. Especially at a time of tight budgets when most of us would consider ourselves lucky to get promoted after six or seven years at grade — and when the threat of being "selected out" remains very real — it is essential that promotion boards base their decisions solely on the skills and potential of candidates reviewed on a level playing field.

Everyone agrees that we in the Foreign Service, like all federal employees, must have a strictly merit-based promotion system. Okay, then: let's keep our promotions based on merit, not on willingness or availability to go to two particularly dangerous posts that may happen to be politically sensitive at the moment.

Similarly, the open assignments process is supposed to be a transparent exercise in identifying the best-qualified candidate for a particular assignment. As the number of hardship posts increases and the number of "cushy" posts dwindles, it becomes all the more important for the system to show fairness and even-handedness in the assignments process. Willingness to volunteer for a year in Iraq does not necessarily make someone the best candidate with the most appropriate skills for a particular onward assignment. Service there should not trump strong qualifications of other bidders, especially those with a recent tour at a hardship post.

This is a painful family quarrel. Most of us know people on both sides and can sympathize with the emotions of each. But the issue is not about whether or not there should be special recognition, incentives and rewards for our brave colleagues who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan; AFSA is firmly in favor of better incentives packages for them. It is about determining what are the most appropriate rewards that neither come at the expense of the rest of the hard-working Foreign Service, nor unfairly put everyone else at a long-term disadvantage. □



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## Merger Rumors

The question asked most often this summer by visitors from overseas missions was: “What do you hear about USAID’s merger with State?” They must think that I am privy to discussions in the lofty corridors of power. I am not. Even so, I have views and this space allows me to express them.

I (first-person singular and not AFSA) do not believe that it would be in the best interest of long-term U.S. foreign policy if USAID were merged with State. There is still serious debate on whether it was wise to have merged USIA with State back in 1999. Some would argue that our public diplomacy function is far less potent and effective today than it was in the heady days when we were at the “end of history” and naively concluded we no longer needed “vestiges” of the Cold War. One wonders, had USIA not been disbanded, whether our image in the world would be better than it is.

If a merger were to occur, I fear that the development rationale would be on the losing side in every debate.

Do healthy organizational tensions lead to better results? I contend they do. Once USIA officers were subsumed under the predominant organization’s personnel system, there was no longer any reward for an opposing view. Future promotions and assignments could be jeopardized by nonconformity with perceived organizational orthodoxy. And so it would be with USAID. Something could be lost — something quite important.

In the foreign policy debate, one of USAID’s primary roles is to advocate for long-term development goals. These often compete with short-term political objectives. In practical terms, this could play out with the U.S. using its resources in a particular country on an education strategy over several years versus a questionable infrastructure activity designed to curry fleeting favor with the ruling elite. Sound familiar? Just as the U.S. Navy’s mission is different from that of the U.S. Army, so is USAID’s mission different from State’s. If a merger were to occur, I fear that the development rationale would be on the losing side in every debate.

FEMA melded into Homeland Security and USIA into State because merger seemed like a good idea at the time and the cost-cutting advocates held sway. Does a similar fate await USAID? Let’s ask those same cost-cutters in the wake of Osama and Katrina, what costs were saved?

There is another disturbing aspect to this merging, which puts USAID even deeper behind walls. I am reminded of the two scheming fathers in the popular musical, “The Fantasticks.” The fathers build a wall between their two houses, because they know it will bring their two children together in marriage rather than keep them apart. On Broadway, building a wall can accomplish the desired objective. But what works in the theater, more often than not, fails in real life. Intuitively, we know walls don’t work.

Merger or no merger, USAID’s retreat behind the walls of fortress-like embassies is not the answer. Yes, there are real security concerns, but USAID, like the Peace Corps, cannot achieve its objectives encased behind walls. Instead, it needs desperately to find imaginative ways in which it can breach and eliminate the walls — or a “hostile takeover” will be the least of its worries. □



all his colleagues, I extend my heartfelt condolences to Mr. Sullivan’s family.”

Sullivan served in the U.S. Marine Corps and as a U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman before joining Diplomatic Security in 2002. After service in the Miami Field Office, he was posted to Kabul in 2004, serving as an Assistant Regional Security Officer. Following his service in Kabul, he volunteered to go to Iraq as an assistant regional security offi-

AFSA urges the U.S. government to continually review the security arrangements protecting our heroic colleagues and to provide them the fullest measure of resources and protection possible.

cer in 2005. Based in Baghdad, he was on temporary assignment as the acting regional security officer in Mosul when this tragedy occurred.

AFSA recognizes that it is impossible anywhere to provide 100-percent protection for our personnel who staff the front lines of American diplomacy. Since the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings in which 224 died (including 53 U.S. government employees), progress has been made in bringing our overseas embassies, consulates and other missions up to acceptable security standards. However, much work remains to be done.

We also recognize that Embassy Baghdad and the four consulates in Iraq are special cases and that security standards for our colleagues there (and in Afghanistan) are judged differently than at other posts around the world. At every opportunity, AFSA urges the U.S. government to continually review the security arrangements protecting our heroic colleagues and to provide them the fullest measure of resources and protection possible. □

## Capitalizing on FAS's Human Resources

These days, almost every federal agency is grappling with human capital questions. How do we align our people, budget, technology and organizational structure to ensure strategic goals are achieved? How do we create an organizational culture that supports results-oriented leadership and innovation? How do we attract, develop and retain the best talent?

To get a picture of the perceptions of FSOs, AFSA FAS conducted our own human capital survey. As with all federal agencies, there are areas where FAS is doing well and areas that need improvement.

Most of the survey responses from our FSOs were on par with the FAS-wide and governmentwide responses to the human capital survey. However, in key areas, the attitudes and perceptions held by FSOs were less positive. More than half of FAS FSOs said they did not have sufficient resources — people, budget, materials — to do their jobs, as compared to 37 percent in FAS overall and 32 percent governmentwide. Only 19 percent of survey respondents agreed that our performance-management system rewards high-performing employees, as compared to 49 percent in FAS and 42 percent in other federal agencies. Only 32 percent of FSOs felt they received adequate training as compared to 56 percent in FAS overall and 60 percent governmentwide. On key issues such as communication, leadership and management, FAS FSO responses were below governmentwide averages.

Nearly 70 percent of AFSA FAS members responded to the survey. Of the respondents, 64 percent were in the field; 90 percent were supervisors or managers (including 21 percent in the Senior Foreign Service); 66 percent were male and 34 percent were female.

The survey responses on sufficient resources to get the job done are troubling. Our overseas presence is indispensable to the effective management of the agency's programs. Our posts overseas play a vital role in negotiating new trade agreements, resolving trade disputes, developing agricultural markets and providing agricultural market intelligence. To ensure that the activities of our posts and the resources committed to them are aligned with agency goals, FAS conducts a thorough and rigorous global review process every year. Surprisingly, there is not a similar structure in place to evaluate our domestic operations. AFSA encourages FAS to implement a "domestic review" process to ensure a more balanced approach to resource allocation and to help ensure that our FSOs have the resources necessary to do their jobs.

FSO responses on performance management reflect a lack of confidence in the current system. A top AFSA FAS priority is working with management to create an integrated performance management and measurement system that rewards proven leadership and management skills and meets the objec-

tives of the Presidential Management Agenda. Two AFSA FAS working groups — the Leadership and Management Working Group and the Performance Management Working Group — have been instrumental in developing a memorandum of understanding to enhance our performance management system. We will circulate the draft MOU in the near future, and look forward to obtaining comments and suggestions from FAS FSOs.

Enhanced training for FSOs is high on AFSA's priority list. AFSA is working through the FAS human capital working group, which was established at our request, to develop a comprehensive training program for FSOs. We would like to see a comprehensive training and development program for junior, mid-level and senior FSOs that builds on the recently identified core professional competencies, leverages distance-learning programs, better utilizes detail opportunities and equips FSOs with the management and leadership skills necessary to lead people, lead change and achieve results.

The survey responses on communication, leadership and management likely reflect uncertainty on the part of FSOs regarding the ongoing FAS strategic review and alignment process and what it means for employees. To address employee concerns, AFSA is encouraging FAS leadership to strengthen its communication with employees, particularly those in the field, and to more actively involve employees in the strategic review and alignment process.

While not specifically addressed in the survey, the Washington Placement Plan is another issue that merits our attention. While we are convinced that FAS senior management makes every attempt to ensure the process is equitable, we are concerned that the process itself is flawed. If evaluated on the basis of its original objective — a mechanism to place returning FSOs in positions best suited to advance the agency's mission — the WPP is a failure.

AFSA FAS strives to represent member concerns and interests, but we need your input to be successful. Our door is always open and the cappuccino-maker is on. □



More than half of FAS FSOs said they did not have sufficient resources — people, budget, materials — to do their jobs.

**Survey • Continued from page 1**

8,000-member target group. Respondents, who came from virtually every overseas post and every domestic bureau, broke down as follows:

- Overseas: 71 percent
- Domestic: 29 percent
  
- FS generalists: 67 percent
- FS specialists: 33 percent

Respondents were asked to rank order priorities for AFSA. The survey revealed clearly what State active-duty members want AFSA's top four priorities to be, in the following order:

**1. Lobbying for overseas locality pay and better benefits.**

**2. Fighting for fairness in assignments/promotions.**

**3. Assisting members with individual labor-management problems, concerns, inequities, disciplinary issues, grievances, etc.**

**4. Defending the reputation of the professional Foreign Service and its role in the foreign policy-making process.**

Other AFSA activities, such as publishing the *Foreign Service Journal* and providing services such as scholarships, awards and insurance, are also important to the membership, but constitute a somewhat lower priority.

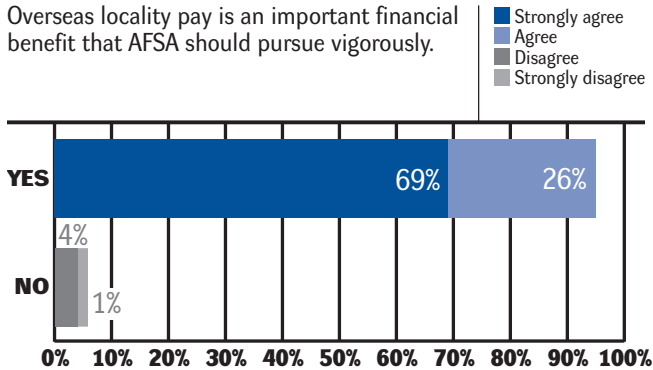
On the major specific issues of concern to the Foreign Service, the poll revealed mostly unequivocal consensus

views — but some differences of opinion as well — as illustrated in the accompanying graphs.

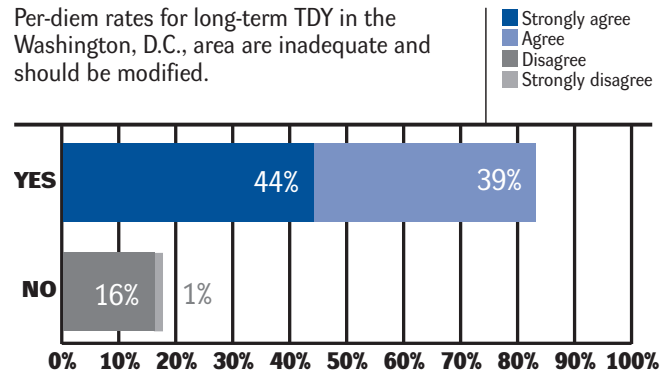
Overseas comparability (locality) pay remains “an important benefit which AFSA should pursue vigorously,” according to 95 percent of respondents. Increasing the Separate Maintenance Allowance, Washington-area per-diem rates, and employment opportunities for family members overseas all received high marks. Some 70 percent believe that AFSA should challenge unqualified political appointees at all levels.

Even more interesting than these targeted questions on key high-profile issues, however, are the often elaborate comments entered by nearly 1,000 respondents on

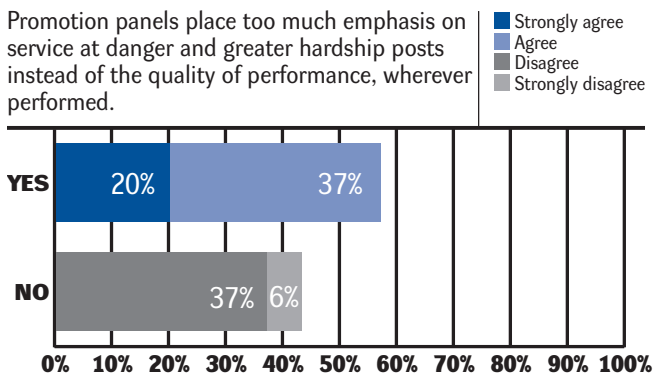
Overseas locality pay is an important financial benefit that AFSA should pursue vigorously.



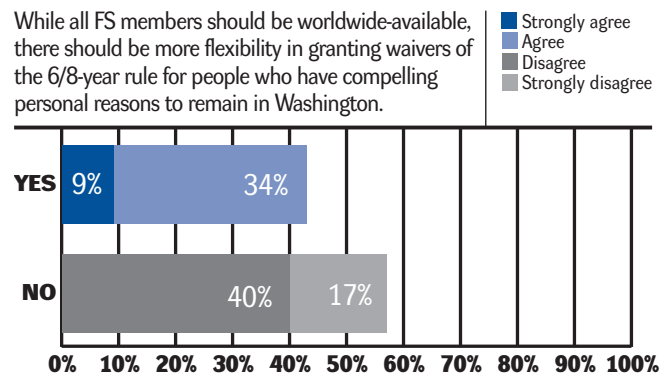
Per-diem rates for long-term TDY in the Washington, D.C., area are inadequate and should be modified.



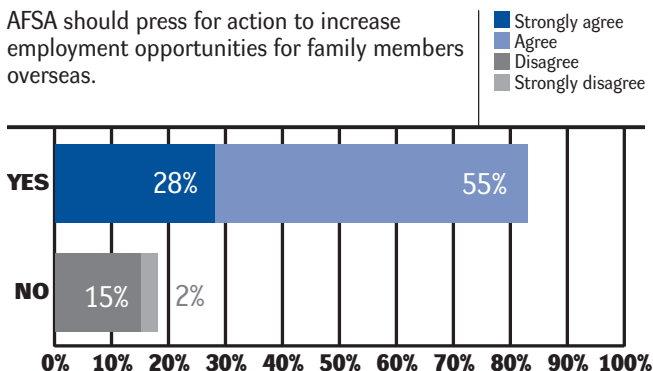
Promotion panels place too much emphasis on service at danger and greater hardship posts instead of the quality of performance, wherever performed.



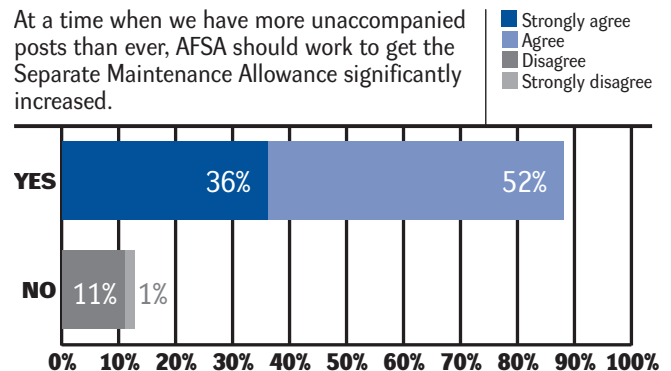
While all FS members should be worldwide-available, there should be more flexibility in granting waivers of the 6/8-year rule for people who have compelling personal reasons to remain in Washington.



AFSA should press for action to increase employment opportunities for family members overseas.



At a time when we have more unaccompanied posts than ever, AFSA should work to get the Separate Maintenance Allowance significantly increased.



other areas of concern to them. These comments, which AFSA staff have been scrutinizing and are now cataloging, suggest the wide range of disparate problems members would like AFSA to address, as well as the diversity of opinion on how AFSA should approach these problems. The comments cover a multitude of subjects, resulting in at least 100 distinct suggestions for action items. Recurring themes include: frustrations over the EER/promotion process, the inability to use home leave, unequal treatment of Members of Household, secret “handshakes” for choice assignments, problems with household effects/storage, inadequate arrangements for pregnancy/maternity, disparity between generalists and specialists, poor managerial skills of senior

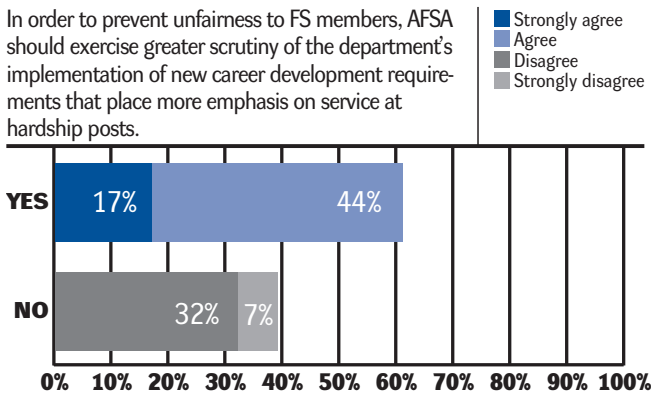
officers, excessive security investigations/punitive actions and a widespread perception that the department is offering unfair and inappropriate rewards to people who volunteer to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan. (See my column on this latter subject on page 3.)

This survey highlights the challenges facing AFSA when we try to represent this multifaceted — and often feisty — membership. We cannot tackle every issue of importance to every member. When we do take on an issue in our negotiations with department management, we typically find that members disagree on what AFSA should do about that particular issue or how much effort AFSA should expend on it.

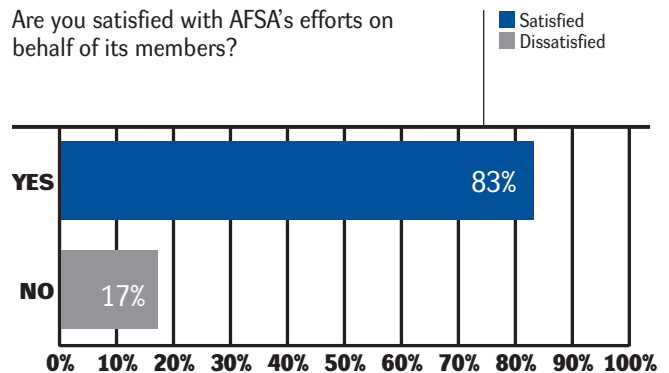
We at AFSA will take to heart the responses we received in this survey as we define our agenda and our priorities. Our members overwhelmingly (68 percent) want AFSA to serve as both a labor union and a professional association, and a clear majority (61 percent) think AFSA should be more vocal and assertive in dealing with management. We will continue to listen to members’ concerns, to tackle every problem we can and to strive conscientiously to represent our diverse constituency to the best of our ability.

The response to one question was particularly heartening: when asked if they were “satisfied with AFSA’s efforts” on their behalf, some 83 percent of survey respondents answered yes! □

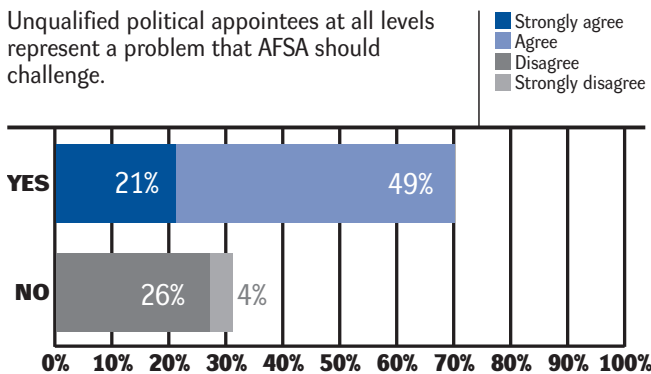
In order to prevent unfairness to FS members, AFSA should exercise greater scrutiny of the department’s implementation of new career development requirements that place more emphasis on service at hardship posts.



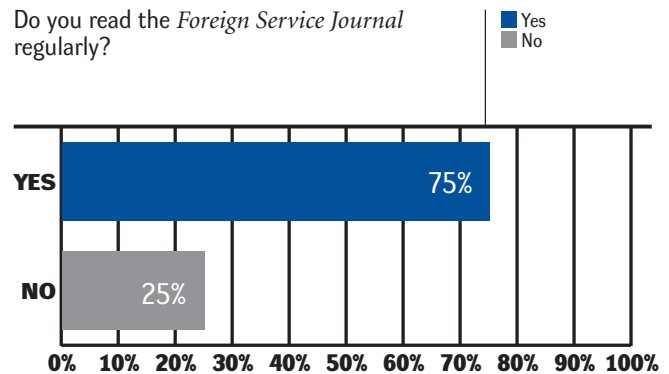
Are you satisfied with AFSA’s efforts on behalf of its members?



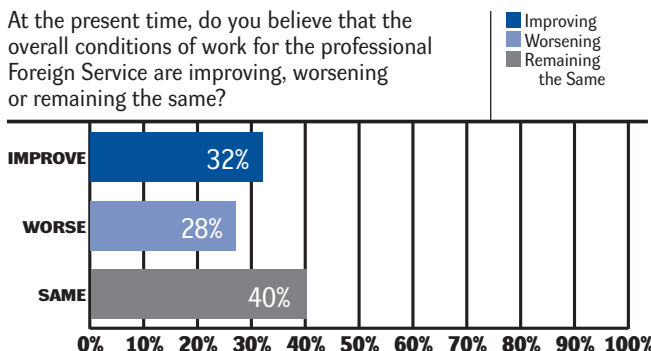
Unqualified political appointees at all levels represent a problem that AFSA should challenge.



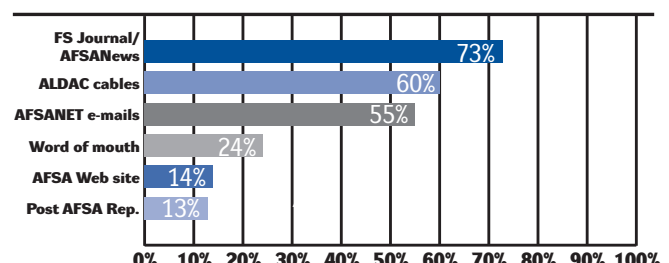
Do you read the *Foreign Service Journal* regularly?



At the present time, do you believe that the overall conditions of work for the professional Foreign Service are improving, worsening or remaining the same?



By what means do you get information on AFSA activities/efforts?



## New Address, Same Mission

The Associates of the American Foreign Service Worldwide has moved to Northern Virginia, on Columbia Pike just east of Carlin Springs. AAFSW invites AFSA members to stop by for a visit.

The location may be new, but AAFSW is as dedicated as ever to connecting the Foreign Service community at home and abroad. Over 1,400 members of the Foreign Service community worldwide are connected through AAFSW's Livelines e-mail discussion group, which is free to all. Each month, thousands visit [www.aafsw.org](http://www.aafsw.org) for helpful links, housing and book reviews, articles and tips on living the FS life. Over 800 AAFSW members contribute time, money and energy to support the association's publications, special interest groups, online resources, outreach efforts, annual BOOKFAIR and the Secretary of State's Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad.

Founded in 1960, AAFSW is a 501(c)3



nonprofit organization and an independent advocate for its membership — spouses, partners, and active and retired employees of all U.S. foreign affairs agencies. AAFSW is not affiliated with the State Department, although it works closely with State representatives and helped found the Family Liaison Office and the Overseas Briefing Center.

You can join AAFSW at [www.aafsw.org](http://www.aafsw.org). The \$40 annual membership fee includes:

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### Dissent • Continued from page 1

against official U.S. government policy, to 2,500 European Jews (including many prominent cultural figures) at great personal risk and cost to his career. He received a posthumous dissent award from AFSA in 2002, presented by Secretary of State Colin Powell to Bingham's children at the awards ceremony. We understand that next year, the U.S. Postal Service will issue a series of six stamps honoring U.S. diplomats, and Hiram Bingham will be among them. It has taken over 60 years, but his story is finally being told. However, AFSA wants to tell the story of our most heroic dissenters today, while these brave employees are still serving their country in the Foreign Service.

Our country continues to face extraordinary challenges in the conduct of international affairs. Foreign Service employees at all grades and in all agen-

Please give some thought  
now to identifying colleagues  
who have had the courage  
to challenge the system —  
on any subject.

cies put their lives and the lives of their families at risk every day to advance America's interests abroad. AFSA's dissent awards offer an opportunity to recognize the critical contributions made by our colleagues who have demonstrated the courage to stand up for what they believe, just as Harry Bingham did in 1942 in Marseilles. AFSA asks that you help us honor Foreign Service colleagues who have followed in his path and have taken risks for their convictions, demonstrated inde-

pendent thinking or dared to ask the tough questions that no one else will ask.

Please give some thought now to identifying colleagues who have had the courage to challenge the system — on any subject. Success is not a requirement. The willingness to ask the tough questions despite the circumstances is what counts. The official call for dissent award nominations will be in the December *AFSA News*.

The four dissent awards are: the Herter Award for senior officers, the Rivkin Award for mid-level officers, the Harriman Award for junior officers and the Harris Award for specialists. For more information, please contact Barbara Berger at [berger@afsa.org](mailto:berger@afsa.org) or (202) 338-4045, ext. 251. For nomination instructions and additional information on AFSA's dissent and other awards, please go to [www.afsa.org/awards.cfm](http://www.afsa.org/awards.cfm). We are counting on you to help us maintain this proud tradition of dissent. □

## Permanent Impermanence: Finding a Foothold in the Foreign Service

*“Nostalgia is fatiguing and destructive, it is the vice of the expatriate. You must put down roots as if they were forever, you must have a sense of permanence.”*

— Isabel Allende, *Of Love and Shadows*

All of us, Americans associated with missions around the world, have chosen the expatriate’s life. Perhaps our choices horrify our families back home, perhaps they inspire envy, but either way, we’re out here, living a life that changes dramatically every two or three years. We’re doing our work in languages and cultures that are foreign to us, living in homes we may never have picked for ourselves, sleeping in beds bought in bulk, meeting people we may not have otherwise known. We are diverse in looks, background, politics and states of origin, but all of our personal roads have led us here, to this transient lifestyle. So what do we, expert expatriates, make of the “vice” of nostalgia? How, with the constant transition that comes with our chosen professions, do we shuck off nostalgia to maintain a sense of permanence? Or should we? Can looking back be useful?

Nostalgia, in a sense, is home for us. Beyond the household effects that we carefully pack up and ship from post to post, the one variable that is consistent is our memories. Our overseas homes are temporary. If we didn’t let ourselves engage in nostalgia we would feel adrift — without the anchor of a personal history. Nostalgia also gives us a sense of a greater community. How many times do you say goodbye to someone at one post only to see them again at a conference in Washington, or find out they’ve just been assigned to your new post? Being able to compare stories and trade histories is especially important to people with temporary physical roots in any one place. We need our nostalgia to bolster our efforts every time we move.

### Moving On

Everyone has a similar story: Maybe you’ve lived in Nairobi for two years and loved every minute. Your house is beautiful, the garden is full of hummingbirds and banana trees, you spend your weekends viewing big game in the national park and, to top it all off, your boss is the greatest. This, you think, is what Foreign Service life is all about. Then bidding season rolls around, and though you hate to leave Kenya, you know another adventure is in store for you wherever you may end up. You’re confident, adaptable and ready for anything.

Getting used to your new post in Fredonia turns out to be dif-

ficult. The city is large and cold, the air filled with factory smoke. You miss Nairobi. Maybe your sponsor takes you out for dinner and you spend the whole evening telling stories of camping in Maasai Mara. At the market you scoff at the produce because “the markets were filled with mangos and passion fruits as big as your head back in Kenya.” I suspect this is the kind of nostalgia Allende warned us about. Maybe she meant for us to keep the past, but throw ourselves into each new post with both feet, as if this were the last place we’d ever live.

It’s hard to transcend the feelings of sadness that can come with moving. It’s easy to compare every aspect of this country to the one you miss. Transition is a kind of grief, and those of us who move often need to let ourselves pass through the stages of grieving in order to make peace with the present. Transition has five stages: Involvement (being happily settled), leaving (the physical process of moving), arriving (the chaotic and anxious

period of arrival), entering (being vulnerable — a new face in new place, learning the ropes) and reinvolvement (settling back in and feeling at home). Letting nostalgia play too big a role contributes to getting stuck in the entering stage — constantly feeling like an outsider.

### A Fine Balance

So we are faced with the challenge of maintaining the balance between welcoming the transience of Foreign Service life and committing our full selves to finding happiness in each new place. It’s about leaving the office in the evenings and walking through the neighborhood, making discoveries and connections. It’s about suspending judgment and, instead, letting experiences wash over you. After all, this is the adventure; the daily minutia of watching a whole new country and culture unfold before you and knowing that, for the time you’re given, you’re a part of it.

It’s a life that can be hard. It’s hard to say goodbye, to leave houses and people and places that you loved, but the silver lining is that it’s also a never-ending source of potential joy. Every place you go will offer you some kind of gift if you are willing to put yourself out there, let yourself relax and find it. It’s your role to enjoy every place you go while you can, set your roots down for awhile, live as if you were never leaving. This is the talent that this special life calls for: being permanently impermanent. And enjoying the ride. □

*Adrienne Benson Scherger grew up in four African countries with a USAID father. A freelance writer, she is currently serving as the CLO in Tirana, where her husband is administrative officer for the Peace Corps.*

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