



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *Telling Our Story*

BY JOHN K. NALAND

During my first week of A-100 orientation many years ago, a classmate pointed out that when I said "Foreign Service," I differed from my colleagues by putting the stress on the first word instead of on the second. While I quickly changed my pronunciation, I still feel that the defining characteristic of our profession is that we spend most of our careers abroad.



Certainly, overseas stationing has also become a characteristic of U.S. military service since 2003. But, absent an invasion from Mars, the next administration will likely seek to return our military to what it was when I served in the Army in the early 1980s: a mostly U.S.-based garrison force. That will never be the case for the Foreign Service, which has consistently maintained two-thirds of its positions overseas.

I mention this because I am often disappointed at how little credit the Foreign Service gets from the American people and their representatives in Congress for the fact that we spend so much of our careers far from home, often in very difficult places. Over a long career, that adds up to a lot of missed births of nieces, deaths of family members, weddings of old friends, and holiday dinners at grandma's house.

This lack of appreciation of the

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burdens of the Foreign Service career costs us dearly on Capitol Hill. For example, only after years of effort was AFSA able to convince Congress that Foreign Service members, like the uniformed military, should not have to pay tens of thousands of dollars in capital gains tax on the sale of a primary residence that their overseas postings had not allowed them to occupy for the required two of the last five years.

Similarly, while it is intuitively obvious to us that we should not take a nearly 20-percent cut in base pay when we transfer abroad, few in Congress consider the issue in the context of the many burdens borne by the Foreign Service. Instead, many are guided by obsolete images of diplomats spending their careers in comfortable European capitals.

Of course, AFSA works hard to educate lawmakers and the American people about the realities of Foreign Service life. Just review our annual report published each March in this *Journal* to gain an appreciation of how often AFSA is quoted in the media, how many speaking engagements we coordinate around the nation, and how many congressional offices we visit. But more needs to be done.

One obvious candidate to undertake increased efforts to "tell our story" is the State Department's Bureau of Public Affairs. Yet, with rare exceptions in recent decades, PA has

focused exclusively on building support for the day's foreign policy initiatives, without also making efforts to build a long-term constituency for diplomacy. Contrast that with the Pentagon's teams of people dedicated to generating positive press coverage of, and long-lasting admiration for, the hard work and sacrifices of soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen.

Other candidates to help educate outsiders about the realities of Foreign Service life include almost everyone reading this column. Yes, it is the job of AFSA's officers and small staff to take the lead on this. But there is no way for a handful of people to call on all 535 members of Congress, get letters printed on the editorial pages of every local newspaper around the nation, and single-handedly undertake the many other possible outreach efforts.

This is clearly an endeavor that could benefit from more helping hands. For example, active-duty members could brief visiting congressional delegations on the overseas pay inequity. Retired members can write to their local newspapers to highlight the need to adequately fund diplomatic engagement. And all members should contact their lawmakers to raise these issues, thereby transforming AFSA's once-a-year Day on the Hill lobbying blitz into a year-round campaign.

There is plenty of work to go around, so any and all help will be appreciated. ■

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