



LETTERS

Fortresses or Embassies?

During a recent visit to Armenia in support of the Future Leaders Exchange Program, I had the opportunity to drive by the new fortress-like facility that is now the American embassy in this historic country. A more intimidating and unwelcoming, yet high-profile, presence is hard to imagine. This surprisingly large facility sits alone on the outskirts of Yerevan surrounded by high walls. Its design warns all who might consider approaching to keep their distance.

Armenians I spoke with who have had the occasion to actually visit the embassy told me that the lengthy physical screening process for entry can be as intimidating as the building itself.

While the formula we have used in Armenia may be understandable from a pure security perspective, I could not help but be troubled by the image of America that this facility creates among the impressionable population of this developing democracy. It cannot be helping to win hearts or minds for us. I also noted that other major embassies in Yerevan, such as those of China and the U.K., have managed to retain accessible locations that do not scare away the locals.

As one who spent a good deal of my career serving behind the former "Iron Curtain" during some of the prime years of the Cold War, I can recall the time when our embassies were a beacon of hope to the peoples of those countries. When planning

our future embassies, we must do a better job finding a balance that will produce facilities that reflect our country's basic values while dealing with the inevitable security concerns. While I realize that Embassy Yerevan is unlikely to be abandoned, perhaps it can provide useful service as an example to be avoided.

Donald Kursch
FSO, retired
Washington, D.C.

Qualifying and the QEP

The June article, "Who Is the 'Total Candidate'?" FSO Hiring Today," discussed new elements of the Foreign Service generalist selection process. The article pleaded for the fairness of one new aspect — the Qualifications Evaluation Panel — that is a new step between the written exam and the oral assessment.

Based on personal experience, I have doubts that the QEP portion is as fair as it might be. I took and passed the written exam in March, but a few weeks later received a letter that said "a review of your file does not allow us to continue your candidacy." I wrote a short note to HR/REE asking if there had been a mistake.

You see, I've been a direct-hire Office Management Specialist for almost five years. I am serving at my third post, Toronto, after full tours in Kabul and Guangzhou. I have a 2/0 in Mandarin Chinese that I earned at FSI in June 2004. I also hold a mas-

ter's degree and served seven years as an active-duty officer in the U.S. Army. I mentioned all these facts in my e-mail to HR.

In return I got an e-mail that was unsatisfying. Parts of the message were addressed to me (it mentioned my already being in the Foreign Service), but the rest was obviously cut-and-pasted with advice on how to pass the QEP next time. Such advice included getting involved with the local immigrant community and eating at their restaurants, the importance of writing a stellar personal narrative, and (most perplexing) seeking out the advice of a Diplomat-in-Residence. Thanks!

I followed up my inquiry with an e-mail to DG-Direct, which elicited an even more unhelpful reply. The gist of it was, "We can't offer you an explanation about why you weren't chosen for the oral examination, but better luck next time."

If continuous overseas service since June 2004, a master's degree, prior service in the U.S. military and my personal narrative are not enough to get a person's foot in the door to the oral assessment, what is? On the other hand, if all of the applicants who passed the written exam are indeed more qualified than I, then the Foreign Service can look forward to a generation of diplomats who have spent several years overseas, have advanced degrees, speak one or more critical languages and can write an outstanding personal narrative when-

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LETTERS

ever and wherever the situation calls for it.

*Rick Polney
Office Management
Specialist
Consulate General Toronto*

Texas Tuition

I was shocked to find that after a career serving the federal government abroad with the State Department, my children would not be eligible for in-state tuition anywhere in the U.S. Although I'm domiciled in Texas, the Texas residency laws only extended to dependents of the Department of Defense and Public Health Service whose parents are serving outside the state. That didn't seem fair. With three children all scheduled to start college within a three-year period, having no in-state tuition could wipe out our savings.

So I decided to try and get the law changed. I used to run some programs at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, so I lobbied my former colleagues to propose changing the law in the Texas legislature. After several years of waiting for the drawn-out legislative and rules-making process — voila! Here's how it now reads:

"The temporary absence of a person or a dependent's parent from the state for the purpose of service in the U.S. Armed Forces, Public Health Service, Department of Defense or U.S. Department of State, as a result of an employment assignment, or for educational purposes, shall not affect a person's ability to continue to claim that he or she is a domiciliary of this state. The person or the dependent's parent shall provide documentation of the reason for the temporary absence." (Find it at www.theccb.state.tx.us/Rules/tac3.cfm?Chapter_ID=21&Subchapter=X)

It is heartening to see lobbying and

the democratic process work for my benefit for once. I had originally requested the wording be changed to "federal employees" to cover all foreign affairs agencies, but the final wording only extended the benefit to State Department employees.

I suggest that AFSA publish a list of states that grant in-state tuition to dependents of serving foreign affairs employees so other states can be lobbied to grant the same benefit.

*Bob Kirk
Information Management
Specialist
Embassy Berlin*

A Last Request Granted

I was very moved by Lawrence Cohen's June article, "A Lagos Diary: Dying Request for a Kosher Burial." It brought back fond memories of Nina Mba, a dear friend and colleague whom I met during my tour as cultural affairs officer in Lagos from 1984 to 1988. Her voracious love of books often brought her to the USIS library on Broad Street, and I would also run into her on Saturday mornings at the small community library on the Shell Oil compound.

Nina was a distinguished professor of history at the University of Lagos and a pioneer in the field of women's studies in Nigeria. Her two books on Nigerian women will be her important and lasting legacy to a country and people she loved. I'm so pleased that a fellow officer reached out to her family and fulfilled her dying wish for a kosher burial. Such kindness makes me proud to be in the Foreign Service.

*Claudia E. Anyaso
FSO
Director for Public
Diplomacy and
Public Affairs,
Africa Bureau
Washington, D.C. ■*