



PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

Professional Responsibility

BY JOHN K. NALAND

Last month, my column ended by posing a question: What are the professional responsibilities of senior career officials and what should happen to those who fail to fulfill those duties? As I explained, the context of that question is the widespread view that — due to timidity or careerism — some senior career diplomats in recent years have not fulfilled their professional responsibilities to provide their political superiors with frank, expert advice behind closed doors.

What are examples of such failures? Future historians may point to any number of foreign policy decisions in recent years. However, I will leave such judgments to history since any criticism by me of foreign policy decisions made by sitting officials might hamper those officials in their dealings with foreign governments during the remainder of their term of office. But I see no professional constraint on citing leadership failures by senior career officials that have weakened diplomatic readiness to the point that the next president will face serious logistical constraints in implementing his foreign policy. Examples include:

- Secretary Powell's hard-won gains in reversing the ill-advised 1990s downsizing of the Foreign Service evaporated in recent years as new mis-



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sion requirements (notably in Iraq) far exceeded the available staffing. The resulting staffing gaps are so harmful to national security that concerned outsiders such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates are calling for sharply expanded resources for diplomacy and development assistance. While the Bush administration's final budget requested significant new resources, they should have been sought years earlier. The fact that they were not was due in part to a failure by some senior career officials to insist — if necessary at the point of resignation — that more resources must be requested from Congress.

- To fulfill the desire of their political superiors that Embassy Baghdad be fully staffed regardless of other concerns, senior career officials unnecessarily raised the specter of ordered assignments in the fall of 2007 instead of allowing the normal assignment process to take its course. In so doing, they undermined congressional and public confidence in the Foreign Service by leaving the mistaken impression that employees were refusing to answer the call to duty, despite the fact that the Foreign Service has stepped up every year since 2003 to volunteer for Iraq. The fact that Foreign Service members, including myself, have now volunteered to fill all 2009 vacancies in Iraq proves how unnecessary the earlier ordered assignment threats were.

- Several senior career officers launched a public attack in January against an AFSA survey that showed deep dissatisfaction within the Foreign Service over inadequate resources. Nearly 40 percent of the State Department's active-duty FS personnel participated in the online survey. Despite that high response rate, the senior officers dismissed the survey findings as being non-representative and non-credible. They then lauded the job their political superiors had done in obtaining resources, without mentioning the serious budget and staffing gaps then facing the State Department. In response, one employee noted that great courage must be required for senior officials to "go on the record to say that they love their boss."

These examples show senior officers failing to stand up for the career Service. Instead of speaking up to their political superiors about likely negative consequences of the pending decisions, some officers became compliant yes-men and yes-women. Some crossed the divide between nonpartisan career officials and political appointees by allying themselves with a politically appointed patron. As a result, they reaped personal gains such as obtaining or retaining a plum assignment leading to a pay-grade promotion or performance-pay bonus.

These trends must be arrested. Were it to become accepted practice for career officials to ally themselves with political appointees, then every



change of presidential administration would be accompanied by the kind of wholesale turnover in diplomatic staffing that our nation wisely abandoned more than a century ago. If future political appointees cannot rely on career diplomats for frank advice, then the number of foreign policy failures could increase, due to decisions being made entirely by political appointees who lack the overseas and domestic experience to see potential pitfalls and unintended consequences in new policy initiatives.

Thus, the next president should seek out only those career officials who have the moral courage to provide their best professional advice without regard to prevailing political winds. The next Congress should use its oversight and confirmation powers

to insist on apolitical career officials who live up to their professional responsibilities.

I must stress that some senior career officers in recent years have understood that true loyalty sometimes requires telling bosses that they are wrong. Other senior officers recognized that errors were being made outside of their areas of responsibility, but lacked the standing to attempt to influence events. Others have even quietly taken the personally difficult step of retiring rather than continuing to serve in an environment where they could not effect positive change.

The Foreign Service needs senior career officers who understand their professional responsibility and are willing to act on it. Those who meekly tell their political superiors what

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they think they want to hear, or mechanically implement directives without first speaking up about likely negative consequences, do a disservice to both their bosses and our nation. ■

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