

# A SECURITY ENGINEERING OFFICER'S POINT OF VIEW

BY CRAIG L. CLOUD

I'm an electronics engineer who couldn't bear the thought of spending a lifetime tethered to a computer in a manufacturing facility, so I joined the Foreign Service in 1992 as a Security Engineering Officer. During the past 11 years I've seen the inside of more airports and airplanes than I care to remember. I've lived on four continents, battled rats in my hotel room, had an AK-47 put in my face by a drunken soldier, spent several nights in an embassy under imminent threat of a terrorist attack, and responded to countless calls from Marine security guards in the middle of the night.

My job is to ensure that the physical and technical security infrastructure at our embassies meets or exceeds department standards. I install, repair and maintain alarms, closed circuit television cameras, walk-through metal detectors, vehicle barriers, intercoms, emergency notification systems, and access controls. When a Marine security guard pushes a button to unlock a door, it works because of someone like me. I also search for clandestine listening devices, and make sure that computer systems and telephone switches are correctly configured so that they do not pose a security risk.

When the department builds a new embassy complex, or embarks on a major physical or technical security upgrade, I act as the eyes and ears for the Overseas Building Office and Diplomatic Security Bureaus, informing them of potential trouble spots and performing acceptance testing of the security systems.

THE WORK IS CHALLENGING AND REWARDING BUT THERE IS DEFINITELY ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT, IN THIS SEO'S VIEW.

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## Challenging Work, But ...

Since I started with State, I've served in four overseas posts and Washington, D.C. I've had a great time serving my country at home and overseas, but there are clear signs that the department could do a better job of retaining its employees. Of the 12 SEOs that started work together in 1992, only six of us are left. The others resigned within the first three years, perhaps because of the constant travel, difficult logistics, and temperamental people and equipment.

Then, too, there is the personal side of the coin. My life is a never-ending balancing act. I want to do a good job for my employer, but I also want to be a good husband and father. I've missed a great many school plays, holidays and other important life events while fulfilling my work obligations. As a matter of fact, as I sit writing this article in my Lagos hotel room, I'm missing my son's preschool acting debut.

When I evaluate all of the positive and negative aspects of Foreign Service life, I know I made the right decision when I joined, but there are several ways that the department could improve the security engineering skill code.

**Consistent Hiring.** In 1992, when I started with the department, there were approximately 143 direct-hire security engineers. By 1998, when the bombs went off in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam, our numbers had dwindled to about 80. In the six years between 1992 and 1998 only five SEOs were hired against attrition, and our resources were stretched so

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thin that we could not do our jobs.

The new embassy complexes being built around the world have integrated security infrastructures that far exceed those of the past. A typical complex will have five or more vehicle barriers, X-ray machines and walk-through metal detectors at all of the visitor entry points, and 40 or more cameras, just to name a few of the systems we have to maintain. All of these systems require maintenance and repair if they are to be an effective deterrent against attack.

Over the next five years, the department projects that it will build between seven and 10 NECs each year, adding tremendously to the security infrastructure and workload worldwide. If we go through another hiring freeze similar to the one in the mid-1990s, all of the security systems in these new facilities will fall into disrepair until another tragedy occurs and the cycle repeats itself.

**More senior-level promotions.** In order to be hired as an SEO, applicants must hold a bachelor of science degree in an engineering field or physics. The working level for most SEO positions is FP-2, and SEOs typically advance to this level within five to eight years — then we hit a ceiling. During the past two years, the promotion rate from FP-2 to FP-1 for SEOs has been less than 2 percent per year, and over the past eight years, it has averaged under 4 percent per year.

It becomes very difficult to retain good employees when they are faced with the statistical likelihood of having to spend the last 15 years of their career at

the FP-2 level with very little chance for promotion.

**More excursion opportunities.** The Foreign Service promotion panels have repeatedly stated that employees who have served in excursion positions have a promotional advantage as long as they do not spend too much time outside of their primary skill code. The personnel system, in theory, encourages specialist employees to take assignments outside of their area in order to develop a more versatile work force.

Yet in practice, it is very difficult to receive an out-of-cone assignment, as no manager wants to allow experienced employees to leave their area of specialization, and, without the consent and backing of the employee's home bureau, it is extremely difficult to secure an excursion assignment. The department would benefit by implementing a program that requires managers to allow employees to take excursion assignments at the mid-level grades in order to better prepare them for leadership positions later in their careers.

### **Room for Improvement**

The Foreign Service has provided me with great experiences and an amazing extended family, but I do see room for improvement. I have been impressed by the recent reforms under Secretary Powell's leadership, and am gratified that Director General Ruth Davis and AFSA seem committed to improving the working conditions of Foreign Service generalists and specialists. I hope the trend will continue when our leadership changes.

By the way, I just spoke with my wife and she said that our son is a star. He delivered his one line flawlessly, and she captured most of the show on video — I can't wait to fly back home and watch it! ■

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*Craig Cloud has been a Security Engineering Officer since 1992, serving in Moscow, Buenos Aires, Abidjan and Washington, D.C. He is currently posted in Harare.*