

THE SPOKESMAN LEAVES THE PODIUM

FSO RICHARD BOUCHER WAS THE VOICE FOR SIX SECRETARIES OF STATE
OVER THE PAST 13 YEARS. HERE, FOR A CHANGE, HE SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF.

BY GEORGE GEDDA

Richard Boucher, a career Foreign Service officer, spent almost half of the past 13 years as State Department spokesman and assistant secretary of State for public affairs. He was the voice for six Secretaries of State; very few of his predecessors spoke for more than one. He worked closely with all six at Foggy Bottom as well as on often-grueling overseas trips. The fact that so many Secretaries of State — four Republicans and two Democrats — relied on him for such a sensitive task is a remarkable tribute to his skill and trustworthiness. It is, after all, a job in which the tolerance level for missteps is understandably low.

Boucher was able to go before the media each day and explain, often without looking at notes, the Secretary's thoughts in sentences that parsed and that could be understood not only by the press corps' diplomatic experts but also by ordinary citizens watching on C-SPAN or other news outlets. Yet he always seemed relaxed and seldom had to grope for words. Grandstanding was not his style. The press admired him even though diplomatic sensitivities prevented him from going beyond the often skimpy guidance with which he was provided each day. "There are more questions than answers," Boucher said in a *Foreign Service Journal* interview on June 3, the day before he passed the spokesman's torch to fellow career diplomat Sean McCormack (see sidebar, p. 76).

He witnessed some abrupt policy shifts as he migrated from one administration to the next. He watched Secretary of State Madeleine Albright raise a toast to North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang in October 2000. Barely 15 months later, President Bush lumped North

Korea together with Iran and Iraq in an international "axis of evil." Hardly an example of policy continuity, but Boucher seemed to take it all in stride.

His miscues were rare. In September 2003, he was asked about a meeting among Belgium, Germany, France and Luxembourg in Brussels on European defense. "Yeah, the chocolate makers," Boucher deadpanned, drawing laughter from the press. He realized immediately that he had crossed a line. "Sorry . . . I think they've been referred to that way in the press; I shouldn't repeat things I see in the press."

During the Clinton administration, when he wasn't department spokesman, Boucher spent most of his time as consul general in Hong Kong; U.S. envoy to the APEC, the Pacific Rim economic cooperation group; and as ambassador to Cyprus. He joined the State Department in March 1977. China was an early specialty; once full diplomatic relations were established, he was assigned to open the consulate in Guangzhou.

A native of Rockville, Md., about 12 miles north of Foggy Bottom, Boucher enjoys taking computers apart and putting them back together in his spare time. He and his wife, Carolyn, met in China. Their daughter Madeleine, 18, is a freshman at Columbia University. Son Peter, 14, attends Washington International School.

Following are excerpts from the June 3 *Foreign Service Journal* interview:

FSJ: Which Secretaries of State did you speak for?

RB: I started out as deputy spokesman to Secretary [James] Baker. I moved up to the spokesman's job for Secretary [Lawrence] Eagleburger and was here for about the first six months for Secretary [Warren] Christopher.

And at the end of the Clinton administration, Secretary [Madeleine] Albright asked me to come back when Jamie Rubin left and I served for nine months. Under Secretary [Colin] Powell, I didn't think I would stay long but stayed all the way through. And I then stayed on for the first five months or so of Secretary [Condoleezza] Rice.

FSJ: *What's the best part of the job?*

RB: The best part of the job is the whole world. There are very few jobs in Washington where you deal with the whole world at the same time. From minute to minute, you can be trying to explain Russia policy, what we are doing against AIDS, how we are promoting democracy in the Arab world. And you deal with the whole world in all of its aspects — economics, politics, diplomacy, arms control, proliferation. And that makes it interesting and exciting. There is nothing quite like it in government. There are few jobs where you try to understand intellectually why we're doing one thing in Zimbabwe and then something slightly different in Cambodia.

So it has been an extraordinary education. And even after all this time I'm learning new stuff every day. [And] I'm forgetting the stuff every day, too (laughs). But I'm learning new stuff every day.

At one point in my life, I probably knew as much about Chinese economic reform as anybody. And there is indeed a pleasure that comes from that. But trying to understand and figure out the big picture is a challenge that speaks not only to what are American interests but what is our role fundamentally in the world. Or, in understanding democracy policy as it applies to different places. I think that's the most interesting thing going on right now.

FSJ: *What is the most difficult part of the job?*

RB: Answering all those questions. There are more questions than there are answers. And there are usually more questions you can't answer than questions you can answer. So how do you give people an honest indication of what policy is, what the Secretary wants, the direction she is going in a way that supports the diplomatic process without

A frequent contributor to the Journal, George Gedda covers the State Department for The Associated Press. He was present for most of the press briefings Richard Boucher gave since 1993.

getting into things that might make it more difficult to achieve our policy goals? Every day you've got to do that balance.

Questions usually go right to the heart. Journalists are as smart as we are.

FSJ: *Have you ever made a sensitive negotiation more difficult by saying the wrong thing?*

RB: I don't think I've ever messed up any negotiation. But I've certainly seen it happen. Once, when I was a senior watch officer, I remember walking a very highly classified cable with instructions down to a communicator so they could send them to our negotiators in Geneva who were negotiating with the Soviets on a missile deal. I walked it downstairs and I came back up. I was on the midnight shift. I came back up and the newspapers had arrived. There was the U.S. position and the U.S. fallback position on the front page of the *Washington Post*. It was 1986 or 1987.

The other thing is that people get a distorted impression of U.S. policy. For a long time there was the belief that we had provided arms to the Khmer Rouge. Because we had a policy of not commenting on intelligence, this belief was rampant. It took a major effort inside the bureaucracy to say [publicly], "No, we don't supply arms to the Khmer Rouge."

FSJ: *But didn't [National Security Adviser Zbigniew] Brzezinski encourage the Chinese to supply the Khmer Rouge because they were the only anti-Soviet force in Southeast Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s?*

RB: That's a different question. The idea that the United States supplied them was wrong.

FSJ: *Has being a spokesman been more difficult since 9/11?*

RB: Everything we've been doing is more difficult since 9/11 because what we say is more important. What our diplomats are doing in the field is more dangerous and difficult because we know how important security and the job are. On the other hand, it gives a certain sense to our role in the world, to what we are trying to accomplish. And that applies to the briefing, as well. There is an organizing principle: to prevent another attack on America. And that has enormous ramifications for everything we do around the world, even the support for democracy. You have to be able

to explain everything in that context. Because that is the only thing that really matters.

When we were coming back from Peru that day [Sept. 11, 2001], on the airplane, everyone was sort of sitting around, and about a couple of hours into the flight, I walked up to Secretary Powell's cabin. He had his yellow pads written out. And I had my little piece of paper. And I said, there's half-a-dozen things we're going to have to think about. I went through my half-a-dozen things. He said, "You've got to understand; this changes everything." He was right.

I don't want to leave the impression that preventing another attack on the United States is a simple thing. It involves visa policy, proliferation policy and democracy, how we interact with foreign governments, how foreign governments treat their citizens, how much interest we take in different things.

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We're now confronted with the problems of Uzbekistan. You want to have your base there. You want to be able to fight terrorism with the Uzbek government. So aren't you compromising on democracy? The fact is the two are very closely related: building stability and healthy societies through

democracy as well as working together on security.

FSJ: *How disruptive has the job been with respect to home life, late hours, late phone calls, etc.?*

RB: I suppose there are a variety of jobs where you never quite get away from them. This one is pretty constant. The advantage is you do everything in the world. The disadvantage is you do everything in the world. If something happens far away, somehow you need to know about it and need to deal with it. Other people don't have the same weekend as we do. Some people don't have the same midnights as we do. It's pretty disruptive. It's a lot of travel and a lot of phone calls.

The one virtue compared to a lot of other jobs is that you live in the unclassified world most of the time. And so you do a lot of your work on weekends by BlackBerry and cell phone. So you may be on the phone, but at least you're on the phone at your kid's soccer game.

FSJ: *Presumably your next job will be a little less disruptive?*

RB: A little more predictable. Not necessarily quieter. I used to say it's time to leave this job when somebody has a coup on Friday night and you think they did it to ruin your weekend. I never quite got to that point of paranoia but you do start to take things a little bit personally ... It's like being a wire service reporter sometimes.

FSJ: *Is there a particular answer that you've given over the past dozen years or so that you regret more than any other?*

RB: In my own mind, I think I screw something up every day. There is always something I think I could have done better or didn't do as well as I should have. Sometimes if I got it wrong, I go out to try to fix it right away.

The New Spokesman: Sean McCormack

Richard Boucher's replacement as State Department spokesman and as assistant secretary of State for public affairs is Sean McCormack, a fellow Foreign Service officer.

Seldom has a spokesman been better prepared for the job than McCormack. He served in that role for the National Security Council during President Bush's first term, working closely with then-NSC adviser Condoleezza Rice. That experience permitted a relatively seamless transition to his new State Department role.

McCormack's official titles while working for Rice were Special Assistant to the President, Spokesman for the National Security Council and Deputy White House Press Secretary for Foreign Policy.

McCormack began his career in the Foreign Service in 1995. The following year, he was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Ankara as the Farsi-speaking officer in the consular section.

After two years in Ankara, he was posted to the U.S. embassy in Algiers from 1998 to 1999, with responsibility for economic reporting and consular issues. McCormack served in the State Department Operations Center in 1999 before moving to the Executive Secretariat Staff ("The Line"). He was detailed to the National Security Council Staff in 2001.

McCormack graduated from Colby College in 1986 with a bachelor's degree in economics. He received an M.A. in international relations from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1990.

— George Gedda

FSJ: I remember when Ed Muskie was Secretary of State 25 years ago. He was amazed at how an off-hand remark would reverberate around the world. Do you see in your mind's eye a banner headline as you think about what to say and perhaps hold back?

RB: I think you have to try to understand what's it's going to look like to the people that hear it. Your first responsibility is for what you say, how you explain things. But you have to think about what it's going to look like. You have to remember that something that's a minor story in America is a big story in the country you're talking about. Marlin Fitzwater [press secretary for President Reagan and the first President Bush] once said, "I stand at the podium and I see all these electrons going out and I can't catch them." It is indeed instantaneous. When you travel, you might see a big story in a newspaper for something that took 30 seconds in a

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briefing. You see a story about something you didn't really say much about. But it creates a story out there. You're very conscious of it.

People come back from the oddest places and say, "I heard you on the radio." But that's less a reflection of me than it's a reflection of the media first of all, how international things are. If you say something stupid in Southeast Asia, it's going to go all over the world. ... [So] you try to keep it straight and steady so the answer is as clear as possible. Sometimes I will say [in answer to a question], "I don't know," or "I don't know; I'll check on it." And I know that in some countries that creates a headline, "State Department uninformed on X policy." And then there is a long analysis as to why we don't know about something. In fact there is probably somebody who does know. I just don't happen to know myself.

And then the next day we'll come back with an answer and they'll write another story saying, "The State Department has finally figured it out."

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FSJ: Are there any issues that you see as important that the press simply ignores?

RB: Economics. When the Secretary of State travels around the world, he or she spends a good deal of time talking about economics, talking about development assistance, talking about economic growth, good governance, corruption, how [to become] a Millennium Challenge country, how [to] export more textiles to the U.S. When the airplanes hit the World Trade Center on 9/11, Secretary Powell was talking to the president of Peru [in Lima] about exports of Peruvian cotton to the United States. Secretary Rice, whenever she's gone on her trips to Asia, to Latin America, to Europe, met with African leaders, everybody's talking about China and China's export policies. That's what a lot of the world's fussing about. I think there is a lot less (media) attention to economics and how it fits into

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foreign policy. We do try to talk about the doubling of development assistance. We try to talk about the importance of CAFTA [the Central American Free Trade Agreement].

FSJ: There is a lot of good work that is done out of this building. You have the annual reports on human rights, on U.S. support for human rights, on trafficking in persons, on the state of religious freedom around the world. Do you think the media should be paying more attention to these activities?

RB: All the time. Part of it is the nature of our business and the nature of the press business. News is news. News is drama. News is different. Our work involves steady pursuit of a lot of things. It may not be different from one day to another. It may not be different from one year to another. So there are all these reports that we do and once a year create big stories, maybe a couple of other times, maybe different pieces of it. But there are dozens and dozens of people who work on these every day to try to make next year's story better than this year's story, to try to help people who are caught in slavery, who are caught in jail because of human rights violations. I'm sure there are a lot of things that we can do better in terms of [drawing] attention to them.

[Take the issue of] Middle East peace. People are working every day on that. Every day or every other day there is a story that we failed to get peace in the Middle East. One day the Israelis and the Palestinians or the Jordanians sign a treaty and it's big news. [Then] there's maybe three or four days of follow-up stories — and within three or four days there's another story saying we failed to get peace in the Middle East today. It's part of the nature of our business. There are these moments that stick in your mind and I think the Afghan elections, you know some of the pictures from there, the Iraqi elections, again, pictures from there. That will stick in people's minds. You've given them an image they can grab onto. Part of our job is to make sure that people see those images. ■



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