



# LETTERS

## Just Say No

Thanks for your fantastic June issue on Foreign Service personnel issues. However, I would note that the various articles that discuss the deficiencies of the FS personnel system fail to recognize a fundamental truth: as long as the Foreign Service successfully performs its job despite the deteriorating working environment and “benefits,” there is very little real pressure on department management to make fundamental improvements. It took me a while to figure this out during my 30-year FS career, but eventually I did — so by the time of my first ambassadorship in a small West African post that was chronically understaffed, I knew what buttons to push.

When told that there would be a six-month gap in replacing our departed consular officer (and that was only half of one position), and that the handful of other employees at post would just have to divvy up the work (in addition to doing more than full-time jobs already), I told the department, “Sorry, but we’ll just close the consular section from May through September.” Amazingly, the department then “found” a spare officer at a large European post, and we were able to maintain all consular operations without burdening others at post beyond reason.

As long as Foreign Service members continue to absorb the workload — and it doesn’t matter if they do it with or without grumbling, writing scathing articles and op-eds, etc. — nothing will change. When critical

positions remain unfilled, or larger numbers resign from the Service, department management will finally take real notice. Yes, Foreign Service work is among the most challenging and fulfilling around, but it is also seriously undervalued. Those same skills are priced much higher in the private sector, especially in today’s globalized system, so members do have other options.

If folks are discontented by Service conditions, then they should vote with their feet — which will be a much more effective change inducer than all the articles ever written.

*Tibor P. Nagy Jr.  
Ambassador, retired  
Ransom Canyon, Texas*

## Recruiting for Intellect and Leadership

I was glad to read AFSA President John Naland’s column in the May *FSJ* asserting that ambassadors ought to be grown in the ranks of the Foreign Service as opposed to being political appointees. Absolutely right. Appointing unqualified ambassadors not only damages our nation’s ability to conduct effective foreign policy. It punishes the employees at the appointee’s mission who must work doubly hard to do their already tough job, while simultaneously carrying the weight of a diplomatic novice who knows little of what it takes to run an embassy. This is one of the leadership failures of the Foreign Service.

Similarly, Shawn Dorman’s article in the June issue (“Who is the ‘Total

Candidate’? FSO Hiring Today”) spoke of the traditional recruitment cycle the Foreign Service has utilized for FSO selection. Recruiting has focused primarily on intellectual skills. These traits are essential, to be sure, but what of the practical and equally rare skills of leadership and management?

The Foreign Service recruits and promotes people who have an amazing ability to write, report, analyze and discuss foreign policy matters, but have real difficulty when called upon to assume positions of leadership. Many brilliant FSOs have been Peter Principled into jobs where they flounder. Some of them have no idea how to lead or manage people and resources. They would rather hole up in their offices and write cables than actually walk through the halls of their embassy or sit and chat with some of their employees.

This is why a profession with perhaps one of the most highly educated work forces falls so short on organization, leadership and esprit de corps. Ambassadors and senior officers must wear two hats to be effective: intellectual and leader.

We certainly have people with brilliant minds and excellent leadership skills in the Foreign Service, but they are few. A great deal of the morale problem can be remedied by changing the way we recruit and promote our own officers as well as our ambassadors. We need *leaders* to fill leadership roles. A move away from appointing political insiders or bookish



introverts would go a long way toward cementing the leadership structure we must have in place.

Mr. Naland has used the U.S. military as an example of professional education and leadership development, and I agree. A one-week leadership course at FSI for our officers is a flimsy foundation compared to how much time, education and scrutiny military officers are afforded before they are given command of personnel and resources.

The Foreign Service can grow intellectuals with solid leadership skills. We just need to recruit in the right places, train our future leaders well, weed out the non-performers and promote those with intellect as well as a talent for leading people.

*Robert J. Roulston*  
Assistant Regional Security  
Officer  
Embassy Caracas

### Safeguard the Hiring Process

I would like to commend Shawn Dorman for her clear explanation of the changes in the Foreign Service examination system in the June *FSJ*. I must confess that when I heard that the exam system was to be tinkered with yet again, I was a little bit uneasy, particularly with the idea of an online written test.

Upon reflection, it would appear that the new system has been well thought out, and has the potential to lead to a hiring process that is essentially fair. I am not particularly concerned about the elaborate registration process, which others have criticized, because it will have the effect of weeding out those who are not truly interested in pursuing a Foreign Service career.

There is still one aspect of the new system, however, that I find disquieting: the increasing complexity of the intake process itself. A number of new steps have been added, and each

new step creates an opportunity to shape the pool of job applicants according to the prejudices of the day. Because of this, I hope that every safeguard will be put in place to ensure that “political correctness” will not be allowed to intrude upon a process that should, under ideal conditions, be expected to select personnel primarily according to merit. This problem could become especially acute if the written exam were made too easy, thus allowing the Qualifications Evaluation Panel to choose candidates for the Oral Assessment who would not have made it past the written exam in previous years.

There has been a tendency over the past few decades to “lower the bar” with regard to the written exam. When I first took the exam in 1971, it was the hardest test I ever took. I sweated bullets waiting for my marks, but in the end passed and went on to pass the orals, which at the time were little more than a glorified interview. I took the written exam again in 1999, and found that over the years it had become considerably easier, although this was remedied by the much more realistic oral assessment process.

If, over the next few years, standards for the written exam are further relaxed, that would raise a red flag about the purpose and objectivity of the new hiring system.

*James F. Schumaker*  
FSO, retired  
San Clemente, Calif.

### Ignoring USAID?

With specific regard to the June *FSJ*, and earlier issues as well, why do you seem to ignore USAID FSOs and issues? It is certainly true that there are many overlaps between the life and personnel system of State and USAID — but there are also important differences. Are you confirming the suspicion of demoralized USAID staff that the creation of State’s F

Bureau represents the effective integration of our agency into State by stealth?

*Irving Rosenthal*  
USAID FSO, retired  
Washington, D.C.

### Editor’s Note:

*In fact, several articles and columns in the June FSJ (mostly, but not only, in the AFSA News section) discuss USAID concerns, as is true every month. Admittedly, the June issue, focusing on the future of the Foreign Service personnel system, did concentrate more than usual on State Department-specific topics — but that is only because the State cohort accounts for more than 90 percent of the active-duty Foreign Service.*

*That said, let me reassure you that we are eager to publish material dealing with professional and policy topics affecting members from all AFSA constituencies. For more details on how to submit contributions, please see this month’s “Letter from the Editor” (p. 16).*

### Service for the Unaccompanied

As the spouse of an FSO currently on his way to a posting at a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq, I read Kelly Bembry Midura’s June article on family life in the Foreign Service (“Going It Alone: Family Life in the ‘New’ Foreign Service”) with some interest. Because my sister-in-law is career Air Force with previous deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, our family has seen the support given to unaccompanied deployments from both sides of the military/civilian divide. Simply put, State has a long way to go to meet the kind of support the military provides to its separated families.

As Ms. Midura points out, the FLO and its unaccompanied tour specialist are working very hard with few

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resources to assist families left behind, but they are limited by their budget as to what they can provide. By contrast, when my sister-in-law is overseas, her family back at home has access to 24-hour-a-day child care, housing maintenance and car repair services. Located on base are schools, after-school activities and medical care, not to mention a supportive community of teachers and neighbors who are all in the same situation. In many ways, the Foreign Service unaccompanied experience mirrors that of the military reserves, who also lack these on-base services.

This is not to say that the department needs to match the benefits provided by the military, which, after all, gives its members far fewer choices for deployments than FSOs and whose members don't have the option

of quitting. But State should recognize some of the logistical challenges its separated families face.

Concerning the Separate Maintenance Allowance, tandem couples are not eligible unless one takes leave without pay. Ostensibly this is because both spouses could be assigned to the same unaccompanied post, but that requirement ignores the reality of families with children. This is another inequity that the department needs to look at fixing.

*Lisa K. Heller*

*FSO*

*Washington, D.C.*

### **N'Djamena Evacuation**

During my regional travel days I spent some time in N'Djamena and remember the embassy as being on the main street where the media

reported the rebels and Chadian army forces fought earlier this year. Assuming the embassy has not been moved, I am very surprised that anyone remained in there after Jan. 31, as Rajiv Malik recounts ("Three Days in N'Djamena," May *FSJ*).

With the French military base available, I am further shocked that the essential personnel were not moved there on Saturday morning, Feb. 2, after the dependents were evacuated to Yaounde. Sounds like the Emergency Action Committee needs some remedial training.

*Paul Good*

*FSO, retired*

*Herndon, Va.*

### **Use Real Arabic**

The superheroes cover on the June issue neatly symbolizes the outstanding abilities of the FSOs to be brought in via the new examination system. However, it fails to reflect the language knowledge of the Foreign Service.

The book, held aloft by the central figure on the cover, bears a title which is in Arabic letters. However, it is not real Arabic because the words are written left to right, like English, whereas Arabic is written right to left, and because the letters are in the freestanding form (roughly equivalent to capital letters), which is not how words are written that way in Arabic.

Of course, contract artists can't be expected to have foreign language knowledge — their field is art. So it might be good for the *FSJ* to get an advance copy and show any inscription to one of the many FSOs who know the language.

When translated into English, the book title means "KOOB SNOIS-SERPXE CIBARA." (Try reading this right-to-left.)

*Pierce Bullen*

*FSO, retired*

*Washington, D.C.* ■

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