



AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION

AFSA Speakers Bureau Hard Questions (and Answers)

Q: Why do we need the Foreign Service? Everyone knows that if you want to get something done, you turn to the military, because the State Department is too ineffective.

A: War has always been a part of the human condition; that doesn't appear likely to change any time soon. You won't find anyone in the Foreign Service opposed to a well-supported military. However, you will likewise not find anyone in America's military who is opposed to strong diplomacy. Persuasion is a key part of national security. That is: persuasion of foreign governments to change their policies; OR persuasion of allies to band together against a common enemy; OR persuasion of average citizens in a country to abandon a previously hostile opinion; OR, more often, some combination of all three. There are countless examples of how vital to security and strategy these things are. To take one recent such example, diplomacy united the world against the Iranian regime and forced it to the bargaining table. If we are indeed able to achieve our interests regarding Iran without resorting to military force, our savings in "blood and treasure" will be immeasurable. These are young American lives we're talking about; perhaps even children of people in this room.

Defending America's security and interests is only part of what the Foreign Service provides. Our advocacy also creates jobs and prosperity through trade and tourism, and we are there for individual Americans who are either traveling overseas or need help with international issues such as adoptions. Most people don't know that it's the Foreign Service that creates markets for U.S. businesses and agriculture abroad.

As the most powerful country in the world, America has an ongoing relationship

with other countries. We are everywhere. When I say "we," I mean the United States, in the person of its Foreign Service professionals, who are the only U.S. entity and the only entity from any country that is always deployed, worldwide.

Q: Whenever I watch a movie, and there is a Foreign Service character, he or she always seems over-cautious, afraid to rock the boat. How can someone like that handle all of these dangerous and vital situations that you have been describing?

A: With all due respect to our countrymen in Hollywood, reality does not always square with what you see in the movies. It has been a genuine pleasure throughout my work to have such bright, motivated, thoughtful, and - yes - opinionated colleagues. We have intense policy debates behind the scenes, but we all know that once any policy is established, it is our job to go out and explain and defend it. If we feel we cannot do this sincerely, then we must resign, and occasionally throughout our history, some have taken that route.

All of that said, I do need to acknowledge that caution and deliberation is often part of our job description. The fact is that geopolitics is dependent on fluid, ever-changing events, and there are numerous gray areas that do not fit into a news headline or a bumper-sticker. A simplistic approach to such issues risks doing more harm than good. If you're in the Foreign Service, you know this. What might appear to be a "timid, faceless bureaucrat" may instead be a passionate, well-informed public servant who wants to do his best to make sure policy-makers avoid the law of unintended consequences.

Q: Doesn't the Foreign Service have a tendency to "go native"? How can we really be sure that you all are out there defending U.S. interests, rather than those of other countries?

A: I can assure you that all members of the Foreign Service take an enormous pride in representing, protecting, and defending our country. American values of freedom and democracy have captured the imaginations of people worldwide throughout its history, and our efforts to promote those values give our work meaning and purpose every day. I honestly have never seen American diplomats arguing for the interests of another country over those of the U.S. Where I think the myth of "clientitis" comes from is that it is our job to understand the perspectives of the people in foreign countries with whom we are interacting. As Washington formulates policy, it needs to hear from us what is happening on the ground where we are, and what the prevailing sentiment is, so that decision-makers at home can take this information

into account. When we explain the viewpoints that people in these other countries have, that should not be confused for *advocating* for those viewpoints.

Q: It seems like America just causes itself a lot of unnecessary problems with all of these foreign entanglements. Why are we even engaging with the rest of the world - just to make oil companies and defense contractors rich? And why do we spend all that money on foreign aid when we can't even fix our bridges and roads at home?

A: The answer to one part of your question is simple: We spend less than one percent of the federal budget on foreign affairs as a whole; so, whatever is taking away from those bridges and roads, it's not foreign aid. As for the broader issue, even as our founding fathers were eschewing foreign entanglements, they were still sending envoys to France to help strengthen our alliance against the British, to help combat piracy (a problem then as it still is now), and to strengthen trade for our new fledgling economy. Diplomacy has always been with us, and always will be. And it was one thing to avoid foreign entanglements when we had those two big oceans to protect us. Nowadays, with all of today's technology, "the world is always next door." What we need to do is to keep engaging with the world, but to do it with our eyes open and our knowledge bank fully stocked. That's where the information provided by the Foreign Service comes in.

Q: Aren't the people in the Foreign Service all rich and entitled? The men and women of the military are out there in the trenches, sleeping in tents, while pampered diplomats put on their fancy suits and go to cocktail parties.

A: There is a misconception that we are all wealthy snobs. Career members of the Foreign Service have to pass a highly competitive exam to enter the service; if you have an interest in foreign affairs, I encourage you to have a look at careers.state.gov, where you can learn about registering for the exam (it's free). American diplomats come from a wide, diverse cross-section of the country that we represent. Getting in has nothing to do with your family or your socio-economic status, and has everything to do with the qualities and skills that you demonstrate if you pass the exam. Our salaries are far below much of the private sector; no one joins up in order to get rich. We do it out of a desire to serve, and also because the Foreign Service career is exciting and fascinating. Part of that excitement, at times, is that we are out on the front lines, shoulder to shoulder with those in the armed services that you mention. That's what our work is all about; getting out of the office and deep into the places where we are serving, so that we - and our colleagues in Washington - can understand what is happening on the ground.

Q: How can this be a serious career if a well-connected political hack can buy himself or herself a nice ambassadorship? Nobody can buy a general's title.

A: This is a very good point, and one I'm glad you brought up. There is a law on the books – the Foreign Service Act of 1980, if you care – which specifically states that Ambassadors should come from outside the Foreign Service only “from time to time.” Unfortunately, that seems to have translated into 30% of ambassadorships being filled by individuals from outside the Foreign Service – generally in nice and comfortable places like Western and Northern Europe and the Caribbean. This is a problem, both when it comes to perception and in practice. Most of those in the Foreign Service would like this practice to end, but it would require significant reform of the political system. It's unlikely that either party would be willing to undertake such reform, since they both like to take advantage of what has become a modern spoils system. There have been some awful examples of the damage an unprepared political Ambassador can do to bilateral relationships and the effectiveness of the mission. That said, there have been some very good Ambassadors from outside the Foreign Service; Pamela Harriman, Walter Mondale, Mike Mansfield and Shirley Temple Black come to mind. But talk to any diplomats, and they will tell you that the Ambassador's job should in all but exceptional circumstances be filled by an individual who has trained for the job all their lives.