U.S. Foreign Service: The First Line of Defense

The video was developed as an educational tool intended for general audiences, who are not familiar with the work of the Foreign Service. AFSA suggests showing this video in conjunction with discussion about the Foreign Service as the first line of defense. Discussion questions for video in a separate document.

Suggested Talking Points/Building Blocks

Note: these materials are intended for use by AFSA members and others presenting to an audience not familiar with the work of the Foreign Service. These materials provide the building blocks for discussion; please adapt as appropriate.

What role do diplomats play in our national security?

• National security brings to mind images of the military. It’s easy to envision soldiers fighting on the front lines to keep Americans safe.
• The Foreign Service doesn’t have tanks, or ships, or guns. It doesn’t have bases all around the country – much of the Foreign Service’s work is overseas.
• This could be one reason why the Foreign Service is not as well known to the American public.
• Another reason could be that the work of the Foreign Service is largely unseen. It is focused on the long and delicate process of establishing and maintaining good relationships with other nations in service of the American people and ensuring our national security, prosperity, and interests.
• Like the military, Foreign Service members work on the front lines (many in hardship locations such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan), keeping Americans safe by promoting and protecting our national security, working to alert our government to possible problems and to mitigate them before they become bigger problems for us here at home. Sometimes the Foreign Service works closely with the military as well, particularly since 9/11.
• In addition to terrorism, there are a variety of issues- economic, political, climate, disease, agricultural, or cybersecurity related - that can become threats to American national security.
• Amassing knowledge and experience from post to post, Foreign Service members have expertise on a range of topics to be able to address and counteract the threats.
  o Diplomats are experts on their respective regions and on domestic and foreign policy and are able to clearly interpret and analyze events on the ground to report to Washington for policy decisions.
US Agency for International Development have expertise and experience on disease prevention, humanitarian assistance, as well as advancement of democracy worldwide.

- The Foreign Commercial Service promotes American businesses and exports abroad, while the Foreign Agricultural Service opens markets for U.S. agricultural products and works on food security.
- The Broadcasting Board of Governors, through Voice of America, brings America’s values right to your radio or wireless device without the interference of local propaganda.

- The work of the Foreign Service to stabilize countries and influence foreign opinion neutralizes many issues before they become threats – characterized as preventative diplomacy. Diplomats leverage relationships cultivated over the years and extensive policy and regional knowledge to make the U.S. safer. It is difficult to claim success for the attacks that have not occurred or for the state that has not failed. But we know how valuable this preventative work is.
- This translates into untold savings of both money and American lives otherwise lost to war.
- Secretary of Defense James Mattis told the Senate in March 2013 when he was Commander of U.S. Central Command, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”
- With the foreign assistance budget representing less than 1% of our federal budget, the investment in diplomacy represents a real value for our country, particularly when compared to the cost of military interventions.

Benefits of a strong diplomatic presence and call to action

- Having a cadre of experienced professionals that have made a career of dealing with issues and potential threats is an invaluable asset, especially when it comes to facing new unanticipated problems - like the new coronavirus pandemic.
- Over the course of several months in early 2020, foreign service officers working on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic coordinated the repatriation of more than 100,000 Americans from 136 countries and territories.
- This magnitude of a response was only possible due to the strong U.S. diplomatic presence in so many posts around the world.
- This is true for other threats and issues that could pose a problem for the U.S. A strong Foreign Service presence us to see events unfolding firsthand and respond quickly to keep Americans safe, whether abroad or home.
- This is why it is important to retain a robust American presence and increase the number of staff overseas, which has been decreasing over the past few years.
- A smaller diplomatic American presence means that our national security objectives cannot be met. It also means that America can no longer be a global leader the same way it used to be. And if the U.S. doesn’t lead, who will?