

PART II

Foreign Service Work and Life: Embassy, Employee, Family

By Shawn Dorman

THE EMBASSY AND THE COUNTRY TEAM

Embassies are located in the capital city of each country with which the United States has official relations, and serve as headquarters for U.S. government representation overseas. U.S. consulates are ancillary government offices in cities other than the capital. American and local employees serving in U.S. embassies and consulates work under the leadership of an ambassador to conduct diplomatic relations with the host country.

The Department of State is the lead agency for conducting U.S. diplomacy and the ambassador, appointed by the U.S. president, reports to the Secretary of State. Diplomatic relations among nations, including diplomatic immunity and the inviolability of embassies, follow procedures framed by the 1961 Vienna Convention on the Conduct of Diplomatic Relations and Optional Protocols, ratified by the U.S. in 1969.

The foreign affairs agencies that make up the Foreign Service—the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Foreign Commercial Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and the International Broadcasting Bureau—are part of the overall U.S. mission in a country and usually have their offices inside the embassy. Each embassy can also be home to the offices of other U.S. government agencies and departments, in some countries as many as 40 different entities. Agencies with a significant overseas presence include the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Treasury Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Homeland Security.

Most U.S. ambassadors have two titles. The first—ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary—is the international diplomatic title conveying the responsibility for relations with the host government. The second—chief of mission—has a more internal focus, representing the responsibility for management of the embassy.

The chief of mission leads the country team, an interagency group made up of the head of each State Department section in the embassy and the heads of the other U.S.

government agencies represented at post. Depending on the size of the U.S. mission and the breadth of America's relations with the country, the team can be quite large.

The country team meeting represents a regular occasion for the sharing of information among sections and agencies, and an opportunity to coordinate activities. It is where the ambassador can give instructions, share new priorities, request input or feedback, and be briefed on what is going on in the country and throughout the mission.

There's a saying some in the military like to use: "If you've seen one country team, you've seen one country team." The effectiveness, utility, and dynamics of country team meetings depend heavily on post leadership and vary widely from post to post and from year to year. Personalities and styles do matter, and the ambassador sets the tone.

The country team usually meets once a week. Ambassadors run their country team meetings differently, but, typically, each section and agency head (or a designated representative) will give a brief report on what the office is focused on that week and will raise any issues that might be of interest to the wider embassy community. Regular interagency consultation offers an opportunity to ensure that the various departments and agencies in the mission know what the others are doing and are not working at cross purposes. Embassy division chiefs attending the country team meeting return to their offices and brief their staff on relevant information from the meetings.

The first country team was established by the Truman administration in Germany in 1951. Following World War II, with economic assistance programs and Defense Department activity overseas growing, there was a need for more coordination of the overall U.S. mission. The "Clay Paper," named for General Lucius Clay, one of the architects of the Marshall Plan, was a memorandum of understanding among the Defense Department, State Department, and Economic Cooperation Administration that established the original concept of the country team: "To insure the full coordination of the U.S. effort, U.S. representatives at the country level shall constitute a team under the leadership of the ambassador."

A decade later, President John F. Kennedy initiated the practice of providing each chief of mission with a letter outlining his or her authority and expectations for the country team. The authority covers all executive branch employees, except those under a military commander.

"You are in charge of the entire United States diplomatic mission," the Kennedy letter states, "and I shall expect you to supervise all of its operations. The mission includes not only the personnel of the Department of State and the Foreign Service, but also the representatives of all other United States agencies which have programs and activities in (country name). I shall give you full support and backing in carrying out your assignments."

Depending on who is in the White House, between 30 and 40 percent of ambassadorships are filled by political appointees, the rest coming from the career Foreign Service. Many political appointee ambassadors have strong business

MINDS WIDE OPEN: THE FSN-FSO RELATIONSHIP

By Galina Sabeva



When I left my job as a correspondent for Reuters in 2003 to join the American embassy in Sofia as a political assistant, I had only a vague idea what to expect. A glossy job description in the newspaper, coupled with my misperception about embassy work, led me to believe that I had landed an important, if not glamorous, job. I knew very little then about the ups

and downs of working as a Foreign Service National, a term used for the local employees working for U.S. missions abroad. *Note: The term has been officially changed to Locally Engaged Staff, but most people still use the more familiar FSN.*

I was given a tiny desk in the embassy basement, with no access to the classified diplomatic area. A set of complex security instructions and a long list of acronyms added to my confusion. An FSN colleague, who had worked at the embassy for more than 10 years, offered soothing advice: “Once you get over the strange rules, it can be quite interesting.” But it was the deputy chief of mission, an energetic former journalist for *USA Today*, who gave me a clear perspective on what to expect. I’d probably have a hard time getting used to the embassy’s protocol-conscious environment, he said, and I would have neither the visibility nor the access of my previous job. But, he added, “These limitations aside, the job is rather exciting.” This conversation was an important reality check for me, and got to the essence of the FSN job. There are certain limitations, but also opportunities—it’s up to the individual to accept the former and explore the latter.

Why the U.S. Embassy?

I joined the embassy when working for America wasn’t the most prestigious job. The U.S. was involved in an unpopular war in Iraq, while anti-Americanism was peaking in Europe. Trust among Americans in their own administration hovered near record lows.

Strange as it may sound, FSNs don’t generally join the embassy for competitive pay, work benefits, and job security. Consecutive post–World War II

American administrations have pursued policies aimed at spreading democracy, and the U.S. diplomatic service has played a key role in advancing these policies. Locally hired employees in an American embassy have the unique chance to observe the inner workings of a global superpower's diplomatic machine and see how it conducts diplomacy on a day-to-day basis.

Despite their vivid awareness of their country's power, I have seen very little arrogance, if any, in the men and women who actually conduct U.S. diplomacy. At the same time, I have often been surprised at how my otherwise amiable American colleagues have difficulty taking "no" for an answer when pursuing U.S. foreign policy goals with forceful determination. I have had the opportunity to observe American idealism and pragmatism, two interwoven, but also often contradictory, strands in U.S. diplomacy. And during the war in Iraq, I saw diplomats upholding policies with which they did not necessarily agree, and doing so with professionalism and loyalty to their government.

As someone born and raised in Europe, where diplomacy is primarily a behind-the-scenes occupation, I have been fascinated, at times disconcerted, to watch how the embassy has used bold public diplomacy as a policy tool.

An (Extra)Ordinary Job

I am often asked how it feels to be a foreigner at a U.S. embassy. The honest answer is that although exciting, it is not always easy. All the challenges related to an ordinary job, such as communication, career development, motivation, and workplace safety, are amplified by intercultural differences, political sensitivities, and security issues related to the specifics of diplomatic work.

When they pass through the embassy gate, local employees in effect give their loyalty to a foreign government. In some regions, local employees pay a high price for working for America, and at some high-threat posts they have paid with their lives. So it is important that loyalty works both ways and that the local staff know that their advice and effort are valued by their American colleagues.

Interpersonal communication between the local staff and American employees of the embassy can be a challenge. This is a delicate area that requires tact and patience on both sides. For the FSN, there is no full information cycle. Because of the classified nature of diplomatic work, FSNs often work on projects with no corresponding access to the final product or feedback on their input. In most political sections, FSNs and FSOs are physically separated due to information security requirements.

Yet in some cases, being an FSN is an advantage. Sometimes FSOs stick to the safest approach to sensitive issues, telling mission leaders what they want to hear. I have often seen ambassadors look to FSNs for an unvarnished view.

Trust and Loyalty

The formula for a successful relationship between FSN and FSO is the same as in any relationship—trust and understanding. Although the work standards and the nature of the FSN-FSO relationship vary from post to post depending on political and cultural issues, there should be a clear understanding of each other's functions. Some (in my experience most) diplomats see the local staff as an inseparable part of embassy operations, while others regard FSNs as second-class employees. It is vital, however, for diplomats arriving at a new post to approach their local colleagues with open minds. It is also up to the FSNs to prove they are full-fledged members of the embassy team, performing up to the highest American standards of work excellence and professional ethics.

The FSNs are at the embassy for the long term, preserving institutional memory, providing valuable knowledge about the domestic scene, acting as liaison between the mission and host-country representatives. Every three to four years, they have to prove themselves anew and get accustomed to a different leadership style. FSNs don't know what to expect, and vice versa. The relationship between FSNs and junior officers is tricky. The need to educate your supervisor is a delicate matter; yet this is what many FSNs must do. "Managing up" requires tact on the part of the FSN and the right attitude on the part of the officer, some of whom come to post with little idea about the local employee's role.

Career advancement—a vital motivating factor for FSOs—is another challenge for FSNs. There is an "iron ceiling" beyond which they cannot advance, so there must be a strong effort on both sides to keep the local staff challenged. I have had bosses who have gone out of their way to assist the local staff's professional development. In one case, political section FSNs were invited to accompany high-level political delegations to the U.S. on U.S. government-funded Volunteer Visitor Programs, thus raising the local employees' profile while achieving mission goals.

The Human Factor

Working alongside my American colleagues and watching them in action has been one of the greatest benefits of the job. It is amazing how many of them have joined the Foreign Service to work for their country, believing in an ideal. I have worked with interesting people, including a former financier for Armani who left the fashion house to serve at the State Department,

and a brilliant economic officer who used to act in movies and probably could have been a star if he hadn't chosen to pursue a diplomatic career. I have had the chance to work for both career and political ambassadors with radically different styles who actively sought local employees' opinions. "There is hardly a better adviser on what is happening on local soil than the local staff," one ambassador used to say.

The local employees take pride in their U.S. colleagues' professional achievements and share their occasional frustrations. The American and local staff are united by common values, but also human bonds, which sometimes last long after the FSO departs post. There are numerous cases of collegial solidarity. One excellent example is the worldwide FSN Emergency Relief Fund, established and sustained by American colleagues to help FSNs in need.

A Special Relationship

There are some 43,500 local employees working in more than 270 overseas U.S. posts. In many ways, their work is similar to any other job, with ups and downs, joys and disappointments. What makes embassy work unique, from the local staff perspective, is the special relationship between the FSN and the FSO.

Over the past several years, we have seen growing appreciation of FSN work. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell deserves special recognition for acknowledging our contributions to American overseas missions. While the institutional framework is important, it is ultimately up to individual FSNs and FSOs to take up the challenge and make their relationship work. In my own case, it has worked much more often than not.

A lot has changed since my first day at the embassy. Over the past seven years, Embassy Sofia's local staff has doubled and the Bulgarian employees like myself have taken on increasingly greater responsibilities. I have come to truly enjoy my job, its diversity, and its dynamics. Being a foreigner working at an American embassy has not become easier, and the same limitations are still in place. But so are the growing opportunities.

I haven't regretted for a minute taking up the challenge.

Galina Sabeva, a former Reuters correspondent, is a political specialist at the U.S. embassy in Sofia, Bulgaria.

backgrounds, but come to the job without international affairs experience or an understanding of how an embassy functions or the best way to manage the inter-agency process. Some political ambassadors bring with them the power that comes with a personal relationship with the president. The American Foreign Service

Association has long urged an end to the practice of giving out ambassadorships as campaign spoils, arguing for qualified ambassadors in all cases.

The country team—when it works well—is where everything the U.S. government is doing in a country comes together. However, because the number of programs and agencies operating out of U.S. embassies continues to expand, a unified purpose is not always evident in all areas of activity. That said, the country team usually serves as the focal point of embassy coordination, and does the job of keeping members informed of what's going on in the country.

While the exact text of the letter varies from president to president, the overall message is the same: the ambassador is in charge. The challenge for chiefs of mission to remain in charge continues to grow, however, as the scope of U.S. government activities widens, along with the growing presence of non-Foreign Service personnel and agencies overseas, especially since 9/11. The global terrorist threat and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in a major upsurge in the number of military personnel overseas, as well as personnel from other security-related agencies such as the FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

Most embassies have a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) headed by a defense attaché—the DATT. The DAO, which may have representatives from more than one military branch, represents the U.S. Department of Defense and advises the ambassador on military matters. The DAO also implements bilateral military engagement programs and reports on political-military developments in the host country. U.S. Marines serve a critical protection role, guarding embassies and consulates around the world, working closely with the State Department Bureau of Diplomatic Security.

The military role in public affairs and foreign assistance—work that best fits the mandates of the State Department and USAID—has grown since 9/11. Resources play a key role here: the military is simply much better funded and staffed than the foreign affairs agencies, and has filled in where there are insufficient civilian resources. In 2010, the Obama administration—including Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—focused on strengthening the civilian diplomatic function. However, by early 2011, stark budget realities along with new congressional leadership were pointing to a possible swing back toward the familiar fallback mode for the foreign affairs agencies, “do more with less.”

Each member of the country team regularly reports back to his or her own home agency in Washington, receiving instructions and coordinating activities with officials, as well as among embassies in the region or elsewhere, depending on the issue. The country desks at the State Department manage the day-to-day relationships between the U.S. and other countries. They are the primary points of contact in Washington for ambassadors and the State Department's embassy offices. Desk officers tend to everything from coordination of policy inputs and high-level visits to managing the flow of information from Washington to the embassy.

These desks (offices) are organized into the six geographic bureaus of the State Department, which are in the domain of the Under Secretary of State for Political

Affairs, known as P. These are African Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, South and Central Asian Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs. The functional bureaus of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, and International Organization Affairs, are also under the political affairs umbrella.

So-called functional bureaus are involved and informed based on global issues rather than geographic regions. The Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs (called G) covers the bureaus of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs; Population, Refugees, and Migration; and the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The other under secretaries are responsible for Economic, Energy and Agricultural Affairs (E); Arms Control and International Security Affairs (T); Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R); and Management (M). The Under Secretary for Management covers a wide array of functions, including the offices and bureaus of Administration; Consular Affairs; Diplomatic Security and Foreign Missions; Human Resources; Information Resource Management; Medical Services; Overseas Buildings Operations; Resource Management; and the Foreign Service Institute.

The nerve center of the State Department is the Operations Center. Almost always the first place called when something critical or newsworthy happens overseas, the Ops Center (as it is familiarly known) manages the flow of information during a crisis, finding and briefing the Secretary of State and other officials who need to know. Watch officers are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week, monitoring the world and trying to stay abreast of world affairs and any events that may have an impact on the United States.

The Operations Center is a smart place to spend a year if you don't mind working a rotating shift schedule. The best place to gain a true sense of the rhythm of "the building" and the flow of high-level communication, the Ops Center is also a networking hub that can facilitate access to choice assignments.

Embassy reporting is sent to the State Department, but it is also shared with multiple federal agencies that may have an interest in the subject. When an embassy sends a report—still known as a "cable"—the author and the post decide on the level of classification and on how widely to share the message. It may be distributed further after receipt in Washington.

State Department communications have been more widely distributed in recent years as part of a post-9/11 emphasis on increasing information-sharing among government agencies. In 2010, hundreds of thousands of classified State Department documents were allegedly downloaded by an American military private and shared with the founder of the Web site WikiLeaks, who then proceeded to post and share them widely, with the media and on the Internet. This devastating breach of the protection of classified documents has led to a re-evaluation of information-sharing policies. Access has been tightened as a result.