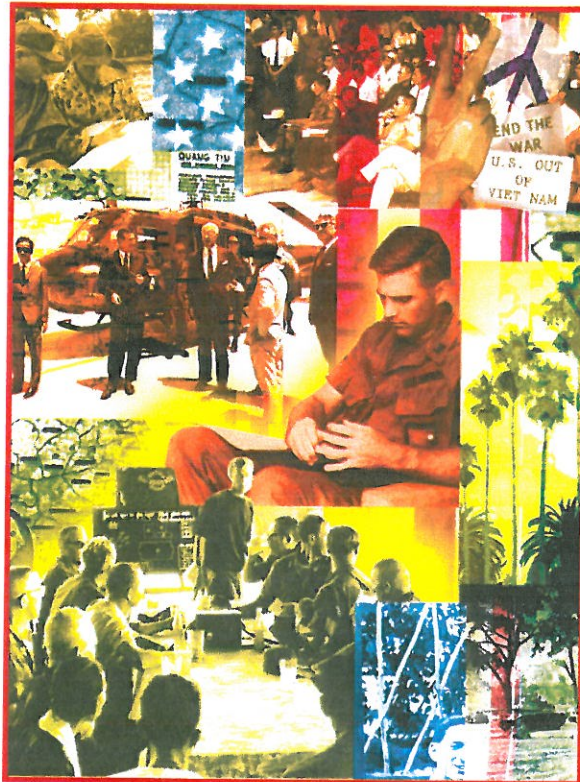


# ADVISE AND DISSENT: THE DIPLOMAT AS PROTESTER



Ben Fishman

**P**ROTESTS OVER VIETNAM FROM FSOs DIDN'T END THE WAR—BUT THEY DID LEAD TO THE OPEN FORUM AND THE DISSENT CHANNEL.

*By DAVID T. JONES*

Popular images of the Vietnam War don't usually include Foreign Service officers protesting in pinstriped suits or carrying placards with familiar anti-war slogans outside the diplomatic entrance at State. "Hell, no, we won't go" might not have rolled off the lips of FSOs, but nevertheless, many diplomats staged their own protests deep within the drab corridors of State, using cable traffic from overseas and other tools to wage bureaucratic guerrilla warfare against American involvement in Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s.

For young FSOs of the period, dissent over U.S. policy in Southeast Asia reflected self-interest. By June 1968, every unmarried male junior officer who had not performed active duty military service was automatically sent

to Vietnam for his first Foreign Service tour, whether or not he had requested the assignment. To make matters worse, many FSOs received assignments as development officers, administering USAID programs and helping the Vietnamese set up self-help projects in the provinces, often with little or no security against Viet Cong attacks. As a result, they were killed in Vietnam and neighboring countries in numbers totally unprecedented for the diplomatic profession. Between 1960 and 1975, 36 members of the Foreign Service died in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Moreover, in a still inexplicable personnel decision, the department waited until 1972 to acknowledge the scope of its losses in the war, permitting rumors to run rampant. Most American diplomats knew at least one FSO who had died in Vietnam, so suspicions about true casualty totals only fanned fears among junior officers and depressed morale throughout the Foreign Service. One effect of this crisis of confidence quickly became obvious: In 1968 alone, 266 FSOs, 80 percent of them junior officers, resigned from the Foreign Service, while only 103 JOs entered — a drop of more than half from the previous year, when 219 new officers joined the service. Although not all the resignations can be attributed to disagreements about Vietnam policy, there is little doubt that the war was one of the main underlying factors for this massive exodus.

## **How Not To Handle Dissent**

Vietnam was hardly the first case of widespread policy dissent within the State Department. Even though it occurred two decades before the Vietnam War, the "Who lost China?" controversy still represents the prime example of a diplomatic disaster caused by the failure of State Department policymakers to heed dissenting views from better-informed representatives in the field.

The Truman administration's post-World War II

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decision to continue backing Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists well after it became clear that Mao Tse-tung's Communists were going to win control of China was understandable, but also extremely short-sighted. The lack of reliable information about Beijing's capabilities and intentions fostered hysterical visions of "Red China" overrunning U.S. military forces throughout East Asia. Many historians believe that this panic, in turn, led to strategic blunders which unnecessarily prolonged the Korean conflict and would even-

tually lead the U.S. to stumble blindly into the Vietnam swamp. Conversely, though the years have thinned their ranks, there are still some historians who insist that the dissenters to U.S. China and Vietnam policies, if not active traitors, severely undercut their government's position and thereby brought about the very outcome they had predicted.

But instead of learning from the debacle and utilizing the expertise of its China hands to minimize the damage done by that miscalculation, the State Department panicked. In the wake of witch hunts launched by Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin in the early 1950s, State not only retaliated against the "old China hands" but generally cracked down on dissent throughout the Foreign Service.

It would take until 1967, when it could no longer ignore the growing disenchantment among FSOs over U.S. involvement in Vietnam, for State to acknowledge the value of listening to diverse points of view and begin moving to institutionalize its handling of dissent.

## **The Open Forum**

Like the American public they represented overseas, 1960s-era FSOs tended to be idealistic and were predisposed to support U.S. policy. Many had either entered the service in the spirit of President John F. Kennedy's call — "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" — or thought of their profession in those terms. As a consequence, resistance to the war within the Foreign Service was slow to develop and tended to be passive, at least during the 1960s.



(It is worth noting that the pages of the *Foreign Service Journal* during this period contain few references to Vietnam, and even fewer negative ones.) And as with any organization, there was also a significant minority who may not have supported the president's position on Vietnam on the merits but decided to live with their misgivings either out of loyalty or for the sake of career advancement.

As the U.S. military commitment to Vietnam grew, more officers began resigning outright, as noted above, but most dissidents simply evaded assignment to Southeast Asia as best they could. By the late 1960s, however, a critical mass of officers had genuinely come to believe that U.S. policy in Vietnam was wrong, ineffective or both. Their growing defiance and their willingness to speak out in an organized manner prompted the State Department to create a mechanism that would channel and control the growing dissatisfaction with Southeast Asia policy.

In 1967, largely at Secretary of State Dean Rusk's instigation, the Foreign Service created its first-ever bureaucratic mechanism for gathering the views of the rank-and-file, the Open Forum Panel. Drawing on his academic background, Rusk reportedly conceived of the OFP as a potential seedbed of fresh thinking by younger officers. Inaugurated in August 1967, the OFP began with 10 self-selected junior- and mid-level officers who would serve terms of 12 months each. The panel had a mandate to "review all suggestions submitted and select those worthy of further consideration." By December 1967, the OFP's mandate had widened to generate new ideas and serve as a general conduit for the views of junior officers on personnel and administrative matters, as well as policy.

During the first year of its operation the Forum received 150 submissions, but only 10 addressed policy and just one questioned the U.S. role in Vietnam. So far as policy contributions were concerned, the new forum was not a hotbed of dissent. As William Marsh, a now-retired FSO who was one of the first panel members, put it, "Open Forum was a steam valve, not a steam turbine."

In 1969 the OFP repeatedly considered the idea of approaching Secretary of State William Rogers, both

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with their general concerns about Vietnam policy and their perception that dissent over such policy was being suppressed within the department. Nothing came of this initiative, however, partly because members were reluctant to embarrass Rogers with further illustrations of State Department dissent, but mainly because it was already becoming

apparent that National Security Council Director Henry Kissinger was running U.S. foreign policy, not Rogers. (At least one group of JOs did meet with Secretary Rogers to discuss Vietnam policy, but that meeting was apparently not connected to the OFP initiative. See "From Diplomat to Dissident: A State Department Odyssey" on page 28.)

The panel members eventually came to the conclusion that no obvious untapped reservoir of "deep think" among new officers existed, as most of the submissions the OFP had received dealt with personnel or administrative concerns. In addition, it is not certain that most FSOs even opposed the war at this point.

## **Cambodia**

The most spectacular single instance of policy dissent within the Foreign Service over Vietnam occurred completely outside the parameters of the Open Forum process, as then-Under Secretary for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson describes in his 1984 memoir, *The Right Hand of Power*. Although none of them had ever served in Southeast Asia, a group of 50 FSOs sent a letter to Secretary of State William Rogers in April 1970 protesting an anticipated U.S. invasion of Cambodia designed to relieve North Vietnamese pressure on Saigon and Phnom Penh. In his book, Johnson acknowledges the legitimacy of the officers' substantive complaint, but he faults their tactics in circulating multiple copies of the letter to secure additional signatures, which led to its leak to the media. Making matters worse, the letter hit the news just as the U.S. military assault was taking place in Cambodia.

Johnson received a 2 a.m. phone call from President Richard Nixon, who, spouting abuse and expletives, demanded that the offenders be fired immediately. With the tacit approval of Secretary

Rogers, who recognized that creating 50 martyrs wouldn't stimulate public support for an already controversial policy, Johnson obfuscated to protect the group from White House wrath. On another front, the American Foreign Service Association Governing Board addressed a letter to President Nixon, assuring him of the Foreign Service's "full loyalty and support." Although the board also used the letter to call for openness and "candid communication within the Department of State," the pledge of loyalty was a controversial and divisive action all the same.

### **Alternative Approaches**

By this point it was clear that while Foreign Service regulations permitted the submission of alternative political opinions by embassies, there was no effective way for individual officers to dissent. There were no assurances that their careers would not suffer, much less any prospect that their views would be taken seriously.

Good-faith efforts within the department to fill this gap continued on an ad hoc basis. For many years, the Open Forum circulated a classified in-house publication featuring a selection of articles by FSOs, but that has been discontinued. The panel now places emphasis on stimulating policy discussions, chiefly through its speakers series, which is unclassified but off the record, and is looking into the possibility of creating a classified e-mail exchange.

The Bureau of Intelligence and Research tried another approach. INR is where much of the dissent over Vietnam was concentrated, because it received the widest range of data and because it encouraged analytical thinking and consideration of worst-case scenarios. After considerable discussion between junior officers and senior officials within INR, in June 1970 the bureau authorized an internal publication, *Viewpoint*, as an outlet for "thoughtful, creative, new analysis" that could be circulated among government agencies without being misinterpreted as an official State Department statement. Only one issue appeared at the time and then the idea died. In 1993, INR revived *Viewpoint*, which Thomas Fingar, the INR deputy assistant secretary for analysis, says now runs around 50 articles a year, mostly written by a small number of geographic analysts with sometimes esoteric views.

On a parallel track, in 1968 AFSA instituted two

awards for dissent by junior- and mid-level officers; the following year an award was established for senior officers. Of the eight winners who received the awards in the first three years, four were honored for work in Southeast Asia. All but one of the honorees, however, seem to have been recognized for creatively advancing U.S. policy interests rather than dissenting from them. For example, the 1969 award was given to John Paul Vann, a former military officer with a reputation for criticism of Vietnam policy, only after he switched positions following the Tet offensive and began advocating more forceful prosecution of the war effort.

Such well-intentioned efforts were clearly not enough to address the growing disaffection within the Foreign Service, however. The fact that 50 FSOs were willing to take their protests over U.S. policy to the media constituted but one symptom of a more serious malady.

### **Channeling Dissent**

To address these concerns, Under Secretary for Management William Macomber, with the support of Secretary Rogers and Deputy Secretary Elliott Richardson, launched a five-month study in 1970 involving 13 task forces. That study ultimately yielded over 500 recommendations in a report entitled "Diplomacy for the '70s," known in shorthand as the Macomber Report.

Like studies before and since, this one recommended "a climate more conducive to creative thinking is essential if the Department and the Foreign Service are to continue to attract and hold the best young people." Southeast Asia and Cambodia were barely mentioned in the Macomber report. If anything, it deliberately avoided criticism of existing administration policy. For example, while one task force included biting thumbnail critiques on each postwar secretary of State, there was no comment on sitting Secretary of State Rogers. This same task force lambasted Sen. Joseph McCarthy for stifling State Department creativity, but avoided discussion of Vietnam dissent. The one substantive comment on Vietnam was, "...Secretary [Rusk] did not welcome dissent on the Vietnam issue and had little time to encourage creative thinking in other areas."

Still, the report urged the establishment of "a general principle ... that officers who cannot concur in a

report or recommendation submitted by the mission are free to submit a dissenting statement.”

As a result of this and other recommendations, the State Department revised the Foreign Affairs Manual in February 1971 to give FSOs the explicit freedom to dissent. After further internal discussions throughout 1971, the secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff was selected as the office designated to handle individual dissents. Both the Open Forum and INR offered to play a role in overseeing the handling of dissent within the State Department, but their overtures were rejected by State management.

In October 1973, however, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger issued his own guidance about dissent. He said the dissent should be heard, but also expected “that all officers ... will keep dissenting views in the channels provided for,” and observed that “expression of differing views will of course be subject to the ambassador's control.” Kissinger's less than wholehearted welcome of contrarian views may help account for the fact that the dissent channel, once it was established, did not stimulate an immediate burst of cable traffic protesting the war.

Nor was Vietnam or Southeast Asia the subject of most messages. Only one dissent message was submitted in 1971 and it was about the Middle East. Of the nine message submitted in 1972, four were about East Asia, but there is no way to be sure that any of them addressed the Vietnam War. In 1973 there were only four dissent messages and none of them touched upon East Asia.

That pattern has continued since Vietnam. In the almost 30 years of its existence, the Dissent Channel has received over 250 messages, ranging from a high of 30 in 1977 to a low of 3 in 1997. Of the first 200 messages from 1971 to 1991, about 50 addressed “general,” non-foreign-policy topics such as housing allowance policy. None of the other 150 or so messages can be credited with reversing existing policy; instead, at best, the dissenting viewpoint may have received some senior level consideration. During the past decade, annual totals of contributions have averaged in the single digits.

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Officers in the field also have the option of including a dissenting opinion on an embassy telegram, while those in the department can take a footnote on interagency intelligence assessments indicating their disagreement with the consensus. These dissents (which require senior-level clearance) come from INR, not the individual drafter, but some of them are easily identified with an individual analyst, whose credibility may carry considerable weight with other agencies.

**Lessons Learned**

While disagreements about the U.S. role in Vietnam were the most readily identifiable stimulus for the establishment of the Dissent Channel, it is also true that societal fury about the war never manifested itself in the Foreign Service. While State Department officials periodically wage fierce internal policy debates, most of these battles have been fought over questions of U.S. national interest more than ideology or personality (though those factors are often important as well). No matter how adroitly the Foreign Service handles such controversies, some officers will always resign over policy differences. Others will avoid implementing disagreeable policies by seeking transfers. Still others, probably a majority of the corps, will express their opposition and then faithfully execute policy.

But while State is open to contrasting policy views, not many FSOs use official dissent channels. Some believe that the strict legal protections available to dissenters are very thin if an ambassador or deputy assistant secretary is irritated. A more mundane explanation might be that no issue has galvanized American society, or the Foreign Service, in the way the Vietnam War did 30 years ago.

Whatever the explanation, when State decided — however reluctantly — a generation ago to institutionalize dissent, it helped defuse the inevitable tensions policy disagreements generate. And in opting for greater tolerance of divergent views, State has learned a valuable lesson from the debate over Vietnam: No matter how irritating dissenters may be, ignoring them can be hazardous to an agency's health. ■