

THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

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APRIL-MAY 2025

The Evolution of U.S.-Vietnam Relations



PLUS

SERVICE DISRUPTED USAID DISMANTLED

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A Diplomacy Success Story for Today

BY TOM YAZDGERDI

This edition of *The Foreign Service Journal* focuses on the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the 30th anniversary of renewed relations with Vietnam. As our nation reflects on these milestones, we should look at the lessons they may hold for this time of upheaval, including the dismantling of USAID and what appears to likely be a thinning out of our career Foreign Service.

First, it is noteworthy that, as in rebuilding relations, the dedication of the U.S. Foreign Service was conspicuous on the ground during the Vietnam War itself, as Ambassador Kenneth Quinn reminds us in his riveting reflection on the 1968 Tết Offensive.

Like Quinn, hundreds from the State Department and USAID served under life-threatening conditions in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam's Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program, and other efforts over more than a decade.

Once diplomatic relations were reestablished in 1995, a series of U.S. ambassadors built on the successes of their predecessors to augment and deepen our relationship with Vietnam. In this edition, four career diplomat ambassadors offer firsthand accounts of this work.

The U.S.-Vietnam relationship's evolution from the depths of war and destruction to a dynamic and constructive

partnership is "a remarkable story of diplomatic accomplishment," writes Ambassador Ted Osius, the sixth U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, to sum it up in his overview.

Ambassador Ray Burghardt completed the process of normalization, building the groundwork for a more strategic relationship. Ambassador David Shear led the work to deepen trust.

Current U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper oversaw the largest peacetime deployment of U.S. military equipment to Vietnam since the war—for the 2024 International Defense Expo. As Knapper points out, "ensuring Vietnam has the capabilities needed to protect its interests ... provides security for the United States as part of our strategy to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open."

The U.S. and Vietnam now enjoy a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). Buttressed by bipartisan support and leadership from Congress, the impressive turnaround underscores the importance of diplomacy and development assistance.

Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States H.E. Nguyen Quoc Dung writes in this edition that "the Vietnam-U.S. relationship serves as a powerful testament to the spirit of reconciliation and healing between the two nations, exemplifying a model for promoting peace and cooperation in the future."

Marc Gilkey, an FSO with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), highlights "stone fruit diplomacy" as one aspect of the mutually beneficial economic relationship.

But how does this all relate to the present-day circumstances? In a word, the U.S.-Vietnam relationship is outstanding evidence of the critical value of a well-supported career Foreign Service.

Without respect and understanding for what professional diplomats do and the need for people and resources to do it, durable successes like this will not happen. Our rivals, particularly China, will move to fill the void, and our country will only be worse for it.

As we at AFSA continue to reach out to our congressional champions to shore up bipartisan support for the Foreign Service, I have to remain hopeful.

Though AFSA can't stop reductions in force (RIF) from happening, we can and will hold management to account on following the regulations. Please see the FS Know-How article on RIFs by FSO David Roberts and guidance in AFSA News. Because the rules on RIFs were not followed at USAID, AFSA is preparing a class action suit to challenge the process. Meanwhile, our lawsuit asserting that the dismantling of USAID is unconstitutional is awaiting summary judgment.

Please also read the poignant stories of our USAID colleagues in the collection, "Service Disrupted." No one can hear these voices and be unmoved by the chaos that has befallen these patriotic Americans for working to protect U.S. interests and make the world a better place.

Please let me know what you think at yazdgerdi@afsa.org or member@afsa.org. ■



Tom Yazdgerdi is the president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Thank You, AFSA!

Thank you to AFSA for supporting the Foreign Service and for the Feb. 3 statement objecting to the administration's decision to dismantle the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), covered in the March 2025 *FSJ*'s AFSA News, "In Defense of the U.S. Foreign Service and USAID."

I couldn't agree more. I spent my life as a Foreign Service kid (my father, William Gibson, was with Diplomatic Security and served last as the regional security officer in Tokyo), and I saw firsthand how important the work of our Civil and Foreign Services are, including with regard to our safety at home and abroad.

Keep up the good work and let us know how we can help.

*Kathryn (Gibson) Eberhart
Severna Park, Maryland*

Changing Foreign Service Culture

Congratulations to the *Journal* for its many recent articles aimed at updating the Foreign Service—in particular, those in the December 2024 *FSJ* by George Krol ("The Foreign Service at 100: It's Time for Renewal") and John Marks ("Social Entrepreneurship and the Professional Diplomat").

I've addressed similar issues in my own Speaking Out articles: "Is the Foreign Service Still a Profession?" (June 2011 *FSJ*) and "A Plea for Greater Teamwork in the Foreign Service" (December 2013 *FSJ*).

Ambassador Krol writes that for an ambitious officer, training and overseas assignments can be seen as obstacles to promotion. From my experience as

director of training assignments in my day, I say check. He sees the Service dominated at highest ranks by those officers on fast tracks from executive

assistants to senior positions in Washington and as ambassadors, without notable experience at desks or subordinate positions at embassies overseas. Check.

Krol describes step by step his own purposeful concentration on picking assignments

that specifically broadened his experience of jobs overseas and in Washington—just as my friend Ambassador Samuel Lewis has described carefully doing throughout his own career, with its due rewards.

This reinforces Krol's main argument that it is too easy to minimize the value of extensive and varied experience abroad (which he and I agree should be a necessary ingredient to effective foreign policy) in favor of a quicker rise in Washington through attention only to policies that suit domestic American political ambitions. (Perhaps you can call this "Wristonization" gone berserk.)

Interestingly, Krol cites an "eight-year rule" that prohibits domestic assignment of FSOs for more than eight consecutive years. This is a rule I had never heard of in more than 30 years of service, and one I never saw applied to some FSOs who rose all the way to the top.

Last but not least, I applaud John Marks' description of the good Track II work done by retired diplomats, particularly my friend and frequent boss Assistant Secretary, Ambassador, and

Foreign Service Director General "Roy" Atherton and my school classmate and longtime friend Assistant Secretary and Ambassador Samuel Lewis.

Unfortunately, this does not modify my growing suspicion that arguing for group cohesion at the expense of individual ambitions in the Foreign Service may never succeed. The fact is that America has mainly been built by individuals coming to improve their own lives among relative strangers, unlike the case of diplomats from more ancient countries like Britain, France, Russia, and many others who have lived together longer and have older common traditions to guide their behavior.

*George B. Lambrakis, PhD
Senior FSO, retired
Brighton/Hove, England*

Don't Forget About Language Skills

English may be the language of the boardroom, but English is never the language of the bar. This adage is known well by world language educators and by those who are successful working internationally and interculturally.

In the context of U.S. diplomacy, English may be necessary and sufficient in formal situations, but English alone is insufficient in many informal settings. And it is in informal settings in which relationships can begin to form and the foundations of trust be laid.

The new administration must continue to steer American foreign policy through a tremendous number of international challenges, almost immediately. This will require cooperation across many nations with diverse and diverging interests. It will also require convincing



foreign governments and local populations of the salubriousness of American policy and projects.

When you speak in another's language, you speak with the weight of that society's history, culture, and values. It is critical that American embassies be equipped with myriad highly skilled, bilingual professionals. This cadre of diplomats, who are essential workers, will serve as the face of U.S. foreign policy within host countries. They will explain American interests and values to the societies of the world in a language accessible to the majority of that society.

Bilingualism is an essential tool for these essential workers. While not every member of an embassy team needs perfect fluency in a local language, it would be prudent for American diplomacy to err on bilingualism being a default quality of embassy staff, and English monolingualism reserved for those in exceptional circumstances.

This reality should become the norm at all levels of the Foreign Service. Within embassies, American diplomats should be encouraged and supported to undertake language learning that would maximize their effectiveness within the host country.

Subsequently, this norm should permeate the FSO candidate selection process. Candidates with exceptional bilingual proficiencies, particularly those with advanced proficiencies in rare or critically important languages to national security or American interests, should be prioritized within the selection process.

As highly competent, bilingual U.S. diplomats, they will succeed in advancing U.S. interests when given clear policies and realistic objectives.

Dr. Roger W. Anderson
Independent Scholar
Monterey, California

Engaging Religious International Youth

Today's youth must navigate an increasingly complex religious landscape. Our experiences with religion are being influenced by the breakdown of traditional religious institutions, the impact of social media on religious practices, and the deterioration of the current world order.

To achieve prosperity and security for Americans, the new administration will therefore need to take a hard look at the preexisting whole-of-government and agency-specific strategies, policies, and procedures for promoting religious freedom, openness, and tolerance among the world's youth. Otherwise, American diplomats will struggle to make strategic choices that advance our national interests among the world's youth.

More than a decade ago, the Obama administration released the National Strategy on Integrating Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement into U.S. Foreign Policy, but it was a missed opportunity because it failed to include an explicit reference to youth in its strategic objectives.

To shift the needle, the Trump administration should consider creating a new national strategy centered on the promotion of freedom, openness, and tolerance to integrate international youth religious engagement into U.S. foreign policy.

Among the elements of such a program, the new administration could, for example, leverage the "International Religious Freedom Reports" to systematically generate a high-quality country-level dataset that sheds light on the nature, scope, and distribution of youth religious experiences; champion industry standards for promoting and safeguarding international youth religious freedom, openness, and tolerance in artificial intelligence and social media; and develop a program-specific sanctions

program to accomplish the national security and foreign policy goals articulated in the new national strategy.

One of the added benefits of a new national strategy is that it would provide a useful platform for the new administration to reset bilateral relations with a number of countries around the world—for example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has made it a national priority to promote tolerance in its primary and secondary education systems.

His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan declared 2019 to be the "Year of Tolerance." That initiative was intended to position the UAE as "a communication bridge between countries and different cultures of the world by promoting coexistence and upholding the values of dialogue, respect, acceptance, kindness and openness." The initiative revolved around a set of seven pillars that included tolerance in education.

The new administration could take inspiration from the UAE framework. Such a move would not only boost the prestige of the UAE on the world stage; it would strengthen the cultural bonds between our two countries.

Kana Walsh
Youth Ambassador
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
Washington, D.C.
and
Michael Walsh
Occasional Lecturer
Foreign Service Institute
Munich, Germany ■



**Share your thoughts
about this month's issue.**

**Submit letters to the editor:
journal@afsa.org**

Requiem for the Voice That Carried a Nation's Conscience



BY STEVE HERMAN

I am speaking here in my personal capacity and not as a representative of any agency or organization, past, present or future ...

My colleagues and our broadcasts—devoted to telling America's story to the world, honestly, fairly, and with an unwavering commitment to the truth—are being silenced this weekend. The de facto destruction of the Voice of America (VOA) is nothing less than a betrayal of the ideals that gave birth to the institution and made it relevant throughout World War II, the Cold War, and in the decades after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

VOA has been a trusted presence—not just because of what was said, but how it was said. With facts. With fairness and with balance, no matter which political party was in power.

I had the honor of serving on the front lines in dozens of countries—reporting on TV, radio, and the Web—from conflict zones, covering historic summits, and in more recent years navigating the complexities of global diplomacy as VOA's White House bureau chief and then its chief national correspondent.

I was in Fukushima, as radioactive fallout descended, immediately after the quake and tsunami that caused a nuclear disaster, delivering timely, accurate infor-

mation when panic and misinformation threatened public safety.

I boarded military helicopters to reach the worst-affected communities destroyed by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, to bear witness to unimaginable devastation, while giving voice to those who had lost everything.

Whether it was filing stories from war zones or pressing presidents and other leaders in palaces for answers on major geopolitical issues, I always understood that my duty was not to power, but to VOA's stakeholders and our global audiences, especially in countries without a free or developed press.

Many of our colleagues risked their lives to get the story right—journalists whose voices were sometimes the only source of truth in their native languages. I've met many in our audience who told me VOA gave them their first taste of freedom, led to their decisions to defect from authoritarian lands, or that they now speak our language because of VOA's Learning English broadcasts.

Destroying VOA (along with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Radio Free Asia) is a national security issue. These entities, funded by the American people, have been among the most effective instruments of American soft power—a bridge to those who may never set foot on our soil, but understand our values because they heard them in one of the dozens of languages in which we broadcast.

To eliminate these institutions is to turn our backs on those around the world

who have counted on us. It is to surrender a unique platform that no other country can replicate. It was never just about America's voice—it was about America's integrity. *There will be celebrations in the autocratic halls of power this weekend in Moscow, Minsk, Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran.* They will cheer the totally ridiculous excuses that it was necessary to burn down the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) because its broadcast outlets have become riddled with spies, and its journalists have colluded with “radical Leftist advocacy organizations” and created “false narratives.”

Such canards were hurled at VOA during the 1950s red-baiting and, again, under a previous short-lived USAGM politically appointed leadership. Historians and outside unbiased investigators concluded such charges were unfounded then, and they are likely without merit now. It would not be surprising to see legal challenges against such defamations in the weeks and months ahead. Any hope of ultimately saving VOA and the other USAGM broadcasters might rest with the judiciary.

All at VOA, who swore an oath to the Constitution, strove daily to live up to our charter: to be accurate, objective, and comprehensive. That promise, more than any broadcast or byline, is a legacy worth protecting.

To effectively shutter the Voice of America is to dim a beacon that burned bright during some of the darkest hours since 1942.

Veritatem dilexi. ■

Steve Herman, a member of the U.S. Foreign Service, is a Voice of America senior correspondent (and former AFSA Governing Board member). This essay was posted on his Substack (@newsguy) on March 15, 2025.

Dismantling of USAID

The dismantling of USAID began shortly after the new administration took office and froze foreign assistance program funding by executive order on Jan. 20 (“Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid”).

On Feb. 27 and 28, USAID employees in Washington, D.C., were given 15 minutes each to clear out their offices at the Ronald Reagan Building. Hundreds of supporters showed up to clap them out, holding signs and distributing hugs and food as the staff exited. U.S. and international journalists from as far away as Japan covered the event. On March 12, 13, and 14, USAID employees at the annexes were also given 15 minutes to collect belongings and evacuate their offices.

The acting assistant administrator for global health at USAID, Nicholas Enrich, was fired on March 2 after drafting a series of memos outlining how cuts to USAID’s programs “will lead to increased death and disability, accelerate global disease spread, contribute to destabilizing fragile regions, and heightened security risks—directly endangering American national security, economic stability, and public health.”

On March 10, Judge Amir H. Ali of the Federal District Court for the District of Columbia barred the Trump administration from “unlawfully impounding congressionally appropriated foreign aid funds” that the State Department and USAID owed to grant recipients and contractors, requiring it to pay for work completed before Feb. 13.

Also on March 10, Democracy Forward and Public Citizen Litigation Group filed a motion for summary relief on behalf of AFSA, AFGE, and Oxfam America to block the Trump administration from dismantling USAID.

They wrote that the administration has “shuttered life-saving projects

People carrying signs turned out in force at USAID HQ on Feb. 27 and 28 to show support for USAID staff given just 15 minutes to gather their belongings and leave the building.

funded and developed by the agency, leaving people to suffer and to die by the thousands. They have halted disease surveillance efforts, leaving Americans vulnerable to dangerous pathogens. ... These actions have had untold costs, for the United States and for the world. These actions are also unlawful.”

Also on March 10, Secretary of State Marco Rubio wrote on X (formerly Twitter): “After a 6 week review we are officially cancelling 83 percent of the programs at USAID. The 5,200 contracts that are now cancelled spent tens of billions of dollars in ways that did not serve, (and in some cases even harmed), the core national interests of the United States. In consultation with Congress, we intend for the remaining 18 percent [sic] of programs we are keeping (approximately 1,000) to now be administered more effectively under the State Department. Thank you to DOGE and our hardworking staff who worked very long hours to achieve this overdue and historic reform.”

Along with the termination of assistance projects is the news that the Payne Fellowship program has been canceled. This competitive merit-based program was a recruitment tool for bringing outstanding candidates to the USAID Foreign Service, supporting fellows through graduate school and internships.



On March 10, remaining USAID employees were instructed via email by Acting Executive Secretary of USAID Erica Y. Carr to report to the Ronald Reagan Building on March 11 to clear out classified safes and personnel documents. They were to “shred as many documents first and reserve the burn bags for when the shredder becomes unavailable or needs a break.”

AFSA noted in its March 11 press release that it is illegal to destroy government documents, as the Federal Records Act of 1950 established strict requirements for the retention of official records, particularly those that may be relevant to legal proceedings. An emergency motion for a temporary restraining order was granted by the D.C. Circuit Court. In court filings, USAID leadership denied violating any laws and pledged that no additional documents at RRB would be destroyed without notifying AFSA counsel.

We will continue to update this story in future editions.

Contemporary Quote

 The tools of foreign policy, as I've learned, are defense, diplomacy, and development. And the development part is the soft power. We're not sending troops into Asia and Africa and Latin America. We're sending hundreds of thousands of civilians without uniforms, who are there to represent the United States, and to pursue common goals together—whether it's stemming the tide of fentanyl coming across the border, addressing climate disasters, protecting the world from disease. And that soft power is a reflection of our values, what we stand for—our strong belief in freedom, self-determination, and advancement of people's economies; bringing more stability and peace to the world. 

—Atul Gawande, former assistant administrator for global health at USAID, to *The New Yorker* on March 15.

Paris AI Summit Exposes Global Divides

The AI Action Summit in Paris, co-hosted by France and India on Feb. 10 and 11, brought together nearly 100 countries and more than 1,000 representatives to discuss the future of artificial intelligence. Instead of fostering unity, the event exposed divides over regulation, competition, and cooperation.

The U.S. and U.K. refused to sign the AI Action Summit Declaration on inclusive and sustainable AI. U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance dismissed global regulation as restrictive, emphasizing American leadership and warning against AI partnerships with China. The U.K. echoed concerns over security but distanced itself from the U.S. position rejecting governance frameworks.

French President Emmanuel Macron positioned Europe as an AI hub, pointing to its reliance on nuclear energy as an advantage. The European Commission pushed for balanced regulation, prioritizing sustainability and human rights. Meanwhile, AI safety remained a top concern, with experts warning of risks. However, global competition overshadowed discussions of regulation.

A major announcement was the launch of Current AI, a \$400 million initiative backed by France, Google, and various philanthropists, aimed at developing ethical AI models. China, represented by Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing, sought collaboration on AI security, while Chinese firms like DeepSeek showcased advancements that rival Western models.

News of Elon Musk's \$100 billion bid to take over OpenAI sparked speculation about AI's future governance. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman dismissed the offer, saying that OpenAI was “not for sale” and playfully suggesting they could buy Twitter instead.

With competition intensifying and regulatory frameworks in flux, the debate will continue when India hosts the next AI summit.

EducationUSA Stalled by Policy Shifts

State Department employees advising international students on U.S. higher education opportunities are struggling with unclear federal guidance.

EducationUSA, a State Department initiative operating in 175 countries, helps recruit students to U.S. institutions.

However, in the wake of a Trump administration executive order on diversity-related language, EducationUSA staffers have received conflicting directives on how to discuss or promote their programs.

Initially, a now-rescinded internal document titled “EducationUSA Messaging Guidance: America First” advised employees to avoid terms like “diversity,” “underrepresented,” and “minority.” The lack of clarity has left staff uncertain about how to conduct outreach, potentially affecting international student recruitment.

International students contribute billions of dollars to the U.S. economy, with more than 1.1 million students enrolled in 2024 alone, according to EducationUSA. The confusion over messaging could hurt enrollment decisions, particularly among students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Fulbright Scholars Stranded Worldwide

The funding freeze has hit participants in one of the most well-known and prestigious U.S. government programs, leaving both U.S. and international Fulbright scholars and grant recipients stranded abroad and in the U.S. without enough money to pay their bills or return home.

In an email, the nonprofit Fulbright Association informed Fulbright alumni that the funding freeze has hit “over 12,500 American students, youth, and professionals currently abroad or scheduled to participate in State Department programs in the next six months.”

An additional 7,400 international students also lost their funding.

Administered by the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the Fulbright program was created in 1946 and has

(Continued on page 14)

Statements of Support for USAID

USAID and America's foreign assistance programs are vital to our interests, the career men and women of USAID have served each of us well, and it is the duty of the Administration and Congress to swiftly protect the Agency's statutory role.

—Former USAID Administrators J. Brian Atwood, Peter McPherson, Andrew Natsios, Samantha Power, and Gayle Smith in a Feb. 5 statement.

History will not look kindly on this avoidable tragedy—for the hundreds of millions in need, for U.S. leadership and moral authority around the world, and for U.S. national security, as global competitors like China and Russia rush to fill the gap we have created. ... When Presidents, Cabinet Secretaries, and Members of Congress are welcomed in countries of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, the concrete manifestations of U.S. government support have been the humanitarian and development programs supported by USAID. These programs represent less than one percent of the federal budget but have given the United States enormous capacity for influence.

—Letter from 200-plus former U.S. ambassadors and national security officials to Congress, Feb. 14.

Foreign assistance is critical to national security. It builds allies, strengthens ties, expands trade; it encourages countries to cooperate on common interests—containing disease, creating jobs, ending illiteracy, and attacking cross-border issues like terrorism, crime, and misuse of natural resources which are too big for one country to take on alone. ... Gutting USAID will have grave consequences for the countries in which USAID operates, America's reputation, and U.S. national security. ... The harm these actions

will cause cannot be overstated. As USAID closes critical programs, the vacuum left will be filled by our adversaries.

—USAID Alumni Association in a Feb. 11 letter to Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Every President since the end of World War II has understood the important role that economic and development assistance has played in securing our well-being. USAID has been the leading U.S. government assistance agency for over 60 years. Along with our military, diplomatic, and intelligence services, it has been a vital guarantor of our national security. ... The brave and devoted American officers who make up USAID serve around the world in difficult and dangerous places, bringing a message of hope and solidarity from the American people.

—American Academy of Diplomacy, Statement on USAID Closure, Feb. 6.

We have seen attempts at wholesale dismantling of departments and entities created by Congress without seeking the required congressional approval to change the law. These actions do not make America stronger. They make us weaker. ... USAID employees assigned to build programs that benefit foreign countries are being doxed, harassed, and given conflicting information about their employment status. These stories should concern all Americans because they are our family members, neighbors, and friends. ... Refusing to spend money appropriated by Congress under the euphemism of a pause is a violation of the rule of law. The money appropriated by Congress must be spent in accordance with what Congress has said.

—American Bar Association, Statement on the Rule of Law, Feb. 10.

50 Years Ago

Diplomacy for Sale

What we should vociferously oppose is a "spoils system" in connection with the appointment of ambassadors. The sale of embassies to the highest bidder or the use of them for

consolation prizes for defeated politicians is not only repugnant—it is also dangerous.

—Retired Foreign Service Officer

Thomas J. Dunnigan in "Letters to FSJ" in the April 1975 edition of *The Foreign Service Journal*.



Site of the Month: OneAid Community

OneAid Community

This month, we spotlight OneAid Community, a platform dedicated to supporting global humanitarian work. Designed as a nonpartisan collaborative hub, OneAid connects humanitarian assistance, international development, and national security professionals and partners to share resources, expertise, and crisis response updates.

The platform offers a crowdsourced database of humanitarian projects, enabling users to track, contribute to, and learn from ongoing initiatives worldwide. It also features discussion forums and expert-led insights on topics such as disaster relief, health care, and refugee support.

The appearance of a particular site or podcast is for information only and does not constitute an endorsement.

(Continued from page 12)

since supported more than 400,000 people to study, teach, and do research in the U.S. and abroad.

As of press time in mid-March, there was no clarity on when and whether Fulbright funding would be restored to current grant recipients and those in the pipeline.

SIGAR Releases 66th Quarterly Report

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has released its 66th Quarterly Report to Congress, providing an update on U.S. assistance to Afghanistan amid shifting policy directives and a foreign assistance funding freeze. The State Department and USAID halted funding reviews and issued stop-work orders on existing foreign assistance projects in Afghanistan.

Since its withdrawal in 2021, the U.S. has spent approximately \$3.71 billion in Afghanistan, with most of the funding directed to UN agencies and the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund. An additional \$1.2 billion remains available for potential disbursement.



The report identifies concerns that the Taliban continues to hold U.S. citizens hostage, restrict women's rights, and provide safe haven to terrorist groups. SIGAR suggests that the U.S. government should reassess its approach to ensuring aid does not inadvertently benefit the Taliban regime.

A pressing issue raised in the report is the status of \$4 billion in Afghan central bank assets, held in the Swiss-based Fund for the Afghan People. The report notes that Congress and the administration may consider returning these funds to U.S. control, as the Taliban is not a legally recognized government.

SIGAR continues its oversight efforts, with recent audits identifying \$1.1 million in questionable expenses related to U.S. funding in Afghanistan. This quarter also saw one conviction resulting from a

fraud investigation. Moving forward, SIGAR plans to release a final forensic audit and a lessons learned report focused on the challenges of providing aid while minimizing Taliban influence.

With U.S. policymakers reassessing foreign aid strat-

egy, the future of American engagement in the country remains uncertain.

The full report is available at <https://bit.ly/SIGAR66>.

Changes to Gender Identification in Passports

On Jan. 20, the White House issued an executive order titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." It calls for eliminating the X gender marker in U.S. passports and Consular Reports of Birth Abroad (CRBA). Only M or F markers, matching biological sex at birth, will be issued. Those requesting changes may face delays and receive requests for additional information. Existing passports remain valid until expiration under the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) policy.

This order extends beyond passports. It dismantles diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs across federal agencies, reversing Biden-era initiatives. Agencies must eliminate DEI offices and initiatives, with language in grants and contracts also revised. Phrases including "indigenous community," "gender-based violence," and even "women" have been flagged for removal from government communications.

A February 2025 order, "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports," bans transgender athletes from women's competitions. U.S. consular officials have been instructed to deny visas to transgender athletes, and those suspected of misrepresenting sex on applications may face permanent bans. Ahead of the 2028 Olympics, the Secretary of State is working with the International Olympic Committee to ensure women's sports eligibility is based on biological sex.

The ACLU filed a lawsuit on Feb. 7 arguing that the order is unconstitutional and fails “to comply with requirements to provide notice and comment for changes to government forms.”

89 Seconds to Midnight

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved its Doomsday Clock forward by one second in January, setting it at 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to midnight, representing global catastrophe.



WIKIMEDIA/RICHARD 59

At a press conference on Jan. 28, former Colombian President and Nobel laureate Juan Manuel Santos, alongside Princeton Professor Emeritus Robert Socolow, said the change reflects growing concern by the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board about the war in Ukraine, the collapse of nuclear arms control agreements, and extreme climate events that have intensified over the past year. Bulletin scientists also pointed to AI’s role in spreading misinformation and its potential misuse in biological weapon development.

The Doomsday Clock, first introduced in 1947, was originally set at seven minutes to midnight, symbolizing the nuclear tensions of the Cold War. The furthest it has been from global catastrophe was 17 minutes to midnight in 1991, following U.S.-Soviet nuclear disarmament agreements.

Despite the bleak assessment, the Bulletin stated that solutions remain within reach, urging the U.S., China, and Russia to cooperate on nuclear and climate policies. “Every second counts,” Santos said. “We must act before it’s too late.”

Heard on the Hill



JOSH

The president of the Iowa Farmers Union said USAID is important for farmers. It’s unfortunate that we would drop those relationships that we have built over time. The Ohio Farmers Union president said USAID plays a crucial role not only providing food aid to millions around the world, but also directly purchasing grain from Ohio farmers. Ohio farmers are more than capable of rising to the challenge of feeding the world, but they need stability to do so.

—Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), during a House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing, “The USAID Betrayal,” Feb. 13.

And when done right, USAID has made it possible for the U.S. to connect with other nations on a societal level. Now as we look at America’s diplomatic effectiveness, when done right, I commend the opportunities that USAID has provided to students. These successes make USAID’s wasteful programs all the more heartbreaking. ... My hope is that Secretary Rubio maintains what works, but hopefully it’s clear that USAID needs to change.

—Del. James Moylan (R-Guam), during a House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing, “The USAID Betrayal,” Feb. 13.

USAID and our foreign assistance, it’s not charity. It helps our country. It helps us grow as leaders. That ultimately helps our security. It also helps grow our economy when we can build ties with businesses in these other nations and be able to have access to their markets to sell American goods.

Ronald Reagan was a strong supporter of this idea that our national security is based off of defense, diplomacy, and development—that we have different tools in our toolbox. You can’t use the military for every single [thing]. Diplomacy can only work in certain types of circumstances. Development helps us open doors.

—Sen. Andy Kim (D-N.J.), to The Washingtonian, March 3.

Radio Silence

The U.S. Agency for Global Media, parent entity to Voice of America (VOA) and other U.S. government-funded international broadcasting, was essentially shut down on March 15. All VOA full-time staff were put on administrative leave, and funding to affiliated broadcasters including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was cut.

This follows an executive order on reducing the federal bureaucracy issued March 14, aiming to “eliminate non-statutory functions and reduce

statutory functions of unnecessary governmental entities to what is required by law.”

In a March 15 press release, AFSA condemned the move, calling it an unconstitutional overreach that weakens U.S. foreign policy and vowing to fight for its reinstatement: “Dismantling VOA undermines America’s ability to counter disinformation and promote press freedom.” ■

This edition of Talking Points was compiled by Mark Parkhomenko.

An Open Letter on USAID to the Secretary of State

BY STEVEN E. HENDRIX

I write to you with the utmost respect for your office and the immense responsibility you bear. History has always judged U.S. leaders not by how they navigate moments of ease but by how they respond to crises—whether they rise to the occasion or shrink from it. As Henry Kissinger once said, “The task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been.”

Today, America finds itself at a crossroads. The choices we make now will define not only our place in the world but the future of millions who look to us for leadership, stability, and hope. The world is watching, and history will not be kind if we falter. I urge you, with all due respect and urgency, to course-correct on several critical issues—most urgently the dismantling of USAID—before the damage becomes irreversible.

The Unraveling of USAID and America's Global Influence

If you have ever stood in a refugee camp, watched a child take their first sip of clean water, or seen a mother cradle a bag of grain knowing her children will eat that night, then you understand

what is at stake when we dismantle our development efforts.

Tens of thousands of professionals dedicated to international development now find themselves without work, their hard-earned expertise and deep understanding of global challenges discarded. This is not just about jobs—it is about America's ability to see, interpret, and shape the world around us. These professionals were our bridge to communities in crisis, our human face in places where our military cannot and should not go. They were the architects of stability, quietly preventing the conflicts and pandemics that would otherwise reach our shores.

The humanitarian cost of this withdrawal is staggering. Consider Nigeria: Until several months ago, if you were HIV-positive and on antiretrovirals, there was a 100 percent chance your medication came from USAID. Today, that lifeline is gone. The world faces a 20-25 percent chance of another pandemic in the next four years, yet we have dismantled our global health team and withdrawn from the World Health Organization. In Sudan, genocide unfolds before our eyes. In Gaza and Ukraine, devastation continues. And yet, we have gutted one of

the core instruments the U.S. government has to respond to these crises.

The consequences will not remain overseas. Halted interventions in faraway countries will lead to the rise of preventable diseases—tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, polio—within our borders. Reducing our capacity to monitor the spread of infectious diseases leaves Americans at risk of contracting avian influenza, mpox, and other deadly diseases that know no borders.

As you know, USAID food aid programs account for less than 1 percent of current U.S. agricultural exports, yet they have historically provided U.S. farmers and manufacturers with a stable \$2 billion market and supported an estimated 15,000-20,000 U.S. jobs. Suspending these programs will lead to layoffs across the U.S. food processing, manufacturing, and transportation sectors.

America will not be safer, stronger, or more prosperous for these decisions—it is becoming weak, isolated, and increasingly irrelevant in the global arena.

Further, the responsibility for managing these abandoned programs now falls on the State Department—an institution already stretched thin, unprepared for the operational demands of development work. USAID contract officers, auditors, and program managers—all essential personnel—have vanished, leaving behind a bureaucratic vacuum. The inefficiency, the waste, and the inevitable failures that are now cropping up will draw the ire of Congress and the public. A scathing Government Accountability Office (GAO) report is almost inevitable.



Steven E. Hendrix, a retired Foreign Service officer, is the principal of Hendrix LLC. In 2024 he retired from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Foreign Service, where he served most recently as the USAID coordinator for the State Department's Office of Foreign Assistance and as the State Department's managing director for planning, performance, and systems for the Office of Foreign Assistance. Earlier USAID assignments include senior adviser for South America, deputy mission director in Ghana, program office director in Nigeria, peace negotiations adviser to the president in Colombia, director of national capacity development for Iraq, and others.

You will bear the brunt of the criticism, but the greater tragedy is the damage to America's global standing.

The Fraying of Alliances and the Rise of Global Disorder

But your problems go beyond the destruction of USAID. For generations, American leadership has been a force for stability. We built NATO, we upheld the rules-based order, we led the fight against climate change, and we stood as a beacon for democracy. That legacy is slipping away, and you face intractable crises on several fronts.

- **Ukraine:** Russia is the aggressor, yet the president appears aligned with Kremlin talking points. Our wavering support is emboldening Putin and eroding NATO's trust in us.

- **Climate Change:** Abandoning the Paris Agreement is not a policy shift—it is a retreat from reality. The climate crisis does not recognize political ideologies, and our abdication of leadership will cost us dearly.

- **Diplomatic Absurdities:** The world does not take seriously the notion of annexing Canada, Greenland, or the Panama Canal, or turning Gaza into a beachfront resort. But they do wonder whether the United States has lost its sense of strategic direction. These missteps push allies away and embolden adversaries.

At this moment, China and Russia are not just watching—they are moving into the void we are leaving behind.

- **The Migration Crisis:** The majority of migrants crossing our southern border are not Mexican, and Mexico does not want them either. We have a shared interest in solving this crisis, yet threats and tariffs have replaced diplomacy and cooperation. We have the chance to work

alongside Mexico to build real solutions, but we squander it with bravado and short-sighted ultimatums.

The Soul of State

Beyond policy, beyond global strategy, there is a fundamental truth that cannot be ignored: The State Department is at war with itself. Morale is at an all-time low. Hostility, exclusion, and fear have replaced unity and purpose. This institution, home to the best and brightest in American diplomacy, as you yourself noted on your first day at the department, is fracturing under the weight of internal strife.

You must lead. The culture wars have no place in Foggy Bottom. Competency, commitment, and intelligence must remain the measures by which we value those who serve. Every diplomat, every civil servant, must know they are included and valued—not for their race, gender, or political ideology, but for their contributions to our great nation and to the mission of American diplomacy.

The Call to Leadership

Mr. Secretary, you are at the helm of this great institution at a time of unprecedented challenge. Your legacy will not be written by how well you implement directives from above but by whether you had the courage to stand up when history demanded. As Kissinger might say today, it is time to get the department where it has not been.

It is time to right these wrongs—not for political gain, and not for personal legacy, but for the American people and the ideals we have long championed. The world still looks to us for leadership. We must show them that America is still worthy of that role.

The weight of history is upon you. Your moment is now. ■



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VIETNAM AND THE UNITED STATES

The Way Ahead

A partnership forged from the ashes of war attests to
the power of trust and mutual respect.

BY TED OSIUS

Ambassador Ted Osius
meets residents of Nghe
An province in March 2016
during a 600-kilometer bike
ride from Hanoi to Hue.



COURTESY OF TED OSIUS

This year the United States and Vietnam are celebrating a vital bilateral relationship forged patiently over the past 30 years from the ashes of war, one now known as a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It is a remarkable story of diplomatic accomplishment involving respect, trust, and a joint effort to create a meaningful, powerful partnership. This effort benefits regional and global prosperity, stability, and security.

As America's eighth ambassador to Hanoi, Marc Knapper, often points out, however, 2025 isn't only the 30th anniversary of normalized relations and the 50th anniversary of the war's end, but also the 80th anniversary of Vietnam's independence. From this perspective, the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship is even more compelling.

Eighty Years Ago

In 1945, as war with Japan was winding down in the Pacific, Americans in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency—began training an elite force of 200 Việt Minh guerrillas. The OSS's "Deer Team" knew something about two of the guerrillas, Hồ Chí Minh and his most famous general, Võ Nguyên Giáp. That year, when Henry Prunier of Worcester, Massachusetts, and six other Americans parachuted into Tan Trao village in northern Vietnam on a clandestine mission, Prunier taught the diminutive General Giáp how to throw a grenade.

When I visited Tan Trao in March 2017, as the sixth U.S. ambassador to Hanoi, a guide showed us a massive banyan tree in the clearing at the heart of the Việt Minh's jungle base. She said one of those long-ago Deer Team agents had parachuted into the tree and gotten tangled in its branches. Armed men emerged from the jungle, and he fired his revolver, thinking they might be some kind of pro-Japanese militia. They retreated, and at daybreak, the OSS agent, still stuck in his harness, woke from a fitful sleep to see a bamboo mat below on which someone had written two words in English: "Welcome friend."



A career Foreign Service officer for almost 30 years, Ted Osius served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam from 2014 to 2017. He wrote Nothing Is Impossible: America's Reconciliation with Vietnam (Rutgers, 2022). Currently, he is president and CEO of the US-ASEAN Business Council, which supports private sector ties between Southeast Asia and the United States.



COURTESY OF TED OSIUS

Ambassador Ted Osius and his spouse, Clayton Bond, with their son and daughter wearing traditional Vietnamese clothing to celebrate Tết in Hanoi, February 2017.

Relieved, he called out to the Việt Minh, and they cut him down from the tree. Once in camp, he found out that the words that had lured him down had been written by the one person in the guerrilla band who knew some English: their leader and the future president of Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh.

Hồ, Giáp, and the Việt Minh welcomed the Deer Team. Paul Hoagland, an OSS medic, treated Hồ for malaria and may have saved his life. After grenade lessons, Prunier instructed "Mr. Văn" (aka Giáp) in the use of American rifles, machine guns, bazookas, and other arms. (Prunier earned a bronze star for these exploits and returned to Vietnam in 1995 to meet Giáp, who demonstrated the grenade-lobbing technique Prunier had taught him.)



Ambassador Ted Osius chats with a local woman while taking a break during the bike ride from Hanoi to Hue.

[sic] THE NEGOTIATIONS MORE IN KEEPING WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ATLANTIC AND SAN FRANCISCO CHARTERS RESPECTFULLY HOCHIMINH.”

Hồ’s message to President Truman did not reach the president and went unanswered. Vietnamese leaders told me that Hồ wrote seven times, but he never received a response.

In 1946, the United States was already obsessed with commu-

nism. That obsession had only increased by 1950, when Senator Joseph McCarthy announced that he had a list of supposed Communists working in the State Department. By decimating the team of Foreign Service Asia experts—people who would have known about 11 centuries of enmity between Vietnam and China—McCarthy left the State Department unprepared for the coming conflict in Southeast Asia and contributed to the debacle of America’s engagement in the Vietnam War.

Fifty Years Ago

Graham Martin became ambassador to South Vietnam in June 1973. Accredited to the Republic of Vietnam, that part of the country below the 17th parallel, Martin was chosen for the job of ambassador by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who correctly believed that Martin would refuse to depart from Saigon until the bitter end. By March 1975, the North Vietnamese were advancing quickly and overtaking the south.

In April 1975, Saigon was a city under siege, and although Martin had not yet ordered a general evacuation, U.S. Marines began assisting thousands of Vietnamese employees of the U.S. government to leave from Saigon’s Tan Son Nhat Airport in the 12 days before South Vietnam surrendered. Some of these Vietnamese had worked for the U.S. government over the past decade and a half, and they knew that the invading North Vietnamese would treat them brutally as enemies.

Most of the Vietnamese employees were evacuated with their immediate families, flying out on U.S. military transport aircraft and chartered jetliners. Vietnamese personnel working for the Defense Department (nearly all of whom worked for the Central

When Hồ learned that Prunier was from Massachusetts, he told stories of his time as a pastry chef at the Parker House hotel in Boston. Hồ requested a copy of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which the OSS arranged to be air-dropped into the camp.

In August 1945, after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the OSS helped protect Hồ as he traveled to Hanoi to announce Vietnam’s independence. In Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square, he declared, “All men are born equal: the Creator has given us inviolable rights, life, liberty, and happiness!”

I repeated these words in Vietnamese to the press in Tan Trao, near the spot where Allied planes had dropped the Declaration of Independence for Hồ to study. Hồ had told the United States something important with his use of Thomas Jefferson’s words to announce Vietnam’s independence from France on Sept. 2, 1945, but by then America was too alarmed by encroaching communism in Europe to listen.

The OSS argued against President Harry Truman’s decision to support France in its war against the Vietnamese nationalists. Invoking the “Spirit of 1945”—referring to when the United States had been the prime supporter of Vietnam’s independence—Hồ sent a telegram to President Truman on Feb. 28, 1946: “FRENCH POPULATION AND TROOPS ARE MAKING ACTIVE PREPARATIONS FOR A COUP DE MAIN IN HANOI AND FOR MILITARY AGGRESSION STOP I THEREFORE MOST EARNESTLY APPEAL TO YOU PERSONALLY AND TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE TO INTERFERE URGENTLY IN SUPPORT OF OUR INDEPENDENCE AND HELP MAKING

Intelligence Agency) got out on the airlift, as did a number of those employed by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the U.S. Information Agency. Ambassador Martin determined the timing of the evacuations from the country. His decisions to delay evacuations had life-and-death consequences.

On April 25, a 40-man force attached to the Seventh Fleet augmented the small force of beleaguered Marines defending Tan Son Nhat Airport. At 3:45 a.m. on April 29, the North Vietnamese army attacked the airport, and their heavy shelling forced an immediate halt to the evacuation. The first rocket landed on the main road, killing the last two Marines to die in Vietnam, Lance Corporal Darwin L. Judge and Corporal Charles McMahon Jr. In the chaos that ensued, their remains were left behind. At the U.S. embassy, the order for a helicopter evacuation was finally given.

Amb. Martin made the staff wait until the North Vietnamese had already entered Saigon before they could cut down a large tamarind tree on the embassy grounds to make room for helicopters to land. His opposition to giving the general evacuation order until the last moment resulted in many people who worked for U.S. civilian agencies being left behind. The helicopter airlift was too late and too disorganized to rescue many of the locally employed staff who had been told to wait in safe houses for transport to the airport.

Martin contended, against the strong protest of senior U.S. staff at the embassy, that a mass evacuation would have caused panic in South Vietnam's army and the Marine units defending Saigon, ending hopes for a negotiated cease-fire. By delaying evacuation until the airport in Saigon had been destroyed, Martin failed the Vietnamese who had supported the United States and were left behind.

For 24 hours without a break, Master Gunnery Sergeant John J. Valdez loaded helicopters from the embassy compound. Just before 5 a.m. on April 30, Valdez and Ken Moorefield, a Foreign Service officer and former infantry captain, put Amb. Martin, dazed and suffering from pneumonia, aboard one of the last helicopters to take off from the embassy roof. Moorefield later reported that, as he rode in another helicopter headed for the U.S. fleet, "I realized my war, our war, was finally over."

When the ambassador departed, the coded message "Tiger is out" was issued, causing confusion among some of the helicopter pilots—who thought the message meant that the evacuation was complete. Still on the embassy roof with the last of his Marines, Valdez noticed that the flow of choppers had decreased: "No birds in sight. But I never thought for one minute that the choppers would leave us behind." A helicopter returned and lifted the



By decimating the team of Foreign Service Asia experts—people who would have known about 11 centuries of enmity between Vietnam and China—McCarthy left the State Department unprepared.

Marines off just before 8 a.m. Valdez was the last Marine to climb aboard. Three hours later, North Vietnamese troops crashed through the gates of Saigon's presidential palace.

Thirty Years Ago

In early 1995, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara publicly expressed his shame over the war's conduct. McNamara said what most Americans already knew: U.S. leaders had let down members of the armed forces when they sent them into battle and had failed the American people by their prosecution of the war. Twenty years after the fall of Saigon, the debates remained personal and painful.

In May 1995, a presidential delegation headed by Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Hershel Gober visited Vietnam and found the government remarkably forthcoming with information about the U.S. servicemen lost during the war. The delegation reported that "more than 800 separate POW/MIA documents have been turned over to U.S. officials by the [Socialist Republic of Vietnam] government." The success of Gober's mission allowed President Bill Clinton to argue that genuine collaboration with the Vietnamese was the best way to achieve America's overriding goal in Vietnam: the fullest possible accounting for Americans missing from the war.

Flanked by almost every Vietnam veteran serving in Congress, as well as Bobby Muller, chairman of the Vietnam Veterans of America, in a wheelchair, President Clinton announced his decision to normalize relations on July 11. Drawing on Abraham Lincoln's words, the president said: "This moment offers us the opportunity to bind up our own wounds. They have resisted time for too long. We can now move to common ground." He closed by quoting scripture: "Let this moment ... be a time to heal and a time to build."

Veterans in Congress supported President Clinton, including Senator Frank Murkowski, the Republican who chaired the



Ambassador Ted Osius meets 8-year-old Phú at an orphanage in Ha Tinh province.

My most significant accomplishment as ambassador was to facilitate the visit of Communist Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng to the United States in July 2015. In a meeting that broke historic ground, President Barack Obama stated that the United States could respect political systems that differed from our own. He spoke respectfully about how deeply the United States valued

Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and Democrats such as Senators John Kerry, Bob Kerrey, and Bennett Johnston, and Congressman Pete Peterson, who later became the first U.S. ambassador in Hanoi. Most important, Republican Senator John McCain—a Vietnam veteran and former prisoner of war—declared that “tangible progress” had been made toward the fullest possible accounting. “We have looked back in anger at Vietnam for too long,” he added. “I cannot allow whatever resentments I incurred during my time in Vietnam to hold me from doing what is so clearly my duty.”

McCain also pointed out the strategic advantages of a positive relationship with Vietnam. Noting that Vietnam would join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, McCain wrote: “An economically viable Vietnam, acting in concert with its neighbors, will help the region resist dominance by any one power.”

Forging the New Relationship

In November 2000, Bill Clinton made the first U.S. presidential visit to a united Vietnam. In a speech broadcast live, the president outlined the key elements of a diplomatic agenda he hoped the United States and Vietnam would pursue. Describing Vietnam's progress from isolation to the political and economic reforms called *đổi mới*, the president predicted (correctly) that a bilateral trade agreement with the United States would lead to Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization and to the country's integration into the global economy. Together, he said, Vietnamese and Americans would find and return the remains of soldiers who perished, eliminate land mines and unexploded ordnance, and clean up Agent Orange. For the next 25 years, we pursued that agenda.

human rights, saying, “This is just who we are.” The president and general secretary issued a joint statement after the meeting that included a commitment to “respect ... each other's political systems”—the most important line in the document for the Vietnamese. The two leaders made other significant commitments, such as continuing party-to-party dialogues, cleaning up dioxin, promoting human rights, supporting educational exchange, and finishing trade negotiations.

In 2016 I had the honor of hosting President Obama in Vietnam. Those three days were, for me, the highlight of a long diplomatic career. The president met with leaders, spoke with young people and entrepreneurs in Ho Chi Minh City, committed to dioxin cleanup—a process that continues to this day—and agreed to open Fulbright University, the only U.S.-style institution of higher education in Vietnam. During Obama's presidency and the first term of President Donald Trump, the partnership evolved from one focused primarily on addressing the legacies of war to a regional security partnership that also addressed common challenges like climate change, public health, and global peacekeeping.

At the same time, commercial relations between the United States and Vietnam surged. From less than \$800 million in 1995, two-way trade ballooned to \$138 billion in 2022. The United States is now Vietnam's largest export market, and Vietnam was our eighth-largest trading partner for the past two years. The year 2023 marked a record high in U.S. investment in Vietnam, with \$36 billion in registered investment capital—a 32 percent surge from the previous year. Analysts predict that Vietnam will grow approximately 6.6 percent per year for the next 10 years.

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese study in the United States, contributing nearly \$1 billion to the U.S. economy. When they launched a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, President Joe Biden and General Secretary Trọng identified new education initiatives and committed to skills-building in Vietnam. U.S. companies are also investing significantly in workforce development in Vietnam, helping to strengthen the semiconductor ecosystem and boost supply chain resilience. Areas of ongoing collaboration include cybersecurity, undersea cables, and digital infrastructure. This engagement will pay off for both countries and bring us closer together.

As leaders prepare for Vietnam's 14th Party Congress to chart a course for the future, collaboration with U.S. academics, business leaders, and citizens can help create a legal framework for the digital economy, resolving ethical, legal, and institutional questions surrounding artificial intelligence, and can invest in science, technology, and innovation as critical drivers for economic growth. The United States supports Vietnam's goals for continued independence, self-reliance, and prosperity and can

help provide tools for research, especially in science and technology, biotech, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence.

In New York last September, Vietnam's new General Secretary Tô Lâm said: "Thirty years ago we could not have envisioned how far we would come." He added a quote from President Abraham Lincoln: "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Former Secretary of State John Kerry, a Vietnam veteran and significant architect of U.S.-Vietnam reconciliation, wrote: "Reconciliation requires hard work, courage, compromise, and—most important—recognition of the humanity of brothers, sisters, friends, and loved ones on both sides. ... Step-by-step, Americans and Vietnamese deepened the pool of trust that allowed us to become, if not allies, at least close economic and security partners."

The story of the United States and Vietnam over the past 30 years is a remarkable testament to the power of trust and mutual respect in bringing together former adversaries and creating a powerful friendship and partnership. The story of the next 30 years promises to be even more exciting. ■



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A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

U.S.-Vietnam Ties at 30 Years

The U.S. and Vietnam have developed a partnership that illustrates the value of professional diplomacy.

BY MARC E. KNAPPER

Few moments better reflect the progress of U.S.-Vietnam relations than the largest peacetime deployment of U.S. military equipment to Vietnam since the war displayed at the 2024 Vietnam Defense Expo. Standing alongside U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral Sam Paparo, I underscored the U.S. commitment to supporting Vietnam in modernizing its defense force. Ensuring Vietnam has the capabilities needed to protect its interests at sea, in the air, on the ground, and in cyberspace, including in the South China Sea, provides security for the United States as part of our strategy to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open.

At the conclusion of my remarks, hundreds of Vietnamese military, veterans, and members of the public lined up to take

photos with visiting U.S. service members in front of the U.S. military equipment, which included a C-130J, two A-10 attack aircraft, a Stryker combat vehicle, and an M777 howitzer artillery piece. The public's enthusiasm for bilateral collaboration was evident. This type of event would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, let alone when I served as the political chief here two decades ago.

This moment, and so many others over the last year, have been a clear testament to the growth of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, which is now a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), the highest level of partnership in Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy.

Ambitious Goals

The progress in our bilateral relationship took decades of hard work, collaboration, and building on the success of past Mission Vietnam teams and my seven ambassadorial predecessors. Under the CSP framework, our two countries are addressing shared challenges and seizing opportunities in ways that make America stronger, safer, and more prosperous.

With a population of more than 100 million individuals, 45 percent of whom are under 30, Vietnam has set ambitious goals for its economic development, many of which will benefit U.S. national security by ensuring reliable and sustainable supply chains. Education remains one of the strongest bridges between our nations. Vietnam ranks sixth in sending international



Marc E. Knapper is a member of the Senior Foreign Service of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. He most recently served as deputy assistant secretary for Korea and Japan from August 2018 to July 2021. Prior to assuming this position, he was chargé d'affaires ad interim in Seoul from 2017 to 2018 and deputy chief of mission from 2015 to 2016. Earlier assignments include director for India affairs, director for Japan affairs, and postings in Seoul, Baghdad, Tokyo, and Hanoi.

COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY RECEPTION



Ambassador Marc Knapper and Vietnam Vice Foreign Minister Hà Kim Ngọc unveil the 30th anniversary logo at the celebration of the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership's first anniversary, September 2024.

students to the United States, with some 30,000 students studying in the United States, contributing nearly \$1 billion to the U.S. economy.

We bring the expertise of the U.S. private sector and U.S. universities into our collaboration with Vietnam to modernize its higher education. Programs like Fulbright, Peace Corps, English

language training, and Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) equip young Vietnamese with essential skills to be competitive partners for the United States in the future. There are now almost 8,000 Vietnamese alumni of U.S. government-funded exchange programs. Vietnamese students and the Government of Vietnam want that number to continue to grow.

We are also developing new areas of economic collaboration as Vietnam seeks to move up the value chain, and the world looks to strengthen and diversify critical supply chains. We are working together to address requirements that are vital to attracting more high-tech investment, such as strong strategic trade controls, a robust cybersecurity regime, secure critical infrastructure, and a modern and efficient regulatory environment.

These are not idle conversations. Our joint research efforts and science and technology collaboration are increasingly sophisticated and dynamic, an indication of where Vietnam wants to be and who it wants to partner with to support economic growth. While U.S. companies have been steady investors in Vietnam for decades, we are now seeing a growing number of Vietnamese investments in the United States. Vietnam proudly led the largest delegation of Asian companies to SelectUSA in 2024 and hopes to do so again in 2025.

Another area that reflects the growth of cooperation is our work together on health. U.S. support has saved countless lives affected by HIV and laid the groundwork for the robust health



Ambassador Marc Knapper delivers remarks at the second Vietnam International Defense Expo at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi, December 2024.

Ambassador Marc Knapper joins an onsite POW/MIA operation in Quang Binh province, March 2023.

U.S. EMBASSY/HANOI



security partnership we have today. We have supported

Vietnam's efforts to build a capable multisectoral public health workforce and equipped laboratories with advanced diagnostic capabilities like genomic sequencing to detect influenza and other potential threats to global health security.

All these areas of collaboration support Vietnam's bold goals: becoming a digital economy by 2035, a high-income nation by 2045, and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Our collaboration spans nearly all aspects from agriculture to space cooperation. As I often say, if it's worth doing, the United States and Vietnam are doing it.

Reconciliation Is the Foundation

While 2025 marks 30 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, we also recognize the historical significance of where we are today by remembering 50 years since the end of the war.

The anniversary is personal to me, the son of a veteran. My family's connections to Vietnam span generations. My grandmother lived in Saigon in the 1960s. My father, Marine Colonel Roger E. Knapper, served in Da Nang and Hue during the height of the war. His experiences shaped his life and mine.

In 2004 my son and I accompanied my father on his return trip to Vietnam, fulfilling his dream of seeing the country at peace and thriving after experiencing the horrors of war. Together, we witnessed a nation transformed—one that had rebuilt itself into a beacon of resilience and progress. That journey was a clear reminder of the sacrifices on both sides and the enduring importance of reconciliation.

My father has since passed away, but his experience stays with me during my talks with American veterans revisiting former battlefields or meeting with former enemy combatants. These encounters

reflect the full-circle nature of reconciliation and the power of shared understanding. American visitors, to include U.S. Vietnam War veterans, often tell me they are surprised by the warm

reception they receive from the Vietnamese people "despite" our history. I believe it is *because* of our steadfast commitment to reconciliation about that history, and having overcome so much together, that Vietnam is receptive to Americans.

Reconciliation remains the foundation of our partnership. The effort began with the search for missing American service members, followed later by assisting persons with disabilities, clearing unexploded ordnance, and remediating dioxin hotspots.

One of the most moving moments of my tenure was participating in a Joint Field Activity with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) and Vietnam's National Office for the Seeking of Missing Persons. In Quang Binh province, I sifted through soil to find bone fragments and twisted metal shards of aircraft equipment to recover the remains of those missing in action. I had the honor of participating in a repatriation ceremony following the site

visit and later learned that the remains were identified as those of U.S. Marine Corps Captain Ronald W. Forrester from Odessa, Texas, and Captain Ralph J. Chipman from American Fork, Utah, who were lost in action in 1972. Supporting the work to find



COURTESY OF MARC KNAPPER



Above: Ambassador Marc Knapper and his son visit his father's grave after his death in 2014. Inset: Amb. Knapper (left) with his father and his son.

Ambassador Marc Knapper (second from right) and the U.S. embassy delegation visit Tuyen Quang, the birthplace of the U.S.-Vietnam friendship, where 80 years ago the OSS “Deer Team” landed to cooperate with Vietnam during World War II, February 2025.



U.S. EMBASSY HANOI

missing American military and bring them home has been one of the most meaningful aspects of my work in Vietnam.

Through a separate effort, known as the Vietnam Wartime Accounting Initiative, we are also now helping Vietnam locate, gather, and identify Vietnamese personnel killed during the war. With the help of Harvard University, we also return archival research and personal effects of Vietnamese soldiers to veterans and their family members. For some, these artifacts are among the only personal effects that remain of their loved ones. Witnessing these artifacts being returned is a solemn reminder of the human cost of conflict and the healing power of reconciliation. And this work, collectively, has helped to build trust and mutual understanding between the United States and Vietnam in ways that have enabled us to expand bilateral cooperation in key areas such as defense, law enforcement, education, and trade.

A Partnership for the Future

Despite our progress, the United States and Vietnam do not always see eye to eye on every issue, but we address these differences respectfully and frankly. Our annual human rights

dialogue reflects this approach. While raising our concerns about the human rights situation in Vietnam, we emphasize respect and seek to identify areas of collaboration such as religious freedom, the rule of law, and legal reform.

What has consistently driven growth in this relationship is the willingness on both sides to seek areas of cooperation, despite our differing political systems and our painful past.

As ambassador, I believe that to truly strengthen our ties, we must engage deeply and directly with the people and leaders of Vietnam. This commitment has taken me to 45 of the country’s 63 provinces, where I’ve had the privilege of meeting provincial officials, joining U.S.-Vietnam friendship events, and witnessing the shared optimism for our future by engaging with young people. In all my visits, my hosts express enthusiasm and excitement for more partnership, more collaboration in education, and more engagement with Americans. In this spirit, we will celebrate 30 years of bilateral relations with a series of friendship festivals, visits to U.S. companies, and other anniversary events throughout the country.

The ongoing construction of our new embassy campus, set for completion in 2030, symbolizes our enduring relationship with Vietnam. We are lucky to have many members of Mission Vietnam who, like me, have served here multiple times. But as I can attest, we have never served in the “same” Vietnam twice, because this country is growing and changing fast.

Leading this country team to advance our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Vietnam feels like the fulfillment of what was always possible. As we celebrate 30 years of U.S.-Vietnam relations, I am confident our next chapter will bring even greater achievements that make our countries safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

Follow us @USEmbassyVietnam on Instagram and Facebook to join the journey. ■



Ambassador Marc Knapper speaks to maritime law enforcement officers during boarding officer course at An Thoi Port in Phu Quoc, December 2024.

U.S. EMBASSY HANOI

PEACE, COOPERATION, AND GLOBAL PROGRESS

30 Years of Vietnam-U.S. Diplomacy

The Vietnam-U.S. relationship shows that reconciliation and cooperation can overcome even the most profound historical challenges.

BY H.E. NGUYEN QUOC DZUNG

The relationship between Vietnam and the United States has navigated numerous historical challenges while achieving remarkable progress over the past 30 years since the normalization of diplomatic relations on July 11, 1995. The two countries have reached significant milestones, including the establishment of the Comprehensive Partnership in 2013 and its elevation to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023. The Vietnam-U.S. relationship serves as a powerful testament to the spirit of

reconciliation and healing between the two nations, exemplifying a model for promoting peace and cooperation in the future.

From Adversaries to Strategic Partners

The history of Vietnam-U.S. relations can be traced back over two centuries, marked by early diplomatic exchanges despite geographical and communication barriers. President Thomas Jefferson expressed interest in Vietnamese rice, and subsequently, American trading ships sought to establish cooperation with Vietnam. During World War II, the Việt Minh, led by Hồ Chí Minh, assisted stranded U.S. pilots, demonstrating goodwill between the two nations. Following Vietnam's declaration of independence in 1945, President Hồ Chí Minh sent 14 letters to U.S. leaders seeking full cooperation.

However, historical challenges led to prolonged hostilities, resulting in significant losses for both countries. Vietnam suffered the loss of more than 3 million lives and continues to grapple with the lasting legacies of war, such as the effects of Agent Orange. Meanwhile, the U.S. lost 58,000 soldiers, with many veterans facing long-term trauma as a result of their experiences.



H.E. Nguyen Quoc Dzung, a career member of Vietnam's Foreign Service for more than 30 years, is the ambassador of Vietnam to the United States, appointed in January 2022. He served as deputy foreign minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2016 to 2022, and before that as assistant minister of foreign affairs and Director General.

The war ended in April 1975; however, the domestic and international conditions were not yet conducive for our two countries to begin the healing process. Hostility, resentment, and suspicion lingered on both sides for many years, resulting in numerous missed opportunities. Sanctions and economic embargoes imposed by the United States and its allies plunged Vietnam into hardship, further deepening the divide between our nations.

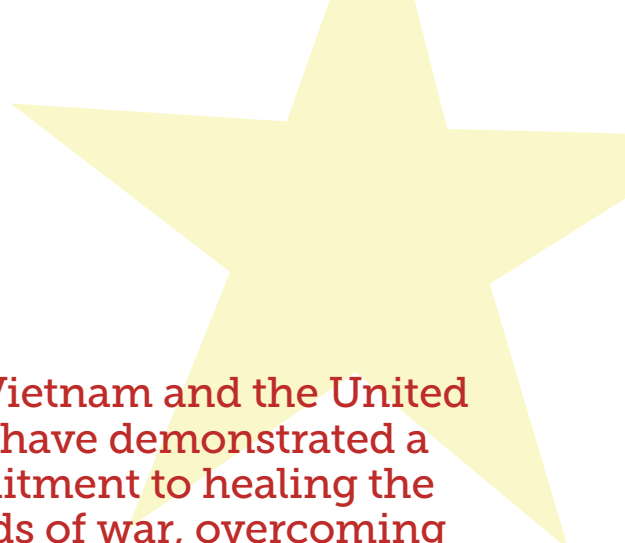
Despite this challenging backdrop, early efforts emerged on both sides to lay the groundwork for improved bilateral ties, particularly in addressing war legacies and humanitarian issues. Ultimately, these efforts culminated in a historic breakthrough that set our countries on a path toward reconciliation and partnership. On July 11, 1995, Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt and President Bill Clinton officially announced the normalization of diplomatic relations, marking the beginning of a new chapter in Vietnam-U.S. relations.

From that point onward, the Vietnam-U.S. partnership flourished, rising from height to greater height. In 2000 and 2005, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải made history as the first leaders of their respective countries to visit each other since the war. In July 2013, President Trương Tấn Sang visited the United States and, alongside President Barack Obama, announced the establishment of the Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Partnership.

In 2017 President Donald Trump highlighted the remarkable progress in Vietnam-U.S. bilateral relations, stating: “The United States and Vietnam have come a long way. We’ve seen it from both sides of the picture, and this is the pleasant side.” In September 2023, as our two countries celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Comprehensive Partnership, President Joe Biden visited Vietnam. Together with the late General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, they elevated our relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for peace, cooperation, and development. Biden emphasized that no one could have imagined a day when a U.S. president would stand alongside Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi to announce such a partnership.

Today, the United States is Vietnam’s largest export market, with bilateral trade increasing more than 250-fold since the normalization of relations. U.S. businesses recognize Vietnam’s potential and are continuously expanding their investments, particularly in high-tech industries, emerging sectors, and renewable energy. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Vietnamese businesses are also investing in the United States.

In the areas of politics and security, cooperation between Vietnam and the United States has been increasingly strength-



Both Vietnam and the United States have demonstrated a commitment to healing the wounds of war, overcoming the past.

ened by addressing key issues in bilateral relations, responding to climate change, and supporting regional initiatives within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework and Mekong cooperation. In education and people-to-people exchanges, Vietnam leads Southeast Asia in the number of students studying in the United States, with more than 30,000 Vietnamese students enrolled. Additionally, many U.S. universities have established research programs focused on Vietnam, contributing to a deeper American understanding of Vietnamese culture and history.

The journey from former adversaries to comprehensive strategic partners is a powerful testament to the value of peace in today’s world. This process of reconciliation and cooperation demonstrates that nothing is impossible when both sides exhibit determination, goodwill, and shared objectives to foster a sustainable and forward-looking relationship.

Drivers for the Relationship

The robust growth of Vietnam-U.S. relations has been propelled by a number of factors. First, the trend of international integration following the Cold War created opportunities for the two countries to redefine their relationship. The development of bilateral ties since normalization aligns with this broader global trend. As nations increasingly prioritize economic cooperation and stability, both Vietnam and the United States recognize the strategic benefits of enhancing their bilateral relations. This shift has opened avenues for both sides to overcome historical barriers, strengthen ties, and pursue a shared future.

Another critical factor is the concerted effort to address war legacies. Both Vietnam and the United States have demonstrated a commitment to healing the wounds of war, overcoming the past, and strengthening ties between their peoples. Cooperative programs focused on Agent Orange remediation, unexploded ordnance clearance, and the search for missing soldiers have played a significant role in building mutual trust.

Vietnam's remarkable socioeconomic growth over the past three decades has been an important driver of bilateral relations.

These initiatives not only address humanitarian concerns but also convey a strong message of long-term commitment to improving bilateral relations.

At the same time, Vietnam's remarkable socioeconomic growth over the past three decades has been an important driver of bilateral relations. Transitioning from an economy primarily based on agriculture, Vietnam has evolved into a major manufacturing and trade hub, its GDP increasing twentyfold. It now ranks 35th among the world's largest economies and is among the top 20 trading nations. With its independent, self-reliant, and diversified foreign policy, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 194 countries. These achievements not only affirm Vietnam's stature, capabilities, and growing influence but also attract interest from major powers, including the United States, in fostering bilateral relations.

Further, the role of high-level leadership, government agencies, local authorities, and business communities in both countries has been crucial in advancing bilateral relations. Upgrading ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in September 2023 ushered in a new era characterized by greater depth and scope to meet the aspirations of both nations. This framework reflects the strong commitment of both leaderships to enhancing cooperation across all sectors and establishes clear mechanisms for implementation. As a result, Vietnam-U.S. relations have inspired confidence and motivation for organizations, businesses, and individuals on both sides to engage more actively in collaborative efforts.

A New Era of Development

Entering a new era, Vietnam-U.S. relations are poised to expand comprehensively and deeply. With the solid foundation established over the past three decades, both countries now have the opportunity to enhance strategic and comprehensive cooperation across multiple fields, including diplomacy, politics, economics, trade, investment, education, security, and environmental protection. This broadening of collaboration is

expected to strengthen ties further and promote mutual benefits, paving the way for a prosperous future for both nations.

One of the most important breakthroughs in the Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is the cooperation in science, technology, and innovation, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors. Vietnam's burgeoning digital economy presents vast opportunities, and U.S. expertise can significantly support its integration into global value chains. Notably, major U.S. tech firms are expanding their investments in Vietnam, fostering advancements in AI development and semiconductor manufacturing. This collaboration will enhance Vietnam's technological capabilities, attract high-tech investment, and position the country as a player in global supply chains. Vietnam is also eager to collaborate with American companies to ensure its energy security and facilitate the transition to sustainable energy sources.

In the realm of security, both nations share common interests in maintaining peace, stability, and the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region. Challenges such as cybersecurity threats and regional security issues necessitate close bilateral and multilateral coordination. Collaborative efforts through ASEAN, the Mekong-U.S. Partnership, and other initiatives will further consolidate Vietnam-U.S. relations.

Overcoming differences is a natural part of any bilateral relationship. However, with strong commitment, goodwill, and adherence to international law, along with mutual respect for sovereignty and noninterference, both sides will continue to navigate challenges and further strengthen their cooperation. People-to-people ties, cultural exchanges, and educational programs will play a vital role in fostering deep mutual understanding, ensuring that Vietnam-U.S. relations remain resilient and enduring. This solid foundation will support the continued sustainable development of Vietnam-U.S. relations, aiding Vietnam as it steps into a new era of growth and advancement.

In a world of constant change, 30 years of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States have shown that reconciliation and cooperation can overcome even the most profound historical challenges. Looking ahead, the two nations are not only strategic partners but also trusted companions, working together to create greater value for the region and the world. With strong determination and commitment from both sides, the Vietnam-U.S. relationship will continue to play a vital role in promoting peace, prosperity, and stability both regionally and globally. This enduring partnership is poised to address contemporary challenges and seize new opportunities for mutual benefit. ■

THE LAST STEPS OF NORMALIZATION

Reflections of the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, 2001-2004

Completion of the normalization process got a boost when Vietnam's leadership determined that "the triangle" (Vietnam, China, U.S.) was out of balance.

BY RAYMOND BURGHARDT

George W. Bush nominated me to be the second U.S. ambassador to a unified Vietnam. I would return after 28 years to the country where I began my Foreign Service career during the war, first seconded to USAID and then as a political officer. I knew that the chief advocate for my nomination was Deputy Secretary of State Rich Armitage, whom I accompanied in March 1982, when he was a deputy assistant secretary of Defense, on one of the first missions to negotiate normalization of relations.



Ray Burghardt was U.S. ambassador to Vietnam from December 2001 to September 2004. He began his Foreign Service career as a political officer at U.S. Embassy Saigon in the early 1970s. He served as chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) from 2006 to 2016; AIT director in Taipei from 1999 to 2001; deputy chief of mission in Manila and Seoul; consul general in Shanghai; and National Security Council senior director for Latin America.

The process would take 13 more years until ambassadors were exchanged.

For both me and my wife, Susan, who had been with me in Saigon from 1970 to 1973 as manager of the USO's "Call Home Service" for the U.S. military, return to Vietnam prompted many emotional moments when we felt as if we were picking up the thread of the long story of U.S.-Vietnam relations.

As I prepared for confirmation in fall 2001, the message I received from Senator John McCain and Senator John Kerry, the two senators who had been the strongest advocates for restoring U.S.-Vietnam relations, was that Pete Peterson, the first postwar ambassador, had made a great start, and now my job was to complete the process of normalization.

A Step-by-Step Process

Our bilateral relationship had developed in identifiable stages, the work of which continued as new areas of cooperation were added. Three important areas weren't there yet: military-to-military relations, law enforcement cooperation, and an intelligence liaison relationship. These would be tough, the most sensitive issues. They involved the people on both sides



GARY GRANGER/U.S. NAVY

U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Raymond Burghardt (center) joins the commanding officer of the USS *Vandegrift*, Cdr. Richard Rogers (to his right), for a press conference aboard the ship in Ho Chi Minh City on Nov. 19, 2003. This marked the first U.S. Navy ship visit to Vietnam in 30 years.

who would be most wary and, in many cases, most embittered about the war, particularly on the Vietnamese side. In my meetings with Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary Armitage, they stressed exactly the same goals.

From the early 1990s, even before normalization, cooperation began in dealing with the legacy issues remaining from the war: returning the remains of those missing in action (MIAs), reuniting refugees with family members remaining in Vietnam, and demining and removing unexploded ordnance. Then came economic engagement.

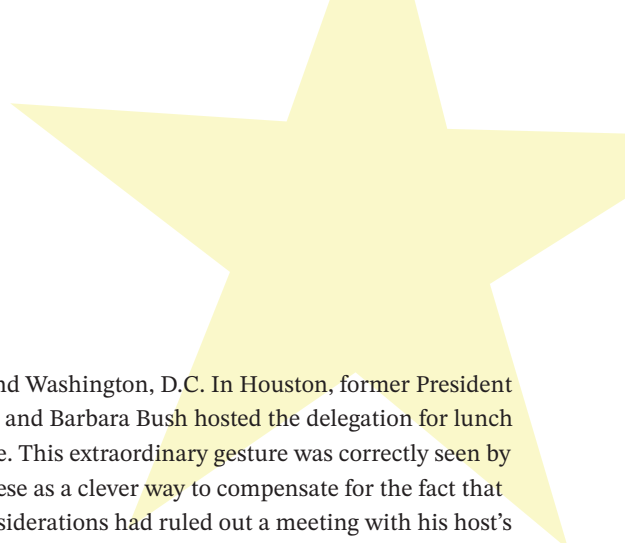
Our bilateral trade agreement was signed a few days before I arrived in Hanoi as ambassador on Dec. 15, 2001, and was quickly followed by agreements on textiles and civil aviation. The U.S. was soon Vietnam's biggest trade partner. Intel's decision to build a multibillion-dollar manufacturing and testing facility near Ho Chi Minh City was a critical step for Vietnam in moving from basic manufacturing to high tech.

Humanitarian and educational cooperation were also strong. We had one of the largest Fulbright programs in the world. And President George W. Bush designated Vietnam, which managed

the SARS epidemic well, as the only Asian country to benefit from a special fund for HIV/AIDS, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). This progress was encouraging, but I soon realized that I had come during a period of some tension in the relationship.

On Easter Day 2001, large and at times violent demonstrations had broken out in the Central Highlands. Ethnic minority people—often known as “Montagnards,” the name given to them by the French—protested harassment of their Christian house churches, which were not officially recognized by the state. A more fundamental cause of discontent was that ethnic Vietnamese had been occupying the indigenous peoples' land to develop coffee plantations. The army suppressed the demonstrators, and many fled to Cambodia.

By December, when I arrived, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had repatriated some of these people back to Vietnam. UNHCR wanted to visit the Central Highland provinces to confirm that conditions permitted continued repatriation. Vietnam resisted the inspections. The Bush administration was giving a lot of attention to this issue, which



soured the relationship somewhat. Progress slowed as important sectors in both countries remained wary about improving ties.

The Breakthrough

The breakthrough in U.S.-Vietnam relations came on July 12, 2003, at a regular plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The meeting focused on Vietnam's strategic position in the world. Immediately following the plenum, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Bang asked to meet. Bang, who had been Vietnam's ambassador in Washington, was my key contact. We met regularly one-on-one to manage the relationship. He informed me that his country's leadership had concluded that "the triangle is out of balance." The triangle was Vietnam, China, and the United States.

Hanoi had improved relations with Beijing, overcoming serious differences. But they remained deeply concerned about a stronger China throwing its weight around, being more aggressive in the South China Sea where Hanoi has competing claims, and improving ties with Cambodia and Laos, which Vietnam considers in its sphere of influence. The geostrategic trend was going in the wrong direction. Hanoi wanted improved ties with Washington to create a better balance. Human rights issues had strained our ties; now we should focus on our strategic relationship.

Bang was very concrete about what should happen next. The U.S. had suggested that Vietnam's defense minister visit Washington, D.C., in reciprocation for Secretary of Defense William Cohen's visit to Hanoi a few years earlier, and that should now take place as soon as possible. The U.S. had also proposed that a U.S. Navy ship make a port visit in Vietnam; that should happen very soon after the defense minister's trip. A day or two later, Bang added another item—a proposal that Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan, number two in the government and secretary of the politburo, a key party position, visit the United States and meet everyone he could in Washington.

Defense Minister Phạm Văn Trà met Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon in early November 2003. Later that month the USS *Vandegrift* sailed up the Saigon River waving the Stars and Stripes next to the Vietnamese flag and docked at the Port of Saigon. Susan and I were on board, chatting with young sailors whose fathers had fought in the war. The ship visit was a profound signal of good relations—to Vietnam's own people, to the U.S., and to Beijing. Vietnam had invited back an American warship, an iconic symbol of the military power of its former enemy.

In early December, Deputy Minister Bang and I accompanied Deputy PM Khoan on a trip to San Francisco, Houston,

New York, and Washington, D.C. In Houston, former President George H.W. and Barbara Bush hosted the delegation for lunch at their home. This extraordinary gesture was correctly seen by the Vietnamese as a clever way to compensate for the fact that protocol considerations had ruled out a meeting with his host's son in the White House.

New Progress

In Washington, Khoan met with Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and many members of Congress. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage commented to me on how remarkable he found Khoan's openness to discuss Vietnam's anxieties about Beijing: This was a sea change, Armitage said, probably the most important consequence of Khoan's trip. Khoan talked about China's aggressiveness, asked what the U.S. planned to do about China, and if the U.S. could help Vietnam's military.

When we got back to Hanoi, I found another aspect of improved relations: Access to the top leadership opened up. I met for the first time the party's general secretary, Nông Đức Mạnh. Equally important, the meeting was front-page news in Vietnam. The foreign ministry then arranged for me to meet, one by one, all the members of the politburo. Two of them became key contacts whom I met regularly.

Now that both sides had begun to see each other as useful in maintaining the regional balance of power, it became easier to develop those three missing aspects of the relationship—military, law enforcement, and intelligence cooperation. Military ties developed through continued port calls, visits from Honolulu by our Pacific commanders, and beginning the sale of some military equipment to Vietnam. Our Drug Enforcement Administration office in Hanoi led the way on improving law enforcement relations, including visits by FBI officers based in Bangkok. We sent lots of Vietnamese police to our training facility in Bangkok and signed a mutual legal assistance agreement.

Establishing an intelligence liaison relationship, with declared chiefs of station (COS), was the last piece to put in place. Our first declared COS visited the day before I departed post. I introduced him to Vietnam's minister of public security, and he returned to begin his tour of duty during the time of my successor, Mike Marine.

In Conclusion, a Story

I could tell many stories about meeting Vietnamese I had known during the war or about events that evoked memories of the early 1970s. Here is one: In January 2002, on my first visit

Traveling by punt boat in Vietnam's Mekong Delta on July 16, 2002, Ambassador Raymond Burghardt (second from right) observed U.S.-funded disaster relief projects in the U Minh Thuong National Park. Also pictured: Bành Văn Đĩnh (far left), director of the U Minh Thuong National Park, and Nguyễn Hữu Thiện (second from left), field project manager for the U Minh Thuong Nature Reserve Conservation and Community Development Project, CARE International in Vietnam.



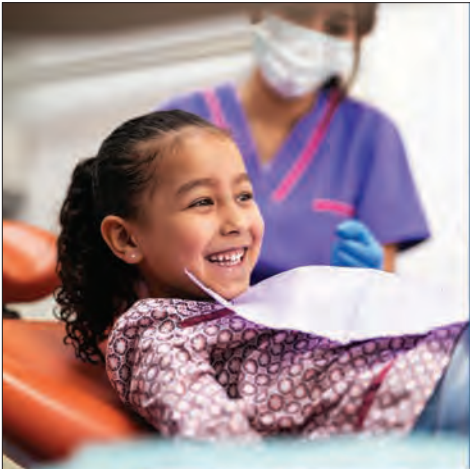
U.S. CONSULATE GENERAL HO CHI MINH CITY

to Ho Chi Minh City as U.S. ambassador, I attended a concert sponsored by the U.S. government at the conservatory. During the intermission, a man walked up to me and said, "Good to see you again." He looked vaguely familiar.

I asked if we had met when I was there in the 1970s. He asked if I remembered when Vice President Spiro Agnew met with President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu of the ill-fated southern government. I said I did: it was in late 1972. I had come as the notetaker with Agnew and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. My friend, now smirking broadly, said he was there as special assistant for public affairs to President Thiệu.

What did he do now? He was editor in chief of *Thanh Niên*, the main Communist Party newspaper in Ho Chi Minh City, he said. When I returned to Hanoi and asked my friend Deputy Foreign Minister Bang about this unusual guy, Bang collapsed in laughter. "Ray," he said, "let's put it this way. No one can ever be *that* rehabilitated."

My new old friend had been on the other side all along, right in the inner circle of the presidential palace. No wonder the Saigon government lost. ■



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AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION

TOWARD A MORE “GEOPOLITICALLY DRIVEN” RELATIONSHIP

Reflections of the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, 2011-2014

Moving beyond legacy war issues required building trust in the U.S. commitment to a strong, prosperous, and independent Vietnam.

BY DAVID B. SHEAR



Ambassador David Shear visits an orphanage in Bac Ninh province in March 2012.

COURTESY OF DAVID SHEAR

It became clear to me as I prepared to depart Washington for Hanoi in summer 2011 that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and East Asia and the Pacific Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell did not want me to just continue strengthening bilateral U.S.-Vietnam ties in the tradition of post-1995 ambassadors. They agreed with my conviction, developed during my 2008-2011 role as China desk director and China deputy assistant secretary, that the United States needed to establish a geopolitically driven relationship with the Vietnamese that would strengthen our position in the region vis-à-vis an increasingly assertive China.

David B. Shear, a 32-year veteran of the U.S. Foreign Service, served as U.S. ambassador to Vietnam from 2011 to 2014. He also served in Sapporo, Beijing, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, and Washington, D.C. From 2014 to 2016, he served as assistant secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs. He is now an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.



COURTESY OF DAVID SHEAR

Ambassador David Shear chats with rescued child laborers at the Blue Dragon NGO headquarters in Quang Nam province with embassy interpreter Nguyen Duy Minh in March 2013.

The time was right for a geopolitical approach. Now that we were drawing down in Iraq and South Asia, President Barack Obama wanted to shift our attention to East Asia and to a rising China. He would not unveil our “rebalance” to the region until a November 2011 speech, but Secretary Clinton and Assistant Secretary Campbell had already begun laying the groundwork.

The Secretary had articulated an American strategic interest in the South China Sea in a widely reported July 2010 speech to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Hanoi. In fall 2010, we had participated in the East Asia Summit (EAS) as a guest, against the wishes of the Russians and the Chinese but with the strong support of Vietnam—that year’s ASEAN chair. We would join EAS formally the next year. So, building a regional role for the relationship driven by common U.S.-Vietnam geopolitical interests made strong sense, and my previous experience with Japan, China, and Southeast Asia had prepared me well for the task.

But what would establishing a more “geopolitically driven relationship” require? Vietnamese political elites have a saying: “If you get too close to the Americans, you lose the [Communist] Party; if you get too close to the Chinese, you lose the country.” My goal as ambassador was to help the Vietnamese walk the tightrope between the United States and China in a way that recognized local realities and suited American interests.

Those interests required that Vietnam participate effectively in a Southeast Asian balance of power that would maximize Hanoi’s room to maneuver, limit Chinese regional influence, and allow the United States and our allies to play the strongest possible role in an area of growing strategic and economic importance to us.

For a Strong and Independent Vietnam

Common interests notwithstanding, an outright alliance with Vietnam was unlikely any time soon. The Chinese invaded

Vietnam in 1979, partly in response to Hanoi’s conclusion of an alliance with Moscow, and I doubted that the Vietnamese leadership, many of whom had suffered through that war, would want to risk another such conflict. Moreover, China was geographically too close and offered too many economic opportunities for the Vietnamese to turn away from the big northern neighbor in favor of the U.S., a distant power with a reputation for bugging out.

“Why should we rely on the U.S. for our security,” a Vietnamese general exclaimed to me after the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident,

“when you’re unwilling to defend your ally the Philippines in the South China Sea?” So, a more incremental approach, within which I could manage growing Washington expectations, seemed wise.

We could still pursue a more vigorous diplomacy with Vietnam right away using all the tools of statecraft, not to establish a new alliance, but to buttress a balance of power that could assure our continued economic, diplomatic, and military access to the region. Vietnam’s size and population may have paled in comparison to the big powers with interests in the region, but this proud and growing middle power had agency, its leadership had pluck, and its people craved autonomy. Our Vietnamese interlocutors were astute observers of regional power relations and of the ebbs and flows of Chinese influence. Senior American officials liked talking to them.

At my first press conference as ambassador, I hit on a statement that would sum up our approach to Vietnam in words that would resonate with publics on both sides of the Pacific: “The United States seeks a strong, prosperous, and independent Vietnam that respects human rights and supports the rule of law.” Our two countries had significant common interests in free trade, freedom from coercion, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and I hoped we could build a cooperative relationship on that basis.

To cooperate effectively with Hanoi, we had to build greater bilateral trust. This meant energetically continuing to address the legacies of war, including the search for American personnel missing in action (MIAs), the remediation of Agent Orange contamination at key sites, the removal of unexploded ordnance throughout the country, and assistance to those Vietnamese people with Agent Orange-related and other disabilities. I was proud to have watched over the construction of USAID’s project to incinerate soil heavily contaminated by Agent Orange at Da Nang Airport. I joined the congressional father of this program, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), in Da Nang to open this facility in April 2014.

Legacy War Issues and Beyond

My predecessors had labored diligently on war legacy issues, including the search for MIAs. My Washington colleagues and I added a new task: removing the now outdated arms embargo on Vietnam. This would generate increased bilateral trust, build a closer military-to-military relationship, and help open a market for American military sales. I worked closely with my Washington counterparts to partially lift the embargo in late 2014, which we fully ended in 2016 while I was assistant secretary of Defense.

Building trust also required closer relations between the embassy and Vietnamese Communist Party headquarters. After all, the party ran the country, made all the important foreign policy decisions, and managed Vietnam's day-to-day relations with China. Political Counselor Mark Lambert developed a useful relationship with the party's Foreign Affairs Department. We sent party officials on International Visitor programs and briefed party officials generally on our approach to major developments in the region. Senior Vietnamese officials later informed me that this effort contributed directly to the decision to send then-Party

General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng to the U.S. in 2015.

Before departing for post, I was instructed to persuade the Vietnamese to join negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement. That both countries would benefit from the TPP economically was obvious. It was also obvious that U.S. regional economic policy could bolster our geopolitical strategy not only by building Vietnam's economic base but also by diversifying its international economic options.

The TPP would make it easier for Vietnam to avoid having to accommodate themselves completely to Beijing's economic interests. It would also offer more opportunities for American firms looking to invest outside China. Our Economic Counselor Laura Stone made these points to our Vietnamese and American counterparts at every opportunity and smoothed the way for the U.S. Trade Representative's talks with the Vietnamese. They joined the TPP negotiations in 2013.

On my 2011 introductory calls in Hanoi, I had told my hosts that both sides wanted Vietnamese TPP membership but that we had a problem: Congress would be less likely to support Vietnam's

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Ambassador David Shear (second from left) with (from left) Dr. Le Ke Son and Hill staffer Tim Rieser, both active in Agent Orange remediation, Michael DiGregorio from the Asia Foundation, and Charles Bailey from the Aspen Institute during Senator Patrick Leahy's visit to Vietnam in April 2014.

participation in the agreement without demonstrable progress on human rights. Vietnam should not only agree to strong labor provisions within the TPP text itself but also show progress in other areas. My Vietnamese colleagues understood this and agreed to embark on an effort to explore with our embassy realistic steps the government could take.

We decided on a list that included, inter alia, Vietnam's accession to the United Nations Convention Against Torture, registration of more unofficial house churches, and the release of political prisoners. By the time I left post, the Vietnamese had shown improvements in all these areas. (Our geopolitical and geo-economic strategies diverged, and much of our leverage on human and labor rights evaporated with our departure from TPP in 2017, to my great disappointment and to the utter chagrin of our Vietnamese partners.)

Security Cooperation

My able predecessor, Mike Michalak, had initiated negotiations on a military-to-military agreement during his tenure. In September 2011, a month after my arrival at post, the two sides concluded a Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Security Cooperation under which both sides pledged to upgrade collaboration in maritime security, military medicine, UN peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and exchanges between our defense universities.

We increased naval ship visits to Vietnam, including to Cam Ranh Bay, and intensified bilateral defense policy exchanges. We also added a civilian capacity building component to Vietnam's maritime security program by agreeing to transfer six fast patrol boats to Vietnam's Coast Guard. This was the precursor of the 2015 Maritime Security Initiative, a five-year, \$450 million pro-

gram designed to build capacity throughout the region that the Congress authorized during my tenure as assistant secretary of Defense.

"When the Chinese know the United States is engaged in the region, they treat us better," a senior Vietnamese official once told me. During my tenure, the Vietnamese hosted visits by Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry, the Secretaries of Defense, Treasury, Commerce, Health and Human Services, the Environmental Protection Agency administrator, and the Pacific commander, among others.

My mission also worked hard to bolster congressional support for an activist policy on Vietnam. Senators McCain (R-Ariz.), Leahy (D-Vt.), Carden (D-Md.), Corker (R-Tenn.), Whitehouse (D-R.I.), Ayotte (R-N.H.), and Lieberman (D-Conn.) and multiple congressmen visited Hanoi. As one might expect, Senator McCain was particularly supportive of our effort to take the relationship in a geopolitical direction. Increased exchanges like these paved the way for a successful 2013 visit to the U.S. by President Trương Tấn Sang, during which we announced the launch of a comprehensive partnership.

The Chinese provided the drama that marked the end of

my already eventful tour. In early May 2014, the state-owned Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) moved an oil rig into disputed waters south of the Paracel Islands. This action sparked a stand-off between the two sides' coast guard vessels, multiple sharply worded responses from Hanoi, and anti-Chinese rioting across Vietnam. Long-standing U.S. policy on territorial disputes prevented us from supporting the Vietnamese claim, but we did make our displeasure with the Chinese known and used

the event to strengthen our ties to Vietnam's national security community, particularly its coast guard. The Chinese action drew strong negative reactions throughout the region, and CNOOC withdrew the rig a month ahead of schedule, a modest victory for those opposed to Chinese adventurism in the South China Sea.

Any gains for U.S. interests in Vietnam during my tenure were the result of a team effort, also led by Deputy Chief of Mission Claire Pierangelo. A strong, collegial country team allowed us to use all the tools of statecraft in a systematic way. I tried to ensure that my team had everything it needed to do what American diplomats do best, which is to discover opportunities to advance U.S. interests and exploit them. ■



Ambassador David Shear (fourth from right) accompanies an MIA recovery mission to Son La, northwest Vietnam, in July 2013.

THE TẾT OFFENSIVE

Six Hours That Transformed America

A career diplomat reflects on a pivotal moment in the fraught Vietnam War era.

BY KENNETH M. QUINN

January 1968 had not started in an apocalyptic fashion. The triumphal sense that America was a force for good and capable of accomplishing almost anything it put its mind to—having begun with victory in World War II and, inspired by President John F. Kennedy, taken us to space and set us en route to the moon—still pervaded the country. As a result, President Lyndon Johnson seemed securely ensconced in the White House as he

prepared to launch his reelection campaign. While there were some disquieting signs that anti-war elements were causing unrest on college campuses—something I had witnessed as an instructor at the University of Maryland—as the year began, the opinion polls still showed a firm majority supporting the war effort in Vietnam.

Saturday, Jan. 27, 1968, was the first day of Tết Mậu Thân, the Vietnamese New Year celebration that marked the beginning of the Year of the Monkey. As the media ran stories about the informal military cease-fire that was going into effect across South Vietnam, I had just begun long-term Vietnamese language training and was immersed in learning phrases to extend wishes for good health and prosperity.

I was a brand-new Foreign Service officer from Dubuque, Iowa, and my visions of diplomatic soirees in chandeliered ballrooms in Paris or Vienna had been dashed when the personnel mavens at Foggy Bottom assigned me—a single, unmarried, 25-year-old draft-eligible male—to 10 months of Vietnamese language training followed by a tour as a pacification adviser helping win the “hearts and minds.” Although whatever that exactly entailed was not yet clear, the scheduled training segment at the Special Warfare Training School at Fort Bragg conjured up ominous possibilities.



Kenneth M. Quinn, PhD, served as U.S. ambassador to Cambodia from 1996 to 1999. The first tour of his 32-year career as a Foreign Service officer was for almost six years in Vietnam, during which he became the only civilian to earn the Army Air Medal

for his participation in more than 100 hours of helicopter combat operations; received the State Department Award for Heroism and Valor for four life-saving rescues he carried out in the war zone; and submitted the first-ever report from the remote Vietnam-Cambodia border, warning about the genocidal Pol Pot Khmer Rouge movement. He is the only three-time recipient of the AFSA Award for Constructive Dissent.

It was the culmination of seven years of political upheaval, all of which had begun on that night in January 1968, when those 20 Việt Cộng blew their way into the U.S. embassy compound.

The Vietnam Training Center, or VTC as everyone called it, was in a drab, charmless basement of the Arlington Towers apartment complex in Rosslyn, just across the Key Bridge from Georgetown. For six hours a day, we would assemble in small groups in windowless rooms endeavoring to mimic the seemingly impossible (to me) sing-song tonal language that was Vietnamese.

I could not have realized that this assignment would give me a front-row seat to one of the most tumultuous periods in American politics since the Civil War, one that began 57 years ago, on Tuesday, Jan. 30, 1968.

Ten months later, just before Thanksgiving, as I boarded a plane to fly to Saigon and start my assignment in the Mekong Delta, our politics, race relations, the Vietnam War effort, and America's triumphal spirit would all be seemingly forever changed.

Assault on the Embassy

It all began when, breaking the traditional Tết truce, the North Vietnamese Army and the Việt Cộng opened a surprise nationwide attack on Jan. 30. The images of the fighting, which affected every major population center in South Vietnam including the capital city of Saigon, flowed almost instantly into millions of homes across America via television, sent by a new generation of skeptical, young correspondents, reporting first-hand from the scenes of battle.

The fighting was intense, and American casualties were the highest ever. Among them were Foreign Service personnel, including Robert Little, with whom I had been practicing my Vietnamese tones just a few weeks earlier. Pulled from language training and sent early to address refugee issues, Little had been captured by a North Vietnamese team and summarily executed. The account of his death brought home the reality of the danger of our assignment. From then on, the main topic of our discussions during the breaks between hourly language

classes was which handgun to buy to take with you and the ballistic capabilities of various types of ammunition.

The most significant event of the Tết Offensive and, in retrospect, of the entire Vietnam War, occurred at 2:45 a.m. Saigon time on Jan. 31. It was then that a 20-man Việt Cộng "sapper team" blew a hole in the outer wall of the brand-new U.S. embassy compound and then rushed inside to try to storm the chancery, where the ambassador's office was located. Frustrated by the ballistic doors and unable to enter the main office building, the insurgents nonetheless marauded about the grounds in search of targets.

Several of the attackers gained access to an annex building where a senior official, George "Jake" Jacobson, one of the few individuals living on the compound (and who four years later would be my boss), was trapped without a weapon on the top floor. As the guerrillas made their way up the stairs inside the building, Jake opened the window and shouted for help. A Marine Security Guard threw his .45 caliber pistol up to Jacobson, who, according to the reports eventually making their way back to the Vietnam Training Center in Arlington, spun around and shot his would-be assassin in the face when he entered the room.

U.S. Superiority Takes a Hit

In tactical terms, the assault on the embassy was judged a failure. By 9:30 a.m., just six hours later, the episode had concluded. All of the Việt Cộng were dead, their bodies strewn around the embassy grounds. To demonstrate we had reestablished control, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker came to inspect the situation with a coterie of Western journalists, recording every image and then sending them back by wire service and video reports that would be seen in every remote corner of America.

In strategic terms, however, the penetration of the U.S. diplomatic compound, the symbolic heart of American power and authority, was the most traumatic and devastating aspect of Hanoi's monthlong countrywide offensive. The images and television reports of it undermined the confidence of the American people in the conduct of the war and began the erosion of the country's will to prevail in the conflict.

The perception that even with 500,000 U.S. military personnel in the country, we were unable to protect the embassy, the vital center of our operations, spread across America. Even for military hawks, the view began to take hold that something was profoundly flawed in the war effort. Concerns multiplied that the president and General William Westmoreland had badly misled the American people and foolishly ensnarled us in an unwinnable conflict.

The images of the fighting flowed almost instantly into millions of homes across America via television.

Political Unraveling

That was followed just a few days later, on April 4, by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I can still vividly recall standing transfixed outside our Arlington training center as huge plumes of black smoke rose out of the burning national capital city. That weekend, when the fires had been put out and order restored by units of the 82nd Airborne flown in from North Carolina, I drove into D.C. and saw the results of the rage that the murder of Dr. King had unleashed. The sights of burned buildings and helmeted soldiers carrying rifles with fixed bayonets on street corners remain with me to this day.

It was then that Robert Kennedy stepped to center stage. Carrying the mantle of Camelot, he seemed to offer the chance to restore the ascendancy of the New Frontier and the justice his brother, Jack, had pledged to African Americans. It seemed that the triumphalism of post-World War II America that JFK had symbolized could be restored. If there was any hope of undoing the damage to the body politic of the past four months, Bobby Kennedy was that possibility.

And then, in a hotel ballroom, that last chance for redemption was shattered on June 5 by an assassin's bullet that took Bobby Kennedy's life. Watching the hearse carry his body across Memorial Bridge en route to Arlington Cemetery, I recall feeling an incredible sense of depression about the direction of the country.

The anti-war protests and demonstrations in inner cities that multiplied across the country, followed by the turmoil at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that produced harsh responses by law enforcement, left the political process convulsed. The impact of this yearlong political unraveling became evident with the election of Richard Nixon later that year and the beginning of Vietnamization—turning the war effort over to South Vietnamese forces. It soon became clear that the U.S. was no longer trying to win the war, only to find a way out.

By the time I arrived in Vietnam in late November 1968, assigned as part of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in the Mekong Delta, I witnessed the rapid spread through the U.S. military of the attitude that “I don’t want to be the last person to die in Vietnam.” The contagion eroded discipline and morale, especially among draftees.



COURTESY OF KENNETH QUINN

In the second half of 1970, FSO Ken Quinn (center, white shirt) was the senior adviser in Duc Ton district of Sa Dec province in South Vietnam as part of MACV/CORDS Advisory Team #65. In that position, he led a 13-person U.S. Army team, participating in more than 100 hours of helicopter combat operations, becoming the only civilian and only FSO to earn the Army Air Medal. Pictured here with Quinn are (from left) team members Sgt. Norbert Stynski, Sgt. John Hoover, Capt. Paul Kalowski, Lt. Jim Connell, and Sgt. James Smith.

The visit to Vietnam of avuncular CBS evening news anchor Walter Cronkite in February, and his audible on-air sigh during his commentary upon return, expressing doubt that victory was possible, was the dagger to the heart of President Johnson's reelection bid. Approval ratings of the war effort dropped below 50 percent in just one month; and, as a result, insurgent Democratic candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota came close to pulling an upset over LBJ in the New Hampshire primary in mid-February.

Johnson, who had produced a remarkable array of legislative accomplishments in civil and voting rights following the JFK assassination, had in effect presided over what would be the final year of America's post-World War II triumphalism. It had been an ever-ascending period of U.S. global leadership and dominance, which made New York the commercial capital of the world, made Washington the epicenter of global military power and diplomatic influence, and caused America to be seen as the ubiquitous bulwark against communism.

Then, in a stunning array of increasingly traumatic political tremors and tragedies, America's triumphal position came undone. Violent paroxysms tore apart the country's political fabric and intensified opposition to the Vietnam War. In late March, as the Wisconsin primary approached, Johnson, trailing badly in the polls, stunned the country by withdrawing from the presidential race.

The perception that even with 500,000 U.S. military personnel in the country, we were unable to protect the embassy, spread across America.

While Nixon's election could be seen as temporarily providing a respite to the political turmoil that had, like an Iowa tornado, swirled the nation uncontrollably, events over the next few years continued to keep tensions high. The killings at Kent State, the Cambodian incursion, and eventually Watergate (which I observed as a member of Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff) left America exhausted, divided, and without the will to continue the Vietnam struggle.

The Final Blow

Seven years later, the ignominious disgrace of the American ambassador fleeing the advancing North Vietnamese Army

on April 29, 1975, from the roof of an embassy building in a helicopter, dealt the final blow to American triumphalism. It was the culmination of seven years of political upheaval, all of which had begun on that night in January 1968, when those 20 Việt Cộng blew their way into the U.S. embassy compound.

In an apocryphal reflection on the denouement of America's decade in Vietnam, the British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson was reported to have said: "In Indochina the Americans used the most powerful weapon known to humankind. The most intriguing aspect is that they used it against themselves."

He was referring to television, which in his view had contributed significantly to undercutting the will of the American people and thus led to our defeat in Vietnam. Despite U.S. military superiority in every way, that power had apparently been neutralized by the images, including those of dead Việt Cộng sappers inside the embassy compound, transmitted almost daily into every American home.

America's infallibility could be offset. A divided America could be defeated. ■



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THE FOREIGN SERVICE JOURNAL

THROUGH THE VISA WINDOW

Those Who Leave, Those We Left, Those Who Stay

The faces on both sides of the visa window in Ho Chi Minh City Consulate General reflect a complex history of war, partnership, and the American Dream.

BY GREG NAARDEN AND CHARLES HELMS

Ho Chi Minh City's (HCMC) Immigrant Visa (IV) Unit is a gold mine for amateur historians. Amid the mounds of documents and notes from daily interviews lies a microcosm of our relationship with Vietnam. The basic facts and figures show an extraordinary trajectory of population flows. Fifty years ago, the fall of South Viet-

nam started a massive outflow of refugees to the United States. Forty-five years ago, the United States established a main office in Bangkok as part of the orderly departure program (ODP) to support the continued flow of Vietnamese, and 25 years ago, that office was closed as the HCMC Consulate General opened.

Since opening in 1999, HCMC's IV Unit has supported the lawful immigration of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to the United States, and today, it is one of the five largest and busiest in the world, interviewing more than 30,000 people annually. U.S. census data indicates that with the continued flow of Vietnamese people, they are now the sixth-largest immigrant population in the United States.

Perceptions of America

Over 50 years, the nature of Vietnamese immigration has changed significantly. While those who left in the 1970s and 1980s did so generally as refugees, those who seek IVs today are largely hoping to reunite with family members. There are a few important recurring themes in our IV interviews.

Applicants from rural communities near Ho Chi Minh City or Da Nang in central Vietnam certainly view the United States



Greg Naarden is the consular chief in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He joined the Foreign Service in 2004, and in addition to several tours in Washington, D.C., he has served in Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.



Charles Helms is a first-tour political-coned Foreign Service officer in Ho Chi Minh City's Immigrant Visa Unit. Prior to joining the State Department, he worked in local government and regional economic development in Louisville, Kentucky.



U.S. CONSULATE HO CHI MINH CITY

U.S. Marines at plaque honoring members of the military who died defending the embassy in 1968.

as a place of opportunity, and they are pursuing immigration as a way to break out of difficult economic circumstances. With few opportunities for higher education or careers beyond unskilled labor, these applicants have spent years preparing for a move to the United States and, through networks of contacts in the diaspora, have plans to establish themselves through a job in a family-run business. Anecdotally, the notion of the United States as a land of possibilities is not limited by socioeconomic status.

Regardless of where they come from, many IV applicants are motivated by the idea of giving their children greater opportunities. A lot of this comes out in discussions about education; Vietnamese have placed a premium on English language instruction (there is a nationwide belief in the importance of speaking English proficiently), and many see a U.S. education as a ticket to a brighter future for their children.

The stories that applicants tell, and their motivations for immigrating to the U.S., are also reflections of a kind of pragmatism that is a noticeable characteristic of today's Vietnam. The United States is very popular in Vietnam—overwhelmingly so in public opinion polls—and Vietnamese people focus on the United States as a rich country full of opportunity, not as a for-

mer adversary. Very few people mention the war, and a majority of the population was born well after 1975. Landmarks from the fall of Saigon are visited mainly by tourists, and the site of the famous 1975 photograph of evacuees boarding a helicopter is atop a nondescript office building that is easy to miss.

But the IV applicant pool also tells us a lot about our own country. The Vietnamese diaspora in the United States has grown to an estimated 1.5 to 2 million over the last 50 years, and the core of that diaspora comes from the south—those who were allied with the United States, who lived in Central or South Vietnam, and mainly arrived in California or Texas in the 1970s or 1980s. Increasingly, though, destinations of Vietnamese IV applicants go well beyond the west and southwest—from Bauxite, Arkansas, to Raleigh, North Carolina. Knowing how new Vietnamese immigrants start out in the United States gives greater context to and appreciation for those who have become well known, such as former U.S. Representative Stephanie Murphy, who was born in HCMC, or Dat Nguyen, who was born in a refugee center in Arkansas and played middle linebacker for the Dallas Cowboys.

The lure of opportunity, a focus on the future, and a diaspora that contributes to the fabric of the United States are not unique

concepts to Vietnam. But in the context of the last half century, the fact that Vietnam is among the largest sources of IVs—along with Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Philippines, and China—is noteworthy.

Human Faces of the Legacy of War

While most IV applicants today are the beneficiaries of relatives who left the south and established lives in communities throughout the United States, some IV applicants never met their fathers and can neither ignore nor escape the legacy of the war. They are known as Amerasians, the children of U.S. servicemen, officials, and contractors who were left here when the United States departed in 1975. HCMC's Amerasian IV applicant pool is unique: As public attention turned to maltreatment of these children in the years after the war, Congress created a special immigrant visa class for these individuals through the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Over the years, more than 70,000 Amerasians and their family members have immigrated to the United States to start new lives.

Regardless of where they come from, many IV applicants are motivated by the idea of giving their children greater opportunities.

There are many tragic elements of this story. Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the war, Amerasians were completely marginalized in Vietnam as children of “enemy” Americans born during the war and denied education and employment opportunities, social support, government benefits, even identity cards. As a result, many lived as outcasts, some eking out a living in remote rural environments or taking to the streets of major cities. The majority of recent applicants were raised by adoptive families, abandoned by mothers who feared reprisals by the Vietnamese government against those viewed as



While our applicant pool tells us much about the history of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, we work with people who experienced that history firsthand.

having collaborated with American forces during the war. Most have distinct features that make them readily identifiable. Few could name their fathers, and fewer still have ever met them. In the best of cases, birth mothers or other relatives managed to preserve a photo or two.

This special IV category has given Amerasians a shot at a new life, but proving parentage has often been difficult. Particularly for applicants raised by adoptive parents, evidence was hard to come by. This problem was exacerbated by rampant fraud and attempts to exploit these applicants in the 1980s and 1990s along with a tendency by caretakers to tell orphans of uncertain parentage that they might be Amerasian—a form of hopeful storytelling, even if there was no reason to believe such claims.

As the years have passed, applicants with the strongest and easiest claims to prove have already been issued visas. Only those with complicated or unclear cases remain, and for several years, visa issuances ground to a near-halt. Resourceful consular officers engaged with nongovernmental organizations to create a process utilizing commercial DNA evidence, and this allowed for a minor resurgence in the visa class and a path forward for applicants who had been trying to prove their claims of American parentage for decades.

The number of Amerasian cases is dwindling, as this population ages into their 50s and 60s, remaining cases are cleared, and some of those eligible choose to remain in Vietnam.

Witnesses to History

Every consular officer must acknowledge that locally employed (LE) staff are the backbone of our operations; that is most assuredly true in HCMC's consular section. But it is truly amazing to work side by side with people who have experienced the full breadth of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship over the last 50 years.

Pictures of former Embassy Saigon from April 1975 are particularly poignant. Today, IV applicants enter the same

compound portrayed in those old pictures, though the former embassy chancery building was torn down long ago and the current prefab-style building was erected as a stand-in until a more permanent structure could be built. They line up patiently as they await their turn at the IV windows. Today's morning bustle of applicants is a striking contrast to the images from 50 years ago, when throngs of people scaled the same walls trying to escape Vietnam.

While our applicant pool tells us much about the history of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, we work with people who experienced that history firsthand. Several of our Vietnamese colleagues have been with us from the beginning, when the consulate building was dedicated in 1999. Some even worked for the ODP, before the U.S. established a relationship with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. While many of their colleagues have moved to the United States on SIVs, they have stayed, spending almost three decades in the service of the United States, and standing as living testaments to the human efforts of rebuilding a relationship.

Several of our current local staff members who lived through the war in Saigon were among the very first people hired to staff the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh City in the late 1990s. While much of the history of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship has been told through the eyes of ambassadors, historians, and politicians, the perspectives of our colleagues are fascinating and compelling. Yet our long-serving LE staff members do not dwell on the past. They choose to focus on the present and the future because they take a pragmatic approach to life: Working at the consulate is professionally enriching, and they are well respected in their communities. Some have even said that their friends respect them more because they work for the U.S. government in HCMC.

Our colleagues have had plenty of opportunities to move on, but they have chosen to serve alongside generations of FSOs who are focusing on the most recent 30 years, while being mindful of the last 50.



IV work in HCMC brings a range of conflicting emotions: satisfaction that Vietnamese still carry the torch of the American Dream; sadness about Amerasians who have had a lifetime of hardships; appreciation for Vietnamese partners who have stood with us and who saw a future beyond the war; and ultimately, optimism about the human ties that bind the United States and Vietnam. ■

STONE FRUIT DIPLOMACY

From the Golden State *to the* Land of the Blue Dragon

The significant progress made in agricultural trade over the last 30 years highlights the mutual benefits and promising future of the U.S.-Vietnam partnership.

BY MARC GILKEY



Marc Gilkey is a Senior Foreign Service officer who has served with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) for more than 30 years. He is currently posted in Bangkok as a Career Minister, where he serves as the regional manager for South

Asia, and will be heading to Japan this summer. He has served previously in Afghanistan, Mexico, India, Belgium, and Colombia, in addition to assignments in Washington, D.C. He is a Navy veteran. He wrote for the FSJ in 2019 on avocado diplomacy in Colombia, in 2022 on agricultural work in Afghanistan, and in 2024 on pomelo diplomacy for work in Thailand.

The year 1995, when the United States and Vietnam officially normalized diplomatic relations, was a major turning point, unlocking a new era of cooperation and engagement. Deeper diplomatic relations are often led by increased trade and cooperation, and trade in agricultural products is often at the center of that cooperation.

Nations have come to the table for thousands of years to negotiate, cooperate, and trade the bounty and surplus provided by agriculture. The significant progress made in agricultural trade and other sectors highlights the mutual benefits and promising future of the U.S.-Vietnam partnership.

The International Service (IS) wing of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) plays a unique and pivotal role in facilitating global agricultural trade. IS maintains a Foreign Service cadre stationed in U.S. embassies, enabling direct and immediate engagement with international partners to facilitate trade and prevent disruptions. Besides working to expand U.S. agricultural trade, the Foreign Service works to safeguard and strengthen it through technical cooperation.



Marc Gilkey (fourth from left) and J.J. Hurley (fifth from right) stand with Vietnamese officials in an orchard at the height of bloom on the outskirts of Hanoi celebrating the exchange of Texas Ruby Red grapefruit for Vietnamese pomelos in 2023.

From the early 2000s, APHIS and other agencies worked tirelessly to open and maintain market access for U.S. agricultural products in Vietnam. A big part of this success was ensuring safe trade practices, which involves meticulous sanitary and phytosanitary measures to protect both countries' agricultural sectors from invasive plant pests and animal diseases.

Today, as we celebrate the 30th anniversary of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations and mark 50 years since the end of the war, Vietnam ranks as the United States' 10th-largest export market for agricultural and food products (up from 24th just 15 years ago), while the United States is the largest agricultural export market for Vietnam. In addition to fruit, the U.S. exports cotton, soybeans, tree nuts, and poultry to Vietnam—all of which APHIS contributed significantly to facilitating and maintaining.

New Milestones

On Sept. 10, 2023, the U.S.-Vietnam relationship reached a new milestone when it was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This historic move marked a new phase of bilateral cooperation aimed at peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. Not long after, the symbolic exchange of Vietnamese pomelo and U.S. grapefruit took place. At the height of bloom in a pomelo orchard on the outskirts of Hanoi, APHIS International Services and Vietnam's Plant Protection Department symbolically solidified the relationship between the United States and Vietnam by trading U.S. (Texas) grapefruit with a local farmer and Vietnamese officials in exchange for a Vietnamese pomelo. It was "citrus diplomacy" in action.

For those who don't know, APHIS is the smallest Foreign Service agency, but our work is at the heart of most agricultural trade. The APHIS

Foreign Service, called "International Services," is the platform by which APHIS delivers all technical talent to support international agricultural diplomacy. We actively back and cultivate the capacity of communities, institutions, and governments to manage threats to agriculture in a way that is sustainable, effective, and protects plants, animals, and the finely interwoven global agricultural community.

International Services encompasses a range of technical experts in entomology, plant pathology, animal health, aquaculture, and risk management, whose expertise is leveraged across APHIS. We develop strategies to anticipate and address disease outbreaks, and we serve as a technical body assisting in the systematic identification, mitigation, and management of agricultural pests and diseases to reduce global crop and livestock losses. Through collaboration with foreign counterparts at



The author provides opening remarks at the California Fresh Fruit Association (CFFA) "Love California" event celebrating market access for peaches and nectarines in August 2024.



The first shipment of “California gold” from the Golden State is delivered to the taste testing event in August 2024.

diplomatic, policy, and technical levels, APHIS promotes science-based regulatory transparency that leads to safe and resilient agricultural trade.

Market access for fruits from the U.S. to Vietnam and vice versa supports producers and consumers of both countries. Thus, citrus diplomacy was followed by “stone fruit diplomacy” a year later. Looking at the U.S.-Vietnam relationship and working closely with the California Fresh Fruit Association (CFFA), APHIS determined that Vietnam, the “Land of the Blue Dragon,” could be a strategic export market for the “golden” state’s stone fruit industry.

In Vietnam, the dragon is a positive symbol of rain, agriculture, strength, and good luck; and the country’s coastal location and stunning azure waters add “blue.” Vietnamese consumers value high-quality and sweet fruit; California peaches and nectarines would most definitely meet this requirement. (I must admit—being from California and growing up on such amazing fresh fruit—there is nothing better than a juicy peach or nectarine on a hot August day.)

“Stone Fruit” Diplomacy

But as you probably guessed, it isn’t as easy as simply sending the fruit to Vietnam. This is where the APHIS Foreign Service comes in. The regulatory process is arduous, requiring on-the-ground engagement and numerous rounds of bilateral consulta-

Vietnam ranks as the United States’ 10th-largest export market for agricultural and food products, while the United States is the largest agricultural export market for Vietnam.

tions. First, all the potential plant pests and diseases must be identified in what we call a Pest Risk Assessment (PRA), and then risk mitigation measures are identified. After that, there are rounds of negotiation to establish guidelines. Only then can an import permit be issued, and California can begin to send its tasty and sweet peaches and nectarines.

Normally I would focus on all the technical hurdles we faced, but this story is more about one perfect day in Hanoi, a warm, pleasant August day—Aug. 14, 2024, to be exact—when some APHIS folks made history. The APHIS team in Hanoi is led by Senior Foreign Service Officer J.J. Hurley, with Brooke Rockentine as one of our newest Foreign Service officers, and locally employed (LE) staff members, agricultural scientists Nguyễn

Market access for fruits from the U.S. to Vietnam and vice versa supports producers and consumers of both countries.

Thị Hương and Phạm Thanh Phương. Local staff played an especially critical role in making Aug. 14 happen; through their work, we identified the Vietnamese importer, someone willing to be the first to take a chance, Klever Fruits. Klever was the first to import California peaches and nectarines on that beautifully warm and pleasant day when Vietnam welcomed the initial shipment.

Brooke and Hương met the shipment at the airport and worked with Vietnam's Plant Protection Department (PPD) to inspect and clear the fruit for celebrations across the city. Brooke participated in celebrating the first shipment with Klever Fruit and even shared her grandmother's peach cobbler recipe with the company.

Next was a fruit tasting event and a very symbolic welcome of a wrapped present of this "California Gold." The containers arrived with a big red ribbon, a gift to the people of Vietnam. The event was perfectly planned, and the tasting was delicious, as expected. After the tasting event, a very elegant evening event got quickly underway. Hosted by Klever Fruit, the event unveiled California peaches and nectarines to the Vietnamese consumer. U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper gave opening remarks, interviews, and overall support of the new market access. He expressed his appreciation to Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and encouraged the advancement of trade opportunities for both countries.

I was honored to give opening remarks as well, highlighting the teamwork between APHIS and Vietnam's Plant Protection Department. At the end, Caroline Stringer, director of trade for the California Fresh Fruit Association, gifted peaches and nectarines to all dignitaries. The event concluded with dinner, pictures, and, of course, a lot of peaches and nectarines.

When all was done, I thanked the amazing APHIS staff in Hanoi, rushed back along the same path the peaches and nectarines had just taken to gather my family in Bangkok, and headed home to the Golden State.



The APHIS Team and California Fresh Fruit Association enjoy the fruits of their labor in August 2024. From left: Phạm Thanh Phương, Brooke Rockentine, Caroline Stringer (CFFA), Marc Gilkey, Đỗ Hữu Dũng, and Nguyễn Thị Hương.

A Long Journey

After picking up the rental car and heading down State Route 99 toward Sacramento, as we have dozens of times to visit family, I was thrilled to pass a small green sign installed along the roadside to celebrate Sacramento's Vietnamese community. In 2010 the City Council designated a two-mile section of Stockton Boulevard as "Little Saigon." It's a vibrant, lively neighborhood with dozens of Vietnamese restaurants, coffee shops, jewelry stores, bakeries, and markets. This neighborhood is a remembrance of the shared Vietnamese and American history, a history of both war and friendship, creating a lasting legacy that continues to heal and evolve.

The evolution of U.S.-Vietnam relations from the fall of Saigon to the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and beyond is a testament to the power of diplomacy and cooperation. APHIS International Services has played a crucial role in this journey, demonstrating the importance of dedicated and skilled diplomats in identifying and achieving opportunities and progress.

Klever Fruit, the Vietnamese importer, uses the Golden Gate Bridge in their promotional campaign for California peaches and nectarines. Across Asia, the bridge—whose name, "Golden Gate," referred historically to the entrance of trade into the U.S. from the Pacific Rim—is often seen as a symbol of American innovation and progress. The gateway between the Americas and the East, it represents the potential for global exchange and deepening connection across the Pacific. ■

LIVES UPENDED

The Impact of USAID's Dismantling on Those Who Serve

For members of the U.S. Foreign Service, the mission is what matters. Foreign Service members and their families pack up their lives and go where their country needs them, serving across the world in challenging environments.

USAID Foreign Service officers serve in the toughest places—the poorest, the least secure, the least developed—because these are the places where their work makes the biggest difference. They stop diseases from reaching our borders, which keeps all Americans healthier. They ensure children are fed where they live, keeping would-be migrants in their homes. They buy U.S. products and deliver them to the people and places where the products are most needed, which helps U.S. farmers and businesses prosper.

As the dismantling of USAID continues, staff are being fired, partner organizations are not being paid for their work, and USAID members and their families face life-altering uncertainty and disruption. The following testimonials from USAID FSOs are part of the “Service Disrupted” AFSA public outreach campaign highlighting the experiences of diplomats and development professionals whose work has been disrupted by recent policy decisions—and the impact of those decisions on Americans.

While we cannot share them all here, we hope what follows will shed light on the profound toll these decisions have taken on those who serve. These stories have been lightly edited for clarity. We will continue to share stories in the *FSJ* and on our social media channels as we receive them. If you have a story to share, please send it to humans-of-fs@afsa.org.

We honor and thank our USAID colleagues and family members for their service.

—The Editors

Struggling to Rebuild Routines

When political violence broke out in Kinshasa in late January, I fled my home in the middle of the night, carrying just one small bag. I was joined by my husband, my children, and 211 colleagues and families. In a typical evacuation, you expect to have access to U.S. government support services when you arrive in the U.S. But because USAID Staff Care services weren't accessible anymore, I needed to download all my personnel records, find housing, enroll my kids in school, and brace for losing my job—all while supporting traumatized colleagues still at work in the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] and others being needlessly persecuted because of political rhetoric and misinformation about the mission and workforce of USAID.

Here in D.C., I am hotel-hopping, sharing a room with my husband and two children, ages 9 and 11, as we try to find longer-term housing options.

I spend my days trying to keep up with what's happening in the DRC, working, checking on colleagues, wondering if our home and possessions back in Kinshasa have been looted or destroyed, and refreshing emails to see if I have been placed on administrative leave or fired. Uncertainty and insecurity frame every thought and decision I try to make. I am paralyzed as the actions of this administration continue to harm my colleagues, our partners, and the people we serve as we work to make America safe, strong, and prosperous.

USAID Is Not a Charity

I have served with USAID, advancing U.S. strategic interests abroad for more than 15 years. During my career, I've been an FSN [locally employed staff], a USAID contractor, an FSL [Foreign Service Limited employee], and finally an FSO. From day one, I understood that USAID is not a charity—it is an invest-

ment in American security. My efforts contributed to reducing youth radicalization, fostering economic partnerships, and strengthening diplomatic ties.

One of the most effective programs I led was an English language initiative in a MENA country [Middle East and North Africa], which successfully integrated English into the national curriculum from primary school through university. This program was not just about language—it was about building pro-American sentiment, expanding economic opportunities, and countering misinformation. I was on the verge of replicating this success in Mali for 20,000 young people when the decision to recall FSOs and shut down critical programs came down from the new administration. This decision directly undermines U.S. influence and security efforts in regions vulnerable to extremism.

On a personal level, this action has left my family in crisis. Losing my job means I can no longer afford my small apartment in Virginia, the only home I have. With no means to cover the mortgage, I face foreclosure. Worse, my daughter will be forced to drop out of school, derailing her future. My husband and I now face homelessness, with nowhere to go once we return to the U.S. Our savings will not sustain us for more than a month.

Food Left to Rot

I am from Pennsylvania and have been with USAID for more than a decade. I have worked in several sectors—economic growth, education, and democracy and governance—across several continents and countries, including Afghanistan. I speak three languages and have attained the highest level of education. Using the administration's own terminology, I am highly qualified and “have merit,” having overcome some of the challenges of being from a historically marginalized community.

On the day the stop-work order was announced, my [implementing partners] were in the field, heading out to provide meals to hundreds of hungry children in drought-stricken and conflict-affected communities. In compliance with the stop-work order, we stopped delivery of the meals. The perishable foods were left to rot while the children went hungry. Letting

food go to waste while children went without did not make America stronger, safer, or more prosperous.

The Future Looks Bleak

I'm from California; I've been a Foreign Service officer for not quite three years. My future looks bleak, as does the agency's. My wife and I worked very hard to make it into the Foreign Service. We both sacrificed our previous careers, proximity to family and community, and even time together for this dream. I had just received my onward assignment, which would put me geographically closer to my wife, and we were looking forward to starting a family.

Frankly, I am completely in shock and without a plan. They are even saying we have to leave our dog behind.

What is the point? Where is the emergency? This false sense of urgency in shuttering the agency is destroying careers and causing immense pain for some of the finest Americans I know—those who were proud to represent, serve, and share America's goodwill in the world.

Standing Up for the Voiceless

I am a resident of Virginia and have been with USAID for nearly 18 years—first as a civil servant and now as a Foreign Service officer. I have served in numerous administrations, both Republican and Democratic, and I have lived up to my oath of working in the public interest. My area of expertise is democracy, governance, and civil society, and I have spent my career standing up for the rights of those who have no voice.

I now find that I am in the same unfortunate place myself. I was placed on administrative leave along with nearly 2,200 staff in Washington, D.C. My husband, who works for an international organization, was laid off along with two-thirds of his staff with just two weeks' severance pay. With both of us unexpectedly unemployed, we will have to live off our savings and leave our home to find jobs elsewhere.

During my 20 years in government, I have served loyally in Washington and in three missions overseas. I have implemented policies I did not agree with because my job has always required supporting any elected administration's decisions. I have worked with difficult governments to find

“In compliance with the stop-work order, we stopped delivery of the meals. The perishable foods were left to rot while the children went hungry.”

connections between government and civil society. I have dutifully managed more than \$180 million of programming entrusted to me by the American taxpayer. I have visited project sites in the equatorial heat and freezing Andes. I have lived in very poor countries and adapted to the unimaginable.

I have done all this without complaint at the expense of my health and that of my family, who followed me around the world.

Leaving Patients to Die

I am originally from California, and I have been with USAID for nearly 15 years. I am currently doing long-term training at the School for Advanced Military Studies in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I moved my family here in June 2024, and now I'm not sure if I will be able to complete the degree program. My family lives on base, and I fear that my kids may get yanked out of their home and school should we be terminated.

I am grieving for my family, for everything we stand to lose. But more than anything, I grieve for our abandoned programs, our local staff and implementing partner staff, and, most of all, our beneficiaries. My colleagues and I have dedicated our lives



“Uncertainty and insecurity frame every thought and decision I try to make.”

to helping people, and we are now leaving patients high and dry—without services, health providers, and lifesaving medical treatment.

Medical Evacuation in Limbo

I hail from California, and I have been with USAID since 2009. I arrived in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 21, 2025, on a medevac from U.S. Embassy Bujumbura, where I have served for more than three years. I was diagnosed with a life-threatening blood disease that will require several weeks of both inpatient and outpatient care before I can return to post. The executive orders and recalls that began after my hospitalization have caused distress and anxiety, as I fear my medevac status will be revoked, and I will be stranded without coverage for the outpatient care required by State’s Bureau of Medical Services. I am fighting for my life—this added uncertainty is not helping my recovery.

Mission Accomplished

I am from Georgia, and I’ve been with USAID for 20 years. I am feeling a deep sense of betrayal. I’ve served in war zones. Been shot at. Had friends die. All in the service of USAID and the United States. We help open markets to U.S. goods and services. We work to improve U.S. national security.

My spouse, my young child, and I were evacuated from a previous post due to a political uprising. People were being shot on the street in front of our house. We were uprooted in 48 hours, our lives in complete upheaval—my spouse lost her embassy job, our son was pulled from school. It took years of counseling and work to recover from that experience. We specifically chose a more stable post for this assignment because of the trauma of the previous post. Now we are living it again, but this time without any job security. My spouse and I both work at the embassy. If we are pulled to D.C., we will lose both incomes, and we have nowhere to live. How do we apply for jobs with no address? How can we enroll our child in school?

This administration said they want to traumatize their own workforce. Congratulations: Mission accomplished. And for what? For our 20 years of sacrifice in trying to make the world a better place.

With Only a Go Bag

I am from Virginia. We were evacuated from post under cover of darkness onto boats with only a go bag. The evacuation, precipitated by insecurity in the Congo, has completely uprooted our lives. If that weren’t already hard enough, we are living in limbo as the agency I have so proudly served is vil-lainized, purged, and dismantled. I do not know when I will be unfairly fired, whether my evacuation expenses will be reimbursed, or whether I should (or can even afford to) enroll my children in daycare.

My two children are traumatized—they are having trouble sleeping and eating and keep asking when we will be able to go back “home” to Kinshasa. They miss our dog, their friends, toys, and daily routines. This devastating experience will be replicated 1,400 times over if all USAID Foreign Service officers are forcibly removed from their overseas posts and recalled back to Washington, D.C., under dehumanizing conditions with little dignity or respect.

The DRC is a hardship post. I’ve been working there for two years, four months of those alone with my kids as my husband pursued his dream of becoming a Foreign Service officer himself back in Washington, D.C. I managed a program in the DRC to disrupt criminal networks engaged in human trafficking, protect U.S. economic interests, and safeguard our national security. This program, like so many others, is now on hold and will likely die, putting Americans more at risk. Simply put, the vacuum we are leaving cedes control to China and Russia.

I have sacrificed so much to serve my country, but nothing has been as demoralizing and excruciating as the degrading manner in which my service is being vilified by those who don’t understand the vital role that USAID plays in protecting our national security, building stable trading partners, and staving off fatal epidemics.

Improving Life for Millions of Kids

I grew up in Indiana and have been a Foreign Service officer with USAID for nearly four years. I changed careers from teaching elementary school to managing education development programs with USAID because

I saw an opportunity to improve the lives of millions of children around the world.

I felt that I was representing the best of what America has to offer and serving my country.

False statements have portrayed me as a criminal to my fellow citizens. The misinformation and wrongful accusations about USAID and FSOs, along with the flood of unpredictable orders and lack of guidance about their implementation, have resulted in my family feeling very stressed. It is especially frustrating because the chaos seems to be inflicted intentionally and is actually at odds with the purported vision to safeguard and increase benefits to U.S. citizens of U.S. taxpayer funds.

I Believed in the Mission

I grew up in California, the first in my immigrant family to earn a college degree. Fourteen years ago, I joined USAID because I wanted to make a difference—helping communities grow their own food, protect their land, and build better futures. My work has taken me all over the world, and just seven months ago, I moved my family again for a new role, believing in the mission and the stability it provided us.

Now, everything is falling apart. The push to recall diplomats and shut down USAID isn't just about losing a job—it's about losing our home, our security, and our future. The public attacks on us have been heartbreaking, but what's worse is the uncertainty for my family. Our last transition was difficult, and we are just now settling into our new home—one we are suddenly being ordered to leave.

On top of that, my son needs surgery, which can't be performed in the high-security-risk country to which we've been assigned. We resigned ourselves to waiting until the next time we're in the U.S. for the procedure, relying on the stability of our insurance when we opted to wait. If we're forced to move abruptly, I don't know how we'll ensure his medical care.

I've spent my career helping others build security in their lives. Now, my own family is being thrown into chaos. It's terrifying, and I don't know what comes next.

Keeping Americans Safe

I'm originally from Virginia and have served in and around USAID for more than 20 years. I've worked directly for USAID for more than 10 years, much of that time spent working on the front lines in Afghanistan and across Africa, with the rest spent in Washington, D.C., on peace and security policy implementation. My entire career has been devoted to programs that advance U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives,

“My husband and I now face homelessness, with nowhere to go once we return to the U.S.”

from stabilizing fragile regions to promoting peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected zones. These missions are not abstract—they've required real sacrifices, long hours in volatile environments, and unwavering commitment to U.S. values abroad. But my work is important, and it keeps my fellow Americans safe.

The recent efforts to recall Foreign Service officers and downsize USAID have had a deeply personal impact on me and my family. But more than that, this decision threatens to undo years of work by dedicated American patriots, who have risked their lives to protect U.S. interests and promote stability globally. I have colleagues who made the ultimate sacrifice while serving, and many others who carry the invisible scars of their time in conflict zones. Their sacrifices—and those of their families—deserve recognition and respect, not abandonment.

For us, this isn't just about jobs or bureaucratic shifts—it's about the deep commitment we've made to service and the mission we believe in. My family and I have carried the weight of that responsibility, knowing that what we do saves lives, builds peace, and protects the U.S. at home. But now, it feels as though our commitment is being disregarded, leaving us uncertain about what comes next.

Welcome to Post

I'm an FSO from Texas, and I've been with USAID for 12 years total, although this is my first year as an FSO. I arrived at post on Jan. 25, just as USAID was beginning to be dismantled. The day I arrived, the Trump administration announced a freeze on foreign aid. On day six, I received notice that all global staff would be put on administrative leave and had to leave the country. Everything I owned was in transit to post; I'm now told the shipment will be held until further instructions arrive. When it finally does arrive at post, it will have to clear customs in country before it can be sent back home. It will be at least 8 months before I am reunited with my possessions.



“I carry the greater burden of knowing our abrupt withdrawal has left our Belarusian partners in real mortal danger from an authoritarian regime.”

No Hope After Miscarriage

I am an FSO from Missouri. I’ve worked for USAID for a decade—first as a contractor and then in the Foreign Service. I am currently posted to a tiny country surrounded by neighbors facing civil war, terrorism, and famine. Where I am serving, there are no playgrounds, no grass, rampant malaria, no fresh fruit, no potable water. I moved here with my young children to represent the U.S. government and help advance key national security objectives.

The last three weeks have been terrifying for me and my family. We face the prospect of losing my job, our sole source of income; our only home; and our health insurance. We’ll have to rip our children out of school in the middle of the school year. Worst of all, at the end of last year we decided to try for another child knowing that we would be at post this fall, and early this year I found out I was pregnant. The physical and psychologi-

cal stress of the past weeks—not eating, not sleeping, rushing to pack up our lives with only a few days’ notice, getting our pet’s health clearance to travel on a day’s notice, trying to reassure my staff in what little way I could that I am looking out for them—all of that resulted in a miscarriage yesterday. Now the one last glimmer of hope for what we saw our lives being in 2025 is gone.

Leaving Partners in Danger

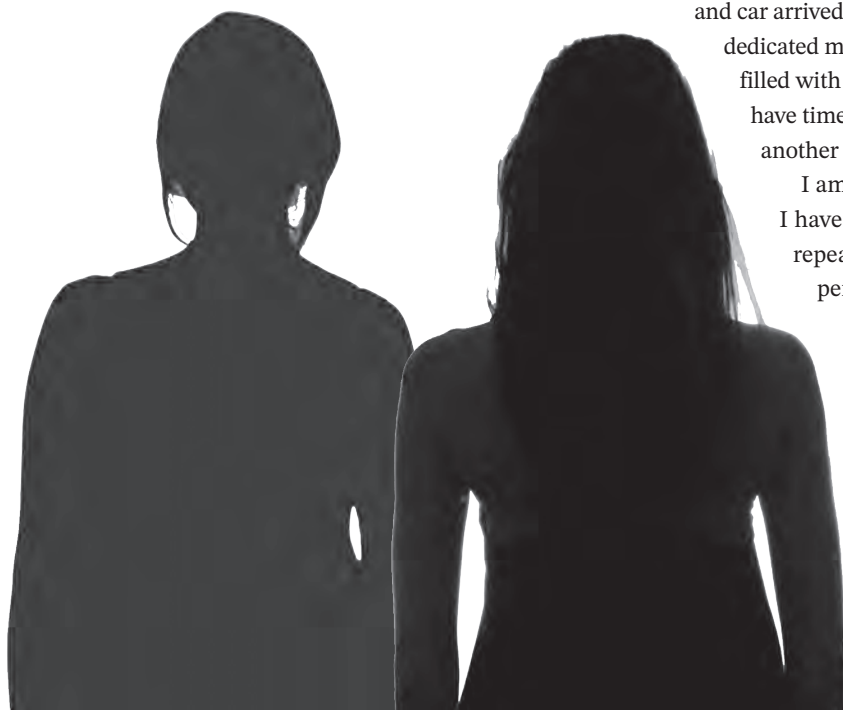
I am a Foreign Service officer with more than 16 years of service. I am from California and have proudly served in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Haiti, USCENTCOM, Guatemala, South Sudan, Iraq, the Ebola response in West Africa, and now the mission to Belarus. Before joining USAID, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco.

My entire adult life has been dedicated to service. I have been rocketed, shot at, missed family milestones, and endured health challenges, but I have always been proud to represent my country and USAID’s mission: From the American People.

My husband and I arrived in Belarus in mid-December 2024, spending thousands of our own dollars to relocate. After a grueling year in Juba—where we faced constant threats of violence and evacuation—this assignment offered a chance for stability. In South Sudan, my husband suffered severe pneumonia twice, likely from diesel fumes from the compound generators next to our hooch. He was eventually medically evacuated to South Africa, spending a week in the hospital on oxygen. We were relieved to start fresh with health care and a safe home.

Just as we were settling in, a day after our household effects and car arrived, we were told that the organization I have dedicated my life to no longer exists. Our house is in chaos, filled with unopened boxes. I am panicked that I won’t have time to organize travel for my cat. How can I plan another international move with no information?

I am close to retirement but not close enough. I have committed my life to serving my country, repeatedly going into danger, trusting that my pension and health care would be there for my family if the worst happened. Beyond the very intense stress and anxiety of losing my career, income, and health care, I carry the greater burden of knowing our abrupt withdrawal has left our Belarusian partners in real mortal danger from an authoritarian regime. And no one back home seems to care. ■



A Brief RIF EXPLAINER

We've faced RIFs in the past. One FSO dug into the FAM to learn about the legal parameters of reductions in force.

BY DAVID ROBERTS

The U.S. Department of State last effected a reduction in force (RIF) for Foreign Service officers in the early 1990s—before many of today's most seasoned diplomats joined the Service. The department nearly went through it again in 2017, in response to direction from then-Secretary Rex Tillerson and OMB Director Mick Mulvaney to trim the overall budget by 34 percent. At the time, the department—with support from AFSA—was able to stave off the threat of a RIF by implementing other budget cuts and a departmentwide hiring freeze.

So how would a RIF work, anyway? The Foreign Service Act of 1980, as amended and implemented by 3 FAM 2580, offers a clear legal framework for implementing a reduction in force.

What Happens During a RIF?

The Secretary of State holds the primary authority to conduct reductions in force within the Foreign Service. This authority is explicitly outlined in Section 611 of the Foreign

Service Act of 1980, which broadly authorizes the Secretary to order a RIF for the purpose, *inter alia*, of effecting “organizational changes.”

In practice, the Secretary, in consultation with senior staff and the Director General, determines the need for such organizational changes—likely in response to budgetary constraints or as directed by the president. During the 2017 review, for example, the department froze spousal employment as it determined whether a RIF would be necessary.

Prior to making a RIF determination, the department can choose to take other force-shaping measures, like incentivizing voluntary retirements. In the past, most agencies haven't jumped straight to RIFs, instead implementing hiring freezes and offering voluntary retirement and separation incentives to mitigate the need for involuntary separations.

After determining the need for a RIF, the next step is to identify changes to the organizational structure and the positions affected. For example, a directive to cut personnel by 30 percent would prompt a review to determine which domestic offices and overseas posts could be consolidated and downsized, and which positions should be eliminated.

Following this, the Director General determines how such a reorganization would affect the department and decides how many positions in each competitive class and Foreign Service cone and specialty would be eliminated. The Secretary must then analyze and justify the implications of a RIF to Congress.



David Roberts is a third-tour Foreign Service political officer, part of a tandem, currently serving in Pretoria. The opinions in this article are his own.

The Secretary of State holds the primary authority to conduct reductions in force within the Foreign Service. This authority is explicitly outlined in Section 611 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

A State Department reorganization would not mean that officers encumbering Foreign Service positions identified for elimination would necessarily be severed from employment. The Foreign Service Act requires the Secretary to account for “documented employee knowledge, skills, or competencies; tenure of employment; documented employee performance; and military preference” when executing a RIF and requires these principles to be applied consistently and fairly. Consequently, any employee structure downsizing under a RIF takes place through a competitive process.

What Is the RIF Process?

The RIF process defined by 3 FAM 2584 et seq. looks remarkably similar to the Foreign Service accession process, only in reverse. Foreign Service generalists may be assigned to a “competition group” based on class. The Director General can combine several cones into a competition group or evaluate each cone separately. The rule is slightly different for Foreign Service specialists: The FAM directs that each class within a specialist skill group will constitute a separate competition group. The RIF may be targeted to some or all competitive groups. The Director General could hypothetically determine to RIF 90 percent of medical officers, half of economic and political officers, and no management officers, if circumstances require.

Once the competition groups are established, each officer within the group is assigned a tenure group: Group I, for tenured officers; Group II, for officers serving in limited career extensions granted following expiration of time-in-class limitations; and Group III, for untenured officers. Generalists are then assigned a composite score with points accumulated for veterans’ preference, language proficiency, and the results of each of the five previous promotion selection boards. Additionally, Foreign Service specialists are awarded credit for the number of years it took for them to promote to their current class from a “base class” of FP-7 (for office management specialists, or OMSs) and FP-5 (for all other specialties). Ties in composite

score are broken by service computation date, in favor of officers with longer time in service.

As an illustration, consider Anne, a tenured FS-2 political officer with 12 years of experience and a 3/3 proficiency in both Arabic and Spanish, and who was promoted to her current rank four years ago and received a Meritorious Step Increase (MSI) last year. Anne would receive two points for her language proficiency and five points for her MSI. She would also accumulate 45 points for her selection board reviews: 15 points for the year she was promoted; 10 points for each of the first two years following her promotion during which she was ineligible; and five points each for this year and the year before her promotion, during which she was reviewed for promotion but not selected. Anne’s total composite score would be 52.

Next, consider Billy, a tenured FP-3 OMS with 18 years of experience in the Foreign Service, after being hired at FP-7. He does not have any language proficiency at the 3/3 level but happens to be a disabled veteran. He was promoted to his current rank this year and promoted to FP-4 three years ago. This OMS would accumulate 10 points for his status as a veteran and 36 points for having reached FP-3 in 18 years. He would also accumulate 50 points based on his five most recent selection boards. Billy’s total composite score would be 96.

Finally, consider Corrie, a tenured FS-2 economic officer with 10 years of experience and a 3/3 proficiency in Mandarin. This officer was promoted to their current rank two years ago and happens to carry a disabled veteran status. Corrie would receive one point for language and 10 points for veterans’ preference. They would then accumulate 45 points for selection board reviews: 15 points for the year they were promoted; 10 points for each of the last two years during which they were ineligible for promotion; and five points each for the two years before they were promoted. Corrie’s total composite score would be 56.

Once composite scores are assigned, registers are prepared for each competition group. On each register, members are ranked in descending order based first, on tenure group, and then by composite score. Then, among officers with the same composite score, ties are broken by service computation date. Returning to our illustration, Billy probably would not compete on the same register as Anne and Corrie—but Anne and Corrie, as FS-2 political and economic officers, could be listed on the same register. In that event, Corrie would be listed higher on the register by virtue of having a higher composite score.

A few interesting implications can be drawn from this analysis. First, untenured officers and officers on career extensions are at a distinct disadvantage when competing against tenured

and nonextended peers. Second, the composite score calculation tends to reward performance and potential rather than time in service, which only factors in when composite scores are tied. Finally, language proficiency and especially veterans' preference are distinguishing factors. Officers who could qualify for either should take the time now to test on language skills and ensure any veterans' preference is appropriately noted in their records.

What Happens If I Am Selected for Reduction?

After the registers are prepared and published, there is no statutory or regulatory provision for qualitative review of officers' records, as there is during a promotion board. Instead, the Director General will determine how many positions from each register need to be cut and then select those positions in the inverse order of the register. The cuts need not be uniform across classes and occupational codes.

Once the Secretary directs a RIF, the Director General typically provides a general notice of the RIF, including information on the number and the competition groups from which employees will be released, and a deadline for inclusion of

additional information in affected employee profiles. Then, once the Director General has executed the RIF, each employee to be separated should receive a specific notice at least 120 days—or as little as 30 days, if the RIF is caused by “circumstances not reasonably foreseeable”—prior to the effective date of separation. Affected members can then file grievances under Chapter 11 of the Foreign Service Act or file appeals with the Merit Systems Protection Board. Such grievances are limited to cases of reprisal, interference in the conduct of an employee's official duties, or other prohibited personnel practices; and filing a grievance will not delay the effective date of separation.

Additionally, it is worth noting that federal employees who are involuntarily separated under a RIF maintain certain re-employment rights, including hiring preference for federal jobs. The full scope of these rights is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice to say that a RIF need not be forever, as the needs of the government may change.

For more on potential RIFs, please see the AFSA update on page 72 as well as AFSA's resource page on RIFs at <https://afsa.org/reductions-in-force>. ■

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Discovering Extended Family at Spirit of America

This former Foreign Service officer found a way to take his development expertise into the nonprofit world.

BY CHAZ MARTIN

When I joined the Foreign Service in 2007, I joined a small family. A speaker told our training class that our family of Foreign Service officers (FSOs) was so small, we were outnumbered by the Department of Defense's uniformed musicians. To succeed, we would need to depend on each other. Over 11 years of service, I learned how important the Foreign Service family bond can be. It enabled teams I worked with to help save the lives of American citizens in Sudan, defend independent media in Tajikistan, counter extremism in Afghanistan, and

build partnerships with dynamic young leaders in Kazakhstan.

I left the Foreign Service in 2018 to join a London-based strategic communications agency and quickly discovered that the private sector had tools and technical capabilities that I never had at an embassy. It was illuminating to gain new skills outside the department, but I missed the sense of mission and family I experienced working with Foreign Service colleagues every day.



The Foreign Service has a funny way of pulling you back. Five years after I left the department, my wife joined the Foreign Service and was assigned to Tajikistan, where we had been posted a decade before. This time, I was proud to take my turn as a Foreign Service spouse. As an eligible family member (EFM) working in the public affairs section, I wondered what impact I could make as a now literal member of the Foreign Service family.

I found out on Aug. 15, 2021, when the Afghan government collapsed, triggering a mass exodus from the country.

Thousands of Afghan refugees poured into Tajikistan and found safety in the town of Vahdat, where they used a dilapidated building as a makeshift community center and English language school. Tajikistan's only Dari language school, serving 500 Afghan girls and boys, announced it would shut down within days because it depended on funding from the now-fallen Afghan government. The school needed only \$2,500 per month to make rent—a rounding error for most U.S. assistance programs—but for technical reasons, the embassy was unable to identify a funding stream to cover it.

That's when I discovered Spirit of America, a nonprofit organization that directs private American funding to help U.S. troops and diplomats succeed in their missions—a sort of “extended family” for the Foreign Service.



Spirit of America's model is to channel private donations and independent capabilities to meet needs identified by servicemembers and diplomats, thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding with the



Chaz Martin is director of international communications at Spirit of America. As a Foreign Service officer from 2007 to 2018, he served in Sudan,

Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. He was named the department's 2016 Linguist of the Year for his work countering Russian disinformation. The author can be reached at chaz@spiritofamerica.org.



COURTESY OF CHAZ MARTIN

Embassy Dushanbe public affairs team member Shefali Agrawal and Chaz Martin at Afghan refugee school in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, December 2021.

Department of Defense and inclusion in the National Defense Authorization Act. Because Spirit of America neither seeks nor receives U.S. government funding, it can often operate faster and more flexibly than government-funded partners. In Tajikistan, Spirit of America had been providing support for years, ranging from COVID-19 protective gear to upgrades for the American Space facilities that are used for public diplomacy and other outreach to local community members.

When I told Spirit of America Regional Director Zack Bazzi about the imminent closure of the refugee school and the plight of the Afghan community in the town of Vahdat, he responded within an hour, offering to provide emergency funding to cover the school's rent for the year. While U.S. government funding might have

taken months, Spirit of America sent the school the funds it needed within days, saving it from closure and keeping kids in classrooms. In Vahdat, Spirit of America funded renovations, equipment, and even American Space programming to transform the Afghan community center into a vibrant, welcoming educational hub helping refugee students of all ages. Building on this success, Spirit of America launched the Afghan Future Campaign to create opportunity for thousands of young people across Central Asia and the Middle East.

Spirit of America's model of agile, innovative support inspired me as a way I could continue supporting the mission of the Foreign Service outside of government. In January 2023, I became an official member of the Spirit of America team, helping embassies and deployed

troops accomplish missions that otherwise might not be possible.

My work as Spirit of America's director of international communications often comes full circle to my time as a Foreign Service officer. Ten years ago, as a public affairs officer in Almaty, Kazakhstan, I led a communications campaign to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II. Today, at Spirit of America, I am helping the U.S. mission to Germany and its local partners in Leipzig mark the 80th anniversary of liberation through an independent digital campaign to educate young people about the role of U.S. troops in securing the freedoms we now enjoy. The lesson is clear: Whether inside or outside of government, we can all play a part in promoting American values and partnership.

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Spirit of America Regional Program Manager Alex Ebsary (right) and U.S. Ambassador Dan Rosenblum (center) at the Aral Sea greenhouse ribbon-cutting in Kazakhstan, April 2024.



At Spirit of America, I have seen my colleagues leverage our model to make transformational changes.

In Europe, our team helps local partners stand up to Russian pressure in ways large and small. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, our Regional Director Colleen Denny was on the ground within days. Since then, she and her team have delivered more than \$59 million in private assistance. Beyond nonlethal support to the Ukrainian military like trucks, buses, and mobile showers, Colleen's team empowers Ukrainian youth through UActive, a program that works with high school students to develop and implement projects to help their communities recover. Next door in Moldova, U.S. Embassy Chisinau identified a need to help rural communities endure the winter after Russia disrupted energy supplies to pressure the country's democratic government. Colleen's team responded by helping Moldovan partners deliver firewood and fuel to keep hundreds of families and schools warm.

Across Asia, our team helps local partners build resilience from the Taiwan Straits to the Gobi Desert. In Taiwan, our Asia-Pacific team is helping civic organizations build their democracy's resilience to crises. My colleague Josh Brandon and his Asia-Pacific team have helped Taiwanese partners train thousands of people in life-saving crisis preparedness skills. When Embassy Ulaanbaatar highlighted Mongolia's food insecurity and dependence on Chinese agriculture, Josh's team partnered with a Fulbright scholar to build a solar-equipped well and greenhouse in the desert, allowing local herders to feed their families and sell to local markets.

In Africa, Spirit of America supports diplomats in critically important places that don't make the daily headlines, like Comoros, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean that needed help countering maritime trafficking and People's Republic of China (PRC) fishing encroachment. To help U.S. Embassy Moroni strengthen the Comoros Coast Guard's surveillance and search and rescue capabilities, Spirit of America's Africa Regional Director

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Spirit of America Assistant Program Manager Maya Sullivan delivering backpacks to Afghan students in Tajikistan, June 2022.



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John Schroder launched a pilot program to provide surveillance drones and training. Spirit of America's early investment in maritime domain awareness was so successful it ultimately led to a much larger U.S. government investment. As terrorism has spiked across the Sahel, so has our Africa team's collaboration with U.S. embassies in coastal West Africa, where we help local partners build resilience to threats to their communities and democracies.

In the Middle East, Spirit of America works closely with embassies and military personnel to fill critical gaps between what is needed and what the U.S. government can do. In Iraqi Kurdistan, our team is partnering with Consulate General Erbil and the Kurdistan Regional Government to train hundreds of Peshmerga security personnel in English-language skills, expanding their access to U.S. training programs. Beyond military collaboration, our team empowers local partners to create opportunity, like a community-based tourism project to map trails in the Zagros Mountains. Our work in Iraqi Kurdistan has strengthened America's relationship with an important partner in the Middle East.



I've seen the power of strategic private investments—what we like to call “venture capital for national security”—that can help larger U.S.-funded projects make a bigger difference. In Kazakhstan, for example, my colleague Alex Ebsary learned that USAID was helping Central Asian partners restore life in a place the Soviet Union had left for dead: the Aral Sea basin. Through the Oasis project, USAID planned to introduce drought-resistant plants to counter desertification and reduce the spread of toxic dust that threatened public health.

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LIFE AFTER THE FOREIGN SERVICE

Spirit of America helps Taiwanese civic organizations train citizens in emergency response capabilities, and it joined national exercises in 2023 and 2024.

There was a problem, however: The project needed a new greenhouse to grow 100,000 plants every year in the middle of the desert. Spirit of America invested \$55,000 in private funding to build the greenhouse, the missing piece that enabled the \$10 million-plus Oasis project to make impact at scale. To help tell this story of recovery and partnership, we invited some of Kazakhstan's most popular social media influencers to visit the Aral Sea. The story resonated: Through Instagram and TikTok, more than 1.1 million viewers across Central



COURTESY OF CHAZ MARTIN

Asia learned how partnership between the United States and Central Asia is helping the region heal.

I loved being in the Foreign Service. Today, I have the privilege of being part of its extended family of veterans, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and like-

minded citizens who believe in the ideals of America and stand with people around the world who share our values. By channeling the ingenuity, capabilities, and resources of the American people, Spirit of America has pioneered a “whole of America” approach to public service. ■

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Supporting Access to Virginia Schools for FS Families

The American Foreign Service Association began advocating for Virginia Senate Bill 1244 after receiving numerous firsthand accounts from members detailing significant enrollment challenges their children faced when returning to Virginia schools from overseas assignments.

These families encountered rigid residency verification requirements, delayed school placements, and credit transfer issues, disrupting their children's education and creating undue stress. Many were unable to enroll in school on time because they were required to provide a physical address and utility bills, documents often unavailable until they relocate back to the Washington, D.C., area. Other members found their children were misclassified for language assessments and denied appropriate course credit, which ultimately affected their academic progress.

Recognizing the systemic nature of these challenges, AFSA mobilized efforts to support legislative change, leading to the introduction of SB 1244 to amend Chapter 783 of the Code of Virginia. The bill sought to provide Foreign Service families with the same enrollment flexibilities afforded to military families living in



Senator Tara Durant (R-Fredericksburg) with AFSA Policy Analyst Sean O'Gorman at the Virginia General Assembly on Jan. 23, 2025.

Virginia. It would ensure that orders for official government service overseas serve as sufficient proof of residency.

By advocating for this change, AFSA aimed to alleviate the bureaucratic burdens placed on returning families and guarantee their children seamless access to Virginia's public education system.

AFSA played a key role in advancing this legislation by connecting Virginia

Senator Tara Durant (R-Fredericksburg) with the Global Community Liaison Office (GCLO) at State to provide critical data on Foreign Service families facing these challenges. Partnering with the Foreign Service Youth Foundation (FSYF), AFSA gathered firsthand accounts from affected families, illustrating the issue's urgency and helping drive bipartisan support.

On Feb. 3, SB 1244 passed the Virginia Senate.

CALENDAR

Please check afsa.org/events for the most up-to-date information.

April 7
Deadline for AFSA Constructive Dissent and Exemplary Performance Award Nominations

April 15
Voting Deadline for AFSA GB Election Ballots

April 16
12-1:30 p.m.
AFSA Governing Board Meeting

April 18
Deadline for AFSA Financial Aid Scholarship Applications

May 1
AFSA Foreign Service Day Events

May 2
Foreign Service Day

On Feb. 20, the bill was passed by the House and was officially approved by Governor Glenn Youngkin on March 24, 2025. This budget-neutral bill faced no opposition. AFSA was on the ground in Richmond, advocating for the bill at the Jan. 23 Senate subcommittee hearing.

This new state law will be enrolled under Chapter 445, and it will go into full effect on July 1, 2025. AFSA hopes that this law will reduce undue bureaucratic hurdles for Foreign Service families. ■



Navigating Uncertainty in the FS Evaluation Cycle

Thank you to the more than 2,500 members who joined our AFSA town halls on Feb. 27. We welcome your participation and know you had many more questions than we could answer in the span of one hour.

I am particularly grateful to our amazing AFSA staff who managed the chat room and answered as many questions as possible, adding links to critical resources such as the AFSA virtual go bag, the reductions-in-force (RIF) references in the Foreign Affairs Manual, and the AFSA lawyers list.

There is one area about which I know many of you have unanswered questions: What should I do about this year's performance evaluation (EER) cycle? How will I be measured? Will I be negatively targeted for prior accomplishments in the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility precept?

First, I want everyone to consider the big picture. Our annual performance evaluation is an opportunity for us to explain how our accomplishments were effective in advancing foreign policy for the promotion boards. Effectiveness is not merely a precept title or buzz word: It is about impact. The building blocks of this evaluation have always been the Core Precepts: a set of standards that the boards use to make promotion recommendations.

The State Department released guidance on March 19 unilaterally eliminating the DEIA precept for the 2024-2025 rating period, without AFSA's concurrence and in violation of the department's collective bargaining agreement. We shared our stance in an AFSA net to members, explaining that AFSA and the department have negotiated core precepts every three years for decades. Foreign Service members use these precepts to establish job duties, seek assignments, and prepare for their evaluations, and AFSA will challenge this unilateral action.

I reiterated AFSA's position during the AFSA town hall: that we, along with the Bureau of Global Talent Management, proposed a path forward on messaging the core precepts that would have aligned with the administration's Executive Orders and the 2022-2025 AFSA-Department of State negotiated EER Core Precepts.

However, the department rejected our proposal, declaring that only four precepts (leadership, management, communications, and substantive and technical expertise) will be evaluated for the 2024-2025 rating period. I note that a number of examples such as interpersonal skills, professional behavior, and external engagement strategies can also form the basis of strong accomplishments that make

America strong, safe, and prosperous.

We advise all employees to follow the latest department guidance and review their current-year narratives for inadmissible comments and any DEIA titles or subtitles. More importantly, all employees should highlight relevant skills demonstrating impact that will help the Selection Boards determine whether the employee has the potential to succeed at the next level.

There are plenty of accomplishments that fulfill all other precepts without referencing DEIA. Don't discount any of your accomplishments but instead strengthen the links showing how they delivered for American security and prosperity.

While we continue to press for additional departmental guidance, we have no reason to believe that any previous precept-specific accomplishments, including those shared in the DEIA precept in previous EER cycles, would be held against any employee.

We will be looking closely at the upcoming 2025 Procedural Precepts—the instructions to the promotion boards we expect to negotiate later this spring. We will work hard to ensure there is a clear, transparent, and fair approach that will enable the 2025 Foreign Service Promotion Boards (FSPBs) to appropriately apply all past and

present precepts, including the cross-functional competency, for promotion decisions.

The Procedural Precepts provide Foreign Service Selection Boards (FSSB) with specific instructions to make their decisions. For example, one major change is that we will forgo the use of the precept-by-precept scoring rubric this year. As a historically accepted best practice, we anticipate FSSBs would evaluate each employee's five-year file to determine if they would fall under "promote" or "mid-ranked." Those who are recommended for promotion will still be ranked and those employees will see their specific rank order.

Please read the 2024-2025 EER rating period guidance carefully and engage with their raters and reviewers to make any necessary adjustments. AFSA also successfully advocated for all untenured officers who have not yet gone through a tenure board to be given sufficient time to submit or resubmit their EERs so they have equal opportunities to review and adjust if they so choose.

I continue to offer drop-in virtual and in-person office hours on the third Friday of each month. Write to me at wong@afsa.org and write to ogc@afsa.org with individual EER grievance questions. ■



Foreign Assistance Is Vital

As we reflect on the mission of USAID and the values that guide our world, it is worth remembering where we began. More than 60 years ago, President John F. Kennedy articulated a vision for America's role in global development. This vision was rooted in moral responsibility, economic pragmatism, and strategic necessity.

His words still resonate today, reminding us why we do what we do and why foreign assistance remains vital to the United States and the world.

When USAID was formally established through Executive Order 10973 on Nov. 3, 1961, it marked a new era of American commitment to long-term development, not just short-term crisis response. Since then, USAID has played a crucial role in everything from eradicating smallpox to responding to natural disasters, from strengthening democratic institutions to expanding economic opportunities for millions worldwide.

In signing off, a message to my colleagues and friends: Be safe, take care, and always remember that you have my undying love, respect, and pride.

—Randy Chester
joined the USAID Foreign Service in 2004 and has served in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Tanzania, Pakistan, Madagascar, and Washington, D.C. ■

Special Message to the Congress on Foreign Aid

... The program requires a highly professional skilled service, attracting substantial numbers of high caliber men and women capable of sensitive dealing with other governments, and with a deep understanding of the process of economic development.

... it is proper that we draw back and ask with candor a fundamental question: Is a foreign aid program really necessary? ...

The answer is that there is no escaping our obligations: our moral obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations—our economic obligations as the wealthiest people in a world of largely poor people, as a nation no longer dependent upon the loans from abroad that once helped us develop our own economy, and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom.

To fail to meet those obligations now would be disastrous; and, in the long run, more expensive. For widespread poverty and chaos lead to a collapse of existing political and social structures which would inevitably invite the advance of totalitarianism into every weak and unstable area. Thus, our own security would be endangered and our prosperity imperiled. A program of assistance to the underdeveloped nations must continue because the nation's interest and the cause of political freedom require it.

But I am not proposing merely a reshuffling and re-labeling of old agencies and their personnel, without regard to their competence. I am recommending the replacement of these agencies with a new one—a fresh start under new leadership.

... We have a positive interest in helping less-developed nations provide decent living standards for their people and achieve sufficient strength, self-respect and independence to become self-reliant members of the community of nations. And thus, our aid should be conditioned on the recipients' ability and willingness to take the steps necessary to reach that goal.

A program based on long-range plans instead of short-run crises cannot be financed on a short-term basis. Long-term authorization, planning and financing are the key to the continuity and efficiency of the entire program. If we are unwilling to make such a long-term commitment, we cannot expect any increased response from other potential donors or any realistic planning from the recipient nations.

For, if we are to have a program designed to brighten the future, that program must have a future. Experience has shown that long-range needs cannot be met evenly and economically by a series of one-year programs.

Thus, without regard to party lines, we shall take this step not as Republicans or as Democrats but as leaders of the Free World. It will both befit and benefit us to take this step boldly. For we are launching a Decade of Development on which will depend, substantially, the kind of world in which we and our children shall live.

—President John F. Kennedy, March 22, 1961



FAS Provides Massive Returns on Investment

USDA research shows—and American farm groups agree—that exports are vital to U.S. rural economic success, with every \$1 of agricultural exports generating more than \$2 in additional economic activity.

Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) trade policy wins last year generated more than \$27 billion of U.S. economic activity. That same year, our operating budget was \$237 million. The FAS workforce provided U.S. taxpayers a better than 11,000 percent return on their investment in 2024.

FAS has roughly 1,000 public servants—including more than 350 locally employed (LE) staff—across 95 overseas offices. Corrected for inflation, our operating budget has shrunk by 9 percent over the last 25 years.

In nominal terms, the budgets for our core export promotion programs—which generate more than \$24 in return for \$1 invested and require matching industry funds—have not increased since the mid-2000s. We are not a large group, but we accomplish amazing things on behalf of American farmers, ranchers, foresters, and exporters.

FAS Foreign Service officers and LE staff build and maintain relationships with foreign government officials who control access to valuable export markets. Foreign

government officials won't negotiate with individual companies. They work at the government-to-government level. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and FAS make up the USDA Foreign Service team, an irreplaceable resource for U.S. agricultural exporters.

When our export market contacts anticipate market closures, they let us know so we can preemptively engage foreign government counterparts and keep foreign markets open to U.S. exports. When political, economic, or agronomic conditions change, and a foreign government restricts U.S. product access to an export market, we apply the full breadth of U.S. technical expertise—federal government, land-grant universities, private sector, and trade associations—and regulatory tools to get U.S. exports flowing again.

Just because the FAS Foreign Service team brings sound science, logic, and trade law to the negotiating table doesn't mean that we succeed right away; some agricultural trade barriers can persist for years or even decades.

Our overseas offices pursue market access, adapting tactics and building alliances with foreign market stakeholders (e.g., importers, further processors, retailers, food service, and even con-

sumers) to make compelling arguments for U.S. products. And when conditions are ripe, our institutional knowledge helps us get the best possible deal for U.S. exporters.

When U.S. companies make mistakes, we capitalize on our relationships with foreign government regulators to reach common sense accommodations, preventing the destruction of millions of dollars of U.S. products and avoiding shipping losses.

In less developed economies, we provide technical assistance to foreign governments to ensure their regulators understand the effectiveness of the U.S. regulatory system and its overlapping food safety protections. These investments expand access for U.S. products in target economies and bolster the credibility of U.S. positions in international agricultural regulatory bodies.

International entities—including the Codex Alimentarius, the World Organization for Animal Health, and others—set standards that many markets around the world adopt rather than investing in their own regulatory review processes. When we invest in our less developed trade partners' capacity to regulate agricultural trade, we are building more predictable, rules-based trading relationships,

favorable to U.S. exports.

In addition, USDA purchases hundreds of millions of dollars of U.S. agricultural commodities every year to support projects that make less developed countries more food secure, more stable, and more capable of purchasing a wider range of U.S. value-added products.

Overseas, FAS Foreign Service officers also apply local knowledge—cultural, linguistic, political, economic, structural—to inform U.S. policymakers, exporters, and producers back home. FAS analysis—informed by our literal in-the-field reporting—feeds into USDA statistical products that contribute to efficient global commodity markets and price discovery.

FAS overseas offices provide insights into local consumer demand, market structures, and market conditions that inform U.S. exporters. And FAS overseas offices' market development activities increase U.S. exporters' chances of landing export sales and reduce the cost of promoting U.S. products to foreign consumers.

FAS work doesn't often grab attention or headlines. But it adds up. In 2024, our trade policy successes added nearly \$9 billion to U.S. agricultural exports. Our export market development

Continued on next page



Providing for Your Next of Kin

While many things happening today are out of our control, one thing we can do is ensure that our next of kin know how to obtain survivor benefits when we die.

When an active-duty Foreign Service member dies, their agency initiates the process of authorizing survivor benefits. When a Foreign Service retiree dies, however, their next of kin must take the first step.

But many family members are unfamiliar with offices and functions in Foreign Service agencies, so

survivors often do not know where to start. And after the State Department terminates the deceased retiree's pension, survivors can sometimes go for months without income while they attempt to figure out and follow the process to apply for a survivor annuity.

To assist survivors with quickly initiating the necessary actions, AFSA created a list of seven steps to take in the event of the death of a Foreign Service retiree. The steps include contact-

AFSA created a list of seven steps to take in the event of the death of a Foreign Service retiree.

ing the State Department's Human Resources Service Center, filing claims for Thrift Savings Plan and Federal Employees Group Life Insurance benefits, and notifying AFSA.

The complete checklist can be found in the 2025 AFSA Directory of Retired Members on pages 24 and 25. A one-page version is

posted at <https://afsa.org/retirement> in the section "What Surviving Spouses and Children Need to Know." We suggest that retirees download and print the checklist (perhaps on a brightly colored sheet of paper), show it to your next of kin, and leave it in a place where they can easily find it if the need arises. ■

FAS VP VOICE
Continued from previous page

programs alone add \$45 billion of U.S. economic activity every year. And U.S. agricultural exports generated \$400 billion of related U.S. economic activity in 2024.

Our small but mighty corps of Foreign Service officers has been posted around the world for nearly 100 years, bringing the bounty of American agriculture to global markets—making the United States stronger, safer, and more prosperous. ■

USAID Alumni Group Fundraising

The USAID Alumni Association (UAA) is raising funds to assist staff affected by recent USAID reductions in force (RIFs).

In one-hour time windows on Feb. 27 and 28, Washington-based USAID employees were granted 15-minute access to their offices in the Ronald Reagan Building to collect personal belongings. In a show of support for the dedicated public servants of USAID, colleagues, community members, and AFSA officials and staff participated in the two days of farewell and thank you "clap-outs" for USAID employees leaving the building.

Ahead of the farewells, the USAID Alumni Association (UAA) launched a GoFundMe campaign, "Support USAID Staff in Transition," to raise funds to sup-

ply packing materials, food, and drinks to USAID employees leaving their former offices in the Ronald Reagan Building.

As it happened, there was so much support from the community the funds were not needed for that event and are available for subsequent pack-outs at the USAID annexes and other needs. As of early March, UAA had raised more than \$6,500 and will utilize the funds to support USAID staff in transition.

UAA has been and continues to advocate for USAID and fosters networks among former USAID employees, promoting the exchange of knowledge and leveraging alumni expertise to support U.S. foreign assistance work.

Donate at <https://bit.ly/USAIDfund>. ■

AFSA Update on Reductions in Force

The following is a summary of a recent RIF explainer compiled by AFSA's Office of General Counsel. To read the complete story, go to <https://bit.ly/4bQouVX>.

On Feb. 11, President Donald Trump signed an executive order directing federal agency heads to prepare for reductions in force (RIFs). AFSA is urging the foreign affairs agencies to consult with us before making any decisions and to strictly follow the reduction-in-force regulations.

Agencies have the right to conduct RIFs as long as they comply with legal requirements. That said, AFSA will work to ensure the administration adheres to the relevant foreign affairs agency guidelines. If we find evidence of noncompliance, we will take appropriate legal action to advocate for our members' interests.

Where can I find my agency's RIF regulations? Section 611 of the Foreign Service Act allows for RIFs. This section also requires the creation of rules for letting go of career and career candidate members under Chapter 3 of the Act. The regulations note that the retention hierarchy in the event of a RIF should be based on the following:

1. Organizational changes
2. Documented employee knowledge, skills, or competencies
3. Tenure of employment
4. Documented employee performance
5. Military preference

The State Department, USAID, and the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) each have established rules for reducing their Foreign Service workforce based on the above-mentioned

criteria. However, the Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) does not have regulations regarding the RIF process. As such, we advise FCS employees to review the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) as several sections apply to Foreign Service employees across all the foreign affairs agencies.

For more specifics, please refer to your agency regulations:

- **State:** 3 FAM 2580
- **USAID:** ADS 454
- **FAS:** Article 20 of the FAS-AFSA Collective Bargaining Agreement

What about untenured members of the Foreign Service? If you are an untenured employee, your status affects how you are grouped for a RIF. For untenured employees, your status on the retention register will be determined largely by the application of veteran's preference and your service computation date.

Can I file a grievance if I'm RIF'ed? An employee impacted by a RIF has limited grievance and appeal rights. That said, RIF'ed employees have the right to file a Chapter 11 grievance with **their agency office responsible for grievances** with the option to appeal adverse rulings to the Foreign Service Grievance Board (FSGB). Employees may appeal to the FSGB or appeal to the Merit Systems Protections Board (MSPB) under procedures prescribed by the MSPB, but not both.

AFSA has examined the various avenues for challenging the RIF notices. **Due to the Foreign Service Grievance Board's limited jurisdiction in RIF cases, the most viable option appears to be an appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB).** MSPB appeals cannot be filed until after the effective date of your separation (i.e., the date you are no longer an employee) and must be filed no later than 30 days after the effective date of separation.

A grievance will not delay the separation and is limited only to cases of reprisal, interference in the conduct of the member's official duties, or similarly inappropriate use of RIF authority. It must be filed before the effective date of separation. No other grievances relating to the member's separation or proposed separation due to the RIF may be filed.

Retirement benefits in the event of a RIF. Please review our detailed PowerPoint—"Benefits at Retirement, Resignation, and Involuntary Separation"—for answers to frequently asked retirement questions. All our retirement guidance and resources can be found at <https://afsa.org/retirement-resources>.

For the full text of our original message on RIFs, members can visit our website at <https://bit.ly/4bQouVX>. ■

In Case You Missed It

AFSA has been issuing frequent updates and guidance for its members. Below are excerpts from recent AFSA communications through March 21. Please visit the AFSA Resource Hub for the most recent information: <https://afsa.org/2025-resource-hub>.

Update on AFSA's Lawsuit. AFSA remains engaged in legal action to challenge USAID's decisions regarding administrative leave and expedited recall of employees and their families. A recent court ruling denied AFSA's request for a preliminary injunction, allowing the government to proceed with its plans. However, the court left open the possibility of further legal action should directed departures result in imminent harm. AFSA and its co-plaintiffs, AFGE and Oxfam, are evaluating next steps and exploring additional legal avenues to protect members affected by these policies.

Class Action MSPB Appeal. AFSA has organized a legal coalition to represent USAID Foreign Service employees who received RIF notices in a class action appeal before the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). Representation will be provided at no cost to class members. AFSA is committing up to \$100,000 from its Legal Defense Fund to support the case.

AFSA is aware other firms may be forming similar appeals and is working to coordinate efforts. You will have the option to opt out if you choose to pursue individual legal action or join a different class. If you submit retirement or resignation paperwork before receiving a RIF notice, your separation may be considered voluntary and not challengeable before the MSPB. Please wait for a RIF notice before taking action.

RIF Exemption for DS Agents. AFSA has advocated for a reduction in force (RIF) exemption for Diplomatic Security agents, pointing to their role in law enforcement and immigration enforcement. The association has formally presented its position to senior State Department leadership and will continue to push for this exemption in future policy discussions.

DETO Exemption for Return-to-Office Mandates. The State Department has clarified that all Domestic Employee Teleworking Overseas (DETO) arrangements will be exempt from recent return-to-office mandates. Employees under existing DETO agreements may continue teleworking, and new DETO requests will now be processed.

Updated Benefits Information for Retirement and Separation. AFSA has revised its retirement benefits guidance, particularly in regard to postponed annuities. Employees eligible for an immediate annuity at the minimum retirement age (plus 10 years) now have the option to delay their annuity to mitigate penalties, preserving their federal health and life insurance benefits. Members are encouraged to review these updates and attend Foreign Service Institute retirement seminars for in-depth planning resources.

Legal Defense Fund and Membership Growth. AFSA extends its gratitude to members for their generous contributions to the Legal Defense Fund. These donations support AFSA's legal efforts to uphold Foreign Service protections. The association has experienced a surge in membership, with more than 1,000 new members joining in the past month. We welcome additional donations at afsa.org/donate.

Guidance on "5 Bullets" Mandate. A new "5 Bullets" mandate may be issued to the federal workforce soon, though each agency will determine how employees should respond. Unless an agency has explicitly exempted employees from responding to this directive, members should follow their agency's instructions.

Updates on USAID RIFs and Grievance Options. AFSA has received reports that additional RIF notifications may be sent out soon. Employees receiving such notices are advised to download them to a secure device and verify the accuracy of the information. While signing the form only acknowledges receipt, any errors should be reported to USAID's Human Capital and Talent Management office.

Given the limited jurisdiction of the Foreign Service Grievance Board in RIF cases, the best recourse for most affected employees appears to be an appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). Appeals must be filed within 30 days after separation from service. AFSA is also consulting with legal experts about a potential class action MSPB appeal for USAID employees. Those who have previously submitted information for a possible cohort grievance may have that information used for an MSPB appeal, pending further guidance from AFSA.

Advocacy for VERA and Congressional Outreach. AFSA continues to advocate for congressional authorization of a Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) for the Foreign Service. The AFSA Governing Board has unanimously endorsed this effort, recognizing it as a critical option for members facing separation due to RIFs. AFSA is engaging with lawmakers and has created a VERA advocacy template available at <https://afsa.org/2025-resource-hub>.

For more information, please see the following AFSA resources:

- afsa.org/press
- afsa.org/reductions-in-force
- afsa.org/virtual-go-bag ■

FSJ Reader Survey

The *Foreign Service Journal* recently conducted a reader survey to gain a deeper understanding of its audience and their reading preferences. With 467 respondents, the survey provided valuable insights into how the *Journal* is consumed, what readers prioritize, and where improvements might be made.

The survey revealed that an overwhelming majority—96 percent—of respondents are members of AFSA, while the remaining 4 percent are individual subscribers. Respondents were split almost evenly between active-duty and retired members, with the majority of active-duty respondents currently serving overseas.

Demographics. In terms of age demographics, the largest group of respondents was more than 66 years old (40 percent), followed by those aged 51-65 (32 percent).

Format. When it comes to format preferences, print still dominates with this group of readers. While 40 percent of respondents reported reading only the hard copy, 22 percent favor print but also engage with some digital content. Meanwhile, 17 percent reported reading exclusively online, and just 12 percent balance print and digital equally.

Content. Content satisfaction remains high. About 66 percent of respondents believe the *Journal* strikes the right balance in coverage. However, 21 percent would prefer more Foreign Service-specific content, while only 9 percent want an increased focus on foreign policy. That said, open-ended comments reflected a wide variety of viewpoints on the ideal content mix.

Most popular. Among the most-read sections, In Memory leads the way, with 69 percent of respondents

Readers' Reflections on the FSJ

With different agencies and constituency groups, you'll never please everyone. I appreciate the deep dives into my agency (USAID) and read foreign policy pieces relevant to my current work. Life issues are helpful if they hit the stage I'm at (family, college kids, high school transitions, etc.).

I read the FSJ to learn about the FS as an institution and about issues affecting my career. I feel the FS is being threatened on multiple fronts and would like to see more of what AFSA is doing to protect it. I find the actionable information on taxes, law, and education helpful, and also appreciate reading personal histories.

The FSJ remains one of the few publications I continue to read (and prefer) in print, and I value it, and everything AFSA does for the FS community.

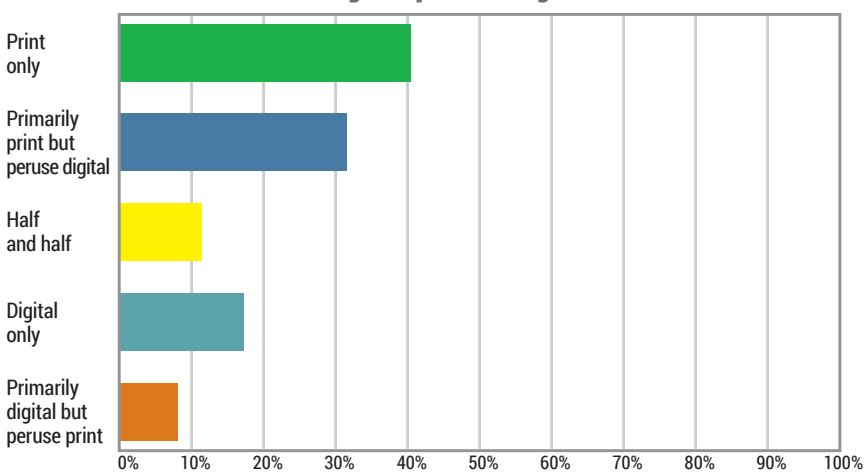
I would like to see fewer long articles analyzing foreign policy issues. A lot of our members (active and retired) have great stories to tell from their work, and I appreciate that. If it's the type of article I can find in mass market foreign affairs publications, I'd prefer not seeing it in the FSJ.

There are plenty of other good sources for policy reporting and analysis. General (non-FS-specific) info about finances and retirement is also not so useful. The comparative advantage of the FSJ is it's by and for members of the FS.

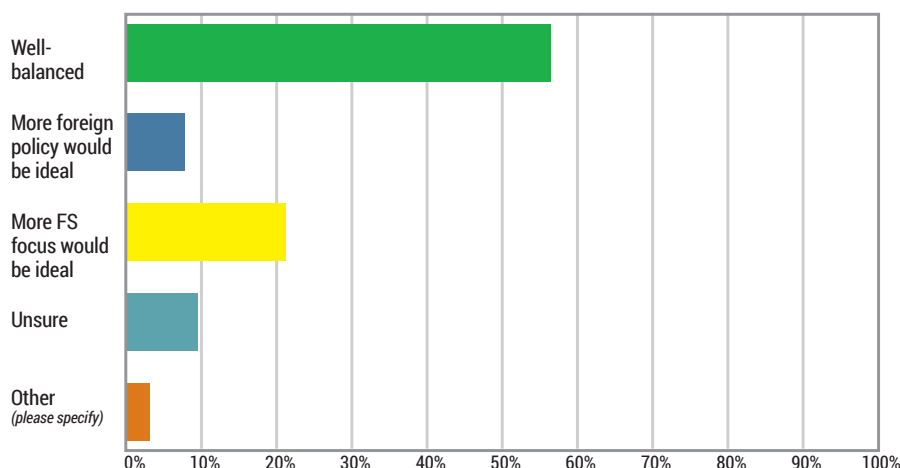
I like reading personal essays from other FS folks.

I hope you continue to issue a printed version and not shift to digital only. Hard copies of the FSJ are both nice to get and good to keep on the coffee table to hand to people considering Foreign Service careers or who are otherwise interested in what we do.

Which format of the FSJ do you primarily read?



How do you rate the balance of content covering foreign policy issues versus Foreign Service career/work/life issues?



Keep providing the hardcopy print version of the FSJ for those who want it. It's also a good promotional tool for the FS.

I've been a regular reader of the FSJ for nearly 30 years now and have always found the Journal to be an indispensable resource and forum on key issues of concern to the foreign affairs community.

regularly reading it. Cover stories and feature articles follow closely behind, along with AFSA News and the retirement supplements.

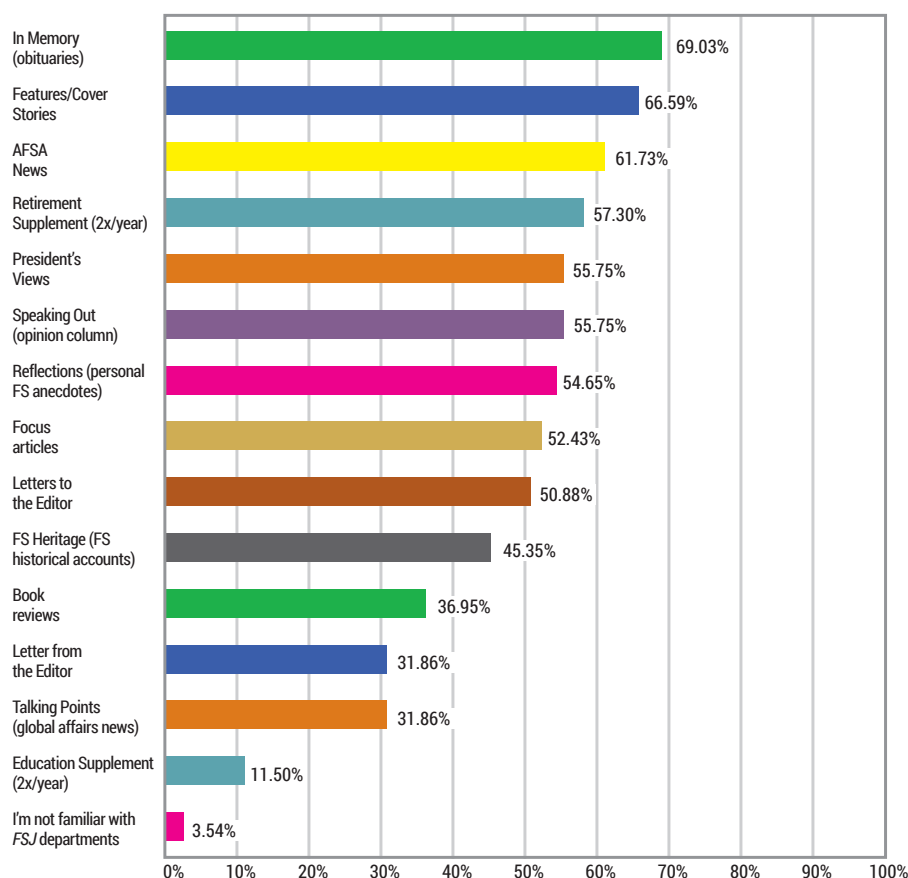
When it comes to contributing to the FSJ, 27 percent of respondents have contributed an article, letter, or photograph.

Areas for growth. The survey also highlighted areas for potential growth. Engagement with FSJ content on social media remains low, with nearly 74 percent of respondents reporting they never interact with it online. In addition, the *Journal's* 100-year archive remains underutilized—30 percent of respondents report rarely using it, and a notable portion had never even heard of it.

The strong connection to print, the preference for Foreign Service-centric content, and the high satisfaction with design and length reaffirm the FSJ's core strengths. At the same time, increasing awareness of digital resources, enhancing social media engagement, and refining the online reading experience present valuable opportunities for growth.

FSJ editors thank everyone who took the time to respond to the survey. For those who missed their chance, you can always share your thoughts at journal@afsa.org.

Which FSJ sections do you read regularly?



Changes to Pet Travel Policies

Here's a small bright spot in the news: The rules around airline travel for Foreign Service pets have just been relaxed.

According to 25 State 6820, as of Dec. 7, 2024, an amendment to the Fly America Act (FAA) has expanded travel options for pet owners under chief of mission (COM) authority. Previously, only State Department personnel could use foreign air carriers when U.S. carriers could not accommodate their pets.

Under the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), all U.S. government personnel and their eligible family members under COM authority are now eligible for this exemption. This allows pets—specifically cats and dogs—to travel in-cabin, as accompanied baggage, or as checked cargo on foreign air carriers when no U.S. carrier is available. Travelers must

cover any fare differences incurred by using foreign carriers, however, as these costs are not reimbursable under relocation allowances.

Rules on Rabies

The rules for dog importation and rabies vaccines are also undergoing a change.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established new, stricter dog importation regulations in August 2024, outlined in 25 State 10746, affecting pet owners bringing dogs into the United States. These rules differentiate between dogs coming from low/no-risk rabies countries and those from high-risk countries. While rules for low/no-risk countries remain unchanged, new requirements for high-risk countries will take effect on Sept. 15, 2025.

At that point, U.S. government employees must fully adhere to public

While rules for low/no-risk countries remain unchanged, new requirements for high-risk countries will take effect on Sept. 15, 2025.

CDC importation requirements, which include veterinary inspections at CDC-approved animal care facilities (ACFs) upon arrival. The State Department has secured an extension of the current exceptional protocol until Sept. 14, 2025, easing some requirements for U.S. government employees bringing dogs from high-risk countries.

For dogs entering from low/no-risk countries, the process remains straightforward, as these pets may enter through any U.S. port of entry without additional requirements beyond proof of valid rabies vaccination. For dogs coming from high-risk countries before Sept. 15, 2025, U.S. government employees can still use an exception protocol that simplifies documentation and waives the ACF inspection requirement.

Approved arrival airports include 18 major U.S. hubs. After Sept. 15, 2025, employees must follow the same process as the general public, which requires advance reservations at CDC-approved ACFs and an inspection upon arrival. Unvaccinated dogs and those under six months of

age remain ineligible for importation from high-risk countries.

To help Foreign Service personnel navigate these changes, the Bureau of Administration's Office of Travel Management and Policy (TMP) and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) are conducting informational sessions throughout 2025. These include a "CDC Dog Importation Guidance Webinar," held in March 2025, and an FSI virtual class, "Traveling with Pets," on April 1. Recorded sessions and detailed guidance will be available on the TMP and FSI websites.

Foreign Service personnel are encouraged to research CDC, airline, and destination country regulations well in advance of travel. TMP, FSI, and airline representatives can assist with pet travel logistics. TMP continues to engage with airlines and external partners to ensure U.S. government employees experience fewer travel disruptions when flying with pets.

For more details, visit the CDC dog importation website or contact TMP at TransportationQuery@state.gov. ■



Revamping the FSN Emergency Relief Fund

These are trying times for the Foreign Service, including American employees and locally employed (LE) staff. As colleagues, we must support the Foreign Service community in any way we can. The demands are monumental. Our priority must be supporting our colleagues amid profound challenges. In the longer term, we also need to protect the institutions that help us support each other, such as the Foreign Service National (FSN) Emergency Fund.

It is in that spirit, and on behalf of our LE staff at missions worldwide, including local USAID staff, that a group of seven retired ambassadors—Nancy Powell, Maureen Quinn, Steve Browning, Kathleen Doherty, Michael McKinley, David Johnson, and Steven Mann—worked over the past year to update the FSN Emergency Relief Fund to ensure it remains sustainable for the future.

Thirty years ago, the FSN Emergency Relief Fund was established to respond to the immediate humanitarian needs of Foreign Service Nationals (now called LE staff) and their families affected by natural disasters and war. In 2024, many of our host country colleagues faced unprecedented hardship. From Haiti and Venezuela to Sudan, Ukraine, the Middle East, and Afghanistan, headlines told stories

of devastation. Most of us have known or heard about LE staff who lost homes to floods, gang violence, or armed conflict.

Since its inception in 1994, the FSN Fund has disbursed more than \$2 million in voluntary contributions to affected local staff across the regional bureaus, including personnel from other U.S. government agencies under chief of mission authority. The stipends, typically under \$1,000 per family, provide vital assistance during crises.

Many of us assume Washington or our missions overseas can step in and assist, but there are, in fact, no congressionally appropriated funds available that can be disbursed to local employees for damage to personal property.

The group instead focused on two immediate steps to increase donations, both of which have succeeded:

Securing a Unique Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN): The department obtained a unique TIN for the FSN Fund, separating it for tax purposes from the department's other gift funds. This measure assures donors that their contributions in fact go to the FSN fund, allows the department to more easily track contributions, and encourages direct contributions from donor-advised funds and from retiree contributions

through nontaxable IRA disbursements. The EIN number is 38-4303032.

Registering with Major Donor-Advised Funds: The department also registered the FSN Fund with three of the top five donor-advised funds—Fidelity, Vanguard, and J.P. Morgan. Test contributions have been made successfully through these three funds.

In addition, the group recommended promoting the fund at AFSA and American Academy of Diplomacy events and increasing social media engagement to highlight its importance in responding to crises.

It would be naive not to acknowledge that major changes may come to the

State Department in the future, and impact this and other initiatives to assist our wider family. Strengthening the FSN Fund, however, continues to be worth supporting in these trying times, and, as with every year, unforeseen events will highlight its continuing saliency and need.

For more information on the fund, visit <https://state.gov/the-foreign-service-national-emergency-relief-fund/>.

—P. Michael McKinley is a retired Foreign Service officer who served as ambassador to Peru, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Brazil and as senior adviser to the Secretary of State. ■

From the FSJ Archive

What LE Staff Want You to Know

For a first-hand look at the important work locally employed staff do on behalf of the U.S. government, take a look at the December 2018 FSJ Focus on “What Local Staff Want You to Know.” It includes personal stories written by LE staff in cities from Paris to Pretoria, including USAID Foreign Service local hires. Find the edition online at <https://bit.ly/FSJ-Sept2018>. ■



Marie Maxey Foundation

**Announcing four college scholarships
of \$2,000 each for Latino youth in
memory of our Foreign Service family.**

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beloved son of
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Peter Deinken**

**Elena Bathrick,
beloved wife of
David Bathrick**

**Apply at <http://www.maxeys.org>
Deadline for applications is August 15, 2025.
Award of scholarships will be made on
September 1, 2025.**

AFSA Welcomes New Members

On Feb. 13, AFSA welcomed the 231 members of the January 2025 Foreign Service Orientation Class. Because of heavy snow in the Washington, D.C., area at the time, AFSA engaged with the incoming class through three virtual sessions, during which AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi, AFSA State VP Tina Wong outlined AFSA's advocacy efforts and shared the benefits of AFSA membership. After the presentation they answered questions from the attendees.

This class includes 20 returned Peace Corps volunteers, nine foreign language and area studies fellows, six Presidential Management Fellows, four Fellows, two Rangel Fellows, and two Foreign Affairs IT Fellows.

Fifty-two percent are generalists and 48 percent are specialists, with backgrounds spanning law, medicine, finance, security, technology, and federal service. Nearly 60 percent hold master's degrees, and many have prior State Department experience.

Class members bring a variety of unique experiences, including: performing with the National Symphony Orchestra, spending a year at the South Pole, hiking through Siberia, working as a historical reenactor, and competing in the Paralympics.

AFSA remains committed to supporting all these new hires as they uphold the highest standards of the Foreign Service, ensuring that America's diplomatic presence remains strong, principled, and effective.

Due to the current federal hiring freeze, plans for the April orientation class have changed. Job offers for generalists (FSOs) have been rescinded while specialists (FSS) will still be brought on board. AFSA understands the incoming April class will now consist of specialists only. AFSA looks forward to the lifting of the hiring freeze. ■

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AFSA Governing Board Meeting, January 15, 2025

At its first meeting of 2025, the board announced the beginning of the 2025 Governing Board election cycle.

The board discussed the cancellation of the March 10 orientation class for limited career appointments due to the federal hiring freeze. ■

AFSA Hosts State and USAID Town Halls

On Feb. 25 and 27, AFSA held four town halls, two for USAID staff and two for State and the other foreign affairs agencies, bringing together more than 2,500 members to discuss pressing workforce concerns, particularly the uncertainty surrounding potential reductions in force (RIFs).

These conversations touched on a range of issues—how potential workforce cuts might unfold, what options employees have, and how AFSA is working to advocate on their behalf. AFSA is committed to helping Foreign Service members navigate what lies ahead.

Throughout both discussions, there was a strong emphasis on the need for clarity from agency leadership. Members voiced concerns about the lack of information, the unpredictability of potential job losses, and how these changes might impact careers, families, and long-term stability.

AFSA representatives, including AFSA President Tom Yazdgerdi, USAID VP Randy Chester, State VP Tina Wong, FCS VP Joshua Burke, FAS VP Evan Mangino, and members of AFSA's legal team, discussed their efforts on behalf of members.

There were also conversations about broader workforce policies, the potential for legislative solutions, and the legal avenues available to employees who

may be affected. Members were encouraged to stay informed, to reach out, and to engage with lawmakers where possible.

Retirement options came up frequently. Some members wanted to know if early retirement programs could be expanded, allowing those who qualify to leave on more favorable terms. Others had questions about benefits—what they could count on, what might change, and how different choices could shape their futures. AFSA panelists shared ongoing efforts to engage with lawmakers, agencies, and other stakeholders to explore possible solutions.

At USAID, where workforce reductions are underway, the conversation had a more urgent, immediate tone. Employees there were focused on what comes next.

Legal challenges are in motion, grievances are being prepared, and AFSA is working to ensure that proper procedures are followed.

USAID employees expressed frustration over job losses and the way reductions were handled. AFSA leaders assured them that they are pressing for accountability while also working to provide practical assistance to those affected.

Beyond discussion of the specifics of RIFs, the town

halls also touched on larger concerns about the future of the Foreign Service. Members wondered how ongoing workforce uncertainty might affect diplomacy and development work. Would agencies be able to retain talent? Would reductions weaken institutional knowledge? Could essential programs be disrupted? These are difficult questions with no immediate answers, but they are at the heart of why AFSA continues to advocate so strongly.

AFSA is working on multiple fronts—through policy discussions, legal channels, and direct engagement with members and with management—to ensure Foreign Service professionals are treated fairly and have the support they need. ■

AFSA's New Membership Intern

AFSA is pleased to welcome Ariana Becemberg, our new membership intern, who brings a passion for diplomacy, cultural exchange, and community service. A senior at American University studying international relations, Ariana is eager to contribute to AFSA's mission while gaining hands-on experience in Foreign Service advocacy.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Ariana is fluent in Spanish and has a growing proficiency in Portuguese. Her love of travel has taken her to more than 20 countries, including a year in Scotland, where she studied British



Ariana Becemberg

politics at the University of Edinburgh.

In summer 2024, Ariana interned for Puerto Rico's Department of State under the mentorship of former Puerto Rican Secretary of State Omar J. Marrero. Working in the External Affairs Office, she focused on strengthening Puerto Rico's diplomatic relationships with Caribbean nations.

In addition to her intern experience, Ariana volunteered with Boricua en la

Brega, a nonprofit dedicated to helping Puerto Ricans recover from the long-term effects of Hurricane Maria and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her current capstone research explores how hosting the FIFA World Cup can be a catalyst for promoting human rights.

At AFSA, Ariana will support membership recruitment, outreach events, Foreign Service Day, scholarships, and awards. She looks forward to engaging with the AFSA community, meeting new people, and contributing to initiatives that support the Foreign Service. ■



Jimmy CARTER

DIPLOMATS REMEMBER

The President's Control Officer Nepal, 2014

My first-ever opportunity to serve as control officer came during my first tour in Kathmandu, where I was serving as the pol/econ office management specialist (OMS). President Carter had visited Nepal several times to support the Carter Center. I remember telling anyone who would listen that if he came to the embassy, I wanted to be his control officer. My family has strong connections to Georgia, and I really wanted to meet him. Everyone said he wasn't going to come, but then at the last minute, he did! So, I think they felt like they had to let me be the control officer. He gave a great speech, without notes, and shook everyone's hands, and took photos with the Marines before he left. I remember thinking, "Wow, I don't know why everyone complains about being control officer, this was so easy!" Ha. One of my first Foreign Service memories.

Katie Koehler

Vice Consul

U.S. Consulate Guadalajara

Monitoring Elections in Port-au-Prince Haiti, 1990

Most Foreign Service officers have stories about their experiences with prominent people during their careers. One of my most memorable ones is of Jimmy Carter, who came to Haiti in 1990, a decade after leaving office, as the head of an observer mission for the historic first free elections in that country. As the embassy political officer in charge of our election



Katie Koehler with Ambassador to Nepal Peter W. Bodde and President Jimmy Carter at the embassy in Kathmandu, 2014.

COURTESY OF KATIE KOEHLER



Jean-Bertrand Aristide with Jimmy Carter in Port-au-Prince, 1990.

COURTESY OF STEVE KASHKETT

PORTRAIT BY COMMONWEALTH CLUB - SAN FRANCISCO, SAN JOSE - 2/24/2013/WIKIMEDIA

monitoring efforts, I spent the day escorting the former president to dusty polling places in the slums of Port-au-Prince. He was gracious, inquisitive, and tireless under difficult conditions and security threats—a true statesman. At his request, we took Carter to meet popular but controversial leftist presidential candidate Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who subsequently surprised most foreign observers by winning the election in a landslide. Sad to see him pass on ...

Steve Kashkett

Senior FSO, retired

New Year's Eve in Tehran Iran, 1977

My first and only contact with President Carter was during his overnight visit to the Shah of Iran on New Year's Eve in 1977, when he praised Iran as “an island of stability” in an unstable Middle East. I had received a personal letter of thanks from the woman directing State's new Bureau of Human Rights for something I had done as political counselor in Tehran, and I enjoyed a handshake and pleasantries as the president saluted the embassy's senior officers and their spouses before climbing into Air Force One.

In retrospect (I am now 93 years old), President Carter had the misfortune to be pressured by many Rockefellers and others to let the shah into the United States for medical treatment. He was honest but could never convince a suspicious Ayatollah Khomeini—whose own maneuvers and half-truths had convinced Washington that he was the right foil to the Soviets—to admit the shah. Khomeini had, after all, released us Americans from the first takeover of the embassy back in February 1979. So, despite repeated warnings from our embassy in Tehran that we could never convince Khomeini, the second embassy takeover in November 1979 lasted 14 months—and lost Carter his reelection.

Happily, we all know this defeat did not stop President Carter from his unique lifelong devotion to truth, peace, and support of human rights around the world.

George B. Lambrakis

Senior FSO, retired

Brighton/Hove, England

The “Anti-Hero” with a Heroic Legacy Washington, D.C., 1977

When Jimmy Carter entered hospice care in February 2023, Taylor Swift's song “Anti-Hero” was atop the pop music charts. That caused me to reflect that “Anti-Hero” might have seemed the most appropriate appellation for the 39th president, when I first encountered him at a meeting in the Cabinet Room



COURTESY OF KENNETH M. QUINN

Kenneth Quinn was the interpreter and junior-most member of the delegation for the first postwar mission to Vietnam, led by Amb. Leonard Woodcock in March 1977. He is in the left corner of the photo, next to the window.

in March 1977. As an FSO with five years of experience in Vietnam, I had been selected as a member of the first postwar mission to be sent by the new president to Hanoi.

As I entered the West Wing, I noticed the absence of any photos of the new president, which made the White House feel bland and devoid of its prior grandeur. Carter's informal attire, along with his refusal to have “Hail to the Chief” played when he entered the room during formal events, reinforced that anti-hero image.

At that meeting, however, I had the opportunity to observe President Carter's “heroic” inner character. With deep empathy, he articulated the pain that families of the more than 2,500 U.S. military personnel who were still missing in Vietnam were enduring. Our mission was to begin accounting for those MIAs—a process that continues in 2025, the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

In July 1979, I again saw that empathy with the president's decision to reopen America's doors to the “Boat People” refugees from Vietnam, who were tragically dying at sea as they desperately sought freedom. I will never forget witnessing the spontaneous standing ovation that America received at the UN Conference in Geneva, when Vice President Walter Mondale announced President Carter's decision to accept 168,000 Indochina refugees a year, thus saving the Boat People.

It is the ultimate irony that at what was arguably the most significant humanitarian achievement of his presidency, perhaps reflecting his anti-hero instincts, Jimmy Carter was not present.

Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn

U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia, 1996-1999

President Emeritus, the World Food Prize Foundation

Des Moines, Iowa

President Jimmy Carter and Human Rights Buenos Aires, 1976

I joined the Foreign Service in late 1975 and was assigned as the junior political officer in Buenos Aires in mid-1976. Legislation mandating a human rights office, annual report, and compliance at the State Department, championed by my home-state congressman, Don Fraser (D-Minn.), had been recently enacted, and Jimmy Carter's election as president later that year raised human rights as a prominent bilateral issue. His election changed my life.

As the embassy's first designated human rights officer, I met with victims of the Argentine junta's repression and disappearances campaign, reported on abuses, drafted statements, and briefed diplomats and U.S. officials, including newly appointed Human Rights Coordinator Patt Derian.

In 1977 prominent Argentine human rights activist Adolfo Pérez Esquivel was kidnapped. I was among the first contacted by his family for help, and the embassy, under holdover Ambassador Robert Hill, applied intense pressure to force the junta to acknowledge his whereabouts. Tortured and held without trial for more than a year, he was eventually released. In 1980 he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

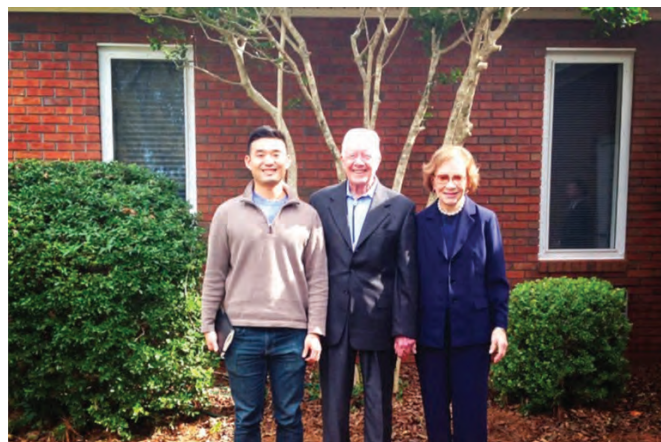
Human rights under President Carter became a significant issue in many, albeit not all, U.S. bilateral relationships, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the move toward democratic rule in Latin America and Eastern Europe, humanitarian and refugee assistance, and U.S.-China relations. It changed my career trajectory as I found purpose in assignments managing refugee assistance in Central America, anti-narcotics, Kosovo, and, after retirement, 20 more years of work in refugee resettlement and assistance in Cuba, Jordan, Lebanon, and throughout the United States.

President Carter brought morality, dignity, and pride to representing the United States abroad and at home. May he rest in peace.

Yvonne Thayer
FSO, retired

Meeting My Role Model Plains, Georgia, 2014

During college, I wanted to give some percentage of my work-study earnings to causes I believed in, and the Carter Center was one of the foundations I selected. The more I learned about President Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center, the more inspired I grew to pursue public service. After graduation, I was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Navy and served



Jason Taehee Lee stands with President and Mrs. Carter in front of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, 2014.

in the Navy's Nuclear Propulsion Program, where President Carter had served during his naval career. Upon learning that President Carter would turn 90 years old in 2014, I realized I might have only a few more years to meet my role model, so I made my way from Washington, D.C., to the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, to meet him and his lovely wife, Rosalynn. After the church service, I was able to meet and take a picture with my role model, and I was so thankful for his graciousness and encouraging demeanor.

His pursuit of truth and service to those around him are principles I try to embody in my personal and professional life. His life was truly one fully lived.

Jason Taehee Lee
Vice Consul
U.S. Embassy Phnom Penh

Giving Voice to the Voiceless Egypt, 2010

This photo with President Carter was taken in 2010 during my first Foreign Service posting in Cairo. I was in charge of taking his son, Jack, and daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, to the pyramids while President Carter met with then-President Hosni Mubarak. I couldn't help but reflect on President Carter's leadership in crafting one of the most durable peace agreements in the region.



President Jimmy Carter with Maryum Saifee, 2010.

As someone who has spent most of my Foreign Service career working in public affairs, I often write into talking points “the U.S. needs to lead by example on [insert lofty goal].” It’s a way to acknowledge that while we aren’t perfect, we are actively trying to be better. President Carter spent a moment in time—how lucky for us it was a century—where he embodied this talking point. He lived it quietly and with humility, but he also used his platform loudly—no matter the blowback—to advocate for those who had no voice.

In reflecting on Carter’s legacy, I’m reminded our diplomacy has the power to build trust, and we have the capacity to be our better selves, to lead by example. The fact that every living president showed up in the front row of the National Cathedral at his funeral felt like a possibility only President Carter could manifest.

More than anything, President Carter’s consistency of character and commitment to framing human rights as not just a nice-to-have but a national security imperative will be the lessons from his legacy I’ll carry with me throughout my life and career.

Maryum Saifee

FSO

New York, New York

Honoring a Life Well Lived Illinois, 1976; Sudan, 1993

In 1976 Jimmy Carter campaigned for president at the Foellinger Auditorium on the University of Illinois campus in Champaign-Urbana. I was fortunate to witness his speech. Many students felt his words encouraging following Watergate and the Vietnam War. America, similarly responding, brought him into office soon afterward.

During his presidency, human rights, environmental matters, and energy issues gained salience as not only U.S. policy priorities but also, gradually, as global concerns. No one can forget the breakthrough of the Camp David Accords in 1979. Inspired, the following year I joined the Peace Corps and went to serve as a community health development worker in the Philippines, which led to my interest in becoming a Foreign Service officer.

In 1993, during my second tour as a Foreign Service officer, in Khartoum, I saw President Carter again, when he and his wife, Rosalynn, visited the embassy, where he posed for a photo with my children, Ginger and Jordan. Over the years, Jimmy Carter came to three other countries in Africa while we served there—Ethiopia, Mali, and Mozambique. In all, he had a heart for Africa and made an amazing 44 trips there.

We were delighted to brief him and to gain insights regarding his work to eradicate Guinea worm, support electoral processes, and construct affordable housing. I found great encouragement through my work as a diplomat in advancing our priorities and engaging foreign audiences.

The Carter Center, which was founded in 1982, collaborated with us and other like-minded partners to observe elections and promote human rights, and its work continues around the world today. Jimmy Carter, a sincere Christian who lived his enduring faith and values, stands out among heads of state as a servant leader. We, along with the world, honor his life well lived.

Ambassador Eric P. Whitaker

Department of State

Washington, D.C.

Welcome to Belgrade, President Carter! Yugoslavia, 1980

President Carter made an official visit to Belgrade from June 24 to 25, 1980, a month after the death of longtime Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito.

My husband, Mark Dillen, and I had been serving at the U.S. embassy in Belgrade as press and cultural officers since summer 1977. I gave birth to our first child, daughter Vanessa, on May 1, 1980, at the U.S. military hospital in Vicenza, Italy, and was still on maternity leave when President Carter’s visit to Belgrade was announced.



President Jimmy Carter greets FSO Anne Chermak and her 7-week-old daughter, Vanessa, on arrival in Belgrade, 1980.

President Jimmy Carter was a good and decent man who cared deeply about humanity and devoted his life to making this world a better place.

As the embassy's deputy press officer, Mark was fully engaged with visit preparations. Meanwhile, I, as a first-time mom, was sleep-deprived and still adjusting to my newborn's feeding schedule. I sent an SOS to my highly experienced mother, who had eight children of her own, to please come and help me. She took her very first flight, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Belgrade, arriving a couple of weeks before the big presidential visit.

Embassy staff were invited to greet President and Mrs. Carter upon their early morning arrival at the Belgrade airport,

and my mother convinced me that we should go with 7-week-old Vanessa. We took a taxi from our home in Belgrade's residential diplomatic colony, me cradling the baby in my arms—there were no seat belts or baby car seats back then—and took our place in line on the tarmac.

President and Mrs. Carter descended the stairs of Air Force One, and when he saw me standing there with a baby in my arms, all dressed up in a lacy dress and bonnet, the president made a beeline straight for us. Carter smiled broadly, asked how old my baby was, caressed her bonnet, and said to me in his Southern drawl, “You take good care o’ her now.”

As has been recounted by so many since his death at age 100, President Jimmy Carter was a good and decent man who cared deeply about humanity and devoted his life to making this world a better place. Thank you, President Carter!

Anne M. Chermak

Minister Counselor, retired

Denver, Colorado ■

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■ **Morton I. Abramowitz**, 91, a retired Foreign Service officer and former ambassador, died on Nov. 29, 2024, at home in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Abramowitz was born in Lakewood, N.J., on Jan. 20, 1933, the youngest of seven children. His parents, Mendel and Dora, emigrated from Lithuania in 1915.

In 1950 he graduated from Lakewood High School and in 1953 from Stanford University. He earned a master's degree from Harvard in 1955.

Mr. Abramowitz joined the U.S. Army in 1957. A year later, he went to work for the International Cooperation Administration, a forerunner to USAID.

In 1960 he joined the Foreign Service. His first assignments included Taipei (1960-1962) and Hong Kong (1963-1966).

During his long career, Mr. Abramowitz served as special assistant to the under secretary of State; special assistant to the Secretary of Defense; political adviser to the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet; and deputy assistant secretary of Defense for inter-American, East Asian and Pacific affairs.

As assistant secretary for intelligence and research at the State Department in the 1980s, Mr. Abramowitz played a critical role in providing Stinger missiles to the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, helping turn the tide in the war and leading to Soviet withdrawal.

He served as U.S. ambassador to Thailand (1978-1981), U.S. ambassador to the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction Negotiations (MBFR) in Vienna (1983-1984), and U.S. ambassador to Türkiye (1989-1991). He was named a Career Ambassador in 1990.

As ambassador to Thailand, he alerted the U.S. government to potential famine in Cambodia and mobilized a massive

international effort to save lives. Amb. Abramowitz also played a vital role in mobilizing the Thai and U.S. governments to protect hundreds of thousands of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia.

As ambassador to Türkiye after the Persian Gulf War, he took actions that led to the protection of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees who had massed on the Turkish-Iraq border in 1991.

Former USAID Administrator Samantha Power told *The New York Times*: "If his career had a through line, I think it was that the human consequences of what we do and what we don't do in government matter."

Mark Malloch-Brown, a former president of Open Society Foundations, said Amb. Abramowitz "is somebody who will be remembered both for his own extraordinary achievements but also the careers of so many that he encouraged and built and developed.

"I consider myself one of those for whom he was a mentor and example. ... He inspired me not just to serve but to aspire to change the world."

After retiring from the State Department in 1991, Amb. Abramowitz became president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1991-1997). He founded the International Crisis Group in 1995 and was a fellow at the Century Foundation from 1998 to 2013.

Amb. Abramowitz was the author of *Remaking China Policy: U.S.-China Relations and Government Decisionmaking*, with co-author Richard Moorstein (Harvard University Press, 1971); *Moving the Glacier: The Two Koreas and the Powers* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971); and *Chasing the Sun: Rethinking East Asia Policy*, with co-author Stephen W. Bosworth (Century Foundation, 2006).

Amb. Abramowitz was the 2006 winner of AFSA's Award for Lifetime Contributions to American Diplomacy. He also received the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Service (1981, 1985, and 1988), the National Intelligence Medal (1989), and the Director General's Cup of the Foreign Service (1995).

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina Muhamed Sacirbey said: "Ambassador Morton Abramowitz has been, in my opinion, a worthy model of how to serve on behalf of a government policy regime while maintaining personal integrity of views."

He served on the boards of the International Rescue Committee, International Crisis Group, National Endowment for Democracy, and Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Amb. Abramowitz was predeceased by his spouse of 64 years, Sheppie Abramowitz. He is survived by his son, Michael Abramowitz, director of Voice of America (and spouse Susan Baer), of Chevy Chase, Md.; daughter Rachel Abramowitz (and spouse Joshua Goldin) of Los Angeles, Calif.; and grandchildren Kate Abramowitz, Eli Goldin, and Joseph Goldin.

■ **Hollis Spurgeon Summers III**, 79, a retired Foreign Service officer, died on Feb. 15, 2025, at Greenspring Village in Springfield, Va., of acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

Mr. Summers was born on July 14, 1945, in Lexington, Ky.

In 1967 he graduated from The George Washington University and in 1979 earned a PhD from the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana with a thesis on politics in British literature from 1688 to 1885.

After several years of teaching, including instruction aboard U.S. Navy ships,

he joined his brother, David Summers, in the Foreign Service in 1986.

While studying Portuguese at FSI before heading to his first assignment in the Azores, Mr. Summers reconnected with Colien Hefferan, a fellow PhD student from the University of Illinois. A decade after they had parted ways in Champaign-Urbana, Colien spotted Mr. Summers crossing Constitution Avenue one stormy night.

In 1988 they married and moved to Canberra, where Colien worked at the Australian National University and their daughter, Margaret, was born.

Overseas, Mr. Summers served primarily in unaccompanied hardship posts, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cabo Verde, Eritrea, and Pakistan.

Among his Washington assignments, he relished a tour in the Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and Science that involved a project in Costa Rica saving turtles from fishing nets. He also worked in the State Department's personnel office and in refugee affairs and volunteered on the editorial board of *The Foreign Service Journal*.

In retirement, Mr. Summers resumed teaching, now at Northern Virginia Community College. He was an avid swimmer and biker, equipping his garage to hold seven bikes and assorted gear. He nurtured a large crop of mint that was much appreciated by his family, who enjoyed annual gifts of dried mint leaves for tea.

Mr. Summers was also known for meticulous recordkeeping, both of rainfall totals and of his efforts to control the ever-growing bamboo sprouts in his backyard. His front yard sported tomato plants and a ginkgo grove that provided saplings for friends and family.

As part of a group mostly made up of retired Foreign Service friends, he and his wife followed the Washington Nationals closely and regularly attended games.

Mr. Summers is survived by his spouse, Colien Hefferan; daughter Margaret Vimont Summers; brother David Summers; sisters-in-law Beatrice Camp (also a Foreign Service officer), Anne Shotton, and Stephanie Nelson; and two nephews and their children.

■ **John P. Becker**, 88, a retired Foreign Service officer, passed away on Feb. 11, 2025, in Arlington, Va.

Mr. Becker was born on March 28, 1936, to Addison and Beulah Becker.

He graduated from Winchester High School in Massachusetts in 1954, earned his undergraduate degree from Brown University in 1958, and later received a master's degree from Boston University in international relations.

From 1958 to 1961, Mr. Becker served in the U.S. Army and attended the Monterey Language School in Monterey, Calif., where he met his future wife, Priscilla Clark.

In 1961 he joined the Foreign Service, specializing in political and labor issues.

Mr. Becker's diplomatic career took him and his family to postings around the world including Germany, Canada, India, Austria, Israel, and Washington, D.C., where he contributed to the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty and issues related to Micronesia.

Mr. Becker and his spouse traveled widely and enjoyed the many cultural and artistic opportunities at their various posts. He concluded his career with the State Department's Office of World War II Reparations, working on art restitution issues.

In 2001 he and his wife established the AFSA John and Priscilla Becker Family Academic Merit Award Scholarship.

Retiring in 2005, Mr. Becker was a true public servant known for his dedication to family, career, and community. Those who knew him appreciated his loyalty,

humility, hard work, strong ethical principles, and subtle sense of humor.

Mr. Becker was active throughout his life, starting as an Eagle Scout in his youth. He was an enthusiastic cross-country runner in high school and college and finished the 1968 Boston Marathon in 3 hours and 37 minutes.

He was also an avid gardener, belonged to the Arlington Rotary Club, and nourished a lifelong passion for music. He was the drum major in his high school band and later sang with the Augustinerkirche Choir in Vienna, the Metropolitan Chorus, the Arlington Chorale, and the Arlingtones Barber-shop Chorus in Arlington, Va. He and his wife also attended countless musical performances around the world and particularly enjoyed events at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Becker is survived by his loving wife of 63 years, Priscilla Clark Becker; daughters Joan Becker Kelsch (and spouse Thomas) and Alison Becker Weems (and spouse Weyman); sister Eleanor Becker (and spouse Robert Huseby); brother Robert Becker (and spouse Nanette); and his cherished grandchildren, William, Tucker, Adeline, and Mason.

Contributions in Mr. Becker's memory may be sent to the Arlington Community Foundation at <https://bit.ly/johnbecker>.

■ **Warren Bruce Kinsey**, 84, a former Foreign Service officer who spent two years in Vietnam as part of the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) pacification program, died on Feb. 14, 2025, in Winchester, Va., as the result of a fall.

Born in 1940 in Peoria, Ill., to Warren and Elizabeth (née Trost) Kinsey, he grew up in Decatur. There, his family hosted an AFS student from Spain, intensifying Mr. Kinsey's interest in foreign affairs.

After graduating high school in 1958, Mr. Kinsey attended Northwestern University but soon transferred to the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

In 1962 he entered the Foreign Service—at that time the youngest officer ever to have done so. He was posted first to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he did political reporting and consular work under the ever-watchful Frances Willis, America's first female career ambassador.

Mr. Kinsey was in Stuttgart from 1965 to 1966 as a consular officer. A German speaker, he also gave many presentations on U.S. policy in Vietnam to German civic associations and student groups.

Early in 1967, Mr. Kinsey was the first civilian volunteer for the Vietnam Training Center in Arlington, Va., an interagency facility where hundreds of civilian and military officers trained in the Vietnamese language and in CORDS programs to pacify rural South Vietnam, including bridge-building, health improvement, and the organization of hamlet defenses.

After CORDS training, Mr. Kinsey served nearly two years in Long An province, one of the country's most embattled areas. Later, he worked for the Pacification Studies Group under Ambassador William Colby.

In 1970 the American Foreign Service Association awarded Mr. Kinsey the Averell Harriman Award for "courage, creativity and disciplined dissent." USAID also awarded him its meritorious service award.

Between 1970 and 1971, he served in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, briefing Secretary of State William Rogers and others daily on allied efforts to sever the trail network in Laos through which North Vietnam funneled military supplies to



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its forces in the South. He also was the State Department's representative on an interagency task force analyzing possible cease-fire outcomes for the war.

Mr. Kinsey took leave from government service while he studied at the University of Virginia's Darden School, earning an MBA.

In 1973 he resigned from the State Department to pursue a career in business, working first for the New York consulting firm Cresap, McCormick, and Paget, and later for *Congressional Quarterly* and other publications. He was a longtime member of the Direct Marketing Association of Washington and served on its board for several years.

In 2000 Mr. Kinsey retired and moved with his wife, Joan Anderson, to Golden

Pond Farm in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The farm became a frequent unofficial assembly point for civilian and military veterans of the Vietnam pacification program.

At the time of his death, he was writing a detailed history and analysis of Vietnamese pacification efforts, based partly on recollections of many Vietnamese-speaking pacification advisers. It was to be titled "Good Guys."

Mr. Kinsey's first marriage ended in divorce. In 1981 his second wife, Nancy Norman, perished in a house fire, along with the couple's son, Matthew.

Mr. Kinsey is survived by his wife, Joan Anderson; son Scott Graves, of Salt Lake City, Utah; daughter Jacqueline Norris, of Castle Rock, Colo.; son



If you would like us to include an obituary in In Memory, please send text to journal@afsa.org.

Be sure to include the date, place, and cause of death, as well as details of the individual's Foreign Service career. Please place the name of the AFSA member to be memorialized in the subject line of your email.

Geoffrey Howard Kinsey, of Bothell, Wash.; and by a surfeit of supremely talented grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Memories can be shared on the Heishman Funeral Home website at www.valleyfs.com. ■

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Diplomacy: The Vietnam Crucible

Diplomats at War: Friendship and Betrayal on the Brink of the Vietnam Conflict

Charles Trueheart, University of Virginia Press, 2024, \$24.95/paperback, e-book available, 368 pages.

REVIEWED BY LAURA KENNEDY

In the words of author Charles Trueheart, *Diplomats at War* is “a work of memory hiding inside a work of history.” This is a beautifully written book, rich with detail evocative of the Vietnam War era that illuminates the two central diplomatic actors—the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Frederick “Fritz” Nolting, and his deputy chief of mission (DCM), William Trueheart—as well as a sprawling cast of American and Vietnamese characters.

The account is set in the fateful year of 1963, when U.S.-Vietnam policy lurched tragically toward all-out war. It culminates with the recall of Ambassador Nolting, who was seen as too sympathetic to the increasingly isolated and autocratic South Vietnam President Ngô Đình Diệm, and the subsequent coup against Diệm, which ended with his assassination and that of his powerful brother.

An embittered Ambassador Nolting blamed his fall from grace on his deputy, a close friend from their days at the University of Virginia before they entered the post-World War II Foreign Service.

The portrait of Ambassador Nolting and DCM Trueheart offers not only a fascinating look at a critical diplomatic relationship but also at the fracturing of a longtime personal relationship between the two and their families. This professional and personal conflict was later mirrored in the societal and political

cleavages that the Vietnam War caused at home.

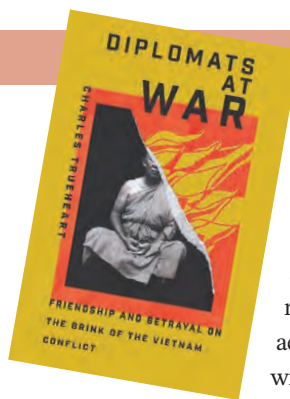
The author of *Diplomats at War*, Charles Trueheart, is the son of the DCM and godson of the ambassador, endowing the book with an immediacy and bitter-sweet resonance. Trueheart complements his knowledge of diplomatic life and the fateful events in 1963 Saigon with primary research, including Nolting’s archives and the author’s mother’s weekly letters home.

Trueheart provides a captivating picture of the role of a Foreign Service family in a bygone era, when career diplomats had more autonomy to both shape and carry out policy and their families were deeply involved (Foreign Service wives used to be officially rated in the annual reviews of American diplomats).

The author is very much a character in the book as a pre-adolescent, bicycling around Saigon as Buddhist monks set themselves afire and hiding under a table at a friend’s house as the battle to overthrow President Diệm raged around the presidential palace.

Author Trueheart succeeds in avoiding the bias and partiality that one might expect toward his protagonist father, offering equally sensitive portraits of both men. He portrays clashing interpretations of what each player found essential in the diplomacy: loyalty (Nolting toward the erstwhile U.S. partner Diệm as well as a DCM to his boss) versus professionalism (DCM Trueheart, who came to view Diệm as a failing leader who was endangering U.S. interests).

This book is particularly praiseworthy for its comprehensive use of and tribute to two important tools of diplomatic history—the State Department Historian’s Office and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST), whose archive contains the oral histories of both



Nolting and Trueheart, as well as other players. Trueheart’s research combines the best of academia and journalism (he wrote for *The Washington Post* for many years) as he tracks

down participants and their descendants in that drama of some 60 years ago.

In addition to capturing the personalities and quirks of such giants as President John F. Kennedy, Averell Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge, and others, the author paints a fascinating portrait of the interagency process (notably the August 24 telegram from Washington that presaged Diệm’s overthrow).

He describes diplomatic dilemmas that we continue to grapple with today: a diplomatic establishment that seeks to assert its authority over an increasingly dominant military, the relationship of State and the CIA, journalists who not only report but shape political and popular attitudes, and the embrace of “strong men” whose proclivities can end up undercutting the policies we pursue. The depiction of this chapter in history is as compelling and relevant as if it were spinning out in yet another crisis zone today.

It is a terrific read on family and personal dynamics, an important addition to contemporary understanding of diplomacy during the Vietnam War, and an in-depth look at the practice of diplomacy (and the vicissitudes of a Foreign Service career). It is so evocative of an era, a place, and timeless conflict—both personal and public—that it would make a gripping movie.

Laura Kennedy served as U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva as a career Foreign Service officer. She is a member of the Secretary of State’s International Security Advisory Board.

The Vietnam War Through Canadian Eyes

Supervising a Peace That Never Was: Recollections of Canadian Diplomatic Personnel in Indochina, 1954-1973

Co-edited by Helen Lansdowne, Nick Etheridge, and Phil Calvert, *The Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives, University of Victoria*, 2023, available for free in e-book or pdf format (<https://bit.ly/Supervising-a-Peace-book>), 120 pages.

REVIEWED BY PARKER W. BORG

Canadian diplomats in Indochina? Few Americans realize that Canadians were involved in this former French colony that had become Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for nearly 20 years—longer than American troops were present in Vietnam. The Canadians were not U.S. combat allies as the Koreans, Australians, and New Zealanders were; nor were they assigned as diplomats, since Canada did not establish diplomatic relations in the region until 1973.

Beginning in 1954, Canadian diplomats and military personnel were assigned to Indochina as “cease-fire” observers under the terms of the Geneva Accords that divided North and South Vietnam. As the agreement was being completed, the conference co-chair, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, invited the Canadians as a NATO member to serve on the International Control Commission (ICC) along with Poles and Indians—as the “Western” member of the group to oversee Vietnam’s division and the other provisions of the accord.

The ICC existed for the following 18 years. After the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, it morphed into a new organization, the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS), adding

Indonesia and Hungary to Canada and Poland as a four-member commission. While the ICC was somewhat operational at the beginning, it quickly became dysfunctional. The replacement, ICCS, proved inoperable after the first two months, convincing the Canadians to announce their exit in May 1973 (to be replaced by Iran—before the overthrow of the shah, a U.S. ally).

While several books have been written about the Canadian role in Indochina, *Supervising the Peace That Never Was* offers an oral history perspective from young Canadian diplomats about their experiences as “legal advisers” to senior Canadian commission members. Often on first or second assignments, speaking French but not Vietnamese, and without any specific legal background, the young diplomats were assigned for one-year tours in Saigon, Hanoi, and elsewhere in Indochina.

This short volume, available exclusively online and for free, begins with a summary history of Canadian involvement in Indochina. Essays by the young Canadians follow in a roughly chronological order, providing their observations about the course of Vietnamese war history, including the implementation of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the 1963 assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm, the 1968 Tết Offensive, the 1972 Christmas bombings of Hanoi, and the efforts to implement the 1973 Paris Accords.

The book is in some ways reminiscent of a volume that might theoretically be compiled from the oral histories of Americans who served in Indochina. A big difference, however, might be that the Americans were working at embassies in the region, with USAID or Civil Operations and Rural Development Support



(CORDS) in Vietnam’s provinces, and generally spoke about their observations of events in a specific place or their jobs implementing specific policies.

The Canadians, by contrast, were working as part of an organization that, except for brief periods in the beginning and at the end, was not operational. Shortly after arriving, the Canadians did not delude themselves that there was any real work to do. They wrote about what they saw and what was happening.

While in Hanoi, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh, they lived isolated lives, generally restricted by authorities from regional travel or interactions with locals; but this was not the case in Saigon, where the young diplomats seemed able to pursue a relaxed, sometimes sybaritic lifestyle.

In Saigon, they all seem to have stayed at the Continental Hotel, the relatively luxurious hangout of journalists and wealthy visitors, and wrote not only about their war observations (poignantly sometimes) and the people they met but also about their social engagements, tennis games at the Circle Sportif, and frequent journeys around the country.

As might be expected, while well edited and filled with nuggets of understanding, some of the essays contain more substance than others. All offer candid insights into aspects of the war and life in Indochina that are generally sympathetic to the concerns of their American friends. The introductory essay by Brendon Kelly provides an excellent overview of the Canadian role on the commissions.

Among the best of the dozen other essays are those by James “Si” Taylor, who joined the Department of External

By 1973, nearly a third of all Canadian diplomats had served somewhere in Indochina.

Affairs in 1953 and retired in 1993 after serving as ambassador to Japan and, before that, as the deputy minister for external affairs, and Nick Etheridge, who joined the Department of External Affairs in 1967 and retired in 2002 after serving as high commissioner to Bangladesh and then as director of the Defence Relations Division in Ottawa.

The truly exceptional essay in the collection is the one written by Manfred Von Nostitz, who lived in Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Hanoi in 1968-1970 and returned to head the Canadian ICCS delegation in

Can Tho in 1973, where he succeeded in establishing probably the most operational of the regional commissions.

Prior to 1954, the Canadians had only a small diplomatic service and little East Asian experience. By 1973, nearly a third of all Canadian diplomats had served somewhere in Indochina. Of the dozen young diplomats who contributed to this volume, half went on to become ambassadors, and many of the others played prominent roles in subsequent Canadian politics or in the world of peacekeeping.

Their early work not only influenced

their subsequent diplomatic careers but, more important, the role of Canada in world affairs. ■

Parker Borg served for more than 30 years in the State Department, including as U.S. ambassador to Mali and Iceland and in senior positions in the Offices of Combating Terrorism (S/CT), International Communications (CIP), and Counternarcotics (INM). Earlier, he served in Vietnam twice: first with Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) in 1968-1970 (where he never encountered any Canadians), and second on temporary duty as a cease-fire observer after the Paris Accords in 1973 (where he reported on the work of the Canadians and other members of the International Commission of Control and Supervision, or ICCS).

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Early Days in the Operations Center

BY JONATHAN B. RICKERT

The State Department Operations Center was established in 1961 after President John F. Kennedy was unable to reach anyone at the department by phone after hours during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Since then, the office has expanded from a small, relatively primitive operation to the much larger, more complex, and high-tech facility that it is today. The primary purpose remains the same, however: to be the round-the-clock communications and crisis management center for the State Department, monitoring world events as well as keeping the Secretary and other principals informed and connected to each other and to world leaders.

My first Foreign Service assignment, in September 1962, was a one-year stint in the Ops Center. At that time, developments in Vietnam were of great interest to the department principals and increasingly were the Ops Center's top substantive priority. We were the eyes and ears of the Seventh Floor—not generally an action office per se but one that facilitated the work of many others. Our coordination with the Department of Defense and CIA was also growing rapidly, due primarily to the demands of this conflict.

Daytime staffing on weekdays consisted of the director, deputy director, senior watch officer (SWO), associate watch officer (AWO), a military represen-

tative (MilRep), and a few clerks and the like. Because its crisis management role was just beginning, the office had few staff, little infrastructure, and no experience for that purpose.

The main daytime duties were to screen immediate or higher precedence cable traffic and to alert action offices. We also handled calls from within the department, other agencies, and the general public.

As one can imagine, our technology was Stone Age by today's standards—landline phones (including one bulky STU 2 “scrambler” phone for classified calls), AP and Reuters news tickers, and a TV set. Cable news did not yet exist.

Evening and night coverage normally consisted of just three FSOs—an SWO, AWO, and an editor who prepared the daily Top Secret cable summary for department principals. Watch standers like me worked two day shifts, two evenings, and two nights or “mids,” followed by three days off.

The Ops Center had a small, windowless bedroom, with two bunk beds. It was used occasionally during night shifts for naps by one of the three FSOs on duty if there was absolutely nothing going on. He—and in those days it was always a he—could easily be awakened if things heated up suddenly.

Although the work we did in the Ops Center was serious and important, it could

also be diverting. One time, Secretary Dean Rusk came in midday to take an encrypted phone call, something he could not do then in his own office.

SWO Norman Getsinger was seated at his desk and had just started eating an egg salad sandwich. He quickly vacated his chair as the Secretary approached but left the sandwich on the desktop. Rusk chose to sit casually on the desk while taking his call, failing to notice the sandwich and depositing his derriere directly on it.

As Norman and I looked on silently but in horror, egg salad oozed out from under the Secretary. He completed his call, graciously thanked us, and returned to his own office. When he noticed the damage to his trousers, I do not know, but we never heard back from him.

When things were quiet, I benefited from hearing about many SWOs' World War II experiences. One also gave me the following counsel about FS assignments. In his somewhat jaded telling, there were three important factors—the job, the place, and the people.

According to him, if you got one of the three to your liking, you should be satisfied, two and you should be delighted, and if all three, don't believe it because it couldn't be true. An exaggeration certainly but, in my subsequent experience, containing more than a kernel of truth.

My year in the Ops Center passed quickly, and soon it was time to move on as part of a “rotational” first assignment. It was a great introduction to the State Department, at a high level, and provided enough experiences and memories to last for the remainder of my 35-year Foreign Service career and beyond. ■



Retired Senior Foreign Service Officer Jonathan B. Rickert spent the majority of his 35-year career serving in or dealing with Central and Eastern Europe. His first assignment in the area was as Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson's staff aide at Embassy Moscow from 1967 to 1968. His final two overseas posts were as deputy chief of mission in Sofia and then Bucharest. His then-FSO daughter, Ulla Saleh, was assigned to the Operations Center in 2008 and 2009 as a crisis management officer, more than 45 years after his own time there.

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Andrea Nagy joined the Foreign Service in 2016 and has completed tours in Chengdu, Brasília, and Erbil. She is a management-coned FSO currently serving as a consular officer in Istanbul. She took this photo in September 2024 with her Galaxy S23 Ultra.

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