ONE HAND CLAPPING: THE SOUND OF STAFFING THE FOREIGN SERVICE

THE FOREIGN SERVICE HAS BEEN CRITICALLY UNDERSTAFFED FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES.

BY MARK JOHNSEN

In a memorable Sidney Harris cartoon, a scientist fills a blackboard with equations, in the middle of which he writes, "Then a miracle occurs." A second scientist examining the work responds, "I think you need to be more explicit here in step two."

This cartoon came back to me vividly and repeatedly during lectures at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., where I was privileged to spend a year in 2000. In discussing various scenarios, an instructor or student would often refer to a process diagram to describe organizational interactions and responsibilities in operational situations. At some critical point, the presenter would point to a subprocess, and confidently state, "The Department of State steps in here and takes care of it."

Such expectations of the State Department and the Foreign Service increasingly caused me concern. To provide a little more perspective, I prepared a force analysis of the Foreign Service for my classmates. While most of my fellow students had never encountered a real, live FSO, they were very familiar with problems of staffing and force analysis, and confidently expected that the State Department had done its homework, too.

My presentation, however, did little to support the expectation of a miracle regarding the State Department's part in the process diagrams. Indeed, filling positions in the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan has become a major challenge for the Department of State. While these new requirements have strained State's human resources, they are not themselves the source of the current staffing crisis. In fact, the Foreign Service has been critically understaffed for more than two decades: this is an entrenched liability that the demands of Iraq and Afghanistan have simply exacerbated.

Some measures can be taken to more effectively leverage the existing inadequate numbers of personnel. But even in the optimal scenario — where Congress and the administration drastically increase hiring — the staffing deficit will continue to limit the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy long after Iraq moves from the headlines to the history books.

A Snowballing Deficit

The Department of State's funding in real terms in 2000 was about 50 percent of what it had been in 1985. On the personnel side, the picture was even bleaker. From 1990 to 1997, State hired at below attrition levels, resulting in a shortfall of about 700 Foreign Service

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entry-level officers. A buyout program in the mid-1990s further compounded the reduction in the Service by drawing down senior ranks.

At the same time, during the 1990s the Department of State opened 22 new embassies. Assuming an average of 60 FS employees per embassy, that's about 1,320 new positions. The 1990s also saw a substantial workload increase as a result of the accelerating pace of globalization. In the consular field alone, for instance, the workload increased during the decade by at least 30 percent, creating a demand for approximately 300 more officers.

Beyond supporting this expansion, the Foreign Service was also carrying large, accrued deficits of time for training (only 50 percent of the officers occupying language-designated positions were getting the necessary language training as of 1997) and for the use of mandatory home leave. By my estimate, the personnel needed to cover the training and leave deficits alone totaled approximately another 900 positions.

By 2000, then, the actual shortfall for Foreign Service staffing was not 700 positions — the number commonly accepted at the time as the deficit and the target for the subsequent Diplomatic Readiness Initiative. Because of the additional, cumulative deficits that were never addressed, such as those cited in the previous paragraph, it was actually more like 2,000 to 3,500 positions. Although the Foreign Service was marginally capable of fulfilling the elemental functions of its mission, it lacked the resources necessary to effectively respond to more challenging demands.

Now seven years have passed, and the Foreign Service is still struggling to fill all of its positions and meet its commitments overseas. Dire in 2000, the staffing situation has only marginally improved since then. The Diplomatic Readiness Initiative that began in 2001 hired 1,158 people above attrition, yet the entrenched, historical staffing shortfalls have persisted. And they have been aggravated by increases in staffing demands and changes in staffing demographics.

Policy Demands, Demographics Undercut DRI Gains

One source of increased demands on staffing has been the DRI itself, inasmuch as the program introduced new Servicewide leadership and management training requirements. Apart from DRI initiatives, other FS training programs have been added or expanded since 2000. This training comes at a cost: time. A week of training for 11,000 Foreign Service employees costs 440,000 hours, or the equivalent of about 212 full-time-equivalent positions. Nor has the upward trend in workloads slowed since 2000. Consular workloads have continued to increase with the implementation of post-9/11 procedural changes and the growth of travel by both Americans and visitors to the United States. New embassies in Baghdad, Kabul and Tripoli have placed added demands on staffing resources.

It is not just the increase in workloads that is affecting the Service. Like much of the federal government, the Foreign Service is an aging work force. Baby boomers are poised to retire in unprecedented numbers, potentially swelling staffing deficits. Moreover, health and family commitments play larger roles in older employees' decisions to serve overseas, making it more likely that they will serve fewer tours abroad.

Other factors are also eroding the personnel base. Individuals retiring under the Federal Employees Retirement System, which went into effect in 1987, face losing accumulated sick leave. Under the Civil Service Retirement System, retiring employees could convert unused sick leave for cash; under FERS, sick leave is "use it or lose it" upon retirement. Not surprisingly, the trend has been for employees to increase the use of sick leave in the years before retirement rather then forfeit it. Even a slight tick upward in its use can add another couple of percentage points to the personnel deficiency. And in the department's Foreign Service employment pool of 11,000, each percentage point is worth 110 positions.

More significantly, a deficit of several thousand Foreign Service employees is not something that can be cheaply or quickly corrected. The DRI effort severely strained the department's recruitment, training and assignment capacities. Developing a trained, professional force takes time — an average of 10 years of experience and training to reach mid-level proficiency. Even if the hiring of entry-level officers were doubled or tripled tomorrow, it will take as long as it takes the average Foreign Service officer to advance to senior ranks — between 20 and 30 years — to raise staffing by a third at all levels of the Foreign Service.

Political realities make increasing the numbers of the Foreign Service in the near term highly unlikely. So if the will and the money are not there to build a Foreign Service that is matched to its mission, what other options exist? Well, there aren't many. No matter how firm the faith might be in rightsizing, only so many rabbits can be pulled from that hat. The staffing resource base is simply too small to possess enough waste or surplus that could be mined to close the gap between personnel supply and demand.

To balance the force with its mission, either the size of the force or the mission must change. If a major increase in staffing will not happen, only a correspondingly major overhaul of what we do and how we do it will balance the equation.

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"Anti-Deficient" Staffing

The first step in achieving a fundamental change in staffing the Foreign Service is to manage its human resources with the same care and consideration given to financial resources. The department has implemented comprehensive financial control systems to capture actual monetary costs; nothing is left to chance. Any federal employee who makes a financial commitment on behalf of the government without having sufficient funding risks serious consequences. Obligations that require personnel should be subject to the same level of control and accounting. We should be no less serious about staying in balance in staffing than we are about funding.

Keeping human resources in balance entails recognizing that time is a resource and making the connection between time and positions. Tasks require time, which comes from people. New tasks require new positions, a correlation that is routinely overlooked. For example, visa sections have already gone from taking no fingerprints to taking two per applicant, and now must take 10 prints. One rough field estimate is that taking 10 fingerprints instead of two requires an additional minute per applicant. So in a section that daily processes 500 visa applications, eight more hours a day are needed. This time debt must be met either by adding an eight-hour-a-day position or reducing other tasks in the section.

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To reduce the existing staff-time deficit, large time liabilities need to be removed from the staffing balance sheet. One of the biggest single time-sinks in the Foreign Service is the Employee Evaluation Report and promotion process. The current practice consumes two months to produce and five more months to evaluate. It is doubtful that the institution is getting a sufficient return on this enormous investment. Two other policies that need to be reconsidered with a view to freeing up staff time are the retirement age of 65 and the time-in-class limits, both of which are legally mandated by Congress.

Secretary Rice has called for a more "expeditionary" Foreign Service, and this idea has potential for leveraging staff resources. While technically any force that is overseas is expeditionary, the concept implies a more self-contained, flexible organization, operating in remote areas. Interestingly, as historical staffing data show, the Foreign Service of the early 20th century could be seen as something of a model.

In 1920 we had 413 overseas posts. In 1997 we had just 237. Thus, in the post–Cold War era, a period of increasing complexity with rapid growth in populations, economies and threats, we had fewer posts than we did after World War I. But from 1880 through 1930, the number of employees per post averaged 3.33. By contrast, from 1950 through 1997, the number of employees per post averaged 61. Similarly, the ratio of domestic to overseas staff has ballooned from .22 in 1910 to 1.55 in 1997. (The ratio went to 1.38 in 1920 and has stayed above that ever since.)

Significantly, however, the historical data also highlight the stagnation in absolute numbers of overseas personnel over the long term. Through the turbulence of the last several decades, the number of overseas personnel has remained flat — fluctuating between about 5,800 and 6,800 from 1960 to 1997. This long-term stagnation underlies the staffing crisis prompted by recent demands from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Just Showing Up

If we are seeking to free up resources for redeployment in the developing world, to become more expeditionary, the manner in which we organized and operated our posts a hundred years ago should perhaps again become more the rule than the exception.

Setting up more American Presence Posts (each with a single mid-level officer supported by one to four locally engaged staff at a regional center), with smaller footprints and lower overhead, achieving more influence through closer integration with local institutions — rather than the trend toward fewer, bigger posts — would better match the goal of a globally positioned, expeditionary Foreign Service.

After all, no congressional candidate up for re-election in a contested district would attempt to campaign only from Washington, D.C., forgoing personal appearances at hometown venues. Likewise, Starbucks would not make a double hazelnut decaf caramel macchiatos in Nebraska for a customer in Manhattan just because overhead is lower in Omaha. Whether one is running for Congress or selling cups of coffee, influence and market share are won at the local level. Presence is the key to influence; smaller, more numerous posts can efficiently deliver that presence.

Where the greatest gains can be made in increasing the expeditionary nature of the Foreign Service, however, is not at rough posts in developing countries, but in the cities of the First World. The transformation to an expeditionary force is dependent upon two changes: relying more on private-sector services and making it simpler to obtain those services. While outsourcing is not a panacea for the strategic-level staffing shortfalls, at the tactical, post level, contracting for basic services would obviate the need for positions that duplicate those services. Legal restrictions and security concerns would, of course, have to be worked through. But generally, in the cities of the First World, stable and complete commercial sectors enable an expeditionary presence.

This shift to the private sector for administrative support will not produce the needed gains in efficiency, however, if the existing structure of management controls must also be supported simultaneously. Much of a management section's effort at post does not go to direct support of the mission, but rather to the application of regulations and policy relevant to that work. For example, we do not just purchase a plane ticket; we filter the purchase through a screen of rules.

This level of management control comes at a high cost, and current regulations impose a significant overhead on posts' operations. At large posts where the overhead is spread among many employees and many agencies, the cost is proportionally smaller and the protection it gives proportionally higher. For a small post in a First World city, where both the staff and the potential losses are small, a high level of management controls is not cost-effective.

Keeping staffing in balance depends on the recognition that time is a resource.

Success in shifting to private-sector services is dependent upon adopting private-sector modes of operation. Most critically, this means moving away from management by regulation to management by budget. Small, lightly staffed posts do not have the staff to work both the substantive issues and the intricacies of our housing, travel and allowance systems. Although shifting to management by budget might save money, it would, even more importantly, free up positions that otherwise would have been devoted to navigating basic business decisions through a sea of regulations.

Woody Allen famously said that 80 percent of success is just showing up. Becoming readier, more rightsized, expeditionary, transformed and globally repositioned — in short, doing more with less — as we are doing, will help to maximize our current, inadequate supply of human resources. But in more and more arenas, the Foreign Service does not have the staff to even show up. Ultimately, without a net addition of personnel, we are taking ourselves out of the fight. ■