



American Academy of Diplomacy
2009 Annual Members' Meeting
Monday, June 29, 2009
DLA Piper/Cohen Group

“Whither the Foreign Service?”

The American Academy of Diplomacy (AAD) held its 2009 Annual Members' Meeting on Monday, June 29, 2009 at the DLA Piper/Cohen Group in Washington, DC. It was pleased to welcome Ambassador Harry Thomas, Director General of the US Foreign Service, as the keynote speaker. Over forty Academy members, financial supporters, and friends gathered for a discussion focusing on the future of the US Foreign Service, in light of new positions and funding for the State Department and USAID. Of particular interest was identifying the short-term challenges of establishing new positions and absorbing additional funding, as well as the long-term, institutional challenges of managing growth in the Foreign Service.

Amb Thomas highlighted the positive movements towards expanding the service, noting that President Obama's 2009 budget plus the 2009 supplemental have resulted in the Department's planning to hire 2,300 new Foreign and Civil Service staff over 18 months. In order to spend the funds and hire this many people in the time available, the Department has shortened the A-100 class for new officers from seven to five weeks. The FY 2010 International Affairs Budget, if approved, will provide for even more staffing increases.

These developments are a step in the right direction in strengthening American diplomacy and a meaningful way to move towards “Diplomacy 3.0,” or the holistic policy approach of focusing on development, diplomacy and defense. The influx of new resources, however, has created challenges in terms of recruiting new officers quickly, and how to efficiently process new security and medical clearances in a timely manner.

Additionally, another personnel challenge the Foreign Service faces is the high percentage of vacancies that currently exist. Ambassador Thomas estimated that there is a 20% vacancy rate in Washington, DC alone, and a 12-15% vacancy rate in overseas positions. The escalating crises in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq have stretched the U.S. Foreign Service thin.

The relative inexperience and lack of training is another long-term challenge the Foreign Service faces. It has had to devote much time and resources to provide additional training for officers by sending them to institutions such as the National Defense University to gain needed skills and experience.

Amb Thomas suggested that the Academy could help in the recruiting process by engaging high school and college students and persuading them to take the Foreign Service Exam. Graduate students who are interested in the Foreign Service could consider applying for the Presidential Management Fellows program, a prestigious two-year paid government fellowship sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management to work in a federal government agency. Undergraduate

students who are interested could apply to the Career Entry Program, a two-year career development program.

Amb Thomas credited the “Obama factor” and the economy for strong interest in the Foreign Service. 9,700 signed up for the June FS exam. The Foreign Service has also had much success in harnessing new media to help with recruitment. It has developed its own Facebook page, and has noted that 64% of those who are “fans” of the Foreign Service Facebook page have taken the Foreign Service Exam.

Of the recent successes the Foreign Service has had, Ambassador Thomas mentioned 1) obtaining the first year’s funding of a hoped-for three-year process of achieving overseas pay comparability for non-senior FSOs, and 2) new legislation extending benefits to same-sex partners of federal employees. He hopes these measures will attract more people to join the Service. A new Best Practices website has also resulted in savings by migrating physical paperwork to the Internet. The monetary savings this has yielded have gone towards health plans for locally hired staff (formerly known as FSNs).

During the question and answer period, Ambassador Ronald Neumann asked how the Foreign Service will bridge the gap between hiring new officers and having officers at the relevant level of experience to meet the needs of the service at the mid-level. Amb Thomas listed a number of measures to address this gap, including department-wide PSC authority and recalling of recent retirees. In the long-term, he noted that the answer relies on investments in training and staff management within the Service. This is an area, he said, where the Academy could usefully join forces and work with the incoming Director-General, Ambassador Powell.

Ambassador Roscoe Suddarth asked how new recruits are evaluated in terms of their foreign language skills, which are of critical importance. Those who take the Foreign Service Exam are given an extra 0.4 point (out of 7.0 points) in the Oral Exam for critical foreign language capabilities, and the Service encourages officers to take foreign language courses at local universities.

Ambassador Thomas Boyatt asked how the new recruits and officers hired into the Office for the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Development (S/CRS) will be trained for reconstruction and stabilization activities. Amb Thomas noted that recruitment for S/CRS is being handled by S/CRS Coordinator Ambassador John Herbst. Training is being coordinated directly between S/CRS and the Foreign Service Institute.

Regarding how students could gain relevant experience before entering the Service, Allen Holmes asked how undergraduate or graduate students could learn more about field operations. Amb Thomas said opportunities are available in this area, and that the Service had asked Patrick Kennedy for \$400,000 to create an internship program.