Book Review: Career Diplomacy: Life and Work in the US Foreign Service

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When this book first appeared in 2008, it won praise from reviewers for its quality address of a gap in authoritative information on the history, structure, and practice of American diplomacy. The authors, Harry W. Kopp and John K. Naland (both retired Foreign Service Officers) have distinguished records and deep experience, including Naland’s background as a retired US Army officer and graduate of the US Army War College.

This work describes the US Foreign Service’s mission to represent the United States, conduct operations, and shape and carry out foreign policy. Representation includes reporting and analyzing events and conditions abroad to inform and influence policymakers in Washington, using diplomacy to influence public opinion abroad and establish credibility, and negotiating to adjust international relationships through compromise in a realm usually governed by mutual self-interest (rather than by overarching law). Operations involve running systems and programs (such as embassy communications, finances, and building maintenance); protecting Americans abroad; and carrying out projects related to law enforcement, disaster relief, development, migration, human rights, and many other areas. Policy—normally determined in Washington—relies on diplomatic knowledge of foreign cultures, institutions, leaders, societies, economies, laws, and languages and an understanding of relevant American domestic context (such as Congressional interest).

This book surveys American diplomacy, which, like the military, predates the federal government, as the country had active envoys before the Declaration of Independence. Although the US Army and US Navy had developed professional structures at the United States Military Academy at West Point and the Naval Academy by 1802 and 1845, respectively, the diplomatic service remained part-time and amateur for most of the nineteenth century, earning a corresponding measure of scorn. (Horace Greeley referred to it as a “sewer” in the 1850s, and Theodore Roosevelt complained during his presidency that ambassadors viewed their work as a “glorified pink tea party” [13].) Only in 1924 did the Rogers Act establish the modern Foreign Service.

The State Department remained weak until the Truman era, when Secretaries of State George C. Marshall and Dean G. Acheson (1947–53) led national efforts to respond to the Soviet threat. The immediate sequence of the “who lost China” debate and the predatory tactics of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy—who denounced the State Department as “thoroughly infested” with Communists—
tempered its strength (17). The “Lavender Scare” (a purge of men and women thought to be homosexuals) accompanied the “Red Scare.” The State Department failed to rally to the defense of its members—a pattern which persisted through the decades.

The Vietnam War saw the development of expeditionary diplomacy through the famed Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program. The State Department gained its current governing legislation with the passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which created the Senior Foreign Service, unified consular and diplomatic functions, and united employees serving overseas from the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, State and the US Agency for International Development under one Foreign Service.

Kopp and Naland describe and explain critical concepts of diplomacy (such as the origins and importance of diplomatic immunity, protocol and precedence, and the accreditation process). They also describe the internal structure of the Foreign Service, its generalist and specialist corps, and interagency relationships within embassies and in Washington.

Career Diplomacy has a clear and vivid style, many pungent anecdotes, pithy quotations, and illuminating asides. The following references address internal biases and predilections: Alexander M. Haig's dry observation that "the Foreign Service is not infected by Republican sentiment" (144); Henry A. Kissinger’s comment, "the permanent career service has endured so much abuse that its sense of beleaguerment is accompanied by an acute consciousness of bureaucratic prerogative" (146); and Truman’s decision to create the Central Intelligence Agency only after the State Department failed to take up his invitation to oversee the intelligence function itself, which Acheson later labeled “gross stupidity” (183). Other anecdotes highlight acts of integrity and courage, for example, John F. Kerry's defense of diplomatic risk-taking in telling Congress, “if we are to bring light to the world, we have to go where it is dark” (134); Lynne M. Tracy's decision to remain at her post in Peshawar, Pakistan, after gunmen shot up her vehicle while she was in it; and Marie Yovanovich’s calm and lucid testimony to Congress, unaffected by the then President Donald J. Trump's public insults.

The book includes well-chosen case studies, such as the Balkan negotiations led by Richard C. A. Holbrooke in the 1990s, the development of the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief during the George W. Bush administration, and the Obama-era Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear agreement).

The authors, while scrupulous in fairness and accuracy, do not shy away from calling out past and present errors, including the State Department's repeated but only partially successful efforts to increase diversity, its failure to provide adequate support to its members and to reinforce the ability to convey internal candid policy critiques, and the continual lack of resources for diplomacy. They also decry the “corrupt” ongoing presidential practice of rewarding campaign contributors with ambassadorships. The final portion of the book describes the selection process for those entering the Foreign Service and offers advice on how to succeed at this.

This latest edition of Career Diplomacy improves upon the already high standard set by earlier versions and will be valuable to anyone studying the history and practice of American diplomacy and those interested in the State Department as an institution.

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