

What Is the Foreign Service?

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The 14,000 men and women of the Foreign Service represent the government and people of the United States. At more than 265 diplomatic and consular posts, the U.S. Foreign Service safeguards national security and manages America's relationships with the rest of the world. America's diplomacy began in the eighteenth century with Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and others who were dispatched abroad by our young nation to promote its vital interests. Thanks to their skilled diplomacy, the warring colonies received vital French help—help that finally turned the tide of the revolution. In the years that followed, separate diplomatic and consular services evolved, each primarily staffed by short-term appointees who changed en masse after each new president took office.

Efforts to replace this inefficient “spoils system” gathered steam following a 1906 order by President Theodore Roosevelt that began to depoliticize the consular service and a 1909 order by President William Howard Taft to modernize the diplomatic service. Then, responding to America's increasing foreign involvement during and after World War I, U.S. Representative John Jacob Rogers, R-Mass., spearheaded the unification of the diplomatic and consular services into a single corps of professionals recruited and promoted on the basis of merit. The Foreign Service Act of 1924, known as the Rogers Act, established a career Foreign Service composed of professionals who possess keen understanding of the affairs, cultures, and languages of other countries and who are available to serve in assignments throughout the world as ordered. The Rogers Act of 1924 evolved into the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which set the framework of today's Foreign Service.

At any given time, two-thirds of Foreign Service personnel are stationed abroad staffing our embassies and consulates—serving one- to three-year tours—and one-third are working in the United States, mostly in Washington, D.C. Overseas, they are assisted by 37,000 locally employed staff. Domestically, they work beside Civil Service colleagues who provide continuity and expertise in functions such as legal, consular, and financial affairs. Foreign Service members work for five federal agencies: the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Commerce's Foreign Commercial Service, the Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service, and the International Broadcasting Bureau (primarily at the Voice of America). Foreign Service members also serve tours on congressional staffs and at other federal agencies, including the National Security Council, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Department of Defense.

The Foreign Service is a career like no other. It is much more than a job; it is a uniquely demanding and rewarding way of life. As representatives of the United States to foreign governments, Foreign Service members have a direct impact on people's lives and participate in the making of history. They travel the globe, experiencing foreign cultures as no tourist can. They work alongside highly talented colleagues, face the unexpected every day, and find themselves in situations that push their ingenuity and creativity to the limit.

But a Foreign Service career also imposes significant demands. Typically, Foreign Service members spend two-thirds of their careers overseas, often in unhealthy or otherwise difficult locations. They live for extended periods of time far from parents, siblings, and old friends, and sometimes without familiar amenities or access to modern medical facilities. Due to international terrorism, Foreign Service members face physical danger almost everywhere they serve.

Most Foreign Service veterans, however, have found that the rewards of representing our nation far outweigh the personal burdens. Diplomacy is an instrument of national power, essential for maintaining effective international relationships, and a principal means through which the U.S. defends its interests, responds to crises, and achieves its international goals. The Foreign Service is a proud profession, safeguarding American interests by: managing diplomatic relations with other countries and international institutions; promoting peace and stability in regions of vital interest; bringing nations together to address global challenges; promoting democracy and human rights around the world; opening markets abroad to create jobs at home; helping developing nations establish stable economic environments; helping ensure that American businesspeople have a level playing field on which to compete for foreign investment and trade; protecting U.S. borders and helping legitimate foreign travelers enter the United States; and assisting U.S. citizens who travel or live abroad.

The American Foreign Service Association, established in 1924—the same year as the Foreign Service itself—is both a professional association and the collective bargaining representative for all active and retired Foreign Service professionals, more than 28,000 people. It negotiates the regulations affecting employees' careers, advocates Foreign Service issues before Congress, and communicates its professional concerns to the news media and general public. AFSA works to make the Foreign Service a better supported, more respected, and more satisfying place to spend a career and raise a family. These goals, in turn, serve to make the Foreign Service a more effective agent of U.S. international leadership.