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Foreign Service Stereotypes ^[1]

When I was in college, I longed to travel and get paid to do it. So I asked a family friend—a British businessman—for career advice, adding that I'd never work for the government, that I didn't want to give up being "me." His response: "It's entirely possible to be your own [person] in the Foreign Service. I personally know American diplomats who have succeeded at that." Today I'd say that to represent the people of your country—especially as a public diplomat—you *must* let the best of yourself shine through.

I make a point of asking PD students—many of them aspiring diplomats—about other negative stereotypes they may have heard about this career. Some are surprising; others have an element of truth. Like all stereotypes, they are misleading, and you buy into them at the risk of missing out.

Here's my take on just a few:

- **Diplomats are stuffy.** Yeah, some are. But don't hold it against us; many are just introverts. Some are just really, really smart and operate on another plane. On the other hand, we've got all kinds. I'm casual and a little quirky. More importantly, some of the finest diplomats I've known—many went on to become high-level senior officials—are really friendly people.
- **The Foreign Service is too white and male.** Well, I sure am. But if you are afraid to sign up because of who you are, please take a critical look at your logic. This is a system that is falling over itself to get you to apply. Once you're in, you'll find a lot of people rooting for you to do well. We need you to help represent all of America.
- **Diplomats went to Ivy League schools.** Some did, but the Foreign Service is mainly people who graduated from everywhere else. Their secret? They applied and got in. Get over the Ivy League thing. No one cares where you went to school.
- **Diplomats don't have integrity and will do anything to get ahead.** Wrong. As in other organizations, we have ambitious human beings, complete with flaws. But we signed up for public service, and we are continually trained and evaluated based in part on our readiness to take the high road. Compared with the private sector, this is a collegial crowd.
- **Diplomacy is only about helping the U.S. at the expense of other countries.** No. It's about finding common ground, win-win, preventing and ending conflict, building and helping allies, and being open to working with people who oppose or don't like us. All those good things. That said, power politics are a real thing. Believe me, when it comes to keeping you safe, you'll want us out there fighting hard.
- **It's all about cocktail parties and receptions.** Uh, I've had to go to a few of those. It's called "showing the flag," and many of us can't wait to leave. I'm short and get neck pain

from looking up at foreign ambassadors. But I've generated more ideas and programs and have made more contacts at these galas than I can count. Bottom line: you don't always have to go, unless (ahem) the boss or a colleague is hosting it.

- **You're part of the system.** Yes, but every American is part of the "system." The difference is that public servants are out there trying to make it work better. If not us, then who?
- **Change is impossible.** Define change. We're changing things all the time.
- **The ultimate goal is to become an ambassador.** Go for it, if you think you can. The odds are against you. A far more reasonable goal is to do good, do well, and have fun.
- **It's about who you know.** Yes, that's a factor once you're in, especially for getting assignments. If you do want to become an ambassador one day, it can help to work for someone "destined" to be very senior. Sometimes that even works. But do the math: it usually doesn't. The best strategy is to do what you love, be very good at it, and work well with others. You'll realize decades later you've lived an adventure.
- **You can't get promoted as fast.** True. Sorry about that. Consider it a blessing. Private-sector office politics can be awful. The old-fashioned stability still found in Foreign Service is underrated, although you'll have to change countries every two-three years. Also, while the pay is higher at senior levels, the best jobs are at mid-career, where some people like to linger.
- **The pay sucks.** We get what they give us, file state and federal taxes, and sit in cattle class. The system is transparent, however, with built-in incentives to meet organizational demands. This isn't a bad gig, and attrition is low: for most of us, the predictability compares well to the slings and arrows of private-sector misfortune. As for me, I learned hard languages, took hard-to-fill jobs, and earned more money.
- **Men have to wear a suit.** Ugh, it's true. Especially to meetings. If it were up to me we'd all be in jeans. For years, after my morning meetings I couldn't wait to shed the straitjacket and noose—and got away with it because I was the PD/press guy. Outside the embassy it's somehow more "American" to be less formal, so that's how I've tried to be.
- **You can't speak truth to power.** Yes and no. There's a right time and place and way for most things, and there's not one kind of boss. Many expect you to speak up. I once kicked a two-star general under the table to get him to stop talking at a press conference. I privately gave honest feedback to an ambassador after a TV interview, who then humiliated me at a staff meeting but then wrote me a stellar evaluation. And yeah, I've often kept my trap shut because I knew opening it wouldn't do any good. Sounds kind of like life, doesn't it?
- **I'll have to represent my country 24/7 and always be on my best behavior.** What's your point?
- **It's dangerous overseas.** That, by the way, is what a lot of foreigners think about the

United States. Sure, there are risks. We have people whose job it is to help you and others stay safe. They are very, very good at it and are getting better. My advice is to ignore the headlines and do your own research.

- **I'll get sick.** You bet. But not everywhere or all the time. And you can't escape all the ailments that might have hit you at home. It's nice, though, having a clinic in the embassy building with walk-in hours.
- **I'll have to leave my family behind.** This is a tough one. Think of it this way: American families tend to be mobile. You'll just be mobile across international borders. But it's true: I've felt guilty about not being there for my parents. My sisters have stepped up, and I am forever grateful. The good part is that family and friends have been proud of me and supportive.
- **My kids will grow up moving from country to country, without a single place they can call "home."** It's more complex than that, but yeah, they won't have that particular form of stability. This life isn't for everyone. All I can say is that for everything you give up to serve your country overseas, you gain many, many other things—like friends all over the world.

So in the end, stereotypes be damned: Our Foreign Service is full of real people with the travel bug who get a kick out of being part of something bigger.

That's an anti-stereotype you can buy into.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *The opinions represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government. For more information on public diplomacy careers with the U.S. Department of State, visit careers.state.gov.*

Photo by Joseph Lim. Conrad Turner with USC Annenberg Professor Nicholas J. Cull and students of cultural diplomacy.
