

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy

EDMUND A. WALSH SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

GETTING THE BEST— IS THIS THE BEST WAY?

**The Foreign Service Examination
and Entry Process**

November 2000



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The Foreign Service Examination and Entry Process

November 2000

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
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FOREWORD

For all the obvious benefit that advances in communications, high-speed travel, and information technology have brought to the practice of modern diplomacy, the effective conduct of U.S. foreign policy still depends on people. There is increasing concern about the ability of the Foreign Service to recruit and retain high-caliber men and women able to deal with the complex international issues the United States faces in the new century. Reduced interest in government service overseas, competition for talent from high-paying private sector firms, and the appeal of attractive work abroad in non-government organizations are all taking their toll. So are the well-publicized dissatisfaction on the part of many Foreign Service Officers with the way the State Department operates, the perception of its declining role in the making of foreign policy, and the erosion of its budget.

We are convinced that the system the Foreign Service uses to recruit and enroll new officers is an important if less widely recognized part of this serious problem. Although the entry process has been touched on in some of the broader studies published over the last few years about the operation of U.S. diplomacy in the post-Cold War age, we believe the issue needs more careful attention. The Institute's role at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, long a source of fresh diplomatic talent, and its contacts with the State Department and other parts of the Washington foreign policy community have heightened its interest in the problem and give ISD strong credentials to examine the issue.

The Institute study that follows spells out how the present Foreign Service examination and entry system operates and identifies its strengths and weaknesses. It compares the process to the recruiting methods used by some other government and private sector organizations, recognizing that these will necessarily differ from those that best meet State Department needs. Finally, the study outlines in some detail options for change that

can make the system more effective in attaining the goals of the Foreign Service.

Ambassador Howard B. Schaffer, the Institute's Director of Studies, was the principal author of the study. ISD Associate Mary Gawronski contributed significantly to it. The study benefitted greatly from candid discussions with a broad range of people in the State Department led by officers in the Bureau of Human Resources. Ambassador Schaffer had useful talks with Foreign Service Institute staff and met with members of the FSI entry-level course. At Georgetown, he interviewed many students who had taken the present Foreign Service exam and had decided views about it. Members of the ISD Board who had earlier served as Foreign Service officers read the study in draft and made useful suggestions, as did other present and former FSOs. Representatives of the Central Intelligence Agency, Merrill Lynch, and the Embassy of France in Washington gave generously of their time and expertise to provide a broader perspective for the study.

We have timed the publication of the study to coincide with the organization of the new administration and the designation of members of its State Department transition team. We urge the top leadership of the Department that takes office in January 2001 to give urgent attention to the entry and examination system and act promptly to promote its reform. For it is only with their support that needed changes can be brought about.

Max M. Kampelman
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Casimir A. Yost
DIRECTOR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Foreign Service is failing to recruit the broad range of talented, skilled, and dedicated officers it requires to deal with the complex diplomatic tasks of the 21st Century. If it is to do better in the increasingly daunting competition it faces for talent, it needs to make substantial changes in the way it identifies outstanding men and women and brings them into its ranks.

... one key change must be an overhaul of the entry and examination process to make it more responsive to Service needs and more attractive to high-caliber potential candidates.

After studying the present system and comparing it to others, we are convinced that one key change must be an overhaul of the entry and examination process to make it more responsive to Service needs and more attractive to high-caliber potential candidates.

The new Secretary and other top State Department officials need to give their urgent, sustained attention and support to this overhaul, and campaign vigorously for the modest increase in resources the Department will need to bring about meaningful reform. Otherwise, it will not happen.

An overhaul should have three major objectives. These are to:

- Identify more effectively candidates for the Department's administrative and consular cones as well as recruits who can bring into the Service with them certain specialized training and experience, including competence in a strategic "hard" language, strong economic credentials, public diplomacy skills, and familiarity with some of the "new" areas of foreign policy such as environmental issues.
- Strengthen the confidence of high-quality candidates that the process will adequately measure their talents and experience in judging their qualifications. Ample anecdotal evidence indicates that the current entry and examination system actually discourages some top prospects and rejects other highly qualified people who do not do well in the role-playing that is crucial for passing the exam.

There is something wrong with an examination that rejects a talented and personable candidate with a master's degree in foreign service who has lived for years in Japan, speaks and reads Japanese, and wants to be an officer in the administrative cone, a category for which well-qualified candidates are not easy to find.

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- Substantially reduce the length of time between a successful candidate's application and his or her entry into the Service. This must include speeding up the unconscionably lengthy security investigation that is a requirement for final acceptance.

In comparing the Foreign Service entry system with those of the Central Intelligence Agency, Merrill Lynch, and the French Foreign Ministry, we found that in stark contrast to the Foreign Service the others begin their selection process on the basis of résumés or applications that highlight the applicant's educational achievements, experience, skills, and special qualifications. While the other organizations value the same skills, abilities, and personal qualities valued by the Foreign Service, none of them relies solely on a general screening examination and an oral assessment composed exclusively of role-playing situations to assess them.

Moreover, CIA and Merrill Lynch top management stress the importance of the selection process, professional cadres play an active role in augmenting the efforts of full-time recruiters, and ample resources are made available for recruitment and selection. This too contrasts sharply with State Department practices.

Our comparison of the Foreign Service system with the way these other organizations operate has helped persuade us that to move toward the key objectives we have spelled out above, the Department has basically two options.

- It can retain the present two-tiered written and oral examinations while making substantial changes in both portions, especially the oral assessment.
- Or it can scrap the formal examination altogether and move to a more targeted and flexible résumé-

based recruiting process similar to the one the CIA uses.

There are many strong reasons for retaining the examination system. It is a time-honored and familiar structure used in one form or another by other major countries. Many, though not all, Foreign Service Officers consider it an important element in distinguishing the Service from other parts of the government and would resist giving it up. But it has significant shortcomings. Time-consuming and expensive, it has not proven an effective way to home in quickly on promising candidates, sustain their interest, and recruit those with skills matching the projected needs of the Service.

If the Department decides to retain the examination, it should scrap the present oral assessment in which teams of “blindfolded” examiners score candidates solely on their ability to demonstrate designated Foreign Service-useful attributes in role-playing exercises.

If the Department decides to retain the examination, it should scrap the present oral assessment in which teams of “blindfolded” examiners score candidates solely on their ability to demonstrate designated Foreign Service-useful attributes in role-playing exercises. This format, unique to the Department among government and private organizations in the international field, rules out examiners taking into account candidates’ job experience, academic credentials, exposure to cultural diversity, or motivation in wishing to join the Service. It makes impossible their identifying candidates who meet the Department’s special requirements, let alone giving them extra consideration, and is viewed by too many candidates as an unpredictable, quirky “crapshoot.”

This oral assessment format should be replaced by a more flexible and credible approach comprising a series of tests and interviews conducted by examiners who have access to candidates’ résumés and other pertinent material about them. Important if less far reaching changes in the written examination are also called for. We have recommended two that are designed, among other purposes, to encourage more would-be administrative and consular officers to enter the exam process and improve the chances that the more capable of them will successfully reach the orals.

The CIA-style model, the second option, comprises a determined, intensive recruiting effort to attract qualified applicants followed by a series of screenings winnowing them down to the number required for annual intake. It

is a more flexible tool for identifying candidates with needed skills and other valuable attributes and can do a better job in moving promising applicants along in the recruiting process. It is probably less costly than the elaborate examination system.

But it is also less transparent and relies much more on the good judgment and participation in the selection process of officers drawn from outside the ranks of those regularly assigned to recruiting. Securing such participation, which should include a prominent role for senior officials, would require a determined effort on the part of top State management to promote recruiting as a serious responsibility of all aspiring officers and to establish a credible system of incentives.

Whichever method the Department chooses to revamp the entry system, it must at the same time change the way it goes about persuading attractive candidates to become Foreign Service candidates. For reform to be effective, the Department must allocate more resources to its woefully underfunded recruiting campaign and consider substituting younger “comers” for the senior Diplomats in Residence at universities who are now one of its principal recruiting tools. It should also try to make greater use of officers outside the formal recruiting system on an ad hoc basis. Such measures will be even more crucial if the Department eliminates the examination, long the focal point of its recruiting effort, and adopts a CIA-type system.

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Any substantial reform of the present system is likely to heighten the specter of litigation that hangs over the entry and examination system. In devising changes, the Department needs to spell out guidelines to its examiners and interviewers that will assure that any new system will not only be transparent, objective, and fair but will also be seen to be so by candidates and by others concerned with the composition and operation of the Foreign Service. It should consult candidly with women’s and minority organizations, the American Foreign Service Association, and concerned members of Congress to gain their understanding and support. A substantial number of women and minorities should be prominently included in the selection process, as they are now.

INTRODUCTION

One of the remarkable things about the present entry and examination process is how few people know what it is, even within the Foreign Service itself. Most people interested in the Service are aware that the main elements of the process have for generations been a written examination and a subsequent oral exam (now termed an oral assessment) open to those who have passed the written test. But so often have the exam formats and the system of candidate selection changed over the years that aside from recent entrants and those Department officials directly involved not many know what these are.

. . . alone among government and private organizations in the international field, the Foreign Service examination does not allow examiners any meaningful access to information about a candidate's background. . . .

We suspect that few in the Department leadership, not to speak of those outside State, are aware that alone among government and private organizations in the international field, the Foreign Service examination does not allow examiners any meaningful access to information about a candidate's background—job experience, academic credentials, exposure to cultural diversity, or motivation in wanting to join the Service—let alone an opportunity to question candidates about these important matters.

There is similarly only dim awareness of what we consider other serious flaws in the process. They include its inordinate length compared to the much speedier entry systems used by rivals for potential talent; the difficulty of targeting candidates who have special language, economic, and other skills the Service needs; and the problem of recruiting an adequate number of administrative and consular officers who are seriously committed to careers in these cones (rather than seeing them as a backdoor to political, economic, and public diplomacy work).

Some of these and other shortcomings are obviously linked to the broader recruiting process—the way the Department goes about attracting talented people representative of the whole country to seriously consider a Foreign Service career. Although that broader process is not a focus of this ISD report, in our view it too has serious weaknesses that need prompt high-level attention and remedial action.

A few of those who have reviewed this study in draft have suggested that no matter how successfully the entry process is improved the Foreign Service will continue to have difficulty in recruiting and retaining top-flight officers until it seriously reforms what can be termed its organizational culture. We don't dispute this point. But we have resisted their suggestion that we expand our study to consider this broader issue. We believe the best contribution ISD can make at this time is to focus on a major problem the State Department faces and use its particular experience and resources to make an impact on the way the new administration deals with it.

THE FOREIGN SERVICE ENTRY PROCESS

The first decade of the Twentieth Century ushered in efforts for reforms which would move many government positions from the spoils system to merit-based selection. A 1909 executive order of President Taft led to the establishment of the Board of Examiners for the Diplomatic Service and called for qualifying examinations for appointment. In 1924, the Rogers Act combined the Diplomatic and Consular Services into the Foreign Service and provided for open and competitive examinations for the selection of officers. The Foreign Service examination system has a long history and a tradition that has become a pillar of State Department culture.

The State Department maintains a modest-sized recruitment division headed by a mid-grade civil servant who is a former Foreign Service Officer to spearhead the effort to encourage potential candidates to take the examinations. It is organized on a regional basis to cover the six major geographic regions in the country and some fifty targeted academic institutions within them. Most recruiters are also responsible for a "Special Emphasis Program" usually linked to minority recruitment goals. Additionally, there is targeting of professional groups that represent potential sources of talent. Former military officers with strong administrative skills and social workers who might have a natural inclination toward consular work are two examples.

Campus visits, meetings with faculty and targeted student and professional groups, and participation in career

days and job fairs are among the methods used to recruit Foreign Service candidates. A modest selection of recruitment brochures is published and further information is available on the State Department web site. The recruitment division would like to try other electronic recruiting tools such as a chat room, digital video conferences, and audiovisual materials, but funding is too scarce (a mere \$25,000 for recruiting outreach activities and \$14,000 to support Diplomat in Residence recruiting in FY-2000) and staff too thin to support much innovation. The division's Student Employment Branch, which directs a variety of programs designed to give students on-the-job experience in foreign affairs, has in its Foreign Affairs Fellowship Program a high-octane recruitment tool to attract to the Service outstanding women, minorities, and students with financial need. This small program provides funding for several years of undergraduate and graduate studies to those who meet its stringent requirements. In return, the Fellows must make a commitment to spend four-plus years in the Foreign Service and must pass both the written and oral examinations before receiving career appointments. By now, 51 Foreign Affairs Fellows have entered the service and another 54 are in the pipeline.

The very lean recruitment staff of eight in the Outreach Branch (including its chief) is augmented by a number (nine in 1999–2000) of Diplomats in Residence. These senior Foreign Service Officers are assigned to selected colleges and universities with diverse or minority student populations. While many teach and participate in a wide range of campus activities, recruitment is their primary responsibility. Diplomats in Residence travel to other institutions in their areas within the same tight budget constraints which severely limit the travel of Washington recruiters. For all recruiters, the academic year begins with an all-out effort to encourage registration for the written examination, the first step in the process.

The Written Exam

The examination has long remained a combination of a written test that serves as an initial screening mechanism for aspiring Foreign Service Officers followed by an oral exam or assessment to skim off the very top candidates. Over the years, both portions have been changed from time to time, presumably to employ what were thought to be more modern and relevant selection

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methods and to make the system as fair as possible in keeping with equal employment opportunity concerns. The written examination has been the target of litigation. Examinations given between 1985 and 1987 were successfully challenged in the courts on grounds of gender discrimination, exams given in the early 1990s are still under active litigation, and the 1996 and 1998 exams may also be challenged. Although the oral assessment has not been subjected to legal action, it is evident to us that concern over possible litigation has been an important element in the way formats and individual questions have been devised in both portions of the examination process.

The Foreign Service written examination is given once a year, currently in early November. (No exam was given in 1995 and 1997 as a result of either litigation or budget concerns.) An identical examination is taken by applicants wishing to work in all five cones or functional areas of Foreign Service work (administrative, consular, economic, political, and public diplomacy). Applicants can apply by mail or on-line. The only eligibility requirements are that they must be U.S. citizens, at least 20 years old (and 21 years old and under 60 years old to be appointed), available for worldwide assignment, and not have been previously separated from the Foreign Service under certain provisions of law. No specific educational level or proficiency in a foreign language is required. The exam is given throughout the United States and at embassies and consulates abroad.

The written examination is currently a four-part test which lasts about six hours. It is prepared by ACT, Inc., a professional testing organization. It comprises a test of job-related knowledge, a biographic information questionnaire, an English expression and usage test, and a written essay. The first three parts are given equal weight in determining a candidate's score. The essay is graded only for applicants who have passed the other parts of the exam, which are all multiple choice. In 1999, about a quarter of those who made the first cut did not get by the essay. The cut-off point for determining passing and failing scores is determined according to the hiring needs of the Foreign Service in a given year. Thus a

candidate might fail in one year and pass in the next with a similar score.

The English expression and usage test and written essay need no explanation. The job knowledge test is linked to a 1997 job analysis which sought to identify the knowledge important for Foreign Service Officers to possess prior to entry on the job. It includes a wide range of general knowledge questions in fields from U.S. history to basic economic principles. The same 1997 analysis forms the basis for the biographic information questionnaire. This portion of the exam is designed through a series of multiple choice questions to measure “the candidate’s experience, skills, and achievements in school, employment and other activities” and to provide “an assessment of personal characteristics gained through experience, skills, and achievements.”

Candidates must choose between the five functional cones at the time they apply for the written examination. Until recently, this had been a non-binding expression of preference. After passing the oral examination, candidates received more specific information on cones and had an opportunity to speak with practitioners in each functional specialty before making their final choice. Now, however, candidates cannot change the cone selection they make when they apply for the written exam. In order to assist candidates in making their choice of career tracks, a one-and-one-half to two-page description of the work of each cone is included in the registration materials. Many observers have questioned whether this material is adequate for making such a critical decision, and candidates themselves have told us they would have appreciated further guidance before they had to express their choice.

The Oral Assessment

Results of the November written examination become available in late January and oral assessments begin in March. The oral assessment is conducted at an Assessment Center in Washington and for limited periods in a few other cities. Candidates pay their own way to sites of the day-long test. In recent years, about 3,000 candidates passed the written examination of the 9,000 plus who took it. There was some drop-off between the written exam and the oral assessment. In 1996, only a little

more than 2,600 of those who passed the written exam went on to compete in the oral assessment; in 1998, the number came down to around 2,400. Of these, 856 got through, a pass rate of 35.6 percent. This percentage is much higher than others in recent years. It reflects additional hiring needs following a period of low intake as well as an anticipation that fewer successful candidates than before will remain interested in entering the Service. No breakdown is available as to how many of these passers persisted in their candidacies, came into the Service, or are still awaiting appointment (or will accept it if it is offered). The Service enrolled 313 new junior officers in 1999 and will take 275 in 2000.

The oral assessment is a very time-intensive process in which teams of four examiners or assessors work with groups of four to six candidates, as a group and individually, in a series of exercises. To quote from State Department publications, the exercises, like the written examination “are based on the 1997 Job Analysis of the Foreign Service and the skills, abilities and personal qualities deemed essential to the performance of that work.” Assessors are Foreign Service Officers of different ranks drawn from all five cones. They are assigned to the Board of Examiners, generally for one or two years, as part of the normal Foreign Service bidding and assignment process.

The assessment runs from seven in the morning to mid-afternoon. The first formal exercise is a group simulation in which candidates play the roles of members of an embassy committee that must allocate funds among competing projects they each sponsor. This is followed by two exercises in which a pair of examiners assess an individual candidate. The first of these is a demarche simulation in which the candidate plays the role of an embassy officer who delivers U.S. Government views to foreign government officials and carries on a dialogue with them. The second comprises hypothetical problems: candidates are placed in overseas situations and asked to work through difficulties typical of work in the administrative, consular, and public diplomacy areas. Following the oral examination, the candidate writes a brief report on the demarche simulation.

Examiners are given no information on any of the candidates and do not know for which cone he or she has

applied. Candidates themselves are admonished to avoid any autobiographical comments in the course of the assessment period. Each examiner observes every candidate at some point during the day and scores the candidates on the basis of twelve “dimensions” considered critical for success for Foreign Service Officers. These are: written and oral communication, information integration and analysis, planning and organizing, judgment, resourcefulness, initiative and leadership, negotiating, working with others, composure, objectivity and integrity, and cultural adaptability. Candidates are made aware of these dimensions and their definitions well before the oral assessment.

After the conclusion of the exercises, examiners meet to reach a consensus score on a candidate’s performance in each of the twelve dimensions. These consensus scores are averaged to arrive at an overall score. The candidate passes if his or her score is at or above the cut-off point, which is determined annually by intake needs. As soon as a decision is reached, successful candidates receive a pre-employment briefing, written informational materials, and contact information. Only then do they submit a standard Application for Federal Employment, for the first time making available to the Department pertinent information about their academic and work experiences. They also turn in at that time a Statement of Interest (which thus can have no influence on whether they pass or fail the oral assessment) and engage in a short discussion with the examiners on their backgrounds and interests. Those who fail the examination are told so at the time and receive their complete scores in writing later.

From Exam to Entry

Once they have passed the examination, candidates are placed on a rank order list of eligible hires for the cones they have chosen. They can remain on the list for up to two years. Names are added to the list as new candidates pass the oral exam and candidates’ places on the register change according to the scores of new arrivals. As classes for entry-level officer training at the Foreign Service Institute are filled, names are drawn from the top of each list and conditional offers of employment extended. Only then do the required security and medical clearance processes begin.

The security clearance is often an obstacle on the road to entrance, adding further delay to the already lengthy bureaucratic process. The clearances of 20 of the 45 people admitted to the entry-level class of May 2000 took six months or more. Some of these candidates had lived overseas and background investigations covering those periods were handled by security officers at embassies in the relevant countries, often a cause for further delay. Eight candidates were cleared in three to six months. Only 17 were cleared in three months or less.

When all of the clearances are received the entire file is evaluated by a panel of examiners who review candidates' overall suitability for the Foreign Service based on guidelines set out in the Foreign Affairs Manual. Factors that could affect this final suitability review include findings of financial irresponsibility, criminal records, and problem-filled employment histories. Only a few candidates fail to pass this review.

After seven weeks of orientation and basic training at the Foreign Service Institute, most officers receive additional training in tradecraft (usually consular work) and a foreign language before going overseas. Pre-departure training usually runs from four to twelve months. Entry-level salaries for Foreign Service Officers are currently between \$29,911 and \$41,150, depending on education and relevant work experience. New officers come in with a limited appointment and are reviewed for tenure and commissioning over five years. Most are commissioned by the fourth year of their appointment.

The Lengthy Time It Takes

It will take the quickest candidates some nine months, and the slowest three years, between the time they file their applications to take the written examination and their enrollment in a training class.

The schedule is daunting. Applications are due in October for the early November exam. The cycle of oral examinations of successful candidates then ordinarily runs from the following March through November. The last candidates to take the oral will thus already have waited a year from the time they applied. One way under consideration for relieving this log jam is to offer the examination on-line at testing centers at times of candidates' own choosing, an arrangement similar to the one used to administer the Graduate Record Examination.

The subsequent period that those who pass the oral wait for a conditional offer of employment will vary greatly depending on Service needs for new officers in the cones they have selected and their scores on the oral exams. Candidates for the popular political cone who have passed the oral are unlikely to be made an offer before their 24-month eligibility expires unless they have received a high score. Those who choose other cones generally fare better. (Candidates' knowledge of these results and the Department's efforts to persuade more of them to contest for other cones helped to reduce markedly the historical preference for the political cone among applicants for the November 2000 written examination.) The long security and medical clearance processes described above then follow.

The length and uncertainty of this wait [for appointment] takes its toll. . . . It is no surprise that many promising candidates fall by the wayside, . . .

The length and uncertainty of this wait takes its toll. The experience is understandably stressful for candidates confronting decisions about giving notices to their employers, accepting competing job offers, enrolling children in school, terminating leases, arranging spouses' employment, and other major personal problems. Their difficulties are heightened by the widely criticized failure of the Department to keep them adequately informed of where they stand in the selection process. It is no surprise that many promising candidates fall by the wayside, particularly in an economy where graduating seniors or advanced degree candidates have offers to begin attractive jobs immediately after commencement (and often have sizeable loans to pay off). Under these circumstances, candidates must ordinarily be highly committed to joining the Service if they are to stay the course.

A Word on the Alternate Entry Process

The State Department is currently into the second cycle of a pilot project on an Alternate Entry Process (AEP) to enroll Foreign Service Officers who are employed in other agencies of the Federal Government. As the system operates, candidates fill out lengthy application forms with information on background and experience and including writing samples. Those whose applications are selected then pass through the same oral assessment as those who have passed the written examination. Of the roughly 575 applicants in the first cycle, 200 were invited to the oral assessment, 176 were assessed and

34 passed. While the pilot project is still in its initial stages, the AEP appears to hold promise in bringing qualified applicants with government experience into the Foreign Service in a considerably shorter time.

OTHER MODELS

The Foreign Service is unique with its very particular needs, goals, opportunities, and hardships. It requires strong commitment to public service and the flexibility needed to fulfill this commitment under highly variable circumstances. Given its mandate to represent American interests abroad, the Foreign Service strives to be representative of the United States, with all the diversity that implies. Recruitment and hiring processes reflect the singular nature and needs of the Foreign Service. Nevertheless, in assessing the Foreign Service entry system, it is useful to explore how other potential rivals for talent select new entrants for their organizations. While comparisons in some cases can be rough at best, they are nonetheless instructive. The examples we have considered are: in the public sector, the Central Intelligence Agency; in the private sector, the Merrill Lynch Corporate and Institutional Client Group; and as an example of another country, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France.

Summary Observations

- A major characteristic that all of the organizations have in common—in stark contrast to the Foreign Service—is that they begin their selection process on the basis of résumés or applications which highlight the applicant’s educational achievements, experience, skills, and special qualifications. The labor intensive part of the recruitment process then focuses on a pool of candidates who have the qualifications and skills the organization is seeking.
- The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the most impressive example of a system that targets particular areas of knowledge, be they specific language and area expertise or specialization in economics, law, politics, consular affairs, administration or technical specialties.
- A second common characteristic is that all organizations have a considerably shorter process from

time of application until an offer of employment, even conditional, is made. In the case of Merrill Lynch applications are due September 1 and decisions are generally made by November. At CIA, the period between application and a conditional offer of employment is approximately three to five months and the time from the initial field interview to entry on duty some six to nine months. The French system of competitive examinations takes only a few months to bring in new entrants.

- In all cases the recruitment and hiring is done on an annual basis rather than holding over lists of eligible employees from previous years as is done by the Foreign Service.
- CIA and Merrill Lynch are striking examples of public and private sector organizations in which top management stresses the importance of the selection process, professional cadres play an active role to augment and complement the efforts of full-time recruiters, and ample resources are made available for recruitment and selection. This contrasts with the Foreign Service system in which recruitment and examination functions are primarily performed by staff assigned to those divisions and resources are limited.
- Merrill Lynch is particularly notable in offering career-enhancing incentives for professional staff to participate actively in recruitment and selection, thus bringing their best talent into the process. Likewise, active CIA officers have inducements to participate in the recruitment/selection process along with those actually assigned to recruitment positions. The Agency's highest ranking officers led by the Director take part. In the State Department, service in recruitment and examinations is considered by many to be outside the mainstream of foreign affairs work. It is rarely rewarded with promotion or other professional dividends.
- Finally, while all the other organizations value the same skills, abilities, and personal qualities the Foreign Service does, none of them relies solely on a

The Agency's highest ranking officers led by the Director take part. In the State Department, service in recruitment and examinations is considered by many to be outside the mainstream of foreign affairs work. It is rarely rewarded with promotion or other professional dividends

general screening examination and an oral assessment composed exclusively of role-playing situations to assess them.

The Central Intelligence Agency

The CIA Recruitment Center hires almost all CIA employees and, since 1998, has had complete authority for hiring decisions. This is a departure from past procedure in which the principal directorates played an important role, and was one of many changes reflecting the strong emphasis the Director of Central Intelligence placed on the recruitment and hiring process after the Agency experienced a difficult personnel situation in the mid-1990s. The increased focus on recruitment resulted in an overhaul of the system and gave the Recruitment Center central authority, generous resources, and a heightened profile within the organization. At present, the CIA enjoys great success in recruiting for its hiring needs, based on large numbers of interested applicants and strong “brand attraction” for young people.

The following comments focus on the recruitment and hiring for the Clandestine Service of the Directorate of Operations. These are the officers heading for overseas assignments and, in this sense, are most comparable to Foreign Service Officers within the State Department system.

For positions as Operations Officers, academic record is considered less important than life experience. Overseas experience and language facility and competence are particularly prized. The average age of those entering this branch is about 29 years, reflecting the emphasis on experience and maturity. The maximum entry age allowed is 35. While some officers enter right after college, they come in as Professional Trainees and must spend more seasoning time in stateside jobs before taking up duties overseas. In an attempt to attract diversity, the Agency recruits all over the country and photos of minorities dominate in its recruitment ads and literature. About 15 percent of the entering DO officers are minorities. The Agency seeks to hire long-term career employees. This is particularly true for DO recruits since the process and training are very costly and *esprit de corps* is considered essential.

Although the CIA uses on-campus recruitment to satisfy many of its hiring needs, only about ten percent of its

Operations Officers are recruited this way. The major recruitment tool for the Clandestine Service is the recruitment “blitz.” Recruitment blitzes take place in every major U.S. city, but are “invitation only” events. Well in advance of the blitz, prominent advertisements are run in local newspapers. Interested individuals are asked to submit résumés which include education, a skills summary, knowledge of foreign languages and foreign areas, foreign travel (except for tourism), work experience, and other job-related information. The résumés are examined by Recruitment Center staff and those applicants considered prime prospects for CIA employment are called for a thirty-minute telephone interview. If they successfully complete that interview they are invited to the blitz recruiting session. Although the net is cast far and wide, the CIA is highly selective and expends its efforts only on those whose qualifications it needs.

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The actual blitz recruiting sessions are conducted by Directorate of Operations officers with overseas experience. Given the importance attached by senior agency leaders to the recruitment function, officers who serve as recruiters can expect good on-going assignments and a recruiting hitch is often linked to a coveted future position. The Recruitment Center carefully filters nominations for recruitment positions and tries to assure that those who are still rising in the system will be those recruiting future talent.

Once applicants arrive at the blitz, they receive briefings which provide extensive information on the organization, its operations, career opportunities, and life overseas. Applicants who choose to pursue their candidacies have a one-on-one interview later. For applicants found to be promising prospects, the process then shifts to Washington. While travel costs to field interviews are paid by the applicant, travel to Washington is covered by the Agency.

Interviews in the field and in Washington are extensive and applicants must discuss foreign affairs so interviewers can gauge their range of interests and knowledge. Hypothetical scenarios dealing with situations in which officers might find themselves are included so that applicants’ reactions can be judged. Good prospective

employees must show interest in foreign cultures and politics as well as exhibiting patriotism and interest in public service. Motivation is key, as are personal qualities and experience. Writing samples are usually obtained as part of the process since applicants are asked to provide written answers to some questions.

Once at headquarters, the major testing device and decisive hurdle for candidates is a psychological test called the PAT-B (Professional Aptitude Test Battery) which was developed in-house by psychologists and has been used for many years. The test is administered, scored, and evaluated by psychologists and is designed to measure intelligence, mental agility, and other psychological factors. The PAT-B weeds out many aspiring CIA officers as no offer of employment is made to those who do not score competitively.

If a candidate has passed through the interviews and the PAT-B successfully, a conditional offer of employment is made. Security and medical clearance procedures then begin. For officers hired for the Clandestine Service, salaries are dictated by the federal pay scale, beginning at entry level with credit given for education, experience, and language competency. (The general entry range is GS 9-11, roughly \$35–40,000). Officers receive one year of operational training and then, perhaps, a year of language, depending on the specific assignment. Most can expect to go overseas after two years.

The time between sending in a résumé and appearing at a recruiting “blitz” is from one to three months, depending on the scheduling of the field interviews. The lapse between the field interview and a conditional offer of employment (following the Washington interview and the PAT-B) is approximately two months. From the blitz to entry on duty is usually from six to nine months depending on the security clearance process and the scheduling of orientation/training courses. New hires are brought on two or three times a year. For the Clandestine Service about two percent of those submitting résumés are hired.

Merrill Lynch

Merrill Lynch’s Corporate and Institutional Client Group sector is the firm’s most appropriate division for comparison with the Foreign Service system. The comparison can only be an inexact one, of course. Merrill Lynch

is a private business organization whose goals and purposes differ sharply from those of the Foreign Service. The financial sector in which it operates is noted for its rapid turnover, and although the firm hopes that outstanding performers will stay on, it initially brings in recruits for two years.

Merrill Lynch is a worldwide organization and recruitment and selection practices vary according to geographic areas and between those entering with a BA and those who have a graduate degree (usually an MBA). In this division, a high percentage of new hires are foreign nationals, about 95 percent overseas and 10 percent in the United States. The following comments focus on the system in the United States and Europe.

The recruiting cycle runs from September 1 through the end of February. Most new entrants into the professional cadres of Merrill Lynch come on board right after graduation from college or graduate school. Thus, academic records are very important, especially in the initial screening.

The hiring process is extremely competitive and seeks those with high levels of competence in addition to those personal qualities deemed key to success. As with the Foreign Service, leadership potential, teamwork skills, poise, judgment, and communication skills are among the qualities sought. Foreign language skills are not required, though foreign nationals must speak English. Not surprisingly, a strong background in economics is emphasized. Diversity is considered important, and attempts are made to focus on schools with diverse student bodies.

The recruitment process begins in earnest after an initial screening of résumés. For those in Europe, there is also a “numeracy” test of mathematical ability which is used as an additional screening device. Only after the preliminary screenings, are applicants invited to their first interviews, either on-campus in the United States or at local Merrill Lynch offices in European countries. (In a few cases, students who go through a school “lottery” process are interviewed before résumés are reviewed.) The third step in the process for those applicants whose qualifications meet the firm’s standards are invitations to the London Assessment Center for undergraduates applying

for work in Europe, or to competency-based interviews at the Merrill Lynch headquarters in New York for those seeking work in the United States. MBA graduates in Europe and the United States also undergo competency-based interviews. While applicants are expected to pay their way to the initial interviews, the firm covers expenses for travel to either the London Assessment Center or the New York headquarters.

The experience at the London Assessment Center process bears some similarity to the Foreign Service oral assessment. It includes practical exercises such as analyzing case studies and sales simulations. The competency-based interviews, rather than the Assessment Center approach, are used in New York, where the higher volume of candidates and intense Wall Street competition dictate a faster process. These interviews bring candidates together with firm experts in specific areas who test their knowledge and assess their abilities.

The division President himself heads one of the recruiting teams and promotion to Managing Director—the equivalent of partner—requires some participation in the recruitment process during the individual's career.

A hallmark of Merrill Lynch recruitment is the participation of large numbers of practitioners from the firm's professional ranks. Recruitment and selection are given high priority from top management on down and there are strong incentives for personnel to participate. The division President himself heads one of the recruiting teams and promotion to Managing Director—the equivalent of partner—requires some participation in the recruitment process during the individual's career.

After applicants go through the selection process, actual hiring decisions are made by the managers for the business groups. Once an employment offer is accepted, other clearances such as checks of credit ratings, criminal record, drug screening, and verification of records submitted with applications follow. Entry-level salaries are determined by the market. All Wall Street firms have identical salaries and compensation programs and if one raises the level, the others follow suit. In the past year, BA entry salaries have gone from \$40,000 to \$55,000 and MBA salaries from \$75,000 to \$85,000. Although entry-level salaries and benefit packages are uniform, potential for bonuses and stock options and relocation benefits for new employees can vary.

The selection process moves swiftly; two to three months from application to a final decision and offer of employment. Generally, applications are due by September 1 and a decision is made by November 1. For those who pass through the subsequent clearances, work will begin the following July (for BAs) or September (for MBAs). About two to two-and-a-half percent of those who apply are hired. Of those who are offered positions, about 75 percent of the undergraduates and around 60–65 percent of the MBAs accept.

Entry-level training generally consists of eight weeks for those at the BA level and five weeks for MBAs. In addition there is time to study for exams for certification required by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Language training is only provided in mid-career and there are no pay bonuses for language competency.

The French Foreign Service

Entry into the French diplomatic corps rests on a multi-tiered system of stringent competitive examinations. Each year, according to hiring needs established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry holds examinations for the three categories of personnel hired for overseas assignments in its missions. These are defined as categories A, B and C. Category A applies to diplomatic counselors and secretaries of embassy who are to fill political, economic, juridical, consular, or cultural posts, and to those who are to be systems/communications managers in overseas missions. It also includes those hired to carry out administrative work in the central administration in France. Category B includes secretaries of the chancellery who have administrative and certain consular responsibilities overseas such as issuing visas. Category C pertains to secretarial and technical support staff and specialists such as maintenance workers and drivers. While this discussion will focus on Category A, it should be noted that entry into all categories is based on written examinations and oral examinations or interviews. In 1999, there were eleven competitions and eight professional exams given to roughly six thousand candidates.

The examinations for diplomatic counselors and secretaries of embassy (Category A), the classification most comparable to the majority of Foreign Service Officers,

are subdivided into different groups. There are examinations for internal applicants who are already government officials as well as for external candidates hoping to enter public service. Diplomas are required before an applicant can sit for an examination. A certain number of applicants from the prestigious National School of Administration (*l'Ecole Nationale d'Administration* or *l'ENA*) are admitted after completing their studies without taking further examinations. There are different examinations for generalists and those seeking entrance into the “*cadre d'Orient*” or the cadre of officers specialized in a specific language and corresponding geographic area. For both generalists and those with language and area specialization, English language proficiency as well as proficiency in another foreign language is required in most cases.

The written examinations are arduous and are geared to selecting those who have achieved high levels of education and erudition. In addition to languages, the examinations are designed to test a broad range of knowledge including general culture, economics, European affairs, public finance, politics, geography, etc. There is also a part of the examination in which the candidate can choose a subject area from among options such as public law and consular affairs, the European Union or economics. The examination is in essay format requiring compositions and analyses in response to various questions. The examinations screen out the majority of applicants and those who succeed move on to a rigorous oral examination.

The oral examination is conducted by a panel composed of diplomats and academics; it is usually presided over by a retired ambassador.

The oral examination is conducted by a panel composed of diplomats and academics; it is usually presided over by a retired ambassador. Oral examinations include: a commentary on a text; a background interview to allow the panel to evaluate the aptitudes, personality, and motivation of the candidate; a presentation on a subject related to knowledge of civilization, history, political science, and other subjects; specific questions posed by the panel; questions on the European Union; a test of English; and in some cases tests in other foreign languages.

Only the very best of the candidates pass and enter the diplomatic corps. For example in 1999 in the category of

counselor with a foreign language/area specialization, of 175 who registered for the competition, 9 were admitted. Of the 719 who registered in competition for secretary of embassy/generalist, 10 were admitted. The increasing rate of employment in France and expanding economy have resulted in some decrease in the number of candidates registering for the competition. Nevertheless, competition remains stiff.

While there are no particular studies required for admission to the diplomatic corps, level of education is considered important in light of the stringent and academically oriented examination. Those who have studied at the elite “*grandes ecoles*” or schools of advanced studies have the highest rates of success. Most Ministry recruitment efforts are focused on universities and schools of advanced studies, although now the Ministry puts detailed materials on its web site. New entrants receive an orientation of a few weeks and then go on to an overseas posting or spend a few months working in Paris before going abroad. Most entrants come in at a similar level and pay status unless they are coming from another government ministry and bring a higher rank and salary with them. The examination process takes just a few weeks with just a few months from initial application to entrance on duty.

FINDINGS

After carefully reviewing the structure and operation of the current Foreign Service system for recruiting junior officers and comparing it with the selection processes of other organizations in the international field we have concluded that the system is badly flawed. It requires a major overhaul.

We are particularly concerned with the entry system’s glaring weakness in recruiting some of the key skills the Service needs.

We are particularly concerned with the entry system’s glaring weakness in recruiting some of the key skills the Service needs. The chronic shortfall of adequately prepared entry-level economic officers illustrates this problem and has necessitated the Department’s training a large percentage of its economic officers in a nine-month course at considerable expense. The shortage of well-qualified administrative officers and willing entrants to the consular cone has been a worry to Department

A good deal of money could be saved—the two years of intensive training needed to give an officer competence in Mandarin is estimated to cost about \$300,000—were the examination and entry system able to do a better job in recruiting able officers who already had these necessary language skills.

management for years. And the Department's substantial investment in language training reflects in part the Service's failure to recruit more than a very small number of officers with some knowledge of the most strategically important hard foreign languages—Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Arabic, and Korean. A good deal of money could be saved—the two years of intensive training needed to give an officer competence in Mandarin is estimated to cost about \$300,000—were the examination and entry system able to do a better job in recruiting able officers who already had these necessary language skills. This sum is many multiples of the Department's current budget for recruiting.

The Service does better in finding talented candidates who want to devote their careers to what they perceive to be traditional foreign policy roles, especially political work. It has been able to do so despite a post-Cold War slackening of interest in foreign affairs, increasing competition from the private sector and non-governmental organizations for people looking for remunerative and productive careers overseas, and a growing perception that the State Department's style of operating has many shortcomings for those who aspire to play meaningful roles in it.

Ample anecdotal evidence suggests that the current system actually discourages some top prospects from seriously pursuing their candidacies and rejects other highly qualified people who do not do well in the kind of role-playing exercises that make up the oral assessment.

We caution, however, against complacency on this score. Ample anecdotal evidence suggests that the current system actually discourages some top prospects from seriously pursuing their candidacies and rejects other highly qualified people who do not do well in the kind of role-playing exercises that make up the oral assessment.

Unless substantial changes are made in the entry system, the competition for talent the Foreign Service faces is likely to make the weaknesses we have identified even more glaring in the future. The Service simply cannot afford to continue a process that is not only unable to recruit in sufficient numbers people with skills and interests it requires, but also turns away some of the best and brightest interested in a Foreign Service career.

In dealing with these major shortcomings and devising a better way for getting the best, the Service should establish three objectives. These are to:

- Identify more effectively junior officers for the administrative and consular cones as well as candidates who can bring with them certain specialized training and experience, including competence in a “hard” language, strong economic credentials, public diplomacy skills, and familiarity with some of the “new” areas of foreign policy such as environmental issues.
- Strengthen the confidence of high-caliber candidates that the process will adequately measure their talents and experience in judging their qualifications for appointment.
- Substantially reduce the presently inordinately long time between a successful candidate’s application and his or her entry into the Service. This must include not only cutting back the drawn-out period between application and conditional acceptance but also speeding up the often unconscionably slow security investigation that follows.

TWO APPROACHES

There are basically two ways to meet these objectives.

- Retain the present two-tiered written and oral examination while making substantial changes in both portions, especially the oral assessment.
- Scrap the formal exams altogether and move to a more targeted and flexible résumé-based recruiting process. This would be along the lines of the CIA model (see pages 16–19) and would incorporate aspects of the competency-based interviews of Merrill Lynch.

Whatever approach the Department decides to take to improve the entry system, it should as a first step undertake a study to determine what skills it needs to recruit in its annual hiring. The Department’s senior management must prioritize personnel requirements and ensure the cooperation of various regional and functional

bureaus to make certain that the study is completed promptly. Not insignificantly, setting skill-based recruitment goals could help the Department meet its requirement to develop performance measures for important aspects of its work. The exercise should be updated annually.

The study should include not only how many junior officers are required for each of the Service's five cones, but also the number of recruits the Service needs who are competent in specific hard languages and have advanced economic training. It should take into account the need for administrative officers with the technical expertise necessary to oversee specialists responsible for upgrading the level of technology in the Department, a critical priority in the information age. In undertaking the study, the Department should use the best technology available rather than the "seat of the pants" approach familiar to such projections. The study might also usefully include projected requirements for officers with strong backgrounds in such specialized "new" foreign policy areas as the environment and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Option I: A Revised Examination

There are many strong reasons for retaining the examination system. It is a time-honored and familiar structure that is used in one form or another by all major nations with broad foreign policy interests, as witnessed by the example of France. The process is a rigorous one designed to take into account knowledge, skills and abilities deemed essential for success as a Foreign Service Officer. The FSOs who conduct the oral assessment are given some training and assigned to the Board of Examiners for a year or more, thus assuring a good degree of consistency in evaluations. Although the written exam continues to be the subject of litigation, the examination approach is probably more transparent and objective than any substitute arrangement is likely to be.

For many FSOs and others, the examination is also an important element in distinguishing the Foreign Service from the Civil Service and other personnel structures in the U.S. government. Offered all over the country and at U.S. overseas missions, it reaches out to potential applicants from a wide variety of backgrounds and reflects and symbolizes the openness of the Foreign Service. A

decision to scrap it would almost certainly raise a storm of protest from within the Service and among retired FSOs. Our interviews suggest, however, that many present and retired officers would be prepared to accept a different system if they were convinced it would better meet the needs of the Service and was consistent with its distinct status.

There are many powerful arguments against the examination route, however. It is time-consuming and expensive. A blunt instrument, it is not an effective way to home in quickly on promising candidates, sustain their interest, and recruit those with skills matching projected Service needs. As noted above, the exam has had difficulty in bringing into the Service a sufficient number of would-be consular and administrative officers or those competent in hard languages, advanced economics, and other subjects important in foreign policymaking. Many who take the written examination are not serious or well-informed about Foreign Service careers; this makes it a wasteful use of resources. Moreover, some see in the retention of the written exam a recipe for unending expensive and destructive lawsuits by those who claim it is discriminatory. (Substitute procedures might also become the subject of litigation, of course.)

Although some of these problems are probably endemic to any large two-tiered exam system, we believe that if several major changes are made in its present format the exam will become more effective than it now is in meeting Foreign Service needs. These changes should be made in both portions of the examination.

Changes in the Written Examination

As noted, the written exam currently comprises a test on job-related knowledge, a biographic information “questionnaire,” an English expression and usage test (each given equal weight), and an essay. We propose two major changes:

- Eliminate the biographic info questionnaire. We suspect from substantial anecdotal evidence that the questionnaire is routinely manipulated by candidates. Despite warnings in the instructions, a good number no doubt try to figure out the answers they think examiners are looking for to questions such as “To what extent have you enjoyed speaking to groups of people?” or “In the past year, how many

At best, this biographic portion of the exam seems to us a circuitous and unreliable way to learn of a candidate's skills and achievements.

Revise the job-related knowledge test in order to encourage more would-be administrative and consular officers to enter the exam process and improve the chances of the more capable of them of successfully reaching the orals.

social functions were you responsible for organizing at work or school?" At best, this biographic portion of the exam seems to us a circuitous and unreliable way to learn of a candidate's skills and achievements. We understand that its inclusion has led to a greater proportion of women and minorities among those passing the examination. We believe, nonetheless, that a much better approach would be for the examiners to have access to candidates' files and, in the oral exam, have the opportunity to discover what they can bring to the Foreign Service. We have recommended below that the oral exam be revised to provide for this.

- Revise the job-related knowledge test in order to encourage more would-be administrative and consular officers to enter the exam process and improve the chances of the more capable of them of successfully reaching the orals. There are two feasible ways of doing this. The first is to assure that the job-related knowledge test includes more questions that draw upon the experience of candidates who have opted for the administrative and consular cones. A second approach that can be used either in place of this or in addition to it is to include as part of the job-related knowledge test separate options for candidates for each cone. This would be an adaptation of a system used earlier, in the 1960s, before the current rigid conal divisions were adopted. At that time, candidates were offered a choice between "general," economic-commercial, and administrative options. (A large majority chose the general option.)

Changes in the Oral Exam

We recommend much more far-reaching changes in the oral portion of the exam. We urge nothing short of the scrapping of the present system in which teams of "blindfolded" examiners score candidates solely on their ability to demonstrate designated Foreign Service-useful attributes in role-playing exercises. We believe it must be replaced by a system that bases the decision on candidates' acceptance into the Foreign Service on much broader criteria.

The present oral assessment is intended to consider candidates on a level playing field by deliberately eliminating to the extent possible any personal information that might prejudice examiners either in their favor or against them. But in trying to do so it has gravely restricted what examiners know about a candidate before they make a decision on whether or not he or she should be enrolled in the Foreign Service. The only information examiners have is derived *in toto* from the three simulated exercises that make up the oral assessment and are used to compute candidates' scores on the twelve "dimensions" judged important in carrying out Foreign Service duties.

For the blindfolded examiner, there is no difference except what is revealed in the simulations between a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur who speaks fluent Mandarin, has a Ph.D. in financial economics, and has wanted to join the Foreign Service since he spent a couple of years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Gabon, and a rival candidate who has bounced around from job to job and has limited experience or success either in overseas living or in dealing with cultural diversity at home.

For the blindfolded examiner, there is no difference except what is revealed in the simulations between a successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur who speaks fluent Mandarin, has a Ph.D. in financial economics, and has wanted to join the Foreign Service since he spent a couple of years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Gabon, and a rival candidate who has bounced around from job to job and has limited experience or success either in overseas living or in dealing with cultural diversity at home. Presumably the first candidate will do better in the simulated exercises, but that is by no means assured: some people are better at role-playing than others. But what is certain is that if the Department is looking for financial economists and Mandarin-speakers, as it should be, examiners have no way of identifying them in the present exam process, let alone giving them extra consideration. To us, this makes no sense at all.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many high-caliber candidates are concerned that what to them seem obvious qualifications for the Foreign Service—serious motivation, special skills, academic attainment, proven leadership ability, cultural sensitivity—are at most indirectly weighted in the oral assessment if they are taken into account at all. Some candidates, including successful ones, have come to view the assessment as a quirky, unpredictable exercise, a kind of "crap-shoot" that often rewards the seemingly less deserving and inexplicably rejects those who seem the most qualified. The extent to which this attitude has already turned people away from

Some candidates, including successful ones, have come to view the assessment as a quirky, unpredictable exercise, a kind of “crap-shoot” that often rewards the seemingly less deserving and inexplicably rejects those who seem the most qualified.

the Foreign Service cannot be accurately assessed. But it is a problem that needs to be taken into careful account in redesigning the entry system.

We recommend that the present oral assessment be replaced by an oral exam that is more flexible, supple, and credible. Conducted by examiners who have access to candidates' résumés and other pertinent material about them, it should comprise a variety of tests and interviews that in sum would allow the examiners to come to better-informed judgments about their qualifications and make it easier for their skills and experience to be taken into account in meeting Service needs. The examination should be strongly oriented to the conal preferences of the candidates, which as they do now they would designate on their original applications.

The examination we propose to replace the present oral assessment comprises four parts:

- A brief oral presentation by the candidate on a subject relevant to his or her conal preference, followed by a question and answer period in which the candidate would defend the position presented.
- A series of “hypothetical” simulations similar to those now included in the oral assessment. At present, these simulations comprise role-playing in dealing with consular, administrative, and public diplomacy problems. Economic and political problems could usefully be added.
- A résumé-based interview in which examiners draw out candidates on relevant skills, experience, and motivation for wishing to enter the Foreign Service.
- A discussion of broad foreign policy issues with which candidates could reasonably be expected to be familiar.

Candidates would be examined by panels of three officers who will have had previous access to information about them, including a full résumé, an academic transcript, and letters of recommendation from people with whom they have had direct work- or school-related associations. It is important to define this narrowly. If candi-

dates can submit references from a wider range of supporters, the system could be exposed to the kind of political favoritism it has scrupulously avoided in the past.

The candidates would be advised to make certain to include in their résumés and other documentation information that is relevant to specific Foreign Service interests and needs, e.g., knowledge of designated languages and managerial experience. Those who claim such language skills should be examined by phone—a method the Foreign Service Institute has developed—to determine their level of competence.

Each panel would comprise two officers from the Board of Examiners staff and an additional officer from elsewhere in the Department who would serve on a part-time basis. These part-time examiners would be recruited from all cones and assigned to examine candidates for appointment to the cones to which they belong. They would be given a short training course to prepare them for their duties. With this mix of regular and part-time examiners and a more concentrated exam format, we estimate that the oral exam process can be completed in less than three months, a great improvement over the present oral evaluation cycle that runs to as long as nine.

Following the completion of the examination, examiners would confer and then give individual scores to the candidates taking into account their oral performance and their résumés as these relate to their skills and experience. To help assure that the revised exam is perceived as fair and transparent, it will be extremely important that examiners be given clear and precise precepts/guidelines instructing them about the weight they are to assign to different factors in coming to their decisions. These would include both the twelve specific “dimensions” in the current evaluation and other elements, e.g., motivation, suitability for the cone selected, and qualifications related to current and long-term Service needs. The scoring system would thus differ markedly from the one used in the present oral assessment in which candidates are rated solely on the twelve dimensions.

Once all candidates are examined, they would be rank-ordered by cone. The top-ranked will be given condi-

tional offers of employment contingent on their receiving security and medical clearances and passing a final suitability review.

The Bureau of Diplomatic Security should be instructed to give high priority to processing background investigations of prospective new entrants both in the United States and abroad and to set strict deadlines for their completion.

The Department must devote greater resources and attention than it now does to these post-examination procedures, especially the security clearance. The Bureau of Diplomatic Security should be instructed to give high priority to processing background investigations of prospective new entrants both in the United States and abroad and to set strict deadlines for their completion. The Department should also consider giving limited, Secret security clearances to new officers pending completion of the investigations

for the Top Secret clearances required for Foreign Service Officers. This would allow them to enter the junior officers' course at the Foreign Service Institute and undergo other training. The downside of this approach is that some candidates, probably only a few, might eventually fail to be cleared and would have to leave the Service.

The number of candidates chosen for each cone would reflect Department requirements during the annual cycle. Candidates would be obliged to accept appointment into a junior officers' training course during the upcoming year. This would end the present unsatisfactory situation in which those who have passed the oral evaluation can remain on a register of eligible hires for as long as two years. A transition period would be needed to accommodate those already on the register.

Option II: A Modified CIA System

An alternative to retaining the exam is to develop a résumé-based system modeled broadly on the CIA approach. The CIA's system, spelled out earlier, comprises a determined and intensive effort to attract qualified applicants followed by a series of screenings in which they are winnowed down to the number the Agency needs to employ in its current cycle. The first screening is based solely on examiners' reading of candidates' extensive résumés. Three subsequent screenings involve direct examinations of the candidates, one by phone, a second at a regional office, the third at CIA headquarters. The final screening includes psychological testing.

A similar model is a viable approach for recruiting Foreign Service Officers, though it would have to be modified to take into account the Service's different requirements. It has several advantages over the revised examination system outlined above. It is a more flexible tool for identifying candidates with needed skills and other attributes and can do a better job in moving promising applicants along in the recruiting process. Although we do not have access to comparative cost figures, it is probably less costly than the present elaborate two-tier examination structure. But it is less transparent than the exam system and relies much more on the participation and good judgment in the selection process of officers drawn from outside the ranks of those regularly assigned to recruiting.

As in our proposed revised examination system, the application form candidates prepare would be expanded. The CIA requires résumés that include education, a skills summary, knowledge of foreign languages and foreign areas, foreign travel (except tourism), work experience, and other job-related information. The Foreign Service should do the same, adding to it a request for information relevant to cross-cultural experience (including domestic majority/minority experience) and job-related work or volunteer experience that is specifically relevant to work in the Service. This last is a feature of the Peace Corps application. As with the Peace Corps, "relevant" should be defined broadly enough to include experience, aptitudes, and skills needed in the Foreign Service even if the content of the work is quite different (e.g., drafting of analyses not related to foreign policy issues, managing programs, social work). The documentation would also

The assigned recruiters would be made aware of special short-term and long-term needs the Department expects to face in the upcoming annual cycle, and would be instructed to make extra effort to identify and encourage the candidacies of applicants who meet these requirements.

include academic transcripts and letters of recommendation from employers, teachers, and others with whom the candidate has had direct job or academic relationships. At some stage, a phone examination testing claimed hard-language skills should be arranged.

These résumés and supporting documents would be initially screened according to agreed criteria. The assigned recruiters would be made aware of special short-term and long-term needs the Department expects to face in the upcoming annual cycle, and would be instructed to

make extra effort to identify and encourage the candidates of applicants who meet these requirements. Similar special consideration would be given at later phases of the screening process.

Successful candidates would go on to the next stage in which they would be personally interviewed, initially by phone. For these later screening phases, too, the Department would need to develop specific criteria, though considerable discretion would necessarily remain in the hands of recruiters in interpreting them to meet Service needs. The final screening should be structured to resemble the oral examination in the revised form we have suggested above: an oral presentation, a number of simulated exercises, a résumé-based interview, and a discussion of foreign policy issues. As in the revised oral exam, the content of these would take into account the conal preference of the candidate. Consideration by recruiters of a candidate's writing skills as demonstrated in an essay could be done at this stage or earlier.

In the CIA model, conal preferences can be handled more flexibly than in the examination system. Candidates would state their choice in their initial applications. They would have the opportunity to revisit this preference during discussions with recruiters as the process proceeds. Recruiters could use early screening sessions to develop or reinforce qualified candidates' interest in pursuing careers in the historically underbid consular and administrative cones. Candidates would be required to make their final choice of a cone before they enter the last phase of the selection process.

In this final phase, interviewers would comprise a highly select group of officers similar to those who make up the Department's annual promotion panels. As in the promotion panels, competent outsiders should be included as public members. Service on these panels, which always include strong women and minority representation, is considered an honor in the Foreign Service. Those selected readily serve despite disruption in their regular duties and personal inconvenience. They work long hours with a strong sense of responsibility. We would expect those chosen to select junior officers to do the same.

As in the revised examination process, the panelists who conduct the final review would rank order candidates by cone. The number of candidates appearing for this review can be more effectively controlled than is possible in the examination system, where all those who pass the written test are invited to the orals. This practice has led to a greater ratio of political officer candidates to job openings than for candidates for other cones. The number of candidates per available position chosen for the final cut is likely to be lower than the CIA has found necessary since no CIA-type psychological test—with its significant rate of failure—would be included.

RECRUITING

Whatever method the Department chooses to revamp its entry system, it must at the same time change the way it goes about persuading attractive prospects to become Foreign Service candidates. We have not made a detailed study of this broader recruitment issue. But several problems are evident:

- The present recruitment effort is woefully underfunded. Recruiters' travel and the preparation and dissemination of advertising material are severely limited. Minimal budgets hamper effective use of web sites, chat rooms, production and distribution of cassettes and other popular marketing techniques. Unable to deal properly with candidates' requests for information, the small and understaffed recruiting office is seen by many candidates as uncaring and unresponsive. Making matters worse, positions in the office of recruitment have often gone unfilled for long periods.
- The effort to beat the bushes for candidates relies too heavily on Diplomats in Residence. Senior officers assigned to these positions are often in the twilight of their careers and are less interested in recruiting than in their other responsibilities on campus and future prospects. Although some of them prove to be effective recruiters, demonstrated or prospective skill in recruiting is not a significant consideration in their selection.

- The Department seems to regard recruiting as an activity exclusively for those assigned to it. Little effort is made to enlist other Foreign Service Officers who could play a useful role on an ad hoc basis, e.g., when they are traveling outside Washington on official business or home leave. We have been told that the short-staffed recruitment office does not have the resources to identify such officers, let alone use them.

Working with the regional and functional bureaus, senior management should develop a system to use officers traveling in the hinterland in the recruiting drive.

For a reform of the entry system to be effective, the Department must allocate more funds to its recruiting campaign. The recruiting office must be strengthened. Working with the regional and functional bureaus, senior management should develop a system to use officers traveling in the hinterland in the recruiting drive. A bolstered recruiting office will have a key role in coordinating their participation. The Department should consider carefully, and promptly, whether the senior officer Diplomats in Residence are an effective recruiting tool, and if greater use should be made of younger “comers.” It should also make a greater effort to reach out to the student interns who work effectively in the Department and overseas posts during their summer vacations in junior-FSO level positions.

These measures, necessary in any event, will be even more critical if the Department adopts the CIA model. The annual examination has long been a focal point for the recruitment effort. If it is eliminated, as it would be under a CIA-type system, the Department must make an even greater effort to assure that candidates of different backgrounds are aware of the Foreign Service as a career and are encouraged to apply.

A CIA-type system would also necessitate a major Department effort to assure that high-caliber officers are available to take part in the successive screening interviews and information sessions that make up this approach. This will require top-level stress on the importance of recruiting and the development of a system of incentives for participation which characterize the process at CIA and Merrill Lynch. Management must be prepared to overcome the objection Department bureaus will make to this “raiding” of their most talented officers for temporary recruiting duty. The Secretary and Deputy

Secretary have to make it clear that this recruiting service is an obligation that strong officers must undertake. Their own brief participation in the process would have a very salutary impact.

If the examination system is retained, the Department should make a greater effort to assign quality officers to the Board of Examiners staff. As noted, these BEX positions are not considered career enhancing. They are too often filled with officers who need a nine-to-five Washington job or are not competitive for what are considered more mainstream assignments. The Department has always assigned strong officers to the promotion panels. It should do at least as well in staffing the Board of Examiners and assuring that officers it assigns there are given proper recognition afterwards.

THE CHALLENGE OF LITIGATION

Any substantial change from the present system is likely to heighten the specter of litigation that hangs like Damocles' sword over the entry and examination system. The Department must assure that a reformed system will be transparent, objective, and fair. It must also make a concerted effort that it is seen to be so. It should consult with women's and minority organizations, the American Foreign Service Association, and concerned members of Congress to gain their understanding and support. The election process must include a substantial number of women and minorities, as it does today. But the fear of litigation should not deter the Department from carrying out the reforms that are necessary to ensure that its need for good officers is met.

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We understand that the Department is now considering a proposal that goes part way in reforming the "blindfolded" oral assessment we find so objectionable. In this revised arrangement, the current system of relying solely on blindfolded examiners' evaluating a candidate's performances in role-playing exercises would be supplemented by an interview of the candidate by "unblindfolded" examiners familiar with his or her record. A composite score would then be tallied.

Those who have proposed this hybrid system have apparently been prompted by concern that were the blind-

folded system to be scrapped altogether, candidates who did not have impressive credentials, such as degrees from elite universities, could be disadvantaged or perceived to be so. Such a hybrid arrangement may also seem less vulnerable to litigation than the outright scrapping of the blindfolded oral and its replacement by an examination along the lines we have recommended.

We find it difficult to believe that examiners' bias will be a problem, especially given the presence among them of officers of greatly varying backgrounds. It has been a long time since the Department was dominated by white males of Ivy League college pedigree who tended to replicate their own kind as they considered junior officer candidates. If this inevitably cumbersome hybrid process is adopted, it should be recognized only as a transitional arrangement and soon be replaced by a fully "unblindfolded" oral examination more suited to meeting the needs of the Service.

NEED FOR PROMPT ACTION

We strongly urge that the leadership of the Department promptly study this report and other material, and make an early decision to revamp the entry system. Time is important. Necessary changes as far-reaching as the options we have proposed cannot be carried out overnight. Nor can they be effected with anything less than a shift in organizational priorities from the top on down. Although senior managers will have many other pressing items on their foreign policy plate, they need to act urgently to assure that the Foreign Service continues to be staffed by the high-quality officers it has traditionally depended on for its success.

Comments on this report are welcome and can be sent to Amb. Howard Schaffer, Director of Studies, at schaffeh@gunet.georgetown.edu.

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