

The Under-Appreciated Consular Cone

Though their work is vital, consular officers have long been overworked and under-promoted. That may, at last, be changing.

By David T. Jones

Consular officers have the best "war stories." Every day they meet the public surging through U.S. embassies and consulates: they issue visas for those who wish to visit the U.S. temporarily or to immigrate permanently; they address every problem that U.S. citizens encounter abroad, including birth, death, and prison. Years and ultimately decades of work in the trenches produce an extended set of tales that every consular officer spins to amuse or enlighten friends, colleagues, or foreigners. Some are hilarious, some tragic, some bitter. The bitterness is often career-related.

Consular services are responsible work, vital work. Consular officers affect lives retail, in concrete terms, one body at a time. At a time when the Foreign Service appears to struggle with Congress for the bureaucratic equivalent of small change every year, and individual Foreign Service officers appear to be noticed by the American public only when they are blown up or gunned down by terrorists, consular officers perform services that are instantly recognized and appreciated by both the Hill and the public.

Despite this appreciation, for many years consular officers have recognized that their long-term career prospects were limited in comparison with their colleagues in the political and economic cones of State Department. Why, when consular work is so essential, have the hard-working FSOs of Consular Affairs not had as much recognition as their colleagues elsewhere? And have recent managerial reforms within CA started to improve the prospects and conditions of consular officers? Those are the questions this article seeks to answer.

A Question of Respect

If consular work tends to get less respect than that of other cones, a key reason may be the nature of the work itself. Most consular work--especially on the visa line--tends to be very routine. There are relatively clear regulations to guide the consular officer on all elements of visa and U.S. citizenship services. The administrative center "Congen Roslyn" was, in fact, created to familiarize new FSOs with case studies typical of the overwhelming majority of problems a consular officer might encounter. In cases of doubt, for example on possible legal complications involving a U.S. citizen, the decision is made in Washington and not in the field.

The premium consular officer is efficient and extremely fast. Consular work is probably the one Foreign Service specialty in which productivity can be mathematically tallied. In fact, some consular efficiency reports have ranked officers on production and speed. In an era when many FSOs enter the service with advanced degrees and the hope of doing creative or sophisticated work, toiling on a visa line may well prove demoralizing.

Moreover, the job for many years tended to become harder and harder. Twenty-five years ago, an officer who finished a couple of charring tours in visa mills such as the Philippines or Mexico City might hope for a pleasant, lower-pressure assignment in Western Europe. Currently, however, the visa waiver for low-fraud countries has eliminated many of these "respite" assignments. As one consular officer wrote to the Journal, "While the Visa Waiver

Pilot Program may be a success from the big-picture immigration viewpoint, it makes getting those cushy assignments to prosperous European countries that much harder for us consular types."

Issuances of non-immigrant visas grew from under 8 million in FY1996 to over 9 million in FY2000; they are projected to rise to 12 million in FY2005. And the bulk of these cases are in countries where there is a high risk of fraud and of even legitimate visa recipients not returning. Thirty years ago consular officers recall grouching over the "three-minute visa." Now, although there are exceptional cases that can take considerable time, one career consular officer commented that an employee who handled only 50 visa applicants an hour "would be considered slow."

Additionally, consular officers have known for years that available resources did not meet requirements. Long lines of visa applicants snaking through the streets, beginning at ridiculously early hours, led to public relations problems in host countries and the potential for a terrorist catastrophe. Consular officers were buffeted by the pressures to increase visa issuances. At the same time, inadvertent issuance of visas to bad cases (e.g., the blind Egyptian sheik later linked to the World Trade Center bombing) generated countervailing pressures to make no mistakes. When floods of illegal immigrants were making a mockery of any attempt to maintain credible standards, consular officers who thought that they were the thin red, white, and blue line regulating legitimate entry to the U.S. often concluded that their best efforts were futile. In the face of these pressures, officers were told to "manage better;" their response was, "There is no blood left in these stones."

Consequently, the frustration. Junior officers entering the Foreign Service were forced to do routine work at breakneck speed, always facing a line of frustrated, sometimes desperate, people.

Perhaps the angst among junior officers was highest between 1991 and 1997, when all officers were entering "unconed" -- that is, without predesignated career specialties. Those seeking careers as political or economic officers faced two to four years of consular work. On the strength of their performance as junior consular officers -- an area of minimal personal interest for many -- they would then be considered for tenure and assigned to a cone. It was a grim picture.

Nor was there any expectation that things would change. Issues from the early 1970s of *The Consular Packet*, the "newspaper of consular affairs" published by the Consular Officers' Association, suggested the same range of problems: lack of respect from other elements of the Foreign Service, excessive workloads, understaffing, concerns over the cone system, limited numbers of senior-level assignments.

Under-promoted and under-graded

The disrespect receives a further endorsement from the promotion profile. Statistics from the summer of 1998 demonstrate that consular officers do not receive a proportional share of senior positions. At that time, there were 802 consular officers from career minister through O-6 -- that is, 18 percent of State's FSO corps of 4,530. Consular officers held 12 percent of the top three ranks: career minister, minister counselor, and counselor -- approximately one-third below their numerical percentage in the Foreign Service.

In comparison, political officers were 28 percent of the FSO corps, but held 34 percent of the top three ranks; economics officers at 21 percent held 19 percent of the top grades; administrative officers at 19 percent of the foreign service held 16 percent of the top grades; and public affairs officers at 15 percent of the Foreign Service were 18 percent of the top three grades. Circumstances were more equitable at the O-1 level, where most cones were represented within a percentage point or so of their overall proportion of total FSO ranks.

And in representation at the ultimate Foreign Service career prize -- chief of mission -- consular officers held only seven out of 99 (or 7 percent) positions in November 2000.

There may be more than one reason for the under-representation of consular FSOs within the top ranks. First, the very nature of consular work: State needs a relatively large number of bodies doing standard visa, passport and citizens services work. That work may not merit a high grade level.

Beyond that, senior consular officers argue that consular positions are often "under-graded." That is, they are not ranked at the appropriate level of responsibility and expertise. Consequently, individuals who hold these positions are not given appropriate rank and promotions. Perhaps the strongest piece of supporting evidence is that consular officers--even at a relatively junior level--often supervise several employees. Their colleagues in the political and economics cones typically do not supervise more than half a secretary and the occasional intern until they are past mid-rank.

Consular officers do well in qualifying for promotion up to mid-levels because they have plenty of opportunity to demonstrate their "generalist" supervisory and management skills. However, once they are more senior, the promotion precepts start giving added value to other factors, such as promoting U.S. national interests. On such matters, consular positions give less opportunity to demonstrate competence than, for example, an economic minister handling tricky trade negotiations.

But Times Are Changing

Senior officials in CA, however, contend with considerable justification that the worst is over. Speaking on behalf of CA, Frank Moss, the bureau's executive director, concluded that the problems of the past have been recognized and are being addressed, with considerable effectiveness and energy. And the answer has been simple: money, the mother's milk of political clout. One crucial ingredient has been institution of the machine-readable visa, which can be put in a passport by machine. The MRV includes codes and watermarks that permit it to be read by an optical scanner at U.S. ports of entry, thus making it highly resistant to fraud. Along with the MRV came a congressional mandate permitting the department to retain the proceeds from visa fees. The combination of these two factors has proved to be the equivalent of drilling an oil well in the basement of every consulate. As the price for applying for a visa has risen from \$15 to \$45, income has skyrocketed from slightly over \$50 million in 1995 to over \$320 million in 2000.

Although CA does not retain direct bureaucratic control over this income flood, it has been able to direct substantial amounts into operations directly benefiting consular operations. Approximately 2,000 department Foreign Service and Civil Service positions are funded from this source. Moreover, upgraded communications, computers, software, visa "lookout" systems and the like are being funded from these revenues -- technical developments and their regular upgrades benefiting in many instances the rest of the embassy as well as consular

work. Additionally, CA projects more of the same with plans to "buy" extra consular positions, boosting consular corps strength another 10 percent within the next several years.

In the interim, CA has creatively arranged a variety of support personnel beyond straight line consular officers to manage the crush of visas and U.S. citizenship services. There has been an innovative medley of resources to fill gaps, including professional associates (hired family members); consular associates, who are equivalent to consular officers; Civil Service visa adjudicators, notably in Mexico; foreign language fellows (individuals who receive federal educational assistance and have a commensurate service commitment); foreign affairs specialists; retired annuitants; and Civil Service excursion tours. While some of these measures have a stopgap quality, CA argues, quite credibly, that it's better to have these options available than not to.

On occasion reinforcements can be rushed from Washington to handle emergencies and fill gaps that the post had to "eat" in the past. One effect of these efforts has been reduction of the demoralizing (for both consular officers and visa applicants) endless lines around U.S. consulates. It is now more likely that immigrant visa applicants will receive scheduled appointments and that all applicants will encounter a more friendly, less harassed atmosphere. While this template is the ideal (and doubtless in some posts the reality), reports from other consulates describe very long waits for appointments, exhausted officers, and massive workloads in substandard circumstances.

Nevertheless, in the slightly longer term, the core of the disgruntled will lessen. The decision to return in 1997 to hiring Foreign Service officers as "coned" in their preferred specialty from the time of acceptance into the service means that entering junior officers usually will now have only one tour as consular officers. Those officers who will spend their career in consular work will be those who signed up with that expectation--which is likely to reduce the resentment experienced by junior officers, compared to that in the early 1990s.

Likewise, the tenor of the announcement for the November 2000 Foreign Service Written Exam makes it clear that the department is primarily seeking applicants other than political officers. These registration instructions stated: "While we anticipate hiring in all five cones, past experience has shown that we typically have more candidates in the political and public diplomacy cones than we can reasonably anticipate hiring. We always look for candidates in the economics cone, but have our greatest needs in the administrative and consular cones." Apparently in reaction, registrants for the administrative, consular, and economics cones rose sharply, but both political and public diplomacy cone registrants fell when compared to 1999. The hoped-for consequence would be fewer junior officers entering with illusions of grandeur and a greater sense that they were getting what they signed up for with State.

The Emerging Consular Corps

For the past 50 years, the U.S. diplomatic service has been political officer-heavy, driven partly by the reality that "political" events, e.g., Cold War confrontation, collapsing colonial empires, nascent nationalisms, regional wars and arms control negotiations, were paramount. Arguably these imperatives are no longer as imperative; commercial concerns, environmental pressures, human rights violations, and movements of populations, if not displacing traditional political issues, now argue credibly for equivalent attention. And never have there been more U.S. citizens traveling, living, working, and studying in foreign countries with commensurate requirements for official assistance. Nor are these patient placid citizens; they

expect the instant gratification that high-technology communication permits, and woe betide the embassy that comes up short in addressing emergencies.

Senior consular officers envision a consular career as increasingly challenging intellectually, managerially and personally. It becomes easier to argue to new JOs on the visa line that they are learning more in raw language facility, cultural insight, decision-making skills, and effective managerial techniques than their counterparts in political and economic sections.

Visa technology is more sophisticated; managing a visa section is more complicated; finances are more intricate. Consequently, CA is able to make a stronger pitch for rank equivalence for heads of consular sections with those for political, economic, and administrative sections. If successful, promotions will follow these assignment levels.

At mid-levels, CA is seeking multifunctional opportunities for consular officers on geographic desks and functional bureaus; these are often professionally challenging, but open the possibility at least for multifunctional promotions previously largely the preserve of political and economic officers. The trick may be convincing consular officers that these are real opportunities for the adroit to exploit.

Alternatives to the Status Quo

For more than 75 years the Foreign Service has operated as a combined diplomatic and consular corps. Nevertheless, for more than a century, the Department of State operated separate diplomatic and consular corps establishments. In 1924, under the provisions of the Rogers Act, the diplomatic and consular services were combined with the objectives of creating greater service unity, higher morale, and a more interchangeable pool of foreign affairs experts.

But the State Department and the Foreign Service remain works in progress. As we stride into the 21st century, a new administration may find it worthwhile to look at some alternative ways of structuring consular affairs.

1. Reverse Rogers. A number of other countries, notably Germany and the U.K., have separate diplomatic and consular services. Obviously, it would take legislation to undo the Rogers Act (or any of the other options examined below), but America's consular work might benefit from the reorganization. After all, Congress at least understands what consular officers do and individual congressional staffers enmeshed in constituent "case work" often deal with and appreciate the complexities of consular issues.

The potential advantages for consular officers of a separate corps are obvious: the consular specialization would be run top to bottom by consular officers. And if the visa fee retention authority were attached to the new consular corps, it could become a virtually self-financing, semi-independent operation, still under the overall authority of the ambassador as head of the country team but at least as independent as the Foreign Commercial Service.

Almost certainly, establishing a separate consular service would improve promotion prospects for consular officers. And while that might mean that consular FSOs would seldom if ever become chiefs of mission, consular officers are not having much luck getting ambassadorial positions under the current regime anyway.

2. Combine Consular and Immigration Functions. Although this topic has long been discussed without coming to pass, it has an inherent logic. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, currently part of the Justice Department, would be better fit if merged with CA. Visa issuance and entrance to the U.S. should be a seamless web.

3. Combine Asylum/Refugee Cases with CA. Currently INS decides on refugee cases, although State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor is often asked for its opinions on individual cases, which run into the thousands each year. Referring asylum cases to those having expertise on visa and consular issues would eliminate bureaucratic power struggles between agencies, and might well eliminate mountains of paperwork and endless delays.

A More Consular World

Whether the U.S. consular function is reorganized or continues as CA within the State Department, one can plausibly argue that America's consular work is on an upswing. Not only are visa fees being retained and the most critical management needs being addressed, but larger trends point to a growing importance for consular work.

Americans are everywhere. Everyone wants to come to the U.S., not just to travel, but for business, study, family visits, and of course immigration. It's a multinational world with fewer real borders. There is no Soviet Union and no Cold War. Given that reality, the protection of U.S. interests now means active protection of U.S. citizens overseas. And Congress and CNN will be looking over the State Department's shoulder to make sure State doesn't blow it.

At the same time, visa issuance must become more careful than ever -- or State will share the blame for the next successful terrorist bombing. Preventing such acts is now a real national security concern.

Given all these factors, consular work is taking on a growing importance for the United States. Maybe that means that the overworked, under-appreciated consular officer will finally receive a full measure of the State Department's -- and the country's -- appreciation.

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