The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program

ANDRÉ GOODFRIEND

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Initial Interview Date: April 21, 2021

INTERVIEW PART II

GOODFRIEND: Before going further, I should probably say a few words about TDYs—temporary duty assignments—and the role they've played throughout my career. TDYs gave us the kind of flexibility we needed to plug staffing gaps, take on short-term projects, and respond quickly when something unexpected came up. In fact, my career with the State Department more or less began with a TDY—I was detailed to the Visa Office to help out with the Visa Waiver Pilot Program. And throughout the years, I've either benefited from TDY support or gone on TDY myself more times than I can count.

When three of our consular officers had to leave post following the DS and OIG investigation back in 1989, we kept the section running by bringing me back in from the political section and getting a few others detailed to us on a TDY. That included someone to cover the Visa Section Chief role and a couple of vice consuls. Later, in New Delhi, during the summer visa surge, we brought in retired consular officers on "while actually employed" contracts—they came on TDY to help handle the rush. In 2001, when our embassy in Belgrade was closed after the military action in Serbia, I went on TDY to Budapest for a couple of months. That way, we could continue immigrant visa processing for applicants from Serbia, who were being routed through Budapest. And when I was RCO, I made a point of reminding DCMs and Vice Consuls at our smaller posts in Africa that, with a little advance planning, they could request TDY support to free up their Vice Consul for a vacation—just to make sure no one felt stuck.

In 2006, I was serving in London when I was asked to go on TDY—twice, actually. The first was to Riyadh, to stand in for the Consular Section Chief who had been medevac'd. The second was to Larnaca, Cyprus, where I led the consular task force assisting Americans who had been evacuated from Lebanon.

In March 2006, Consular Affairs asked me to head to Riyadh for about a month. The Section Chief there had needed to leave suddenly for medical reasons. The consular section was primarily staffed with local employees—not Saudis, but Arabic-speaking foreign nationals with permission to work in the Kingdom—and a group of entry-level Vice Consuls. Most of them were on their first or second tour. Complicating things was the fact that the Jeddah consulate had been attacked a little over a year earlier, and visa operations there were still suspended pending security upgrades. So, applicants who would usually have gone to Jeddah were now showing up in Riyadh, and vice consuls from Jeddah were rotating in to help with the caseload—also early-career officers.

The medevac of the Consul General had left Riyadh with a very inexperienced team and no senior consular officer in place. So, I was sent on TDY from my London assignment to oversee about ten entry-level officers spread out across three posts, with no mid-level support. To help create a mutually supportive environment, I drew on collaborative approaches and on collaborative technology. We created a virtual workspace using eRoom, met regularly to talk through adjudications, and kept lines of communication open across posts. The DHS Visa Security Unit was embedded in the section, and although they added helpful experience and a second set of eyes, their required sign-off added a 24 to 48-hour delay on visa issuance.

We worked well with DHS, but the dual-track system did create ambiguity over roles. It was important that our Vice Consuls understood they still bore responsibility for their decisions. The DHS team helped train them, too, so they could learn what patterns and indicators the VSU looked for, but we had to maintain the consular officer's adjudicative authority. In cases of disagreement, we encouraged open discussion. The reality was, DHS objections were usually respected, given their access to law enforcement information that consular officers didn't have.

We also had infrastructure and logistical issues. Interview slots were limited, and scheduling still happened by phone, through staff in Jeddah. That wasn't ideal. So, while I was there, we worked with CA to build an online appointment system, something that had already been successful in London. It went live shortly after I returned to London, and it noticeably reduced the burden on phone lines.

Physical space was also an issue. The DCM in Riyadh told me there wasn't funding for a new security-grade interview window, but that he'd already gotten DS and OBO approval to move an unused one from Marine Post 2 to the consular section—if CA agreed. I secured CA's agreement, and, by the time I left, the renovation was complete. It allowed three more windows to open, so we could bring in more support from Jeddah.

Culturally, the concept of *wastah*—connections and influence—was strong in Saudi Arabia. That meant we often got visa inquiries that didn't follow standard procedures. Embassy officers sometimes felt pressure from contacts to intervene. One of my focuses was to establish a straightforward referral process, ensure officers understood it, and train them in how to manage and log those interactions. Over time, we also instituted a requirement that only officers who had received formal training and signed a statement of understanding could submit referrals. That helped avoid improper pressure on junior consular officers.

While there, the consular officer in Jeddah apprised me of the assistance he was trying to render to an American woman who wanted to leave Saudi Arabia without her husband's permission. Under Saudi law at the time, a married woman's husband was considered her guardian and his permission was required for her to leave the country. I followed up on this matter with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but there was no progress. These situations were sensitive and tied to local legal structures. We did what we could—raised the issue diplomatically and made sure it was flagged in human rights reporting and bilateral consular discussions—but there were limits to what we could accomplish.

I returned to London in April, and wasn't there long before being asked to go on TDY again to assist Americans caught in a crisis. On July 13, just a day after Hezbollah launched an attack on Israel, we, in London, started getting calls from Americans with relatives trapped in Lebanon. Israel had bombed Beirut airport, and people couldn't get out. A few days later, I was asked to go to Larnaca, Cyprus, to lead a task force receiving U.S. citizens evacuated from Lebanon. I arrived by July 18.

The team included volunteers from Washington and several embassies. The embassy itself was in Nicosia, but we based the task force in a hotel basement in Larnaca, near the airport and seaport. The embassy's IT team connected our room to OpenNet, which felt like magic at the time. Just seven years earlier, the Kosovo Diplomatic Observer Mission couldn't get access to the Belgrade embassy's systems in its Pristina hotel control room. Now, we were networked, not only to the embassy OpenNet platform, but we were also to use eRoom to share files collaboratively with each other and with Washington.

We built a work structure quickly. People answered calls, updated logs, received arrivals at the port, and escorted evacuees to the airport. One U.S. Congressman even called asking if he could fly in from the U.S. to join an evacuation flight from Cyprus. Most of the evacuees arrived starting on July 19. Ambassador Ronald Schlicher welcomed the first ship. We did our best to help people place calls home and ease their journey.

Initially, evacuees from Lebanon were expected to book their own onward travel. But commercial flights filled quickly. So, CA and DOD arranged charter flights. At first, evacuees had to sign promissory notes agreeing to repay the government. Then, due to pressure from Congress, that policy was waived. Within three days, we had communicated three different policies to evacuees: 1) Use commercial flights to travel onward from Cyprus, 2) Use a chartered evacuation flight to travel to the U.S. from Cyprus, with the requirement that you sign a promissory note for the cost of the flight, and 3) Use a chartered evacuation flight to travel to the U.S. at no cost to the traveler.

We also tested wireless laptops for data entry at the port. Cyprus's infrastructure for wireless connectivity wasn't always up to this task in 2006, so we often fell back on paper. But the laptops helped when they worked. They allowed us to prepare manifests and upload evacuee data directly to Washington.

Evacuees had to be staged overnight in Cyprus before flying out. The embassy has obtained the agreement of the Government of Cyprus to use the fairgrounds in Nicosia as a temporary shelter, with hundreds of cots. The embassy coordinated with Cypriot authorities, and the environment was safe. Staff and TDYers were housed in the same hotel as the control room.

We had to verify that the documentation held by the evacuees was valid for onward travel to the U.S. Those with valid passports and green cards to use the chartered evacuation flights, while those with visas could fly commercially. Those without visas had to apply at the embassy in Nicosia. There were challenges—some families had to be separated until visas could be arranged. But we worked to minimize that, and Cyprus was gracious with support, including from local Rotary clubs.

In just two weeks, over 15,000 Americans were evacuated. It was a considerable effort—one of the largest evacuations in U.S. history. There were hiccups, but we made it work. And after it all, in October, I was asked to participate in a NEO exercise in Hawaii. We looked at the lessons learned from Lebanon—how to track evacuees, how to coordinate with DOD, and how to refine digital systems.

Each crisis—and each exercise—helped improve our response. By the time the Arab Spring came, years later, we were operating in a very different environment, with social media, mobile tools, and new assumptions. The work done in Riyadh and Larnaca helped lay the foundation for that transition. Crises also shaped eDiplomacy's work. The technology was only part of it—the mindset shift, recognizing the value of technology and of collaboration, was just as significant.

Q: Okay, today is August 9, 2022, and we are resuming our interview with André Goodfriend with session eleven. It's still in Syria.

GOODFRIEND: We were in 2010. That was quite an active year for strengthening a positive relationship—or at least getting back to a somewhat normal relationship—with a country that was still designated a state sponsor of terrorism. But it was also a year in which we saw improvements: we had an improved consular relationship and were able to provide better consular services both to American citizens and to foreign nationals seeking visa services.

The Damascus Community School was going to reopen in 2010, after having been closed a couple of years earlier. Work was underway to find a new location for the U.S. Embassy. There were several initiatives moving forward.

Toward the end of the year, we were also gearing up to welcome a new ambassador, after a five-year gap. So, throughout 2010, things were moving in a positive direction.

I also noted our ability to work with the Syrians on the return of a child who had been abducted a decade earlier. That was one of several significant efforts that year.

But there was also a more difficult issue in 2010: WikiLeaks. The leak of a large number of documents by Corporal Manning occurred in early or mid-2010. At the U.S. Embassy in Syria, we were deeply concerned—not so much because of what the documents revealed about U.S. policy, since the content was generally consistent with our stated positions—but because it compromised our ability to communicate privately with others.

It made people hesitant to speak with us. People who were independent thinkers, or critical of the government, or who simply wanted to have a confidential conversation with a U.S. government representative—these individuals now faced a risk that their names or the content of their conversations might become public. We had to inform them that we could no longer guarantee the confidentiality of those conversations. The documents made it clear that what they shared with us might be exposed and could bring them unwanted attention from Syrian authorities.

Q: And given that understanding and knowing that WikiLeaks had intentionally or unintentionally exposed these people. Did any of them begin applying for asylum, claiming that they had a reasonable fear of persecution?

GOODFRIEND: Well, I mean, that’s what we were trying to contact them about. We knew these documents were likely to be published before they actually were. We didn’t know how much would be published, or whose names might appear, but we anticipated that sensitive material would be made public.

So, members of the embassy began reaching out to anyone they had spoken with, to let them know it was possible that their names could appear in a searchable index. This wasn’t going to be some multi-volume paper edition that you'd have to leaf through manually; it would be online, and searchable by name. Anyone with a computer could potentially find those names.

Inside the embassy, we discussed what options might be available before people even came to us. It was a proactive approach. We didn't want to wait until someone was desperate, with police knocking on their door and no idea what to do. So, we reached out in advance to let them know what options might exist.

We explained that if they were already barred from leaving Syria, there might not be much we could do. But if someone felt that their life was now in danger because of the release of this information, then we told them we could try to assist through humanitarian parole.

Q: Right. Yes, that's what I meant.

GOODFRIEND: From what I recall, we reached out to dozens of people. And while none of them had wanted this situation, they also didn't want to uproot their lives and seek protection abroad. Many said they'd take their chances, they had said what they said, and this was their country. They hoped to stay, relying on their networks, and hoping that Syria was on a path that might ultimately offer them some measure of safety.

Q: Interesting. To the extent you heard from these people, was that because they were in fact expecting some kind of democratic transition, or?

GOODFRIEND: In 2010, as I mentioned earlier, the context suggested that things seemed to be moving in a direction of normalization. There was a desire for increased commercial contact—not just from the government, but also from entrepreneurs within Syria, and people involved in commerce more broadly. They wanted to improve ties with countries outside Syria. There was also a push to develop tourism and expand human exchanges between Syria and the rest of the world.

So, there was a sense that, slowly, step by step, progress was being made. You could see it in the way our embassy was able to operate more effectively: in our collaboration with local authorities on consular issues, in our work with banks, with couriers, with doctors and lawyers. There was a noticeable improvement in how various parts of Syrian society, especially professional or technical sectors, were engaging with us. These were people who, in previous years, might have been more fearful or reluctant to be seen cooperating with the U.S. Embassy, but were now more willing to do so.

To some extent, the appointment of a U.S. ambassador was an acknowledgment of that progress. It was a signal that Syria was starting to move in a direction where normalization of ties might eventually be possible. As I noted earlier, Syria was still officially designated a state sponsor of terrorism—but Syria seemed to be taking tangible steps to address that.

Still, it was a very complex environment. For example, if you went to a reception hosted by the Syrian government—or even a National Day event organized by another embassy—you could expect to see, say, Khaled Mashal, the head of Hamas there, surrounded by his entourage. That wasn't someone we engaged with, either at those events or elsewhere. But it was indicative of the nature of the environment: one where quite different actors were present, often mistrustful of each other, but still moving within the same diplomatic and social spaces. Everyone knew the others were there.

Q: You mentioned Hamas. Did you also see Hezbollah there?

GOODFRIEND: I don't think I saw Hezbollah. The PLO had its representation, and the major groups in that context were Hamas, Hezbollah, and the PLO. But Hezbollah was more centered in Lebanon and didn't have a formal presence in Damascus in the same way. Of course, Iran had a strong presence there, and there was a wide range of diplomatic representation. Even North Korea was represented. So, you had this broad mix of entities that you wouldn't typically encounter together in many other capitals. It was the kind of environment where, while you were limited in how far you could go in terms of contact, you still often found yourself in the same space—at receptions, official events—as representatives of these groups. That was simply the nature of Damascus in 2010.

That year also marked the first Marine Ball we had held in quite a while. In 2009 and earlier, the Marine Corps birthday was marked with smaller gatherings, maybe a cake-cutting at the ambassador's residence, or a modest event at the school or another venue. But in 2010, for the first time in several years, I don't recall exactly how long—it was a full-scale Marine Ball held at the Sheraton hotel in Damascus. There were all the ceremonies, music, dancing—the full program. And it carried a sense that we might be moving toward something more normal, that perhaps the coming year would bring more openness: universities sending students to Syria, the return of tourism, international arts events—the kinds of exchanges that, in a way, make it harder for a country to maintain extremist positions. When a country becomes a crossroads for so many different people and perspectives, it starts to have to accommodate them.

A good example of this was internet services. Facebook was blocked in Syria, but people accessed it using VPNs. Amazon was also blocked—you couldn't place orders from within Syria. Diplomats, of course, could order items online and have them delivered through the DPO—the Diplomatic Post Office—or APO, depending on the setup. I believe we were using a DPO at that point. But unless you had access to the embassy's systems or were using a VPN, you couldn't reach Amazon at all. One of the jokes at the time was that Assad must have had an Amazon account—because somehow, he seemed to be shopping online.

With regard to Facebook, like I said, it was blocked in Syria. I remember speaking at an event with the marketing head of a local company, someone leading their e-marketing office. They told me their company relied heavily on social media to promote products. So, I asked, "How does that even work here, in Syria? No one can officially access Facebook—how can anyone see your page?"

The person acknowledged the block but explained that most of their customers were sophisticated enough to work around it. They knew how to use VPNs to bypass the restrictions. And then they said something striking: that in some ways, the censorship helped filter their audience. According to them, it was actually a good thing—because only people who had made the effort to understand the wider world, to engage with it actively, could reach their page. Those were the people they wanted to reach. People who didn't know how to use a VPN might not be ready for that environment anyway. They might be overwhelmed by the diversity of ideas and perspectives available online.

It wasn't necessarily a unique view, but it was one way to rationalize the censorship—that the technological barrier acted as a kind of screening mechanism. It ensured that only people who had a certain level of initiative and awareness could enter that space of free exchange. Others, perhaps, weren't ready for it.

That was how things were in 2010: there were tentative steps toward opening the doors to greater exchange, to Syria becoming again a kind of crossroads of peoples and ideas, a place where the old and the new could coexist. But we were still in 2010, and WikiLeaks, as I mentioned, was a reminder of the risks that come with information exposure. Even documents that should have remained confidential—because disclosure could be misused, or names pulled out—posed real danger to those who had spoken to us in confidence.

Still, most of those individuals chose to remain in Syria, to wait and see what would happen, or to rely on their networks for protection. I believe there may have been one or two who pursued humanitarian parole, but the majority stayed.

Within the broader context of Damascus in 2010, there was still a Jewish community in the city. I was interested in learning more about it, not only from a religious or cultural standpoint, but also from a sociological perspective. I arrived in August, and that year, the High Holy Days—Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—fell in September. I thought: how do I find the synagogue?

It wasn't easy. You couldn't just ask about it—it wasn't marked on any map. Even others at the embassy didn't know where it was. So, I began digging through descriptions of Damascus, trying to find any references to its location. A few sources offered vague indications of where a functioning synagogue might be, and through a kind of triangulation, I came to believe I had found it.

I made my way there for the High Holiday services. The synagogue was in the Old City, not on one of the broader roads outside the walls, but within the narrow alleyways of what had once been the Jewish Quarter. I stood across from a boutique hotel—one of my sources had said the synagogue was opposite it. Across from the hotel, a narrow path led off into the quarter. I began walking down it.

Maybe ten steps in, someone from the hotel came after me. This goes back to what we'd discussed previously: you're always under observation in places like that. The man asked, "Excuse me, where are you going?" I said, "I think the synagogue is here—I'm going for Rosh Hashanah services." He told me to wait, went inside, and came back with someone else. They appeared to be checking whether I was permitted to go in. I explained who I was—that I was the Consul at the U.S. Embassy—and they allowed me to proceed.

The path led to a small courtyard, and then to the entrance of the building itself. Inside, the synagogue was modest but ornate. It was known as the Frankish Synagogue, because it was established in the 16th century by foreign Jews expelled from Spain – and Frankish refers to foreigners. There had been other, older synagogues in Damascus, but this was the only one still in use.

Typically, synagogues are full during the High Holidays. But here, there were maybe ten people, mostly elderly, in their seventies. And "ten" is not just an observation; it's significant. In Jewish tradition, you need a *minyan*—ten adults—to hold a full prayer service, especially if you want to read from the Torah. I suspect that's one reason they were happy to let me in: I helped make a *minyan*.

I sat down and was well looked after. I think I was a bit of an anomaly. I hadn't gone to stand out; I hoped to sit quietly toward the back. But with so few people—and given that they knew I was the U.S. Consul—that wasn't really possible. Even during the service, there was room for conversation, and afterward, they asked about my work. I spoke briefly about visas and asked questions of my own—about the community's size and how often they held services.

I went back a few more times, and it was always the same. I was the center of attention. They had many questions about consular services, especially visas. And while I didn't want the synagogue to become a consular office, I also wanted to be responsive. I said, "Look, I'd really like to understand more about your situation. If there are questions or things we can possibly do for the community, let's discuss them—but maybe not here. How about we set up a time for those who are interested in visiting the embassy? Anyone with questions about visas or consular matters—including American citizens—can come. We'll accommodate as many people as want to come."

We set up a day. Part of what I wanted to understand was how comfortable the community felt. Did they feel they had to speak to me surreptitiously? Or could we engage more openly? Some had initially suggested meeting for coffee somewhere discreet. But in the end, I proposed a date to come to the embassy—and they came. Around twenty-five people showed up. They told me that the entire Jewish community in Damascus at that time numbered no more than forty. It was a small, ageing community. Most were in their seventies; a few were in their sixties; and only a handful—perhaps just enough to count on one hand—were in their forties.

I tried not to come in with assumptions about what their concerns or expectations might be. I simply wanted to understand their situation—what challenges they faced, and whether they had questions about visiting or immigrating to the United States. Many of their questions weren't about permanent immigration. What they wanted, often, was a visa or a green card as a kind of safety valve—just in case. If things got worse, could they have the option of going to the U.S.?

Some had family in the U.S. and had already begun the petition process. But they asked, “What would we do there?” They owned property in Syria. They had the means to live there. They were in their sixties or seventies—what kind of pension would they have in the U.S.? That’s not an easy question. It’s one reason older people generally don’t immigrate unless they can live with their children and take on the role of grandparents caring for kids, mainly staying at home, and relying on their family. But if someone is used to being independent, surrounded by familiar places, friends, and a known culture, uprooting at that age is hard. Very hard.

They weren’t just asking what could be done. They were asking what would be done if things deteriorated. Where would they go? One man in the community became a kind of spokesperson for someone else. He said, “Look, don’t worry about us. We had our chance to leave earlier. We chose to stay. We’ve been to the States. We came back. It’s not necessarily the life for us. But this person—this younger man in his forties—maybe you could talk to him. Maybe you could help him.”

So, I did. I said we’d be happy to talk with him, hear what his concerns were, and see if there were grounds for a visa. It was clear this man felt trapped. He told me, very candidly, that there was no one left for him to marry in Syria. As I mentioned, most of the community was significantly older, and he may have been the only Jewish man of his age left in Damascus—possibly the only Jewish person of that age. He wasn’t trying to dramatize the situation; he was simply stating a difficult truth. And I wasn’t in Damascus “bride hunting,” so I don’t know what prospects there might have been. But it highlighted a very human dilemma: when your community is disappearing, what does that mean for your life choices—especially if you feel you must marry within that community?

Unfortunately, due to issues in his prior immigration history, I had to tell him it was very unlikely he would qualify for a visa to the United States. I did ask him, “What about Israel? It’s next door.” But he was worried that going to Israel would mean he could never come back to Syria. That was a genuine concern. If his passport showed any evidence of travel to Israel, it could close that door permanently. Of course, many people found ways around this—traveling via Türkiye or Jordan, and avoiding direct Israeli stamps—but he was hesitant. He told me, and I’m just relaying this, that he felt it was too dangerous to go to Israel. That was his perception.

And again, this was 2010. Things seemed to be improving, or at least stable. People didn’t necessarily know what the future held, but they weren’t trying to flee. They were hoping for a better tomorrow.

I had mentioned the boutique hotel near the synagogue—that was just one of several that had opened in Damascus around that time. People were investing. They were taking 19th-century homes and restoring them, turning them into boutique hotels for the expected influx of tourists who wanted a traditional Syrian experience. Restaurants were being remodeled. The food in Damascus and Aleppo was extraordinary. There was a sense of possibility.

The community also offered to show us other synagogues. Aleppo's Jewish community was gone by then. But there was another synagogue on the outskirts of Damascus, in a suburb called Jobar. It was considered the oldest synagogue in Syria. According to tradition, it was where the prophet Elijah hid in a cave while fleeing persecution. The cave was still there, and the synagogue had been built over it. It was ornately decorated, and over time, objects from other synagogues had been brought there for safekeeping, as the number of functioning synagogues declined.

Sadly, in the fighting in 2012—or perhaps early 2013—that synagogue in Jobar was destroyed. It no longer exists.

So that was 2010. Before moving on, I wanted to reflect on the impact of WikiLeaks that year, and on our outreach to the Jewish community—an especially vulnerable group in Syria. We tried to address their concerns, answer their questions, and provide whatever support we could. At the same time, other things were happening. The American school reopened, the Marine Ball was held, and we were moving toward 2011. I think in our last conversation, I mentioned that 2011 brought a new ambassador. And then came the Arab Spring—Tunisia, Libya, Egypt.

Q: So, just one quick question before you go on to 2011, about the people who were mentioned in WikiLeaks. Were you able to follow up on any of their situations? Did anyone in the embassy know what happened to them?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, we stayed in contact with them. The embassy maintained communication throughout. But I should say—by the time we entered 2011, the situation wasn't just difficult for the people mentioned in WikiLeaks. The challenges had broadened considerably.

In 2010, there was still hope. Many people believed they could weather the storm, that peaceful change was possible. Some of the individuals we spoke with—those who had been frank in their discussions about the direction Syria was going or should be going—believed they had support networks that could protect them. And I don't recall anyone suffering direct repercussions in 2010 as a result of what was leaked.

But 2011 was a turning point. Everything shifted. People who had once been committed to staying were now hiding, joining the opposition, leaving the country, or calculating whether they could endure what was coming. The decisions they had to make, whether to stay, whether to leave, when to go, became incredibly difficult.

As 2011 unfolded, we tried to reach out—not only to those mentioned in the cables, but also to Americans in Syria who were under threat, some of whom had been arrested and released. We worked hard to explain the risks they faced if they stayed. But many still wanted to hold on. Their kids were in school. They wanted to wait until the school year ended.

As I mentioned earlier, the Damascus Community School had reopened in 2010, and in 2011, it managed to finish the academic year. The school board wanted to continue. They hoped their teachers could teach off-site. So, there wasn't this overwhelming sense of panic. It wasn't "we have to get out tomorrow," but more of a quiet determination: "We understand what you're telling us. We know the risks. But we want to hold on just a little bit longer."

With regard to American citizen parents and students, there was also a sense of determination to try to continue life as usual, at least to the end of the school year. Some said things like, "Yes, I was just released from jail—it was bad—but I need to stay to take my school exams." Others felt they understood the government's direction well enough to believe they could manage. That was the kind of mindset we were dealing with.

We did everything we could to make our message clear, while also recognizing that people had to make their own choices. Many of the mechanisms we had put in place in 2010 for efficient, normal day-to-day operations—effective communication, consular preparedness—suddenly became vital for helping people navigate this crisis. Those systems allowed us to continue offering credible, effective services even in exceedingly difficult circumstances.

As 2011 progressed, we were still providing full consular services to American citizens. That included passport renewals, expedited immigration processing—everything needed for people to leave the country. And we did this even as our staffing shrank to a skeleton crew. Family members of embassy staff had already been sent out earlier in the year, and by the time we closed the embassy, there were fewer than 20 Americans left. In the consular section, I was the only American officer still there.

But we kept the services running. That was one of our primary justifications for staying—to make sure Americans could leave safely and legally. An American who wanted to leave needed a valid passport, and we were committed to providing one—even up to the final day.

A big challenge, though, was family. We often heard: "How can I leave my wife? My husband? My children? My elderly parents?" These were American citizens who had never filed for their family members to immigrate. We didn't want the lack of a visa to become an obstacle—and we also didn't want people, in desperation, to try to mislead us into issuing tourist visas for relatives who clearly intended to immigrate.

So, we worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Bureau of Consular Affairs to get authorization to accept immigrant visa petitions ourselves.

Now, this was significant because a few years earlier, DHS had withdrawn the authority of consular officers to accept and approve those petitions. It used to be routine. Consuls could accept a petition on behalf of DHS or the old INS. A petition is the document an American citizen submits to request immigration for an immediate family member—typically a spouse, parent, or child.

In normal circumstances, those petitions are filed in the United States and processed by DHS. But given the urgency of the situation in Syria, we were given special permission to accept them at post.

When a petition is approved, that opens the door for the beneficiary—the named family member—to immigrate, or at least to apply for a visa based on that petition. So, for example, if I'm an American citizen and I file a petition for my wife—who is not an American citizen—to come to the United States, once that petition is approved, the focus shifts. The process moves away from me, as the petitioner, and from DHS. It becomes the responsibility of the foreign national and the embassy. The foreign national would then apply for an immigrant visa at the U.S. embassy, based on that approved petition.

Under normal circumstances, this process takes time. DHS might take weeks or even months to approve a petition. Then, once the petition is approved, all the necessary documentation has to be gathered, so that the case is ready for the embassy to take action. After that, it could take another month or two before the embassy schedules the visa interview. So even for immediate relatives of U.S. citizens—where there are no annual numerical limits on visas—it's not unusual for the entire process to take about six months, depending on the workload and backlog at each step.

But what we were able to do in Damascus—particularly from October 2011 through the closure of the embassy in February 2012—was to significantly compress that timeline. We managed to process immigrant visas within roughly the same two-week timeframe as nonimmigrant visas. If someone was eligible, we could accept and approve the petition on the spot, on the same day. We could schedule the visa interview immediately and begin the rest of the process: the medical exam, the collection of documents, and the required background and security checks. And if everything was in order, we could issue the immigrant visa within two weeks.

This was absolutely critical. It enabled American citizens to leave Syria without having to leave close family members behind. We didn't want anyone to feel forced to stay in an increasingly dangerous environment because a spouse or child lacked the paperwork to travel with them. If we could overcome that barrier, we would.

But I realize I'm jumping ahead a bit—to the end of the story, when we were operating with a minimal staff and trying to get as many people out as possible.

So let me take us back to the beginning of the Arab Spring—when events were just starting to unfold elsewhere. Egypt, at that point, was the most recent domino to fall, so to speak.

Q: Just a quick question. From Damascus to the extent that you knew, what were people thinking about all this? They were seeing the region becoming increasingly unstable and authoritarian leaders being challenged. What were Syrians thinking at the time, to the extent you had contact with them?

GOODFRIEND: Well, as I think I mentioned last week, the political dynamics that were mobilizing people in other countries didn't gain the same immediate traction in Syria. There were certainly hopes among some opposition figures that they could organize rallies, but at the same time, the Syrian authorities had been closely watching events elsewhere—particularly what had happened in Tahrir Square in Cairo. They took deliberate measures to prevent similar mass gatherings from forming. Major public squares were closely monitored or blocked, making it extremely difficult for large demonstrations to coalesce.

In January and February of 2011, there weren't sustained, large-scale protests. Occasionally, groups of a few dozen people would try to gather, perhaps hoping others would join in and the movement would grow—but often no one else came. These efforts would quickly fizzle out. Protesters might chant slogans like "Down with the regime," or "The people want dignity," or "The people want the regime gone," echoing phrases heard in Egypt and Tunisia. But the slogans weren't catching on.

Then, in March, something changed. As I mentioned before, a group of high school students scrawled those kinds of slogans—calling for the fall of the regime—on a wall. They were arrested. Their parents, demanding their release, went to the police station and began protesting.

This incident placed Assad at a crossroads. It presented him with a clear choice: how would he handle this? This was a municipal-level abuse of power—something he could have addressed directly. He could have defused tensions by responding with compassion, showing respect to the parents, and holding local officials accountable.

In fact, there had already been a minor incident a few weeks earlier in the Old City of Damascus. A delivery driver had been arrested after an altercation over parking in one of the narrow alleyways. The situation escalated. Bystanders protested the man's treatment, saying, "This isn't how people should be treated. We want dignity." That gathering had the potential to snowball into something larger, but it was defused when a government official arrived, listened to the crowd, and assured them that the matter would be looked into. That calmed things down. The protest ended peacefully.

At that time, there was a widespread sense that Syria was a tinderbox—and people were watching closely for what might spark an explosion. But Assad still retained considerable popularity. Many believed he might act differently than his father. They hoped he would demonstrate more respect for dignity and pluralism, and that he would address the grievances of Syria's vulnerable communities—such as the undocumented Kurds who had been denied citizenship and civil services under restrictive interpretations of Syrian law.

So now we're in March 2011. The arrested children are at the center of a growing public crisis. Initially, it looked like Assad might take a conciliatory approach. There were some early signals—some people with insight told the embassy that he was leaning toward accountability and human dignity. He even made public promises: to register the stateless Kurds, to lift the decades-old Emergency Law, to investigate the arrests, and to release the children.

And, indeed, the children were released. But as we soon learned, they had been tortured while in custody. This fact enraged parents and the wider community. Instead of calming the situation, it inflamed it. This wasn't just about slogans anymore. These were real children, and now there were tribal and familial demands for justice. In Dara'a, where this occurred, tribal ties were strong. The crowd began calling for accountability—not just the release of the children, but punishment of those responsible.

That's when the protests began to grow. As I mentioned last week, I think it was around March 18th when the turning point came. I was on an embassy-organized family outing to the Syrian countryside when my phone started ringing. Reports came in that helicopters and tanks were being used to disperse demonstrations in Dara'a. It became clear that the regime had chosen force over dialogue.

By the third day of demonstrations, people were being killed. And at that point, everything shifted. This was no longer just about abstract political reform. Now it was about blood. Blood had been spilled. The cry became: "We must avenge the martyrs of Dara'a." That became the rallying cry, spreading across Syria.

From that moment, demonstrations began to spread to other cities. Friday prayers became the focal point. After prayers, people would gather to protest. There were still appeals for peaceful demonstrations, but the government had begun using force more systematically. They aimed to suppress gatherings before they could grow large enough to pose a threat.

By April, the security situation was clearly deteriorating. Damascus itself hadn't yet seen major protests, but we were starting to see warning signs. And having seen what had unfolded in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, we knew where things might be headed.

At the time, daily life in Damascus continued relatively normally—except on Fridays, which became the day to watch closely for unrest.

Coincidentally, my in-laws visited around the end of March. This was after the violence in Dara'a had begun, but before the full extent of the crisis had become clear. They stayed for about three weeks. We traveled to several tourist sites across Syria, even crossing into Jordan via Dara'a to visit the Jerash archaeological site. At that point, the border was tense, but still open.

But things were worsening. Within a week of their departure, all embassy family members were ordered to leave. It was no longer a voluntary authorized departure—we had moved to an ordered departure. The situation had become too unstable to guarantee their safety. The embassy footprint was simply too large to manage safely.

My wife at the time, my son, and the dependents of other embassy staff all left around the second or third week of April. That was a clear indicator that the U.S. government viewed the security environment as having changed dramatically in just a few weeks.

And this also meant we had to be consistent with our public messaging. If we were telling our own personnel it was no longer safe, then we needed to say the same to the public. We issued a Travel Warning accordingly.

In hindsight, I believe even more strongly that it was the right call to have removed the Travel Warning a year earlier, in 2010, when the environment had improved.

We had gone a year without a Travel Warning in place. So, when we reissued one in 2011—with a specific and credible threat—it had far more impact than it would have had if a warning had already been in place. We were now actively advising Americans to leave Syria, and the new Travel Warning caught people's attention.

We had started to see Americans being arrested—not for participating in demonstrations, but simply for being near them. One case I remember involved an American student who had previously been studying Arabic in Cairo. When the situation there, in Egypt, deteriorated, he relocated to Damascus, which at the time still seemed relatively calm and historic—a good place to continue his studies. But one day, he was having coffee near a mosque where a protest erupted. He wasn't involved in it, but he was arrested nonetheless. His family contacted us. We engaged with the Syrian government, and fortunately, he was released soon afterward.

That incident became a clear part of our messaging: we advised Americans not just to avoid participating in demonstrations, but to avoid being anywhere near them. Even proximity could be dangerous.

By April, demonstrations were intensifying. There were efforts at dialogue, but Assad's approach was to deflect attention from the internal causes of unrest. He didn't acknowledge the abuses in Dara'a—the arrest and torture of children, the killing of peaceful demonstrators. Instead, he characterized the unrest as the work of foreign extremists, trying to destabilize Syria.

Framing it that way allowed him to avoid engaging with domestic concerns. If the protesters were agents of foreign powers, there was no one to talk to—only threats to suppress. There was no need for reform, no call to address human dignity or corruption. These were, in his narrative, external threats to be met with force.

That closed the door, in the short term, to any political resolution. The regime had chosen a military path.

We were engaging with both the Syrian government and opposition figures—warning both sides. To the opposition, we said: the government has heavy weaponry—tanks, helicopters—you will not be able to stand up to this militarily. And to the government, we said: force will not suppress this movement. You can kill people, you can make life miserable for protestors, but this kind of discontent tends to persist, even under repression.

I personally wasn't involved in those political policy conversations. That was the role of the ambassador and our political officers. The ambassador was in contact with senior government officials; the political section engaged with political activists at various levels. But we in the consular section had a unique role too. For many Syrians, we were their window to the United States—and they were our window into what was happening throughout Syria.

People came to Damascus from all over the country to visit the consulate, which gave us opportunities to hear firsthand what they were experiencing. And as consular officers, we also went out on outreach trips across Syria. In 2010, we typically notified the Syrian government before traveling and waited for authorization. I mentioned earlier that we'd had issues with permission for the Vice Consul to go to al-Hasakah, even though we insisted this was a right under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations—to provide services to our citizens. Eventually, they relented.

So, in 2011, as the civil unrest escalated, we thought it was more important than ever to reach out to Americans across the country. We were getting phone calls from U.S. citizens saying their towns were under siege—that they had no food or drinking water, and could only go out at certain times. We couldn't always do much in the moment, but we gathered this information so we could raise it with Syrian authorities and make the case for access to check on the welfare of our citizens.

We submitted requests to travel to areas with large clusters of U.S. citizens. The Syrian government responded by saying they could not guarantee our safety and, therefore, would not authorize travel. That went on for a few weeks.

I think I mentioned before that we had a Consular Corps in Damascus—representatives from the U.S., European, Canadian, and other embassies met regularly to share information. Before, it had been more about maintaining a collegial network, with briefings by officials and discussions of policy. But now, it shifted. Our lunches became working meetings, as we discussed how each of us was approaching this new, volatile situation.

The European Union had begun coordinating a joint consular response among its member states. They invited us and Canada to participate. That collaboration reflected the strength of the relationships we had built—we had invited them to our events in the past, and now they felt comfortable including us in theirs. We discussed challenges like accessing our citizens in different parts of the country.

Some embassies had simply stopped asking for permission to travel—they were just going. So, we decided to do the same.

The Syrian government was not approving any requests from the U.S. Embassy to travel outside Damascus. But we felt we had an obligation to see what was happening—to reach our citizens and fulfill our responsibilities. We coordinated within the embassy and with the Regional Security Officer. We planned day trips to cities like Aleppo, Homs, and others where Americans lived.

One city in particular was having large demonstrations, especially on Fridays. The atmosphere was almost festive. People gathered peacefully, not violently, and celebrated their ability to protest. They were showing that this was a grassroots movement, not driven by foreign influence or violence.

One of our Vice Consuls visited that city, and others. Because of security concerns, we decided it wasn't safe for our local drivers to accompany them—diplomats have some protection through diplomatic immunity, but our Syrian staff did not. So, the Defense Attaché volunteered to drive the Vice Consuls. That partnership gave us added safety and provided the Defense Attaché with a unique view of what was happening in the country.

It was all very low profile—nobody recognized the Vice Consul or the Defense Attaché. Every two or three weeks, they'd go to a different city. These trips gave us critical insight—not just from what we saw, but from what American citizens told us directly.

Meanwhile, we continued to gather information in Damascus as well. Even though it was becoming harder to travel, the rest of the country was coming to us. People were still applying for visas and passports, and in those interviews, we'd ask: How are things in your city? How's the situation in your town?

That's standard in any visa interview—you're trying to understand the applicant's circumstances. But in this case, it also helped us build a picture of how the unrest was spreading and affecting everyday life across Syria.

As we started aggregating the information each week—what people were telling us as they came into the consulate—we realized it offered a valuable lens on what was happening throughout Syria. In fact, within the embassy, the consular section was the only part of the mission with that kind of regular, structured public contact. We were the window through which the rest of Syria passed.

At some point, I asked one of the Vice Consuls to begin compiling a weekly report based on these interactions—or perhaps it was her idea, and I approved it. I honestly don't remember whether the initiative came from her or me. It may have been mine, since it was similar to something we had done in Moscow, where we had put together weekly reports focused on things like visa fraud.

Either way, it reflected the kind of collaborative approach I liked to promote. It wasn't just one officer reporting from her own perspective; the report required her to speak with the other interviewing consuls, pull together their notes, and synthesize those perspectives. She had the pen, but the process was shared.

We ended up calling it "Tidbits from the Line." It was a weekly email that summarized what we were hearing—what Syrians and Americans were telling us as they came in for visa and passport services, or for other citizen-related issues. It gave us a real-time sense of how people across the country were experiencing the growing unrest. And it offered a way to communicate that perspective quickly and effectively with colleagues across the mission and beyond.

For reporting about our more formal outreach—like our trips to American communities across Syria—we used traditional State Department cables. The Vice Consul who went on those visits would write up a report, which we would clear through the embassy before it was sent out. That ensured everyone had visibility and that it went out with proper authorization as a formal reporting product.

But “Tidbits from the Line” was something different. It was deliberately positioned as an informal consular product, not a cleared embassy-wide statement. We didn’t want it to be mistaken for an official embassy line—it was an informal, timely perspective from consular officers on what individuals were telling us. That format also made it easier for readers to respond directly to the Vice Consul and ask follow-up questions or engage in dialogue.

Before sending it out, we’d circulate it internally. Either I would circulate it, or the Vice Consul would—but we made it clear that we weren’t seeking edits or formal clearance. We were simply letting colleagues know, “This is what we’re sharing.” It was an FYI, not a committee-reviewed statement.

This all took place in 2011, when email as an official communication medium was evolving. In previous decades, something like this might have gone out as an “official-informal” cable—a longstanding format for conveying views that weren’t formal policy statements. But email had been in place at the State Department for over 20 years by that time and had replaced many older forms of messaging. The drawback, however, was that ordinary emails weren’t automatically recorded in the same way as cables. If we wanted an email to be part of the official record—searchable, archived, and formally attributed—we had to mark it as a "record email."

That was a relatively new practice at the time. Marking an email as a record meant it would be retained alongside cables, ensuring it had institutional value and could be referenced later. It still had the personal authorship of the sender, but it would be filed for posterity, and people could reply to it just like any regular email.

Q: I understood every single email that's exchanged on government machines was part of the official record.

GOODFRIEND: Well, it depends on the content. You're right that individuals are responsible for sorting their emails—discarding personal ones and retaining work-related messages—but how those emails are disseminated, stored, and retrieved can differ. For something to become part of the official record in the sense of cables and retrievable documentation, it needed to be designated a “record email.”

We’d talked earlier about WikiLeaks and how Manning accessed a massive archive of cables. But emails aren’t necessarily in that same archive—they were stored separately, on Microsoft Exchange servers. So, if you were searching the cable system for material about Syria, you’d find cables—but not emails—unless someone had designated their email as a record email. That record designation allowed the email to be stored alongside cables, searchable in the same way.

But even that wasn't entirely reliable at the time. The system was still being refined. We tried using the record email function, but the messages often didn't go through properly—they failed to deliver or reached only part of the audience. So, we reverted to sending to email distribution lists. It achieved the practical effect we needed: timely delivery, broad visibility, and easier back-and-forth. And it helped the Vice Consul who wrote the "Tidbits from the Line" reports to quickly build a network of contacts and distribute her observations with impact.

As the situation deteriorated and Syrians began applying for visas at neighboring posts like Amman and Beirut, those posts began to issue similar situational messages. That collaboration deepened, especially as we prepared for a possible drawdown of essential personnel. We were now in May, heading into June 2011. Protests continued—some peaceful, like the large one in Hama—while others were increasingly violent. There were ongoing discussions and flickers of hope. Then came July.

The Vice Consul had already been traveling throughout the country, seeing things firsthand. The ambassador, Robert Ford, began considering whether he too should go out into the field and see for himself. I'm speaking here from my own perspective, of course—Ambassador Ford could tell his own story—but as it unfolded, Ambassador Ford decided to go to Hama the first week of July. He planned to stay overnight, leaving on Friday and returning on Saturday.

Now, when an ambassador travels, it's a much more visible affair. The Vice Consul and Defense Attaché had traveled low-profile—no one noticed them. But when the ambassador went, the Regional Security Officer (RSO) was with him, and their presence was quickly recognized. Even before Friday prayers ended, a crowd had gathered. People recognized the ambassador's car, threw flowers, danced in the street, and chanted, "The American ambassador is here!" Videos were uploaded to YouTube before he even returned, showing the U.S. as standing with the demonstrators.

(Ambassador Ford in Hama - July 8, 2011 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1FcCm9eMqM)

It made an immediate impact.

By Saturday, protests had already begun in front of the embassy. On Sunday, our first workday, crowds grew. By Monday, they swelled. Just days earlier, we had finished renovating our perimeter wall. The embassy still sat right next to the sidewalk, but we'd reinforced part of the courtyard with higher, supposedly "non-climbable" walls topped with barbed wire.

The protesters came prepared. They brought blankets, threw them over the wire, scaled the wall, and overran the embassy grounds. Our personnel sheltered in secure areas. A few were briefly caught between buildings but made it inside. Thankfully, no one—on our side or theirs—was physically harmed.

But it was serious.

Protesters climbed to the roof, tore down the American flag, tried to set fire to the building, and smashed some of the shatterproof windows. Tear gas was used to disperse the crowd. The next step would have been live ammunition—and we were determined to avoid that.

The ambassador called the Foreign Ministry, demanding that the mob be removed immediately. We believed the attack was government-orchestrated. The crowd was too organized to be spontaneous. The regime, in our view, bore direct responsibility. After that call, Syrian security forces arrived and dispersed the crowd.

The incident was traumatic—especially for the Marines, who watched the flag come down and couldn't stop it. But it was a pivotal moment. Around the same time, the French embassy was attacked as well, in retaliation for the French ambassador's visit to Hama. Their front doors were damaged. And ours wasn't the first target—prior attacks had hit the embassies of the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and others, depending on political tensions.

After the attack, we reassessed the security posture. The front of the embassy was no longer fully usable. We began working in staggered shifts to limit the number of staff present at any one time. We were also asked to reduce American personnel. Within the consular section, I was told to retain only myself, a deputy, and one Vice Consul.

But I argued that we shouldn't send our trained Vice Consuls—who already held diplomatic visas—back to Washington. If we needed to bring people back into Syria, obtaining new visas could be nearly impossible. So instead, we proposed repositioning the two Vice Consuls—one to Amman, the other to Beirut.

Most Syrians preferred Beirut—it was a two-hour drive from Damascus, compared to six hours for Amman. But Beirut couldn't accommodate additional personnel. Their compound was small, their staffing tight. So, both Vice Consuls were ultimately sent to Amman.

We advised Syrians seeking nonimmigrant visas to apply in Amman. Beirut still accepted some applications, but at their discretion. Meanwhile, we in Damascus continued processing immigrant visas for immediate relatives of American citizens—spouses, children under 21, and parents—because those could be processed quickly and locally. For all other categories, like employment-based petitions or petitions from green card holders, processing had to go through DHS in the U.S., and wait times could be months or even years.

We also continued providing passports and other services for American citizens.

After our deputy asked to leave to reunite with his family, I was left with one Vice Consul and a rotating, staggered staff. Security teams began building a “hard room” within the consular section—a fortified space where staff could shelter if another breach occurred. This also became the designated safe space for local employees. We relocated some from other sections—public affairs, refugee affairs, and possibly HR—into our space. In effect, we became a mixed, close-knit team, working under pressure but adapting together.

Our messaging to American citizens also became more blunt. And here, one initiative we’d started earlier proved essential: our monthly email newsletter. It gave us a reliable, effective way to reach all registered Americans. We’d spent time making sure we had current email addresses and developed systems that bypassed spam filters so our messages would get through. You can’t just blast out 5,000 identical emails and expect delivery—many systems would block them. But because we’d been doing this regularly, we had the infrastructure and processes to reach people when it really counted.

The newsletter explained how to prepare to leave Syria, what to expect in the U.S., and how to think about these decisions—not as abrupt panic signals, but as reasoned, timely guidance. We also issued Travel Warnings when necessary—formal messages stating, in effect, “It’s time to leave Syria.”

Q: At this point, you have literally said it is now too dangerous for Americans to remain. You should depart.

GOODFRIEND: Yes. Once we reduced staff, after the embassy was overrun, we began strongly advising Americans to leave Syria. This was around July 2011.

By then, we were seeing Americans being arrested—or hearing from family members that their teenage son or their father had been picked up. One of the individuals our Vice Consul had spoken with during her visit to Hama later reached out to us, saying he feared for his life and asked if the embassy could shelter him.

This was quite different from a case we had dealt with the previous year, where we had helped someone with a clear plan to depart. Now, we were being asked to offer what would effectively be indefinite shelter—with no end in sight. We advised him not to seek refuge at the embassy, but instead to leave the country as soon as possible, by any means available.

At that point, Damascus International Airport was still operational. Many people also preferred to leave through Beirut, which had a larger airport and was just a couple of hours away by car. So, we made it very clear: don’t wait for an evacuation. There may not be one.

Leaving while commercial flights were still running gave Americans the most flexibility—they could buy tickets, compare prices, bring their luggage, bring pets, and travel with family members. If they waited for an evacuation, they’d face severe limitations: just one small carry-on, no pets, and restrictions on non-citizen family members traveling with them.

And as I've said before, evacuation flights aren't free. U.S. policy is to charge the equivalent of commercial airfare. So, people would still have to pay—and get far less convenience and comfort.

We explained all of this in our newsletter. I believe we ran several pieces with headlines like "Don't Wait for an Evacuation," laying out the reasons why it was better and safer to go now.

Behind the scenes, we were also contacting airlines regularly to get a sense of their plans. We didn't want to be caught by surprise if flights suddenly stopped. Fortunately, most airlines were still flying at that time and had no immediate plans to suspend service. That information informed our planning and reinforced the message that departure was still viable.

Washington, too, was becoming more concerned about our presence—both the number of Americans at the embassy and the broader American population inside Syria. We began sending regular reports on those numbers and maintained a close watch over the situation.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government made life increasingly difficult for us after Ambassador Ford's visit to Hama. They formally prohibited American diplomats from traveling outside Damascus without government permission. They barred all hotels in Syria from hosting American diplomats, effectively cutting off any possibility of overnight travel. I believe this restriction applied to other diplomats as well, not just Americans.

No Syrian domestic airline was permitted to sell tickets to diplomats, which meant we couldn't fly to cities like Aleppo. Even if we'd hoped to avoid overnight stays by flying there and back the same day, that option was closed. If we tried to drive outside Damascus, we'd be turned back at checkpoints unless it was a trip that could be completed in a single day.

In response, we imposed reciprocal travel restrictions on Syrian diplomats in the U.S.—limiting them to travel within, I believe, 25 miles of their embassy in Washington, and likewise from their mission in New York to the UN. We had tried to avoid doing this, urging the Syrian government to lift its own restrictions. But when they went as far as canceling pre-approved trips by their own diplomats—essentially enforcing the ban on themselves—it was clear that reciprocity was inevitable.

By now, there were no family members remaining at the U.S. Embassy. Our American footprint had shrunk dramatically. I was also doing my best to prevent staff burnout. This was intense, sustained crisis work, and I felt it was important that we manage the workload in a way that didn't break people.

We had positioned two Vice Consuls in Amman. Our consular records had been digitized. We had a functioning appointment system for passports, visas—including immigrant visas—and could manage the workload with the reduced staff we had. Importantly, we weren’t trying to operate around the clock. We scheduled what we could reasonably handle during regular working hours, and of course, we remained available for emergencies at any time.

We had reduced operations to what we believed was sustainable. That included allowing staff to take occasional breaks—to get away when possible. While we could no longer travel freely within Syria, we still had the ability, at that point, to fly out of the country without needing the two-week advance notification the Syrian government would soon begin requiring.

So, we made use of that window. I managed to take brief trips, for example, to Istanbul, to Budapest, and even to Jerusalem. It was possible to fly to Amman, then to Tel Aviv, and return without having a passport stamped in a way that would cause problems. These short getaways helped maintain a degree of normalcy and gave us a bit of breathing room.

That lasted until around October. Then the Syrian government imposed new restrictions: no travel outside Syria without formal notification and prior authorization. It was one more way the space around us was shrinking.

Still, people kept coming to the embassy. We couldn't leave Damascus anymore—but our consular services remained open. So, we still had that window into what was happening across the country. And we still had a way to communicate with the public.

In August 2011, President Obama made a public statement calling on Assad to be part of a solution or to step aside. We were given advance notice, and we prepared a message to American citizens in Syria, advising them to be aware of the statement and the possible security implications. If someone identified them as Americans, they could be targeted—not for anything they had said or done, but simply because of the President's remarks.

Some of our wardens—local contacts who helped us stay in touch with American citizens—were reluctant to pass along the message. They feared it could put people at risk just by association. And we understood that. We’d seen it before: the moment when people begin to worry that their relationship with the U.S. embassy, or even with other Americans, could endanger them. We didn’t pressure anyone.

Fortunately, we had built our own infrastructure to communicate directly with U.S. citizens. So, we sent the message ourselves.

The embassy's Facebook page had also become an important channel. The ambassador, working closely with Public Affairs, was now using Facebook to communicate policy messages, since we could no longer hold public events or speak freely in person. Much of our engagement with Syrians had shifted online. In that sense, we had become, to some extent, a partially virtual embassy.

This was the situation we were in by October 2011: limited movement, reduced staff, active online engagement, and growing urgency in our message to Americans—leave Syria while you still can.

This was where I was saying that many Americans were choosing not to leave because school was in session—and that really highlighted how important education was for these families. They felt they could endure the risks. We had one case, for example, of a young man who was arrested. His family was worried, of course, but when he was released, they still didn't want to leave—he had exams coming up. Ultimately, they did decide to depart, but only after realizing that he couldn't focus on his studies after what had happened. It was challenging to get people to accept the seriousness of the situation and act accordingly.

Around that same time, there was also an unusual episode that briefly distracted from the larger crisis. Around May and June 2011, someone launched a blog titled A Gay Girl in Damascus. It quickly picked up a large following. The story was told from the perspective of a young woman who, it was said, had been raised in the United States—an American citizen. Her mother was supposedly American, her father Syrian. The parents had separated, and the father had returned to Syria, where the young woman was now staying with him in Damascus. She was blogging about getting to know life in Syria, exploring the LGBTQ+ community, and reflecting on what it meant to live as a lesbian woman in Damascus. Her posts touched on her daily experiences, the fears people had, and what it meant to be part of that community in such a conservative and surveilled environment.

One post described a visit from a family acquaintance, someone who turned out to be with the police, coming to the house asking for her. The father was said to have defended her and berated the visitor, leveraging traditional notions of honor and family ties: "I know who your grandfather was," that kind of thing. The story resonated with people, reinforcing specific ideas about how deeply embedded social bonds function in Syrian society.

Then, one day, the blog said that this young woman—"Mina," I believe—had been arrested. The blog post, written by someone else, claimed that she had gone out to meet someone at a café and was taken away by men in a black car. The story spread fast. We began getting calls from journalists and media outlets asking what the U.S. Embassy was doing to help her. She was believed to be an American citizen, and now—apparently—she was in custody.

So naturally, our first step was to try to verify her identity. We were preparing to write a diplomatic note to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requesting access. But before we could do that, we had to confirm she was a U.S. citizen. I looked through our systems to find her passport record—nothing. I checked for visa records under her father's name.

I tried to locate any record of her mother. Again, nothing. Maybe she was using a different name, I thought. Meanwhile, Washington was asking for updates. They had heard about it too.

I reported back that we couldn't find any documentation to confirm her identity—not just that we couldn't confirm she was an American citizen, but that we couldn't confirm she existed at all. It reminded me of what I'd experienced in London, with fabricated cases—individuals who were entirely invented. In those cases, too, the first thing we always did was search for a passport or visa record.

Now, there was someone claiming to be Mina's girlfriend. They had been in a long-distance relationship—texting, emailing—but had never met in person. This wasn't someone trying to deceive us. She genuinely believed Mina was real. A reporter from the British newspaper, The Telegraph, also claimed to have interviewed Mina—possibly by email, perhaps over the phone—but again, there was no in-person contact.

All of these people were sure they had been engaging with a real person. And we were doing our best to investigate, but I couldn't approach the Syrian authorities with a diplomatic note on behalf of someone whose citizenship, or even existence, I couldn't substantiate. Doing so would have undermined our credibility on every other case we brought to the Syrians.

Ultimately, irregularities in the story started to emerge. The State Department's press team fielded questions about it and acknowledged we were trying to verify the information. Meanwhile, it was the blogosphere that did the real detective work. They traced IP addresses, looked into domain registrations, and eventually uncovered the truth: A Gay Girl in Damascus had been authored by a middle-aged man in Scotland.

He later claimed he wasn't trying to deceive people maliciously, but rather to make specific points—about Syria, about LGBTQ+ issues—through a voice he felt might have greater resonance. But for many, it felt like a betrayal. It was someone speaking through an identity that wasn't theirs, borrowing credibility from a vulnerable group, in a moment of real danger and crisis.

(Wikipedia Page for "A Gay Girl in Damascus" - June 2011- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Gay_Girl_in_Damascus)

But that was the environment in 2011—people were being arrested, people were being held. One case that stood out involved a reporter who was stopped at the airport in Syria. It turned out she was wanted by the Iranians. She was arrested by the Syrians and then handed over to the Iranians. In that instance, we were able to quickly gather the relevant information, make it clear to the authorities what we knew, and she was ultimately released. No one ever officially acknowledged what had happened, but she did come out of Iranian custody.

So, these were the kinds of situations we were dealing with in 2011. The Gay Girl in Damascus story was just one example—albeit one that captured a lot of attention and imagination. But it was taking place in a broader context where real people were being detained, real threats were unfolding, and we were navigating all of it in real time.

We're at 9:36 here, my time.

Q: Yeah, it is. It is time to break. I kept listening because it's just so fascinating. And you're not done yet.

GOODFRIEND: No, not yet. We're probably only about two-thirds of the way through 2011—still a long way to go.

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Q: Today is September 9, 2022. We are beginning session twelve with André Goodfriend. You're still in Syria, and things are getting worse.

GOODFRIEND: All right. We're in the middle of 2011—it's summer. Family members had been sent away under a mandatory departure. We were still a staffed embassy, but without family members. The school was still functioning, many people were still around, and many of the other embassies remained operational, with their family members still in-country.

I think, because of the situations we had seen in other countries in the region—how rapidly things had deteriorated following what was called the Arab Spring—we were generally leaning on the side of caution. Rather than wait for things to turn quickly, we responded proactively. We were tracking our own security situation very carefully.

As I mentioned in earlier conversations, we were also communicating regularly with the American citizen community—through a newsletter, through our Warden system—so they could share the same perspective we had within the embassy.

At this point, we were advising American citizens not to travel to Syria, and recommending that those in the country depart. We informed them that our own family members had already left due to the security situation. And if they chose to stay, they needed to be aware of and accept that risk.

That said, many other embassies still had their family members present, and the school remained open. There was unrest outside Damascus, and inside the city, there were attempts at demonstrations—but those demonstrations were generally suppressed fairly forcefully by Syrian security forces.

As I think I mentioned before, we had been visiting American citizens across Syria. A Vice Consul would go out to assess their situation—sometimes visiting during demonstrations, other times just during the week—to get a sense of how they were faring and what was happening in those communities. It also helped us better understand the broader political situation that our citizens were dealing with.

The ability—and the responsibility—of consular personnel to engage and safeguard the welfare of American citizens also gave us insights into the internal situation in the country. We were able to interact in ways that other embassy personnel could not, given our mandate to connect with the American public.

As I said before, once we had taken on this role of going out and assessing the situation with our citizens, we also began discussing our findings with colleagues at other embassies. Their consular staff were doing similar outreach with their own citizens.

Generally, if we had asked the Syrians in advance for permission to travel, that permission would never come. So, the approach we and our colleagues adopted was to inform the Syrian government that we were traveling—but not to wait for authorization.

So, we were going out and visiting different American citizen communities pretty much on short notice—letting the Syrian government know, but not waiting for approval.

That being said, when the Ambassador went—not to visit American citizens, but to get a sense of the situation in Hama—it was a much higher-profile visit. Even though the visit wasn't promoted by the Embassy or announced in advance to the public, the car was recognizable: the license plate and the type of vehicle made it clear who it was. So, when he visited Hama in July 2011, people who had gathered in anticipation of demonstrations recognized that the American Ambassador was there. They began recording video and uploading it—in this age of cyber-connectedness—to the internet. They portrayed the visit as a show of support and were visibly joyful about it.

I believe the video is still available on YouTube. You can see people dancing, throwing flowers at the car, and welcoming the Ambassador to Hama. It received a lot of attention. While it was not intended as an overt statement of U.S. support for the demonstrations, it was interpreted that way. And the State Department did not disavow that perception. The position was that the Ambassador had a right to travel and observe the situation in the country, and that the U.S. supports peaceful expression and the rights of citizens to speak out.

So yes, it became a perceived show of support.

What followed—I don't want to imply direct causality—but what followed was a demonstration at the American Embassy by Syrians who appeared to have been bused in from various places. They came prepared. They scaled the walls, tried to set parts of the embassy on fire, tore down the flag, and smashed security glass. It reached a point where the embassy was genuinely under siege. Staff had to shelter in hardened locations for their protection while people ran through the compound.

The Ambassador engaged directly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make clear that it is the host country's responsibility to safeguard diplomatic missions—and that if anything happened, Syria would be held responsible. He demanded that the Syrian government take immediate action to remove the protesters, as the situation was becoming dangerous.

And they did. The lack of an initial police presence suggested the demonstration had been permitted to happen. But shortly after the Ambassador's call with the Foreign Ministry, the protesters were dispersed fairly quickly, indicating it wasn't a difficult situation for the Syrian government to control.

The embassy was damaged and some of its security infrastructure had been compromised.

It was clear that something like this could happen again—that the embassy was in a vulnerable position. Safeguarding the safety of our diplomatic personnel, as well as our local staff, became a real challenge.

Following that incident, we were required to reduce our footprint—to scale back the number of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Damascus. Many embassy sections reduced their American staffing to just one or two diplomats.

In the Consular Section, however, we took a different approach. During times of unrest—when evacuation might be necessary or when there's an increased need to ensure the welfare of American citizens—consular personnel are often the last to leave. They're essential for any operation that ramps up to protect U.S. citizens.

Rather than reduce the number of consular officers and pull them out of the region entirely, we coordinated with our neighboring posts—specifically in Jordan and Lebanon. Our goal was to reposition consular staff while maintaining capacity.

We moved two Vice Consuls from Damascus to Amman, Jordan. Our embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, due to its own security posture at the time, wasn't in a position to host additional staff or take on the added workload. So, Amman became our regional consular hub. It also took over the nonimmigrant visa workload for Syrian applicants, since we could no longer process visas in Damascus with a reduced staff.

In Damascus, it was me, my deputy, and one Vice Consul who remained. Meanwhile, the two Vice Consuls now based in Amman continued working under my supervision. Due to the heightened security threat, we staggered work hours at the mission, making sure not to have too many people in the building at once, since the compound itself had become a target.

We reduced the number of American personnel on-site, and for the safety of our local staff, we implemented a rotation system: only a third would come in on any given day. That way, we maintained a working presence while minimizing risk.

Through it all, we maintained regular digital communication with our colleagues in Amman. The officers there continued reporting to me, and I reviewed their adjudications using our consolidated database review tools. This helped ensure consistency in visa decisions, even though the adjudication was now being carried out outside Syria.

And, as I had mentioned earlier, even before the drawdown, we had already started compiling a weekly report—based on what we were seeing at the consular window. One of my officers...

Q: Let me ask a quick question. Visitor visas go to Amman, but what other functions was the section in Damascus still doing?

GOODFRIEND: We were still carrying out our responsibilities to American citizens. Passport issuances continued, as did reports of birth, prison visits, and assistance to Americans who had been arrested, were destitute, seeking repatriation to the United States, or were hospitalized. All of that was still being handled from within Damascus.

We were also continuing to process immigrant visas for immediate relatives of American citizens. Nonimmigrant visas were being handled in Amman. We were not processing immigrant visas for people who were not immediate relatives of U.S. citizens—such as employment-based applicants or relatives of lawful permanent residents. Those cases tended to be less urgent, and often applicants had already been waiting for years due to numerical limits and long visa backlogs.

So, immigrant visa cases for non-immediate relatives were being handled in Amman, if Amman agreed to accept the case. We continued to process cases for immediate relatives of American citizens in Damascus.

Part of safeguarding the welfare of American citizens meant recognizing that the most effective way to ensure their safety was often for them to leave the country. But many were reluctant to do so because their close family members—spouses, children, or parents—were not U.S. citizens, and they didn't want to leave them behind.

We were advising them that we could help facilitate immigration for those family members if they were ready to depart together. If the lack of a visa for a loved one was the main obstacle to their departure, and they were prepared to leave as a family, we could assist with that process.

But of course, if an American citizen didn't feel able to support their family in the United States, or simply preferred to remain in Syria—because they had built a life there, or because their parents or others were unwilling to leave—then there were other factors at play, and we couldn't force anyone to leave.

But if the obstacle was: I can't leave my parents behind; I want to take them with me, but they don't have visas—I can't leave them behind, and people had heard it could take months, even years, to get an immigrant visa—well, that created real hesitation. They also didn't want to get into trouble by applying for tourist visas when their true intent was long-term immigration.

So, working with Washington and in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security (which had an office in Amman), we were able to receive authorization to adjudicate petitions ourselves. I may have discussed this in a previous conversation, but just to clarify—the immigrant visa process is, for simplicity's sake, divided into two parts. The American citizen handles the first part: it's the petition. The non-American citizen handles the second part: it's the application.

A non-American citizen cannot simply apply to immigrate to the United States as an immediate relative of a U.S. citizen unless that American citizen has first submitted a formal petition requesting that their relative be allowed to immigrate.

So again: the first step—the petition—is done by the U.S. citizen. Up until around 2008 or 2009, consular officers at U.S. embassies could approve these petitions and collect the associated fee. But then there was a policy question about where that fee should go—because the service was being provided by the State Department on behalf of USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), which is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

In the U.S., if you're an American citizen and you want to petition for a family member, you submit that petition to USCIS. Overseas, however, consuls had been handling it—but the question arose: since it's a DHS function, should the fee go to DHS, even though the State Department provided the service?

To simplify that bureaucratic question, DHS eventually said: American citizens can file directly with us, no matter where they are—it's the digital era. So, embassies were no longer authorized to accept petitions on behalf of USCIS.

But that meant the process became much slower. In our case, given the emergency circumstances, we had to request special authorization from both the State Department and USCIS to once again accept and adjudicate petitions locally—so we could handle them quickly.

With that background, what we were then able to tell American citizens was this: If you have all your documents ready, if your family is ready to depart, and the only thing holding you up is that your immediate relative—your spouse, parent, or child—doesn't yet have an immigrant visa, we can help. We could accept their petition immediately and adjudicate it on the spot. No waiting period.

If you came in—if you scheduled an appointment—we would tell you what documents were needed. If you brought them, paid the fee, and everything was in order, we would approve the petition. That didn't mean we were waiving any security checks or procedural safeguards. Those checks generally don't occur during the petition approval phase anyway.

What we were checking was: is this person, in fact, an American citizen? And, as an American citizen, are they eligible to petition for this family member? Is this really their spouse, their child, their parent? If they could establish the family relationship through civil documents—birth certificates, marriage records—and prove U.S. citizenship, then we could approve the petition.

After that, we could immediately schedule an appointment for the family member to submit the visa application. That application process, including the medical exam, could be completed within days. The applicant would undergo a medical exam in advance, and we would also require any police certificates to confirm they didn't have a criminal record.

That's the stage where the security checks come in. We would run our own background checks, and the entire process—from petition to application to visa issuance—could often be completed within a couple of weeks.

So, we were able to tell our American citizen community: even under these difficult circumstances—or really because of these circumstances—we can help you leave Syria, with your immediate relatives. And that enabled a lot of American citizens to go ahead and begin the process. Many were able to depart for the United States.

Of course, it wasn't an easy decision. People were leaving their homes, their lives. Some families waited until the end of the school year. For example, by September, school was back in session. Regardless, many American families wanted their children to finish out the grade, hoping the situation might improve. Let's wait and see, they would say. We'll try to stick it out.

But the situation wasn't improving.

As I mentioned, the American school—actually, the International School—was still trying to remain open. Even if there were no American students left, there were still children enrolled from other embassies.

There were also children with dual nationality—residents in Syria—who were able to study at the school. The Syrian government permitted students who were children of diplomats or who held other nationalities to attend, as well as a small number of Syrian students who had only Syrian nationality. The school remained open and wanted to stay open.

But we were increasingly concerned about the security of the school. If the American Embassy was seen as a target, then the International School—which was strongly associated with the embassy—could easily become a target as well.

I think I mentioned earlier that one reason I arrived in Syria a year earlier than originally scheduled was that my predecessor departed early. That happened when the Syrian government shut down the school in retaliation for what they claimed was an American attack on an al-Qaeda arms pipeline. In that case, the Syrian government didn't close the embassy, but they did look for other symbolic representations of the United States—and the school was one of those. Because it was identified with the U.S., it became vulnerable.

There were concerns from the school board that if the school closed again, it might never reopen. They had managed to budget their way through the previous closure and believed they might weather this one, especially since they still had a student base. But we had to be very clear that we did not think the school was safe.

Ultimately, the school was located on property owned by the U.S. government, controlled by the American Embassy, and we said that the school could no longer use that property. Students could not assemble there. It wasn't safe.

At the same time, we were advising American citizens to leave the country. Many of the school's teachers were American, and we didn't want them to feel obligated to remain in Syria just because the school stayed open. We didn't want that sense of responsibility to become a reason for putting themselves at risk.

Since the school could no longer hold in-person classes on embassy property, there were proposals to shift to remote learning. They began exploring online teaching tools—this was in 2011, well before the widespread remote learning we saw during the COVID pandemic. But even then, more than a decade earlier, there was an effort to use online education as a way to keep the school going and serve the students who remained.

Ultimately, though, many students and teachers recognized that the situation was becoming untenable. As time went on, continued study became impossible. The school had to wind down its programs, teachers began departing, and other embassies were also reconsidering their presence and evaluating their options.

In a sense, the walls were slowly closing in around Damascus. We continued to provide the services we could, but everything increasingly centered on one priority: safeguarding the welfare of our citizens. That became the axis around which all our activities revolved.

Of course, I realize I'm speaking through the lens of having been the Consul General at the time, which might make it sound as if everything revolved around citizen welfare. And certainly, that was a major focus. But the other sections of the embassy were still performing vital functions.

The Management Section, for instance, was responsible for maintaining the physical infrastructure of the embassy—ensuring people were paid, that the motor pool was functioning, and that staff had safe places to live. They were operating on a skeleton crew, doing everything they could to keep the mission running.

Public Affairs also continued working, though with a much-reduced staff. Obviously, we were no longer holding public programs—no school visits, no bringing people into the American Center, which remained closed even after the International School reopened. But we had a very active Facebook page.

This was the period when we were beginning to move into digital diplomacy. Even though we couldn't travel around the country, and our in-person engagement was increasingly restricted, we were starting to use the available technologies—Facebook, Twitter—to maintain some form of dialogue with Syrian society.

In fact, a group emerged to troll our Facebook page. They called themselves, I believe, the "Syrian Electronic Army"—a group essentially tasked with countering or discrediting anything we posted. They would flood the comment sections with rebuttals, insults, or inflammatory remarks—not just on our page, but on any discussion of Syria on social media.

Their goal seemed to be to make digital discourse confusing, hostile, and difficult to navigate—to cloud the conversation with noise and deter meaningful engagement.

Q: Here, let me just quickly ask, was this action handled by personnel inside the State Department in Washington, or located in Syria, the Middle East?

GOODFRIEND: The people maintaining our Facebook page were from the embassy—we were still running that ourselves.

Q: This with the people who were doing the online Syria attack force, you called it?

GOODFRIEND: Right—the Syrian Electronic Army, I think they called themselves. They could have been based in Syria, or not. We weren't managing that, obviously, so we couldn't know exactly where they operated from. But just as the "forces that be" were able to mobilize people to physically overrun the embassy when they disagreed with what we were doing, those same forces were also capable of managing a digital campaign—to harass, to disrupt, and to undermine any rational discussion of Syria online.

It was a kind of shift—this confrontational engagement was now moving from the physical realm into the virtual one. And this was 2011—over a decade ago—so it was still new territory. But people adapted to it quickly. What we saw then were the early, somewhat primitive forms of what has since become far more sophisticated: fake identities, disinformation campaigns, and the general clouding of online discourse.

In Syria, this was already happening. The digital space—social media in particular—was being flooded with noise, aggression, and confusion. And those involved likely developed an early sense of the dangers, the traps, and the hostile terrain that could emerge in digital environments.

Meanwhile, restrictions on our own movements inside Syria tightened further. If I didn't mention this earlier: after the attack on our embassy in July—following the Ambassador's visit to Hama—the Syrian government imposed new constraints on diplomatic personnel.

Before July 2011, we were still able to travel throughout Syria without interference from the Syrian government. After that, they mandated that diplomats could not leave Damascus without explicit prior permission. And to enforce this, they took very practical steps: airlines were prohibited from selling tickets to diplomats for domestic flights, and hotels were prohibited from accommodating diplomats overnight. Effectively, it became impossible to travel within Syria.

Of course, it was also becoming increasingly unsafe.

The U.S. State Department responded reciprocally. If Syrian diplomats in Syria were going to restrict our personnel to within 20 kilometers of Damascus, we would apply the same rule to Syrian diplomats in the U.S. Those in Washington, for instance, were limited to a certain radius—perhaps 25 miles. The same applied to Syrian diplomats at the United Nations in New York. We made clear that this was a reciprocal measure, and that if Syria lifted its restrictions, we would lift ours. But the Syrian government refused. In fact, they said they would continue enforcing these travel limitations on their own diplomatic staff—and on ours—ostensibly "for your own safety."

So that was the environment by late July and into August. I may have referred earlier to September, but by this point, we had a skeleton staff. Many diplomatic personnel had been withdrawn and sent back to Washington. The two Vice Consuls were now operating from Amman. Regionally, we were still able to provide consular services—but not from Damascus.

We had positioned ourselves to continue prioritizing the welfare of American citizens, which we saw as our highest responsibility. Other sections of the embassy were also continuing their work, but were also stretched thin and constrained in what they could do. The political and economic sections were down to one or two officers each. And no one could leave Damascus.

Even meeting with embassy personnel was becoming risky—for Syrians.

This was a new concern. While Americans might have had some degree of protection from direct state actions, the Syrians who met with us did not. That's something we had to think about. We even included language in our public country information sheet, noting that individuals who engaged with the U.S. Embassy might not enjoy the same security that we did.

That concern was compounded by the recent WikiLeaks publication of diplomatic cables a few months earlier. That still lingered in people's minds: To what extent are our contacts now at risk? And yet, despite that fear, many Syrians still wanted to talk to us, still wanted to share what was going on in the country.

We continued to engage as much as we could.

And this brings me back to what I mentioned earlier—how, within the Consular Section, we had mechanisms in place to report on what we were hearing. Since our movement was restricted, we gathered insights from the people who came to us—those applying for visas or passports, or coming to talk about their families and their plans to leave. What they shared gave us a clearer picture of conditions in Hama, in Aleppo, and in other cities across Syria.

While we had originally been writing up these reports when we still had a full consular staff based in Damascus—drawing only from what we saw firsthand—now the situation had shifted. With two consular officers relocated to Amman, and visa applicants no longer coming to Damascus but instead going to Amman—or, in many cases, choosing to go to Beirut, even though that post wasn't officially staffed to handle their cases due to its closer proximity—we moved toward a more collaborative effort.

Amman began reporting what it was hearing from Syrian visa applicants, and Beirut began doing the same. This created a broader base of information. We were still providing a service, but we were also gaining insight into what was happening in parts of Syria we could no longer access directly.

These updates weren't formal political assessments—they weren't coming from the political section. They were anecdotal reports: what people were telling us. They were consular in origin, based on the experiences and observations of individuals coming in for services—visa applicants, people seeking assistance. And so, this "product" continued to be produced, but now with input not just from Damascus, but from one of our Vice Consuls in Amman, who remained the coordinator of the effort.

She was pulling together stories and accounts from Damascus, as well as those being gathered by consular staff in Amman. I'm not sure whether she was directly coordinating with Beirut, or whether Beirut was producing its own version separately. As I mentioned, Amman had officers originally from Damascus, so coordination was easier on that front. Beirut was certainly a collaborative partner, even if not reporting into the same system. They may not have been contributing to a shared product, but were sharing their own reports for broader awareness.

As this evolved, we remained focused on the concerns of the Syrian public—as conveyed to us through these interactions—and on maintaining effective communication with them.

I previously mentioned our Warden system, which was one of the main channels we used. But even there, we had concerns. As conditions worsened, we worried about the safety of our wardens and didn't want to put them in positions where they might feel at risk.

We continued to communicate with our wardens and shared information we wanted them to circulate—for the safety and welfare of American citizens. But we were also trying to ensure that we could communicate directly with citizens ourselves, so it wouldn't fall entirely on the shoulders of the wardens.

One of the ways we did this was through our monthly newsletter. It served not just to provide information, but also to help keep our email lists current. We regularly tested whether people were receiving our messages and began calling American citizens individually to check in—especially if they had registered with us.

As I mentioned earlier, we no longer had much staffing in the Consular Section. But we were able to draw on local employees from across the embassy to assist with this. They helped make phone calls using the contact lists we maintained. Every couple of weeks, starting around September or October, we'd go through the entire list and call every number we had. The goal was to make sure our citizens were safe, to find out whether they were still in the country or had left, and to maintain as accurate a count as possible of how many Americans remained and where they were located—so we could assist them if needed.

We received calls from Americans reporting that their towns or neighborhoods were under siege. And while I may be recounting this somewhat dispassionately, it's important to remember that many areas in Syria at the time were genuinely under military siege. Some towns were being shelled. In others, helicopters were flying overhead, and people were afraid to leave their homes for fear of being shot. These lockdowns often lasted a week or two, before security forces moved on to another area.

In many of these towns, phone lines still worked, and people would call the embassy, asking for help. If they were American citizens, they wanted to know what we could do. But our ability to assist was very limited. We couldn't visit them. We couldn't bring food or restore water. What we could do—once they were in a position to leave—was help them depart.

If a family member had been arrested, we could and did engage with the Syrian government to remind them of their obligations under the Vienna Convention: to inform us when an American citizen is arrested, and to permit us to conduct a consular visit.

This ties back to a topic we discussed a few weeks ago—the case of the fictitious American woman who was reportedly arrested. That's why we took such pains to confirm whether she was, in fact, an American citizen. Had she been, we would have taken it very seriously.

In genuine cases, we raised the issue with the Syrian government, sent formal diplomatic notes, and tracked the case closely. Even during this period, we maintained a functional relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at least to some extent. There was a kind of dance. They would respond to us, but often only partially.

For example, when we brought a case to their attention, the consular bureau in the Foreign Ministry might say: “We haven’t been informed of this arrest. You’re telling us now—we’ll check into it.” They would add that another ministry had likely handled the arrest, and that’s why they hadn’t yet informed us. We would remind them that under international obligations, once they know a detainee is an American citizen, it’s their responsibility to notify the Foreign Ministry, which in turn must notify us.

The pattern continued to be that we were rarely informed proactively. But when we raised a case directly, the American citizen was often released—sometimes within a week or two. Rarely was there an acknowledgment that the person remained in custody, which made it difficult to request a prison visit. If they had confirmed that someone was in custody, we would have immediately requested a visit, wanted to know the charges, and asserted our right to see the detained citizen.

I think there were a couple of cases involving long-term American citizen prisoners where we were able to conduct prison visits. But in most cases, especially those that didn’t involve long-term detentions, by the time there was any acknowledgment that someone had been in custody, they had already been released, and we never had the chance to visit them.

As I said before, I don’t want to speak too confidently about causality—I can’t say for certain what caused what—but the general pattern was this: we would inform the Syrian authorities that we had reason to believe a particular individual was in custody. We often learned this through various sources. We would provide all the relevant details—passport number, name, date of birth, etc.—and then, within a week or two, the family would inform us (not the ministry) that the person had returned home.

These were the kinds of actions we continued to carry out during this period, even while we were severely short-staffed.

And with all this happening, we also had to consider morale—what was the situation inside the embassy itself?

We had staff members making hazardous journeys just to get to the embassy for their shifts. In some cases, employees had even been detained on their way in. That wasn’t something we in the Consular Section could typically address—issues involving embassy staff would fall under the Management Section’s responsibilities. We, in Consular, engaged the Foreign Ministry on behalf of American citizens, but matters involving locally employed staff were usually handled by Management.

Still, there was widespread concern among staff for their own safety. For many, the embassy became something of a sanctuary. It was located in a relatively secure part of Damascus—safer than the areas where many staff lived, especially those who lived on the outskirts.

After the attack on the embassy, we took additional security measures. Within the Consular Section, we hardened the interior to create an area that was doubly secure—a space where local employees could feel safe. There was already an area in the embassy that was restricted to American personnel only, but we wanted to ensure that our local staff also had access to a secure zone. In the end, the Consular Section became the safest place for them to be.

But we had to increase security. We built an additional wall inside the Consular Section—a secure room that staff could retreat into if we came under attack again. It had a reinforced door that could be sealed off.

As I mentioned earlier, employees from other sections were already assisting us with phone calls to American citizens. But beyond that, some of those employees were physically relocated into the Consular Section because their original work areas in the embassy were less secure. The Consular Section became something of a safe zone. Staff from more vulnerable sections were now co-located with us for their own protection.

This became an embassy where we genuinely tried to work together harmoniously. There was a strong spirit of collaboration. Staff from other sections helped us when they could, and we tried to reciprocate as much as possible. It was a collective effort.

As the situation continued to deteriorate, some of our staff—not just in the Consular Section, but across the embassy—began asking serious questions about their own future. Should we leave? Where can we go? Is there a way out? Some were wondering whether they could apply for visitor visas to leave Syria temporarily.

So, one of the things I did—because this was squarely within the consular realm—was to collect and clarify information on what options were realistically available to local staff, especially non-American citizens, if they wanted to leave Syria.

As I've said, our primary focus was facilitating the departure of American citizens to the United States. And our processing of tourist (visitor) visas had already shifted to Amman. But we still had the physical capacity to issue visitor visas in Damascus if necessary.

So, questions started coming up: In an emergency like this, can't we just issue visitor visas to help staff get out of the country?

To address this, and in consultation with the Ambassador, I held a town hall for our local employees—primarily Syrian staff—to explain what their options were. I emphasized that a visitor visa was only an option if the person truly intended to go to the U.S. for a short visit and return. If that was their plan, we could consider it.

But if their actual intent was to relocate permanently, then applying for a visitor visa would pose serious problems. They would either have to misrepresent their intention—amounting to fraud—or risk being denied entry at the U.S. port of entry when it became clear they weren't returning. I explained that using a visitor visa to immigrate would likely cause them more harm than good.

So, I walked them through the various criteria. For those with dual nationality—including some local employees who also held U.S. citizenship—we could help facilitate the immigration of their family members, just as we were doing for other American citizens.

And for others—those who genuinely feared for their safety—I told them they should consider leaving Syria, even if it wasn't to go to the United States. They could seek refuge in another country. There was a refugee process available—but it wouldn't necessarily result in resettlement in the U.S.

I want to be clear: when I say "we" in the Consular Section did something, I often mean my Vice Consuls, or members of my team. Sometimes I was directly involved too. But in this case—speaking to the local staff about their visa options—that was me. It was a personal effort to explain a difficult truth clearly and honestly, out of concern for their well-being.

You would go and apply to the UNHCR to be documented as a refugee. The UNHCR would then work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help facilitate possible resettlement as a refugee. There were already many Syrian refugees at that time in Jordan, Türkiye, and Lebanon. So, if someone genuinely feared for their safety, our advice was: leave right away.

We might be able to communicate with the UNHCR on that person's behalf, confirming their identity and former employment, but it would not be a ticket to the United States. It would be to enter the refugee process, which might eventually result in resettlement, but not necessarily to the U.S.

For those who had worked at the embassy for fifteen years or more, there was another option: applying for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV).

Today—taking us from 2011 to 2022—there's a lot of public awareness about Special Immigrant Visas, especially for Afghan partners or employees in Iraq and other war zones. Many people assume that these visas were created specifically for military evacuation contexts. But actually, SIVs have existed for a long time. They are a recognition of loyal and faithful service to the U.S. government over an extended period.

If someone had worked for the embassy for fifteen years or more, they could be eligible. And the longer the service—twenty or thirty years, for instance—the more likely it was that the visa would be granted without issue. If someone had worked for thirty years with no problems in their record, it was usually a straightforward case.

For those with fifteen years of service, but less than that threshold, the U.S. government generally looked for some demonstration of exceptional service. That might include, for example, putting oneself at risk during a crisis to safeguard Americans, or preventing harm to an ambassador during an attack. In those cases, exceptional contributions could justify granting a Special Immigrant Visa even without three decades of service.

So, I laid out the different options available and explained that we would support staff in whichever route they pursued. The key was honesty—on both sides. If someone wanted to relocate to the U.S., and the situation in Syria continued to deteriorate, we would do everything we could to help them understand and follow the proper procedures.

I also explained that one of the criteria for an SIV—where service is considered *de facto* exceptional—is when the U.S. breaks diplomatic relations with a country, and local staff continue working for the U.S. mission. In that scenario, continuing to serve carries its own risks and is itself viewed as exceptional.

The point was to reassure people that, even in worst-case scenarios, there were options. We were trying to avoid panic. Throughout the year, we had taken steps to continue providing services and to shift them to places where they could still be delivered, even with reduced staffing. And as you may notice from this and other assignments, there was a recurring effort to build regional and global partnerships—so that responsibility didn't rest solely on one embassy.

We had developed a strong partnership with Amman. We had collaborated with colleagues in Lebanon. And we maintained close coordination with Washington. Even with a skeleton staff, we could still provide support, especially for long-serving, loyal employees.

That said, not everyone met the fifteen-year threshold. Many staff had been with us for ten years, or five. And they were also asking: What are our options?

I made it a point to speak with them honestly and directly. That credibility was important—not just internally, but also in our public messaging. Just as we had communicated clearly with the American citizen community throughout the year, we felt it was important not to leave our local employees in the dark.

So, around October 2011, I called a town hall for the local staff. We didn't want to wait until the last minute or allow rumors to spread. People needed accurate information—because trying to take shortcuts or pursue unofficial channels could damage their chances of getting a visa they might otherwise qualify for if they followed the proper path.

As a result, several employees began preparing paperwork for SIV applications. We had a pre-existing committee to review the requests. The process worked like this: an employee would first express interest in being considered for an SIV, usually through a conversation with their supervisor. That request would then go to the SIV committee.

The committee would review the employment history to determine whether the applicant met the criteria of loyal and faithful service. If so, the committee would recommend the case to the Visa Office in Washington. That recommendation served as the functional equivalent of a petition—not yet an application, but a necessary prerequisite.

Once the petition was approved, the employee could then proceed with the formal application.

I believe that helped calm some of the anxiety that had built up during those tense weeks.

And did I mention previously how we also benefited, in the Consular Section, from calling on the regional psychiatrist?

Q: No, I don't recall.

GOODFRIEND: As you can imagine, during this period of intense pressure—when many people no longer felt safe in their own homes—the embassy became a place of refuge, a space where they could find some respite from the unrest around them. But even within that sanctuary, there was uncertainty, tension, and emotional strain.

We had a diverse employee base at the embassy: people of different religions, ethnic backgrounds, and genders, all working side by side as a team. But those differences didn't disappear; they remained present. And in one case, a rumor was spread about an employee, which left them feeling victimized and singled out. It was brought to my attention, and we called the team together to address it.

We had a candid conversation about what's acceptable behavior in the section, about what everyone was going through, and about the harm that rumors can cause. That meeting had a real impact that day—but, of course, the underlying tensions didn't disappear.

To help address these issues more sustainably, we also requested a visit from the regional psychiatrist.

Just to clarify: our embassy had a nurse practitioner, which is standard for many U.S. embassies. Some larger posts have a doctor and a nurse; smaller ones may not. But almost all posts have a nurse or nurse practitioner who can provide immediate care and help diplomatic personnel navigate the local medical system in what, for most Americans, is a foreign and unfamiliar environment.

In addition to medical staff, the State Department also deploys regional psychiatrists—each responsible for several embassies. These psychiatrists visit periodically to check in, provide guidance, and help assess whether there are any mental health concerns or morale issues that need attention.

At that time, our embassy was under tremendous strain, not because of anything the employees themselves had done, but because of the broader context: civil unrest, a recent attack on the embassy, a dangerous commute, and a dramatically altered work environment. We were operating as a skeleton crew inside what had effectively become a mini-fortress, and everyone knew the risks were real.

So, we asked the regional psychiatrist to speak with our team in the Consular Section and offer suggestions, anything that might help us relieve the pressure and restore a sense of normalcy.

Some of the advice was simple but helpful: hang pictures on the walls, bring in plants, and try to break up the stark white interior of the workspace. Our walls were bare—especially after we'd spent the past year or so removing old filing cabinets and reducing our paper footprint, which had freed up wall space but made the section feel even more clinical. And with the additional security wall we had built, we had even more blank surfaces.

So, we took those suggestions seriously. We decorated the section to soften the atmosphere. We also explored small group activities to help restore collegiality and maintain some semblance of normal life.

Most importantly, I wanted to make sure the staff understood: it's okay to talk about what you're going through. We had to recognize the stress everyone was under and provide an environment where people felt comfortable discussing their challenges—and knew that we had resources available to help them, like the regional psychiatrist.

In the same spirit, I encouraged people to take time off if they needed it. If someone needed a break—some time away—that was something we supported.

Local staff, in particular, still had more flexibility than American staff in this regard. Many of them could still travel to Beirut, catch a flight, and take a short holiday if their circumstances allowed. For American staff, it was much more complicated. The international airport in Beirut was just two hours away, but we weren't permitted to go to Lebanon without a strong justification and a special clearance, because it was classified as a hostile environment for U.S. diplomatic personnel.

So, we had to make do as best we could—finding ways to protect one another, sustain morale, and create a workspace that didn't just function, but also offered a measure of emotional support.

So yes, we could still travel out of the airport in Damascus. And I have to say—I genuinely felt this way at the time—I made a point of taking weekend trips, both for my own well-being and to demonstrate that short breaks were still possible. Even though we couldn't travel freely within Syria anymore, we could still leave the country for a few days, and I wanted to show that it could be done.

I took a weekend trip to Istanbul to meet my son there. I started looking at where there were direct flights from Damascus, so that short trips would be as easy and practical as possible. I went to Budapest for a few days. I also traveled to Israel, which meant going through Amman and then continuing onward from there, before returning the same way. These were just short getaways—two or three days.

Honestly, I was probably taking more trips than I normally would, partly because you can't always accurately gauge your own mental health. If the advice is to take a break and decompress, I wanted to model that behavior. Not to escape the situation entirely for weeks at a time, but to take small steps—to reset, to recharge—and to encourage others to do the same for their own well-being. The goal was to maintain our effectiveness at the embassy, and taking care of our mental health was essential to that.

Of course, even when I traveled, I remained on call. When we were in Damascus, we were essentially on call 24 hours a day. So, whenever I was away, I had my phone with me, and my staff knew they could reach me anytime, no matter where I was.

In the Consular Section, I was also able to access consular systems remotely. I had experience with that already, from my time in London and also as a Regional Consular Officer. Even back then, in 2011, the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) could be accessed securely from remote locations. That meant I could look up a case, update a record, or inform Washington of a case's status, even if I was outside the country.

Of course, I couldn't print a visa or issue a passport unless I was physically in the building. But if it was about taking a phone call, checking data, or entering a note into the system—those things could be done from wherever I was.

Now, in 2022, remote access and flexible work environments are far more common. Many people have been working remotely for years. But back then, this kind of remote access was more limited—and the CCD was one of the few tools available to us. Still, it meant I could continue working, even while I was away. And yes, I received my fair share of late-night calls.

This kind of brings us back to how we use our systems—both in normal times and in emergencies.

As I mentioned earlier, over the course of about a year and a half, we had significantly reduced our paper files. We digitized all our nonimmigrant visa records so that all that information was now online. The physical files were gone. But in Damascus, we went a step further—we scanned and digitized all of our American citizen records as well, integrating them into the system used by consular sections to deliver services.

At the time, I think that put us ahead of what many other embassies were doing. The software platform allowed for digital documents to be attached to case records, but many posts were still maintaining parallel paper records. They had the basic information in the system, but hadn't scanned and attached all the supporting documentation.

We had. We added the full set of documents for our American citizen cases directly into the system—everything available digitally.

With immigrant visas, it was harder. That wasn't entirely under our control, since the petition information was handled either by USCIS or by the National Visa Center. We still had a number of long-pending immigrant visa cases stored physically in Damascus, and reducing that paper was more difficult.

But even there, we were working with Washington to be part of a pilot project—launching around 2011—that aimed to transition immigrant visa processing fully into a digital format. So even in that area, we were actively moving towards full digitization.

All this meant that, even amid a crisis, we had critical information at our fingertips. We were using it effectively. Our American citizen registration system was being used not only to send out regular messages, but also to verify and update our records. Staff were calling through the list, checking in with citizens, confirming who was still in the country, who had left, and whether anyone needed assistance. All our American citizen records were readily available digitally.

Then, during the crisis, the Bureau of Consular Affairs in Washington informed us: We have a crisis management system that we'd like you to use—that we expect you to use.

At first, I was enthusiastic. I've always been a strong advocate for using the best technology available.

Q: Early adopter.

GOODFRIEND: Yes—I like to take advantage of technology when it's available. But I also try to make sure there's a real benefit. I tend to be part of the group that thinks ahead about what tools might be useful, how they should work, and whether they actually meet our needs. I try to understand the systems so that when I adopt them—or advocate for others to adopt them—they're solutions, not burdens.

So, when Washington suggested we start using a new crisis management system, I thought: Okay, maybe there's something here. I hadn't been involved in the development of that system, unlike with the pilot for the digital immigrant visa platform, where we were eager to participate because it aligned with our digitization goals.

But this crisis management system was positioned as something that would help in emergencies—enable better coordination between Washington and the post, make information sharing more effective, etc. So, at first, I was open to it.

I asked: Will it have access to all the information we've already entered into the American Citizen Services (ACS) system?

The answer was "No." It was an entirely separate system. We would have had to manually re-enter all of our American citizen data into this new platform for it to be useful. And that brought me back to my first days in the Foreign Service, when I was asked to copy information from one system to another—by hand—so it could be shared with what was then the INS.

Now we were being asked to do essentially the same thing: duplicate work, manually rekeying information from one digital system into another. And we were being asked to do this in the middle of a crisis, with no extra staff, while already short-handed. We had spent months digitizing our records and building a system that worked for us—and now we were being told to stop using it and switch to something else, with no added functionality and no time to train staff.

We didn't see the benefit. Washington already had access to our American Citizen Services data. It was all replicated in the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD). I could access it remotely; they could access it in DC. It was integrated and working.

So, I said "No." I explained that it would place an unnecessary burden on staff, with no clear payoff. And to their credit, the Bureau of Consular Affairs understood. They knew I was not anti-system—in fact, quite the opposite—and they respected the reasoning. It was a friendly exchange, and we continued to work well together.

We were, in fact, using our systems aggressively—perhaps more effectively than some other posts. We were collaborating digitally with our partners in Amman, Beirut, and Cairo, sharing information across platforms. Even in the midst of the crisis, we were functioning, and functioning well. The proposed system simply didn't meet our needs.

By that point, we were almost a paperless office. The walls were mostly bare—plenty of white space, some of which we had begun decorating just to make the space feel less stark. We were well into the crisis period. People were leaving. We were facilitating departures of both citizens and embassy personnel.

Every day, the Consular Section worked closely with the Management Section to monitor flights—which airlines were still operating out of Damascus and Beirut. This information was essential for both sides. For Management, it informed decisions about the safety of U.S. personnel. For us in Consular, it determined how we advised American citizens.

As long as flights were still departing from Damascus, there was no need to consider a U.S. government–sponsored evacuation. Our message was clear: Book your ticket. Flights are still operating. We will do everything we can to help you leave.

If your passport had expired, we could issue a new one in a day. If your family members didn't have immigrant visas, we could process those within a couple of weeks. If you didn't have the money to return to the U.S., we could arrange repatriation assistance. That was our role. We made it clear that this was not going to be an evacuation scenario—and that it would be far more convenient, more comfortable, and likely less expensive if people made their own arrangements while commercial flights were still available.

So that was the messaging we were putting out, through November. And now, it's 11 o'clock here. I think this is a good place to pause.

I can continue or add more if you have specific questions, but I was trying to bring things to a point where we could pause—right before those final months: November, December, January—leading up to the embassy's closure in February.

Q: So that's 20 November. 2011 into the very early months of 2012. All right. Let me pause.

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Q: Today is September 19, 2022. This is our session fourteen with André Goodfriend. So, it corrects the session number from the previous session, which was session thirteen. André, we were in November, and you had just been giving instructions to State Department personnel, other personnel in the embassy, about how to plan a departure before an ordered evacuation.

GOODFRIEND: Right. We had talked about the town hall we held for embassy employees—particularly the non-U.S. citizen employees—who were concerned about their future and what the embassy could do to help them leave Syria, where the security situation was becoming increasingly tenuous.

Even during that period, we continued providing services to U.S. citizens to the extent that we could. We still had personnel in place carrying out their diplomatic responsibilities—trying to understand the situation on the ground and engage with their appropriate counterparts.

And we had to recognize: we were physically present in an environment that, for many of our local employees, was home. They had lived there their entire lives. They would remain there even after the departure of Foreign Service personnel—whose tours typically lasted two or three years. These local staff were seeing the rest of their careers play out in Syria.

But the situation was deteriorating, and they were asking: What's going to happen to us? What happens when the Americans leave? What if the situation collapses? How are we going to be helped?

That was the basis of our discussion with the local embassy employees—looking at the different paths available to them. Some considered simply leaving Syria and seeking assistance as refugees in a neighboring country. Others could apply for Special Immigrant Visas, having served faithfully at the U.S. Embassy for fifteen years or more.

And just to note, they were well aware that their counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan had been able to apply for Special Immigrant Visas much more quickly.

As I mentioned in an earlier session, Syria—until just a year prior—was the only country in the region that didn't have danger pay. It was seen, to some extent, as a haven—a stable haven—in the area.

So, all the regular processes applied. There were no extraordinary provisions for Special Immigrant Visas simply for being assigned there. Apart from the fact that it was considered a hardship post, which meant a two-year assignment instead of three, it was still seen as a relatively stable environment, without any exceptional circumstances that would affect employee safety or merit special consideration under SIV programs.

Q: Given that situation and you're moving in from 2011 into 2012, the embassies have been attacked once and so on, and your locally employed staff are now concerned that they may not be able to get a special immigrant visa to leave in a faster amount of time. What was the State Department telling you? Were you in contact with them and advocating for faster SIVs? And what was their reply?

GOODFRIEND: Well, the SIV process itself wasn't slow—at least not for the category we were dealing with. We were able to facilitate faster immigrant visa processing, as I mentioned earlier, for family members of U.S. citizens by taking on the petition process ourselves at post.

But when it came to Special Immigrant Visas, we have to distinguish between several types of applicants. On one hand, there were long-serving employees at U.S. embassies—people we knew well, who had worked for us for years. On the other hand, there were contract personnel supporting the military in conflict zones—often interpreters—who may have only worked with the U.S. for a few months or a year.

In war-torn environments, it was especially difficult to address the security concerns and conduct background checks for those contractors, especially because the numbers were much larger and turnover was high. Someone might have only worked for a year, but because of the dangerous circumstances, eligibility requirements had been shortened. I believe, at one point, it was just one year of service to qualify. That created complications in processing, particularly for security assessments.

By contrast, our embassy employees were already vetted as part of their long-term employment. Many had served for 15 years or more. The distinction also extended to whether someone was directly employed by the U.S. government, versus working under a contractor. That too had implications for SIV eligibility and processing.

For our direct-hire local staff at the embassy, the process followed the normal global procedure. These were people who had already been through years of background checks and performance evaluations. If they wanted to apply for a Special Immigrant Visa, they would work with HR to compile their application, which included documents such as awards, evaluations, years of service, and so on.

An internal committee, often chaired by the Deputy Chief of Mission, would review their applications. That committee might normally meet quarterly, but in this context, we increased the frequency of meetings to expedite the process. If the employee was in good standing—and again, these were typically people who had served for 15 or 20 years—they were likely to receive a positive recommendation.

This ambassador's recommendation would then be sent to the Visa Office in Washington. Usually, it would be reviewed within a couple of weeks. Once eligibility was approved, the next step was for the employee to resign or retire from the embassy and then formally apply for the visa.

From there, the application process could proceed relatively quickly—similar to what we'd do for an immigrant visa petition for a U.S. citizen's family member.

So, at the time, we saw this as a relatively straightforward path. Our role was to clearly explain the process to employees, make sure HR supported them promptly, and ensure the internal review committee met more frequently to keep things moving.

That was one avenue available to employees with 15 years or more of service. But we also had staff who hadn't reached that threshold. For them, we had to explain alternative options. If someone was in danger because of their affiliation with the U.S. Embassy, we could request that their case be considered for humanitarian parole. That was another possible route we could pursue.

Q: Take a moment to explain what humanitarian parole is. I think a lot of readers or people outside the Department may not know what that means.

GOODFRIEND: Entering the United States under parole is different from entering with a visa. If I enter with a visa—whether as a visitor, a student, or an immigrant—I've entered in a defined legal status. That status grants me certain rights and pathways to adjust my situation while in the U.S.

For example, if I enter with a student or tourist visa—a nonimmigrant status—I might later be eligible to adjust to an immigrant status, if I meet the legal criteria. If I enter as an immigrant, I already have that status and a clear path to permanent residency and eventually citizenship.

But if I enter under parole—specifically, humanitarian parole—I'm allowed into the United States without a formal visa status. I'm legally present, but I don't have a status that leads naturally to something else. It's a temporary, exceptional permission to enter, usually granted in urgent or extraordinary humanitarian situations.

It's used when no existing visa category fits the circumstances. In normal situations, we'd advise someone to apply for the right type of visa: whether it's a Special Immigrant Visa, a family-based immigrant visa, or a nonimmigrant visa for short visits. But sometimes there is no appropriate visa. In those cases, and when there's a compelling humanitarian concern, parole may be considered.

Take, for example, a child—say, seven or eight years old—whose entire immediate family has been killed. The child has no one left except uncles and aunts in the U.S. There may be no visa category available at the moment to cover that case. But it's clearly a humanitarian emergency. That's where people might ask, "Can't something be done for this child?" And we might say, "Perhaps they can request humanitarian parole."

The request is made to the Department of Homeland Security. The State Department doesn't approve parole; it's DHS that reviews and decides these cases. The petitioner would need to demonstrate the humanitarian need, and also that there is a hardship for the U.S. citizen family involved. For example, if the family in the U.S. is having to spend substantial amounts of money or is otherwise struggling to care for the child from afar, that could be part of the justification.

Humanitarian parole allows the U.S. to respond in cases where there's no other legal avenue to help. But even once in the U.S., a person paroled in this way typically doesn't have the right to work or to adjust status. The humanitarian issue may be addressed by allowing them entry, but it doesn't resolve their long-term legal status.

Q: One quick follow-up, can you move from a humanitarian parole status to claiming refugee or SIV status? If the situation in your home country changes, and you do have a reasonable fear of persecution, if the parole status is ended, and you are expected to leave?

GOODFRIEND: Well, if you're already in the United States, it's more likely that you'd be looking at asylum rather than refugee or SIV status. Refugee status is different—it applies to people outside the U.S. who have been screened and approved before entry, typically through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). That's part of an organized resettlement program where the U.S. agrees to accept a certain number of refugees each year. Refugees coming through that system are eligible for various benefits and assistance to help them resettle.

But if you're already in the U.S., you wouldn't apply as a refugee—you'd apply for asylum. Asylees are people who are already present in the U.S.—either at a port of entry or already inside the country—and who say, "I fear persecution if I return." They may have entered with a visa, or they might have been paroled in under humanitarian grounds.

Unlike refugees, asylees haven't yet been determined to qualify. Their claim must go before an asylum officer or an immigration judge for evaluation. So, asylum involves a legal process where the individual's claim of persecution is reviewed and either accepted or denied.

Q: If you are applying for asylum, do you then get the opportunity to work? Once you're applying formally?

GOODFRIEND: While it's pending? Well, I'm not a DHS expert—and asylum and refugee status are both handled by the Department of Homeland Security—but I can say that in some circumstances, yes, an applicant may be granted work authorization. In other cases, they may not. It often depends on the specific circumstances of the case and what the court or immigration authorities decide.

Refugees, on the other hand, do generally receive authorization to work and also receive resettlement benefits once they arrive in the U.S. For asylees, again, it depends—there's a process to request work authorization, but it's not automatic, and timing can vary.

That reminds me—this came up during my earlier assignment in Russia, back in the early 1990s. At the time, we had an office of what was then the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in Moscow, and it was authorized to approve refugee and asylum claims while applicants were still in Russia.

But then we encountered a strange situation: some individuals who had been approved for refugee or asylum status—meaning they had valid claims—did not actually leave Russia. Instead, they stayed and later came in to apply for visitor visas to the United States. That created a dilemma.

Q: You went that far.

GOODFRIEND: It also highlights the difference between refugee status and asylum status—and some of the irony in how the process works.

Back in the 1990s, between 1994 and 1997, the general criterion for a nonimmigrant visa application—like a tourist visa—was that the applicant had to show they had a home in the country where they were applying (in this case, Russia), and that they intended to return there after a temporary visit to the United States.

But then we had people applying for tourist visas whose records showed they had already been approved for refugee or asylum status. And that created a contradiction.

To qualify for refugee or asylum status, you have to demonstrate that your home country is no longer safe for you—that you face persecution, that your situation is untenable, and that you need to leave. That's what we were explaining to our local staff in Syria: if you fear for your life and cannot stay, here are the options—refugee, asylum, or humanitarian parole. These pathways exist because it's not safe to stay.

But here, in Moscow, we had individuals who had made those claims, been approved as refugees or asylees, and then, rather than leaving Russia, they stayed, and later applied for tourist visas to the United States.

Now, tourist visas are based on the assumption that you're planning to return to your home. But these individuals had already claimed they could not safely return home—or, more precisely, that they couldn't remain in Russia. So, we had to reconcile these two things. If someone claims they intend to return, and thus qualifies for a tourist visa, what does that say about their earlier claim of persecution? Was that claim no longer valid?

We asked them. And what many of them told us was that the situation wasn't as bad as they had thought—or that it had improved—and they had decided to stay in Russia for the time being. But they still wanted to keep their refugee or asylum status in case things got worse again. In the meantime, they simply wanted to visit the U.S.—perhaps their daughter had just had a baby, or there was a wedding, or some other family event—and then return.

In that sense, the fact that they had already been approved as refugees or asylees actually lent credibility to their claim that they didn't plan to overstay the tourist visa. They said, "Why would I abuse the tourist visa and stay illegally? I already have an approved refugee or asylum status that I can use later if I need it. Right now, I just want to visit and return."

Still, it raised a policy dilemma. The two statuses—refugee/asylum and tourist—aren't supposed to go hand in hand. So, we discussed it with the INS office in Moscow, and they took it to headquarters in Washington.

For those with refugee status, the answer was that they could retain their approved status. If they chose to visit the U.S. temporarily for a family event—say, to see a grandchild or attend a wedding—they could still use their refugee approval later if the need arose. So, in those cases, we would usually issue the tourist visa. They had little incentive to lie or overstay, since they had another valid pathway available to them already—one that also came with work authorization and resettlement benefits if and when they used it.

But for those who had been granted asylum, it was different. In most of those cases, their initial refugee claim had been denied, and asylum had been offered instead as a humanitarian alternative. Asylum did not come with the same benefits as refugee status—it simply provided a legal way out of a dangerous situation.

So, if someone with approved asylum status tried to enter the U.S. as a tourist, that would effectively negate their asylum claim. Because by applying for a tourist visa, they were saying: “I don’t fear persecution. I plan to return to where I am.” This directly contradicts the basis for their asylum claim.

That was our understanding at the time—and we explained it to visa applicants. Refugee status could be retained even if they came temporarily as a visitor. But for asylum, using a tourist visa would cancel their approved claim, because it would imply the threat they once claimed no longer existed.

You make your choice, and we were trying to be forthcoming and transparent. But if someone was, in fact, risking their asylum claim—their ability to remain in the United States—by choosing to enter as a tourist, they needed to know that. We wanted them to be able to make an informed decision. Did they want to go and visit their grandchild now, knowing that if the situation later got worse, they might want to make another claim for asylum? Well, the approval they'd previously received might no longer be valid, because their circumstances had changed.

This also illustrates the difference between entering as a refugee versus entering as an asylee. Refugee status is part of a clearly defined program. It takes time to qualify, and once granted, it comes with a legal status and a path forward in the United States. There's an understanding that once you've gone through that lengthy process, you’ll use it when you truly need it. And if you visit the U.S. briefly in the meantime, that doesn’t invalidate your refugee status.

Now, whether things have changed in the past thirty years, I don’t know. But in the mid-1990s, that was the framework.

Returning to where we were in 2011—in Syria—humanitarian parole was an option we could use in situations of imminent danger. It provided a legal path to get out of a life-threatening situation. And we did use it at least once.

One of our local employees was able to make the case that, as a long-serving and well-known employee of the U.S. government, they were being targeted in Syria. Their life was at risk. In that case, we moved quickly. We took their request and helped facilitate its transfer to the appropriate office in the United States—again, that would be DHS, not the State Department. And it was approved.

The process was fast. This was even before the embassy closed. From start to finish, it took maybe two or three weeks. That allowed us to support an employee whose service had put them at real risk, and to get them out of Syria safely.

These were the types of options we were laying out for our employees—so they would know we were there for them, and that we would guide them in making the best possible decision under the circumstances.

In general, the system worked as it should. Our staff continued to serve faithfully throughout a very difficult period. Morale was maintained, though of course it was a jittery environment. There was constant civil unrest, war, uncertainty, and plenty of rumors.

That's why we saw it as essential to counter those rumors with as much transparency as possible. We did this not only with the general public and our American citizen community, but also with our own staff. We didn't want people to think we were hiding something, or that they needed to look elsewhere for "the real story."

We wanted to be the authoritative source. We let people know they could engage with us—by phone, by email, by social media. And not just by reaching out to us; we also made a point to reach out to them. The same went for our internal team—our own employees.

I think that helped create a better work environment.

You looked like you were going to ask something…. but just to add, that spirit of outreach was also behind our efforts at the time to call all of our registered U.S. citizens in Syria.

Of course, we would have happily called those who weren't registered, but if someone wasn't registered with us, we often didn't know they were even there, and we had no contact information.

Even before the civil unrest began—during the calmer times—we had already been working to strengthen our outreach. We wanted to build rapport with our American community, circulate helpful information, and encourage people to register—not just so we could contact them in an emergency, but so they could also benefit from useful resources.

We didn't want people to think that every time we called, it was only to warn them or tell them to evacuate. We wanted them to see us as a partner, someone they could turn to for information, services, and support.

Once the unrest began, and we were essentially in a bunker inside the embassy—unable to travel as we used to, unable to visit citizens in other cities—we pivoted to calling them.

We created a phone bank in the Consular Section. And because we were short-staffed, we pulled in people from across the embassy—staff who normally handled residence maintenance, payroll, and administrative tasks. With fewer demands in their usual roles, they volunteered to help us call American citizens.

This wasn't a one-time thing—we aimed to call every American in our database every couple of weeks. Just to check in: How are things going? We're still here. Do we have your correct contact info?

And often we'd ask if they knew other Americans who weren't registered—so we could try to reach out to them too.

We kept the Ambassador updated, and we regularly reported to Washington on the number of Americans still in Syria, the conditions on the ground, and the status of travel routes in and out of the country.

The Damascus airport was still open. The road to Beirut, where there was a major international airport, was also open. It was still possible, though increasingly difficult, to travel within Syria or to exit via Jordan or Lebanon. But the only way we could truly gauge the feasibility of travel and safety conditions was through ongoing interaction and communication with the public and our partners.

One of our key tools was DHL. We had been using DHL in Syria to deliver passports to applicants. You might recall from earlier conversations that, shortly after I arrived in 2009, we worked to modernize the consular processes in Damascus—to bring them in line with what one would expect in any functioning country in the 21st century.

Back then, someone applying for a visa had to come to the embassy four separate times—once to make the appointment, once to pay the visa fee, once for the interview, and once again to pick up the passport. That was largely because we didn't have an online appointment system. So, people had to come in person for each step.

We gradually built confidence that people had access to the internet and could use online tools, which allowed us to rely more on email and even social media for public engagement. We also established a contract with a local bank so people could pay visa fees directly through the banking system. That gave us insight into the reliability of Syria's financial infrastructure.

We eventually moved to courier delivery. Rather than requiring people to pick up passports in person—especially dangerous if they were traveling from places like Aleppo—we used DHL to deliver both visa-stamped passports and U.S. passports for American citizens renewing or applying. This helped reduce personal risk.

Some applicants, understandably, were reluctant to send us their passports—they didn't want to be without them for any period of time. But the process, once started, took maybe one to two weeks. The new passport would arrive from the U.S. to the embassy, and we would then hand it to DHL, which delivered it wherever the applicant was—even in challenging conditions.

That also gave us insight into the status of the roads and transport networks. It was often surprising that DHL could still operate under such circumstances, but it was a useful indicator of what was still possible.

By late 2011, we were calling American citizens regularly. We were also constantly checking with airlines: Are you still flying? What are your plans for the coming weeks? Some airlines were pulling out of Syria, but not to the extent that it created a crisis. There were still plenty of seats available for those who wanted to leave—whether directly from Damascus or, as many chose, via Beirut. While we didn't encourage travel to Lebanon due to security risks, many did it anyway, and it remained a viable route.

There was, however, a widespread assumption—or hope—that the embassy would organize an evacuation. But many people didn't really know what that meant. So, we made a concerted effort, through newsletters and other communications, to explain what an evacuation actually involves.

We emphasized that as long as commercial flights were available, an evacuation was unlikely. A commercial flight offers far more flexibility—you can choose your destination, take your luggage, and even bring pets. In contrast, an evacuation flight means you're allowed one small carry-on bag. No pets. Not everyone may get a seat. And only U.S. citizens would qualify.

We were very open about what services we were still able to provide. Passport services continued. American citizens could still get their new or replacement passports via DHL. U.S. citizens concerned about their non-citizen family members could still apply for immigrant visas, and those would typically be processed within two weeks.

So, the same kind of practical, transparent communication we were providing to the public, we also provided to our own employees. And we stuck to our word. Whatever we said we could do, we actually could do. We didn't cut corners, bend the rules, or mislead anyone. These were real procedures, designed for exactly these kinds of situations, and we implemented them efficiently—with all safeguards in place.

It was, in a way, like our approach to computer systems. We didn't try to redesign everything or switch platforms in a crisis—we knew the systems well enough to use them to their maximum potential. And the same applied to the visa and passport systems. We knew how they worked, what they allowed, and how to get results within the rules.

So, there we were—November 2011—Thanksgiving approaching. And despite everything, we were still together, still a kind of family.

The previous Thanksgiving had been more festive. I'd invited my staff and our American citizen wardens to my house. But this time, with fewer people and heightened tension, it was a much smaller gathering—just the people from our section. My family wasn't with me anymore. Other diplomats' families had also left. We did our best to keep up traditions and camaraderie, even in constrained circumstances. There was also a small Thanksgiving gathering at the ambassador's residence.

As we moved into December, some people, including myself, were making vacation plans toward the end of the year. We also continued with our annual awards for embassy employees.

Normally, awards would be handed out at a large all-hands ceremony—each section seeing the work of others, everyone together. But under these conditions, we couldn't hold large internal gatherings. So, each section had its own small ceremony, and section heads handed out awards directly to their staff.

Photos were shared, but we kept everything low-key. Many employees were understandably nervous about any public recognition of their affiliation with the embassy. In that environment, even well-earned recognition could carry risks.

Still, we wanted to show our appreciation and maintain a collegial, supportive environment. These were people who had been through a lot—many of them serving the U.S. government faithfully for years. We owed them not only safety, but respect.

It was an environment where our local staff were, to put it politely, asked to speak with the police or security services. Less politely, they were interrogated—sometimes regularly. Some were ordered to report for an annual interrogation, and for others, it was even more frequent.

There was always a sense of unease about what it meant to work at a foreign embassy in Syria. It put you in the crosshairs of the security services.

Sometimes this took a more neutral or even superficially positive form—when relations between our two governments were better, Syrian authorities might express a desire to "work together" or show goodwill, and they would convey those messages through their conversations with our employees. But there was always a veiled threat behind those interactions. It was understood: "We know who you are. We know where you work."

That constant pressure was part of the underlying concern, especially in cases where we facilitated humanitarian parole. For example, when the threat to an employee became direct and credible, we recognized the need to act quickly.

By December, we were operating with a skeleton American staff, and local employees were working in staggered shifts—not only for security reasons, but also to reduce exposure and avoid having too many people on-site at once. Everything was muted. Even the usual internal ceremonies and gatherings were toned down—not just because of physical security, but also because it was harder to celebrate knowing that lives were being upended and neighborhoods destroyed.

Some of those neighborhoods were where our employees lived. A number of staff had moved out of their homes—either because their neighborhoods had become too dangerous or because their homes had been damaged or destroyed. Many were staying with friends or in areas they considered safer.

Still, we continued our work—trying to safeguard the welfare of U.S. citizens, provide a clear understanding of events on the ground, and support each other and our mission. But it was getting harder. The situation was becoming increasingly dire.

Efforts were being made—at international and political levels—to resolve the crisis. Delegations from different sides were meeting outside of Syria. But nothing was bearing real fruit. And our work went on.

As we approached the end of the calendar year, the holiday season was upon us. People were deciding whether to stay or go. Our local employees could still travel—many went to Lebanon just to get a breath of fresh air. American employees also made travel plans elsewhere.

I should mention another incident that reflected the uncertainty of the time. We regularly tried to send our local staff to training programs at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in Washington. These opportunities were fully funded and offered a chance for professional development, skills enhancement, and building connections with colleagues abroad.

We had identified a couple of staff members to participate in training—they were accepted into the program. But then their acceptance was rescinded. The concern was that, if they left Syria, they might not be able to return.

That moment stood out as one more sign of how abnormal everything had become. Even a routine step like sending staff to training, something that symbolized normalcy and professional continuity, was no longer a safe or reliable option.

Everything in that environment had become a question: What's going to happen? Where are we heading? Is there any normal left?

And increasingly, the answer was clear: no, this was not normal.

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Q: We temporarily lost our connection. This continues our session on September 19 with André Goodfriend. André, sorry for the technical glitch.

GOODFRIEND: That's all right. I was just noting another aspect of the atmosphere we were in—how our employees were picking up on different signals, trying to interpret what the future might hold for them and for the embassy in Syria.

We had a couple of local employees who were scheduled to attend training in Washington, D.C. But Washington informed us that they wouldn't be able to receive them. The concern was that, given the uncertainty of the situation in Syria, things could deteriorate to the point where the employees wouldn't be able to return. And then what?

So, under those circumstances, the employees weren't allowed to go.

There was, however, a shorter training conference being held in Amman, Jordan. Since that was a neighboring country, we managed to persuade Washington to allow one of our local employees to participate.

But it felt as though the walls were starting to close in—not just from the constraints imposed by the Syrian government, but from the broader atmosphere of uncertainty.

We were living in a world where we had grown used to mobility, to being able to travel as needed, to being part of a global network of colleagues. Suddenly, concerns about the security situation in Syria were limiting that freedom. It was becoming harder to maneuver—not just physically, but professionally.

We were still managing, though. I'd mentioned earlier the similar concerns I had regarding our vice consuls—if we had to pull them out, would we be able to bring them back quickly? That's what led to our establishing a regional collaboration and placing two vice consuls in Amman.

By December, there were small steps being discussed toward some kind of political resolution—but they always seemed just out of reach. Meanwhile, the violence and military operations on the ground were intensifying.

By mid-December, there seemed to be a brief lull. I took the opportunity to travel to Scotland, where one of my sons was living, and we had a small family gathering in Edinburgh over the holidays. Others from the embassy also traveled to their holiday destinations.

Before going to Scotland, I stopped in London.

While I was on vacation, I got a message saying I needed to check something on the classified system. I was still able to receive unclassified emails—maybe it was through a Blackberry; I can't quite remember the exact setup—but I could stay in touch while traveling.

There was a classified message I needed to access, and I was able to persuade the team at the U.S. Embassy in London to let me into their classified system. That's not always a simple thing. Even though we're all part of the same diplomatic network, gaining access to classified systems at a different post requires coordination and clearance. But we do work together, and they made it possible.

It was part of the ongoing need to monitor developments in Syria. Even while I was away, I stayed in regular contact with my vice consul, who was acting in my absence, so communication remained solid.

I finished my holiday in Edinburgh, then made my way back to Syria via Paris. Communication was good enough that, while sitting in a café in Paris, I was able to dial into a board meeting for the International School in Damascus. The school was still trying to figure out its future. Could it transition to an online model? Could it even survive? No one knew. I was a member of the school board, and even in transit, I joined the meeting to stay involved in those discussions.

But when I returned to Damascus, the situation had shifted again. We were preparing for an even further drawdown.

We were already operating with a skeleton crew, but the security situation continued to deteriorate, despite ongoing diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution.

One especially troubling development was the use of car bombs in Damascus, targeting Syrian government buildings. That tactic was often associated with terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. And we had to consider: what if we were next?

Our embassy didn't have a setback from the street. A car bomb could have devastating consequences. And at that point, it wasn't clear who was behind the attacks. We couldn't rule out that the U.S. Embassy might be a target.

The decision was made to draw down even further. The number of personnel in Damascus was reduced to the absolute minimum—just enough to maintain core embassy functions. Some who were still in Syria were told to depart. Others, who were on vacation, were told not to return. Their belongings would be packed out for them.

But one of those core functions we were committed to maintaining was safeguarding the welfare of American citizens. So, I came back.

The Deputy Chief of Mission didn't return. That was the level of the drawdown we had reached. The Ambassador was still there, I as Consul General, and just a handful of others. In this respect, as the second most senior diplomat at the embassy, I was again serving as Acting DCM.

Now, we were at the beginning of January. The holidays had passed. People had traveled, thinking they'd be returning to the same situation they left. But the environment had changed. Most did not return, and others were told to leave.

At this point, we were essentially telling the Syrian government that the situation was untenable—that our security could no longer be assured.

We were very clear: given the layout of the embassy, with no setback from the street, and given the use of car bombs—a tactic now being employed in Damascus, even against Syrian government institutions—we needed specific safeguards in place. We told them that if we are to remain here, you must close off the streets around the embassy.

We asked the Syrians to install barriers to prevent vehicles from driving past or parking near the embassy. And we gave them a timeline: we needed a response within a month, or we wouldn't be able to stay. That was January. So, in effect, we gave them until February to act.

While we waited, we prepared. Each section of the embassy began transferring materials to our embassy in Amman, Jordan. We didn't keep much paper in the first place, but we still had materials that needed to go to Amman.

Items from the Ambassador's residence, for example—things with the U.S. government seal, official plates and insignia—were transferred. In the Consular Section, we moved controlled supplies: blank visa foils, notarial seals, passport paper, all of which could be misused to create fraudulent documents or give the false impression of U.S. government endorsement.

We didn't want to keep anything on-site that wasn't essential. The idea was to slim down the operation—to reduce our footprint to what was strictly necessary, so that we could effectively lock up and go if needed.

At the same time, we ensured that we kept just enough on hand to continue our core mission: assisting American citizens and providing consular services.

We retained a small supply of controlled items—enough to meet urgent needs. For example, we kept some emergency passports on hand, so we could issue them to citizens in critical situations. We kept just enough visa foils to process immigrant visas or other essential cases.

We didn't keep a surplus—just what we estimated we might need for a month of operations.

Q: Here, I just want to ask a quick question. Since you are now down to a very small staff, thinking about the possibility of closing the embassy, did you have an evacuation plan? Had you been working with the Department on an evacuation plan?

GOODFRIEND: For the American embassy personnel, yes. We had a plan in place and were regularly reviewing it. The Regional Security Officer (RSO) conducted regular drills. The evacuation route was by road—first to Jordan, and then from there onward to other destinations.

Q: And just one last question on this, you would be leaving and closing the embassy, but you wouldn't be breaking diplomatic relations. At some point, the embassy to Syria would be relocated to another city in a different country where it was more or less safe to conduct business, or were we planning on breaking relations?

GOODFRIEND: No, we weren't breaking relations. That's an important distinction.

We were closing the embassy due to security concerns, but diplomatic relations with Syria were not severed. Other countries still maintained a presence in Damascus. We didn't force the Syrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., to close, either.

We were actively looking for a protecting power—a third country that could host or represent U.S. interests in Syria. Interestingly, the plan was for the protecting power to work out of our Consular Section building.

The Consular Section, due to the additional physical security enhancements we'd made over the years, was probably the safest part of the compound. It wasn't located directly on the main street; it had its own entrance from a smaller side street and wasn't part of the section housing classified materials or equipment.

We made sure to destroy any classified materials before departing. Eventually, we locked the door—literally—and prepared to leave.

As the story concludes, we did close the embassy at the beginning of February. January was our final full month on the ground. The Syrian government didn't implement the security measures we had requested—those barriers to create a setback from the street—so we followed through with the plan we had communicated in advance.

We were organized. We had systems in place. We had prepared for this outcome, and that allowed us to continue operating—even offering limited services—right up until the end.

The RSO (Regional Security Officer) maintained contact with our staff via a phone tree and an SMS-based alert system that allowed him to quickly text all employees. The Consular Section coordinated closely with the RSO so that if a threat affected embassy staff, and it might also affect American citizens outside the embassy, we would issue a message to the public as well.

We coordinated closely with Washington, especially to ensure that we had the authority to issue these alerts without waiting on lengthy clearances. If something was urgent, we needed to act immediately—and we did.

Physically, we had already transferred much of what needed to be moved to our embassy in Amman. That included items with the U.S. government seal, secure materials, and consular supplies like blank visa foils and passport books. We retained only what was essential for short-term operations—just enough emergency passports and visa supplies to meet potential needs in the final weeks.

We had also digitized much of our documentation. In the Consular Section, we used a platform called "eRoom," which served as a collaborative space for unclassified documents. That made our resources accessible to Washington, Amman and our regional consular team.

The State Department had also modernized by that point. All cables were now accessible via an online repository, so no matter where we were, we could stay informed. Even HR processes had become digital.

I should note that our previous DCM in Damascus, back in 2010, had pushed hard for the embassy to adopt the new online employee evaluation system. It was not especially popular—most people were used to the old paper process, where handwritten evaluations passed physically from one rater to the next. But we adopted the system early, and I took to it reasonably well.

I was on several of the review committees that year, and even while traveling between Washington and the region for meetings on consular technology, I was able to access and complete the evaluations online.

So, these advances in technology helped us remain operational, even when our staffing was minimal—at the end, it wasn't even a full skeleton crew. It was a skeleton without many bones left.

But we were still there—still running the embassy, still communicating with American citizens, still reporting to Washington, and coordinating with our neighboring posts.

And we were moving through all the steps necessary to ensure a smooth closure. We had prepared a full evacuation plan for our American employees. And as we reached the end of January, we were preparing to implement it.

Part of our responsibility in the Consular Section was to make sure the public understood that we didn't know how long we would be able to remain in Damascus.

We couldn't give them an exact date—we didn't know when the embassy might close—but we made it clear that it was very possible we would cease operations, and that people should begin making preparations accordingly.

We also had to communicate something else, very clearly. Even if the U.S. Embassy closed, it would not mean there would be an evacuation of the American citizen public.

Why? Because commercial flights were still operating. The option to leave was available. Our messages—and those coming from Washington—were very clear on that point: Americans should leave, and leave now.

We spelled out the options. Use commercial flights. There would be no organized evacuation of private U.S. citizens.

The evacuation of embassy personnel was not going to be dramatic. There was no helicopter coming in to rescue us. The plan was simple: a convoy of embassy vehicles would drive across the highway to Jordan—a several-hour journey—and from there, we would travel on elsewhere.

Adding American citizens to that convoy would not have made anyone safer. It would have meant extending the convoy by a factor of ten or more—creating a longer, slower-moving target. If anyone were trying to attack, that would have increased the risk, not reduced it.

So, we emphasized: embassy employees would evacuate by road because it was the most viable option under our circumstances. But for the American public, the safer and more practical option was to depart using commercial flights—on a date of their own choosing, with their belongings, and in relative comfort.

They could leave from Damascus or from Beirut, if they chose to go overland to Lebanon.

That was the message we repeated again and again: leave while you still can, and do so using the commercial options available to you.

Again, just to highlight the steps we had taken to make a possible closure of the embassy relatively smooth, we had begun serious preparations a couple of months in advance.

A few months before the closure, we packed out all of our household effects from our apartments, everything that wouldn't be taken with us by air. For at least two months prior, all of us had been living out of just a couple of suitcases.

Our apartments were furnished, so we still had beds, couches, tables, etc. But anything personal—books, electronics, personal furniture, televisions—had all been packed and placed in storage, ready for shipment back to U.S. government facilities, out of harm's way.

There was, of course, still some hope that things might improve and that we could resume normal operations, return our belongings, and go back to a fully functioning embassy life. But we prepared for the opposite.

Interestingly, some of our colleagues at other embassies were surprised we had taken these steps so early. Many had not. But this was already November–December 2011, and while the situation at moments appeared to ease, we felt far more exposed than some of the other missions. We were among the first to prepare for full withdrawal—and we did so thoroughly.

As we moved into January, it was clear that nothing had changed in a way that would allow us to stay.

In the final weeks, we cleared out what remaining paper records we had in the Consular Section, transferring files either to Amman or directly back to Washington. We even reached out to Washington with a proposal: since there was talk of a pilot project for fully digital immigrant visas, we said—Let us do it. We volunteered to be part of that pilot, to help enable a smooth transition away from paper-based processes.

The Polish government had agreed to serve as our protecting power. That arrangement was made ahead of time. The Polish Embassy in Damascus remained operational, and they committed to bringing in a couple of additional consular officers from Warsaw to handle the new responsibilities.

Interestingly, those Polish consuls were not going to work out of the Polish Embassy—but instead from the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy. That section, as I mentioned earlier, had better security features and was more secure than the main chancery building.

We also designated a caretaker staff to remain behind. This included local employees who would be responsible for basic maintenance and upkeep of the buildings, ensuring the facilities stayed in good shape. The local guard staff would continue to function. And a small number of local employees would assist with American citizen services under the direction of the Polish protecting power.

In practice, the two Polish consuls would work with this caretaker staff to handle their responsibilities—maintaining the premises, ensuring the motor pool remained operational, and continuing essential support for any American citizens still in the country.

It wasn't just about keeping the lights on—it was about ensuring continuity of presence and responsibility, even as our diplomatic footprint dramatically shrank.

We had identified five people from the Consular Section to serve as part of the caretaker staff—actually, a fairly large number under the circumstances.

One of them was the senior staff member in our American Citizen Services (ACS) unit, which made the most sense, given that safeguarding U.S. citizens was our primary responsibility. There was also a designated backup for that role. While we weren't operating on a 24-hour basis for routine situations, we needed to ensure there was always someone available, especially in case of illness or emergency.

I had mentioned earlier that our processing of immigrant visas wasn't framed as a service to foreign nationals—it was a service to American citizens, helping them get their immediate family members documented and ready to depart Syria alongside them. In many ways, these immigrant visas were a practical part of facilitating evacuation for U.S. citizens with non-citizen spouses or children.

So, we included our senior immigrant visa specialist on the caretaker team as well. He coordinated closely with the DHS office based in Amman. Previously, we had been able to handle immigrant visa processing locally in Damascus: accepting petitions, reviewing documents, and issuing the visas. But now, that entire process had shifted to Amman.

Still, American citizens were in Damascus. So, our staff member worked directly with them, explaining the process, helping them gather the necessary documentation, and preparing it in a way that would allow for rapid consideration by DHS in Amman. We had a backup for that role, too.

We also designated one staff member to serve as the public point of contact. That person handled incoming calls to the Consular Section through a single number, fielded inquiries directly or routed them to the right team member, and kept our website updated with the latest information.

So, I believe, in the end, we had five caretaker staff members. Notably, we did not designate anyone to handle nonimmigrant visas. That was not a critical service under those conditions, and it didn't support our core mission, which was to safeguard the welfare of U.S. citizens.

Immigrant visa processing, in this context, was supporting that mission—so it remained part of the caretaker operation.

Another unusual aspect: none of our local employees were dismissed. Some were selected for the caretaker team and were expected to report to work and collaborate with the Polish consular officers who would be taking over protective functions.

But the rest were also kept on the payroll—even if they weren't actively reporting in to work—because we simply didn't know how long this closure would last. At the time, we thought: A month? Six months? Hopefully, no more than a year or two.

Now, of course, it's been over ten years.

But back then, everyone remained officially part of the U.S. Embassy team in Damascus.

And something else that was unusual: typically, when a protecting power takes over, the local staff are transferred to that country's payroll. The protecting power pays their salaries with funds transferred by the original country—in this case, the U.S.

But we didn't do that. We kept all local employees on U.S. government contracts. They remained U.S. government employees, even though they were now supervised by the Polish Embassy acting as our protecting power.

As we moved toward the end of January, it became clear that the Syrian government would not be implementing the security measures we had requested. So, we followed through.

I had mentioned earlier that one of our local employees was going to attend a conference in Amman. As it turned out, I also attended that conference. It was scheduled to begin just before the official embassy closure.

So, I flew to Amman the day before the closure. The embassy shut its doors the next day, and the convoy—our evacuation convoy—departed across the desert for Amman at that time. I was not in that convoy.

On the day the embassy closed, the Ambassador addressed the entire staff. He spoke with deep regret about what was happening and explained the decision to shut down operations.

And that was it.

Actually, backing up just a bit—

I'd mentioned to you in an earlier conversation that the Syrian government had imposed restrictions on the movement of embassy personnel.

Naturally, we had to inform the Syrian authorities of our planned departure. We had already been warning them that this would be the likely outcome if they failed to implement the security measures we had requested. We gave them an approximate date for our departure, and they indicated they would approve it.

Now, to be clear—this wasn't a sudden evacuation triggered by a crisis unfolding within 24 hours. It wasn't a situation where we were evacuating under fire. We had established a target date for departure, and things proceeded without incident leading up to that date—with one significant exception.

The Syrian government withheld the Ambassador's passport.

As part of the standard diplomatic protocol, we had submitted the passports of all departing embassy personnel to the Syrian authorities, so they could record that the departures were authorized. We received all of the passports back—except for the Ambassador's.

As the departure date approached, we had to apply serious pressure to get it returned. I don't know what their intent was—whether it was a bureaucratic oversight, a political signal, or a tactic of some kind—but it required a strong diplomatic push to resolve.

Eventually, the Syrian government did return the Ambassador's passport in time for the convoy to depart, and everyone was able to leave together as planned.

I had arrived at our embassy in Amman the day before the closure. The convoy from Damascus arrived the following day, after the embassy had been closed up and most of the U.S. personnel had departed.

The plan was for most of the staff to stay in Amman just a few days and then head to their next assignments or designated locations, according to their individual travel plans.

I remained in Amman for another month.

My role at that point was to meet with the incoming personnel from Poland who would be serving as the protecting power. They came through Amman first, and I met with them there to discuss the transition—especially how consular matters would be handled.

During that time, I continued to coordinate consular operations in Damascus remotely from Amman, maintaining close communication with our caretaker staff on the ground. Until we could fully hand over responsibilities to the Polish consuls, I remained the point of contact for U.S. consular affairs in Syria.

It was a busy month.

We'll talk more about that in the next session. But I'll just note now: during that period, an American journalist was killed. Another reporter was kidnapped. The situation in Syria was becoming even more dangerous.

It was thanks to the work of our caretaker staff in Damascus—still on the ground, still engaged—that we were able to track what had happened in the case of the journalist who was killed.

They helped recover the body and facilitated its transport out of the country.

In our next conversation, we can talk about the transition—what happened after the closure of Embassy Damascus.

But just to close out this phase: on my last day in Damascus—the day before the official closure—I was still working alongside my senior immigrant visa specialist. Together, we were finalizing Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) requests and submitting them to the Visa Office in Washington.

That final day, we continued to provide services. I remember we issued emergency passports to a family desperate to leave. We still had the necessary equipment in place, and both my staff and I knew how to use it. Even with a minimal setup, we were able to accomplish a lot.

While we may not have issued any immigrant visas on that very last day, it's possible we did—we were still processing cases right up until the end.

Before I left for Amman, I collected the remaining controlled items—not classified material, but items that required secure handling, such as visa foils, seals, and blank passport books. These had to remain in U.S. government custody, so I physically transported them with me.

Up until the very last evening, we were still transmitting Special Immigrant Visa requests that had been reviewed and approved. The SIV process required the committee's recommendation, followed by the ambassador's approval, and then submission to the Visa Office in Washington.

We wanted to make sure all approved requests—about fifteen of them—were digitally transmitted before the embassy officially closed. Once the embassy was shuttered, the question would arise: Who has the authority to submit? Where is the ambassador? So, it was critical to push those through in time. We got them out the "digital door," so to speak, just before we shut everything down.

When I got to Amman, I continued to follow up—not just on those SIV cases, but on the general transition. I stayed engaged with the caretaker staff in Damascus to make sure everything was functioning as it should, and to ensure continuity in consular operations.

We can go into more detail on that next time—the early post-closure period, the role of the protecting power, and how the SIV process and American citizen services continued under extraordinary conditions.

Q: All right, here, I'll pause the recording then.

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Q: Today is October 6, 2022, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. Ten years ago, in 2012, as the U.S. embassy in Damascus closes in 2011, and you take care of some of the final duties of closing that embassy.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, and actually, we're stepping back a bit from 2012, as you mentioned. The embassy closure happened in early 2012, but I want to revisit the end of 2011, because there are a couple of points that might be worth noting.

I think I had mentioned that we weren't actively planning an evacuation of American citizens from Syria at that time, largely because commercial flights were still operating. In that situation, it actually served the public better for us to guide them toward booking a commercial flight—getting out while they still could, with their baggage, pets, and personal belongings. That's quite different from an official evacuation flight, which comes with strict limitations—typically just one small bag, and other constraints.

That said, we were in regular contact with Washington and with our colleagues at other embassies in Syria, thinking through what we might have to do if the situation worsened—if flights stopped, for instance, and it became more urgent for Americans to leave the country. As I said, at that time flights were still operating, and we were checking regularly with the airlines about their plans—how long they expected to keep flying, whether there were enough seats for people trying to leave.

We were also considering whether it remained feasible for Americans to self-evacuate by traveling to Lebanon. But just in case that option also closed, we had to plan for the possibility that no flights—commercial or military—would be able to enter Syria. We didn't have a friendly environment for landing U.S. military or even chartered aircraft, so any kind of air evacuation would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible.

So, we began thinking: if people needed to leave and flights were no longer an option, what alternatives were there? Could we help people evacuate by road? Where could we position consular personnel and resources to assist with that kind of effort?

One of the things we had done—even before arriving in Syria—was to explore what digital mapping resources were available. By that time, we had online maps of Damascus and the rest of Syria. Beyond the digital maps provided by the State Department, we were now in the age of Google Maps and similar tools. We could input postal codes and zones, match that with our own data and with publicly available information, and get a sense of where our citizens were located.

We had done something similar in the UK, actually, using postal districts to determine how many American citizens were in each area. That helped us in emergency planning, letting us know where to focus our resources in case of a crisis.

You looked like you had a question.

Q: Just here quickly. To the extent you were able to estimate roughly how many U.S. citizens were there as we go from 2011 into 2012?

GOODFRIEND: I think we had roughly 5,000 U.S. citizens living in Syria, and maybe about 21,000 dependents and other non-U.S. citizens, including lawful permanent residents, family members, and citizens of countries with which we had mutual evacuation arrangements, who also needed to be considered during an evacuation.

We were definitely trying to get a good estimate, drawing on the number of registrants. Every year, each embassy submits a strategic plan, and part of that involves setting measurable goals—ways to demonstrate progress in our ability to carry out our functions. One of the goals we had was to develop a more accurate picture of how many Americans were in the country and where they were located.

To do that, we'd begun more active outreach. I think I mentioned in an earlier discussion that we were sending out a regular newsletter. That served multiple purposes: it kept people informed, yes, but it also helped build a relationship between the embassy and the American community living in Syria.

And importantly, it gave us a sense of whether we were actually reaching real people, not just relying on numbers from old registration databases. In some cases, someone might have registered with us ten years earlier, but never notified us when they left. So, the numbers could be misleading if we didn't regularly update them.

By sending messages via email to all our registrants, we could confirm whether those contacts were still valid. If an email bounced back as undeliverable, we'd try following up with a phone call. In some cases, people would reply and tell us, "I'm no longer in Syria, please remove me from your list." That gave us a better handle on who was actually still in the country.

Of course, even with that effort, we still had to estimate beyond the list of registered citizens, because not every American in Syria had registered with the embassy. While we had a strong relationship with those who had registered and given us their contact information, we had to assume that in the event of an evacuation, more people would come forward than we had on our books.

Generally, we used a multiplier—we assumed that the number of Americans seeking help in an evacuation could be up to three times the number of registered citizens.

Q: Now, you've mentioned that Americans could still leave on commercial flights if they needed to evacuate or if they found that the situation for them was untenable. Could they still leave via road to Amman?

GOODFRIEND: Yes. I think I noted in earlier conversations that, while there were real risks within Syria, the violence tended to move from place to place. There might be demonstrations in a particular town, and Syrian forces would go in and put that town under siege.

When that happened, we would start receiving phone calls and communications from American citizens in those areas asking for help. We had to explain that our ability to assist was extremely limited. Still, we were engaging with the Syrian government, letting them know that we had American citizens in the affected locations. We made it clear we were tracking the situation and felt responsible for their welfare. We wanted to know what was happening and make it known that we were watching.

Before July, we had been able to visit American citizen populations around the country—even during periods of relative calm. We could still navigate safely to those areas. But after July—after the attack on the U.S. Embassy and the Syrian government's clear show of displeasure over the American and French ambassadors visiting Hama—we were no longer permitted to travel outside the capital. From that point on, we couldn't visit American citizens in other parts of the country.

Still, we could gather information about what was going on in the rest of Syria from those who came to the embassy in Damascus—for example, to apply for passports or visas. And we maintained regular contact with our embassies in Amman and Beirut. Since we had scaled back operations so significantly in Damascus, we had stopped processing nonimmigrant visa applications there. But Syrians could still apply for U.S. visas in Amman and Beirut.

Our colleagues in those embassies would share anecdotes from interviews with Syrian applicants—what they were saying about the situation inside Syria. I think I mentioned we were putting together a weekly internal report—not exactly a formal newsletter, more like a collection of notes we called "Tidbits from the Line." It included informal observations from people applying for visas, compiled by one of our vice consuls from Damascus who had relocated to Amman. She was working under both me in Damascus and the Consul General there, in Amman—we were jointly supervising personnel and managing resources across the two posts.

Through that partnership, we were able to keep sharing information about the broader regional picture and what was happening inside Syria itself. People from Syria were now crossing into neighboring countries, and through their visa interviews, they were indirectly helping us understand what was unfolding on the ground back home.

Q: Here's an interesting thing about reporting in the Foreign Service and the value especially in remote places, even if you don't have perfect macro data, having these anecdotes and being able to send them back to the Department are worthwhile because over time, they can help show a trend, especially if they are similar kinds of these applicants, business people, students, and so on. You're able to begin to put together a picture of what is going on, at least in a given city, a given university, a given kind of business that feels particularly vulnerable to political unrest, and so on. And I only mentioned that because sometimes people think, oh, an anecdote here, an anecdote there, that doesn't really tell you very much, but, from the consular visa line, you can begin to put together social trends that are valuable.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, absolutely. That's something I've emphasized throughout my career, especially in mentoring consular officers. Whether I was serving as a Regional Consular Officer or working with junior officers at small posts—where often one person was wearing multiple hats as consular-economic, consular-political, consular-GSO—I tried to make sure they didn't see their consular role as primarily clerical.

It's not just about collecting documents, stamping papers, and moving people through a line. Through visa interviews, you're actually engaging directly with the local population. You're learning about what they do, why they want to travel, and how they see their future. That kind of interaction gives you insight into the society around you, how people think, what concerns them, what motivates them. And it helps you sharpen essential skills: how to establish rapport in another culture, how to distinguish fact from fiction, how to interpret what someone is really saying.

Those are foundational skills—not just for consular work but for all Foreign Service officers, no matter their specialty. Being able to communicate clearly, to explain a decision in a way that makes sense to the applicant, to move beyond a scripted response—that's part of treating people with dignity and also of gathering meaningful information.

Instead of reading a standardized line—"Your visa has been approved" or "Your visa has been refused for the following reason"—it's far more effective to have a conversation. "We're pleased to issue your visa," or "We're unable to issue one, and here's why." That builds trust. It also helps you, as an officer, carry those stories forward—because you've actually understood what the person was telling you.

I saw this across all kinds of posts—from small ones in Africa to larger ones like Moscow or London. In Moscow, as I'd mentioned earlier, I'd had officers contribute their observations to weekly reports, not formal newsletters, but summaries of what they were hearing from applicants. Those observations helped us understand larger trends and apply our own backgrounds in meaningful ways.

Coming into Damascus, we had already been doing much of this before the crisis began. But once civil unrest broke out, the value of this kind of anecdotal reporting became even more apparent. The consular section's informal insights became useful not just to us, but to the political and economic sections, and to Washington. They helped build a fuller picture of the evolving situation.

That's why I chose to keep our "Tidbits from the Line" as an informal email—not a formal cable. We didn't want it to be perceived as an official embassy assessment. By keeping it informal, we encouraged conversation. Recipients could just reply to the drafter, ask questions, or forward it to others. It enabled faster turnaround and more interactive engagement.

Still, we wanted it to be a record email—something that would be archived alongside official correspondence of the time, even if the tone was informal. There were some technical challenges in making that happen, but that was the goal.

This was the environment we were operating in during the second half of 2011. The embassy was downsizing rapidly, and we were trying to adapt. We had moved two of our vice consuls from Damascus to Amman—not withdrawing them to the U.S., but keeping them "in theater," so to speak. That allowed them to continue supporting our crisis response and consular functions, even though they were no longer physically in Syria.

We had to be flexible in how we deployed people and used communications tools. Our goal was to maintain consular services for American citizens still in Syria, while building strong information-sharing relationships with Amman and Beirut. We also wanted to make sure the workload being redirected to those posts didn't just disappear from our radar—we needed to continue learning from it and helping manage it, even remotely.

And throughout all of this, we were constantly planning for the possibility of a full evacuation—preparing for what might happen if commercial flights stopped. That scenario was always at the back of our minds. But in fact, even after the U.S. Embassy in

Damascus closed, commercial flights never completely stopped. They continued, and they're still operating even now. So, in that sense, a formal, large-scale evacuation never actually occurred.

But we still had to plan for what an evacuation might look like. And that might have meant American citizens needing to travel to a neighboring country. We knew at the time that the roads were still functional. I believe I mentioned earlier that we had a partnership with DHL in Syria for delivering U.S. passports to American citizens—especially those not residing in Damascus. Even for those who were in Damascus, some chose to have their passports delivered via DHL.

That arrangement gave us two key insights. First, it confirmed that the road network was still navigable. Second, it allowed us to reduce risk for private American citizens—limiting the need for them to travel long distances, say from Aleppo or Homs or Hama to Damascus, just to submit or collect a passport. For routine passport renewals—which don't require in-person application—we could accept documents via DHL, process them at the embassy, and then send the renewed passport back to the applicant.

However, for new passports—such as first-time adult applicants, or cases where the applicant had previously held only a child's passport—they still had to appear in person. So, we continued to see some individuals at the embassy for those cases.

And when we talk about evacuation planning, we also have to consider the financial realities. Some people simply can't afford to leave. If we're advising American citizens to depart the country, we may have individuals come to us and say, "I want to leave. I need to leave; but, I can't afford it. I don't have the money for a plane ticket. What can I do?"

It's important to reiterate that evacuation flights are generally not free of charge. Anyone taking a U.S. government-organized evacuation must sign a promissory note agreeing to repay the full cost of a commercial-equivalent airfare to the designated destination. Until that debt is repaid, the person is ineligible to receive a new U.S. passport.

That said, if someone came to the embassy saying, "I have no money, but I'm an American citizen and I want to go home," the consular section could help through what's called the repatriation loan process. In such cases, especially under emergency conditions, we would work closely with Washington to get authorization to loan the necessary funds for the flight back to the U.S..

Normally, our first step would be to help the person try to obtain support from family or friends. We'd assist them in making phone calls to parents, siblings, or other relatives and contacts to see if someone could send money, so the person wouldn't have to take on debt to the U.S. government.

If help was available, money could be sent through Western Union or other transfer services. Of course, money transfer systems have evolved a lot over the last decade, but at that time, there were fewer options. In some cases, family members in the U.S. could deposit funds directly with the Department of State, which would then disburse the money to the citizen abroad.

Those funds could be used to purchase a plane ticket or to cover immediate needs—such as a hotel stay, food, or medical care—while waiting for departure.

Just to clarify—if a person was receiving money from a family member or friend, they could use that money however they chose. In those cases, since they weren't borrowing from the U.S. government, they would retain their full-validity passport and could travel freely, assuming they used the funds to return to the U.S.

But if they weren't able to receive money that way, then we could step in with a repatriation loan. Essentially, the U.S. government would loan that citizen the funds necessary to return home. In such cases, we would cancel their full-validity passport and issue them a limited-validity passport—valid only for return to the United States. That passport would serve as a kind of collateral until the debt was repaid.

The loan could also cover other immediate needs—like a hotel stay, meals, or basic transportation—until the next available flight. So, if someone came to us and said, "I want to leave, but I can't afford a plane ticket," and they understood there wasn't going to be a formal evacuation, then yes, we could assist them through that process.

That was part of what we were dealing with during those final few months—figuring out what an evacuation might look like if it became necessary. We were actively identifying where we would position our resources. And because we'd had the foresight to keep our consular officers "in theater," so to speak—in Amman rather than sending them back to the U.S.—they were still available to assist if the need arose.

We were also in regular contact with other embassies, coordinating evacuation planning. We didn't want every embassy executing its evacuation plans on the same day. That could have caused traffic congestion, confusion, or even chaos on the roads, especially if convoys or mass departures were involved. So, we worked on deconfliction—ensuring that our plans could be implemented smoothly, without interfering with each other.

Another major priority was regular communication with the American public. We emphasized that commercial airlines were still flying—and that meant people should not be waiting for an evacuation. We tried to make it very clear: if they were thinking of leaving, now was the time. An evacuation wouldn't necessarily get them where they wanted to go in the U.S., and it could end up being more expensive.

So, we urged people to take advantage of the commercial options while they still existed. We didn't know what the future would hold. And, as it turned out, commercial flights continued operating even beyond the closure of the embassy.

Flights continued to be available, and we kept consular resources in place to assist as many Americans as possible—issuing passports and processing immigrant visas right up to the last possible moment.

Now, with all that being said, I want to make it clear: there was a lot of coordination underway—both within the region and with Washington—in case an evacuation became necessary. But while we were managing all of that, and operating with only a skeleton crew, life was still moving forward in other ways. Part of it was thinking about what would happen when our assignments in Damascus ended.

My original assignment in Syria was scheduled from the summer of 2009 to the summer of 2012—a three-year tour. It had initially been a two-year posting due to the hardship designation, but I had found the environment in Damascus rewarding. I enjoyed being there, and we were accomplishing quite a lot. So, I requested an extension for a third year, and it was granted. My planned departure date was July 2012, and a new officer was already slated to replace me then.

All the usual assignment processes were moving forward, as they typically do in October and November. Even though we were reduced to a skeleton staff, bidding season was still underway. I had been looking at the available assignments since September and was consulting with my wife at the time about possible next steps. I was now an OC—an Officer Counselor of the Senior Foreign Service—having been promoted while in Damascus. So, I was considering senior consular positions in Washington or overseas.

One of my colleagues in Damascus encouraged me to consider DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) roles as well. Those are handled through a separate selection process. I'd already been acting DCM for most of my time in Damascus and also served as chargé d'affaires on several occasions. So, it seemed like the right moment to pursue that path.

For me, the assignment process has always included a kind of internal check-in—asking: Are my professional goals still aligned with the Department's mission? How is my work being evaluated? What role can I best play in the organization?

At that point, I was leaning toward either a senior consular role—whether in Washington or at a major post overseas—or possibly a DCM position. My wife and I looked at the DCM list and found a few interesting options. I figured Sri Lanka could be a good fit. She was interested in Oslo. Both were small enough posts that they seemed like manageable places for a first-time DCM.

I submitted a broad list. There were some posts where I thought I wouldn't be competitive, especially those that were more desirable or had more experienced bidders. Still, I made the shortlist for several positions and began receiving interview requests.

I interviewed for the DCM position in Sri Lanka and was also being considered for several assignments in the European bureau. They didn't consider me for every one of the posts I'd listed—just the ones they thought I might fit best. I was a bit surprised at which posts considered me competitive, in the same way I'd been surprised by the Damascus assignment. That had also seemed like a long shot at the time. But it turned out to be a deeply meaningful experience—both personally and professionally—one where I could connect with the local culture, history, and society, and contribute meaningfully to the Department's work.

So, when the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the European Bureau contacted me and said they wanted to consider me for the DCM position in Budapest, I was intrigued. It was a slightly larger embassy than I had imagined for a first DCM tour, but a very attractive post—beautiful surroundings, rich culture, and complex political history.

I had visited Budapest before. In fact, I'd spent time there in 2001 on a temporary duty (TDY) assignment. I don't think I mentioned this in our earlier conversations, but that summer—after the war in Kosovo and while the Belgrade embassy remained closed due to security concerns—many Serbian applicants were being redirected to Budapest for visa processing. To handle the increased workload, the post needed extra consular staff, and I volunteered to help. I was in Budapest for about a month, in July 2001, just before the September 11 attacks.

In some ways, it was similar to what we later did with Damascus personnel in Amman—repositioning staff to a nearby post to handle overflow from a mission that could no longer operate at full capacity.

Yes, so I was in Budapest in July 2001. I remember enjoying walking around the city, getting to know the embassy, and really getting a sense of the beauty of the place.

Fast forward about ten years—to 2011—by which time, as I mentioned earlier, we were no longer able to travel around Syria. Movement was restricted, and the situation was tense. I had encouraged my staff not to burn themselves out. I reminded them that if they needed to take a break—to get away for a weekend and reset—they could. Just a change of scenery, while it was still possible, could help with the stress.

For a brief period, there was a direct flight from Damascus to Budapest. I took advantage of that, booked a flight, and went for two or three days. It was also a chance to meet up with my wife at the time and have a short holiday. We spent a few days sightseeing around Budapest, in September 2011.

So later, when I found out they were considering me for the DCM position in Budapest, it felt like a full-circle moment. I thought, "That's great." Much like with Damascus, I was a bit surprised to be offered a post I assumed would attract a lot of competition, especially from people more familiar with the local context than I was.

When I expressed my surprise, I was told that they weren't looking for someone with deep local experience or a deep command of the political issues in Hungary. What they needed was someone who could work well with people, someone who could manage collaboratively and foster strong internal relationships.

That was encouraging to hear. As I've mentioned in our conversations, collaboration has always been central to my approach. I've tried to build networks of trust and information-sharing—where leadership isn't just top-down, but values what each person brings to the table. I've found that effective teams are built on mutual respect, not rigid hierarchy.

What really validated that for me was hearing how it came through in the assignment process. For DCM selections, you're required to submit a number of references—these are 360-degree evaluations. You ask people you've supervised, your peers, and your own supervisors to offer assessments of your work.

And one thing the Deputy Assistant Secretary told me stood out in those evaluations was the feedback about my collaborative style. People described me as someone who brought out the best in those around me, someone they enjoyed working with. That meant a lot to me. It felt like a kind of professional consultation—an assessment not just of what I had done, but of how I had worked.

To have that approach recognized and appreciated—especially for a role like DCM—was meaningful. It reaffirmed that the way I believed in leading and managing was not only valid, but valued. That was sometime around the beginning of November, when I received confirmation that, following my assignment in Syria, I would be posted as Deputy Chief of Mission in Budapest, starting the following summer.

I reached out to my predecessor at the time—just to let him know that I was looking forward to the assignment and hoped we could stay in touch in the lead-up to my arrival. I wanted to get a better understanding of the embassy environment and the situation on the ground in Budapest.

I was also really interested in exploring how much more possible it had become, by then, to engage with a future assignment before actually arriving at post. Earlier in my career, there wasn't much you could do in that regard. Back then, the standard advice was to write a letter to the ambassador, maybe one to your predecessor, just as a courtesy. But communication was slow, and information was shared in very different, more limited ways.

Now, with the evolution of digital tools and collaborative platforms, it was possible to be much more engaged—even as a kind of "external" member of the team—before arriving. That represented a big shift. You could start participating in a meaningful way before physically being at post.

So, in the midst of all that—this growing anticipation about my next assignment—life in Damascus remained unstable and unpredictable. It created this strange dual reality. On one hand, I was navigating a very real, very active crisis environment. On the other hand, I was simultaneously planning for what came next.

I think I mentioned in our last conversation that as we moved into December 2011, there were moments when it seemed like some kind of negotiated resolution—maybe even a peace agreement—was within reach. Hopes would rise… and then collapse. It felt like the Charlie Brown and Lucy routine with the football: every time you thought something might work, the ball got pulled away at the last moment.

There were talks, there were possibilities, but it kept falling apart—especially when it came to what the Syrian government would actually commit to. Meanwhile, the security situation was deteriorating rapidly.

By the end of December, with the holidays approaching, a number of embassy personnel were on vacation. But the situation worsened significantly—there were car bombs, and the overall threat environment escalated. Many of those on leave were instructed not to return to post.

I returned. Others didn't. But it was essential to maintain at least a minimal consular presence. Safeguarding the welfare of American citizens was still a priority, and we needed to ensure the Consular Section remained operational, however limited its staffing.

The political section, if I recall correctly, was essentially empty at that point. In fact, my Vice Consul, who had previously been the one visiting towns outside Damascus before July, was repositioned in the embassy to serve primarily as a political officer since her political observations, including from within the consular section, had been outstanding; and there was no one else left to carry out the political section functions. This also gave us the benefit of a political officer who also had a consular title, authorizing her to carry out consular functions.

So yes, even though our Vice Consul had taken on political reporting duties, she was still keeping one foot in the consular world. And I think that really underscored something important: that the value of our consular personnel wasn't just in their administrative function, or in helping other sections of the embassy with overflow work. It came from the substance of what they were doing within the Consular Section itself, safeguarding the welfare of American citizens.

That included, for example, visits to American citizen communities across different parts of Syria earlier in the assignment. These visits resulted in reports that gave the embassy a much deeper understanding of local conditions—insight we wouldn't have otherwise had. Toward the end of our time in Syria, a prison visit led to a particularly powerful and detailed report about detention conditions—again, something that came directly from a consular officer's ability to carry out their core duties, build relationships, and communicate effectively.

What made this possible was not just the officer's reporting ability, but also her language skills. She could speak Arabic fluently, which was absolutely essential in the Consular Section. That linguistic ability, combined with her on-the-ground knowledge and reporting acumen, meant her role was valued throughout the embassy—not just as a consular officer, but as a key source of insight and analysis.

And importantly, because she retained her official consular title, she could continue to perform core functions—issuing passports, approving visas, notarizing documents—things only someone with a consular commission can legally do. That meant even as the embassy was reduced to a skeleton crew, we were still able to keep two consular officers in place: me and her.

The Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) wasn't able to return after the holidays, so I was serving both as head of the Consular Section and acting DCM. The Public Affairs Officer also didn't return and was managing that portfolio remotely. By January, we were operating in a very different environment.

That said, we had distributed our consular resources effectively across the region. And we had digitized a great deal of our documentation and workflows. So, when it came time to close the embassy and I moved to Amman for a month, I could still access many of our key files and case materials from there. I could also direct colleagues in Washington to where those records were stored, because they had been saved in a shared internal system—something of a precursor to what we now think of as "the cloud." It wasn't public-facing, but it was accessible from Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Washington—anywhere authorized personnel needed access.

That meant we could continue operations remotely. So, when we closed the embassy in February, it was, in a sense, just a matter of locking the door to one part of the compound. We kept the Consular Section accessible because it would serve as the workspace for the Polish consuls and the Polish government, who were to act as our protecting power.

Instead of operating from their own embassy, the Polish consuls would work from our Consular Section, which had been hardened somewhat and was considered one of the most secure parts of the facility. That arrangement was part of our agreement with them. So, we prepped the space for that continued use.

We also had to designate caretaker staff from among our local employees—those who would remain on-site to maintain basic functions. That included identifying not just who would stay, but what roles needed to continue even while the embassy itself was no longer operating at full capacity.

The focus was on essential maintenance and security. Our guards were part of that caretaker team, making routine rounds and safeguarding the premises. Within the Consular Section, our priority remained the welfare of American citizens. So, we retained our senior American Citizen Services (ACS) specialist and a backup—our two local ACS employees, as it happened.

We also retained our senior immigrant visa specialist. That function had remained operational because it directly supported American citizens trying to leave Syria. For some, the only obstacle was that their immediate family members—spouses, children, or parents—had not yet received their immigrant visas.

Our local employees couldn't approve an immigrant visa—only an American officer has the authority to do that. But the local staff member could still review the documents, just as he had done when we were fully operational. He could verify that everything was in order and then transfer the petition package to Amman, where there was a DHS (Department of Homeland Security) office. The DHS officer there could then approve the petition that had been prepared in Damascus.

This was another example of the collaborative setup we had developed across posts—one that continued functioning even after our departure. To ensure continuity, we also had a backup in place: our second specialist in the Immigrant Visa Section. She was trained and ready to step in if needed.

In addition, we had someone assigned to manage the embassy's public-facing communication—handling the phone line and website updates. Through him, we could continue keeping the website current. He coordinated with Washington to make sure updates were made. His phone number also served as the public contact point for emergencies—he would receive the calls and then redirect them to the appropriate person.

These individuals formed the caretaker staff within the Consular Section. Notably, no one from the Nonimmigrant Visa Section was retained in a caretaker capacity. That function had been suspended by then.

We also worked to assist our local staff in finding positions at other U.S. embassies, when possible. Some were asking what they could do if they wanted to continue working within the U.S. embassy system. A few managed to secure opportunities—one employee took a TDY (temporary duty) assignment in Beirut, another found a permanent position there, and someone else was able to relocate to Abu Dhabi.

We were trying to offer them some stability as we prepared to close the embassy, helping them navigate their next steps. I believe I mentioned earlier that a number of our employees had applied for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) before the embassy closed. Those applications were in process. And then, the American staff departed.

It was a difficult thing to leave behind the local personnel we had worked so closely with, many of whom had served at the embassy for decades. It's important to understand that not everyone who had been a longtime employee rushed to apply for a Special Immigrant Visa just to get out. In fact, many of them had been eligible for years—SIVs require fifteen years of service, and we had staff who had been there for over thirty. But there was no mad rush. They weren't simply trying to leave. What they did want, however, was a clearer understanding of what the path forward might be. That's what we tried to help provide.

One of the reasons I spent a month in Amman after the closure was to help ensure a smooth handoff to the Polish consuls, who were stepping in as our protecting power. I wanted them to be able to work effectively from their first day in Damascus, alongside the personnel who had stayed behind. That continuity was important.

And I think it's worth emphasizing the experience and dedication of those who remained. Our senior caretaker, for example, had been with the embassy for over thirty years. He had photographs and certificates signed by Secretaries of State and even Presidents—commemorating his role in supporting their visits to Syria. This was someone who had served faithfully through many transitions and had worked directly with the most senior figures in the U.S. government over the decades. That kind of commitment remained in Damascus, even after the American staff had gone.

Within the Consular Section, our senior-level caretakers—the ones responsible for American Citizen Services and immigrant visas—had each served at the embassy for decades. Their dedication was extraordinary. In fact, among them were recipients of the Foreign Service National or Locally Engaged Staff of the Year award, globally. One of them had received it twice. This is one of the highest acknowledgments available to locally employed staff in the State Department.

These were individuals who had chosen to stay and continue carrying out the work of the U.S. government—despite the risks—after the American diplomats had left and the doors of the embassy were closed. When we did close the embassy and the Americans departed, there was a brief moment in Amman when we came together. After everyone had arrived, we gathered for a final meal as "Embassy Damascus"—the Ambassador, the Defense Attaché, and the small group of American staff who had remained through the very end. It was a way of marking the transition.

The next day, most of this contingent, who had closed the embassy and traveled to Amman, left—heading back to Washington or to new assignments elsewhere. I stayed behind, on TDY in Amman, based out of a hotel. My objective was to continue coordinating with the caretaker staff in Damascus until the Polish consuls arrived, and to ensure continuity in operations.

Interestingly, my mobile phone from Damascus continued to work in Amman, which was a small but welcome surprise. Even though the physical embassy was closed, we were still actively maintaining the functions of Embassy Damascus. The General Services Office (GSO) was still handling accounts, but bills were still being paid, including phone bills. HR was still operational. Some of our local staff had relocated from Damascus to Amman and were continuing their work from there.

Because so many of our records had been digitized, that transition was possible. It became a matter of remote management, something I'd grown increasingly comfortable with. I'd tried to move toward the working premise that, no matter where I was physically, I needed to be able to engage with the information and people I was responsible for.

From my personal computer, I could still access the CCD—the Consular Consolidated Database. I had a notebook computer with me, and with the secure key fob we used at the time, I could log into OpenNet from that personal device. We were still in the early stages of remote access, but even then, we were beginning to experience the shift: that embassy functions could continue even when personnel were dispersed, and that digital infrastructure was becoming central to maintaining operations under crisis conditions.

OpenNet was now accessible no matter where we were, which was a major shift. At the time, we were using what was called a fob for secure access, though those aren't used as much anymore. This was about ten years ago, and the fob functioned on the same basic principle as today's two-factor authentication systems.

It generated a seemingly random series of characters, valid for about sixty seconds. When you logged in, you had to input not only your password but also the current code displayed on the fob—much like the way people now use authenticator apps.

But this wasn't an app. It was a small, key-sized physical device with an LED screen. I think you had to press a button on it to refresh the number. Every minute or so, it would generate a new code. If I remember correctly, mine was starting to fail. One of the characters on the screen, the top segment of the LED, wasn't displaying properly. So sometimes I had to guess: "Is that a 7? Or a 3?" And I'd try it, hoping to get the right combination.

I distinctly remember one occasion—I forget exactly what the issue was—but I had to log in quickly in order to respond to a query from Washington. And there I was, squinting at a half-lit screen, trying to decode a number while under time pressure. I couldn't, however, replace the fob in Amman, since it had been issued in Damascus, from the Damascus allocation of fobs. With the closure of embassy Damascus, any new fob would have to come from Washington, DC.

I was constantly trying to figure out what the code on my fob was so I could log in and respond as needed. Sometimes it took a few guesses, but I had to get through—because there were still urgent matters that required attention.

One of the sad developments during this period involved Americans contacting us about family members or cases that required us to raise concerns with the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the welfare of U.S. citizens. These situations were always difficult, but around mid-February, one case began to dominate all others.

Several international reporters had become trapped in the town of Homs. They were still filing stories from there, despite deteriorating conditions, very little food, very few supplies, and constant danger. And then, one of them was killed.

Marie Colvin had been reporting with the BBC, but she was also a U.S. citizen. She was easily recognizable—she wore an eye patch, which made her identity very public and distinct. Reports quickly emerged that she had been killed in an attack on the area, and that the strike had come from Syrian government forces.

The group she was with was under siege, and it was clear they were being directly targeted.
One of the major challenges at that time became retrieving Marie Colvin's remains. That responsibility fell to the Consular Section local employees still in Damascus.

Working with the Damascus American Citizen Services team, we were able to identify individuals who might be able to carry out the recovery. But it wasn't straightforward. There were questions about whether the Syrian Red Crescent would be allowed to go in, and whether they would be trusted by all parties involved. In that environment, there was a lot of suspicion. People questioned whether organizations or individuals were truly acting independently or whether they were operating on behalf of the Syrian government. Even the act of recovering a body had become politicized.

Despite that, our consular personnel remained engaged and committed. I was involved in the conversations, and Washington was too. But it was really the people on the ground—the caretaker staff in Damascus—who made it happen. They facilitated the recovery, ensured the remains arrived in Damascus, and then carried out the process to return them to her family.

That all took place towards the end of February, just as my own temporary duty in Amman was coming to a close. It was, of course, a heartbreaking task, but one they accomplished with professionalism and courage, despite the risks and uncertainty. They deserve real credit for that.

Around that time, the Polish consuls arrived. They spent just a day or so in Amman—long enough for us to meet, for me to brief them on what to expect, and to help them orient themselves. Then they went on to Damascus and began setting up.

What stood out about this transition—and I'm not a Department historian—but as far as I know, this may have been the first time the U.S. government retained and continued to directly engage with the local caretaker staff after closing an embassy and establishing a protecting power.

Typically, under established procedures, at least as outlined in the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM), once a protecting power is designated, the local staff are transferred to that power. They technically become employees of the protecting power, even if the U.S. government continues to pay their salaries via that intermediary.

But in this case, the U.S. government continued to treat them as its own employees. We engaged with them directly. Washington would call from time to time, and in particular, they would contact the local employee we had designated to handle calls and maintain the website—the one who served as the central point of contact for the public and for internal communications.

He essentially became the embassy's communications hub. But that role also put him at risk. The frequency of calls he received from Washington began to attract unwanted attention. Eventually, for his own safety, he had to leave the country.

After I left and returned to Washington, one of the issues that came up was how we would maintain contact with our locally employed staff. We had already set up all of our employees with commercial email accounts before departing Damascus. Once we left and the systems in Damascus were shut down, including OpenNet access, they could no longer use any of the official embassy infrastructure. While they could now work with whatever systems the Polish consuls were providing, they also retained their commercial email accounts, which allowed us to remain in direct contact with them.

I remember working with Consular Affairs to determine what methods we could use to continue collaborating with the caretaker staff. It became more of a partnership—between the Polish consuls, the remaining local employees, and us—than a strictly hierarchical relationship where the locals were answering only to their Polish supervisors.

This arrangement also had a practical benefit. Because the staff remained officially employed by the U.S. government, the clock on their eligibility for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) continued to run. Some hadn't yet reached the required fifteen years of service, and this continuity meant that those who were only a few months or a year away from reaching that threshold could still become eligible.

Then the question became: how would those employees apply for SIVs, now that Embassy Damascus no longer functionally existed? Previously, the committee reviewing SIV requests included me and colleagues in Damascus. But now we were all scattered. In the immediate aftermath of the closure, the decision was made that Embassy Amman would take on the role of reviewing SIV applications from former Damascus staff.

That was just one of the many procedural and bureaucratic issues we had to manage amid the upheaval. Another involved the annual performance evaluation cycle. For Foreign Service personnel, the Employee Evaluation Report (EER) covers the period from April 16 to April 15 each year. By February 2012, the embassy had closed, and our staff had been dispersed around the world. Yet during the preceding year, they had done extraordinary work—work that needed to be formally recognized in their evaluations.

We were fortunate that Embassy Damascus had already been an early adopter of the digital EER system. I think we began using it in 2010—at first in a hybrid format, some paper, some electronic—but by 2011, we had transitioned completely to digital. While some found the system frustrating, it allowed people to write and review EERs from anywhere. Each step of the process could be completed electronically—from self-evaluations to supervisory inputs to final reviews—and the platform made it all visible and accessible remotely.

So, as the rating period came to a close, we were able to complete the EERs on time. In fact, because of the embassy closure and the associated change of reviewer status, we were able to begin some of the evaluations earlier than usual. I started working on mine while still in Amman, and continued doing so when I returned to Washington—even while on home leave.

The HR specialist in Amman, who did a wonderful job, managed the EER process itself. One of her biggest challenges was tracking everyone down. The team was dispersed globally, but she kept following up to ensure people didn't forget their responsibilities—to complete their own portions, to provide input for colleagues, and to recognize the work that had been done. That effort helped ensure all the EERs were submitted and processed on time.

So, amid everything else—coordinating consular operations remotely, responding to emergencies, and supporting the caretaker staff still in Damascus—we were also carrying out this very routine but essential HR function. It was one more example of how the machinery of the Foreign Service kept moving, even in extraordinary circumstances.

And throughout this period, the caretaker staff in Damascus continued to perform incredibly brave work. Towns were under siege. People were being killed. The American diplomats were no longer physically present, but the local staff kept the mission functioning. They remained the face of the embassy in a very dangerous environment, and they did so under increasing pressure and scrutiny.

As the Polish consuls took over the role of protecting power, I continued engaging with them—at least for a month or two after leaving Amman. Occasionally, questions would arise—about ongoing cases or documentation—and I would help however I could.

During the first month or two after we closed the embassy, I knew that our records were still accessible. The server that had housed our data in Damascus—at least the physical disks—had been brought to Amman and reassembled. Those files remained available to colleagues in Washington and Amman, although not to the caretaker staff in Damascus, as they no longer had access to OpenNet.

Still, digital resources like the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) remained accessible to U.S. officers, which meant we could continue supporting the caretaker staff in safeguarding the welfare of American citizens in Syria.

As I mentioned earlier, on my last day in Damascus, I was working with our senior immigrant visa specialist—who stayed behind as part of the caretaker team—on a set of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications for about fifteen of our local staff. We had submitted them to Washington before the embassy closed.

That was an important distinction: because Embassy Damascus was still technically open at the time of submission, the SIV petitions bore the formal endorsement of the Ambassador. Once the embassy was closed, and there was no longer a U.S. Ambassador to Syria in place, that chain of authority no longer functioned, so we made sure those applications were submitted under the proper auspices while we still could.

While I was in Amman, I followed up with colleagues in Washington to check on the progress of those SIV recommendations that had been submitted. The process is that a locally employed staff member first expresses interest in applying for an SIV. Then, a committee at the embassy reviews that expression of interest, considers whether there are any disqualifying concerns, and makes a recommendation.

Under normal circumstances, fifteen years of service is considered the minimum threshold for eligibility, but that alone doesn't guarantee approval. The committee might determine that while someone has a solid record, there's nothing exceptional enough to justify a visa, especially if their service just barely meets the time requirement. On the other hand, an employee might be found ineligible if there were multiple poor performance reviews or other concerns.

In our case, all the applicants we submitted had at least fifteen years of service and clean records. What gave us additional confidence was that one of the evaluation criteria for an SIV is whether the applicant has performed "heroic service," and there is an established presumption that local staff are deemed to have provided such service if they continued working for the U.S. government after diplomatic relations were severed.

But in this case, things got complicated. While we had closed the embassy and withdrawn all American personnel, the U.S. had not formally severed diplomatic relations with Syria. That technicality meant we couldn't check the box that said, "This employee worked for us after diplomatic ties were broken."

While I was in Amman, I spoke with the reviewer assigned to the cases. I was a bit surprised to find that SIV reviews had been contracted out and that I was not talking to a State Department employee, but to a private contractor. She asked whether the applicants had received individual awards—Superior Honor Awards, Meritorious Honor Awards—that would elevate their eligibility. I explained that while not everyone had individual decorations, they had all continued working in an environment where their lives were at risk, without the daily presence of Americans, under increasingly hostile conditions. That, I argued, should count as *de facto* "heroic service."

The reviewer pushed back, noting that without the formal severing of diplomatic relations, the criteria weren't technically met. I found that perspective frustrating, but I also understood that a contractor had very limited scope to interpret regulations. I knew, however, that I would be returning to Washington soon and decided I would pursue it in person with those who did have the scope to discuss and interpret regulations.

One of the first things I did upon returning was speak with the head of the Visa Office's legal team, the office responsible for interpreting eligibility criteria for SIVs. We weren't in direct conflict, but there was some back-and-forth. The point I tried to make was this:

while it was true that the U.S. had not formally ended diplomatic relations with Syria, the practical situation was indistinguishable from having done so.

Our staff remained on duty, with no American personnel on site. They continued to come to work at personal risk. The fact that we had to designate a protecting power—Poland—was evidence that our diplomatic presence had effectively ended. In spirit, if not in letter, the criteria for heroic service were met.

So, we had that conversation, and, as I mentioned, after that, the recommendations we had submitted were quickly approved. The employees were then able to formally apply for their Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs).

The process works like this: once the initial approval is granted, and the employee expresses interest in applying, they work with HR to prepare and submit their full application within a reasonable period. After that point, once the application is officially submitted, there's another time frame, during which they undergo a medical exam and prepare other time-sensitive documents that will be submitted at the time of their visa interview.

Applicants also have to make a formal commitment to leave their employment. One cannot receive an SIV and remain employed by the U.S. government. They must retire or resign before the visa can be issued. At the time of the visa interview, they must have already separated from their position. Then, once they receive the visa, they typically have six months to enter the United States.

Following that initial group of about fifteen applicants, people began to emigrate. But within a few months, I heard that Embassy Amman—initially designated to handle follow-on applications from former Damascus staff—felt it couldn't adequately assess them. These were not Amman's employees. The review process isn't just a checklist; it depends on an understanding of the applicant's record, their contributions to the mission, and the value they brought to the workplace. The review committee makes a recommendation to the ambassador based on that understanding.

The Amman team simply didn't feel they had the familiarity with the context or with the individuals to make that assessment credibly. So, Washington created a new solution: a virtual SIV committee.

There were a lot of "firsts" involved in how we managed the closure of Embassy Damascus—how we digitized records, maintained continuity of operations, coordinated regionally, and kept locally employed staff (LES) on board. The virtual committee was a natural extension of that innovative and adaptive approach.

The Executive Office for Near Eastern Affairs (NEA/EX) reached out to those of us who had been members of the original SIV review committee at Embassy Damascus—me and several colleagues—and asked if we would continue in that role remotely. We agreed.

From then on, we operated as a virtual review board. Each application would be assembled by the HR team—now relocated to Amman—drawing on digital personnel records. Employees were encouraged to safeguard their award certificates, letters of commendation, and other supporting documents. They could scan them or work with HR to prepare a complete application packet.

Those packets would typically include the application form, recent Employee Evaluation Reports (EERs), any commendations, and relevant awards. The files were circulated digitally to the virtual SIV committee, much like how we had already been managing digital EERs.

We received quite a few applications in the first several years—probably over the first two to four years in particular—but the process had been continuing for over a decade after the embassy's closure in February 2012. I believe I was the first committee member to retire in April 2022. I had been the senior member of the group, and it had been ten years. That I should retire first was sort of the natural order of things.

Q: Let me ask one question here. Were any significant numbers of SIVs denied?

GOODFRIEND: No. There weren't. Everyone who submitted a request had a clean record—no negative indicators. I believe HR did that initial screening before forwarding the applications to the SIV committee.

Q: And the reason I ask is because you can approve them, but then they have to go through all the security checks and so on. I just wanted to be sure that after your approval, there were no other U.S. government hesitations about the granting.

GOODFRIEND: Ah, I see. I misunderstood your earlier question. I thought you were asking whether the SIV committee had denied any applications. And the answer is no. We never forwarded any applications that had negative indicators. HR conducted a thorough screening before anything reached us.

But your question is about what happens after the committee's approval—when the person applies for the visa and goes through the standard security checks. In general, no, there were no significant obstacles.

That said, it's important to remember that our situation in Damascus was quite different from cases in places like Iraq or Afghanistan. There, SIVs are often tied to one year of service, and applicants are frequently contractors. In our case, these were long-term Department of State employees—many with 15, even 20 years of service. They weren't contractors. They were direct-hire local staff, vetted and assessed over long periods.

So, the process was smoother. There's an assumption—reasonable, I think—that someone who's worked faithfully for the U.S. Embassy for 15+ years is less likely to pose a security concern than someone known to the U.S. government for only a short time in a highly volatile environment. Still, they did go through all the regular visa security screenings once their application reached that stage.

I can’t speak to the specifics of the SIV process for military translators or applicants from other posts in the region, where the security reviews are often more intense and where delays are more common. But for our applicants from Damascus, most of whom were long-tenured embassy staff, the process was relatively standard.

If you want to say it was "easier," you could—but it's like saying it’s easier to get a medal for bravery during wartime on the battlefield than during peacetime at a domestic base. The reason the process was smoother is that these staff had already demonstrated loyalty under extremely difficult conditions. What would have been considered routine service in a post like London was, in Damascus, elevated to heroic service.

So, back to your question: to my knowledge, there was only one case where there was a complication. An employee reached out to me—someone I didn’t know very well personally, but like many others, he had my email address and contacted me. He said he had been approved for an SIV, but there was a delay with his wife’s visa. She was placed under “administrative processing,” which is the standard language used when a case is held up for additional checks. Often, even consular officers don’t know the exact issue—it could be a name similarity, a documentation discrepancy, or something else. He was understandably concerned. He had small children and didn’t want to leave his family behind. I advised him to remain in contact with the embassy and to follow up after a certain period if the issue wasn’t resolved.

That was the only case I heard about directly where an administrative delay caused concern.

Most of our applicants, especially early on, were long-serving employees, many of whom had worked across several embassy sections. Later applicants—those who reached 15 years in 2017, 2018, or 2020—were often guards. They had six or seven years of service when the embassy closed, but they remained on the payroll and eventually became eligible.

And these were the people on the front lines—literally. Guards were not only physically safeguarding the embassy but often doing so under enormous risk. Their recommendations usually came from the RSO (Regional Security Officer), and they spoke to the valiant, courageous service these individuals had provided.

So, I do feel gratified by how the State Department handled this entire process. When we left Damascus, many local staff were understandably worried. I had held a town hall before our departure to reassure them. I told them: Don’t rush to flee. Don’t feel like you need to storm the gates right away. There will be paths forward. We explained the options—refugee status, humanitarian parole, and SIVs—each with different criteria.

But we wanted them to know that there would be a legal pathway to the U.S. for those who had served honorably. And I believe we upheld that promise. Even those who didn't apply before we closed the embassy—those who waited until they were eligible—were still able to do so later. At one point, we could have processed 50 applications before closing, but many chose to wait, perhaps because they trusted us to keep our word.

And we did. We kept our commitment—not just to the caretaker staff, but also to other local employees. We continued to pay them, even if they weren't part of the caretaker team. This ensured they remained eligible over time. Some later left to pursue other opportunities and didn't apply for SIVs. But the key point is, the framework stayed in place for them if they chose to use it.

In fact, right up to the month before I retired, I was still reviewing SIV applications as part of that virtual committee. And when it became clear I would be stepping down, I let the team know they'd need to reconstitute the committee with new members—which they did.

So yes, it's something I'm proud of. Not for myself, but for the State Department and for the U.S. government—that we followed through and took care of the personnel in Damascus who had stood by us for so many years, even in the most difficult of times.

Q: You've managed to explain the whole SIV process, including the. How, how far, and how long it takes to carry out the responsibilities that the law requires. So, I'll go ahead and pause now, and we can make an appointment for the next session.

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Q: Okay, today is October 13, 2022. We're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. André, just let's remind ourselves, this is 2012. And you're in Amman?

GOODFRIEND: That's right. It's February 2012. The embassy in Damascus had closed, and all the remaining American personnel—very much a skeleton crew—had relocated to Amman and then dispersed. I stayed in Amman for the month of February to assist with the handover to the incoming protecting power, the Polish consuls. The goal was to help ensure a smooth transition on consular matters.

I think in our last discussion, we talked about the ongoing consular activities, the locally employed staff (LES) who stayed on as custodians, and their continued work with the Polish consuls who were arriving. During that same month, American reporter Marie Colvin was killed, and there were efforts to help bring her body back to Damascus and then repatriate it.

At that point, my role in Damascus was effectively ending. We still had vice consuls from Damascus operating out of Amman, assisting with visa processing for Syrian applicants who had been directed to apply there. A DHS (formerly INS) officer was also present, handling immigration petitions from Americans in Syria who wanted their family members to emigrate. That officer still had the authority to process petitions quickly.

We put in place a lot of infrastructure to allow consular work to continue from Amman, even though the embassy in Damascus was closed. All the consular files had been digitized and were accessible in Amman. The physical server that stored many of these files had been moved from Damascus to Amman. Since they were in a collaborative environment, it allowed for shared access. The files could be accessed not only in Amman but also in Beirut and Washington, enabling collaborative work to continue without a physical mission in place.

This was a new situation. We had a protecting power physically present in Damascus, but its employees, including the consuls, did not have access to the U.S. government systems where the working files were stored. There were times when the Polish consuls needed to consult with Washington about a particular case, or when local staff in Damascus—still occasionally contacted by Washington—needed information from digital files they once had access to, but now didn't.

Once the U.S. systems were shut down in Damascus, that access disappeared. The server was gone, and the OpenNet, the State Department's unclassified intranet, was no longer available. The classified network had never been accessible to local staff anyway, but the unclassified system, which hosted most of the consular data, was turned off as of February 1st. From that point on, if access to information was needed, they would contact me while I was still in Amman or go directly to Washington.

By the end of February, I had wrapped things up. Earlier, I'd mentioned that family members had been evacuated to the U.S. My wife at the time, and my middle son—who had been with me—were both evacuated in April 2011. It wasn't voluntary; family members were evacuated whether they wanted to leave or not.

While I was still in Damascus, my wife at the time had begun looking to buy a house in Washington. We were discussing it remotely—she was in DC, and I was in Syria. She had found a house, and we were about to close on it. So, part of the timing of my departure was to get to Washington and finalize the purchase. We were trying to schedule it so that we could walk into the new house on my first week back.

She had also started working in DC. One of the things offered to evacuated family members was priority when seeking employment within the State Department. She got a civil service job as a secretary in one of the offices there and had been working for about a year by then. So, there was that normal life in Washington already underway—one that I was now returning to.

For the last couple of months in Damascus, I had already been living out of a couple of suitcases, anticipating that we might have to leave on short notice. Everyone's belongings had been packed up: divided into household effects and airfreight. Both had been shipped, leaving us with just our suitcases and the welcome kits—basic dishes, cutlery, that sort of thing—that are often provided to employees when their household effects are in transit. That was how we got by during the last weeks in Damascus, and also during that month in Amman.

So, by the end of February, I packed up and returned to the U.S.

Q: Just two quick questions. First, given the more or less three years you were handling all the consular functions in Damascus, whether it was in the city or subsequently in Amman. This sounds like the kind of material that would typically get you an award. Did you receive an award for this work?

GOODFRIEND: I did. In fact, I received a pretty significant one. After I returned to the U.S.—I think it was a couple of months into my time in Washington—Consular Affairs reached out to me. At that point, I was working for a short period within the consular systems office, which we'll talk about later in this interview. They contacted me and said they wanted to put my name forward for the Mary Ryan Award.

Q: Explain that for one second.

GOODFRIEND: Mary Ryan was the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs from the mid-1990s until 2002. She was deeply engaged in the human side of consular work. She really cared about the people doing the job, not just the policies. A lot of the collaborative, team-based approach I tried to take—working with people rather than just issuing top-down directives—reflected the kind of spirit she embodied.

When I was in New Delhi, on my second tour, we received recognition for some of the fraud-related reporting we were doing. That continued in Moscow, where we were dealing with issues related to Russian organized crime. Her office regularly sent kudos messages—not just to me, but to many colleagues—acknowledging our efforts. It meant a lot to receive direct recognition from the Assistant Secretary. Colleagues would say, "This kind of message doesn't come often," but with her, it did—when the work warranted it.

She was also instrumental in changing how we approached information sharing. After the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, Congress demanded reforms. Mary Ryan acknowledged that we had been caught off guard. At the time, we didn't have a global information system for consular officers to access real-time data that might inform visa decisions.

The case that came up involved a man named Abdel-Rahman—often referred to as the "Blind Sheikh." He got a visa in Libya, even though Cairo had provided information that should have led to a refusal. But at the time, consular officers didn't have live access to global lookout information. There wasn't a centralized network. In the early 90s, such connectivity did not exist.

So maybe the consul in Tripoli didn't check the lookout information. Or maybe they did check—but they were using microfiche, and the fiche they had was printed before Cairo's warning was added. We don't know. There was no way to tell whether the person checked and missed it, or didn't check at all.

Mary Ryan's response was clear: Never again. We should never again be in a situation where we do not have access to the information necessary to make an informed visa decision. And you want to say something?

Q: Let me just interject here. Now that you're describing the story, I remember it from overseas as Mary Ryan having to go before Congress and being excoriated. She was the fall guy or the fall gal who took the bullet from Congress, because I remember even seeing in the media, the testimony and the hearings, where every senator and member of Congress who could get into a meeting took turns at slamming her.

GOODFRIEND: Are you talking about the ' 90s or after the 2001 attack?

Q: After 2001.

GOODFRIEND: I was referring to 1993, when she was also in charge of Consular Affairs. And that's what, in a sense, makes her taking the fall after 2001 even worse, because she had already taken measures to ensure that what happened in 1993 would never happen again.

Thanks to her efforts and vision—and her collaboration with Congress—she helped establish the framework for a system that would allow consular officers to have real-time access to the information they needed. Not only that, but it would also make the process auditable, so that you could verify whether the officer had actually reviewed the information. And if an officer either failed to review the data or overrode it improperly and then something went wrong, like a terrorist attack, there would be accountability.

But Congress didn't fund that system outright. Instead, Consular Affairs began collecting fees from nonimmigrant visa applicants, and those fees financed the development of that system. In fact, it became the backbone for global communications within the State Department—not just for consular sections, but for entire embassies. Before that, many posts didn't even have real-time telecommunications. This infrastructure—what eventually became OpenNet—enabled the collaborative work I mentioned earlier.

So, by the time 9/11 happened, she could rightly say: This wasn't a failure of the consular process. We did what we were supposed to do. If someone was issued a visa who should have been flagged, it's because other agencies failed to share that information with us. She characterized it as a "failure of intelligence."

But someone had to take the fall. And she did.

That's what makes it such a tragedy—not in the casual sense, but in the classical sense. In a traditional tragedy, the hero is brought down by a fatal flaw. But Mary Ryan did not seem to have such a flaw. She did what needed to be done. She brought Consular Affairs into the digital age. She championed interagency cooperation. She built the infrastructure to ensure this kind of thing wouldn't happen again.

And when she stood up and said this wasn't the consular system's fault—but rather a failure of interagency information sharing—some people in other agencies didn't want to hear it. There was infighting. I wasn't privy to it, but we heard there was real tension behind the scenes. Some didn't want to admit it was an intelligence failure and tried to shift the blame back to Consular Affairs.

After all, consular officers were the ones who issued the visas. And as I recall, Secretary Powell told her, "It's going to have to be you." She saluted… and stepped down. She was replaced by Maura Harty.

But I think it's important to recognize what she contributed, not only in modernizing the systems, but in her human approach to leadership. She saw the value of the people working in Consular Affairs.

As we've talked about throughout this interview, for many years, consular work was labeled "non-substantive." That was the phrase: there was "substantive" work—and then everything else. But I hope it's come through in our conversations that I view consular work as very much substantive. It's part and parcel of diplomacy.

Talking with visa applicants, engaging with American citizens abroad, interpreting U.S. law and communicating it to the public, interpreting what the public is telling us, and using that to assess local conditions—that's not just administrative work. That's diplomacy. That's national security. That's public service.

And Mary Ryan understood that. She fought for that. She fought to have consular work recognized for what it truly is: core diplomatic work.

And, just to link this back, we also talked earlier about the 1990s, when I was in Moscow during the government shutdown. Remember what function kept running? The consular function.

Q: Because it was self-financing, or mostly?

GOODFRIEND: No, no—it wasn't self-financing at that point. That came later. The reason the consular function continued during the shutdown was due to the pressure on members of Congress. There was strong pressure from constituents—American citizens abroad—who relied on those services. And even though visa applicants aren't technically constituents, there are often ties or relationships that made their cases politically relevant as well.

So, there was authorization to keep consular services running. And, interestingly, other sections of the embassy started looking at their own activities to see whether anything they were doing might fall under consular work—because the consular section was the one still operating.

This was just before we started collecting separate consular fees. That fee-based funding model began around the same time I was in Moscow. The shutdown may have occurred just before that system was in place. But again, the key point is this: What is considered essential embassy work? And ironically, the work that had to continue—the work that was too important to stop—was consular work.

Building on that, Mary Ryan began to emphasize that consular officers weren't just service providers—we were leaders. We make decisions that directly affect people's lives. We are often the public face of the U.S. embassy. The way we lead our teams, the way we uphold integrity in our responsibilities—that defines leadership.

She really tried to instill the idea that consular officers are leaders within the mission. Every section has its function, of course, but consular work should not be viewed as peripheral. It's central. And those of us doing that work should recognize that we are part of the embassy leadership.

Q: Let me interject something from my experience as a consular officer in Jamaica, which was a heavy-application post. Back in 1984, when I first joined the Foreign Service, we were told that consular officers are the face of the embassy. Yes, there's a Public Affairs Section whose officers appear in public from time to time, but we were the ones people saw every day.

That visibility meant that if the embassy developed a negative reputation—if newspaper articles or editorials claimed the U.S. was cruel in denying visas—we were the ones who bore the blame. Yet we still had to adjudicate visas. And when large numbers of applicants couldn't overcome the presumption that they were intending immigrants, there was little we could do to change that image except to engage directly with the public.

We tried to explain how the system worked, how applicants could best prepare for an interview, and why regulations constrained our decisions. At the very least, giving people clear information showed respect: "We understand you want to travel to the U.S., but we have rules we must follow." That kind of outreach sometimes helped blunt the harshest criticism in the media, though not always. Some cases—such as those involving sick children or celebrities—inevitably attracted attention, regardless of outcome.

It was, and remains, a razor's edge. Handling it requires thoughtful leadership—both from managers of the consular section and from entry-level officers who are still learning what is culturally appropriate, and how to deny a visa in a way that is firm yet respectful.

What is often overlooked is that consular officers, as they advance, also acquire deep substantive knowledge: of the U.S. refugee and asylum systems, of how international organizations are resourced, and of how embassies themselves function and manage their resources. Some officers even go on to work in those organizations, gaining insights that strengthen cooperation overseas.

GOODFRIEND: Absolutely. And a big part of that is not just explaining it to the public, but to your colleagues inside the mission—to the ambassador, the deputy chief of mission, the other section heads. It's about making sure consular work is represented at the table, that it's seen as integral to the embassy's mission.

That was certainly the case in Moscow, where we were dealing with the effects of organized crime on the visa process. But it wasn't just a consular issue—it had broader implications for the society and the political environment across Russia and the former Soviet Union. We didn't keep that information to ourselves. We worked with the political section, shared what we were seeing in interviews, and helped build a more comprehensive understanding of what was happening.

We also needed their support when, for example, we were planning to deny a visa to a senior Russian official. That kind of decision required buy-in across the mission. And for that, consular officers had to have credibility. We needed to be able to explain not just what we were doing, but why—and what it meant for U.S. interests.

Leadership also meant recognizing how those decisions affected our own staff. Whether it was taking a strong position on criminal activity or simply moving from paper files to digital ones, we had to be aware of how these changes impacted the people we worked with. Digitizing files may seem mundane, but for someone whose entire job had been managing physical documents, that shift could feel deeply personal. As a leader, you had to bring them with you.

And in cases where our actions might draw attention or provoke threats, we had to ensure our staff understood the value of their work and felt supported—while also taking care not to put them at undue risk.

All this ties back to the broader shift that began after the first World Trade Center attack in 1993. We started building systems of accountability. We told our officers: if you make a decision, your name is on it. You're responsible for having reviewed all the available information. But we weren't taking that responsibility away from them—we were affirming their authority, and expecting accountability.

That also meant adapting to a digital environment. Officers were no longer writing notes on slips of paper tucked into files. Notes had to be entered into a shared system, clearly written, and understandable by people you might never meet—at another post, or in Washington. These notes weren't just for internal use anymore. Customs and Border

Protection could see them at the port of entry, and they might help explain a traveler's situation to the inspecting officer.

So, we had to emphasize: Be responsible for what you write. Don't stereotype. Don't use acronyms that nobody else understands. Don't simply repeat what's on the form. Instead, explain how you came to your decision, so that someone reviewing the case later can follow your reasoning.

That ability to clearly explain a decision—that's an essential skill for any diplomat. And for consular officers, it's a daily responsibility.

And then there's the matter of referrals. One of the cornerstones of consular independence is that no one can force a consular officer to issue a visa—not another section head, not even a colleague making a personal request. Only the ambassador or DCM can sign off on a Class A recommendation to issue a visa. And even then, the ambassador must be able to justify why it's in the interest of the U.S. government, and the recommendation can't override a serious ineligibility.

All of this—accountability, transparency, leadership, communication—was part of Mary Ryan's legacy. After she retired, and then after her passing, a new global award was created in her name. There had already been an award recognizing outstanding mid-level consular officers. The Mary Ryan Award was established to honor senior-level officers, those whose consular service had a lasting impact.

So, getting back to your question—whether what I had done during my tour in Syria was recognized—yes, it was. And not just with a Meritorious or even a Superior Honor Award, but with the Mary Ryan Award.

This was something Washington itself had noted. I had been in close communication with them throughout that period, and the recognition reflected the full scope of the work we did. That included making sure the American citizen community understood the evolving situation, knew what steps they might need to take as the embassy was closing, and had guidance on how to safeguard themselves—whether to leave, or how to navigate the risks.

It also involved the steps we took to protect our own staff—the planning we did to position personnel throughout the region so we could continue delivering consular services effectively, even after the physical closure of the mission. We put in place the infrastructure that allowed us to issue and deliver passports throughout Syria—something we hadn't been able to do before—by making effective use of digital technologies.

So, it was a whole range of things. And yes—short answer—it was recognized. I felt deeply honored to receive an award named after someone I truly admired during her tenure as Assistant Secretary.

Q: Just a quick follow-up up these awards, these named awards, typically come with an award ceremony in Washington, often given by the Assistant Secretary or the Secretary himself or herself. Is that what happened with yours?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, it was. The award was presented while I was already in Washington, between assignments, in November, during the Department's annual awards ceremony.

The Secretary didn't present it, but Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who was then the Director General of the Foreign Service did.

Q: Interesting, okay, okay, all right, so now you are back in Washington, you've received the award, and you begin work in your next assignment.

GOODFRIEND: Yeah. I was back early—my next official assignment wasn't scheduled to start until September, when I'd begin studying Hungarian in preparation for my posting to Budapest in 2013. So, this was March 2012, and I was essentially back without a formal assignment for several months, March through August.

One of those months was used for home leave. I think we took that in April. It was a nice way to return—a new house, family back together. And of course, home leave is meant to help Foreign Service personnel reconnect with the country they represent. I've always taken that seriously. I'd usually spend home leave in Arizona, where I grew up, and in California. It was a chance to talk to people—family, friends, even strangers—and get a sense of what's on their minds. It helped me stay grounded in how people outside the Washington, D.C. bubble see things. We'd take road trips, visit a lot of places, and have good conversations.

When I returned to Washington, I made a point of connecting with people—the Assistant Secretary in Consular Affairs, the Deputy Assistant Secretary in EUR, colleagues I'd worked with, folks from Ops. I'd been in touch with many of them throughout my time in Syria and Amman.

One of the things I followed up on was the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for our local employees in Damascus. While I was in Amman, those cases weren't really moving forward. So, I spoke with the head of CA/VO (Consular Affairs / Visa Office), the legal advisor, and others to understand what the holdup was. I wanted us to come to a shared understanding of the criteria—particularly as outlined in the Foreign Affairs Manual—for determining whether someone had provided "heroic service" and therefore qualified.

The Manual said that if the U.S. had ceased diplomatic relations with a country, that could be considered grounds for SIV eligibility. In Syria, while we hadn't formally severed diplomatic relations, we had closed the embassy—and in some ways, that made things even more precarious for our local staff. They were still representing U.S. interests in a country from which American personnel had withdrawn. We came to agreement, and the SIVs began to move forward again.

There were also debriefings and information-sharing sessions. We did a brown-bag talk with Consular Affairs to share what it was like during those final months in Syria—how we managed operations, what we learned. And I also made myself available, asking, "What can I do in the meantime until language training begins?"

Q: Since we're in a sort of a brief moment in between…. I just wanted to ask you one other thing about the end of your tour in Damascus, to the extent you were able to follow it. We're now 10 years out from this. Did we maintain consular operations in Amman, or did we eventually close those?

GOODFRIEND: Oh, yes. The U.S. Embassy in Amman continues to function fully, including its consular operations. What did change is that the two Damascus consular positions—created temporarily and filled by officers relocated after the Damascus closure—were never made permanent. Those were Damascus positions, not Amman positions. So once the tours of those officers ended, the positions ended too.

Amman returned to normal staffing levels. Beirut did as well. That said, Syrian visa applicants are still encouraged to apply in Amman. Some continue to apply in Beirut, too, often because it's closer. But Amman isn't facing the same kind of emergency demand it did in those early years, so it's now able to manage appointments in a way that aligns with its resources.

We had to balance multiple priorities back then. First, we anticipated a significant surge in workload, especially after the Damascus closure. Second, we wanted to maintain consular capacity in the region with officers who were credentialed to work on Syria. That was important because you couldn't just send someone assigned to Amman or Beirut into Syria to carry out consular work. You needed a Syrian visa and official approval from the Syrian government to operate there.

And just to clarify how that works: diplomatic and consular titles—like Vice Consul, Consul, or Consul General for consular officers, or Second Secretary, First Secretary for diplomats—are assigned by the U.S. government based on your role. But host governments must also recognize and accept those roles. You can't perform consular functions—like issuing visas or passports—unless you've been officially designated with a consular title and that title has been recognized by the host government.

So, for example, you can't pull a political officer into the consular section and say, "We're short-handed—can you help with visas?" Not unless that officer has a consular commission authorized by Washington and accepted by the host country.

Q: If I'm not mistaken. Also, consular assignments come with a consular appointment, but only to that country.

GOODFRIEND: Right. Everything—both consular and diplomatic titles—is assigned to a *particular* country. So, for example, if you're designated as a Vice Consul in Damascus, that doesn't automatically make you a Vice Consul in Amman. Now, Washington *can* transfer your title if you're reassigned or sent on temporary duty, but that has to be officially done.

Let's say you're in Damascus as a Vice Consul. You can't just show up in London and start issuing visas. Washington would have to send you there on TDY—temporary duty—and issue you a consular commission for London while you're there. That's the U.S. side of the process.

But there's also the host country side. For you to function as a diplomat or consular officer, the receiving country has to accept you in that role. That's where diplomatic immunity, for example, as well as other roles and protections under the Vienna Convention, comes in—not because you have a diplomatic passport from the U.S., and not even because Washington says you're a diplomat, but because the host country has formally recognized you as such.

So, ultimately, the U.S. can assign whatever title it wants, but unless the receiving state agrees and grants you the appropriate diplomatic or consular status, you can't legally carry out your duties in that country.

Q: And here, just as a quick aside, my very first assignment as a consular officer to Jamaica. My official recognition as a consular officer came from Queen Elizabeth, because she was the head of state, and it was quite a lovely document with, you know, the old-style seal, little ribbon, and the signature of the Queen. Well, I'm sure they had an auto signature machine, but it was quite a lovely document, and the Queen herself approved my status as a consular officer.

GOODFRIEND: So, I hope you still have that.

Q: Somewhere, yes.

GOODFRIEND: And it also touches on something important—the formal record of one's status in a host country. Whether in a diplomatic or consular capacity, that status isn't just something we assign ourselves. It's a reciprocal process. The United States may designate someone as a Consul or Diplomat, but that designation only carries legal weight if the host country formally accepts it.

In our system, consular officers assigned to embassies are considered diplomats and receive full protection under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. That includes 24/7 immunity—everything they do is assumed to be part of their official function.

But those assigned specifically to consulates fall under a different treaty—the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Consular immunity is more limited. It applies only while the officer is performing official consular duties. Anything outside of that—like a traffic incident, for example—might not be covered. So, you sometimes see public debates about whether a consular officer has full immunity or not, depending on their post and what they were doing at the time.

This also affects how assignments are structured. For example, if you're a political officer assigned to a consulate—not an embassy—you fall under consular status, not diplomatic. It's not just about job function; it's about where you're assigned and how your host country recognizes your role.

Getting back to the question you asked earlier about Amman, once the Damascus embassy closed, the staff positions associated with it weren't reconstituted. That meant there was no longer a standing resource of Syria-commissioned consular officers in the region—people who could immediately be deployed if we needed to respond to an evacuation or some other emergency in Syria. That had been an important reason to keep those officers in Amman with their Syria-specific titles and status.

But once the Syrian government stopped granting diplomatic status—and we stopped asking for it—those Syria-based positions disappeared. If Amman needed more help to handle increased demand, they could request temporary (TDY) support from Washington. But they'd have to justify that request with numbers, similar to when I had been TDY'd to Budapest years earlier, to help with the visa surge from Serbia. That was an emergency response.

Still, the digital infrastructure we'd put in place allowed me to remain connected to consular issues in Syria in a way that wouldn't have been possible 15 or 20 years earlier. I was still receiving emails from contacts in Syria—people had my address—and I could refer them to the right people in Washington or raise citizen service concerns as needed. For a month or two, I was also helping American Citizen Services (ACS) staff figure out how to access the digital files in our new collaborative platforms. It was a new environment, and not everyone was comfortable yet with navigating it remotely.

So, I ended up providing informal support—showing where case files were stored, explaining how to access them, especially ACS records. That naturally led to the next thing. When I offered my availability to the Bureau of Consular Affairs, they said: We need someone who's comfortable with technology to help us modernize our systems.

They weren't looking for a software developer—just someone who could work with existing systems, understand how they function, and help improve usability. Our consular software at that point was still based on systems developed in the late '80s and early '90s. They were becoming clunky and unfriendly both to staff and the public.

They knew I wasn't a programmer, but I had experience using the tools, and I was generally unafraid of the technology. I didn't have the frustration level that some others had. I wasn't quick to throw up my hands and say, "I can't work with this." My mindset has always been: How can we make this work for us? How can we use these tools rather than try to sidestep them?

So that became my role—offering feedback and insight on how to make our consular systems more accessible for staff and for the public. What kind of information did we need? How should our systems interact? How do we ensure they work better together?

I think part of this also reflected the generational moment we were in. This was 2012. You and I had overlapped in our careers, and I think it's fair to say that a good part of our generation in the Foreign Service still had some discomfort with technology. There were many—frankly—who weren't happy about having to integrate new digital systems into their daily work.

From the outset, I was always trying to make the technology work for us—not the other way around. Going back to my earliest days, even before I was posted to Tel Aviv, I remember pushing for systems that could actually talk to each other. I wanted to be able to focus on the parts of the job that were better suited to human judgment—things that required understanding, context, and decision-making—not repetitive data entry or fragmented workflows.

In Tel Aviv, I was asking: Can we enter data first so that we can record our decisions directly into the system? And I quickly discovered, no—it didn't work that way yet. In Delhi, I tried putting a terminal at the interview window to streamline the process and asked, "How can we make this setup more effective?"

So, throughout my career, I was working with technology to make it serve our work, not define it. That mindset carried through consistently.

When I returned to Washington in 2012, Consular Affairs had just lost the head of consular information systems. He had stepped down, and since I had a good working relationship with many people in that office, they asked if I could step in and serve as an advisor for a few months. I agreed—thinking I'd help out short term, and offer what I could.

But I'll admit, I was starting to feel a bit boxed in. I was regularly seen as "the systems person" within Consular Affairs, and while I understood the technology and could work with it, that wasn't how I saw myself—or how I wanted to be seen.

I was always more interested in the people side of things: citizen services, engaging directly, helping others understand the law and how to apply it effectively. My strength was in working with people—interpreting the law, reading the local environment, and helping teams collaborate. Yes, I could use the technology, and yes, I could help improve it—but for me, the technology was always an adjunct, a tool.

Q: Let me interject one point. You've now been recognized and assigned as a Deputy Chief of Mission, and earlier, you mentioned the importance of not being pigeonholed as "the IT guy." That matters, because it's easy for management to overlook the broader range of skills you've developed—through consular management and through your *collaboration with colleagues in the management and IT sections—and how you've integrated those into your leadership style.*

In the Foreign Service, you often have to be your own advocate. Unless you have a champion in the front office who knows the full scope of your abilities, you need to make sure others understand that you're not just the IT specialist in Consular Affairs. You bring a wider set of skills that deserve recognition, particularly as you move into senior management positions.

GOODFRIEND: Yeah, yeah—you're right. And in my own EERs, when I wrote about my work, I always framed things in terms of leadership: how I worked with my team, how I identified their strengths, how I mentored and empowered them, how we navigated the local environment, and how we communicated effectively both internally and externally. Technology was always there in the background—as a tool I was comfortable using—but it was never something I wanted to highlight as the main focus of my work.

I don't recall if I mentioned this earlier, but between 1999 and 2002, I worked in Consular Systems—so yes, I was clearly engaged with the systems side of the house during that time. That coincided with the Department's creation of its first Chief Information Officer (CIO). The State Department restructured the Bureau of Information Resource Management (IRM) and appointed a CIO whose role went beyond just managing a bureau—he was tasked with overseeing how the entire Department could better use information and technology.

This CIO began reaching out to bureaus to explore how technology—much of it funded through consular MRV (machine-readable visa) fees—could be leveraged more effectively. His vision was influenced in part by the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel's report on the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. That gave him both a mandate and the congressional backing to push for change. He started building a collaborative network designed to improve information sharing across the Department and between agencies.

But here's where some tension arose. He framed it as technology transforming diplomacy. And that rubbed many diplomats the wrong way. There was pushback from many in the diplomatic field who felt strongly that diplomacy shouldn't be defined by the technology we use. Rather, diplomats should be aware of what technology can do and be empowered with the right tools to carry out their work effectively. But people, not systems, should shape the direction of diplomacy—its goals, values, and practices.

That debate—between the technologists who want to reshape diplomacy through tech, and those of us who argue for a more human-centered approach—continues to this day. I've always placed myself in the second camp. I engage with the technology side extensively, but I do so from the perspective that our mission and objectives must come first. Then we ask: how can technology support what we're trying to achieve?

And I have to say, in hindsight, the CIO's own departure from the Department reflected that tension. Part of what contributed to his exit, I think, was this belief that diplomacy could be reengineered by technology alone. There were other issues, of course, but that disconnect—between tools and purpose, systems and mission—was central.

We'll likely return to this theme in our later conversations, because it continues to raise the foundational question: what comes first—the human mission, or the tools? Do we shape our work to fit the technology that's handed to us, or do we define the work first and demand that the technology serve that purpose? For me, that's never been a question. It's the people and the purpose that come first. Technology should follow.

Q: Here, once again, just a very quick point, having lived through a lot of these changes myself, you are correct that one of the big things, One of the big dilemmas the State Department faces is overestimating how much technology can replace the human interaction in diplomacy and underestimate how vital it is to have people speaking to other countries in an effective cross cultural way.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, absolutely. That human element is fundamental. We're a human organization operating in a human society. The progress we make, whether in diplomacy or any other field, doesn't come from how much technology we can implement. It comes from understanding what makes us human and how we shape society through relationships, communication, and judgment.

That said, we also have to recognize the environment we're operating in today. It includes the internet, smartphones, digital platforms—these are part of our reality. We shouldn't ignore them. But at the same time, we shouldn't overstate their power to replace the need for people to speak to other people across cultures.

You and I both know colleagues who say, "I'm old school—just point me to the door, and I'll go talk to someone." Others prefer pen and paper, writing notes by hand and expecting someone else to type them up. That approach is symbolic of a certain generation or mindset, often shaped by early mentors or supervisors who trained them to do things "the way we've always done it."

What happens sometimes is that even incoming officers, encouraged to bring new ideas, eventually feel they have to conform. After five years, they've adapted to a style that reflects their supervisor's expectations, not necessarily their own instincts. For example, being told, "Don't email me—put a printed memo on my desk every morning." There's comfort in those patterns, and it's often justified as preserving human interaction. But it also reinforces resistance to change.

For me, being comfortable with technology never meant believing it would save us or fundamentally change how we work. It meant recognizing it as a tool—something I could use to carry out my work more effectively and comfortably. The goal wasn't to let the tool dictate how we operate, but to ask: How can I draw on this to enhance what I'm already doing?

In that respect, Consular Affairs was sincerely trying to move forward—adapting systems to a world where the public expects to engage online, where personnel across government expect to access information efficiently. The challenge is no longer whether we need to evolve, but what's holding us back? Why can't our systems do what we need them to do? And how do we fix that?

So, in 2012, I found myself back in Consular Systems—after having worked there earlier, from 1999 to 2002. Some of the same people were still there, and we had a good working relationship. In fact, a few went back even further—to when I first entered Consular Systems in 1988, as a junior officer trying to get the Visa Waiver Pilot Program off the ground. I couldn't tell people what to do back then, but I could say, "Here's the business need. Can you help?" And often, they could.

And again, from 1999 to 2002, I was a generalist—like most Foreign Service officers—embedded in a specialist environment. Technicians and programmers are specialists. But consular, political, management, economic, and public affairs officers—we're generalists. We move across functions and countries. So, as a generalist in a technical space, I brought something different.

My role was to bridge that gap—explaining to specialists why we needed the technology to work a certain way, what the data meant to us, how it could be better presented, and how a system could be positioned to encourage people to use it. I was constantly drawing on personal experience—not as a tech expert, but as someone who understood the work and could advocate for how technology should serve it.

And so now, returning to Consular Systems a decade later, I could see just how much the world had changed. Technology was no longer something new or novel—it had become a baseline expectation. In fact, the equation had flipped. Where once the specialists, the technologists, were introducing new tools and features—often met with confusion or hesitance—now it was the users who were leading the way, saying: "We want more from this."

Instead of, "What's this new thing you've put on my desk?" people were now asking, "Why can't I do this with our systems when I can already do it on my phone or laptop?" That shift—from passive adaptation to active demand—was significant.

Just to illustrate the state of things when I first returned to Washington: my account was still technically assigned to Damascus. Until I received a new assignment, I was operating in a kind of digital limbo. When I logged into systems in DC, the authentication process would struggle—it had to verify my credentials through the Damascus server, which had been physically moved to Amman. My email was still stored on servers accessed through Amman, and performance was sluggish, to say the least.

Ironically, I often found it faster to use the notebook computer I had been using in Amman, logging in via wireless using my fob. And if a wireless signal wasn't available—this would no longer be allowed under today's security protocols—I would use my phone as a hotspot. That way, I could at least connect via "OpenNet Everywhere" (OpenNet Everywhere was the expansion of OpenNet+ so that it could be accessed remotely, e.g. using a fob) and access my email and files, even if it was a bit of a workaround.

Eventually, after two or three weeks, we sorted out the issue and migrated my user profile properly to a Washington-based system. But the experience underscored just how outdated and inflexible some of our internal systems still were—how long it could take for even something as basic as a personnel reassignment to catch up with the IT infrastructure.

That real-world friction was part of what led Consular Affairs to say: "Why don't you go into Systems for a while and help us understand what's slowing down the shift from these 1990s-era platforms to something that actually meets the needs of the 21st century?"

So, while I was back in Washington, I took on a couple of short-term projects—short-term by design. I wanted them to be achievable within the few months I'd be there, rather than being assigned to some long-term effort that would continue well beyond my departure.

One project involved identifying how we could make the online visa application process more user-friendly. Another focused on understanding the challenges behind how our various legacy consular systems communicate—or often fail to communicate—with each other.

To some extent, it was amusing. But it was also frustrating. These were the very same issues Consular Affairs had been discussing for over a decade. In fact, while I was still in Damascus, they had brought me and others back to Washington for a focus group on consular modernization. The goal then, as now, was to move toward a more unified approach—identifying the common elements among systems and services: visa processing, passport issuance, and American Citizen Services.

We asked: What do these processes have in common? Could a passport application, from a systems perspective, be seen as functionally similar to a visa application? What's the first step in either case? When is data entered? What's the sequence of actions? By mapping that out, we could start to define the structure of our work in clearer, more process-driven terms.

There's often a perception that this kind of analysis is only applicable to consular work—because it's procedural, because there's a form, a queue, a decision. Political officers might say, "Well, that's consular—you can define a process there. We deal with intangibles. We talk with people, take notes. There's no set process." But I always found it fascinating to try to do the same exercise with political work.

You could ask: What exactly does a political officer do? How do they gather information? How do they take notes? What happens to those notes? How is analysis generated, and who receives it? You can map that. There's a workflow, even if it's less linear. There's a process behind analysis, reporting, and briefings. It's not magic—it's just less often documented.

That mindset—thinking in terms of workflows and resource optimization—is something I brought with me wherever I worked. And if there's a "systems" element to how I operate, it's in that sense: breaking things down so we can understand them, define roles clearly, and use our resources more effectively.

When I worked with interns, for example, I always asked: What do they bring to the team? How can we define their role so it's meaningful for them and beneficial for us? That's a systems way of thinking—not in terms of software, but in terms of people and processes.

And in London, we actually formalized that approach. We used a management methodology, ISO 9000, I think, that focused on documenting and certifying processes. It helped us define what we were doing, how we were doing it, and how we could make it repeatable, auditable, and improvable.

One of the things the Embassy in London was working on during my time there—from 2004 to 2008—was process certification. The idea was to document and formalize how different sections operated, to define what we were doing, how we were doing it, and how it all fit together.

In the consular section, this proved to be a particularly useful exercise. We looked at things like: What is the process for issuing a passport? What's the process for assisting an American in prison? And we broke those procedures down step by step. It wasn't just bureaucratic formality; it helped the team better understand their own roles and how to ensure consistency and efficiency in service delivery.

We managed to get that done while I was there. Of course, after all the fanfare of achieving certification, I suspect the documentation eventually ended up in a drawer somewhere, and people moved on with their work, thinking, "Well, we know what we're doing now—let's just get on with it."

Q: Just a quick aside here, when I was in Hungary as a cultural affairs officer, my boss sent me to an ISO course. I duly went. I did not understand it, and I did not think it applied to public affairs, but I can see how, in Consular Affairs, where you actually work with products, any kind of product chain, it would be much easier to apply.

GOODFRIEND: Here's where I'd respectfully disagree. I think it's always valuable—regardless of whether you're in Consular, Public Affairs, Political, or Economic work—to take a step back and ask: What exactly are we doing? That exercise of defining your processes is useful everywhere, not just in places with clearly structured outputs like passports or visas.

Earlier, we talked about how, even in consular work, it was a challenge to get officers to write succinct, clear notes explaining their decisions. That wasn't easy, but it was important. And I think the same kind of clarity applies across all functional areas.

Take Public Affairs. Suppose you're putting together a program featuring American poets from a specific cultural background. It's one of many events you're organizing to promote cultural diplomacy in, say, Hungary. Well, what's your process?

Do you begin with a brainstorming session? Do you refer back to previous programs to avoid duplication? Are you working from thematic guidance provided by Washington? How do you choose venues? How do you reach your target audiences? What kind of follow-up do you conduct to assess impact?

All of those are steps in a process—even if it's not always labeled that way. The same goes for managing J1 visa programs, selecting candidates, assembling review panels, coordinating with other sections—there's a sequence, there's documentation, there's decision-making.

Even in grant management, someone has to be certified to sign off on awards. That person must understand clearly defined responsibilities and protocols. And that, too, is a process.

Or take the work of a press officer: drafting and releasing a statement. What's the workflow? How do you gather the information, draft the message, get it cleared, release it, and then monitor the response?

In Political Affairs, the same questions apply. How do you track contacts? What do you do with the business cards you receive? How do you share those contacts with your team? How do you document your conversations and make them useful to others?

If you can't define the process, it's difficult to collaborate across sections. You don't know when or how to contribute information, or where your work fits into theirs. But if you can define their process, and they can understand yours, you can work together more effectively.

I think this process-oriented perspective allowed me to integrate consular work into other parts of the mission without saying, "Okay, this officer is now seconded to Political or Public Affairs." Instead, I could say, "Here's what we do. Here's what they do. Here's how our functions align." That helped us build collaborative partnerships based on understanding, rather than mystery.

In broader terms, I think this reflects a mindset that distinguishes between "issue people" and "process people." Some are drawn to specific issues, such as combating child trafficking or advancing energy independence, and success for them means achieving concrete outcomes in that space.

I've always leaned more toward the process side. I ask: How can we build systems and workflows that enable us to tackle whatever issue we're addressing—whether it's organized crime, civil unrest, or visa fraud? What tools and structures help us address those challenges more effectively?

That's been a throughline in my career: putting processes in place to support the mission, whatever that mission happens to be.

So, when I found myself back in the Consular Affairs' systems office, that same perspective guided me. I was helping to improve how we present visa information to the public—making it more intuitive, accessible, and user-friendly. Internally, I was working to identify the common threads between systems: visa issuance, passport processing, and American Citizen Services.

What are the shared data points? What are the structural similarities? How can we get these systems to talk to each other, to work in harmony rather than in silos?

So, I brought in that process-oriented thinking—along with models and proposals for how the systems might be better integrated—to make sure that we weren't just modernizing for modernization's sake, but actually enabling our people to serve more effectively.

And then, as August rolled around, I began wrapping up my time with Consular Systems. I was showing the various models I'd developed, presenting the ideas and frameworks that we'd been able to shape over those few months. It was, in a sense, a moment of taking the training wheels off, saying: "Here's what we've accomplished in this short period. These are projects that can move forward without me."

I was preparing to transition to Hungarian language training and wanted to leave things in a place where others could carry on the work. I hoped that the tools and approaches I helped develop would be useful to consular personnel going forward—and that my engagement during that brief return to Consular Affairs had, in some way, added value.

So that was where I left things in August 2012, closing that chapter as I prepared to begin full-time language training at FSI. Actually, even before formally starting the course, I figured that since I was already in Washington, I might try to get a jump start. I reached out to the Hungarian Language Department at FSI to ask whether I could preview the materials or get some early reading done.

Their response? "You'll get the materials when you start the class." So, that was that.

Q: That's a typical reply, alright? So, we have come to the end of our two-hour session, and it's an excellent place to break because you're now finished with the temporary *assignment in Washington. You're ready to go over to FSI, and we can pick up with that at the next session.*

GOODFRIEND: Yeah, yeah. I was looking at this. This looked like a good time. And we'll stop there.

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Q: Okay, today is November 2, 2022, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. André, you had just completed your temporary duty in the Consular Affairs Bureau. And now you're getting ready for your assignment as DCM in Hungary.

GOODFRIEND: As noted, I had to leave Syria early, but language instruction has always been part of the preparation for the next assignment. I think I've mentioned before that language is something that entices me. It's an incentive for me when bidding on assignments. As with previous posts, there was a year of Hungarian language instruction built into the timeline for this tour.

At this point, it's September 2012, and I'm scheduled to arrive in Hungary. We haven't yet set the exact arrival date, but it will be either July or August 2013. So, this year will be spent studying Hungarian, and gaining an understanding of the political and social environment—what's happening in the region more broadly.

This is actually a good point to talk about preparation for State Department work—specifically, the need to know both the language and the area where one is assigned. The U.S. has been criticized at times for sending diplomats who don't adequately understand the language or the environment in which they're serving. In my experience, though, that's something the State Department has tried to address.

This will have been the third or fourth language I'd studied at the Foreign Service Institute. Before joining, I tested in several languages. I didn't study Hebrew at FSI before going to my first post—it was offered, but I already had a background in it. Then I studied Hindi for six months, and Russian for nearly a year. At the time, if you weren't tenured, the maximum language training you could get was six months. I managed to reach a 2/2 in Hindi, which was what was required. In a year of Russian, I got to a 3/3—possibly even a little higher—sufficient for the assignment.

Before going to Syria, I studied Arabic for one year, instead of the two years that would normally be provided, because the emergency situation there required me to arrive a year earlier.

For me, this aspect of the work—the language, the preparation—is one of the most attractive parts of serving in the State Department. We're asked not only to represent U.S. policy, but the Department also tries to ensure that we understand the environments in which we serve, and that we can engage in the local language. Of course, not everyone is interested in doing that.

I think I've mentioned before that one of the reasons I was assigned to Damascus—even though it was one of the more appealing posts on the list—was that it required two years of language training, and not everyone is willing to take that much time between assignments to study.

There's a perception in the system that taking time out for language training, spending too long in the classroom instead of being out at post, can be a disadvantage for your career. The thinking is, it doesn't help you get promoted or gain the operational experience needed to demonstrate that you can achieve policy goals.

But one could argue that one of those policy goals should be to understand the environment you're working in—and language is part of that.

So now I'm beginning Hungarian language training. As I said, language study is something I always look forward to.

Go ahead.

Q: Just a quick note here. Each year, when Foreign Service officers are evaluated for their efficiency, productivity, and so on, their evaluation form has six areas of competency. And what you're talking about are two areas of competency that are very important before you arrive at a new Foreign Service post. One is communication, cross-cultural communication, and the other is substantive knowledge. Both are very important. But they're not enough. In other words, having this foundation is very important. But then, when you get there, being able to use it in an actionable way will be part of how you are evaluated eventually. And I just wanted to make that point because, once again, people from the outside often don't realize how carefully and with what specificity Foreign Service officers are evaluated in so many different ways. Now, please continue.

GOODFRIEND: Right. I mean, communication isn't just about taking words in English, running them through a translator, and having them come out in the language of the country where you're serving. It's also about incorporating local nuance—understanding how what you're saying might be interpreted, even if it seems clear to an American audience.

Even if you've properly translated the words, you might be drawing on cultural references, pop culture, or historical allusions that don't carry over—or that mean something very different in the local context. Being able to anticipate how your words will sound to the person hearing or reading them is a key part of communication. And that's not just about language training—it's about the whole engagement.

One thing that's often said about language training—and something FSI has tried to address—is that diplomats are often taught a certain way of speaking, focused on specific topics, rather than being prepared to engage in routine matters. You might be trained to discuss nuclear disarmament or human rights at a high level, with the right vocabulary for those issues, which, of course, is important. But that's not the language you'll need when you go out to buy vegetables.

Q: Or talk to a plumber?

GOODFRIEND: Exactly. There can be a disconnect. You might have all this specialized vocabulary, but then you're out in the real world and you want to walk around, engage with people, and you realize: you're not ready for that. You're not ready for small talk or everyday transactions. You don't know how to explain what's wrong in your apartment to a plumber. And that can be intimidating. It can leave you wondering: how proficient am I, really? Can I connect?

I think FSI recognizes this. What I'm saying here isn't new—it's something that comes up often in conversations about how to prepare diplomats. The training can't just be about speaking with diplomatic counterparts in formal meetings—because in those meetings, honestly, there's usually an interpreter present. But being able to carry on a conversation outside of that setting, in a natural way, is a real challenge.

Sometimes there's even a tendency to divide training based on job function—this is the language a Political Officer needs, this is what an Economic Officer needs, and so on—as if those spheres are completely separate. But in reality, consular officers, for example, often need to be even more conversational, since they're interacting with the general public.

That said, even consular language training can sometimes focus too narrowly. You'll get trained to ask things like, "What kind of visa are you applying for? What's your income?"—which is important—but that's not the same as learning how to hold a real conversation. Asking someone what they do for a living, how their day was, how things are in the country—that takes different language skills.

So that's one of the challenges of truly preparing to communicate. Fortunately, I think today's diplomats are better equipped because of the tools available now. With the internet, you can get real-time exposure to language. You can read the local press, watch the news, stream programs from other countries, and hear the language in use in ways that just weren't possible in the 1990s.

Now, going back to Hungarian language class—these classes are small, as they usually are at FSI. They try to keep class sizes to around three people, which allows students to interact both with each other and with the teacher, fostering real conversation. It's not a lecture-style setting with fifteen students. This is intensive language training designed to build conversational ability, reading comprehension, and listening. Writing isn't emphasized as much—we're not expected to compose essays—but we are expected to be able to read letters or articles and carry on conversations.

In my case, there were three students and one teacher. And the teachers at FSI, while all native speakers, aren't always formally trained as language teachers. They often come from a wide range of professions—journalists, government employees, social workers…. That background gives them depth and the ability to bring in real-life context. They're not just focused on grammar drills—they engage with the material and with us. They help us explore the cultural significance of what we're discussing.

And that's important. They act as a kind of cultural sounding board. So, when you're in a conversation—whether with classmates or with the teacher—you're engaging with someone who can react authentically. They might be impressed that you've picked up on a certain nuance, or surprised that you know something from their culture. Or they might be offended—because what you said doesn't resonate, or clashes with how things are understood in their country.

Q: A quick confirmation of what you're saying, I served in Hungary from 2005 to 2008. I did not get full language training; I got about six weeks of survival Hungarian. But once you get there, often when you speak to Hungarians, not necessarily in the government, but average Hungarians, and you say, Oh, what do you do for a living, and often they'll tell you, Oh, I work in a bank, or I'm a teacher, but I'm really a poet. I do the teaching or the work at the bank to earn a living. But my real vocation is poetry, or my real vocation is music. I play clarinet in a group, and we play jazz. Hungarians are often completely ripped by the arts; they're interested in them, and they're very interested in participating to the extent their talent allows.

GOODFRIEND: Yes—and when you're able to have those kinds of conversations, you're also, in a way, representing your own culture. As an American abroad, that's part of what we bring into the conversation.

This ties into why we have "home leave"—the idea being that diplomats periodically get out of the Washington, D.C. environment, where there's such an intense focus on politics and governance. If you spend all your time in D.C., you can start to believe that life in the U.S. revolves entirely around government, NGOs, and political policy.

But when I go back to Arizona or California, I'm reminded that people are focused on very different things: Local issues…. The environment…. The cost of food…. Sports…. What's being taught in schools…. Family life…. And, like you said, many people separate what they do for a living from what really inspires them.

That's something people outside the U.S. sometimes miss. There's a stereotype that Americans are singularly focused on work and money—working 18 or 24 hours a day just to get rich, without taking time to enjoy life. But that's not the whole picture. There's real pride in many countries, including Hungary, in the idea that life isn't just about making money—that it's about being human, enjoying the arts, music, spirituality, poetry.

And I wouldn't argue with that. But I'd also offer a counterpoint: not all Americans are about making money. There are many who live here, who work hard to support their families, but who also pursue passions—playing in bands, writing poetry, engaging in activities that help them maintain balance. It's part of what we talk about a lot now in the U.S.—this idea of "work-life balance." We need to live in a way that doesn't consume us, that doesn't burn us out.

And that's something I think people in every culture can relate to. When we talk to each other as human beings, those commonalities come through. They help us communicate more deeply and challenge stereotypes—like the idea that Europeans always know how to enjoy life while Americans don't. That's not always true. There are plenty of people in every culture who feel like work takes them away from the things they care most about.

Finding those points of similarity—being able to talk about what people do outside of work, what they watch, what music they listen to, what inspires them—that opens up real conversations. Pop culture, daily life. Even sports—though I admit, I'm not a big spectator-sports fan—can be a major touchpoint. Knowing what teams people support, whether it's soccer elsewhere or football, basketball, or baseball in the U.S., can spark great conversations. It gives people a way to compare their own cultures with others.

Now, back to the Hungarian language class and what you mentioned earlier—yes, Hungary is full of people who take real interest in life around them. But like many places, by 2012, it had also become highly politically polarized.

At that point, the current government—led by Viktor Orbán and Fidesz—had been in power for about two years. In fact, when I was still in Damascus, these elections had just occurred. It marked a significant shift—from a socialist government that had been more focused on providing social benefits, to one that identified as conservative, nationalist, and more centralizing.

And part of what drove that change was the 2008 financial crisis. What started in the U.S.—the collapse of the housing market, defaults, the spillover into junk bonds—destabilized the stock market and led to a near-global financial collapse. It wasn't just a U.S. problem; it hit the European Union hard as well.

Countries in Central Europe—Hungary among them—that had moved away from the Soviet sphere in 1989 and turned toward the West, joining the EU with hopes of prosperity, were suddenly facing economic hardship. And that hardship challenged the very narrative that Western integration would automatically bring economic success.

In a way, it ties back to what we were discussing earlier—how money and livelihood shape people's lives and political choices, and how those choices, in turn, shape the environment we're working in as diplomats.

It seems significant to me—and I think it was already clear back in 2012 and 2013—that the driving vision for many of these countries when they joined the EU was the promise of financial prosperity and material satisfaction. Of course, part of it was about liberal democracy, freedom of speech, and a transformed political environment—a breath of fresh air after the repression of the Soviet era. While these countries weren't part of the Soviet Union itself, they were certainly within its orbit, under a form of heavy, Soviet-influenced socialism.

So yes, joining the EU was about embracing democracy and freedom. But it was also very much about the promise of economic benefits. The prevailing hope across much of Central Europe was: “Now that we’ve broken away from repression and scarcity, we’ll share in the prosperity we’ve seen in the West.” Capitalism was seen as a path to a better standard of living. And, for a while, there was progress. People were saving money, building lives, believing that they would finally enjoy the financial rewards of being in a market-based democracy.

Then came 2008—and it wiped much of that optimism away.

The financial crisis wasn’t just a downturn; it was, in many ways, seen as a capitalist catastrophe. After all, what better symbols of capitalism are there than the stock market, foreign exchange rates, and currency values? And when those collapsed, and people lost their life savings, the promise of the West started to look hollow.

Hungary, in particular, suffered heavily. The government at the time faced a financial crisis so severe that austerity measures had to be imposed. Budget cuts. Belt-tightening. Restrictions that hit people directly, just to avoid state bankruptcy.

The Prime Minister at the time, Ferenc Gyurcsány, had been elected in 2006 as head of the Hungarian Socialist Party. But as the crisis deepened, and as he became embroiled in a politically explosive scandal, he resigned before the end of his term. What triggered the crisis even further was the leaking of a speech he gave internally to his party—a speech in which he admitted, in very blunt and profane language, that they had been lying to the public day after day about the economy. That admission, meant for party insiders, erupted into public outrage once it was leaked.

What years did you say you were there?

Q: 2005 to 2008, I left just before the big collapse of the housing market and the effects, the knock-on effects it had.

GOODFRIEND: So, you’re familiar with Gyurcsány—when he was elected, and then the internal party speech he gave. That speech could be interpreted in more than one way. On one hand, it seemed like he was fed up with having to conceal the reality of the economic situation from the public, frustrated by the manipulations his party was engaging in to make things appear more positive than they were. But once the tape of that speech was leaked, the opposition framed it very differently. They said, “Here is the Prime Minister admitting to lying.” It became a rallying cry: we are being governed by a liar who is destroying the country.

The political climate became incredibly divisive. Gyurcsány stepped down before the end of his term and appointed a so-called technocrat to finish the mandate and try to restore fiscal credibility. That technocratic government did manage to stabilize things to some extent, but the Socialist Party was left deeply weakened.

In 2010, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis and the loss of confidence in the Socialists, the Fidesz party—led by Viktor Orbán—was able not only to win the election, but to win decisively. They had positioned themselves as center-right, conservative, but still pragmatic and centrist enough to appeal broadly.

It was no ordinary victory. It was a landslide. Even though the vote percentages weren’t dramatically higher than past winners, the way the electoral system was structured—the way districts were drawn and seats were allocated—meant that their majority translated into a two-thirds supermajority in Parliament.

That gave them extraordinary power. With two-thirds of the Parliament, they could do almost anything, including rewriting the constitution, which they did quickly. And because they didn’t need to form a coalition, they had no incentive to engage with the opposition. The parties that had governed previously were completely sidelined—excluded from any meaningful role in governance.

By 2012, the consequences of this were starting to be felt. Initially, some people thought, “This is just another election. A new party has come in; they’ll be voted out in a few years.” But the systemic changes Fidesz implemented were swift and far-reaching. The polarization grew. Each side began to demonize the other, and the space for the middle ground seemed to disappear.

This environment was also reflected in the FSI classroom. As I mentioned before, language teachers at FSI aren’t separated from what’s happening in their countries. When I studied Arabic, the teachers had clear personal perspectives—and that’s good. We want to hear those views and discuss them. The same was true when I studied Russian.

I remember back then, shortly after the Soviet Union had dissolved, there was a real debate within the Slavic Languages Department at FSI: should Ukrainian now be taught separately? Should it be distinct from Russian? There was an emerging understanding that we were dealing with new, independent states, each with its own national identity and language.

But this also created some practical questions. Did we have the right teachers? Was it really necessary to teach, say, Uzbek separately? Wouldn’t Russian still be sufficient for diplomacy there?

And that brings us to a broader issue. If you arrive in a country and speak the former dominant language—the language of the previous occupying or governing power—it can send the wrong message. Yes, people may understand you, but you're speaking a language they fought to move beyond.

Hungary is a prime example. Many people still understand Russian, but the country rebelled against Soviet domination in 1956 and pushed out the Soviets by 1989. There's a strong sense of national and ethnic pride—of finally being able to express Hungarian identity fully. You probably noticed that too, back in the early 2000s. There was a palpable feeling: Now, at last, we can speak and live as Hungarians.

For decades, there had been pressure to suppress that identity—under socialism, the idea was that ethnic nations didn't matter, that what counted was class and economic structure. Expressions of ethnic nationalism or cultural distinctiveness were not encouraged.

So, after 1989, there was a resurgence not just of democratic expression, but of national and cultural self-definition. The history that had been silenced—national memory, cultural traditions, language—was reasserted.

And all of this—language, history, culture, economics—intersected with the political shifts that followed. The move from the promise of EU membership to the disillusionment that followed the financial crisis was about more than money. It was about the gap between the expectations people had for democracy and prosperity, and the reality they experienced. And in that gap, political realignments took root.

And now, Hungarians were free to write their own history—to express their traditions—and there was great pride in that. That sense of regained cultural identity also bolstered support for the conservative government, which generally draws on tradition, on a sense of proud ethnicity, and on a national culture that goes back centuries. That pride, that history, became a source of strength.

Within our language classes, all these threads—cultural, historical, political—were part of the learning environment. As I mentioned, we were a small group: three students and the teacher. And unlike earlier eras of language instruction, when materials were static and outdated, our class could draw on current materials—extremely current, in fact.

Twenty years earlier, you'd have a textbook, which, by nature of being printed, was already five or ten years out of date. If we could get newspaper clippings, they'd arrive late, maybe a month or more after publication, and even then, only occasionally. Getting a Hungarian newspaper in 1995 or 2000 was not simple.

But by 2012, we had the internet. That changed everything.

The teachers could now supplement—or even set aside—standard textbooks and prepare their own materials daily. They would go online, pull up current newspaper articles, and say: "This unit will focus on social issues," and then find a piece on that topic. Another unit might focus on economics or international relations. Whatever the theme, the teacher would find relevant articles and even video clips from the news.

Of course, this came later in the course. In the first month, you're still building basic vocabulary—"Hello, my name is…", "Let me introduce myself…" That sort of thing. But because the instruction had to move quickly—this was a course that ran from September to May—we advanced fast. By the second month, we were already reading simple news articles.

We also got exposure to pop culture—contemporary songs, for instance—not from a standardized curriculum, but materials that were current, possibly released just a few days earlier. So rather than something used every year, the material reflected what was happening that very week.

And in a politically charged environment, those articles—those news clips—were also politically charged. That added both richness and complexity to the class. How do you talk about current events when there are real differences in perspective between the U.S. and the country you're studying?

This was especially true in 2012, which was both the end of President Obama's first term and the post-election leadup to his second. U.S. foreign policy during that time emphasized liberal democracy, alliances, and human rights. There was a strong commitment to supporting democratic institutions globally.

In fact, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had visited Hungary in 2011. During that visit, she publicly criticized the Hungarian government for what she described as democratic backsliding. That moment was significant—it marked a clear expression of concern from a U.S. administration that prioritized democratic values.

Q: I just want to mention one thing. I was around in Eastern Europe, in this case, Romania, during the time when all of these elements from European countries were working towards getting into NATO and the EU. Among the many things they had to demonstrate before they could be accepted, is that they were firmly on a path to democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights. Hungary, apparently to the satisfaction of NATO, reached that in 1997, 1998, and we're in the first tranche of acceptance by NATO and entry into NATO. This kind of backsliding is contrary to the basic mission and the basic understandings of both the EU and NATO. And yet, there have not been very many criticisms like the one you mentioned, the one Secretary Clinton made about the backsliding in Hungary. And up until now, the backsliding in Poland has been significant because of how important it has now become as the conduit of support for Ukraine.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, exactly. And I think that frames a lot of what we've been talking about—not just in terms of language training, but as a foundational context for understanding the situation when I arrived in Hungary in 2013.

There's an irony in all this. The Prime Minister of Hungary, when the country was making its accession to the EU and NATO—back in the late 90s—was Viktor Orbán, the same Viktor Orbán who is in power now. And that leads many people to ask, " What happened? How did Fidesz change? How did he change?

That question comes up a lot. Even during the time we're talking about—2012, 2013—there were already articles being written and documentaries being made trying to answer that. And even today, that hasn't stopped. People are still looking back at the late 1990s, trying to understand the trajectory. There's ongoing media coverage, research, retrospectives…. Sometimes I'm consulted in that conversation, sometimes not—but I can see that the interest is very much alive.

Because what you have is this government—still in place—led by the same individual who once championed a very different vision. Yes, there was an interlude between his early term and his current tenure, but now he's served three consecutive terms, and the direction of governance has shifted significantly.

Public statements, constitutional changes, media laws, policies—many of them suggest a move away from the liberal democratic trajectory Hungary seemed to be on when it joined the EU and NATO. So, people look back and ask, " What happened in the intervening years?

And in a way, that's where our conversation really starts. Because understanding that shift—from a government once praised for meeting the democratic standards required for NATO accession to one now facing accusations of backsliding—is essential background for everything I encountered, including during my language training.

And there's a lot more to say about that. Even within the classroom environment, the political context was present. We'll get to that.

Q: Right. All right. I will pause the recording.

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Q: Today is November 16, 2022, and we're beginning our session eighteen with André Goodfriend. André, the floor is yours.

GOODFRIEND: All right. I think when we last spoke, I had just finished my interim assignment with Consular Affairs and had begun language training. We talked a bit about the nature of language training in the State Department. This was a class of about three people, each preparing for different roles at the embassy.

It's actually a good opportunity for those assigned to a country, or an embassy, or a consulate to get to know each other in a different kind of setting—very informal. We'd have conversations with each other, trying to speak in the host country's language. In this case, it was Hungarian.

I was in class with someone entering the Foreign Service as a second career—he was probably around sixty-two. He knew, going in, that he'd likely have just two assignments before mandatory retirement at sixty-five. I think that says something about the Department's efforts to diversify its officer corps—not just recruiting people fresh out of university. In fact, some people join without a university degree at all, while others come in after successful careers elsewhere.

In one post, for instance, a former Defense Attaché—a retired colonel—had come in as a first-tour officer adjudicating visas. The knowledge-sharing that happens in these situations, whether in the classroom or later at the embassy, is invigorating.

In our group, one person was on their first tour and headed for the Consular Section. Another was going to be the press attaché. Each of us brought a different perspective, with different levels of experience. I was going to Budapest to be the DCM. Even the new consular officer had already had a full career—he had worked as an attorney, I think—so he brought a wealth of experience as well.

The way these classes are structured—something I touched on last time—there's a lot of discussion about current events. In the past, language classes often relied on pre-prepared materials: textbooks, Foreign Service Institute-developed materials, or old newspaper clippings that might be several years out of date but still useful for vocabulary and context.

But now, with the internet and live access to video, streaming radio, and online news portals, our teacher could bring in materials that reflected that very week's political developments. They'd often review the day's or previous day's news and choose articles organized by theme—politics, economy, culture—for us to read and discuss.

Of course, we also had basic vocabulary books for grammar and sentence formation. Each of us had different learning styles, which really stood out in a small group of three—much more so than in a university class of twenty, where the focus is more on passive learning.

My approach has always been to jump in and do what I can with the few words I know. Once I've mastered some basic conjugations, declensions—if the language has them—and general grammar, I try to form sentences, even if I don't know the perfect word. I substitute another word and try to make it work.

Others in the class preferred to focus on grammar and reading comprehension. Their spoken Hungarian was more tentative, but their written or structured grammar was often more precise. Each approach has its strengths. For someone like me, who enjoys speaking with people and engaging in casual conversations, the more conversational approach worked well.

As we discussed last time, one of the challenges people face after language training is engaging in informal, everyday conversations. That's something I enjoy—being aware of what's being said around me, understanding the environment, and engaging with people.

We had very different styles and approaches in the class, but also different ways of engaging with the subject matter. Hungary's political situation was becoming increasingly charged.

I believe I mentioned earlier that a couple of years prior, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had visited Hungary. At a press conference—possibly with the Prime Minister—she made a public statement expressing concerns about Hungary's backsliding on democracy. That caught the Hungarian government off guard. They weren't comfortable with anyone but themselves making such public assessments about the political situation.

And those concerns, about democratic backsliding, have continued ever since.

The Hungarian government was taking the position that diplomats and representatives of other countries should discuss their perceptions of the political situation in Hungary only in closed settings—not publicly. The concern was that public commentary by foreign governments would appear as interference in domestic affairs. That was the stance the Hungarian government took: if the criticism wasn't coming from them, then it was seen as confrontational.

This goes back to around 2011. Now, in 2012, the ruling party, Fidesz, held a two-thirds majority in Parliament. It was testing the waters, stretching its wings. That large majority was seen as a mandate—and to some extent, it was. But they interpreted it as a mandate to move ahead with their full agenda, often without engaging the parliamentary minority.

That two-thirds majority gave them significant unilateral power, including the ability to change the constitution and pass laws that would themselves require a two-thirds vote to amend. If a future government were more divided and didn't have that same supermajority, undoing what had been put in place would be extremely difficult. Fidesz understood that—and they ran with it.

They moved quickly, not only to change the constitution but also to restructure the judiciary and redefine how religions were officially recognized in the country. It was a fast-paced consolidation of authority, politicizing the system in ways that many Hungarians weren't used to.

There was considerable public unease. Fidesz had been elected in 2010, and the changes they had begun implementing were noticeable by 2011. That was when Secretary Clinton made her statement expressing concern about Hungary's democratic backsliding. Now, in 2012, that backsliding process was still in motion.

There were people who strongly supported what the Fidesz government was doing. Many of them were firmly opposed to the previous government, led by the Hungarian Socialist Party. Some drew direct links between the Socialist Party and the pre-1989 socialist regime.

So, the country was divided. Fidesz positioned itself as conservative, defending traditional values and claiming to restore what the socialists had taken away—linking their rhetoric to a post-Soviet recovery of national identity.

But about half the population valued the progressive direction of the earlier governments. Hungary was now part of the European Union. It was modernizing its economy, and many citizens took pride in the healthcare and education systems, modeled on Western Europe. There was a sense of openness in society that many wanted to protect.

In Budapest, one of the universities attracting international students was Central European University (CEU). Its curriculum was primarily in English, and it had been founded by philanthropist George Soros—"George Shorosh," as it would be pronounced in Hungarian—who was born in Hungary.

Soros had funded several universities aimed at opening up Central and Eastern Europe after decades of Soviet influence. He also supported civil society and NGOs focused on human rights, press freedom, judicial equality, and individual liberties.

I remember when I was serving in Moscow, one of the first Soros-funded projects I came across was his support for spreading internet access in Russia. There was a service called Glasnet—a play on the Russian word "*glasnost,*" or "openness" and "open net"—which enabled private citizens to access the internet.

So, this was the environment in Hungary during my language training—divided and increasingly polarized. That polarization—the sense that one side was completely right and the other completely wrong, with no middle ground—also showed up in classroom conversations and in the articles we read.

As I've mentioned before, language teachers are not detached from the societies they're helping us understand. In fact, part of the goal is to expose us to the culture through people who think in the ways that locals do. So, as our discussions became more current and less historical, strongly held opinions emerged.

For me, I found it invigorating. I enjoy having conversations where I'm engaging with people to understand what they think. I don't expect them to agree with me, but I do want to explore their thinking—why they think the way they do—and I'll challenge it as well. Sometimes that goes over well; at other times, it can come across as provocative and lead to heated discussions.

That was the environment in the classroom. There were three of us—three students—and the teacher. We each had a different perspective. I was generally the one pushing back a bit, questioning some of the views being presented.

At the same time, being in D.C. during that training period was also a chance to start building relationships that would be important once I arrived at post. In addition to getting to know the people I'd be working with in the State Department—like the desk officer, the assistant secretary, and others in the regional and functional bureaus—I also reached out to people from the Hungarian Embassy and to civil society groups active in or focused on Hungary. It was as much for them to get to know me as it was for me to understand their perspectives.

Some of those contacts reached out to me as well. One advisor to the Hungarian Prime Minister contacted me to talk about the political divisions in Hungary and to express concern that the U.S. Embassy, according to him, had been engaging more with the opposition and with civil society groups than with the governing party. He was worried this imbalance could cause tension and friction in the bilateral relationship.

He also gave me a copy of a book written by John Montgomery, the U.S. Ambassador to Hungary during the lead-up to and early stages of World War II. The book was generally sympathetic to Hungary at the time and to Admiral Horthy, who was then, as Regent, the head of state. Horthy, of course, remains a controversial figure. I mention all this because this background—the historical context and the sensitivity around it—played a role in the conversations I would have and in how I would represent U.S. positions during my time in Hungary.

So, to give a bit of that context: after World War I, one of the outcomes was the abdication of the Austrian Emperor and a redrawing of the map of Europe. This redrawing was largely inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's principles, particularly the idea of self-determination—that multi-ethnic empires should give way to mono-ethnic nation-states, each with the right to self-determination.

That idea—that a "nation" should have its own state—has become central to how we think about modern international relations. But defining a "nation" is complex. Wilson often used language as a key marker—if people spoke the same language, had a shared cultural history, and a defined territory, that was a basis for nationhood.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up into several new nation-states: Czechoslovakia, parts of what became Yugoslavia, and Hungary, among them. Hungary, after the war, briefly experimented with a communist government.

Horthy, who had been an admiral in the Austro-Hungarian navy, led the counter-revolution. The legend is that he rode into Budapest on a white horse in 1919 to depose the communist regime. He assumed power, as Regent for the absent emperor, in 1920 and remained head of state for nearly 25 years.

Part of the story is that Charles, the heir to the Habsburg throne, hoped to return and believed that Hungary might be the best place to restore the monarchy. And while Horthy's position as Regent was nominally based on there being a monarch, he resisted that return.

Horthy led a fairly conservative government—one that was, in many ways, elitist, as was much of European society during the 1920s and 1930s.

At the same time, Hungary began taking a more explicitly antisemitic posture with regard to how it defined the Hungarian nation and society. There had always been a trend across Central and Eastern Europe to elevate a dominant ethnicity as the defining identity of the state, often excluding Jews from that category. Jews were viewed not as members of the core national group, but as a separate ethnicity—one that didn't fully belong.

This exclusionary mindset had started to shift somewhat in Central Europe during the late 1800s, and, in parts of Western Europe as well, civic identity began to displace religious and tribal identities. The transition to a more inclusive civic national identity, however, was not without resistance. France, for instance, had its own struggles with antisemitism—famously during the Dreyfus Affair. But in Hungary, by the 1920s, legal restrictions were already being imposed on Jews even before Hungary formally aligned itself with Nazi Germany.

These laws, known as the "*numerus clausus,*" and enacted in 1920, placed quotas on how many Jews could attend university or participate in certain professions. They were implemented before the alliance with the Nazis, but they signaled the direction the country was heading.

After World War I, there was significant population displacement. Large parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were broken off to form or expand other countries. Transylvania, for instance, was transferred to Romania; parts of Hungary were incorporated into what is now Ukraine. Many people from those territories—who still identified as Hungarian—migrated to what remained of Hungary rather than staying in the newly created states.

This led to overcrowding in Budapest and elsewhere—housing shortages, food insecurity, unemployment…. There was already a sense of economic pressure and dislocation, exacerbated by the collapse of the short-lived Béla Kun government, which Horthy overthrew.

Under Horthy, the *numerus clausus* set strict quotas on Jewish participation in universities and certain professions. And eventually, Hungary allied itself with Nazi Germany—motivated in part by the belief, and the reality, that Germany would support Hungary's claims to recover the territories it had lost after the war.

Q: Here, just one very quick aside, Hungary only has about ten million people. Now, it may have had slightly more territory, immediately following the Versailles Treaty. But *once Horthy took over, and you go from the 20s to the 30s, a lot of real geniuses, mostly Jews, emigrated, and most of them went to the U.S, one or two, maybe to Britain. But people who worked on the atomic bomb, or people who worked on the early development of computers, and so on, it's kind of a pity, and they were Nobel Prize winners. In essence, intellectually, Hungary punches well above its weight, as a small country with a relatively small base of people who could become these levels of genius, even in the arts, you had movie directors and so on who became very famous, but I–*

GOODFRIEND: Right, and part of that exodus was a direct result of the *numerus clausus* limitations I mentioned earlier that were placed on Jews in Hungary—limitations on which professions they could enter, whether they could even attend university. The *numerus clausus* predated Nazi influence and was a homegrown Hungarian effort to restrict Jewish participation in fields they viewed as reserved for "real" Hungarians, as they saw it.

It marked a regression from what the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been. That empire, for all its flaws, had a more pluralistic structure. I think Hitler even wrote about this in *Mein Kampf*—his time in Vienna, observing all these different peoples and cultures mixing together. That experience, for him, was formative in pushing toward his vision of an "ethnically pure" nation.

But that ideal—of a singular ethnic nation-state—was not just Hitler's. It was, as I noted, embedded in the nation-state model promoted by Woodrow Wilson after World War I: the idea that a nation, defined by ethnicity and language, had the right to self-determination. The trouble is how you define a nation. If it's ethnic—if it's not a civic concept like the United States tries to maintain—then it becomes exclusive. You're either born into it or you're not. It becomes a question of lineage, of ancestry—of whether your family is part of a shared history. Often, it even includes religion as a defining trait of that national identity.

As I've said, I like conversations that explore these things—sometimes provocative, though never intentionally provocative. Sometimes it's just a question to invite reflection. For example, I might ask someone in Hungary, just as we might ask in the U.S.: When would you say your national history begins?

In the U.S., some might say 1776. Others might trace it back to the colonies in the 1600s. And if you push further, to before European colonization, you reach indigenous peoples—Native Americans—and their long histories. There's a layered understanding of who was there and when.

In Hungary, if you ask the same question, people might start with King Stephen, the founding of the Hungarian state. If you push back further, they might mention Árpád, who "retook" the Carpathian Basin—though arguably that was the first time Hungarians entered it. Still, the language is often "retook," implying a historical claim. Go further back, and they might say, "Well, before that, we were further east"—associated with the Khazar kingdom or other tribes. But that starts to detach from the territory itself.

The American perspective might trace the evolution of peoples in a place—the Romans, then other kingdoms, and so on, all contributing to a layered, organic development of a nation. The Hungarian perspective, and many ethnic national models, follow the people, not the land, back to a common ancestral origin. And that can lead to exclusion of those who aren't part of that ancestry. Jews, for instance, are often placed outside of that lineage.

As I noted earlier, in the late 1800s and before World War I, there was a broader effort across Europe to integrate Jewish citizens into national identity—as Germans, as Hungarians, as French. In France, for example, the Dreyfus Affair was part of that reckoning—confronting what it meant to say "We are all French."

But in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a shift—an emphasis on ethnic purity returned, with the idea that some people simply didn't belong, that they were not actually members of the nation. That sentiment was growing during Horthy's period.

Now, Hungary's treatment of its Jewish community was more tolerant than what later happened in Nazi Germany. That was something the advisor to the Hungarian Prime Minister—who had given me the book about the wartime U.S. ambassador—wanted to emphasize. He pointed out that this was acknowledged in the book. Also, that Horthy, after the war, wasn't convicted and lived in exile—supported, in part, by some prominent prewar Jewish figures in Hungary. The suggestion being: how could Hungary have been antisemitic if that were the case?

All of this was part of the background to a contemporary Hungarian government that was beginning to rehabilitate figures like Horthy, casting them as national heroes. Figures once vilified for their ethnocentrism and antisemitism were now even honored with monuments.

It's not unlike the debate that has taken place in the United States in recent years over Confederate monuments—debates about who is commemorated in public spaces, what they stood for, and what message that sends. In the U.S., those monuments sparked heated political debate. Some were removed, some relocated to museums, and others defended by people who said removing them would be erasing history.

In Hungary, that same kind of conversation wasn't happening in the same way. Instead of removing monuments, new ones were being erected—somewhat like the Confederate monuments built in the 1920s in the U.S. These monuments were affirming a certain historical narrative.

And all of this tied into our classroom discussions: What does it mean to be Hungarian? How are others—other groups, other identities—viewed within that framework? Even the Constitution identifies the different nationalities living within Hungary. These weren't abstract debates—they were current, and they shaped how Hungarians saw themselves and others.

There are groups within Hungary that are identified within the Hungarian constitution as nationalities, alongside the Hungarian nation. In principle, their rights are protected—these rights are enshrined in the constitution. But at the same time, they are identified as distinct from the Hungarian nation.

So, there's the question: while they may be Hungarian citizens, are they still considered fully part of the Hungarian nation if they are considered to be a separate nationality? These are, I think, complex and still unresolved questions—issues that continue to simmer in Hungary today.

During my preparation, I engaged with the Hungarian Embassy in Washington to get a better sense of their perspectives. They were very welcoming. I met with Ambassador Szapáry, who was gracious and engaging. We had good conversations about how Hungary sees its role within the European Union.

On my initiative, we invited members of the Hungarian Embassy to visit the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), so they could see how the U.S. prepares its diplomats for assignment—what cultural studies, language training, and professional tradecraft courses are involved. We wanted to give them a sense of how seriously we take our preparation and, hopefully, to begin building a constructive relationship even before we arrived at post.

Some of the relationships I formed during that time continue to this day. A few of the people I met at the Hungarian Embassy have since left the Foreign Ministry, but we've stayed in touch. Facebook has proven to be a useful tool—not so much for forming new relationships, but for keeping them alive after meeting in person.

I did something similar before my assignment to Syria. I reached out to the Syrian Embassy in Washington. That was more complicated, though—it hadn't really been done before, and there were questions about the kind of relationship we should have with the Syrian Embassy. At the time, relations were improving—certainly not now—but with Hungary, engagement was more straightforward. It was understood that we would try to establish human relationships as part of our diplomatic approach.

Washington also offers many other venues for engagement. The German Marshall Fund, for example, regularly hosted speakers. When I was a student there, the leader of the Hungarian Socialist Party came to speak. That gave me the chance to hear from voices outside the governing coalition. Other Hungarian politicians came through Washington as well, and either I would reach out to them, or they would reach out to me. It was an opportunity to have conversations with people from across the political spectrum.

That principle—of speaking with everyone—was something I took seriously. The advisor to the Hungarian Prime Minister had encouraged me not to limit engagement to civil society or opposition groups, but to speak with all sides, including the government. I took that to heart and made a real effort to do so.

One notable example was a group of Hungarian Members of Parliament who came to the U.S. on a J1 visa exchange program. There were four of them, each from a different political party. They were all relatively young—probably in their thirties—and they came to learn about the U.S. government and legislative system, while also sharing their own perspectives.

I had the opportunity to talk with them and made a few lasting contacts. One of them, from Fidesz, later rose to a prominent senior position in government. At the time, though, he was still relatively junior. He came with colleagues from the Socialist Party and a couple of other parties.

What struck me was how friendly they were with each other, particularly the Fidesz and Socialist Party members. It was a reminder that, despite the public image of political polarization, personal relationships still existed across party lines. Watching them interact, you saw a very different picture than what might be portrayed publicly—that these parties don't engage with one another.

In this smaller setting, with just four of them traveling together, they were able to show that kind of collegiality. And for us, it was encouraging to see that, at least on a personal level, dialogue was still possible.

That was the situation in 2012—a lot of groundwork being laid, both linguistically and through what we called area studies. I think that model has changed somewhat in recent years—you may know more about that than I do—but I've heard that area studies have been significantly reduced compared to what they were in 2012.

At the time, we had one day a week set aside for area studies. A speaker would come in to talk about the history, culture, or human rights situation of the region, offering different academic or policy perspectives. One session featured Ambassador Szapáry, the Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S., along with ambassadors from other Central European countries. I don't recall all the countries represented—Croatia, perhaps, and others from the region—but my focus was on Hungary.

We also heard from a representative of the Helsinki Commission, the U.S. body that emerged from the Helsinki Accords, which were agreements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to safeguard human rights across Europe. This speaker focused on human rights in the region and the types of concerns the Commission monitors. Other sessions included academics from various universities, who provided further context.

In general, the experience offered a solid foundation—at least for those of us who chose to engage actively, ask questions, attend events around D.C., and take advantage of the resources available. That was my approach.

As I've mentioned in previous conversations, this was the fourth language I had studied at FSI. Each time—whether it was Hindi, Russian, Arabic, or now Hungarian—I found that I became more adept at making connections and gaining a nuanced understanding of the country I was preparing to serve in.

Of course, early on, when I was learning Hindi, I was a more junior officer. People weren't reaching out to me in the same way. But we still had area studies one day a week, giving us a window into the politics and culture of the region.

Back then, we didn't have the internet—not in the way we do now. With Russian, the internet was just beginning to emerge, and our training materials weren't particularly current. The Soviet Union had only recently collapsed, and a lot of our textbooks still referred to it as a "multinational" country. That itself raised interesting questions—what does "multinational" mean? Why was the Soviet Union considered multinational, but the United States was not? How do we distinguish between "multinational" and "multiethnic"? These were questions that came up even then.

With Russian training, we also faced political sensitivities—especially between Russian and Ukrainian speakers—and the content we received often reflected the biases of the instructors, depending on their background. I don't remember whether we had teachers from places like Azerbaijan at that time, and I don't know if we do now, but those post-Soviet states were asserting their linguistic and national identities, and that influenced what we were learning.

By the time I studied Arabic, we were in the post–9/11 era and dealing with the Iraq War, developments in Afghanistan, and broader changes in the region. The internet was more widely available, and we had more tools at our disposal. We could use online dictionaries and translation tools, even Skype. We could connect with language partners—people learning English while we were learning Arabic. There were groups in Washington you could find through platforms like Meetup to practice Arabic or French. These tools weren't available even five years earlier.

By the time I was preparing for Hungary, all of this had matured. I could look up organizations I was interested in, find relevant people, send an email, and arrange a meeting—all on my own, even without an office support system, while at FSI. That was a big shift. It helped me feel more prepared for my arrival at post.

And even the nature of arriving at post had changed. It was now much more possible to engage with the embassy and its staff before arrival—extensively and easily, by email.

So, I was regularly engaging with my predecessor, with the front office support staff, with the Community Liaison Office (CLO), and with others at post to help coordinate my arrival and understand what to expect. I wanted to be aware of any important issues ahead of time and also to begin the process of selecting my Office Management Specialist, since that position would be vacant.

These were all preparatory steps that were much easier to take in 2012 than they would have been ten years earlier—thanks to email, easier access to colleagues, and more open communication with post before arrival.

This was also a very different kind of assignment for me. I was going in as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), which meant I'd be stepping into a leadership role right away. In fact, it appeared that for at least a short time upon my arrival, I would also serve as Chargé d'Affaires. The sitting Ambassador was scheduled to depart in July, and I would be arriving around that time.

So, the expectation was that I would step into the acting head of mission role immediately. There was speculation during my language training about who the next Ambassador would be. My sense at the time was that someone would be appointed fairly soon after my arrival, maybe within a month or two.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the immersion component of language training. I don't recall this being part of the curriculum when I studied Hindi or Russian—there wasn't a structured immersion opportunity where students would spend a week in a community speaking only the target language.

But for Arabic, we did have an immersion experience. A small group of us—maybe three students and one teacher—traveled to Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit with a large Arabic-speaking community. We planned a week of full immersion: speaking only Arabic, meeting with local community members, and following a structured schedule that we designed ourselves.

For Hungarian, our teacher was hoping to organize something similar. But ours was the only Hungarian class, and we had only three students. There weren't multiple classes to pool from to build a larger group. Of the three of us, I was the only one who expressed interest in participating in an immersion experience.

The teachers encouraged me to pursue it anyway and see what I could arrange. To make it viable, I had to find a school in Budapest where I could take structured classes daily, something to demonstrate that this would be a legitimate language immersion experience and not just informal exposure through sightseeing or casual encounters.

I did find a school and put together an itinerary—something that included daily language instruction and a variety of activities. This wasn't something we wanted to tie to the embassy, so it wasn't presented as an embassy initiative. It was considered an FSI program, and I still needed travel orders, but no funding was provided. I paid for it myself.

The key was to ensure that the immersion week had a clear educational structure, that it wasn't just a language-by-osmosis experience through wandering the streets of Budapest. I needed to show that there was a plan in place and that each day would be spent actively engaged in Hungarian language study.

Again, the goal wasn't just to meet parliamentarians and government officials. I wanted the immersion experience to be diverse in its focus and give me the opportunity to speak Hungarian with a wide range of people. That was a real challenge to arrange from the United States.

The teacher had a couple of suggestions—one was to attend a concert at a local venue—but beyond that, I had to take the initiative. I turned to Meetup, which I'd mentioned previously. I looked for relevant groups in Budapest.

Interestingly, I found that outside the United States, at least in Hungary at the time, and in Cyprus, where I am now, many Meetup groups seem to focus on programming and tech. If they exist at all, they're often geared toward computer professionals—people networking around work, sharing skills, or searching for job opportunities. So, while I did find some, they weren't necessarily ideal for casual, language-focused interaction.

In the United States, Meetup seemed to offer a much broader range of topics. But I did manage to find a group in Budapest that met during the week I was there, focused on crisis communication, interestingly enough. It turned out to be a great fit, so I signed up and added that to my itinerary.

One of my classmates was friends with a school headmaster in a town over an hour by train from Budapest. We arranged for me to visit the school, and he gave me a tour while I was there. I also notified the U.S. Embassy of my visit and asked if they had any suggestions for meetings or contacts that might align with my language-learning goals.

They were able to set up a meeting for me with a Roma organization, which I added to my calendar. They also arranged a meeting with the U.S. desk officer from the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. I made it clear, though, that my primary focus was on practicing Hungarian—these were not pre-arrival policy discussions in English, but rather informal conversations intended to help me improve my fluency and become familiar with a variety of voices and perspectives.

I also arranged a visit to a radio station that, at the time, was still operating independently, though it was already facing significant pressure. Over the past ten years, the government has made repeated attempts to shut it down, and while it eventually shifted to operating online, back then it was still a functioning broadcast station—though clearly under threat. That visit was also on my itinerary.

Coincidentally, my immersion week overlapped with Passover, so I looked for where I might attend a Seder and worked on coordinating that as well.

Along with the scheduled events, I was able to arrange a few other things while I was in Budapest—including attending Hungarian folk dance lessons. My goal was to keep every day of the immersion week full, and I think I succeeded.

I reached out to a former colleague from the Hungarian Embassy in Damascus—we had worked together when I was at the U.S. Embassy there. He was now back in Budapest, and he helped arrange a visit to the Hungarian Parliament.

I also contacted some of the Members of Parliament I had met through the Exchange Visitor Program. I let them know I'd be in town and suggested we meet—again, with the clear understanding that I would only be speaking Hungarian. That became something of a mantra for the week: this is to speak Hungarian. I'd say, "I know you might want to discuss other things, but for this meeting, let's limit it to what I'm able to say in Hungarian."

It was, in the end, a really valuable immersive experience. The schedule included a diverse range of venues, topics, and people from different backgrounds and sectors across Hungarian society. And I do think my conversational skills improved meaningfully over that week.

While I was there, I also made a point of visiting a lot of bookshops. I had mentioned earlier that the instructor herself largely compiled the material we were using to study Hungarian at FSI. I found myself wondering: why weren't we using professionally prepared materials? At least for certain lessons—things that weren't so topical, but offered structured conversations and exercises. Something a teacher could prepare around and build into the curriculum.

Perhaps these materials were not readily available in the United States. So, I thought, while I'm in Hungary, let me see what resources they use here to teach Hungarian.

I visited several bookstores and picked up quite a few materials. This was still a time when I regularly bought physical books—something I do much less often now. These days, I mostly read digitally. But back then, I had a habit of "haunting the bookshops," as I'd call it, and bringing home a bag full of books. This was probably one of the last trips where I did that.

I returned with my carry-on and checked luggage packed with books—and a few other things you can only get in Hungary, like pálinka, their traditional fruit brandy.

Q: Yeah, I used to do that as well. There's one other thing that's useful about going to bookstores: getting maps, getting guides that would not be available in English, things that would be helpful in orienting yourself once you get there.

GOODFRIEND: I agree. While I was there, I also visited a TV station. Navigating public transportation was part of the experience—working with the buses, using the metro system, walking around, figuring out, "Where am I on this map?"

I've been talking about how much things had already changed by 2012–2013, and at the time, that immersion trip in spring 2013 felt like we were at the peak of modernity—everything seemed to be available online. But now, looking back from where we are today—2022—that period already feels like a very different time. Technology has continued to evolve.

When I was preparing for Hungary back then, I had to account for the different phone systems. I believe we were using 3G phones at the time, and those U.S.-based phones often didn't work with European networks. Even if they did, roaming charges were steep, and the data speeds were slow.

In my case, I had to get a different phone entirely from my provider. I told them I was going to Hungary, and they were kind enough to lend me a phone that would work there. But the data capabilities were limited. I couldn't use it the way I would now—constantly checking the map or accessing information on the go.

Things have changed dramatically since then. Right now, as you and I are speaking, I'm physically in Nicosia, Cyprus—but I'm still using my U.S. phone, with global roaming. I have access to everything: data, maps, communication, the full range of information I'd have if I were back in the United States.

Such seamless access was simply not possible in 2012 or 2013.

Time has continued to move forward, of course. But thinking back to that period in 2013, when we were talking about books and maps, I remember clearly that to find my way around Budapest, I used a physical map. I'd unfold it on the street to figure out where I was going, something I rarely do anymore. I had to protect it from the rain and from getting worn out. I also picked up guidebooks and other books with maps, photos, and images that were helpful in orienting myself and planning visits.

Although I now mostly rely on digital books for their convenience, especially when traveling, there's still something satisfying about leafing through a physical book. And as much as I try to avoid accumulating physical copies, even in the few months I've been in Cyprus, I've somehow already started building up a new little library. That seems to be a pattern.

The immersion trip to Hungary really was useful. When I returned to Washington, I started preparing for my transfer to post. I coordinated with my predecessor about the timing of my arrival, since there were still a couple of things I needed to finish up in D.C.

One thing that surprised me was the result of my final language test. Despite all the effort I put in—including that immersion week—I didn't receive a 3/3, which is considered working proficiency in both speaking and reading. I ended up with something like a 3/2+.

For context, the Foreign Service rates language proficiency on a scale from zero to five, assigning separate scores for speaking and reading. A "zero" means no knowledge of the language at all. A "one" is enough to say a few memorized phrases or greetings, but you wouldn't be able to form full sentences. A "two" means you can put words together and be understood, but conversations remain halting, and there are limits to what you can express or comprehend. A “three,” which is what most officers aim for, is working-level proficiency—you can discuss a wide range of topics, navigate conversations fluently, understand what others are saying, and if you forget a word, you can usually work around it. The same applies to reading: a “three” allows you to read and understand most articles, even if you don’t catch every word.

A “four” corresponds to near-native fluency—you can speak and read almost as well as someone who grew up with the language, though your vocabulary might be slightly less refined. A “five” is the level of a highly educated native speaker, someone capable of reading and discussing complex, academic material with ease.

Writing isn’t tested as part of the official language score. That’s because in most cases, our duties require us to speak and read the language, not necessarily to write it. Drafting official texts in the local language is usually handled by our locally employed staff.

Q: Also, about writing, often the literary language is considerably different from the spoken.

GOODFRIEND: Right—and that’s where the ability to read becomes essential. I think there’s also a distinction in how the brain processes composition versus comprehension. Some people can understand everything they read or hear, but if they haven’t practiced actually producing language—forming sentences, expressing themselves—they may struggle to do it.

That’s part of the rationale for the Foreign Service’s emphasis on speaking and reading, rather than writing. Writing is a different skill. It’s not just a matter of vocabulary; it requires knowing how to spell words correctly, how to structure written language, and how to form the script or use the keyboard for non-Latin alphabets. It’s time-consuming to teach and, for most diplomatic functions, not often used.

We don’t typically need to write official correspondence in the local language—that’s usually handled by locally employed staff. So writing isn’t included in the standard language proficiency evaluation. The focus is on what we will actually use in our roles: speaking fluently enough to communicate effectively, and reading well enough to follow press and official materials.

It reminds me of studying Classical Greek. There aren’t many people you can speak it with—it's not a living language. You might learn to read it fluently or recite poetry from memory. But even someone who can speak it eloquently from memorized texts might struggle to form spontaneous sentences in conversation. Recitation is different from communication.

In my case, as I mentioned, I didn’t receive the 3/3 score. And that was significant because a 3/3 was a formal requirement for taking up my assignment at post.

Q: Oh, boy.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, I had a decision to make. Either I could take additional time—extend my training by a few weeks—to try to reach the required 3/3 proficiency level, or I could proceed to post without it. That level wasn't just a bureaucratic benchmark; it was required because it genuinely served the needs of the post. And, of course, reaching that level also made me eligible for language incentive pay.

But there were other factors. My predecessor already had a future assignment lined up and needed to leave. The Ambassador was also scheduled to depart, which meant I was needed on the ground. Regardless of the score, I felt I had a strong enough command of the language to carry out my responsibilities. I wasn't going to argue about the score itself—I had completed the immersion week, functioned entirely in Hungarian during that time, and didn't feel disoriented in a Hungarian-only environment. I could follow conversations, and in terms of reading, I could grasp the overall meaning of most material.

On top of that, we were already in a digital age where Google Translate and other web-based translation tools had become quite powerful. Since most of the material I would need to read—news articles, academic papers, and even some official documents—was now available online, it was often just a matter of mastering the right tools. Translation apps could help fill the gaps in comprehension when necessary. So, I accepted the minor financial hit of not qualifying for language pay and arranged to go to post, provided they would accept me.

To do that, I had to request a language waiver. I outlined the reasons, which were deemed sufficient, and then coordinated with my predecessor on a departure date that worked for both of us.

Now, to get into the minutiae of the Foreign Service system, we were conscious of the evaluation cycle. Foreign Service personnel are reviewed annually, with April 15 as the cutoff. If an officer remains in place for more than about 120 days after that date, they may be required to write employee evaluations for the intervening period. To avoid triggering that requirement, we agreed that I would arrive by August 15—just under that window.

August 15 also happened to be about the same time as St. Stephen's Day, which is on August 20, one of Hungary's national holidays. I was told that if I arrived by August 15th, I'd also be jumping straight into Hungary's "event season." So, it was a good time to begin the assignment.

In the meantime, we attended our son's university graduation in Edinburgh, Scotland, packed up the house, put everything in storage, and went straight to Hungary. There wasn't time to make stops along the way—we had to get there and get started.

Another thing worth noting, and this would become relevant during my early months at post: Budapest was scheduled for a routine inspection by the Office of the Inspector

General (OIG) shortly after my arrival. Oddly enough, the same thing had happened in Damascus—an inspection soon after I got there.

(Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Report for Budapest (ISP-I-14-03A) - September 5 and 27, 2013 - https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/isp-i-14-03a_1.pdf)

I was also trying to get a sense of whether my advance perceptions—what I thought I might encounter at post—lined up with what the inspectors might be thinking. In Damascus, talking with the inspectors ahead of time was helpful. It gave me ideas about how I might want to get a head start, especially on structuring the Consular Section before they arrived.

With Budapest, there weren't any obvious indicators pointing to issues with how the embassy was functioning. But I think I may have mentioned that when I was assigned to Budapest, one of the factors that helped me get the assignment was feedback from the Assistant Secretary and Deputy Assistant Secretary. They said they were looking for someone who worked well with people. That suggested to me that there may have been some previous challenges with interpersonal dynamics—issues around communication, collaboration, or general collegiality.

That emphasis on team-building and internal coordination was something I had focused on in previous posts, and I felt confident bringing that approach to Budapest. Even before arriving, I was thinking about how we could foster stronger relationships between sections, encourage better information sharing, and take advantage of technology to support those goals. I didn't know exactly how the embassy was running, but I wanted to ensure it functioned smoothly, particularly during a time when the Ambassador would be leaving and I would be stepping in as Chargé.

As DCM, the internal operations of the mission were my responsibility—making sure the different sections were communicating effectively, supporting each other, and that shared information was actually being shared and accessible. It wasn't about coming in to change things for the sake of change, but rather building on what worked and improving where necessary.

In Damascus, by the time we left, the Consular Section, at least, had become very effective in sharing information internally and working across sections. That experience gave me a model I hoped might be useful in Budapest.

I'd already mentioned that one of the key roles I needed to fill upon arrival was selecting an Office Management Specialist—or OMS—for the front office. When I was interviewing candidates, one of the things I focused on was their ability to work in a digital environment. I wanted someone who could help manage information effectively, not just handle scheduling and correspondence, but really help improve how we work with and share information across the mission.

Q: Just one second, explain for a second what an OMS is, because it might not be understood outside the-

GOODFRIEND: Yes, of course. OMS stands for Office Management Specialist. The role has evolved over time, but traditionally, people might think of it as a secretary—someone responsible for the administrative support in an office, whether that's the political section, the front office, consular section, or any other part of the embassy.

Historically, the secretary's job was to support one officer directly, and the term itself comes from "secret-keeper"—someone who managed the personal correspondence and documents of a principal. But by the 2010s, the role had shifted. It was less about managing a principal's documents and meetings and more about ensuring that the entire office functioned efficiently and that information moved to where it needed to go.

Back in 1985, the OMS would maintain a physical filing system—subject files, chronological files. Business cards would be stapled to sheets of paper and entered into a Rolodex. If the principal needed to arrange a meeting, they'd ask the OMS, who would look up the contact details.

But by 2013–2014, we were transitioning away from paper entirely. Almost everything originated digitally. The paper was just a physical copy of something that already existed on a computer. So, the focus became: how do we manage our digital information more effectively? How do we ensure it's organized, accessible, and shareable—not just buried in individual inboxes or spreadsheets?

Business cards were still handed out, of course, but now principals were often emailing or calling contacts directly. They didn't want to have to ask the OMS for a phone number; they expected to find it themselves. The challenge was that everyone was maintaining their own separate lists, on separate devices, with no unified system.

So one of the things I wanted in an OMS was someone who could help coordinate and manage that information—a person who understood digital systems, who could help create a shared contact database, who could work proactively in a paperless office.

And to be fair, many OMSs were in the process of learning how to make that transition—from the traditional paper-based system to a fully digital one. It wasn't just about keeping up; it was about rethinking how information management could work in a modern, connected embassy.

So again, in looking for an OMS at the time, I was really focused on finding someone who would be comfortable in a digital environment—someone who might even be able to innovate, to come up with ways we could share information more effectively. To my mind, that was one of the keys to successful collaboration: having everyone on the same page through shared access to information—contacts, schedules, working documents. That was the mindset I brought with me heading into the assignment. We can get into how that developed in more detail in the next session, but that was the initial focus.

I hope this discussion has helped provide some of the historical context of Hungary, as I was preparing to go there—what issues were looming, and how the State Department prepares people to understand what they're going to face. I should also note that, both during my immersion week and in my previous assignments, I had begun to observe a political undercurrent that shaped how I understood the situation in Hungary.

What struck me was that the political climate wasn't just about a conventional left-right divide. There was something more fundamental at play—a deeper, more visceral appeal based on ethnonational identity. That kind of rhetoric had become central to the Hungarian government's political narrative, and it wasn't just confined to one side of the spectrum. The idea that Hungary has an ethnic nation to protect—within and beyond its borders—was a widely shared sentiment, even among those who were not aligned with the ruling party.

One moment that really brought this home for me was during the immersion week. I was speaking, in halting Hungarian, with someone from an opposition party. I was surprised when the conversation turned to how the United States should approach "the Hungarians in Romania." I asked for clarification because to me, "Hungarians in Romania" sounded like Hungarian citizens who had moved there. But for my interlocutor, citizenship had nothing to do with it. These weren't Romanian citizens of Hungarian descent—they were, in his mind, simply Hungarians. Period.

There was a deeply rooted belief that ethnic Hungarians living outside of Hungary's current borders were still part of the Hungarian nation. And that sense of ethnic nationhood was not only shaping domestic policies but also influencing foreign policy and regional relations.

This framework also complicated how issues like xenophobia and antisemitism played out within Hungary. The political appeal of the conservative government was closely tied to this sense of ethnic tradition, which created friction not only with the Jewish community—which generally identifies as Hungarian—but also with the Roma population. It raised difficult questions about what it means to belong, and whether a truly inclusive Hungarian identity was being fostered.

That, to me, was the prism through which many of these issues came into focus. And I wasn't sure this perspective was fully appreciated within the policymaking community in Washington. When I raised questions about how we were approaching national identity in Hungary, and how powerful the appeal of ethnonationalism could be—especially in an autocratic context—I often got the sense that it didn't quite register the same way. That's likely because the U.S. conceptualizes ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship very differently from most of the countries where we serve.

So that was very much in my mind heading into the assignment: recognizing that this perspective might not be widely shared within the Department, but that it was a real factor on the ground. And maybe it was a sensitivity that came from my previous posts—in Syria, in Russia, even in Israel—where ethnicity played a major role in shaping national identity and policy. I wanted to explore how that same dynamic operated in Hungary, and how we—as U.S. diplomats—understood and responded to it.

Q: This is a good place to pause.

GOODFRIEND: We're just about to arrive, and the journey continues. So then, we can stop, and we can set the next time.

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Q: Okay, today is December 6, 2022, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. And André, go ahead and start us with the date and location.

GOODFRIEND: All right. We're in August 2013. I had just finished language training. In Hungarian, I received a score of something like 3/2+. My reading wasn't quite strong enough to meet the formal criteria for arrival at post. But the post agreed to waive the requirement so that I could get there on time.

I had taken the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) course, as well as all the other required courses. I had been in touch with my predecessor, and while in Washington, I also reached out to various groups and individuals at the Hungarian Embassy—people with an interest in U.S.–Hungary relations—to get a better sense of what to expect.

There was a general sense that the bilateral relationship was good, but some in Hungary felt that the U.S. Embassy spoke too often with those critical of the Hungarian government. From the U.S. side, there was an emphasis on maintaining a broad range of contacts, making sure we were engaging effectively with civil rights organizations and members of all political parties.

This was especially important given the political environment I was stepping into, where the government in power had significantly altered the Constitution and had been criticized by the previous Secretary of State for democratic backsliding.

That was the context in which I arrived—just before Hungary's national holiday, St. Stephen's Day, named after the first king of the Hungarian state, King Stephen, who was later canonized. There's a relic—his hand—that's kept in the Basilica in central Budapest. On that day, it's paraded around the area in a kind of ceremonial circuit.

So, that was my arrival in Budapest. I was coming in as Chargé d'Affaires. The Ambassador had left in July, and while I did overlap briefly with my predecessor, the outgoing DCM, which is a luxury we don't always get, I had also been corresponding with him for quite some time. While in language training, I was reading up on developments in the country through cables and reports, trying to stay informed.

It was helpful to have my predecessor introduce me to his contacts and present me as the incoming DCM—though, in effect, I'd be the Chargé once he departed. At that time, we didn't know when the new Ambassador would arrive. There was an ongoing stalemate in the Senate, and several ambassadorial nominations were stalled without confirmation hearings.

The backlog hadn't yet reached extreme levels, so there was still hope that the Ambassador would arrive by September or October—before the end of the calendar year. As Chargé, I needed to be careful not to act too much like the top person at post, since the Ambassador, once confirmed, would naturally assume that role. So my arrival was kept fairly low-profile.

I had looked forward to this assignment. While I'd served as Consul General in Damascus and had at times functioned as acting DCM, there had always been a Chargé there. When an Ambassador was present, the DCM was often away. So while I'd had some experience in that role, I had never held the full, formal responsibility of being Deputy Chief of Mission.

I had admired the work of Chuck Hunter, the DCM in Damascus, and had hoped to carry forward some of the lessons I learned under his mentorship—applying them in Budapest under the leadership of an Ambassador, once one arrived.

Arriving in Budapest, the first priority was to get to know the people at the embassy—to understand how the different sections interacted, who the staff were, and where everything was located. Every two or three years, with regular rotations, there's a kind of re-learning that has to happen: rediscovering how the embassy is physically organized and how people work together.

This was the first time I had responsibility for the entire mission, rather than being focused primarily on a single section. It felt important to walk through the entire building, take time to meet people, observe how the work was being done, and see how the various elements of the mission fit together.

As DCM, I saw one of my key roles as making sure the embassy functioned well as a whole. In previous positions, I had focused on fostering collaboration within individual sections—encouraging open communication, moving away from opaque environments where information stayed locked in file cabinets. Now, the goal was to take that same mindset and apply it across the entire embassy.

I wanted to ensure that every section felt valued and understood how their work contributed to the overall mission. No one should feel siloed or disconnected from the embassy's core objectives.

So those first few days were spent getting to know the embassy internally, while also beginning to meet contacts outside the embassy and getting a better grasp of how we were positioned on the issues affecting U.S.–Hungary relations.

It was still summer, and in Hungary, they refer to this time as the "*uborka szezon*"—the “cucumber season”—a quiet stretch when parliament isn’t in session and not much tends to happen in the news cycle. People often say, even during cucumber season, more and more seems to be happening. But generally, it’s a relatively calm period, which made it a good time to get out, meet people, and establish connections without the pressure of active crises or urgent issues.

That worked well for me as a newcomer. But one thing on the horizon was an upcoming inspection from the Office of the Inspector General—scheduled for September or October, just a month or two after my arrival. It was similar to what I’d experienced in Damascus, where an OIG inspection came shortly after I began.

I’ve generally seen inspections as an opportunity to better understand what’s happening and to benefit from the insights of the inspectors. Their impressions can help the mission improve and help individual sections strengthen their operations.

Of course, there’s a flurry of activity leading up to an inspection: preparing documents, ensuring everything is in order, and being ready to open the doors for a thorough review. The inspectors usually read much of the material in advance, so our task was to make sure the mission was prepared for their visit.

At the same time, it was an excellent chance for me—as someone just settling in—to get a kind of “temperature check” on the health of the mission. Where were things working well? Where might more attention be needed?

Apart from learning about Hungary’s political landscape and key actors, I wanted to focus on internal communication within the embassy. I worked to ensure that information was being shared effectively, that country team meetings were meaningful for everyone involved, and that all sections—including those outside the State Department, like the Defense Attaché, Legal Attaché, and Commercial Section—were able to coordinate well.

Sometimes, different agencies using separate computer systems or reporting lines complicate coordination. My goal was to draw on the communication models I had explored before and see how well they could be adapted to the environment in Budapest.

So, all of that took place within the first month. There were also other moments that served as useful entry points into Hungarian society—ways for the embassy to make a positive impression. September 11 was approaching; I had arrived on August 15. One of the things the embassy traditionally did on September 11 was to highlight the importance of volunteerism and helping others during times of crisis. In this case, it was through a blood drive with the local Red Cross, where embassy personnel would donate blood. It was a simple but meaningful gesture—something constructive and positive that helped demonstrate the embassy's role in society.

It also got me out into the community in a way that was apolitical and well-received.

Our first press event also took place during the so-called "cucumber season," when things are typically quiet. Parliament was out of session, news was slow, and there wasn't much official activity. That press encounter was more introductory than substantive—an opportunity to meet members of the media and to convey that we were an open embassy, willing to engage. I wanted to make it clear that we welcomed media inquiries, and that we were happy to provide the U.S. perspective when asked—not to hide it away.

This approach was in line with practices I'd pursued in other missions. I've talked before about how we built relationships with the American citizen communities, for instance, in the UK, where we published monthly newsletters. The idea was to avoid being seen as a remote institution that only appears during emergencies. We wanted to maintain a steady, communicative presence.

In Syria, we took similar steps—regular communication with the American citizen community, not just through newsletters but by being present and accessible, answering their questions. That groundwork paid off during the period of unrest. People knew us. They knew we weren't just speaking at them—we were listening and engaging.

So I wanted to carry that approach into Hungary, especially in the absence of an ambassador. It was important to show that the embassy still had a voice, that we weren't sidelined or silent just because we lacked a confirmed chief of mission. That was a message I tried to communicate in my early media interactions—probably in late August or early September, during an evening reception with the press.

We wanted them to know that we were approachable, open to dialogue—not hidden behind walls. Some journalists were skeptical, of course—"Sure, you say that now, let's see what happens." But for others, that personal contact was welcome. The tone was friendly and informal, and the reception helped lay the foundation for future engagement.

I also made a point of getting out into the city. I enjoy walking, and it gave me a chance to observe, to get a feel for the embassy's place in the broader urban and social landscape. I tried to use my Hungarian where I could—though I hadn't achieved a full 3/3, I had enough to interact with people, and I wanted to take advantage of that.

In line with what I'd heard from both government and non-government sources before my arrival, I was also trying to broaden our network of contacts. From the government's side, there was a sense that we needed to be more present—attending their events, engaging with their rank and file. From the opposition and civil society side, the concern was often that we were only talking to the "usual suspects"—the same handful of people who always showed up at our events.

So I was open to invitations—attending as many events as possible, looking for ways to reach beyond the standard circles and connect with a wider range of people and perspectives.

Q: Here, I do want to ask a quick question because what you're talking about overall is the public face, the public diplomacy that you're pursuing right now? Obviously, you're going out and talking to people. Were you able to use the embassy's convening power to bring a variety of voices together for roundtable discussions or other issues that would help get a broader picture among a variety of people?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, we did that—and began organizing those types of gatherings fairly early on. But in the first month after my arrival, I was still largely a new face. As I mentioned earlier, my predecessor had taken me out to meet various groups, but during the summer, we weren't yet putting together panels or roundtables. Those started to come together in October and November, after I had been in-country for a few months.

By then, yes, we were organizing discussions with legal scholars and judges on developments in the Hungarian constitution, the rule of law, the functioning of the court system, and so on. We also regularly engaged with human rights organizations.

Before my arrival, one of the Prime Minister's advisors had mentioned that we should try to reach out more to younger members of the Fidesz party. He said we weren't engaging with them as much as we could or should—that we tended to speak mostly with senior officials, not with the rank and file.

So I asked him: if you can identify some of the people you think would be useful for me to meet—those up-and-coming members—please share their names, and we'd be happy to bring them together. And we did just that.

At the time, I actually had access to a couple of residences because there was no Ambassador when I arrived. My assigned DCM residence was undergoing renovation, so for the first two weeks, I was in a hotel, then I moved into the Ambassador's residence for about two months. Later, I transitioned into the DCM residence. During that period, while both homes were available, we had multiple venues where we could host gatherings. In addition, we used spaces within the embassy, though it was a relatively small building.

That said, the embassy compound was in the process of being expanded. Ambassador Kounalakis, who had left shortly before my arrival, had negotiated a property trade. We agreed to give up a building in the old part of the city—a historic property with deep cultural value to Hungary. Mihály Táncsics, a 19th-century Hungarian activist, had been imprisoned there, and there was an old prison beneath the building that people still visited. The building had been designated for embassy use and housed the Marine detachment—the Marine House. It was a beautiful old structure with historical significance.

Q: Sorry, I would like to ask one other question. When I was there, from 2005 to 2008, we had negotiations with the previous government, the socialist government before Fidesz, and I thought we had already agreed back then for that trade. Was there a delay or a problem that caused it to continue for several more years?

GOODFRIEND: I believe there must have been some re-evaluations over time. What we eventually did wasn't just a simple trade. When you were there and discussing the exchange, was it focused primarily on acquiring the buildings adjacent to the existing embassy?

Q: Correct.

GOODFRIEND: Right. Because of OBO (the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations) requirements, we had to ensure that the acquisition came at no additional cost. But the renovation costs for the adjacent building were substantial—we needed to bring it up to embassy standards, including all the required security infrastructure, and that would have been at the U.S. government's expense.

So, in the end, we negotiated a trade involving the building in Buda, along with another property near the embassy—what they referred to as the "bank building"—and a few other smaller properties.

Q: Ah, yes. The bank building formerly held the Public Affairs Section, yes.

GOODFRIEND: Exactly—Public Affairs and also the Commercial Section.

Q: Correct. Yeah.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, and the Agricultural Section, the Office of Defense Cooperation and others were there as well. At the time, we had several embassy offices scattered across four different properties. We ended up trading away a number of these historic properties to the Hungarian government.

One of the buildings, the so-called "bank building," wasn't actually ours—we didn't own it, we were leasing it—so we weren't able to drop that lease as part of the trade. But the overall effort was to consolidate our presence, to bring various embassy functions into a single structure and create much-needed additional space, including accommodations for the Marines.

Previously, the Marine Security Guards had been living across the river in Buda. In an emergency, that distance could have caused serious delays in their response. So part of the logic of the consolidation was to ensure that everyone—including the Marines—would be within the same secured compound.

Construction work was already underway when I arrived. While the negotiations had begun years earlier, the agreements were finalized, and the physical relocation, including moving the Marines from the historic Táncsics building into the new compound, happened during my tenure. We even have some great photos of the signing ceremony, which took place at the old Táncsics property. As you probably remember, it overlooked the river—offering a beautiful view across to Pest. It was a very picturesque spot.

(Flag Lowering Ceremony at Marine House Táncsics Property, Budapest - August 27, 2014 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSvI9ppGRNc&t=290s)

But all that came a bit later. In August and September, right after my arrival, my focus was largely on getting oriented—taking in advice from colleagues at the embassy, observing public reactions, attending events, and trying to gauge public perception. The goal was to ensure that the embassy projected an image of openness, transparency, and engagement with the broader public.

At some point, maybe in September or October, I was invited to speak at a regular gathering held at the Gundel restaurant in Budapest. The topic was U.S.–Hungary relations. I was told the audience would be mostly Hungarian-speaking, so I saw it as an opportunity to prepare a speech in Hungarian. I wrote out the remarks and delivered them in Hungarian, and then relied on interpreters to help with the Q&A. It was an informal setting—another chance to humanize the embassy's presence and to demonstrate that we were approachable, present, and interested in dialogue.

Of course, the embassy itself had many security barriers. You mentioned earlier the idea of convening authority. Perhaps when you were posted there, it was easier to bring people into the embassy—there were movie nights, we had a library, and we tried to create a sense of openness. The goal wasn't just to distribute information but to make the space itself feel welcoming—where people could come in, experience something of American culture, and feel like they were part of something accessible and familiar.

For example, people could walk into the library. If there was a film screening that evening, they could attend. But by 2013, that kind of accessibility was much harder to offer. The security requirements had increased significantly, and simply clearing someone to enter the building had become a complex process. We also no longer had the space inside the embassy for those kinds of public events.

That's why the new facility under construction was so important.

Meanwhile, we relied on what were called "American Corners." These were information and cultural spaces hosted at Hungarian universities or cultural institutions. They offered books, resources, and American-themed programming—like lectures, poetry readings, or music events.

In some ways, the American Corners took over the role that library and media centers once had. They made it possible to engage with the public without requiring people to come all the way to the embassy, which, in many cases, wasn't located centrally anymore. In some countries, embassies had moved to the outskirts of the capital, making access difficult. But the American Corners, located in places like Budapest, Szeged, and Veszprém, brought American culture closer to the public.

We also held events in other venues across the city, such as commercial spaces or cultural centers.

And one personal initiative I undertook, partly because I love music and folk songs, was inspired by something I had participated in while in the United States—a folk song meet-up. In those gatherings, people would come together once a month to sing from a shared songbook. It was a way to connect, enjoy each other's company and express something of the American spirit.

American folk songs have a particular quality—different from what other countries might consider folk music—but for us, they say something meaningful about the soul of the country.

In Hungary, folk songs tend to be closely tied to ethnicity and cultural identity. These are the songs of the Hungarian people—especially those from the countryside. They're often about love, family, sorrow—personal and communal themes—rather than political ones. They're the kinds of songs that villagers might have sung for generations. That's the sense of "folk song" in the Hungarian context.

I was curious: what would it mean to bring a similar kind of event to Budapest, but with American folk songs? Could we show that there is such a thing as American folk culture—that Americans, too, are a people with a sense of shared identity, a kind of national soul that can be expressed through music? In the United States, many people grow up with certain songs. They can gather, sing together, and connect over that shared heritage.

So I thought: what if we hosted a regular event in Budapest where people could come together and sing American folk songs? It would be a way to present American culture—not in a formal or polished way, but through something lived and human. It would also give me a chance to engage with the public in an informal setting, where they could see the head of the embassy not just as a figure quoted in the news or seen at high-level events they'll never attend, but as a person—sharing a song, a story, a moment.

These were some of the ideas I was working on and exploring as I settled into the role. I was also mindful of not playing favorites—of reaching out to a range of groups and learning what they were about, participating in their events, and listening.

When it came to religious observance, I primarily attended Jewish services. But there were also events held at churches that I would attend—not in an official capacity representing the embassy, but out of personal and cultural interest. Even within the Jewish community, I tried not to favor any one synagogue or denomination.

Hungary has a long-standing Jewish community. The largest branch today is called "Neolog" Judaism, which exists only in Hungary. It's somewhat analogous to Conservative Judaism in the U.S., but with different historical roots. There's also a small Orthodox community with deep roots in Hungary.

Both Neolog and Orthodox were recognized by the Hungarian state as official religious communities, which is important in Hungary because recognized religious groups receive public funding. That's how most religious communities cover their expenses—whether Catholic, Calvinist (known locally as the Reformed Church), Jewish, or others. The financial model is quite different from that in the U.S., where religious institutions are generally funded by their members through donations. In Hungary, they typically don't "pass the plate." Funding comes through state subsidies.

When the current government came to power, one of the changes it made was to revise the process of religious recognition. All previously recognized religions were initially delisted. The government's stated reason was that many groups had registered as religions simply to gain access to public funds, without functioning as genuine religious communities.

Under the previous system, the process was more administrative—similar in some ways to the U.S. model, where, if a group meets certain legal criteria, it is recognized as a religion without political interference. In the U.S., recognition primarily brings tax-exempt status. In Hungary, it brings direct state subsidies.

When the Hungarian government delisted these communities, they lost access to that funding. Only those groups that were re-recognized regained support—but the re-recognition process itself became politicized. That created tension around questions of religious freedom, equality, and the criteria by which a religion could be officially acknowledged.

In Hungary, recognition of religious communities is not just an administrative process—it involves parliamentary approval. Among the various branches of Judaism, both the Neolog and the Orthodox communities were officially recognized.

There was also a branch of Hasidic Judaism—the Chabad movement—which, while not historically rooted in Hungary, has a strong global presence and established itself in the country. In seeking recognition, Chabad aligned itself with a historic category known as the "status quo" community. Historically, Hungarian Jewry had been divided into Neolog, Orthodox, and Status Quo branches. The Status Quo communities were those that had refused to align fully with either of the other two camps. While the Status Quo category no longer actually exists, except on paper, Chabad essentially applied to be considered the modern successor to the Status Quo designation. This was accepted, and Chabad was granted recognition and state funding.

However, one group that was not recognized—despite having previously been recognized—was the Reform and Progressive Jewish communities, which were united in their request for recognition. Reform Judaism, coincidentally, is the largest branch of Judaism in the United States. In Hungary, the Reform and Progressive movements applied for recognition, appeared to meet all the legal criteria, and yet were denied recognition by the government. The reasons for this denial seemed political.

The Reform and Progressive communities took the matter to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, arguing that their exclusion was unjust. They won an initial ruling in their favor, but the broader legal process was still ongoing at the time.

One of the leaders of Hungary's Reform Jewish groups was an American rabbi. Many members of that congregation were also dual nationals—American citizens who had become part of the community. I made a point of visiting with them and the Progressive community, just as I visited the Neolog, Orthodox, and Chabad communities, to understand not only their relationship with the Hungarian government, but also the dynamics between the different Jewish denominations themselves.

This community—the Reform and Progressive movement—was also deeply involved in broader social discussions in Hungary: questions about national identity, what it means to be Hungarian, how the country confronts its past, and how it commemorates the Holocaust. They were a particularly important community to listen to and engage with, especially for anyone trying to understand the intersection of religion, memory, and identity in contemporary Hungary.

Q: Here, just a quick question. You were talking about the issue regarding the Reform movement of Judaism. Did the Embassy of Israel take any position on this?

GOODFRIEND: Not that I'm aware of—at least, not with regard to the Reform movement in Hungary specifically. That said, as you probably know, Reform Judaism isn't officially recognized in Israel either. So, in that respect, the Hungarian government could easily point to Israel and say, "Look, we're taking our cues from the global Jewish community, and even Israel does not recognize the Reform movement in the same way."

When I spoke with Hungarian officials about it, what they said was that the Jewish communities needed to organize themselves and speak with one voice on such matters.

At that time—this was in 2013—there was also a sentiment within the recognized Jewish communities in Hungary that it would be inappropriate to include the Reform community. One of the reasons cited was that Reform Judaism does not adhere to *Halakhah*, traditional Jewish law. In contrast, the Neolog, Orthodox, and Chabad communities all did, to varying degrees, and thus fit more easily under a shared religious and legal framework.

This made it difficult for MAZHISZ, the umbrella organization representing Hungary's recognized Jewish communities, to advocate on behalf of the Reform movement, which stood apart both theologically and legally.

And when it came to state funding, the distribution structure added further complications. Unlike other religious denominations—where, for example, the Methodists, Catholics, and Calvinists each received separate, direct subsidies—the Jewish communities had to draw from a single, shared pool of funding. It was then up to the Jewish communal organizations themselves to determine how that money would be divided internally.

So, from the government's perspective, the Reform movement's exclusion wasn't seen as a unilateral decision by the state, but rather something that needed to be resolved within the Jewish community itself. And at that time, the umbrella body wasn't advocating for the inclusion of the Reform community. That changed later—eventually, the umbrella organization did say it would be open to welcoming the Reform group in.

Q: One last question, given that the official Jewish community of Hungary did not, at least for a while, recognize Reform Judaism, and therefore the government didn't, did the government allow foreign money to support the Reform Movement, money from the U.S. or other places?

GOODFRIEND: Yes. At the time, the government did not prevent foreign contributions. It didn't block or interfere with foreign support for the Reform community.

Now, that gets into another issue—not specific to religious communities, but related more broadly to the government's evolving approach toward NGOs and civil society.

Q: It's my coy way of moving the discussion. Exactly where you're going.

GOODFRIEND: With regard to religious communities, the government's position was that it would control which ones received state money. And within the Jewish community specifically, there was, at times, a somewhat cynical effort to divide groups and maintain influence through that division.

When it came to the Reform community, the government effectively pushed the question onto the traditional Jewish communities—particularly those that adhered to *Halakhah*, or traditional Jewish law. They were expected to decide whether the Reform movement should be included. But there was nothing in the religion law that required such doctrinal vetting by other denominations.

It would be as if the Orthodox Christian or Catholic Church were given the authority to decide whether Baptists or Methodists were legitimate forms of Christianity. That kind of arrangement doesn't really make sense in a pluralistic society—and it promoted rivalries within the Jewish community in Hungary.

That said, there was an interesting parallel in how other religious groups operated. For example, one of the largest Christian communities in Hungary was the Wesleyan Church, an offshoot of Methodism. Its leader, Gábor Iványi, had built an extensive charitable organization that was providing social services throughout the country.

In fact, if I recall correctly, he had even officiated at the Prime Minister's wedding. But there was a falling-out between the two, and as a result, the government later refused to recognize Iványi's religious community—despite the fact that it met the legal criteria for recognition.

So sometimes, the state's approach reflected a "divide and conquer" strategy—managing or fragmenting communities to maintain control. Other times, it appeared more overtly politicized, driven perhaps by personal vendettas or grudges. Recognition of a religious group could hinge not just on doctrine or structure, but on relationships with those in power.

That said, communities like Iványi's were still free to receive funding from overseas. The government didn't block foreign contributions, as long as the groups in question weren't openly engaging in political activism.

Where the government did take a much more aggressive stance was with civil society—non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The state applied a broad classification to NGOs, encompassing everything from national women's associations, pet lovers' clubs, or local clean street initiatives, to organizations with a more political or advocacy-based mission.

While many of these groups were non-political in their goals and activities, others saw themselves as watchdogs. Their mission was to protect the rights of disenfranchised citizens, to monitor government activity, to expose corruption or human rights violations, and to inform both the government and the public of their findings.

It was these watchdog organizations—those that engaged in public interest advocacy—that drew the most scrutiny and resistance from the government.

Some of these organizations are active in both Hungary and the United States—organizations like Transparency International, Human Rights First, Amnesty International, and others. There's a wide range of civil society organizations, as I mentioned earlier—environmental groups, human rights organizations, transparency and anti-corruption groups.

They establish themselves to carry out work aimed at ensuring that democracy functions properly, that the public stays informed, and that government actions aren't hidden behind secrecy—particularly actions that might be illegal or involve the misuse of public funds.

These organizations were often critical of the Fidesz government. They may have also been critical of previous governments—that's generally the role they play. They tend to scrutinize those in power, regardless of who that is. And many maintain a level of independence because they are not financially dependent on the government.

That said, just as the government funds religious organizations, it also provides funding to certain non-governmental and civil society organizations. That creates a challenge for groups that see themselves as independent watchdogs—how to maintain that independence if they are, in part, receiving funds from the same government they are meant to monitor.

To avoid that conflict, many rely on grants and external funding. They develop specific projects and then seek funding for those projects—often through international donors. Unlike in the United States, where civil society groups often turn to individual donors and fundraising campaigns throughout the year, that kind of grassroots donation model is not as common in Hungary.

Current and prospective members of civil society organizations in the United States regularly receive solicitations for donations to support causes they believe in—whether it's five dollars, ten dollars, a hundred dollars—everything from public radio and television to the kinds of watchdog and advocacy organizations I mentioned earlier.

In Hungary, however, such solicitations were generally not part of the operating model for established civil society organizations. Fundraising appeals might be made during emergencies—for example, to assist refugees or in response to a flood—but not typically for the ongoing work of civil society groups.

When I spoke with some of these organizations about that, I pointed out that, in my view, this kind of grassroots fundraising serves multiple purposes. It helps the public become more aware of what these organizations do, and it creates a sense of investment—of ownership—among citizens. People feel, "I believe in this, and I'm willing to support it with my own money." That's part of building democratic legitimacy.

But many of the organizations responded that Hungarians were generally not receptive to such appeals. They cited low levels of disposable income, public distrust, and a lack of confidence that donations would be used effectively. That presents a problem: if an organization acknowledges that the public doesn't trust it, or that people are unwilling to fund it, how can it defend itself when the government tries to discredit it?

In the United States, while similar concerns exist, there are independent organizations that monitor civil society groups—providing transparency on how donations are used, how funds are allocated, and how effective the organization is. That kind of infrastructure didn't exist in Hungary, at least not while I was there. It was a significant challenge for civil society organizations to build grassroots support and to communicate their purpose to the wider public.

Beyond concerns about public trust or lack of funding, there was also fear. Some believed that if a Hungarian business or wealthy individual supported a civil society organization—especially one critical of the government—the authorities would find out and retaliate. Potential donors worried that even anonymous contributions could be traced, and that support for a disfavored NGO could bring consequences.

Independent or opposition-aligned newspapers, for example, often struggled to secure advertisers. Media outlets that didn't reflect the government's views found it difficult to attract domestic funding. In contrast, civil society organizations that received external support—whether from private foundations or foreign donors—came under increased scrutiny.

The government began framing such foreign-funded groups as acting on behalf of foreign interests. The message was: if they were truly working in Hungary's national interest, why would they need outside money? The implication was that foreign funding itself was proof of disloyalty.

That framing became more personalized through the figure of George Soros, whose philanthropic foundations had long supported liberal democracy, human rights, and transparency initiatives in Hungary and around the world. Even during my time there, this narrative was starting to take shape. But from around 2016 onward, the Hungarian government intensified its campaign to demonize Soros—casting him as a symbol of foreign interference, a supposed threat to national sovereignty, and a proponent of refugee resettlement in Hungary.

This tactic—portraying liberal democratic advocacy as foreign subversion—echoed broader global trends, where similar rhetoric has been used against civil society organizations critical of authoritarian or populist governments.

This was the political and civic environment that was taking hold in Hungary.

But I may have jumped a bit ahead in the story. There were a number of ways in which things developed gradually, from what were, at first, more or less innocuous beginnings. During those first couple of months, my focus was really on getting to know the issues within the society, how people understood them, and how they talked about them.

At the same time, I was trying to establish a sense that the embassy wasn't just there to echo formal talking points from Washington. We were there as human representatives of the U.S. government—people who were genuinely interested in understanding the situation in Hungary, engaging in dialogue, listening, and exploring common ground. The aim was to work from a shared understanding of how societies function, how challenges arise, and how people see the world around them.

A lot of our work centered on emphasizing shared experiences and intertwined histories. Because one of the recurring themes—in Hungary and in other countries where there's pushback against outside perspectives—is this belief that if you're not part of the society, if you're not Hungarian, then you can't really understand what it's like. The view is that outsiders come in with preconceived ideas, that they get their information from foreign media, and that their minds are already made up before they even arrive.

And in fact, that was something I encountered almost immediately upon my arrival.

This exhortation from the Hungarian government—don't just believe what you see in the media; get to know the country, the society, talk with people—was something I heard often. And to some extent, there's a valid point there. If you rely solely on media coverage—especially from abroad—for your understanding of how a country feels about certain issues, or how its people perceive their situation, you're likely to come away with a distorted perspective.

If you arrive with your mind already made up about how things are, then yes, you're going to miss a great deal. There's some justification, then, in that pushback: that you don't understand, because you haven't yet engaged. That's why getting out and talking to people was so important to me—taking seriously that we are human beings, and that we carry with us a human sensitivity to what feels authentic, what resonates, and what doesn't.

That's the sensibility I tried to bring to my work. And I think it was also reflected in something as simple as the anecdote about folk songs—that there is a soul in a nation, and that sometimes we express it through music. Different communities can find common ground through each other's songs, through literature, through stories. That shared expression can build mutual understanding.

It also helped to recognize the historical and human continuity between Hungary and the United States. Many Hungarians have emigrated to the U.S., and they've maintained contact—writing letters, sending emails, making phone calls, and now video chats. So Hungarians don't only hear about the U.S. through media narratives. They hear about it from people they trust—family members, friends—who live there.

Likewise, Americans are influenced by their relationships with Hungarians. If I'm Hungarian and now living in the U.S., and my brother is still back in Hungary, we're talking, and I'm also talking with my neighbors about what Hungary is like. That exchange shapes how Hungary is perceived.

So when you think about how long our countries have been in contact—over decades, even centuries—Hungary really isn't foreign in the way it's sometimes portrayed. There is a living connection, an ongoing conversation, and it's that shared human experience that diplomacy has to engage with, not just formal positions or media coverage.

I think to emphasize this point—something we regularly discussed—whenever we talked about the shared history between the United States and Hungary, it always went back quite far. One of the earliest links was during the American Revolution, when a Hungarian soldier, Michael Kovats de Fabriczy, fought on behalf of the United States—well, of the United Colonies at the time. Some say he helped establish the American cavalry. He saw the American struggle for freedom as a cause that, as a Hungarian, he could identify with and support.

Since then, there's been an ongoing interaction between the Hungarian fight for freedom—especially in the 1848 revolution and beyond—and the United States. There was a conceptual exchange between how national identity and self-determination were understood in America versus how they were treated in Europe. In the U.S., ethnic communities often found more space to express their identity than they could back in Europe, where centralized empires and multi-ethnic states often suppressed such expression.

To some extent, the communication between immigrant communities in the U.S. and their countries of origin helped inspire or reawaken ethnic national consciousness in Europe, especially in the late 19th century and leading into the First World War. These crosscurrents—this mingling of history—matter. For someone who's familiar with this legacy, it reinforces the sense that we do understand each other, not just politically, but culturally and historically.

Beyond that, there's a shared tradition of striving for self-rule, for human rights, for the ability to speak freely. These are values both our societies claim, even if neither has fully achieved them. In the United States, we still grapple with how to live up to our ideals. Other societies do too. But acknowledging that our aspirations overlap—that we value many of the same things—creates a foundation for connection.

And as diplomats working in a host country, being able to identify those shared values, and to talk about how we might together continue working toward the ideals we hold in common, has a powerful resonance. It still does.

There's often talk of shared values when we speak about our diplomatic goals and how we work with allied nations. Whether bilaterally or multilaterally, there's a recognition of the common values that bind countries like the United States and members of the European Union together—values that help explain why we collaborate as effectively as we do.

These values are also frequently cited as the foundation of what holds NATO together—beyond the military alliance itself, there are principles and commitments at the core. The same is true for other international bodies like the OSCE or the United Nations, where member states identify certain norms and values and choose to adhere to them.

That broader context was very much in the background of what I was doing in September and October of 2014, when I was there, talking with people and trying to get a sense of: Are these values as shared as I understood them to be? What kind of conversations were possible? How did people perceive their own government? Did they feel it was still functioning as a liberal democracy? These were important questions for understanding how to engage more effectively with the public.

On the public diplomacy side, there has, for some time—especially since the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) was integrated into the State Department—been a growing recognition that public diplomacy is not a separate track: public diplomacy is diplomacy.

It's not confined to closed-door meetings between government officials. And particularly between democracies, diplomacy depends not only on what is discussed and agreed upon in private, but also on whether the public understands and supports those goals.

If a government enters into discussions with the United States, and the public perceives those discussions as secretive or contrary to national interests, that government may have a much harder time following through on its commitments. Conversely, if there is public buy-in—if citizens understand the goals as aligned with their own values—it becomes far easier for the government to act on those agreements.

So engaging with the public, making sure there's transparency and resonance around shared goals, is essential—especially in democratic societies where public opinion shapes the government's ability to act.

That brings me back to the context I was working in—Hungary in September 2014. One of the persistent, simmering issues in our conversations was how Hungary was dealing with its own history. It was, in many ways, a fragmented society. The ruling party had positioned itself as center-right, but further to its right was a significant political force that was widely seen as ethnocentric—Jobbik, a party with openly antisemitic elements and, at the time, ties to a paramilitary wing that had been accused of targeting Roma communities.

As long as there were groups further to the right of Fidesz, the party could point to them and say, “We’re not like them.” Fidesz could present itself as a responsible center-right party, asserting that it was not anti-Roma, not antisemitic, and that it stood for human rights, a strong civil society, the rule of law, and the importance of democracy.

That was part of the political context in October 2013, when there was an unveiling of a bust of Miklós Horthy. I think we may have discussed this before. Horthy was the regent of Hungary following World War I. After a brief communist government held power in the aftermath of the war, Horthy and his conservative allies overthrew it—many accounts say he literally rode into Budapest on a white horse—and installed himself as the representative of the monarchy, even though there was no reigning king. He ruled as regent, and while there was a parliament, Horthy effectively served as head of state from the early 1920s until near the end of World War II.

During this period, Hungary developed increasingly institutionalized antisemitism. In the 1920s, antisemitic attitudes were expressed both by some church leaders and through state legislation. One of the most notorious examples was the *Numerus Clausus* law, which imposed quotas on Jews in universities and professional fields. This led to dismissals of Jewish faculty and restricted Jewish students from higher education.

In the 1930s, following the Nazi rise to power in Germany and Hitler’s expansionist policies, Hungary aligned itself with the Nazis in hopes of regaining territories lost after World War I under the Treaty of Trianon. These included parts of Romania (Transylvania), Slovakia, and other neighboring areas. The Nazi regime supported

Hungary’s revisionist territorial claims, and in return, Hungary deepened its political and military alliance with Germany.

As Nazi antisemitism became more overt and extreme, Hungary remained a close ally. By 1944, the Horthy government ultimately facilitated the roundup and deportation of the majority of Hungary’s Jewish population to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. So Horthy, as the country’s leader during this time, bore more than symbolic responsibility. His regime collaborated with the Nazis not only in war but in genocide. To say he had “baggage” would be putting it mildly.

In the years leading up to my arrival, there had been a growing rehabilitation of controversial—and often openly antisemitic—figures in Hungarian public life. Writers who had vilified Jews in their works were being reintroduced into school curricula. Statues were being erected in towns and villages in their honor.

And then, in November 2013, a bust of Miklós Horthy was unveiled—just a five-minute walk from the U.S. Embassy—in front of a Reformed Church.

The statue was not on public land, but it was clearly visible from public space, and the unveiling ceremony was very public. Members of Jobbik, the extreme ethno-nationalist party, participated in the event. The symbolism was clear: this wasn’t just about rehabilitating Horthy—it was about elevating him, turning him into a heroic figure, despite his association with some of the darkest chapters in Hungary’s 20th-century history.

This was particularly troubling because the crimes of Horthy’s era still echo deeply in Hungarian society. Though the majority of Hungary’s Jewish population was systematically deported to Auschwitz and murdered, Hungary today still has one of the largest surviving Jewish communities in the region—a community that can trace its roots back centuries, long before World War II. In contrast, in many neighboring countries, the Jewish communities were virtually wiped out entirely, and any postwar resurgence has largely come through immigration and rebirth, not continuity.

In Hungary, especially in Budapest, the Jewish community never completely disappeared. In the countryside, however, it was effectively erased. The trauma of that history remains alive. Many survivors are still living—some were children at the time, and their children and grandchildren continue to carry the memory. For them, the elevation of Horthy—turning him into a figure of national pride—is deeply disturbing. It has stirred controversy and concern within Hungarian society, particularly among those who remember or have direct family ties to what happened.

Faced with this, we—together with colleagues in Washington—felt it was important to respond. We needed to reaffirm the values that the United States stands for. At the same time, we understood that a direct condemnation of the Hungarian government might not be the most productive path, especially since the government itself had not officially organized or sponsored the event.

But the ceremony took place in a public setting, and it included the participation of a political party that was represented in Parliament. So while the government could claim a degree of distance—it wasn't state-sponsored—the public nature of the act, and the involvement of parliamentary actors, gave it a broader political resonance. It wasn't something we could ignore.

This party, which was represented in Parliament, had been condemned perhaps a year earlier for proposing to publish a list of government officials who were either Jewish or held Israeli citizenship, along with their Hungarian citizenship. At the time, they were rightly criticized for attempting to cast suspicion on members of Hungary's Jewish community.

And now, in a sense, they were at it again—this time by participating in the glorification of Hungary's leader during a period marked by virulent antisemitism.

In response, we issued a statement addressing the role of free speech and how societies can respond to hate speech. In this context, we viewed the commentary surrounding the event—and the manner in which Horthy was unveiled—as an expression of hate speech, targeting a segment of Hungarian society.

(U.S. Embassy Hungary Statement on Horthy Bust Unveiling - November 7, 2013 - https://web.archive.org/web/20140111133929/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_11072013.html)

Our message was that it is incumbent upon leaders in a democratic society not necessarily to ban or censor such speech, but to speak out—to make their position clear, to show that they do not agree with it. This is something we emphasize in the United States as well: when acts of hate or glorification of hateful ideologies occur, responsible leaders are expected to take a public stand.

I mean, literally, in the past couple of weeks in the United States, we've seen a rise in antisemitic statements by prominent individuals on social media. One of the more widely discussed incidents involved President Biden condemning a statement that suggested terminating the Constitution—a comment that echoed broader extremist rhetoric. At the same time, other public figures were being asked to respond to associations with white nationalists, white supremacists, and antisemites, particularly following the public glorification of Hitler by a well-known entertainer.

In a sense, this was the same discussion we were having in 2013. A political party represented in the Hungarian Parliament had participated in the unveiling of a bust honoring a Nazi ally—Miklós Horthy—who had overseen Hungary's deportation and extermination of its Jewish community in 1944, as well as the antisemitic laws passed in the years prior.

In our public statement, we emphasized that, in a democratic society, it's essential to uphold free speech. But that also means those in positions of responsibility and authority have a duty to speak out and condemn hateful views. The government, however, seemed to interpret this message as a criticism of its own actions—perhaps because it had failed to speak out clearly. Instead, it chose to remain ambiguous on the matter.

It was, in a way, the "good people on both sides" approach. There was a reluctance to confront this part of Hungarian history directly, especially at a time when certain authors and figures with antisemitic legacies were being rehabilitated. The government was, to some extent, positioning itself as the defender of Hungarian ethnic identity, promoting what it called traditional values. But in practice, that often meant treating other ethnicities as outsiders, or "guests."

This is where tensions began to rise. We had made it clear that we were prepared to speak publicly about the values we stood for, and to engage in conversations—even uncomfortable ones—about freedom, inclusion, and historical memory. While we weren't directly criticizing the Hungarian government for specific actions, we were willing to hold a mirror to the society, and to shine a light on where shared democratic values should lead us.

It was becoming clear who was moving in that direction—and who was not.

Maybe we'll stop there for now, and pick up from that point, where our discussions became more public, and the values we sought to represent increasingly diverged from those the Hungarian government appeared willing to embrace or aspire to.

Q: Alright, let me go ahead and pause the recording.

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Q: Today is December 13, 2022, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend as Chargé d'affaires in Budapest.

GOODFRIEND: I think we discussed the settling-in period during the slower summer season. I felt a need to get out and understand both the internal dynamics of the embassy—how the different sections worked with one another—and also to engage with the broader society. Not just the usual people on the contact lists, but really trying to talk with individuals outside that circle, to broaden both public understanding of our role in Hungary and the range of people we engaged with through various programs.

That was the focus of the first couple of months—August and September. I think I mentioned earlier that prior to my arrival in Budapest, there had already been calls for us to engage extensively with all elements of the population. We did not engage with the extreme ethno-nationalist party, Jobbik, due to the nature of their positions—militant nationalism, antisemitism, and anti-Roma rhetoric. They were on the extreme fringe and not a part of the governing coalition. But we were engaging with the other parties involved in governance.

That was the situation in August and September. At the same time, we had to deal with the underlying tensions related to the growing authoritarianism in the Hungarian government—what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had previously referred to as "democratic backsliding." There was a lot of head-scratching over how we could continue working with Hungary to move toward shared democratic goals.

I think there was still a sense—at least in principle—that both the Hungarian government and the United States aspired to a form of liberal democracy: one that incorporates the voice of the public, but also includes the rule of law and separation of powers between the judiciary, legislature, and executive. In a parliamentary system like Hungary's, those last two are to some extent intertwined.

So we worked with civil society and other stakeholders—interested citizens and institutions—to define and support a shared vision of liberal democracy. That included understanding the role of citizens, of civil society, and engaging the Hungarian government in dialogue. The European Union was also engaged with the Hungarian government on these issues, trying to reverse some of the backsliding that had been identified.

A key concern was judicial independence—ensuring that the judiciary was not being co-opted by the legislative or executive branches. Other concerns included protecting civil society, safeguarding religious freedom—ensuring people had the right to worship freely—and upholding freedom of expression. These are all essential principles of liberal democracy: universal human rights, equal application of the law, transparency, and government accountability.

These were areas where we maintained engagement with the Hungarian government. But there remained a sense that the government was not making substantive progress in addressing the concerns that had been raised.

It's worth noting that after the 2010 elections, the Fidesz party came into power with a two-thirds majority in Parliament. That supermajority enabled them to govern without the need to consult or compromise with other parties. They used that majority to rewrite the Constitution and enact a series of laws that couldn't be changed without another two-thirds majority—a threshold difficult for any other coalition to reach.

As one example, the process for recognizing religious organizations was altered. The new law allowed the government to determine which groups qualified for legal recognition, essentially giving it control over which religious groups were officially acknowledged. This sort of legal restructuring allowed the government to retroactively legalize actions that might otherwise have been impermissible under the previous legal framework.

Q: You mentioned that they now were the governing party with a two-thirds majority in the parliament, which gave them sort of complete control, even making it possible to change the constitution. What was understood at that time regarding their mandate? Was it economic? Did the Hungarian people just become essentially more conservative and more interested in defining Hungarianness as an ethno-linguistic group, separate from citizenship, or a mix of all of that?

GOODFRIEND: The previous government—the largest party in it was the Hungarian Socialist Party, led by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. In 2006, he gave a speech to his party, in a closed setting, where, in very blunt and vulgar language, he admitted that the party had not been serving the people well. He said, essentially: "We are lying. I am lying day after day to the Hungarian people."

He acknowledged that the government had spent beyond its means, that the economy was in trouble, and that there was no actual plan—despite public reassurances that everything was under control. This was not intended for public release, but the recording was leaked. To this day, it's unclear who leaked it. But in it, Gyurcsány, swearing and speaking candidly, admitted to misleading the public.

Fidesz seized on that moment. In its populist approach—one that tends to personalize politics and vilify individuals rather than focus on policy—it targeted Gyurcsány. Gyurcsány also alienated members of his own party with that speech, as it called them out, too. After the subsequent election, he eventually left the Socialist Party. Initially, many thought he'd been sidelined.

But at the time, rather than resign, he stayed on and tried to push through as head of government. The challenge was that Hungary was broke. Eventually, they brought in a so-called technocratic prime minister—Gordon Bajnai—who introduced strict financial austerity measures to stabilize the economy. They had to borrow from the IMF, reduce subsidies, and implement major budget cuts. This created widespread public dissatisfaction.

There were protests—some of them violent. Fidesz, then in opposition, was accused of at least encouraging those demonstrations. The police used force, including rubber bullets, which led to injuries. The government's use of police force further stoked public anger, and the whole episode became a symbol of mistrust toward Gyurcsány and his government.

Add to that a perception that the Socialist Party had become corrupt and out of touch. They had won three successive elections—something that was seen by many as "too much." There was this informal notion that two terms might be acceptable, but three was excessive, and that the pendulum should swing back. Fidesz and Viktor Orbán felt that the 2006 election should have been theirs, and that it had been "stolen" from them, politically speaking. So for 2010, Orbán pulled out all the stops.

The Socialists were deeply unpopular. The economy was in bad shape. Fidesz capitalized on that and won. But it's important to note that while they won a strong majority, they did not win two-thirds of the popular vote. Through a combination of electoral districting and the electoral system—where unused votes from smaller parties that didn't reach the threshold are redistributed to larger ones—they gained a disproportionate number of seats.

That system is designed to avoid fragmented parliaments and give a clearer mandate to the winning party. So even though Fidesz may have received 55 or 60 percent of the vote—well short of two-thirds—they ended up with two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. And with that, they claimed a mandate.

It wasn't that they manipulated the vote at that time—they won under the existing system. But once they had the supermajority, they saw it as an opportunity, even a responsibility, to implement their agenda. Some within the government told me that not using the power that came with a two-thirds majority would be irresponsible—that it would ignore the will of the people.

So they acted decisively. They saw their victory as a referendum on the Socialist government's policies and took it as a chance to remake Hungary. Part of that involved delegitimizing what came before. They claimed that after the fall of communism in 1989, the Hungarian Constitution hadn't really been rewritten—just patched over. In reality, the Constitution had been amended and transformed significantly, but they argued that Hungary needed a truly new constitution.

The government was also making the argument that Hungary had lost its sovereignty, starting with the German occupation in 1944. That claim was somewhat disingenuous because Hungary had been an ally of Nazi Germany. Still, the narrative focused on March 1944, when Regent Miklós Horthy began making overtures toward the West and attempting to distance himself from the Nazis. In response, Nazi Germany launched Operation Margarethe and occupied Hungary, tightening its control. From that point, according to this narrative, Hungary lost its sovereignty.

After Nazi control ended, the argument continued, Hungary transitioned almost directly into Soviet domination through the establishment of a communist regime. Therefore, Hungary, they said, never truly regained sovereignty during that entire period. Even after the fall of communism in 1989, the Constitution that remained in force was still rooted in a framework created under foreign domination. It had been amended, but not fundamentally rewritten. Thus, they claimed, it was time to create a new constitution—one developed by a fully sovereign, democratic Hungary.

This justification formed the basis for Fidesz's rewriting of the Constitution. As part of that shift, they also changed the official name of the country. Previously, it was the "Hungarian Republic"; They changed it simply to "Hungary". While this was largely symbolic—they retained the institutions of a democratic republic, including the office of the President of the Republic—the change was presented as a way to break from the socialist past and assert a new national identity.

They framed these sweeping changes as steps that needed to be taken to differentiate post-communist Hungary from its past under Soviet domination. That narrative helped justify not only constitutional reform but also broader structural and ideological changes. One example was the promotion of a revised national historical narrative, supported through state-sponsored institutions like the House of Terror Museum.

The House of Terror Museum begins its exhibitions with the Nazi occupation of Hungary and the atrocities committed under the Arrow Cross regime—the Hungarian ethnocentric authoritarian party aligned with Nazi Germany. The museum then transitions almost seamlessly into the period of Soviet domination. The design suggests a “revolving door” of oppression: the same buildings, sometimes even the same personnel, but with new uniforms. This portrayal has been criticized by many historians and observers for creating a false equivalence between the Nazi and Soviet regimes—particularly given the different nature and scale of their crimes. Still, the museum reinforces the central message of national victimhood and lack of sovereignty.

This framing of Hungary as a passive victim of foreign powers was used to justify the Fidesz government's actions, including its consolidation of power. Beyond using its two-thirds majority in Parliament to pass legislation and constitutional reforms, the government also employed procedural tools to bypass scrutiny and avoid transparency.

One such method involved introducing legislation not through the government itself, but through individual members of Parliament—technically "private member bills." When legislation is introduced by the government, it typically requires a consultation process and review period. Private member bills, however, are not subject to the same procedural requirements. By using this approach, the government could fast-track legislation while maintaining the appearance of procedural legitimacy. The ruling party would argue that every member of Parliament has the right to introduce legislation independently. But in practice, Fidesz MPs followed the party line, and such bills often originated from the Prime Minister’s Office or reflected government priorities.

Anyway, this was the broader context behind the concerns the U.S. government had at the time—that Hungary was backsliding on democracy, becoming increasingly authoritarian, and not exhibiting indicators of a genuine commitment to democratic processes. That included respect for the rule of law, the checks and balances of liberal democracy, and institutional separation—especially between the judiciary and the legislature.

There were real concerns that the executive and legislative branches were operating hand-in-glove, and that the judiciary lacked the independence and oversight capacity that should serve as a check on legislative and executive action. Civil society was also being increasingly sidelined in Hungary at the time, and that raised additional concerns about the health of democratic institutions.

So the question in Washington was: how do we signal our dissatisfaction with what's happening in Hungary? The standard approach was to withhold high-level engagements. That meant no meetings between the Hungarian Prime Minister and the U.S. President; no meetings between the Hungarian Foreign Minister and the Secretary of State. In fact, senior-level officials from the State Department or the broader U.S. government were not traveling to Hungary. The highest-level visits were at the Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) level, or sometimes even lower—office directors coming through for orientation.

There was a clear policy of limiting engagement to emphasize disapproval. But in my discussions with Washington, I wasn't sure that this was the most effective way to demonstrate that we were serious about addressing the issues. If we want to raise specific points, it helps to have consistent opportunities to do so—whether through meetings at my level as Chargé, or at the level of an office director, a DAS, or even an Assistant Secretary. My sense was that we should still meet, but speak with one voice, so that in every encounter, at every level, the same concerns were raised.

Not meeting at all, in my view, cuts off a tool we have—dialogue itself. That was my perspective, and perhaps it was shared by others. Still, the prevailing view in Washington seemed to be that high-level meetings are a benefit, a privilege reserved for countries with which we see eye-to-eye. They're not extended where there is deep policy disagreement.

That said, we did manage—perhaps due to ongoing conversations with Washington—to arrange for the Assistant Secretary to come to Hungary at the end of October. But this visit was not for a bilateral meeting. For many, optics mattered. A bilateral engagement could have been interpreted as an endorsement, so it was off the table.

Instead, we found another opening: participation in a multilateral conference. The event took place just outside Budapest, in the town of Gödöllő. It was called the Central European Initiative and was organized by the Hungarian government. It brought together senior representatives from countries across Central Europe—members of the so-called Visegrád Four (Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic), as well as Romania and others from the region.

There were also participants from outside Hungary who came to take part in the conference. Everything was carefully choreographed to ensure that the visit included meetings not only with government officials, but also with representatives from other participating countries and with members of Hungarian civil society. The message was clear: this was not a favor to the Hungarian government. The Assistant Secretary was in Hungary to participate in a multilateral conference, where there would be opportunities to engage on a range of issues with all participants—including, but not limited to, Hungarian officials.

Importantly, the visit also included time with civil society organizations. The goal was to signal U.S. support for civil society, and to hear directly from them about how they perceived the operating environment in Hungary—what space they had to function, what restrictions they were facing, and how they viewed their role in shaping public policy.

At the time, civil society actors were feeling increasingly constrained. They were under pressure, struggling to secure funding, and found it difficult to influence legislation or contribute meaningfully to governance. While, on paper, there were mechanisms for public input, in practice, civil society voices were often dismissed or ignored.

This situation tied back to the government's two-thirds parliamentary majority. With that kind of power, they felt no obligation to consult—even with opposition parties represented in Parliament—let alone with non-governmental organizations or independent experts. They could pass legislation unilaterally.

So while there was appreciation that the Assistant Secretary had come to Hungary in October 2013, the fundamental concerns remained. The visit helped underscore U.S. support for democratic principles and civil society, but the core issues—centralization of power, lack of meaningful consultation, and democratic backsliding—were still not being addressed.

As we moved forward, all of this formed the backdrop to a continuing question: What can be done in this situation? How do we work constructively with an ally in a way that reduces tension? It was in no one's interest to maintain an atmosphere of underlying strain—an atmosphere where there are no senior-level meetings, where dialogue is limited, and where common ground is hard to identify.

There were areas of cooperation, of course. The government regularly pointed to military cooperation and law enforcement collaboration. Those were solid. Hungary remained an important member of NATO and a reliable partner on policing and security matters. That was consistently put forward as evidence of a good bilateral relationship. But beyond those areas, it was difficult to point to other subjects where we clearly saw eye to eye.

At the same time, in 2013, preparations were underway for the upcoming 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, which would be commemorated in 2014. As I alluded to earlier, 1944 was a pivotal year. The German occupation of Hungary began in March of that year, after Regent Horthy made overtures toward the Allies. Germany responded by seizing tighter control through Operation Margarethe.

That was the year when Hungary's remaining Jewish population—particularly those outside of Budapest—was rounded up. Despite Hungary's alliance with Nazi Germany prior to that point, its Jewish population had, for the most part, not yet been systematically deported to extermination camps. But that changed in 1944. In just a few months, about 70% of Hungary's Jewish community was deported to Auschwitz and other camps. This was carried out under the leadership of Adolf Eichmann, with significant cooperation from Hungarian authorities and gendarmes. The German occupying force was relatively small, so the deportations required local collaboration.

2014 was thus shaping up to be a major commemorative year. The Hungarian government was planning a series of events to acknowledge the tragedy. But there were concerns about how the historical narrative was being shaped.

Some of these concerns stemmed from earlier statements by government officials. For example, a Hungarian government spokesperson had, a few years prior, declared that the greatest tragedy in Hungary's history was the loss of territory after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. When pressed about the Holocaust or the fate of Hungary's Jewish population, that was not viewed as a Hungarian tragedy, but as a Jewish tragedy with less impact on Hungary. This fed into an ongoing national debate: What are Hungary's greatest historical traumas? What should be emphasized in schools, commemorations, and national memory?

In this discourse, the loss of territory after World War I is often emphasized more than the events of World War II. That context is important as we approach 2014, because Hungary was also preparing to assume the chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).

As part of that, the Hungarian government began reviewing school curricula—looking at what was being taught about the Holocaust. There was already a Holocaust Museum in Budapest, established under a previous Orbán government. But the museum was in a somewhat out-of-the-way location. It had taken a critical view of Hungarian complicity and maintained an independent academic and historical perspective. It was not controlled by the government, and that independence was increasingly seen as problematic by some officials.

By contrast, the House of Terror Museum—which I mentioned earlier—was heavily promoted. It drew direct parallels between Nazi and Communist rule in Hungary, depicting both as oppressive foreign occupations. This museum was a required destination for schoolchildren across Hungary. Its narrative reinforced the idea that Hungary was a victim of both fascist and communist regimes, and that Hungarians, broadly speaking, bore no responsibility for what occurred during those periods.

The Holocaust Museum, however, was not a required visit for students, though there had been some discussion about possibly making it one. Meanwhile, plans were underway for a new museum—one that would tell the story of the Holocaust in what was portrayed as a more modern, interactive format, aimed at both adults and children. It was not going to be a traditional exhibit-based museum, but rather a narrative experience told through the eyes of a young girl whose life is dramatically affected by the events of the time.

The story was set to begin around the early years of World War II and end with the onset of Communist rule. The focus would be on how this young girl's world was disrupted by both the Nazis and, later, the Communists. A significant part of the museum would emphasize how Hungarians had tried to help Jews, highlighting rescuers and heroic acts.

This framing, however, drew criticism from Hungary's Jewish community, academics, and other observers. The concern was that it would minimize Hungarian complicity, emphasize heroism over collaboration, and omit critical context—such as the *Numerus Clausus* laws passed in 1920, well before the Nazi occupation. These laws, introduced by the Hungarian government, had already stripped Jews of rights and livelihoods. The concern was that the new museum would ignore or downplay that pre-1944 reality and focus instead on Hungary as a victim and occasional rescuer, rather than as an active participant in persecution.

So these were the different currents we were dealing with at the time. As we moved toward 2014, there was the ongoing concern about democratic backsliding—the increasing consolidation of power within the executive, particularly within the office of the Prime Minister, enabled by Fidesz's two-thirds majority in Parliament. There was the marginalization and shrinking of space for civil society in Hungary. And there was growing tension between the government and Hungary's Jewish community.

Against this backdrop, we were asking: How do we navigate a path that allows us to continue engaging effectively with the Hungarian government? How do we remain a credible and friendly voice, as we talk about what we believed to be our shared aspirations—to be well-regarded democracies that listen to all their people? Democracies where the government represents the entire population, not just those who voted for the winning party.

We had the visit by the Assistant Secretary at the end of October, which could have been a platform for positive forward movement together on issues of values and democracy. But then came the unveiling of a bust of Miklós Horthy, just days after the Assistant Secretary's visit. I believe I described this in a previous conversation. It took place in November, when various figures gathered to prominently honor Horthy with a statue. That moment reignited tensions.

Horthy is a deeply divisive figure in Hungarian history. Some idolize him as the man who crushed the short-lived communist government of Béla Kun and restored what they see as a more traditional, Western-oriented capitalist government. Others remember him as the leader who allied Hungary with Nazi Germany and who remained in power while the country's Jewish population was systematically destroyed.

So when that bust was unveiled—especially amid the already tense political atmosphere—we issued a statement from the Embassy. It was focused not just on Horthy himself, but on the broader principle of how responsible public figures should respond to hate speech.

As we discussed previously, when prominent individuals rally people around messages of hate, it's important for other prominent figures to speak out and counter those messages. That's something we stress regularly in the U.S.—the idea that hate speech should be met with more speech, not censorship. It's a core principle of our approach to freedom of expression. The statement we issued reflected that view.

We emphasized that governments trying to counter division and hatred need to speak up—that's the role of effective leadership. We acknowledged that in many parts of the world, the standard response to hate speech is censorship. But the United States takes a different approach. Our model is to respond not by banning speech, but by confronting it with positive, inclusive speech that sets a moral example.

That statement—issued in November—was, in a way, an invitation. It gave senior Hungarian officials the opportunity to join us in saying, "Yes, we agree—this kind of divisive rhetoric is not helpful, and it's not the role of responsible political leaders." They could have joined us. But instead, their response—delivered, I believe, through the media—was that they were not pleased with what they saw as criticism.

In reality, the statement was less a rebuke than an open door. It was something they could have endorsed or expanded upon. But they chose not to. It would have required them to take a clear position on a sensitive historical figure—much like in the U.S., when political figures are asked to take a stance on someone like Andrew Jackson, given his role in Native American removal, or on Confederate leaders.

In Hungary, the sentiment seemed to be: we'd rather not go there. Horthy is an important historical figure. His role is often misunderstood. Let scholars debate it. That was the official stance. But for many in the public, our statement was appreciated. It was also valued in Washington. We had coordinated closely with Washington in preparing the statement, and it was seen as an expression of American values—a refusal to remain silent in the face of something so symbolic, and something taking place essentially on our doorstep.

The U.S. Embassy is located on Freedom Square—Szabadság tér—in Budapest. And the Reformed Church, where the Horthy bust was unveiled, is also on Freedom Square. The symbolism of that location was not lost on anyone.

Q: Just as a quick comment, there's a bit of irony here, because during World War Two, when we did not have diplomatic relations with Hungary, our protecting power was Switzerland. And our embassy was used by a Swiss diplomat to give all kinds of Swiss travel documents to Jews for them to escape, several 1000s in fact, before he was recalled by the Swiss authorities and told, You can't do this anymore. And there is a memorial to him in front of the embassy that was completed shortly before I left in 2007, 2008. And I wonder, was anything said about this during this whole dustup about Horthy and the bust and that memorial?

GOODFRIEND: Not at that time. At least not directly. I was trying to walk a careful line—one where we weren't taking a position on Hungarian history per se, but rather reaffirming a shared value that we hoped both our countries embraced: how to respond to hate speech.

The issue wasn't whether Hungary should or shouldn't have a statue of Miklós Horthy. We recognize that countries commemorate figures from their past—even ones who generate debate. We have those conversations in the United States, too, and they were especially active just a little later, with controversies over Confederate statues, for instance. It's not simply a question of which statues exist, but what is being said through the ceremonies around them. What's the message conveyed? And if that message seems to celebrate or legitimize hateful ideologies, then what responsibility do leaders have to respond?

That's what our embassy statement focused on—the responsibility of those in positions of authority to speak out when hate speech or divisive rhetoric is amplified. We didn't frame it as a condemnation of Hungarian history, but as a call for leadership in the face of troubling public messages.

As for Carl Lutz—that's a remarkable story, and one I became more familiar with later, particularly during the 2014 Holocaust commemoration year. At that time, there was a public education program in Budapest focusing on the "yellow star houses"—residences marked with yellow stars during the war that were designated as places where Jews were allowed or forced to live. On one particular day, there were organized visits to many of these houses, and the embassy participated.

Our building was one of those historical locations. We put together a program, and I spoke in front of the embassy about its wartime role and about Carl Lutz himself—the Swiss diplomat who used the building as his office while issuing protective documents. It was a moving event, and personally reflective for me. Having previously served as a Consul, it made me think deeply: what would I have done in his position?

(Yellow Star Houses - U.S. Embassy of Hungary Commemoration - June 26, 2014 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Lp4seEggII&t=1s)

Lutz acted with great courage—knowing his government would disapprove—and he saved thousands. Tragically, after the war, he was not recognized by his own government for what he had done. His story is powerful, and it's an important part of the memory we were trying to keep alive in that year.

The Swiss government, as you noted, did not condone what Carl Lutz was doing at the time. He received no formal recognition immediately after the war. In fact, he was essentially sidelined. This, despite the fact that he had carried out truly heroic work in Budapest, issuing thousands of protective documents and helping save countless lives.

For me, that story resonated deeply. I had served in countries where people were at risk, and I believe I've already discussed some of what we did in Syria before my assignment in Budapest. I found meaning in the work we were doing—trying to ensure that those who needed to leave could do so. Whether it was through humanitarian parole or the issuance of a visa, the goal was to move quickly and effectively, and to operate within a legal and moral framework—with the full support of my government.

That support made a real difference. It was fulfilling, as a Consul, to know that I could act decisively—and lawfully—in a way that aligned with both humanitarian objectives and U.S. policy. Lutz, by contrast, acted without his government's approval. He operated in a moral space, but without institutional backing. He navigated a very difficult path, with little reward except the personal sense that he was doing the right thing.

In our case, there were still ways to get things done—within the framework of our laws. And that's something we still talk about in the United States today: how our immigration system can be made fairer, more humane. You can't fully imagine what it must have been like to be a U.S. Consul during World War II—knowing that a population was under threat of extermination and having to weigh every decision. But you can try to understand the ethical space that people like Lutz were navigating.

Back in Budapest in 2013, I found myself thinking within a similar framework—how do we do as much as possible, as effectively as possible, within the envelope of our authority? People talk about "pushing the envelope," but for me, it wasn't about pushing past legal or ethical limits. It was about exploring the full range of what could be done within the envelope—to achieve outcomes that matched our values.

In this case, it meant asking: if the goal of both the United States and Hungary is to uphold liberal democratic principles, how do we work together to make that real? How do we create space for civil society? For minority voices? How do we reinforce shared values?

So the statement we issued about hate speech was really a reflection of that. It wasn't about any one historical figure. It was about principles—about what leadership looks like in a liberal democracy.

This was now November; but, despite the tensions, we still maintained friendly and engaging relationships with members of the Hungarian government. Shortly after I arrived, for example, my Political Section Chief took me to lunch with one of the advisors to the Foreign Minister. As we were chatting about various interests, Bob Riley—who was my Acting DCM and also the Political Section Chief at the time—mentioned that I enjoy singing. That put me a little on the spot. The advisor immediately said, "Oh, we have a Christmas party every year at the Foreign Ministry, and people from different embassies and the Ministry itself perform. Would you like to sing?"

I said I'd think about it. But the idea appealed to me—not just as a musical opportunity, but as a chance to connect more personally with our interlocutors. These weren't just people we met in formal meetings; they were full human beings with diverse interests. Music seemed like a great way to build those relationships.

Eventually, I agreed to sing at the event. This was heading into December. But before that—still in November—we hosted a Thanksgiving dinner for our Youth Advisory Council. It was our first Thanksgiving in Budapest. We were still splitting time between the Ambassador's residence and the DCM's residence, but I had the benefit of the residence staff in both places, so we were able to organize a proper dinner. The American Chamber of Commerce also had its own Thanksgiving celebration, and there were a few other events as well. These occasions helped us continue building relationships on a more human level—rooted in shared experience, not just diplomacy.

So we entered the holiday season—starting with Thanksgiving, that quintessential American holiday—and then moving toward Christmas. For the Foreign Ministry Gala, Foreign Minister János Martonyi sat in the front row. One of the deputy state secretaries sang with me. A state secretary played wonderful jazz piano, and another Foreign Ministry official played the saxophone. We rehearsed for two or three weeks leading up to the performance.

They chose to play American standards—songs from the 1940s and 1950s: Cole Porter, Gershwin—classic jazzy pop. During rehearsals, we shared stories. They told me how, growing up, they listened to Willis Conover's "Jazz Hour" on the Voice of America. It was their window into American culture. Jazz had left a real impression on them. So here we were, years later, performing those very songs together—an expression of shared cultural memory. It was a wonderful, convivial atmosphere, and it underscored the deeper connections that can exist beyond politics.

Hanukkah also fell around the same time, and I attended various community celebrations, which were similarly meaningful. The holiday season tends to be quiet diplomatically, and December 2013 was no exception. I don't recall any major developments at the time.

But we were beginning to look ahead. 2014 was coming—the 70th anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust. Elections were also scheduled for April, so political activity was starting to ramp up. In December, I began thinking more seriously about how to engage not just face-to-face, but with the broader Hungarian public.

I raised this with our Public Affairs team. How could we, as an embassy—not just me personally—reach beyond formal meetings? How could we open up? Let people understand what we were doing here, as diplomats? How could we demystify the embassy?

Social media seemed like one possible tool. By 2013, platforms like Facebook and Twitter existed, and some in the Foreign Service were beginning to experiment with them, but it wasn't yet common practice. I had used Facebook in Syria and was considering Twitter, but I wanted to consult our Public Affairs Section first. What would they recommend as a way to take questions from the public and respond directly?

They suggested launching a live "Talk with the Chargé" session—an hour-long interactive event online where I could answer questions from the public in real time.

They had asked whether we could set up a live website where people could ask questions—something publicized in advance, where I would be online for an hour to talk with the public. The idea was to try creating a space for direct engagement. It was something I genuinely wanted to explore.

At the time, we already had a few platforms in place—the embassy had a website and a Facebook page. But these weren't being used in an interactive way. We weren't really engaging with the public. There was a concern: should we allow people to post comments on our Facebook page? If we did, how would we moderate it? Would we be able to handle the volume and the tone? The fear was that online spaces could quickly become hostile—people posting insults or inflammatory comments—and we didn't yet have the resources or protocols in place for that kind of real-time monitoring. We didn't want the page to spiral into something unconstructive.

But I kept returning to the question: How do we engage? And I think I've touched on this theme in many of our conversations. To me, communication isn't just about broadcasting a message—it's about building a relationship. That means creating channels where people can talk with us, not just listen to us. It means letting them hear our voices, and letting us hear theirs.

Whether it was through newsletters with reply options, or, as I'd done in Damascus, using email in a more interactive way to involve local staff in communication—not just sending a cable to Washington but having a dialogue. Or using Facebook in Syria to answer questions from the public in a real-time, transparent way.

So in Budapest, I was asking: What could we do here? How could we reach people not just in person—through events at American Corners or embassy receptions—but throughout the country? How could someone in a small town, with just a computer or phone, have a way to connect meaningfully with the embassy?

That was the thinking behind the "Talk with the Chargé" concept. The idea wasn't just to be visible—it was to be accessible. To be part of a conversation that anyone in Hungary could join.

(U.S. Embassy Hungary "Talk with the Chargé" Webchat Page - December 20, 2013 - https://web.archive.org/web/20140305063806/http://ircblog.usembassy.hu/2013/12/20/webchat-m-André-goodfriend-kovetsegi-ugyvivovel/)

We had our Talk with the Chargé session that evening. I think it was around seven o'clock—timed so that people could join from home after work. The Public Affairs staff had done a lot to prepare. They had already put together a few questions to seed the conversation—just in case no one showed up or there was a lull. These were intended to get the dialogue going, to avoid having a whole hour pass without engagement.

I went into the space where the session was taking place, and there were about five staff members there in the evening, ready to help field questions, shape coherent responses, and, where needed, translate them into Hungarian. It was quite an effort.

We did receive a few questions, and we put together thoughtful responses. But what struck me was that the level of effort required made it feel unsustainable as a recurring activity. You were pulling together a whole team—and without knowing in advance how much participation there would be, it felt a bit too resource-intensive for something intended to be routine.

I could absolutely see doing this kind of thing for a special guest—for example, if the Secretary of State wanted to engage directly with the Hungarian public, or if a prominent visitor from Washington came to speak. In that case, yes, it would make sense to mobilize a team and treat it as a special event.

But for regular engagement—for having the same person, like the Chargé, connect with the public on an ongoing basis—it seemed excessive to require that kind of mobilization each time. It raised the broader question: How do we normalize public engagement so it's not just a major production? How do we create channels that allow others—not just the head of the embassy—to interact meaningfully with the public?

That was the challenge. How do we move from these one-off efforts to a more sustainable, inclusive model of outreach, where different sections of the embassy—whether consular, public affairs, political, or economic—could all have a voice?

Q: Let me just add one quick note, I was the cultural and educational attaché from 2005 to 2008. It was a historical moment for Hungary, because it was working very hard to get into NATO. And it did in 2008, or the completion of all members' votes was completed by 2008. We did similar events, the way you did. We had in the Ambassador on, might not have been Facebook, but whatever predated Facebook in terms of social media.

GOODFRIEND: MySpace.

Q: Where she answered questions, and we also had various visitors from Washington, Congress people, and so on, where we would have public events at that time at Central European University, or another university, and we never worried about a negative question because everyone in Hungary wanted to be in NATO. And they were not going to screw it up by making a lot of criticism against the United States, or at least, that's what we understood. And that was true almost throughout all of Hungarian society at that time. There were a few who weren't as friendly to us as we might have liked. But overall, yeah, it was a different moment. And now that Hungary was in NATO and the EU, the citizens of the government no longer felt they needed to watch their P's and Q's with Americans anymore.

GOODFRIEND: That's really interesting—just seeing how much the environment has shifted over time. You were there from 2005 to 2008, and I recall that era too—it was a new and exciting space, with lots of experimentation in how to use digital tools. I remember even earlier, back in the late '90s and early 2000s in the U.S., using America Online and participating in early online chat forums. That was my first taste of digital engagement—and I quickly pulled back. The tone of those spaces was often hostile; it didn't feel like real conversation, just clashes. So the challenge afterward became: How do you create constructive conversations in an online medium?

In Damascus—shortly after your time in Budapest, so this would be around 2009—we started exploring that more seriously. Facebook was still relatively new for embassy use. But once we were restricted from traveling due to the security environment, Facebook became one of the few ways we could reach the public. Ambassador Robert Ford used it extensively to connect beyond Damascus.

At first, comments weren't restricted. People could post freely. But then we started encountering what came to be known as the Syrian Electronic Army—a coordinated troll group that would flood our posts with hostile or irrelevant content. It made it difficult to follow any legitimate discussion because the comments were buried under noise. The platform quickly became combative and hard to manage.

By the time I got to Budapest, this was in our minds. How much should we open our digital platforms? Did we have the staff to monitor comments? What if people posted insults or disinformation? That concern shaped our Facebook policy—whether to allow open commenting or not.

Still, as I've said before, I didn't want engagement to be just one-way communication. I wasn't looking for a digital billboard. I wanted dialogue. Whether it was newsletters, emails, or Facebook posts—my goal was always to create a space where we could actually hear from people, not just talk at them.

In Damascus, we had used email and Facebook in interactive ways—responding to questions, encouraging real-time engagement. In Budapest, I wanted to find ways to reach beyond the capital, beyond the American Corners and formal meetings. Could someone in a small town still feel connected to the embassy?

So we experimented. In late 2013, we launched the "Talk with the Chargé" event—an online session held in the evening, around 7 p.m., when people could log in from home. The Public Affairs team had prepared some seed questions in advance to get things going. I wrote responses, and we had a small team—about five staff members—there in the evening to help translate and format answers.

We did get some real questions and responded thoughtfully. But the effort was intense. It took a lot of coordination and people-power. And I started to realize that if this was going to be a routine event, it wasn't sustainable. You could do that kind of mobilization for a high-profile visitor or for a major campaign—but not for weekly or monthly updates from the same person.

That got me thinking: How can we make public engagement a regular, not exceptional, part of our diplomatic work? How can others—not just the head of mission—engage publicly too?

By January 2014, I started exploring alternatives. Could we launch a blog—something simple, sustainable, and bilingual—where I or others could post short reflections and invite responses? It wouldn't require a whole team to manage. Just a few sentences, posted in English and Hungarian, and a way for the public to comment.

I spoke with our Public Affairs team and our systems officer to see what tools were available—something approved for embassy use and easy to maintain. Eventually, it was our systems person who identified a blogging tool authorized for use by Public Affairs. That's what we launched in early 2014.

We ended up using WordPress for the blog. I believe the platform was linked to a central site—something like blogs.state.gov—where you could see all the embassies that had active blogs. The idea was to use the same tools that other missions were using so that we were within approved systems, making collaboration and compliance easier.

Setting it up was a collaborative effort. It highlighted something I've always believed: different sections of the embassy need to share knowledge and work together. Systems, Public Affairs, Political, Consular—everyone brings different expertise, and when they coordinate, it makes a real difference in what we're able to accomplish.

In this case, our Information Systems Manager was instrumental. He brought us onto the WordPress platform and handled the configuration. Since WordPress begins as a blank slate, he also helped create a simple graphic identity for the blog—playing around with designs and coming up with a logo that would give it a distinct identity.

Then came the question of the blog's name. We wanted something that reflected the spirit of what we were trying to do: promote thoughtful, respectful dialogue between the embassy and the Hungarian public. A place where engagement could happen—not in the form of top-down statements, but through shared reflection.

We settled on "Civil Voices."

("Civil Voices" Blog Homepage - January 2014 - https://web.archive.org/web/20140707193309/http://blogs.usembassy.gov/goodfriend/2014/01/)

The name carried multiple meanings. On one level, it spoke to the tone we were aiming for: civil discourse, mutual respect, and an openness to hearing and being heard. That connected back to earlier conversations we'd had around hate speech—our message then had been that hate speech shouldn't be censored, but met with more speech, with positive speech. This blog was a continuation of that principle.

But the phrase also had a more pointed relevance to Hungary at that moment. Civil society was under pressure. The word civil thus subtly signaled support for civil society, a sector we were increasingly concerned about. We hoped the title would resonate on both levels: a space for dialogue, and a gesture of solidarity.

The blog launched in January 2014, and I was the primary writer. I enjoyed the process—not as a platform for commenting on Hungary, but as a space to talk about the United States, and to select themes that might resonate in both contexts. I wasn't trying to be provocative or critical, but reflective—offering American perspectives on issues that also had relevance in Hungary.

One early post, for example, marked Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. I reflected on King's legacy, and the symbolism of monuments—drawing attention to the MLK statue in Washington, D.C., and the broader question of how societies remember and memorialize their history. Even in early 2014, debates over statues—especially Confederate monuments—were starting to emerge in the U.S., though they wouldn't reach their political boiling point for a few more years.

("Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Learning from History" Blog Post - January 20, 2014 - https://web.archive.org/web/20140707185907/http://blogs.usembassy.gov/goodfriend/2014/01/20/martin-luther-king-jr-day-and-learning-from-history/)

That post wasn't directly about Hungary, but it touched on themes that clearly echoed issues there too: how history is interpreted, who is celebrated, and what messages monuments send.

In that way, the blog was designed to reflect shared values and invite conversation—not by attacking or confronting, but by opening a thoughtful space where civil voices could be heard.

Q: We're going to have to pause in a moment. Sorry to interrupt, but this might be a good place because you've just described one of the major new outreaches that you determined based on the situation you were working in and the technology available.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, that's fine. We had this new platform, and we were moving forward—toward the elections, toward what would become a more tense—or intense—period in 2014. But in January, we were still at that early stage: using the technology we had to find new ways to engage with the public. That's where we were. So yes, let's pause there.

Q: Right, exactly.

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Q: Okay, today is February 7, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend in Hungary. And André, we're in 2015 now?

GOODFRIEND: We're actually in mid-2014. Earlier that year, Hungary held parliamentary elections. The ruling party won again, this time just shy of a two-thirds majority. They had previously changed the electoral laws and the Constitution—something we discussed earlier. One of the key changes was eliminating runoff elections. Previously, Hungary had a two-round system, allowing opposition parties to consolidate their support in the second round. By shifting to a single-round system, even while maintaining the appearance of a multiparty system, it made it more difficult for opposition parties to coordinate effectively and challenge the governing party.

Moreover, the government leveraged state resources and media to promote its electoral platform, creating a significant imbalance in the political playing field. They postponed some controversial initiatives until after the election. One of those was the planned erection of a monument commemorating the victims of the Nazi (or more precisely, German) occupation of Hungary.

This monument had already stirred controversy. There had been no public consultation, and the design itself was deeply symbolic and problematic. It depicted Hungary as the Archangel Gabriel being attacked by a German imperial eagle—a representation of the German occupation. The eagle was styled after the traditional German coat of arms, not necessarily the Nazi version, but the message was clear: Hungary was portrayed as an innocent victim of the occupation.

Many critics noted that this depiction ignored Hungary’s alliance with Nazi Germany during World War II. The real victims of the German occupation in 1944 were primarily Hungary’s Jewish population. By representing the Hungarian state as the victim, the monument suggested that Hungary bore no responsibility for the deportations and killings of that period. This fed into a broader narrative that Hungary had lost its sovereignty and thus should not be held accountable for what followed. But many in Hungary—especially in the Jewish community and among historians—argued that Hungary must acknowledge its role and accept responsibility.

The monument sparked a broad societal debate over historical memory and national accountability. When Senator John McCain visited Hungary in January 2014, he also noted the division that the monument was causing in a society still grappling with its twentieth-century history.

Before the election, the government had said it would postpone the monument and hold a public discussion on its meaning and the broader historical narrative. Civil society groups, historians, and activists—including us at the U.S. Embassy—were engaging with different segments of Hungarian society to understand the discourse and how the government was addressing civil unrest tied to historical memory.

But after the election, the government moved forward quickly. The construction site, which was a two-minute walk from our embassy on Szabadság tér (Liberty Square), became a daily site of protest. We saw it unfold firsthand. Police cordons surrounded the area, but protesters kept coming. Then, one night—without any public ceremony or announcement—the monument was unveiled. It was simply there the next morning.

Some saw this as a sign that the protests had succeeded in denying the government a public unveiling. Others saw it as the government's quiet but forceful imposition of its historical narrative—literally set in stone.

In response, a civil society initiative began called *Eleven Emlékmű*—"Living Memorial." Every day, people gathered at the site to place personal mementos—photographs, shoes, artifacts—representing victims of the Holocaust. Survivors in their 80s and 90s held public story sessions. It became an open-air seminar on Hungary's role in the Holocaust, presenting an alternative narrative rooted in personal testimony.

Given the monument's proximity to the embassy, and our commitment to democratic values—including transparency, accountability, and engagement—we felt compelled to respond. The Obama administration had emphasized the importance of civil society and open government. These were principles we advocated globally and were certainly relevant in Hungary at that time.

We issued a statement from the embassy underscoring the importance of open dialogue in democratic societies, especially when dealing with history. We acknowledged that the U.S. also struggles with historical memory and the importance of truth-telling in bridging societal divides.

(U.S. Embassy Hungary Statement on German Occupation Monument - April 22, 2014 - https://web.archive.org/web/20140526043856/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_04222014.html)

But the Hungarian government, which saw it as interference, did not well-received our statement well. From their perspective, questions of Hungarian history should be left to Hungarians. Still, this was 2014—the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary—and many commemorative initiatives were underway.

Due to the controversy surrounding the monument and a related lack of consultation, the Jewish community withdrew from participation in official government events. A new Holocaust museum that had been planned was also unable to open, partly because key stakeholders—especially from the Jewish community—had not been included in its planning.

It was a painful time. Hungary appeared to be tearing itself apart over how to reckon with its past. Meanwhile, 2014 was also the "Year of Civil Society" under the Obama administration, part of our global campaign to support civic engagement. So, it was a year filled with conversations—not only about historical memory, but about what makes a democracy healthy: civil society, public participation, and accountability. All these values were being tested in Hungary.

Q: These were instructions from Washington, in essence? You received a cable or a sort of strategy from the Department saying, overall, we would like the embassy to engage in this way?

GOODFRIEND: The strategy came more through conversations with EUR than through cables. Civil society had long been a central theme in our engagement. The fact that the Obama administration proclaimed 2014 the Year of Civil Society only emphasized that commitment. But even beyond that thematic focus, it was always a standing objective. Whenever we had senior-level visitors from Washington—whether from the State Department or the White House—they consistently made it a point not only to meet with government officials, but also to engage with opposition figures and members of civil society. The goal was to understand the environment in which civil society operated—whether it was thriving, constrained, or under threat.

Each year, USAID conducted and published a Civil Society Sustainability Index, which assessed the strength and resilience of civil society across many countries. So, yes, you could say this engagement was a standing instruction. But in 2014, Washington was publicly more vocal and proactive about it. There were more high-level discussions and greater emphasis on civil society as a cornerstone of democratic development.

Later that year—this would have been in September—President Obama gave a significant speech at the Clinton Global Initiative, just ahead of the opening of the UN General Assembly. That speech focused heavily on the importance and role of civil society globally. In it, he named countries where the space for civil society was shrinking. One of the countries he explicitly cited was Hungary. And that mention certainly caught the attention of the Hungarian government.

(President Obama's Remarks at Clinton Global Initiative - September 23, 2014 - https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative)

Q: Did he also mention Türkiye, as far as you can remember?

GOODFRIEND: I remember him mentioning Hungary in the same context as Egypt and Azerbaijan. I don't specifically recall if Türkiye was named, but the speech is publicly available—we could certainly look it up. What I do recall is that he used language along the lines of "from here to there"—saying, in effect, "from Hungary to Egypt, from Azerbaijan…"—to highlight a global trend of shrinking space for civil society. That was something that had become an increasing concern in Washington throughout the year.

Hungary, of course, is a member of the European Union. But there are other countries—like Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein—that aren't EU members but participate in the EU's internal market. To do that, they support various EU initiatives, including programs that fund civil society. These countries—Norway being the largest contributor—provide financial support to civil society within EU countries through what are commonly known as the Norway Grants.

In Hungary's case, that funding was distributed through two channels. One was via the Hungarian government, which then allocated the funds directly to organizations. The other route was through an independent civil society intermediary, a regranter—an NGO tasked with distributing the funds in a transparent way, independent of government influence.

The Hungarian government strongly objected to this second route. It wanted full control over the distribution and insisted that funds only be distributed by an entity it would designate—one it claimed would be independent, though in practice it would be government-aligned. The government expressed concerns about how these funds were being allocated and began to exert pressure on Norway and the other donor states to stop using the independent regranter route.

As the tension escalated, the Hungarian government took increasingly aggressive steps to discredit and hinder civil society organizations receiving these funds. Authorities raided the offices of some NGOs, withdrew their tax identification numbers—effectively preventing them from legally receiving or using funds—and accused them of financial irregularities without due process or audit.

At the same time, the government also targeted independent media. A new advertising tax law was introduced that increased the tax burden on media outlets, especially those not aligned with the government. Advertising in Hungary is heavily influenced by state spending, and media outlets critical of the government were increasingly cut off from that revenue stream. Eventually, government-aligned actors purchased many independent media outlets, shrinking the space for independent journalism even further.

All of this was happening in 2014, and we raised our concerns with the Hungarian government. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with input from various sources including the United States, issued a statement expressing concern over Hungary's intimidation of civil society organizations and independent media. I believe that statement came out in early summer 2014.

(OSCE Statement on Intimidation of Civil Society and Media in Hungary - June 19, 2014 - https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/c/120520.pdf)

Then, in September, President Obama gave his speech at the Clinton Global Initiative. Following that, I was "summoned," using the Foreign Ministry's terminology, to discuss the remarks. I was serving as Chargé d'Affaires at the time, and it wasn't unusual for me to be called in, sometimes at our own initiative, other times because something had been said by Washington that the Hungarian government found objectionable.

In this case, I was asked to meet with the Deputy Foreign Minister, who is now the Foreign Minister. He questioned why the President would make such statements about Hungary. The Hungarian government was trying to argue that civil society in Hungary was thriving and not under threat. We pointed to the specific actions that had prompted the OSCE's concern: the raids, the withdrawal of tax numbers, and the broader pattern of intimidation. These were hard facts.

Their response was that these were just a handful of politicized organizations—that these NGOs were acting as political actors, not as genuine representatives of civil society. They claimed that civil society organizations not engaged in political activity, not partisan in nature, were not under threat.

We disagreed. We noted that USAID publishes an annual Civil Society Sustainability Index, which tracks exactly these kinds of developments. Around this time—probably in September or October—we hosted a panel discussion at the embassy, bringing together civil society organizations to speak for themselves: to share what they do and why civil society is essential to any functioning democracy, including in Hungary.

Then in early October, we held another press event—essentially a press conference—to present that year's USAID Civil Society Sustainability Index and to discuss the chapter on Hungary. The report, which I believe was the 2013 edition, tracked trends in civil society space going back several years. The Index had been around since 2005. It uses a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents an optimal environment for civil society—open, fully functional, independent—and 7 represents a situation where civil society is barely viable, or cannot function at all.

Back in 2005 or 2006, Hungary had been in a relatively strong position—somewhere around 2.6, if I recall correctly. But by 2013, the score had worsened. I think Hungary was down to about 3.0, reflecting a clear negative trend. What was important, though, was that the trajectory was downward. Over the past few years, especially from 2010 onward, the decline in civil society sustainability was accelerating. The report flagged growing concerns about government intimidation of NGOs, deteriorating public trust, and increasingly difficult operating conditions.

The main message we wanted to convey in 2014 was the importance of a sustainable, grassroots-based civil society as a core component of democratic life. That summer, a number of issues were coming to a head—concerns about shrinking civic space, increasing government authoritarianism, and manipulation of the democratic playing field.

The Hungarian government had been expanding its influence not only through control of media and changes to election rules, but also through redefining who "counts" as a member of the Hungarian political community. They had begun extending citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living outside of Hungary—in neighboring countries like Serbia, Ukraine, and Romania. Along with citizenship came voting rights and, in some cases, government subsidies and benefits.

From the opposition's perspective, this was a way to build a loyal voting base outside Hungary's borders—one that was not subject to the government's domestic policies, but could vote in its elections. There was an inherent tension in giving electoral influence to people who didn't have to live with the consequences of their votes. From our perspective at the embassy, we had to consider: how does this affect U.S.-Hungarian relations? What are the long-term implications for democratic governance and political accountability in Hungary?

So we were working to support democratic institutions and practices, while also highlighting the challenges. One of our priorities was to help foster grassroots support for civil society organizations within Hungary. Many NGOs were reliant on foreign funding and structured their proposals around international donors' priorities. But at the local level, people often didn't see the benefit of these organizations. They weren't giving money to them, they didn't feel ownership over them—and in some cases, they didn't understand their purpose at all.

We were encouraging NGOs to engage more directly with their own communities—to explain their missions, build trust, and demonstrate value. Part of the challenge was helping these organizations communicate more effectively with the public so that domestic civil society wouldn't seem like a foreign implant, but rather like what it was, something homegrown and vital to Hungarian democratic life.

There was also an initiative that year—under the auspices of the OSCE—called the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, which focused, in part, on civil society. It took place in Warsaw that year, and provided an opportunity for civil society organizations across the OSCE region to network, attend workshops, and share strategies for engaging their societies. We worked with our partners in Hungary to encourage participation and helped identify strong candidates from local organizations to attend.

At the same time, another issue was emerging regarding the broader implications of Hungary's citizenship policy. By granting citizenship—and therefore Hungarian passports—to individuals in neighboring non-EU countries like Ukraine and Serbia, Hungary was effectively expanding its citizen base. But this had implications for the U.S. as well.

Hungary is part of the EU and within the Schengen Zone, and its citizens generally don't pose visa overstay risks from a U.S. immigration perspective. But if a growing share of Hungarian passport holders were, in fact, residents of non-EU countries—countries where U.S. visa refusal rates were higher—it created security vulnerabilities for the U.S. Some of these new passport holders were now eligible to travel to the U.S. under the Visa Waiver Program by virtue of their Hungarian citizenship, even though they might not have lived in Hungary at all.

Q: Since you are a consular officer and know about these things. The Hungarian government can grant a passport. But many countries do not recognize dual citizenship. For example, Austria does not. I've known some Americans who have settled there who have to give up their American citizenship in order to remain a citizen of Austria and derive the benefits, social and so on. Was Hungary running into that problem in any of these places?

GOODFRIEND: Yes—Slovakia, in particular. Hungary was encountering various problems with neighboring countries related to its approach to nationality and identity—especially the way the government framed what it meant to be "Hungarian." There were undertones of irredentism in how the government viewed ethnic Hungarian populations in neighboring states.

For example, the Hungarian government at the time was advocating for autonomy for regions like the “Székely Land” area of Transylvania, suggesting it should have a semi-autonomous status within Romania. That, of course, raised concerns for the Romanian government. Similarly, with Ukraine, there were tensions over the status and obligations of ethnic Hungarians living in Ukrainian territory—especially during periods of military mobilization.

One of the arguments the Hungarian government raised was: if ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine were called to fight in a Ukrainian war, what should their allegiance be? Why should they be expected to fight for a state in which, from the Hungarian perspective, they had only a tenuous sense of belonging? These were the kinds of questions being raised—particularly during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, which happened while I was posted there.

There was also controversy around a Ukrainian language law introduced by the new government following the revolt and change in government in 2014. That law prioritized Ukrainian as the sole official language, mandating its use in schools and government institutions. The Hungarian government argued this was discriminatory—that it would marginalize the ethnic Hungarian population in Ukraine and make it harder for them to preserve their cultural heritage.

But again, the terminology here can be misleading. When Hungarian officials refer to "the Hungarian community" in Ukraine, it can sound as though they're talking about Hungarian citizens. In most cases, however, these are Ukrainian citizens, ethnic Hungarians who may have historical, linguistic, or cultural ties to Hungary, but are not, strictly speaking, Hungarian nationals. In the U.S., we might refer to them as ethnic communities, not as extensions of the nation-state.

Hungary’s expansive approach to national identity—offering citizenship and passports to ethnic Hungarians in neighboring states—has continued to raise tensions. Hungary argues it’s defending cultural rights. Ukraine and others argue it’s political interference.

And yes, regarding dual citizenship—Slovakia, as far as I recall, does not permit it. Slovak citizens who acquire Hungarian citizenship are technically violating Slovak law. In practice, many keep it quiet. There’s something of a tacit, informal understanding—not with the Slovak government, but among ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia and the Hungarian government—that these new Hungarian passports are not to be advertised or used publicly in a way that would provoke official scrutiny.

So yes, Hungary's dual citizenship policy has caused friction, especially in countries that either prohibit dual nationality or see this as undermining their sovereignty.

Q: Do the Slovakians who get this Hungarian passport actually try to travel on it?

GOODFRIEND: That may be so. I don't have specific anecdotes, but it's possible. From the Hungarian government's perspective, the primary motive behind granting these passports is political—building a voting base abroad. You could ask: What's the practical benefit for a citizen of one EU country, like Slovakia, to hold a passport from another EU country, like Hungary? In terms of travel within the EU, the added value may be minimal.

The issue becomes more relevant in places like Romania or Ukraine, where ethnic Hungarian populations are larger and where the travel advantages of a Hungarian passport are more pronounced. In particular, for people in Ukraine or other non-EU countries, holding a Hungarian passport can mean access to the EU labor market and visa-free travel to countries like the United States under the Visa Waiver Program.

What we were observing at the time—though informally—was that many people holding Hungarian passports outside Hungary weren't using them to move to Hungary itself, but rather to live elsewhere in the EU or to travel internationally, including to the U.S.

We were trying to anticipate the implications of this—what these policies might lead to in practice, not just in theory. If they created observable anomalies in travel patterns or document usage by Hungarian citizens, that could trigger action from other governments. While no immediate policy change occurred while I was in Hungary, it was something we were watching closely.

In fact, and this is more recent—just a couple of years ago, and now in effect, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) made a change to the Visa Waiver Program rules for Hungary. DHS noted that many people who were entering the U.S. on Hungarian passports had not been born in Hungary, and in some cases had acquired the passport under questionable circumstances or held dual identities. So, as of 2020, the U.S. no longer allows Hungarian passport holders to travel under the Visa Waiver Program unless they were born in Hungary. And then, in 2023, additional limitations were placed on Hungarians who were still able to use the Visa Waiver program.

This caused considerable frustration among some Hungarian citizens—particularly those born outside Hungary to Hungarian parents, for example, in Austria or Germany—who had previously traveled visa-free to the U.S. but now must apply for visas through the embassy.

The policy is also a way to address broader concerns—such as people born in Romania, Ukraine, or even farther afield who acquired Hungarian citizenship and used it to gain travel privileges not otherwise available to them.

All this was already on our radar back in 2014. Hungary's approach—both its expansive nationality policy and its increasingly opaque governance—was raising questions about the long-term effects on trade, travel, and Hungary's ability to maintain trust with its allies.

We also saw business climate implications. The government's unpredictable tax policies and regulatory changes created uncertainty. Every year, our Commercial Section prepared an Investment Climate Statement for Hungary, evaluating the country's attractiveness to foreign investors. Our goal was to be honest and transparent about the risks.

And inevitably, the issue of corruption arose. For U.S. companies, this is a serious constraint because of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which prohibits U.S. firms from engaging in bribery or corrupt dealings abroad. If success in a country depends on such practices, it places American companies in a bind: either they risk losing business, or they risk violating U.S. law. It's a no-win situation.

Q: Just a quick example of this. When I was in Hungary from 2005 to 2008, under the socialist government, they used their tax authority to go after some American nonprofits that were operating there, using selective taxation on them, and trying to find all the little tax regulations that would cause these NGOs to pay much, much more tax. So, the fact that the Orban regime is doing this is not particularly new. Still, they may have found ways of making it even more difficult, especially for larger companies with more money.

GOODFRIEND: Right. That tracks with some of the dynamics we were seeing. When I mentioned the election earlier, one of the major themes of that campaign was the alleged corruption of the Socialist government. If I remember correctly, one of the campaign posters actually showed a number of former Socialist politicians behind bars, although I don't believe any of them had been convicted, or even put on trial. It was part of the governing party's messaging—that they were above corruption, and it was the Socialists who were corrupt.

At the same time, there was another party—Jobbik—an ethnonationalist, militant, and xenophobic party, what many might call a far-right party. However, I try to avoid left-right labels because they don't always apply cleanly. Fidesz, for example, has adopted economic policies—such as buying up utilities and setting price caps—that echo socialist programs, even though it's often described as conservative or nationalist. On the other hand, Jobbik was explicitly anti-Semitic at the time, and I think I mentioned earlier their prominent role in the 2013 unveiling of the bust of Miklós Horthy, presenting him as a heroic figure of Hungarian identity.

Jobbik's primary attack against Fidesz was not ideological—it was about corruption. They portrayed themselves as clean, representing the average Hungarian, whereas both major parties were seen as compromised. The Socialists were viewed as corrupt in a disorganized way—individuals being bribed, favors being traded among parties. There was a sense that corruption was tolerated so long as everyone got a cut.

Fidesz, in contrast, seemed to have institutionalized corruption. Rather than individual kickbacks, there was a systemic mechanism: companies were pressured to contribute to quasi-governmental entities. If they cooperated, things went smoothly. The funds were then channeled back—not into individuals' pockets necessarily, but into party operations, where they could be used to support political activities or reward loyal members. It created a centralized, more opaque system of control.

Public perception was overwhelmingly that corruption was widespread. Transparency International publishes an annual Corruption Perceptions Index, which reflects how people view the prevalence of corruption; but it's important to note that it measures perception, not corruption itself. And in Hungary, there were virtually no prosecutions. When criminal charges were brought, they were almost always against members of the opposition. It created the appearance of selective justice.

Despite numerous credible stories from whistleblowers and investigative journalists, there were no legal consequences. That lack of accountability was something we closely tracked. We understood that these dynamics—corruption, media intimidation, legal unpredictability—would ultimately shape Hungary's relationship with the U.S. and its investment climate.

For U.S. companies, this matters a great deal. Under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), American firms can't engage in bribery or corrupt practices abroad. So when a country develops a system where success depends on playing along with informal, opaque structures, it puts U.S. businesses in a bind: either they lose out, or they break the law.

By mid-2014—say, August or September—we began asking ourselves: is this just rumor and perception, or can we identify a pattern? What does corruption in Hungary look like, structurally? Who's involved? What forms does it take? What obligations do we have if we uncover a clear picture?

So we started documenting what we were hearing—from whistleblowers, from media reports, and from our own outreach across different sectors. We wanted to understand what people mean when talking about corruption. What practices were being normalized? What was being tolerated?

The embassy team worked to compile internal reports. One of the key findings was that while allegations were common, there were no examples of ruling party officials being prosecuted. In the rare cases where someone was caught engaging in blatantly corrupt behavior, the party would expel that individual and say they were no longer affiliated with Fidesz—essentially distancing the institution from the wrongdoing.

But in terms of systemic corruption—where companies were pressured to contribute money in exchange for favorable treatment—we didn't see accountability. That's the environment we were navigating. We needed to understand it—not just to inform Washington, but to guide our own decisions: How do we protect U.S. interests? How do we responsibly engage in a country where corruption is widely believed to be entrenched, yet formally unacknowledged?

Q: Did you ask U.S. companies? And were they helpful?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, we were in regular contact with U.S. companies. Some were willing to speak candidly about what they were experiencing. As the situation unfolded, we developed a clearer understanding of the patterns. We documented what we learned and shared it with Washington, working across different parts of the State Department to help with the analysis.

Eventually, we were able to identify several individuals—mid-level officials, not the top leadership—who were directly involved in corrupt activities. In some cases, they even volunteered information to us themselves, knowingly or unknowingly implicating themselves.

At the time, in 2014, our strongest available tool to address government-affiliated individuals engaged in corruption was a visa-based restriction, grounded in presidential executive order 7750—originally issued by President George W. Bush. That executive order allowed us to deny entry to the U.S. to individuals involved in corruption, especially if it created a hostile environment for U.S. businesses. The legal basis came under Section 212(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

So, we moved forward. We compiled the names of several individuals involved in corrupt activity. All of this required engagement with Washington—it wasn't something the Embassy could decide on its own. The information had to be reviewed and assessed by the Department of State to determine whether it met the threshold for determining that the person was ineligible to enter the U.S. for engaging in corrupt activity.

In the end, six individuals were barred from entering the United States under this authority. These were not symbolic actions; we had substantive, corroborated information on their involvement in corrupt practices that contributed to a problematic environment for investment and governance.

Importantly, we wanted these individuals—and the Hungarian government—to know. Under the Visa Waiver Program, Hungarian citizens can travel to the U.S. without a visa. But if someone shows up at a U.S. port of entry and is denied entry, it creates not only diplomatic friction but significant inconvenience to the traveler. So we made attempts to notify the individuals directly, informing them that due to their involvement in corruption, they were now ineligible for travel to the U.S.

Separately, I requested a meeting with the Deputy Foreign Minister and his aide—this time, we initiated the contact, not the other way around. In that meeting, I explained that this action had been taken under U.S. law. I made it clear that we could not disclose the names of those individuals due to U.S. privacy regulations. This wasn't a public sanction—like those later available under the Global Magnitsky Act, which includes naming individuals, freezing assets, and more. This was a visa ineligibility, which is considered a private matter between the U.S. government and the individual affected.

I told them that if anyone approached them claiming to have been informed by the U.S. embassy that they were barred, that would be true. But we, as a matter of policy, could not confirm names.

The Hungarian officials seemed surprised. They asked: “How can you say there’s corruption? What evidence do you have?” I explained that we were happy to discuss the details with the individuals involved, but not with the government.

And I also said: “Corruption exists everywhere—including in the United States.” Every year, our Department of Justice publishes a list of public officials convicted of corruption. Governors, senators—it doesn’t matter what party they belong to—if they’re found guilty, they’re prosecuted, and that information is made public. I offered to show them our list and asked, “Can you show me yours?”

Because ultimately, we would prefer to rely on judicial outcomes. It’s easier, more credible, and more consistent to deny entry based on a conviction for a crime involving moral turpitude. But in Hungary’s case, there were no convictions. No charges. No prosecutions. And yet, there was clear evidence that there was corruption.

So we said: this isn’t something we’re going to publicize. This is not a statement to the press. We’ve notified the individuals. We’ve notified you. That’s the extent of it.

This was early October. By then, we’d come through a summer marked by escalating concerns—civil society crackdowns, media intimidation, rising polarization. And all along, we were trying to remain consistent in emphasizing the values of openness, transparency, and democratic engagement.

I believe it was also around late September—maybe early October 2014—that there was a planned international conference in Budapest organized by a U.S.-based identitarian group. This was essentially a white nationalist organization promoting the idea of European civilization and ethnic identity as a civilizational pinnacle. They had invited like-minded Euro-nationalists, including figures from Russia and other countries with strong white ethnic identity narratives. Jobbik, the far-right Hungarian party I mentioned earlier, was supporting the conference.

The U.S. Embassy did not take an official position on the conference itself. But the Hungarian government, apparently viewing the event as an international embarrassment, ultimately banned it. They cited its racist character as the reason and said such activity would not be tolerated in Hungary. By that point, some attendees had already arrived. A couple of American citizens were arrested in connection with the event, which is where the Embassy became involved.

From a U.S. perspective, our approach to free speech differs with that of many other countries. A conference like that—deeply offensive as it may be—would likely be allowed to take place in the United States under First Amendment protections. The expectation, however, is that responsible public officials would publicly condemn the ideas being expressed. As I've mentioned in other contexts—such as the controversy surrounding the Horthy bust—it's important for leaders to speak out clearly against hate speech. That's a core part of democratic accountability.

(American Renaissance Report on Banned Identitarian Conference in Budapest (October 5, 2014 - https://www.amren.com/news/2014/10/report-from-budapest/)

Interestingly, a few years later—around 2018—the Hungarian government itself hosted a conference with a similar theme centered on European identity. The political atmosphere had shifted. I believe Steve Bannon, former chief strategist to President Trump, was a featured speaker at that event. So, while Americans had been arrested for participating in the 2014 white nationalist conference, no such arrests were made in connection with the later, government-endorsed event. It reflected how the broader political and rhetorical environment—in Hungary and in the United States—had evolved in the intervening years.

(Counter-Currents Article on "Future of Europe" Conference - May 23, 2018 - https://counter-currents.com/2018/05/the-future-of-europe-conference-focuses-on-migration-identity/)

At the time, in 2014, the Embassy had a fairly high media profile. We were regularly engaging with media outlets to explain U.S. positions on civil society, freedom of expression, transparency, democratic norms, and related issues. By early October, in the wake of President Obama's Clinton Global Initiative speech and our own ongoing engagement with Hungarian society, there was heightened media interest in what the U.S. Embassy had to say.

That intensified further after we implemented visa restrictions against several individuals due to their involvement in corrupt activity. As I've said, we made no public announcement—we followed the legal framework of visa denial, which is a private matter between the U.S. government and the individual. But on that Thursday evening—while I was hosting a weekly folk song gathering that our American Corner in Budapest organized as an informal cultural event—*Magyar Nemzet* reached out to us.

They were following up on a story that *Napi Gazdaság*, a daily business paper, was preparing to run. According to their report, the U.S. had barred officials from Hungary's tax authority from entering the United States—not because of corruption, but allegedly as retaliation for the tax authority investigating corrupt practices by American companies operating in Hungary. That was the narrative they were putting forward.

So *Magyar Nemze*t contacted us for comment. And this was the beginning of a new and very public phase of the controversy.

Q: Here I want to ask a very quick question. The newspaper contacted you after working hours while you were at a representational event, and what they gave you was a one-hour deadline, or even shorter?

GOODFRIEND: Something like that, yes. *Magyar Nemzet* contacted us and said, essentially, “We’re running a story tomorrow—do you have a comment?” At least they contacted us. *Napi Gazdaság*, the business daily preparing the original piece, hadn’t reached out to us at all—we had no prior knowledge that they were planning to run a story.

Magyar Nemzet reached out through our press office, which then contacted me. I was at an event that evening—a weekly folk song gathering I hosted as a cultural engagement activity—but I left to coordinate our response.

Together with the press team, we quickly crafted a statement to clarify what was happening. Up to that point, we had remained silent. It had been one or two weeks since I had spoken with the Foreign Ministry. No public announcements. The government had been informed privately, and so had the individuals concerned.

But now, with this article about to appear, the narrative was being distorted. The *Napi Gazdaság* report was claiming that the United States was barring Hungarian tax officials from entry as a retaliatory move because they were allegedly investigating corruption by U.S. companies operating in Hungary. That was simply not true.

In our statement—this is a paraphrase, but the wording is on record—we made it clear that yes, certain individuals had been barred from entering the United States due to credible involvement in corruption. But it had nothing to do with any investigation by the Hungarian tax authority into U.S. companies. In fact, we had no knowledge of such investigations. That clarification was given to Magyar Nemzet, which published our statement. But by then, the story had exploded.

(U.S. Embassy Hungary Press Release on Visa Ineligibilities - October 18, 2014 - https://web.archive.org/web/20141230153750/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_10182014.html)

It became national news in Hungary—and quickly spread internationally. The core of the story was now that the United States had barred Hungarian government officials from entering the country because of corruption. Naturally, everyone wanted to know: who were they?

We couldn’t say.

The Hungarian government wanted to know as well. They asked for evidence. We had to explain: this was a sovereign U.S. decision. It was not part of a legal prosecution. We were not trying to bring charges in a Hungarian court. In fact, much of the information we had was already known to Hungarian authorities—reported by whistleblowers or others. What action Hungary chose to take, or not take, was its decision.

We also explained that if Hungarian authorities were serious about investigating corruption, and if they brought actual charges against individuals, they could submit a request for information under our existing Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT). But that would require a legal case—not a fishing expedition. You can't just ask, "Do you have information about any Hungarians?" If you open a case and have charges, then you can request U.S. assistance relevant to that case.

But, of course, no charges were ever brought.

So this story—now in full public view—was difficult for the Hungarian government to manage. They didn't seem to know what to do. Our position was clear: this was not a press stunt. It wasn't symbolic. It was a legal action under U.S. immigration law. And while we weren't broadcasting it, we weren't backing away from it either.

By then, I was regularly fielding press inquiries. But we made clear: we wouldn't go beyond what had already been stated. We confirmed only that six individuals had been barred. They were not senior-level officials. And we wouldn't release names or specify agencies.

Then, the situation escalated. The head of the Hungarian Tax Authority, Ildikó Vida, came forward and identified herself publicly as one of the barred individuals. She gave an interview to *Magyar Nemzet* in which she said, "I'm one of the people barred from the U.S. I don't know why. I've done nothing wrong. I'm not corrupt."

Because she had now voluntarily identified herself, we were permitted to confirm it. Under U.S. law, visa decisions are confidential unless the individual discloses it first. Once she went public, the U.S. could legally acknowledge the fact. I believe it was the State Department's spokesperson who confirmed it, because the story had already gone international.

What was surprising—and damaging domestically in Hungary—was that Vida apparently did this without informing her minister, the Finance Minister, in advance. So this was the equivalent of the head of the IRS in the U.S. announcing to the press that she had been barred from entering a foreign country, without notifying the Secretary of the Treasury.

From our side, we reiterated: if she wanted to discuss it, we were happy to meet. But we were not going to elaborate in public. This was a visa matter—not a sanction. Not a prosecution. And not a media campaign.

A few days later—in early November—I had just come out of a country team meeting at the embassy. It was a crisp day, the weather was good, so I decided to step outside for a short walk and some fresh air. As I passed the front of the embassy, I noticed a couple of people standing at the checkpoint—what we call the Control Access Point. I didn't pay them much attention, though they looked vaguely familiar. We exchanged glances as I walked by.

As I continued walking through the square in front of the embassy, a cameraman began to follow me. A reporter approached with a microphone, speaking to me in Hungarian. I didn't want to be drawn into an impromptu interview—especially not in Hungarian, and certainly not on the street, in front of the embassy. I regularly engaged with the media, but there were appropriate channels for that—typically through our press office.

The reporter persisted. Then he called out something along the lines of: "Why are you walking away while the head of the tax authority is waiting to talk to you?"

At that point, I realized who one of the individuals at the gate must have been. I turned and responded, saying I didn't know she was there to meet me. As I looked back, I saw the woman—Ildikó Vida, the head of the Hungarian Tax Authority—and a man accompanying her walking toward me. It turned out the man was her attorney.

So now the three of us were together in front of the camera and reporter. I asked her directly, in English, if she had an appointment. I said I hadn't been informed that she was there to see me. She responded by asking for an interpreter.

That moment became the story.

The reporter offered to interpret, and so now we were having a conversation—on camera—with the reporter acting as an ad hoc translator. I said, "If you'd like to talk, we can go inside," and invited her into the embassy. Inside, I spoke with her and her attorney for about two hours. We discussed the nature of U.S. visa law and the processes involved. However, when it came to the specific visa matter—that had to be handled by the Consular Section. It was a legal process, not a political one.

The news crew had filmed all of our interaction in public view on *Szabadság tér*. But, what struck the public—what turned into the story—was not the visa issue itself. It was the fact that the head of Hungary's tax authority didn't speak English. That raised a lot of questions in the media, including in government-friendly outlets. Senior Hungarian officials are expected to pass an English-language exam, and many found it remarkable that she would appear at the U.S. Embassy—ostensibly to speak with the head of mission—without bringing anyone who could speak English.

It backfired. The media narrative became: What was she trying to accomplish? Why no interpreter? What was the plan?

Hír TV, part of the same pro-government media family that included *Magyar Nemzet* originally filmed this. For better or worse, I came off looking reasonable in that encounter. I'd been courteous, invited them inside, and tried to maintain professionalism.

(Video of Vida-Goodfriend Encounter - November 10, 2014 - https://hirtv.hu/ahirtvhirei/vida-es-goodfriend-talalkozasa-nem-kell-lopni-itt-a-vagatlan-felvetel-1258096)

The incident sparked a wave of online memes. Phrases like “Do you have an appointment?” and “Can I have a translator?” became catchphrases. Even the film “Lost in Translation” came up in the cultural commentary. It must have been quite embarrassing for her.

At that point, the story shifted—she had publicly identified herself and was continuing to speak to the media. Though we had spoken at the embassy, she declined to engage further with the Consular Section. She even said something to the effect of: “I’m not planning to travel to the United States, so it doesn’t really matter.”

But now that the matter had become a public spectacle, it attracted political attention. As I heard it, the Prime Minister told her she had two choices: sue me for defamation, or resign.

She chose to sue.

Of course, under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, accredited diplomats have immunity from legal proceedings in the host country. This kind of situation is exactly why that principle exists—not just for minor incidents like car accidents, but to protect diplomats from legal reprisals when performing official duties that may be politically sensitive or unpopular with the host government.

Our response was clear: as a U.S. diplomat, I was acting in my official capacity and, therefore, protected under diplomatic immunity.

Following all this, the Prime Minister even addressed the issue in Parliament. He said that I should “be a man” and waive my diplomatic immunity so that I could face the charges, like a man, as he put it. Of course, it’s not up to me. Diplomatic immunity is not a personal shield that a diplomat can discard at will. Diplomatic immunity is a legal status established under international law and recognized by the host government.

If Hungary, as the host government, objected to my having diplomatic immunity, it could formally request that the State Department waive it. And that’s what it did—the Hungarian Foreign Ministry wrote to the U.S. Secretary of State, requesting that my diplomatic immunity be lifted. By this point, I believe we were into December. So, this had become an ongoing public issue, sustained over several months.

During this entire period, I had been active in public communication efforts, trying to engage constructively with Hungarian society. As I’d noted previously, earlier that year—at the beginning of the calendar year—I had launched a blog titled Civil Voices. The idea was to explore and promote themes of civil discourse, civic engagement, and civil society. I thought the title captured multiple layers of meaning. I used it as a platform to post essays every couple of weeks—usually about a page long.

For example, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I wrote a piece on the theme of capturing history in stone, drawing on the U.S. experience with monuments. Of course, readers in Hungary could draw their own comparisons to debates happening there—particularly about their own contested monuments and national memory.

Another post I recall was for Stephen Foster's birthday. I reflected on how we romanticize the past in American folk music, even when that portrayal may be inaccurate or sanitized. These were cultural reflections intended to share aspects of American society—but they resonated in Hungary, where historical memory and national identity were also highly contested.

That said, the blog didn't generate much engagement. The conversations I hoped to foster never really materialized in the comments section.

Then, in July, I began using Twitter. My first tweet was on the Fourth of July—an appropriate launch point. At first, it was modest. A handful of followers—maybe 30 at first, then gradually climbing to 100, then a little more than that by August.

But by October—after the events involving the head of the tax authority and the barring of Hungarian officials from entry into the United States—the follower count exploded. Suddenly, I had over 7,000 followers.

Q: Wow!

GOODFRIEND: Everything-

Q: Just a quick comparison, by 2012 in Costa Rica, where I've been a public affairs officer, we got the ambassador's Twitter up to 5,000 followers. So that took two years. So within just a few months, you got it up to 7,000.

GOODFRIEND: Over 7,000. Yes. It was remarkable. People were recognizing me on the street—in a friendly way. They'd spot me, take a picture, and post about it online. It became a bit surreal—like The Scarlet Pimpernel: "He's here, he's there, he's everywhere."

I'd go grab a taco at a fast food place, and someone would post a photo: "Goodfriend was here." It had become a media phenomenon that was hard to control. There was even a sort of Robin Hood narrative building around it—this idea that I was standing up for values, and that resonated with people.

Several Facebook pages popped up—essentially fan pages or support groups—not about me personally, but in support of the dialogue around democracy, civil society, and transparency that I was trying to engage in. It was striking. Even something as simple as tweeting "Happy Holidays" ended up in the newspapers.

As one Hungarian film director put it, I had become as recognizable—if not more so—than many of the television and movie stars he was working with. It was a media storm, and in those weeks of October and November, it just kept building.

At one point, I was seated in the diplomatic gallery of the Hungarian Parliament—perhaps for the swearing-in of the new government or a major session. Most of the other diplomats present were ambassadors; I was still Chargé d'Affaires since the ambassadorial post was still vacant.

As I sat there, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff—a very senior figure—walked across the floor, in front of the assembled diplomatic corps. There had been speculation about tension or animosity between us. But at that moment, he walked over and shook my hand, in full view of everyone.

It caught people off guard. My ambassadorial colleagues were visibly surprised. Nobody quite knew what to make of it. But it was a symbolic moment—an indicator of the strange and charged environment we were operating in at the time.

(Hungarian Media Article on Diplomatic Interaction - November 6, 2014 - https://hvg.hu/itthon/20141106_Foto_Testbeszed_az_eletunk__amikor_Lazar)

Let's stop there for now. But yes—it was a unique and telling reflection of the moment we were in.

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Q: Today is February 14, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend, you're still Chargé in Hungary. And there's more to come.

GOODFRIEND: Yes. So the situation, as I'd been describing in the previous interview, was that over the course of 2014, the Hungarian government had been taking an increasingly authoritarian approach. And it was also beginning to describe itself that way—at least implicitly—by the summer of 2014.

Every year, the Prime Minister and some of his close associates would go to Romania for what they called a summer university—a kind of summer camp. It was held in an area with a high concentration of ethnic Hungarians. The current government saw this part of Romania as a region that should be dominated by Hungarian culture. So they would regularly gather there for this event.

In 2014, the Prime Minister used that occasion—he often used it as a platform to float different concepts and approaches, to speak freely and test out political ideas—to introduce a new term: illiberal democracy. He raised questions like, "Why should democracy only be considered something liberal?" or "Why should we only look at liberal models of democracy?" He suggested that perhaps democracy could also be illiberal.

As a counterpoint to what he described as liberal models being forced on Hungary by the West, he pointed to countries like Türkiye, Singapore, and Russia—places with centralized authority—as examples of alternative democratic models. He never really defined what illiberal meant, but he used it largely in the context of strong state control, particularly over the economy.

That summer marked a turning point. He was signaling that Hungarian democracy was going to be different—turning away from Western European and U.S.-style liberal democracy, and instead looking eastward. But people weren't sure how to interpret it. Was this a formal declaration that Hungary was no longer a liberal democracy? What exactly did he mean by illiberal?

The term sparked a lot of discussion—and still does—in the press. There was debate about whether this was a serious ideological position or just political theater: throwing red meat to critics, provoking confusion, and creating space to maneuver.

While many opinions were voiced on the concept of illiberal democracy, we were focused on actions. We wanted to identify specific policies or decisions: were they ones we could support as advancing shared ideals, or were they cause for concern?

Were there actions that suggested a weakening of core democratic values—such as respect for human rights, the universality of rights, and protections for vulnerable populations? In a liberal democracy, those safeguards apply to all, not just those in power. Were those safeguards now being eroded under this illiberal model? If so, what were the concrete signs?

Those were the kinds of questions we were asking in the summer of 2014.

Go ahead.

Q: I just want to add one point regarding the Prime Minister's reflections in Romania and his efforts to draw attention to himself through the Hungarian community there. Having served three years in Romania, I worked periodically with representatives of that community. Simply noting their presence doesn't say much in itself, because the Hungarian communities in Romania are as diverse as any other community.

They do have a single ethnic party that consistently wins enough votes to secure parliamentary representation. In the 2020 elections, for example, that party won 21 out of 395 seats. Whether it truly represents all Hungarians in Romania is open to debate. The Hungarian population makes up about 15 percent of Romania's total and is concentrated *almost entirely in Transylvania. Politically, they span the spectrum—conservative, liberal, and everything in between—but they run under a single ethnic banner.*

What practical benefits that brings them is hard to measure; I've been away too long to judge. But I will say this: during my time there, I never heard ethnic Hungarians call for reintegration with Hungary. That was simply not part of their demands. Nor did I hear calls for autonomy in any strong political sense. What they did consistently ask for were measures to preserve their cultural and linguistic identity. And from what I saw, the Romanian government did not actively suppress that. Of course, there was some friction, but it never rose to the level of a major national issue between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians.

GOODFRIEND: It was something I discussed with members of the diplomatic community, including colleagues from the Romanian Embassy, in terms of Hungary's approach to supporting cultural heritage in the region.

I'll try to frame it carefully—avoiding language that implies separatism or focuses on racial or ethnic distinctions. Instead, it's framed as support for cultural heritage, which Hungary views as consistent with EU principles. In fact, the EU encourages member states to preserve the cultural heritage within their borders.

Different states interpret and implement this obligation differently. Hungary, in some respects, takes a pre–World War II approach to cultural heritage. That is, it believes each ethnic community is best served by organizing itself with a degree of semi-autonomy: having recognized representatives, operating community organizations that receive state funding, running schools, and managing their own cultural institutions. In this model, these community structures serve as guardians of that culture.

The overarching idea is that the state—Romania, in this case—contains multiple ethnicities and cultures, each of which should have the right to self-expression and preservation through its own institutions. Hungary sees supporting these ethnic Hungarian institutions abroad as a legitimate contribution to safeguarding cultural heritage. And from Hungary's perspective, the state should actively support such structures—not to encourage separatism, but to ensure that these cultures can continue to exist and thrive within the larger state framework.

That earlier model—what we might call a pre–World War II communal approach—was based on the idea that cultural identity could best be preserved through separate community organizations within the state. But after World War II, this began to be seen as problematic. These separate structures often created distance between minority populations and the state. They allowed the state to avoid direct engagement with individuals as citizens, instead interacting only through cultural intermediaries.

This approach implied that these ethnic or cultural communities were somehow distinct from the core citizenry—separate, and therefore not equal. In the United States, we might understand this through the example of segregation: if you're going to separate schools, separate community centers, separate institutions that are apart from the mainstream, then your rights are not necessarily being safeguarded to the same extent as those of the majority population.

This became tragically evident during the Holocaust, especially with regard to Jewish communities. It underscored the danger of treating communities as separate rather than integrating them into the fabric of the nation as citizens. So after World War II, there was a shift in principle: the idea became that the individual, not the group, is the subject of rights. The state's responsibility is to safeguard those individual rights—language rights, cultural rights, the right to education and expression—not through delegation to ethnic organizations, but through state institutions.

Within Romania—and you can probably attest to this from your time there—this became part of their approach. They observed that in Hungary, by contrast, the ethnic Romanian minority was dwindling. The Romanian community in Hungary wasn't receiving the same funding or institutional support as the majority, and many ethnic Romanians didn't want to live in cultural enclaves or ghettos defined solely by language. They didn't want to be segregated; they wanted to be part of mainstream society. And since the ethnic institutions were effectively segregated, they weren't thriving.

In Romania, the model was different. Ethnic minority institutions—such as Hungarian-language schools—were still part of the state system. People could study in Hungarian, but these schools weren't completely separate. Students also learned Romanian and were expected to integrate into broader Romanian society. These institutions were not ethnically exclusive but multilingual and integrative. The idea was: you maintain your cultural heritage, but you do so within a shared civic framework.

But this also depends on the understanding that all citizens—regardless of ethnicity—are participating in Romanian state institutions and accepting a common set of civic values. Romanian remains the official language of the state, and everyone must function within that framework. There's one legal and institutional system for all citizens, not parallel systems for different ethnic groups.

The Hungarian approach, by contrast, often emphasizes group-based rights and semi-autonomous ethnic institutions. And this has led to tensions with neighboring countries, including Ukraine. I think we touched on this last week.

Hungary has strongly objected to Ukrainian policies on language use, especially after the Maidan Revolution. When the new Ukrainian government came to power, it sought to promote Ukrainian national identity and reinforce the use of Ukrainian as the official language—especially in areas with large Russian-speaking populations. The goal was to establish Ukrainian as the language of instruction in schools, and the language used in state institutions.

While this was aimed largely at reducing the dominance of Russian, it also affected other minorities, including the ethnic Hungarian community in western Ukraine. Hungary viewed these changes as discriminatory against Hungarians and argued that such policies undermined minority rights. As a result, Hungary became more reluctant to support Ukraine internationally, including in its relations with NATO and the EU.

So this question of how language and cultural rights are handled within a state—whether through integrated state institutions or through ethnically defined structures—continues to shape Hungary's relationships with its neighbors, as well as its approach to the EU's principles of minority rights and cultural preservation.

This was something the Hungarian government was actively supporting in neighboring countries—namely, the maintenance of separate political parties for ethnic Hungarians. It was quite opposed to parties that tried to bridge ethnic divides or promote a civic form of political unity, where different ethnic groups would work together toward a common agenda that served all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

One example was a party in Slovakia called *Most–Híd*—which means "bridge" in both Slovak and Hungarian. The party aimed to bring together ethnic Slovak and Hungarian communities, working jointly to protect cultural heritage while pursuing shared political goals. But this approach—this idea of building civic unity across ethnic lines—was not something the Hungarian government welcomed. Instead, the government wanted to ensure that ethnic Hungarian communities in neighboring countries maintained distinct, separate identities. It encouraged a form of cultural nationalism in which these communities looked to Hungary as their homeland, even if territorial claims weren't being made.

For example, in the Székely Land area of Transylvania, Hungary wasn't claiming the territory or pushing for annexation. But it was promoting the idea that the ethnic Hungarian heritage there was unique and should be preserved through some form of semi-autonomy—where Hungarian, not Romanian, could be the language of education and governance. This was similar to the position Hungary took with Ukraine, especially following the Maidan Revolution.

In both cases, the Hungarian government objected to state efforts—by Romania, by Ukraine—to promote a unified national identity through language policy. In Ukraine, after 2014, the new government prioritized Ukrainian as the language of instruction and administration, particularly in response to the Russian-speaking population. But those changes also affected other minority communities, including ethnic Hungarians. Hungary protested these policies, arguing that they were discriminatory, and used them as grounds to distance itself from broader support for Ukraine, including in coordination with the United States and the EU.

So in some respects, these moves by the Hungarian government—and especially by the Prime Minister—were a kind of "coming out" in terms of promoting a more assertive cultural-nationalist policy abroad. Or perhaps, as some said at the time, it was just "throwing chum in the water," provoking opponents, creating confusion, and testing limits.

This came after a summer of sharp international criticism directed at Hungary—criticism over its treatment of civil society, its pressure on independent media, and efforts that many saw as attempts to whitewash Hungarian history. Several prominent historians ceased working with the Hungarian government over its representation of the past. Jewish community leaders, too, found it increasingly difficult to engage meaningfully with the government.

That was the context going into the fall of 2014. Then, in September, the U.S.-Hungary relationship was back in the spotlight after criticism from President Obama, who publicly raised concerns about the closing space for civil society in Hungary.

So rather than trying to parse vague ideological statements about "illiberal democracy," we focused on practical indicators. What did these pronouncements actually translate to in policy? Were there concrete signs that Hungary's actions were diverging from principles we considered shared—such as minority rights, government transparency, and citizen participation?

One major area of concern that came to the forefront was corruption—an issue directly tied to transparency and accountability.

Q: But yes, I do want to go on with the issue of corruption. But before we do, I have one question on the criticism of whatever it was understood. Hungary was talking about illiberal democracy. Were you hearing criticisms in NATO, or in OSCE as well, about the actions Hungary was taking?

GOODFRIEND: Certainly from the OSCE. I believe I mentioned earlier that the OSCE had issued a statement—either in the spring or early summer—concerning the intimidation of civil society and the media in Hungary. So yes, there was a clear expression of concern from that organization.

As for NATO, the relationship was somewhat different. Hungary was cooperating closely in the areas of law enforcement, military coordination, and common defense. These were areas where we had concrete, positive examples of collaboration, and where we could point to Hungary as a strong ally, even when we disagreed on other matters. Those sectors—defense and security—remained solid pillars of U.S.-Hungary cooperation.

That said, Hungary was also, at the time, committing to increased defense spending. In 2014, President Obama had emphasized—at the NATO summit in Warsaw—the importance of all member states meeting their defense spending obligations. The target, as you know, is 2 percent of GDP.

That was the benchmark. Hungary had been well below that, but it did submit a plan to gradually increase its defense budget to meet the NATO target. So, from a military expenditure standpoint, Hungary was showing alignment with alliance goals.

Still, NATO isn't just a military alliance—it's also an alliance based on shared values. And while there weren't official statements from NATO headquarters at the time regarding Hungary's political trajectory, the rhetoric coming from the Hungarian government, especially around illiberal democracy, suggested a divergence in values. It was seen by some as a potential warning sign of deeper tensions that could emerge down the line.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Just as a quick aside, Hungary declined to assist the U.S. in Afghanistan or Iraq. Of course, a small country doesn't have that much in the way of a national military, but they were among those who declined to be part of it.

GOODFRIEND: When was this?

Q: Oh, way back, at the beginning of the war. And as far as I know, up until at least 2010, which is the last time I was keeping track of it.

GOODFRIEND: That wasn't the case, at least not later. Hungary did participate. And that participation, I believe, benefited both Hungary and the broader international effort. Through their involvement, Hungary received financial support for military modernization, and they were able to collaborate operationally with other military units.

However, the Hungarian government began to shape its messaging around its participation in a particular way. They emphasized that their deployment was to support Christian communities in the region—particularly those under threat. So they framed their role as a kind of cultural or religious protection mission. And we regularly had to engage them on that point—to stress that the mission could not be about supporting only one religious group. It had to be about contributing to broader stabilization efforts.

Still, Hungary was there, and they liked to reiterate that fact—that they were standing "shoulder to shoulder" with their allies in a turbulent region. As I've said before, NATO is a values-based alliance. But at the time, the closer ties Hungary was building with Russia, and concerns about the security of their internal communications systems, hadn't yet become the prominent issues they are today.

Back in 2014, we were already pointing to certain trend lines—especially regarding civil society and democratic backsliding—and how Hungary's role within democracy-oriented institutions was evolving. These were early signs of divergence from the values that the U.S., the EU, and NATO were built upon. And you can see where things have gone since. For example, just last year, when President Biden hosted a Summit for Democracy, Hungary was not among the invited countries.

So in 2014, we were not at the very beginning of the deterioration in the U.S.–Hungary relationship, but we were at a point where it needed to be addressed—openly and constructively—to prevent further erosion. That meant putting the issues on the table, not just responding to vague accusations in the media about corruption, anti-Semitism, or civil society restrictions. We needed to distinguish between perception and reality.

That was something I emphasized regularly with the embassy team, especially as we compiled human rights reports and other analyses. We needed to understand that surveys like those from Transparency International measure the perception of corruption—not corruption itself. Similarly, data from the Anti-Defamation League reflects perceptions of anti-Semitism, which can vary widely between societies, even if the underlying behaviors are similar.

In one country, for example, the public might be more sensitive to certain statements or actions than in another, which would affect perception ratings. So two countries might have similar objective levels of anti-Semitism or corruption, but quite different scores depending on local awareness, expectations, and trust in institutions. In that sense, perception is a signal—an indicator that something should be examined—but it isn't, in itself, a measure of the underlying condition.

It's a bit like Plato's allegory of the cave: people see shadows on the wall and think that's reality, because they haven't yet turned around to see what's actually casting the shadow. Our job was to try to look at the source—to get a better understanding of the actual situation, so we could have informed, productive conversations with the Hungarian government.

Around that same time—in September 2014—the Hungarian Foreign Minister wanted to travel to the United States. And one approach taken in Washington was to limit the level of diplomatic engagement, as a way of signaling dissatisfaction with Hungary's direction. As a result, senior Hungarian officials were not receiving high-level meetings in Washington.

As I mentioned earlier, during my time in Hungary, the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit since Secretary Clinton had been Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland. She came briefly as part of a broader European visit.

Now, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó wanted to go to Washington, and the meeting he was going to have was also with Assistant Secretary Nuland. Before that meeting, a Hungarian government representative came to us and said, "We recognize there are serious differences between our countries. There's been criticism of our treatment of civil society, criticism of transparency, and it's clearly impacted our relationship. But we believe we're doing the right things. So please—tell us specifically: What can we do to improve the relationship between Hungary and the United States?"

And so, before that meeting in Washington, the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR) worked closely with us at the embassy to prepare a clear and direct response—to answer their question: What can they do?

And the goal wasn't just to get Hungary to say the right things—respect rights more publicly or deliver speeches affirming liberal democracy. We didn't want gestures or symbolic statements. What we were looking for were concrete issues: steps that, if addressed meaningfully, would show that Hungary was taking its responsibilities seriously as a democracy within a values-based alliance like NATO, and as a member of the European Union. We worked closely with Washington to assemble a list of specific issues that Hungary could address. In my view, the way the document was worded made it feel a bit like a checklist—which I was unsure would lead to a productive outcome—but this was what the Hungarian side had requested: clear, specific things they could do to improve the relationship.

When Foreign Minister Szijjártó came to Washington, he met with Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland. Their conversation was frank, and they went over this list of items—steps that might help rebuild trust and show a renewed commitment to democratic values. About a year later—by which time I had already left Hungary—the list was published in a Hungarian newspaper. I still don't know exactly how it got out. I can speculate, but I don't believe it came from the State Department. The way the article framed it made it sound as though I had personally handed the list to Szijjártó in Budapest, which I had not. It would have been delivered in Washington, DC. That's also one reason I doubt it was leaked by the State Department—if it had been, the reporting would likely have reflected more accurately the origin of the document.

(Hungarian Media Article on U.S. "Checklist" for Hungary - October 15, 2015 - https://mandiner.hu/belfold/2015/10/igy-csicskaztatna-amerika-az-orban-kormanyt-27-pontos-exkluziv-non-paper-a-mandineren)

Importantly, this wasn't a matter of the United States trying to interfere in Hungary's internal affairs. Hungary is a sovereign state and decides for itself what course to take. But part of our diplomatic engagement was to lay out the shared aspirations and values that we believed formed the basis of our alliance. That's always been how I've approached it. We don't issue commands; we work as partners. We say, "Here are the things that can be done if we are to move toward the vision we've agreed to pursue together." That's how I would have framed the list—as a kind of roadmap that Hungary could consider if it wished to demonstrate that commitment.

The first set of points concerned civil society. We had already discussed much of this internally and in earlier exchanges with Hungarian officials. The list called for an end to harassment and intimidation of independent civil society organizations. That meant stopping politically motivated audits, investigations, and police raids—especially those directed at organizations receiving funds from the EEA/Norway Grants or from Switzerland. It also meant returning documents, IT equipment, and other property that had been seized, and reinstating the tax licenses that had been suspended in the course of these investigations. The point was not just to stop saying that Hungary was intimidating civil society, but to stop doing the things that clearly amounted to intimidation. To further promote transparency, the list suggested that all audit and investigation materials be published online, accessible to the public. The Hungarian government was encouraged to affirm civil society's role in a healthy democracy, to uphold the importance of human rights and political pluralism, and to ensure that civil society and opposition voices could operate freely and without constraint.

A second area was inclusiveness. This stemmed in part from public controversy over the monument to the victims of the German occupation, which the government had commissioned and installed without consultation, as well as other actions taken without engagement across the political spectrum. At the time, the government was using its two-thirds parliamentary majority to pass legislation and constitutional amendments without involving opposition parties or civil society. So, we urged Hungary to include opposition voices and individuals outside the ruling party in the policymaking process. Oversight bodies, for instance, should be composed of independent subject-matter experts, not political loyalists. Judicial and constitutional appointments, we suggested, should return to the pre-2010 system—using an *ad hoc* committee structure requiring a two-thirds consensus across parties. These were concrete ways to strengthen inclusiveness and reduce the perception—and reality—of one-party dominance.

The third area involved media freedom, which had drawn consistent criticism from the OSCE, the EU, and the United States. There were growing concerns about the government's influence over the media landscape and the marginalization of independent outlets. Among the recommendations was the repeal of the advertising tax, which disproportionately affected independent media and distorted the media market. This had been highlighted in an earlier OSCE statement. We also urged that government advertising budgets be distributed fairly among major media outlets, rather than being used to favor pro-government channels. Finally, we called for balanced, multi-party representation on Hungary's Media Council, and for the terms of council members to be shortened to prevent long-term political entrenchment.

None of this was abstract. These were specific, concrete steps that Hungary could take to demonstrate that it remained committed to democratic principles and continued to value its partnership with the United States and other democratic allies. The purpose wasn't to dictate policy—it was to rebuild mutual confidence based on actions, not just words.

And there were numerous other steps as well—steps that would have shown a real commitment to maintaining an independent, active media not beholden to the party in power. There were also some points related to elections. We recommended that the Hungarian government implement all of the recommendations made by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), which had observed the 2014 elections. While those elections were generally described by OSCE/ODIHR as free in the technical sense—no ballot stuffing or major anomalies—they made clear that the broader environment had been skewed in favor of the ruling party. They laid out a number of reforms Hungary could pursue to level the playing field, so that future elections would be conducted in a more genuinely democratic environment.

We also raised a few points regarding the judiciary, including the Constitutional Court and certain administrative rules, and the broader structure of the constitution itself. These were issues we had already discussed with Hungarian counterparts on previous occasions. But now, in the context of Szijjártó's visit to Washington, they were asking directly for a list—something specific they could work from. They didn't want generalities; they wanted to know what specific actions we believed would help move the relationship forward. And so Szijjártó returned to Budapest with that list.

We were prepared to engage on it—to discuss it with them, to see whether there was a path forward. But a few weeks later, maybe a month, instead of opening a conversation about next steps or possible reforms, the Hungarian government delivered a long, formal response. It argued that every item on the list had already been addressed. They provided documentation—laws, regulations, policies—intended to demonstrate that the concerns were unfounded or had already been resolved. In essence, their response was: there's nothing to be done, because everything you're asking for has already been implemented.

At that point, which was now around November, we had already laid our cards on the table. We had taken the appropriate diplomatic steps to show that these were genuine concerns and that we regarded them as serious impediments to Hungary being seen as a thriving democracy. So if Hungary ever wanted to know why we were raising concerns—why we said civil society space was shrinking, why we believed independent media was under threat, or why we were concerned about backsliding—this was our answer. We had laid it out as clearly and constructively as possible.

Unfortunately, rather than working with us as a partner to explore how the relationship might be improved, the response from the Hungarian government was simply, “This isn’t necessary—we’ve already done everything you’re asking for. Just take our word for it.” That was not a promising reply. At that point, the Hungarian government began to perceive us… me … the U.S. government more broadly, as closing ranks around Hungary. They saw the list not as an invitation to partnership, but as a form of pressure. We had laid out what could be done; they had essentially responded that nothing needed to be done. That left very little space to move forward.

Around the same time, the Bureau in the State Department responsible for countering organized crime and corruption was developing a general global plan of action—an initiative designed to build partnerships with governments in combating transnational threats to democracy. The Hungarian government, however, began to focus on certain phrases within that effort—terms like “action plan” or “battleground”—and began asking whether this was in fact a coded effort aimed at Hungary itself. Were we building a covert “action plan” against them?

We tried to clarify: no, this wasn’t targeted. It was a transparent, global initiative aimed at building partnerships. The point was not to single out Hungary, but to work collectively as democracies to address corruption and criminality, which we saw as serious threats to democratic institutions everywhere. Still, the Hungarian government was increasingly tense. Within Fidesz itself, there were signs of strain. A few members of parliament began to acknowledge publicly that corruption was a real problem. Some were even suggesting that the government had lost its direction. There was a sense that things might be approaching a tipping point—not because of any external action by the United States, but because of growing internal pressure.

What we were doing—our intent—was to be honest about the divergence we were seeing. We had believed we were moving forward together, working with Hungary and our regional allies toward shared goals. Now it was no longer clear that Hungary was still on that same path. And we weren't the only ones saying that. There were voices within Hungary itself, including within the ruling party, echoing some of the same concerns.

That was the situation as we moved into November. To back up a bit: prior to my arrival in Hungary, an ambassador had been nominated. Coleen Bell had been selected to be the U.S. Ambassador to Hungary. Initially, we expected she might arrive in 2013, but the process took longer. The hearings were delayed. December came and went. By January 2014, all pending ambassadorial nominations had to be resubmitted. Her nomination was reintroduced in early 2014, and I believe her hearing took place in February.

At her confirmation hearing, ambassador-designate Coleen Bell was grouped with a couple of other nominees who, frankly, appeared less prepared than she was. The hearing itself became something of a poster child in the press and public discourse for the perceived lack of readiness among some political appointees. One nominee seemed unfamiliar with the political system of the country to which he was being assigned. Another appeared out of touch with the responsibilities and demands of serving as a U.S. ambassador.

In contrast, Coleen Bell had done her homework. She understood the basics of the role, and especially given the nuanced state of U.S.–Hungary relations at the time, she was prepared. Hungary was, on the one hand, a NATO ally and a partner in law enforcement and regional security. On the other hand, there were serious concerns—particularly in Washington—about democratic backsliding. Ambassador Bell was aware of this complexity. She sought to strike a careful balance: to highlight areas of strong cooperation and shared values while acknowledging that real issues needed to be addressed.

However, during the hearing, Senator John McCain felt that she came across poorly, particularly when she hesitated during some of her responses. He was sharply critical of her nomination. In some ways, the criticism was unfair—perhaps shaped by frustration with the other nominees on the panel, or with her pauses as she carefully considered her answers. The broader context was also important: this hearing was taking place at a time when there was growing national scrutiny over the qualifications of political appointees to ambassadorial posts.

The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) was actively advocating for more rigorous standards. It had called for greater transparency and publicly available scorecards to evaluate ambassadorial qualifications—whether the nominee was a career diplomat or a political appointee. That broader debate—about the role and preparedness of non-career ambassadors—was unfolding in spring 2014, just as Coleen Bell's nomination was advancing.

Ambassador Bell came from a background in television. She had been a producer—specifically, the executive producer of The Bold and the Beautiful, one of the most successful soap operas on American television. Some critics dismissed this as insufficient preparation for diplomatic service. They questioned how someone with a background in scripted entertainment—television fiction—could be qualified to handle complex international affairs. For those critics, that was "strike one."

"Strike two," in the eyes of some, was that she had been a major fundraiser for President Obama's campaign. She was a well-known bundler—meaning, rather than contributing large sums of her own money, she brought together contributions from multiple donors, channeling a significant amount of support to the campaign. That method of bundling had long been part of how ambassadorial nominations are rewarded in U.S. politics, but it nonetheless drew criticism—especially in a moment of heightened sensitivity about political appointments and their qualifications.

Q: In essence, using their connections, their networks, their friends to be able to bring in more money.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, exactly. Bundlers use their networks, their connections, their friends to help raise significant sums of money—bringing people together around a shared cause.

These issues—bundling, qualifications, political appointments—were topics of active discussion within the embassy, within the State Department, within AFSA, and certainly within the broader Washington policy community. And of course, they were discussed in Hungary as well. Any media coverage in the United States about the future U.S. ambassador to Hungary was quickly picked up by the Hungarian press.

From the time I arrived in Budapest until Ambassador Bell's confirmation hearing in February, the general attitude toward her was cautiously positive. The reaction was along the lines of: "Who is she? Let's welcome her. We look forward to meeting her." But after the hearing, and especially as we moved into the spring and early summer—when the President and other U.S. officials began voicing sharper criticisms of Hungary, and my own remarks became more critical—the tone in Hungary shifted. The local media began picking up on her hesitations during the hearing, and the same criticisms being leveled in the U.S.—that she was a soap opera producer, not a diplomat—were echoed in Hungary. She was mocked as unqualified, a lightweight, someone unfamiliar with the country and the region. Some commentators argued that Hungary needed someone "substantial," someone well-versed in Hungarian issues.

I sensed there was also an element of sexism in the criticism. It felt, at times, that if she had been a man, the reactions might have been somewhat different. In both internal discussions at the embassy and in external conversations with others—including those aligned with AFSA's position—I often found myself making the same point: there is real value in bringing people from outside the career Foreign Service into senior diplomatic roles. They bring fresh perspectives, different kinds of expertise, and a broader sense of how the United States can be represented abroad.

An ambassador's job isn't to manage the day-to-day workings of the embassy—that's handled by the country team, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and the section heads. Ambassadors represent the President of the United States. In that sense, having someone who can pick up the phone and talk directly to the President—or to someone close to the President—can be incredibly valuable. For a career ambassador, communication with the White House is usually filtered through formal State Department channels. A political appointee, on the other hand, often maintains direct access to the White House, while also gaining access to State's institutional support. That dual access can be an asset.

As for Ambassador Bell's background, she was the executive producer of The Bold and the Beautiful, one of the most-watched television dramas globally. For some, that seemed like a disqualifier. "Soap operas are fiction," they'd say. "How does that prepare someone to be a diplomat?" But I saw it differently. Soap operas often deal with pressing social issues—crime, relationships, inequality, even things like human trafficking or drug addiction. They take complex societal problems and turn them into human stories that people can relate to. That's not so far from public diplomacy. The ability to tell a compelling story, to connect emotionally, to frame issues in ways people understand—that's valuable for a U.S. ambassador.

And then there's the fundraising. Some people asked, "What's the value of being a bundler?" I'd say: look at the skill set. A successful bundler articulates a vision, convinces others to invest in that vision, and pulls together resources to achieve a common goal. That's not unlike diplomacy. An ambassador must say to a host country, "Here's what we believe in. Here's what we're trying to achieve. Let's work together, let's pool our efforts to make progress." That's what bundling is—it's coalition-building with real-world consequences.

I understood the objections. They were human reactions. It's easy to mock someone who hasn't followed the traditional path—to ask how someone without diplomatic training could be given such a senior post, especially when career officers have worked their whole lives toward such a position. But in terms of representing the United States—the president, our values, our diversity—I genuinely believed Ambassador Bell was an excellent choice.

These were conversations I had not only internally, with my American colleagues—some of whom also questioned the number of political appointees—but also in external settings, when asked by Hungarians or the media. I felt it was important to explain how someone like Bell could make a meaningful contribution, and how her presence reflected the United States' openness to bringing people from diverse backgrounds into public service.

That, too, was part of the backdrop. But as the U.S. position toward Hungary hardened—and as I became more publicly associated with that position—I also became a target. In some ways, I had come to represent the voice of that critique.

As I mentioned in our last discussion—when we were talking about the head of the Hungarian tax authority, and the whole spectacle that took place in parliament—this was the moment when the Prime Minister publicly challenged me, saying I should "be a man" and waive my diplomatic immunity. That came after we had imposed entry bans on certain individuals due to credible information regarding corruption. Despite the pressure, we held firm. We had made our determination, and we were clear: these individuals were barred from entering the United States. That decision stood.

I think it was at that point that the Hungarian government began to see the situation differently. Up to then, they had been working hard to diminish the incoming Ambassador's image—questioning her qualifications, mocking her background. But now, they started to view her arrival as a potential opportunity. There was a sense that her presence could signal a change in tone, or perhaps even a change in approach. They had already invested a lot of energy in vilifying me personally, and they were clearly not going to be able to walk back or resolve the substantive issues that had been raised during the meeting between Szijjártó and Assistant Secretary Nuland.

So by the autumn—moving into December—the attitude began to shift. The government seemed to welcome the idea of a new face, someone they might be able to work with differently. There was a certain anticipation around her arrival, as if it might provide them a reset or a new channel for engagement.

Now, to go back a bit, in October, we had publicly announced visa bans on specific individuals. This followed the meeting between Szijjártó and Nuland, where both sides had shared their perspectives quite frankly. There's another word sometimes used to describe that kind of meeting—

Q: Candid.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, it was a frank and candid exchange of perspectives. By November, there was still a great deal of media focus on the situation, particularly the episode involving the head of the tax authority. That had escalated to the Prime Ministerial level. As I mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister publicly suggested that the tax authority chief should either bring legal action against me or step down. She chose to file the lawsuit. He then demanded that I waive my diplomatic immunity and went so far as to send a formal request to Secretary of State John Kerry, asking that my immunity be lifted.

That brought us into December. While the news cycle was beginning to quiet down as the holidays approached, there was one major development just before the end of the calendar year. As I had mentioned, at the end of the previous calendar year, Ambassador Bell's nomination had still not been approved. The hearings had taken place in February, but there had been no vote for many months. Part of the delay had to do with political gridlock. There had been another government shutdown around that time, and a number of ambassadorial nominations had been held up.

Then came the November 2014 midterm elections. After that, the logjam finally broke. The Senate began moving forward with appointments. I believe it was in early December that Coleen Bell's nomination was finally approved. We began speaking more regularly at that point—actually, even during the run-up to the vote. Senator McCain, as before, remained sharply critical of her. Strangely, he was also publicly complimentary of me, saying something along the lines of, "They already have a very capable Chief of Mission there." But at the same time, he continued his caustic remarks about her nomination, which added drama to the confirmation process. It was close—a bit of a nail-biter—but her nomination was approved, along with several others.

That allowed us to begin planning for her arrival in earnest. We started speaking almost weekly, going over the issues she would face when she arrived, and discussing what we could over the phone. The Hungarian government, at this point, was very eager for her to arrive. There had been concerns on our end that they might delay her accreditation, perhaps as a way of signaling discontent. They had the option of slowing down the process of granting her an audience with the President or delaying the formal presentation of her credentials—something they could postpone for weeks or even months if they wanted to.

But instead, they reassured us: "Don't worry, we'll move quickly." Even with the holidays approaching, they committed to facilitating a smooth process. At that point, it was simply a matter of Ambassador Bell's schedule. She had planned to spend the holidays in the United States, but began preparing for a mid-January arrival in Budapest.

That gave us about six weeks to coordinate. The Hungarian government made it clear they were eager to arrange meetings with ministers and other senior officials soon after she presented her credentials. They also expressed interest in welcoming her in a formal way at the airport, which they did. A Foreign Ministry representative met her plane and presented her with flowers. While there was no press at the airport, the Foreign Ministry's official photographer was present, and photos were published showing the Hungarian government warmly greeting the new ambassador. She arrived with her husband and children and was settled into the residence.

The Hungarian President arranged to receive her credentials and wanted to do so in a way that underscored how warmly she was being welcomed. Instead of the usual formal ceremony—which typically would have included the Deputy Chief of Mission—they proposed something more personal: a private meal between the President, his wife, Ambassador Bell, and her husband. Just the four of them. It was a break from protocol, but clearly intended to signal a fresh start and a more personal touch.

At that point, the Hungarian government had fully embraced her. Internally, we worked to identify the full range of issues she would need to engage with and began organizing her first couple of weeks—introducing her to the key players, setting up meetings with various political, civil society, and media figures. It was the normal process of onboarding a new ambassador, but with added urgency and symbolism, given the context. It was a moment of transition, and the Hungarian government seemed eager to highlight the shift.

It was actually pretty easy to arrange her early meetings, because those not affiliated with the government—NGOs, civil society groups, members of non-government-aligned political parties—were certainly eager to meet with the new Ambassador. And to their credit, the Hungarian government had also made all of its ministers available for meetings as soon as we could fit them into the Ambassador's schedule. So we were able to put together a comprehensive schedule for her almost immediately.

She timed her arrival so that it would fall just before the day she could present her credentials. I believe she arrived either one or two days beforehand, which allowed her to take on her full responsibilities as Ambassador immediately. She was well-prepared—not just because of her own efforts, but because she had been waiting for quite some time. She had been thoroughly briefed, and now, she was not only ready to engage but was also being actively welcomed by the Hungarian government. There was real anticipation around her arrival.

For me personally, her arrival was also a welcome development. It gave me someone to talk to—someone to share the weight of the moment with. She arrived in mid-January, and during that entire period, the pressure on me had been steadily increasing. Beginning in November, I was advised that I should have a security detail. Not because of any specific threat, but because of my visibility. At that point, I was recognized almost everywhere I went in Hungary. My public profile had grown so high that I could hardly walk anywhere without being noticed.

The Regional Security Officer suggested—more than suggested, really—that I accept a security detail. I agreed. So from then on, whereas I had previously walked around freely or even gone biking on my own, I now did so accompanied. I wasn't driving myself anymore either. And even after Ambassador Bell arrived, they continued to provide me with a driver. Normally, once the Ambassador takes up post, the Deputy Chief of Mission or Chargé would go back to self-driving, but in my case, the guidance was that I continue with a driver and detail, given the circumstances.

At the same time, I had a number of personal and family issues building up that were becoming more and more difficult to manage while abroad. So, the Ambassador and I sat down and had an open conversation about the situation. We reviewed where things stood, and we agreed that I had done my part. She was now in place, ready to take on the challenges ahead. And it was time for me to return to the U.S. to address the matters waiting for me there.

I left Hungary not long afterward. In fact, today is February 14th. I left exactly eight years ago.

I left on February 14, 2015, and said my farewells. By that point, things had taken on an almost mythological quality. I don't want to exaggerate—but the attention had become surreal. There was very little I could do or say that wouldn't be noticed or reported. I'd mentioned before how people would post sightings of me on social media—something as simple as me walking down the street or sitting in a cafe.

There was one occasion when I was heading to lunch with a family who had invited me over. On the way, I asked my driver to stop at a florist so I could bring flowers. Later, there was a media story about the visit—not just about the lunch, but about the flowers, too. It described how I'd gone into the shop, bought flowers, and given some to others there, and how I'd chosen the bouquet quickly and politely. I don't even remember all the details that were reported, but it was the kind of moment where an ordinary act became part of a public narrative. Much to the irritation of the government, I think, I was still being portrayed in the media as a very human figure—approachable, visible, even generous.

And in that particular case, I was going to visit someone who had written to me: a daughter who said, "My mother has gone through a lot, she really admires you, and would love to meet you." From the very beginning of my time in Hungary, I made it a point to get out and engage directly with people from all walks of life, to get a real sense of what day-to-day life was like for Hungarians.

Another moment that stood out was over the holidays. My sons had come to visit, and one of them wanted to attend a New Year's Eve party at the *Szécsenyi* Baths. It was a large event—crowded, full of steam, laser lights, music. Not the kind of event I'd normally go to on my own, but it sounded fun, and my son wanted to go. He brought a friend, and the three of us went together. It was packed. We arrived around ten o'clock, and midnight was set to feature a light show. Between the steam and the crowd, we occasionally got separated, but we regrouped. After midnight, my son wanted to stay longer, so I told him how to get back and went home. I probably got in around 1:00 a.m.

Before going to sleep, I sat down to read the news. I came across a story in The Economist—a piece on what was happening in Hungary, the pressures facing the ruling party, and references to my role in some of those dynamics, as well as broader questions around illiberal democracy. I read through the article and then, as one does, scrolled through the comments.

One comment criticized me: It said I was getting involved in too many issues. Then another person responded—saying, actually, people in Hungary appreciated what I was doing, that I was speaking out, and getting out among the people. And then they added, "In fact, tonight he was at a New Year's party with his son." I had just come home from that party. I hadn't spoken to anyone I recognized there. But someone who had also attended had spotted me, and now, here they were, weighing in on The Economist website's comment section within an hour or two of the event.

That kind of encapsulated the environment I was living in. My public presence had taken on a life of its own. There was a kind of Robin Hood quality to how I was being portrayed in some media—a figure standing up, engaging with society, making the rounds. And a lot of it was positive.

But I also sensed, beneath the surface, a quiet expectation—that I or the United States might somehow "solve" Hungary's political problems. That's something we at the embassy were careful to address. We constantly emphasized that these were issues for Hungarians to resolve. Our role was not to topple governments or dictate outcomes. What we could do was articulate the principles we believed in—citizen engagement, civil society, transparency—and express our support for the democratic tools that allow people to shape their own future.

That's what that list we discussed earlier was about: not demands, but examples. If a government wanted to address concerns, these were ways to do so. But they weren't U.S. prescriptions—they were suggestions aligned with international norms and democratic practice.

So I left Hungary on February 14, returned to the U.S., and began addressing matters back home. And, I know, you have a hard cut-off in ten minutes. We're ready for the next chapter—next time.

Q: All right, good. I'll pause the recording here.

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Q: Okay, so this is February 25, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend, who has just left Hungary and has returned to the United States. And André, this is now 2015 for you.

GOODFRIEND: That's right. That's right.

Q: Now you've just completed being Chargé in Hungary. What next?

GOODFRIEND: Alright, so it's February 2015. I've returned, having curtailed my tour in Budapest. I didn't yet have anything lined up in D.C., and at the same time, I was dealing with a number of family matters.

In those first couple of weeks, I was getting settled back in Washington—a place where, despite being with the State Department my entire career, I hadn't really lived or worked much. Early on, I'd only been at FSI [Foreign Service Institute] for a few months at a time before heading out to post.

We had a house in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where we raised our family from 1997 to 2002. Then, just before I went to Hungary, we were living in a house in Southeast D.C., though I was still attending FSI at that point.

Q: That's quite a distance to go from Southeast all the way up to Arlington.

GOODFRIEND: It wasn't so bad. Actually, I enjoyed biking from Southeast to Arlington—along the river, over the bridge. The morning rides were really pleasant. When the weather was bad, I'd take the Metro instead.

But overall, my time then was very structured—classes at FSI, commuting, and coming back to D.C. I got to know the city a little during that period.

Now, though, I was on my own—looking for a place to stay, and trying to get a feel for the D.C. environment while also navigating the State Department landscape, figuring out what might come next.

Because it was February, most regular assignments had already been filled, so I was seeing if I could arrange a bridge assignment—something temporary that could fill the gap. I wasn't interested in going overseas again immediately—there were still personal matters I needed to take care of here in the U.S.

So I started reaching out—to people I knew, to offices I'd worked with—to see what might be available. I also looked at my areas of interest. In Hungary, I'd been focused on human rights, open government, good governance, the rule of law, and how we function as allies within those frameworks.

I got in touch with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor—what we refer to as the "J" bureau—to look into possible opportunities related to human rights and cross-border legal issues.

I also reached out to Consular Affairs—my original home bureau—to see if there were any openings. It would have been good to return there for a while.

And I looked into opportunities with IRM [Bureau of Information Resource Management], particularly in how technology supports diplomacy. Not as a tech specialist—I'm not a programmer—but in the Office of eDiplomacy. That was actually something I'd helped launch about twenty years earlier, when we were exploring how to use technology for more effective collaboration.

At the time, there had been a new CIO brought in after the 1998 embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The idea was to create an interagency network and rethink how diplomacy could be conducted, with technology as a driver. But those early efforts were rebuffed to a certain extent.

Q: Take one second to define CIO.

GOODFRIEND: Chief Information Officer. Around the end of the 20th century, there was a government-wide push for federal agencies to take technology more seriously and manage it more effectively. The sense at the time was that agencies weren't using information technology efficiently—they weren't managing their information resources well—and that there needed to be a shift toward more structured, professional oversight.

The idea was that agencies should begin modeling themselves, at least in part, on private-sector practices when it came to information management—centralizing oversight under a Chief Information Officer. This CIO would be a senior-level position reporting directly to the head of the agency—in the State Department's case, to the Secretary of State.

Before that, the State Department had the Bureau of Information Resource Management, or IRM. But its profile was lower. Different bureaus managed their own information systems—Consular Affairs, for example, had a major investment in technology—but there wasn't a coordinated, department-wide approach.

Establishing a CIO role helped bring about a unified vision for how technology should be implemented and managed across the Department—for the benefit of all users.

So the first Chief Information Officer at the State Department—around the end of the 20th century—was marshaling resources to address some of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that had been pointed out by various "blue ribbon" panels, think tanks, and non-governmental organizations. These analyses highlighted the lack of coordination in how we used technology across the Department. We simply weren't taking full advantage of the available tools.

One of those so-called blue ribbon panels was the Overseas Presence Advisory Panel—the OPAP. It had been established after the 1998 bombings of our embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The panel was tasked with examining the structure and effectiveness of our overseas presence and identifying what could be done to reduce the vulnerabilities that had allowed such devastating attacks to occur.

Among their findings, one of the key issues they raised was the lack of coordination in information technology. Offices within the same embassy were often using different systems, and information wasn't being shared effectively—not just within embassies, but also between State Department bureaus and even between agencies across the federal government.

In response, there was a new focus on developing an interagency approach to information sharing, with technology as the enabler. The CIO secured resources to build a cross-agency network—something that could help move diplomacy forward to meet the needs of the 21st century.

But outside the IT sphere, there was concern that this effort looked like technology trying to drive diplomacy, rather than diplomacy effectively using technology as a tool. And there was some truth to that perception.

There was a working group created within the State Department—this would have been around 2000 or 2001. The group was tasked with reviewing the CIO's proposals and ensuring that non-technologists were meaningfully engaged alongside the technologists. The idea was to make sure that the tools being developed would actually meet the needs of the people using them—primarily generalists and policy officers—and that they would have a substantive role in shaping how technology would be applied in diplomacy. It had to be a real partnership.

As a result of that working group, some of the CIO's proposals were adopted, and others were not. One important outcome was the creation of an office called eDiplomacy. The concept was that non-technologists who would work closely with the technical side to maintain that collaborative approach would staff this office. The goal was to ensure that the needs and insights of foreign policy professionals remained central in how the State Department's technology evolved—and that the CIO and IRM (the Bureau of Information Resource Management) would continue to benefit from that input.

Anyway, that was back around 2002. I'd been involved in that working group and stayed engaged with eDiplomacy over the years—essentially trying to be one of the non-technologists who was friendly to technology. I saw my role as helping bridge the gap—making proposals on how we might use technology to collaborate more effectively, to analyze and share information, and to create a more open, collaborative working environment.

Q: Were you assigned to this taskforce? How did you end up there?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, in fact, I think this was around 2000. At the time, I was in Consular Affairs, in the Consular Systems Division, and I had been engaging with the CIO to provide input from the consular side. I was also working with different bureaus across the Department to advocate for the adoption of collaborative software.

And prior to that—before I was in Consular Systems—when I was in IO, from 1997 to 1999, you might remember that I had been an advocate for bringing SIPRNet into the Department. I wasn't a technologist, but I was a user—someone who could make a business case for why we needed this technology. I think it was that reputation for advocacy, particularly around SIPRNet, that helped lead to its eventual incorporation into the Department.

It also led to our using the unclassified interagency network, which at the time was called OSIS—the Open Source Information System—and later became known as Intellink-U.

There was also the Intellink-S community, which operated on SIPRNet and was capable of hosting information classified up to the Secret level. Intellink-U, by contrast, was used for unclassified information. The intelligence agencies, at that time, managed both Intellink communities.

There were other interagency communities on SIPRNet as well—for example, the Law Enforcement Network and others. And on the unclassified side, there were networks supporting counter-narcotics and other collaborative efforts.

At the time, the State Department had not been participating in these interagency groups—largely because we hadn't connected to them. No one had yet made a strong business case for doing so. I took that on. I made the business case not only for using SIPRNet, but also for participating in the unclassified interagency network.

That effort led to Consular Affairs making its Consolidated Consular Database available to other agencies—particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. We were able to make that data accessible through OSIS, which eventually became known as Intellink-U—the interagency unclassified network.

During the period from 1998 through 2001—when I was first in IO [International Organizations] and later in the Consular Systems Division—I was a strong advocate, and became known among colleagues throughout the Department for promoting more effective use of the technologies we already had available.

At that time, a panel was created to review the CIO's proposals. It became a working group composed of representatives from various cones—political, management, and others—and I served as the consular representative. That was my role in the group. There were also a number of toolsets being proposed for how we might collaborate more effectively across the Department.

Then, in 2002, I went overseas to Frankfurt as a Regional Consular Officer. Even there, I continued promoting and using these collaborative tools—working with posts across Africa in a shared online environment. I think we talked earlier about that—how we were operating collaboratively online. Around that time, I was also discussing with Consular Affairs the implications of moving the Diversity Visa program to an online application process.

All of that was happening during the period when eDiplomacy was being established, and when IRM was moving forward with a range of new initiatives—like putting Department cables online and improving digital access to information that had previously been harder to get to. I had a role in much of that work at the time.

Q: I'll just interrupt briefly. During the period when you were responsible for several countries in West Africa, you also helped a U.S. citizen escape from the French Foreign Legion—a remarkable episode amid all your other accomplishments in modernizing information technology. But I digress, please go ahead.

GOODFRIEND: That incident with the U.S. citizen trying to escape the French Foreign Legion—yes, that happened during the time I was responsible for a number of regional countries in West Africa. And in a way, my ability to assist was made possible by the technologies that were just becoming available.

Before leaving Washington to take up that regional position in Frankfurt, I had strongly advocated that anyone in a regional role needs online access to the same data available at the posts they're supporting. So in that case—when an American citizen came to the embassy seeking assistance to leave the Foreign Legion—I was able to view the case notes the officer at post was entering in real time. I could contact the officer directly to discuss the situation. Beyond just email, we were able to use online systems to review documentation, confirm the person's citizenship, and ensure that everything was properly recorded and visible in a way I could follow from afar. I could also help the officer ensure the record was clear for anyone else who might have to access it later.

These were things we were just beginning to do in the early 2000s. But they set the stage for the kind of work I'd be doing much later. When I returned to Washington—fifteen years later—I went to Consular Affairs to explore what roles might be available. They proposed a position in their systems office, similar to what they had done when I returned from Damascus in early 2012, before beginning Hungarian language training.

At that time, they had been trying to rethink their use of technology, and given my long-standing involvement in those efforts—including my perspective as a non-technologist who consistently worked with tech teams—they thought I could offer valuable input, advice, and direction. And that was fine. I was happy to help during that period, especially as the process was just getting underway.

But by 2015, when I came back from Budapest, they were offering me something nearly identical to what they'd offered three years earlier. And frankly, I had the sense that things hadn't progressed much. Back in 2012, there had been talk of a unified system—ConsularOne—that was just about ready to move forward. But in 2015, it still felt like we were in the same place. That was concerning.

At that point, my interests had broadened beyond a narrow focus within Consular Affairs. I was thinking more systemically—about how the entire Department uses information, how we collaborate internally and externally, and how we can work more effectively with digital tools, wherever we're posted.

There were also broader issues at play in 2015—like the controversies surrounding the use of personal email for official business. Why were senior officials turning to personal systems? Why didn't they want to carry multiple devices? How do we engage effectively with the NGO community while managing what we can and cannot share?

During my time in Budapest, I had worked hard with the embassy's different sections to improve internal information sharing. And I was encountering many of the same challenges that had been identified by the OPAP commission nearly twenty years earlier:

systems that couldn't talk to each other, limited coordination between agencies, and siloed information flows.

We needed to be able to function as an interagency team and partner more effectively with NGOs and civil society. I'd seen this in Damascus too, when we had to close the embassy and shift services to Amman and Beirut. We needed to ensure everyone could access the same information in real time, wherever they were. We ended up creating online collectives—shared files and collaborative spaces—but had to rely on workarounds. A lot of what worked then did so because I was willing to try new tools and think about what non-technologists could realistically use.

Back in Washington, I engaged with various bureaus, including eDiplomacy, and shared where I was coming from—how I'd approached these issues, and where I thought we still needed to go. eDiplomacy had always been about enabling generalists to help shape the tools we all use. I explained how I might contribute—especially in terms of engaging civil society more effectively, and building virtual environments where government agencies, NGOs, and others could collaborate.

As part of those conversations, one place I visited was the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. If you recall, many of the issues I dealt with in Hungary centered around how the Hungarian government was addressing the Holocaust during its 70th anniversary. The Holocaust Museum had taken a strong interest and offered guidance—and criticism—on how Hungary was approaching those commemorations. But even with that shared interest, we lacked a proper way to collaborate or share information with them.

So, I took those experiences—and the input I'd received from others—and brought them to eDiplomacy. I laid out how I might be useful to them in a bridge assignment, and how we could continue building tools and frameworks that enable more effective internal collaboration, and more meaningful external engagement with partners like the Holocaust Museum and others.

Q: Let me take one second with you. You mentioned eDiplomacy. Can you just give a brief explanation of this office?

GOODFRIEND: I mentioned earlier that around 2002, following the recommendations of a working group, there was a recognition that the State Department needed better coordination between generalists and specialists—between the technology side and the foreign affairs mission side. The concern was that the tech teams were moving forward without enough input from the people crafting foreign policy and engaging with international partners. At the same time, there was a cultural divide: a sense among some generalists that they didn't need to engage with technology, that they could just keep working the way they always had—and that IT was for someone else.

There was difficulty finding a common language between technologists and non-technologists. So, after that working group, an office was created—eDiplomacy. It was meant to be a bridge. It would be led by an ambassador, report to the Under

Secretary for Management (known as “M”), and would be made up primarily of non-technologists—generalists drawn from all the State Department’s career tracks.

The purpose was to articulate what generalists needed from technology, and also to learn what technology could offer, to ensure that those working on foreign affairs could use tools effectively. This office remained under the Under Secretary for Management and functioned that way for about a decade.

eDiplomacy also took on responsibility for several specific tools to address long-standing challenges in how we manage institutional knowledge. One of the issues was that so much of what Foreign Service Officers know never gets captured or shared. There's a lot of valuable knowledge that's carried around informally—and if it’s not recorded, it disappears when someone retires or moves on.

To help address that, eDiplomacy created Diplopedia—a kind of internal Wikipedia for the State Department. Anyone with access could write and share articles. It became a living compendium of knowledge contributed directly by the Department’s workforce.

Another challenge was that we didn’t have a good way to know who our colleagues really were—what skills or interests they had—let alone to connect people who shared similar backgrounds or expertise. So eDiplomacy developed a platform called Corridor, modeled loosely on LinkedIn, but internal to the Department. It allowed employees to identify their own skills, interests, and experiences. It could be used for things like bidding, forming working groups, or simply finding people to collaborate with. The name “Corridor” was a play on the idea of the informal reputations and connections people build in the hallways of the Department—what people say “in the corridor.” But this time, it gave individuals the chance to define themselves and connect on their own terms.

All of this came from a broader philosophy: that the State Department is not just about data, reports, or systems—it’s about people. And while IRM focused on information management—IT systems and infrastructure—eDiplomacy took on knowledge management: understanding how to capture, share, and contextualize what people know.

That means recognizing the human dimension of information—bringing people into the equation. When we take what a person knows and give them a way to share it, especially in ways that others can access and learn from later, we create institutional memory. In that sense, it’s not so different from what we’re doing right now with oral history. If that human knowledge isn’t recorded, it disappears. But when it’s shared—whether through mediated interviews like this one, or through tools like Diplopedia or Corridor—it becomes much more valuable. It reminds us that the Department is driven not just by technology or data, but by the people who use them.

We are not just data-driven in how we achieve our missions, or how we shape our missions, or how we work together as a team—we are also people-driven. That is, we recognize the essential role of the human element in everything we do. The technologies we use are there to support the people who are carrying out and shaping policy. That was the core focus of the Office of eDiplomacy at its inception.

Over time, though—and this is my interpretation—there was a shift. eDiplomacy began developing and deploying various tools. At some point, there was a review by the OIG [Office of Inspector General] that recommended a structural change.

The suggestion was that because eDiplomacy was reporting to the Under Secretary for Management (M), it lacked direct influence over how technology was being developed and implemented. To address that, the proposal was to move eDiplomacy into IRM—the Bureau of Information Resource Management—so that generalists could work directly with technologists. The idea was to embed those foreign affairs professionals within IRM, where they could have a more immediate and practical impact on the technologies being built and deployed. Rather than functioning as an external office offering recommendations, they would be inside the technology development process, helping shape the tools from within.

Q: An overall strategic question. Is eDiplomacy or the overall management of these information systems, also taking into account the many platforms that the State Department uses or can use to get its message out? In other words, how would the information system of the Department be capable of using, let's say Facebook, or Twitter, or any of these other outward-facing platforms to quickly get out a message, a correction, or an explanation of some aspect of policy?

GOODFRIEND: eDiplomacy saw its role as touching all of that—meaning, all the technologies the Department uses to communicate internally and externally. That included the kinds of platforms used to get messages out to the public or to interlocutors quickly—like Facebook, Twitter, or, more recently, WhatsApp.

We're jumping forward a bit in time here, but take early 2018 or 2019, for example. WhatsApp was being widely used—not just by the public, but across federal agencies. It had become a *de facto* standard in many overseas posts because, in some places, it was the only way to reliably reach interlocutors. WhatsApp allowed us to communicate across devices and borders. A political officer or an econ officer could contact someone abroad just using their U.S. phone—no need for a local number. And for public affairs officers, being in WhatsApp groups with journalists or civil society actors was crucial for pushing out messages or staying connected.

But WhatsApp wasn't authorized on State Department devices. That left it in a gray area. People used it, but officially, it was restricted—especially in controlled environments. You couldn't bring your personal phone into a secure space, and WhatsApp couldn't be installed on a government computer, even an unclassified one. That meant people would sometimes miss messages—sometimes important ones. There were even anecdotes about missed communications with real consequences.

So, eDiplomacy, working with Public Affairs and drawing on what we were hearing from embassies—not from systems personnel, but from political and econ sections and front offices—helped elevate this issue. We made the case: these are real communication needs. Yes, there are security concerns, but the mission itself depends on effective communication. The CIO's job is to manage that risk—not to avoid all risk, but to mitigate it. The alternative is paralysis. And we were trying to shift the conversation from "risk avoidance" to "risk management."

This was part of eDiplomacy's broader role: understanding how every office uses technology, and advocating for tools that support both policy and operations.

There was another example of this kind of agility and coordination involving "the Watch" on the Department's seventh floor. Just for context—the Watch is the crisis management team. It's a 24/7 operation that monitors global events, ensures senior leadership is informed, and helps coordinate responses, whether it's a terrorist attack, natural disaster, or high-level visit.

I remember an example from London, during a terrorist attack on the metro system. Part of our job at the embassy was to make sure we got in touch with the Watch before they contacted us—because we knew they'd soon be hearing about it from cable news. That proactive communication was essential—it showed that we were on top of things and helped ensure the Department could respond in a coordinated way.

The Watch was also exploring tools to help monitor social media in real time—commercial platforms that could track public posts globally and flag events as they happened. The idea was that people often report incidents on social media before they're picked up by traditional media. So with the right tool, you might learn about a bank robbery in Mumbai, a car crash in Paris, or an explosion in Beijing—15 to 30 minutes before it appears on the news.

The Watch wanted to implement that capability but needed buy-in from across the Department to purchase the necessary licenses and bring down costs through an enterprise agreement. That's another example of how the Department was trying to adapt quickly, using technology not just for efficiency, but for better policy execution and crisis response, and eDiplomacy was facilitating.

What we did within eDiplomacy was identify who else in the Department might be interested in this kind of tool. Diplomatic Security, for example, was very interested—because of the level of granularity it offered. An RSO (Regional Security Officer) at post could potentially be alerted to a security threat faster than through local law enforcement or broadcast media—because people were already tweeting about it, or posting about it on other platforms in real time.

Consular Affairs also expressed interest, because consular officers need to be aware of events that could affect the safety of private American citizens. While RSOs focus primarily on the security of diplomatic personnel, consular sections are responsible for the welfare of private Americans overseas. So this tool was seen as valuable by multiple offices—each approaching it from a slightly different mission need.

Part of what eDiplomacy took on—while I was there—was the role of making these connections. We worked to identify who might want to partner on this type of acquisition so the Department could secure access to such tools for the widest possible audience—and at the best cost. It wasn't about developing future capabilities—it was about drawing attention to what already existed, what was available now, and asking: are you interested in using this?

That said, being part of IRM (the Bureau of Information Resource Management) posed certain challenges for eDiplomacy. The examples I've given—WhatsApp and the social media monitoring platform—are from around 2018 to 2019. A lot changed between 2010 and 2020. One major shift that began around 2014–2015 was the transition from locally installed software to cloud-based systems.

Tools like WhatsApp or the social media monitoring system were cloud-based, and they only became widely available—and broadly practical—in the latter half of that decade, say from 2015 to 2020. Before that, the dominant model was to develop or procure software that would be installed and run on the Department's own infrastructure. The process involved gathering user requirements, finding developers or vendors, purchasing licenses, and then figuring out whether the software was compatible with existing systems.

You probably remember how long it could take—especially when there were incompatibilities—and how difficult it sometimes was to get those tools into the hands of users. So eDiplomacy had to navigate this broader shift in the IT landscape while also acting as a bridge between technologists and end users, advocating for faster and more flexible access to the tools people needed in the field.

Q: Yeah, I saw that from the point of view of the Undersecretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy, the revolutions and the evolutions in being able to use that sort of technology to improve our outreach in a variety of ways. As much as you are working on the whole Department's ability to do this, and so on, there was a sort of a separate issue related to how quickly we could respond to the new platforms and new technologies to make ourselves more interesting and to make our messaging more interesting.

GOODFRIEND: I think what you've identified is a key distinction: if the technology is available and we have access to these platforms, then what are we authorized to use them for?

Q: Exactly.

GOODFRIEND: And for that, it's Public Diplomacy that sets the guidelines for how to use social media—when clearances are required, when they're not, how quickly to respond, what type of language to use, and so on.

But the first question is really about access. It's easy to say, "Here's how we'll use the tool if we have it." But the more immediate questions are: Are you authorized to have it? Where are you authorized to have it? Can you actually use it on the system you have access to?

That's one of the reasons why Public Affairs, for example, often prefers not to use OpenNet—the standard unclassified system used by most State Department offices. They feel constrained by it. There are applications they want to use—tools they know would not be authorized if they were operating strictly within that system.

Q: Correct.

GOODFRIEND: Part of what eDiplomacy tried to do was pull these perspectives together and highlight the shared interests across bureaus. Like I mentioned earlier, with the social media monitoring tool, different offices had different needs, but many of those needs overlapped.

Public Affairs, for example, might say, "We need social media tools because our mission depends on public outreach." And that's true. But eDiplomacy saw that other parts of the Department could benefit as well.

Consular Affairs, for instance, uses social media to communicate with American citizens, explain visa processes, and reach out to foreign audiences. Political and econ sections use tools like WhatsApp for direct engagement with interlocutors. These are outreach tools, too.

There was even a time when we explored what we called virtual presence posts—not quite "virtual embassies." These were a product of the late 1990s, so it was really Internet 1.0 territory. The idea was to create web-based "windows" that would let embassies engage with people in remote areas—on commercial, political, or economic issues—almost as if there were a physical presence there. It may have been a bit ahead of its time, but the concept was sound: that embassies could use digital tools to maintain engagement where they had no physical footprint.

And the point is: the technology side isn't going to make that business case. Nor are individual bureaus, especially when they see themselves as separate. But eDiplomacy could help connect the dots—help different parts of the Department see how technologies developed for one function might benefit others.

As it happens, the person who proposed the virtual presence posts later became the head of eDiplomacy. So that sort of vision carried forward.

Now, in the 2010s, when eDiplomacy was under IRM, there was a shift. And I think they became, to some extent, victims of their own success. Once they started developing useful tools and applications, other offices began claiming credit, or at least wanting to be seen as part of the initiative. What's the saying? "Success has many fathers..."

Q: Failure is an orphan.

GOODFRIEND: That’s right. Success attracts attention. If something worked well, other bureaus would often step in and say, “Actually, this is really our portfolio—we should be the ones doing this.”

Take, for example, the workshops with civil society. That was something eDiplomacy had launched—training on how to use digital tools effectively to create public-private partnerships. These workshops were happening globally. But eventually, Public Diplomacy stepped in and said, “That’s our function. Thank you, eDiplomacy, for setting it up—but we’re going to take it from here.”

At the same time, eDiplomacy began offering development as a kind of fee-for-service model. Other bureaus could come to us with a specific need—“we need a tool, and we need it fast”—and we’d bring on contractors and build it. The expectation was that once the tool was created, the requesting bureau would take on ownership. IRM wasn’t going to manage or maintain these tools long-term.

But that model led to tensions. Some tools developed quickly by eDiplomacy were not formally adopted by any bureau. If the requesting office didn’t have the capacity to take it on, the tool became what we called an orphan, with no clear owner.

There’s one example that stands out: the Virtual Student Federal Service (originally the Virtual Student Foreign Service). It allowed American students to serve as virtual interns for the State Department—and later, for other federal agencies. It was built quickly at the request of Secretary Clinton. eDiplomacy put it together efficiently. But after it launched, no other office wanted to manage it.

It logically belonged to HR, but HR didn’t have the bandwidth to take it on. There was some talk about moving it to OPM. But, by the time other offices became interested, the program was already successful—and ironically, it gave IRM a public win. Suddenly, IRM didn’t want to let it go either. So it remained with eDiplomacy—a success and an orphan at the same time.

This pattern repeated itself. Some tools eDiplomacy developed were absorbed by other bureaus, who considered themselves the “biological parents.” Others stayed in eDiplomacy's care. But gradually, the office found itself managing a growing number of tools, with limited resources left to innovate.

Meanwhile, the tech landscape was changing. From 2010 to 2020, the Department—and the world—was moving from locally installed, client-side software to cloud-based services. The social media monitoring tools and WhatsApp I mentioned earlier are examples of that evolution—those were cloud-based systems only available in the latter half of the 2010s. Before then, we were still gathering user requirements, developing or purchasing software, installing it on our own infrastructure, and testing for compatibility. That process was slower and more rigid.

By 2015, eDiplomacy was essentially juggling multiple responsibilities: maintaining tools it had created for other bureaus, operating on a fee-for-service basis, and losing bandwidth for new development. That's when I came in—not as director, but on a wide-ranging assignment. I had originally expected to work more on civil society partnerships—helping create collaborative public-private platforms. And I did a bit of that in the beginning—fielding questions like: "Can we use DOD's open platforms? Are these networks cleared for State Department use? At what classification level?" I tried to help unpack those questions and identify the complexities behind them.

Ultimately, in 2015, I was tasked with leading the development of the State Department's Open Government Plan. This was part of the broader Open Government Initiative, launched by President Obama early in his administration. The idea was simple but ambitious: Government should be more transparent, more participatory, and more collaborative. Every federal agency was required to publish an Open Government Plan every two years, detailing what it had done, what progress it had made, and what it planned to do next.

This was tied to our involvement in the Open Government Partnership—a global initiative bringing together governments and civil society to push for greater openness and accountability. It wasn't just governments talking to each other—it was a partnership with civil society, which often played the role of pushing governments to go further. Civil society was not just a participant—it was a driver, using transparency and engagement as tools for democratic reform.

So that became my focus. I worked on putting together our next plan—figuring out how the State Department could collaborate more effectively with the public, share information more openly, and make meaningful commitments that would be monitored independently, and reported alongside the efforts of our international partners.

My role focused on what the State Department was doing—what it had done and what it was planning to do—to meet its open government commitments. There was an envoy who handled the international dimension and worked at the interagency federal level on the U.S. government's overall commitment to open government. But I concentrated specifically on the Department itself: how we were improving transparency, how we were increasing citizen engagement, and how we were opening up the State Department's work in meaningful ways.

The Virtual Student Foreign Service—now called the Virtual Student Federal Service—was one example of how we engaged the public directly in the Department's work. It offered students across the United States a way to contribute remotely to real government projects, which was a tangible expression of open government in action.

We can pause here, and I'd be happy to talk more next time about that particular initiative.

At this point in 2015, I was working at eDiplomacy on a bridge assignment, initially intended to last one year, but ultimately extended to two. From about November 2015 onward, my primary focus was preparing the State Department's Open Government Plan, which we published in 2016.

That effort involved drawing input from every bureau and office across the Department—asking each one to define what open government meant in the context of its work, and to highlight actions and initiatives that supported greater openness, transparency, and public engagement.

In many ways, the process was eye-opening. It revealed the range of efforts already underway throughout the Department, and it helped surface opportunities for collaboration and innovation that might not have been fully recognized until they were placed under the lens of open government.

Q: Okay, one last question. Before we pause, you are now a counselor of the Department, you're in the Senior Foreign Service. Was this job satisfactory to you, consistent with the level of responsibility and competency that typically comes with that rank?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, I think jobs are what you make of them. Coming into it, the position might not have appeared fully commensurate with my experience. It was a tour as a senior advisor—but still, an advisor—within an office that reported to a Deputy Assistant Secretary.

In principle, at my rank—Minister Counselor—it might have seemed a bit limited in scope, but the role provided an opportunity to contribute across the entire Department, especially through the Open Government Plan, and to draw on my experience in ways that supported institutional goals.

I was promoted from OC to MC in 2014.

Q: While you were in Hungary.

GOODFRIEND: While I was in Budapest, it was actually a nice surprise. In principle, yes—there are many positions that are commensurate with rank. But as you move up, there are fewer and fewer such openings. I arrived in February, and a Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) position would clearly have aligned with my rank.

But titles aside, I've often found that what matters more is what you do with the position. In some cases, you can take on a role that may not appear, on paper, to be fully aligned with your rank, but then use it to accomplish things that might not have been possible had you simply followed the expected trajectory.

I actually find that kind of challenge fulfilling. And in this case—something we'll talk more about next time—the Open Government portfolio gave me that opportunity. Leading the effort to put together the report allowed me to engage with every office in the Department. It became an inter-bureau, inter-office collaboration. We drafted the report in a way that was intentionally transparent, and we even used Diplopedia to do it—so that others could see the draft evolve in real time.

That process—building something collaboratively, drawing on insights across the Department—I found very fulfilling.

Was the size of my office smaller than I might have liked? Perhaps. But that's a different topic—and one we can pick up next time.

Q: All right. So I will go ahead and end the recording here.

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Q: Today is March 1, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. André, we left off while you were a senior advisor in eDiplomacy. And I wondered, since you were an MC and minister counselor, if this was a job adequate to your skills and great.

GOODFRIEND: Well, that's an interesting question. By 2015, I'd been in the State Department for about twenty-eight years, with assignments both overseas and in Washington. One of the things I'd thought about while I was overseas was that if I were to go out again as Deputy Chief of Mission or as Ambassador, it would be important to first serve back in Washington for a while.

The reason is that, to be effective in one of those senior overseas roles, you really need to understand the mechanics of Washington: how the different offices interact, how decisions are made, and who to call when you need something. You need those connections and that perspective. Then, when you're overseas, essentially representing the President, you're better equipped to operate effectively.

At that point, I'd been overseas continuously since 2002—Frankfurt, then London, then Damascus, and then Budapest. That's four consecutive overseas assignments. Prior to that, my Washington-based roles had been at the mid-level—first in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs, working on conflict prevention, and then in the Consular Systems Division, dealing with technology and systems development.

Those were good experiences. The International Organizations role was especially broad—it involved working across regions and issues, more so than many regional desk positions. Being in that space—conflict prevention—meant engaging in interagency and inter-bureau coordination, which I found valuable.

The Consular Systems work, meanwhile, was about how we used technology to support decision-making. I was part of a working group focused on improving how diplomats use technology, and on bridging the communication gap between generalists and specialists. The goal was to ensure that the systems we used truly facilitated our work. But again, those were mid-level roles.

So I thought: before taking on something at a higher level, I should engage more directly—at a senior level—with the various bureaus in Washington. Around that time, I was having conversations with Assistant Secretaries and Deputy Assistant Secretaries about potential opportunities. But I wasn't approaching it from the standpoint of "This is what I deserve because of my rank." In fact, for many of us, getting promoted has always come as a bit of a surprise.

I think I may have mentioned this before, but when I "opened my window"—that's the process of putting yourself forward for promotion to the Senior Foreign Service—it felt like a moment of truth. It was a chance to take stock of my relationship with the State Department. Looking back, I felt that we—meaning the Department and I—had been aligned in our goals. I believed I had added value, and the Department had given me opportunities for growth and development. We had worked together in pursuit of the same vision.

Opening that window, though, is a kind of mutual check-in. If the Department promotes you into the Senior Foreign Service—crossing that threshold—it means they still see your work as valuable and aligned with their needs. You have five years after opening the window to get promoted. If not, you're required to retire. It's a "move up or move out" system.

In my case, I opened my window in 2008, and I crossed the threshold in 2009, became an OC (Officer Counselor). That was quicker than I expected, which again showed that the Department still saw us as moving in the same direction.

But I had also come to terms with the idea that at any point, it could be time to leave. That's the calculation you make when you open your window: if things don't move forward, then maybe it's time to go.

So once I was promoted, the question became: what are the new opportunities now available? When I was in Damascus, that was an FS-1 position. After being promoted to OC, I stayed in the FS-1 role for another two years, maybe three. And at that point, I asked myself: Does it really matter what the rank of the position is?

I concluded that what matters is what you make of the position—how you approach it. In Damascus, for example, how do we manage the relationship with the host government? How do we support American citizens? How do we function internally as an embassy?

What I kept wondering was: What can we do to improve the way we carry out our work? I had good relations with the other sections in the embassy, with other U.S. government agencies, with other embassies, and with Washington. So, regardless of rank, we were able to work collaboratively on improving how Consular Affairs operated more broadly.

Damascus, in particular, often served as a kind of testbed—a place where we could try out different approaches. People listened when I shared my thoughts, and I was also able to incorporate their feedback into how we did our work.

At the time, there were even internal discussions about whether the Consul General position in Damascus really needed to remain an FS-1 position. Could it possibly be downgraded to FS-2, given the relatively small size of the consular section? So here I was, an OC, serving in an FS-1 position, and they were questioning whether that position might be graded at FS-2 in the future. But again, for me, rank wasn't the issue. The real question was: What can I do in this position? What can I accomplish with the team and experience I have?

That same perspective carried into my next assignment. After Damascus, I went to Budapest in 2013—again, into an OC position. I was pleasantly surprised when, at the end of that year, I was promoted to MC (Minister-Counselor). So now, once again, I was in a position officially one grade below my rank. And although I had bid on a position at grade, I ended up serving in one below it. Still, I didn't see that as a mismatch. It wasn't about deserving a higher-level post because of my grade. It was about the value I could bring to the role.

I've had conversations with colleagues who are focused on finding the fastest path to promotion—asking what positions they should take to get promoted quickly. And I've always thought that if that's your perspective, you're likely to be disappointed. You may end up in roles that don't serve you well, and that don't serve the Department well either—because you're in them mainly to check off boxes. And if the promotion doesn't come, you're left wondering whether you truly did the job you were supposed to do, and whether it was worth it.

So there I was in Budapest, now an MC in an OC position. But there was no Ambassador at the time. I happened, by circumstance, to be serving in a higher capacity than originally planned. And that came with its own set of responsibilities—particularly in an environment where there was an expectation that the Chief of Mission would actively and publicly represent American values, even in the face of strong opposition from the host government.

Again, the question wasn't about what grade I held. It was: What experience could I bring? What values guided my approach? I worked closely with Washington and with various agencies, collaborating as a team to carry out our mission.

And just as an aside: I think I may have mentioned that when I served in London, friends and colleagues told me, "That's not going to be a place that leads to promotion." And that might have been true. But then, in Damascus, where I was in an FS-1 role and had just been promoted to OC, I was again told that this wouldn't likely lead to another promotion. Yet I was promoted to MC while in Damascus. So these assumptions don't always hold.

These are the kinds of experiences and reflections I had in mind as I was leaving Budapest and returning to Washington. For me, it was never the rank of the position that held the value. I think I may have joked with you before that maybe my office wasn't quite the size one might expect—but I said that only half-seriously. Because throughout my career, even now in the way we're communicating, I've tried to emphasize that you can bring the tools you need with you wherever you go—regardless of your office size.

Even before I went to Frankfurt as a regional officer, I was already working with consular systems and technologies. That work eventually evolved into what became known as eDiplomacy. The idea was that we could access the same information tools and data that people at Main State (in Washington) had—no matter where we were. We didn't need a large staff or a central office if we managed knowledge well—if we knew where information lived, how to retrieve it, and how to evaluate it.

That belief—about managing knowledge and enabling people through systems—was something I carried with me throughout my career. From my very first overseas assignment, I was working on getting two incompatible computer systems to talk to each other, so we didn't need a person retyping data manually between them. From the start, my thinking was: shouldn't the systems themselves provide us with the information we need?

And now, back in D.C., I still thought the same way.

I also knew that many of my colleagues—maybe not a majority, but certainly a handful or two—preferred holding their meetings outside the State Department. That was often because bringing people into the building could be a logistical challenge. Security procedures, access restrictions—these made it difficult for visitors to come in. So, for various meetings, people would suggest grabbing coffee somewhere nearby instead. It was just easier, more flexible, and often more conducive to open conversation for both sides.

The office spaces themselves weren't always well-suited for meetings, unless both parties had the right badges to access each other's areas. That was just part of the environment at the Department.

At the time, I was making the rounds—talking with different offices, trying to get a sense of where I might fit. And I had a clearer understanding of where my strengths lay. I wasn't someone who focused narrowly on a specific issue or region. My strengths were more in facilitating how we work together as a department—how we function as a team. I was interested in improving internal processes, making sure we had the right information, knew how to analyze it, and could chart a path forward.

So I continued having conversations, knocking on doors, seeing which ones were open, which weren't. Some discussions were disappointing. Others were encouraging. I had seen colleagues—people I thought would make excellent ambassadors—say things like, "I've got something promising, maybe we'll see how it goes," and then nothing would come of it. And I heard myself saying similar things: "There may be something coming, we'll see." It reminded me a bit of when I had opened my senior threshold "window" earlier in my career.

But again, I didn't define myself by any particular job. My mindset was: As long as I'm adding value—and as long as the Department sees value in what I'm contributing—then I'll keep going. It didn't really matter where I was or what position I was in. I felt confident that wherever I landed, I'd be able to assess the situation, see what needed to be done, and find ways to contribute that would serve both the Department and my own growth.

This is something I emphasize when I mentor others or talk with colleagues about how they define their roles. It's important to realize that when you step into a job, you're not just inheriting your predecessor's responsibilities. You have the opportunity—and, really, the responsibility—to help shape that role based on your own strengths and interests. You should be in dialogue with your supervisor. Say, "Here's what I think I can bring to this role. Here are some ideas. What do you see as our priorities, and how can we work together on them?"

That's the approach I've taken throughout my career, almost from the very beginning. And now, once again, it looked like I was stepping into a role where I would essentially have to define what I was doing—write the description myself. And that was fine. It gave me the opportunity to benefit the Department while also giving me a deeper understanding of how things work internally. That had been one of my main goals in returning to Washington—aside from family reasons.

I wanted a position that would help me better understand how the Department operates here in D.C.—how it interacts across bureaus, and with other agencies. I had previously been offered something in Consular Affairs, working on systems. But I felt that wouldn't give me the kind of cross-bureau engagement I was looking for. By contrast, working in IRM (the Bureau of Information Resource Management), especially with eDiplomacy, gave me that broader scope. It meant working on approaches that served the needs of colleagues throughout the Department, not just in one functional area.

As I was finalizing the offer with IRM, I started reaching out to colleagues across the Department. I'd say, "Here's what I'll be doing. Tell me—how are you using technology now? What's working? What could be better?" These conversations, whether spontaneous hallway chats or more formal meetings with Deputy Assistant Secretaries and Office Directors, helped me understand what was really going on within the Department.

Q: I just want to quickly ask, when you talk about technology from the position you're currently in, eDiplomacy, are you principally talking about information technology? Or did I, or is that wrong?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, you're right—information technology, which covers a lot of ground. But yes, we're not talking about cars, motors, or refrigerators. It's about the ways we share and access information—whether it's through our computer systems, our phones, or even the televisions lining the hallways. The question is: where are we getting our information, and how are we sharing it? How are we collaborating?

Q: Access and storage as well.

GOODFRIEND: Yes—access, storage, and discussion. I may have mentioned this before—there's an anecdote from around 1999, when I was in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO). IRM saw my role as that of a political officer, but they also knew I was "system-friendly." A group from what I believe was Enterprise Network Management came to me—they were drafting a systems strategy for the Department and wanted my thoughts.

This was just before we made the full transition to the internet. We were still in a period of major systems change, especially with the looming Y2K deadline. They had drafted two different conceptual models of how systems should support officers, and they wanted my input. One model was for political and economic officers, the other for consular and management officers.

The model for political and econ officers showed a network of people connected through a "cloud"—it was a collaborative model. Officers shared and exchanged information, using technology to communicate and interact. My feedback was: "That's great, but where's the output?" There was a lot of activity, a lot of sharing, but no clear product emerging from it.

The second model—for consular and management officers—was transactional. Officers input information into the system, which then passed it along a series of steps to produce something: a visa, a passport, a contract. It was almost automated, with little discussion or human interaction involved.

What struck me was how differently IRM saw these roles and processes—collaborative versus transactional—and how that shaped their vision for how systems should support them. It also made me wonder how the officers themselves saw their work. At that time—again, this was still the late 1990s—many political and economic officers didn't see much of a role for technology in what they did. The internet wasn't widely used yet. A lot of their work was based on personal relationships, on the "art" of diplomacy: gathering information through meetings, sharing perspectives, and writing up analyses based on experience and intuition—not through databases or analytics.

Meanwhile, consular and management officers had long been successful in quantifying their work—how many visas issued, how many cars tracked, how many contracts signed. That quantification lent itself to automation and systematization, and perhaps that made it appear there was less need for collaboration or nuanced judgment in their work—though I would argue that's not entirely accurate.

That was the landscape when I left Washington in 2002. Things were just beginning to shift. People were starting to use the internet more routinely, and by 2015, of course, it was everywhere. But even then, many still hadn't defined how to use it effectively. That's what I was exploring when I re-entered the Department in an advisory capacity—talking to colleagues about how they were using technology, what was working, and what could be improved.

At the same time, the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources was launching an initiative called Statecraft. In many ways, it echoed earlier efforts. There's a pattern—history repeats itself. There was, and still is, a sense both in the Department and across government that we lag behind the private sector in information technology, that we need to modernize to do diplomacy more effectively.

It felt like déjà vu. These were the same kinds of conversations we were having in the late '90s—after the embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, after the blue ribbon panels, and with the appointment of the first Chief Information Officer (CIO). All of them pointed to the need for better technology, more collaboration, and better information management.

And yes, a lot had been done in the meantime. eDiplomacy had been established. Programs like Diplopedia, Corridor, and broader knowledge management tools were developed. The idea was that employees across the Department could contribute their knowledge in shared systems—and others could access and build on it. We could improve how we track and share contacts, ideas, and expertise.

I think I mentioned earlier, when you asked why I was on that early working group, that part of the reason was I had always been outspoken about how we should be using technology—what we needed, how to use it more effectively. I'd been pushing that discussion from the very beginning—even before going out to my first post.

Q: As you're talking about diplomacy and both searching out the needs, and then defining them in a way that they can be used broadly throughout the Department. I did have a question. I don't know if it's applicable. But I had the impression that eDiplomacy also reached out to the private sector for models that might be useful for the Department. Did that happen? And were you aware, or did you try to use any of those?

GOODFRIEND: Models of what?

Q: Of how to organize information management in the Department that could maximize access for everyone, securely and efficiently?

GOODFRIEND: Ah—yes. Well, first, let me back up for a moment to finish a thought I had earlier. Around 1999, while I was in IO—the Bureau of International Organization Affairs—I got involved in a number of technology-related discussions, especially leading up to Y2K. You'll recall that back then, we were worried that the world might fall apart because many systems still ran on COBOL and weren't built to handle the date change from 1999 to 2000.

There was serious concern that core software used throughout the U.S. government—including at embassies—would fail. At that time, every embassy had its own local programmers, often locally employed staff, who wrote custom software for their particular post. There was no standardization—each post had its own homegrown tools.

To address the Y2K issue and the broader question of software sustainability, the Department created a working group to evaluate all these disparate tools and identify the best ones to support and maintain moving forward. This initiative was known as the American Embassy Software Program, or AESOP.

Frankfurt became the hub for this effort, and they invited me to participate in the first AESOP conference in 1999. It was focused on pooling ideas about how we could move forward with more unified, internet-based tools. From that, a suite of applications was developed—some for management functions that eventually became standard across posts.

One piece of software that didn't make it into that core suite was for contact management. That continued to be developed and managed separately out of Frankfurt, starting around 2000.

Even earlier, in my first assignment in Tel Aviv in 1988, I remember that USIS had a separate contact management system. It was isolated—we could walk over and enter contacts, but it wasn't integrated across the mission. Most people still relied on Rolodexes. And if a colleague took their business cards with them when they left post, it could be very difficult for their successor to recover that information.

In Moscow, I saw a variety of approaches. Some people used spreadsheets, others used desktop contact management tools. When I was in London in 2004, our public affairs section was using GoldMine, a commercial contact relationship management (CRM) system.

By then, contact management had emerged as one of the few truly common IT needs across all embassy sections—political, economic, consular, public affairs, and management. Everyone needed to know who they were talking to, and—just as importantly—who others were talking to, to avoid duplication and confusion.

Q: Yes, yes.

The Overseas Presence Advisory Panel had also flagged this issue, noting that embassy sections often failed to share contact information. Officers would leave post without transferring their contacts, and successors had to reinvent the wheel. It was a recurring problem.

So Frankfurt continued developing its contact management software—regularly updating it. By 2015, they were preparing to move it to the cloud. They had been very responsive to user needs. The contact management system remained separate from the centralized IRM-managed systems. It was still managed by EUR (the European bureau) and maintained out of Frankfurt.

Posts outside EUR could use it too, but they had to pay a small fee to EUR for support. When I was in Budapest, I pushed hard for all sections to use the system. I didn't want separate spreadsheets floating around. Protocol would otherwise have to reconcile all the guest lists for major events—often at the last minute—because each section had its own siloed records. I insisted that each section input their contacts directly into the system, rather than making Protocol do the cleanup.

Even from 2009 to 2012, in Damascus, we used that same Frankfurt-based system. It was a challenge to get officers to enter data themselves, but once we had a shared contact pool, it really helped facilitate cross-section coordination.

When I returned to Washington in 2015–2016, the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources (D/MR) was leading a broader software modernization effort. And going back to your question—yes, from about 2002 to 2004, when I was in Frankfurt, eDiplomacy did reach out to the private sector to look for "best of breed" tools.

They were trying to assemble a collaboration suite that pulled together the best email systems, contact management tools, search engines, and other collaborative technologies. I was part of that effort too—I flew back from Frankfurt to participate. The idea was to evaluate different working models and recommend a complete software package for embassies and bureaus to use.

They even set up a showcase to demonstrate how the suite might work—including advanced search capabilities, tools for summarizing documents or identifying key contacts, and more. At the time, many of these things were cutting-edge—now they seem basic. But in 2002, they were new and promising.

The Office of eDiplomacy made its recommendation to IRM. But ultimately, IRM set aside that best-of-breed suite and instead went with a more familiar, off-the-shelf Microsoft suite.

I can't speak to the internal decision-making—I wasn't in the room when the final call was made. But from the outside, it appeared that the "best of breed" suite we proposed didn't gain traction because it required integrating software from multiple sources, despite the potential it offered.

I think there was a sense within IRM that adopting a best-of-breed suite—drawn from many different private sector tools—would be challenging to manage effectively. The individual components came from a variety of sources, and system administrators were more familiar with standardized toolsets. There was also a concern about compatibility—whether these various tools would integrate well with Department systems.

In the end, what was deployed became known as the SMART suite. If you remember, back in 2002, SMART (the State Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset) was envisioned as a full suite of tools to enhance knowledge sharing and communication. What we ultimately got was a more familiar, off-the-shelf solution—easier for the IT staff to manage, but not necessarily designed with input from generalists. At least, that was my perception.

The primary achievement of SMART at the time was giving users the ability to search and receive cables online, which was a step forward. But many of the broader, collaborative goals originally envisioned didn't really materialize through that platform.

In response, the Office of eDiplomacy began developing its own set of knowledge management tools. This included platforms like Diplopedia (a kind of internal wiki), Corridor (for sharing and collaboration), and others that targeted more discrete, practical needs.

One approach they adopted was a fee-for-service model. That is, if a particular bureau or office had a specific need, eDiplomacy could rapidly design and deploy a solution—without the lengthy approval and development timelines that IRM typically required. In IRM, there was often a sense that a project had to be large-scale to justify the investment. Smaller-scale, niche requests could easily fall through the cracks.

So eDiplomacy filled that gap. It became something of a rapid-response team—agile and able to innovate. But over time, as it developed more tools, it also became a producer and maintainer of software. That meant it had to start allocating resources not just for development and innovation, but also for support and maintenance. And that, in turn, limited its capacity to take on new projects.

By 2015, the widely shared sense that the Department was technologically behind—not just compared to the private sector, but even to other government agencies—had only deepened, a concern that had lingered for decades. This perception of technological backwardness fueled growing frustration and the belief that we were no longer equipped to carry out diplomatic work effectively. Complaints were mounting over what were perceived as outdated, underperforming systems, and there was increasing pressure to upgrade the Department's IT infrastructure to better support its mission.

One of the central focus areas was, again, contact management. The system in global use at that time was still the one managed out of Frankfurt—the same one I mentioned earlier, developed in response to the Y2K efforts and continually updated and aligned closely with embassy needs. But now, Public Affairs was beginning to push for a transition to Salesforce—a widely-used private-sector platform with advanced CRM capabilities tailored to commerce.

Q: Okay, yeah. And as you're saying, this GoldMine had been, at one time, the choice for contact management; but by the time you get to about 2012, people didn't like that anymore. And Salesforce was coming in. And yeah, it was driving people crazy, because then they had to move data, again, a significant amount of data to a new software system. And it was time-consuming.

GOODFRIEND: Exactly. And beyond just the frustration of switching systems, the cost and usability challenges with GoldMine—and this may sound like we're getting into the weeds, but it's important—really illustrate how devil-in-the-details issues can hinder not only large-scale initiatives within the Department, but also the day-to-day ability to get our work done.

As I've mentioned, contact management has been a persistent thread throughout my entire time in the Department. From the very early days, it's been one of those constant, unresolved problems: How do we manage our relationships? How do we keep track of who we're engaging with? How do we ensure that knowledge isn't lost when someone leaves post? I imagine it's still an issue today.

Q: Just to cut in for a second—because I think many people don't realize this—contact management at an embassy isn't just keeping a Rolodex of names. It's a critical tool. Of course, you record names, addresses, and emails, but you also note their interests, their main contacts, and the issues they follow. For example, if a political officer knows a legislator or a legislator's staffer, you want to track what topics that person cares about, how you might be helpful if a visitor comes through, which representational events to invite them to, and who else to connect them with.

All of that information goes into the contact management system—not just for you, but for the entire embassy. When planning networks, representational events, or VIP visits, everyone needs to know: Who should be invited? With limited space, who is the most important? And how do we handle those who aren't invited so they don't feel overlooked?

So contact management is not just an address book—it's one of the most important tools an embassy has. And because of that, it's also one of the trickiest issues for software to get right.

GOODFRIEND: Right. I mean, one of the things we say when people ask, "Why do we still need embassies?"—the answer is, because you need diplomats on the ground. Human beings. People who build relationships in person.

Especially now, with so much information available online—news, social media, public broadcasts—you can sit in Washington and consume most of the same content that someone overseas is seeing. Sure, there are a few things that might not be accessible, but in general, the informational gap has narrowed.

What can't be done as easily from afar is building trust. You can't walk into someone's office. You can't share a coffee. You can't have them over for dinner. You can't just bump into someone, as you would in real life. And those unstructured interactions—those moments of social contact—are often where the most useful conversations happen.

Even during the pandemic, people noticed that. Yes, you could still get your work done from home. You could schedule a Zoom meeting or a virtual coffee. But that ambient, spontaneous connection—what we call the "water cooler" effect—was missing. You couldn't just casually catch up with someone in the hallway. And that's where a lot of diplomatic work also happens.

There are systems now that try to mimic that: virtual collaboration platforms with shared spaces, status updates, or avatars. But they still can't quite replicate what happens when you meet someone face to face—when you're in the same room and having a real-time, human interaction.

And that brings us back to contact management. It's not just managing a list of names. It's managing relationships. In the private sector, they call it Customer Relationship Management, or CRM. In our world, the "C" doesn't stand for "customer"—we're not selling anything. But the principle is similar.

Our value as diplomats lies in the relationships we build. With people who are plugged into their societies. People who help us understand what's really going on—not just what's in the newspapers, but the dynamics behind the scenes. Through these relationships—through conversations, events, shared experiences—we gain insight.

And those relationships are critical to achieving our goals. If you don't understand them—if you don't know who knows who, who has influence, who is aligned with whom—you may think you're making progress, only to find the rug pulled out from under you.

You didn't see the relationship in the background, the loyalty, the rivalry, the informal network—and you missed a key piece of the puzzle.

That's why contact management isn't just an administrative task. It's core to the mission.

Q: And that ability separates good Foreign Service officers from great ones. Like you say, technology can be improved to help the good Foreign Service officers who might not think about the second and third order. Contacts and networking can help them better understand and utilize.

GOODFRIEND: Exactly. And that's part of why putting information into a shared system matters so much. It helps ensure that a contact isn't seen as just your contact—someone who only has a relationship with you because you're a nice person or because you had a good working rapport. And that when you leave post, the two of you are going to be best friends forever.

That's not the point. These are professional contacts—they're contacts of the embassy, not just of an individual. And if you treat them that way, you're helping your successor. And there will be a successor. That person needs to understand the relationships in place and how they function within the host society.

It's also important for you to know if someone you value highly as a contact is also in close contact with another section of the embassy. Maybe they've already shared information with your colleague—and now they're wondering why you're asking the same questions or why you seem unaware of what they already said. If you treat the relationship as private, you're operating in a vacuum—and duplicating effort or losing credibility.

That's been one of the ongoing challenges of contact relationship management in embassies: the reluctance to share contacts across the mission. There are technical hurdles—sure—especially if it's just a name in your email address book or a card in your Rolodex. If it's not in a shared system, then it's essentially invisible to the rest of the team.

But the biggest hurdle is often that nothing gets entered into the system at all. And that traces back to outdated assumptions about how embassies are staffed.

There's still this lingering belief—from twenty or thirty years ago—that every office has an administrative staff—someone who handles the files, manages the Rolodex, types up the guest lists, makes the calls, knows the addresses. That the officer just needs to say, "Find me this number" or "Add this name," and someone else will take care of it.

But those office management specialists have largely disappeared. That layer of support is much thinner now, especially in smaller or leaner posts. Officers are expected to do more themselves—not just the relationship-building, but also the data entry, the follow-up, the tracking.

Q: Right. I'm smiling because one of the key aspects of sharing contacts—knowing who's who and who has information that might matter to your colleagues—often comes out at representational events with the Ambassador. The Ambassador only has so much time, and if she gets cornered by a well-meaning but nonstop talker, she may glance over and give you the little "save me" signal. In that moment, you can step in—not by rudely pulling the person away, but by steering them toward someone else you know will genuinely enjoy the conversation. It's not about marching them off; it's about using your network to redirect the exchange in a way that helps everyone, and the Ambassador certainly appreciates that.

GOODFRIEND: Exactly. And it works because you know who these people are. Everyone has looked at the guest list in advance. You've had time to think about who's coming, what their interests are, and how they might connect—not just with you, but with others on the embassy team.

But again, this all comes back to: How are we managing that information? How do we capture and share those contact details across the mission?

We've gone through major right-sizing, budget constraints, and changes in how we operate. We don't have typing pools anymore. We don't have people sitting there preparing your correspondence. In most cases, officers are expected to draft their own letters, send their own emails, and make their own calls. A lot of the administrative support that used to exist—receptionists, office management specialists—is no longer there, at least not in the same numbers, and not distributed across all sections.

That makes data entry and contact management even more of a challenge. And often, people just haven't had the training they need. Moving from paper to digital systems isn't just a matter of using a new tool—it requires a shift in mindset, workflow, and expectations. And not everyone has had the opportunity to build those skills.

So now, the expectation is: If you meet someone at a reception, if you follow up with them, if you learn something about them, you enter that information yourself. Their spouse's name. Their kids' ages. What topics they care about.

All those personal context details matter—not just for you, but for your successor, and for the team.

Rather than jotting down a note on paper and handing it to the OMS to enter into the system, the expectation now is that officers should enter the information themselves. But one of the challenges we had with GoldMine—and this may sound technical, but it reflects a broader problem—was that it required user licenses. You had to pay for those licenses, and they weren't cheap.

I remember when I was in London, we were using this commercial software, and the question came up: How many licenses do we really need? There was a real effort to limit the number because of cost. That limitation made it difficult to ensure widespread use across all embassy sections.

By contrast, one of the big advantages of the Frankfurt-developed system was that it didn't require licenses. You could make it available to everyone, regardless of their section or role. That openness was critical.

In both Damascus and Budapest, I was in a senior enough position to set expectations. I could tell the team, "Everyone should be using this. Everyone should have access to the contact information. Everyone should know how to review and update the data." And I used the system myself, actively.

In Budapest, I found it particularly useful for tracking invitations. Often, an invitation would arrive, and by the time it had gone through internal review—who should attend, is it worthwhile, should I respond—it was one or two days before the event. Yet the invitation may have arrived two weeks earlier.

The system helped fix that. One of the first things that happened with incoming invitations was that they were scanned and logged into the contact relationship management system. That allowed me to check on their status, follow up with the team, and ask: "Where are we on this one?" or "Has this been routed to the right office?" It gave me situational awareness without micromanaging.

Of course, you have to be careful not to get too deep in the weeds. Some things take time, and people need space to do their jobs. But having visibility into the process is a useful management tool.

Still, by 2015–2016, I felt like we were going back to square one. We were again looking at commercial software with licensing issues. I was part of the Statecraft team, which was exploring CRM solutions and other technologies. There was strong momentum behind switching to a commercial product, driven largely by Public Affairs.

Public Affairs officers really wanted a system that was widely used in the private sector. They weren't happy with the in-house software that had been developed—especially the version available to overseas posts. They pointed out that the commercial platform was cloud-based, so it could be accessed from anywhere, whereas the in-house tool had to be installed locally and was harder to access remotely.

Now, I should say that the in-house system was also about to be moved to the cloud, but that didn't carry the same weight in the debate. What I started to wonder was: Are we now being driven by the technology itself? Not by IRM saying, "Here's a tool that will change how you work," but by colleagues pushing for specific tools and insisting, "This is the one we want to use."

That's not necessarily a bad thing—but it raises important questions: How are people going to use these tools? Who needs access? Who should have licenses? Public Affairs knew what its own needs were, but what about other sections?

Because again, these commercial tools are expensive. So the question becomes: Do you give one license to someone in the Political Section? One to the Econ Section? But then, how do you ensure the data in the system is actually relevant and complete?

If a political officer has important contacts but doesn't have access to the CRM system, are they going to feed their information into it? Probably not. They're not going to ask someone else to look up their own contacts for them. What you'll end up with is people maintaining private lists—redundant, fragmented datasets. And that defeats the whole purpose of shared contact management.

This was part of the broader Statecraft conversation—the need to build a system and culture where information is accessible, useful, and reliable across the mission. But to do that, we had to think not just about tools, but about workflow, policy, and mindset.

Q: Let me pause just one second. I'm hearing some things outside that I just need to take a look at. Okay, sorry for the interruption. Go right ahead.

GOODFRIEND: That's all right.

So Statecraft was tackling this fundamental question: How do we manage our relationships with contacts? And—just as important—can software solve that problem?

From my perspective, the answer wasn't simply a matter of changing the software. The real issue was: What are we actually trying to do with our contacts? And do we understand the value of managing and sharing contact information across sections of the embassy?

That's part of what you and I were just talking about—the need to understand how different sections engage with their contacts, and how important it is to make sure everyone feels comfortable sharing that information.

It's not just about adopting new technology and assuming, "Now I'm going to share all my contacts because the system expects it." It's much more of a cultural issue.

First, people need to recognize the value and importance of sharing information. And second, they need to trust that sharing won't lead to loss of control or misuse. We're not being held back anymore because the technology doesn't exist—we've got the technology. What's holding us back, in many cases, is ourselves.

This was true 20 years ago, too. Back then, the narrative was, "Technology is going to change everything." And there was some pushback from diplomats and foreign officials, saying, "No—it's not the tools that define our work; we define how we use the tools." And that's fair. But now, two decades later, the situation is different.

Today, we actually do have the technology to do the things we've long said we want to do—collaborate, share, track relationships. So, the limiting factor is no longer technology. It's the culture—and our willingness to use the tools we have.

For instance, do we want Washington to know who our contacts are? And maybe even reach out to them directly? How do we feel about that? Do we want another U.S. embassy to reach out to someone we know—simply because they can now see that contact in a shared system?

Even within the embassy, are we okay with colleagues engaging with our contacts without first coming to us? Or do we feel like we still need to be gatekeepers?

These are questions of protocol, etiquette, and trust—not questions of software design. What we're really wrestling with is: How do we want to work together?

We already have the tools. Now it's about whether we're willing to use them collaboratively, and to define the norms and expectations around how shared contact information is handled—between sections, between embassies, and between the field and Washington.

Q: One quick consideration: we collect a great deal of information on our contacts, which is necessary for our work. But every so often, it becomes known that the embassy maintains data on individuals, and people start asking, "What does that mean? Why is the U.S. Embassy collecting data on me?"

This is separate from visa information, which is strictly limited by law. Visa data cannot be shared outside the embassy without the applicant's permission, though of course it goes through U.S. government security checks as part of the process. What I'm referring to here is the broader collection of biographical information on contacts—data we use for diplomatic purposes. When word of that collection surfaces, it can sometimes become a public relations issue.

GOODFRIEND: Right. And before the U.S. government can collect data on anyone, it has to comply with federal transparency requirements. That includes submitting a publicly available form that describes the system of records in which the data is being stored, what type of data is being collected, and the legal justification for doing so.

So there has to be a clear rationale for the data collection. For example, in Public Affairs, when people sign up for mailing lists or event invitations, they're voluntarily providing their information. And by doing so, they're giving implicit consent for their data to be stored and used for official communication.

Consular Affairs has a similar structure—for instance, when Americans register with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). In both cases, people knowingly provide their information for a purpose they understand.

Even in day-to-day diplomacy, when someone hands over a business card, there's a reasonable understanding that the information will be used to follow up. That's the nature of the exchange.

But still, any system that stores this data must be formally registered as a government system of record. That registration is public—it describes what data is being collected, how it's stored, how it's used, and under what conditions it may be accessed. It's part of our legal obligation to ensure transparency and accountability.

Of course, using these tools is not unique to the government. The private sector relies heavily on the same principles. In fact, one of the leading cloud-based Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platforms is now run by one of the largest software companies in the world. It became a major player by building precisely these tools—contact and relationship tracking at scale.

But for us, the challenge isn't so much the technology—it's our culture. How we manage information, how we share it, who has access to it, and how we define the relationship—not just between individuals, but between those individuals and the U.S. government as an institution.

That's a key shift: the contact belongs to the embassy, not to a particular officer. The relationship is with the U.S. government, not with "John Smith, the Political Officer."

This becomes even more critical in a modern diplomatic environment where we expect information access on the move. If I'm heading to an event, and I've just come from another meeting, I may not have time to return to the office and pick up briefing materials. I need to be able to check—who is this person I'm about to meet? What's the background? What's our history with them?

The ability to access that information digitally and securely, from wherever you are, is one of the real benefits of diplomacy in the 21st century. And that was part of what the Statecraft initiative was trying to enable—not just CRM, but mobile, secure access to sensitive data.

There were pilot programs using smart tablets configured to allow officers to access classified or sensitive but unclassified (SBU) information on the go. The idea was to empower people with the right data at the right time, without requiring them to be physically tethered to their offices.

And again, while there are technical challenges—like how to secure the devices—the bigger issue isn't the technology itself. The bigger issue is: Do we know how to handle it? Do we know where it's appropriate to use a device with sensitive information? What are the protocols for using that tablet at a conference, or on public transport?

So we're no longer limited by the availability of the tools. We're limited by our own institutional discipline—our protocols, our comfort level, and our clarity around how information should be handled.

Q: There's just one other limitation I've mentioned about accessing this information when you're away from your desk—cellphone coverage. If coverage is poor, and that's your only way to reach the database, you may not be able to get what you need. I can't tell you how many times the Ambassador was on her way to a meeting and couldn't log into the contact management system. She'd just call me and say, "I've got two minutes—who is this?" I'd quickly check who she was about to meet and flag the most important topic for *her to raise. After that, of course, you never know exactly where a meeting will go, but at least she could be sure to accomplish her top priority*

GOODFRIEND: Absolutely. And that's actually something IRM has been working on over the last few years—ensuring that our devices can access critical information wherever we are, and that we have redundant ways of doing so.

It's technically possible—it just depends on how much we prioritize it. There are several approaches being explored, and without going too deep into the technical side of things, I can give a quick example.

I remember when I was working on Kosovo—this was over twenty years ago now—we were doing conflict prevention work and supporting the Kosovo Diplomatic Observer Mission. At the time, we were experimenting with Iridium satellite phones, which were just becoming available.

As coordinators for the observer mission, we were looking at how to use satellite access to stay connected—either for phone coverage or possibly even for internet connectivity, though bandwidth was limited. We had these rugged, field-ready laptops where, if we were traveling through rural areas, we could pull over, set up, and manually point the device at the satellite to establish a connection.

I can't recall now whether that specific setup was used for full internet access or just for voice communication—but the point is, even then, we were thinking about how to stay connected in places without reliable infrastructure.

Q: I remember it as a phone, but go ahead.

GOODFRIEND: It probably was. We had a few different methods at the time, but this was 1999, so it most likely was a phone.

That said, I do remember—just from personal experience—when I was commuting from Fredericksburg to Washington, D.C. around that same period, I had a device I could plug into my laptop that gave me slow internet access, even on the train. So even more than twenty years ago, we were experimenting with remote connectivity.

Since then, the technology has matured tremendously. Today, having access to the internet wherever you might be isn't far-fetched at all—it's increasingly expected.

And part of that evolution has to do not just with connectivity, but with how and where information is stored. You don't want to store everything locally on a device, because that raises security risks. So what we began talking about was the concept of "zero footprint" systems—where no data is stored on the device itself. Everything resides in a secure environment, accessible when needed, but not lingering on the hardware afterward.

That shift has allowed many embassies to stop storing sensitive information locally. Everything's in the cloud or on secured remote servers, and as soon as you're done with the data, it's no longer accessible from the device. That's no longer the "embassy of the future"—that's the embassy of now.

Back in 2015, we were looking at a few different threads simultaneously. One was Contact Relationship Management (CRM), making sure that data about key interlocutors could be accessed securely and easily, wherever you were.

Another was improving internal communication. One of the goals was to revamp the front page of the intranet site—to turn it into a kind of news portal, something more dynamic and relevant to Department personnel. Instead of landing on a static menu of links, you'd see updated content: news, policy changes, upcoming events—things relevant to your work and your role.

And the technology existed to make that happen. But the next question was: Who decides what's relevant? And who manages that content?

At the time, eDiplomacy managed the front page of the intranet. So when this change was proposed, eDiplomacy was also expected to manage the new, dynamic version. But that raised a deeper question: Should the office that manages the technology also determine the content?

To me, that was like asking the housekeeping staff who sets up a meeting room to also write the agenda. Just because someone knows how to plug in the phone and lay out the folders doesn't mean they should decide what's going to be discussed. Managing the infrastructure isn't the same as managing the substance.

And that gets to a broader organizational challenge: ownership. Who "owns" the technology, and who "owns" the information being managed by that technology? We were trying to clarify that.

These questions came up constantly. Who should be managing the CRM system? Is it the OMS, because they handle logistics? Is it the IT specialist, because they maintain the system? Or should it be the officer who owns the relationship and the data—the person actively using the system to track and engage with contacts?

Likewise, for the internal information portal on the intranet: Should IRM run it, just because they maintain the infrastructure? Should it be Public Affairs? Probably not, since they're externally focused. Maybe it should be Human Resources, because this is an internal staff-facing tool.

Later, when I became Director of eDiplomacy, we tried to address this directly. We reached out to identify information owners across the Department—people who could take responsibility for the accuracy and relevance of their information.

But the responses we got were… well, bewildering. That's the word I'd use.

Some said, "We've never done that before." Others said, "We don't have the resources." Or, "It's not clear whose job that really is."

So even in my advisory role, I found myself having repeated conversations about responsibility—Who owns this data? Who is accountable for it?

At the heart of it all was the need to distinguish between those who manage the tools and those who are accountable for the content those tools deliver. We needed both groups to work collaboratively, with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Q: Here, just a very quick question. As you're going through this process, did you reach out to other executive agencies to see how they do it?

GOODFRIEND: Sometimes they actually reached out to us—particularly in connection with things like Diplopedia. Other times, depending on the issue, it was handled within different parts of the Department. For example, HR information—like internal communications—typically fell under Human Resources, not IRM or eDiplomacy.

But let me give you a specific example that highlights a recurring challenge: the staffing pattern. This was one of those seemingly small but symbolically and politically sensitive documents within the Department. It outlined which offices reported to which directorates, where special envoys were placed, how bureaus were structured—details that could shift with new administrations, like in 2016.

The question was: Who owns that information? On the technical side, eDiplomacy was responsible for publishing the staffing pattern internally, as part of its effort to make key reference information accessible on the Department's intranet. Meanwhile, Global Information Services produced the phone directory—I believe it was GIS at the time.

But the structure of the staffing pattern itself—how it was organized, what reporting lines were shown—that wasn't something eDiplomacy could just create. It required input from HR, which was the office of record for organizational structure.

We sat down with them—HR and eDiplomacy together—and said: "What we're displaying on OpenNet is outdated. It's inaccurate. If you can provide the current structure, we'll format it, we'll make it visually clear—but we need the data from you."

The answer? HR wasn't producing anything for internal use.

Instead, they were providing information to Public Affairs, which was then posted publicly. And what ended up happening is that the public-facing staffing pattern became the *de facto* internal version. That's a reversal from earlier years, where internal information was vetted and then selectively shared externally.

This wasn't an isolated example. In the late 1990s, I remember a similar tension around the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM). At the time, there was a push to make the FAM available online for public use, which made it much more searchable with modern indexing tools.

But the office that produced the internal FAM wanted it understood that the authoritative version was the one they maintained on the internal system—not the one posted online. The external copy was just that—a copy. Not definitive.

Fast forward to more recent years, and it's often the reverse: public versions of documents are more accessible, and internal users rely on those instead of trying to navigate outdated or hard-to-find internal systems.

And that leads into something I took on in my advisor role: the Open Government Plan. That was separate from the Statecraft effort, but related in spirit.

The Open Government Plan was formally assigned to IRM, because it was seen as a technology deliverable—but it wasn't just about technology. It was about transparency, accessibility, and public engagement. It asked: How is the Department making information available to the public?

I took that on—not because I had formal responsibility, but because I saw it as a way to engage with different bureaus and offices. I could ask them: How are you promoting transparency? How are you sharing your information externally?

Then, I compiled those answers into a single document—both a history of what had been done and a vision of where we might go next.

What was particularly intriguing—and maybe a little ironic—was that in many cases, the public-facing tools being developed to share information externally were actually being used by staff internally, because they were easier to search and access than the systems designed for internal use.

So the flow of information had, in some ways, reversed. What we were producing for public access had become a workaround for internal visibility.

But I'll stop there—and we can pick that thread back up next week.

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Q: Okay, today is March 8, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. André, go ahead. You are still working at eDiplomacy.

GOODFRIEND: Right. We're in 2015. It's still the second Obama administration. Every two years, each federal agency is supposed to prepare an Open Government Plan.

Backing up a bit—at the very beginning of the Obama administration, pretty much on his first day in office, the President signed the Open Government Initiative. The idea was to engage both with other countries and with civil society to highlight the benefits of transparency, public participation, and openness within government.

As part of this initiative, the U.S. helped create the Open Government Partnership—a multilateral initiative that brought together like-minded countries—generally democracies, though not exclusively—that were interested in working with civil society to pursue the benefits of open government. This was happening in a new digital era, where it was increasingly possible to make government accessible to the public through technology.

The U.S. federal government took a whole-of-government approach. All agencies were expected to participate and to engage with civil society to fulfill the commitments the U.S. made each year in relation to open government—commitments to increase transparency, enhance public participation, and so on. We would set targets collaboratively—with public input, with civil society input—and then work with other countries doing the same. There was a mutual accountability aspect, too—countries would hold one another to those commitments.

That was the international thrust of the Open Government Initiative. But there was a big domestic component as well: every federal agency was required to prepare its own Open Government Plan, which was updated every two years. These plans documented what the agency had accomplished in terms of implementing open government principles and laid out future goals—goals that could be tracked over time.

As I said, this was 2015. The next round of plans was due in 2016. By then, I had signed on with eDiplomacy as a Senior Advisor.

And here's something worth pointing out: I think people often assume that anything involving technology is a tech program. But what I just described isn't really about technology *per se*—it's a policy program. It's about good governance. It's about engaging the public and civil society in shaping how government works. Yes, it's facilitated by technology—but the core of the initiative is policy, not tech.

That said, as soon as you introduce technology, the office handling it tends to be treated as the "tech office." That's what happened with the Open Government Plan. Responsibility for drafting the plan was handed to IRM because of its role in technology.

IRM had drafted the 2012 plan. It had drafted the 2014 plan, and now that I was there, I was asked if I could take the lead on the 2016 plan.

Q: And IRM, just for everyone's benefit. What does that stand for, and where is it located? In terms of the management—

GOODFRIEND: IRM stands for the Bureau of Information Resource Management. It's the bureau responsible for the State Department's IT strategy. That includes developing a vision for how the Department can use technology effectively, implementing that technology, and making sure it functions as intended.

IRM's role is to ensure that the technology meets the needs of its users—particularly the foreign affairs community. The State Department operates globally, with over 220 posts around the world, across multiple time zones. It's an "always-on" organization, and diplomats need constant access to functioning systems wherever they are.

There's also a substantial domestic side to this. People working at the State Department in Washington and at regional offices across the country—including passport offices—need the same access to tools and services. So there's a constant need to coordinate across both overseas and domestic operations.

Now, this overlaps significantly with the Public Affairs side of the Department, which also plays a major role in identifying and using technologies to support outreach and public engagement—what we often call public diplomacy.

But here's where it gets complicated. As soon as something involves technology, there's a tendency to say, "Well, that's the tech office's responsibility." But that creates a kind of gray area—between managing the technology itself and managing the missions that are carried out using the technology. Who's responsible? The office that manages the tech? Or the office that best understands the mission and its needs?

This tension comes up all the time. Technology has a certain mystique, especially in the State Department. People who aren't technologists often shy away from discussing it—even though nearly everyone relies on it in their daily work. And when users don't—or won't—clearly articulate their technology needs, the responsibility falls back on the technologists to guess.

I think I shared an anecdote in one of our earlier conversations: IRM came to me with two different models—based on how they imagined management officers, consular officers, political officers, and economic officers worked—because they were trying to design systems to support those roles. But they were doing this largely in a vacuum.

One reason they came to me was that, at the time, I was one of the few people in political affairs who would actually talk with them about operational needs. I had also mentioned a past example: the State Department's first Chief Information Officer had tried to develop a major technology program in the wake of the 1998 embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. The idea was to change the nature of diplomacy using new tools. But there was pushback—largely because not enough consultation had happened between the diplomats and the technologists. There was a disconnect between the people implementing the systems and the people expected to use them.

Q: Let me ask just one question here. As you were preparing for the Open Government exercise and looking at the many different needs in State Department information management, how did you factor in the rapidly changing social media landscape? In public diplomacy—and even in the Department's own efforts at openness—the platforms keep shifting. Just as you're developing a strategy for one, another pops up. TikTok, for example, seemed to come out of nowhere and suddenly became a huge platform the Department might consider using. That's just one case among many. Did these shifts create difficulties for your work on the Open Government Initiative, or was that not really a concern?

GOODFRIEND: So, as I mentioned, in 2015 I had just joined eDiplomacy as a Senior Advisor. I came in from the field, having spent about twenty years working with these technologies—not as an IT specialist, but as someone who relied on them to engage in diplomacy. I'd been in the position of making demands on what the technology needed to do, and I expected that by this point, eDiplomacy and IRM would have made significant progress in collaborating with other parts of the State Department—really understanding and facilitating the needs of various bureaus.

But that wasn't the case. As I think I mentioned in a previous session, one of my reasons for coming back to Washington was to get a better sense of the internal dynamics—how the bureaus were interacting, how information was flowing, how decisions were being made. Washington is often described as "the belly of the beast" because, even more than in the field, it's hard to know who's doing what. Offices might be working on the same issues without knowing it—even if they're just two corridors apart or one floor up.

So what I found was that a lot of those same dynamics still existed. There wasn't the collegial, cross-functional interaction I had hoped for. Instead, it was still a resource-driven model—each office focused on its own hierarchy, its own budget, its own mission. The mentality was: "We'll handle our focus, you handle yours."

Let me give an example. I think I mentioned Tech Camps earlier—an initiative launched by eDiplomacy. These were workshops focused on helping civil society organizations use technology—social media and other tools—to engage with their communities and with the State Department. These were out in the field, hands-on, and they proved successful.

But as the program matured, there was growing recognition that this wasn't really IRM's role. From a mission standpoint, it aligned more with Public Affairs—working with civil society, engaging the public. So Public Affairs eventually took over Tech Camps, which I think was a positive development. It showed that IRM could build something valuable that other offices would adopt.

But it also highlighted a problem. If IRM builds a useful program, and no one else adopts it, then what happens? One example is the Virtual Student Foreign Service—now known as the Virtual Student Federal Service. It's a very successful internship program, but it never found a home outside IRM. So the question becomes: why is IRM, the tech bureau, running an internship program? The answer has always been, "Well, because it uses technology." But that again blurs the line between mission and method. It's a human resources program that happens to use tech—not a tech program in and of itself.

That brings us back to the Open Government Plan and the Open Government Initiative. Many of the ways we were opening up federal agencies—making them more transparent and participatory—were facilitated by technology. So, because tech was involved, the responsibility for drafting and managing these plans was given to IRM.

The same thing happened with the Digital Government Strategy, which we can talk about more later. But in short, the White House tasked all federal agencies with developing a digital government strategy—basically, a roadmap for how agencies would use technology to engage the public, whether that was through social media, online applications, or digital service delivery. For the State Department, this included everything from websites—managed by Public Affairs—to consular services like passports, birth reports, and visas—handled by Consular Affairs.

Yet the task of reporting on all of this—of writing the strategy paper—was given to IRM, even though most of the actual implementation was done by other bureaus. So again, I found myself asking: just because something involves technology, does that mean IRM owns the initiative?

When I eventually became Director of eDiplomacy, I tried to make this point clear. The presence of technology doesn't mean IRM owns the business function. The goal should be to work collaboratively—to recognize which part belongs to IRM (the tech infrastructure, the IT strategy) and which part belongs to the program or policy offices doing the actual engagement.

There's a distinction between owning the technology and owning the business. If we're talking about how the State Department communicates with the public, or how we make our processes transparent—that's a business need. The offices responsible for the activities need to own them. They are the business owners. IRM should be working with them and providing the facilitating technology to enable them to achieve their objectives, while not making it IRM's responsibility to define how they achieve their objectives.

To bring it back to the Open Government Plan: as I was preparing the 2016 version, I reviewed the 2012 and 2014 plans, which were the first things I did. I saw a lot of things included that were framed purely from a tech perspective. Other things were included that we couldn't easily track or report progress on. And many valuable open government activities weren't mentioned at all—probably because the offices doing that work didn't realize it counted as part of the Open Government framework.

Q: We're getting a little bit of a frozen screen now and then. Okay.

GOODFRIEND: Okay. Yeah, I noticed that too. Just as a note: today I'm not at home—I'm in a hotel room in Ayia Napa, Cyprus. I was over on the Turkish-speaking side these past couple of days. Right now I'm using my phone to connect.

Now, coming back to the Open Government Plan: as I was working on it, I started noticing that some things were missing—things we were actually doing. It seemed that previous versions of the plan had focused only on new and innovative initiatives. The thinking might have been: "The Open Government Plan is a new program, so everything in it should be new." That approach left out important activities that had been ongoing, just because they weren't launched during the timeframe of the Open Government Initiative.

So I took a big step back and asked: What do we actually mean by "open government"? What are we trying to facilitate? Are we truly changing the way we do business?

To me, it would be a mistake to frame this purely as a technological initiative. Because if that's the case—if we treat it as something temporary, tech-driven, and bound to a particular administration—then the whole thing risks disappearing as soon as the initiative winds down. And in 2015, we were already approaching the end of the Obama administration. That raised the question: would this all just vanish when the political leadership changed?

That's why one of the perspectives I brought to the 2016 plan was that we need to make it clear that many of these programs are not new—they are part of how we've long done business. And more importantly, we must continue doing business this way. If we stop seeing transparency and public engagement as essential components of how we carry out the work of the Department of State, then we're not doing our jobs properly.

It's not just about saying, "Here's a cool new way we're using tech. We're calling it Open Government 3.5. It's going to revolutionize everything and last forever." Because if it's framed that way, the moment the initiative ends—or the administration changes—it's likely to be abandoned.

Instead, we need to show that this is an evolution of existing practice. These are not fads; they're institutionalized practices. People have been engaging in open government without necessarily calling it that. What we're doing now is recognizing the many programs already in place across the Department that further transparency, public engagement, and openness—not as exceptions, but as models for doing business.

And when you really look at the way we do business in the Department of State, you can trace the lineage back a long way. I think I mentioned before: the State Department's library could be considered the first Open Government initiative in the federal government. It was the first federal library, and in that sense, it was an early act of transparency and information sharing—long before we used terms like "open government."

(2016 Open Government Plan Within the Department of State - September 15, 2016 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riGGSw7ydDM&t=17s)

(The Importance of Open Government/2016 OGP within the Department of State - October 4, 2016 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHXY6rZZA_Y&t=166s)

Q: Wow, yeah, even before the Library of Congress.

GOODFRIEND: That's right. The purpose of the State Department's library, going back to the 18th century, was to bring in materials from outside the Department to help shape foreign policy. At the time, using the available technology—books, correspondence, and printed works—this was a form of public engagement.

You couldn't always bring speakers in on horseback to consult with diplomats. But you could bring in the thinking of scholars, public intellectuals, and commentators—through their writings. That material would then be accessible to U.S. diplomats, informing a more thoughtful and informed policy approach. It was, in its way, a very early effort to connect the Department with the broader public discourse.

This tradition of bringing in outside perspectives and making information accessible has long been part of how we operate, even if we haven't always called it "open government."

Another example—and I don't think I came up with this one myself; I believe it was cited as part of the Statecraft Initiative I mentioned earlier—is Secretary of State William Seward. He helped bring transparency to diplomacy by releasing to the public some of the diplomatic correspondence between the United States and Britain.

These weren't cables in the modern sense—not yet—but as it happens, the first undersea cable also came during Seward's tenure. That may be part of why he was highlighted in the initiative. He understood the importance of diplomatic communication—and the value of making some of that public.

Later, Woodrow Wilson famously argued for a diplomacy of transparency as well. After World War I, he pledged to avoid the secret treaties and backroom deals that had characterized European diplomacy. He called for openness in negotiations—an American hallmark, he claimed. Of course, not all of those ideals were fully realized, but the aspiration was there: that diplomacy should be open, not opaque.

This had been a long-standing impulse within the Department—to resist the model of 19th-century great power politics, with its secret protocols, and instead embrace transparency.

So, what I ended up doing as part of preparing the Open Government Plan was to look across the entire Department—at all the programs, all the information the Department makes available online. There's a lot of it.

We publish federal contract data. We disclose systems that collect personal data—listing the names and purposes of each system online, so that citizens know what's being collected and why. We put treaties online. We provide visa statistics: how many are issued, how many denied. There's economic data, public–private partnership information, and much more.

The point is, a great deal of information is already out there. But many of the offices producing and publishing it weren't thinking in terms of "open government." They were either fulfilling legal requirements or doing what they felt would best help them engage with partners and build trust.

I think I mentioned before—back when I was in IO [International Organizations Bureau] in 1998 or 1999—we tried a pilot project where we took a desk officer (in this case, me) and made that person available in an online public discussion about the Millennium Assembly.

(Proceedings of the Virtual Forum on the Role of the UN. in the Twenty-First Century - June 28 - July 31, 1999 - https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/990901_ioforum_proced.html)

The idea was to engage civil society, NGOs, and academics in a transparent dialogue about how the U.S. should approach that assembly. That came in response to hearing that our representatives at international conferences were sometimes being ambushed—caught off guard by how strongly civil society groups felt about certain issues.

It wasn't that the desk officers disagreed with those concerns—they just hadn't been engaging with these groups and didn't fully appreciate the emotion or urgency behind them. Meanwhile, civil society actors were already using digital tools to coordinate and strategize, and we weren't.

In fact, in the 1990s, we weren't even communicating effectively internally, let alone with the public. We weren't using electronic communication in a transparent, collaborative way. So that experiment was an early attempt to fix that—not to tick a box on some policy checklist, but to do our jobs better.

And that's the broader point. The people in Public Affairs, for example, don't use social media because the Open Government Directive told them to. They use it because it works. It helps them do their jobs more effectively—engaging with the public in meaningful, dynamic ways.

So when I was working on the 2016 Open Government Plan, my approach was to look at what we were already doing—then contact those offices to let them know: "What you're doing meets the criteria for open government. We'd like to include it in the plan."

Most of them had never heard of the Open Government Plan. They weren't doing their work for that purpose. But by recognizing and highlighting what they were already doing, we were able to present a fuller, more honest picture—one that showed open government not as an add-on or political buzzword, but as a mode of operation deeply embedded in how we carry out diplomacy.

So yes—it started with identifying what we've been doing historically, what we were doing now, and helping offices realize that much of their work already fits into a broader initiative—an effort to make the State Department's operations more transparent, more available to the public, more open to engagement.

Some programs obviously fell into that category—things that were clearly about facilitating exchange between the Department and the public. The Fulbright Program, for example, and other international exchange programs. These have been around for a long time.

The Virtual Student Foreign Service, which I mentioned earlier, had already been included in the Open Government Plan because it was seen as a "tech" initiative. But what about all the other exchange programs we were running? Those weren't being flagged as part of the Open Government effort, even though they clearly fit the model.

So I reached out to the different offices—the ones running these kinds of programs—and engaged with them about the Open Government Plan. The idea was to make sure we were accurately capturing the nature of their work and the ways their programs advanced openness and engagement. We offered to draft language describing their work, but also encouraged them to revise or write it themselves if they preferred.

It became part of a broader effort to, as people were saying at the time, "eat our own dog food"—to actually use the tools we were advocating.

One of the things I had noticed was that eDiplomacy talked a lot about digital tools—promoted their use across the Department—but didn't always use them internally. Not for work purposes, anyway. Tools like Diplopedia and Corridor were being pushed to others, but were they truly integrated into the way we worked? Not really.

So, for the Open Government Plan, I decided to put this into practice.

I created a page on Diplopedia for the Plan. I also used Corridor to reach out to the various offices and post updates. But the key step was putting the actual draft of the plan on Diplopedia. That meant starting with a very rough first draft—version one—and posting it publicly (internally, that is).

Unlike something like Google Docs or even traditional drafting processes, Diplopedia works more like Wikipedia. Once it's out there, it's visible by anyone and editable, and anyone can see who made which changes. It's transparent. You can comment, suggest updates, and everything is tracked. And because of that, I thought: "Let's just put it out there—rough as it is."

And that’s important. It was a deliberate choice not to wait until it was polished. The roughness itself was part of the point. It was an internal transparency move. It signaled: “This is how thinking starts. It starts messy.” We didn’t want to bring people into the process only after the draft was refined, when most of the work had been done, and when it would be harder—both practically and psychologically—to make substantial or substantive changes.

This also ties into a broader point: the distinction between technology and culture. Too often, there’s a belief that introducing a new technology will change how we work. But we’ve seen again and again that that’s not true. Technology doesn’t drive change on its own. It has to be accompanied by a shift in how people think about their work.

Take contact management systems, for instance. If people don’t believe that contact information should be shared—within their section, with other sections at post, or across embassies—then it doesn’t matter how advanced the technology is. They won’t use it that way. Culture trumps the tool.

The same goes for document drafting. In the past, we might have said, “No one sees this until it’s more refined.” But in this case, I was in a position—because of my rank and perhaps my perspective—where I could say, “Let’s post it now. It’s rough. It’s incomplete. It’s wrong in places. But it’s a starting point.”

That’s part of internal openness. And if we want to work collaboratively, we need to be comfortable inviting others into the process before we’ve invested too heavily in a draft—when there’s still room to think differently.

Q: The only thing about that kind of process is that you can get an enormous number of responses, from how to conceptualize it, all the way down to very small details regarding the needs of a single embassy.

GOODFRIEND: If I understand you correctly, yes, you can get a lot of responses. But I think that’s part of the challenge of working in the 21st century, and especially in a collaborative or democratic environment. The solution isn’t to say, “Forget it, this is too much. I don’t want all that feedback,” but rather “how do I prioritize and assess the feedback.” And here too, technology can help, providing tools for prioritizing, for comparing, for analyzing, for assessing feedback.

The fear some people have with rough drafts is that if they put the draft out there too early, people will throw arrows at it. They’ll complain. They’ll say, “Take it down.” And so the instinct becomes: I’ll keep it private, I’ll polish it in secret, and only share it once it’s finished. But by then, as I’ve said before, I’ve already invested so much in it that I’m less open to feedback.

At that point, other stakeholders may feel like the process wasn’t really collaborative. They might say: “Well, you’ve already done all the thinking. What am I supposed to contribute now? You should’ve come to me earlier.”

So I keep coming back to this question of how we change the culture—how we become more comfortable working openly and transparently. And my view is: to become comfortable with it, we have to do it.

We can talk about openness all we like. We can say, “That’s a great idea—we’ll do it when we’re ready,” or worse, we can try to mandate it for others while exempting ourselves. But if people don’t see a benefit in working that way, they won’t adopt the technology—or the approach.

So putting the Open Government Plan on Diplopedia was a small experiment in working more openly. And remember, this was 2015. You and I are talking in 2023—eight years later. In 2015, working in a collaborative online environment was not yet the norm. Most State Department work was still done over email, if not on paper.

And email, while widespread, is not truly collaborative. It’s still point-to-point. You can forward it, you can create groups, but you can also easily cut people out. And newcomers to a chain don’t see the full history. It’s clunky and not always transparent.

At the time, some newer tools were emerging. Chat-based platforms—like Slack, to use a proprietary name—were just beginning to be used as ways to encourage more informal, transparent communication. And since then, of course, we’ve seen a shift. During the pandemic, for example, our ability to telework and stay productive depended heavily on platforms that supported team collaboration—where multiple people could work on a shared draft, access archives, and track changes in real time.

So what I was trying to do in 2015 was essentially a first attempt at that model. I posted a rough draft of the Open Government Plan on Diplopedia. It was open to the whole Department. Anyone could see it. Anyone could edit it.

And yes, that raises the concern you mentioned: What if too many people weigh in? What if it’s overwhelming?

But honestly, what I’ve found—going back to the online Millennium Assembly discussion I mentioned earlier—is that it’s rarely overwhelming. In fact, it’s often the opposite: you’re underwhelmed. You put something out there and… not much happens.

Unless you already have a large, highly engaged audience, you don’t get a flood of feedback. Most bloggers know this. You post something, and unless you actively reach out to people, very few will engage.

That’s exactly what happened with that first online discussion in the late 1990s. We thought: “We’ll be buried in responses.” But we had to invite people—personally—to participate. “Can you take a look at this? Can you write something? Can you comment?”

And the same thing happened with Diplopedia. I didn't just post the draft and wait. I followed up with emails to individual offices saying, "Hey, it's here. Can you take a look? Can you give us your feedback?"

But often the response was: "I'm not familiar with the platform," or "I'm not sure how to do that." Or, just as often, there wasn't enough urgency. You can't simply put something out and ask vaguely for feedback. You usually need to say: "We're looking for your input by this specific date so we can move forward."

Q: Let me just ask a quick question about that. Is the reluctance mainly because they're overwhelmed with work, or because they don't understand how to use collaborative technology to open and edit the document—or is it a bit of both?

GOODFRIEND: I think it's a combination of both. It's a different way of working. And while things have evolved—again, this was back in 2015—I do think more people today are used to the idea that they can open a shared document and edit it collaboratively, rather than having fifteen or twenty different versions floating around.

But part of it is that people were still becoming familiar with the tools themselves. And part of it is cultural. You might remember some of the conversations we used to have about trying to get principals or senior managers to move away from paper.

Q: Yeah, that was difficult—especially for a certain generation that's mostly retired now. The only other question I have about this work style, the way you're doing it, is this: you'll inevitably get a variety of responses—I suggest this, I think you should delete that. But at some point, there has to be a final decision-maker.

Someone has to say, Yes, I'll accept that edit, or No, I won't. Are you the last word?

The reason I ask is that I worked on SharePoint in embassies back when it was in its early stages. It was almost "line in, line out," with five, six, seven, even eight people contributing simultaneously. And as the drafter, it could be difficult to decide what stayed in and what came out—especially if a supervisor suggested something you didn't think was very good, but you felt obliged to include it anyway.

So in your case, as the drafter, are your decisions final?

GOODFRIEND: In this case, the ultimate decision-maker for what went into the final Open Government Plan was Under Secretary Pat Kennedy. I'll give you an example in a moment of the only thing he actually removed.

But before that stage, the real challenge was just getting people to engage in the process at all.

As I've said, we made it clear that we weren't looking for tech people to be the ones responding. This wasn't about systems engineering or backend infrastructure. We were trying to reach the business owners—the policy people, the program managers, the folks who understood their mission and were carrying it out.

In the past, when something came from IRM, it was often treated as a technical issue. The tasking would be shunted over to the office's IT person. But this time, even though IRM was managing the process, it was about programs. That raised questions for some: "Why is IRM doing this?" But we were trying to shift perceptions—to show that the Open Government Plan was a policy document with a tech-enabled aspect, not a tech document with policy input.

So we reached out to program leaders—office directors, deputy assistant secretaries—depending on the level of the program. If something originated from eDiplomacy, we wanted someone in eDiplomacy to engage with it, to see that their work was part of the broader digital diplomacy landscape and an open government agenda.

Part of what we were doing was helping embed these programs more deeply within the Department's institutional memory—and helping people see that these weren't just short-term initiatives. These programs had existed long before we started calling them "digital" or "open." They had long been part of how the Department operated. And part of our job was to help partners across the Department rethink their relationship to both technology and IRM.

We asked them to take ownership—to make sure their programs were described appropriately in the plan. That meant explaining their historical evolution, their current function, and where they were headed next. "What's in the pipeline? Where are you going with this?" That was part of the framework we used.

Some offices came to us with ideas already underway. I remember one was experimenting with using—well, I don't think it was cryptocurrency per se, but they were working with the underlying blockchain principles. That was the kind of forward-looking input we were also trying to gather.

Q: Non-fungible tokens?

GOODFRIEND: No, no—not NFTs. It was blockchain, but not in the commercial or speculative sense. The application was about using blockchain technology to support more accurate and secure recordkeeping in some of the countries we were assisting, particularly in efforts to combat corruption.

For example, one office was exploring how blockchain could be used in land registry systems, ensuring that land deeds couldn't be altered or falsified, and that records remained tamper-proof. That absolutely fits the Open Government framework. So we said, "If this is what you're doing, let's make sure it's reflected in the plan."

We reached out to some offices directly. We told them, "You're already doing this—it's aligned with open government principles, let's make sure it's included." Others came to us and said, "We've got something new, it hasn't been publicized yet, but it belongs in the plan." That kind of initiative helped build awareness—not only of the Open Government Initiative itself but of how much valuable work was already being done across the Department.

As we put together the content for the plan, there was a fair amount of refinement and wordsmithing, but very little real pushback. The only item that was ultimately removed from the draft was a paragraph I'd included about bringing in external expertise at senior levels—specifically, a reference to the role of non-career ambassadors and political appointees. The point I was making was that these individuals often bring perspectives from outside the traditional career service—whether from business, academia, or other walks of life—and that their involvement reflects a form of public engagement in diplomacy. It seemed to me that this aligned with Open Government principles. But it didn't make it into the final version.

Everything else did. The plan was signed off on by the Undersecretary for Management and published. One of the things we emphasized in the final draft was that these were not just temporary programs created to satisfy a federal mandate. These were substantive efforts, and many had long been integral to how we conduct diplomacy. We weren't just saying, "Here are a few tech-driven innovations." We were saying, "This is how we operate. This is how we've always tried to operate, and how we'll continue to operate going forward."

Throughout the process, I was engaging civil society organizations. That was an essential part of the domestic side of the Open Government Initiative. While there was an overarching federal-level plan, each agency—including the State Department—was responsible for its own. I met with civil society groups to understand what they expected from the Department. Were we transparent enough? Were we engaging constructively? What did they want to see improved?

I also shared a pre-publication draft of the plan with the public, in keeping with the spirit of the Open Government Initiative, for review and comment. The response was generally very positive. People appreciated that we were doing this openly and that we had taken the step to invite feedback before publication. Some of the feedback, interestingly, had to do with the platform we were using to invite public comment. A few organizations asked whether comments had to be public or whether they could provide them privately. There was a small irony there—transparency advocates occasionally wanting discretion in how they offer feedback—but it was an honest and understandable question.

In the interagency presentation of all the departmental plans, I was especially pleased by the reaction of the Sunlight Foundation. They seemed to recognize that the State Department had taken this effort seriously and wasn't just going through the motions. From my perspective, the entire exercise gave us valuable insight. It helped me see where the Department stood in terms of internal collaboration. It revealed how much different offices knew—or didn't know—about each other's work, and sometimes even about their own programs in the context of openness and public engagement.

We published the plan in September 2016. And then came the election. A new administration took office, and naturally, questions began to circulate. Would this initiative continue? Would there be another round? Would the 2016 plan amount to anything lasting?

(2016 State Department Open Government Plan - September 15, 2016 - https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Open-Government-Plan.pdf)

That's why I had made a deliberate choice from the start not to frame the initiatives in the plan as separate, novel experiments. They weren't stand-alone projects. They were extensions of the way the Department had long conducted its business. I wanted the offices responsible for those programs to see themselves reflected in the plan—and to feel affirmed. In a sense, it was a way of saying, "You're already doing good work, and it deserves to be recognized in this broader framework."

Because these efforts were already embedded in the Department's work, they didn't depend on the Open Government Initiative to survive. Public-private partnerships would continue. Data publication, mandated by law, would continue. Our efforts to make information accessible to civil society and to other agencies would continue. These weren't optional—they were effective. The more we routinely engaged with the public using authoritative, reliable data, the more trust and credibility we built.

That's something I've seen repeatedly throughout my career. Whether I was working with the public in the UK or in Syria, one key lesson kept coming up: it's not enough to communicate only when there's a crisis or when we need something. We have to engage consistently. When people see that we are willing to share information, and willing to engage openly and respectfully—not just reactively—it builds lasting relationships and makes diplomacy more effective.

Q: Did it continue after 2016?

GOODFRIEND: The plans didn't—but the programs did. The 2016 Open Government Plan was the last one produced. There was no plan in 2018, no plan in 2020, and none in 2022. It may be revived in some form in the future—I don't know.

But in a way, that's not a bad thing. The key point is that the continuation of the programs didn't depend on the continuation of the plans. These weren't initiatives that existed only because there was a requirement to document them every two years. They carried on because they were useful. People recognized their value, and that enabled them to endure.

Frankly, that may be the better outcome. Preparing the Open Government Plan was my primary responsibility in 2015 and 2016, alongside the work I was doing on the Statecraft Initiative I mentioned earlier.

Q: Right, right, right.

GOODFRIEND: Statecraft was managed by the Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources, and it involved a lot of work focused on changing the way the State Department operates—again, through the use of technology. In many ways, it was a return to earlier efforts, a revisiting of things we had tried to implement in the past.

Q: Last question on this. You developed the plan and carried it out—were there any knock-on effects or additional benefits that came from the Open Government Project? Either in terms of information management or in how people approached their work?

GOODFRIEND: There were. I think the most immediate was relationship-building, but let me shift the focus a bit and think more broadly.

So—it's 2016. Let me pause for a moment to recall, because a number of things were happening at once. There was growing awareness across the Department that what various offices were doing already fit under the umbrella of Open Government. That recognition helped build relationships—internally, among offices, and externally, with partners.

Then in 2017, I became Director of the Office of eDiplomacy. That brought a shift in responsibilities, and I began thinking about how to build on the Open Government Plan, not just to preserve its content, but to evolve its approach.

One of the principles I carried into that role was the distinction I've mentioned before: separating ownership of technology from ownership of mission. As Director, I encouraged my office to initiate more conversations around the Department—to talk with other offices about where their programs were going, how their work could be supported, and what we could do to act as a partner, not a gatekeeper.

At the same time, the State Department was beginning to see more clearly the value of data. There was increasing attention to how data was being used internally—not just what we published externally.

When I was preparing the Open Government Plan, one of the things I realized was how difficult it was to access certain types of data inside the Department. I remember comparing it to the Foreign Affairs Manual, or FAM. The version available to the public online was, in some ways, easier to search and navigate than the internal version. The public platform had better search tools. The same problem existed more broadly on OpenNet, the Department's internal unclassified network—it was often harder to find key information there than it was on our public-facing sites.

So as I worked on the plan, one of my first steps was to map out all the public-facing information the Department already provided—every website, every data stream—and then contact the relevant offices. I'd say, "This is great. We want to be sure this is included in the Open Government Plan." But at the same time, I was struck by how often that information wasn't available internally in the same clear, accessible way.

That discrepancy raised real problems. We sometimes had conflicting data from different offices on the same issue. Yet when something was published publicly—as part of an Open Government release—it was expected to be authoritative. We gave it attention, we vetted it carefully. But we weren't always doing the same for our internal data.

So while I wouldn't say this was a direct knock-on effect of publishing the plan, it definitely raised awareness. We began asking: Who owns this data? Who manages the program? If we're going to be transparent externally, we need to get our internal data house in order, too.

That growing awareness has since led to real changes. One of them is better internal data management—more attention to data ownership, consistency, and usability. There's also been progress in data visualization and in understanding that internal access to authoritative data is critical to effective policy work.

I wouldn't go so far as to take credit for the creation of another office—but today, the Department has a dedicated office focused on data analytics.

Q: Oh, interesting.

GOODFRIEND: Are you aware of the office?

Q: No, I am not aware of the office. I have only the most basic understanding of data analytics, Google Analytics, basically.

GOODFRIEND: Let me clarify a bit more, then. The need really originated with "M"—the Under Secretary for Management. M needed timely, reliable information—especially during crises—about things like who was at post, who had been evacuated, who remained, and so on.

We've had many posts around the world in crisis situations, and every time leadership called for this kind of data, it was a struggle. The responsible offices had to scramble to figure out who actually owned the relevant data, where it was stored, and how it could be reconciled when there were inconsistencies. There were often different versions of the same data floating around, and it wasn't always clear which was authoritative.

So there was a push to create a unified internal data source—something that would be easily accessible to those who needed it. And, just as importantly, a recognition that many people across the Department needed access to the same information.

Now, just having raw data available is one thing. But having the tools to analyze it and tell a story with it—to visualize it, to draw conclusions from it—that's a whole other level of service. That's where real value comes in.

So an office was created under M to take on this task—identifying and consolidating internal data sources and making them usable. And along with that, a Chief Data Officer position was established at the State Department.

Q: That's separate from the Chief Information Officer.

GOODFRIEND: Yes, it's separate. It's also separate from the Chief Knowledge Officer.

If you think back to how I started this conversation—talking about how everything related to technology tended to get pulled into IRM—this marks a significant shift. Over the past eight years, there's been a growing recognition that we need to separate the technology itself from the business it's meant to support. Just because something involves data or digital tools doesn't mean it should automatically fall under IRM.

Data is not the same thing as the technology it's stored on. For a long time, data management was seen as the purview of IRM. But, with the establishment of a Chief Data Officer, it was moved to a different office, M/SS, the Office of Management Strategy and Solutions. Within that larger office, data analytics is a defined subunit, and the Chief Data Officer is there.

Their focus isn't on a specific technology or IT system—it's on the data itself. They're looking at the data the State Department holds, thinking about how it can be made more accessible internally, and identifying what tools or services are needed to work with it effectively.

You mentioned Google Analytics earlier—that's one example of an analytical service. But there are many others out there, tools that let you visualize data, analyze patterns, tell a story, build an argument, or better understand what's happening in the world. That ability to transform information into insight is really what we're after.

This separation—between the technology infrastructure and the information it conveys—is one of the key institutional shifts of the past decade. And as I took on the role of Director of eDiplomacy, I made it a priority to ensure that our office remained part of those broader conversations that were now taking place around the Department.

At the same time, knowledge management was becoming more prominent—particularly within FSI, the Foreign Service Institute. They had a group working on knowledge management, asking: What are the best ways to develop and manage the institutional knowledge we already have? eDiplomacy and the Chief Knowledge Officer were still located within IRM, so we had to make sure we stayed relevant and engaged with those evolving initiatives elsewhere in the Department.

As we moved forward, we continued looking at emerging technologies like blockchain—not just for internal processes, but for their potential to facilitate diplomatic practice itself.

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Q: Today is March 21, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. André, this is session twenty-six. And you want me to go back to a question we had in the last session?

GOODFRIEND: Right. In the last session, we were talking about the Open Government Plan that I had helped put together. I'd been trying to show that both my colleagues and the State Department as a whole had embraced open government as a core principle from the beginning—not just as a new initiative, but as part of our ongoing approach to diplomacy.

The idea was that technology enables us to do much more in terms of transparency, engaging the public, and building a more responsive government. You asked what impact this effort actually had—whether I saw any long-term effects. And at the time, I was thinking about some of the offices that now exist, and the ways we've come to work with data more effectively. Those were the more immediate, tangible outcomes I could identify, especially between 2016—when the Open Government Plan was published—and the couple of years that followed.

But thinking more broadly, I don't like to claim too direct a link. Yes, there are some practices and structures today that we emphasized in that plan, and they weren't just about ticking boxes to show compliance with open government goals. We were showing that these were our normal ways of working, and that this was an evolution—not a project with an expiration date. The point was that even when the Open Government Initiative faded, the work wouldn't stop, because it wasn't dependent on the initiative. These efforts started before it and continued after, largely because they reflected how we already worked—or aspired to work.

That led me to a broader reflection. Across my career, how had my efforts to support the work of the State Department affected the way we carry out our foreign policy mission? One thing I've always tried to convey—going back to many of our earlier sessions—is that we, as non-technologists, shouldn't view technology as something alien. Instead, we should see it as a way to augment our human capacity to collaborate, communicate, and share information.

We should be using technology to handle the tasks it's best suited for—routine, mechanical, repetitive ones—so that we can focus on the human elements: engagement, judgment, collaboration. I remember, early in my career, being asked to manually transfer data from one computer system to another. And I thought: That's what computers should be doing. Our role is to interpret the information—not manually reenter it. I asked: "Can we get our systems to talk to each other?"

From there, it was about using digital tools—email newsletters, group emails, collaborative mailing lists—not just to inform but to work more horizontally across the organization. In one case, we used an email collective in the mid-1990s to coordinate responses to organized crime in Russia. That list connected officers from former Soviet republics, Central Europe, the Middle East, Canada, and multiple U.S. agencies. That was 1994–1995.

At the same time, we began putting visa information online—material that had previously been seen as internal or specialized—so that the public could access it. That was a mental shift too. Realizing that transparency didn't weaken us; it strengthened our engagement. We started seeing ourselves less as gatekeepers and more as participants in a public dialogue.

We also built collaborative platforms internally—secure networks like the SIPRNet—so our own people could work together more easily. We improved tools like the Consular Consolidated Database to support consular officers during interviews—moving from handwritten notes to real-time data entry on computers. All of this was about building habits and capabilities over time, not implementing a one-off fix.

So by 2016, I wasn't just counting accomplishments—I was pushing back against the narrative that "We don't have the tech to do our jobs." Often, we did have the tech. What we needed was a better understanding of what we were trying to do and how to align our tools with our mission.

At that point in my career, I had enough credibility in both the tech and policy communities to reach out to colleagues across the Department. I told them: "We want to showcase the work you're doing in our Open Government Plan." They might not have thought of their work as "open government," but they were already doing it—because it worked. Sharing information helps you do your job better. Sharing with colleagues builds a shared vision. It makes you a more effective leader—not through hierarchy, but through collaboration.

And now, I can look around and see others carrying this forward. My voice is just one of many now. Colleagues across different offices have picked up the torch and are moving ahead—whether through the Center for Analytics, partnerships with the private sector, outreach to academia, or even through our envoy to Silicon Valley.

That said, a disconnect still remains. There's this idea that technology is for a younger generation, or that you need a different mindset to really engage with it. I've always tried to push back on that too. Age isn't the issue. In fact, people who've been working longer may better understand the mission—and are motivated to apply technology in ways that support that mission. Meanwhile, newer colleagues may be more familiar with emerging tools, but they might not yet know how to use them strategically.

It takes partnership: those who understand the mission working together with those who understand the technology. That's where magic can happen.

So yes, I now see thousands of sparks of light throughout the Department. A couple of years after the Open Government Plan, some of my colleagues in eDiplomacy were asking: "What's our future? What does this office look like in five or ten years?" Because everything was changing.

IRM was also redefining its role. Agencies were shifting away from running their own infrastructure toward subscribing to external services: cloud providers, analytics tools, and so on. The State Department, like others in the federal government, no longer wanted to manage huge custom-built systems internally. Instead, offices wanted lightweight, cost-effective tools they could subscribe to.

With that, a lot of people began to realize that you didn't need massive computing power in-house. You just needed access—to tools, to data, to analysis. You could subscribe to services, plug in your own proprietary data, and get insights about what was happening in the world.

I didn't mean to cut you off—but go ahead.

Q: Yeah, just one question, as you're describing this, how to manage the architecture and the interaction among these new powerful systems that can both hold data, exchange data, and give people access to data as they need it. To what extent does cybersecurity or security of the systems limit or, not so much limit but help require certain design changes, in order for them to work?

GOODFRIEND: That fits with what I was saying earlier about the importance of understanding both the mission and the technology. Cybersecurity isn't something that can be handled easily by one agency on its own.

Q: I see.

GOODFRIEND: In fact, we've run into challenges related to agency-specific cybersecurity—things like software patches that haven't been applied, or not allocating enough budget to implement or choose among competing tools. There's always a balance to strike: managing risk without locking down the system so much that people doing foreign policy work feel their hands are tied.

If our people can't access their counterparts in other governments, or work across embassies, or even communicate with the media, then we can't function effectively as a team. And when that happens, people often start bending the rules just to get their work done—and at that point, your cybersecurity framework collapses anyway.

As we shift more toward cloud-based environments—storing data not on our own hardware but through providers like Amazon, Google, or IBM—we're using services that already meet federal standards for handling sensitive data. Many of these services are even certified to handle classified data. So the question becomes: Do we trust those certifications? Do we rely on the fact that these services are certified to meet federal standards?

Or do we add our own extra layers of requirements—because we feel that if we're not doing it ourselves, we can't be sure it's done right? That's an internal debate. It's like deciding whether to keep your money in a bank or under your mattress. With a bank, you can't see your money. You have to trust that it's there and that it's safe. But keeping it under your mattress—well, you have to ask yourself, is it really safer because your mattress is hiding it? Maybe you joke that you'll build a vault in your house. But ultimately, banks are better at security. It's their job. They have the resources, the expertise, and the infrastructure.

So yes, cybersecurity remains a major issue. But much of the discussion now is really about partnerships. How do we work with external providers and make sure that their systems meet standards we can trust?

Going back to what I said earlier, there's also been a shift inside the State Department. More and more offices now understand how to apply available tools to their mission. They don't need an office like eDiplomacy to tell them what to do. They feel empowered—they know how to use analytics tools, how to work in collaborative groups, how to share information in virtual spaces, and how to build partnerships in platforms accessible both to them and their external partners.

They feel comfortable drawing on social media data to understand what's happening globally. They can make the case for subscribing to services and know how to do so. So it's no longer just about one centralized office doing this—there are now multiple centers of excellence throughout the Department helping diplomats use 21st-century digital tools effectively.

That said, there's still a need for coordination. A roundtable, if you will—so offices can share what they're doing, learn from each other, and build on that. That's one thing the Open Government Plan helped with back in 2016. It showed that people across the Department were already doing this work, often without realizing they were participating in a broader open government effort.

The datasets were being made accessible, and people started using them—sometimes without even knowing how that access had come about.

But here's where I sometimes feel we could have done better. I still hear people say, "The State Department doesn't have the technology it needs to do its job." I see think tanks write that. And when I hear that, I think: You're underestimating the capabilities of the people working in the Department, people who are using these technologies, and using them well.

What they're often up against isn't a lack of technology—it's a rigid hierarchy, a difficult clearance process, or a cultural bias against openness. Like we discussed a few weeks ago with contact lists, it's not that we don't have the tools to share contact information. There's a longstanding habit of keeping that information close, not collaborating across offices, and not recognizing that we use contacts in similar ways and could benefit from shared tools.

So yes, maybe I'm giving a longer answer than necessary. But when we ask what impact the Open Government Plan had, I think it's important to say this: the plan itself wasn't the starting point. It was part of an ongoing evolution. It built on what came before and served as a stepping stone for what came after.

At the same time we were putting out the Open Government Plan, there was another initiative—one I think I've mentioned before—called Statecraft. It aimed to bring on new tools and technologies to help the State Department work more effectively. But in some ways, Statecraft followed the more traditional model: a big, top-down initiative designed to show impact quickly. And once it's over, the question is: what's left?

That's something you see with many initiatives. They call it "Statecraft" or maybe "transformational diplomacy" or

Q: Each Secretary of State has some description of their vision, of how diplomacy is going to change. Transformational was….

GOODFRIEND: "Expeditionary diplomacy"—yes, there's always a brand. Even branding itself was an initiative for a while. Each Secretary arrives, puts their mark on things, and later people look back and ask, "What was the actual impact?" And often, they scratch their heads.

That's not to dismiss these initiatives. Efforts launched at senior levels do have an impact. But they're usually incremental. They build on what came before. Even when an administration claims, "We've never done anything like this," the reality is, they're building on prior work. And eventually, they hand it off to others, who carry it forward in new directions—benefiting, in part, from having seen diplomacy through that particular lens, even if they later shift to a new one.

I've come to see my own work as about creating the foundations, connections, and platforms that I, myself, would have wanted to use—or did use. And ,I've been lucky. I had the opportunity to benefit from the systems I helped build. I could use them in my own efforts to support our foreign policy mission. And then others could come along and either continue in that direction—or say, "No, Goodfriend, we're doing it differently now. But we see what you did. It was valuable."

That's how it goes in the Foreign Service. Every few years, someone new brings their own perspective to the work. They share a vision for how we might improve. And by the latter part of my career, I started stepping back and seeing others build on what I had helped set in motion. That's something to take pride in.

There's a Talmudic story—I don't think I've mentioned it before—that captures this idea. The story goes that a group of rabbis was debating a point of law. One rabbi was holding firm to his interpretation, while the others disagreed. To prove his point, the lone rabbi called for signs: he said, "If I'm right, let the walls of the study hall shake"—and they shook. But the other rabbis replied, "That doesn't prove anything."

So he said, "Let a great wind blow"—and a great wind blew. Still, they said, "That's not how we decide." Finally, the rabbi said, "If I'm right, let the voice of God declare it"—and a heavenly voice proclaimed, "He is right in everything he says."

And the other rabbis said to God, "You gave the law to us—to interpret it. A voice from heaven doesn't settle this."

And so it ends there. But years later, the story goes, Moses was walking in heaven with Isaiah, and they were discussing the episode. One asked, "What did God do when the rabbis said that?" And the other answered, "He smiled and said, 'My children have defeated me.'"

It's a touching story, and I think it resonates for many in the Foreign Service, especially later in their careers. We're constantly handing things off. Others will carry the work forward, evolve it, or take it in entirely new directions. And that's how it should be.

By 2017 or 2018, I saw what I earlier referred to as "a thousand points of light"—to borrow from George H.W. Bush—across the State Department. Different offices, different colleagues, all engaging with these technologies in ways that went beyond what I myself could do.

Not that I wasn't still proficient—but the creativity, the initiative, the eagerness to lead in collaborative settings—that was impressive. I saw colleagues using these platforms as spaces for partnership, not just tools.

Even in informal, off-site spaces—professional social media groups, for instance—Foreign Service colleagues were engaging in ways we couldn't have imagined a decade earlier. Whether it's a Facebook group for retiring officers, a Slack workspace for consular personnel, or a LinkedIn thread where someone announces their ambassadorship and is met with congratulations—it's all part of this evolution.

That's the era we're in now—2022, 2023. It's a far cry from where we were in 2015, let alone 2005. It's not just the technology that has changed—it's the way people have embraced it. Not only externally, through public platforms, but internally as well.

Across the Department, people are using the tools available to them to do their jobs better. They understand the mission, they understand the tools, and they're comfortable sharing perspectives informally—with colleagues, without layers of clearance—so they can collaborate and get things done.

Even to the point where—back in 2016, or maybe it was 2015—collaborative work was formally added as an element in the Employee Evaluation Report, the EER, under the core precepts. I'm certainly not going to take credit for that. But I do see myself as having been part of the advocacy community that pushed for it—arguing that collaboration is a fundamental part of who we are as State Department personnel. And that we needed systemic ways to recognize and reward it.

We had already been doing some of that. As I mentioned earlier, we were using email to create internal collectives—digital spaces that allowed us to collaborate on specific missions. We built collaborative, transparent virtual workspaces. Those were projects, and they worked.

But the pushback we often heard was: "If we work collaboratively like this, how do we get promoted? Where's the recognition? My supervisors don't have any mechanism to reflect that kind of contribution in my review."

So getting collaboration formally written into the EER helped answer that concern. And when you combine that with the technologies we now have—and the broader Open Government emphasis—you get a reinforcing effect: a system that encourages people to work collaboratively and assures them that they'll be recognized for doing so. Each piece reinforces the other.

Now I see colleagues taking these concepts and tools and running with them. And I can step back and ask myself: Is this the State Department I expected to see when I joined back in 1987 or 1988? Is this the direction I hoped we'd move in by 2000?

Actually—yes. I was working toward that throughout my career.

So, stepping away in 2022, I can see that despite the pendulum swings—on policy, on priorities, on funding—the overall direction has been toward greater collaboration, greater transparency, and a stronger ability to use technology effectively.

And like I've said before, whenever I hear someone criticize the State Department for not having the right technologies, my reaction is that they're misreading the situation. The technologies are there. It might be that they didn't get the exact tools they wanted, or that they don't yet know how to use what's available. But they're overlooking the broader toolkit that the Department actually has.

Q: Interesting. Does this explanation bring us to the end of this tour?

GOODFRIEND: That brings us to around 2017. At that point, I had completed my role as Senior Advisor to eDiplomacy, wrapped up the publication of the Open Government Plan, and concluded work on the Statecraft Initiative. A new administration came in—President Trump took office in January 2017, with Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State—and the Department's focus began to shift.

But many of the initiatives and platforms we'd put in place remained in operation, regardless of the change in administration. In fact, the Trump administration, and Secretary Tillerson specifically, were at least verbally supportive of using technology to carry out our mission more effectively. One of the strengths of eDiplomacy, and of focusing on improving process rather than engaging in policy debates, is that these process improvements—things like promoting collaboration and information sharing—tend to persist. They're hard to disagree with and generally survive changes in leadership.

By mid-2017, I had taken on a new role—as Director of the Office of eDiplomacy. Having finished as Senior Advisor, I went through the normal bidding process and was selected for the position. That raised the question: What is the role of eDiplomacy now?

We've talked about that before—in today's conversation, and in previous ones. I had been there at the very beginning, during the formation of the office, and I've mentioned the working group from around 1999 that led to its creation. The idea back then was to bring people from outside the traditional technology space into the conversation—to set direction, to bridge the gap between system owners and end users. We wanted to ensure that colleagues outside of IRM understood what tools were available and how to use them—and that the systems offices were listening to user needs.

Over time, though, eDiplomacy evolved. It began developing its own technologies. It became, in a way, an offshoot of IRM—stepping in when other parts of IRM couldn't meet a specific need. Offices or bureaus would approach us and say, "We need this kind of tool. Can you build something for us?"

So by 2017, eDiplomacy had moved to a fee-for-service model. If a bureau wanted a custom technology solution, eDiplomacy would work with contractors to define the business requirements, build a tool quickly, and then deliver it. The bureau would pay for it, and eDiplomacy would either release it to them or maintain it for them.

The challenge was that many of those offices didn't have the capacity to maintain the technology themselves. The systems remained under IRM's "care and feeding," even though eDiplomacy was acting as the intermediary. Often, we had to continue maintaining the tools—sometimes by paying IRM to host them, other times by hiring our own contractors. It was a model that worked for a while—but it wasn't sustainable in the long term.

eDiplomacy had ended up managing a growing number of applications with a relatively small staff. That made it difficult to respond to new needs—because we were spending most of our energy maintaining existing tools. And the way our funding was structured—transferring from one budget line to another—wasn't stable over time.

There were also broader structural challenges. Within IRM, there were other offices better suited to maintain these technologies once they were up and running. IRM had established processes for ensuring that new technologies were properly vetted, staged, and integrated into broader systems. Some of the tools eDiplomacy had built hadn't gone through those processes, so transferring them over to IRM later wasn't always straightforward.

So, stepping into the director role, I took a step back and asked: What's our mission now? How do the various branches within eDiplomacy work together?

We had the Diplomatic Innovation Division, whose role was to engage with colleagues across the Department to spark innovation. They solicited ideas, and they often served as the unit that built custom software to meet unique mission needs.

We also had the Knowledge Leadership Division. That division reflected the belief that knowledge is a core asset of the State Department—that we are, at our heart, a knowledge organization. Our strength lies in our ability to build on accumulated knowledge, to share it, and to connect people through it.

Knowledge, of course, lives in people. And the job was to help turn that personal, internal knowledge into something accessible across the Department. Knowledge Leadership managed platforms like Diplopedia—our internal wiki—and Corridor, which I think I've mentioned before. Corridor was a sort of hybrid between LinkedIn and Facebook, a space where colleagues could share their areas of expertise and find others to partner with based on what they knew.

So, within eDiplomacy, we often referred to this portfolio as knowledge leadership—or more traditionally, knowledge management.

And then we had another division, the Customer Liaison Division, which had originally been located elsewhere in IRM but was moved into eDiplomacy. That division acted as a kind of advocate—or even an ombudsman—for colleagues across the Department who felt they weren't getting the support they needed from IRM's help desk.

These were the people calling in with computer issues, systems challenges, or needing to do something new with their IT setup, only to find that their problems weren't being resolved. The Customer Liaison Division (CLD) was about building relationships with different bureaus—getting a sense of whether they felt their needs were being met by IRM, and identifying where those needs were falling through the cracks.

At times, it wasn't entirely clear how all of these divisions within eDiplomacy fit together. What exactly was our office, as a whole, trying to be? I've always liked building connections—listening, looking for symbiosis, figuring out how one division could strengthen another. That's what I tried to bring to the role: helping the office think of itself not just as a collection of parts, but as a team.

So one of my initial goals as Director was to revisit the original vision of eDiplomacy. What was it created to do? What was each division's current vision for its work? And how could those visions be connected—aligned—with one another?

The Diplomatic Innovation Division (DID) needed to be out there in the field, talking to colleagues across the Department, understanding what different offices were trying to achieve, and what technology they hoped to use to get there.

The Knowledge Leadership Division also had to engage. Did people across the Department understand what tools were available to help them share and build on their knowledge? Were the tools accessible and visible? And how did their efforts complement those of DID? Were they making sure that the insights they gathered were being shared across the organization?

And for CLD, the question wasn't just: are we solving the problems people bring to us? But rather, are we proactively listening to the Department? Are we helping IRM understand what the Department needs—not just in terms of complaints, but in terms of aspirations? What's the temperature out there? Could CLD help build a more collegial liaison culture—not a transactional one?

We used to debate the word "customer." I didn't like it. It implied an "us and them" relationship—if they were the customer, that made us the vendor. And to me, that was the wrong framing.

It became something of a running joke inside the office—and IRM more broadly—that I refused to call colleagues "customers." They weren't customers. They were our teammates, our colleagues.

I used to quote that old Pogo cartoon: "We have met the enemy and they are us." Well, in this case, we have met the customer, and they are us.

That's what eDiplomacy was created to emphasize—that it's not about servicing "clients." It's about working with your colleagues, as part of the same organization, as part of the same mission, understanding that mission, and helping to facilitate it, together.

First, we came together as a team, trying to understand how each division's focus related to the others. But then we took another step. And that step was recognizing that we in eDiplomacy needed to stop building software. That was not our core role.

In fact, software development was preventing us from engaging effectively across the Department. We were turning into systems managers rather than facilitators of innovation or collaboration. And as more offices began identifying off-the-shelf services—particularly cloud-based tools—it became clear that building custom software in-house was becoming anachronistic.

By continuing to say, "We can build this for you," we were becoming part of the problem.

So I said, we need to move all the software development we'd taken on out of eDiplomacy. That responsibility belongs elsewhere—specifically, to another office within

IRM that manages systems development and integration. We could still partner with them, but we shouldn't be trying to do it all ourselves.

This was a shift back toward true collaboration, rather than maintaining a siloed hierarchy within eDiplomacy. Over time, eDiplomacy had become just that—a hierarchical structure managing its own portfolio of software, disconnected from the rest of IRM.

So, we opened discussions with the Systems Integration Office (SIO) within IRM. I asked if they could take over the systems we had been supporting. And not just take over the software—we'd also transfer the contractors we were using to maintain and develop those tools. eDiplomacy would no longer supervise those contractors.

Now, some tools remained under our purview, but in a different way. For example, platforms like Diplopedia and Corridor—those were overseen by the Knowledge Leadership Division (KLD). In those cases, we were the business owners—responsible for the strategy, the vision, and ensuring that the tools met mission needs—but we should not have been responsible for the technical upkeep.

Knowledge Leadership worked with contractors to ensure those tools functioned properly, stayed patched, and received upgrades. But again, our role wasn't to manage the systems. Our role was to guide the Department's knowledge-sharing strategy: to understand how people share information, what tools support that, and then work with IRM to provide and manage those tools.

So we arranged for SIO to take on responsibility for system management—keeping Diplopedia, Corridor, and others operational—while KLD focused on user engagement, training, and articulating the value of those platforms across the Department.

That shift—clarifying the business-owner versus system-owner roles—was the difficult part. It was hard for my team to adjust to. Like many offices, there was a certain pride in having built and maintained things ourselves. People like seeing results from the staff they brought in, from the systems they'd nurtured. There's a sense of ownership in that.

But I continued to emphasize that we needed to focus on our mission. And if our mission is to advocate for collaboration, then we ourselves must collaborate—starting within IRM.

We couldn't keep saying "collaboration is the way forward" if we weren't practicing it in our own structure. This shift was about realigning eDiplomacy with the role it was created to play: not to be everything, but to be a catalyst, a connector, and a thought partner across the Department.

We moved all of the contractors—at least a dozen personnel—to another office. Then we began working with that office to ensure they were carrying out the tasks we needed. The idea was that we, in eDiplomacy, should see ourselves as having the authority to request support from other offices—and that they would be accountable to us in that context. We were part of IRM, and we needed to act as partners within it—not isolated operators.

Another area where this shift in thinking—about partnership and shared responsibility—came into play was the State Department's internal OpenNet portal. Specifically, its homepage.

Since OpenNet and its content had been seen as part of the Department's knowledge-sharing infrastructure, eDiplomacy had been made responsible for the homepage. You might recall that, prior to 2015 or 2016, the homepage had a very static, menu-like structure—lists of links to offices and resources. In the center of the page was a section called the "Sounding Board," where employees could post recommendations or thoughts they wanted the Secretary to be aware of. It was intended to foster internal dialogue.

Secretary Clinton had specifically asked for that feature, and it had been implemented. But one of the goals of the Statecraft Initiative, at the end of the Obama administration, was to reimagine that homepage—to make it a more dynamic, living space. The idea was to create a central window into what was happening across the Department: something that could actively inform and engage personnel, not just serve as a passive list of links.

That redesign was handed to eDiplomacy. And from a technical standpoint, we implemented it—we reshaped the homepage into something more versatile and dynamic.

But, there was a deeper business issue: Who was actually responsible for the content? That gets to a broader point we've touched on throughout these conversations—just because a task involves technology doesn't mean the technology office should own the business function or policy authority behind it.

So, yes, eDiplomacy had been asked to redesign the internal homepage. But did that mean we were now deciding what was important for the entire State Department workforce to see? Were we now the voice of the Secretary when it came to internal priorities and messaging?

If someone had said, "Yes, eDiplomacy, you now speak on behalf of the Secretary in terms of internal communications,"—well, I might have welcomed the recognition. But I also would have said, "That's not appropriate." That's not our role.

That responsibility—communicating with the workforce—traditionally belongs to Human Resources. HR publishes State Magazine. HR oversees internal messaging related to employee matters. So we approached HR and said, "Would you be willing to take on the role of managing homepage content?"

But HR said it didn't have the resources.

So next, we spoke with Public Affairs, which was already managing external messaging—telling the world what the State Department was doing. Public Affairs agreed to step in and take on that role, at least in part. They would be responsible—or at least a key partner—in selecting and clearing stories to feature on the internal homepage.

That reflected another organizational issue we've talked about: even something as basic as who manages the org chart—that also comes through Public Affairs. So this role fit within their broader responsibilities, even if it was inward-facing rather than outward-facing.

So, yes, we implemented the technology. But we also had to ensure that the right people—with the right mission—were guiding the message.

You look like you're about to say something—?

Q: No, no, go ahead. This is something I hadn't heard of, and it is now taking place after I retired because I was a public diplomacy officer, and this is new in my understanding of public diplomacy. But go ahead.

GOODFRIEND: It wasn't so much a question of mission—it was about who was willing to step up and take responsibility.

Around 2017–2018, one of the things the new administration did was to stop funding the software that had supported the Sounding Board, the internal feedback mechanism on the State Department's intranet homepage. As I mentioned earlier, the Sounding Board enabled Department employees to post suggestions or questions and receive feedback from colleagues across the world. But with funding gone, that feature was removed from the homepage.

At the same time, we, at eDiplomacy, were tasked with reshaping the homepage. We designed and implemented a new version that allowed stories to scroll dynamically across the screen. And we reached out to colleagues throughout the Department, encouraging them: Tell us your stories. Just send us a write-up of what you're doing, along with a photo.

We weren't going to go out and collect stories ourselves, and Public Affairs wasn't set up to actively solicit internal narratives either. So we created an email address where any office could submit content they wanted featured.

To avoid having eDiplomacy be the sole arbiter for what got published, we partnered with Public Affairs. We would review submissions together—either myself or my deputy, along with a designated contact in Public Affairs, possibly one of the assistant secretaries. Meanwhile, SIO, the Systems Integration Office within IRM now handled the technical work of posting content on the page.

HR wasn't involved in this at all, which, interestingly, reflected a larger ambiguity: Who's really responsible for internal communication to the workforce?

In practice, it became a joint eDiplomacy–Public Affairs process. And I found it useful, even clarifying, in terms of how we thought about our own role. We weren't just putting up content—we were actively shaping the narrative of what our workforce saw as important, current, and relevant.

My deputy, who had managed the old static homepage for six or seven years, noted how difficult it used to be when various offices wanted their links added. IRM had a hard time saying "no" to anyone, because its role was on facilitating technology, not on determining the content. As a result, the page kept growing longer and longer, which was one reason the Under Secretary eventually wanted a redesigned, more focused homepage.

In the new format, we tried to keep things visually striking and easy to navigate. We resisted turning the homepage into another long list of links. Instead, we offered rotating stories with graphics—features that would be posted temporarily and then replaced.

If a post wasn't a good fit for the central story area, we could offer to place it in one of the smaller peripheral graphic zones. Sometimes we had to push back and say, "This doesn't belong on the main page—but here's another option." We had to guide offices in thinking about what kind of information they were sharing, and why.

All of this, I think, highlights the broader dysfunction: We tend to think more about the technology we're using to share information than about who's responsible for the content itself.

Too often, no one steps up to say: Yes, I'm responsible for ensuring this information is accurate, or Yes, this needs to be shared with this specific audience. That's not a technology question—it's a human responsibility. A leadership responsibility.

And now that the technology can do nearly anything we want, the challenge isn't the platform—it's the governance. So when people say, "The State Department doesn't have the technology it needs," I often think: No, we do. We just haven't clarified how to use it—or who should.

Q: I have to say that we'll need to wrap up for this session, but we can pick up this topic at our next session. So I'm just going to go ahead and pause the recording.

GOODFRIEND: Fair enough. One reason I was a bit late today is that it's now only a six-hour time difference.

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Q: Okay, today is April 27, 2023, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend. And André, we're in the changeover from the Obama to the Trump administration. And I think you wanted to go into a little bit of how the environment of your work changed.

GOODFRIEND: Right. Okay. I joined eDiplomacy in 2015 and was working on a number of initiatives, including the State Department's Open Government Plan. At that time, there was a strong emphasis within the Obama administration on transparency, open government, and an engaged citizenry. There was also a focus on how we share information internally.

As I've mentioned in previous sessions, there was the Statecraft Initiative—an effort to improve the technologies that our diplomats used to engage with each other and to adapt diplomacy to take fuller advantage of digital tools. The Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources spearheaded that initiative.

That was the environment I came into. Under different Secretaries of State—Clinton earlier in the Obama administration, and Kerry later—there were also efforts to promote transparency and internal engagement within the State Department. For example, under Secretary Clinton, although I wasn't yet at eDiplomacy, she had asked the Bureau of Information Resource Management to create something on the Department's internal homepage that would allow employees to post suggestions or comments about how the Department operated.

People could post transparently, with their names visible, and engage in discussions. Some saw it as a great way to raise concerns with senior leadership. Others dismissed it as a forum for people with too much time on their hands—talking about cafeteria food or topics not usually discussed so openly before. Still, it was a shift in the internal culture of the Department.

As a senior advisor, I had responsibility for consolidating what the State Department was doing to promote open government—looking at the technologies and frameworks we were using to bring the public into our work. Where were we publishing data? How could NGOs and the public use that information? We were releasing data on foreign commercial activity, foreign aid, visa and passport services—looking at ways to engage the public virtually through exchange programs and public-private partnerships.

One of the challenges within the Department was that different offices often didn't know what others were doing, even when working on overlapping issues. So a lot of my focus was on connecting those dots.

Then came the 2016 election. Obama had served two terms. Hillary Clinton lost. Donald Trump won. And with that, a transition began. In any transition, some programs continue and others are dropped. Part of the thinking around the Statecraft Initiative, even before the election, was: how much could we get done before the change? Because initiatives championed at senior levels often don't carry over to a new administration unless they're institutionalized.

Outside the Department, the civil society and NGO partners we worked with on open government were asking: Will this continue? There was a lot of cynicism about whether the progress on government transparency could survive the change, especially given the very different policy priorities of the incoming administration.

One of the things I tried to do was avoid presenting Open Government as a check-the-box exercise. Instead, we focused on initiatives that genuinely made our diplomacy more effective and efficient—things that we would have done anyway, even if we didn't call it "open government." The goal was to integrate transparency, citizen engagement, and accountability into the core of what we did.

Because of that approach, the individual programs that made up our Open Government efforts weren't discarded. The plan itself remained on the State Department website throughout the Trump administration. And, whether that's good or bad, it might be because no one noticed it was still there—but technically, it continued to be part of the Department's ongoing activities even under the Biden administration.

That said, no new Open Government Plan has been issued by the State Department since the last one I prepared in 2016. Normally, when an administration changes, the Department archives its public websites and removes prior content, except for ongoing programs. If you search for Obama-era State Department policies today, you'll be taken to an archived site—not the current State Department site.

But the Open Government Plan I worked on was retained on the current site, because it was tied to ongoing programs. Still, no subsequent plan has been released.

With the transition, there was a lot of uncertainty—questions about what would continue, how policies might shift under Secretary Tillerson, and what the Department's staffing would look like. The Trump administration imposed a hiring freeze, and there was an expectation that the Department would lose positions through attrition.

At the same time, there were internal surveys and discussions about the Department's future. Did we need as many overseas resources? Should we reassign personnel? Do things differently?

Change is always a challenge. Some colleagues were anxious, while others, myself included, saw this as part of an ongoing process. For years, we'd been asking how diplomacy should evolve and what resources we'd need.

Previous administrations had launched "right-sizing" initiatives—evaluating whether embassies were in the right places and properly staffed. eDiplomacy played a role in that broader effort—helping diplomats get the tools to work more effectively in an evolving environment. Innovation, after all, means changing the way we work.

One of the programs eDiplomacy managed—and continues to manage, though it arguably belongs in HR—was the Virtual Student Foreign Service, now known as the Virtual Student Federal Service. It allowed us to bring in interns from anywhere in the world without requiring them to travel to Washington, D.C. or overseas. That made internships more accessible and cost-effective.

Q: One quick question about this. As the Virtual Internship Program grows—it's effective partly because it's inexpensive and easy to manage online—could you give an example, perhaps from the eDiplomacy office or elsewhere, of what a typical virtual internship looks like? What kinds of projects would a student work on?

GOODFRIEND: There are many examples. Some overseas posts were using virtual interns in their Community Liaison Offices to help track local cost-of-living data. The interns would compile this information to support justifications for adjusting the allowances paid to personnel stationed at those posts.

In my own work, I used virtual interns to review Open Government Plans from other agencies—both past and current—and offer their assessments. Since they were university students, they brought fresh perspectives. I wanted their sense of whether those plans clearly explained what the agencies were doing, whether there were ways the plans could be made more informative, and how they compared to plans from other federal agencies. We used their input to improve our own Open Government Plan.

Other offices within the State Department—and across other federal agencies—were using these interns similarly: for research, drafting, and anything that could be done in an unclassified environment. These interns didn't have access to classified systems or the security clearances that would be needed for such work. So the tasks had to be aligned with open-source, non-classified materials.

Their assignments were often tied to their fields of study—political science, management, languages—allowing them to apply their academic knowledge while engaging with the real work of the Department. Since they weren't physically in Washington, they weren't doing things like filing papers or walking documents from one office to another for clearance, but that kind of physical paperwork is less common anyway now in our digital environment.

In fact, the shift toward virtual internships prompted many offices to rethink how much of their work could be done digitally. Creating a meaningful internship experience for someone who wasn't physically present forced people to ask: How can we make full use of this intern's skills remotely? That process helped catalyze a broader shift toward digital workflows—offices began sharing information electronically and communicating effectively with interns across distances.

So while it opened the door to engaging more citizens in the work of the State Department, it also served as a catalyst for internal change. It helped move us further into the digital age, made us reconsider how we use our personnel, and raised questions about what tasks really require someone to be physically present to carry out diplomacy effectively.

These kinds of lessons were folded into our Open Government planning. But moving to such an environment also requires culture change. It's not enough to just give people new tools—great computers, internet access, social media accounts—and say: Now go use them and be productive. If people aren't used to working in the ways these tools enable, then the tools don't help much.

I think we've discussed before: the challenge of contact management... We have tools that enable us to manage information about our contacts and to share that information with colleagues. But if we're not accustomed to, or don't have a culture of, sharing that information, then the tools aren't used effectively. People end up blaming the technology, but really, the issue is how we ourselves work in this new environment.

That was something, in principle, the new administration was also looking at: How do we work in this new environment, and what kinds of changes might be needed? There was a general sense that cuts to personnel and funding were inevitable—because, in theory, new technologies would allow us to do more with better, but fewer resources. But there was also a kind of opaqueness to how the administration was conducting its assessment. While there may have been some goodwill at the outset—a willingness to consider change—there was also a strong feeling that we didn't really know which direction things were going.

I had mentioned the "Sounding Board," the internal online forum that allowed State Department employees to discuss morale and workplace issues. One of the first things that happened under the new administration was the defunding of that tool. There was a sense that we're not going to pay for this anymore. But instead of replacing it, the platform was simply removed.

That discussion space, which had been prominently placed on the State Department's intranet homepage, disappeared. And with it, we lost a key channel for understanding what our colleagues were experiencing. That forum had been managed by eDiplomacy. So once it was cut, we had to figure out how to maintain a sense of engagement—how to preserve the idea that the internal portal, this intranet platform, could still function as a space for dialogue and information-sharing.

In fact, that portal—the redesigned intranet—was one of the few things the Statecraft Initiative managed to hand off to the incoming administration. It was supposed to carry more content and engage staff across the Department. But that raised a question we'd been discussing in our previous session: Who's responsible for internal engagement? Which office owns the responsibility for promoting a culture where employees are informed, involved, and connected?

Initially, the responsibility for the portal was delegated to my office, eDiplomacy. By 2017, I was no longer serving as a senior advisor—I was now the Director of the Office of eDiplomacy. I wasn't working on the Open Government Plan anymore. I was leading the office, and we were now facing the question: Is eDiplomacy responsible for engaging the Department internally? For identifying the issues that matter to our colleagues? For managing how they receive that information?

Technically, the tools were under our purview—we could manage the platform. But part of what we were trying to make clear at eDiplomacy was this: It's not the technology that drives the work. And it's not the technologists who are responsible for the content that flows through those tools. Technology exists to facilitate the work of the rest of the Department. And the Department needs to understand what those tools can do—and how to use them.

So we went on a kind of quest to find the right home for this responsibility: Who should be in charge of keeping State Department employees informed about what's affecting their work and their lives? Our first thought was Human Resources (HR), since they already publish State Magazine, the Department's monthly periodical, which serves a similar function.

But HR felt it was already stretched too thin. They said they didn't have the capacity to manage a platform that would need to be updated every other day—with new content, short news items, things employees could actually use. A sort of "news you can use" model for internal audiences.

So we turned to the Bureau of Public Affairs. They agreed to help take on the responsibility of curating and reviewing content for the portal. We ended up designing a structure that encouraged different offices throughout the Department to think about their own activities: What are you doing? What would you like to share with your colleagues?

It became an exercise not just in publishing internal news, but in getting offices to think about their role in a larger community—how they might engage with their peers across the Department. Just like we had done with Diplopedia, where individuals could contribute knowledge for others to build on, this portal became another opportunity for shared insight and collaboration. What we created was a framework where offices throughout the Department could submit short pieces—sometimes with photos—that might be of interest to their colleagues. Public Affairs would review them, we in eDiplomacy would review them, and then we'd ensure they got published.

But what really came into focus through this process was the question of who bears responsibility. These technologies made that question unavoidable. Neither Public Affairs—which is externally focused—nor eDiplomacy—which was primarily focused on enabling technology—could really be said to "own" the content. If the technology weren't involved, which office would be responsible for keeping employees informed about what's going on inside the Department?

The technology made it possible to communicate, but the question remained: who's accountable for the message?

I think I mentioned an anecdote last time about trying to figure out who was responsible for the State Department's organizational chart. That, too, took quite a bit of detective work—figuring out which office compiled it, who had the authority to release it, and whether it was officially sanctioned.

Ultimately, it turned out to be HR—but even there, the chart had its own internal complexities. It had to reflect bureaucratic sensitivities: who reports to whom, what lines are solid and what lines are dotted, and whether those dotted lines implied functional coordination or just informal liaison. It couldn't just be published casually—it had to be considered an official representation of the Department's structure.

Interestingly, the version of the chart published externally by Public Affairs became the one adopted internally as well. It was pulled in and treated as the Department's official org chart. So again, we found ourselves in this fascinating space of trying to clarify roles and responsibilities around information governance—who creates it, who owns it, and who distributes it.

Around this same time, there was also policy work happening on digital government, similar to the Open Government initiatives. The digital government policy—another Obama-era initiative that continued into the Trump administration—focused on making government information and services accessible digitally. The idea was to move government fully into the 21st century, making public data and services available online.

In the State Department's case, this meant both the websites hosted by embassies and domestic platforms, as well as digital services like passport renewals and visa applications. Initially, this work was assigned to IRM, since it involved technology. But I argued—successfully—that this shouldn't be seen as a technology issue alone.

It was really about public information, and therefore it belonged more appropriately to Public Diplomacy, especially since they already had responsibility for the content of web pages and how we communicate with the public, both domestically and abroad.

Public Diplomacy itself was undergoing internal changes—trying to sort out which offices handled domestic communication and which handled overseas public affairs. So even within that bureau, there wasn't always clarity about who should take ownership of meeting digital government benchmarks. But that's what we needed, someone to say, "Yes, this is our responsibility"—not because it involves computers, but because we're responsible for delivering this service to the public, and we need to make sure it's done effectively using digital tools.

So in 2017, much of my focus was on clarifying what we were supposed to be doing, and what other offices were supposed to be doing, given the tools now available. The conversation wasn't really about the technology itself. It was about responsibilities, workflows, and whether people were using the available technology effectively to do their jobs.

At the same time, as the Trump administration settled in, questions emerged about what information the government would continue to make public. There was no formal rollback of Open Government. No one said, We're canceling transparency. In fact, there was talk of expanding it. There was support, at least rhetorically, for transparency and digital modernization.

I believe Jared Kushner had a portfolio within the White House focused on using technology to improve government operations. There was a general sense that we needed to modernize, to use the tools of the digital age, and to be open.

All of the right things were being said.

But in practice, there was less information actually being collected or published. The infrastructure remained, the websites remained—but the flow of content slowed. The real issue wasn't about whether we should publish; it was about who would take responsibility for preparing the content, reviewing it, and making it public. That's where things became murky.

The need to make information available was widely accepted. But the ownership of that information—ensuring it was accurate, relevant, and regularly updated—that's where things got stuck.

That brought me back to the same philosophy I had tried to apply in the Open Government Plan: that we weren't doing this just for the sake of transparency or to tick boxes. We were doing it because sharing information helps us do our jobs better. It makes our diplomacy more effective.

We were still able to move forward, and I don't think the State Department was dropping any programs that were already in place. But if something was sensitive from a policy standpoint, it might be that, rather than withholding information from the public, the Department simply wouldn't collect that information in the first place—or the program itself might not be carried out at all. That was the kind of environment we were navigating, with real concern about how the Department would evolve.

There were big questions: Would we still be able to engage internally? What information would still be made public? Apart from any specific policy changes, there was a more general anxiety about the future of the Department itself.

There were senior-level departures—but to some extent, that happens with every transition. People leave every year. Yet the media helped feed the perception that this time was different—that people in leadership positions were leaving in unprecedented numbers. That wasn't my perception. But the concern was definitely out there.

At the same time, Congress pushed back on the proposed budget cuts to the State Department, and so those cuts never materialized. People had expected reductions in staff, maybe buyouts, early retirement incentives. Many were waiting to see if they'd be offered packages to leave. But that never happened either. So there was just a lot of nervous waiting, compounded by a lack of clear internal communication.

Meanwhile, a lot was happening on social media. People inside the Department were turning to Twitter and other platforms—external sources—to find out what was happening internally. That became necessary because, as I mentioned before, even our organizational chart was published externally before it was distributed inside the Department.

There was simply no strong internal culture of information-sharing via our own technologies. And part of that disconnect stemmed from the broader perception that the State Department was being bypassed altogether—decisions were being made and announced directly by the White House on platforms like Twitter.

Take, for example, the announcement of the visa ban affecting predominantly Muslim countries. That policy was announced publicly before it went through any kind of internal clearance process. And then, ultimately, the dismissal of the Secretary of State—that was announced via Twitter as well, rather than internally. So while we were operating in an intensely digital environment, we weren't using our internal communication tools effectively.

Part of my focus, aside from trying to get other offices to take responsibility for their areas, was making sure that eDiplomacy itself was stepping up to its responsibilities, particularly in knowledge management.

How do we share information effectively inside the Department? Do we have the technologies to help colleagues collaborate, to build a base of institutional knowledge, a kind of human capital or collective wisdom, so that we know who knows what, and can tap into that? Are we ahead of the curve in identifying those knowledge resources?

Are we innovating effectively? Are we using modern technologies in a flexible, agile way to give our colleagues the tools they need when they need them? Can we anticipate their needs?

We also had to ask: Are we engaging with our colleagues in a collegial, peer-based way? Because eDiplomacy wasn't made up of technologists—it was made up of generalists assigned to IRM, bringing an understanding of how diplomats wanted to use technology and where they hoped it would go.

Were we listening carefully enough to our foreign affairs colleagues? Were we understanding what they really needed—not waiting for a formal request to go through development and implementation, only to deliver a solution two years later when the need had already changed?

We wanted to be more responsive. But by the time I came into eDiplomacy, a lot of our focus had shifted toward maintaining systems that had been built in the past. We had contractors who handled software development and system upkeep, but so much of our time and energy was going into maintenance that it limited our ability to innovate—to explore new platforms or services that might better meet evolving needs.

Q: I do want to ask a question. It's not a typical role for a Department, full-time employee or full-time employee equivalent. Or is that something typically the Department has contracted out?

GOODFRIEND: Yes, we had contractors doing that work.

Q: Okay. But even though they're contractors, eDiplomacy and other offices nevertheless had to oversee all of their activity, and that's what is taking up so much time, preventing more innovation.

GOODFRIEND: Right. I mean, we probably had about ten to fifteen contractors. And that brings us into a broader discussion about our relationship with contractors.

There are two types of contracts. One is a personal services contract, where we're essentially hiring a contractor as if they were an employee. We want person X, and we put together a contract specifically for that individual's personal services.

Then there are non-personal services contracts—those are structured around the work, not the individual. We outline our need—for example, programming expertise—and contract with an external company that has the capacity to gather business requirements, develop the software, maintain it, and ensure the systems it runs on meet State Department standards.

This second type—non-personal services contracts—was how we typically worked. The company would collaborate with us to understand the needs of our stakeholders—our colleagues throughout the Department—then help develop technology solutions to meet those needs and ensure those systems were properly maintained and supported.

I've mentioned before that we were focused on two main areas: knowledge management and innovation. What I just described falls under innovation.

In that context, different offices would come to eDiplomacy and say, We'd like to do this in a new way. We need a system that can help us manage this process. And we would say, Okay, let's talk about your needs. Here's what we can do. We estimate it will take X amount of time. Then we'd develop the system and hand it over.

It was structured as a fee-for-service model. Offices would be charged for the service we provided.

Separately, there were systems we owned ourselves—tools like Diplopedia, Corridor, and others focused on knowledge management. In those cases, eDiplomacy was the business owner. We had built the tools to support internal knowledge-sharing, and we were also responsible for maintaining the systems so they continued to function effectively.

We also managed programs like the Virtual Student Federal Service, which relied on custom-built technology. We built the system, and we had to keep it running.

So over time, we ended up with a suite of software that required ongoing attention—not just building new things, but also maintaining and supporting what we had already created. That took up a lot of bandwidth. And at the same time, we were still trying to look ahead and anticipate new needs across the Department.

With limited resources, when you build up a sort of basket of tools, a lot of your time ends up being spent just making sure everything continues to function properly—instead of looking ahead at what more might be possible. Again, it came down to clarifying: What was our responsibility, and what was the responsibility of others?

I mentioned that we were the business owner for knowledge management, but that didn't mean we should also be the system owner. That's an important distinction. Public Affairs, for example, may be the business owner for engaging with the public. But that doesn't mean they're responsible for running the servers or managing the infrastructure that makes that communication possible.

Or consider the Israel Desk. It may be responsible for coordinating with our embassy in Jerusalem, engaging in aspects of the peace process, and making sure the seventh floor (senior leadership) is informed. But that doesn't mean it's responsible for managing the phone system it uses to call the seventh floor—or maintaining the word processors used to draft memos. Owning the business function is not the same as owning the system that facilitates it.

At eDiplomacy, though, we had ended up doing both. We were managing the systems as well as the substance of the programs—because we had contractors working with us who were responsible for system development and maintenance. Over time, we were getting pulled deeper into system management, and it started taking precedence over our core mission.

It's like needing to write a document, but spending all your time playing with fonts and colors because your word processor makes that so easy. You lose focus on the substance of what you're trying to say.

My approach was to work with other offices within IRM to ensure they felt comfortable taking on the role of system owner—so that we, in eDiplomacy, could refocus on our role as business owners.

So if, for example, we were identifying innovation needs—say, a new system that a particular office required to carry out its work in a different way—we might help identify the need, but it would be another office's responsibility to build it. And if we had a business need around facilitating knowledge management, we would define the requirements, but someone else should be maintaining the system that supports it.

To the surprise—well, maybe more the chagrin—of my office, I made a decision that not everyone might have made: we moved our contractors out of eDiplomacy. We handed them over to the offices that were now taking on system development and maintenance responsibilities.

That meant we no longer had the resources in-house to develop or manage systems ourselves—but in my view, we never should have had that role in the first place.

Our role was to focus on the substance of knowledge management: to understand how we could share information more effectively, collaborate more successfully, and build up institutional knowledge within the State Department. We were responsible for the theory, the practice, the strategy—not the wires and code. And we needed to be able to convey those needs to the technical teams or to contractors, so they could build the right tools.

By the same token, as we engaged with other offices about their technology needs, we had to ensure that IRM had both the understanding and the capacity to provide the appropriate solutions.

So we repositioned eDiplomacy—moving out of the system-building space and focusing instead on building relationships across the Department. We worked to create a more collaborative internal structure, making it clear that we weren't trying to build an empire of our own.

Within the State Department, it often happens that offices try to do everything in-house, rather than collaborate with others. There's a tendency to grow staffing—not just to increase capacity, but to enhance prestige. If your office can do everything on its own, it can justify more resources, more visibility, more influence.

I was taking the opposite approach. I wanted to reduce our size—not to diminish our importance, but to become more flexible, to focus on what was truly our responsibility, and to be more reliant on collaboration with others. That required building strong working relationships with other offices in IRM.

To formalize those relationships, we put in place memorandums of understanding and memorandums of agreement. These written frameworks enabled us to rely on other IRM offices to maintain the technologies we depended on.

This was part of a larger culture shift. As I've said before, culture change is the hardest element. It's not just about adopting new tools—it's about rethinking how we work.

The shift I was encouraging was toward a collaborative culture—one where we don't assume we need to have everything under our own roof, but instead recognize the value of inter-office cooperation. If we have strong, clear understandings with our partners, we don't need to duplicate capabilities—we can get things done more effectively together.

You could see this shift in various areas: for instance, in moving our contractors out of eDiplomacy and into other offices that were better equipped to manage system development. Or in working with Public Affairs to publish content through our internal portal, rather than trying to control every aspect ourselves.

This approach was consistent with how I had operated in other posts. I think I mentioned before—in Damascus, we moved consular personnel to Amman to allow us to collaborate more effectively with regional partners, rather than insisting on doing everything ourselves in-country. That was another example of enabling work through collaborative adaptation, not in-house expansion.

So the challenge I took on at eDiplomacy was to model that collaborative culture—especially ironic because one of the main things we were promoting through our technology platforms was exactly that: collaboration. Yet at the same time, our own internal behavior hadn't fully reflected that ethos. We were still tending to bring people in rather than build partnerships.

That started to change. We started moving in another direction.

Another area I focused on within IRM and eDiplomacy was making sure that we ourselves were working the way we wanted others to work. That meant using collaborative tools internally to shape our policies, practicing transparency in how we communicated with each other, and exploring remote work wherever possible through technology.

You mentioned the Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) program. I was probably one of the only offices within IRM that was actively using VSFS interns at the time. There were other offices, of course...

Q: I'm not surprised—it does take time and attention to organize: recruiting, and then at the end, providing some kind of evaluation or recognition of the interns' work. That way they can use it for course credit, a job application, or another internship. The fact that you made the effort shows how committed you were to sustaining this tool, even in a complicated situation like yours—let alone in less complex settings, like a geographic or functional bureau, where interns typically work on a very specific, limited product.

GOODFRIEND: Right. I'm really speaking here about using virtual interns rather than those who are physically present. While many offices in the Department—and in other agencies—were increasingly using virtual interns each year, I think eDiplomacy was among the more consistent adopters. The VSFS program became one of the Department's success stories. It was well-regarded and remained under the umbrella of the State Department, specifically under IRM.

From a business ownership perspective, it probably didn't belong in IRM—it might have fit better elsewhere—but IRM retained it because it was a feather in its cap. When people thought of the VSFS within IRM, they associated it with something positive: Look what we've accomplished with the virtual internship program.

That said, even though IRM—and especially eDiplomacy—was promoting the effective use of technology and new ways of working, we ourselves weren't always following those practices internally. So one of the things I tried to encourage in our office was to adopt those same methods—to be a model of the digital work environment we were advocating.

For instance, I encouraged us to start with the default assumption that any position in our office might be eligible to be filled by a DETO—that is, a Department Employee Teleworking Overseas, a domestic employee working remotely from an overseas post.

This typically occurs when one family member is posted abroad and their spouse—also a Department employee—requires a domestic assignment that can be performed remotely. This arrangement often helps avoid issues of nepotism, particularly if one spouse is assigned as the DCM, or when no suitable position is available for the spouse at the overseas post. DETOs have the necessary security clearances, and since they are located at an overseas post, they can access classified systems, including SBU and higher-level platforms.

So the question became: Do we really need to have everyone physically present in DC to get this work done? The technology makes it possible—but we still had to deal with the institutional culture.

We had to ask: What absolutely requires someone to be physically present? What can be done remotely? And if someone is working virtually, how do we manage them effectively? How do we make sure they feel like part of the team?

It's no longer a question of technical feasibility. It's a matter of culture. For some managers, the reluctance came down to things like wanting to walk around the office and see people at their desks. But that might also mean we need a new kind of manager—one who knows how to oversee remote work, track productivity, and maintain engagement even when employees aren't in the same room.

So I tried to have our office serve as a kind of test case—to demonstrate that what we were advocating Department-wide could actually work.

Another shift I encouraged was to focus less on the technology itself, and more on the people. If human beings are at the center of our work, then any tool or system we build should start with their needs, not the available tech.

That meant approaching our work from a human-centered design perspective—not system-centric, but human-centric. We began engaging more directly with our colleagues to understand: What are your office's goals? Where do you want to go? What are you trying to accomplish? And how do you see your processes evolving?

Our role was to walk that path with them—to support them not just with tools, but with meaningful approaches aligned with their culture and mission.

We were fortunate that, at the time, the CIO was using the same language. And I tend to take people at their word—so even if the actions weren't always fully aligned, the verbal commitment mattered. If someone said, Yes, we believe in human-centered systems, then we'd move forward on that basis and hold ourselves to it.

My approach—just as it had been when I was in Budapest—was to take people at their word. If a government says it upholds certain values, we take that at face value. It's not about being naïve, but more in the spirit of 'trust but verify'. If someone commits to something, we hold ourselves to it, and we hold them to it too.

The same applied within eDiplomacy. We were committing to a different way of working—one based on collaboration, engagement, and transparency. The CIO was using the same language we were using, language we believed in. The Seventh Floor was echoing that language as well. There was shared vocabulary and vision, which gave us a basis to actually move forward with implementation.

One initiative we developed was a Human-Centered Design Lab—a space, in principle, that would bring offices together to explore innovation and rethink how they carry out their work using technology. For a long time, we hadn't been able to implement such efforts effectively because we were bogged down maintaining legacy programs. But after refocusing our office, and with the inspired vision of the DID Deputy Director, we were finally in a position to start building this capability.

From 2017 into 2018, we started putting the pieces in place. We were having conversations with different offices. We were making the internal case within IRM about why this direction—human-centered innovation—was important. We also started addressing questions around off-the-shelf tools like WhatsApp or other widely used messaging apps.

This was a culture shift, too. We were no longer saying: Let's build a secure messaging tool from scratch. We were asking: Are there tools already in widespread use that can meet our needs? And if so, do we have the right policies to support their use?

It wasn't just about coding software anymore. It was about making sure the business needs were clearly understood—by IRM, by cybersecurity teams, by RSOs (Regional Security Officers)—so that any assessment of risk could be weighed against real operational needs in the field.

We wanted to ensure risk assessments were grounded in the actual needs of our colleagues, rather than assumptions. And we wanted policy to reflect that balance—not block tools by default, but evaluate them in a meaningful, informed way.

This wasn't new to me. Years earlier, as I've noted, I helped bring SIPRNet (the interagency classified network) into the Department by clearly articulating the business need for it. Once that need was established, IRM was willing to accommodate it—so long as it could be done securely.

The same principle applied when I worked in Consular Systems. Back then, we were building the Consolidated Consular Database, and there were questions like: What data do we really need to keep? Can we discard any of it? My job was to make the case for why certain data was valuable—how it could be used to improve our global consular operations.

Now, 10 or even 25 years later, I kept coming back to the same core idea: ensuring that the people and offices who support foreign affairs understand the business needs, so that those needs can be facilitated effectively. That's one of the main reasons I wanted to join eDiplomacy in the first place—to advocate for those needs, and to make sure they were being addressed.

Another example: the Ops Center came to us with a request. They were using DataMinr, a commercial tool that provided real-time alerts—often minutes or even hours ahead of the mainstream media—by pulling from social media posts. For instance, if there was a bombing, earthquake, or civil unrest anywhere in the world, the tool would detect it from social media chatter before traditional media outlets reported it.

For the crisis center, that kind of lead time was invaluable. It meant the Secretary of State could be informed almost immediately.

But the Ops Center was only on a trial license, and it was about to expire. They came to us asking: How do we keep this tool? We don't want to build anything. We just want to keep using what's already working.

And again, this illustrated the changing digital environment—we're not always building tools anymore. Often, we're subscribing to services. So our role became figuring out: Can we make this an enterprise-wide purchase? Are other offices interested?

We began reaching out, engaging colleagues across the Department to find out who else might benefit from this type of capability—because if multiple offices saw value in it, we could support a broader, coordinated acquisition rather than isolated purchases.

RSO—Diplomatic Security—actually approached us. We had already begun outreach, but they came to us and said, We've heard you're looking into an enterprise purchase of this service, and we'd certainly be interested. We also reached out to Consular Affairs, as well as to desk officers and regional bureaus, to ask: Is this something that's useful to you? Is there enough demand across the Department to justify a Department-wide contract for this particular service?

Again, this wasn't a software development exercise. We weren't saying: We need a new tool—let's write business requirements, hire a development team, and build something that might be ready in a couple of years. This was more like subscribing to an existing service—pay the fee, turn it on, and use it. And if it stops being useful, you turn it off.

That said, we still had to follow the Department's procurement process, which meant issuing a Request for Information (RFI). Even though the Operations Center had already been using a specific tool, we had to ask: Are there other tools that offer the same capabilities? We couldn't just make a purchase because someone liked a particular product. We had to survey the market.

When we issued the RFI, we got responses from vendors offering to build a custom system from scratch, offering a non-personal services contract with a long-term support package. That's how procurement was traditionally structured: hire contractors, have them manage a program on-site for one, five, or ten years. But that didn't fit the model we were moving toward.

We were trying to make the case to procurement officers: This isn't about custom development or hosting software on our own servers. This is about subscribing to an existing, off-the-shelf service. The structure of the procurement process itself had to adapt to the changing nature of the digital environment—one where we don't always need to build, but instead subscribe to what already works.

And in that way, I think we were successful. We were pursuing a different course than the traditional one—engaging offices across the Department to understand their needs, rather than owning or managing tools ourselves.

At the same time, this experience made it even clearer that pockets of innovation were growing throughout the Department. Offices outside of eDiplomacy and IRM were becoming increasingly familiar with existing technologies and eager to adopt them. Our role became more about facilitating those efforts—not holding them back.

By 2019, we were at a transition point—and I think, in many ways, we still are. When I left eDiplomacy in September 2019, we were in the process of building the Human-Centered Design Lab. It wasn't operational yet, but we were establishing partnerships and knowledge-sharing groups to help each other navigate virtual engagement.

We were working with tools like Microsoft Teams, Google Groups, and others to support networked collaboration. The technology was in place. The challenge was making sure people knew how to use it—and more importantly, who to turn to for help. We were building a network of tech-aware diplomats who could support one another, regardless of where they were in the world.

Because now, access to these tools no longer required being physically present at the State Department. That was part of the shift we had helped facilitate.

When I left in September 2019, no one could have known that within six months, we would be in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. By March 2020, the Department had to shift nearly all operations to virtual work.

And in many ways, we were ready. There were plenty of challenges, of course—health concerns, travel disruptions, questions of whether it was safe to return to the U.S., and whether flights were even available. But in terms of carrying out the work of diplomacy remotely, the systems held up.

People knew how to navigate the tools, how to connect with each other, and how to keep things moving. And I believe that was in large part because of the groundwork we had laid at eDiplomacy: building virtual collaboration models, developing remote engagement practices, working with DETOs, and reinforcing a culture of digital fluency.

It wasn't the technology that let us down. What still needed to evolve were the workflows and institutional processes—but the tools were there. They worked. And people knew how to use them.

I'll pause here, because I think that brings us through to the end of my tour as Director of the Office of eDiplomacy.

By the time I left eDiplomacy, we had managed to get a number of things in place. We were seen as an effective interlocutor, a reliable partner—both in how we shared knowledge and how we supported innovation across the Department. We weren't afraid to champion the efforts of others, and we recognized that innovation was no longer centralized—there were now pockets of creativity and technical fluency throughout the Department that were chomping at the bit to move forward.

And our role had shifted—to facilitate them, to support them, rather than lead everything ourselves.

Years earlier, eDiplomacy might have been the primary office, if not the only office, trying to figure out how to engage—how to structure knowledge management so that we could effectively capture and share what we knew. But now, other offices were putting together data visualization tools, dashboards, and storytelling platforms that assumed the technology was already in place. The issue wasn't whether the technology existed—it did. The question now was: Are we using it effectively?

And this wasn't even really a generational issue anymore. Whether you were 60 or 20, the core challenge wasn't whether you could use the technology—it was whether you knew how to ask the right questions, whether you knew where to find the relevant data, and whether you understood how to use data to make a compelling case for a policy.

The tools had become more intuitive. But knowing what to do with them still required experience, judgment, and institutional knowledge. It also required internal transparency—knowing which authoritative datasets to use, rather than ending up with three or four different versions of the same data that didn't quite align. Those were issues we were better positioned to address by 2019.

I stepped down as Director of eDiplomacy in mid-September 2019, and in doing so, I stepped off the plank, so to speak. I didn't have another assignment lined up.

I was approaching two years before mandatory retirement, and there weren't many positions left that I could bid on. So I was in a space of uncertainty—looking for something in DC, trying to decide whether this was the right time to retire, or whether there were still meaningful ways for me to stay engaged.

Before leaving eDiplomacy, I had been in conversations within IRM about taking on a senior advisor role, helping think through how the bureau might be reshaped more broadly. But that didn't materialize as quickly as I had been led to believe it would.

So when October came around, I found myself in a unique situation: still employed, but without a formal assignment. That had never happened to me before.

I tried to stay involved—participating in virtual engagements, drawing on the very technologies we'd been championing at eDiplomacy, continuing to interact with different offices, and trying to contribute where I could. But I was also wondering, what is this going to be like?

It was unfamiliar territory, and I can pause there.

Q: All right. Yeah, it's a good place to pause.

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Q: And today is Tuesday, May 9, and we're resuming our interview with André Goodfriend in 2019. André, go ahead and reset the scene.

GOODFRIEND: It's September 2019. My two-year tour as Director of the Office of eDiplomacy had ended, and I didn't have a new assignment yet. The bidding cycle had started toward the end of 2018, and I had submitted a few bids.

I knew I was approaching the end of my career—simply because of age. In 2019, I was sixty-two. That meant I could potentially take on one final three-year assignment, assuming I moved directly into it from eDiplomacy without any training gap. That would carry me through to 2022, when I'd turn sixty-five—the mandatory retirement age for the Foreign Service.

At that point, my options were increasingly limited. It was either a direct overseas posting for two to three years or a short-term assignment in Washington. I had submitted some bids accordingly, but was also starting to reflect more seriously on retirement. I was eligible to retire, having joined the Foreign Service in 1987. By 2019, I'd been in the Service for thirty-two years.

More and more of my colleagues were retiring. There were very few people left in the Service who had ever supervised me. When I reached out for professional references or engagement, it was essentially peers—or people I had supervised.

I was also thinking a lot about what would come next—what comes after the Foreign Service, what comes after this career. Those thoughts were very present for me.

That said, if something appealing came along, I was still open to it. I had put in a few bids for assignments that met the criteria I was looking for, but nothing had materialized.

So, we're in 2019, and I'm in the process of handing off to my successor at eDiplomacy. In the meantime, I had coordinated with the Deputy CIO in the Bureau of Information Resource Management for a sort of temporary assignment or "Y tour." While exploring my options, I was looking for ways to contribute within IRM—but...

Q: Tell us what Y tour stands for?

GOODFRIEND: It's a bridge assignment. Most tours of duty are predefined positions—assignments that are part of the regular bidding process. Officers rotate in and out, and those positions are listed on the assignment list for two, three, sometimes four years.

But there are occasions—like the one I found myself in—where no assignment is immediately available, and I need to bridge the gap between the position that's ending and whatever might come next. A Y tour allows for that. It has to be something worthwhile, clearly defined, and accomplishable within the course of a year.

It's not meant to go on indefinitely—otherwise it would be treated as a regular assignment. The idea is to create a project with a clear scope that you can complete within that one-year period, during which time you're also preparing for your next full assignment.

At the time, one of the things happening within IRM was a restructuring of the Business Management and Planning Directorate (BMP). The Office of Inspector General had conducted an inspection and made several recommendations—particularly about restructuring the budget, planning, and management offices to better align with

21st-century systems management needs. That was in progress, and I could help facilitate it.

But for a Y tour to begin, there needs to be a written description of the assignment. That hadn't yet come together. So, by the time I left my role as Director of eDiplomacy, I didn't have a defined Y tour to step into.

Instead, I found myself unassigned—still within IRM—but not officially in a new role. I spoke with Human Resources to clarify what that meant. To my surprise, it didn't mean much at all. I was just unassigned. But I was still able to come in regularly, meet with colleagues, and stay engaged.

I continued mentoring several colleagues. I also started exploring opportunities with NGOs and think tanks outside the State Department. I kept applying for positions, maintained my professional network, and stayed involved in areas of interest.

There was, however, very little guidance on how to navigate this kind of situation. I had to be highly self-directed. In some ways, it felt like treading water—uncertain footing, no structure under me.

There's an expression in the State Department: "water walker." It refers to someone who can do no wrong, someone who walks on water. This was a bit different. I wasn't a water walker—I was just keeping afloat.

Like in many positions, you're expected to take initiative in shaping your work requirements. Here, that applied even more. I had to come in each day and ask: what would be useful? One day, it might be attending a seminar. Another day, it could be meeting with colleagues, mentoring, or following up on Y tour possibilities.

Taking a course at FSI [Foreign Service Institute] was also on the table. But overall, it was far less structured than I had expected. I had imagined there'd be more direction, more clarity on how to proceed in this sort of interim status.

This was September and October 2019. During that time, there were even periods when I served as Acting Deputy CIO. Since I was still attached to IRM and one of the senior-ranking officers in BMP, I occasionally stepped in—especially over the holiday season—when the Deputy CIO was away for a couple of weeks.

So, I remained actively engaged, even if I wasn't formally assigned to a position.

Q: Let me ask you a quick question here. You've now had several tours in information tech related to information technology and so on. But you started life as a consular officer. Were you at all interested in trying to go back to the consular bureau in any supervisory position?

GOODFRIEND: Oh, I was engaging with them, but there wasn't anything available that fit. There was also a lot of transition happening at that time. This was 2019, and we knew an election was coming up in the next year.

As things progressed, by the time we got to March 2020, we were suddenly in lockdown due to COVID. That had a big impact on the environment I was in and the opportunities that might have otherwise existed.

For the first two or three months, I was still thinking that the Y tour I had been discussing within IRM was just about to happen. But by March, everything shifted—suddenly, everything went virtual.

That had implications not only for what I might do next, but also for how we used that time to look for other opportunities—especially outside the State Department. But with travel restricted and in-person engagements with NGOs or think tanks no longer possible, everything came to a halt.

There was a general sense of uncertainty. People were asking, "What are we going to be doing now? How do we set up and function in this environment where we can't interact the same way?"

At the same time, I could also reflect on what IRM had already managed to provide the Department to enable global operations during this period. From the very first day of the pandemic, people were able to telework, to function from wherever they were.

This was something I had been advocating for during my time at eDiplomacy. We had established virtual working groups to help colleagues around the world navigate collaborative technologies—not as some future vision, but tools that were already available.

So, while the transition to virtual work came suddenly, in some ways, we had already laid the groundwork.

Q: Plus virtual interns?

GOODFRIEND: Yes—virtual interns… and virtual teams. It was now possible to get your email on your personal cellphone. You could participate in meetings virtually from wherever you were, using pretty much any device—whether it was a smartphone, an iPad or similar tablet, or a regular computer.

In fact, sometimes it was easier to join meetings using personal devices. Many office desktops on OpenNet didn't have webcams or microphones attached, which made virtual participation difficult. If you only had your standard OpenNet computer, it could be a challenge to join a video conference unless external hardware was available.

So now we're in 2020—in March—and the effects of the pandemic are being felt. People are working from home. I was engaging, as I had been, virtually—using my home computer.

At the same time, I was thinking about how to assess my own efforts over the past year. By April, I needed to draft my own evaluation report.

It raised some interesting questions—about being self-directed, about defining your own contributions to the work of the Department—especially when you're in this kind of undefined, floating role.

Q: Let me ask one question, as you mentioned, April 15. Two things you have to send your taxes in, but in the Foreign Service, you have to send your draft evaluation in or have it agreed by your supervisor. Given the level of supervision and just the level of the work you were doing. Did you have a supervisor who could fully understand the depth of all the work you were doing and the contributions that you had made?

GOODFRIEND: I think they did—or at least they respected how I characterized it. At that level, there was a lot less inclination from supervisors to do the drafting themselves. There's a psychological effect when you're operating in something of a void, like I was. You start asking yourself, "Is it even worth doing an EER? What happens if I don't submit one?"

By early April, I hadn't yet drafted anything. I was still in regular contact with HR—in fact, I was serving on the panel that reviews EERs, providing feedback and staying engaged with the process. HR reached out and said, "We haven't received your draft yet—how are things going?" That served as a strong prompt for me to put something together quickly.

I submitted a draft to my nominal supervisor, who was the Deputy CIO, as well as text for the reviewer. Just for clarity, the EER—Employee Evaluation Report—has three main parts: the self-assessment written by the rated officer, a rating statement from the supervisor evaluating performance and potential based on established criteria, and a brief reviewer statement from the supervisor's supervisor, providing context on the rater–rated relationship and any overarching observations. In my case, the reviewer was the Principal Deputy CIO.

My self-assessment covered the period from the end of my tenure at eDiplomacy through the months when I was unassigned. I focused on how we had laid the groundwork in eDiplomacy for a more human-centered approach to technology in the Department. We had been advocating for and implementing tools and structures—like the Human-Centered Design Lab and various people-focused working groups—not just for the sake of technology itself, but to empower users. Instead of being handed tools and told, "This is what you'll use," we worked with colleagues—actual diplomatic professionals—on how to use these tools effectively in pursuit of their missions.

We couldn't have predicted something like the pandemic, which closed offices, confined people to their homes, halted travel, and posed real health risks. Diplomats couldn't return to the U.S., and their replacements couldn't travel out. The world came to a standstill.

But even if we hadn't anticipated that scale of disruption, we had laid the foundations that allowed the Department to keep functioning. The tools were already there. Our work had focused on how to use them—how to operate from anywhere, under any conditions. It wasn't about handing out a "crisis tech kit" in the moment; it was about being ready for a crisis.

We'd talked in earlier assignments about crisis management—not having to suddenly learn new tools, but already knowing how to work with what you have. Using your human networks, accelerating when necessary, slowing down when appropriate—but doing it with continuity, not chaos. That's what we did in London during the metro bombing, in Syria during civil unrest when the embassy closed—working regionally, remotely, staying engaged. In each case, we built ad hoc virtual groups to support the work.

But now, we were in a position where the entire department could operate this way—collegially, using familiar tools. For those uncomfortable with the tech, there were colleagues nearby who could help. That was the purpose of the global framework of virtual working groups we had set up: to make sure no post was isolated, and no officer had to navigate it alone.

We even had to push for some rapid policy changes—so that not just officers, but Locally Employed Staff could access the necessary platforms from outside embassy walls. It wasn't about adopting new technology. It was about applying the right policy to ensure continuity of work under radically changed conditions.

Looking back, by the time I wrote my EER in April 2020, I was actually able to draw on quite a few developments—ways in which the work we had done during my time at eDiplomacy had laid a foundation, and how I continued building on that afterward. I was still engaging with NGOs, with think tanks, and working closely with colleagues.

After March, I also started collaborating with the University of Arizona in Tucson, my undergraduate alma mater, on projects related to the application of the humanities. I worked with Public Affairs, participating as one of the diplomats they could draw on for their virtual exchange programs. These programs had traditionally been carried out in person—bringing in high school students from other countries to Washington, having U.S. students travel abroad, and hosting simulations of diplomatic scenarios at the Marshall Conference Center. Now, all of that had shifted to a virtual environment.

And we were ready. We were able to pivot our engagement—from high-level diplomatic discussions to exchange programs that gave high school students the opportunity to see diplomacy in action—from physical to virtual environments, even in the midst of a global pandemic. These efforts directly informed what I included in my work requirements and evaluation.

Then summer came, and a new Deputy CIO came on board sometime afterward. I reached out to him and said, essentially, "I'm here and happy to support any projects where I can be helpful." From that, we were able to put together a Y tour focused on the realignment of IRM's Budget, Management, and Planning (BMP) Directorate.

I have to say, even now, I've never met the new DCIO in person. That was one of the real challenges—especially for him, stepping into a senior role without being able to meet his team in person. All engagement had to happen virtually. But that situation also set the stage for what came next.

This new phase marked a shift away from pure self-direction. We now had a structured Y tour, intended to last for about a year—roughly from September 2020 until sometime the following summer, maybe July.

The challenge was significant. Not only were people still unable to come into the office due to the pandemic, but now they were being told that the entire directorate's organizational structure would be changing. Some offices would cease to exist. New offices would be created. And by the end of the process, many staff members would be in different roles than the ones they started in.

It became a matter of change management. And with change comes resistance. Often, people don't believe change will really happen. They continue working as they always have—until the change becomes undeniable. And then there may be resentment, frustration, even anger.

Part of what I was tasked with was helping to implement the changes recommended for the directorate—to actually carry them through. The goal was to have the realignment completed by the end of the calendar year. That meant new positions would be created, staff placed in those roles, and by January, we would have a functioning supervisory structure in place.

This raised understandable concerns—people wanted to know how the changes would affect their rank, their grade, their responsibilities. It required a great deal of communication and explanation—why the changes were happening, what steps staff needed to take, and the expected timeline for completion.

It also tied back to something I've mentioned before: the importance of employees taking an active role in shaping their own work requirements in collaboration with their supervisors. One of the frustrations in BMP was that the staff didn't feel they had been part of shaping the process. The realignment was driven by a recommendation from the Office of the Inspector General—an OIG assessment that had taken place around 2017. We were now in 2020. The plans had been developed and communicated, but not everyone felt they had been included in how those changes were designed or delivered.

Like I said, I had thought that when I left eDiplomacy in 2019—even while I was still there in 2018 and early 2019—I had already been involved with others in developing what the future state of BMP might look like. I was present at the town hall where the plan was presented to employees, which I think was in early 2019.

And yet, by 2020, people were saying, “No one told us about this.” There had been a lull. Things hadn’t moved forward visibly. And maybe part of that was denial—something that often accompanies change. Unless you're actually seeing changes happen rapidly and right in front of you, it’s hard to believe they’re real.

But that said, I think there was also a genuine feeling among the rank and file that they hadn’t been part of shaping what was coming. They didn’t fully understand what they were being asked to do or the logic behind it. And again, you have to remember the broader context. We’ve talked before about the efforts to reshape the State Department under the new administration and under Secretary Tillerson. There was a similar sentiment then—that maybe the changes were justified, but nobody was communicating with the staff about them. There was a lack of clarity about what was happening.

There were working groups that had been putting together ideas for reform—plans for what might come next. But nothing actually materialized from those efforts. Some of the concepts were retained for future implementation, but they never went anywhere at the time. I think there was a similar sentiment in this case. Even though the BMP realignment had been laid out, even though people were told what was going to happen and why, there was still skepticism that it would ever actually happen as described.

But my role was to make sure that it did happen, and to do so according to the plan that had already been laid out.

To do that, I had to make sure I understood the rationale behind the reorganization—what the new directorate would look like, how the pieces fit together, and why they were designed that way. I had to understand which positions were being moved, what offices were being closed, and which ones were being created.

No new positions were being added to the directorate. It was a realignment, not an expansion. Some positions had been vacant for a long time, and within the directorate, there was a sense of frustration—“We’ve had empty offices, and we haven’t been allowed to hire because of this plan that’s always supposed to be implemented at some point in the future.”

My job was to engage with colleagues within BMP, to understand their concerns, and to lay out clearly not only what was going to happen, but why it was important that they be involved in shaping it. This was a significant change. One of the first things that had to happen was drafting new work requirements. Even though the organizational structure had been outlined, that wasn’t enough. We still needed to write and submit new position descriptions to HR, describing what each position entailed.

And people couldn't just sit back and assume that the descriptions would be written for them. If they did that, they'd end up asking later why they hadn't been consulted. I wanted to make sure that message was communicated clearly—not just to the staff, but also to leadership: that we needed staff to be actively engaged in this process. Because in the end, everything starts with those position descriptions.

At this point, it really came down to the position descriptions. We were also revising the section of the Foreign Affairs Manual that describes what the offices and the directorate actually do. Keeping with the spirit of openness and transparency that we had been championing, we made both the current and proposed drafts available internally, in a collaborative virtual workspace, so that everyone could see them. Even though the comment period on the draft had technically closed, we reopened it. Employees in BMP had said they hadn't seen it—they weren't sure whether it was accurate. So we said, "Everything's open. This is the structure as it's going to be. Here's the rationale. If there are things missing, if there are elements that should be included, now is your time to speak up."

In a way, it echoed what I'd done earlier with the Open Government Plan—putting it online, making it transparent, allowing for open engagement. I tried to manage this change with transparency. And I got the sense that, for some, that was actually unsettling. As we've noted before, there's a fear that if you make everything visible, people will have concerns. But it's far easier to address those concerns early, when people still feel they can influence the outcome—when they feel that their input matters, that it's being heard and incorporated, and that they are shaping their own roles.

We encouraged office directors and division chiefs to engage their staff directly and to develop the new position descriptions collaboratively. The idea was that while these descriptions needed to reflect the needs of the restructured directorate, they should also reflect the experience and insight of the people actually doing the work. That way, employees would be shaping what they were going to be doing moving forward.

Naturally, some questions arose. People asked, "Who's going to be doing this role, which doesn't seem to exist anymore?" And we'd have to explain: either that function was no longer part of BMP's mandate, or it was being shifted to another office, or, in some cases, it was simply being phased out as no longer necessary.

Another important point we emphasized was that positions weren't being shaped around the people currently in them, but rather around what the office needed moving forward. If a position would now require additional training or certifications, then that training would be provided. We were also clear that position descriptions would be sent forward for proper classification, so we couldn't promise in advance what the grade level would be. Some positions might end up graded higher based on added responsibilities. But if someone was assigned to a position that ended up graded lower than their current grade, we reassured them that, for the purposes of the reorganization, they would retain their grade and salary. For example, if a GS-13 moved into a position graded at GS-12, they would remain a GS-13 as long as they stayed in that role. If they moved later to a different position, then the grade of that new role would apply. But as part of this restructuring, we made sure that people weren't penalized in terms of pay.

All of this was happening, of course, in the middle of a pandemic lockdown. People were working from home. They were participating in meetings without knowing when—or if—they'd be returning to the office. They were doing their best to stay engaged and were relying on the information we were putting out.

We tried to maintain strong communication. Beyond the initial town hall where the restructuring was explained, I met virtually with each office and each division to address their specific questions. We circulated weekly status reports to everyone, tracking the progress of the transition and sharing what to expect next.

I drew on experiences from previous assignments—especially those involving crisis management or complex coordination—to ensure there was an ongoing sense of engagement. We created an internal website where people could access historical materials. For example, I uploaded the original Office of Inspector General (OIG) report that had prompted this change. That way, staff could see the initial recommendations, the documents submitted to the Under Secretary for Management, and the timeline of how the realignment plan had developed. It also jogged people's memories—they remembered having seen these ideas presented before, even if they hadn't taken them seriously at the time.

We kept the conversation going. Staff knew their office directors were working with them to revise the position descriptions, and they could see their input being reflected. The draft FAM revisions were posted for feedback. It was an intense period—especially from September through December 2020.

And it had to be. The goal was to have all the revised position descriptions submitted by the end of the calendar year, so that starting January 1, the new structure would be reflected across the board. That meant systems would correctly show which positions reported to which supervisors, using the new office codes and symbols. We wanted the transition to be clean.

We also had people stepping forward to help. Some volunteered to handle the back-end work—getting the organizational codes in everyone's email addresses updated to reflect the new offices. Others offered to update the intranet page with the new org chart and ensure everyone was listed correctly under their new assignments.

Instead of resisting change or denying it would happen, people now recognized it was real. And many of them wanted to help make the transition as smooth as possible. They didn't want to be caught in a situation where colleagues didn't know how to contact them or weren't sure which office they were part of.

By January 1, we had successfully transitioned to the new structure. It took a lot of communication, constant responsiveness, and being available to talk through concerns. People knew they could reach out and get honest answers. We also held open virtual lunch sessions where anyone could join and ask questions—about what the changes meant for them, for their contractors, for their work. It was open-ended, but it built trust.

For the office moving forward, we were happy to discuss anything—why this was happening, what it meant for people's roles, all of it. And again, you could see different personality types in how people approached these conversations. I was fairly comfortable taking questions on the fly. I'd start with a bit of context-setting and then open things up—"What are your questions? Let's talk about them." Others preferred a more controlled format. They gave presentations without leaving space for questions, asking instead that any concerns be submitted in writing and followed up later.

So we tried to strike a balance between formal and informal approaches. Part of that involved making people feel comfortable speaking up—especially in group settings. Some were hesitant to say anything in front of their supervisors, or didn't want to speak if their supervisors weren't present. They were concerned about being perceived as critical or out of step.

A big part of fostering a collaborative culture meant encouraging that openness—creating an environment where people felt that what they said would be respected. We were in late 2020, moving into early 2021. The November 2020 election had just taken place, and while there was a change in administration, the BMP realignment had already been completed. There was no longer a question of whether it would happen; it was done.

But with the new administration came a renewed focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access—DEIA—which I was glad to see. In some ways, our approach to the BMP realignment dovetailed naturally with those principles. We recognized that our workforce was made up of people with a wide range of backgrounds, skills, and perspectives, and we wanted to ensure that everyone could participate meaningfully in the process. People needed to see their input being considered, their concerns addressed. The idea was that by the end, they could look at this new structure and say, "Yes, I had a part in shaping that."

Of course, the realignment was a top-down initiative—it had been directed from above—but the implementation was shaped from within. We drew on employee input to ensure that the result worked for everyone involved. That engagement continued into February 2021 as we tied up loose ends and confirmed that everything was functioning as intended.

As I mentioned earlier, a Y tour is meant to be time-bound, with a clear beginning and end. This one had a defined scope, and we saw it through. It was a successful process, and I believe the keys to that success were communication and transparency.

At the same time that BMP was going through this realignment, two other directorates within IRM were also restructuring. There were questions about what those new structures would look like and how they would interact with the newly realigned BMP. But from the outside, those other processes appeared much more opaque than what we were doing in BMP. In fact, that restructuring—which, to be fair, began a bit later—was still ongoing well into 2023.

I hope that in the course of their efforts, those teams can draw some lessons from what we did in BMP. I know that some members of the current team in IRM have been looking at our experience to see how it might help guide their own realignment work.

As we moved forward, one of the issues that came up was organizational morale. Every year, the federal government conducts the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, and...

Q: Right. This is well known within the Department, and it's also been published in the Foreign Service Journal. It's covered by the wider federal workforce media as well—not just State Department outlets, but also newspapers and other publications that track government-wide surveys. They ask all the executive agencies about job satisfaction, morale, how happy people are in their work, and so on. And I didn't mean to steal the thunder there.

GOODFRIEND: You're absolutely right. It's a well-known annual exercise. The questions have changed over time, but the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey—or FEVS—is a major source of data, and people pay attention to it.

At that point, I think there wasn't so much concern as a sense of wondering: "What can we actually do with this information," especially given the very unusual environment we were all in. People still weren't seeing each other in person. Like I mentioned, the new DCIO hadn't met anyone face-to-face, and a new CIO was coming on board as well.

The DCIO asked me if I could take on the FEVS results—analyze them and see what lessons we might draw, especially in terms of concerns raised by employees within IRM and BMP, and how we might respond. Given the emphasis we'd already placed on communication during the BMP realignment, this was a natural extension. So I began that work after the realignment was completed. One phase flowed into the next.

For me, this tied into something I'd been interested in ever since returning to Washington—understanding the internal culture of the State Department. I wanted to learn how decisions were made, how information flowed, how people understood the institution they were a part of, and how we could work more effectively and collegially.

The FEVS results offered data on that. They gave us insight into how employees saw themselves, how they perceived the relevance of their work, how aligned they felt with the Department's overall mission, and what they thought of leadership—particularly how leadership communicated with them. These were exactly the kinds of questions that had been on my mind from the beginning, especially in terms of evaluating my own role and contributions during the previous year. How did that work connect with the Department's broader goals?

And while this kind of self-reflection was second nature to me—something I had done throughout my career—I realized that for many of my colleagues, it wasn't necessarily part of their routine. They knew what they were doing in their own roles, but they didn't always see how it fit into the larger framework. Often, they didn't even know what their colleagues in the next office were doing, or how their work was connected.

So this became an opportunity: to use the FEVS results to understand employee concerns, to see whether those concerns aligned with people's lived experiences, and to identify realistic, practical steps we could take—at least within BMP—to address weaknesses and build on our strengths.

But to do that, we needed to come up with something actionable. Talking about the results is important—it raises awareness—but at the end of the day, people want to see outcomes. They're willing to participate in discussions because they hope their ideas and concerns will lead to real change. And many had just experienced that during the BMP realignment—their input had had a tangible impact on what was ultimately implemented.

Now we had something more tangible: survey results. The question was, what could we do with them to improve morale, engagement, or whatever else had come up?

We held another town hall—this would have been in March or April of 2021, since the previous one had been in September 2020. In this session, we presented the survey findings and explained that we'd be setting up focus groups to explore them in more depth.

If I recall correctly, there were five main focus areas in the FEVS data—leadership, communication, recognition, and a couple of others I can't name off the top of my head. We created five corresponding focus groups, each with about five people. We tried to include a mix of office directors and staff from different levels, so the conversations would reflect a broad range of perspectives.

What quickly became clear was that communication was central to many of the concerns. Recognition for good work was another recurring issue—whether people felt that their contributions were acknowledged appropriately, or conversely, that poor performance wasn't being addressed.

There were also mixed perceptions of leadership. Some employees felt very seen and appreciated by their supervisors, while others felt there was a gap—that leadership didn't really know their teams, or didn't engage meaningfully with the work being done on the ground.

There were still challenges when it came to people feeling comfortable speaking up about their work or participating in discussions. I think I've mentioned this before—even during our open-door virtual lunch hours, people often hesitated to speak in front of others. So we started asking: what can we do that doesn't require a lot of resources, but might have a significant impact on the culture of the organization?

We wanted to create an environment where people felt more at ease engaging with one another, where they could hear from colleagues, and get a better sense of what was happening across the office, the directorate, and the bureau. We hoped that would build their confidence—not only in talking about their work but also in preparing their evaluation input and communicating with leadership. It was also about breaking down that hesitation some people felt about sharing what they do with others.

So we started designing an actionable program that would create a space for regular engagement. A place where people could share what they're working on, get feedback from colleagues and office directors, and participate in an ongoing dialogue. The idea was to normalize that kind of interaction—to make it a standard part of our culture that people could talk about their work, offer and receive feedback, and know that leadership was listening.

By this point, we were getting into September 2021, and I was also starting to think about my own timeline. A key part of making something like this successful is handing it off properly. A Y tour, by design, has a clear beginning and end. But something like shaping workplace culture doesn't really end. You might create an environment that encourages openness, but if leadership doesn't continue to engage, if people don't feel that their contributions in that space are valued, then the space becomes empty, barren, and abandoned.

At that stage, we had the Human Centered Design Lab available, and I brought them in. I didn't want this to be solely based on my perspective or the work of our initial groups. I had ideas, certainly—but I wasn't going to be around to see them through. The Lab's mandate was specifically geared toward applying human-centered methods. They could draw on collaborative input and help structure experimentation and testing—developing focus groups and putting potential solutions into practice.

We had already conducted initial focus groups and generated a report, and while it was implementable, there was still some hesitation from leadership. That's when the Design Lab stepped in. They organized their own set of focus groups, which was a good move. It gave us a second, institutional perspective—one that could continue after my departure. They were positioned to work with IRM leadership and office directors in a structured way, and their involvement helped reinforce that employee input was being taken seriously.

At the same time, BMP had created a new unit focused on DEIA—Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access—and assigned a dedicated officer to lead that work. I saw an opportunity to connect all of these efforts: inclusion, transparency, access, and engagement. I reached out to her to see how she might carry some of this forward after I stepped away.

Once the new year came around, I felt the pieces were in place for a proper handoff. I had to decide between the April or September retirement course. I knew I couldn't go past September, and once I'd made the decision, I committed to the April date.

I wrapped things up and retired at the end of April—just over a year ago from today. I continued to participate remotely through the end of March, tying up loose ends and helping with the transition.

And as something of an epilogue: the Office of eDiplomacy—which had once been at the forefront of these initiatives—is, to some extent, now being dismantled.

The Human Centered Design Lab—which I had hoped would institutionalize this effort and carry it forward—now has no personnel. And the DEIA officer I had brought in to continue the work has since left the State Department. I say that with some mild chagrin, because all the structures I helped put in place, the ones I handed the project over to, are now gone.

And I can say with a fair degree of confidence that the initiative itself, to improve communication within BMP, is no longer moving forward.

That said—and I think this reflects something we've touched on throughout our conversation this past year—many different seeds were planted in this direction. They've taken root in other ways, in other places. The ideas have become institutionalized across different parts of the Department, even if this particular implementation didn't last.

More importantly, leadership across the Department continues to speak in the kinds of terms I've tried to emphasize throughout my career: the need for transparency, the importance of valuing what our workforce brings to the mission, and the centrality of human engagement. Finding ways for people to connect, to share experiences, to speak with their own voices—that's become more and more part of the norm.

These trends, of course, ebb and flow with different Secretaries and different administrations. But the general direction has remained, and to some extent, it's been made easier by the very technologies you and I are using right now to have this conversation. These tools have helped broaden participation and bring in a wider range of voices across the Department.

Transparency remains a challenge—for everyone. So does creating mechanisms for real engagement, where perspectives are not just expressed but seen and considered. There's still work to be done there.

But as far as the expectations among colleagues—how they engage with one another, how they share and communicate, whether internally or publicly through platforms like social media—I do feel that many of the values that inspired me throughout my career are now being championed more broadly.

So yes, this specific project, within this specific office, did fall apart after I left—for a number of reasons. But the broader movement, the general trajectory of the Department, is one I'm proud of.

And that's something I can walk away from with a real sense of satisfaction.

So—that's it.

Q: Well, sure, if this concludes the Foreign Service part. Do you have plans? Or are you currently working in areas where you develop these talents and skills as post _____?

GOODFRIEND: Yes. I think I mentioned earlier today that I'd been engaging with the University of Arizona, especially during the period when I was unassigned. I stayed in regular contact with them. That relationship had actually been rekindled a few years earlier—maybe around 2017 or 2018.

The University of Arizona would occasionally send representatives to Washington, D.C., to meet with alumni. Someone there heard that I was a U of A alumnus, and I was invited to lunch along with another graduate. That lunch restarted the relationship. I talked about what I'd been doing and how much I valued the humanities education I received at the university.

In many ways, diplomacy is one of the careers that directly applies the humanities as a core job skill. You're engaging with other cultures, understanding different languages, histories, and artistic traditions. You draw on that cultural awareness to build rapport, represent your own values effectively, and understand the values of your host country.

I shared that perspective with the university representative, and continued to engage with others there—including the relatively new Dean of the College of Humanities. He had recently launched a degree program in Applied Humanities, which I found very exciting. It was built around the idea that the humanities aren't just academic—they're deeply relevant in one's daily life and one's career.

Too often, people study the humanities because they're personally interested, but then feel pressure to pursue something more "practical" if they want a job. This new program was a direct challenge to that thinking. It affirmed that the humanities are applied—and that they give you the tools to thrive in an increasingly automated and AI-driven world.

As more technical or process-based work becomes automated, it's our understanding of the human element that becomes essential: knowing how to craft a narrative, how to relate to others, how to lead a team, and how to collaborate effectively. These are exactly the kinds of themes we've been talking about today—recognizing the value of each person's contribution, connecting individual work to a larger purpose, and articulating a vision that brings people together.

Those are all skills rooted in the humanities, in my view. The dean and I had a lot to talk about, and I also engaged with others at the university. In 2018, they honored me as Alumnus of the Year for the College of Humanities.

I had taken my humanities degrees and applied them in a very direct way throughout my career—and I was willing to talk about that, to champion that. That's part of why I was named the Alumnus of the Year for the College of Humanities in 2018.

I've continued to support the University of Arizona's efforts in this space. One example was helping establish a scholarship in Applied Humanities, with the hope that it would keep its focus on the principle that the humanities are not just academic—they're something we apply in our daily lives, if not directly in our careers. And I genuinely believe that the careers of the future will be built on a foundation in the humanities.

That relationship with the university continued, and in 2021—maybe early 2022—the dean reached out and asked if I would contribute to a volume they were putting together. Not on applied humanities this time, but on entrepreneurial humanities. That gave me pause. I had to take a step back and ask, "What exactly does that mean?"

We live in a world where terms like "entrepreneurship" carry a lot of cultural weight. There's an assumption that value means economic value, or that entrepreneurship has to involve starting a business or selling something. But when I thought more about it, I returned to the original meaning of the word entrepreneur—someone who undertakes something. There's risk involved, but the goal is to build something of value. It's not necessarily monetary.

And from that perspective, I could absolutely see diplomacy as a form of entrepreneurial humanities. As diplomats, we take risks constantly—going into unstable environments, engaging in negotiations that may well fail—but we do it because we believe in the value of what might be achieved. Often that value isn't material—it's about stability, mutual understanding, and, yes, even peace.

Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I considered referencing the film Miss Congeniality in my paper. There's a scene where Sandra Bullock's character, an undercover cop posing as a beauty pageant contestant, is asked what she most wants to see in the world. All the contestants say, "World peace," one after another. Then Bullock's character says, "Harsher penalties for repeat offenders." No applause. She adds, "…and world peace," and then the audience cheers.

The line is played as a joke—world peace as an empty platitude. But for diplomats, world peace isn't a throwaway. It's literally in our job description. Our work requirements often boil down to promoting international stability. That's the goal.

So, in my chapter for The Entrepreneurial Humanities, which is being published by Routledge—maybe even as we speak—I reflect on diplomacy in those terms. I use the United Nations as an example of a diplomatic startup. Think about it: in the middle of

World War II, a handful of countries rallied around this idea of preventing future global conflict. They launched the concept at great risk. By 1949, it had become an operational institution. And despite many challenges, it's been remarkably successful at maintaining global stability. Wars have still occurred, but not at the scale or destructiveness seen before its founding.

("Diplomacy as Entrepreneurial Humanities" in "The Entrepreneurial Humanities" Chapter - June 7, 2023 - https://books.google.com/books/publisher/content?id=A1G_EAAAQBAJ&pg=PT33&img=1&zoom=3&hl=en&bul=1&sig=ACfU3U2YQ_PrTkp5_95PgdFsdf7nIyUJbg&w=1280)

I've remained involved with the university. I've served as a guest speaker in classes, especially one on intercultural competence that's part of the Applied Humanities curriculum. The last time I spoke, it was midnight my time, just so I could contribute to the session.

Right now, I'm living in Cyprus. I've been here almost a year. And when I had to put together a business card for myself recently, and wanted to include a title, I chose "humanist."

I had considered using the title "entrepreneurial humanist" on my business card, but the challenge of translating that—especially capturing the nuance—was daunting. Even "humanist" on its own can provoke chuckles or confusion. In Greek, for instance, trying to convey what it really means is difficult. What does it mean to be a humanist? What does it mean to apply the humanities?

That question is at the heart of what I'm thinking about now—whether there's a space, or a country even, where a humanities-based approach could help bridge divisions. Here in Cyprus, for example, we have two major language communities—Greek-speaking Cypriots and Turkish-speaking Cypriots—physically divided by an internal border. Yes, it's possible to cross, but there's a great deal of hesitancy. There are very few regular meeting spaces. People gather occasionally for events in the UN-monitored buffer zone—the Green Zone—a literal no man's land in the 21st century. NGOs and international organizations host bi-communal activities there. But otherwise, each side grows up largely in isolation from the other.

Next year marks 50 years since the events of 1974. An entire generation has grown up without regular contact. Children no longer understand each other's cultures the way their grandparents once did. Many no longer see the need to learn each other's languages.

This, to me, is a place where applied humanities might make a difference. I don't know whether I'll actually accomplish anything, but I'm now living in Limassol. After the summer, I plan to move to Nicosia, where I expect more opportunities. As the capital, it's more of a hub—more NGOs, more cultural initiatives, and more potential for a humanities-based approach to intercommunal engagement.

Interestingly, I have a family member here who's an academic organizing a conference on globalization and the commercialization of religion. When I showed her my business card and we got to talking, she suggested I submit a paper. We come at this issue from different angles—hers more grounded in religious thought, mine in a humanities framework—but there's overlap.

She asked if I'd consider writing something. So this week, I need to finish my abstract and begin drafting a paper, probably on the role of applied humanities in fostering a more constructive form of globalization—one that counterbalances commercialization. To me, globalization isn't inherently commercial; it's an accelerator. If we're in a commercial environment, globalization amplifies that. But if we embed humanities more deeply—especially in education—it could amplify human values instead.

Right now, many parents are skeptical about their children studying the humanities. Humanities departments are shrinking, perceived as impractical or irrelevant to careers. But as we discussed earlier, I believe the jobs and value of the future will be built on a humanities foundation. If I can express that clearly, I'd like to present it this September.

("Adjusting the Focus: The Role of Applied Humanities in Rectifying the Commercialization of Religion in a Globalized World" Conference paper published in "Business, Economy and Commerce in the Name of God" - August 2024 - https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-71762-8_5)

Apart from that, I've also had time for more personal pursuits—things I wouldn't have been able to do while in government service. Family history projects, travel, and participating in things I care about. And in a way, I'm grateful that the system forces us to "retire" at 65. Otherwise, I might have stayed until 75 and missed the opportunity to do these things while I still can.

That's been my year since leaving the Foreign Service.

One other development: I may have another book coming out. While I was posted in Hungary, I met a scientist—his field is chemistry, and he must be in his late seventies or early eighties now. After publishing many books on chemistry, he turned to writing about scientists—their lives, their human stories. Nobel laureates, émigrés, Hungarian figures in science. More recently, he and his wife began documenting statues—science-themed statues in Hungary, New York, Moscow—photographing them and exploring what they reveal about those societies.

After I left Hungary in 2015, he visited the U.S., and we met. I'd read some of his work, and he was doing research for a book on New York. During that visit, he asked if he could interview me for a possible article or book.

I told him I'd have to check—I was still with the State Department. I received approval to do the interview as long as it focused on open government, which was what I was working on at the time—not on U.S. policy toward Hungary. He agreed, though of course our conversations drifted into related areas—transparency, governance, comparative experiences.

After the interviews, I submitted the manuscript for clearance, and it was denied. So the project was shelved. He held on to it.

Now that I'm retired, the material no longer represents the perspective of a serving official, and there's nothing classified in it. In fact, much of it still holds up well—especially the reflections on transparency and open government, which continue to resonate.

He recently found a publisher—Central European University Press—and they've agreed to publish it. It may be coming out this summer, possibly in June or July.

("Open Government, Open Diplomacy" - June 6, 2023 - https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789633866092/open-government-open-diplomacy)

Q: Interesting. Of course, once you begin editing your final transcript, you can put hyperlinks to these books in.

GOODFRIEND: Yeah, I'll definitely do that. And if I manage to get this new paper written for the conference in September—and if it ends up being published—I'll link to that as well.

Q: Absolutely. Anything online that exists online, you can hyperlink.

GOODFRIEND: I'll do that. I've been keeping busy. I'm still very engaged—my evenings are often full two or three nights a week, because I continue to participate in events and conversations happening in the U.S. Right now, there's a seven-hour time difference. It's a little after nine o'clock here in Cyprus, which means it's around two in the afternoon back in the States. So that's often how I spend my evenings—connecting globally. And I'm enjoying it.

So, what happens next? That's where we are with this story.

Q: Well, all right. In that case, we'll end the interview here. And I'll talk to you offline about the next steps. All right, okay. Okay.

End of interview

Addendum: Selected Online Sources Referenced in the Oral History

Internet and Diplomacy (1999)

· The Dynamics of Collaboration – The Internet as a Tool in Diplomacy (André Goodfriend's Talk to the Secretary's Open Forum, March 22, 1999)

🔗 https://1997-2001.state.gov/dept/openforum/proceedings/mar22-99/a_goodfriend.html

Summary: Report on André Goodfriend's presentation on the role of the Internet in fostering collaboration in diplomacy.

· Proceedings of the Virtual Forum on the Role of the UN in the Twenty-First Century (June 28 – July 31, 1999)

🔗 https://1997-2001.state.gov/issues/990901_ioforum_proced.html

Summary: Summary of an internet-based virtual forum hosted by the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs to discuss themes for the Millennium Summit and UN General Assembly.

Syria and Regional Context (2011)

· Wikipedia: A Gay Girl in Damascus (June 2011)

🔗 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Gay_Girl_in_Damascus

Summary: Overview of the 2011 blog that gained global attention before being revealed as a hoax.

· Ambassador Robert Ford in Hama (YouTube, July 8, 2011)

🔗 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1FcCm9eMqM

Summary: Video of Ambassador Ford's visit to Hama, Syria, during rising civil unrest. His presence was welcomed by demonstrators, but interpreted by Syrian authorities as U.S. support for protests.

Hungary: Embassy Statements and Civil Society (2013–2018)

· Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Report for Budapest (ISP-I-14-03A) (September 2013)

🔗 https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/isp-i-14-03a_1.pdf

Summary: Routine inspection report for the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, conducted shortly after André Goodfriend's arrival as Deputy Chief of Mission.

· U.S. Embassy Statement on Horthy Bust Unveiling (November 7, 2013)

🔗 https://web.archive.org/web/20140111133929/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_11072013.html

Summary: Press statement addressing the unveiling of a Miklós Horthy bust near the embassy, emphasizing the dangers of hate speech and the responsibility of leaders to condemn it.

· "Talk with the Chargé" Webchat (Archived) (December 20, 2013)

🔗 https://web.archive.org/web/20140305063806/http://ircblog.usembassy.hu/2013/12/20/webchat-m-André-goodfriend-kovetsegi-ugyvivovel/

Summary: Transcript of an interactive online session where André Goodfriend, as Chargé d'Affaires, answered questions from the Hungarian public.

· "Civil Voices" Blog Homepage (Archived) (January 2014)

🔗 https://web.archive.org/web/20140707193309/http://blogs.usembassy.gov/goodfriend/2014/01/

Summary: Embassy blog launched by Goodfriend to promote dialogue with Hungarian society.

· Blog Post: Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Learning from History (January 20, 2014)

🔗 https://web.archive.org/web/20140707185907/http://blogs.usembassy.gov/goodfriend/2014/01/20/martin-luther-king-jr-day-and-learning-from-history/

Summary: Reflections on MLK's legacy and the symbolism of monuments, tied to debates on historical memory in Hungary.

· U.S. Embassy Statement on German Occupation Monument (April 22, 2014)

🔗 https://web.archive.org/web/20140526043856/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_04222014.html

Summary: Statement highlighting the importance of dialogue on historical memory, in response to the planned monument commemorating victims of the German occupation of Hungary.

· YouTube: Yellow Star Houses Commemoration (June 26, 2014)

🔗 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Lp4seEggII&t=1s

Summary: Goodfriend speaks on Carl Lutz, the role of consuls, and U.S. Embassy efforts during the Holocaust in Hungary.

· OSCE Statement on Intimidation of Civil Society and Media in Hungary (June 19, 2014)

🔗 https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/c/120520.pdf

Summary: OSCE concerns regarding Hungary's treatment of civil society groups and independent media.

· YouTube: Flag Lowering at the Marine House Táncsics Property (August 27, 2014)

🔗 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSvI9ppGRNc&t=290s

Summary: Ceremony marking the relocation of U.S. Marines from the historic Táncsics property in Budapest.

· President Obama's Remarks at the Clinton Global Initiative (September 23, 2014)

🔗
https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative

Summary: Speech emphasizing the global importance of civil society, explicitly citing Hungary.

· American Renaissance Report on Banned Identitarian Conference (October 5, 2014)

🔗 https://www.amren.com/news/2014/10/report-from-budapest/

Summary: White nationalist publication's report on a banned identitarian conference in Budapest.

· U.S. Embassy Press Release on Visa Ineligibilities (October 18, 2014)

🔗
https://web.archive.org/web/20141230153750/http://hungary.usembassy.gov/pr_10182014.html

Summary: Embassy statement clarifying visa bans against individuals involved in corruption.

· Hungarian Media Photo Feature: Unexpected Handshake (November 6, 2014)

🔗 https://hvg.hu/itthon/20141106_Foto_Testbeszed_az_eletunk__amikor_Lazar

Summary: Report and photograph of a surprise handshake between Goodfriend and the Prime Minister's chief of staff in Parliament.

· *Hír* TV Video of Encounter with Ildikó Vida (November 10, 2014)

🔗 https://hirtv.hu/ahirtvhirei/vida-es-goodfriend-talalkozasa-nem-kell-lopni-itt-a-vagatlan-felvetel-1258096

Summary: Video of Goodfriend's encounter with the head of the Hungarian Tax Authority, amid corruption disputes.

· *Mandiner* Article on U.S. "Checklist" for Hungary (October 15, 2015)

🔗 https://mandiner.hu/belfold/2015/10/igy-csicskaztatna-amerika-az-orban-kormanyt-27-pontos-exkluziv-non-paper-a-mandineren

Summary: Hungarian media report on a leaked alleged "27-point checklist" of U.S. concerns regarding Hungary.

· Counter-Currents Article on "Future of Europe" Conference (May 23, 2018)

🔗 https://counter-currents.com/2018/05/the-future-of-europe-conference-focuses-on-migration-identity/

Summary: Far-right commentary on a 2018 Budapest conference on migration and identity, featuring Steve Bannon.

Open Government and Transparency (2016)

· YouTube: State Department's 2016 Open Government Plan Launch (September 15, 2016)

🔗 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riGGSw7ydDM&t=17s

Summary: State Department officials discuss Open Government initiatives and the drafting of the 2016 plan.

· State Department's Open Government Plan (2016)

🔗 https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Open-Government-Plan.pdf

Summary: Plan developed under Goodfriend's leadership as Senior Advisor to the Office of eDiplomacy, emphasizing transparency, participation, and collaboration.

- YouTube: The Importance of Open Government (October 4, 2016)

🔗 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHXY6rZZA_Y&t=166s

Summary: Officials explain the role of Open Government initiatives at the Department of State.

Later Writings and Publications (2023–2025)

- Book: Open Government, Open Diplomacy (June 6, 2023)

🔗 https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789633866092/open-government-open-diplomacy

Summary: Publication of István Hargittai's 2015 interview with Goodfriend, released in 2023.

- Chapter: "Diplomacy as Entrepreneurial Humanities" (June 7, 2023)

🔗https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003380665-4/diplomacy-entrepreneurial-humanities-andr%C3%A9-goodfriend

Summary: Goodfriend's contribution to The Entrepreneurial Humanities, exploring diplomacy in the context of applied humanities.

- Chapter: "Adjusting the Focus: The Role of Applied Humanities in Rectifying the Commercialization of Religion" (August 2024)

🔗 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-71762-8_5

Summary: Goodfriend's essay in Business, Economy and Commerce in the Name of God on the role of metaphor in shaping approaches to religion and monetization.

- Book: The Diamond Axis Bends But Does Not Break (May 2025)

🔗 https://kaskiado.hu/termek/the-diamond-axis-bends-but-does-not-break/

Summary: Coauthored with András Sándor Kocsis, this book blends cultural perspectives in discussing history, current issues, and the human role in shaping the future.