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

MATTHEW GOSHKO

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is February 3, 2025, and we are beginning our interview with Matthew Goshko. Matthew, we want to begin first with where and when you were born.

GOSHKO: I was saying in our pre-conversation, where I was born and how my family raised me had an impact on why I joined the Foreign Service. I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but only because, at the time, my father was a foreign correspondent and my parents were living in Lima, Peru. He was from Massachusetts while my mother was from Minnesota.

My mother had been sent to Carleton College by my grandparents who followed an adage that said, "if you send your daughter to a good local college, she will marry a good local boy." Instead, she met and married my father, who at the time was beginning his career as a journalist writing for a Minneapolis newspaper, the *Star Tribune*. They met and married and moved to Washington, DC when my dad joined the Washington Post's as a reporter for their Metro staff in 1961. My mom taught at Janney Elementary School in Northwest, DC, which is actually about a mile from my home in Washington. He moved from metro to the foreign desk and in 1965 he opened the Post's first Latin American bureau in Lima, Peru.

I have no memories of it, but we initially started off in Lima, Peru. I believe he was kicked out of Peru for covering a story about an arms sale that the Peruvian government shouldn't have been able to carry out—I'd have to check the exact details.

My first real memories were in Germany. We lived there for five years, in Bonn, the capital of West Germany at the time, [before reunification] before returning to the United States, where he covered the State Department. So, we were always exposed to international affairs. I grew up in the Washington, D.C., area and was interested in diplomacy and writing. At that time, D.C. was—well, it still is—a very divided town. You could often tell people's political allegiance by the cars they drove. If you drove a Volvo, you were a Democrat; if you drove a BMW, you were a Republican. In my father's case, we drove Fords because he believed in "buying American."

My dad was probably a second-generation American, I'm not clear whether his father was born in the States or Ukraine. I grew up in a liberal environment, and several of my friends went into the Peace Corps, among other things. I barely made it through college—

Q: Wait before we go too far into college. Where did you go to elementary and high school?

GOSHKO: I went to Larchmont Elementary, which no longer exists, in Montgomery County, Maryland. We were at the tail end of the Baby Boom, and that's where I first discovered that all politics is local. If you want to see a truly vicious political fight, go to a school board meeting.

Because of the contraction in the population of school age children, Montgomery County was closing and consolidating elementary and middle schools. When I was growing up, there were three elementary schools, all within walking distance. Two of them are now gone. Larchmont Elementary, for example, was closed and is now Grace Episcopal Day School.

At the time, the school was somewhat integrated, but children from diverse ethnicities all had one thing in common, parents who were able to afford homes in what was a neighborhood that was home to comfortably middle-class professionals who worked in local or federal government or other professional fields like teaching, journalism, dentistry, etc. It was also the era of school busing, which was another major issue. Like in many places, neighborhoods were divided along racial and economic lines, and when school busing was implemented — which I personally supported—it brought students from other school districts into ours. This led to an exodus of some students from some public schools to private schools. Racism played a role in that shift, I have a distinct memory of a kid who went to local private school asking me why, "I went to that [N word] school, referring to Larchmont Elementary

After elementary school I spent one year at Leland Junior High School, which also no longer exists and is now a park. As school enrollment declined, largely because tail-end generation baby boomers were having fewer children, schools continued to consolidate. Ironically some of the remaining schools in the district are now enormous, since the baby boomers' and Generation X children's children have filled them again. I was in the first class at a school called Westland, which had combined two former schools—Western Junior High School and Leland Junior High School. Are you from the area, or are you from elsewhere?

Q: I'm originally from New Jersey, but from 1977, I'm more or less from the area, because I started college here.

GOSHKO: I went to Bethesda Chevy Chase High School. If I remember correctly one of the school administrators was married to a Reagan official who was caught up in the Iran-Contra scandal. I just remember that being in the background. I first became aware of AIDS [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome] when I was in middle school at Leland, though at the time, no one had a sophisticated understanding of it.

Academically, I was a terrible student throughout school. My parents kept me back a year and I went to Sandy Spring Friends School in the hopes that a smaller school would help me improve my grades, but I continued to struggle. I was turned down by every college except the University of Maryland at College Park, where I went. It took me a long time to finish my degree, but ultimately, it was a really good and useful experience to learn how to navigate in a very large institution.

Q: One more question, during the time you went to school, elementary and high school, were you involved in other activities, any extracurricular that you know you may have liked more than the school itself?

GOSHKO: I always enjoyed theater. I occasionally participated in school newspaper activities, played some sports in high school, and enjoyed them, though I wasn't a great athlete. I swam and picked up lacrosse when I was at Sandy Spring, which I really enjoyed

There was always a tension between sports and theater, but I think I ultimately preferred theater. I wrestled Junior Varsity at Bethesda Chevy Chase. My friends and I played Dungeons & Dragons for a while when we were younger in elementary school and middle school, that sort of thing.

I was always interested in international affairs. We always had newspapers in the house, and discussions about world events were common. One of my father's longtime friends was a journalist, and every year, our families would hold a Seder together. It was always the long, traditional Seder, but with a political tone to it. To this day, even with all my travels, I'd describe myself as a "High Holiday Jew". I go to Yom Kippur services, and that's about it. But if the rabbi doesn't get political, I don't go back.

Q: One last question about elementary and high school. So, in essence, the Jewish community, there was not a significant part of your growing up, or your formation —

GOSHKO: This is coming out in my writing efforts. One of the things I'm trying to do is publish a story called *Kadish for Brooks Brothers*, which explores my mother's side of the family. They were German Jewish immigrants who came to the United States much earlier than my father's family. I recently discovered that Jews in Germany had connections to the early development of Reform Judaism. My mom's side of the family were very assimilated, we always had a Christmas tree, something my children, (My wife is Christian, and while according to Judaism my children are technically Christian we are raising them to be aware of both faiths) now refer to jokingly as a "Hanukkah bush."

On my father's side, they immigrated much later. One of the compromises in my parents' marriage was how they handled religious traditions. Maybe that's why I consider myself a "High Holiday Jew." My father, for example, accepted some of my mother's traditions, like celebrating a secular Christmas, but he was firm on observing Yom Kippur. We didn't go to services, but no one was going out socially. On Yom Kippur we stayed in the house. I remember we went to Hebrew School briefly. I didn't realize at the time just how Reformed it must have been, but I do recall the teacher explaining that when the Jews were wandering in the desert for forty years after the destruction of the stone tablets that the Ten Commandments were written on, they were sustained by manna, which, our teacher explained, could taste like anything, even pepperoni pizza, which is about as unkosher a meal as you can get.

I would attend bar mitzvahs for my cousins on my father's side, but they were nowhere near as lavish as the extravagant bar mitzvahs you see today. I think Adam Sandler's film *You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah* captures some of that current culture—it doesn't always paint my people in the best light, but it's done with humor.

When we lived in Germany, my siblings and I were still young and didn't fully grasp the weight of history. My parents would occasionally, in a joking manner, make comments like, "Watch out for this" or "Be mindful of that," but I didn't understand what they meant at the time. I knew we

were Jewish, but it wasn't something I thought much about as a child and certainly had no awareness of Nazi Germany

Looking back, I realize we had an early awareness of cultural distinctions. My father once told me a story about when I was in elementary school in Bonn, Germany. I showed him a picture of my class and pointed at different kids. I said, "He's from America," while pointing at an African American student. Then I pointed at another student and said, "He's also from America, but he's from Nigeria," So I assume that from a young age, I understood that people who looked similar could come from completely different backgrounds.

Q: Since you had an early life overseas, are there any important recollections from that?

GOSHKO: I really enjoyed being in Germany, and looking back, I realize that I had a great deal more freedom there that I didn't have in the United States. I now understand that it was because we went to school in a part of Bonn called Plittersdorf, a section of Bonn designated as the American Settlement after the war. It was where American diplomats and military personnel and their family lived, though we lived in the nearby town of Venusberg. Plittersdorf had the American schools, commissary, and Post Exchange (PX). At a very young age, like five or six, I could leave school by myself, walk to the PX and commissary area, buy some comic books, and then wander over to meet my older brother who went to another school for older children. I also enjoyed a great deal of freedom in our neighborhood in Venusberg.

I was either seven when we moved back to the U.S. I think I started in second grade at Larchmont. I remember it being a shock at one point when I realized I had lived in America longer than anywhere else. Two of my parents' closest long-term friends came from an embassy family in Bonn, (he was a Public Affairs Officer at what was then the United States Information Agency (USIA) and they remained close with my parents throughout their lives.

Q: So yeah, and then the other thing I wanted to ask you about your high school experience is your father, by that point is a journalist. Did that? Did his profession also open up doors for you in terms of your interest in international affairs or any other aspect of your family life.

GOSHKO: I think very much so. International affairs were always front and center in our household. My parents frequently hosted foreign diplomats posted in Washington. As a journalist, my father would invite them over, and my brother and I would bartend, wash dishes, and run food during these gatherings. He traveled often with the Secretary of State. I have one distinct memory of a time when he wasn't traveling. We got a call, and my mom said, "Dinner's going to be late—we're bombing Libya." My dad had called to let her know.

There was always a contrast between the incredible grace and charm of my parents' diplomatic guests and the frankness of their journalist friends. At one point—I think during the George H.W. Bush administration, though it could have been earlier— USIA blacklisted several American journalists from being able to participate in USIA speaker programs. My father was one of them. We were all very proud of that. Even though I became a Public Diplomacy (PD) officer, I initially resisted going into PD because of that issue. But I eventually discovered I could put my skills to better use there. [Note: Public Diplomacy became a career track, or "cone", for Foreign Service Officers when USIA was folded into the State Department in 1999.]

Another major influence was my father's writing. He was a strong editor, and he edited my papers very intensely—never in a cuddly way. That's something I picked up from him, though I've tried to soften my approach. Developing the writing and reporting skills of officers I supervise has always been an important part of my leadership ethos as I progressed in the Department.

To this day, even in retirement, some of my colleagues will send me drafts of their Employee Evaluation Reports (EERs) for feedback. I am happy to do it but always tell them I have three rules. First, they need to remember that I am not a gentle editor— they will get a lot of red ink in drafts, but I'll always talk them through it. Second, they have to promise to get a second opinion, and finally, they have to make sure my edits are both factually correct and authentic to their own "voice."

This is for two reasons. One, as a PD officer, I'm trained to write as an advocate – what is also known as spinning. But while you can put facts in the best possible light, your writing must always be firmly based in fact or you lose all credibility, whether that is with a foreign audience or a State Department promotion panel. Secondly, as someone who spent a career writing speeches and op-eds for others, as well as preparing them for media engagements, I know it is critical that the final product be authentic to that person's voice and style. It reenforces credibility, again be it with members of the media or a promotion panel, which will look at least five years of previous EERs when considering someone for promotion and comparing an employee against everyone else in their rank, some of whom were likely working on similar, if not the same issues as their colleagues who they are competing with for promotion. Authenticity and honesty are critical. Whether or not you split a gerund, not so much. Several of my colleagues have asked me to review their EERs many years after we no longer worked together.

My first Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Ambassador (ret.) Barry Walkley, spent a lot of time teaching Junior Officers (now called First and Second Tour Officers – or FASTOs in State Department jargon) the importance of the different styles of writing needed for different purposes in the Department. These include spot reports for fast breaking news items, longer analytical reports to help inform policy formulation, scene setters for visiting principals and persuasive pieces – like speeches and OpEds, needed to help shape public opinion. Each has its own purpose and unique style. And each needs to be drafted under often very tight deadlines. Reporting has to be timely, correct, clear and concise if it's going to help policy makers' decision making process.

In one of my most recent posts, I had an officer who struggled with deadlines. We were in a dangerous, high threat post, and the Operations Center (Ops) was closely watching developments. I asked for three paragraphs by 3 p.m. because Ops was monitoring the situation. By 10 p.m., I had received seventeen paragraphs. This officer didn't understand that a deadline was a deadline. His supervisor at the time didn't provide the leadership he needed, and later, that same supervisor demonstrated such shockingly bad judgment that he was given the option to either voluntarily curtail or face a formal loss of confidence. That officer's case was reviewed by the "Discipline DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) of the Bureau of Global Talent Affairs (formerly Human Resources).

One key difference between my father's approach to writing, and mine own, is that he was a straight news reporter – he made a point of never editorializing. As a PD officer, and later as a

manager of reporting officers, my focus when writing and editing wasn't just about tight drafting or concise analytical reporting, it was also often about policy advocacy. Sometimes, it was a spot report; other times, it was a longer piece. But in PD, we are usually trying to get a foreign audience, be they decision makers, thought leaders or the general public to take, or accept a specific course of action, and our writing has to advance that. The same is true for making policy recommendations back to the Department, or at more senior levels, to the Washington Interagency and Congress

Q: So, a sensitive question, you don't have to answer. You said you did not do well in high school. Is there a particular reason where you were not interested, or do you have an excuse?

GOSHKO: It turns out I have an excuse. Later in life I received an adult diagnosis of ADHD, which wasn't something we were aware of when I was in school. The way ADHD shapes how a person thinks and focuses is actually very useful for things like media relations and crisis management, but not so great for academics.

Before the formal diagnosis I mentioned it to one of my Locally Employed press team colleagues when I was in London that I had reason to think I had ADHD. Without missing a beat, he immediately replied, with typical English understated irony, "Really, you think so?"

After doing some reading on the subject, I came across a great book called *Spark*, which examines how exercise affects the brain. It discusses how, with ADHD, you sometimes need pressure to focus—once the adrenaline kicks in, you lock in. That resonated with me because I've always enjoyed working in the press, handling tight deadlines, and working in some of our more challenging posts. I initially joined as an economic officer, but you definitely do not want me representing America in trade negotiations. On the other hand, if you need someone who can respond to multiple media outlets on a quickly evolving, high visibility, high pressure issue, my brain works well in that environment. The Department sometimes refers to people like me, a bit derisively, as 'adrenaline junkies.' I always thought it was an unfair description but now that I know more about how ADHD works, I can better understand why I was attracted to the career path and jobs I sought out.

The State Department has a saying that "there is a job for everyone" which is a reflection on the wide variety of work, postings and people employed by State to fill those jobs. Beginning with Secretary Powell, there was a big focus on improving training. As leadership training evolved, it's becoming more acceptable to acknowledge that we are built differently, we have different skill sets, and we should place people in roles that match their strengths and build teams of people whose skills complement each other. I have yet to meet the person who is a master of all skills. Good managers and leaders will look to recruit personnel whose different skills, backgrounds and perspectives strengthen the team as a whole.

I once worked with an officer who was a great person but who didn't handle stress well, and press work is often high pressure and highly visible. That officer kept pursuing high-pressure, high-profile jobs because he thought that's what he needed to do to get promoted. In reality, all he was doing was burning himself out when they would really shine in equally important public diplomacy areas like program management, which would have probably gotten him promoted more quickly.

No one is good at everything and I say this as a proud "Jack of all Trades, Master of None. Person X on your team might be someone who sees the big picture and thinks strategically but is weaker on details and follow up. Person Y may have a narrower focus, but will have deep subject matter expertise, attention to detail and follow up skills. Both are essential to successfully advancing U.S. national interests. Good personnel, be they Foreign or Civil Service or Locally Engaged, will have some mastery of both skill sets.

Public Diplomacy's (PD) Cultural and educational exchanges are a perfect example. They are incredibly important to building long term relationships with foreign counterparts in leadership positions, they help build expertise in a wide range of areas within partner countries, and they help cultivate future generations who will understand U.S. policies and values and will look to the United States as a foreign policy and security partner of choice.

You need officers, both Foreign and Civil Service, who are able to see the big policy picture and set goals and guidelines. But you also need officers and local staff with strong long-term planning skills, local knowledge, and the ability to stay in touch with and recruit new program members. Cultural programs and exchanges can sometimes take ten years or more to pay a return on the initial investment, but if managed correctly it is a return that provides lasting benefit. A good FSO will work with their entire country team at Post to pick great candidates, but the Americans all rotate out after one to three years. The Department needs people at Post and working our U.S., and international implementing partners who to manage and track these exchange programs once they are launched to ensure the participants are getting the most out of the program and remain connected to the Embassy through the years, not only as good contacts, but as credible and influential opinion leaders who understand and support American values and policy initiatives. At a minimum, we want to foster an influential foreign partner who sees the United States as their partner of choice for international affairs and security issues, even if they disagree on a specific policy.

Building local and regional expertise is also crucial to advancing both U.S. and our partner countries' interests, I saw this during my first posting in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Then President Laurent Kabila's inner circle was filled with people who had no idea how to manage an economy. After he was assassinated, his son Joseph Kabila took over, and brought in Humphrey Fellows, Fulbright Scholars and Chevening Scholars who helped turn the economy around almost overnight simply by floating the price of petroleum. That change helped cut fuel scarcity, because fuel was being bought at prices well below market value and then resold on the black market. Gas stations always had long lines and required soldiers to stop fights from breaking out. I used to see vehicles that were almost nothing more than four wheels and gas tanks pushed into those stations. Later that day, the same guys would be standing a few blocks away selling liter bottles of gas they'd siphoned out of those "cars" at market prices. When the price of gas floated, the scarcity disappeared and the resultant black market trade activity stopped.

But the new officials Laurent Kabila Jr. brought in who made those needed changes were Congolese leaders who had been identified by the U.S. and UK for exchange programs decades earlier.

This is just one reason why it is so important, and very much in the U.S. national interest, to recruit, hire and retain personnel with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and skills sets. Doing so prevents the dangers of groupthink, illuminates institutional blind spots, and ensures we have the right talent to address a wide range of evolving challenges.

To be direct, the Trump Administration's crusade against recruiting for, and creating working environments that support Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Access (DEIA) works against our national security and foreign policy interests. DEIA is one of our most successful tools for advancing and protecting American interests.

Q: All right, so if you grew up for several years overseas and then went to high school entirely in the U.S. or did your family move overseas again?

GOSHKO: No, at that point, we had moved back and were based in Washington, D.C. We stayed there until my siblings and I went to college. One summer, my father was ill and I stayed with him in the hospital a lot throughout the break. In appreciation, my grandmother sent me to a summer camp, which became another big formative part of my life.

It was a camp up in northern Wisconsin, where I met people from all over the country. The camp made a point of bringing in campers and counselors from around the world. In fact, their slogan is, *This Shall be a Place of Welcome for All.* There is a big signpost in the camp that is hung with placards that says exactly that in languages from all over the world. It is called Camp Nebagamon. They often had a large contingent of kids from Mexico as well as a few other countries and usually hired summer staff from programs like the British Universities' North America Club (BUNAC) or Camp America would bring in British camp counselors. They have also had counselors from Scandinavia and children from Japan and Uzbekistan have attended.

One of the counselors who worked there when I was a camper, and then later became a colleague when I started working as a counselor, went on to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). A lot of people from the camp later joined the U.S. Peace Corps and/or entered jobs in international affairs. It was a boys' camp, co-directed by a husband-and-wife team who did a lot to break down gender barriers, beginning with expanding roles for women at the camp.

Wilderness camping is a big part of the camp's ethos and previously, women had only worked as *younger boy trippers*—leading short wilderness trips for kids aged eight to ten. The full-blown trips, where campers would go into the Quetico or onto Isle Royale for two weeks, were all led by men. Sally and her husband Nardie brought in the first group of female trip staff who would lead any of the camp's extensive wilderness trips, be they canoeing, hiking or cycling. One of the first cohort of these women later helped me write my Peace Corps application essay.

Another encouraged me to travel more and convinced me to take some time out from college to travel to Argentina. Instead of going to Argentina, I ended up going to Israel just before the first Gulf War. I worked on a program called Sar-El, which I didn't realize at the time was essentially an Israeli military public diplomacy program. I think the name of the Program Sar-*El*, but in the U.S., the group was simply called *Volunteers for Israel*.

It was an interesting experience—I worked on a military base and traveled around. There had been ongoing Palestinian-Israeli violence, and I remember an Israeli, hitchhiking near the base,

had been attacked by Palestinians who picked him up. He was taken to the base I was working at for medical care.

After returning from Israel, a little before the first Gulf War started, I worked as a cab driver, car salesman, and waiter. I quickly saw my career options, doing work that would allow me to live overseas would be limited without a bachelor's degree.

Q: Oh wait, too far, all of these trips you're describing were during your high school years or during your college years. This was college. So let's just go back a moment. As you're finishing high school, I imagine you and your parents are talking about college or how did that come?

GOSHKO: One of the things my parents made clear was that getting a bachelor's degree was non-negotiable. Whatever I wanted to do after that was up to me, but I had to get my degree first.

Q: So now the only other thing during high school and during college, did you work? Work part time or —

GOSHKO: — I was a bag boy at Chevy Chase Supermarket, which no longer exists—it's now a fancy high-rise on Connecticut Avenue. I still remember everyone watching out for *the doctor* because she tipped $3. Back then, bagging groceries was mostly done by high school boys. We'd take the groceries out to the car and usually get a buck for it, which was great. But the Doctor was the legendary $3 tipper.

That job led to me opening my first bank account. I remember walking across the parking lot to the drugstore, which had a grill where you could grab a burger and a Coke. Besides bagging groceries, we'd also go around offering to shovel snow out of people's driveways for extra cash. But my first full-time job was definitely as a bag boy.

I also had a brief job as a receptionist for a journalist friend of my father, but I barely remember it. Later, in high school, I worked in the kitchen at a place that has since changed names—it was called the Olney Ale House at the time. I was mostly washing pots, cleaning floors and cleaning bathrooms.

Q: Okay, all right. So you enter University of Maryland, did you have an idea by then of what you wanted to study? You know, where did you see yourself going?

GOSHKO: Through summer camp, I formed some of my longest and closest friendships. My oldest friend—who is now at the Department of Justice—has been in my life since we were seven. His parents, like mine, had focused on foreign affairs.

I also have two other close friends I'm still in touch with today, one of whom is an established writer. Back then, the great fantasy was that we'd all grow up to be writers. We devoured books by Hemmingway, everything by Somerset Maugham—especially *The Razor's Edge*. Someone once said that one of the most damaging things that can happen to an emotionally unformed 13- to 15-year-old boy is to read *Atlas Shrugged*—it ruins them forever by turning them into libertarians who don't think. We thought *The Razor's Edge* was the exact opposite of that.

I was convinced I'd go live in cafés, write great books, and produce the next great American novel. Obviously, I ended up becoming a bureaucrat instead.

Q: I just want to mention I read Ayn Rand's books when I was seventeen. Absolutely for the next year, I had been completely absorbed by her, and by the end of my freshman year in college, we had an amicable separation.

GOSHKO: Some of the writers I admired when I was younger haven't aged well. One book I need to pick up is a new biography on Gauguin that's coming out. I was thinking about *The Moon and Sixpence*, for example. It's interesting to see how things have evolved—how some of the romanticized heroes of the past don't hold up under modern scrutiny, though Maugham does illustrate what a reprehensible individual Gauguin was as a person despite his artistic talent.

I wanted to be a writer, and that was always in the back of my mind. I had done a lot of theater in high school, so I started out thinking I'd pursue creative writing or acting in college. I took acting classes, but I wasn't good enough. At a certain point, you have to audition to continue in the program, and I didn't make the cut.

Since I was an English major and wanted to learn how to write female characters better, I applied for a women's studies course. They were, appropriately, very rigorous about making sure students were there for the right reasons and that the space was respected. I took the course, then another, and eventually realized I was halfway to a minor. So, I ended up graduating with a degree in English literature a minor in women's studies.

Looking back, that exposure to discussions about creating space, diversity, equity, and inclusion was valuable. I remember one African American woman in class saying, *"If you want to be my friend, you have to forget that I'm Black. And if you want to be my friend, you can never forget that I'm Black."* That conversation has stuck with me because it was an early exposure to broader issues of identity in America.

I also grew up navigating these issues in a personal way. We lived a block away from a Catholic school, and when the kids there found out we were Jewish, our house was often vandalized. Once, someone stuck a newspaper clipping of a burning cross through our door. My reaction was, *"You're Catholic, you moron. The Klan doesn't like you either."* My mom taught at that school for a while, and sometimes kids carved swastikas into her desk.

When, in 2024, a Department employee asked me if I was negatively affected by some of the antisemitic incidents that had occurred in the building I replied honestly that *"I've dealt with this all my life, and that frankly, my attitude towards antisemitism is one of belligerence, not victimization."*

(Note: I want to stress that I do not equate legitimate criticism of Israel, or U.S. policy towards Israeli-Palestinian issue as de facto antisemitism. There are serious policy and morality issues with how Israel, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hizballah, Iran, the Houthis, and the U.S. handled the events leading up to and after the October 7, 2023, terror attacks. To my mind, the only possible near-term solution is a true Two State solution with international support and security and economic guarantees for both countries. EndNote)

In college, I got involved in student government. Maryland was huge, and as a commuter student, I had no real connection to campus life. So I joined a fraternity. Student government, at the time, wasn't taken very seriously. It was run by a group called the Monarchist Party, and some of the Greek organizations decided to take advantage of that. They figured, Greeks will

vote as a block, which was largely true, so they organized, took over the system, and I got swept up in it. That experience was eye-opening.

I quickly learned how things worked behind the scenes. For example, the school newspaper had a deadline for putting the paper to bed (get it ready to print), so we'd table controversial issues until after the reporters left, then bring them up. There were also serious political battles. The Young Republicans wanted to cut funding to the Gay Student Union. There were tensions between the Jewish Student Union, the Palestinian Student Union, and the Black Student Union.

Despite the conflicts, I built a good relationship with the head of the Palestinian Student Union, and we even co-wrote a petition regarding antisemitism in Russia at the time. We worked together to deliver it to the Russian Embassy.

That time in student government taught me a lot. People often put their critical thinking and ethics on hold to identify with their "tribe." It's easy to rally people around a shared identity rather than an idea. That was true when the Greek organizations organized and took over student government, and it was true when different student unions clashed.

One of the key issues we worked on was sexual consent and sexual assault prevention. We collaborated with Student Health Services and Greek organizations to hold discussions about consent, alcohol, and the realities of college life. Some people pushed back— *"Not all of us are rapists!"*—but that wasn't the point. We were simply trying to facilitate conversations about these issues.

Before college, I had already been involved in some activism. In high school, as an aspiring actor, I participated in a public service announcement about HIV/AIDS, with an unintended consequence, stigma. I remember being at a dance when someone pointed at me and whispered, *"He's got AIDS."* but addressing both the spread and social and economic impact of HIV have been important parts of the Mission Priority Plans at both the beginning and end of my career.

Public service and activism were always part of the backdrop of my life. My mom made a point of welcoming people—Peace Corps volunteers, strays—into our home when we were overseas. One of her closestclosest friends played a central role in creating and implementing fair housing policy in Montgomery County. It wasn't linear, but all of these experiences shaped my perspective and the path I ended up taking.

Q: All right, so just before we leave college. You know, you've mentioned a lot of aspects of your formation. There were other aspects, in terms of academics, or any other aspects of the college experience that, as you think back, sort of helped prepare you for the Foreign Service.

GOSHKO: At the University of Maryland, a diverse mandatory curriculum proved beneficial. Initially intending to major in English and become a novelist, I was required to take a business writing course, which, despite my initial resistance, proved valuable. An Islamic Studies course was also fascinating, demonstrating the interconnectedness of various aspects of history and culture, from the origins of Islam to the spread of Arabic architecture. The so-called hacienda style of houses you can see across the Americas originally came from Arabic housing designs that moved across North Africa, into Spain and then the Americas. The course also explored the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam, drawing parallels to the Catholic and Protestant

schisms. This exposure to diverse subjects was facilitated by the university's broad distribution requirements.

I was also required to study mathematics, to a point, and Spanish. Travel remained a constant interest, influenced by contacts from my summer camp. I traveled to Latin America and Israel, working various jobs to fund my travels. I intended to join the Peace Corps after I graduated and then be a backpacker for a while, until my first great novel took off.

My interest in Asia, stemming from childhood exposure to a kung fu school, led me to travel to Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Taiwan, I briefly taught English, but asthma and pollution forced my return. I then visited a friend in New York who had another friend who offered me a job at Tiffany & Co.

This transition from backpacking to corporate America was unexpected but provided valuable exposure to a different world. I worked as Christmas help at Tiffany's and was subsequently hired for a corporate position. For three years, I commuted from New York to New Jersey.

Q: So after you, what? What year did you graduate from college?

GOSHKO: 1992. I was on an extended tour.

Q: Then after college, is that when you did your travel, or just to pick up on the chronology, what happened right after college?

GOSHKO: I had dropped out of college to travel to Israel, then right after I graduated, I looked for work to fund future travel. I tried selling cars, and it was a horrible experience—dishonest, racist, sexist, just a scuzzy business. So, I went back to doing what I knew: waiting tables and washing dishes. I waited tables for a while, saving up money to travel, and eventually, I did. That is when I went to Asia, to Hong Kong and Taiwan to visit a friend and ended up staying on as a teacher until my asthma forced me to come back to DC. > I then went to New York, where I got hired by Tiffany & Co.

Around that time, I took the Foreign Service Written Exam for the first time. Back then, it was administered by a company called the Psychological Corporation, and for some reason that sticks in my mind, the Psychological Corporation failed me on the "Personality" section of the test by eleven points There are only a few numbers I remember in life—my SAT scores, my Foreign Service Oral Exam score after I finally passed the written exam, and the fact that I failed the Foreign Service written exam personality section by eleven points. I also failed the economics section.

Tiffany & Co. had something similar to the personality test. Their hiring process included a test with questions like, *"What do you find more attractive, a well-written poem or a well-made handgun?"*—and apparently people did actually fail that test. Another question was, *"Do you find yourself talking to strangers on the bus even when you know you shouldn't?"* That was literally a part of their screening process.

After failing the Foreign Service exam, I kept working at Tiffany's. I got to a point where I was relatively comfortable—typical New York story. At one point, I lived in a one-bedroom apartment with six people. Eventually, I could afford to share a one-bedroom with just one

roommate, which felt like progress. I figured I'd keep moving up at Tiffany's, but then summer camp—the one that had played such a big role in my life—came back into the picture.

At the camp, each age group was organized into a "village" that had a logging-themed name. The youngest boys were called Swampers, which is an actual entry-level position in a logging company. Then there were Loggers, Axemen, and Lumberjacks. Swampers went into swamps and scoured for any useable timber, Loggers helped move felled trees to sawmills, Axemen were skilled enough to safely fell trees, and Lumberjacks were the most experienced workers who could do anything, from felling to trees to breaking up log-jams, etc. The *Push* was a logging company manager and each village was directed by a Push. My first boss at the camp, a guy named E.J. Hahn, had become sick with cancer. He wanted to come back for one last summer but didn't feel up to running things alone. So the camp directors reached out to me and asked if I'd be his co-Push. I said yes, quit Tiffany's, and went back to camp.

Before leaving Tiffany's, which was a good job and helped me grow up a lot, I had become a bit dissatisfied and wanted to find a way back into public service. If you were a good liberal kid from the East Coast, like I was, you did the Peace Corps. I had considered it but never got around to writing my application essay. That summer, I reconnected with one of the three women who had been a trailblazer at the camp. She had been a Peace Corps volunteer, showed me a copy of her essay and told me, *"Look, just write the essay."* That gave me the push I needed.

That summer was tough. My friend and former boss became so ill he had to leave halfway through, so I finished out the summer for him. But by then, I had applied to the Peace Corps and been accepted. So I went straight from summer camp into the Peace Corps.

Originally, my plan had been to go to China. I was interested in Chinese culture but hadn't realized how difficult tonal languages are—especially if you have tin ears like I do. I was supposed to go to China, but because of my asthma, that was ruled out. They gave me a choice between Sri Lanka and the Philippines. I thought, *something's probably going to go wrong in Sri Lanka because of the ongoing instability at the time,* so I chose the Philippines. As it turned out, Sri Lanka did fall into a crisis and had to evacuate its Volunteers, so I ended up in the right place.

Q: This is in the Peace Corps? And what year did you go?

GOSHKO: I was in 1996 to 1998.

Q: Okay. Now in preparation for the Philippines, obviously, to Learn Tagalog or any of the other native languages, it would have taken a considerable amount of time. But did you get any preparation to go to the Philippines?

GOSHKO: Upon receiving acceptance into the Peace Corps, I went from summer camp, briefly visited my parents in Minnesota and, then flew to San Francisco for pre-departure training.

The Peace Corps provided in-country training in Dumaguete, Visayas, where I was assigned to the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports (DECS) as a sort of central office representative who would help with training teachers on new pedagogies to teach English. While others had teaching backgrounds, I did not. We received training in pedagogy and local languages, specifically Ilocano for me, which was the northern regional language of Ifugao, where my site was located.

Regional pride was evident in the Philippines, and many Filipinos preferred to use either their specific local language/ or English instead of the national language Filipino, which was essentially Tagalog, the regional language of the capitol, Manila.

My site was in Kiangan, Ifugao, known as the unofficial surrender site of General Yamashita at the end of World War II. Even in 1996, it attracted lots of Japanese tourists, whom local residents claimed had come back to look for General Yamashita's legendary buried gold. Memories of the war were kept alive in Ifugao, including stories of Ifugao resistance. A friend of mine told me her grandmother had an old Japanese flag that she had taken from a Japanese soldier she had killed and beheaded.

Though not a teacher, I organized "*Train the Trainer"* events, leveraging the expertise of my fellow volunteers. I conducted follow-up visits throughout the countryside. It was a fulfilling three-year experience.

During my service, I had a relationship with a Filipina woman, an advertising vice president in Manila. This relationship highlighted cultural differences and the importance of avoiding generalizations. The country was beautiful, but regionalism and tensions were present. I remember once walking with her through a mall in Manila and, rather stupidly, saying this wasn't the "real" Philippines. Her response to my arrogance was appropriately withering. Her friends, mostly advertising executives, wanted to know why she was dating a 'street urchin'.

I took the Foreign Service exam twice while in the Philippines. I failed a second time, but in my defense, I was suffering from amoebiasis and had to leave the exam room frequently. During my downtime in Kiangan, I studied economics from freshman-level textbooks to prepare to take the exam again.

True to what people may imagine life was like in the Peace Corps, I lived in a hut. But my hut had electricity and cable television. I recall watching news coverage of a potential conflict, possibly between Thailand and Vietnam, which was interrupted by news of Princess Diana's death. I took the Foreign Service exam a third time and passed. I then completed my Peace Corps tour.

Q: Which wasn't one quick thing about the Peace Corps tour throughout those three years, you were essentially a manager, and principally a manager for teachers and mentors and so on. Were there other responsibilities?

GOSHKO: My role was more like a manager, but in a way that leaned toward USAID or public diplomacy (PD) work. I was managing a program, which meant writing grant proposals to secure USAID funding—money for training, follow-up training, and other resources. It wasn't about me teaching directly but rather ensuring that the people who knew what they were doing had the support to teach effectively.

One of the big challenges was figuring out how to make English instruction more effective. You'd have classrooms with thirty to sixty students studying in a one-hour period, and the old, traditional methods just didn't work. So we focused on learning clusters, increasing speaking opportunities, and following up to see what strategies were actually working. A big part of my job was identifying what was needed and then finding ways to get those resources.

For example, one school was very isolated, with no electricity. I wrote a grant to get them solar panels and worked with the school and their students to hand carry the panels to the building. If I recall correctly, a British Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO the UK version of the Peace Corps) volunteer who was an electrician working on micro hydro-electric projects helped with wiring the panels up.

So it was a mix of program management, training, follow-up training, and securing resources for schools—similar to some of the things I later worked on in Iraq with the State Department. There was also some travel involved, but the focus was always on improving learning acquisition and access to resources.

Q: No, I so I just wanted to kind of link up the talents and skills you acquired in the Peace Corps with what you would later do in the Foreign Service. Were those valuable for you?

GOSHKO: One thing I learned from applying for grants was that reporting isn't just about documenting facts—it's reporting with intent, with advocacy. You're not just saying, "Here's what's happening." You're writing in a way that compels someone to act. In this case, you're trying to convince someone to give you money. That skill carried over into other areas of my work.

For example, when we were reporting on the Somali famine of 2011-2012, it wasn't enough to say, "This is what's going on." We had to make it clear that people were dying and that inaction had consequences. At the same time, we had to be honest about the realities on the ground—yes, some of the food aid was being skimmed off, but it was still staying within the community and saving lives. The challenge was to make sure Washington understood that while this wasn't ideal, it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

My experience in the Peace Corps also gave me my first exposure to fraud, waste, and abuse. I remember when money went missing from a project. My host mother, Ina, was very direct about it. She told me I had to have more direct control over the funds or some of the recipients would skim funds for their own use. Sure enough, she was right.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned came from a moment of frustration. Ina saw me struggling and said, "You know what your problem is? You don't ask for help." You think you know everything, but you're not asking the people who actually know what's going on."

That moment was formative. It shaped how I've worked with local counterparts, host country partners, and civil society throughout my career. I've always tried to keep that in mind—just because I have an idea doesn't mean I'm right. I want that challenge factor, colleagues and partners have to feel they can offer dissenting views. Oh, and another important lesson was that turkeys are vicious, vicious creatures. Never turn your back on a turkey. They will attack.

Q: I also learned that the hard way, though, in Romania, where from 2000 to 2005 it was still emerging from the old economic system where you couldn't earn a lot on the quote, normal economy. So you kept chickens, you kept turkeys, you kept whatever you could earn a little bit more, or at least have a regular source of food. I'd go out to the Romanian provinces, where this was even more prevalent. There it was in Bucharest, for sure, but far more prevalent. And had there not been a fence between me and these big turkeys, I probably would have had a problem. They're really aggressive?

GOSHKO: I'm not a fan of cruelty. But when you'd be out in the backyard washing the dishes and she (the turkey) would quietly sneak up behind you just to attack. So I just started carrying this branch broom with me for self-defense. After the first whack, she saw the broom and left me alone. If I forgot the broom, she'd creep up and attack.

I should note that I have perhaps unfairly stereotyped wild Turkeys. We later lived with a truly wild Turkey in Ottawa and she was lovely, minded her own business, never attacked anyone and even liked to be fed breadcrumbs. (The turkey in Kiangan was also fed, she was just mean.).

But to sum up I would say that developing organizational skills, designing, tracking projects and implementing projects, learning to ask for help, learning to check my own assumptions, were all invaluable skills Peace Corps helped develop and that I would use in my Foreign Service career.

Q: What year did you leave the Peace Corps?

GOSHKO: 1998.

Q: And that's the same year that you passed the Foreign Service exam?

GOSHKO: Yes. I was told I'd passed the Written Exam and had scheduled the Oral Exam for when I was back in the States.

One thing that sticks out is how language and regional identity shape interactions. I don't look Filipino, and that made for some interesting experiences. For example, there was another volunteer who came to Kiangan later—a Filipina American. They taught her Ifugao, the local language, whereas I was navigating things with Ilocano, the regional language. One time, we went to a market in Baguio, a major regional town in a different province. She asked for the price of something, speaking in Ifugao, and the vendor gave her a ridiculously high price. I asked the vendor, in Ilocano, "how much?", and he immediately cut the price in half. It was one of those funny cultural moments—Ilocanos have a reputation for being frugal, so vendors expected me to haggle aggressively while assuming the other volunteer was a naive provincial rube.

That experience with language stuck with me when I later tested for Ilocano in the Foreign Service. (Note: In order to be tenured in the Foreign Service new officers have to receive either a 3 (spoken) /3 (reading) in a world language like French or Spanish or a 2/2 in a hard language. At the time, the State Department was giving bonuses to new hires who tested with a 2/2 or better in a hard language.) The examiner initially wrote down a "2/2" proficiency score, then erased the speaking score and gave me a "1+/2." When I asked why, he said, "There's too much Tagalog in your Ilocano." I pushed back, explaining that language evolves and that Tagalog had blended into everyday speech. But he wasn't having it. That lower score cost me $1,700 in language incentive pay, and I'm still grumpy about it to this day. (So I guess there are really 4 scores I'll never forget.)

After passing the written exam, I finished my Peace Corps tour. Around that time, my grandfather on my mother's side was diagnosed with cancer. Everyone else in the family was working, so I became his primary caregiver while I waited for the Foreign Service process to move forward. I lived in Minnesota and helped with his hospice care before moving back to New York, where my parents were living. My father was finishing up his Washington Post career

covering the United Nations, and I took a seasonal job at Tiffany's while waiting for my Oral Exam date.

At the time, I was working full-time on the retail floor at Tiffany's. My father, through his connections at the United Nations, introduced me to one of the Press Officers at USUN (USUN is how the Department refers to our diplomatic mission to the United Nations.) This person took me out for drinks, a point of ethics since he could not accept drinks from a contact, the night before my oral assessment and walked me through what to expect. He gave me some great advice, although I don't know if it still applies to how the exam is run now.

- In the group exercise, be the one to take notes when one of the examiners, who is playing the role of an ambassador briefs the team. Take notes throughout the exercise and be the one who hands the notes to the examiner at the end.
- Facilitate the conversation so to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak—if someone is quiet, bring them into the conversation.
- Avoid all-or-nothing positions—find a compromise.
- For the separate interview portion of the test, the longer the interview goes on, the harder they are on you, the better you are doing. For the demarche exercise, stick strictly to instructions, what must be said, what to say if raised, and what not to say. Don't get drawn into speculation.
- Take good notes immediately after the demarche exercise because you'll have several exercises after that before you draft your demarche report, just like in real diplomatic life.
- Keep the demarche report tight and focused. Don't rehash instructions but open with, "Per instructions, demarche delivered. Then write a concise report.

I took the train to DC the next morning, went to Arlington, and sat for the orals. During the group exercise, I followed his advice. The exercise involves the ambassador giving everyone a different initiative, each which supports an embassy objective, but not all of which can be funded. As a group, you are supposed to come up with a proposal of which initiative to fund. Four examiners sit in the room and watch your interactions.

I took notes, facilitated discussion, and pushed for a realistic compromise. Some candidates insisted that their proposal had to be fully funded or not at all, but I steered the conversation toward a middle ground.

Then came the waiting. There were ten of us in the room, I had been told they called in candidates in reverse order, meaning if you were called in early, you probably didn't pass. As people were called one by one, I sat there sweating. Out of ten people, I was called in fifth and was crushed. Surely I failed. When they finally called me in, I braced myself for the worst. Instead, the examiner smiled and said, "Congratulations, you passed the Foreign Service exam." What I didn't realize was that there were two groups of five candidates being tested. I and one other person passed that day. He later told me he was the last one in the room.

Back then, you didn't have to choose a cone (career track) early. I remember filling out my preferences with a pencil. The examiner explained my options. As a political officer, I'd be stuck on the register forever. As a consular or management officer, I could have started yesterday. Economic and public diplomacy were also options.

Since USIA (the U.S. Information Agency) had once blacklisted my father, I had no interest in public diplomacy. So I chose Econ. They told me, "Great, you're an Econ officer. Don't quit your day job yet." I still had to get through medical and security clearances. So I kept working at Tiffany's, waiting for the call.

I'll never forget the day when my floor manager at the Main Store in New York came up to me and said there was a guy with a badge, asking my co-workers on the floor questions about me—whether I drank, whether I was reliable, etc. My coworkers were baffled. Security clearances were incredibly thorough back then. Diplomatic Security even sent an agent from Chicago to drive eight hours, each way, to interview people I worked with at my summer camp in rural Wisconsin.

One thing I learned at Tiffany's that carried over into the Foreign Service was the importance of perception. Little things count. I got my first manicure then because nothing kills a $200 bracelet sale like scratching someone's wrist while helping them try it on.

Another valuable lesson: never underestimate the person in front of you. At Tiffany's, if a salesperson judged a customer by their clothing and treated them poorly, management would step in. "You have no idea who they are," they'd say. "Everyone gets treated with respect." That lesson stuck with me throughout my career in the Foreign Service, and the really good Ambassadors I worked for reinforced that. Ambassador Swing, my first Ambassador in Kinshasa, was a case in point. One of Kabila's ministers, I think the Minister of Foreign Affairs but am not 100 percent sure, had been a cab driver in Boston before Kabila tapped him to be a Minister. When some folks cast aspersions on his qualifications, Swing immediately made it clear that was unacceptable. "I don't care what his last job was, he is the Minister of Foreign Affairs and we will treat him accordingly."

When I finally got into A-100, I began my career on April 15, 1999, everything I owned fit in the back of my parents' car. I drove down, found an apartment in one day, and stayed with a family friend. The experience of A-100 itself was fascinating—especially the outdoor team-building exercise we called "the Woods." I don't know if they still do it, but back then, it was a rite of passage.

Q: Well, we entered in 1984 and yeah, it was true then. And based on the interviews of retired foreign service officers I've done up till now, it sounds like they continue to do that, whether it's way out in, you know, rural Virginia, or West Virginia, or closer in. It sounds like they still do that.

GOSHKO: It had some interesting moments, but one thing that really stood out was the contrast between the private sector and the public sector. Before joining the Foreign Service, I'd attended a Tiffany's offsite retreat where my room had a hot tub and we were treated to bottles of wine from the CEO's personal vineyard. Then I got to the Woods, the State Department's version of an

offsite, the big perk was free tea and coffee. Anything else? You paid for it. That was the moment I fully embraced public service.

Another key takeaway from the Woods was understanding personal limits—both your own and those of others. Some colleagues, especially those with strong personalities, were already angling for prime Flag Day (when you are assigned your first Post) assignments. I had every intention of spending my entire career in East Asia and the Pacific, but I watched people get a little too loose with their ambitions—and their words—when they'd had a few drinks. Some of them said things that, in a more official setting, would have been career-damaging.

This was also my first real exposure to the impact alcohol (and other vices) could have on a Foreign Service career. The department is actually very good at handling these issues, but I've seen both extremes: people who got help and those who ignored their problems until it cost them their marriages and possibly their careers.

One of the best resources the State Department has is the Office of Counseling Services (OCS). I've known officers who struggled with alcohol, but those who recognized their problem and sought help—some through OCS—have continued on to have very successful careers. Throughout my own career, I've used OCS. The Foreign Service is stressful, and I've always encouraged others to seek support when needed. Getting help won't hurt your security clearances, your promotions, or your onward assignment; but failing to get help when you need it just might. That's been a core idea I have reenforced, both as a mentor and while in official leadership roles...

Like many other FSOs, when I joined, I had a grand plan to land exactly where I wanted to go. At the time, I was still in a serious relationship with my partner from the Philippines, so naturally, I tried to game the system. Back then, in A-100 you listed your 14 post preferences for your first assignment. They were ranked top, middle and low, basically based on the number you listed them. The instructors were very clear. If it was on your list, you could expect to be assigned there, even if it was number fourteen, something some colleagues didn't appear to really believe based on their reactions on flag day. You either got one of your fourteen choices, or you got "the call"—which was basically an invitation to a meeting where they'd tell you, *"No one picked this post, but we need you there."*

(Note: FSOs are expected to be "world-wide available when they accept their commission so the Department has every right to send you anywhere in the world where you are medically and security cleared to serve (someone with family in the People's Republic Of China for example, would likely not be cleared to serve in China. That said, the Department does make an effort to assign people to Posts that make sense for the "Needs of the Service and the FSO.

I thought I was clever. I strategically listed consular positions in the Philippines, and knowing I didn't have any French, I used one of my 14 required bids to bid on a language designated French 3/3 a NOW post in the Democratic Republic of Congo. NOW posts are important positions with staffing gaps that need to be filled immediately. Surely the Department wouldn't assign me to a NOW posting when I didn't have the language. I figured that would get me to the Philippines.

What I didn't realize was that other issues would of course play a role in the overall assignment process. The Philippines, for example, has excellent medical care, and those jobs went to people with certain medical needs. I also wonder if anyone else put Kinshasa on their list. In any case, instead of Manila, I was assigned as the Assistant Public Affairs Officer in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was an early introduction to how an understaffed Department will sometimes carry vacancies, even in critical posts.

Q: Let me just ask you quickly. You say that you spoke no French at that point.

GOSHKO: I'm terrible at languages but not shy about speaking them. My wife, on the other hand, is a true linguist—fluent in beautiful Spanish and beautiful French. Meanwhile, I rely on shameless smiling, pointing, and making myself understood by any means necessary. I had no French when I was assigned to Kinshasa.

FSI (the Foreign Service Institute) turned out to be a lifesaver. French was a real struggle for me. I just couldn't get it—until one of my instructors finally sat me down and said, *"Yes, I understand everything you're saying because I'm fluent in English. You need to stop transliterating. That's not how you learn a language."* He told me to focus on idiomatic phrases, explaining that's how people really learn to speak. It was a breakthrough moment.

I managed to leave FSI with a 3/3 in French. One of the idioms that stuck with me was *"Ce ne sont pas mes oignons"*, which literally translates to "These aren't my onions" but means *"It's none of my business."*

Years later, my second Deputy Chief of Mission who went on to become an Ambassador I worked for told he had quietly refused to believe that *"Ce ne sont pas mes oignons",* was a real phrase but rather something I'd made up. Then, twenty years later, he was watching a French-dubbed version of *Spider-Man* when Peter Parker said, *"Ce ne sont pas mes oignons."* "I nearly fell out of my seat," He told me. So, with my hard-earned French, I finally headed to the Republic of Congo as the Assistant Public Affairs Officer (APAO) for my first post.

Q: That's the assistant Public Affairs Office.

GOSHKO: I was the Assistant Public Affairs Officer—yes, I apologize. I've reached that stage where I can speak in a full sentence of acronyms, and it makes perfect sense to those of us in the Department, but not to the rest of the world. I need to be mindful of that.

I worked for Ambassador Swing, a legendary diplomat who had been an ambassador for twenty years. In 2023, when I was serving in Haiti, I saw a photo of him from his time there, which was a full-circle moment.

He was incredible. He set a tremendous example of what it meant to truly represent the United States. If the job required standing in the baking sun for eight hours, shaking hands, and showing up, he did it—because that's how you build productive relationships. He never saw any of it as being beneath him. He understood our counterparts knew exactly what the United States brought to a relationship and never felt the need to act like someone who expected extra deference

because he represented a superpower. To this day, I look at some ambassadors who think that kind of engagement is beneath them, and let's just say it's disappointing.

Q: No, all that is great. I just want to go back one second when you arrived in Congo, in Kinshasa, and you're the assistant public affairs officer. How did they determine what your responsibilities were? In other words, you divide certain tasks with your boss, the public affairs officer. What did they assign you to when you arrived?

GOSHKO: Well, that's a complicated question.

At the time, my boss, the PAO, and I had a difficult relationship. At one point, that officer literally told me to walk three steps behind her at public events. As PAO, they were never satisfied with any of the housing options offered as a section head; they had come over from USIA during the merger and expected housing allotted to an Agency Head, not a section chief. We did, however, have an incredible local staff, so I focused on doing anything I thought the PAO didn't want to. I hadn't been involved in much planning, so I just picked up whatever bits and pieces needed handling.

Stepping back a bit, I think this context plays a role. I joined at a time when many of my classmates were from the last USIA class before it was folded into the State Department. Some saw the merger as positive, others as a disaster. Personally, I think it was terrible for USIA, but probably one of the best things that ever happened to State. (Note: I strongly believe the current Administration's efforts to dismantle USAID and fold its' functions into the Department are a catastrophic mistake that are likely, at least in the short and medium term to weaken U.S. national interests by increase global instability through increases in transnational threats like poverty, disease, and crime and corruption – all factors that are contribute to things like irregular migration and terrorism. But bringing USIA in forced the Department to think more strategically and programmatically about engaging more effectively with foreign audiences, either directly, or through the media or other credible and influential third-party voices.

During training, I remember going to the old USIA building, where some of the trainers clearly resented the changes. One guy sat through an entire training session eating a banana. He threw the peel on the floor and read the newspaper in front of the trainer. At PAO conferences years later, it felt like a bad divorce—former USIA folks still bitter. "I used to have my own driver and my own budget!" they'd lament. "Seven years ago," I'd remind them.

But back to Kinshasa. About three months into my posting, I attended a dinner hosted by the PAO for civil society leaders—mainly church and labor representatives. Our Public Affairs Officer (PAO) had excellent French, but during the discussion, made a well-intended, but poorly phrased remark. complimenting the patience of the Congolese people in the face of ongoing hardships by saying something along the lines of, "Anywhere else, people would be rioting in the streets."

That comment was immediately taken to the Congolese security services, and the next morning, both she and the Political Counselor were declared *persona non grata* (PNG). I was in the office reading the papers when I saw the news. I rushed to the ambassador to let him know but at that point, the official PNG order had been issued.

The PAO and the Political Counselor (PolCon) were both PNGed while me and the other first tour Political officer in attendance were not. The reason is the PAO and PolCon had official embassy business cards with their names on them. My colleague Brian and I did not and so weren't identifiable to the Security Services., so when the government expelled our bosses, we remained in country. That's how I unexpectedly became Acting PAO, or section head, for the rest of my tour.

We responded reciprocally, PNG-ing two of their diplomats.

As I mentioned earlier, my tour included the assassination of Laurent Kabila, and when his son took over, he brought in foreign economic experts. That's when I truly saw the impact of long-term public diplomacy programs like exchanges. The Congolese economy was in crisis. Fuel prices were kept artificially low, so people would push what were basically four-wheeled car frames with gas tanks, fill them up, and siphon off and resell the fuel at black market rates. Crime was rampant, and soldiers had to deploy to gas stations to stop fights. But then, Joseph Kabila's new economic team—some with Western training—floated the Congolese franc and the price of gas. Almost overnight, gas lines disappeared, and prices stabilized. That drove home the lesson that educational exchanges work. The last westerner Laurent Kabila had seen in the region was Che Guevara, whom he met in a rebel camp in Katanga. Che had not provided a good model for economic management.

Another important lesson about diplomacy, and how the U.S. interagency could unintentionally undermine our good work concerned branding. We'd go to aid deliveries and see assistance from the UK with a big Union Jack, aid from Japan marked with a prominent Japanese flag. Then we'd see U.S. assistance, and instead of a U.S. flag, it was branded with a messy cluster of government seals (*USAID*, *CDC*, *Department of State*) that meant nothing to anyone, especially in a country with high illiteracy rates. That's when I made it a point that, at any post where I worked, any U.S. assistance we provided would have to have the American flag displayed front and center. Fully recognizing that Congress has mandated that USAID must brand assistance with the USAID logo, bureaucratic logos don't matter—people needed to know where the help was coming from. I have no issue with USAID or CDC also using their logos, as long as the U.S. Flag is prominent. The tag line "from the American People" doesn't mean anything to an illiterate audience. I have even had one locally employed colleague at a future posting tell me they used to think that USAID was an International NGO before they joined the embassy.

Q: And how long was the tour?

GOSHKO: It was my first tour—a two-year assignment, as are most first and second tours. One of my mentors, Miriam Guichard, who was an Assistant Public Affairs Officer (APAO), came out for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and we visited the universities.

Q: I'm sorry. Africa Bureau public policy?

GOSHKO: The Africa Bureau of Public Diplomacy (AFPD) is the regional arm of the functional bureau that provides support and oversight. One thing I've always advised public diplomacy (PD) officers is to go to a country desk, rather than a functional desk, for their first Washington assignment. However, I also discovered that a strong PD desk officer can be invaluable in helping navigate the system in Washington.

Miriam Guichard came over and as part of her program we visited. We visited the University of Kinshasa with a famous Congolese writer, Valentine-Yves Mudimbé. —He had written *Entre les Eaux* and *L'odeur du Père* and was a well-known author. He had returned to the university and was heartbroken by what he saw. The institution, which had once been a center of learning, had deteriorated significantly. Offices had been converted into bathrooms; hallways had become makeshift toilets—it was clear that the institution had suffered greatly. That was his one exposure to the way education at the university had deteriorated and it deeply affected him.

Miriam Guichard and I had just returned from the university and were sitting at a café, which was run by some friends of many people who worked at the Embassy. Suddenly, the owner walked over, looking stressed. He asked me what was going on, telling me, "They're closing all the ports." I immediately asked for the check, we rushed back to the Embassy and soon learned that Kabila had been assassinated—killed by one of his *kadogo* bodyguards (Swahili for child soldier). He had surrounded himself with only a handful of trusted individuals, and over time, they had been eliminated one by one until only he and the *kadogos* remained. Eventually, one of these young soldiers turned on him.

At that point, we were in a holding pattern, people waiting to see what would happen next and ports into and out of the country were closed. I remember a reporter—she had never taken a vacation before, and the one time she did, she found herself completely locked out of the country, unable to get back in.

Soon an emergency action committee review was conducted and Post implemented a drawdown of staff. Everyone, except for a minimal staff, was ordered to leave country as a safety departure. Known as Authorized Departures, where staff are allowed to leave Post, and Ordered Departures, staff are ordered to leave Post, these drawdowns limit the number of official Americans at a Post that might need to be evacuated if a Post later has to close for security reasons. The smaller the footprint, the easier it is to evacuate personnel. One of the challenges is to determine the correct number of and type of personnel who will remain so that Post can assure the safety of American Citizens in country and carry out its most important mission objectives. While

We were not able to leave Post from the airport in Kinshasa and had to cross the Congo River by boat to fly out from the airport in Brazzaville the next day. U.S. Embassy Brazzaville played a key role in facilitating the drawdown. This was one of those times when having a diplomatic passport was a huge help.

As we disembarked at the port in Brazzaville, a guard jumped in front of me with his gun raised, demanding to see identification. I pulled out my black diplomatic passport, and he immediately let me pass.

Q: So just to clarify, black passport is a diplomatic passport, and it's good for the one country that you're in. Now, obviously you can travel on it, but then when you're assigned to another country, you get another passport that is good only for the country you're going to, or the international organization and so on.

GOSHKO: A diplomatic passport has a duration of five years and can only be used when traveling on official business, be that to your country or international organization or if you are traveling on official diplomatic business. When traveling to Kinshasa via Brussels, for example,

I used my diplomatic passport to transit the airport in Belgium. Since I was being drawn down from post on orders, I used my diplomatic passport to transit Brazzaville and to enter South Africa, our initial drawdown destination. I also used the same diplomatic passport when I was assigned to Cuba, because it had not yet expired and when I went into and out of Iraq on official temporary duty.

I would not, however, use my diplomatic passport to enter a country for personal reasons. For example, when I went on vacation to Mexico from Cuba, I left Cuba on my diplomatic passport but entered Mexico on my tourist passport, since I was not assigned to Mexico and had no right to diplomatic status while on vacation there. I then left Mexico on my tourist passport and reentered Cuba on my diplomatic passport when my vacation was over. My wife is a British diplomat, and we have two children, So with four people in our family, we had twelve passports. My wife had a British tourist and diplomatic passport, I had a U.S. diplomatic and tourist passport and our children, who are dual nationals each have four passports, one U.S. and one UK diplomatic passport and one U.S. and UK tourist passport. In the U.S. you must enter on the passport of the country to which you are a citizen, and it's easier for them to enter the UK on their UK passports. So when my children go from the States to visit their grandmother in England, they enter the UK on their British passports. When they come back from the same trip, they enter the U.S. on their American passports. I don't carry a British passport, because I am not a UK citizen and am therefore not entitled to a British passport. On postings where my wife is accredited to the host country and I am not; I am issued a diplomatic visa in my U.S. tourist passport.

Passport entry and exit stamps, as well visas, can also be an issue. It is illegal, for example, to enter Lebanon if you have an Israeli visa or entry stamp on your passport, so diplomats and people traveling on official travel who have to go to both countries will be issued two diplomatic or official passports. When traveling to eastern Congo, which was under Rwandan occupation at the time, a separate black passport was needed because if border officials in Kinshasa saw entry stamps from Goma, they would deny us entry back into Kinshasa.

Diplomatic status does not guarantee safety. Before I arrived in Congo, during the time Kabila's forces were advancing with his *Kadogos,* or child soldiers. The French Ambassador at the time confronted some and was killed. We frequently saw child soldiers. In Lubumbashi, I saw very young soldiers, some who looked to be as young as twelve, carrying rocket launchers. He was part of a group of four lined up as a sort of "Honor Guard" to meet our delegation. Later, when they'd disbanded, I saw one of them get on a bicycle to ride away, so it appears he received some material benefit, in addition to probably being fed, from serving as a child soldier. I am not excusing the use of child soldiers, and there are horrible stories in multiple countries about the terrible things that happen to children abducted into forced military service or insurgencies. But equally, there are some studies that show some of these children receive some benefits, like food, status, or the impunity to rob others with the weapons they are given, that can make recruitment into terrorist groups, like Somalia's *Al-Shabaab* (The Youth) very attractive to poor children. That push factor to violent extremism is just one of the many reasons that development, education, job creation and anti-corruption programs carried out by USAID played a critical role in helping to counter violent extremism and by extension helped to protect U.S. citizens and national interests. That is one reason why dismantling USAID was against the U.S. national

interest, especially in places like Haiti or Lebanon where gangs and terrorist groups like Hezbollah will recruit the disaffected and the desperate.

We also saw the source of rare metals used in devices like iPhones. Families were mining these metals, the father being in a hole up to his chest or higher, digging upriver bank while the rest of the family would sift through the dirt mud looking for small nuggets of what I believe was Coltan. Those nuggets would go into small cans, like used soup or tomato cans which were turned over to whoever was in charge, though there were definitely Ugandan soldiers with machine guns overseeing the process, effectively enforcing a form of slavery. This experience has made me mindful of the origins of the materials used to create our modern technology. Most people are aware of the problem of conflict diamonds and I know that many jewelry stores are very careful not to sell them, but I have never heard public discussion on the ethical sourcing of rare earth minerals. This was close to twenty-years ago, but I would be surprised if much has changed given that conflict still occurs in Eastern Congo and minerals like Coltan are very likely to be a funding source for these violent groups. I try to limit the number of times I upgrade my phone and ensure the materials used in the phone are recycled to reduce the demand for these materials.

Q: Let me go back one second with you to President Kabila being assassinated. That is when you were in an ordered evacuation

GOSHKO: Yes, there are authorized and ordered departures In my last post, Port-au-Prince, when the security situation became severely degraded, as the Chair or the Emergency Action Committee I worked very hard to convince to the committee (The Deputy Chief of Mission is not a voting member) to vote that the committee recommend to the Chargé des Affaires that he request Post be put on Ordered, vice Authorized departure, having learned that when Embassy Port au Prince went on Authorized departure before my arrival, Post did not have enough volunteers to bring the number of staff down to a small enough footprint that Washington felt was needed.

Factors like risk tolerance, the possible need to draw on U.S. military resources, and domestic political considerations all contribute to how Post, the Department and the Interagency decide on what the footprint will be. The State Department's Under Secretary for Management monitors, daily, the number of personnel remaining at Post and what roles and responsibilities each person plays. Everybody is counted, including consular officers who take care of American citizens, reporting officers, assistance officers and contractors, military attachés, and law enforcement officers who pursue key U.S. foreign policy and national security objectives as well as the Management teams who keep the building running and the Regional Security Officers and Marine Security Guard detachment who keep the Embassy and staff safe. A ceiling is set for the number of personnel who can remain in country. If that ceiling is exceeded, for example because more security personnel are needed, someone else has to go out.

Q: Now when the evacuation took place, did you go back to Washington? Or was there a location, you know, sort of a safe location while you waited to find out if you could go back?

GOSHKO: Initially, we went to Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo. For anyone studying African history, colonialism, and its long-term impacts, the contrasts between Brazzaville and Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) were striking. The difference in how the French and

Belgians colonized their territories is well documented—anyone interested should read *King Leopold's Ghost*.

In Brazzaville, there was a vibrant culture. The French had clearly invested in education and infrastructure, whereas in the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo], colonial rule had left a far more exploitative legacy. One particularly shocking reminder of this was the existence of the *Place de*" Evolués*"*— a small plaza named after a Belgian colonial-era system where Congolese people had to prove they were "evolved enough" to access privileges like purchasing European wine. Belgian authorities would inspect their homes, even their bathrooms, to determine if they were sufficiently "civilized" To be able to buy wine. The stark differences between the two countries remain evident today.

After Brazzaville, we were sent to South Africa, where I noticed some striking contrasts between the DRC and South Africa. I took a tour of Soweto, which I had understood had grown out of the slums and shanty towns that grew up to support black laborers under apartheid rule. I was expecting something similar to the slums of the *Cité* in Kinshasa, the area where the majority of black Congolese lived in Kinshasa, which was separate from the far more developed *Ville* where wealthy Congolese, diplomats and other expatriates lived. The parts of Soweto I saw looked more like a middle-class neighborhood. This was post-apartheid, but still within living memory of days of South Africa's official racial segregation policies.

Incidentally, Ambassador Swing and my first Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), Barry Walkley—a public diplomacy officer—had been deeply involved in South Africa during the transition away from apartheid. If I recall correctly, Walkley was Swing's press officer during the final days of apartheid, though I'd have to verify that.

South Africa itself was incredible. I was doing press work, which I really enjoyed, and I was happy to stay. We were based at the consulate in Johannesburg, which was the country's media hub, rather than in the embassy in Pretoria. But ultimately, the Africa Bureau of Public Diplomacy (AFPD) wouldn't approve additional funding to keep me there, so I was sent back to Washington.

Q: So you know, after the evacuation, you did not go back to Kinshasa. I just wanted to be sure.

GOSHKO: I eventually returned, and over time, things stabilized under Laurent Kabila's son.

The timing of bringing back officers from Ordered Departure also impacted who could return when. The embassy prioritized bringing back our deputy Consular Officer to assist with American Citizens and a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) as soon as possible to manage the intense press interest. I was out of the country for about three months before returning.

Q: The job that you had, you know, before you left Kinshasa, principally working with the Media, were there important issues or other aspects that you picked up, since this is your first tour about working with press, media and so on.

GOSHKO: Yes. First, the state-controlled press was deeply entrenched, and very wary of the U.S., which had been an ally of the dictator Mobuto Sese Seko who Kabila had overthrown. Information was manipulated to suit the Government's agenda and there the Congolese media reported a significant amount of conspiracy theories. For example, my entry into the country was

delayed because a weapons depot at the airport had exploded—most likely due to someone dropping a cigarette or mishandling ammunition. But for a while, the Congolese press insisted that the U.S. had used a space laser to blow it up. I haven't heard a conspiracy theory like that again until 2021 when reports emerged that U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene suggested the 2018 California wildfires had started by a Jewish controlled space laser.

The international press corps was generally solid, but there was one journalist—just awful—who had been frozen out for years because he had a reputation for twisting information. Near the end of my tour, I took pity on him. I don't remember the exact story, but I finally took his call and walked him through a story, essentially telling him, "*Here is what we're officially saying. Now, strictly off the record, here's the reasoning behind our statement*." The next day, I opened his newspaper, and read, "*U.S. Embassy Public Affairs Officer Matt Goshko says, 'Here's what we're saying officially, but off the record they are saying this because X, Y, Z.'* I couldn't believe it. I got burned, but I survived.

There was another time I got burned—this one was more ridiculous. I was driving while on the phone, which I would never do now because I'm responsible. I swerved to avoid a pothole, almost got hit, and let out a string of curses. Somehow, that got picked up somewhere and made its way into the press.

But the reality is, if you're doing your job as a press officer, actively engaging with the media to make sure you are correctly explaining American policy, you will get burned at some point. You can't be afraid of it. Karen Hughes, the Under Secretary for Press and Public Affairs under President George W. Bush—I was excellent at emphasizing the importance of engagement. She made it clear: "*We cannot disengage. If we do, we cede the narrative to our competitors and opponents."*

She told us, "*If you get burned while doing your job properly, as long as Washington is never caught off guard, I'll back you up."* That lesson stayed with me. Engaging with the media and key influencers intelligently, accepting appropriate and considered risks, while making sure Washington is never surprised, and always having a Plan B—those became key takeaways from this experience.

I have always passed that advice on to more junior press officers. "*If you got burned but didn't do anything stupid, it's fine. We'll support you."*

This also ties into something I've observed over the years. We work for both political appointees and career diplomats, and it's always interesting to see what policies or priorities remain "sticky" when a new administration comes in. Karen Hughes' support for active media engagement had that "stickiness", although it somewhat eroded when Clinton became Secretary of State as her media team wanted much more direct control over media engagement. Secretary Clinton was great for the Department in many, long lasting ways, but her press people were too controlling. Still, they were much better than the press people under both the first and second trump administrations which condones outright lying to the media.

Lying to the media severely undermines the credibility of the U.S. Government and therefore its' ability to convince foreign audiences to support U.S. policies. Vice President Vance was a U.S. Marine Public Affairs Officer and he knows the cardinal rule of a press officer is to never lie.

When he was called out for lying about Haitian immigrants during an interview with CNN's Dana Bash, he said, "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do," even though the Mayor of Springfield and other of his constituents in Ohio had explicitly said the Haitian immigrants where a boon to the local economy and, at the same time, the lies Vance had helped spread had led to bomb threats that disrupted schools and local hospitals and made law-abiding, tax paying migrants fearful. Lying to the press did not advance the interests of his constituents, it worked against them.

The same is true in diplomacy. Lying to the public, especially to the publics of our democratic allies, risks long term disruption and damage to our national interests. Afghanistan and NATO are a case in point. While it is certainly true that our European Allies need to increase their defense spending, it is an absurdity to say that other NATO countries are somehow "free-loading" on the U.S. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that an armed attack on any NATO ally shall be considered an armed attack against all members and that each member will come to the collective defense of the attacked country has only ever been invoked in the defense of the United States, following the attacks by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001. Far from freeloading, our NATO allies spent twenty years giving blood and treasure in our defense. Threatening to throw that out the window, or accusing one of closet allies, the UK, of being 'a random country that hasn't fought a war in 30 years' isn't just dishonest – it's dumb. Treaties aren't transactional. If our allies don't believe we'll honor a treaty, why should they invest in it? And that lack of support increases the chances we will be on our own should we face similar outright attacks, or even threats to our interests, like China's use of the military and proxies to try and control international sea lanes and access in the South China Sea.

Another great example of Karen Hughes talent for public diplomacy shown when she visited Algeria for a three-day trip. She was incredibly supportive, backed up her team, and truly engaged with people. We ran a basketball outreach program to help give kids from poorer neighborhoods positive ways to channel their free time and energy. Under Secretary Hughes didn't just observe the programs —she got on the court and played with the kids. They had set up a grand seat for her, and she waved it off, sitting down at their level instead.

That kind of humanizing diplomacy, when done well, has an importance people don't always recognize. It plays into a broader positive aspect or stereotype of Americans that is generally accepted and appreciated around in many parts of the world. We are often seen, especially as diplomats and assistance professionals as being less aloof and more accessible and engaged—and that resonates really well in a lot of places. In contrast, when American officials insist on rigidly formal engagements – being the last person to enter a public event or pushing their way to the front of a photo op for example, it comes off as insecure and weak. Everyone knows the Americans are the superpower in the room and when officials feel the need to push their weight around for simple optics, they look needy, which is a counterproductive to convincing people to support our positions.

But Karen Hughes was excellent. I know people have strong views about different administrations. This was after the second Iraq war, and so were all sorts of disagreements, like, how we staffed Iraq, and some of those decisions still impact staffing patterns, but she was excellent. And to a degree, I think there was some stickiness there, which was good.

Q: When you say stickiness, what is that?

GOSHKO: By stickiness, I mean ideas, policies, and practices that persist across administrations. A modern example of something that may not be 'sticky' is the shift away from actively supporting Diversity, *Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA) in recruitment and retention*. The current administration has made a point of trying to root out DEIA initiatives, largely for domestic political reasons. However, from a management, policy, and representation standpoint, being more inclusive is simply more effective and better promotes American foreign policy and national security interests.

A lasting policy shift was the acceptance of being more risk tolerant in public diplomacy, which traces back to Karen Hughes. Having spent most of my career in press and public affairs, I remember how the rules were written under the *Smith-Mundt Act*. Legally, a Public Affairs officer does not need Washington's permission to speak with the international press but does require approval when dealing with the American press. (A smart PAO will, of course, always keep Washington informed. 'No surprises' is the golden rule for diplomats in the field, especially if you make a mistake. "Bad news," a Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary used to say, "is not like a fine wine. It doesn't get better with time." I would also add to any future press officers out there the advice that, "a cover up is always worse than the problem, mistake or scandal."

However, when Hillary Clinton became Secretary of State—coming from a political background rather than a purely diplomatic one—there was a shift toward greater control over messaging. To be clear, Secretary Clinton did a lot of great work for the Department on both the policy and management side. But the people handling public affairs under her became much more restrictive about how we engaged with the press. This was during my first tour in London from 2010 to 2013, and their argument was, "*the internet has blurred the lines—everyone follows the English language international press, so we should treat it like the American press."*

From my perspective, all that did was slow us down and prevent us from getting ahead of a story. Instead of ensuring a narrative was accurate, we were stuck reacting to it. It was frustrating because the existing approach had worked well, and adding extra layers of control only made it harder to do our jobs effectively.

Q: Last year you were there. From 2012 to 2013, Clinton was Secretary of State.

GOSHKO: This is where Washington's infamous *five-thousand-mile screwdriver* came into play—an expression I'm sure you've heard. Her public affairs team wanted tight control over everything, and it was frustrating. But one of the best skills a public affairs officer (or any officer, really) can develop is knowing when to push back and when to adapt.

For example, when Secretary Clinton came to Nairobi, we had set up a large, previously cleared, press conference—everything was ready, invitations sent, the room perfectly arranged. Then, at the last minute, her press team came in and said, *No, we're not doing this. Half the people,* previously agreed to with DC*, aren't going to be allowed in. It'll be a much smaller setup.* This was after we had spent all night preparing, setting up the backdrop, wiring the lights, everything. But at that moment, I told my team, *Stop. Don't waste your time fighting this, it's not going to*

change. So we tore it all down and rebuilt it the way her team wanted. People were furious, but we had to pick your battles. Know when to fight and when to let go.

After I finished in Kinshasa, I wanted to go to Afghanistan. I wanted to be where things were happening. Some people called that being an *adrenaline junkie*, but I always disliked that phrase. For me, it wasn't about chasing a rush; it was about doing work that was meaningful, engaging, and intellectually stimulating.

For your first two tours, the Entry Level Division of what was then called the Bureau of Human Resources controlled where you went. At the time, if you had served in a high-hardship post for your first tour, you could use that as leverage for a cushier assignment later. Some people used it to get comfortable posting, like in London. But I loved the work in Congo and wanted to go to Afghanistan—

My long-term plan was to go back to the Africa bureau as a home bureau, then somehow get a job that would allow me to learn Chinese and Japanese so I could do tours in those regions. But fate intervened.

While in Washington during Ordered Departure, I saw a film called *Before Night Falls*, about the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas. It was incredible. The next day, I stormed into my Career Development Officer's office and said, *You're sending me to Cuba!* He laughed and said, *Fine, you're going to Cuba.* Cuba changed everything.

A month into my second tour, I met a young British diplomat on her first overseas assignment. We started dating. Now, we're married with two children. She's the British ambassador to Mexico. I never served in the East Asia-Pacific (EAP) bureau.

Q: So this is probably a good place to pause and consider where we will begin next time. So I'm going to go ahead and stop recording.

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Q: Today is February 10, 2025, we're resuming our interview with Matthew Goshko. Matthew, you had a few more aspects of your tour in consul that you wanted to share.

GOSHKO: There are a couple of things I wanted to touch on regarding the period after Laurent Kabila's assassination, particularly our drawdown and return to post. It also occurred to me that after we returned—following the ordered departure, or possibly an authorized departure at the time—September 11 happened. That event had a huge impact on the rest of my career, which I'll address later. But first, a few more anecdotes from my time in Kinshasa.

As I mentioned earlier, we were with Mariam Guichard, running a program on Martin Luther King Jr. We had stopped for lunch at a café when the owner came over and said, *What's going on? They're closing the ports.* At that moment, we knew something big had happened. *Check, please.* And then we found out—Kabila had been assassinated.

Another moment that stands out was during the immediate aftermath, when the U.S. government was assessing the situation and deciding its posture. Jonathan Pratt—now an ambassador but then a first-tour consular officer—played a critical role in saving a life. He was in his apartment when he started getting frantic calls from a Lebanese American citizen. There was a sizable Lebanese community in Kinshasa, and for some reason, in the chaos following Kabila's assassination, the Lebanese were among the first groups to be blamed.

This caller was in full panic mode: *There are soldiers in my neighborhood. There are soldiers in my building. What should I do?*

Jonathan kept his composure and talked him through it: *Lock your door. Turn off your lights. Stay away from the windows. Be as quiet as possible.* He stayed in touch with him throughout the night, and ultimately, that man survived. Tragically, I believe eleven other Lebanese—possibly including Lebanese American citizens—were later killed by Congolese soldiers.

It was a stark reminder of how critical consular work is, especially in American Citizen Services. Jonathan was in his first or second year in-country, yet he was making life-or-death decisions in real time. It's something I think deserves recognition.

Looking back, I was reflecting on some of the reporting around Kabila's assassination. One journalist, Arnaud—his last name escapes me now—was a very good Belgian reporter covering the situation. He was involved in a film called *Murder in Kinshasa*, which alleged that the assassination was planned by the Rwandan government, that the child soldier who killed Kabila was part of a larger conspiracy, and that the U.S. government had some level of involvement.

I won't go into details, but I'll say this: it's simply not true. We were as surprised as everyone else. We heard the ports were closing, rushed to inform the ambassador, and from that moment on, we were reacting to events just like the rest of the world.

Q: Oh, it's Arnaud Zatjman

GOSHKO: I haven't seen *Murder in Kinshasa* but knowing what actually happened—having sat in the Emergency Action Committee (EAC) meetings at the time—I can say with certainty that the embassy was caught completely off guard by Laurent Kabila's assassination. Just to clarify, the EAC is the Emergency Action Committee, the body responsible for coordinating responses in crisis situations.

The more likely explanation is that this child soldier—one of the *kadogo*—was loyal to one of the leaders of a faction that had marched into Kinshasa with Kabila when he took power. One by one those other compatriots of Kabila were killed off. The *kadogo*'s patron had been killed, and possibly in an act of retribution, he turned on Kabila. A better historian than me could pinpoint exactly which faction that was, but that theory aligns much more closely with my recollection of events on the ground at the time.

Another memory from that time: when we were suddenly ordered on an authorized departure, we had very little time to leave the country. The problem was, U.S. dollars were worthless on the streets, so we had all exchanged money for Congolese francs. We had no idea how long we'd be gone, so we were left with this enormous plastic bag full of local currency. In reality, it was only a few hundred dollars' worth, but in Congolese francs, it was a massive pile of cash.

At the time, Kinshasa had a large population of street children known as *chegué*. Many were there due to poverty, but some had been abandoned due to superstitions—families would sometimes blame their hardships on a child being "cursed" and cast them out. Polio was also still an issue, leaving many children on the streets. A former Peace Corps Volunteer and, I believe, USAID employee named Jay—his last name escapes me—ran *Jay's Kids*, a program that found these children, provided them with medical care, and helped them get prosthetics or braces if needed.

As Jonathan Pratt and I were heading to the airport, two small *chegué* (it was impossible to know if they were just young or were stunted from malnutrition) approached our car, begging. You did what you could to help, but it was a constant presence in the city. We rolled down the window and handed them the entire sack of francs. They peeked inside and were completely stunned. Then, realizing what they had, their first instinct was to sprint away and find a place to hide it. It wasn't a lot of money by our standards, but it's one of those moments that sticks with you.

Another *chegué* story comes to mind. Foreign diplomats could be impatient with the begging, and one day, I saw a particularly grumpy foreigner snapping at a street kid. The child, without missing a beat, shot back, *C'est mon pays* [*It's my country]*. Even in the hardest times, that moment of pride stood out.

Eventually, we returned to post. The Public Affairs Section and the management offices were separate from the chancery, which itself was housed in an old car dealership less than a mile away. One morning, I walked in to find my team talking about a terrorist attack in New York.

"The plane hit the tower," someone said. I brushed it off. "That's not an attack. It's just an accident." Then the second plane hit. That was the moment we all understood what was happening.

September 11 and everything that followed shaped the rest of my career. We went into Afghanistan, and I continued working in public affairs. I remember the infamous "Mission Accomplished" banner on the aircraft carrier, the subsequent attempts to remove those photos from official archives, and the long arc of that war.

Until my final year in service, when President Biden pulled out U.S. forces, I was engaged in some way with what became America's longest war—a war we ultimately did not win. There are so many lessons to take from it, and many books explore those questions. *Through Our Enemies' Eyes* is a good one, among others.

How did Osama bin Laden, once focused on fighting the Russians, become our primary enemy? Was it the liberation of Kuwait? The stationing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia? These are questions for scholars. What's clear is that different administrations took very different approaches to war, post-war rebuilding, and governance. De-Baathification, throwing thousands of people out of work overnight, thousands who had weapons and money and military experience, without a well thought out and funded Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) plan was disastrous and definitely fed the insurgency that arose.

For example, in Iraq, we saw Paul Bremer leading the Coalition Provisional Authority, making sweeping decisions that shaped the country's trajectory. One book—*Assassin's Gate*—describes a fascinating scene: a meeting in London where State Department officials and representatives

from the Vice President's office were arguing. The author captures the divide perfectly: *"I never realized the gap between the true believers and the people who actually knew what they were talking about was so great."* I think that line is on page ninety-six or ninety-seven—though it's been twenty years, so I could be off. As the war in Iraq dragged on, the State Department started what became known as the "Iraq tax." Staffing shortages, shifting policies—there's a lot to unpack there.

Q: It was Jake first, Jay Garner, then Paul Bremer.

GOSHKO: Paul Bremer led the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq when I was there, and that period saw the introduction of what became known as the "Iraq tax." Essentially, the State Department and other agencies had to pull personnel from various bureaus to staff up operations in Iraq. This later expanded to Afghanistan and other high-risk posts.

These positions came with significant incentives. Serving in Iraq could mean a substantial financial boost. It could also be a way to salvage a struggling career—whether due to professional missteps or conflicts with a supervisor. Over time, these assignments became a way for some officers to fast-track promotions or gain "equity" that allowed them to transfer into bureaus where they had little prior experience.

To be clear, many of those who served in these hardship posts were outstanding officers—dedicated, highly capable, and willing to take on incredibly difficult and often dangerous work. But there were also those who went for more mercenary reasons: the financial benefits, career survival, or the chance to leapfrog into positions they otherwise might not have earned.

The impact of these staffing dynamics has persisted for decades. Even in 2024, I still see echoes of it across the Foreign Affairs agencies. The Foreign Service has always attracted a mix of personalities—some seek high-intensity assignments in conflict zones, while others prefer quieter but equally essential work in more stable regions. But I've also noticed a trend where some individuals approach their careers with a transactional mindset, prioritizing financial and professional gain over genuine commitment to the mission.

I don't want to paint with too broad a brush, because there are many dedicated professionals who take these assignments for the right reasons. But I do remember a conversation with one agency—I'm not going to name the post or the organization—where I pointed out that this was a critical-priority post dealing with issues the agency itself had flagged as urgent. My question was simple: *Where are your best and brightest?* The response? *Well, those with the same skill set can have a much better lifestyle in another region.*

That moment stuck with me. Again, I don't want to be unfair—everyone makes career choices for their own reasons, and these hardship posts are undeniably tough. But I do think that sometimes, the places that need the most committed professionals end up staffed by those who are simply passing through.

Q: I just want to mention I was never assigned to Iraq. I probably didn't have the right skill set regardless. But during the time of what was called the Iraq tax where foreign service officers' positions in a lot of countries were reorganized, the position was eliminated, and they were offered the opportunity to go to Iraq. A lot of them took that opportunity. Not all of them were

adequately prepared for what they would face there, and I think you're alluding to that in the sense that not all of them lasted all that long. They really could not stand the security issues, the tension, and they had not been prepared at all for what they were going to be facing in a situation where there was still a fair amount of conflict and danger and you needed all kinds of extra protection. Others thrived, but, but not all. And that was also true, in Afghanistan as well, where you had the impression, oh, I can earn a lot more money. And it's a short tour. And I get all these kinds of extra leave and so many other benefits, but it didn't last because they simply weren't prepared for that kind of work. And I think that's what you're saying.

GOSHKO: One thing I really want to stress is that when we initially went into Iraq— and let's be clear, the second Gulf War was a war of choice—it wasn't necessary. But once we were in, they couldn't staff it properly. That's when they implemented the "Iraq tax," pulling personnel from other bureaus to fill the gaps. Over time, they figured out how to find the right people and provide the right kind of training, but that didn't happen overnight.

It's also important to recognize that not everyone is suited for these environments—and that's <u>not</u> a question of resilience, toughness, or commitment. People are built differently. Some thrive in conflict zones but wouldn't be a great fit in a post like London or Paris. That's not a judgment; it's just reality. The Foreign Service has made progress in acknowledging these differences. Leadership, particularly under Colin Powell, focused on resilience training, and what was once called Human Resources—now Global Talent Management (GTM)—has done a lot to provide better support. Programs like the Office of Counseling and Resilience (OCR) help people prepare for, and cope with, the demands of high-risk assignments.

Even today, some officers and contractors serve in places where they fall asleep to the sound of gunfire. And the coping mechanisms vary. A former ambassador once made a joke about Iraq and Afghanistan, *You either come out a hunk, a chunk, or a drunk.* Meaning, you either throw yourself into fitness, overeat, or drink too much. That wasn't entirely wrong. I saw it firsthand. Personally, I fell into the "chunk" category. When I was briefly in Najaf, I ate the same meals as the Marines, who were burning thousands of calories in combat every night. I wasn't. I probably put on twenty pounds—and it wasn't muscle.

These challenges are tied into bigger questions about risk management. In the early days of Iraq, we tolerated a high level of risk, and people died because of it. I arrived in-country only to realize I was replacing a PAO [Public Affairs Officer] and a USAID [United States Agency for International Development] officer who had been killed. Over time, things improved, especially when the State Department took over from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). But then came overcorrections, like after Benghazi—where the emphasis on security made diplomacy harder. By 2023, when I was working on the risk management group, we were wrestling with questions like, *How do we balance security with presence?* Do we really need a ten million dollar building in a Pacific island country to counter China? Can we find a way to maintain a diplomatic footprint without excessive costs and setbacks?

This brings me to another point; Generalists should be generalists. One of the best jobs I ever had was in budget and performance, even though I'm a PD officer. I didn't get exposure to the Washington side of performance planning until I was in the Senior Foreign Service. That's a problem. Officers should rotate through these roles earlier—whether they're PD, consular, econ, or political officers, so they understand how the joint country strategy and budget process

actually work back in Washington and affect budgets well into the future. Most of these positions are staffed by civil servants who know their stuff, but FSOs need more direct involvement.

Unfortunately, taking those kinds of assignments isn't always rewarded. A senior officer once told me, *If you're a PD officer and you take a job in budget and performance, you won't be as competitive as a PAO at a big post.* That mindset discourages broader experience. We've tried to move away from rigid career "cones," but there's still a tendency to pigeonhole officers. In reality, there's not much difference between a political officer and a press officer – despite what some FSO vehemently believe. And European diplomatic services treat generalists as generalists. At senior levels we need officers with broad experience, including enterprise level experience, to lead Posts and Bureaus.

Shifting back to my time in Kinshasa, we were dealing with the aftermath of September 11, but our primary focus was still on Africa's "World War." The situation in the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] remained volatile, with Rwanda supporting militias in the east. Issues like rare earth mineral mining were central then and remain relevant today. Even the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda was still an open question. These conflicts haven't been resolved, they're ongoing.

Q: Sorry, now when you say they played a positive role. Can you give an example of how some of these programs that the U.S. funds, principally in countries that are poor, and that in a few other countries, like full bread exchanges, there's actually a board where the host country puts in some money, and the U.S. puts in some money, because now you're talking about exchanges among with the Democratic Republic of the Congo as it was. I'm sorry, Zaire, as it was known back then.

GOSHKO: One clear example of how educational exchange programs make a tangible impact is what happened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As I mentioned earlier, under the previous leadership, the economy was mismanaged. The government artificially controlled the price of the Congolese franc, fuel, and other essentials. I worked across the street from a gas station where fuel was kept at an artificially low price, creating an easy opportunity for black-market trade. People would roll up in makeshift vehicles—sometimes just the frame of a VW [Volkswagen] bus with a gas tank—fill up, siphon the fuel, and resell it at market value.

Then, when Laurent-Désiré Kabila was assassinated and his son took over, things changed. He brought in a team that included people with real training in economics—many of them Fulbright, Humphrey, or Chevening scholars (the British equivalent). Their first move? Floating the price of fuel. Overnight, the long lines disappeared. So did the fistfights and much of the black-market criminality. It was a straightforward policy decision that had an immediate impact on economic stability and crime reduction.

This is why these programs matter. Crime today is increasingly transnational. Take a place like Mbuji-Mayi, which literally means *goat water.* It used to be a tiny town, but it had an airport with direct flights to Dubai—because of the diamond trade. These connections highlight the need for strong expertise in governance, law enforcement, and economic policy. Having professionals with international training—people who understand market dynamics, rule of law, and responsible policing—can make all the difference.

In public diplomacy, exchange programs don't just connect participants to the United States; they foster regional and global networks. A Fulbright or Humphrey scholar from Francophone Africa might collaborate with peers across the region, in Europe, or elsewhere. These connections help build expertise, strengthen common understanding, and tackle global challenges like transnational crime, climate change, and fair-trade practices.

On another level, in more developed countries where the U.S. already has long-standing relationships, public diplomacy plays a crucial role in shaping the next generation of leaders. It's not just about explaining or advocating for U.S. policies at the moment—it's about ensuring that future policymakers, journalists, and military leaders understand the United States and see us as a partner of choice.

For example, the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) identifies emerging leaders and brings them to the U.S. early in their careers. Over time, those relationships bear fruit. Margaret Thatcher, if I recall correctly, was an IVLP participant—or possibly a Fulbright scholar. Gordon Brown may have been as well. These programs create connections that, years later, influence diplomatic, economic, and security ties.

One of the most impactful aspects of IVLP is the *homestay* experience, where participants spend time with everyday American families. I encourage anyone interested in international affairs to host an exchange participant. Time and again, visitors return home saying one of their most meaningful experiences was staying with an American family. Despite stereotypes of the "ugly American," those personal interactions reveal the curiosity, generosity, and openness that don't always come across in global media.

These programs are long-term investments. They don't yield results overnight, but in twenty to twenty-five years, they shape global partnerships, strengthen governance, and promote stability. That's why they're so crucial. And for Congress, which controls the budget, especially the House of Representatives, where members are up for reelection every two years, it's vital to think beyond short-term cycles and recognize the lasting impact of these initiatives.

Q: No, that's fine. All right, um, it sounds like you're ready to go on to the next post. If, if that's if that if you agree. All right, how? How did that come about because you're going from Kinshasa to Cuba, that's quite a change.

GOSHKO: As I said, I joined the Foreign Service thinking I was going to spend my entire career in the Bureau of East Asia and the Pacific. I've never done a single tour there.

When we were on authorized or ordered departure, it may have actually been authorized Departure, not Ordered Departure means you have no choice; you're going. Authorized Departure means you're offered the option to leave. I think we were technically on an Authorized Departure, in that the ambassador said, "You're leaving because we have to maintain a small footprint." If it's an Authorized Departure, it's easier to get back into the country later. So, I'm not quite sure what Ambassador Swing recommended to the Department but for some reason, "authorized departure" is stuck in my head.

When I was working in the Bureau of African Affairs' regional office, I went out and saw a movie about Cuba. This is how art can change your life. That day, I stormed into my career development officer's (CDO) office and said, "You must send me to Cuba." He said, "Fine. If

that's what you want to do with your equity, you're going to Cuba." So, Cuba became my next post.

I had to learn Spanish and was living in Washington for a while. When I arrived in Cuba, within my first month, I became good friends with a British diplomat who was friends with an American econ officer. That British officer is now my wife—currently the British ambassador to Mexico, which is why I'm here in Mexico City. She had no desire to work in East Asia and the Pacific, and I had no desire to work where she wanted to, which was the former Soviet Union. But we made it work.

It was the second Bush administration, and this was Cuba. This is something the current administration will have to think about long and hard. Trump ran on clamping down on migration but doesn't want to invest in solving the problems in the countries people are fleeing from. Haiti is a great example. Haiti, especially the capitol Port au Prince, is an incredibly dangerous place. It was my second-to-last overseas posting. The people leaving are doing so because it is dangerous, and they have no hope or future. Cutting or disrupting USAID, CDC and INL programs will make the problems worse and will most likely increase irregular migration. That is just the way the world works, whether or not people like Elon Musk understand that or not.

Back when I was in Havana, —I was assigned there from 2002 to 2004 but actually left in 2003 to go to Iraq when the Department put out the call for volunteers. One of the events that happened while I was in Cuba was the ongoing issue of irregular migration. There have always been Cubans "rafting"—and "rafting" can mean anything from trucks built on pontoons with a propeller at the back to the use of high-speed boats provided by professional smugglers. It's incredibly dangerous.

Cubans did this mostly to escape grinding poverty. Bill Clinton's wet-foot, dry-foot policy, which is another example of foreign policy designed for domestic political considerations, stated that if you were interdicted at sea, you were sent back to Cuba. But if you set foot on U.S. soil, you could stay. That policy was a "pull factor" in irregular migration that encouraged rafting, not just among Cubans but Haitians as well. At one point, Haitian migration was so large that naval ships had to be diverted—normally, this is a U.S. Coast Guard responsibility. There is a Coast Guard attaché in Havana, as well as one in Port-au-Prince. Managing irregular migration is a critical issue.

Going back to my first tour, I had been in public affairs. My second tour was in consular work. Every Foreign Service officer must complete a consular tour in either their first or second assignment. Previously, you could do a management tour to fulfill this requirement, but that has since changed. I may have said this before, but I actually think it's great that everyone goes through this. For most people, the only diplomat they will ever interact with is a consular officer—whether they are applying for a visa or if they are an American in trouble abroad. It is a shared experience among Foreign Service officers and a great testing ground for ensuring you can treat people with decency and professionalism.

Visa applicants are often the most difficult, but we were there to help manage the migration crisis. Many Cubans have come to the United States, but, at least at the time, not enough had naturalized to sponsor their families for immigrant visas. U.S. immigration law defines

categories that determine who can immigrate, and one of the major purposes of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) is family reunification. However, if you become a U.S. citizen, your ability to bring family members over is still limited.

If your minor child reaches age twenty-one and gets married, their status changes. It's been years since I worked in this area, but the law establishes per-country immigration limits. Some countries, such as China, Mexico, the Philippines, and India, have particularly high demand, and Congress places annual caps on immigration from those countries. This means people sometimes wait ten to fifteen years for their number to come up so they can immigrate legally.

I remember being frustrated with some of my colleagues on the consular line. They would grill applicants, saying things like, "Oh, well, you're twenty-two, you're not married, but you've been living with someone and have a child." The reality is, they had been waiting for years for their chance to immigrate, and many were deeply Catholic and unhappy about living in what they considered "sin." A little understanding and humanity would have gone a long way to making the process less demeaning, especially since these people were following the law.

In the case of Cuba, many people could not legally petition to bring their relatives over. Either their children had aged out, or—most commonly—the sponsors had never taken U.S. citizenship. Because of this, the U.S. Interest Section used a program called parole to help bring a certain number of Cubans in every year and relieve the pressure of irregular migration. Parole allows someone without a visa to be admitted into the United States. You can then later adjust status and become a Legal Permanent Resident. If you knew you had a legitimate shot at being paroled into the country you would be less likely to raft.

At the time, I believe the program was administered by what was then Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) before the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after 9/11. When I was in Havana, immigration and customs functions had been merged under DHS, and there was an officer from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) assigned to Havana to help run the parole program. We were trying to increase the number of legal pathways for migration. The exact "floor" or number of migrants legally allowed in each year needs to be double-checked, but I think 20,000 legal migrants a year was the goal.

The goal was to safely admit about 20,000 people so they wouldn't resort to dangerous rafting attempts. It was a pressure valve.

But there were challenges. After 9/11, a Republican administration was in power, and even though Cuba wasn't a hotbed of Islamist terrorism, politics were involved. We had to conduct additional administrative screening to ensure applicants weren't criminals or terrorists.

Ordinarily, common sense would apply—an 86-year-old grandmother isn't a likely terrorist. But you can't make assumptions. The suicide bomber who attacked the UN in Algiers in 2007, for example was sixty-three-year-old grandfather. The screening process created massive backlogs. We were using an outdated system, sending off cables one by one. We had various visa security programs—Visa Vipers, Visa Donkeys, Visa Bears—but it was slow and inefficient.

At one point, we were working 10–12-hour days, six days a week. All my household effects had been sitting in boxes for two months—I just didn't have time to unpack.

Eventually, working with Washington, we found a more efficient way to screen applicants while maintaining national security. One non-sensitive, common-sense example included checking for permanent physical features. If someone had a common name that matched a known criminal and was of a similar age, we would ask them to roll up their sleeves—if they were missing the tattoos we knew the criminal had, or marks of tattoo removal, they were cleared. Simple things like that helped.

A logistical challenge was assembling the paperwork. Parolees didn't get visas, so they needed an elaborate packet of documents. And for some reason, we required grommets—small metal fasteners—to put these packets together. We once ran out of grommets, and without them we couldn't assemble the parole packets so someone leaving Cuba had to bring back a twenty-five-pound bag of them.

I remember leaving the airport one time when a family I had helped get paroled came up and thanked me.

At that time, the Iraq War had started, and Castro used the distraction to crackdown on dissidents. My wife, who was doing political and press work, saw many of her contacts imprisoned. Then Colin Powell, whom I greatly admired, put out a call for volunteers to go to Iraq. So I left for Al Hillah, Iraq.

But calling it just "economic migration" doesn't capture the full picture. People were living in grinding poverty. In places like Port-au-Prince, neighborhoods were sealed off by gangs, and people were shot if they tried to leave. There was no medical care, no water, just extreme suffering. Saying these people were migrating for economic reasons oversimplifies the desperation that creates refugee flows.

Eventually, working with Washington and our deputy consul general, we came up with an elegant solution to process cases more efficiently while maintaining national security. This helped clear the backlog.

Some cases were particularly tricky. A legitimate applicant might have the same name and birth date as a known criminal from the same region. This information wasn't classified but was considered law enforcement sensitive, meaning it couldn't be classified because then it couldn't be used in court. Sometimes we got lucky. I'd tell someone, "Roll up your left sleeve," and if they didn't have the identifying tattoo of the criminal, or evidence it had been removed, we'd know it wasn't them.

Another challenge was logistics. A visa goes into a passport, but parole paperwork was more elaborate. At one point, we ran out of grommets, which were needed to secure the documents. Someone traveling brought back a 25-pound bag of grommets just so we could continue processing.

During this time, the Iraq War had begun, and Castro used the distraction to crackdown on dissidents. I was at the beginning of a serious relationship but volunteered to serve in Iraq when Secretary Colin Powell asked for volunteers to go to Iraq. I didn't expect to be selected, but I was. I was trying to keep it from my mother, but someone she knew had visited Havana and attended one of the lectures the U.S. Interests Section gave to visiting Americans, learned about

my upcoming deployment, and told her. I got a call: “You’re going to Iraq? You couldn’t tell me?”

Before deploying, I went through what is now called Foreign Affairs Counter-Threat (FACT) training, run by Diplomatic Security. Back then, it was known as "Smash and Crash" because you got to do things like ram cars through other cars that have been set up to “trap” your vehicle in a simulated kidnapping or assassination attempt. It was a lot of fun but also serious training—first aid, dealing with bombs, counter-surveillance, and how to disrupt an attack cycle. This training evolved from studying past embassy attacks, like Nairobi. Now, every foreign service officer must go through FACT every six years, not just those going to high-threat posts.

I remember at one point, walking towards the State Department to catch a shuttle to one of the Diplomatic Security Training Centers used for FACT training with a notebook full of details on how to spot surveillance, identify and deal with explosives and nerve gas attacks, and treat mass casualty wounds. At the same time, I was dressed casually, not in my normal suit and tie, and I was listening to Arabic language lessons on my earphones and repeating phrases in Arabic out loud. I look middle eastern, (I was once stopped five times in a single airport overseas soon after 9/11 and questioned) and it occurred to me if a cop pulled me over for some reason and searched my bag, I would have a lot of explaining to do. Hopefully my State Department badge would have been a help.

A major issue in Iraq was balancing security with outreach. The Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) had to adjust its approach. After 9/11 and the bombing of our Embassy in Nairobi, security was extremely rigid. Over time, the State's approach to security evolved. While a visibly hard security posture deters attacks, it also makes diplomacy, especially public diplomacy, harder to carry out.

Iraq also saw a shift in U.S. government staffing. With the end of the Cold War, the military was downsized, and there was a heavy reliance on security contractors, especially with groups like Blackwater. These were often ex-military or law enforcement who could make a lot more money in security contracting then they did working for the U.S. Government. When I deployed, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was still in charge of Iraq, and I was grateful to the Blackwater security teams that kept us safe. But they operated with a lot of autonomy, and there were some serious issues in judgment and execution by some teams, like the September 2007 killings in Nisoor Square. The teams that protected us were generally speaking extremely competent, but there was one issue when we had to be evacuated after a hand grenade was thrown at a building we were having a meeting in. Fortunately no one was hurt in the attack or the evacuation, but while we were driving back to the Regional Embassy Office, we hit a traffic jam. At one point the driver of our vehicle got frustrated and left the vehicle to fire a round from his handgun into the ground to scare a guy off. That lack of discipline should never have happened. The convoy was more than adequately protected, the driver should have stayed behind the wheel and let the team leader clear out the traffic calmly. Hiring and deploying less experienced and disciplined contractors to meet the daily demands of conducting U.S. diplomatic, assistance, and security support was not ideal.

When the State Department took over from the CPA, things became more structured. DSS agents replaced private contractors, and corruption was investigated more aggressively. For example, when I was in Al Hillah, due to corrupt U.S. contractors working for the CPA at the time, a

hospital was built with such poor construction that an elevator collapsed, killing the surgical team and patient inside. People responsible for that are now in prison, as they should be. Corruption turned out to be pretty prevalent in South-Central Iraq during the CPA times. A common tactic, which is illegal, was "splitting contracts"—if someone only had authorization to approve five hundred thousand dollars but needed to fund a one-million-dollar project, they'd split it into two contracts to avoid oversight. Part of having lots of little contracts with minimal oversight was that it allowed corrupt CPA officials, none of whom worked for State to my knowledge, to receive millions in kickbacks. One guy went even farther and diverted weapons intended for Iraq security forces. When he was arrested at his home in the U.S., they found rocket propelled grenade launchers in his garage that had been purchased with CPA funds and somehow diverted to his home.

Splitting contracts is a huge red flag. To their credit, the Foreign Service officers overseeing the design and implementation of projects conceived of them with the best interest of the Iraqi people in mind, but their leadership at the time could be oblivious to corruption. A new Regional Coordinator, an Econ Officer by training, came in, discovered irregularities, and called in special investigators to start cleaning things up. During the transition from the previous Regional Coordinator to the new one, I went from being a Public Affairs officer to serving as the Deputy Regional Coordinator and acted as the Acting Regional Coordinator.

Another example of corruption involved the looting of historic cultural artifacts. The CPA-South Central Headquarters were located near the ruins of Babil, or Babylon, as it is known in English. Some looting had occurred before the second Gulf war. The original Ishtar Gate was removed, I believe by German archeologists and reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin sometime around 1902 to 1914. Sadam Hussein had also tried to build a fake reconstruction on top of the original site, but the original ruins were still present and several of the people working at the CPA - South Central (CPA-SC) Headquarters in Al Hillah had picked up actual artifacts from the ruins that they initially displayed as trophies in their offices and had the intention of smuggling back to the States. This was illegal, in contravention of 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, to which the U.S. is a signatory. One of my last acts, as the Acting CPA Regional Coordinator, was to work with the UN to try and retrieve these items. In the end, I went from office to office in CPA-SC with a cardboard box, explaining to everyone assembled that taking the artifacts was a crime and that if they were caught transporting them back to their home countries, they would be prosecuted. I finished the speech by leaving the box, saying I wasn't asking anyone to admit anything and that I would be back the next day to collect the box with any artifacts inside and return it to the UN representatives. I don't know if we got everything, but we definitely saved and returned several items.

It was a chaotic time, but we learned a lot—about security, about corruption, and about the realities of working in post-conflict reconstruction.

Q: Oh, take Yeah, take a second to explain what a Regional Coordinator did.

GOSHKO: Initially, under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by Paul Bremer after the invasion of Iraq, the country was divided into regions administered by Regional Coordinators. While it's not a perfect analogy, these coordinators functioned somewhat like Consuls General who in turn answered first the CPA, and after the return of sovereignty, the U.S.

Ambassador in Baghdad. They were State Department officials overseeing interagency teams responsible for everything from reconstruction to humanitarian assistance to security assistance and developing the capacity of local law enforcement, democratization programs, health programs, etc..

Our area, South-Central Iraq, included cities like Al Hillah, AR Ramadi—where the horrific 2004 ambush and murder of Blackwater contractors occurred—An Najaf, and Karbala. These were predominantly Shia areas. One major dynamic at play was the tension between Iraq's Shia majority and the Sunni Baathists, who had ruled under Saddam Hussein. Iran also played a role, secretly supplying insurgents with weapons and knowledge on how to do things like make shaped charges—more advanced than traditional improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that were designed to penetrate armored vehicles.

Within Iraq's Shia community, there were different clerical leaders. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, known as a "quietist," focused on religious matters, while Muqtada al-Sadr was a firebrand political figure. His father had been a prominent voice for poor, disenfranchised Shia under Saddam's rule.

It's important to remember that many groups designated as terrorist organizations—such as Hezbollah in Lebanon—also provide social services to impoverished communities. This complicates how these groups are perceived by the local populations they recruit from and is a reason why humanitarian, anti-corruption, and democratization programs run by USAID and State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) and it's' Bureau of Conflict Resolution (CSO) are key elements of any comprehensive and successful counter-terrorism program. Al-Sadr's militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army), took its name from the Shia belief in the Mahdi, a hidden Imam who will return—a concept somewhat analogous to the messianic idea in Christianity. Within Islam there was a historic division between Sunni Islam, which believed the Caliph, the successor to the Prophet Muhammed's religious and political leadership of the Islamic World, should be chosen by the community, while Shia believed the Caliph must be a descendent of the Prophet. Muhammad, specifically through Ali, who was the cousin and son in law of the Prophet, the fourth Caliph.

Different branches of Shia Islam exist, depending on whom they regard as the last divinely ordained Imam. These include branches often informally referred to as the "Fivers," who closely resemble Sunni practices, and the "Twelvers," that make up the majority of Iraqi and Iranian Shia. Twelvers believe the twelfth imam went into hiding and will return as the Mahdi. Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army was fighting U.S. forces in Najaf, a city of immense religious significance. Karbala is also sacred, as it was the site where Hussein—Ali's son—was killed.

During this time, the State Department established State Embedded Teams, placing officers alongside military units. I volunteered to relocate from Hillah to serve in Najaf during a staffing gap while the Marines were battling the Mahdi Army. We worked out of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Baker, which I recall correctly had once been a technical school of some sort. My role was a mix of political advisor to the Marien General fighting the second uprising of Muqtada al Sadr's Jaysh al Mahdi (Army of the Mahdi) militia. and expeditionary officer, conducting reporting and engagement. I lived and worked with the Civil Affairs Group and gained firsthand insight into how public diplomacy can work with, and differs from, what was

then called military's psychological operations units (now known as Military Information Support Operations or MISO).

We observed what worked and what didn't in messaging campaigns. Iraqis were often skeptical of anti-Mahdi Army slogans graffiti, with one taxi driver telling a western journalist he had seen Coalition Forces were painting them on walls. Another example of the importance of having credible voices and messaging campaigns if you want to persuade audiences of the validity of your positions. The fighting was brutal but the Marines had better capabilities and could fight both day and night. Eventually, the Marines pressured the Mahdi Army into a negotiated withdrawal—fighters abandoned weapons and dispersed, though many weapons were hidden for future use.

Najaf was a stressful assignment with FOB Baker occasionally receiving incoming mortar fire I remember working on a report when incoming mortar fire forced me to duck, my hand reaching up around the desk trying to find and hit the send button while hearing a Marine calling for a corpsman, or medic, to tend to a Marine hit by shrapnel. While interacting with the Governor of Najaf, he always had a cocked handgun on his desk, in easy reach reflecting his anxiety. In City Hall, unfired mortars were stacked in rows that ran down the length of a hallway. (Note, by the time I had arrived, the insurgents were no longer in control of the city but had dug into sacred positions around the Imam Ali Shrine and surrounding cemetery. U.S. efforts to prevent serious damage to these holy sites offered the insurgents a degree of protection. EndNote.)

After the fighting in Najaf ended, I returned to Al Hillah. At that point, our new regional coordinator, an economics officer, started noticing suspicious financial activities. He called in investigators, leading to further scrutiny of corruption in the region.

I can't quite remember my exact dates, but I was in Iraq for about six months. I believe I spent roughly three months under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and another three under the transitional sovereignty period, though I'd have to double-check.

One of our responsibilities was teaching proper contracting procedures—how to bid, how to ensure transparency. I worked with USAID and had fiduciary control over certain projects. USAID would oversee the bid process, and once a contractor was selected, we would inspect the work and allocate payments accordingly.

At one point, I took leave during a transition period—CPA was winding down, and the State Department was bringing in proper security and financial controls. To access funds, I had to travel to Baghdad for some basic financial accounting training, sign for the money, and have it returned to what had been the CPA South-Central Headquarters and was now the Regional Embassy Office in Al Hillah (REO Hillah). DS was bringing in more regulated security procedures, but security was still in flux. The team that drove me up to Baghdad handed me an AK-47 and told me to keep it with me in the back of the car. When I arrived at the airport, I turned in the Glock I had been issued and the funds— USD 500,000 in one-hundred-dollar bills, in my backpack for the team to take back to the REO and secure—before leaving for vacation.

When I returned, the half-million dollars was in a locked drawer safe and I used it to begin paying contracts that met the standards of the USAID project. As CPA started wrapping up, CPA officials from Hillah and other regional posts started leaving. To my surprise, one day there was

suddenly a large amount of extra cash in the same drawer safe where I kept the funds I was responsible for. It turned out that a contractor, a holdover from CPA who was managing contracts in another district, had commingled his funds with mine, another red flag. He claimed it was all his money, but I had receipts showing exactly what I had received and spent and how much remaining funds I had.

This triggered an investigation by the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID). It was my first time being deposed as a U.S. government employee. We carefully reviewed receipts, and eventually, the contractor "suddenly remembered" he had a trunk full of cash under his bed. Conveniently forgotten, of course. I don't know what ultimately happened to him, but it was another lesson in why financial controls are essential to good governance and public trust.

Despite all the audits and checks, when I finally left Iraq, I was short by either $40 or $200—I can't remember the exact amount. To make the books whole, I wrote a personal check and covered the difference.

The experience reinforced the importance of vigilance when dealing with money. When people start yelling and screaming, as several of the CPA officials who were put in prison in the U.S. did, and especially where funds are involved, something is usually wrong. It also taught me an early lesson about standing up to bullies. Throughout my career, I've encountered people in leadership positions who tried to intimidate others to get their way.

There have been documented cases—some in Inspector General (IG) reports—of officials attempting to bypass security protocols. For example, I once witnessed an officer I worked for try to have an intern remove classified materials from a secure building improperly. When challenged, their response was, "Let me worry about that." My response was "No, you just don't do it, and you certainly don't ask an intern to do it for you." Over the years, I've had to use resources like the Office of Civil Rights and the Office of the Inspector General to address these and other issues when necessary.

Q: — I'm sorry when you say that, in other words, you were trying to protect yourself from reprisal, if I understand.

GOSHKO: In this particular case, I was trying to protect an intern from being pressured into doing something illegal by a supervisor. In another instance, it wasn't about protecting myself, but I've always emphasized to colleagues throughout my career: document, document, document. Unfortunately, there have been cases—both involving career officials and political appointees—where people have acted inappropriately, and reprisals have followed. That's a discussion for another time, but I can say there was one instance of reprisal against me many years later.

There's a telling difference in how such cases are handled. For example, our ambassador in Kenya was incompetent, abusive, and a bully. The Obama administration removed him. Other ambassadors, however, were not held accountable, with administrations backing them instead. That's why institutions like the Inspector General's office are so important, and why having an administration that upholds American values and supports its people matters.

At this point, I had finished my assignment in Iraq and returned to work on the Iraq economic desk as an econ officer. However, I was planning to transition to public affairs and public

diplomacy, which I enjoyed much more. That process took time, and I initially thought I would spend my career in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA).

To make the switch, I had to go through a process called *conal rectification*, one of my favorite Foreign Service terms. For those unfamiliar, when you join the Foreign Service, you enter a specific career track, or "cone," and the higher you go, the fewer jobs are available. I had joined as an economic officer but wanted to switch to public diplomacy. To do that, I needed a certain amount of time in both domestic and overseas assignments—thirty-six months at the time and the cone had to have a deficit of officers it needed to backfill.

I started looking for public diplomacy jobs in that region, particularly since I had just come out of Iraq and was interested in continuing that work. Around the same time, my fiancée and I were discussing how this might affect our future. A position opened up for a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) in Algiers. At the time, I was still an *O-3* (the first level for a mid-level officer), and this was an *O-2* position. Normally, I wouldn't have been eligible, but Algiers wasn't a highly sought-after post, so I was able to get the assignment in what is known as "stretching into" a position graded higher than my personal rank. This served two key purposes. It allowed me to gain more time in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, helping me fulfill the requirement for a Regional Specialty (either a major or minor) within the State Department. It also contributed to the 36 months I needed for conal rectification.

I should clarify—switching cones isn't automatic. There has to be a shortage of officers at the grade level you're switching into. At the time, there weren't enough *O-2* public diplomacy officers, partly due to budget cuts and partly due to experiments with hiring into specific cones. By the time I made *O-2*, I was essentially a free agent—there were more positions than officers available. For anyone in the Foreign Service, I'll say this, the *O-2* years are where the best jobs are. Enjoy them.

Q: I'm just looking quickly at, you know, at your resume. The, yeah, the period of time when you moved into the public affairs cone was also after the United States of Information Agency (USIA) had been integrated into the State Department. And there had been a large number of people who retired who didn't want to be part of the State Department at that moment. And so it was a good moment for people who wanted to move into the public affairs cone to try, as I was.

GOSHKO: A colleague of mine had a similar experience—she joined as a public diplomacy (PD) officer but wanted to transition to an economic (econ) officer. Working on the Iraq econ desk was a formative experience for me. It was crucial work, and that's why I always tell PD officers: when you come back to Washington for your first tour, while it's important to get experience as good PD desk officers, they should also strongly consider working on a regional policy desk.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, if you know where you want to serve, building your reputation on a regional desk in Washington is the best way to position yourself for an onward assignment to that region since the regional bureaus control most, though not all, of those assignments. Second, if your job is to explain U.S. policy to others, you need to understand how policy is made. Desk officers gather reporting from posts, analyze it, and shape it for senior leadership. They are the link between embassies, State Department leadership, and the broader interagency. It's crucial work.

There are other prestigious Washington assignments as well. Working in the Operations Center, for example, has been described as being a "fly on an incredibly interesting wall." The Operations Center, or Ops, is the Department's 24/7/365 center for communicating between Department Leadership, Posts, and the interagency. If there is a crisis going on, Ops is monitoring it, even if the Department has set up an Ad Hoc task force for a crisis. If the Secretary needs to call a counterpart, Ops sets up the call. If you are Post and find out a Congressperson is flying somewhere that has suddenly become unstable, Ops will connect you. Wherever you are in the world, if you need to get in touch with someone in the Department in an Emergency, day or night, Ops will make it happen. In a career where you get a new phone number every three or four years or so, the number to Ops is probably the one every single FSO will remember throughout their career. It is a prestigious, intense, job. role.

Some officers will go from Ops, or other jobs, to working on "The Line." The Line serves the Secretary and other senior officials, supposedly named because it was once a literal line of desks for policy papers that had to go to the Secretary. Officers on The Line also set up travel for the Secretary and travel with her or him. Both jobs give a great overview of how the Department and Interagency processes work, but it is at the desk level where you see how policy takes shape and is implemented in real time, which is invaluable experience.

This ties into a broader theme I'll touch on a few times. During his tenure, Secretary of State Colin Powell pushed for better training within the State Department. But before his time, the culture was still very much *learn on the job—if you don't know what you're doing, it's your fault.* I learned that firsthand on the Iraq Econ desk when I got a call from someone who wanted to meet with the President of the World Bank. Not knowing any better, I called the World Bank and set up the meetings. Something I quickly learned was a major faux pas.

The State Department doesn't reach out to the World Bank directly, the Treasury does. And even within the Treasury, not just anyone can do it. Similarly, as a desk officer, I wasn't supposed to reach out to the Treasury directly; I had to go through the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs (EB). Never having been told this, I set up the meeting and promptly had my head handed to me for not knowing what the proper channels were. There were a few other moments like that. Washington is a high-pressure environment with tight deadlines, and back then, BlackBerries were just starting to become common. Only very senior officials or officers working in H (congressional affairs). Everything still ran on strict paper deadlines. For example, any document that needed to go to the Secretary of State had to be formatted correctly and fully cleared by *the Line* by 4:00 p.m. If you missed the deadline, or if it wasn't perfect, they bounced it back—and you lost your window. Missing that deadline was a nightmare.

Q: Let me just interrupt one second. A lot of people outside the department won't know there are two pieces of direct contact with the Secretary on a twenty-four-hour basis, and that's the operation center that monitors all the incoming cables. Is there when a Foreign Service post or an embassy has a crisis, they call the operation center, and the operation center then moves all of the information to the right people so that immediate action can be taken and notifies either the Secretary or the appropriate high level official. The line is the monitor of paper going into the Secretary and the people who accompany the secretary so that on the road he can, or she can still do the day-to-day operations of the department while overseas and I only interrupt to say that because it's a really fine distinction, and a lot of people won't know the difference.

GOSHKO: That's a really important clarification—thank you. And sorry, I'm going to jump back for a moment. Ambassador Swing was my first ambassador, and he was terrific in countless ways. The Foreign Service attracts very ambitious people and many of us, especially in our first few tours, start thinking: *How do I become an ambassador? How do I get promoted quickly? What's the best path forward?*

Ambassador Swing's advice was simple but profound: "*There are a million ways to get where you want to go. And by the way, your life is going to change."* You come in as one person, but in five or ten years, who knows? You might be single now but married with kids later. "T*here's no single "right" way to move up*".

Some people follow a traditional high-flyer route: they work in the Operations Center, then "the Line," then become a Special Assistant, and they do very well that way. But there are also diplomats, like an Ambassador who is one of the most experienced people I know. He spent the majority of his early career overseas, ignoring the accepted FSO wisdom that you should come back to Washington for your third tour. I don't believe he returned to Washington until he became Deputy Director for Afghanistan in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

Ambassador Swing, a six-time Ambassador, himself had an unconventional path. He was a French speaker. When under Henry Kissinger the Department adopted a more general globalist assignment policy, Ambassador Swing was told he was being sent to Japan. Swing pushed back, saying he wanted language training. The Department told him There was no time and he would not get language training. Swing refused the assignment, and as "punishment," they sent him to Bangui, Central African Republic which is Francophone. From there, he worked as a consular officer, then moved into human resources, and eventually became an ambassador for over 20 years.

His message was clear: "*Follow your interests. Do work that excites you. If you're engaged in what you do, you'll excel."* While many officers stress about following the "right" path—"*Do I have to do this? Do I have to do that?"* I would suggest following Ambassador Swing's advice. If you love being in the field, stay in the field as long as you can. At some point, if you do want a DCM or other Ambassador Position, you will need to come to Washington—not just to build your reputation but also to see how policy is made, but it certainly doesn't have to be your third tour.

For public diplomacy (PD) officers especially, understanding policy from the inside is critical. PD is often described as a bridge between the U.S. and foreign audiences, but I'd argue PD officers are also a bridge between posts and Washington—and even across different policy silos. You have access to vast amounts of information, but you have to know what to share and how.

So, after Iraq, I was working on the Iraq Econ desk, in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA). One thing that stood out from that period—without naming names—was reporting to a particularly difficult officer. That experience taught me the importance of documentation.

I remember him bragging one day: *This used to be the Office of Northern Gulf Affairs. We wrote all the papers leading up to the second Iraq War.* I thought, "W*hy are you bragging about that?*" That war was a disaster, and we're still dealing with the consequences today.

This kind of bureaucratic obliviousness is frustrating. Some people are so focused on their role in shaping immediate to mid-term policy that they ignore long-term outcomes. Today, for example, we face the issue of whether to cut off support to the Kurds, who are holding thousands of ISIS militants in detention. If the Kurds shift their focus to defending themselves against Turkish attacks, those detainees could escape. Among them are highly radicalized, battle-hardened fighters. There are even reports of some extremist grandmothers who enforce militant ideologies by killing women in the camps they deem insufficiently committed to the cause. All of this ties back to the Second Gulf War – a war of choice.

Similarly, I hear some in Washington say things like, *The Israelis will take care of Iran for us, just like they dismantled Hezbollah.* But that view ignores history. The Israelis are already stretched thin from their war with Hamas and are facing serious social strains, especially from reservists who have been called up to fight, sometimes for more than a year while some members of Israeli society are exempt from service. That conflict is far from over. And let's not forget that Iraq fought a brutal, eight-year war against Iran—in which it went to extremes like the use of chemical weapons—and still failed to beat Iran. The idea that Israel alone can "take care of" Iran while keeping American troops completely uninvolved is just wishful thinking.

Anyway, I wrapped up my assignment and had some rewarding experiences—I represented the State Department at a UN meeting, worked on treaties, and learned a lot about foreign investment. But I also had a definitive moment of self-awareness: I was *not* cut out to be an econ officer. I realized this while sitting in the Ralph Bunche Library at the State Department, listening to two incredibly well-informed Foreign Affairs (civil service) econ officers passionately debate the American versus Japanese debt reduction models for Iraq.

As best as I can remember, somehow, both models would bring the debt to zero over the same period, yet for some reason I lack the math skills to understand, they were arguing that the U.S. model was superior to the other. I was literally stabbing myself in the leg with a pen to stay awake while others in the room loosened their ties, became flushed with excitement and became increasingly animated. At that moment, I knew: "*I am not wired for this. Give me the bullet points, and I can explain it to a general audience. But this level of technical detail? Not for me."*

From there, I went to Algiers. By this point, I was also trying to align my career with my wife's, whose next posting was in London. So I spent the next year looking for a way to get posted there. That's part of Foreign Service life—you have to look ahead.

When I joined, I was single, everything I owned fit in one car, and I expected to spend my entire career in the East Asia and Pacific region. I thought I'd eventually marry my Peace Corps partner, who was a Vice President in advertising. None of that happened. And that's the Foreign Service—you adapt.

Algiers was a fascinating posting. It was a time of transition, as the country was moving away from the extreme violence of the past. However, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was gaining traction, so there was still an undercurrent of instability.

I had a great team—tough but smart. In a way, working with them was like working with a bunch of New Yorkers. They didn't take anything at face value. That mindset was valuable, especially when it came to understanding local perspectives.

For example, some people assume that a woman in full Islamic dress is automatically oppressed. But one of my Algerian colleagues, who wore full-body coverings, was what I'd call an outspoken feminist. She once told me; *I work because I refuse to be dependent on some man who's just standing around doing nothing.* She was fiercely independent and determined to succeed on her own terms.

It reinforced a lesson I'd already learned: you can't make assumptions based on appearances. Some people say the hijab is a symbol of oppression, but many women choose to wear the hijab and for them it's no more a symbol of oppression than a crucifix, a Star of David, or a nun's habit. Context matters.

At the same time, this was also the beginning of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a U.S. effort to promote democratic institutions in the region. That work was an important part of my time in Algiers.

The mayor of a town I worked with once said, *"If you want to stop cholera, arrest whoever controls the city water supply the moment an outbreak happens. It's their fault.* In Iraq, I had seen how clean water projects got mismanaged—people hiring their friends, failing to clean grates. The mayor was right.

Algiers was fascinating—a mix of deeply religious and cosmopolitan people. I remember meeting a man who quietly sipped a glass of wine, saying, *God understands a hard day.* If you wanted a beer in a restaurant in a religious neighborhood, you'd ask for *wheat juice,* and they'd bring you a ceramic mug with beer in it, discreetly. But by the time I left, things had gotten worse. A man recruited for a suicide bombing drove a car bomb into the UN building—the same building I used to jog past. One of my employees had a twin sister who worked there. Thank God she wasn't hurt.

Also, not my greatest Foreign Service achievement, but one I'm oddly proud of—I spearheaded pizza delivery in Algiers. I lived on a hill, and a pizza place was at the bottom. We had a big, but informal party and kept running out of food. So I negotiated with the pizza parlor. Just *bring up pizzas every fifteen minutes, until we say stop and I'll pay five dollars extra for each pizza.*

Karen Hughes visited Algiers while I was there. She was an important Undersecretary for public diplomacy. She wanted people to engage, to shape the narrative. If you went out and made a mistake, as long as it wasn't egregious, she had your back. That acceptance of responsible risk was a major shift in the Department's approach.

After Algiers, I managed to get posted to London. I worked as an assistant press officer—loved the job. London is a major media hub, like New York and Mexico City. It was my first time working at a post during an administration change, and a clear example that political appointees from both Democratic and Republican administrations can be outstanding, or less so.

Ambassador Tuttle was appointed by President Bush. A self-made businessman, he was excellent—smart, knowledgeable, and cared about his people. His successor, appointed by the Obama administration, was more difficult.

But London was a great place to serve. If you're in the Foreign Service and get assigned there, take it. Even with Ambassador Woody Johnson, it was still a great post.

Q: What now, as of now, the posts and the positions that you have completed? Where would you say in your career you are now? You know, you mentioned everything changes. You know, you come in with some notion of where you're going to go and what you're going to do, and then it's completely different, because simply, that's the way it happens at this point. What? What are the major talents and skills you'd acquired, and where did you see yourself going? Because, you know, you've now been in nearly 10 years at this point.

GOSHKO: At this point, I was an O-2, which is the middle of the middle ranks. I was doing public affairs and public diplomacy and really enjoying it. I had also done a regional desk job, which I liked as well. I knew that at some point, my goal was to become a Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). That was the career path I wanted. I also knew that becoming an ambassador was incredibly rare, so it wasn't something I actively pursued.

I was also married to a very talented British diplomat with her own career, so part of our decision-making process was about finding something that worked for both of us. We had our two children while posted in London. They say that if you have children and a career, you should either have them less than three years apart or more than five years apart. In one three-year tour, we had two kids. So as we planned our next move, we were looking for roles that suited both of us professionally and in a place that would be good for a family with young children.

My wife was offered a position as the British government's representative to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), which was based in Nairobi. She would also have a role in the British High Commission there. Around the same time, I landed a job as the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) for the Somalia unit, which was also based in Nairobi. The posting worked out well for our kids. We had a comfortable life, and having access to affordable, reliable, childcare made it easier for both of us to work. It was a good fit for our family.

London had been a great post, and I had really enjoyed working with the press. From there, we moved to Kenya. My wife took the UNEP job, and I took the public affairs role for Somalia, working for Ambassador Gration. That was his name.

Q: You were based in Nairobi, but your work related to Somalia?

GOSHKO: Actually, there was a lot of interesting work involved in doing public affairs there. We were never full-time in Mogadishu—my entire tour, I never went past the airport. We had a small office in Mogadishu, and people would go in and out, but we had to find ways to work effectively in what was essentially a denied area.

Part of that meant working with the United Nations, which had a strong presence there. We also worked with African Union military personnel and established good relationships with the Somali Transitional Government whenever possible. At the same time, there was a huge diaspora community—Somalis in the United States, as well as those in refugee camps in Nairobi. We could reach out to them, get information to them, and have those messages fed back into Somalia to help garner support for the Transitional Government, the African Union and counter the narrative put forth by Al-Shabaab, a violent extremist group that controlled much of the country. Additionally, we played a role in shaping international reactions to events in Somalia.

I said earlier that we worked with the Somali Transitional Government when we could, and we had excellent cooperation with the Minister for Information. But there were also serious issues

with corruption. One example was when the "two Sharifs"— Somali Transitional Government leaders—attempted to unilaterally extend their mandate. At the time, there was a leadership transition in our office and the Deputy was serving as the Acting Head of the Unit.

The Somalia unit was also in the process of transitioning into the official U.S. Mission to Somalia, though it remained co-located with Embassy Nairobi, similar to what you see in Afghanistan and Yemen or other places where the embassy is based in a different country due to security concerns.

The Sharifs' attempt to extend their government was, in my view, a blatant power grab. They had failed to meet any of the obligations set by the international community under whose auspices the Transitional Government had been set up, that were required for an extension. They simply declared, untruthfully, that the Somalis and international community wanted them to stay. I strongly believed we needed to push back publicly, get the media involved, and rally the international community against this move.

The Acting Head of the Unit, however, argued that we needed to endorse the move and support the Sharif's unconditionally. We had a robust policy conversation about this—I was thrown out of the Acting Head's office at one point—but ultimately, Washington agreed with my position. There is a public record of us issuing press statements rejecting the extension as illegitimate.

This was one of those moments where appropriate dissent played a crucial role in policymaking. As we've discussed before, dissent—when done properly—is important. If Washington had ultimately decided to support the extension, I would have accepted that and moved on since supporting the extension wasn't necessarily illegal. But it was bad policy and would have helped entrench a corrupt leadership that was content with the status quo instead of bringing real progress and democracy to Somalia. In this case, I pushed back, and I won the argument with Washington.

Shortly after that, the second DCM I'd served under, now Ambassador James Swan, returned to lead the Somalia Unit as its first official Ambassador. We increased our overall engagement in Somalia and with the diaspora community, and it was a terrific tour.

Now, I previously said I never got beyond the airport, which was mostly true—but we did make it up to Hargeisa, in Somaliland. Somaliland is distinct from Somalia proper, and we flew there on what was supposed to be a quick overnight trip. We traveled with the UN, and it was me and two diplomatic security (DS) agents.

When it was time to leave, the UN had overbooked our flight. They told us, "*Sorry, you're staying."* This caused a bit of a stir in Washington because technically, we weren't supposed to be there overnight. But it turned out to be a great experience. We stayed at the designated compound, walked around with appropriate security and did some outreach, and had a productive weekend.

Of course, as you mentioned earlier about the Operations Center, there were definitely some calls being made. People were calling in, saying, *There are three people in Hargeisa who should not be in Hargeisa.* But in the end, everything was fine—no one got hurt, and it was a memorable trip.

Q: Obviously you were engaged with whatever we could do in the country. But also, there were millions of Somali refugees in Kenya. Was that any part of your job?

GOSHKO: It was, to a degree. We worked very closely with Mission Nairobi's Public Affairs team and other groups where there was overlap. We did outreach to the Refugees in Dadaab and in Nairobi, for example, while the Embassy addressed Human Rights issues like harassment of Somalis living in Kenya. One of our Economic Officers assigned to the Somali Unit, for example, was briefly detained by the Kenyan police. As one senior U.S. official put it, at the time, her crime was *walking while Somali.* Somali refugees everywhere are persecuted.

Our major interface with them was both as a way to communicate back home and to engage in countering violent extremism. One initiative involved promoting Waayaha Cusub, a hip hop band of Somali Refugees living in Nairobi, who took a strong stand against Al-Shabaab, the terrorist group. One of their early hits was a song called *Yacob Al-Shabaab,* or not to Al-Shabaab. They did a lot of rap, in Somali, that was pro-Somali, anti-Al-Shabaab, and pro-democracy.

We worked with the Refugee Unit, which belongs to the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and USAID and others. This was one of those areas where corruption happens everywhere, but nuance is important. We talked about this earlier with the famine—some food aid was leaking, but at least aid was getting through to vulnerable populations at reasonable prices, something we verified through multiple channels.

We also had cases where people applied for protection grants from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). Some would claim persecution, but there would be no evidence to support the claim. Washington would receive reports from people vouching for these applicants, but I would push back: *You're sitting in Washington, and someone in a Nairobi slum got someone else in the same slum to vouch for them. How credible is that?* And we would off check those claims, again through multiple channels. It was a balance—ensuring those who needed protection received it while preventing taxpayer money from going to fraudulent claims.

As a side note, going back to my first tour in London, Washington had set up the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). They focused on countering ISIS propaganda and even coined the term *Da'esh*, which ISIS reportedly hated. They used humor against ISIS, which the group hated because it made people, who they wanted to respect and fear them, laugh at them. John Oliver once mocked this effort on his show, and ironically, the administration was so rattled by his jokes that they rebranded the CSCC as the Global Engagement Center (GEC). In some ways, it was a positive change, but it showed how much influence a late-night comedian could have.

The GEC partnered with governments worldwide, including the UK's *Prevent* program—a counterterrorism strategy with four pillars: Prevent, Protect, Pursue, and Prepare. Prevent worked with counterparts on messaging, press strategies, and social media. Finding credible voices for exchange programs was part of this effort, as was understanding how people consumed media and might be susceptible to violent extremist messaging and recruitment.

The GEC still exists, but its remit has been debated. The State Department is legally focused outward under the Smith-Mundt Act, which restricts domestic propaganda. How the GEC fits

within those constraints isn't entirely clear to me. At one point, Republicans in Congress clamped down on its activities when it examined international white supremacist extremism, arguing that it was suppressing conservative voices. There's reporting on this, but as I understand it, Congress effectively silenced the GEC in that area. This is similar to how Congress prevents U.S. federal agencies from studying discussing gun violence as a public health issue. Congress is not serving the American public interest in this case. It is keeping a lobby group happy.

Our work on countering violent extremism included promoting bands, working directly with the Somali government's Ministry of Information, and crafting timely responses to terrorist attacks. We also collaborated with the African Union (AU) peacekeeping force fighting Al-Shabaab. The AU troops eventually became UN peacekeepers, adding another layer of coordination.

It was an interesting tour and a good early mentoring experience about how State Department culture works. One very good first tour officer I worked with was assigned to examine Somali trade ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). She drafted a perfectly polite letter to the post explaining that she was with the Somalia unit and was planning to come to the UAE on certain dates to meet certain businesspeople. A colleague and I took one look and said, "*Oh no, you can't send that"*.

She was confused—everything she was doing was legitimate. But in the State Department, there's a specific way you phrase things, especially when you are seeking the required country clearance to visit another post and do work there. Instead of just saying *"Hi, I cover an area of strategic importance for Post and need to meet with person X, Y and Z."* It needs to be phrased, unless you are senior leadership, as a request for permission. More along the lines of, "*I would, with Post's permission, like to come to country with your permission and, if possible, meet with the following people."* It's the kind of internal working tradecraft you only learn by being immersed in it.

From Nairobi, we returned to Washington. My wife had taken a job as the head of their political section.

After four years in Washington, we knew we had both secured onward assignments back to London, and my daughter was applying to the Girls' Day School Trust. My wife strongly supports single-sex education—there's good pedagogy showing girls learn better in that environment. At the time, my daughter was at the British School in Washington and needed to take an entrance test under supervision—*invigilated,* as the British say. She passed, and the schools in London's headmistress called to say

"Congratulations, she's cleared the first level. Now she needs to visit the school for a day to complete the application process."

The problem? The visit was scheduled for the same day British Prime Minister Theresa May was meeting President Trump. My wife had set up that visit and was responsible for overseeing it. May was in fact the first international leader to meet Trump in the White House. My wife called the school, explained the situation, and asked if another date was possible. The Head Mistress' response? *"No. The date is fixed. If you don't want the spot, plenty of other families do. "*So my wife called me and said, *I don't care what you're doing—you're taking our daughter to London for this school visit."*

That trip gave me insight into the competitive culture of some UK schools. I remember standing outside the school with the parents of all these six-year-old girls, while the prospective students completed the tour of the school and were assessed. At one point I wished all the parents good luck. One mother looked at me and said, out loud, "*Well, not everyone!"* reflecting her stress at getting one of the limited spots. My daughter did get in, and we moved to London, where my son attended the American School in London.

Q: Before we go on to London, where we're at the end of the two hours before you go on to London. There you spend some time in the department, Office of Public Diplomacy and then office of Western European affairs. So maybe you could spend at our next session, maybe you could spend just a little bit of time on those two before you go on to London?

GOSHKO: Absolutely. I'll leave a cliffhanger. My very brief time in the office of affairs is the first time I was fired in the department.

Q: Okay, all right, I'm gonna pause the recording now.

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Q: Today is February 17, 2025, we're resuming our interview with Matthew Goshko, Matthew, it looks like we are. It started in 2013 when you went back to Washington, correct?

GOSHKO: Yes. 2013 was when we would have wrapped up in Nairobi. Susannah was at the High Commission then, and I was in the Somali unit, and we've covered Ambassador Gration and things like that.

Q: I think so you had a lot of stuff going on in Somalia, especially since you could only go in periodically from Nairobi. But yeah, I think you did cover it.

GOSHKO: Okay? I will not, just in case I forgot to mention it. What was interesting, particularly in the context of the political scene right now, is when you had an Office of Inspector General that was working the way it should have worked. Several justifiable complaints were raised against Ambassador Gration, and he was removed. I put that in contrast to what you can read in the newspapers today, where the administration is actually firing Inspectors General. On the one hand, they are firing Inspector Generals, and then on the other hand, saying that they need to uncover waste, fraud, and abuse, which is exactly what the Inspectors Generals do. Now that I'm not covered by the Hatch Act, I can comment legally on these things, and that's okay.

So, our tours ended, though Susannah ended about three months before mine and she went back with the kids to Washington a little bit earlier. I was looking at a couple of things. At that point, I believe I had been promoted to O-1. I was very interested in possibly a spokesperson job. and a couple of opportunities came up.

What I really wanted was War College, which is one of two Master's Degree level courses taught by the Military in Washington DC for senior mid-level military, diplomatic, and other interagency officials. I didn't realize that War College opportunities sometimes came up late in

the bid season, but I didn't get War College. The Office of Public Affairs—now Global Public Affairs—which manages the Overseas Spokespersons position, was recruiting for an Office Director position. We have spokespersons who are fluent in Arabic, who work in the Arabic hub, as well as spokespersons fluent in French and Spanish. I don't think we had Russian or Hindi yet. I was recruited for this position and had a great Deputy in the office, a civil service guy, Shai Korman.

Initially, I was very excited for the job. Not every job is perfect, and occasionally, there are difficulties with bosses. I think I mentioned the first time in Washington where I had a boss that I had to report to our Union because of his abusive behavior and his attempt to get an intern to mishandle classified documents. Things weren't great with Gration either and the IG report led to his removal. The DAS I reported to Global Public Affairs for this position and I didn't get along. I didn't realize quite how difficult it was until I spoke to my predecessor, who is an outstanding, successful officer and senior leader. I remember having a conversation where I said, "*I don't think I've ever had anyone treat me quite like I'm this stupid before.*" My predecessor responded, "*Oh, you're not special. She treats everyone that way*"

So there was increasing friction in the office, to the point where I went into my boss and said, "*Look, I don't think this is working. This is kind of toxic.*" She seemed surprised to get that feedback, but ultimately, I was able to leave that position. That supervisor was later invited to retire from the Department for abusive behavior in another leadership position.

That role was Director of the International Media Hubs which is run by our foreign language spokespersons. I believe very firmly in the Hubs. It's important to have somebody in-country who is cleared to speak on the record and can react to news as it happens—and can do so fluently and in-language. I wish I had language skills, but I don't.

For example, Michael Pelletier was our French and Arabic spokesperson when I was the PAO in Algiers. He was one of the first hub directors. When I was in Algiers, we would get all sorts of very sensitive questions about the Western Sahara, which Algeria supported independence for and Morocco firmly opposed. It was very useful to be able to tell my ambassador, "Sir, you really can't take this question, we'll punt to Michael Pelletier. He'll speak for the Department on behalf of the U.S. Government." That avoided a lot of unnecessary friction with the Algerian government. The Hubs are an incredibly useful tool. You can see them being especially useful during the UN General Assembly, speaking directly to foreign audiences in language in real time.

That position didn't work out, which was disappointing. But at the time, Mark Toner—who I believe was our ambassador to Mali recently, though I could be wrong, and Christina Tomlinson very kindly recruited me to come be a Deputy in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Office of Public Diplomacy.

I went over and found a good working environment. I worked with—I can see his face, but I'm drawing a blank on his name. I want to say his surname is Johnson? I think. Great guy. He went on to be our PAO in Sweden. I worked with him for the first year, and then he finished up.

Then Rafik Mansour, who I believe is now our PDAS in ECA—Education and Cultural Affairs—came on. (Note: Rafik was just assigned as our Consul General in Jeddah). Rafik had

followed me in Algiers as the PAO [Public Affairs Officer], and I think in a way, we complemented each other very well. We had very different personalities, but we got along closely. I think we balanced each other out.

For example, Rafiq has much better attention to detail than I did, whereas, at the time, I had a higher tolerance for bureaucratic risk. (Note who made PDAS and Consul General and who T.I.C. ed…) We worked well together. In fact, at certain points, we started picking up each other's habits, and we'd joke, "What, did you become me?"

This was around the time the Russians initially sent the little green men into eastern Ukraine. We spent a lot of time responding to that. We divided up Europe—Eastern Europe fell more under Rafik's responsibility, but we split Ukraine. We also did a lot of special programming related to Ukraine.

I also worked with NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and other Western European countries. I did that job for two years. After the first year, Christina Tomlinson, who was an excellent Director, rotated out, and she was replaced by a Director who was not was not a very strong leader.

It was a very fractious relationship. We tried arbitration to improve morale because we had gone from an incredibly high-functioning, high-morale, fast-paced office to a very difficult environment where desk officers felt marginalized. Prior to the new Director's arrival, we had started placing public diplomacy officers in the regional desks. The idea was that they needed to be where the policy was happening so they could understand and explain it. It worked extremely well.

One of the first things the new Director wanted to do was pull all the PD desk officers, claiming, "They're all off in the policy desks—why aren't they here working on my issues?" That struck me as odd, and very much a vestigial USIA way of thinking. PD and Policy issues aren't different issues. Our issues are U.S. policy. We have private diplomacy, public diplomacy, programs, exchanges—a wide variety of tools to advance U.S. policy.

Having PD desk officers sitting where policy is shaped, where reporting is coming in, where they can read it, and where they can more quickly and effectively respond to fast-breaking press lines—was extremely useful. But there was this odd idea that they had to sit in the office and somehow be more responsive to some amorphous priority that belonged to the new Director rather than to U.S. policy in Europe.

I finished my year, but it wasn't a great one. We still did good work, and I kept close ties with Rafik, who went on to become a DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] and has done great things. Suzanne was still going to London next, so I moved over to the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs which would best place me to get an onward assignment there.

It was a great job. I worked for Robin Quinville, who was an excellent boss and we had a very strong team. At the time, we were deeply involved in advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access recruitment and hiring. The Bureau had a reputation for being closed off, though I don't think that was the case, at least not since the Iraq tax era, when people completed hardship tours and then received preference for assignments in EUR. But that reputation had lingered.

Under Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Victoria Nuland (Toria) leadership, we made a strong effort to focus on diversity hiring and followed through with it. It was an evolving process. We had to consider diversity as a factor but not the only factor. People needed to feel comfortable choosing whether or not to identify as diversity candidates. So, along with the other Deputies across the bureau, we discussed how to address these issues in a legal and effective way.

Ultimately, we framed it as: We take diversity seriously in the bureau, both in the traditional sense of underrepresented or protected classes—including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and disability, among others—but also in terms of recruiting from other regional bureaus. Toria emphasized that EUR is a global bureau because European countries provide diplomatic support, resources, and personnel to address global challenges. That meant we needed representation from a global pool of candidates.

We actively recruited from protected classes and from other bureaus. Since we are generalists, we looked for strong candidates from other cones to provide them with broader exposure. I have said this before and will say it again: The department needs to do a much better job of creating true generalists.

For example, the Bureau of Budget and Planning has only one Foreign Service position, an OC-level role. Generalists who aspire to become ambassadors or DCMs should take budget positions in Washington much earlier in their careers. It should not be something that possibly holds back non-Management coned officer simply because people in their cones don't understand the work, potentially making them less competitive for promotion. The Department has explored ways to make the promotion process more transparent and equitable and will continue to do so. It's an ongoing and positive process.

One of the key issues the Department has looked at is how to mitigate unconscious gender bias in promotions. I once reviewed an EER [Employee Evaluation Report] for someone who tried to address bias by referring to their pronouns in the plural. That approach doesn't work because it is not clear if the rated employee is talking about themselves versus the people they've led. When trying to move from *FS-02* to *FS-01*, you have to demonstrate leadership and management, so that has to be clear to a board, and promotion panels are looking at literally hundreds of EERs, reviewing each applicant going back up to five years, looking to see who they can easily mid-rank and not have to review in depth, so the writing has to be clear

Another potential solution would be to eliminate names from evaluations entirely, using neutral descriptors like "the employee." I don't know if that approach has been tested, but I imagine there would be significant pushback from AFSA [American Foreign Service Association]. The Department once attempted identity-blind recruiting for the Foreign Service exam. They removed names, gender, and other identifiers, but it didn't change the results. The same demographic groups as before continued to be selected, because the same demographic groups were self-selecting to take the exam. The Department realized it had to actively recruit for diversity to make sure we were getting the best and the brightest from around the country to apply. The Department continued to look for ways to improve diversifying its recruitment pool to ensure that the Foreign Service better represents the United States and draws the best of the best from all backgrounds.

This is critical for two reasons. First, the face of the United States should truly reflect the diversity of the nation. Second, when organizations hire people who are too similar, they develop blind spots. That's just weak management. Without diverse perspectives, leaders miss important insights. Unfortunately, these efforts will likely take a backseat under the current administration, which has positioned itself against diversity initiatives.

Hopefully the anti-DEIA efforts occurring under the second Trump administration won't have a lasting damaging effect on the good work that has been done, but sadly Secretary Rubio seems all too willing to execute even the President's most short-sighted policy aims. To be clear, we are a democracy and the Department should execute all legal and ethical policy aims as instructed by the President, but one would have hoped that Rubio would at least have tried to push back on bad ideas. Instead, he seems all too happy to revoke visas from people who dared make critical remarks about the President. That is pretty shameful for a guy who spent his career in the Senate posing as a pro-democracy, anti-authoritarian. I

I would argue that our current Secretary of Defense is a DEIA [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility] hire. He was selected for the job because he was a white male whose looks the President liked and who had partially made his career making unfounded accusations against DIEA initiatives in the military. He was confirmed despite being completely unqualified for the position, having been fired for mismanaging a charity a mere fraction of the size of the Pentagon.

Q: When you say he's a DEIA [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access] you mean because he's a veteran.

GOSHKO: No. I mean he was hired simply because he was a white male whom the President thought looked good on TV. Secretary Hegseth did a couple of things that as a military veteran he should have known were bad ideas that undermine military discipline, risk the reputation of our armed force, and therefore the put at risk security of our forces stationed overseas as well as the image of the U.S. Military as a trusted, values driven partner to our allies and friends. During the first Trump administration he lobbied for the President to intervene on behalf of two US soldiers and one Navy SEAL accused of war crimes. Maintaining strict military discipline and following both the international Law of War, International Humanitarian Law and the Uniform Code of Military Justice are very, very important to our own national security. When we send the military in or when we train other militaries, it's crucial that people in those countries believe in the integrity of our forces. Whether they are foreign forces coming in, they must trust that our troops will obey the law of war, that they will not be abusive, and that they can be relied upon.

This trust is how you gain acceptance for a force that first arrives and, if necessary, stays to help transition power. Likewise, when training forces, you want the trainers to uphold these principles. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (*INL*) does this. They often bring in trainers to instruct military and police forces, emphasizing the need to combat corruption. There must be accountability, and the public must trust their police and military. If they don't, it breeds instability and insurgency. Don't forget, the Taliban gained a lot of initial support because they were seen as a force that stood up to corrupt Afghan officials and warlords. Corrupt police and militaries are push factors that help violent extremist groups gain recruits, and as we saw in Afghanistan, where the Taliban gave sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden, this can create direct threats to the United States as well as our allies.

The State Department, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (*USAID*) have long recognized this. They have played important roles in stabilizing countries. In fact, the Department established a Bureau of Conflict and of Stabilization Operations (CSO), that helps the United States, "understanding of violent conflict through analysis and planning; monitoring, evaluation, and learning; and targeted, in-country efforts that help the U.S. government anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflict and promote long-term stability." Unfortunately, Secretary Rubio announced in April that he plans to eliminate the Bureau.

This was after the President and Rubio dismantled USAID. For someone who claims to oppose illegal immigration, the President fails to recognize that reducing migration requires stabilizing and fostering prosperity in the countries people are fleeing. You combat crime, poverty, and disease, which discourages irregular migration. Otherwise, people are forced into incredibly irregular dangerous routes—whether crossing the Darién Gap through central America and then Mexico, or rafting, as many Cubans and Haitians do.

But these actions appear to play well in domestic politics, so the administration is moving forward with them. It is incredibly short-sighted and will create long-term instability. I have no idea how long it will take to repair the damage being done. People talk about it taking generations to fix. You see articles in the press warning about the "end of the American era." That's probably true. U.S. standing and global leadership are being significantly undermined, at the expense of our own security and prosperity. But this is a democracy, and this is the leadership the American people elected.

This is a long way of saying that a lot of the good, important work the department did to make us more representative, and therefore more secure and prosperous, is being sacrificed now—whether through hiring, retention, or otherwise. But during my time in EUR, we worked on these issues. I had two very bright co-deputies, and while we focused on diversity, we also had major challenges, such as holding Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine and the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17. This was also when Russia was sending assassins to poison people abroad, so we did a lot of work to counter them, combat disinformation, and coordinate with the Global Engagement Center (*GEC*).

At some point—I'd have to check the exact timing—Congress began scrutinizing the GEC because of its work targeting extremism. Extremism isn't just Islamic; white supremacist extremism is also a threat. However, some in Congress claimed the GEC's efforts were an attack on conservative voices. That's not conservatism. I think I've said this before. But anyway, there was tension brewing around these issues.

Susannah had wrapped up her role as the head of the Political team at the British Embassy and we both had onward assignments to London, with me going as the Spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy. Trump won the election and the way his Administration conducted business was an early preview of what we are seeing in the current administration. Many senior officials felt they had to protect themselves—taking jobs that kept them out of the limelight or stepping away altogether, expecting to return under a different administration.

At first, I was frustrated by how some of this was covered in the media. For example, some reporting people claimed EUR was being shut down because they had heard furniture had been

removed from offices and stacked up in hallways. That wasn't true. Old furniture was simply being replaced.

Some senior individuals, however, did find themselves marginalized. Meanwhile, I went to London as the spokesperson. Around that time, while still working as a Deputy Director in EUR, I was debating whether to "open my window." In the Foreign Service, opening your window means declaring your candidacy for promotion from the mid-ranks to the senior service. You have a couple of opportunities to change your mind, but once you commit, you're in the running to be promoted to Counselor (OC), the first Senior Foreign Service (SFS) rank. Officers have six chances to be promoted "across the threshold" but if they are not, they have to take involuntary retirement. I thought I would be more competitive for the London spokesperson job, which was graded as an OC position, so I went for it. Fortunately, I was promoted on my first try.

That was a mixed blessing, but I'll get to that later. Part of my success was due to the work we did with the support of my co-Deputy Directors, first Cheryl Fernandes and then Victoria Taylor, EUR Office Director Robin Quinville, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Ambassador Heffern, and. In addition to focusing on policy during a period of intense activity in Europe, we also focused on improving workplace workflows and efficiency. Then Secretary Kerry took over. I'll be frank, I wasn't particularly impressed. One downside of appointing someone who has never managed anything larger than a Senate staff is that they don't necessarily know how to run a large organization. One of our main issues was that too much of the work felt performative, like the showboating you see in Congress, rather than being about long-term planning.

For example, because of poor management from Secretary Kerry's office, papers were often assigned with unreasonably short deadlines, keeping people working well into the evening and night. The most egregious example was when I got a call from the Line, saying, "Where's the paper for Secretary Kerry's White House meeting?" I said, "What meeting?" They replied, "The secretary is on his way to the White House right now." So I asked, "And when is this meeting happening?" They said, "He's in the car. He's going there now."

They wanted us to draft a paper retroactively to create a record of something that had already happened. I told them, "We're not writing it. I'm not making people stay late to fabricate a document for the record."

Somewhat relatedly, the U.S. government, in general, tries to overcompensate for time lags, by writing readouts of meetings before they even happen. When I was in London under the Trump administration, we had a situation where an official readout we issued was completely different from what was actually discussed in the meeting. A very senior British government official—essentially their equivalent of our Under Secretary for Public Affairs—called me up and said, "If this happens again, we will publicly contradict you."

We did our best to thread the needle, but politicians will be politicians, and appointees fill many senior positions. To be clear, I've worked with fantastic political appointees, but they often want to control the narrative, usually with a domestic political audience in mind that too often overlooks the real diplomatic concerns of allies and partners – or our competitors. We saw this under Secretary Clinton as well. Her press team wanted more control over what posts said in the media. But that approach creates artificiality. The press notices it, and it annoys them. It also makes it harder for them to trust that we're being honest. In this case, it wasn't just the media—it

was our own government counterparts telling us, “Your readout has nothing to do with what was actually discussed.”

Q: With anything. Let me agree with a question. The issue that you had in London, where you were writing the outcome before the meeting. This thing you're writing is the public statement about what the outcome of the meeting was?

GOSHKO: Those readouts weren’t actually written in London. They were written by press desk officers in Washington and are cleared first by country desk officers, who closely follow issues at post and then regional bureaus and other stakeholders. Ambassadors at posts clear on them as well. The practice still continues. In my very last job at the department, when I was on temporary duty as a press officer for the Near East Asia bureau, a significant part of the work involved drafting public statements before the meetings occurred. One of the frustrations I sometimes ran into was that when I reached out to the country desks (and most country desks are understaffed and overworked) for guidance on a meeting, they would often respond with, “Same as last time.” But when I would send over a draft that essentially tweaked what was said “the last time” the desk would write back and say, “No, that’s not what the meeting is about, you can’t say that.” If they’d given me the updated points and topics ahead of time, it would have made the process much more accurate and efficient.

At that point, I’d ask, “Well, then give me the points.” This goes back to why it was so important to have people embedded with the desks. If you have a public diplomacy officer or press officer working directly with the desk, you don’t waste time going back and forth. We got the job done, met our deadline, it was fine. But it’s not the best way of doing business. Press officers and, frankly, all public diplomacy program officers should be embedded within the regional offices to improve efficiency.

Q: Now, just one quick comment about this. There are two ways that you pre-write meetings. One is for the actual report of the meeting that goes to Washington. I often pre-wrote it. And then what happens is that the person in the room comes out and says, Okay, give me the pre-written one, and I will correct it and send the corrected version. Because I don't even want to wait for you to write it when I come out of the meeting. I want, you know, a framework, a bare bones thing, that I can then fix and send to Washington. That's confidential. It doesn't go out to the public, but you're saying you have to actually conclude the meeting or state what the conclusions were before somebody comes out. Some U.S. official comes out and actually says what happened?

GOSHKO: Yes, that is the case. In a confidential cable, you might include the bare bones of a discussion, and then the note taker in the meeting would update it and send it as a classified cable. Cables are classified, in part, so that our counterparts feel safe discussing sensitive matters with us and so that diplomats can send candid analysis of key personalities and events in their country of assignment back to their capitals to inform policy making.

You can see this is in media reporting from 2019 regarding the Brits and their then Ambassador, Kim Darroch. In 2019, he sent an assessment of President Trump that someone in Whitehall leaked illegally. Then Trump refused to work with the British Embassy, forcing Ambassador Darroch to resign for the continued benefit of the bilateral relationship.

When it comes to public statements, however, they are usually extremely anodyne. Essentially, the administration—whether Republican or Democrat—decides what issues it wants to highlight publicly. Sometimes the statements reflect reality, and sometimes they don't. More than once, they upset our counterparts. Journalists also tend to find them worthless. They want to know what was actually discussed.

The idea that a statement must be released the second a meeting ends—rather than taking a moment to ensure accuracy—doesn't make much sense. A note taker in the room could draft a summary of the key points, refine it, send it to the ambassador or assistant secretary for approval, and then release it an hour or two later. There's no reason not to do it that way.

Q: I just wanted to be sure I understood, you know, which part of the process you were talking about. Go ahead.

GOSHKO: So, I went to London, and for the longest time, we didn't have an ambassador—we were waiting for one to be named and nominated. I arrived ahead of Courtney Austrian, who was the public affairs officer (PAO). I believe she had been the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in Georgia—yes, that's correct, in Georgia. She had some great stories about uncovering corruption there, which, by the way, when you let professionals handle corruption investigations, they do an excellent job. There's some great reporting on what they discovered.

We prepped the team to prepare for the new Ambassador. We had a terrific Assistant Information Officer who was really skilled, especially during the transition between administrations. Channel Four, a British television company, wanted to do a documentary inside the embassy, and the incoming ambassador didn't shut it down, so that's available to watch. We built strong relationships with the local press. We also had an outstanding DCM, Lew Lukens.

For a while, things went well. I had heard that Ambassador Woody Johnson had initially resisted pressure from political appointees in the Trump administration to fire the DCM as soon as he arrived. Apparently, during the Ambassadorial Training Seminar—what they used to call "Charm School" in the old days, one of the Politically appointed Ambassadors had suggested to their appointee counterparts that the first thing they should do is fire the incumbent DCM to establish authority. These were essentially a group of people unfamiliar with how government functions coming in, being put in charge of running large institutions running complex issues and dismissing the respected experts who had spent their careers earning their positions and were positioned to help make the new Ambassadors successful. It spoke to the arrogance and completely unfounded mistrust that some of these people brought with them.

I will say this about Woody—he was a charming retail politician, good in a crisis, and not easily rattled. But he wasn't particularly hardworking. He was more enamored with the prestige of the job—hosting lavish parties, meeting the Queen, and so on. However, when it came to the difficult work, he wasn't engaged. You can even see it in a clip where we were prepping him for an interview, and he complained, "*Well, I didn't get the briefing materials.*" Out of a sense of professionalism, I didn't say this on camera, but he in fact had had the briefing material for at least two days, he just hadn't read them.

There's an unclassified Inspector General report on his behavior, including inappropriate remarks he'd make. An August 12, 220 CNN report on the Inspector General's report notes:

> "that Johnson was investigated by the State Department watchdog after allegations that he made racist and sexist comments to staff and sought to use his government position to benefit the President's personal business in the UK, according to multiple sources.
>
> Johnson, a Trump donor and political appointee who served as the top envoy since August 2017 to one of the United States' most important allies, made racist generalizations about Black men and questioned why the Black community celebrates Black History Month, according to exclusive information shared with CNN by three sources and a diplomat familiar with the complaints to the State Department inspector general.
>
> His comments about women's looks have been "cringeworthy," a source with knowledge of the situation said, and two sources said it was a struggle to get him on board for an event for International Women's Day."

In a striking example of the differences between the Obama Administration and the Trump Administration, Ambassador Gration was held accountable for his leadership and removed from Post. Ambassador Johnson was not. The Office of the Inspector General considered its' recommendation that, "The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, in coordination with the Office of Civil Rights, should assess the Chief of Mission's compliance with Department Equal Employment Opportunity or leadership policies and based on the results of the review, take appropriate action," was unresolved.

Trump also had Inspector General Steven Linick fired in 2020 when he was investigating Secretary Pompeo for reported abuses. Then in January 2025, the President preemptively fired 17 Inspector Generals from different federal departments, a worrying move against independent watchdogs who investigate reports of waste, fraud, and abuse in the federal government. Those firings most likely violated the Securing Inspector General Independence Act of 2022 (Title LII, Subtitle A), that requires the President cite "substantive rationale, including detailed and case-specific reasons," for dismissing an Inspector General.

Embassy London is a coveted and competitive assignment and people who work there are dedicated and incredibly hardworking. In the IG report, the Ambassador claimed that people just weren't used to his "demanding work style," which simply wasn't true. He would receive briefing papers but wouldn't read them. He was highly selective about what he engaged with, and he would cancel key events he had committed to, like engaging with the financial district after Brexit, to go shooting grouse instead.

A key policy priority was negotiating a post-Brexit trade deal with the U.S. That did not happen under his tenure. Woody understood at least one critical point: there could be no U.S.-UK trade deal without an agricultural trade agreement component. He correctly explained to UK interlocutors that all 50 States have important agricultural sectors and that the U.S. Congress, which must approve legislation and trade deals negotiated and signed by the Executive, would not approve an agreement with a component giving U.S. farmers more equitable access to the UK market. The European Union (EU) is extremely protective of its agricultural sector, and the UK, having left the EU, still wanted access to EU markets. The EU and UK fixated on certain American food safety practices, framing them incorrectly permitting a lower quality of food safety standards — seizing in particular on the theme of "chlorinated chicken."

Now, in reality, lots of chickens raised in industrial farming are chlorinated. It's a common, safe practice, and it allows poultry, particularly industrial poultry farming, to be sold at a lower price point than organic or free-range alternatives. Our argument was that people of all income levels should have access to affordable, high-quality, safe protein. But opponents spun this into a narrative about American food safety standards being subpar. This is untrue and really reflects protectionist agricultural policies in the UK and EU. They could argue that they consider industrial farming to be inhumane, but it does not produce less safe food. And on the question of animal cruelty, the EU's refusal to use certain livestock antibiotics has led to massive culls of farm animals when epidemics like hoof and mouth disease break out, including a cull that killed more than 2,000 cows in Hungary in 2025. Ironically, while the UK opposed the importation of chlorinated chicken, its supermarkets having been selling pre-washed bags of lettuce, which are also chlorine-washed.

Part of the issue was political. The Conservative Party (Tories) were gearing up for reelection and wanted to show they were tough on trade. They seized on this issue, declaring, "*We're not accepting lower-quality American food."* My advice at the time was to stay calm, put out a measured response, and not escalate the rhetoric—because if Boris Johnson won reelection, he would backtrack. And that's exactly what happened. It was an example of managing media messaging, deciding when to go public and when not to.

We also dealt with other major issues, including the UK's desire to let Huawei build its' 5G infrastructure and the controversy over Anne Sacoolas, an American official involved in a fatal traffic accident with Harry Dunn, a young British motorcyclist. The Trump administration insisted that then–Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stop raising the issue in discussions with then Secretary of State Pompeo. This kind of arrogant, dismissive approach "*We'll tell you what to do, and you'll do it"*—didn't work. It didn't work in the first Trump administration, and it certainly won't work in the current one. Countries are more willing to push back. You're seeing it with tariffs and boycotts of American exports in response to the President's current tariff wars. You see it politically, with the German chancellor publicly calling out Elon Musk just days ago for interfering in German elections. This reflects a broader misconception among some U.S. politicians who believe that if the U.S. tells other nations to do something, they'll comply. But the reality is that we're all interconnected. Our economies depend on each other as well as our security.

Take NATO, for example. The only time Article 5—the collective defense clause—has ever been invoked was to defend the United States after 9/11. Thousands of NATO troops fought and died in Afghanistan alongside Americans. And yet, Trump reduced NATO's contribution to a simplistic talking point about countries "not paying their fair share."

Yes, some nations need to increase defense spending, and there was a lot of creative accounting we exposed in our second stint in London about European countries not making the defense investments they needed to. But these are democracies, and their governments have to respond to their people. Look at Canada and Haiti. Canada has a strong Haitian diaspora and linguistic ties to Haiti, yet it wasn't willing to commit resources to a security force for the Haitian National Police.

This is why public diplomacy (PD) and press work are crucial. If Washington wants people to support its policies, it needs to understand that international audiences are not just passive

recipients of messaging. You can't just broadcast a message that plays well with your domestic political base and expect foreign audiences to accept your position carte blanche. Democracies require engagement.

That's why the State Department needs strong press officers—people who can push back against Washington when necessary. I'm not saying I was the model PD officer, but the department needs people who can challenge misconceptions and ensure that policies are framed effectively for foreign audiences. One debate I had with Woody Johnson was how to handle the food safety issue once we could start discussing it again. His approach was, "*Just ignore the criticisms."* That doesn't work in an educated market.

His aversion to engagement extended beyond trade. At one point, he explicitly told us he didn't want to talk to college students because he thought it was beneath him. So, we sent Lew Lukens, our DCM, to deliver a speech at a university. In the speech—and in the Q&A afterward, which I cleared—Lew simply acknowledged that British students had concerns about U.S. policies on LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning] rights and gun laws. The fact is, they do. Lew treated them with respect, heard their concerns, and explained the U.S. perspective. That's how you build relationships. That's how you create a space where even if people disagree, they understand where we're coming from.

Q: These kinds of disagreements occur in many, many countries. Often, you'll get disagreements. Well, when we were in Iraq, every single country, you would have to defend something about our Iraq policy in the craziest of places, as far away from Iraq as possible, with no interest there. But you know, left of center students, left of center governments, simply to make points by opposing the United States, will put out statements like that, and public affairs officers have to go and talk to government officials, talk to college students, and at least maintain dialog. Because we may not be in Iraq forever, and when we're done, we still need to have a dialog. And if you're pulling people out who have credibility, because they're at least maintaining a dialog, then, you know, you have lost a major part of your bilateral relations and a lot of the political parties, and this is true of both Democrats and Republicans. Don't seem to understand that.

One of the more absurd incidents with Woody was when he fired Lew Lukens. Lew had given a speech at a university where he simply acknowledged that British students had concerns about gay rights and gun laws in the U.S. He treated them like adults—listening to their concerns while explaining the American perspective. For that, he was fired.

I was hauled into Woody's office that afternoon and literally called a traitor for clearing the speech. I told him I had worked for both Republican and Democratic ambassadors and that I took my oath to the Constitution seriously. His response was, "I don't give a [expletive] about your oath." He failed to understand that he had taken the same oath.

This reflected a worrying broader trend in the Republican Party that we continue to see today—loyalty to individuals over the Constitution and law, and a culture of cronyism. Woody's erratic leadership continued. In example, he insisted we tweet three times a day, regardless of whether we had anything substantive to say. One day, after the *Tree of Life Synagogue* massacre in Pittsburgh, I decided, as the Embassy Spokesperson, the mission would be best served by focusing our messaging solely on that tragedy rather than tweeting about World War II, as Woody had mandated. Again, I was hauled into his office and chewed out for it.

By this point, my wife had taken a job as the Principal Private Secretary, in the U.S. we would say Chief of Staff, to the UK Foreign Secretary, which meant we needed to stay in London longer. But my relationship with Woody was so bad that there was no way he'd allow me to extend. I had accrued so much leave over the years that I was able to take multiple months off on full pay. I tried to get a temporary assignment in Iraq, but that didn't work out—there's some debate over whether that was the result of retribution from one of Woody's supporters. I will say that the Department found enough evidence to support giving me an additional year of review at the end of my career since I had ultimately not been selected for that career-enhancing position, despite being NEA/PD's top choice.

After my leave, I took a job at the National Security Council (NSC) in the press office. It was fascinating—a career highlight includes being there when the Biden administration officially recognized the Armenian genocide for what it was. I also coordinated with the Interagency and Posts around the world on a lot of the COVID-19 communications.

The NSC press office is staffed by people from across government agencies—State, Defense, USAID, etc. But there was a culture clash. The team handling President Biden's press in the White House—Jen Psaki and Karine Jean-Pierre—were outstanding. They were professional, prepared, and effective communicators who treated everyone with a great deal of respect. Meanwhile, our boss at the NSC had a habit of berating the press, which was counterproductive. I even heard younger public affairs officers saying, "Oh, that's how you deal with the media." No, that's not how you do it. If you want a good model, look to Psaki and Jean-Pierre.

Ultimately, I started looking for a new role. Before the NSC job, I had been offered a position as the Director of Public Diplomacy in the Africa Bureau, which probably would have been a better career move. This was when I was on time off. I was looking for work, but when I finished up in London, I'd been offered PAO [Public Affairs Officer] Moscow and EUR PD [European Public Diplomacy], but there would be a one-year gap. Susannah had a full-time, senior-level job, and there was no one to watch the kids, so I took the break. The then Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy for Africa was very generous, offering me the job with a fixed start date but one that would have minimized our time apart as a family, which would give me several months to try to get something in place.

Then Susannah was selected to be the British High Commissioner to Canada, an Ambassadorial level position.

What I foolishly did—was to break my assignment in AFPD and apply for PAO Ottawa. But before I had that job in hand, I curtailed out of the job in the Africa Bureau. I was absolutely in the wrong and had mistreated a Bureau that had always been great to me. Even worse, I didn't reach out to AF before I made the choice. I did not get the Ottawa PAO position and I ended up without a job.

To be fair, I was an OC [Counselor] who had done press jobs and much more, but I hadn't been in an OC Public Affairs job. So, on the one hand, leaving may have hurt my career. I really cared about Africa, and the work was interesting, maybe that would have been the smarter path. But two roads diverged, and in my overinflated sense of self-importance, I took the dumb one. But maybe not.

What it did eventually lead to was a job in the Bureau of Budget and Performance [BP]. I was the only Foreign Service Officer in that role, working with incredibly smart people on budget and long-range planning. I became the Deputy Director for Performance and Planning.

I had a great boss who let me work remotely a lot. I did that job for a year and learned a ton about long range planning, enterprise level Interagency cooperation between State and the Office of Budget and Management, the Federal Budget Process and working with Posts to best align taxpayer allocated resources to advancing U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. It also gave great exposure to how the Department was continually looking to improve recruitment, training and retention and how the Administration as a whole was focused on delivering key services for American citizens across the Interagency.

One thing I had always wanted was to be a DCM. I looked at a couple of jobs in Eastern Europe, but for whatever reason, my name was mud there. I don't know who I annoyed, but I struck for a couple of positions and never got them. These things happen—probably my fault to some degree. But then Haiti came up.

At the time, the DCM in Haiti—Eric Strohmayer, had been Chargé for months. He couldn't get out of the country because Republicans were blocking Ambassadorial nominees. Rotating through section heads was just too stressful for a mission in an increasingly restricted security environment.

I applied for the job, interviewed, and got it. It was technically a TDY [Temporary Duty Assignment], but I still had to go through and be approved by the DCM Committee.

It was one of the most rewarding jobs of my career. As I mentioned earlier, I enjoy working in transitional environments. The work was interesting, important, and fast-paced, with Washington's attention. This might be a good place to take a break because there's a lot to unpack. It was a fantastic posting, and I'd like to reflect on it a bit more.

Q: No, I'm stopping the recording now.

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Q: Today is February 24, 2025, we're resuming our interview with Matthew Goshko and Matthew you wanted to go back a couple of minutes on this is going to be the tour in London.

GOSHKO: No, I think we left off in London. One thing that occurred to me—I'm retired now, we're doing this, and I picked up a job through LinkedIn. Various people from my past have been reaching out. We previously talked about Karen Hughes and something I thought was really positive—her emphasis on engagement. She wanted people to go out and help set the narrative rather than allowing the narrative to be dictated to us. That approach was sometimes at odds with those who came from political campaigns, who wanted to tightly control messaging and, as a result, didn't always trust people they didn't know to go out and speak.

I think this is an ongoing challenge, regardless of whether the administration is Democrat or Republican. Different administrations have handled it in different ways, but Karen Hughes did a great job of empowering people. Her message was: "Go out, do your job. If you make an honest mistake, we'll back you up." Bruce Wharton, who was the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs at the time—or possibly the DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary] for African Affairs Public Diplomacy—was another good example of this leadership style.

This was back when I was in the Somalia unit. A couple of things happened, which I may have touched on before. Because Washington maintained tight control over what we could and couldn't say, reporters simply stopped coming to us. We couldn't respond to them quickly enough, and we were losing our ability to give the U.S. perspective on events.

I was able to negotiate with the press spokesperson at AFPD [Public Diplomacy for the Africa Bureau] to let me go out and brief reporters, including U.S. reporters, off the record, keeping them informed while also keeping Washington in the loop. It worked very well. At one point, we had a major trip planned to one of the refugee camps in Dadaab. I got ahead of myself on some funding numbers—

Q: Just a very quick interruption. Karen Hughes was the Under Secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy from 2005 to 2007 so that's yes, time period you're talking about

GOSHKO: Different time, but this speaks to the lasting impact of certain policies—what sticks and what doesn't from an administration. Karen Hughes set the tone that engagement was important, and that's something I always watch for: what policies and approaches endure. Hopefully, for example, the wholesale dismantling of USAID [United States Agency for International Development] won't be one of those things that sticks, and the next administration will bring in experienced professionals.

Later on, when I was in Somalia from 2010 to 2013, we went out on a few trips. We never got farther than the airport in Somalia itself, but we did take people to the Dadaab refugee center in Kenya, where many Somali refugees were living. At one point, I got ahead of my skis with some numbers, they weren't quite right. The AP reporter I was talking to was sharp. I gave him some assistance numbers and then quickly realized I wasn't sure they were correct. I asked if a reporter could hold off on using them, but he said perfectly fairly, "No, you didn't say it was off the record, and you didn't say I couldn't use it. I want to use it."

At that point, I knew I didn't have a leg to stand on. So, I called back and let Bruce Wharton know. His response was essentially, "Okay, we were wondering where those numbers were coming from. Thanks for flagging it. Here are the actual figures." The AP reporter back in the State Press pool, Matt Lee, ended up correcting it.

It was a really positive experience because I knew I had their confidence. They gave me enough leeway to engage in the way I thought was important, and when I made a mistake, I owned up to it. Since I wasn't a repeat offender, I didn't get my head bitten off. I was able to keep doing my job. It's just an example of how Karen Hughes' philosophy had a lasting impact.

Q: I think about your work with the refugees in Kenya, as I recall, there was an innovative tool to reach out to comic books.

GOSHKO: Comic books may have been a thing, but I don't believe that was me. Interestingly, though, I did work with a band called Waayaha Cusub, which just reached out to me recently. The lead singer, Shine, was someone we funded because they did a lot of anti–al-Shabaab work. Al-Shabaab, of course, is an extremist group, and Shine's songs were part of the counter-messaging effort.

Shifting back to London, we had been discussing my time working for Ambassador Woody Johnson. To his credit, he was an excellent retail politician—unflappable under pressure. I once saw him calmly handle an aggressive reporter pushing incorrect information based on leaks. However, when it came to long-term strategy, he lacked depth. A key issue was negotiating a trade deal post-Brexit. Food regulations were a major sticking point, but instead of developing a realistic counter approach, he kept things very surface-level.

Woody Johnson, of course, comes from the Johnson & Johnson family wealth, and what we're seeing now in the current administration is a similar pattern: expertise being sidelined in favor of loyalty. A prime example is what's happening with USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. There are also serious concerns about individuals like Kash Patel, who has openly stated that his focus is on retribution rather than the core functions of his role. The FBI also plays a critical role overseas, particularly in places like Somalia and Haiti, where American private citizens can't operate free from significant risks. At embassies, the *legal attaché* is the FBI representative on-site. The kidnapping of Americans is a serious security issue in Haiti. America needs an FBI that is focused on that risk. I am concerned about the impact of inexperienced appointees who seem more focused on domestic political agendas than U.S. national security.

A particularly troubling development is the rumored reduction in force (RIF) at USAID. While senior staff may retain some benefits and pensions, less experienced employees could face significant hardships. Many of these people have spent decades in development work, often living in high-risk environments—dodging bullets, sheltering from bombings—because they believe in the mission. Hopefully, any restructuring will still provide some protection for them, though the news in the papers today is not reassuring.

My time as a Deputy in the Bureau of Budget and Planning (BP) was invaluable. I strongly believe there needs to be more opportunities in BP for non-management officers who want to stay in and have leadership roles later in their careers. Rotating through budget and performance roles for a few years provides an incredible, holistic understanding of how the State Department interacts with USAID, Congress, and the Office of Management and Budget. Over time, leadership development has improved. In the past, most people who became ambassadors were political officers with limited management experience, perhaps overseeing a small section with a few mid-level officers and an office manager. The department recognized this gap, especially under Colin Powell, and started incorporating officers from other fields, like public diplomacy and management, who had broader experience.

One key improvement has been involving entire country teams, at a mission, in long-term strategic planning through the Mission Strategic Plan (MSP). This ensures that embassy objectives align with resources, performance metrics, and broader U.S. government goals. That's why I find Elon Musk's attacks on USAID so frustrating—his claims are patently false. Through my work in the Bureau of Budget and Planning and my involvement with the Learning Agenda

(a congressional initiative to improve the effectiveness of taxpayer-funded programs), I saw firsthand that USAID has one of the strongest cultures of monitoring, evaluation, and learning among all the foreign affairs agencies.

Q: Let me, let me interrupt with one quick question. You mentioned the need for foreign service officers as part of management to interact with OMB. Did you have interactions with OMB?

GOSHKO: In my role as the Deputy Performance Management Officer—my first domestic Senior Foreign Service position—I was the sole Foreign Service officer in the Bureau of Budget and Performance. My responsibilities included working closely with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), participating in weekly calls with the Bureau's Director, an Assistant Secretary Level position, overseeing both budget and performance for the State Department. He served as the department's Performance Improvement Officer, while I was the Deputy Performance Bureau Officer.

My work involved coordination with OMB on broader federal initiatives aimed at improving agency performance. This included setting and tracking agency performance goals, evaluating their effectiveness, and making adjustments where necessary. Under the Biden administration, one major focus was identifying key areas of federal service that directly impacted the American public.

For the State Department, one of the most pressing issues was the backlog of passports, nonimmigrant visas, and immigrant visas caused by COVID-19. This became a priority area for performance improvement, with OMB tasking us with ensuring tangible progress. Efforts included leveraging new technology, setting clear service delivery goals, and reassessing procedural bottlenecks. As a result, passport turnaround times improved significantly, demonstrating the effectiveness of data-driven performance management when the people interpreting the data actually understand it – as opposed to what is being reported about the lack of competent data analysis conducted by DOGE under Musk.

Q: The other question I had about your interaction with OMB is OMB can withhold funds. Yes, depending on, depending on the issue. And you know, you have to go back to them periodically, sometimes and ask for the funds to be distributed,

GOSHKO: This issue ties into a broader conversation about budgetary control and executive authority. The current director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) subscribes to the unitary executive theory, which asserts that the president has significant control over the executive branch, including budgetary decisions. Under this framework, the president can declare a state of emergency and reallocate funds, overriding Congressional intent. We are seeing judicial pushback to this idea on several fronts today, although Congress seems to be too willing to cede its' Constitutionally mandated authorities to the President right now.

During the first Trump administration, this authority was used in an attempt to divert congressionally allocated funds to finance the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall. However, Congress began pushing back against such maneuvers. The issue at hand is that, as per the Constitution, Congress controls federal spending by allocating funds for specific purposes. Those funds are not disbursed all at once; instead, OMB releases them incrementally throughout the fiscal year.

One of the challenges in government budgeting is that even when Congress passes a budget—rather than operating under a continuing resolution—funds are typically not available until late July or early August. Agencies then have until September 30 to obligate those funds, creating a rush to spend within a compressed time frame. I once had a second-tour officer who had come from the private sector express his frustration, saying, *"This is no way to run a business."* But government isn't a business—it operates within a framework that balances executive and legislative authority with domestic and international political concerns.

Despite this inefficiency, agencies implement safeguards to ensure responsible spending. One key mechanism is the use of spend plans—detailed projections outlining how budgeted funds will be used over the fiscal year. These plans build in contingencies for factors such as exchange rate fluctuations, which can impact funding levels and we carefully monitor "burn rates" to make sure, as much as allocations and disbursements allow, that funds are not being spent too quickly or too slowly. This helps ensure we meet key Administration priorities while reducing waste, fraud and abuse that occur without careful tracking of budgets, policy goals, and things like appropriate contract management and oversight.

For example, in a Public Diplomacy (PD) section, a spending plan might allocate a specific amount to cultural and educational programs that advance U.S. interests. Even if the funds have not yet been disbursed, the team can prepare by initiating grant proposals, securing monitoring officers, and completing all necessary paperwork. That way, when the funds are finally released, they can be quickly allocated and disbursed without delay.

USAID operates with slightly more flexibility since it often receives multi-year funding, whereas most State Department funds must be obligated within a single fiscal year. There are some workarounds, such as travel expenses—if a ticket is purchased before September 30, the end of this fiscal year, the actual travel can take place later in the year, typically by December. This is why, to outsiders, it might seem like there's a sudden spike in government spending in the autumn or travel around the holidays—it's simply a matter of when the funding becomes available.

Q: I'll just pop in for one quick thing, since I was a PD officer, and you're planning far ahead for a number of events, including July 4, which is, you know, for the ambassador, the most important day of the public diplomacy year, you can manage a contract with suppliers for that day, people who are going to give You balloons or cake, or whatever else you need for the for the celebration, but you can't give them the money you and you know, you can tell them, Okay, we've agreed you're going to provide this. You're going to provide that. On that day, I will give you the money as soon as I have it. And you know, the administrative section or the management section says, yes, you can do that. We will have the money. We will give it to that source for you, but you can have it until, I don't know, whatever. And for a public diplomacy officer who's trying to do things throughout the year. Uh, especially for the ambassador, it becomes almost unmanageable, because you have to do so many, so much sleight of hand just to be able to have the activity and in some way get the contractor to do it, perhaps with their own funds and promise reimbursement. That it gets to be a dangerous thing in case, as you say, sometimes you don't always get the full allotment for various reasons. And yeah, it gets very, very scary when it ends up being that way. But I just wanted to mention that because I was on the front lines of suffering from that phenomenon.

GOSHKO: That's a great point—you'd be surprised how many people, even at post, don't fully grasp the role of the procurement section within the management section. They operate much like Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) do during tax season. In the last quarter of the fiscal year, they are working flat out because funds must be obligated in a legal and responsible manner before September 30. But they aren't sitting around idly before then. They're doing all the groundwork so that when an allotment is finally released, everything is ready to move forward immediately.

Another critical point is that while funds for grants, cooperative agreements, and contracts—which Public Diplomacy (PD) sections frequently use—require meticulous planning, they often involve long-term commitments. Each funding mechanism grants a different level of control to the U.S. government. Grants provide funding based on a general idea of what will be achieved, with more flexibility for the recipient. Cooperative agreements involve more oversight and collaboration. Contracts specify exactly what the U.S. government is paying for and expect strict adherence to requirements.

Because these funding streams involve such detailed planning, officers often find themselves making decisions that will impact the following fiscal year and beyond. When I worked in Budget and Performance, we conducted training sessions for ambassadors and Deputy Chiefs of Mission (DCMs). Some would question why they needed to understand the budget process, saying, *"My budget is already set for the next five years, there's nothing I can change."* But that's not entirely true. First, there are mechanisms to request adjustments if necessary. More importantly, understanding the process helps officers make strategic decisions that position their post for long-term success.

Even if an officer is only at Post for a three-year tour, they should be thinking beyond their tenure—ensuring that the bilateral relationship is stronger when they leave than when they arrived. Their planning today shapes their post's future resources and capabilities. This is a particularly important lesson for DCMs and executive officers (EXOs) at USAID missions

Q: One last quick example of money you need for the long term. So all of the exchange programs that we do with local, local professionals, they go out to the U.S. on shorter term, longer term tours to see all of the technical aspects that we can train them on that are useful for their home country and useful For us, like preventing transnational crime or preventing money laundering and that kind of thing, and they come back much smarter about how to do it in their own country. Well, when they're back and they're done, you never see them again, and this is where I'm getting so you create, you create an alumni association of all these people. But that doesn't happen in one or two months, or even in one fiscal year. You're assigning one person to go back to these people, to figure out ways they can come back and integrate into things that the embassy is doing, and even create networks among them that never existed before that make our returnees more powerful agents and influencers for the embassy, but it takes a couple of years, and you know, you have to plan out for that, and sometimes it gets difficult because you can't get your hands on the money to do it

GOSHKO: That actually raises a really key point. While funding for grants, cooperative agreements, and various exchanges—which are grants—is not always immediately available,

locally engaged staff salaries are always paid. That is crucial because even if I cannot provide a $2,000 grant for a democratization or anti-corruption initiative, I do have a locally engaged staff member who maintains relationships, reaches out, organizes alumni sessions, attends alumni-hosted events, and facilitates connections between alumni and U.S. officials. That continuity is critical. Salaried staff allow work to move forward even when other funding tools are not available.

Another important funding source is representative money. Diplomats are often referred to derisively as "striped-pants cookie pushers," reinforcing the stereotype that we simply attend cocktail parties on the taxpayer's dime. In reality, representation funds are governed by strict regulations and serve essential diplomatic functions. These funds support events such as receptions that bring together key government, political and civil society leaders in a country. In PD, we often use them for events with program alumni, allowing them to network, meet the ambassador, and connect with the entire embassy team as well as key current figures in the host country or visiting American officials, congressional representatives, etc.

During my early career, when the United States Information Agency (USIA) was absorbed into the State Department—whereas the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) remained separate—there were funding distinctions that remained. One such distinction was "point seven" money, which was not fully integrated into the general State Department budget. This funding structure has provided public diplomacy sections with greater flexibility. While ambassadors receive representation funds as part of their general program funding, public affairs sections maintain their own program funds, representation funds, and point seven money. These resources enable PD sections to issue grants, establish cooperative agreements, and host events that further U.S. objectives.

Public affairs officers use these funds to take key journalists and opinion leaders to coffee or dinner, ensuring they have direct access to U.S. perspectives and policies. However, the restrictions surrounding these expenditures sometimes lead to slightly absurd interactions. Many journalists, adhering to strict professional ethics, insist on paying their own way, while public affairs officers, bound by government regulations, must use available funds or risk budget reductions in the next fiscal year. I always tell reporters, "Look, I understand your integrity rules, but I have funds I need to use. If I don't spend them, I will lose them next year. This is a legitimate diplomatic function—you are not obligated to write anything based on this conversation. You are simply hearing our perspective."

I recall a particularly memorable moment in Lebanon when I was hosting a Washington Post correspondent of Syrian descent. It was the end of the fiscal year, and I needed to spend the remaining representation funds. What ensued was a classic cultural exchange: I discreetly slipped away to pay the bill before she could argue. This mirrored an experience she once had with family friends in the States, where a heated argument erupted over who would pick up the check, meaning everyone insisted they had to pay for everyone else. She shared how someone had overheard the exchange and, recognizing the cultural significance, had asked her in broken English, "Arab and Iranian?" to which she replied, "Yes." His response: "I understand. Turkish." The unspoken understanding was clear, in middle eastern and mediterranean cultures you just don't let someone else pick up the check.

The role of Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in Port-au-Prince was an incredible experience, though we faced constant challenges. Security deteriorated rapidly as gangs grew more emboldened, and our security perimeter continued to shrink. I remember lying in bed at night, hearing bullets flying over the compound—not directed at us, but close enough to be a stark reminder of the instability surrounding us. Occasionally rounds would fall on the compound.

Q: Can you give a brief history of how the gangs ended up becoming what they are, in essence, warlords controlling bits and pieces of Haiti.

GOSHKO: This is my interpretation of history—others may disagree—but there is a definitive book on Haiti, *Written in Blood*, that traces Haiti's history back to the revolution. Historically, elites have financed gangs to achieve their objectives. One example is peyi lòk", where the country is essentially shut down. If a business elite or politician is opposed to something, they would pay gangs to stage protests, sometimes escalating to riots or arson, forcing the government to respond. This practice has a long tradition. To my understanding, even figures like [Jean-Bertrand] Aristide had their own affiliated gangs.

However, after the assassination of Haiti's last president, Jovenel Moise, the system degraded even further. Previously, elites paid gangs to act on their behalf, but after his death, those payments largely stopped. The gangs still needed money, so they took control themselves. They engaged in extortion and, most notably, kidnapping for ransom.

Haiti has a large Haitian American community, with many people traveling between the United States and Haiti. Unfortunately, kidnappers viewed them—and other foreigners, including American expatriate citizens like missionaries, and businesspeople—as "walking ATMs." The gangs were highly organized. Some people mistakenly assumed that traveling in an armored car guaranteed safety. While an armored car provides protection, it does not prevent abduction if the kidnappers are patient. Security professionals refer to this as being "time and place predictable." If someone takes the same route at the same time every day, kidnappers will block the vehicle with a truck in front and another behind, then set the car on fire to force the passengers out.

It was a serious issue. High-profile individuals were taken for ransoms in the tens of thousands of dollars. Other victims were simply targeted because they were American. Negotiations were complicated, and I won't go into details, as some cases are still working their way through law enforcement and the courts. An important strategy is to avoid publicizing kidnappings. If a case gained media attention, ransom demands skyrocketed, making it even harder to secure the victim's release. Without going into details, which vary from case to case, our priorities were to keep people safe and if kidnapped work to ensure their safe return. Victim's families also had to be cautious about intermediaries—there were cases where someone paid the wrong person, or multiple intermediaries had to be compensated, further complicating negotiations.

One of the most notorious gang leaders was known as "Barbecue." He was a corrupt ex-police officer, and there were many like him. These gangs were heavily armed, with most of their weapons originating from the United States. It was a significant problem, as automatic weapons were smuggled into Haiti and supplied to gangs. This issue extends beyond Haiti—organized crime across the region is fueled by firearms from the United States. If the goal is to dismantle organized crime, then the flow of guns from the United States must also be addressed.

Another challenge we faced was the embassy's location. After the Nairobi bombings, the State Department began consolidating embassy compounds for better security. These sites require open space to create security setbacks, meaning they are often located away from city centers. In Port-au-Prince, the U.S. embassy and our compounds were in an area that, for the rest of the diplomatic community, was considered the "red zone." Other embassies were located in the hills, which were relatively safer. We could not relocate because our compounds and housing were already established in gang-controlled areas.

On July 1—or perhaps July 7—we woke up to find that a gang had taken over the entire neighborhood across the street from one of our compounds, which also bordered the embassy. While we were not their target, our personnel were at risk. Americans leaving the compound could potentially be stopped and robbed—or worse—because they were perceived as having money or possessing valuable intelligence. Haitians working at the compound had been attacked so we had to take extra precautions to ensure their safety as well. We had to start moving in armored convoys. Neighborhood residents quickly adapted, waiting for our convoys to pass so they could run alongside, using us as protection against the gangs to reach safer areas.

There was only one instance during my time there of a direct attack on a U.S. embassy vehicle. In that case, the gang had attempted to kidnap a bus carrying other foreign nationals. When that failed, the gang members, agitated, fired at our passing vehicle. Fortunately, our personnel were unharmed, and the vehicle drove away safely. We had excellent interagency support to ensure our security/ Protecting personnel was a top priority. Without discussing classified security postures, I can say we had strong support from the Department of Defense and consolidated into secure areas. One compound even had a clean water system, allowing safe drinking straight from the tap. We arranged armed convoys for food runs to supermarkets located in safer zones.

Eventually, we went on Ordered Departure, which differs from Authorized Departure. There was some debate about this decision. Some argued for Authorized Departure, but the last time that was implemented, almost no one left, and Washington felt that the situation was not being taken seriously. With Ordered Departure, we had to reduce staff while maintaining essential operations.

We kept personnel from USAID, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other agencies focused on humanitarian aid, development, and law enforcement and the rule of law. We also needed Consular, Management, Political, Econ and PD officers and a robust security presence. Washington monitored our personnel numbers closely to ensure we did not exceed a specific threshold, which was critical in case an evacuation became necessary.

We had some very, very innovative management officers who worked closely with the Western Hemisphere Affairs executive office and the M bureau. They came up with creative solutions, such as rotating staff on ordered departure. Instead of leaving permanently, staff could go to Washington, work from there, or take leave, and then rotate back so others could take leave. This ensured that, Staff working demanding schedules in a dangerous environment got the rest they needed, our numbers remained low enough to facilitate an emergency evacuation if needed, and employees could still benefit from the hardship post's compensation package, which is a major factor in attracting personnel to such assignments.

Ambassador [John] Bass played a key role in coordinating these efforts. When staff were in Washington, they remained productive. For example, consular officers assisted with passport processing to reduce backlogs, while political officers worked with the Multinational Security Support Mission to address security challenges. Everyone had a role, ensuring continuity in our mission.

Q: Let me just quickly interrupt with a question of context. Can you describe what the US Embassy, or our footprint was at that time, because, again, there wasn't a lot of visibility in the US, of what we looked like in Haiti, and all of the resources just to protect personnel.

There were high-level discussions about whether to close the embassy, but the decision was to remain because our presence was crucial to protecting American citizens, preventing a migration crisis, and maintaining as much stability as possible. A mass exodus from Haiti or Cuba could create a humanitarian crisis that would exceed the U.S. Coast Guard's ability to address and would require U.S. naval intervention as well, as happened in the 90s.

At one point, we acquired additional land near to one of our compounds, securing it in the short term as a potential evacuation site that would be the safest point of evacuation for both Embassy staff and military personnel conducting an evacuation if needed. Working collaboratively with the interagency we calculated numerous factors required for a safe evacuation if needed.

Long-term, the land acquired would provide safe housing for U.S. contractors, allowing them to complete already obligated, and necessary, projects worth tens of millions of taxpayer dollars that had been put on hold due to the worsening security crisis

People often focus on crises in the Middle East and Asia, but we cannot ignore serious issues in our own region. Haiti has strong American ties, migration concerns, and is a hub for transnational crime. Continued U.S. engagement is critical.

After leaving Haiti, I was assigned to the interagency working group planning for the multinational security support force. However, I admittedly struggled to transition from being a Deputy Chief of Mission.

A key issue arose while the working group was working with post to arrange housing for the Kenyan deployment that would lead the Multinational Security Support that would, under the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2751, support the Haitian National Police in taking on the gangs. A contractor who had drawn down from Port au Prince and was working with the working group failed to do his job in verifying that proposed housing existed. It did not. He gave the working group coordinator incorrect information and sent a misleading report to senior officials. I had left Haiti relatively recently and how difficult life at post was, in particular because we had lost a major generator for the chancery and were awaiting a replacement. I also knew the report was wrong, something I confirmed in about ten minutes with an e-mail. The contractor, on the other hand, had not done the job he was tasked with and blamed a lack of communication to the Coordinator on Post. I contacted the contractor, confirmed the errors, and asked him to fix the report going to our Assistant Secretaries. When he refused, I demanded corrections in a strongly worded email, which overstepped my role. I wasn't the DCM

anymore—I was just another team member. That email was considered inappropriate and I was asked to seek work elsewhere.

The Office of Haitian Affairs was gracious despite my overstepping and found work for me contributing to long-term peace and security planning. Then the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs reached out, offering me a position in Public Affairs in Lebanon.

Q: Before you go into Lebanon. And obviously, without sharing something confidential, are you at all optimistic that whatever tools and resources are being used now in Haiti, that there is a positive outcome in the foreseeable future?

GOSHKO: I honestly don't know enough about what's going on at this point, but steps like trying to dismantle USAID and freeze assistance funds are insane and just demonstrate that Musk and his team at DOGE simply have no idea what they are doing. Haiti is a medical desert. There are highly trained Haitians—doctors, business professionals—who are leaving because they can find jobs elsewhere. The infrastructure is terrible, gangs control much of Port au Prince. If the Trump administration is serious about wanting to limit irregular migration, it needs to work to stabilize the countries people are fleeing from. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away; people will simply turn to irregular and illegal means of migrating. This will spur transnational crime and further destabilize the region as a whole, including the U.S. and our interests. Engagement is less expensive and more effective than simply relying on law enforcement and military solutions.

A good example of one way the Embassy Management team made life better for the small percentage of Haitians who worked for the embassy was to set up a way for local mission personnel to purify water and take it home. People would bring jugs, and we would purify the water for them, which was critical for their health and also helped us retain a healthy and motivated workforce.

There were constant discussions about whether people could work remotely due to security concerns. This is an ongoing debate across the government, but in the case of Port-au-Prince, the reality was that most of the work had to be done there. While crime was spreading to other parts of the country, it was worse in the capital.

I don't know what the broader impact will be, but I think the decision to freeze development assistance is breathtakingly short-sighted, uninformed, and not in the U.S. national interest. I'm concerned about the potential for a mass migration crisis. My hope is that enough of a footprint and infrastructure remain so that, if the President gets more responsible advice from his cabinet officials, we can return quickly. But I'm not optimistic.

Q: Okay. Now go, go right ahead with the Beirut Middle East.

GOSHKO: I think we touched on this to some degree, but I went out there because of an unexpected gap in the Public Affairs Officer position. The post had an excellent Public Affairs Officer, but for compassionate reasons, that officer had to leave. They had a few people rotating in and out, and since I was available, I was able to step in.

It was an interesting contrast. I had come from Port-au-Prince, where the compound itself was beautiful—there was water, a swimming pool and a gym—but you couldn't leave. Then I went to

Beirut, which was built on the side of a hill. I had a beautiful mid-century apartment, but the offices and a lot of the other housing was all shipping containers, like in the early days in Iraq. On the surface, the embassy in Beirut looked rougher, but you could actually go into town with the appropriate security restrictions, movement requests, etc. and enjoy the city and parts of the country. The team there was excellent.

This was after the October 7 attacks that Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched against Israel. Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, which is both a Shia political party and military force that Iran uses as one of its proxies, had declared himself part of the "Axis of Resistance" that would attack Israel as it went after Hamas in Gaza and began launching missiles against Israel. The Israelis were bombing back. I think we talked about this—I had a team member with a family living in the area being bombed, and another traveling back and forth from there. The Ambassador, the Deputy Chief of Mission, and the Management section did an excellent job of diversifying the embassy staff, which was important because Lebanon's population is divided among three major groups: Sunni, Shia, and Maronite Christian. For the longest time, the U.S. had the strongest relationship with the Maronite Christians, but the Shia, often marginalized, largely aligned with Hezbollah and were an important power force and we needed embassy staff who represented all parts of Lebanese society.

Lebanon's political structure is designed to distribute power among these groups. The commander of the armed forces is a Maronite Christian, the Speaker of the House is Shia, and the Prime Minister is Sunni. The President has mostly been Maronite Christian with a few Sunni Prime Minister's serving as the Acting President while the politics of Lebanon slowly churn. The idea was to ensure that no single group could dominate, preventing a return to civil war. However, this system also made governance difficult. Without a President in place, certain crucial international assistance and development programs couldn't move forward.

At the time, the conflict was straightforward: Hezbollah was shelling Israel, and Israel was bombing southern Lebanon in response, causing massive destruction. It will take millions of dollars to rebuild, though Nasrallah downplayed the damage, claiming, Hezbollah built everything back better. A lot of our work involved coordinating aid.

This was further complicated by the ongoing crisis in Syria, which was driving Syrian refugees into Lebanon. Palestinian refugees were also arriving, and there was resentment among some Lebanese communities. A key challenge was distributing aid fairly—to Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese in need—while also maintaining local support to accept these refugees. One effective strategy, which I had also seen in Port-au-Prince, was integrating refugees into host communities. Rather than placing them in camps, we worked with towns willing to accept them and provided resources—like improving local schools—so both the refugees and the host communities benefited.

This wasn't just a humanitarian effort; it also countered support for groups like Hezbollah. Hezbollah operated as both a militia and a service provider, telling people, "*Come to us, and we'll take care of you."* By ensuring basic needs were met, we reduced their influence.

After the Israeli response to Hamas, our work became more difficult because of the perception that the U.S. was allowing Israel to act unchecked. I remember walking into a meeting with military Public Affairs Officers, and CNN was on. The screen showed bombed-out parts of Gaza

with the latest civilian death toll. A general turned to me and asked, "*How do you justify 30,000 civilians being killed?"*

You can argue that Hezbollah deliberately places command centers in hospitals, which is true, but the broader picture is more complex. I'm not an expert on Israel or the Levant, but I can read a newspaper.

In the past, Israeli intelligence had deeply penetrated Hezbollah. They were able to plant bombs in Hezbollah members' pagers and assassinate key figures, including eventually assassinating Nasrallah on September 27, 2024. My question is: If Israeli intelligence was that effective, how did they miss Hamas's long term tunnel construction and military buildup? (Note: Netanyahu has, to date, refused to conduct an official investigation into the security failures that led up to the October 7 attacks. Also, in April, the Trump Administration argued that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) could be sued by Israelis for providing support to Hamas, alleging that UNRWA does not have diplomatic immunity, even though it is part of the UN and that UNRWA allowed Hamas to siphon funds to build its tunnel, claiming "The complaint in this case alleges atrocious conduct on the part of UNRWA and its officers," that must be answered in court. I have seen no one in the Administration attempt to hold Netanyahu to account, even though his government facilitated millions of dollars in payments to Hamas over the years.

There are multiple factors at play, including domestic Israeli politics. Netanyahu was under investigation for corruption. His political base opposed any withdrawal from the West Bank. The opposition was fragmented, allowing him to form a coalition with extreme right-wing figures. Because he didn't want to work with the Palestinian Authority—which has its own corruption issues—he effectively allowed Hamas to grow. Qatar, likely acting in good faith, provided millions of dollars in aid to Hamas-controlled Gaza, but much of that money was most likely redirected to tunnel construction and weapons, according to critics within Israel

There were also warning signs according to Israeli media reporting. A unit of female Israeli soldiers belonging to the Border Defense Corps had reportedly been monitoring Hamas activity, including sending multiple warnings up their chain of command which were ignored.

The other issue is that there is unlikely to be any real resolution to a long term, sustainable, peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestine crisis under this administration. Trump has essentially given Netanyahu a free hand, and even Trump has openly called for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Gaza saying the U.S. will take over Gaza, "We'll own it." His administration tried to walk it back, saying it was just about clearing unexploded ordnance temporarily. But Trump has repeatedly doubled down on his position, saying other countries should take the Palestinians in and that the U.S. own the Gaza strip and develop into a resort, "the Riviera of the Middle East."

I believe this is the first time since Andrew Jackson got Congress to pass the Indian Removal Act of 1830 that an American president has explicitly called for ethnic cleansing. Just as I blamed the Israeli left in 2022 for being divided, I think the American center, center-left, and left are equally fractured. There was an Arab American defense analyst in *The Washington Post* who said, "*There's no way you could ask me to vote for Joe Biden, not even for his COVID response."* What I find shocking is that people couldn't see the bigger picture. I'm not an Israeli expert, but I read enough to know that Netanyahu's default position is to wait as long as possible before

making a decision. He knew that if Trump won, he'd have an even longer leash to continue to prosecute the war for his own political advantage.

People should have realized that if Israel policy was their one issue, a Harris administration would have had much more leverage to constrain. Now, with Trump, Netanyahu has carte blanche. Trump's nominated Ambassador, former governor Huckabee has even said, "*There's no such thing as the West Bank. It's Judea and Samaria."* This is a disaster—not just for Palestinians but for Israel, too. It won't make Israel more secure; it will continue fueling support for violent extremist groups. It's simply bad policy.

Then there's Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas. He was unquestionably a sociopath who didn't care how many Palestinians died because he knew he would win global public support from the way the Israelis would prosecute the war, killing tens of thousands of civilians. Sinwar was an Israeli prisoner, learned Hebrew, and studied Israeli policies when in prison. When Israel exchanged 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for one Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, he took note.

Israel needs to reassess this policy. As long as Israel signals that one Israeli hostage is worth a thousand Palestinian prisoners, Hamas will continue taking hostages.

I'm not excusing it, but there's a stark difference between how the U.S. and Israel handle hostage situations. The American approach is simple and correct: *We don't negotiate with terrorists. If you kidnap an American, you get a target on your back for life.* Israel, on the other hand, makes significant concessions. As long as that remains the model, this problem will persist.

I don't have much hope for the region. Some Israeli experts might dismiss what I'm saying, arguing that every Israeli serves in the military and this is part of the national contract. But that contract needs to change. If it doesn't, the cycle of violence will continue.

People once thought it was impossible to end apartheid in South Africa. Some now argue that Israel operates under an apartheid system. Regardless of terminology, unless Israel redefines its social contracts and the Israeli left unites, the country will keep producing more extremists. For example, a man who was once considered too extreme to serve in the Israeli military is now in charge of security. That only creates more radicals on both sides.

If there's ever going to be peace, there needs to be a two-state solution. Thomas Friedman put it best: *Two peoples have legitimate claims to the land. They need to find a way to share it.* Until that happens, nothing will improve.

I finished my time in Lebanon having accomplished a lot with my colleagues in the PD section and the larger mission. We hired a fantastic woman as our alumni coordinator. She brought together people working on human rights, governance, LGBTQ+ rights, and other critical issues, connecting them with embassy counterparts and identifying new candidates for exchange programs. That's an example of an ongoing initiative that's truly important.

Under the current administration, LGBTQ+ issues are dismissed as unnecessary spending. My argument is that supporting marginalized communities strengthens the rule of law, stabilizes societies, and prevents extremism from taking root. In Lebanon, for example, there was a time when authorities would look the other way when thugs assaulted LGBTQ+ people. But as rule of law improves, these abuses decrease. A stable, law-abiding, society doesn't create room for

violent extremism, militias, or corruption. Stability leads to prosperity and makes a country a valuable partner.

I'm retired and living in Mexico City right now, where there's a huge Lebanese diaspora. In fact, I'm just a few streets away from a road called Calle Monte Liban. If you've ever had *tacos al pastor* here, that's basically shawarma—the Lebanese immigrants brought it, and Mexicans adapted it.

As for my career, I had hoped my work in Beirut, Haiti, and BP would push me over for promotion. Initially, I wasn't even reviewed due to an administrative error. When my case was reconsidered, I wasn't selected, but I did get what I believe was a fair chance. That's just how it goes.

Promotion panels are made up of peers from my grade level or above, both in and out of my career track, plus a public member. The higher you go, the fewer spots there are. I have incredibly talented colleagues who got promoted, and I didn't. In hindsight, had I been promoted I probably would have left anyway. At this point, the only thing I could do at State would be consular work, protecting American citizens abroad. I certainly couldn't defend this administration's policies at a senior level to a foreign audience. They're indefensible. I am not, by any means, saying that FSOs should resign in protest. America still needs talented diplomats to defend and promote its interests and there are ways that even very senior State officials, both Foreign and Civil Service can and do conduct invaluable work that both benefits the American people and respects the Constitutional obligation to carry out any legal policies set by the President who was legitimately elected. The idea of a "Deep State" is simply, 100% untrue. It's a concept Trump stole from another wanna be despot, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan. Not only is it untrue, it is frankly offensive to hear politicians and pundits describe public servants that way, especially when so many of them face considerable hardships, and sometimes lose their lives in the service of their country. But in my field, and the areas where I have experience, I don't see how I could have served under the current Administration.

Q: To just go back one second at this time when you're approaching the end of the relatively brief amount of time you were in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs press office you were in, you were in what's called OC, the first level of the Senior Foreign Service. And at that point, you know, given the description of these last posts that you were working in, you were hoping to be promoted to minister counselor MC. And as you said, there are fewer and fewer jobs, the higher you go up, and you are being reviewed for that possibility. But at the same time, you only get a certain number of years when you can be considered, and if those years pass without your being promoted. Then you know, whatever time is left in in your service, you have to leave,

GOSHKO: Yes, it's called TICing out which means being selected out for Time In Class. We are an "Up or Out" system and you only get some many years at each grade. In the Senior Foreign Service you get seven years. If you aren't promoted, you are selected out.

Q: Now you can get a special extension for you. Very important reason, and you can also get a second look if you've demonstrated that the first time or somewhere along you have been prejudiced. In other words, you know your evaluations have not been accurate because someone above you has done, you know, has been trying to harm your promotion possibilities. And you

mentioned that was, was true without, and I don't mean to pry into confidential things, but could you, could you just mention, in general, that moment.

GOSHKO: In the Foreign Service, some jobs are considered more "promotable" than others. I've seen talented officers excel in non-promotable roles and still advance, while others chase promotable positions without the right temperament and struggle. At a career crossroads, I was selected for a highly promotable Public Affairs Officer role at an important post I had previously served in. I was the bureaus lead candidate but was blocked at the last minute.

Despite my qualifications, I was repeatedly not offered PD for jobs in the NEA Bureau. Later, after a change in leadership, I was informed I was eligible again and was told explicitly that was because a particular decision maker had moved on. With this information, I eventually made a strong enough case that bias had played a role and the Director General's office offered me another look for promotion. However, I was not selected. Promotion panels are composed of officers at my grade or above, both from my specialty and outside of it, along with a public member. The higher you go, the fewer spots there are, and I was competing against other excellent colleagues.

Retirement from the State Department comes with a transition period of up to two years. The department offers an excellent course called JTSP, which covers financial planning, career transition, and personal reflection. It helped me process my departure and think about my next steps. Coaches assisted in refining LinkedIn profiles and exploring new opportunities. One former colleague saw my profile and recently reached out with a job offer, which I accepted.

My wife, a British, and frankly much more talented and capable diplomat, has been incredibly supportive throughout my career, often carrying the load of taking care of our children while working full time in very senior jobs while I took difficult postings away from our family. Now, I appreciate the chance to reset—getting my daughter off to school, making breakfast, and simply being around. The retirement course warns about the "chair of death"—the risk of settling into inactivity. At first, rest is necessary, but eventually, it becomes a trap. I made sure to stay engaged, sending out resumes, networking, and writing.

I've submitted some work to publications, though I'm still waiting to hear back from *The Paris Review* or *The New Yorker*—they must have misplaced my email! Regardless, I'm grateful for the time to focus on finding meaningful work.

Q: And very briefly, just to confirm what you're saying, When I retired, I still felt I had a couple good years in me that, you know, I wish I had been able to stay, but, you know, you sign on, you know what the personnel system is. You know, you know what happened when I retired, I weighed something like 183 pounds, which was for someone five foot seven, that's approaching obesity. And I really didn't

GOSHKO: I'm five foot seven, and I'm not gonna tell you how much I weighed when I retired…

Q: I really noticed that, because I was leaving everything on the field. It, you know, my entire attention wasn't to my health, to exercise or anything. It was everything on the job. And after a few months, and you know, I saw my GP for my yearly physical, he said, you know, you need to lose some weight. You know there's still time. You know you're still in your fifties. You can, you can lose weight. And over the next year, I lost about 20 pounds, and I started exercising and

watching what I ate more closely. You know, not anything crazy, but within a year, I realized what had happened. You know, I had simply let everything else go in order to focus all of my attention on the job. So yes, what they say to you about taking some time and kind of taking account of all of the other things in your life is good advice?

GOSHKO: The Department has improved in addressing stress and resilience, a shift that traces back to Colin Powell's leadership. Since 9/11, we've operated in more dangerous posts, where colleagues have been injured or even killed. Early on, during the Iraq War, there was a push to send everyone, regardless of fit. Some thrived in that environment—if you have ADHD, like I do, it helps focus the mind—but it's not for everyone. Stress takes different forms and affects people differently. For me, high-risk posts weren't stressful but retiring before my kids were in college? That was really stressful.

The Department now acknowledges that not every assignment is the right fit. When Port-au-Prince became dangerous, the Chargé made it clear: curtailing was an option, and it wouldn't hurt anyone's career. Still, a few people misinterpreted this, assuming it meant we were encouraging officers to leave rather than supporting their well-being. But the reality is that the Foreign Service is big enough for people to find the roles that suit them best, though it helps to understand who you are to find those jobs.

Looking back, I had no idea where my career would take me. I thought I'd spend my entire time in East Asia and the Pacific (EAP), maybe even marry someone I met in the Peace Corps. None of that happened. You adapt. And as the State Department evolves, it's working to recruit a more diverse workforce—people who reflect the country they represent, who challenge blind spots, and who ensure we don't repeat past mistakes.

I've worked with extraordinary people—officers who have literally saved lives. I've also worked with people who are now in jail, where they belong. But overwhelmingly, the Foreign Service attracts those committed to public service. As President Obama put it, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The same can be said for the State Department. It's not perfect, but it's learning, growing, and trying to do the right thing.

One of my favorite moments was in Port-au-Prince. I had two brilliant first-tour officers from underrepresented backgrounds, one due to ethnicity, the other due to economics. They were essentially running their section most of the time. When we had to draw down again, I told them, without much warning they had to go. One of them pushed back: *"I'm a section leader, and I need to be treated like one. You need to consult me and take my input into account."*

She was absolutely right. I explained my reasoning, but I also told her I admired the way she stood her ground. I hope she keeps doing that throughout her career—because if she and her colleague stay, they'll end up running the Department one day.

Q: So, before we conclude the interview, are there any other parting thoughts you have? Perhaps, you know, if you were advising someone thinking about becoming, you know, a Foreign Service Officer or advising a new Secretary of State, if they would listen to any advice or changes you would, you would recommend.

GOSHKO: One of the biggest issues we need to address is tour length, a problem that dates back to Iraq. Unlike most countries, where typical diplomatic assignments last four, three for hardship

posts or two years for super hardship postings, the U.S. follows a system of three years for standard posts, two for tough posts, and just one for the hardest assignments. This creates instability. It takes a new officer six months to a year to fully understand a job, and then in some cases you're already bidding for your next job.

There's a perception that if you stay longer than three years, you won't get promoted because you've done everything you can do in your job. That mindset needs to change. The Department is beginning to recognize that diplomacy is measurable over the long term, and people who stay in place longer build more meaningful relationships.

Shorter tours also create hardships for families. Previously, officers could extend their tours so, for example, a child could complete high school. That changed with Iraq, and it's incredibly disruptive—forcing students to spend their senior year in a new school. Retaining talent means making it easier for families to stay in the service. We've made progress in ensuring tandem couples aren't the only ones supported and in providing better opportunities for LGBTQ officers and those with disabilities. But longer tours would significantly improve stability and effectiveness for everyone.

Beyond that, extending tours would save taxpayers millions. If you really want to cut government waste, move from three-year tours to four-year tours. But the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) would likely push back.

Another critical issue is our reliance on contractors. Many are excellent, but their priority is profit, while public servants focus on mission success. This difference in incentives matters. Long-term engagement is key to effective foreign policy, and we've forgotten some of the lessons from post-WWII reconstruction. Of course, Afghanistan wasn't Germany or Japan—they didn't have hostile neighboring countries funding violent insurgents—but long-term engagement still played a role in success.

To make these arguments more palatable to Congress, we need to improve how we communicate our mission to the public. Military attachés do this well, they accompany congressional delegations, ensure members fly comfortably, and even stock their favorite snacks on trips. They have dedicated offices on the Hill and know how to engage with lawmakers. Meanwhile, the Foreign Service often struggles to explain its value to the Hil or the American public in general.

The U.S. diplomatic budget is a fraction of overall spending, yet many Americans don't understand what we do. We need to fix that. And we need to keep prioritizing recruitment, bringing in the best people from across the country, not just those from elite schools. I had a two point five GPA at the University of Maryland, before it was considered a good school. Some Rangel Fellows have told me they felt dismissed because they didn't attend an Ivy League institution, even though they had to earn graduate degrees to qualify for the program.

Ultimately, we must continue attracting people who are passionate about public service. It's an incredibly rewarding career. I'd do it all over again, even knowing I'd work alongside people who later ended up in jail.

Q: All right. Great. Well, thank you. Ben from on the part of ADST [The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training] for conducting this interview, and we'll end the —

GOSHKO: Can I throw one more point in? This is actually something that they taught me in the Peace Corps, and I forgot about. The other thing I think is really, really important about when you come in is, and I'm terrible at this for a host of cultural reasons, but to new officers --network. Find a mentor and ask for help. In my first post, my immediate boss got PNGed, kicked out by the Congolese Government. Things were really tough, and my new boss, the DCM (Ambassador Barrie Walkley (ret.) came up and said, "*Look, ask Washington for help, reach out, use the resources that are there.*" He was absolutely right, I didn't know what I was doing, but there were a ton of people who did and wanted to help and wanted the mission to succeed.

So, get a mentor. Ask people to check your EER, and then when you know what you're doing, mentor other people. That's been one of the most rewarding things I've done. I just wish I'd been smarter about asking for help along the way.

Q: It's not an uncommon problem. People get very engaged, very involved in what they're doing and stop thinking about anything else, and you know, sometimes miss those intangibles, like thinking about who might be helpful to them, who isn't even in their office, but you know, has a reputation for being helpful regardless of what kind of office they're in, who can advise you on career and what kind of talents and abilities you need to acquire and that kind of thing, okay, without belaboring that All right, so I will go ahead and end the recording here.

End of interview