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

AMBASSADOR MICHAEL GUEST

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
Interview date: June 12, 2024

INTERVIEW

Q: Good afternoon, it is June 12, 2020, I'm Robin Matthewman and today I'm interviewing Ambassador Michael Guest for our dissent project. Michael was selected for the Christian A. Herter award in 2006 for efforts to push the State Department to adopt family friendly policies for all families, and to ensure that members of household are treated fairly and equally by foreign service agencies, in particular, for failing to treat the partners of gay and lesbian FSOs the same as spouses of heterosexual officers at a time when they could not marry officially in the United States. Michael, welcome. Could just give me a little bit of background on where and when you were born, on your pre-foreign service life and anything in that first part of your life that might relate to prejudice, discrimination, or dissent. How's that for a small question?

GUEST: Big, wide open. I was born in 1957 and raised in upper state South Carolina, a very conservative Bible-waving, flag-waving part of the country. My entire youth was spent there, up through college, except for four of my early-school years when I lived in New Orleans, where my father was studying to be a Southern Baptist minister. So my background was very conservative, very religious, very Southern, very law and order, very Republican.

Dissent wasn't part of my life growing up. I was taught that the Vietnam War was a good cause, a just cause. Flower Power and the sexual revolution were bad things, against God's word. My dad preached against homosexuality, with me sitting in the front pew. There were no local gay role models growing up: the only ones I saw were on TV, wearing boas and such, and that wasn't me. I was the straight-A student, knee-deep in extracurricular activities. I didn't date hardly at all, didn't even realize that I was gay for a very long time — didn't really start dealing with orientation issues, in fact, until well after I joined the Foreign Service. So that's my background in terms of dissent and the issue we're talking about.

Q: Let's start off then with the Foreign Service. What made you interested in the Foreign Service? And when did you join?

GUEST: I don't know what made me interested in the wider world, coming from that insular, inward church community background I just described. But I always was fascinated by politics and foreign policy and foreign cultures, from the time I was a little boy. Like when the Six Day War broke out, I was at my grandmother's house, glued to the television while all my cousins were outside playing. As a fifth grader I sold greeting cards and newspapers, and the first thing I did with the money I earned was buy a Time magazine subscription. The thing I wanted when I was, I think, eight or nine years old was a "Landslide" board game. I had two of them: one from Santa Claus and the other I bought with my own money, just to have extra parts in case I lost them.

Q: Was it a war strategy game?

GUEST: Well, I guess it wasn't a bestseller. It was a board game about politics, how to win the presidency. At that time and even into college, I thought I wanted to be a politician, specifically a senator because of the Senate's larger role in foreign policy than that of the House. When I was in my freshman year of college, at Furman University in South Carolina, I applied for a Senate internship with either of the two senators from my home state of South Carolina, Fritz Hollings and Strom Thurmond. I sent letters off to both and never heard from Hollings, but Thurmond's office called and offered me an internship. So I boarded a Greyhound or Trailways bus and went up to Washington. That was the summer of '76.

Thurmond was smart. He hired thirty interns, not two or three — I guess to get votes, a payoff for constituents' parents. That was too many for office work, so every day two of us would auto-pen responses to constituent letters while the rest went out on tours his office organized, to teach us about government. To Thurmond's credit, he wanted us to see that there were two sides to issues, and so some of those opportunities were group meetings with other senators, including people from across the aisle like Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey and Ted Kennedy. When we didn't have those kinds of meetings, we went to different agencies of the federal government, to learn what they did.

One day I was in the group that went to the State Department, and we sat in the old East Auditorium, when it was still a sad-looking place with old threadbare theater seats and ugly curtains and such. This guy walks out on stage wearing an ugly brown plaid suit, and I was immediately turned off to the State Department. But then he started talking about what the State Department did — about embassies and their role, and how Washington's foreign policy process worked. My jaw dropped. By that time, the cynicism I'd seen among some of the staff in Thurmond's office had made me question whether I'd be happy in politics. And as this guy talked, I remember thinking, this is what I want to do in life. And so I took the Foreign Service exam out of grad school and got in. They actually called me just after I had accepted a postgraduate fellowship to study international development in France for a year. I didn't know what to do, so I called the State Department intake office. The guy I talked to said, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but you're number one on the political register, you're going to get your job. Go have fun. Enjoy life. Which is probably the best advice I ever got. I went on to study in France and had a great experience.

Q: In French, right?

GUEST: Yeah, the courses were in French. The courses were lousy, to be honest, but they all were scheduled for Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday mornings. That gave me a six-day weekend every week. I traveled, went to restaurants and bars and cafes with French friends, just lived a very different life. And toward the end of that academic year I got my letter inviting me into the Foreign Service. That was September 1981.

Q: Sounds like it was a really good experience, even if it was just for one day a week. OK, you joined the Foreign Service. I'd like for you to give us a feel for your career because it was a very distinguished career. You moved very quickly up the ranks. And I know you mentioned earlier that you weren't really thinking about orientation issues until later but if appropriate please do also talk about any issues that you started to see arise that you felt were prejudicial or discriminatory or uncomfortable.

GUEST: Okay. I joined in September '81. My first tour was Hong Kong, consular work in a big visa mill. I was a European studies specialist so sending me to Hong Kong was a deliberate thing, I guess.

Q: You probably got off French language probation, so you didn't need to work in a foreign language on that first tour.

GUEST: Right. After Hong Kong, I was in the European bureau, largely, in the first part of my career. My interest was arms control and security policy and my second Foreign Service tour was in EUR/RPM [European Bureau, Office of Regional Political-Military Affairs], which focused on NATO policy. The Reagan White House then seconded me as assistant press secretary for foreign affairs, at the start of its second term, when it shifted toward dialogue with the Soviet Union. After a year there, I studied Russian and went out to Embassy Moscow's political section during the Gorbachev era, with a focus on Soviet policy toward Eastern Europe and Latin America. I returned full circle to EUR/RPM in the early spring of 1989, where my focus shifted toward democracy and human rights issues in Central and Eastern Europe.

Q: By 1989, the Berlin Wall was falling and in 1991, the USSR dissolved. So it was a time of change in Europe.

GUEST: Yes. In the run-up to the time the Berlin Wall fell, I was RPM's Deputy Director for Political Affairs, in charge of organizing our political dialogue at NATO and at what was then known as CSCE, now called OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. My job basically was to help figure out how to take advantage of that moment, when Eastern European regimes were tumbling, falling. How could we anchor them in democracy? How could we help them understand the new, basically Western path they had started on, a new culture for them?

I ended up as part of our Two-Plus-Four negotiating team, and the go-to guy that traveled with Ray Seitz, Assistant Secretary of European Affairs at the time. I was always on airplanes, traveling with him to Paris and Berlin and London, meeting with key allies and keeping track of a myriad of things to be done to unravel the quadripartite agreement at the heart of Berlin and the Cold War. I also traveled with Bob Kimmet, Undersecretary for Political Affairs at the time, to G-7 [Group of Seven] political director meetings, which were seized with the same issues. Those were very heady days: threading the goals and dialogue from each trip; coming back from one to prepare briefing books for the next; spurring the interagency process to move on issues that had to be worked. I slept in my office more times than I can remember, showered in the basement gym, wore sneakers to run between meetings. Remember my background — I had entered the Foreign Service essentially to support God and country in the Cold War. And here I was in the middle of this tectonic shift, when suddenly all of those pillars of the post-World War II order were falling, trying to figure out how to make something out of it in a way that would advance American interests. It was head-spinning.

Q: Maybe you can give just a couple minutes about what the actual outcome was. You were working on something called CSCE that became OSCE. In that office, you all were trying to create a different kind of security architecture?

GUEST: Well, "security architecture" sounds really lofty. That's Kissinger stuff. But yeah. I mean, we were trying to make sense of how NATO needed to adapt to the fall of the Berlin Wall. What would NATO's role now be? How could we steer a dialogue to keep Germany in the Alliance, quite frankly, at a time when many were arguing there should be a grand compromise that would move a reunited Germany out of NATO? The Alliance had been critical to our country's security. How could it be configured to ensure continued relevance, and to maintain our interests, in this sudden and new period of history?

OSCE was another piece of that puzzle. It was a Cold War outfit, loosely focused on East-West dialogue. At that time it was called the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. CSCE never had been an "organization," never had the structures that implies. How could we give it more heft? Part of the answer was to give it that name change, with permanent staff, a structure to arrange regular meetings aimed at advancing its goals. But part was just figuring out what goals realistically could be achieved at those meetings. It was a really fascinating time. It was an exhausting time, too, but I loved it.

More than anyone else, Ray Seitz was the person who really taught me the craft of diplomacy. We grew close, and when I was preparing to rotate out of EUR/RPM, he asked what follow-on job I wanted, to reward me for my work across such an intense period. I said "deputy political counselor in Paris," and he said okay, it was mine. A few days later, he came back to me and said that there were about sixty bidders, that it would be a stretch, and that HR [Human Resources] had said hell no. But he stuck by his guns and I was lucky enough to move on to a job that was interesting for a lot of different reasons.

Q: Was it that you just loved France, and wanted to have a chance to be there?

GUEST: Well, I loved Paris, I felt I understood and loved the French way of thinking, and I spoke French fluently. I'd done my graduate thesis on the evolution of the French and Italian communist parties and how they had been both normalized and marginalized, so that also made me interested in the job. The French had a reputation in the State Department for being difficult. But I saw lots of possibilities for how our goals could intersect with those of France — with its diplomatic reach, its interests, and its history. And Pamela Harriman was our ambassador. Who wouldn't love to work for Pamela Harriman? She had more grace and presence and, I don't know, mystery maybe, than anyone I've ever met. Coming out of that end-of-Cold-War era, we had a good relationship with the French and tried to use it to advance a partnership that matters in a world where France matters. Where France continues to matter because of its past and because of its present.

Q: So you got there and who were your bosses?

GUEST: My immediate boss, the political minister counselor, was Kim Pendleton. Avis Bohlen was deputy chief of mission. I'd worked for Avis when she was office director for EUR/ RPM, and then deputy assistant secretary in the bureau. She's the smartest, most analytical, and calmest person I've ever met and was supremely talented in every function she ever filled.

And then there was Ambassador Harriman. She took a liking to me, and sometimes would phone me at my desk and ask, out of the blue, with this sort of deep, throaty voice, whether I had any plans for lunch. Are you kidding? If I had plans, I would cancel them. She knew I loved history and so would pull out letters that she had written to Averell Harriman, or vice versa, during the war, letters for instance describing D-Day in London and how it felt. And after having just been part of Two-Plus-Four, I really felt like I was living history in all directions. It was great.

Q: That sounds like a wonderful tour.

GUEST: It was a time when we felt all things were possible — the best in my Foreign Service career. I had a job with responsibility, one that offered access and entree to the French political class, that allowed me to work on issues that they and we cared about. I had a sexy, new red Mazda Miata, one of seven in the country at that time, I was told. And my time in Paris also coincided with when I was fully dealing with my being gay, by the way. My coming-out place, I guess. I was in this city of dreams and was becoming my own person in many ways.

All of that was before I joined the Senior Foreign Service. I was promoted to that level in 1995 or 1996, I think, a half year or so after I already had been fleeted up to senior level as deputy executive secretary. Then I went out to Prague as deputy chief of mission, after which I came back as principal deputy assistant secretary for legislative affairs, first under Madeleine Albright and then as acting under Colin Powell. After that I went out to

Romania as ambassador, and then returned to FSI as dean of the leadership and management school.

Q: They're all extremely impressive and meaningful positions and—

GUEST: And fun positions.

Q: You're now married to your partner, Alex, who went to Romania with you, right? Did you meet Alex in Paris or later?

GUEST: No, I met him in Washington in 1995, when I was working my ass off as deputy executive secretary. I just said those were fun jobs, but deputy executive secretary is not a fun job.

Q: Well go ahead and explain what it is, because it is pretty hard work.

GUEST: Very intense. People write it off as paper pushing but it's far more than that. You're actually shaping travel for the secretary of state, working with regional and functional bureau leadership to figure out what he needs to know for his meetings and providing that. You're taking a long memo that an assistant secretary has written and chop, chop, chopping it down to what the secretary or president needs to know. You're dealing with records management, deciding who needs to know about the details of a phone call the secretary just had, and managing front-line staff, whether the Operations Center or Secretariat or the secretary's technical and administrative support. The job was fascinating but exhausting, rarely with much time for reflection until the tour was over.

Q: I'm sorry, this is when Warren Christopher is secretary?

GUEST: Warren Christopher was secretary. Very good!

Q: All right. And you met Alex during this period.

GUEST: Yes. I met Alex through a mutual friend. Honestly, I'd come to think I would always be single. I'd been single through all my career, maybe that had allowed me to work long hours without complaint. I loved what I did, I was very career-oriented. But then I fell in love. That career focus continued after I met Alex, but being with him gave a different dimension to life. I never had been aware of the impediments same-sex couples faced when going overseas until after I met Alex; I just assumed that the Department supported all the employees it sent overseas. I was totally wrong. I started to realize that when I went out to Prague as DCM.

Q: Which was what year?

GUEST: Summer of 1996.

Q: What were the issues that you discovered at that time?

GUEST: When I told HR that I needed to get Alex on my travel orders, they looked at me as if I were on the moon. Oh, no, you have to be married, and you're not — that kind of thing. I couldn't even get a straight answer as to whether he could stay with me at the residence. Someone from HR finally said, "Well, look, just have him go. And if somebody raises a ruckus about it, just have him leave." Kind of a cavalier way to deal with such a basic question, don't you think? And not really an ask from me, but an expectation, honestly. I mean, we weren't married — but we couldn't be married. We had been together long enough, and we were no less committed to each other than any straight couple I knew then or now, after being together more than 28 years.

Q: What was Alex's career at that point? What was he doing?

GUEST: At that time he was working with United Airlines but trying to figure out a new path for himself. He loved his job from the standpoint of seeing the world and not carrying problems home from work, but it wasn't very challenging and there was no real career path. Given the answers I was getting from HR, we ultimately decided to finesse the issue by having him stay in Washington and us try and see each other as much as possible. In the end, he got transferred to London, to be closer and more able to visit. And then he transferred to Frankfurt, even closer. It worked out, but that was my first exposure to the weird world of HR on these issues. I thought, this is going to change at some point, and I'll be part of making that change, or at least insisting that they figure out some straightforward answers. And when I came back from Prague to legislative affairs, I was glad to find that GLIFAA was actively working on the issues.

Q: Can you tell our readers what GLIFAA is?

GUEST: Gays and lesbians in foreign affairs agencies, the principal LGBT+ advocacy organization for foreign affairs agencies. They go by GLIFAA.

Q: I think they were starting to form in the early 90s, is that right?

GUEST: Even earlier than that, I think. Like any organization, GLIFAA has had its ups and downs. There were periods when GLIFAA was very much focused on policy, followed by periods when the focus was much more on social networking and planning the annual holiday "Pink Party," it seemed. But at that time, GLIFAA was very much focused on policy.

I didn't have a lot of bandwidth while in legislative affairs, but I tried to be supportive when I could. At one time, that support really mattered. Toward the end of Madeleine Albright's tenure, GLIFAA developed the idea of coming up with two packages of measures to advance LGBT+ fairness in foreign assignments. The first package would have some baseline measures, minimal things like specifying that partners could live together at post, have access to post medical facilities, the kind of stuff that seemed small but, for clarity, was very important. The idea was to send that first package to the Hill, and see what the Hill reaction might be. That was the late 90s, the Newt Gingrich period,

the era of Don't Ask Don't Tell and DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act] and all the other legislation intended to make life difficult for lesbians and gays. The notion essentially was to test the waters, and if the first package went through without unleashing the hounds of hell, a second package would be sent up — one much more along the lines of what spouses can expect.

Well anyway, that was the plan. Timing just never seemed right: elections were approaching, and there always was a bill that needed to get through, or a resolution to block, or a nomination that had to get done. At senior levels, people were juggling all that, trying to figure out the timing of when this could go forward.

Q: Was there anybody on the Hill who is a particular champion?

GUEST: Well, there were a lot of Democrats in favor. I can't think of any Republicans. But the crucial point was that our authorizing committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was chaired by Jesse Helms, and we knew where he stood on LGBT+ issues. With everything going on, the timing was always not today, maybe tomorrow, then not tomorrow, maybe the next day. And when Al Gore lost to George Bush, I wasn't sure whether even the first package would move. But Madeleine Albright finally sent it up, just as she was leaving, and kaboom! Conservative republicans went apeshit, just totally apeshit, sending letters and calling, demanding that the measures be rescinded.

When Colin Powell came into office, a whole chorus of Republicans were pressing him to rescind that package. I was acting assistant secretary and so was dealing with the congressional backwash. I did my best to help him and other incoming political appointees understand why the package needed to stand — that it was important to the troops, to use his language. Ultimately he decided not to pull it back, but also that he wouldn't push anything else forward. So the second package wasn't sent forward, and by the time I left for Romania, six months or eight months later, we were kind of in the same situation as I'd been in before Prague, except that it now was black-and-white clear that my partner could live with me at post.

Q: The small package did get through?

GUEST: Yes, the small package that had been notified to the Hill was not rescinded. It was not pulled back.

Q: So, it wasn't legislation that needed to be voted on. It sounds like all the administration needed to do was notify, and then the policies—like letting members of household stay in the residences—were allowed.

GUEST: Yes, but a lot of things hadn't been notified, so they didn't become part of policy. That left us with a lot of absurdities. State would pay for family cats or dogs to travel to post, but not partners. Medical emergency? Tough, it's your responsibility to get your partner out of the country. Medical facilities at post weren't even open to partners unless the ambassador signed a waiver. That's not a policy, that's just ad hoc luck. When

I was ambassador, we had seven or eight, I think, gay couples at post at one point. Would I tell them to fend with Romania's worrisome healthcare standards, at the time? Of course not, I signed the waivers. But not every ambassador might have felt the same. And what about evacuations in the case of a political insurrection, or volcano, or an earthquake — some trauma that would cause a draw-down of personnel. Can you really imagine the embassy community boarding a plane to evacuate, and waving goodbye to partners left standing on the tarmac?

Q: Training as well was affected, right?

GUEST: Training was huge. In the ambassadorial seminar, when I was learning the duties of my new job before going to Romania as ambassador, I couldn't have Alex sit in an empty chair with everyone else to learn the roles that he was expected to perform, as my spouse essentially, for the community. By that time he had earned his teaching credentials, and ended up teaching at the American School in Bucharest. That was a pretty exposed position, in both the American community and Romanian life. And yet he wasn't allowed security training, including on how to recognize a terrorist or potential intelligence threat. How in God's name was that in the interest of the embassy? Who the heck was thinking any of this through?

Across the time I was single, and even the time that Alex and I were together before Romania, I hadn't really catalogued these problems. Serving as ambassador was of course one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. But he was there to support me, and to support our country. How could I accept that State would treat him like an afterthought, or really a no-thought? How did anyone think it right, in a country like ours, to divide embassy communities and put people at risk like this? Wasn't it even a worse failure, a dereliction of duty, for the people helming the Department not even to think through how these inequalities impacted our embassy communities abroad?

It really was ironic. State's policies basically made a mockery of American values of equality and fairness, the things we're supposed to tell other countries are fundamental to our country's identity. And gay and lesbian families deserved better. And so when I left Romania I decided, okay, we're gonna get this resolved before I go back overseas again. When I went back to the Foreign Service Institute, I figured I had five years in DC to get this settled. It seemed doable.

Q: You didn't go to FSI as a student; you went in a leadership capacity.

GUEST: Yes, first as associate dean of the leadership and management school, and then as dean. And of course at the start I just wanted to focus on my job, get used to my new situation. I wasn't going to go overseas for at least five years; there would be time later to address these issues, if they hadn't been worked out by then. But one day, I want to say two or three months into my tenure, I was in the cafeteria at FSI. This guy comes running up to me — fresh faced, young, energetic, you could tell he was a new hire. In fact he was new in the Foreign Service. He sort of interrupted a conversation I was having and said, "Are you Ambassador Guest?" I looked at him and said yes. He said, "I thought so,

I just wanted to say thank you. I wanted to be in the Foreign Service all my life but thought there'd be a ceiling that I couldn't get through because I'm gay. Then I read about you. And I decided to go ahead and pursue the career and here I am." Then he ran off to class.

Q: Because when you got nominated and confirmed in the Senate as a publicly gay man, it was a big deal. Is that right?

GUEST: I was the first openly gay person to be confirmed as ambassador by the U.S. Senate. Before me there had been one out-gay nominee, under Bill Clinton: Jim Hormel, a philanthropist from San Francisco. Jim was a really decent, wonderful man who gave a lot of money to the Human Rights Campaign and other LGBT causes, so Senate Republicans of course painted him as a gay activist and blocked his confirmation. He went out as an ambassador to Luxembourg, but never was confirmed. It was a recess appointment.

At that time, I was PDAS [principal deputy assistant secretary] in the legislative affairs bureau. I had a ringside seat to the Hormel confirmation mess. I saw my career kind of imploding because I realized if they were going to treat this man, who had given to his country in so many ways, like that, and deny him the privilege and responsibilities of representing his country simply because he was gay, they could turn around and do it to me as well. As a career guy, I could never accept a recess appointment — it would end my career. And if I couldn't go out as ambassador, well there's only so far you can really go at the Senior Foreign Service level if you're not taking up an ambassadorship.

Q: But the background was that you had become a role model.

GUEST: Yeah. Yeah. I had broken that glass ceiling, and it mattered to a lot of people, in and out of our profession. I didn't even think of the role model aspect, didn't honestly realize it, until this guy approached me in the cafeteria. And that's when I realized I couldn't wait until I was ready to go out to post again. At that time, I was coming off a successful ambassadorship and I knew most of the State Department's senior folks. I knew the career ones, and Secretary of State Condi Rice knew me from my time as ambassador. That gave me a certain entree. GLIFAA had worked on these issues for many years, with not a lot to show for it — not because of any failing on GLIFAA's part, but because political and management leaders just hadn't seen fit to prioritize this issue. So I thought, well, at least I can lean in on some of these relationships, and see if we could achieve some progress. That's when I started working on the issues.

Q: How did you do that?

GUEST: Well over, I guess, a three-year period or so I just knocked on doors, sought appointments. I went to see the director general of the foreign service. I followed that by researching the best practices of all the corporations that I had been able to pull up on what they did for same-sex partnerships when they sent their people abroad. I talked to

foreign embassies, particularly European embassies, and learned what their practices were. I bundled all that up, gave it to the DG's office, and talked to his staff.

I met with Nick Burns, who was undersecretary of political affairs at the time — the issue wasn't in his lane, so to speak, but he was the senior-most Foreign Service officer in the building. He said all the right things - you're a pioneer, this is important, it needs to be done. But he pointed me to Henrietta Fore, the undersecretary for management, who I had tried to see to no avail. Nick at least opened that door for me. Fore was a very wealthy political appointee, to the manner born. Our conversation didn't really go anywhere; she did nothing. But I kept trying at every level below her to reach someone who would say, okay, let's do this, let's deal with evacuations, or training, or medical access. Anything.

In parallel, I tried to see Joe Solmonese, at that time the president of the Human Rights Campaign, the country's biggest LGBT advocacy organization. I don't often hold an overly-high opinion of myself, but here I was, the first openly gay Senate-confirmed U.S. ambassador, and I couldn't get an appointment with him for seven months. Seven! When I finally got in the door, the single ask I had was for him to use his bully pulpit to write and raise attention to this inequality, this injustice. I just wanted him to add outside pressure on the State Department to deal with the issue. He never did anything other than send a "nice to meet you" note. Such a waste.

Everyone kept telling me, you're doing the right thing, this is an issue we have to deal with. But nobody did anything about it.

Q: Nothing at all? Because one of the things they were talking about was evacuations. That seems so obviously needed.

GUEST: Not even that. I was so dispirited. I felt lonely, in some respects, and I was reaching the end of my tether. And then suddenly I heard that AFSA was awarding me a constructive dissent award for my efforts. That was encouraging, at least someone had noticed positively. I remember thinking when I learned of the award that what I was doing wasn't really dissent, it was just trying to make the Department step up and deal with the hangover of an old era, to create policies that are fair and that protect embassies in terms of security information, counterterrorism, and health. It seemed more like strengthening the institution than dissent.

You know, in 2005 I think — before the constructive dissent award — avian flu was going around. A lot of embassies, a lot of countries, were being hit hard by it. So Henrietta Fore organized a big, cross-Department roundtable, sort of a tabletop exercise on what our protocols should be for dealing with this at our embassies abroad. I attended as the Foreign Service Institute's representative.

So near the end of the exercise, I raised my hand and I said, "What about same-sex partners of gay employees?" I mean, really. They're talking about big things, like evacuations, but also of things as simple as giving out Tamiflu as a prophylactic, and the

fine print of the Foreign Affairs Manual tied it all to a definition of embassy community members that had no reference to same-sex partners. And so Fore looked around the table with big, wide eyes and said, is that permitted? Someone dutifully said no, they don't qualify, they're not eligible family members. And she blithely said, okay, then, and just moved on. No moment to process, no conversation, no penny dropped. I sent her a letter two days later, took it over and gave it to her assistant, saying this is a loophole that needed to be closed off. It was a vulnerability, a weakness for any embassy to have someone that's not even able to get Tamiflu, and thereby preclude the transmission of avian flu. Why not set up a small working group to look at this issue and figure out policies to make sense for the State Department? Never heard back from her. Her office didn't return a call. A working group never was created.

Flash forward. Here comes AFSA with this award, the presentation of which was in the Ben Franklin Room. It was kind of a big deal — a lot of people came to that event. When I climbed to the dais and gave my remarks, there was a long, standing ovation. Just about everybody stood, and they clapped forever. I got emails from people saying wow, I didn't know about this — and you're right, we have to do something. At that moment, well, first of all, I thought, gosh, I'm not alone. And we're gonna make progress on this. Even Henrietta Fore sent me an email, congratulating me on the dissent award. I sent her a note back saying, do you know what I received the award for? And of course I attached my remarks. She responded that she did know, and that they were working really hard on the issue. And I thought, well, maybe this time is different. Maybe something will happen.

But then the hammer dropped. About two or three weeks later, I went to the director general's office, and new talking points had come down. The new line wasn't "we're working on it"; it was that they couldn't do anything because of DOMA. Such a crown jewel of dumbfuckery! I mean, honestly, no one was trying to undercut marriage — if we would be allowed to prove our commitment through marriage, we'd be thrilled. And no one was trying to redefine marriage. All we were trying to do was amend the definition of eligible family member in the Foreign Affairs Manual to include partners. The definition already included dogs and cats, and senior parents who rely largely on their Foreign Service kids. Just include the word partner, that's all. Acknowledge that they're part of the community to which the State Department has obligations when it sends us abroad in service to our country.

Q: The army would say "taking care of family."

GUEST: Yeah. I felt as if someone at OPM, or maybe in the White House, had just sent out generic talking points on DOMA, like they were trying to save the world, and all they really were doing was chumming the waters, making the world a more difficult and less safe place for gay diplomats to live in, making it harder for us to maintain our focus on advancing American interests.

From that point on, everyone I spoke with, trying to move this issue forward, said DOMA DOMA DOMA DOMA, can't do anything because of DOMA. And I realized that the only remaining avenue to work this was to get through at the political level and convince

them that this wasn’t about marriage but about taking care of families, about protecting State’s interests in sound health, counter-terrorist, counter-intelligence policies and the like at our overseas posts.

I really thought Condi Rice would care. At that time, I ran the ambassadorial seminar for outgoing ambassadors, and she usually would meet briefly with each seminar, giving some remarks before taking photos. She always spoke about how proud she was as an African American and a female to be secretary of state — that her ancestors counted for only three fifths of a vote, and ultimately America had realized this was discriminatory. I thought she would see, from that standpoint, what I was asking — not that the African American experience is like the LGBT experience, no false comparisons intended. But if she cared about discrimination, surely she would see that she couldn't allow some other kind of discrimination to go on in the very institution that she now led. And I thought for sure she’d see the practical policy reasons State should deal with the matter, too — the safety and health and well-being of our overseas communities.

I finally managed to catch her on the margins of one of those ambassador seminar appearances. She said, “Oh, yes, just call and make an appointment and we'll talk.” I tried but never could get an appointment with her, nor with her chief of staff. Ultimately, I wrote a very heartfelt letter, a page and a half, on why this should matter to the Department. I gave it to the Department’s executive secretary, who was a friend. He put it in the pouch of weekend memos to go out to her house one Friday night. I was nervous, but expectant, pretty much all weekend. And then at the beginning of the week, I learned that the letter had come back with a big line crossed through it. No “see me,” no “let's talk,” no “send this to Henrietta Fore” — nothing.

I think people’s lives often turn on a few moments, and at that moment I realized I had come to the end of my line. That night was probably the worst night of my life as I wrestled with what to do. And the next morning, while I was shaving — I had like, two-thirds of my face shaved, the rest still had shaving cream — I stopped and looked at myself in the mirror and said I couldn’t do this anymore. I couldn't continue to work, to be glad about working for a secretary and an institution that devalued my service in this way, that didn't care about my family, that was willing to tolerate workplace discrimination. I couldn’t tell foreigners that America cares about equality when its flagship diplomatic institution, my employer, clearly didn’t. I couldn’t do this to my partner, or to myself. That’s the moment that everything crystallized, the moment I decided to end my career.

A week or so after word filtered out that I was going to leave, someone in HR told me to wait it out, and maybe — “maybe” was the word — they would be able to allow partners to be trained on personal security. I asked if that had been decided, and if it was coming from the top. The answer — something like “we’re not there yet” — told me everything. Nothing real had been decided. There was no plan, no principle. And a half-promised course or two just wasn’t enough for me by that point. State’s leadership, if you want to call it that, was going to continue to turn its back on gay employees.

I have to say that Condi Rice was my biggest disappointment in this whole period. I really had believed she would understand, and that she would approach it the way I was trying to advance it — not as a gay rights issue, but as an issue of fairness and equity, a workplace discrimination issue that stemmed from a sort of divot in history. That this is how you take care of your people. This is how you make sure that there's not a security risk to your people. This is how you make sure that a medical risk isn't allowed to infiltrate the community. And that inequality wasn't our country's calling. I thought she was a better leader and would get it. That she didn't grasp her responsibilities as a leader on this issue, at that moment, was and remains a real disappointment to me. I had pushed the issue as far as I could, and I felt that staying on would, by that point, telegraph that the issue wasn't as crucial to my own values, my own service, as I'd made it to be. And so I figured that I would just leave the Foreign Service. But I decided to address the issue one more time, at my flag ceremony.

Q: What is a flag ceremony?

GUEST: The flag ceremony is a rite of passage the Department does for departing ambassadors — sort of a final salute, I guess, for representing our country at that level. Someone senior gives you a little plastic flag in a box, and generally you make little remarks about all the things you've accomplished.

Q: What year was this now?

GUEST: That was 2007, November 2007.

Q: It's still a year before the election?

GUEST: Before the election. My remarks at the ceremony thanked a few people for their influence on my career, but I didn't talk about my glory days, or about particular accomplishments that you and I haven't talked about in this conversation. Instead, I used my remarks to address this one issue.

I deliberately invited members of an A-100 [State Department orientation for new Foreign Service officers] class that I had mentored. They were just coming into the service and needed to see the dark side, so to speak. And I invited a number of colleagues that I wanted to say goodbye to. I spoke from the heart about how I saw the lack of progress on this issue as a personal failure. For those colleagues who were around the world and couldn't be there, I sent a transcript of the remarks. Boom. Someone sent them to the press, and the remarks went viral. You can still find them on the internet. The New York Times did an op-ed, the Washington Post did a story, Newsweek called and wanted an interview. It was like, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

Those first days, there were a lot of highs and lows. I heard from lots of sympathetic voices on the outside, people like Secretary Albright and Wendy Sherman, about how sad they were to see that this issue was unresolved and was causing me to leave. A few homophobic hate messages trickled in from some rabid anti-gay types who had nothing

better to do but scrounge around for my address and write to gloat, like the hate mail I received in droves after going to Romania as an openly gay ambassador. The Human Rights Campaign, which hadn't done anything to help, grifted my story to its constituents with a "donate now" button at the bottom. Really! Frankly, I wasn't thrilled to be at the center of all the attention, and I wasn't sure any of the churn would lead anywhere. I really just wanted to put my head in a pillow for a while.

And then the Obama campaign called. They said, look, we're not here to ask you for money or an endorsement. We just read about your departure and we don't understand. Can you walk us through the issues so that we can fix them when Senator Obama is elected? Of course, I was thinking that Obama wasn't going to win the nomination. It would be Hillary Clinton. But I talked them through the issues, and over time I guess I got infused with their enthusiasm, where their hearts were. I got involved in his campaign and, when he was elected, I went into the transition.

Q: What does it mean to go to be in the transition?

GUEST: The transition occurs when there's a change of administrations. It's a process intended to look at old policies and issues, old organizational structures, and cipher out what needs to change versus what needs to stay the same. And it looks at how to staff offices to deal with new challenges, all of that. It's a very intense period between election and inauguration, with each agency review team going through a lot of records and archives and organizational charts, and having conversations with people in each department to get their input on what needs to be done.

My service on the transition team wasn't something I'd expected, and wasn't about this one issue, of course. I simply knew the State Department's organization and machinery pretty well. But among many other things, our team sketched out how the policy inequalities that had led to my departure could be resolved. It wasn't hard. The playbook was already there. After Hillary Clinton was announced as secretary designate, Wendy Sherman and I sat down with her and I walked Clinton through what I had experienced. Not in the detail I've given you, in fact, but in terms of the issues involved and how these policies impacted embassy communities. You could tell she got it. I mean, there was this look on her face, like "that still happens?"

Transition teams meet with a lot of stakeholders, and of course GLIFAA was one. I felt certain that the issue would be resolved, and soon, but my advice to them was that incoming administrations have a lot on their plate. It was up to GLIFAA to keep this near the top of the inbox. They got a petition together to urge change, and I think something like two thousand State employees signed. It ended up being the first issue the Obama administration addressed, writ large, for the American LGBT community. That June, I was invited to the Oval Office signing ceremony for the executive order that would amend policies to accommodate our partners, but I was on a plane to Amsterdam, to keynote a conference, and so I didn't attend. But it felt redeeming to read my name and story in the President's remarks. Alex and I raised a good couple of Dutch beers that night from afar, to celebrate the change.

Q: Was it an executive order that the President signed?

GUEST: Yeah, and honestly, it probably could have been done even sooner at the State Department. I think he just wanted to show the LGBT community that he was actually on the side of fairness and was, in fact, doing things to address inequality.

Q: But it was for the foreign affairs community, the change of policy?

GUEST: Yes. His remarks referenced my departure and the issues at State, but the order set in place a template for what other foreign affairs agencies were to do as well. State, after all, isn't the only agency that has personnel overseas. It just manages our embassy platforms and sort of leads the foreign affairs agency community.

Q: What a wonderful thing even though you couldn't be there. I guess it was hard not to be there.

GUEST: They knew my travel dates but had their own reasons for doing it in that period. And that's okay. It was hard not to be there. But you know what? I had been beating my head against the wall for so long on this. Knowing that the policy had changed brought closure and relief.

For a long time, I occasionally had second doubts about having left the circus. I missed my colleagues, and to be honest I carried a certain amount of anger. Why couldn't they have fixed this? Why did it have to cost me my career? It all just seemed so stupid. But once I was in the Obama campaign, I saw that with the right people in place, the policy world could also work in favor of the change I'd been seeking. It hadn't worked out for me, and I was scarred enough from the experience that I eventually decided I didn't want to return to a State career after the election, something that was floated as a possibility. I'd long ago accepted that I'll always be known for leaving the Department more than for anything I accomplished there. That's okay. I'm just glad that, going forward, the problem has been fixed. And I came out of that process with a lot of faith, I guess, in the political system.

Now, I will say that a lot of that faith was destroyed by the Trump administration. Any new administration has the right to set new policies. But he and so many around him devalued people, showed no character of principle, no inclusion. In Secretary Pompeo's tenure, there was an effort to narrow our promotion of human rights to, essentially, religious freedom and property rights. And some want to take America back fifty years, to a time when women's rights were different, when African Americans, black Americans were given second-class status, when LGBT families were basically non-existent. Some would be happy to hoist the flag upside down, the American flag and what it represents, and celebrate for the wrong reasons. That's all the more reason to stay engaged, and for stories like mine to be told.

Q: I really appreciate this discussion. You didn't think you were dissenting, but of course, you were. It was a long fight to try to get a set of policies changed. So it was constructive dissent in the truest sense of the word, right? Do you have any advice for people now who feel so strongly about an issue that they're going to have to go to bat? Do you have any advice on how to get allies? Or anything else that your experience led you to believe?

GUEST: Well, I guess I feel a little odd giving advice, because I failed, at least from the standpoint of someone who was trying to continue in the career. But failure is also a part of life. Allies will come if you're perceived to be standing on principle and working as constructively as possible. That may not be enough; it wasn't in my case. But to win them you've got to lean on your communication skills, shape and frame the message, and listen very actively to concerns that are expressed — not just offer a set presentation.

One example. When I was pushing for partner protections, someone in HR told me that the problem in defining "partner" in regulations was that gays just sleep around all the time. I was shocked to hear that broad-brush caricature from HR. But instead of arguing over the bias I'd heard, I said, let's figure out the parameters. How do you define a relationship? How do you do it in a way that's sensible? Rather than saying we just can't do anything, let's figure it out, maybe with the help of a bunch of folks from GLIFAA, and maybe bring in people who have dealt with this issue elsewhere. So you have to be both strategic and adaptable in your approach. You have to plan, follow up, and never anticipate that someone in a busy job is going to prioritize your issue. Just stay on it. I leaned on all of those skills. Actually, in the last few weeks before I left, I also leaned on my drinking skills, which got very good. But that's a different subject entirely.

Q: I think the moral of the story that I'm hearing, unfortunately, is that at the end of the day, you had to get the press on your side—which is something we try not to do, right?

GUEST: I didn't try to do that. I mean, I did make that futile effort to get the Human Rights Campaign's president to write or speak to the matter. But I didn't send my remarks to the press; someone else did, I'm sure just expressing astonishment that this had happened. And throughout this period, I didn't try to embarrass anyone publicly. I mean, I did find that State's management team, our HR leaders at the time, just weren't thinking it through. The notion that nothing could be done because of the Defense of Marriage Act was total bullshit. They knew it, but no one was willing to sit down with Rice or Fore and say this wasn't a gay rights or political issue, but one of the wholeness of our institution, and that it needed to be addressed. Even so, I had no interest in embarrassing anyone. That might only have made them more resistant to the change that I was seeking.

I guess if I had other advice for anyone at State, from entry class to seniors, it would be that you have to look at our institution more consistently, more diligently, through a management lens. We all enter the Foreign Service wanting to be the next George Kennan or Averell Harriman. Fine, go for it, pursue that dream. But don't let the pursuit take your soul. Every so often, all of us, at every level or function, need to stop and ask whether our institution is being run in such a way that all of us can be effective, can achieve our dreams and the dreams of the American people. Point out the platform

problems affecting us as a whole and fix them. Create working groups to empower our foreign affairs community, to make our workplace better. For your own good, and for the good of the institution and of our country, make course corrections along the way.

Q: Before we end, let's do a little addendum, because we were talking offline about the department's history on LGBT rights.

GUEST: The history isn't that long. Yesterday our country talked about marriage equality, and today it's about rights for transgender people. We don't stop to remember that it was only until about 1975, I think, that gays were drummed out of the Foreign Service if they were discovered by DS. In other words, it wasn't that long ago that you had to be in the closet to keep your job. That was before I joined the Foreign Service by several years. But nonetheless —

Q: DS is Diplomatic Security. So they were drumming people out, because—

GUEST: Just because they were gay. That fact made them considered to be a security risk. That short-sighted mentality came out of the McCarthy era, when the understanding of LGBT issues was very, very different, of course. But by 1981, when I entered the Foreign Service, gays were allowed. So why is it that between then and 2007, when I left, a whole succession of State Department management teams hadn't thought through how to accommodate LGBT families they knew were there, when marriage equality wasn't yet in place?

Q: And then, just remind us about when marriage equality occurred?

GUEST: It was after I left, and after the Obama administration came in, the Obergefell v. Hodges case. [Note: Obergefell v. Hodges was decided by the Supreme Court in 2015.] So a lot of the things that I pushed for are now part of policy. I just approached it from another angle at the time, that of workplace fairness, when no one knew that the separate issue of marriage equality might eventually be carried to the Supreme Court, let alone be decided affirmatively.

Q: Well, thank you so much, Michael. This was a tremendous opportunity for me to listen to the story from beginning to the end.

End of interview