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*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is June 2, 2022. Steve, we are conducting this interview with you as part of our celebration of AFSA's 100th anniversary. When did you first encounter AFSA? What were your initial thoughts about it?

KASHKETT: I remember getting the briefing from AFSA during my orientation when I joined the Foreign Service. I was intrigued and I was a member throughout my career. I had never needed any particular service from AFSA and didn't know all the aspects of its work until I decided to run for Vice President for State Department.

Q: So, while you were overseas, you were never an AFSA representative?

KASHKETT: No. In fact, the only reason why I decided to run for AFSA was because I was a good friend and colleague of John Limbert. John persuaded me to join AFSA in 2005 when I was kind of casting about not getting any good assignment options.

Q: What convinced you to run other than it would be a quick way to get yourself assigned.

KASHKETT: I like the idea of helping AFSA members. To be perfectly honest, this desire to serve the Foreign Service as a whole will lead me into a broader discussion of substantive issues. But the catalyst for running to be a vice president of AFSA came in the period 2004-2005, when we were all dealing with what was clearly an administration that couldn't care less about the Foreign Service. It was already apparent that the Bush Administration was doing a variety of things that were not in the interest of the Foreign Service, and that this would be a good time to stand up and defend the service against what was an uncaring, and I would say, almost spiteful, administration, in terms of its attitudes towards US diplomats.

Q: You succeeded Louise Crane in the State Vice President position. Did you have any sort of handoff from her? Did she give you any advice or warnings before you went in?

KASHKETT: Very little, I only met her once. I think she had been State Vice President for several terms. She was kind of old school. Having then served for four years after her, I came to believe that she had not been very aggressive in defending the service against some of the things that the Bush administration started. It was kind of learning on my own in that job.

Q: As you arrive at the job, what were the key experiences or skills that helped you address AFSA's objectives?

KASHKETT: At that time, we were facing what was very clearly a hostile administration. This was not the case for most AFSA officials previously. This was driven home to me in our very first meeting with Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice. She succeeded Colin Powell, who was well liked among Foreign Service Officers. Rice's appointment, in my opinion, and I still feel this way, was absolutely horrible in almost every respect, both in terms of her policy role as Secretary of State, and in terms of her treatment of all employees of the Department, but especially of Foreign Service employees. I realized that this was going to be walking a fine line, to get the administration to understand our concerns, to be willing to compromise with AFSA on things where AFSA had a statutory role. And doing this without pissing them off. It was going to require a lot of basic diplomatic skills to preserve personal relationships without compromising on the fairly dire things that the active-duty membership needed during those years. It was ultimately not very easy to do with many of the senior Department officials during those years.

Q: In your first meeting with Condoleezza Rice, is there something that stands out?

KASHKETT: Yes, and this set the tone for AFSA's relationship with the Department during almost my entire four years: Secretary Rice made it clear that the only thing that mattered was Iraq, that the staffing of the mega embassy, and the PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] in Iraq, which was by then becoming our largest diplomatic mission in the world, by far, was the only thing that the Bush White House cared about, and having the Foreign Service or professional diplomats help the administration dig itself out of the mess in Iraq was literally all that mattered. Nothing else that the career Foreign Service did carried any importance. That is a radical thing for a Secretary of State to tell the head of the union. That pretty much set the tone.

Q: Was it only Iraq positions they were trying to fill, or did they also want to fill positions in Afghanistan and Pakistan? The embassy staff in both of those countries, especially Afghanistan, needed many Foreign Service Officers in all cones and specialties.

KASHKETT: Iraq was the primary concern. It was because the war was not going well. It was the war whose inception was controversial among many — even on the Republican side. It was a quagmire. Afghanistan at that point seemed like a legitimate war that was going okay. We had an embassy in Kabul, but we did not have unarmed career diplomats scattered throughout 20 or 30 different places in Afghanistan in Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which were numerous in Iraq. As we went down the road of

negotiating special incentives for war zone service and avoiding directed assignments (postings that overrode the expressed desires of officers), the administration began to realize that they couldn't consider staffing Iraq without similar special consideration for the full staffing of Afghanistan and Pakistan. I'm not sure how Pakistan got rolled into that. But eventually, the acronym AIP came about to indicate the three most difficult assignments to staff and the ones that came with incentives unavailable to posts outside of war/threat zones. The administration realized that they couldn't realistically negotiate with us only on Iraq without including Afghanistan as well.

Q: What were the first personnel issues that you had to deal with regarding Iraq, because directed assignments were just one.

KASHKETT: I'll start at the beginning. I started in the summer of 2005 at AFSA. And at that point, the invasion and occupation of Iraq had gone on for three years. The administration was trying to rebuild Iraq so that we could get out of there. That meant creating a massive nation-building structure to manage both the capital and the provinces. In the provinces they created Provincial Reconstruction Teams or PRTs. The administration had an absolute obsession that the Foreign Service should be focused entirely on managing the Iraq mess. And the way they thought to do that, even though this was a war zone and was clearly a very dangerous place, that diplomats should be posted throughout the country to deal with every possible local issue, like local governors, regardless of the fact that it was an active combat zone. This was a fundamental departure from what the Foreign Service had done throughout its history, which was always when things break down, and it's a war zone, you evacuate the diplomats, who are unarmed and untrained for a combat role. That's when you turn to the military which is trained and equipped to deal with armed violence. The diplomats come back when the place is secured when the war is over.

Also, in the past, when we had unaccompanied post assignments in high-risk places, those were always small embassies. My first assignment was at Embassy Beirut during the Lebanese civil war. It was a skeleton staff. It was very small, high risk, strictly volunteer, of course. In Iraq, the size was completely different. Baghdad was literally the largest embassy and the largest diplomatic mission in the world, in the most dangerous place in the world. It was something we had never, ever dealt with -- deliberately putting diplomats in harm's way instead of evacuating them. By 2005, the Bush Administration started to panic. They realized that they needed hundreds of foreign service officers to fill positions at the largest diplomatic mission in the world, in the middle of an active combat zone, without enough volunteers ready to drop what they were doing and go at a moment's notice. They realized that there wouldn't be enough volunteers from the Foreign Service to fill all those. Secretary Rice was laser focused on forcing diplomats to go there.

To take another step back, I'm an NEA person myself [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs]. I grew up in NEA and spent most of my time in NEA. I know what happened from 2002 to 2004. Most of the people in the bureau volunteered to go to Iraq. They were NEA hands, Arabic speakers, and understood that they had unique qualifications and that it was their

duty to go if they could. It was our Bureau's nightmare to deal with. In the first couple of years, the volunteers all came from the ranks of NEA hands. By 2004-2005, they had all done their one year of hard volunteer combat service. After them, I used to joke, you had the thrill seekers, the people who are not NEA hands, but were adrenaline junkies from other parts of the Foreign Service. Many of them had little or no experience in the Middle East, but just liked the idea of going to a war zone, or liked the incentive of the extra money, or were trying to get away from the ex-spouse, or a whole variety of other motives. In many cases you had people who were going probably for the wrong reasons. We had quite a few issues— people who weren't performing well, people who had disciplinary problems, and a few just wiggled out. The Seventh Floor (the top floor where the Secretary and top officials were located) realized this. They were trying to find a way by the summer of 2005 to get good quality people from the Foreign Service, who might not be drawn from the ranks of NEA, especially if they had Arabic language skills, to volunteer for Iraq.

The administration's first thought was, "We have the authority to direct assignments. Let's do it. Let's make this a directed assignment post." This is where AFSA started to get involved. Everything that happened from there started from the point of the administration telling AFSA that it was considering directing assignments to Iraq, identifying people whom they thought could fit into various jobs in Baghdad and in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. They were basically telling officers, "You have to go there." telling them they had no choice, regardless of their personal circumstances.

We realized that this was going to be the hill where we had to fight our greatest battle because the Foreign Service had always been a volunteer assignment service. People would volunteer for the most difficult hardship posts, and the State Department would give them extra financial incentives and extra administrative incentives to make that sacrifice. But we would do it based on people wanting those incentives or wanting to do the right thing. Everyone, even at that point, already had a hardship service requirement built into the promotion precepts. Everyone was going to do it at some point, but the Iraq situation created a unique challenge because suddenly, we had a dramatic expansion of the number of positions overseas where officers could not take families – unaccompanied posts. I think when I started in the Foreign Service, there were two overseas posts that were defined as unaccompanied -- Beirut and Bogota, Colombia. By the time I took the AFSA vice presidency in 2005, we had a couple of dozen hardship, unaccompanied posts. And Embassy Baghdad had 700 unaccompanied slots that needed to be filled every year.

This was a unique challenge. We realized that the biggest battle we would have to fight was preventing directed assignments at all costs. Because in the Foreign Service, diplomats are not like soldiers. We are not trained for combat. We didn't sign up in our 30s 40s 50s to be sent to combat zones. We're not like 18-year-olds who have joined the military knowing they might well be sent into combat. People in the Foreign Service have families. There are single parents. There are people with medical reasons that prevent them from serving in a place like Iraq. We had several dozen single parents who were identified as "prime candidates" for possible directed assignment to Iraq. As you

probably remember, at one point, the director general's office sent out letters, identifying people as so-called "prime candidates," that was the term they used, saying you will be directed to Iraq unless you come up with a very strong justification not to. That included a couple of dozen single mothers, some of whom had young babies. What are they supposed to do? Get sent somewhere in Iraq and find someone to take care of their baby for a year?

Q: I do remember. They never sent me one of those notices. I assume it was because I didn't speak Arabic and was a mere public diplomacy officer.

KASHKETT: It was fundamentally absurd. Besides all the moral issues of forcing people to go to a war zone, the diplomatic service is not the same as the military. This was the goal. AFSA then set about to fight this. We opposed it in public. We talked to the department about coming up with a whole package of other extraordinary incentives that became the Iraq Service Recognition package to persuade people to volunteer rather than directing them. We wanted to preserve the volunteer nature of the Foreign Service.

Q: To deal with this issue of directed assignments were you also reaching to congressional staff or members?

KASHKETT: As this process unfolded, the Foreign Service started getting some very bad press. I'm sad to say that some of it almost certainly came from the Secretary's office, which is one more reason why I have such a low opinion of Secretary Rice. Basically, she, and others in the administration, took or created opportunities to bash us, accusing the Foreign Service of failing to be patriotic by stepping up and volunteering for Iraq. Ultimately, in 2003-2004, all of the positions in Iraq were filled with volunteers. The administration was worried that in the 2005 assignment cycle, the number of volunteers was starting to thin out. We were taking heat from Republican members of Congress and Republican news outlets. The secretary's office was painting us as a bunch of limp-wristed, striped pants-wearing, cocktail party diplomats who are unwilling to serve in this most important place in a war zone. It was both a matter of educating those members of Congress and their staffs about how unusual the Iraq war zone staffing issue was, and how, despite this, we were, in fact, stepping up.

To emphasize what I said earlier, there were 700-800 positions needed to feed this beast. We needed a new crop of volunteers every year, because these were only one-year assignments, we would have to come up with new incentives that were groundbreaking, that were highly controversial, because they gave tremendous advantages to people volunteering for Iraq, to the disadvantage of everyone who either couldn't or wouldn't volunteer for Iraq. It changed in fundamental ways what had been previously a relatively level playing field for assignments and promotions in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did the administration ever consider filling some of the positions with State Department civil service personnel?

KASHKETT: That was one of the ideas that the Department floated. I think we had no objection to that. AFSA had a long-standing objection to civil service employees of the Department taking Foreign Service positions overseas in general because they would get to serve in nice places overseas, without having to go through all of the hardship requirements and language requirements, and hassles that we have to go through in the Foreign Service. That seemed unfair just because they were Department employees. If they wanted to go to the war zone, and help staff, we had no objection to that. That was one of many things that AFSA was very forthcoming about with the Department, in addition to offering the department to go along with a whole batch of new financial incentives: raising the danger pay and raising hardship service differential. We in AFSA actually proposed the unique incentive of linked assignments, which you probably remember where someone could volunteer for Iraq and get a linked assignment to some other post that they really want after their year in Iraq. They're basically given the opportunity to bid on their dream post a year in advance. There's almost no bidding and there's no competition. You would get this gravy assignment in Paris or London or Rome or someplace else that you really want to go that you might have had to compete with 50 people in a normal assignment year. That was a huge advantage to people in terms of assignments, and a whole bunch of other administrative things. A year in Iraq would fulfill the hardship service requirement in just one year. Then you'd be done with hardship service for another eight years.

We also proposed that the Department make every effort to accommodate Eligible Family Members, who could qualify, to fill a job at the embassy in Baghdad. This meant it wasn't always an unaccompanied tour. There were a lot of clerical, administrative, and other positions that these people could fill. Another thing that AFSA proposed, and the Department accepted, which turned out to be one of the most potent incentives, was, if you bid on a one-year war zone service in Iraq, and you're at some other post that you like, you were allowed to leave your family at that post. For example, if you are on a three-year tour in Prague, and you volunteer to give up one of those years for service in Iraq, your family would keep their housing in Prague, and your kids could continue their education there. This was another very attractive incentive. We also lobbied the Department and they agreed to extend home leave for people serving in Iraq. This meant, you got two or three home leaves in the middle of one year in Iraq. A whole package of incentives helped ensure we could get enough volunteers to fill all the positions that had to be filled every year without ever having the department resort to direct assignments.

Q: Now, while you are talking about incentives, there was one incentive that AFSA did not want to approve, which was performance pay. This would have instituted a criterion in your performance evaluation that measured how well you had advanced the administration's goals as a condition for promotion in addition to the usual evaluation criteria. AFSA typically negotiated evaluation criteria with Department management. How did AFSA address this?

KASHKETT: I felt very strongly, and I think the rest of the AFSA governing board agreed that all those other incentives that I just talked about were tolerable but unfair in many ways. I mean, let's face it, it was fundamentally unfair in the assignment system to

give linked assignments because that means many highly desirable Foreign Service assignments were being given to people before anyone else could bid on them. It was not a level playing field for assignments. We felt like we could live with that to avoid direct assignments to Iraq, but what we could not live with were performance related benefits and promotion related benefits. Secretary Rice in one of our most contentious meetings, looked me straight in the eye and said, "we want to make volunteering for service in Iraq, an automatic promotion." Promotion pay", as the administration presented it, would literally be the worst thing ever because it would mean that promotion did not rest on merit, it wouldn't be about quality of service, it would simply be about willingness and ability to volunteer. You could go to Iraq and do a crappy job and you would still get that promotion benefit. This would fundamentally change the Foreign Service, which is supposed to be a meritocracy. It would turn it into just doing what the administration wanted would get you an automatic promotion. And by 2004, as I said, we were seeing a lot of low performing risk takers and thrill seekers, bidding on those combat zones. All those people would get promoted. We will be stocking the senior ranks of the Foreign Service with people who should not be there just because they were willing to volunteer. We absolutely put our foot down on that, and said no way, under no circumstances can we agree to that. The most we would ever agree to was putting something in the promotion precepts, saying that something along the lines of that the Board should consider an individual's willingness to accept the administration's request for volunteers for this war zone service as one of the many precepts for promotion, but nothing approaching an automatic promotion for willingness to serve in Iraq. That would have dramatically increased the number of people willing to go there. A lot of people would say, "sure, I'll go to Iraq for a year and get an automatic promotion." It would have been the most unfair thing ever, and we absolutely couldn't live with that. Fortunately, while many things AFSA negotiates with the department, if the department chooses to do them anyway, over AFSA's objections they can. Fortunately, with promotions, AFSA has a statutory role that the administration can't just kick us aside so we could stop them in their tracks.

Q: One other unique part of filling positions in Iraq was the administration's ability to hire independent contractors to carry out jobs very similar to the Foreign Service, in effect, creating a parallel Foreign Service. What did AFSA think of it? Or what did you think of it as State Vice President?

KASHKETT: It was horrible. As we called them, it was the Sched C's, the schedule C appointments. They hired dozens and dozens of mostly young, unqualified Republican political hacks, who had been connected in some way to the White House, the Bush campaign, or members of Congress, almost exclusively Republican, who were true believers who were sent to help fill the enormous staffing needs at Embassy Baghdad and the PRTs. Most of these people had no overseas experience, no overseas understanding, they were mostly a nightmare for us. You had many smug, self-important 25-year-olds, who had gotten this Schedule C appointment from the White House, feeling like they could give orders to Foreign Service people with 20-25 years of experience. It was horrible, but there was nothing AFSA could do about that, because they were not taking duly established Foreign Service scheduled positions. They were just being sent as

separate Schedule C political appointees to help out at that embassy. And I've said there is no statutory way to prevent it.

Q: I don't want to rush too far ahead. You arrived in AFSA in 2005, but in 2007 there is what might be called the nadir of employee-management relations in the State Department. Director General Harry Thomas held a town hall meeting with officers, specialists, everyone who might be world-wide available. At some point, an officer stands up and says that an assignment to Iraq is a "death sentence." Unknown to those present, there were media reps present who seized on this and it went round the world. Just to give you a little context. I was in Hungary as a Cultural Affairs Office at the time. I heard about it right away. All those in the administration and Congress who distrusted the Foreign Service used this to impugn its loyalty. Were you still in place as State Vice President when this happened?

KASHKETT: You're absolutely correct. That town hall meeting was a major watershed event. What happened was, you can't control a town hall, right? Because individual members can stand up. So unfortunately, Harry Thomas got up there. It was almost like he got up and had a chip on his shoulder, because he felt like he was fighting against his own union and his own membership, to get people to agree to volunteer for Iraq against their will. I maintained throughout all this, that none of it was true. We were volunteering, we were filling posts. It was just that the administration was afraid that there would be a shortfall.

Harry Thomas, who was also a horrible Director General in every respect, was nothing but an errand boy for Secretary Rice. He viewed his mission as solely to do the Secretary's bidding, and the administration's bidding, and did not in any way defend the Foreign Service. What happened at that town hall was that it spun out of control. Several members got up and made some intemperate, ill-chosen remarks, including one who said it's a death sentence, which of course, is absurd. It's hyperbolic. It's not true. By 2007, a couple thousand Foreign Service members had served in Iraq. There had been a couple of people who had died, but it was certainly not a death sentence. It was high risk, but it was not a death sentence. By allowing journalists into that town hall meeting, which we did not know about, and we did not find out about until after the meeting that they had been there, Harry Thomas and the Director General's office had totally screwed us, because this was supposed to be an internal, candid discussion to air people's concerns about Iraq. It made the Foreign Service look like a bunch of whiny cowards.

There was never a shortfall in people serving in Iraq. I would add that it wasn't just a question of serving in Embassy Baghdad which was heavily protected in the "Green Zone," the fortress that surrounded the Embassy. Foreign Service officers also volunteered for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams that were like being in the Wild West. You are out in a remote dusty corner of Iraq with only minimal security protection, and you're out there on your own flapping in the wind, trying to manage problems in a provincial region of that war-torn country under extremely difficult and dangerous conditions. Our people were volunteering for those too, in large numbers. The Foreign Service was getting an unfair reputation. Harry Thomas made it much worse by letting

the journalists portray the Foreign Service as composed by people who were just unwilling to serve.

In the weeks and months after that, I spent a lot of time doing something very unusual, which until the Trump years was not something that an AFSA State Vice President would ever have to do. I had to go on numerous interviews with national media, including the major broadcast networks and NPR [National Public Radio], such as the Diane Rehm show and Kojo Nnamdi and others, trying to defend and explain what had happened at that town hall. The Foreign Service was volunteering, we were willing to serve in hardship places -- and this was true even before Iraq service became such a big part of making career progress. Since at least the late 1980s, you couldn't make it through the career without hardship service. The days when a Foreign Service officer could go from London to Paris to Rome, to Vienna, that was back in the 40s and 50s and 60s, that was long gone. Now, way before Iraq, the Foreign Service had become all about willingness to do hardship service. And even the promotions, you're more likely to be promoted from Baghdad or Pakistan or some other hardship posts than you were serving in London or Paris, which was the exact opposite of what things were like even when I started in the early 1980s. We had to explain this to try to justify it, but Harry Thomas did us a great disservice in that town hall.

Q: During this time, AFSA was also moving into temporary quarters while office renovations were underway. Did that have a major effect on your work?

KASHKETT: No, because remember, the State Vice President has an office in the Department. Not in the AFSA headquarters, and the labor management staff, the lawyers who fight with the State Vice President over all these issues are located in the office in the Department, not at the headquarters. I don't think it had any significant effect. By the way, I would point out, not to detract in any way from John Naland, who was the president during part of that time, or Tony Holmes, who was the office of president during another part, with humility, I still would point out that this was my battle to fight, not the AFSA presidents. These were State Department management issues. I was carrying the water on this more than anyone else. I was the senior negotiator with the department on all these Iraq related issues and incentives. But no, the reconstruction of part of AFSA headquarters didn't affect it at all.

Q: You were just talking about your outreach to media outlets. Did you also reach out to congressional staff, and what was that like?

KASHKETT: We tried to get other people in the Foreign Service, particularly senior people, involved in fighting this public relations battle. We tried to get members to do things like a letter writing campaign to their local home newspapers, letters to the editor and some of that worked. But it was mostly the AFSA team going to members of Congress and their staff trying to talk through it. I came out of that experience feeling as if the Republican members of Congress were hostile to the Foreign Service from long before Iraq. This is a historic problem of the Republicans in Congress having a low opinion of career diplomats, partly because they profoundly believe that most of us were

Democrats or had left-leaning political views, and did not support Republican administrations, as much as we supported Democratic administrations. But the truth is that there is a lot of diversity of opinion within the Foreign Service ranks. There certainly are people whose personal views are more Republican than Democrat. In terms of foreign policy issues, many in the Foreign Service thought that the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq was a catastrophic mistake. It's hard to deny that, but for that reason, these Republican members of Congress were relentlessly hostile to us, and extremely willing to believe the worst about the Foreign Service officers supposedly reluctant to volunteer for Iraq.

Q: I may have missed something in your relations with management on this. Were there other aspects of your interaction with Condoleezza Rice or Harry Thomas that I've overlooked?

KASHKETT: There were also other Iraq related issues for the Foreign Service. There were security concerns. Early on, our members were assigned there before the mega-embassy in Baghdad had been built. They were living in flimsy trailers with thin aluminum walls and had no overhead protection. There were a lot of incoming rocket attacks and so our members were sitting ducks. There were people spending their nights in those trailers, saying that there are cases where trailers are hit, and there's no protection. A hardened trailer would protect you, but just a normal caravan style trailer, the rocket comes right through. We fought that battle, trying to get the trailers hardened.

We also fought the battle of trying to give Foreign Service members the right to carry firearms. Quite a few members argued that, if they are being sent into a combat zone, they should have the option of being authorized to carry a weapon. This wasn't everybody, but some members of the Foreign Service felt like, "I'm in literally the most dangerous place in the world. All the military here are heavily armed. Why do I have to walk around with nothing in the event that I'm in a situation where I'm ambushed? I have literally nothing to reach for."

For those who were willing to take firearms training, we were lobbying for the right to carry a weapon, which is not unheard of. Take the example of Beirut in the early to mid-1980s when I served there. Foreign Service people did have the right to carry, in fact, were expected to carry a sidearm. I went through training and expected to carry a sidearm. The other thing that was frustrating for members was that the special war-zone course that you had to take included a week of not just evasive driving, which was strictly pointless because Foreign Service members never drove themselves in Iraq. You're always being driven by the security people. It also included firearms training, and then you get there, and you have been trained, but you are not allowed to carry a firearm. This was another issue we dealt with.

Another major concern, later in my four years in AFSA, was the impact of PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] among some people. We recognized that members of the Foreign Service are not in direct combat like soldiers are, but are still sometimes in combat-like situations and they witness people getting killed, they witness incoming fire,

they witness everything you see in a war zone. There were people who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from PTSD. The problem with Foreign Service assignments is that as you and I know, the minute you admit to any sort of mental health issue, including, I might add, like, even something like having gone to a counselor for marital problems, then it's as if you have a black mark in your record in terms of medical clearance. Many of the members discovered that, if they admitted to having struggled with any sort of PTSD after volunteering for war-zone service, then they could not get cleared for other assignments overseas. It was a totally screwed up situation. We fought that battle too. At one point, I testified before a Congressional committee about this problem.

There were other Iraq-related issues that we had to deal with. Remember that we were facing an administration that actually didn't care at all about the rules and traditions of what can and can't be done with the Foreign Service. They tried on numerous occasions to assign non-Foreign Service people to senior positions, including the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] at Embassy Baghdad. That was a battle that we lost when they wanted to send a political appointee to this critical DCM position, managing the concerns of all the hundreds of Foreign Service people in Mission Iraq, which was by then the largest U.S. diplomatic mission in the world, and you send someone who's not a Foreign Service officer?

AFSA traditionally, of course, could never really object to political appointee ambassadors because those jobs are presidential appointments, by law. The President has the right to appoint anyone, and they don't have to be in the Foreign Service. The position of DCM, by contrast, is a regularly scheduled Foreign Service senior assignment. There's no tradition -- or legal basis -- for an administration assigning someone who is not in the Foreign Service to a DCM position. The only time they tried it before Iraq years earlier, was in the mid-1990s when the department tried to assign Roberta Jacobson as DCM in Peru. She was a career State Department employee and a highly qualified person, but she was in the civil service. Management tried to assign her as the DCM in Lima, Peru. AFSA strenuously objected, only because Roberta was not a Foreign Service Officer. She would be getting a fairly nice, important DCM job without having to go through consular service and language training and hardship requirements and separation from family and all the other things you have to go through in a Foreign Service career before you get to be a DCM somewhere.

I have my own opinion on why that is the case. I think Foreign Service people did feel like there's a lot of disagreeable stuff we had to deal with, a lot of unfairnesses. But in my time as AFSA Vice President, I had the opportunity to connect personally directly with hundreds of members, because so many people came to us, probably 10 times as many officers came to us for help during the Iraq staffing period than they did for any other issue. I have some insight into that. I think it's because most people join the Foreign Service, not because they believe that it's necessarily a good, well-organized career choice, not because they believe that they will play a historic role in US foreign policymaking, but because these are people who love living in foreign countries who love, learning foreign languages, love foreign cultures, and are excited by the thought of

representing their country overseas. Then after a couple of years, moving to another foreign country, and working in an embassy there, and putting their kids in overseas schools and traveling in foreign areas. These are Foreign Service lovers, and you do get to have that in the Foreign Service, you do get to have that life. All the other stuff you put up with, all the bullshit, all the unfairness, all the losing your household effects, and the constant moves just screw you up, or your kids can't get into the right school, or you have to put up with a hardship assignment and your family is left behind and all the other bullshit we deal with in the Foreign Service, people are still happy, because it's a 100% unique career for people who love the idea of living and working in foreign countries.

Q: That's certainly true. Another area of responsibility related to discipline and security is the question of security infractions and security violations. These can be as minor as leaving a confidential document outside of a secure container but inside a locked office within the State Department. This infraction is very unlikely to cause compromise to U.S. foreign policy. But security violations can also be as egregious as leaving negotiating instruction in a bathroom where adversaries can acquire and read it. Did AFSA negotiate any part of disciplinary actions taken in these cases?

KASHKETT: The truth is, all other typical issues that AFSA traditionally dealt with took a backseat to the Iraq hardship war-zone issues. There was an ongoing concern, for example, about people whose security clearance had been revoked for petty reasons or unjustified reasons, and Diplomatic Security (DS) would then take forever to address the situation. Meanwhile, that person's career was severely affected because he or she couldn't take any overseas job, or even most domestic jobs. They were relegated to truly minor jobs that were not career-enhancing, while their security clearance was being reviewed. There were a few dozen cases of people who've been fighting DS for years over what they consider to be a completely unjustified revocation of their security clearance. AFSA was involved in that.

Another example. Officers of Chinese origin, who came from families of Chinese-Americans, who were often 100% fluent in Mandarin, or Cantonese. These officers were told that they could not serve in China because DS would revoke or restrict their security clearance because of concerns that their family might influence them in the conduct of their jobs, or they might be biased or something.

This is different from many Foreign Service officers who struggle with this difficult language for years and end up speaking it like a toddler. These so-called "legacy" Chinese-speakers should not have their loyalty questioned simply because they come from a Chinese American family. They should be allowed to serve in China. It was even more absurd because some of those people when they came into the Foreign Service, came in with a Chinese language incentive, a special bonus for possessing strong Chinese language skills. But then they weren't allowed to serve in China. These are all things, in a normal AFSA tenure that would have been significant issues. We dealt with them, but they all paled in contrast with the war-zone issues that we were dealing with during my time.

I would argue, -- again, with all humility -- that objectively, my time in AFSA, those four years were the most difficult time in AFSA's history up to that point. The subsequent years under the Trump administration were probably even more challenging. I know that AFSA during the Trump administration had a horrible, rocky time, and that competed with the Bush administration's Iraq obsession. But other than that, everything else absent in all the years before and after was gravy compared to what we had to deal with. I mean, most times, AFSA is not at odds with the administration. The seventh floor and the administration are normally on good terms with AFSA, including mutual respect and a shared approach to resolving concerns in a civil manner. That was not the case during my tenure, mostly because of the war-zone issue and the Bush administration's attitude toward the Foreign Service. That was certainly not the case for the poor people that went to serve in AFSA during the Trump administration.

Q: Let me give you a moment from my experience in considering an Iraq assignment as an example for you to consider. From 2007 to 2008, I was studying for a master's degree at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, which is now the Eisenhower College. My coursework included the resourcing and logistics for the military, principally in war or high-threat zones. As I was considering whether I would go to Iraq after my one-year master's program, I asked my State Department faculty adviser what he thought. He had already been in Iraq for one year. He said, "Aside from security considerations, you need to be ready for one thing. As a Foreign Service Officer, you're going to see programs carried out that have no sustainability. Development projects will disappear in the sands of Iraq as soon as you leave. And even the exchange programs you manage, like the Fulbright program, the Iraqis you send may never be able to carry out a single thing they learned in the United States when they return. If you're ready for that kind of service, then seriously consider going to Iraq."

KASHKETT: You're absolutely right. We heard this all the time. In addition to the family separation and security concerns that people were, most people serving in Iraq were very frustrated. People did realize that it was a shit-show. It became apparent to many of our members serving in Iraq that we were not going to fix that place, that most of what the US did was either a drop in the bucket or was misguided and it was all going to come to nothing -- this was true in Afghanistan as well. There was a lot of frustration, and no question. In the end, people volunteered, I believe, because in spite of that and in spite of the security concerns, and in spite of the family separation, because they were patriotic civil servants bound by their sense of duty. Also because the package of incentives made it worthwhile. You would literally double your salary. You would literally be free of hardship requirements for another eight years. You would be able to leave your family at another post where they were already settled. You would get three trips out of there and a year which was a government expense to meet your family in Dubai or Jordan or somewhere else Cyprus, somewhere not too far. It was as long as you could put up with it for a year, there were so many advantages, and you might get that assignment you already dreamed of in London or Paris or somewhere else. I use those as an example. For a lot of people, the dream assignment was maybe Brazil or Tel Aviv or there are a lot of people's different ideas about what their dream assignment was, but you could get that linked, an assignment that you would never be able to get without that, and you would get it linked.

You have that to look forward to, right after Iraq People volunteered anywhere, despite what you correctly pointed out was a very frustrating work situation in Iraq.

Q: At the same time, we were conducting Plan Colombia, and there was a need for a fair number of people to go there. It was a dangerous situation — but certainly not as dangerous as Iraq. In your recollection was staffing positions in Colombia difficult as well?

KASHKETT: I do not believe so. I don't remember that at all. I think so many things just were so overshadowed by the Iraq war zone issue that they vanished.

Q: In his book on the history of the Foreign Service, Harry Kopp said that around the time you were AFSA Vice President for the State Department, 80% of the active-duty Foreign Service were dues paying members. Was membership or the financial security of AFSA at the time at all a concern?

KASHKETT: No, I think we actually increased the percentage of dues-paying members during those years because we were seen as standing on the barricades, defending the Foreign Service. We lost some, but there were some, not a majority, who felt like AFSA should just be in lockstep with the administration and if they wanted to direct assignments with Iraq, to Iraq, we should support it. Even if they wanted to promote people to serve in Iraq, we should support it. I thought those people were dead wrong. But there were people who just felt like our job was to be loyal to the administration. I never really understood that because our job is not to be loyal to the administration, but to defend the membership. That's what a union does. Remember, AFSA is both a labor union and a professional association. The labor union side of it, sometimes, has to be at odds with management. Otherwise, you're not a labor union. I think we did that. We did it well. In the end, I think it increased membership. You could go back, and AFSA could tell you if that was the case, but I feel like the numbers steadily crept up. One other thing I would say is I think I've gone through everything I can think of about those years.

One other thing I would say today, since you're doing this oral history about AFSA, is that I came out of those four years feeling as if it had done irreparable damage to my career because I learned the bitter lesson that those who serve in AFSA run a high risk of making enemies of senior officials. A lot of very senior people in the department, who are themselves Foreign Service members, are primarily interested in their own advancement. They have gotten to where they are by kowtowing to the administration that happens to be in power because that is the path to their own further senior appointments. They did not take kindly to this pesky little union headed by a lowly FS-01 officer trying to put any limits on their ability to ingratiate themselves with the Secretary or the White House.

I did actually get promoted into the Senior Foreign Service out of AFSA, which was very unusual, but that's only because the undersecretary for Political Affairs Nick Burns actually wrote a strongly worded memo supporting me in my performance file. Typically, you never get promoted out of an AFSA job but anyway. Other senior people did not take

kindly to AFSA being a pain in the ass about Iraq and didn't care about the fairness issues of directed assignments. I honestly think those Senior Foreign Service officers were a disgrace to the service. Harry Thomas was one of them, and Tom Shannon was another. Several of them simply wanted to side with the administration and didn't care that AFSA was fighting for fairness and equity for our members. As a result, I made some enemies. In the years after that, I was a senior officer by the time I left AFSA and in the years after that, I found that my years in AFSA had created bitterness in the minds of some senior officers, and made me lose out on some senior overseas assignments that were blocked by people who I've subsequently discovered still bore a grudge for what I had done in AFSA. That is fundamentally wrong. Today, I would never advise someone I care about in the Foreign Service to serve in an AFSA leadership role. They should not do that if they care about one day being considered for an ambassadorship. In fact, I often felt like serving in AFSA, doing the honorable thing against great odds should actually give you a leg up on onward assignment and promotion should have a big green checkmark in your file for both assignment and promotion. It's not. It's a black mark for both assignment and promotion. That is just so fundamentally wrong.

Q: You answered the question before I could ask it. Were you also working with officers who felt that they had been retaliated against in evaluations or promotions for failure to go to Iraq?

KASHKETT: There was a time in 2004 and 2005, when I happened to be serving in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) -- just before my election as AFSA VP) -- when people in NEA were literally being told "You better volunteer to do a year in Iraq, or you'll never work in this town again. You'll be a persona non grata in this bureau, in terms of advancement." I was one of these people. I'm speaking from firsthand knowledge. I was called into Jim Jefferey's office, who was the PDAS [Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary] in the Near East Bureau. Essentially, the number two in the bureau. I was at that time the head of the Middle East Partnership Initiative Office. Jeffrey told us that we all had to volunteer for Baghdad, or we would not get good assignments in NEA. I told him that I did not believe in Iraq. I thought it was a disaster and I wasn't going to support it. More importantly, I'm an example of what many members came to tell us when I was in AFSA.

For example, I was a single parent. For half of the week, I had joint custody of my two young children. I was divorced, and I would lose custody of my children, who were less than 10 years old, if I agreed to go. You can't maintain joint custody when you're in a war zone 7000 miles away. I wasn't going to do that serving in Iraq for a year, doing the bidding of an administration that made, what I believed, a catastrophic mistake occupying that country, and then lose custody of my children as well. It was not worth being a loyal NEA hand, and I told him to go f--- himself, and I never served in NEA again. I had to go try to find a home somewhere else. After AFSA, I did manage to find postings because I had some good connections in WHA [Western Hemispheric Affairs]. I did manage to get what turned out to be a great job as the Consul General in Tijuana, Mexico. This was a big consulate in a lovely place, and I loved it. It was over the objections of the same Roberta Jacobson, who had a long-standing grudge against AFSA.

To recall that episode that I mentioned earlier, Jacobson did eventually get the DCM job in Peru, despite the fact that was not a Foreign Service Officer, and over the objections of AFSA. But there is a coda to this story that I didn't mention. After she went to Lima, the Foreign Service Grievance Board sided with AFSA and made her come back after nine months. She was super pissed-off about that and she held it against AFSA. The fact that it took place before I ever served in AFSA didn't matter. After my years in Tijuana, she was then the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and she made damn sure that I did not go on from Consul General in Tijuana to get any kind of decent DCM job in WHA. Even then, I would say, my service in AFSA damaged my career in clear irreparable ways.

Q: You mentioned the family aspects of your life, and integrating them with your service. During the time you were in AFSA, were there improvements in the way the State Department supported families that resulted from AFSA's work?

KASHKETT: There was little progress with the Bush administration, other than letting Eligible Family Members (EFMs) get jobs in the war zones, which was in the administration's interest. Other things we were fighting for, such as fair treatment for tandem couples in the Foreign Service, that is, where both spouses are officers. AFSA tried to get agreement from management to try to assign them to the same post. That was completely thrown out the window because war zone service took precedence over that. Tandem couples typically can only find positions together at larger embassies and larger embassies, which tend to be what some might consider cushier postings. We don't have large embassies in most of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, so it tends to be Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, and places like that. But those were also the spots that were sought after by war-zone volunteers who wanted good onward assignments after Iraq or Afghanistan. Giving those people preferential treatment took precedence over the concerns of tandem couples.

We fought the battle over an LGBTQ issue, that same-sex partners should be treated as full EFM's when moving to a new post, when making housing decisions at post, and when considering spouses for employment in the embassy where the Foreign Service officer was working. The Bush administration didn't have any of that, they were fundamentally, ideologically opposed. By the way, that was an interesting case where all through the years when I was AFSA Vice President for the State Department, the administration and Secretary Rice told us that their hands were tied because federal law made it impossible for us to treat same sex partners as EFM's under various Foreign Service regulations, which was unfair because it meant that someone with a same-sex partner being assigned overseas had to pay for the partner to get there and they didn't get any of the housing benefits of being a couple. Moreover, the partner had no status in the country or in the embassy community. It was ridiculous. She told us over and over again, "there's nothing I can do." Secretary Clinton began her tenure halfway through my last six months as AFSA Vice President and transformed that unfair policy instantly. Literally in her first month as Secretary just signed a directive that ended that, and same sex partners became EFM's. It was all bullshit that the Bush administration couldn't do

anything about it because Secretary Clinton proved she could solve this problem with just a stroke of a pen.

Q: Since you did have six months under Hillary Clinton how did that differ? In terms of how AFSA negotiated and whether it was more successful achieving its objectives.

KASHKETT: It was like a breath of fresh air. We suddenly had access to the Secretary. She listened to us. She tried to take positive actions to benefit the Foreign Service, like this same sex partner decision. She just fixed it immediately. It took the new administration a while to get up to speed. During those six months, not that much happened. But it was clearly a whole different tone towards the Foreign Service. You could tell because that day, the first day when Secretary Clinton arrived at the Department for her first day of work, the Foreign Service crowd that gathered in the lobby of the Main State, which was just jam-packed with people. It was like the coming of the Savior. People were so fed up with the Bush administration and Condoleezza Rice and basically being dumped on constantly by their own management and their own administration that it was just such a relief when the election happened, and Obama became president and Secretary Clinton took over. Things were noticeably better immediately.

Q: You mentioned the retaliation you felt, but as you look back and after you left AFSA, did your experience there in negotiation or running a union help you in your subsequent assignments?

KASHKETT: I learned about the politics of the Seventh Floor, and that many people who are senior Foreign Service Officers, or who reach those loftiest positions, only did so by looking out for number one, and turning their backs on the rest of the rank and file of the Foreign Service. This includes, I would add, the current assistant Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Victoria Nuland, who tried to do some very unfair things that broke the rules. When she couldn't get her way, she became another highly-placed senior FSO who bore a grudge towards the AFSA hacks that were trying to enforce the rules. Senior people at that level don't like being told they can't do something even if it breaks the rules. Usually, it involves something like getting someone they know assigned to a position that was above their grade and for which there were other qualified candidates at grade. The whole thing just left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I feel like I did some good. I would never recommend it to a friend who's coming up through the ranks in the Foreign Service. The current AFSA president, Eric Rubin, has done a fantastic job during the Trump years. Since he took that job, knowing the risks, but also knowing that he'd already had his ambassadorship and wasn't really looking to go out again as Ambassador. He didn't take the risk. Anyone who's still got career ambitions AFSA can be a nail in the coffin of their career hopes.

Q: Do you have other recollections that I've overlooked, please feel free.

KASHKETT: I think we covered everything important. There were there were dozens and dozens of “small potatoes” kinds of things that we dealt with members who had been screwed over by an assignment situation or promotion panel, had a bad disciplinary issue at an overseas post, had had a boss who clearly had it in for them, or had a medical clearance issue that that was unfair and couldn't be resolved. We've dealt with dozens, probably hundreds of those. Each of those was minor in its own way, but part of a big picture of a system that can easily ruin the career of an individual Foreign Service Officer. If you try to get satisfaction from within the system, from MED, or from DHS [Department of Homeland Security] or from the Director General's office, you often don't get satisfaction, so your only recourse is to come to AFSA and have AFSA fight the battle for you. AFSA often had success in addressing those individual member problems by shining a light on it with Department management and by pushing hard enough on individual cases. AFSA did a lot of good in that respect.

Q: Did you ever serve on the promotion panel to see how it operated from the other side, the side that makes decisions on promotions?

KASHKETT: I think there's actually a statutory limitation. You can't serve on a promotion panel for a certain period of time before running for AFSA or after serving AFSA. No, in any case, I did not serve on a promotion panel.

Q: On all of the issues that AFSA deals with -- assignments, promotions, discipline, professionalization, and so on, are there recommendations you make looking back from this vantage point?

KASHKETT: This actually requires a long answer, but I'll give you the short version. I believe I came out of that experience believing that both our assignment system and our promotion system were utterly screwed up. For different reasons, the assignment system was very unfair, because our assignments are all about a senior person knowing you who wants to give you a certain job. It has nothing to do with you being the most qualified person for that job, for you having had the best experience or the best language skills for that job. It's all about your friends. If you have a good relationship with someone like Victoria Nuland – who was recently the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs and controlled all senior EUR assignments – then she can give you a DCM job. It's not about you being objectively the best qualified in any way.

Assignment panels are a joke because by the time an assignment goes to panel, it's already been decided. The panel is a rubber stamp. It's decided and in the case of overseas assignments, decided almost exclusively in the “meat market,” the period when a geographic bureau sifts through the candidates who bid on that job and decides whom they will support. No one else plays a meaningful role. No other Bureau as a role. NEA decides NEA assignments— not consular or public diplomacy or any other geographic bureau. But all political and economic assignments are decided by the geographic bureau and decided on the basis of whether you are a well-liked bureau insider, at least well-known to the senior decision makers in that bureau when the meat market takes place. And that's it. As we heard from countless AFSA members over the years... if you

make an enemy of any senior person, that person can prevent you from getting an assignment that you want, even if you are superbly qualified for that particular position.

On performance evaluations, it was very clear to me during my years at AFSA, that 90% of the EERs [Employee Evaluation Reports] are written by the employee, him- or herself. You're writing your own EER and getting your boss to sign it. Everyone's EER is so hideously inflated that they all read like the employee walks on water. It's hard for the promotion boards to pierce through the thick hyperbole and exaggeration that embellish every evaluation to determine which officers are really performing brilliantly, as opposed to all the others who also sound as if they are top performers only because they did a good job writing their own evaluations.

I'd say the assignment system is even more screwed up than the promotion system, but they're both damaged for the reasons I said. Today, the war-zone issue is over. If I had any ability to affect long-term change in the Foreign Service, it would be in the assignment system. I can say I got assignments, great assignments, for the wrong reasons, because I happened to know the right senior decision maker personally. I was DCM in Prague, which is a highly sought-after European post. But I got that assignment because I was working for a very senior military commander as his POLAD (Political Advisor). That four-star commander had an excellent relationship with then-Deputy Secretary Bill Burns, who pushed me for that posting over the objections of the Assistant Secretary for Europe at that time, Toria Nuland, and I believe she bore a grudge over that.

Anyway, be that as it may, I acknowledge that I got that job for the wrong reasons. I had never served in Central Europe before. I had served in EUR, but I knew nothing about Eastern Europe and about post-communist states there. I didn't speak any Slavic language. Honestly, there were people better qualified for that job. I got it for the wrong reasons. At the same time, there were other jobs that I desperately wanted and that I was superbly well qualified for, that I didn't get, because either someone had a grudge against me over AFSA, or because some senior person had their own personal favorite, who was not particularly well qualified for that job. There's no objective qualification for a Foreign Service assignment that is judged by a nonpartisan panel. The current assignment panels are there to rubber stamp it once the Assistant Secretary and the PDAS have decided.

Q: I wonder if there were any comical moments in your tenure that stand out that we might conclude the interview with.

KASHKETT; It would be nice to end on a funny note, but it's hard. It was pretty grueling. I remember one occasion, when we went up with the senior AFSA lawyer, our General Counsel, and a couple of our other lawyers to meet with Secretary Rice. This was right after she told us something she was trying to do to force people to go to Iraq and we said no. She got right up, put her finger right in my face and said, "You're not helping, you are not being loyal to what the US government is trying to do in Iraq." It was very unpleasant.

On the elevator back down, we're all just looking at each other, shell-shocked. Someone said, "Well, that was unpleasant." That's what it was like to serve in AFSA during those years. What I want you to take away from this interview, because you're interviewing other AFSA people as well, is that this period was not normal. The AFSA years when I served were the Iraq war-zone years with a hostile administration. Those were not normal issues, neither with Department management, the administration as a whole, nor with the public. The Foreign Service always gets a bad rap from a certain segment of society, but it was never the kind of bad reputation before or after that it got during the Bush years over Iraq. Most AFSA Vice Presidents hardly ever have a chance to talk to the press or need to. I had to do it all the time because we were fighting a rearguard battle to prevent the Foreign Service from being bashed in the national media.

Q: Thank you very much for this historic interview. You have provided a fascinating look behind-the-scenes at how AFSA promoted both the professional development and workplace interests of the Foreign Service.

End of interview