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AMBASSADOR ALPHONSE F. LA PORTA

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is ADST's interview with Al La Porta for the 100th anniversary of AFSA [American Foreign Service Association]. Al, where were you born and raised?

LA PORTA: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, actually. And I was raised on Long Island, New York.

Q: Is that where you spent all your childhood and adolescent years?

LA PORTA: Yes, basically. Until I came to Washington, DC for university in 1956. I came to Georgetown University, the School of Foreign Service. I chose that School because my ambition was to join the Foreign Service.

Q: As you're approaching graduation from Georgetown, were you going to do anything else before you entered the Foreign Service?

LA PORTA: I had a number of things that I did before then. I graduated in 1960 and then went back to New York where I studied for my master's degree at New York University. And then I went into the Army in 1961 and served in the Army until '63. And then I worked for the National Security Agency at Fort Meade until 1965, when I came into the Foreign Service,

Q: During that time, did you pick up foreign languages? Was that part of your background?

LA PORTA: Not really, I had studied the obligatory language for my undergraduate degree, which was French, but I never was fluent in it. And I'm still not. I also studied German to get through the second language requirement for my PhD degree. And I passed that examination, but I've not used German, except for a couple of times since. So, I had a very slim background in foreign languages.

Q: During all this pre-Foreign Service time, did you have any experience with labor law, or labor unions, or anything that would help you when you took a leadership role at AFSA?

LA PORTA: Not terribly much, except that I was a member of a union. For one summer when I had a job with Republic Aviation, on Long Island, union membership was compulsory. So, I had to learn a little bit about that. But basically, I had no other background in labor management relations until the time I started working in M [Management Bureau], in the office of the Undersecretary for Management. And then I began to learn a lot about labor management in the Foreign Service. I worked on several reforms from the mid-80s to the 90s, when the Clinton administration established its policy of reinventing government. It was not about reinventing at all, it was a sham for basically reducing the size of government, including the Foreign Service. And so, one learns quickly about the ins and outs of labor management relations.

Q: Now before we follow you into your tenure at AFSA, just one other background question. When you entered the Foreign Service, in your orientation class, did AFSA introduce itself and invite new officers to join?

LA PORTA: My recollection is that I never received any pitches for membership from AFSA early on in my career. Certainly not in the 60s and 70s. It was not until the 80s, when Civil Service reform took place under the Carter administration that I began to see more activity by AFSA. This was the period when the Foreign Service Act of 1980 made significant changes to how the Foreign Service worked as well as its benefits, evaluations, and promotions. It was in that moment of churn that I joined the office of the Under Secretary for Management which was responsible for many of the personnel matters that resulted from the Act.

This gives a little more context to what I said earlier that my knowledge of labor relations began during those years of the mid- and late-1980s. Then, after a tour in New Zealand, I came back in the early 1990s and headed up the Senior Foreign Service Association when that organization existed. It was then that I really became more active in Foreign Service personnel management, reform regarding professional issues, the size of the Foreign Service, the conflict over bidding on foreign posts – a conflict that is still not resolved today.

Q: During this time, as you became more active, did you ever need the service or assistance from AFSA for your own personnel issues? Or did you serve as an AFSA rep at an overseas post?

LA PORTA: Not really. I think that labor management issues were in the background to some extent all through the 60s and 70s. Women's issues were a big thing in the 70s. But I was mostly serving overseas during those years. And it wasn't in the forefront of my consciousness. Let's put it that way.

Q: To recap, you become really aware of labor management issues when you go into the office of the Undersecretary for Management.

LA PORTA: Pretty much. I think I returned to Washington in 1981. And I had a year at the War College. But that's not exactly a place where one thinks about labor management relations. But I think that transitioning in 1982, into a job in the East Asia Bureau, and all the things that were going on at that point, as I said, including Civil Service reform. They were changing the retirement system for the Foreign Service. But at this moment I wasn't in an office where AFSA activism made much of a difference. But another aspect of my work in the office of the Under Secretary for Management was outreach to a number of employee organizations. And later on in 1991, I had a job as executive assistant to Elliot Richardson, who had a very large interest in public service and issues that were out there. Let's say, in terms of Foreign Service concerns, my interest initially was driven by more of what was going on in the public service as a whole. That became the main driver of my interest.

Q: Could you give a few examples of the topics and issues you worked on while in the office of the Under Secretary for Management?

LA PORTA: I was in the Office of Management Policy. I worked for Ambassador Bill De Pree and Ambassador George Moose, who was one of our deputy directors. I was one of the officers that handled the management concerns of several bureaus, in particular the East Asia Bureau. I handled post openings and closings. I handled all the NSDD38 issues that came along with those bureaus. NSDD 38, issued in 1982, gives the Chief of Mission (COM) control of the size, composition, and mandate of overseas full-time mission staffing for all U.S. Government agencies. And I also handled the Political-Military Bureau and Legislative Affairs Bureau.

Q: Do you recall any sort of specific examples of your interactions in terms of personnel, personnel policy, or other issues that AFSA was concerned with?

LA PORTA: Well, I had a stint in personnel back in 1965-67. In fact, it was my first assignment in the Foreign Service. I served a rotational one-year assignment in the Personnel Bureau. And even as a new officer at that time, one tends to learn a lot when you work in Personnel. And things don't tend to change a whole lot between then and now, let's be frank about it.

The State Department Foreign Service personnel system is a fairly static animal. But the issues that we had even back in the 60s related to the number of senior jobs as compared to mid-grade and junior officers. These issues included: assignments, equity issues, and general conditions of the service. Even during the 60s what was going on in Personnel related to what I later did in Management in the late 80s. I also served a rotational stint for about six months in an office that existed in the 1960s for management improvement. This was well before Clinton's "Reinventing Government" in the 1990s. The idea in the 60s was to implement a process of matching goals and objectives of our Foreign Service posts with Bureau goals and objectives and with the Department's overall objectives. It

wasn't a brand-new idea at that time, but it didn't get very far. I think it fell far short of its goals. So later on, in the 80s, and particularly in the 90s, a lot of those ideas from the 60s, began to see some reality. That's when I really began to understand labor-management relations within the broader framework of strategic workforce planning.

Q: How did you finally get interested in putting yourself up as a candidate for AFSA board member?

LA PORTA: This is part of what I call the "management stream" and the intersections with AFSA. Those began to really come into focus in the early 90s with the Clinton administration's Reinventing Government emphasis. Al Gore was the point person for that. But also, there were a lot of internal Foreign Service-related issues that came to the fore. And in 1991-1992 I worked on a management reform initiative that included a lot of AFSA leaders like Bill Harrop, Lannon Walker, Ed Rowland, and several others. Another aspect of my interest in AFSA resulted from my association with the Senior Foreign Service Officers Association. This was a group dedicated to not only improving the Foreign Service working conditions and the personnel system, but also in improving AFSA's role in professionalism. The Senior Foreign Service Officers Association no longer exists. It was folded into AFSA when I became AFSA vice president for the State Department. Those things prompted my interest in working on the labor representation side as advocates for Foreign Service officers.

But the story gets a little more complicated from here. At that time, in the mid-90s, Tex Harris was a president of AFSA. Tex was a huge voice, literally and figuratively, in advocating for employee causes. There was some irritation between Tex and the AFSA board. I was not on the AFSA board at the time, but Tex would be off doing his thing and the board would say, "Well, wait a minute, that's not a board policy. That's not a board-endorsed line of action." And so, one reason that I became State Department vice president was to improve AFSA's "inreach" to its members. Make the organization more accessible and responsive to Foreign Service officers, to advocate for various positions and working conditions, and so forth. Tex became president of AFSA while I was the State vice president. Later, in 1996, before the election in 1997, I was approached by Bill Harrop and a number of other officers asking me whether I would stand for election opposed to Tex. And I ran against Tex Harris, and I beat him. And whether that was a blessing or a bane or what, or just an aberration, I don't know. But basically, the idea I had in running for president was to win for AFSA members the benefits that the federal service as a whole received. Also, I intended to have a more consistent approach to management among all the AFSA leaders and board that was different from Tex's management style where he sometimes went ahead without consulting.

Q: Let me go back with you just one moment when you enter the AFSA board as the State Vice President. You mentioned that you entered at a time in the Clinton administration when they were "reinventing government." For the Foreign Service, this had the effect of freezing the number of officers even while workload increased. How did AFSA address this?

LA PORTA: And we were also battling Senator Jesse Helms, who was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Jesse Helms had his own agenda, which was to gut the Foreign Service and eliminate the United State Information Service and the Arms Control Agency by merging them into the State Department. He also tried to get rid of the Agency for International Development, but in the agreement made between the Clinton Administration and Helms, USAID remained a separate organization; however, it underwent a formal reduction in force in which a significant number of full-time staff were separated from the service.

The RIF was not only imposed by Jesse Helms' demands. The Office of Management and Budget, as part of "Reinventing Government," also sought to reduce staffing in the State Department. The easiest way was attrition. Simply do not replace retirees and others going off the rolls. The second easiest way was to reduce hiring. But the most damaging way was to reduce the number of allowable promotions so that mid-level Foreign Service officers with valuable experience did not make the cut for promotion. If you are not promoted within a certain number of years you must retire. This is known as "time in class". So if you are in the class of officers at a mid-level rank, you might have 10 years to get promoted to the next higher rank. If you are not promoted "over the threshold into the Senior Foreign Service, you must retire. If the personnel system reduces the number of available positions for promotion, then many good officers who would otherwise be promoted are forced out.

We lost a couple hundred officers a year in 1998, '99, and 2000 before the wheel turned with the arrival Colin Powell as Secretary of State. But the damage to the Service, in terms of skills loss, was tremendous. I always use the example that we ticked out three of four Cambodian speaking officers, highly experienced senior mid-grade officers in the Foreign Service, and we had nobody to fill the Ambassadorial position in Phnom Penh when it was desirable to do so.

A lot of those Foreign Service officers who were required to retire because they had reached their time-in-class are still good friends of mine. And we still talk about those days and the incredible damage that it did to the capacity of the Foreign Service to perform in many, many different ways not only in language and other specialty areas, but also our senior "bench" became very, very thin and we did not have an adequate number of senior officers to begin to fill the number of ambassadorships, much less other positions like political adviser positions to the military. There was an increasing demand for senior officers, but we simply became unable to fill those positions. By my count, at the time we basically suffered a 1/3 reduction in real capabilities. We're still digging ourselves out of that hole, the size of the Senior Foreign Service has not changed appreciably. And one of the questions that's coming around right now is that with a larger budget, and the congressional authorization for additional positions, is whether the department will put more numbers of positions into the Senior Foreign Service. I don't think they will. But it still is a continuing issue, we have a very thin bench. And at a time when we have more and more Foreign Service posts around the world (we're going to

create another three embassies in the Pacific Islands, for example). And there are always continuing demands for senior personnel, which we just simply don't have.

Q: During this time, when you were State vice president, and these Senior Foreign Service positions were being reduced, do you think that part of the motivation on the part of the administration was to have more opportunities to fill those jobs with political appointees?

LA PORTA: Well, there was that battle. And it is no different than the discussion that goes on today. In fact, things got pretty bad at the end of the Clinton administration, not unlike what we're seeing today in terms of the performance of the Biden administration, in that respect. In fact, things slightly improved under George W. Bush. There are fewer political appointees, but arguably the quality of those appointments was much less than under the Clinton administration. So, you know, it's quality versus quantity. And we're still struggling with that today. When the Biden administration came in the thinking was that Biden would do, as he said, as he publicly said, that there should be fewer political appointees in Foreign Service posts overseas. But as always happens, the personnel apparatus of the White House got the better of him and, and said, "look, we have all of these political appointments lined up for Plum Book positions." And so, the President lost the argument, and the issue has not been really ameliorated since.

Q: In this difficult period of the 1990s, how did AFSA approach inreach – communication and responsiveness to its members-- and outreach – representing the Foreign Service to the public and seeking allies to help advocate positions?

LA PORTA: As far as inreach is concerned, and because of the lack of program specificity, a lot of what was in the political winds that were blowing at the time, seem to dictate a pileup of vacant positions, mostly overseas. We revived the State Standing Committee, which is an additional set of representatives elected by members to help the president and vice presidents carry out the goals of AFSA. Our objective was to have at least one representative from each bureau become part of the State Standing Committee. We had as many as 30 people on our roster, and the state Standing Committee met monthly. In other words, we became a kind of a mini-AFSA board. And the idea was to do two things. Number one, make us more connected to the rank-and-file officers in the bureaus in Washington. Number two, to develop a cadre of officers who would be able to carry on in leadership positions by becoming members of the board or become active in AFSA in other respects. The State Standing Committee, I think, became an effective instrument in those respects.

It was also particularly effective in AFSA's relationships with Management and Personnel. And because we had the backing of 30-odd officers as a sounding board that deliberated and determined our positions, we were always in a strong position when we went to Management, and we took issues to them and were not solely reactive to Management's policies and initiatives. So, it was not only one or two people in AFSA saying something, it had strong backing from the State Standing Committee. Also, during that period, we pushed AFSA to establish similar standing committees for other agencies

represented on our board, such as USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. There were never enough members in the Foreign Commercial Service to be able to form a functioning standing committee. But the USAID committee did become an effective force.

As far as the State Standing Committee was concerned, we did train up a fair number of officers who later became AFSA board members and contributed to the *Foreign Service Journal*, which helped present the Foreign Service in a way that average citizens could appreciate and discuss how policy worked itself on the ground in specific posts and circumstances.

As far as the outreach component was concerned, I would have to say that in the 1990s when we were facing RIFs, we were a little less focused on robust outside representation. We had our hands full trying to maintain the Service in strategic workforce planning and in assuring benefits and protections. This meant dealing with the Hill and combating the administration on RIF's and required retirements and all the rest of that. I think there was also a bit of reaction against Tex Harris, in that a lot of people felt that his off-the-cuff interactions with Management were not the best tactical approach. We felt that his freelancing was damaging our standing with the Director General's Office and parts of Management. We believed we needed to put our own house in order so that we could become a stronger Service professionally with the capabilities and staffing numbers that we saw were necessary.

Q: Along those lines, also growing at the same time in those years, were the sort of sub-communities of interest of Foreign Service officers. So, you have women's group, Asian group, African American group, LGBT group.

LAPORTA: Yes, they were very important. In that regard, we had two big issues. The first was the GLIFAA, Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies. It would eventually represent all of the LGBT community. We did have GLIFAA members represented in the State Standing Committee. And that was very important, because we were able to bring the GLIFAA of people inside and to help support other things AFSA was interested in. And the board was faced with a decision about recognizing GLIFAA. There was tension over that, no question about it. Some of the old bulls in AFSA who were board members were very skeptical about the gay officer's movement and espousing those causes. But we did it. And that was important. And I think that bringing GLIFAA into the State Standing Committee, and making sure that they had a forum to air their concerns, helped make AFSA stronger and more representative of the Foreign Service. Not that we could always do very much about advancing GLIFAA agenda items, but it was a long fight that required determination over many years. But at least we were able to take on those issues in a constructive and programmatic way.

The other issue was family-friendly policies. We were beginning to see, in fact, when we worked on the reform program at the beginning of the Clinton administration, that family issues, and especially spousal employment, were becoming a major issue. Indeed, it is front and center and paramount today. It is a key issue in the retention of Foreign Service

Officers. Back in those days, the idea was that we, the Department, needed to make better use of the extraordinary amount of talent of Foreign Service spouses, partners, and sometimes adult children. Often, because the Foreign Service could not staff all the positions on embassy staffing patterns, those slots went wanting. AFSA's members and the board knew that there was a pool of talent in Foreign Service families we were not tapping. We saw that at least spousal employment could be a significant element in overall workforce management of the Department. That's one thing we did preach from the AFSA board to management. This had the result that more eligible family members (EFMs) could fill positions, especially in consular affairs, security escort duties, and handling of confidential material, and eventually in IT and as political/economic assistants. But to get these positions, we needed more transparency from Management on the breakdown of Foreign Service positions. Where were the needs?

This is still an issue, and the Congress is still asking for the Department for that kind of data. A particularly influential person on this issue was Bill DePree. Bill was an AFSA board member, and he preached the gospel of workforce planning. He said, from the AFSA standpoint, it was in the organization's interests to basically force the Department to show and tell how it managed its basic positions, domestic and overseas. He also wanted to see the projections to a reasonable extent. Today, we use algorithms to project our position needs and thereby project our annual intake, as opposed to just somebody in the Comptroller's office or somebody in the Civil Service personnel system plucking numbers out of the air that had no relationship to what was actually needed. So, workforce planning and family-friendly programs to utilize spouses and partners in the employment mix were issues that we discussed a lot.

Q: That now brings us to 1997, when you ran successfully for the presidency of AFSA. How did things change for you in the organization when you took on that role?

LA PORTA: Well, my presidency was brief. Seven or eight months into my time as AFSA president, I was asked whether I wanted to be Chief of Mission in Mongolia. The position had been vacant for 18 months. There were a couple of candidates who were not acceptable to Congress for one reason or another. So, the East Asia Bureau, which was my home bureau, found me at the top of their list. That's the way things happen in our business. I accepted and left the presidency shortly thereafter.

But to go back to my presidency, the issues were essentially the same – the impact of the RIFs and family-friendly policies. I would add that there was an issue with tribalism. You alluded to the fact that there were these special interest groups in the Foreign Service that were beginning to be formed and heard, not only GLIFFA, but others as well. And so, the AFSA board had to harmonize these views and agendas to the best of our ability to make sure our approach to Management was unified and constructive. There were also abuses in the personnel system. For example, people were being accused and penalized - and indeed run out of the Foreign Service - not only losing their security clearances because of alleged infractions that were highly suspect, if not totally untrue. We had a number of those cases during those years.

And the last thing that really concerned us, during my all too brief time as AFSA president was the shutdown of government. That was the deepest, darkest time of all the years I've served in the Foreign Service. It was one of those things where everybody was stranded, everybody was left exposed and helpless to a considerable extent, because the Congress and groups in the Congress drove the shutdown of government. It was something that we had not experienced in a significant way before. It lasted 15 days. We were sitting at AFSA headquarters basically saying, "Okay, what can we do? How can we help? What can we do to mitigate people's concerns? How can we communicate better?" We didn't have Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx and all the rest of this stuff, we didn't have email, we didn't have all the ways of communicating we have today. So, it was picking up the phone, sending a fax, and trying to help members. For those in remote or underdeveloped places where phone communication was spotty, it became a real problem.

Meanwhile, the Department was telling us "No, no. You have to shut down too." It became an issue because we were on duty in AFSA trying to help people. And the Department was saying, "no, no, no, you should shut down." Our reply was that we were a Union. We weren't funded by the Department. We had to find a way to help our members who couldn't pay their mortgages or had other money problems. It was not until Pat Kennedy became Undersecretary for Management that he found some artful ways of dealing with the shutdown problems. And I think, to a significant extent, in recent years, those have really shielded the Department from the bad effects of government shutdowns. But AFSA was really out there, drifting in space during the shutdown. It was not only demoralizing, depressing, and all the things that you would want to express, but because we felt, as a labor union, the representative of the employees of U.S. foreign affairs agencies, we had an obligation to try to do as much as we possibly could with the limited means we had.

We were able to help some people, but not as many as we would have liked. We did take a strong stand. And I mean literally stand. We got people out in front of the 21st Street entrance to the Department, the formal diplomatic entrance, to demonstrate, making noise and attracting attention. There were over 100 Foreign Service employee demonstrators. People in the Department were just totally shocked to see Foreign Service people out in the streets.

Q: And the media coverage was also vivid. I was abroad when that happened and saw coverage in a whole variety of news organizations.

LA PORTA: Yeah. Well, and I think that at least it told the Department that we were the aggrieved heart of the establishment, and you can no longer ignore us because our people are being hurt in very real terms. People who are caught traveling and travel status, during the shutdown were just left in all kinds of places without allowances, without any kind of support. Embassies were closed, nobody was listening to them. And again, now that has become a different ballgame, in the last decade or so, because of the maturation of American Citizen Services and what the Department is willing to do, and how it deals

with requests and problems that are surfaced by American Citizens in trouble. We had a lot of people in the shutdown who were really affected badly.

Q: Now, you mentioned you had a relatively short tenure as president, and you went out as Ambassador to Mongolia. But thereafter, did you maintain ties to AFSA?

LA PORTA: Yes. When I came back from Mongolia, and ceased to be Ambassador, I then became eligible to become active in AFSA again. I had about eight months here in Washington before I was posted overseas again to my last assignment in Naples as a political adviser to the NATO Southern Command. So, during that period, I began to pick up some of the pieces and become active again. Although being a POLAD, a political advisor, is not like being an ambassador, I could be active in union affairs. Subsequent to that, I did come back to Washington after retirement. I had an overseas contractor job with USAID for a while, and I was involved as president of the US-Indonesia Society. There was not too much room for AFSA activities, even in retirement. But I did pick up things again when I became a WAE [When Actually Employed in the State Department] beginning in 2009 in the Political-Military Bureau. I had more time. I did run for the AFSA board. I was the retiree representative on the AFSA board for four years. So I picked up dealing with many of the same issues that I had left 15 years before.

Q: How do issues related to retirees differ from representing active duty officers?

LA PORTA: I think the last data that I saw was that 31% of AFSA members are retirees, which is a huge amount. But it's not enough. We, frankly, need to have more retirees as AFSA members because they've become part of the critical mass and the weight of opinion. Among the things that our retirees do is serve as public speakers on behalf of AFSA and the Foreign Service. Even in states where it's hard to be active and have a voice, I think that many officers have found ways to do that, whether as former diplomats-in-residence or by taking up leadership positions in universities and foreign affairs departments. An example is Ambassador David Lambertson, who worked many years at the University of Nebraska. The number of retirees who have been active at Arizona State has also been numerous. Even in Texas universities, Foreign Service Officers such as Ambassador and former Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy, have been reaching out. We have all of these wonderful people out there. And we need for them to be more active on behalf of the Foreign Service and to use that kind of influence.

Outreach by retired Foreign Service Officers also helps us understand what concerns their listeners want to hear about. How is the Foreign Service helping them in a practical way? AFSA can help our speakers with examples tailored to the needs of their audiences, like wheat farmers in Eastern Oregon, and so on. I think the other issues that we have in the public service are inside the beltway issues, the budget, and the standing of the Foreign Service on the Hill. The current AFSA administration has done a fantastic job in its outreach on the Hill, talking to members and their staffs, and getting things into bills that matter to us. They're able to be much more active than we were back, in the late 90s.

Q: Speaking of Congress, were you, as the retiree representative, able to use resources to advocate for the Foreign Service during the Trump administration when major cuts to the budget and personnel of the Foreign Service were threatened?

LA PORTA: I think AFSA picked up those issues pretty effectively. A number of recent presidents, for example, Susan Johnson, have been incredibly active in many different ways, and now she is in ADST keeping those issues alive before the public and interested people here in Washington. I think the American Academy of Diplomacy likewise has moved into an effective advocacy position and we're even seeing some life in other organizations that are composed of retirees or former political appointees in the Foreign Service in becoming advocates for the Foreign Service. Again, that's different than it was in the 90s. And you alluded to it, the fact is that both the political process and the policy process today are much more open. The whole impeachment proceedings, to cite but one example, drew both negative and positive attention to the Department and the Foreign Service, depending on what side of the political fence you were on.

I think our Foreign Service members acquitted themselves extraordinarily well, in very professional ways in the impeachment hearings and subsequently. And that lives on, that helps with the public impression of integrity among Foreign Service Officers. We remember Marie Yovanovitch and George Kent. I think this does resonate in the public mind. Retirees were helpful, once again in raising the alarm with the public, indicating how America's national security and prosperity would be ill-served by cutting the Foreign Service. They helped by trying to restore faith in the value of the Foreign Service and in helping to inspire students to apply for the Foreign Service. I've argued that it would take us a decade to work ourselves out of all of the difficulties that the previous [Trump] administrations created for the Department and the Foreign Service. And now that era is only two years behind us, and we still have eight years to go. There's still a lot of issues to unwind - big issues and little issues - but slowly, it will happen.

Q: You mentioned the Biden administration had promised a revitalization of the Foreign Service. Have you seen movement in that direction? Has AFSA helped advance that goal?

LA PORTA: Just look at the international scene: the number and scope, breadth, of crises, whereby insignificant things become very important things. Even where the United States has had a very fitful approach, or ups and downs in relations, like with the Pacific Island countries, those things are now on the upswing, and are arguably much, much more important than they might have been 20 or 30 years ago. You know, there's an argument in the Foreign Service about the need to "tend the garden," as George Shultz used to say, and I'm a believer in tending the garden. Our interests are not measured in one decade at a time but are measured in the long continuity of the kinds of relations we have with other countries and where they have fluctuated because of the political climate, and where they have fluctuated because of inaction or inattention, that's bad. Those are our relationships that the current administration and the Congress in the last two years seems to value and are resuscitating. But we don't know what's going to happen after the next election; January 2025 will be very important. But it's important also to be able to demonstrate the

long continuity in our relationships, and to be able to have effective, if not strong, relationships with countries on a universal basis. We need the small countries with us. And we need them to become members of effective coalitions when required. We need to treat them with dignity and to become as allied as they want to become, as well as to maintain our strength across the board.

We can't have big gaps. We showed that in Iraq and especially in Afghanistan, where the multinational coalitions were very strong. We had Bulgarians and Mongolians, and all kinds of people with us, that strengthened our hand around the world.

Ukraine is the same thing. You know, it makes Putin suck in his breath when, all of a sudden, NATO is in near unanimous position and is taking effective actions in supporting Ukraine.. I would also say the same is true in Asia, when countries are able to act effectively, not necessarily to oppose but simply to do something. It makes people in Beijing suck in their breath and say, "oh, something is happening here." And to the extent that the United States can be associated with those things, and kind of push them forward in terms of not only the rule of law, but also in in terms of maintaining the fibers of relationships between our country and countries around the world; we're always better off for it. We'll also be in a better position to do something when things happen; for example, in a natural disaster, we're the country of first resort for almost anything that happens in that vein around the world. But also, it will be increasingly important as we see more COVID-19's and as we see more kind of suspicious outbreaks of bad stuff that people have witnessed in the Foreign Service and in government for the last 20, 25 years. And so, when those things come around, we need a lot of willing support and interest from a lot of governments. We need to be able to work together to mitigate bad things when they happen.

Q: You've alluded to AFSA's need to be aware of management's strategic workforce planning for adequate staffing of embassies. One way the department is addressing this is by filling Foreign Service slots with civil servants. Has that become a major issue for AFSA? How is it addressing this?

LA PORTA: Well, let me give you the perspective from somebody who has worked for the last six years in a predominantly Civil Service Bureau, the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau. I also had experience as a civil servant at NSA and for a couple of years when I started off when I was still in college as a civil servant. However, the Civil Service and the Foreign Service are still chalk and cheese. They don't go together. And it is hard to make them into the same kind of entity. First of all, their employment rules are totally different. The competitive basis of the Foreign Service is our strength. And to the extent that we can get truly motivated people into the Foreign Service through a competitive system is a real boon and has proved to be the case for over the four decades I have been associated with the Department. Secondly, advancement in the Foreign Service through competitive means is the other major difference. As I look at the Civil Service, it has become increasingly difficult to hire people because of all the encrusted Civil Service rules. Because of the way their system is constructed, you have basically unqualified people determining who is qualified for the Civil Service jobs. I've seen some real abominations occur in that regard during my

experience with INL, and before that with the Office of Management Planning to some extent, but I think my argument is that we need to have stronger Foreign Service participation in Washington leadership positions as well as in overseas positions. There are some of our great leaders who have said, " Washington is for the civil servants and overseas posts are for Foreign Service." No, not quite. We actually need a stronger Foreign Service presence in our domestic bureaus. And we need to have positions in the domestic bureaus not only as training platforms for developing officers, but also to apply the overseas experience and knowledge of foreign cultures to the backstopping of overseas posts. My job as a WAE in INL has been to provide that kind of, of knowledge in the part of INL that I work in, which is on the management side, there is one other officer a retired financial management officer, who is doing the same thing, because his job is to support our posts overseas with the expertise of someone who knows how to move money, how to account for it, counsel leaders on changes in regulations, and so on. These are skills you only accumulate by supporting the leaders in embassies and bureaus. And I'm trying to do the same thing in terms of helping to strengthen our posts and managing their INL programs overseas.

And so you need the yin and the yang, both sides, but right now, the Foreign Service is underrepresented in domestic positions and running the apparatus of the personnel system and overseas operations.

Likewise, I think that in terms of leadership, the Foreign Service work ethic always wins out. You know, the first thing I was told in the A-100 course was that as a Foreign Service Officer, you're like the military, you're on duty 24 hours a day. I don't turn off my laptop on weekends; Civil Service people tend to do that. You don't hear from them during vacation time. I have my laptop with me when I travel, even on other business, not INL business. It's one of the skills that we learn in the Foreign Service that we always have to be up to the mark; we have to be ready to step in when needed at any time. And if it's 24 hours-a-day, we have to be able to go out and look for those American citizens who are lost, or are serving time in prisons, or have escaped from prisons – which in fact we had to do when I was serving as chief of the consular section in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Civil servants are not trained to do that. It's not in their job descriptions, and the mammoth personnel system that we have is over-bureaucratized and operated by Civil Service officials who have no overseas experience and are more concerned about rules and regulations than getting things done – or importantly reforming the systems to make them more responsive and career-friendly to the Foreign Service.. I find it hard to believe that we have roughly 880 people in our personnel bureau, now euphemistically called Global Talent Management. And yet how many of those people have had foreign experience, probably a handful at the most. So long as we have this big Civil Service, tail wagging the Foreign Service dog, we are not going to be able to, in my view, properly fulfill our responsibilities to the Department by having this great mismatch in the way we manage. It's an issue that Management has really not taken cognizance of and is always looking at ways to cherry pick Foreign Service positions to stuff Civil Service people into them without really understanding that they are fundamentally different people that you're putting into those key jobs.

Q: Looking back on all your service with AFSA, what recommendations would you make to its leadership today? How should it apply its staffing and resources into the future?

LA PORTA: Well, first of all, Eric Rubin, the current President of AFSA, is fantastic. He is the president that every AFSA member could have wished for, and more. He has succeeded in bringing people together to do all kinds of incredible things, he has been extremely sensitive and active on The Hill, as well as working with other organizations in the Foreign Service, with other agencies, and helping to strengthen them. We've become stronger in the Department of Agriculture; we're becoming stronger in the Department of Commerce after more than a decade of being in the back of the bus with people there trying to eliminate the Foreign Service. And we are showing signs of becoming stronger in USAID after many years of dissatisfaction. We're not there yet, but under Eric's leadership, I think AFSA is doing a lot better in both the public outreach and on the Hill, as well as within the confines of the Foreign Service system. That's the way I look at it. And we're going to need more Eric Rubins as time goes on to be able to deal effectively with all of the challenges. We need steady hands, we need very thoughtful leadership, and we need a unified AFSA board. And, as one president said, we don't do stupid stuff. That's where we are and AFSA will be a very strong organization. And we need more retirees to continue their membership.

Q: That ends the formal questions I have for you. Is there anything I forgot to ask you or any other areas that you want to remark on?

LA PORTA: I think we've covered most of the areas and certainly the ones that I feel passionate about. I think that AFSA is a surprisingly effective organization with a very small core staff, mostly not Foreign Service people, but very dedicated. And I think that we always need more Foreign Service retirees and experienced hands in AFSA to manage programs and outreach. And when we focus on policy, we need to have somebody like Julie Nutter really devote her time to professional issues, do surveys, and really go out and test the pulse of the rank and file. I think it's just a terribly important thing to have that substantive underpinning to guide what AFSA's public positions are on various issues. And we are going to go into a delicate period when the Congress has mandated the establishment of a commission to basically do whatever it wants to the Foreign Service and our several agencies, but hopefully not redo the Foreign Service Act. But that's the import of what a commission as contained in the current budget reconciliation bill provides. We have a number of other important issues that we have to work on the Hill together, including maintaining and improving the Foreign Service intake, flexible hiring for family members, and other bread-and-butter issues. So, there's no lack of stuff out there that's going to have to be done. We are going to really need Eric Rubin and more like him, who are terribly skillful, as well as experienced to be able to pick up the cudgels in the next five to 10 years.

Q: Thank you on behalf of AFSA and ADST for being part of the AFSA 100th Anniversary series of interviews that looks back on its accomplishments and looks ahead to its vital work in the future.

End of interview