

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

**MARILYN R. POVENMIRE**  
Director of Policy and Coordination  
Bureau of Consular Affairs  
Department of State

*Testimony before the House Post Office and Civil Service Subcommittee on Civil Service  
Hearing on the Volcker Commission Report  
Date: June 28, 1989, 10:00 am*

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Foreign Service as a way of life

- Frequent moving and adjusting to new cultures
- Schooling for Foreign service children
- Health and medical care
- Spouses finding work

How foreign service can be traumatic

- Denying visas
- Terrorist and violent attacks
- Death notices and dealing with deaths of Americans abroad
- Political unrest

Foreign service as a rewarding career

- Enjoyment in lieu of monetary reward
- Lisbon
- Coordination of consular activity

**TESTIMONY**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am a U.S. Foreign Service officer employed by the Department of State. I have been associated with the State Department for thirty-two years; first as a spouse, and for the past eighteen years as an officer myself.

I would like to describe to you today some of the demands, problems and rewards of being a Foreign Service Officer. In particular, I will tell you what it is like being an American consul, based upon my own experience.

Three things need to be explained about the Foreign Service: 1) why it is more than a job, it is a way of life; 2) why it is frequently traumatic; and 3) why I and others find it a rewarding career.

The Foreign Service As A Way of Life. Many people work hard at their jobs; Foreign Service requires hard work and requires this in a foreign environment. Indeed, as representatives of the United States we are on duty abroad 24 hours a day. We cannot leave our responsibilities at the office; they extend into our friendships, our outside activities and our family life.

Part of the job is moving frequently, reestablishing yourself and your family in a new place, only to move again. My husband and I have moved our household sixteen times in these thirty-two years. We spent twenty-four of those years abroad. It is difficult to establish roots in a place or develop long term friendships. The roots have to be in the family, hopefully a strong family, because otherwise the children particularly will flounder.

Our four children, all adults now, fortunately have turned out well. In some ways they suffered from the uprooting. They attended a total of thirty-three schools before finishing high school. In some places I had to teach them myself, because there was no good alternative. They did not share the common experiences of most American school children, they have a different view of the world, but they also profited from the overseas experiences they had.

In much of the world, health and medical care standards are inadequate. Our son contracted polio in Africa, but luckily had received sufficient vaccine that there was no lasting damage. Despite the malarial suppressants we all took, I came down with malaria and have had four attacks of it. We had cases of dysentery, parasites, and tropical boils. My youngest daughter was born in a hospital that lacked even a hot water system.

There is another problem faced by Foreign Service families and that is lack of career opportunities for the spouses. They are talented educated people who want the satisfaction of a good job and that second pay check which is so welcome when college tuition bills come flooding in.

For me the opportunity to pursue a Foreign Service career came in the early 1970's when the Department of State changed its policy on working spouses. The Department agreed to accommodate what we call tandem couples. In 1971 I took and passed the highly competitive examination for the Foreign Service. Since then I have been assigned as a consular officer in Caracas, Nicosia, Lisbon, Sao Paulo and Rome, plus two assignments to Washington.

The Work of the Foreign Service Is Frequently Traumatic. The work itself is frequently traumatic, especially the job of a consular officer. This is my area of expertise.

We have to make tough decisions. As visa officers we receive each year applications to visit or immigrate to the United States from 11 million foreigners. More foreigners come into contact with consular officers than with any other official representative of the U.S. We have to screen out those whose presence in the U.S. might be dangerous or otherwise undesirable. Except for the immigrants who qualify under our law, we are unable to issue visas to many applicants who seek a better life in the U.S. It is a trauma at some posts abroad to face long lines of desperately hopeful visa applicants each morning, knowing that you have their fate in your hands and you will have to turn many of them down.

The principal responsibility of our consular officers is to provide assistance to American citizens overseas. Frequently citizens asking for help face an emergency situation, and everyone, the Consul included, is under stress.

One- Thanksgiving I was at the bedside of an elderly American evacuated to Caracas from a ship on the high seas because of advanced gangrene in his leg. I collected his belongings, listened to his instructions, and comforted him as they prepared to amputate his leg. I helped him fill out the Spanish language consent form. Unexpectedly he survived the operation and headed home expressing his thanks to that red-headed consul.

I traveled far inland in Brazil to the Bolivian border for a series of visits to Americans jailed there on drug charges. In Portugal and Italy too I assisted prisoners to contact their families, arranged for attorneys, attended their hearings, brought them food and other supplies to make their days in jail less dreary.

Why you might ask, spend such effort on criminals? Because they are U.S. citizens and have basic human rights which are often not respected abroad. Without the consular visits, torture and other mistreatment could occur. So even a hammer murderer, one of my prisoner cases, received the Consul's attention. In three other cases, innocent Americans were sent to jail because of a faulty drug test on their luggage at the airport. They were finally released because I insisted that the authorities conduct a new test in a properly equipped laboratory.

Consuls search for Americans who are missing. They assist the destitute and the mentally ill, and they make the final arrangements for those who die abroad.

In Rome, as Chief of American Citizens Services, I was the Consul responsible for sending Leon Klinghoffer's body home after the high jacking of the Achille Lauro. We held a solemn ceremony at the Rome airport and draped his coffin with an American flag.

A few months later I rushed back to that airport because of a terrorist attack. Among scores of others, the terrorists killed five Americans there, wounding fifteen others. After searching through the city morgue and the hospitals, I notified the families, carried out their wishes to have the bodies shipped home, and attended to the wounded until they recovered.

A trauma like that stays with you for a long time. I had nightmares for months. I still

remember receiving from the police and handing over to the family the watch and Mickey Mouse earrings belonging to an eleven-year old American girl killed at the Rome airport.

I can tell you that your consular officers not only work hard but they also care very much about the citizens they are responsible for assisting. Still, no matter how hard you try or how much you do, your mind dwells on what else might have been done.

I had an early experience with real danger in Cyprus following the Turkish invasion and the assassination of our Ambassador. When I arrived in Nicosia I found a wing of the Embassy on fire and the building full of tear gas used to fend off rioters. A piece of shrapnel was pried out of my office door, and I wondered about snipers as I walked to and from the office. Much of my work there involved crossing the no man's land and the road blocks to take care of Americans and protect their property under the extraordinary conditions in northern Cyprus.

Since the 1970's danger has become an increasing aspect of service overseas. Seventy-three of my colleagues have been killed, others have been held hostage, many of them I knew. This is our latest trauma. More Foreign Service people have been killed abroad since 1970 than in the preceding 180 years; since the founding of the Department of State.

Why Is Foreign Service A Rewarding Career? Having heard about the hard work, the stresses and the trauma, you might wonder why anyone would follow a career in the Foreign Service. I cannot say for its monetary rewards. You have to enjoy, as I do, the opportunity of living in foreign places and meeting new people from all walks of life. You find it rewarding to learn their languages to better communicate with them. You take great satisfaction in contributing to our foreign relations.

I remember, for example, 1975 as a crucial time in Lisbon. We observed developments following the Portuguese revolution when the country was almost taken over by the Communists. My husband, a political officer, made a real contribution by keeping in touch with and encouraging the democratic elements. We had served in northern Portugal previously. We knew the country, the language and the people well. This helped me too, to assist apprehensive Americans residing and traveling in Portugal at that time.

In my current job in the office of the Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, I develop policy for, monitor and coordinate consular activities around the world. The numbers and variety of these activities are amazing, as is the dedication of the people who perform them. While we are continually seeking ways to improve, my colleagues and I are inspired by knowing that we make a difference in people's lives and we make a difference for our country.

Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

CA/PC:MRPovenmire:  
6/26/89:0052t:

Clearance:CA:

*End of testimony*