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SUSAN REARDON

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 23, 2022, and this is our interview with Susan Reardon, who was Executive Director of the American Foreign Service Association [AFSA] from 1992 to 2007, a period of remarkable growth for this organization. But let's go back for a moment. Before you joined AFSA, what was your professional background?

REARDON: I came from the nonprofit association field in finance.

Q: When AFSA advertised for an executive director, what drew you to the application? What were you looking for out of a job with AFSA?

REARDON: I certainly looked into the organization. It sounded interesting. I was the director of finance and administration at the League of Women Voters of the United States [LWVUS]. I supervised a thirty-person department, two departments really, the LWVUS was a one-hundred person organization. For me, the logical next step was to look forward to being an executive director, chief executive officer. I wanted to keep moving up. That's one of the reasons I applied for it.

Q: Now, as you come on board in 1992, what were you in charge of?

REARDON: Well, I was really in charge of the organization: making it work, hiring staff, supervising staff. There was always an interesting relationship with labor organization management because you've also got a general counsel, and attorneys.

Fortunately, Sharon Papp, a very talented attorney, came on board a month before I did. Right away we had a perfect relationship, never any turf issues. There were lots of things for the executive director to do. What comes to mind first is helping her shape the personnel, hire the right people, get the right experience, get more lawyers on board. AFSA had rather junior grievance counselors at the time Sharon and I came on board. We worked to upgrade those positions.

As Executive Director you're responsible for everything to make AFSA work. I think what attracted the board to me was my experience with budgeting and finance because

they really wanted to grow in that direction. I'm sure that's what attracted them to my background.

Q: Were there immediate things you needed to adjust yourself to, given that this was an organization that sent people overseas, and to kind of gather more understanding of what that meant?

REARDON: Sure. Just, well, everything, the understanding of the Foreign Service, not having come from that background, grasping that. I spent my whole career working with boards of directors. They're all different, but working with that board of directors, understanding their expectations, of course, the fact that they change every year, or two years. That was something one had to adjust to.

AFSA had a hands-on board because the president and the vice president are situated in the offices, which is different from all my other experiences, so you adjust to that. There was a fairly steep learning curve, but right away, there were personnel issues to address, there certainly were budgeting issues to address, and you just dig in, and you just do it. You learn as you go.

I think back to a moment, this was probably ten years into my 15-year tenure, I'll never forget, one of the people in the hiring committee was Ambassador Don Norland. He is no longer with us, but he was a great AFSA member, a supporter for many years. I was doing something, and then he was talking, and he said something like, "Oh, yeah, that's right you were never in the Foreign Service. I forget that." I took it as the ultimate compliment.

Q: Absolutely. Because with the Foreign Service, like any relatively small organization, there's all kinds of terminology and expectations that you have to get used to. As you arrive in 1992, AFSA did not yet represent all of the foreign affairs agencies: State Department, USAID [United States Agency for International Development], Foreign Commercial Service, Foreign Agricultural Service, etc. From your point of view, how did the adjustment to representing all of those organizations go?

REARDON: It was an effort we organized and planned for. I thought it was interesting, as we embraced those other organizations to get to know all about them and include them. The board was a very congenial and supportive place. At times, there were contradictory issues. Something that was good for USAID wasn't good for the State Department. You run into those issues. But generally speaking, it was very congenial. They came over to the board, prior to official integration. So, I was already meeting some members from agriculture, and all the agencies. That helped build the bond early to allow for a smooth transition.

Q: Once they were aboard, how did that change your job?

REARDON: It gave me a chance to learn about aspects of these agencies I wasn't aware of before. For example, Agriculture has a whole unit—APHIS—the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, as well as a corps of entomologists.

It was helpful in my role, to understand your constituencies, their similarities, differences, and their needs. Through the various activities that we undertook at the office, whether it was articles in the *Foreign Service Journal*, the AFSA Essay Contest, the scholarship program, the solemn commemoration of people who lost their lives in the line of duty, I had a chance to meet spouses, children, basically everyone associated with the foreign affairs agencies. The breadth of our constituency. That was inspiring.

Q: One other aspect of your constituency were communities of interest that form within foreign affairs agencies. Sometimes they approach management with or without AFSA support. Did that have an effect on your management?

REARDON: Yes. One that comes to mind is GLIFAA [Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies]. They had members whose interests sometimes did not correspond with the causes AFSA was promoting at a given time. Sometimes there was friction. But I didn't really get involved in larger issues of policy, other than participating in the board meetings. Representing our individual members always came first. They had a right to representation, and that's what we did.

But there were a few others besides GLIFAA. We worked with the Spouse Organization and DACOR [Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired]. There were other related organizations, and sometimes because AFSA—I can hear Tex Harris in my ear saying—"is a lot like, was a lot like the mother state." was kind of the most powerful, overarching organization, others would come to you and need things and want things, but you had to sometimes say no or prioritize things. AFSA couldn't do everything for everybody.

Q: Is there one particular recollection about balancing all those interests that really stands out in your mind, which illustrates what you're saying?

REARDON: Not now. At this point I've been away from AFSA, longer than I served there.

Q: All right, moving a little bit further in time—1995—the first big government shutdown. In your recollection, how did that affect AFSA? Or, what happened to you at that moment?

REARDON: It was really a time when we swung into action—to be there for our members. I can remember getting calls from distraught family members who were trying to get bodies from overseas. They weren't Foreign Service but we answered the phones. The State Department wasn't answering the phones at that point, but it just showed you when you have a government shutdown like that how it impacts so many people even overseas.

I think that one cut way deeper into the Foreign Service than the subsequent shutdowns because I think they learned a lesson. You can't stop consular services—in subsequent years, they were careful about what they shut down overseas.

AFSA could do things the government couldn't, this example is really from a later time, but it just illustrates what AFSA could do. When they had anthrax in the mail system at State Department, and it shut down, so everyone's mail (this is before email, and online payments)—members were cut off from paying their bills, getting their kids college applications in, you name it, preschool tuition, whatever it was, they were all cut off. So, AFSA went into action, and we set up a FedEx system. They could FedEx AFSA their mail, and then we distributed it—the AFSA lobby looked like the post office.

Q: That brings us to another historic question, which is, you were executive director through two long administrations: Clinton and George W. Bush. How did their presidencies affect the work or agenda of AFSA?

REARDON: Thinking back, it was more the influence of secretaries of state, as opposed to presidents, that we reacted to.

When Bush came in, Powell was his secretary of state. Powell comes in, and he's very focused on the improvement of skills, leadership, and better communications with state-of-the-art computers. Then came the unexpected tragedy of 9/11, I will touch on that. Later at the beginning of the Clinton administration we had Christopher as secretary of state. He was cooler and more aloof. Madeleine Albright was very different. It was under her that we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Foreign Service and started the essay contest. She attended the 75th Anniversary event. She was involved. She was engaged.

I can tell you, there was a difference between Condoleezza Rice and Powell. I think that's what I saw from administration to administration. Although there were certainly issues that created tension between management and AFSA, they pale in comparison to what the Foreign Service is undergoing now (in the Trump Administration). There was another thing I noticed. Regardless of party, some of their political appointees below the Assistant Secretary level managed to convert from appointee – Schedule C employees – to regular civil service positions.

Q: Was that a major issue for AFSA?

REARDON: I never saw AFSA address that. I mean, maybe it did in some negotiations, but I can't say it was a major issue. But I observed it for the good and bad for AFSA.

Q: During the same period, we had the internet and communications revolution. Since you're an office manager, how did that change the way you did business?

REARDON: Well, very early on, it changed a lot. I can remember my first day getting a pile of cables to read. E-mail was revolutionary. Fortunately, that was right when Tex

Harris came in as AFSA president. He was very good with technology, and I followed his lead. One of the first things we did was establish www.afsa.org. You'd be surprised how many other AFSA's there were out there, and they were all shocked when we had their URL. We established e-mail communications long before the State Department would let anybody communicate by email.

During my era, there were still some AFSA presidents and vice presidents after the tech era, who came in and wanted their secretaries to print their emails so they could read them because they were used to just somebody printing the cables for them. One of the reasons I was successful in that job, is that you have to understand the technology that powers an association.

The bottom line is, you've got to have a very good database that supports everything. Membership data was obviously very important, especially when a membership is always in transition. It also manages your finances. Most importantly everything has to connect, and it's all about the database. We upgraded it several times during my tenure.

Q: Was the database also effective in managing participation from retirees?

REARDON: Absolutely. AFSA was incredibly lucky. It had access to data that not all organizations do. The retirees are a great example. We had access to retirees even if they were not currently members. It helped with outreach for all our programming and advocacy.

Q: Speaking of outreach, how well did AFSA reach out to increase membership?

REARDON: During my entire tenure we saw steady membership growth. So, I can assume that outreach was a piece of it. Along those lines, we also worked hard to recruit AFSA representatives at each post.

But another aspect of AFSA's growth in the 2000s was simply that, as one of his goals during his tenure as secretary, Colin Powell demanded and got an increase in hiring. The Foreign Service grew exponentially in the early 2000s, and so did the membership.

Q: Since you mentioned that decade of the 1990s when the Foreign Service had no net growth, was AFSA able, nevertheless, to increase membership then?

REARDON: Well, yes. I think it's the nature of who was leading AFSA. Tex Harris was one famous example of activist presidents, and that made a big difference. He made people see that AFSA was not just a luncheon club. Tex was not alone. The earlier period of the "Young Turks," who began the push for adding more robust labor representation to the traditional role of AFSA as a professional development organization helped kick things off in membership growth. Between the increased initiative of the leadership and the communication revolution, I think we were preparing ourselves for the new hiring in the 2000s.

Q: AFSA also added other aspects of outreach while you were there. A whole variety of things. What else do you recall?

REARDON: The Speakers Bureau was one. We organized retirees on speaking engagements for the World Affairs Councils etc.. We published the book, *Inside a U.S. Embassy: How the Foreign Service Works for America*. Shawn Dorman was the author she really kept on top of developments so the book has gone through a couple of subsequent editions and has become more and more popular with new readers. And there was the creation of the AFSA PAC, a lobbying arm of the organization.

To commemorate the 75th anniversary of AFSA we wanted to reach different audiences.. So, the high school essay contest reached a whole new community. We had exhibits in presidential libraries. That was novel, and each one was customized for each President.. I think there were some we didn't hit, but we had quite a few: Bush, Carter, Reagan, and Ford.

Q: While you're talking about the book, there's a second book: Voice of the Foreign Service: A History of AFSA by Harry Kopp.

REARDON: That happened way after my time. It's more geared to the development of labor representation and advocacy.

Q: Now, I'm not sure every single aspect of outreach had survivability. There was the International Associates Program—.

REARDON: The corporate membership idea.

Q: What happened with that?

REARDON: The idea with a corporate membership.

Q: One new arm of advocacy did emerge, and that was AFSA PAC [Political Action Committee]. What's your recollection of how that started and how it pursued its mission?

REARDON: Yeah. So, prior to that, AFSA had a legislative fund—Legislative Action Fund (LAF) and every year we'd go out and collect money, and of course, because it was for legislation, it had to be held separately financially. It was important because it was a 501(c)(5) and (3). The membership was supportive of AFSA's legislative activity. But it really was Tom Boyatt who pushed for the creation of a PAC.

It wasn't easy. There's a lot of financial management paperwork to ensure that a PAC is properly registered and managed. I went to this conference in Florida for PAC leaders, and it was a technical conference, and it was interesting.

The fundraising improved, because people really saw it as a serious organization, and its growth was so interesting. For the time that I observed the role of the PAC – only a few years, — I thought it was very effective.

Q: Is there one example of the effectiveness of the PAC that sticks out in your mind?

REARDON: I think Sharon might be able to tell you a little bit better, but—I can't remember what all those issues were. Sometimes, it was the silliest little thing, like, there'd be a change in the law, and they left out the Foreign Service, and it wasn't all that consequential, but it was incredibly annoying that everyone in the Foreign Service had to do different that—and you could sit there with a member of Congress, and you could get them to understand that this is really nothing.

The thing I tell people is that I remember from that time I met some amazing members of Congress. I remember Congressman Wolf from Virginia. He cared so much about the Foreign Service. I don't know if you can say that today, but they were then.

Q: How did your member recruitment change over time? Certainly, you were a presenter at the orientation class for new Foreign Service Officers. Were there other efforts?

REARDON: When I came on board, they were already doing the orientation lunch. Obviously, we expanded them for the other foreign affairs agencies as they had new hires. It's not often that you get an audience with your future members—you're fresh off the press members. You have a chance to make your case, and it's so interesting because we tried different approaches. Do you come out hard on labor management with these people? Do you say to them, "We're going to represent you if you have a grievance." No one thought they were going to file a grievance at the start of their career. They were ready for an amazing career. We regularly discussed the question of how to convince them without scaring them with stories of drawn-out formal complaints. So, it was always a delicate balance.

As new Presidents and Vice Presidents came into office the messaging at the recruitment lunches would change according to their focus. This was something the staff always had to be content with and adjust.

Q: AFSA has a membership representation function, but it is also concerned with professionalization. That's a word that many people outside the Foreign Service don't really have a very good understanding of. For example, pressing State Department leadership on workforce management to allow for training and sufficient room at the top for talented career FSOs to reach ambassador level.

REARDON: It waned with the interest of the AFSA leadership. On the issue of political vs career ambassadors, I would get involved in trying to research with my staff and produce statistics to help them. It was always about 70-30. There was always a lot of controversy and debate—internal debate—when it came to publicly opposing a nomination.

Again, there was a great deal of internal discussion about these issues. In addition to access to high level positions for FSOs, we also discussed the problem of “burrowing in” – when political appointees managed to change their designation to career civil service. But there's generally in AFSA kind of a congenial—“that's something we have to put up with, you know, is it really worthwhile to piss off management on this particular issue?” We always considered the trade-offs in the context of our larger strategic goals.

Q: Throughout the time you were there, there were several Blue Ribbon Commissions or studies on how to improve the Foreign Service. Did AFSA get behind any of those?

REARDON: There were some things—again, Sharon could answer this better. There was a fair amount of discussion and work being done with DS [Diplomatic Security]. There might have been something where we made a difference on that. She really was an expert at diplomatic security and the officers—so there was a big push because other federal law enforcement officers had some benefits that DS did not have, but I think we were able to change that—she was or people working with her.

The other thing that AFSA was very involved with—so was ADST [Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training]. So, talking about the intake process, changing the Foreign Service exam process, and I saw that change—we saw that change during my era, and there was some participation. One thing that AFSA did was instant polls. We could do things faster, and then provide useful data.

Q: Okay. Now, you have mentioned a couple of major events. Of course, 9/11 affected the Foreign Service and affected the whole federal government. Are there particular memories of that and outcomes from it that you want to share?

REARDON: So, I'll share my memory with you—maybe more than you need or but it's worthwhile, maybe it's interesting. So, the interesting thing is that Foreign Service Day was always in May, but that was the year that Powell came in. May of 2001 came along, and he had just taken office and he said, “Oh, this is too soon. I don't want to do this now. I'm not ready. And let's do it in September.” That was unusual for us to agree to that because we give awards, but we were eager to work with Powell, so we delayed all of the events. but that year we agreed to push it back to September.. In addition, I had advocated for (because I was used to this with the League of Women Voters), a day on the Hill for lobbying.

Foreign Service Day was on the 10th of September. The 11th was going to be our first annual Day on the Hill. We had over seventy-five Retirees attending. We had an incredible turnout of former ambassadors. Everyone had prepared for visits to the Hill. We had prepared all these strategy packages to leave behind we had worked on for weeks..

After a breakfast and briefing at AFSA we went up to the Hill and our very first briefing was as a group with—Senator Biden’s staff, he was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee. During the briefing, someone comes in and whispers something in his ear but he doesn’t say anything.. A little later again, someone comes in and says something to him, and this time, he's really alarmed. And he says, "Look, I just want to tell you folks, something, since you are diplomats and you get this kind of thing that two planes have hit the World Trade Center." —I think at that time, and we're all like, "wow, there must be something wrong with the towers in New York City, this is strange," but of course, when they say planes, I picture a small plane. The program ended and the staff rushed away.

There's all this talk among the AFSA members about what to do next. I'm supposed to go to the House side, and we have all these materials, boxes and stuff. My cell phone rings, and I'm kind of embarrassed because I thought I turned it off. My husband, who happens to be a captain with Arlington County police, was on the phone and he said, "Where are you?" And I said, "I'm at the Senate". He says, "You need to get out of there." And I said "Why?" And he said, "They just hit the Pentagon." And I said, "What do you mean hit the Pentagon?" He says, "They just hit the Pentagon. It just blew up. I can see the smoke. You need to get out of there." And I tell Tom Boyatt, I said "That's Kevin and he said, they've hit—they bombed the Pentagon. We need to get out of here." Tom Boyatt said “No way, we go on.”.

As we made our way to the House side the Capitol Police were like, "no, they're shutting the Capitol down, get out of here" and the whole group just disperses. I'm with a couple of AFSA staff members. We are carrying all the boxes of the briefing material we've worked weeks on and it suddenly dawns on you, this is all now worthless. The world seems to be coming to an end we're under attack and we dump it in a trashcan.

We get back to the office, and of course, along the way, the city, it's like a scene from a movie. It's gridlock. People were coming up from parking garages, and they're honking at each other like that's going to help. It was like a scene from a movie, and we make it back to the AFSA office where we see on the TV what has actually happened.

Of course, we can see the smoke from the Pentagon, and I let everybody go home. I stayed until about four o'clock to answer the phones because the families of all the people we took to the Hill were calling, eventually it died down and I left. By that time the city was deserted, I was the only car on the GW Parkway.

Two other major events were the Embassy bombing in 1998 and a plane crash in Croatia in 1996 that took the lives of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and other Foreign Service personnel.

This brings up a continual responsibility for AFSA —the plaque in the State Department and who belongs on the plaque. What's in the line of duty? What isn't in the line of duty? It's just, it breaks your heart, because you're always dealing with this, and the family members, people who don't get on the plaque. The stories I could tell—the poisoning of

USAID employees in housing, tragic, an intern killed—do we put them on our plaque? It was never simple, they were all tragic but there had to be some guidelines for the plaque, or it would lose its significance and meaning to the Foreign Service.

Q: These were terrible, tragic moments for everyone. They upended many assumptions, and the entire way the U.S. government approached homeland security as well as security of embassies. But it also resulted in the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. How did that affect AFSA's work?

REARDON: I don't think AFSA so much, other than certainly in our public outreach, we were engaging with some military to speak, inviting them to speak at AFSA. to talk about current events. We put bulletproof film—explosion proof film on the windows at AFSA headquarters.

During the anthrax attacks the Post delivery van would stop at AFSA, drop off mail, and then go to the department. When they found anthrax in the State Department mail system, we had to quarantine some mail and offer staff antibiotics. Looking back, I can certainly say we had our share of excitement.

Q: There was also the problem of finding enough FSOs to fill positions in large, new embassies in Afghanistan and Iraq, and then to fill positions in provincial reconstruction teams. How did AFSA approach this issue with management?

REARDON: Yeah. But again, probably not so much in my purview. Definitely a labor management issue. Growth in membership was tremendous—there was rapid growth, the hiring, the classes, the number of classes, people they were hiring, we were trying to keep up with all of that. I'm sure they were fighting some challenging battles in labor management. Certainly, many more un accompanying posts—we could see that, the impact of that.

Q: Over time also, you had mentioned this earlier, but I wondered if you wanted to mention anything further about spousal employment and family support, how you saw that change over time.

REARDON: Right. Well, I think we certainly saw an improvement in dual families. We saw that improve and—over time with accommodating families. We had a close relationship with AAFSW [Association of the American Foreign Service Worldwide]. I served for time on the board of the Foreign Service Youth Foundation. So we engaged with them and supported them; we certainly gave them monetary contributions for the work they did. We ended AAFSW's access to the network because we had much stronger communications mechanisms and systems in place. So we always worked closely with them.

Someone would come to board meetings and serve as a liaison to AFSA. They had some really strong people in those roles.

Now, I think labor management spent more time—when those issues came up, making sure they were addressed in legislation, no doubt about that. And certainly negotiating with management on conditions. Obviously, 9/11 changed things—so many unaccompanied posts that just changed things a lot and, by the time I was leaving, it was more discussion, but I imagined it became a hotter topic; "what is the role of the diplomat in a war zone?"

Q: Now, the decision to renovate headquarters, you leave shortly after the decision is finalized, I think.

REARDON: Yes, I'm there while they were looking at architecture firms..

Q: Okay. What I'm curious about is, what drove that and what were the objectives?

REARDON: The building was in need of improvement. I had nursed it along—had done little things here and there, put new windows in, had to get new HVAC on the roof, things like that. Constantly dealing with the roof—it's like owning a house, it didn't have an elevator and it wasn't compliant with ADA regulations.

The Club had a long history, and when I came there, they were still trying to make it a full-service restaurant, or a luncheon restaurant. For years AFSA had paid a management company to run the restaurant at a loss. Eventually I got a catering company that did luncheons and catering for us, and they paid us rent, they used the kitchen for their outside catering business.

Basically, there were some really serious issues with the building. So we did some studies on different options, and one was building up and putting condos in that somebody could buy or rent. It's a valuable corner. Could you make more? Could you just sell it? What would you get? Then what would AFSA do? Could you make more out of it than just housing your staff and occasional places to have a meal?—everything was a possibility.

The decision was made to go with a renovation. And we had settled on the architect firm. There were some drawings—they weren't finalized. I didn't know how it would evolve, and because I had an opportunity, and—it was almost 15 years, and I was like, "ok, time to try something else."

Q: Yeah. As you get to that point, looking back on the time you were the executive director, what are the major developments in your mind that best describe how AFSA changed over that time?

REARDON: Well, I think it became a more professional organization with regards to its staff—management staff, personnel policies. That was a big change, it was a little more hit or miss before my time, but it took time to get there. I think it kind of hit a stride in a lot of ways, and, as I look back, a lot of my memories are responding to the emergencies and challenges. That sticks in your mind but slowly builds more stability.

And I think another area of tremendous growth was publications. Obviously, the Foreign Service Journal changed a lot. And probably another major growth was outreach. Being an organization that can engender more public understanding and support for the Foreign Service, whether it's Capitol Hill or high school students.

Q: Another aspect of outreach was AFSA's magazine, and other publications. How would you evaluate that effort?

REARDON: It was always a challenge, trying to get people to write and pay them the appropriate amount for the magazine. There was AFSA News, which was the house organ, and it was, during my tenure, one of the things we did—maybe it's changed, but we separated it in the magazine. We were trying to attract higher level authors to contribute to the magazine and to have interest in beyond just the membership, but certainly enough things to engage the membership. So, it was a delicate balance between that kind of objective.

Q: You mentioned that you were in charge of most of AFSA's personnel. Did that present challenges you had to resolve as you steered the development of human resources?

REARDON: I had an interesting first year, because I was hired through a committee that seemed to have different objectives for the position. I think I improved many of the personnel policies. At times it took some convincing to get the board members who of course were part of a large government personnel system to understand what was needed for a small non-profit/association personnel system.

Q: I've run out of questions, but that doesn't mean you've run out of answers. Have I neglected to ask you anything that is salient or important about your time at AFSA?

REARDON: I think just to go back and put another point on the issue of financial management. and the concept of reserves, understanding what kind of reserves and how you manage reserves.

It's really important that you structure the management of your investments, your funds, and the turnover of board members. You really have to be careful that somebody comes in and they know how to manage funds because they manage their investments.. But that's not how you manage an institution, and you really—especially the scholarship funds need to manage for a long horizon. How do you guard against somebody's bad idea? And you have to have a steady hand on all of that and understand institutional financial management and management of endowments..I think that was something that we matured during my tenure.

As an Executive Director I think it's incredibly important to be open with your Board of Directors. It's not just a matter of sharing information. It's how you tell the story. You analyze the data for them, go back and look at the historical financial data so you can build a plan for the future.

Q: Excellent. We conclude our interview with the thanks of ADST and AFSA for both your service and these recollections of your contributions to AFSA as it approaches its 100th anniversary.

End of interview