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ROBERT SILVERMAN

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is July 27, 2022. We are today conducting our interview with Robert Silverman related to his involvement with AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) and particularly his presidency.

Background, Education, and Early Interest in International Service

Robert, I just want to start with a little background. Where were you born and raised?

SILVERMAN: Sure. I was born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa. And lived in Iowa until going off to college, except for two years of high school in Israel.

Q: Okay. And any other family and so on, brothers and sisters?

SILVERMAN: Four brothers and sisters, all of whom are still with us in various parts of the U.S.

Q: Where were you in the four?

SILVERMAN: I was in the middle, number three out of five.

Q: What introduced you or what motivated you to go abroad, to look into international affairs and serve.

SILVERMAN: One of my brothers a few years ago found an elementary school story I wrote about someone who traveled the world and learned about all these foreign places, and I guess it was “fifth grade me” thinking about my future.

Q: Okay.

SILVERMAN: I think you find a lot of people from landlocked states in the Midwest who go into the Navy, so there might be a general phenomenon there. I loved Iowa, it was a wonderful place to grow up but I was very curious. I was a big reader growing up and I

wanted to explore and learn about places I was reading about, particularly the Middle East, which later became the focus of my career.

Q: Did your parents' jobs or activities also encourage you?

SILVERMAN: Not really. I mean, my parents encouraged my interest in books and education but I knew no one in the Foreign Service or international careers of any kind growing up. My parents were both born and raised in Des Moines from humble backgrounds. My mom was the first person in either family who had gone to college. I come from a mixed marriage, German Jewish on one side and Russian Jewish on the other. (Laughs)

Q: Mm-hm. Were any foreign languages spoken in your homes?

SILVERMAN: My paternal grandparents occasionally spoke Yiddish to each other but only to each other. And once when I overheard them, I remember asking my grandfather, "What language are you speaking," and he said, "Spanish."

Q: (Laughs)

SILVERMAN: But you know, there was a drive to be fully Americanized, though my family had been in America for many generations especially on the maternal side. So, there was no focus on acquiring foreign languages, other than going to Hebrew school after regular public school, which was as much about socializing and goofing off as studying a foreign language. In Iowa pretty much everyone goes to public schools, except for a few Catholic parochial schools, and the schools are generally excellent.

Q: Ah, yeah.

What got you interested in the one-year overseas program?

SILVERMAN: I was interested in Israel. Growing up Jewishly and the Six Day War was a huge factor, and so I went and lived on a kibbutz for one year of high school, and then continued a second year. So, my sophomore and junior years of high school were in Israel, 1973-75.

Q: Mm-hm.

SILVERMAN: I did learn Hebrew from that experience. It was a sink or swim experience. (Laughs)

Q: Well, great.

SILVERMAN: Total immersion from day one (laughs) because I was in a completely Hebrew-speaking environment. That gave me a big appreciation not just for Israel but for

the entire Middle East, and instilled a desire to learn Arabic so I could better understand this region and that led me to the Foreign Service.

Q: All right. Now, when you came back, obviously, you know, you'd had a unique experience, were your parents talking to you about college and, you know, where you were going to go?

SILVERMAN: In fact, when I came back my mom and dad were in the process of divorce. This was the mid-seventies, and I was the oldest of the siblings who were still at home and still tied to the family. I felt a desire to come back and help my family through this, and so I spent senior year of high school in Des Moines with the family. My parents had other things on their minds, and I applied to a couple of colleges, based on course catalogs on hand in my school library in West Des Moines. I focused on what they offered on the Middle East. I was curious after having spent these two years in the region, and wanted to study Arabic. And I chose Princeton because it had the deepest course offerings in that field at that time. When I got into Princeton, I never looked back.

Q: Great.

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

Q: So, in your college experience what else motivated you, aside from, you know, learning Arabic and so on, were you beginning to think about international service?

SILVERMAN: I was. Princeton was a revelation for me as a Midwestern kid, particularly its academics. I majored in public and international affairs, an interdisciplinary major that allowed me to both concentrate on the Middle East and also study the social sciences, especially economics. The goal of that program at Princeton is to train people for public service and I was drawn to it, finishing two degrees in five years. Among the people who influenced me at Princeton in those years was a classmate and friend, Sally Franks, who in our sophomore year sued the private all-male eating clubs at Princeton to open up to women and she won. Another influence was the great Foreign Service officer Charlie Hill. Between my undergraduate and graduate programs at Princeton, I did a summer internship at US Embassy Tel Aviv and my boss was Charlie Hill. He was the first Foreign Service officer I had ever met, and I stayed in touch with him later. He later taught at Yale and had one of my kids as one of his students. He passed away recently. Beautiful writer and very thoughtful person. He was the political counselor in Tel Aviv, a position I later had. That summer experience working for him influenced me to later apply to the Foreign Service.

Pre-Foreign Service Work as an Attorney, Preparation for Foreign Service

Q: When do you take the Foreign Service exam or—because you had considerable post-college education?

SILVERMAN: Yeah, first I did graduate school and law school. I spent all four years of undergraduate at Princeton studying Arabic and then entered a federal government-funded program called the Center for Arabic Studies Abroad in Cairo. Most of the people in that program go on to PhD programs and many become scholars of Arabic. In my year, 1980-81, two of us later went into the Foreign Service, Michael Gfoeller and me. Michael Gfoeller had a storied career in the Middle East. We took a seminar together at Ain Shams University that year and later served together at U.S. Embassy Riyadh where we were friends. Anyway, I had studied Arabic deeply after college for that graduate year, then returned to Princeton for my master program, and then spent three years at Michigan Law School in Ann Arbor. Remember, this is the eighties, the era of greed, and I, by the way, had a lot of debts to pay off. (Laughs)

I worked during college and helped pay for it. But I also went to law school and practiced corporate law for three years before entering the Foreign Service. Remembering my time with Charles Hill as an intern, I realized after my first year at a law firm in L.A., as much as it was fun and new and salaries were good, I knew I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. So, I applied to the Foreign Service during my second year of law practice in L.A., and got into the Foreign Service through this series of exams. I was offered a place in an entry class while in the midst of my first lead deal as a lawyer—the initial public offering of a medical devices company. I told the Board of Examiners person who called to offer me a place, “No, I'm sorry. I can't leave the deal in the middle. That would be very irresponsible. Call me back in two months.” And they said, “Oh, we're not going to call you back.” (Laughs) “This is your one and only opportunity.” (Laughs) We all have these stories, right?

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: We've all experienced something like this. The Board of Examiners guy said, “Well, Mr. Silverman, there's no guarantee of anything. Where you are on this list is pretty low, to be frank, and you know, we're not convinced you'll ever get into the Foreign Service again. This is your one and only opportunity.” And I said, “Jeez, guys, you know, you're giving me a month and a half to leave my life and I'm this small company's lawyer on its multi-million-dollar deal. Call me back in a month and a half, maybe two months when this deal closes.” And they didn't. That was in March 1988 and once the deal closed in June, I called the Board back saying, “okay, ready now,” and they repeated the same thing. “Well, huh, no promises.” I was pretty down, thinking I'd screwed up everything. But I did what I felt was right. Nevertheless, in August, they did call me back and offered me a place in a class for the next February. So, I entered in February 1989 after three and a half years of law practice and lots of years of schooling, including a year of intensive Arabic education in Cairo.

Q: At this point do you have a family? Did you get married?

SILVERMAN: No, I got married during my Foreign Service. In fact, one of my A-100 entry classmates, Rob Forden, introduced me to my future wife Young-mi.

Q: Okay. Let's now turn to some of the AFSA issues. As a new Foreign Service officer did you have any introduction to AFSA or what do you recall about your sort of first contacts with them?

AFSA Assistance to Silverman

SILVERMAN: Yes. Well, like everyone, I attended a lunch at the AFSA headquarters during the A-100 entry class. I then joined AFSA.

There were two cases where AFSA really helped me and left very positive impressions. First, when I was a political officer in Cairo in 1999, the Department denied reimbursement of kindergarten education fees for my youngest child, based on what I thought was a faulty reading of the FAM (Foreign Affairs Manual). One is supposed to be reimbursed for things that would be available at a public school in the relevant area of the U.S. (in my case, metropolitan Washington). Well, there is no uniform age for when public school kindergarten starts – in some school districts in the Washington area it starts at age 4 and in others at age 5. My child was 4 and a half. So an AFSA lawyer helped me document that my child would have been enrolled in public school kindergarten in some districts in the metropolitan Washington area. So we won the grievance and I was reimbursed for kindergarten fees.

The other case was when I entered the Senior Foreign Service in 2007 and the files of newly promoted Senior FSOs were not considered by the performance pay board.

Q: Is that performance pay?

SILVERMAN: Performance pay. We were told that in your first year as Senior Foreign Service officers you aren't eligible for performance pay. Well, for some of us that past year had been full of accomplishments, it seemed arbitrary so a bunch of us filed a cohort grievance, saying the entire group of newly promoted officers should have been considered. There's nothing in the FAM that says we shouldn't. Signing onto that cohort grievance, which I helped write with Mark Pekala of EUR fame, were Eric Rubin, the current AFSA president, and Barbara Leaf who is currently back running the Near East bureau, and we asked for reconsideration of the entire cohort. We won, a performance pay board was reconstituted to look at our files and several of us got it. AFSA was really critical to this win, especially General Counsel Sharon Papp.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: So, I'd had two very positive AFSA experiences before running to be an AFSA officer.

Q: Just take one second to explain how performance pay in the Senior Foreign Service works because that was something in general that AFSA worked with State Department management to ensure.

SILVERMAN: I think the specific system of Senior Performance Pay may have changed since 2007 when we filed this grievance. But the general theory is an annual award to recognize extraordinary performance over the year, similar to a year-end bonus in the private sector. There was at the time an escalating scale of such awards up to \$15,000, plus some performance pay awards put you at a higher step within your pay grade, so of ongoing value.

Q: And who nominates you or writes your proposal for getting performance pay, senior performance pay?

SILVERMAN: The human resources bureau at State (now called Global Talent Management) forms a review panel composed of Foreign Service members plus a public member, to review the annual performance evaluations called EERs (Employee Evaluation Reports)—it's supposed to happen during the annual review process. But after we won the grievance, HR had to reconstitute a special board to look at our files for performance pay.

Q: As you reach the Senior Foreign Service level, you mentioned that you got married and that you had a little child. Were there other aspects of family life or how State Department treats dependents, eligible family members that you saw over this—over the period of your work in the State Department that you want to highlight as something you particularly remember?

SILVERMAN: Well, yes. So, I was married during my third tour, in Baku, Azerbaijan, and my wife Young-Mi joined me for that adventure. And we had three children during our time in the Foreign Service, all raised partly overseas since most of my career was overseas, with tours in Washington in between. And it's hard on families. Each person and each family has a different threshold for this, and I think both myself and my wife were ready to move on from the Foreign Service when we did in 2016, because it was hard to get up and move, particularly as the kids got older. I had one child with some medical issues that were increasingly hard to take care of overseas, and I had to focus on that. And I'm not going to blame the Foreign Service. I was ready for something else, after twenty-seven years, largely overseas, largely in very tough places, sometimes leaving my family behind in Washington where there's no support network when you do that. And you know, I'm still happily employed, and I don't regret a day of the Foreign Service.

Q: Did your wife want to work and did the State Department at all help her in (indiscernible)?

SILVERMAN: She worked on our first tour overseas together in Baku when she volunteered to work for a humanitarian NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) and was put in charge of a refugee program of that NGO. But that program was funded by the embassy, a program I oversaw at the embassy, so it looked bad and became difficult for her to continue. My wife had a career as an investment banker before marrying me and joining a Foreign Service life. In Baku in 1992-94, there was no private sector for her to

work in. And you know, I'm just blessed, I'm lucky with a tremendously flexible and capable spouse. When I went off on unaccompanied tours in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, she took care of three young children back in Washington, where we had no family or support network. Look, these are big sacrifices, particularly for the spouse and the kids. No, she had no help from the State Department during these unaccompanied tours. Thank you for asking those questions.

Q: You've described in general your career and the few times that you were involved in AFSA in addressing work-life balance and so on. What was it that made you decide to run and become an officer in AFSA?

Motivations to Run for AFSA President

SILVERMAN: In the spring of 2013, an experienced senior Foreign Service Officer, who cared about AFSA, came to me and suggested I run in the upcoming AFSA elections for president, with a slate of other AFSA members whom we could recruit. He had talked with some others who were unhappy with the existing candidate for president.

I had positive feelings about AFSA and I was attracted to leading a team of like-minded Foreign Service members. We put together a diverse slate with plenty of prior AFSA board experience. It included Ken Kero-Mentz, the head of GLIFAA which was the gay and lesbian affinity group, Lilly Wahl-Tuco, the co-founder of Balancing Act which lobbied State to modernize work-life policies, Clayton Bond, chair of the Rangel and Pickering Fellows Association—all young Foreign Service leaders who cared deeply about the personnel issues at the heart of AFSA. We had Foreign Service specialists as well as officers on the slate, and representatives from AID and Commerce.

AFSA felt like a great way to finish a Foreign Service career—leading a group of Foreign Service colleagues and AFSA staff to make a difference in this public institution to which we had all dedicated a major portion of our lives. It sounded fun.

Q: Now, when you say a slate, obviously over time the management, the membership of AFSA is growing, and you run for a slate, how many top officials are running with you?

SILVERMAN: We had a slate of 18 candidates running for slots on a governing board totaling 25 members. That's a huge board, representing the Foreign Service employees in six different federal agencies and retirees as well as active-duty members. If you try to get decisions at board meetings, when you have twenty-five people who are all independently elected from different groups, that's an interesting phenomenon. Some experts on corporate governance would say of a 25-member governing board "Oh, my god, that's a recipe for complete inaction." But no, it can work. And particularly if you have a slate of board candidates who ran together and share a common vision, and that was our case. Our slate of candidates came out of the elections with 17 out of the 25 positions. The number two position in AFSA—the State Vice President Matthew Asada—was not on our slate but we ended up working closely and accomplishing a lot together.

My intention here is to tell the story of this board's achievements, not my personal ones, because it was a collective effort of this 25-person group supported by the AFSA staff, which I led.

Q: Right. Now, you know, speaking of this slate and the board, two quick questions. One is that at that point had AFSA, in order to run day-to-day activities, did they have an executive committee? Because typically when you have that many board members, you know, (indiscernible) member say, Okay, these are people—.

SILVERMAN: AFSA's board still doesn't have an executive committee to my knowledge. The emphasis is on inclusion of the entire Foreign Service in AFSA decision-making, so I understand the 25-member governance body. It can be unwieldy but still capable of taking tough decisions.

Q: Okay.

SILVERMAN: We did set up a governance committee of the board that looks into how to improve the governing of AFSA and it is chaired by the secretary, which is an unpaid position. I recruited an outstanding retiree, Angela Dickey, to fill a board vacancy and to become the secretary. I believe that has become a new tradition at AFSA, a prominent retiree as secretary chairs a governance committee of the 25-member board.

It's possible to work with a 25-member board, and still do great things. (Laughs) But it helped in our case that we had a super majority who came in on the same slate, yeah.

Q: Okay. That's sort of the background of your arrival in AFSA. Now, you had a strategic plan so I want to turn it over to you to begin, you arrive and what are your goals?

SILVERMAN: Thank you. Well, I just want to say at the start that service on an AFSA board, whether you're one of the representatives or one of the officers, is a great way to contribute to the Foreign Service. It was my last full tour, and I couldn't think of a better way to finish a diplomatic career.

When you work for AFSA, you represent the past, present and future of your profession. Your board has retirees (over 25 percent of AFSA members are retirees) who are the past and you work on policies that will affect the future. You're elected to do this by your present colleagues. It's a great way to give back to this wonderful career, and I felt that way from day one. It's a real privilege.

It's also, if you like to get things done, challenging. It's not just to reach consensus or take twenty-five member board, it's the nature of Foreign Service people. Naturally, they're all geniuses, right Mark?

Q: (Laughs) All walk on water.

SILVERMAN: They all walk on water. I've read all their EERs. They're perfect. They never—the only room for improvement is, you know, something completely nonsensical. (Laughs)

But the beauty of AFSA is you're out of the bureaucracy, you're now in this independent thing, you can get things done and Foreign Service people also like to get things done. So, it's up to you and your board to do specific concrete things. In addition, your staff are not Foreign Service, they're NGO workers, and so it's a great segue to other things you may want to do outside of government. It certainly helped me in subsequent jobs that I'm currently in, as well as being a feel-good thing. I super recommend it to people. I want to put that out there at the start.

AFSA was born in 1924 as a professional association. Thanks to a small group of “Young Turks” in the 1970s, many of whom were still active in our board in 2013 as retirees, it became also a labor union, with collective bargaining rights. Other organizations have this dual structure. The Screen Actors Guild—you know, they're both a union and professional association too. Now, they have a slightly better awards ceremony, but only slightly. You know, ours is in the Ben Franklin Room of the State Department, that's a pretty cool room with a great view from the balcony, but (laughs) theirs is televised, okay.

Now, when I look at achievements over the two years of our board, 2013 to 2015, I separate them into four areas. First was what many consider to be the signature achievement of the board. Second were other steps on the professional association side. Third came wins on the labor union side, and fourth, as we touched on already, were institutional advances in governance. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to quickly go through all those, and feel free to stop me.

Signature Achievement: Creating and Publicizing the Qualifications for Ambassador

The signature achievement of our two years was the “Guidelines for Successful Performance as a Chief of Mission” or the COM Guidelines for short, which state the qualifications of the professional association for becoming an ambassador or chief of mission. It's a brief four-page document found on the AFSA website (https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/flipping_book/0414/51/)

I decided that we should as a board take on one of the biggest challenges to the Foreign Service which is the growing, with every administration, numbers of political appointees and not just in the ambassador job but also in the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) and assistant secretary levels of the agencies. This growth in political appointments limits the future career paths of young Foreign Service officers and is counter-productive to American foreign policy. At the same time there have always been political appointments and also room for talented non-career appointees in foreign affairs, But we felt that this issue should be addressed head-on by the professional association, it was in our strategic plan. So in 2014 we adopted and then promoted with the media, the administration and

Congress a set of qualifications for what makes a successful chief of mission. We called them “guidelines” rather than qualifications in order to make it less prescriptive sounding. The guidelines document was drafted by a diverse group of ten ambassadors convened by AFSA and supported by an AFSA research person, a great retired Foreign Service officer named Janice Weiner. And the AFSA board adopted the COM guidelines by a super majority. I will explain why it was our signature achievement.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: First, I modeled the COM guidelines on what the ABA (American Bar Association) does on judges. Janice and I sat down and talked to the ABA in their Washington offices.

The ABA decades ago adopted a set of qualifications for what makes a successful judge and then proceeded to evaluate judicial nominees under those qualifications, making their recommendations public. That step—publicly evaluating ambassadorial nominees under AFSA Guidelines - is one for AFSA to consider at the right time. The key is to get Senate Foreign Relations Committee buy-in for the COM guidelines, just as the Senate Judiciary Committee—at least in prior times—used to take the ABA qualifications very seriously. And the media as well. If the ABA declares a judicial nominee unqualified, that garners media attention.

So we listened carefully to the ABA and how they created the judicial qualifications. Then we also visited the two ambassadorial organizations—the Academy of American Diplomacy which mainly represents career ambassadors and the Council of American Ambassadors, which mainly represents political ambassadors. We wanted their buy-in for AFSA’s initiative as well. Finally we selected a diverse group of 10 former ambassadors. It was headed by Charlie Ray, three-time ambassador, very active in AFSA and a very strong writer. Charlie wrote the first draft of the COM Guidelines but believe me there were good suggestions coming from folks like Laura Kennedy, Jim Jeffrey, who had been one of my mentors, and others in the group. By the way, we ensured the drafting committee was diverse also by the different cones within the Foreign Service. And it included several politicals who were considered successful ambassadors, one was Mike Woods, a Republican, and another was Stu Eizenstat, a Democrat.

The drafting group was composed of men, women, different minorities, different cones. But the idea was they came up with a document that laid out, and you can see it, the criteria in three large skill sets for what makes a successful chief of mission. And Charlie Ray did the first draft of it, but quite a few people amended it. Jim Jeffrey added a lot.

Q: By the way, I interviewed him in 2016 before he went back into service as the special representative for Syria.

SILVERMAN: Yeah. Amazing that he did that. He’s also just a lovely person to work with.

AFSA board approved the COM Guidelines in March 2014. I believe all of the active-duty members approved, anyway, a super majority and I recall Ken Kero-Mentz saying after the vote that this would be our signature achievement.

Our timing was excellent, because at this very time the Obama Administration had just nominated a couple of very controversial political nominees whose qualifications were questioned in the press. Leading to the question: Okay, what are the qualifications for this job? Well, here they are, the professional association has issued them. So, it got a lot of media attention. The AFSA media director, Kristen Fernekes, organized a superb media rollout of the COM guidelines—several of the drafters, Charlie Ray among them, assembled for call-in questions from the media and there were many.

I was on TV in various places and did some mainstream press interviews. Later this media helped us on a related initiative—the limitation of political appointees hired under Schedule B. And we got a White House meeting with Lisa Monaco and Ben Rhodes. They were open to meeting with us about the COM guidelines.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: In short, we got this chief of mission qualifications approved at a time when it was very relevant in the public and it remains relevant, of course, and it's up to AFSA to continue to use them.

We got one concrete thing done as a result of this initiative, which is having the Certificates of Competency for Nominees to be Chiefs of Mission made public. You may not know about these certificates.

Q: No, I do not. It's a little higher than my pay grade. But go ahead, yes.

SILVERMAN: Well, neither had I before starting this initiative. But concerns with ambassadorial qualifications is not a new issue and years ago Congress amended the Foreign Service Act of 1980 to require the State Department to provide to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a Certificate of Competency for each nominee for chief of mission. However, the Department never used to publicize these certificates, they were not public documents. For good reason, because some of them stated ridiculous things as qualifications, really creative things, like service on a PTA (Parent Teacher Association) as evidence of relevant leadership, for some donor nominees. So we pressed State and the White House to have them publicly released and put on the State website, as a transparency measure and as part of AFSA's release of COM guidelines.

Q: Mm-hm.

SILVERMAN: We also requested the Certificates of Competency for existing nominees under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). State delayed that request so we went to the press. As the saying goes, sunshine is the best disinfectant. We pushed for transparency of nominees' qualifications. State did comply with our FOIA requests and

also agreed going forward to make these certificates public—now they are available for anyone to see on the State website.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: So it is up to AFSA and also the media to take a look at ambassadorial nominees' qualifications as presented by the State Department. And perhaps review them under the COM Guidelines. I think if the Senate Foreign Relations Committee could buy into such a process—reviewing individual nominees' qualifications under the AFSA guidelines—it could provide a credible way of fixing the broken confirmation process. It would also be a principled way of reducing unqualified nominees, many of whom just happen to be major bundlers of donations to presidential campaigns (though the Foreign Service Act explicitly says donations shall not be considered a qualification for such positions). If they lack background in the skills sets identified by AFSA for this job: consider them unqualified.

Now, let me also describe in fairness the opposition to the COM Guidelines that came from a few members of the Board, they were retiree members, two of whom were former ambassadors and all were important leaders within AFSA. Their point was that the Foreign Service Act of 1980 provided all the guidance needed and AFSA should simply oppose non-career nominees for these positions. Furthermore, they thought we were opening the door to saying some political ambassadors might be fine ambassadors. I recall one colorful retiree Board member pointing at me during the Board debate and said, "You will be crucified for this." (laughs). Anyway, we remained friends and worked closely on other stuff. And those in favor of the Guidelines listened carefully to their criticism.

We argued back at the board meeting that in fact the collective lived experience of the current Foreign Service was that there were some qualified political appointees and also some unqualified career appointees. The point was to lay out what those qualifications were as a public matter, as the professional association. And the Foreign Service Act of 1980 doesn't attempt to spell out qualifications—it says money isn't one, but it doesn't detail the range of skills needed.

Another criticism of the COM guidelines that came up later is that AFSA should support the traditional 70/30 percent split between career and political appointees for ambassadorships—or perhaps some other numerical split to be proposed. My response was: is there some percentage of these appointments that should go to unqualified persons? In today's world, every post has some importance and we should send only qualified persons to each and every one, whether they be career or non-career. If AFSA's guidelines are the criteria, then the great majority of these positions will go to career diplomats who naturally are the most qualified in general.

Q: And just as a quick aside it's sad because there are many other ways to reward these people besides giving them ambassadorships.

SILVERMAN: Right. Sadly, it's a corrupt practice of our country that donors and bundlers are able to get these jobs. It not only makes our country look bad in the world, it can and sometimes does hamstring our foreign policy implementation.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: So, it can't just be about percentages, which makes it seem we are fine with some corruption.

So, that was our signature achievement because we were addressing one of the biggest problems, the shutting off of career paths all the way to the top positions overseas. In sum, the COM Guidelines initiative is a principled, sensible way of addressing this problem of rewarding unqualified donors and bundlers with ambassadorships. It's a bipartisan practice and we need to continue to fight it.

Q: Here I just want to ask a general question.

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

Q: During your tenure as president and I suspect others, about 80 percent of active-duty Foreign Service officers were members and of course, you represent all regardless.

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

Q: Eighty percent is a significant amount. In referenda, like the one you conducted among members, roughly what percent actually replied? Do you get a majority of Foreign Service officers to reply?

SILVERMAN: Ah. Well, the COM Guidelines was not put to a referendum, that's only required for amendments to the AFSA by-laws I believe. It was a policy decision voted on by our twenty-five-member board.

When I said it was super majority, I meant of the twenty-five-member board.

Q: I see, okay.

So, now let's return to your strategic plan.

Promoting the Profession and Professional Development

SILVERMAN: Right.

There were four other achievements on the professional association side, things that enhance the profession of diplomacy. First, we started a daily media digest. Retiree board member Tex Harris suggested early on to me, "You should do a daily media digest for AFSA that goes to all members and only to members." I said, "You know what, that's a

good idea.” We started it and AFSA’s daily media digest remains a key member benefit. I don’t know if you get it. I read it every morning.

Q: Yeah, sure.

SILVERMAN: Well, that was a Tex Harris idea that Asgeir Sigurfusson, then media director and now executive director, implemented with his usual adeptness.

Q: Each one—take just one second to indicate the kinds of things that are in the media digest.

SILVERMAN: Yeah. So, it’s a daily digest of a wide array of foreign policy-related news, from reporting to op-eds and podcasts.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: Second was an idea of my predecessor Susan Johnson. She said, “Bob, the ninetieth anniversary of the Foreign Service is coming up, 2014, and you ought to do a big party.” That was a great idea. So, AFSA did. Board member Lilly Wahl-Tuco chaired our organizing committee. We held a dinner at the Ben Franklin Room on the eighth floor of State, with hundreds of people, and a lot of things were attached to it to celebrate in May 2014 the ninetieth anniversary of the Foreign Service.

We introduced both the oldest member of the Foreign Service—career ambassador Joan Clark, born in 1922 so two years older than the modern Foreign Service, and the youngest recruit from A-100. We had many greats of the Foreign Service and tables of junior officers. The M.C. (Master of Ceremonies) for the event was the journalist Andrea Mitchell.

John Kerry spoke as did the long-time chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Lugar. The AFSA staff director Ian Houston puts together inspirational videos as a hobby, and he made a video documentary of the Foreign Service which was wonderful. Finally, we did some media around the dinner and the whole 90th anniversary event was a highlight of the two-year board.

The third thing on the professional side was emphasizing the AFSA awards. Again, we’re never going to be the Oscars. (Laughs) But the awards ceremony for a professional association should be really cool and a highlight of the profession’s year. I encouraged people to nominate colleagues and expanded the awards.

Q: Ah, yeah.

SILVERMAN: Yes, the family of the late Foreign Service Officer Mark Palmer endowed a new award for the advancement of democracy. I spoke with his spouse about Mark, who had been a very effective ambassador in Hungary when the Wall came down. We revived old awards that hadn’t been done for years, especially the AFSA achievement

award, which is for things done for the association. There had been a lapse of nominations in recent years, but we changed that.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: You have to encourage people to nominate colleagues. Same with the constructive dissent awards. So I jawboned people, spoke to groups at State and highlighted stories from award nominations in Foreign Service Journal columns. We had a good awards committee, but they're only as good as the nominations that come in. So, someone needed to encourage on the supply side. (Laughs) So, I did a bunch of that. State Department has some tools for cool ceremonies—the Ben Franklin Room, maybe the best venue in the federal government, so you've got to use them. So, we expanded the AFSA awards.

Fourth, I started some new relationships for AFSA. For instance, I reached out to USIP (United States Institute of Peace). Now, USIP has many functions, and at that time it had a high school essay contest for the best essay in the country on foreign affairs, just like AFSA does. I learned from Bill Taylor, then its executive vice president, that USIP's long-time staffer on their essay contest was leaving so I suggested that we join forces and do one together. I knew Bill from Iraq. When I left AFSA in 2015, USIP and AFSA were in the process of agreeing to join the two high school essay contests into one based in AFSA that USIP would be part of. We had a very strong staffer doing this, Perri Green, who recently retired. Perri and I met with USIP and started the transition that was finalized under my successor. Giving up any program is hard for an institution to do but Perri's energy made it easier for USIP to agree to turn it over to her. Today the high school contest has joint USIP-AFSA branding, administered by AFSA.

Supporting the Foreign Service in Labor-Management Negotiations

SILVERMAN: Moving to the union side, I was fortunate to have an administration that was willing to engage on sensitive issues.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: The official collective bargaining occurred in regular meetings with the HR bureaus of our different agencies. At State, this meeting had AFSA Vice President Matthew Asada, with our lawyers and me on one side, and on the other was the director general or more frequently the principal deputy assistant secretary of HR together with other deputies and HR staff. We had similar regular meetings at USAID and Commerce.

In addition, I made sure we had back channels to senior decision-makers, especially at State and USAID. I had a strong and good relationship with both of John Kerry's chiefs-of-staff, David Wade and then Jon Finer, with the deputy secretary for management and resources Heather Higginbottom and with Deputy Secretary Bill Burn and their staffs, who included Foreign Service personnel.

Matthew Asada and I frequently met with Pat Kennedy, the undersecretary for management at State, a superb Foreign Service officer who had returned to government on a political appointment and really ran the personnel side of foreign affairs in those years. His chief-of-staff was Kathleen Austin-Ferguson, who had been head of NEA (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs) management office when I served in that bureau. So we were friends.

AFSA is like any other Foreign Service assignment in that one has to learn and influence both the formal and informal channels to the other side's decision-making. It's the same whether you are in Kazakhstan or Foggy Bottom.

Q: Sure, sure.

SILVERMAN: One has to just turn those diplomatic skills on the State Department.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: So, and here are the achievements on the union side.

First, limitation on Schedule B appointments. You know what Schedule C appointments are, right Mark?

Q: Yes. Those are political appointees—

SILVERMAN: Correct.

Yes. There are hiring schedules for bringing in employees to the federal government. Schedule C are the rules for hiring political appointees by an administration. OPM (United States Office of Personnel Management) negotiates for the entire federal government with each agency. In the Obama administration, OPM had fixed with State that Schedule C appointments would be no more than 125 positions at any one time.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: But the Obama administration had a lot more people who wanted a job at State. Look, every administration has this. So, they started using a different schedule to get more political hires. It's called Schedule B. Now if you go to the OPM website and read about Schedule B, it says these are supposed to be "scientific, professional and technical positions" for no more than four years, and only up to GS-15 so not senior positions.

Who are Schedule B hires supposed to be? Say you're doing nuclear negotiations with Russia and your delegation needs a nuclear physicist for the term of the negotiation, or say you're doing a visit to Kyrgyzstan and you need a Kyrgyz interpreter for the visit. Schedule B allows your agency to go out and hire quickly a nuclear physicist or a Kyrgyz interpreter without going through the complex Civil Service hiring procedures. That's

what it's intended for. And, this is very important, the hiring authority says Schedule Bs should not be supervising other employees. They're technical advisors.

Well (laughs), the State Department in my time, the second Obama administration, started hiring politicals under Schedule B - including as Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State (DAS) - because they had run out of Schedule C slots. The Department amended its Schedule B hiring authority to say that while Schedule Bs could not supervise others, there was an exception for Schedule Bs as DASes. At one point, there were over 100 Schedule Bs at State, including many in DAS positions. In one case a person hired under Schedule B authority was the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Energy.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: Like any abuse of the rules, this practice wasn't transparent or easy to discover. A staffer friend had tipped me off to the practice. But to grasp the contours of the problem—the numbers and positions in which Schedule B hires were placed—we asked HR for many months and they delayed. We persisted and eventually got the information.

So, after finding out the numbers of Schedule B hires, I asked for a meeting with Jon Finer, Kerry's chief of staff and his deputy Jennifer Stout. I told them, "We at AFSA are going to write a letter to OPM noting the abuses of this hiring system here and ask OPM to withdraw Schedule B hiring authority from State. These abuses are negatively affecting the career paths of our Foreign Service members. The availability of DAS positions has been dramatically limited because State has hired dozens of DASes using Schedule B authority." We actually at one point drafted a letter to OPM, which I cleared with AFSA legal, and showed the draft to Jon Finer and Pat Kennedy, saying this is what we're going to send to OPM and it's also going into the newspapers. I did give one media interview referring to this issue to let them know I was serious.

At the time, I was warned by Kerry's chief of staff Jon Finer that there will be negative consequences to me. But I ignored that and we got movement. It had to be kept quiet, but I briefed the Board which approved the agreement. State agreed to a numerical reduction on Schedule Bs and not replacing those who left, and no more DASes. You know, we cut out the exceptions so you couldn't be supervising as a Schedule B hire. We asked them to return the hiring to scientific and technical advisors, skill sets that don't exist within the agency that you have to go out and quickly bring in. That was the original intent of this category of hire. It's a useful thing to have, but not if you're abusing it to bring in people to run the State Department.

So, what happened is the number of DAS positions available to career people grew in the last two years of the Obama administration—as Schedule B people left, they couldn't backfill with new politicals per our agreement. They actually did reduce the numbers, and amended the Schedule B hiring authority so they could not be supervisors going forward. So, we got some control over the Schedule B hiring, a good thing.

Q: Mm-hm. Let me ask you a quick question here.

SILVERMAN: Yes.

Q: It's all the things you've been doing, professionalization and so on, and you know, when you go up against major management officials and so on, did you have to deal with retaliation?

SILVERMAN: I did. I'll give you an example. I was driving home one night. It was something like 7:30. I'm in my car and I get a call from the Ops Center, saying, "Do you have time to talk to Jon Finer?" I said, "Yeah." He got on the line, he was pissed and gave it to me on the phone. He was Kerry's chief-of-staff, and a former *Washington Post* journalist. And I had a good relationship with him, which is why he called me directly. I had just publicly criticized State management in a media interview, citing the Schedule B abuse. I must have said it was a corrupt practice. Again, this was one of the few tools I had to get movement, which I eventually did. Anyway, Finer calls and says, "There are going to be consequences for you personally on this."

Q: Wow.

SILVERMAN: Yep.

Q: Yeah. And for—

SILVERMAN: So yeah, there were instances of retaliation. But you know what? I don't hold grudges and I'll go into all that at the end if you don't mind before I finish all the great achievements of our board.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: I was in a sweet spot because I wasn't seeking another big job from State for personal reasons. I was just trying to have a great tour in AFSA. I was going to try to work with them because that's the way you get things done, but if I needed to, I was not going to hesitate to call them out in public, embarrass them if I felt that I could get something done on a major issue like Schedule Bs, which we did.

Okay. A couple of other achievements on the union side. First, my predecessor Susan Johnson gave us very good leverage with the Department. In her last months as president, she had written a very strong *Washington Post* op-ed and in reaction a bunch of senior supervisors at State had denounced her and AFSA in writing. Well, Susan can tell that story, but AFSA had filed a grievance against the State Department. These were all management people, you know, who were expressing ill will towards the labor union. So, our board inherited that grievance and we evaluated it with both in-house and outside lawyers. We settled it in exchange for a couple things from the Department. FSI (Foreign Service Institute) was required to teach a course for newly promoted supervisors on management-labor relations. If you're going to be a supervisor in the Foreign Service,

you should understand how to interact with a labor union. Second, the Department agreed to an annual joint AFSA-State cable to all personnel, explaining what labor-management relations are. So, we negotiated that.

Q: Mmm. Interesting.

SILVERMAN: Okay. A second thing on the union side was a signature achievement of the State VP, Matthew Asada, regarding restoration of meritorious step increases. This is the monetary component of annual review bonuses for a large group of people. It's a runner-up award for those who were not promoted to a higher grade but who nevertheless were recognized as qualified for promotion by the boards. And these monetary bonuses were denied in our time in AFSA. Matthew worked with our lawyers to grieve that, and it took years to get a positive resolution, but Matthew's successor, Angie Bryan, took the baton and AFSA ended up winning that.

Other things on the union side. We did an SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) with State that memorialized what the attorney-client privilege rights were for our attorneys. Apparently, HR had sought to see emails between AFSA's legal team and our members, and we said, No, you can't see those emails, that's an attorney-client privilege. We won on that. And that is a heavy battle, legal argument that again, the credit for that goes to General Counsel Sharon Papp.

Another one is the decision of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) during our time to start recording interviews with people without permission. Before you always had to get signed permission to record an interview and DS decided, No, we don't need that anymore. And I went to Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns but Bill sided with DS. But we did negotiate with HR, I generated enough pushback that we were able to secure safeguards on these recordings that preserved the employee's privacy rights.

Q: And I'm sorry, and these interviews, are these for security reasons?

SILVERMAN: Yeah, for instance DS conducts regular suitability interviews with every employee every five years, asking questions like have you ever been arrested and the like. We've all been through those.

Institutional Support of AFSA

Finally, the fourth category of achievement—advancing AFSA as an institution. I focused a lot on supporting the work of the labor management team, the lawyers. I think they are the core value proposition. What are AFSA's active-duty members getting for their dues? I think the real value proposition is the lawyers because you can save yourself a lot of money if you ever get into trouble. I mentioned the two times I went to the lawyers; it saved me tens of thousands of dollars and it was a very positive experience. They're very professional. So, the biggest gems in the AFSA crown are Sharon Papp and her team. And so, I gave a lot of encouragement to them. They make institutional change in the common-law tradition, which is case by case. You build up the architecture of rights case

by case, through individual cases, and that's how they work. I liked to drop by the labor-management office at State and encourage them, they were dealing with some of the toughest cases, you know.

Q: I need to stop here, but I do have some other questions. I wonder if you'd agree to one more session.

SILVERMAN: Of course Mark, I'm at your disposal.

Q: Today is July 29, 2022. This is our second session with Robert Silverman related to his presidency in AFSA.

Robert, yesterday you went over the four strategic goals that you oversaw in AFSA during your tenure, but there were several other things that you also accomplished with the board and with the governing board. How would you like to start with those issues?

AFSA and the Second Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR)

SILVERMAN: Sure. Thank you, Mark. I just wanted to highlight a few of the other issues that were significant. One of them, with the acronym of QDDR, was the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review. This falls in the category of damage control (Laughs). You know, it wasn't a sparkling, positive achievement, but we prevented damage, if I could say.

Here's the background. The military has a QDR, a Quadrennial Defense Review. So, Secretary Clinton borrowed this four-year planning tool from the Pentagon and inaugurated in 2010 the QDDR, the four-year strategic plan for the State Department and USAID. If you look at this 2010 QDDR it almost doesn't mention the word Foreign Service; it diminished the Foreign Service. I'll give you one concrete example. The QDDR of 2010 introduced the Civil Service overseas development program that cherry-picked twenty overseas mid-level reporting positions, taking them out of the Foreign Service and giving them for one rotation at least, sometimes more than one rotation, to deserving civil servants. But taking them out of the Foreign Service at a time when the Foreign Service was already experiencing a deficit of good mid-level policy jobs that could help develop our future leaders.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: When I came into the AFSA job in 2013, HR was seeking to double this Civil Service development program from twenty to forty positions. And they were seeking positions that were highly bid by Foreign Service officers. They weren't taking out, you know, GSO (General Service Officer) in Ouagadougou. Instead, they wanted for example the Iran watch position at U.S. Embassy London. So we took this doubling of an existing program to official binding arbitration—grievance—and won. We aren't opposed

to Civil Service personnel developing skills but it shouldn't come at the expense of Foreign Service personnel. So we stopped the expansion, but the original program we inherited from the 2010 QDDR remained.

When Secretary Kerry wanted to do a second QDDR in 2014, we said, Okay, we're going to engage on this. We're not going to wait and see what happens because its projects often come at our expense.

So, we launched AFSA's engagement with the State Department's QDDR office, by offering them concrete ideas. We convened six working groups, all staffed by volunteer AFSA members. We sought positive input into the QDDR process. And we came up with some excellent projects. One was on technology, to modernize our platforms, led by information technology members. Others focused on public diplomacy; economic and development policy, how to better integrate that into our overall strategic planning; and on career paths at State. We wanted to make sure that today's junior officers had career paths all the way through a successful Foreign Service path. A fifth group was on security led by DS (Diplomatic Security) members of AFSA. And the sixth sought to reform the special envoy function at State.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

SILVERMAN: There was a widespread view that special envoys were an overused and often counterproductive feature.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: You know, you have an assistant secretary for Africa, the four or five special envoys working on specific aspects of Africa policy sometimes not coordinating well with the Africa bureau and with duplicative staffs. And the number of such special envoys under the Obama Administration had reached a high point at the time, something like 80 in total.

Q: Yeah, yeah, extraordinary.

SILVERMAN: Extraordinary. AFSA had some senior folks who had been special envoys, who knew the value of the role, but we all agreed that it needed to be reformed. So, this working group developed four categories of special envoys. First were a very small number that were congressionally mandated, like the special envoy for antisemitism. Second were special envoy positions that already reported to regional assistant secretaries or should be placed under regional assistant secretaries to ensure coordination.

Q: Sure. Yeah.

SILVERMAN: The third category were a very few positions that should remain as direct reports to the Secretary or Deputy Secretary of State, because of a high-profile policy issue that didn't fit under a regional bureau. And fourth were the many special envoy

positions and their staffs that should be eliminated and their work folded back into the bureaus and also into the missions overseas.

So, the working group went through all of the special envoys using a four-part analysis and gave it to the QDDR office. What happened? Not much, frankly. Secretary Kerry was less interested in the management side of State than Secretary Clinton had been.

Q: Just—could you—

SILVERMAN: But I can tell you there was nothing negative for the Foreign Service in the 2014 QDDR and in fact a few positives. It was a win-win. We got people engaged, hosted meetings, provided coffee and donuts to officers who sat down and drafted interesting papers.

The QDDR office was headed by a smart pol, a former Democratic congressman from Virginia, Tom Periello. But he didn't stick around to see implementation, which was what we always advised him, you need to stick around, not just draft a document that gets published and put on the State Department website. Guess where he went after the QDDR office published its paper?

Q: I have some ideas but go ahead.

SILVERMAN: He was appointed to be the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa, at least it wasn't one of the special envoys the AFSA paper designated for closure. (Laughs)

Q: Right. (Laughs)

Mm-hm. Just one question. Because you mentioned the use of civil servants to go out to mid-level posts—

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

Q: —at one of my posts we had one.

SILVERMAN: Okay.

Q: He didn't last very long, mostly for health reasons. This was an unhealthy post. But separately the big problem people in the field, you know, diplomats in the field found with civil servants taking jobs is that they're perfectly good at analysis, but they have no other skills.

SILVERMAN: Right.

Q: They can't go out and make contacts, they're not used to that.

SILVERMAN: Right.

Q: They're also not used to the hierarchy and how to work within an embassy. You know, they have heard of it, you know, they've sent telegrams and emails and so on, but they've never actually worked in one. Often there is a very difficult ramp up for them, just going overseas, and you know, figuring out how you get housing and all of the basics. But there's a larger question—

SILVERMAN: I couldn't agree more. But by the way, HR thought the Civil Service overseas development program was great, it was a way to advance the "one workforce" motto, that there's no difference between Foreign Service and Civil Service, a seductively positive sounding slogan. But the reality is that they were making a zero sum situation between the Foreign Service and Civil Service.

Q: Yeah. The other question or the other notation I would make is that all the way up to ambassadors, and they would talk about this publicly in, you know, meetings, country team meetings, it begins to eliminate the difference between Foreign Service and Civil Service which means a loss of morale, a loss of a sense of being a corps and you know, basically, you know, as you said, losing slots, which is poison to Foreign Service officers who seek better professionalization by going to these different posts and increasing their substantive knowledge, increasing their ability for intercultural communications and so on and so on. It doesn't look like that's getting any better.

SILVERMAN: So this is an example of why we had to engage on the new QDDR because it could have led to further deterioration.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: But to continue with the example of the Iran Watch position in London: the Foreign Service is where practical knowledge of Iran will develop through these mid-level jobs. HR planned to remove from the Foreign Service the one reward post for an Iran watcher. If you're a budding Iran expert, if you have studied Farsi and have served in Dushanbe and Baku and a few other places where such positions are available, going to London to work directly with the British foreign office on Iran policy and follow the Iranian community in London is a great mid-level job.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: And to take that out of the system, you know, was a morale drop for people training to be our experts on Iran. So, yeah, we fought it and won. But there are proactive ways of preventing these things through engagement. Let them react to your ideas rather than you always playing defense always with their ideas. We gave them ideas they could react to.

Q: Sure, sure.

All right, so that was the QDDR and how AFSA can take the initiative for both professionalization and protecting the interests of Foreign Service officers. But there are other issues as well.

Outreach to Congress

SILVERMAN: Yeah. Let me mention another because in the outreach program area there's huge room to grow for AFSA. One priority area for outreach is Congress. We need more advocates for the Foreign Service in Congress. We have several with deep personal ties to the Foreign Service. You still have this senator from Maryland, Senator Chris Van Hollen, who's the son of a Foreign Service officer and a career civil servant. His mother, the civil servant, was the more famous of the two. She was the Afghanistan expert in State's intelligence and research bureau who predicted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Her son, Senator Van Hollen, was actually born in Karachi in the Foreign Service.

Another go-to person in Congress is Senator Sheldon Whitehouse from Rhode Island. Both his father and grandfather were career diplomats and his father was a president of AFSA. And his first cousin is a famous Foreign Service officer named Robert Blake, a friend of mine from a tour in Tunisia.

Anyway, Senators Whitehouse and Van Hollen advised me at that time not to try to create a Foreign Service caucus in Congress because there are dozens of inactive caucuses and having a caucus doesn't by itself do anything. But to engage Congress regularly.

So, we planned to host one major reception on the Hill at least twice per year based around various themes. In spring of 2014, in March, during Women's History Month we had a big reception in honor of women in the Foreign Service, with speakers including three or four women ambassadors. One was Barbara Stephenson, who later succeeded me. And she is a very effective speaker on behalf of the Foreign Service. And we had a dozen members of Congress, including Republican Senator Tim Scott from South Carolina. Important to have strong bipartisan support.

In another reception, I recall we had Congresswoman Barbara Lee from California as the M.C. So, we put a lot of energy into the Hill and that also helps you get the administration's attention.

Q: Absolutely.

SILVERMAN: State VP Matthew Asada and I had regular meetings with the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee initially to brief them on the COM Guidelines, which they appreciated as a useful tool to help vet nominees, and to support the career nominees. We also met them to help expedite the confirmation of Foreign Service promotion lists. I developed a close relationship with staff director Les Munson and we remain friends, though we have both moved on to new fields.

Another example, in my time as AFSA president we invited returnees from the civil war in Yemen to brief members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The Embassy Sanaa returnees had had some rough experiences. So we hosted a meeting at AFSA where members of Congress could hear firsthand about that conflict and about service in war zones, including the problem of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Two House members came.

Another outreach program that we started was a lunch for ambassadors during the annual chief of missions' conference. We invited all the ambassadors to AFSA to hear the AFSA view of personnel issues and we always got somewhere upwards of fifty ambassadors to attend, including political ones, to come and listen and engage with us.

So, there's much more that can be done on outreach, but I just wanted to say that I put some thought into it. I focused on things that directly impact our members, which include visiting and supporting AFSA chapters outside the Beltway.

Quality-of-Life Issues

Q: All of that is good. I'm looking at your accomplishments in benefits and quality of life, in work life.

SILVERMAN: Yes.

Q: The one that sticks out for me, which I think was absolutely fantastic, is the voluntary leave bank—

SILVERMAN: Yes.

Q: —where people who have a great deal of annual leave built up may donate it to people who need it who, you know, either for illness or family reasons or whatever—

SILVERMAN: Yes.

Q: —have basically run out of their annual leave.

SILVERMAN: Yes. Look, Foreign Service members are so generous of heart that once we established that—and by the way, it had to be negotiated with HR—

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: —because it's of course, something run by the State Department. And this was a case where HR did play ball with us, agreed with it, set it up for us, and it was really—we had people on our board who deserve the credit for this, especially Lilly Wahl-Tuco. She represented the Balancing Act group of mainly young members who wanted more transparency and fairness in access to State Department day-care facilities for their kids, among other issues.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: I think that volunteer bank was Lilly's idea that Matthew and I helped to implement. And again, behind her were a lot of people that were feeding good ideas to her.

Q: This is a small one, but people will not realize how important it is, installing employee showers.

SILVERMAN: Yes. (Laughs) Yes. Yes. I mean, this sounds silly, but one of the things I remember from my time, and I give State VP Matthew Asada credit for this. We lobbied for putting showers in a couple of State office buildings, a couple times. (Laughs)

Q: Right. Yeah.

SILVERMAN: You know, one is in that building across the street from main State, which is the DS building.

Q: Mm-hm.

SILVERMAN: Matthew Asada pushed the Capital Bikeshare program to be available at State. You know, if you're going to have the bike share but not have showers well, you know.

Q: Exactly.

SILVERMAN: So, no, Matthew Asada and I did a couple of inaugurations of shower stalls.

Q: And I don't know if it happened abroad, but for Foreign Service officers who work all day and then have to go to national day receptions or embassy receptions, simply to have showers available so that they can have a clean pair of clothes because they're going to be working another two or three hours for the reception makes a huge difference. You know, you can at least go feeling fresh and ready a second time for another smaller work assignment.

Assignment Restrictions; Equality for LGBTQ Members of the Foreign Service

SILVERMAN: Can I mention another one, a more sensitive one? Matthew Asada took the lead on it, and I supported him, was the—review of assignment restriction and preclusion programs that DS manages.

Q: Ugh. Yeah.

SILVERMAN: And we were the first board to do that I believe. Now, it's an ongoing issue that other boards have taken up, often successfully.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: I wrote about it in my column in the Foreign Service Journal. The only way to understand some of these assignment restrictions and preclusions is as bigoted practices that the State Department has indulged in over the years. I mean, let's go back in history. When I started at the Foreign Service you could not be openly gay. You would lose your security clearance because the working assumption, never proven, was that you were somehow especially vulnerable to blackmail if you were gay.

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: And so, people lost their jobs as a result. This wasn't a theoretical thing. And we're not talking about the seventies here; we're talking about the nineties.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: There are other preclusions that are ongoing. But AFSA has the ability to ask questions and challenge both restrictions and preclusions that aren't based on factual vulnerabilities in individual cases, that are overbroad.

And another initiative was led by another Foreign Service officer on our team, Ken Kero-Mentz. We negotiated with State so that gay spouses were treated the same as heterosexual spouses for the first time.

Q: Mm-hm.

SILVERMAN: We're talking 2013. At that time gay spouses of Foreign Service members serving overseas were treated quite differently than other spouses. They weren't entitled to the same benefits. But you know, we pointed out that this was after the Supreme Court had supported the marriage equality provisions of our law. So, State Department needed to now accord with the law and so we were on very firm grounds to insist on changes to the FAM and we did.

Q: One quick remark about this. What I found in talking to people who had security clearance problems not related to a security infraction or a security violation, but questions about maybe marriage to a foreigner or so on.

SILVERMAN: Right.

Q: They get their security clearance suspended and then they stay in suspension, sometimes for years.

SILVERMAN: Yeah.

Q: And you know, with no explanation and no indication that their clearance will ever be returned.

SILVERMAN: Right.

Q: Or, you know, that there is any settlement of their case at all.

SILVERMAN: Right.

Q: And you know, this has increased over the years.

SILVERMAN: Yes. Mark, you're citing a good reason why people need to be AFSA members because AFSA lawyers, Sharon Papp and her team, are the experts in this area of law and they win cases. This is the common-law way of reform. You do it case by case. Now, you also have to engage in systemic change too, but individual cases need to be brought and won. Sometimes in the past the rationale might be based in societal prejudices. I cite the denial of security clearance for gay persons because now we recognize well, wait a minute, what was that based on? Was there any real proof that gays are somehow more vulnerable to blackmail by foreign intelligence? No, there isn't.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: Especially in recent decades. AFSA has to be the one to take this on, both individual cases through the legal team and systemically through labor-management collective bargaining. And it's not easy because often classified information is involved. But the issues are being addressed by AFSA. Let me just cite one other group—Asian Americans—where AFSA was successful starting in my time and later in challenging certain assignment restrictions. I recall three of us in AFSA in negotiations with 20 or more people on the other side.

Political vs. Career Positions: Ambassador and Assistant Secretary Trackers

Q: Now, a real accomplishment that I'd like you to talk about are the two trackers, assistant secretary and ambassador.

SILVERMAN: Thank you. Well, the ambassador tracker was started well before my time in AFSA. It's valuable because the media uses it and cites it when considering an administration's appointment record in foreign affairs, contrasting numbers of career vs. political appointments. The chief of mission guidelines initiative, which garnered media, helped publicize the ambassador tracker—we cited the AFSA tracker to stress the concerns, which drew media to it.

I credit Asgeir Sigfússon, now our executive director at AFSA, for ensuring that the ambassador tracker became an authoritative tool for the media. The ambassador tracker is one of the most widely visited parts of our website.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: We expanded tracking of career vs political appointments to include an assistant secretary tracker. The concern with limiting career officers is not just about overseas positions. The idea is that Foreign Service expertise should play a key role in domestic policymaking as well as overseas implementation. I wrote a Foreign Service Journal column called “How to Find the Next Bill Burns.” He was in the process of retiring then as deputy secretary of state. He’d been my direct boss earlier in my career and a mentor to many of us. But his retirement raised the question about nurturing future talent of his ilk. and

The key is to make sure that there is a career path for our most talented people all the way up to assistant secretary of state and beyond. As for embassies, the key is not just percentages but the availability of the most important ones that are stepping stones to top policy jobs—Russia, Germany, Israel, India, Korea, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico. Bill had been both ambassador to Russia and Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, for instance.

In short, we wanted an assistant secretary tracker because there was a trend away from the career people there, both Foreign Service and Civil Service because traditionally at State, assistant secretary is also part of the Civil Service career. Traditionally of the twenty-some assistant secretaries of state a couple were held by civil servants and most were Foreign Service. This is one where we shared an interest with the Civil Service. So, we started tracking that, how much were Foreign Service, how many Civil Service, how many political appointees.

Other Public Outreach: Diplomacy Museum and Story Telling

Q: Another question I had and it’s not so much outreach as leveraging your approaches and requests, are working with sister organizations and how that played during your tenure.

SILVERMAN: Well, the Foreign Service needs allies in order to be effective in outreach. We need to be honest with ourselves. We have a very mixed reputation in the public.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: So, we need more allies out there. And that was the impetus, that was the motivation for instance to reach out to USIP to explore joint programs, or reach out to the American Academy of Diplomacy and others to help promote the Chief of Mission Guidelines.

We should be able to tell stories that attract and inform. You know, Foreign Service is—it’s a hard career, but it’s full of amazing stories, and so we need to do, all of us, a

better job of telling those stories in public. And you know, this is an area which, looking back I probably should have spent more time than I did.

One thing we did on this front is support Bill Harrop, a former AFSA president and lovely man, who was one of the fundraisers for the Diplomacy Center. In 2013, this museum to American diplomacy was just a concept that people were raising money for, but they already had developed some exhibits. We realized we needed to engage. So, as part of that, the board agreed to make a donation to the U.S. Diplomacy Center and would be involved in the planning process of their content so that, you know, obviously the Foreign Service would be front and center of the future Diplomacy Center, which many thousands of visitors to Washington would see.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: So the board saw merit in a contribution, which was agreed to at the end of our board's tenure. But I'm not sure where AFSA and the Foreign Service stand in the museum more recently. I moved to New York City to take up a new job directly after leaving the Foreign Service.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: I don't know—have you been to that museum?

Q: Not yet. It seems that every time I examine the possibility, they're changing exhibits or they're, you know, temporarily closed for some reason. But I will get there.

SILVERMAN: Well, and not just because I'm on the line with you, but I want to put in a word about another ally, ADST. Those online oral histories are a huge treasure trove and people use it. An academic friend, Martin Kramer, told me he uses ADST for his research. He's writing a book on Middle Eastern ambassadors in Washington. So, the oral histories are important and during my time we gave the top AFSA award to their creator Stu Kennedy.

Q: Yeah, exactly. That—

SILVERMAN: I loved it. He was such a lovely guy.

Q: Oh, yeah.

SILVERMAN: He was the first, like, I think, non-big-time ambassador to get that award.

Q: Correct.

SILVERMAN: I was thrilled. It was the AFSA awards committee that decided but I was super privileged to be the one to honor Stu on stage.

Q: Yeah. And another reason that it was wonderful that he got it is he was a career consular officer. And often they go unmentioned, you know.

SILVERMAN: Absolutely right.

Q: Mm-hm. Now, I have exhausted the questions I wanted to ask you.

Jews in the Foreign Service

SILVERMAN: I would like to raise one other issue just briefly.

Q: Please do.

SILVERMAN: This is one that rarely gets talked about and I don't want to overemphasize it, but I was the first Jewish president of AFSA. You know, now we have Eric Rubin, the second one. The Foreign Service is a reflection of American society, and there was an older time when the Service was exclusionary towards Jews as well as African Americans, women, and other minorities. And that's not ancient history. AFSA, as I mentioned at the beginning, represents the past, the present, and the future of American diplomacy and the past is still with us.

Q: Yes.

SILVERMAN: Today the State Department is quite different and in fact the three top political appointees are Jewish: we have Anthony Blinken, Wendy Sherman, Victoria Nuland. But early in my career, the Foreign Service still exercised restrictions on where Jews could serve.

Q: As such.

SILVERMAN: For instance, in 1989, when I was going out to Jerusalem as a consular and political officer on my first tour focused on working with Palestinians in the West Bank, an older officer who was Jewish came to me. He was about to retire after a long and good career in the Foreign Service, and earlier he had bid on jobs in the Arab world. And he was told by his career development officer in HR, "Sir, there will be a day when Jews can serve in those places, but that day is not today."

There were restrictions based on American perceptions that certain types of people wouldn't be effective in certain places because of their ethnicity or gender or sexual preference.

Q: Sure.

SILVERMAN: I just want to note that that's something that didn't affect me at all in my career, But it's something in the immediate past of the Foreign Service that AFSA has been able to address.

Mark, if it's okay with you, I would like to finish on the same thought with which I started, which is that I can't think of a better way to end a Foreign Service career than service in AFSA, whether it's running for one of the elected positions, or volunteering to do stuff. Because it's a really feel-good thing, doing something for the Foreign Service outside of the governmental bureaucracy.

Recommendations for the Future of American Diplomacy

Q: Now, actually, typically I do end interviews with the blue sky question. If you were to advise AFSA now about additional things or changing things, what would you recommend?

SILVERMAN: In one or two sentences, what I would say is: "Don't be afraid to advocate for big changes because the Foreign Service does need to make big changes to stay relevant."

Q: Yeah.

SILVERMAN: We need bold, creative leaders who take interest in the personnel and management side of the foreign affairs agencies, not solely in the foreign policy side.

The two changes that I would recommend, in brief, are first, to return to the core strength of the Foreign Service—which is deep but practical understanding of foreign countries and peoples. This is a different kind of expertise than what one gains from the academy or non-governmental sector. Its expertise focused on how to influence foreign governments and societies to work with us in advancing shared interests. Double down on core strength and remind the American public of what we are truly good at. And second, it's time to belatedly elevate economic diplomacy not as a rhetorical matter but as the centerpiece of our strategy, just as the Chinese do when they beat us out in many places. Those are the two reforms I recommend, which would mean reducing the panoply of other missions and policy goals. It's a "back to basics" stripped-down engine with an economic kick-starter.

Q: Right.

SILVERMAN: I wish the Foreign Service and State had the kind of leadership who would take on needed structural reforms, but I haven't seen it. The most talented career folks get into big policy jobs and have outstanding careers but the Service as a whole gradually loses ground. But let's be hopeful. AFSA as an organization is in good shape, with good leadership, and it can play a role in the bold, creative reforms that are needed. Let's be hopeful.

Q: Sure. All right. So, we'll conclude the interview here. I'm going to stop the recording.

End of interview