

The Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

GERALD LAMBERTY

*Interviewed by: David T. Jones
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Q: OK, let me see. All right, it does seem to be responding. OK, right now this is David Jones speaking with Mr. Gerald Lamberty. And it's five minutes after one on the 31st of August, 2011. Mr. Lamberty, we've read the material that gives you the release for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training people to use your material. Let me start on some of the questions. Very briefly, please say a few words about your early life: your home, your parents, siblings, education, career, aspirations.

LAMBERTY: I was born in Merrill, Wisconsin and at 10 moved down to Milwaukee. I was born in 1931, in the middle of the Depression. My father had a fairly successful logging contracting business in Northern Wisconsin. I had two brothers, one older and one younger. The family, like most families at that time, was deeply affected by the Depression. We had had a cook, a maid and nurse for us kids. Then, only the nurse remained. But I see in retrospect now that my parents somehow or other made things appear to be normal and not difficult. After a while we didn't have any help any more, and then we had renters occupying in part of the house. Subsequently we moved to Milwaukee where my grandfather on my mother's side had some properties and he made a small house available for us. It was a very small place. I remember that we took our baths in a washtub, but all of those adjustments didn't bother me. I have no bad memories at all of that period, except that when we moved to Milwaukee, rather than getting your full three strikes when you played softball, you only got two, and that the last foul was out. That was important to me, and stayed in my memory for a long time. We stayed in Milwaukee from then on although we moved a couple more times within the city. My father had to close up his business in Merrill and joined us after a few months. He found a job in the city and so did my mom. We made it through in good order. I went to Catholic grade school and high school and then to Marquette University. I was the first one in my father or my mother's families to attend college. I had never been a great student, although I was president of my senior high school class. I was preparing to be a secondary school teacher and did the teacher training and other studies, but then I noticed in the Chicago Tribune a little article announcing that the Foreign Service entrance exam was going to be held in Chicago among other cities.

Q: Ah.

LAMBERTY: And so I went down to take the exam. I had always assumed that I would start with teaching and that I probably would end up in some kind of public service job. And Foreign Service sounded like an excellent option.

Q: Had you thought specifically of a diplomatic career --

LAMBERTY: Not until I took the exam in Chicago. The usual alacrity or lack thereof of the Foreign Service personnel system followed and several months later I finally took the orals and got into the Service. This was at a time when State was just beginning the Wristonization process, which involved integrating the officer personnel of the Department of State and the Foreign Service. This allowed the Department of State personnel to join the Foreign Service and go overseas as well as serve at the State Department.

Q: Did you have any career work before entering the Foreign Service?

LAMBERTY: No. I was in school until then.

Q: Mm-hmm. Which were the subjects that particularly interested you while in school?

LAMBERTY: History and Economics, which were certainly helpful when I took the Foreign Service exam, and for the Foreign Service itself. My first assignment was in Washington and it involved working in an office that dealt with foreign student exchanges that could have been part of the United States Information Service (USIS) in another world and at another time. The office was located in one of the Second World War Navy Annex buildings that existed in those days across Constitution Avenue, more or less where the Vietnam memorial is now.

Q: I remember them.

LAMBERTY: My first, short-lived job was not that interesting. We were trying to contact all the universities where there were foreign students participating in a program run by this office. In the days of no Internet, most of our letters were returned to us because many of the people we were writing to were no longer at those universities. Imagine how different that would be today. Anyhow, I had stayed in school long enough to get a Master's Degree in History and as an added bonus had not been drafted, because if you weren't in school you were draftable. But when I entered the Foreign Service, after not more than four or five months in this job, I was drafted into the Army. I did sixteen weeks of infantry training in Fort Hood, Texas, which, I learned that Texans say is the only place in the world where you can be in the mud and have sand blowing in your face

So then the Army sent me to Kirch Goens, a U.S. military base in Germany 40 miles north of Frankfurt. At that time the army was having a lot of incidents in Germany. The occupying American troops over there were getting into trouble in the taverns, beer gardens and elsewhere. Thus the Army changed its selection process for infantry combat units. We were submitted to a battery of tests and rather than removing those of us with high scores, we were frozen in our combat units and I became a Small Arms Artificer in the Supply Office.

While in Kirch Goens I became a teacher for the University of Maryland's program with the Army. In those days, Army Officers without college diplomas were being forced to retire. The University of Maryland gave the equivalent of two years of college credits to them for their experience and training as Officers. If in addition they were able to accumulate another year's credit through courses like the ones I taught, the Army would pay for these Officers to be assigned to the University of Maryland for the completion of their senior year. I taught two courses of History and subsequently became the University of Maryland's coordinator at the Kirch Goens base. I was moved out of the company barracks into the special duty barracks with the band and other specialized personnel. As long as I could keep the University of Maryland courses going, I had a lot of free time, and I was able to travel quite a bit. I was able to see the major countries in Western Europe and also Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia, which was very interesting in those days of the Cold War. Some of the sights were vivid reminders of WW II and it was also fascinating to observe first hand the lack of goods and lack of freedom that was prevalent in those days in Eastern Europe.

Q: Yes.

LAMBERTY: Anyway, after I finished my time with the Army in 1958, I returned to the State Department. I had thought that it would be best to serve in Washington first to get some idea of how the State Department worked, and to try to get into an area of expertise where with one language I could serve in more than one country. And so I chose Spanish and Latin America and got assigned to as the Junior Staff Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs. This assignment was very interesting as it provided a good picture of how the Department worked in Washington. One of my jobs was to assist visiting U.S. Ambassadors assigned to countries in Latin America and arrange for them to attend one or two of the daily staff meetings that the Assistant Secretary held and which I always attended. The visiting Ambassadors were invited to say something at these meetings and it was always a little off of what the line in Washington was. When I went to my first post, which was Havana, I was surprised to see what a demi-god the Ambassador was in our Foreign Service world because he didn't seem to me to be very key at all from the Washington point of view and from what the desk officers would ask them to do via cables that are always signed as if written by the Secretary of State.

Q: Now, I understand you had a special interest in Foreign Service personnel issues -- early in your career. Can you tell me about that?

LAMBERTY: Well, not really early in my career. While on assignment overseas (I served in the Dominican Republic, Peru, Poland and Guatemala) the developments on the personnel system of the Foreign Service only came to us through memos from State, articles in the Foreign Service magazine or people that were coming on assignment from Washington and the forthcoming changes were blurred by the very active life overseas. It was not until the 1969-71 period that while I was assigned back to Washington I became better informed on the reforms to the personnel system.

At that point I served in the sub-committee on Personnel Reform in AFSA. I have always liked and have been good at statistics, starting with my interest in baseball when I was just a kid and then more seriously when I was studying economics. I wrote a memo on April 19, 1971 that outlined the proposed changes in the system. Overall I thought that many of these changes represented an improvement over the then-existing system but I found a number of serious issues. The first one was the downgrading of job levels in the Service with the apparent expectation that this would improve the quality of the Service's performance. Under that assumption, the drafters of the proposed changes had to develop a system which would slow up promotions at all levels and continue to force out of the Service officers who were in every way performing up to the Foreign Service standards but that were creating the so-called "Bulge at the Top" which was responsible for the enthusiasm to downgrade jobs. I felt this was unwarranted, as the "bulge" had been reduced sharply in years prior to the early 70's. At that time the service had fewer FSO-3s than any time since 1961, fewer 0-2s than any time since 1959, and fewer 0-1's than any time since 1964. Unlike the military service, the Foreign Service has no need for large numbers of low-ranking officers to provide direction to a large group of enlisted men, nor does it need to staff large offices to provide more or less routine services to the public. What the Service requires instead is to have a large proportion of its Officers with sufficient rank, stature and ability to deal effectively with the upper levels of foreign governments and other U.S. agencies.

The other objection I had was with the proposal of the up-or-out principle, which I thought would be misapplied. Foreign Service Officers are proud of the competitiveness of their service but the time-in-class selection-out process did more damage than good. Although I thought it was very appropriate that officers be given a particularly intense screening before being promoted from mid-career to senior ranks, the utilization of the principle at the executive threshold was not right. Many officers who were performing adequately at the middle level and could have continued to do so were forced into executive ranks where they were unable to do adequate jobs because the only choices available to selection panels were to either promote or fire the individuals. Beginning in 1968 the selection panels were placed under great pressure and selections out for time-in-class almost tripled by 1970. A very effective Reduction-In-Force, even though that was not its announced objective. My third objection had to do with the assumption that FSO's could begin adequate second careers at around age 50. The mobility of executives in the private sector, often cited as standard for the Foreign Service, does not really apply, as most of the substantive skills developed in the Foreign Service are not readily marketable outside the Foreign Service. This being said, many FSOs that were separated from the Service developed second careers which they performed with distinction, but many of them did not with a great loss of experience to the Service

Q: Well, so far as personnel reform was concerned -- what did you have in mind? And what did you think -- how did you think it could be accomplished?

LAMBERTY: My observations on the personnel system are also a result of my tenure as President of AFSA, later in the 1980s. Well, in the first place, I wanted it to be recognized that the Foreign Service was constituted by very bright officers that were

accepted after very hard oral and written exams and that during the term of their careers adapted themselves and their families to other cultures and countries while working very hard and developing special skills that allowed them to successfully represent the country overseas. Of course there were, like in any other work force, some that did not quite manage to perform up to expectations but the limitation of class in time was not exactly the best system to let people go as many were let go because of established quotas rather than an overall merit system.

I felt that most of the selection out should be done as early as possible in the careers of the Foreign Service Officers and that the Service should retain all officers performing up to the norm and promote those who were performing the best at each class and that promotions beyond class 3 ought to be reserved only for officers having the highest competence in their specialty and/or having superior executive ability.

In the past the Service had avoided the “bulge at the top” problems with its system of rank-in-officer, under which an officer could be assigned to any position regardless of its grade, provided he/she could handle the job. Following the Service’s “management emphasis” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the system changed so that the numbers on the job classification had to match the officer’s rank.

The six-year window system established for FSO-1 generalists sought to prevent stagnation and preserve competition -- both very important to all FSOs. However, the results were not what was sought. Officers voluntarily slowed up their own chances of promotion to the Senior Service until the end of their six-year windows coincided with the expiration of their 20-year time in class limits. Many junior officers also hoped to delay their advance in the Service in order to avoid facing the Senior threshold or the Senior Service uncertainties until as late as possible in their careers. This was not because the FSOs lacked self-confidence or wanted to avoid competition, but rather they had come to believe that their chances of surviving the senior personnel hurdles depended more on a “roulette” system than reason. When the selection panels were placed under great pressure not to make “tombstone” promotions, the results were dramatic: the number of officers retired for Time-in-Class increased from 30 in 1968, to 66 in 1969 and 82 in 1970. The suicide of one officer that had been retired by force under this system because he thought he had been wronged, dramatized the cruelty and absurdity of this system.

My goals were to improve the efficiency and the morale of the Service, which was very low in those days. Most of the discontent that had beset the Service then had been located in Washington. I was able to observe up close the grave consequences of the application of these reductions in force that not only demoralized those who were let go but also their families. Although the Department tried to manage this well by providing retirement benefits and allowing the FSOs to exit gracefully or to present their grievances, many did not recuperate and their lives were tinted with feelings of disillusion and worthlessness.

In those days there were several articles written in State magazine about business management. The articles were based on research that reviewed the performance of the best business firms of the time.

The management style in those firms was totally different from that being implemented at the State Department. Some of the main points that were made in the articles stated that a well-run company strives to keep the loyalty of its employees, to maintain their morale high and encourages cooperation among them. What was happening at State was the opposite as the message perceived in the ranks of Officers was that there was no job commitment from State as they were being encouraged to look for careers outside the Service, that the vast majority were losers clogging the pipeline, and that it was better to compete brutally to stay in the ranks.

Another interesting point made by these articles was that in the best business firms management decisions were made at as low a level as possible, while at State these decisions were centralized and thus tied up with tight regulations the impact that managers might have had on the careers of their subordinates. Efficiency reports were also used as very precise tools while these had been found to be not very precise at all. All this led to having management skills being perceived as much more important for the Foreign Service than substantive expertise.

The use of statistics was another poignant difference between the two styles of management, as at State statistics were not handled efficiently -- a clear example was the basic assumption that there was a growing surplus of Senior Officers despite the fact that their number had been decreasing for fifteen years.

Clearly, improved management could have played an important role in improving Foreign Service performance. It was regrettable that at that time the State Department management did not recognize what good management was.

End of interview