

Q&A with Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Valerie Fowler

Jackson School Journal: What first led you to pursue a State Department career? What was your first position?

Fowler: When I was in high school I lived abroad with AFS (The American Field Service), and that experience opened my horizons beyond the United States. I became very interested in learning more about international affairs and international cultures, so I studied overseas in college as well. I knew that I wanted to do something for my country; something as my parents said, “Larger than myself.” So I looked at the Foreign Service as a way to combine my interest in cultures and people abroad with service to my country. For my first posting, I was the assistant information officer in Hong Kong, from 1990-1991.

Jackson School Journal: In the field of public diplomacy, sudden events such as a leak of classified documents can change situations rapidly. How does your office deal with sudden crises and what strategies are used when unexpected and unpredictable situations come up?

Fowler: The Marines have a phrase “Semper Gumby”, referring to the green plastic character, which really means “always flexible.” I think that’s the best characterization of how we approach our work. The neat thing is that because public affairs in

particular deals with the news of the day, when you wake up in the morning you’re not quite sure what you’ll be dealing with that day. I find that dynamic environment exciting. When surprises happen, very rarely do we have all the information accurately at the beginning. I think Clausewitz referred to “The Fog of War”, but in today’s news cycle, the evening news has been replaced by 24/7, which has been replaced by 6-minute twitter cycles. So very rarely does all the information come out accurately and fully at the very start. Responding to what we know rather than to initial news reports is also very important to keep in mind.

Jackson School Journal: How have rapidly changing forms of modern media impacted your job and the job of the Public Affairs bureau? Can you conduct a proper community outreach in 140 characters on Twitter?

Fowler: Edward R. Murrow used to say that diplomacy is about the last 3 feet, meaning that when you’re sitting across from somebody and connecting with them in person, you can have policy discussion at large, but having those last three feet is important. Today those last three feet are often virtual in the palm of your hand. It’s a cellphone, it’s an iPad, it’s a communications device. So our challenge is to connect the online space with the personal space. Diplomacy is about both being online and having those face to face communications,

because all communication, whether virtually or in person, is best done as a two-way conversation, and not just “flooding the space” if you will. I would say that we’ve moved from an era where, as Secretary Kerry said (at Yale, in his 2014 commencement speech) “We’ve moved from an era of power in hierarchies to power in networks, which empowers individuals. No longer are folks dependent upon their government or state media to translate their messages.” Our key role at the State Department is to communicate with people on the platforms in which they communicate, in the languages in which they communicate, and in as real time as possible. In the news cycle you can transmit information globally and instantaneously, and audiences aren’t defined by borders but by languages and particularized segments. It’s a much more horizontal media universe and much more people-to-people focused than it used to be. So we have, for example, 1.2 million followers for the @StateDepartment website, which is larger than any other Foreign Ministry in the world. Senator Kerry has over 450 [thousand] followers. And we are very cognizant that those two platforms alone are very different in tone and content. The @StateDep is more policy focused, and @JohnKerry is more personal. So he tailors his page and we tailor the department page to be a definitive source of information. We also have 8 foreign language twitter feeds, so we’re trying to reach key audiences.

Jackson School Journal: How has the State Department worked to counter the online presence of tech savvy terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State?

Fowler: We have a center for strategic counter-terrorism communication. We set that up a couple years ago to counter Al-Shabab and other groups. It has evolved to focus also on countering anti-Daesh. I prefer to use Daesh rather than ISIL, because it’s the Arabic translation and they don’t like it much. It annoys them, so I love it! We can’t match tweet for tweet, but our credibility and our engagement provide our narrative. And, helping to shape the conversation is important. Just as with Russia, we’re never going to match all of their paid government trolls online. But as we remain a credible source of news, the propagandizing and the disingenuousness of some of their communications becomes apparent.

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Jackson School Journal: Do you think that global public perception of the United States has improved or degraded over the last few decades? What has helped to shape perception of the United States and its policy?

Fowler: I think it depends on where you are. In much of Africa I think the view of the United States has greatly improved because of the role of PEPFAR [President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief], where we’ve been helping the countries and the people. In places like Russia,

because of the prominence of state-run, state-controlled media, I think they portray the US and NATO as encroaching on “their backyard”. In Southeast Asia and Asia at large, I think that we are seen as a counterweight to China’s growing interest and involvement in the region by almost all Asian countries. I think that the US relationship with India has made great strides, under both Presidents Bush and Obama. So I would assert we are in a better place globally, but the bottom line is that all perceptions of the US are local. It is our job to make sure that those perceptions are as informed as possible.

Jackson School Journal: According to your biography, you served in Afghanistan during the reconstruction of the country. In your personal experience, what were the greatest challenges and successes that you encountered working alongside military and intelligence organizations?

Fowler: I would add development organizations as well. The defense, diplomacy, and development combination is a really powerful and unique one for the United States. We work in tandem in places like Afghanistan in ways that I haven’t seen other countries do as effectively. We did have, of course, intelligence organizations there as well, and worked closely with all elements of the US government: law enforcement, counter-narcotics in Afghanistan - “drugs and thugs” - as our narcotics enforcement bureau at the State Department is called. The challenge was that before our time in Afghanistan and Iraq, many military officers had never worked with a development officer and many development officers had never worked with a military officer. Some had worked on both sides with State Department officers but not as closely as we did in military outposts around the country

in Afghanistan and Iraq. I think what it did was foster a great understanding in each of the organizations for the value of the others’ work. My military friends say that they are converts to USAID and its importance, and my USAID friends say that it’s really great to have a personal experience with the military’s influence because there are very few people who move from one of those organizations to the other. The challenge was understanding each other’s cultures in a tense environment. The success was in the way that we, together, created a more stable and more secure Afghanistan where more people and particularly more women and girls were part of the process, and not shunted aside as they had been in the Taliban era.

Jackson School Journal: What advice do you have for students at the University of Washington who are interested in a career in the Foreign Service. What should they be working on in college, and what books should they be reading?

Fowler: I would start by saying that the Foreign Service is a fantastic career. It’s a special thrill to go to work every day in a building where the US flag flies overhead and to be part of a team that is advancing our national interests on the diplomatic side. So I would encourage everybody to pursue a career in the Foreign Service. I think being active and aware of developments going on in the world, aware of trends and things like that, is probably the best approach to take. When I was looking to take the Foreign Service exam, the advice I received was to read *The Economist* for a year, because you will learn all the names of leaders, and events, and economics - all the things that are part-and-parcel not only of our work but also of the Foreign Service exam. To

get a sense of the Foreign Service Entry Exam, we have a website careers.state.gov that is a good site to go to. I took the exam on a whim and I went in with less pressure on myself, and I think that was the key. Most people don't pass, but most of the people who don't pass, fail the test's English section. If you have a really good English SAT score, you'll be fine. Go in without thinking this is the be-all and end-all. It's like studying for any exam - if you over-study you can go in tense. A lot of people I know in the Foreign Service took the exam multiple times. There are very few requirements for entry into the Foreign Service. You have to be a US citizen, you have to be 20 years old and under 60. So if you're interested, research it by going online. Having an understanding of economics can help because commercial diplomacy is a big part of what we do regardless of our position, because of our support for US businesses and companies overseas. As for what books they [interested undergraduates] should be reading, I don't know that there are any particular books that would prepare you for the Foreign Service better than a broad reading of history. The book on my nightstand right now is *National Insecurity* by David Rothkopf, and that gives really good insights into the workings of Washington. It might not be really good prep for the Foreign Service per se, but it's great prep for Washington.

Interview Edited by Evelyn McCorckle and Francis Wilson