Henry Wriston Speaks to the Foreign Service on Personnel Problems

A summary of the Informal Comments of Chairman Henry M. Wriston, of the Secretary of State's Public Committee on Personnel, at a Luncheon Meeting of the Foreign Service Association at the Officers Club, Fort McNair, on March 30, 1954.

It should be made clear at the outset that I speak as an individual and not for the Committee. The members are giving industrious and competent attention to our work. All, save myself, have had Government experience, three of them as Assistant Secretaries of State and one as the present Deputy Under Secretary. My own long interest in this matter has been as a private citizen, but for many years it was a close and attentive interest. We have an extraordinarily able staff who pursue with diligence the data we require. The Committee has not reached conclusions. Therefore, I repeat, these views are personal.

If some of the things I say seem to be critical, it should cause no surprise. The Committee would not have been appointed if conditions were entirely satisfactory—or even reasonably so. If there is need for the Committee, it must look at what is wrong in order to improve the situation. A mere expression of bland approval of the current status could effect no cure for admitted difficulties.

The matter before us has been studied and restudied over a very considerable period of years. Successive reviews and analyses and researches have been carried out by diverse groups. All reveal high competence and true public spirit. Despite the diversities all have agreed on certain fundamental points:

A. The diplomatic service should not be absorbed into the general Civil Service;
B. Nor should it be absorbed into a generalized Foreign Service to serve not only the State Department but to staff all operations abroad—diplomatic, technical, fiscal—for the 28 or 29 departments and agencies which presently have personnel serving overseas;
C. "Above a certain level," which is a strange American expression for an uncertain level, a single personnel system should be established to cover all Departmental and Foreign Service employees in so far as that is practicable.

It is too much to expect that different task forces, committees, study groups or consultants would arrive at the same detailed answers. There are matters where judgment must be used rather than techniques which can produce a "scientific" or precise "correct" answer. Yet repeated reports have all stressed the need for a more nearly unified service.

The time has come to substitute action for an indefinite prolongation of the series of repetitive studies. If, as has been alleged, morale is now low both in the Foreign and in the Department, the moment for change is present. An appropriate text could be found in a passage from Mr. Gullion’s article in The American Foreign Journal, January, 1949:

"...If the Foreign Service is to get on with the get its essential work in the nation’s service done, stand a better chance of doing so if it and the Deq spoke with one voice; if its range of skills were by the addition of those found in the professorial departmental services; and if it could always be tre as some remote pensioner of the Department of S as its very blood, bone, and sinew."

Nothing I say is intended to be out of harmony with view, though with other points in his discussion there be differences.

As to the fabric of my argument, the Terms of Reference laid down for our Committee make it appropriate to Foreign Service Act of 1946 as the base line. The propose to employ passages from the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs introducing that Act outline for my discussion.

This report emphasized that “the base of recruitment, the scope of examinations, and the range of appointment should all be broadened.” This objective has not been fulfilled. There have been no appointments to the Service in Class 6 since August of 1952, and according to figures officially supplied to the Secretary of State, 355 have been appointed to that group under the Public Law of 1946.

In view of the growth of United States interests and responsibilities during the period it must be evident that the respect has experience fulfilled the hope and expect the Committee.

The report asserted that recruitment should be on the basis of merit “regardless of private means.” This aim has been impaired, if not defeated, first by the long delay in application and actual commissioning (sometimes 12 years). Irrelevant employment such as dishwashing, men’s helper, and clerical work (to mention actual cases which comes necessary in the interim unless the candidate has private means. Employers do not like to take on employment such as these and may be the summons, when it comes, is peremptory.

This aim is impaired, in the second place, by the candidate to travel from his home to Washington for oral examinations on “speculation.” It is a hazardous assumption in view of the fact that sometimes 45 percent of those who have passed the written examination and security clearance have failed on the oral test. (The
percentage of failures is 40). People who have to come from the Pacific Coast or the Middle West make a heavy expenditure of money and of earning time. It can most easily be borne by those with private means; it is an undue hardship upon those without independent resources.

In the third place, the long delay often involves almost complete mental stagnation at a time when the mind should be stimulated by fresh and vigorous activity; only if a person has private means can he go on with studies or continue fruitful activities during the overlong interim. The system, therefore, which requires the waiting candidate to get along on temporary jobs on starvation rations unless he has financial resources cannot honestly be said to be recruitment "regardless of private means."

"A disciplined and mobile corps of trained men" with "loyalty and esprit" was another objective of the Foreign Service Act. To a large extent this has been obtained within the Corps, but there are clear evidences of much less well developed discipline under the Secretary of State. The Amendment of 1949 was designed to provide the Secretary with the means of exercising such discipline; in practice it has not done so in anything like the degree that was anticipated. Conclusive evidence on this point is offered by the fact that the "directive" for personnel improvement of March, 1951, has been practically nullified. It would be hard to find another instance of such total disregard of a directive issued by any previous Secretary of State; when a Secretary's directive meets that fate it does not reflect good discipline.

In 1946, the Committee stressed one point as very important: "... any service which overdevelops self-sufficiency and evaluates its performance by criteria peculiar to itself belies its name." It seems to me undeniable that in practice many such tendencies have revealed themselves; some of them lie at the root of current difficulties, as, for example, the relative failure of the program for lateral entry into the Foreign Service.

Lateral entry was stressed in the Committee's explanation of Section 517: "Outstanding men should be able to join the permanent Service at ranks commensurate with their age and qualifications." The only suggested limitation was a stipulation that they should not be "in numbers as to nullify the career principle." The report called for "entrance from outside to the middle and upper ranks of the Service" to make it more flexible and effective. This purpose of the 1946 Act has been effectively defeated by the paucity of substantial achievement. Between 1946 and 1951 only 21 persons obtained lateral entrance under Section 517 and in the three years since the "liberalizing" directive of March 1951 only 25 more. Even with the 100 who are now "in process" (a term almost indefinitely flexible in time), it is clear that the objective of the Act has not been fulfilled.

One of the central problems which the present Committee faces is emotional resistance on the part of Foreign Service officers to what some of them think of as "watering down" the professional character of the Service by larger admissions through the lateral entrance.

There is almost exact historical parallel. When the Rogers Act was passed in 1924 many in the diplomatic corps felt that it was being invaded and swamped by the consular staff. At that time there were only 122 in the diplomatic service and they had to "absorb" 511 from the consular service. Resistance to effectuating the intention of Congress was so serious that a subsequent Senate investigation resulted in a report that the Rogers Act had been "in a manner far at variance from the purpose legislation." The effort to keep the two services apart the Solicitor of the Department to write an opinion a single "efficiency list" was mandatory.

When one looks back at what has happened since 1924 it is clear that after resistance subsided the transition to success. Many chiefs of mission and persons holding distinguished places today came from the consular service the same way in 1939 there was dislike of the idea of having the people who had been in the service of the Department of Commerce. Yet they have been well absorbed and hold important posts. The Manpower Act 1945 was viewed in a somewhat similar light, but has worked out very well.

It is striking that this problem of better relations between the diplomatic service and the Department should persist and yet should have proved so intractable. While the Rogers Act was passed former Secretary Lansing said "If there is a criticism, it is that the Bill failed to clothe in its general scheme of consolidation officers of the bureaus and divisions, assistant solicitors and drafting officers of the Department of State as chiefs and assistant chiefs of and in fact all officers who do not belong to the clerical force. It would have improved the Bill if such officers had been made eligible for transfer to the Foreign Service, ever it seemed advisable to send them into the field. It would unquestionably improve the efficiency of the departmental organization and give them a proper ing not only with foreign diplomats but also with members of our Foreign Service."

It is thus clear that the problem before us has been well for over thirty years. Even at the traditional perspective, diplomacy that seems a long time to let so important a problem remain unresolved. Progress has not been forward, cent drift, indeed, is backward; it will now take vigorous action to reverse an unhealthy trend.

One principal argument against any attempt to correct the union of the two services has been cited again and it is disinclination to accept overseas duties. Yet since the overseas personnel of the United States Government, aside from the military, has grown enormously. So all overseas personnel engaged in business, banking, other commercial and industrial ventures. It is of course clear that reluctance to serve overseas has been the least important factors in retarding the reform for the Secretary Lansing made so strong a plea just thirty years ago.

Moreover, the fact that there has never been a decrease of applicants for Class 6 in the Foreign Service Officer is further demonstration that "dual" service is not so much a barrier as it has been made to appear. The willingness of applicants for admission to the lowest grade to wait is proof that there is no shortage of competent people to serve overseas.