DOS 101: DECODING THE STATE DEPARTMENT

By Alex Avé Lallemant and Amanda Cronkhite, May 11, 2021
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Amanda Cronkhite: Welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Amanda Cronkhite**, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, and an Associate Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. What do the military and diplomats understand and misunderstand about each other? State and Defense are both critical elements of national security but within professional military education, what the State Department does and how it operates can be an enigma for some. So here are a few facts. The Foreign Service was established by Congress in 1924 and is organized based on the early 20th century naval rank and promotion system. Like military officers, FSOs as they're called, have commissionings and are expected to serve anywhere in the world they might be needed. The American Foreign Service Association notes that there are about 8,000 foreign service generalists at the State Department, stationed at 276 posts overseas. That is about half of the entire U.S. Foreign Service community, which also includes USAID, specialists in certain areas and a few other small entities. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice often noted that there were as many members of military bands as there were Foreign Service Officers. She wasn't off by much. A 2017 fact check noted that the military had about 6,500 active-duty personnel in musical roles. With us today to help explain what the Foreign Service does, including in what people might think of as military environments and how state does so much with so few people relative to the military at least, is a Foreign Service Officer with over 21 years of experience, **Mr. Alex Avé Lallemant**. He has served overseas in every one of the State Department's geographic bureaus, including multiple tours in Afghanistan. He is currently the Consular Section Chief in Harare, Zimbabwe. Thank you for joining us, Alex.

Alex Avé Lallemant: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be on with you.

AC: So there's a really popular meme out there: what my friends think I do, what my family thinks I do, what society thinks I do, what I actually do. So what does a Foreign Service Officer do?

AAL: Well, that's a good question and I remember when that meme came out a few years ago and how much fun me and my colleagues had with it. If you want to do a one second, one sentence version of what a Foreign Service Officer does, a Foreign Service Officer is a professional career diplomat who serves overseas and in Washington and in some cases a few other cities in the United States and represents our country. The way that breaks down, it breaks down into several different functionalities but at its core being a Foreign Service Officer is a public service, is working for the American people just like colleagues in any other government agency.

AC: Okay, but what does a Foreign Service Officer do… for example, if someone tells me they work for the Department of Energy, I probably have an idea that either they're working with petroleum or gas or rockets. If you were going to explain to someone what your normal day or week was, what is it?

AAL: Okay, well I'll use my most recent, current job as an example where I am the Consular Section Chief. So consular work is one of the five cones of foreign service work. Cones might equate a little bit to an MOS for our military colleagues or something like that. So within the officer corps, there's consular, political, economic, public diplomacy, and management. Consular is actually the oldest form of diplomacy and the U.S. Consular Corps goes way back to the founding of the country, and that is looking after American citizens overseas—providing routine services like passports, reports of birth, notary services, to more specialized ones like visiting Americans in jail or helping Americans out in distress. That's half of it and the other half it has direct national security implications and that's overseeing the vetting and adjudication of all visas for every individual that needs to come to the United States for temporary purposes or for immigration. So that's the consular functionality. The political and economic are reporting on political and economic developments in a host country. They'll do some advocacy with the host country, what we call delivering demarches, which are official requests from one government to another. Public diplomacy is public affairs, cultural affairs, like Fulbright is an exchange program that's run through the Cultural Affairs Office of the American Embassy in any given country. And then there's management which provides the platform of service for the embassies to function, everything from housing to motor pool to human resources to anything in between. So those are kind of the five broad functionalities that you have in the Foreign Service. Of course it's a lot more varied than that, but when you come in, you come in in one of those five functionalities. We also have specialists who probably equate more to warrant officers that you might find in the Army or something like that where they're specialized in a particular field. We have the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, for example. That is a federal law enforcement agency that does the security for all embassies overseas through what they call the Regional Security Officer. We have IT specialists. We have all number of specialists that are really specialized in a particular field and not generalists like the officers are. And then of course in every embassy overseas you have probably a 2:1or 3:1 ratio to the Americans in the embassy. You have local

staff. I might call them like the enlisted corps, noncommissioned officers or enlisted men and women who stay behind and are really the institutional knowledge in a lot of respects for the officers who are rotating through.

AC: Okay. I appreciate you drawing the analogies to the military. I think that's very useful. What do you wish that the general public understood more about the Foreign Service?

AAL: As you noted in your kind of lead in there, we're not a large organization in terms of the Foreign Service, Foreign Service Officers. When you factor in all of the staff that includes local staff and all that are employed in an embassy overseas, we number about 70,000, so that's not a small cabinet agency, but of course, compared to DoD, it's still tiny. But we're not necessarily as well-known as some of the other government agencies. And to the extent that people are aware of us, there's always this kind of the stereotype, the pinstripe cookie pusher. The person who's wearing the pinstripe suit at receptions, who's handing out beige hors d'oeuvres and meeting people and glad handing or something like that. On one hand that glamorizes what we do a little bit. On the other hand, it kind of minimizes what we do a little bit. As I mentioned before, there's a lot of different things we do and when people ask, I like to say again that we work for the American people, we do the work of the American people. We advance the American interest overseas and that's why we're there and that is more than just being at receptions. It's all kinds of different things from like I said, going to visit people in prison at 2:00 in the morning to negotiating treaties that allow us to advance our national interests in that way. If you were to say, what is it you do, and I have two minutes before they start turning out, that is what I would say. I work overseas to advance the American interest. We work very hard. We're a very dedicated and selectively hired group of people and we're very mission focused. If I had two minutes to explain that that's how I would go about it.

AC: At the War College, we use the Gulf War as a case study for the students to think about the different elements of national power and there's a story and at this point it's become a bit of a military urban legend that after the 100 Hour War, Schwarzkopf basically said, okay, we are a state, they can take over now. Not realizing that there were no diplomats at that point anywhere near Kuwait who could have done the work for him. What does State do in areas with a significant military presence or how do State and the military coordinate in your experience?

AAL: Okay, well I think that there are kind of two answers to that question. Let me first talk about more the traditional way we work with military and I'll focus first overseas and then I can talk a little bit about how it works in Washington. And then I'll kind of segue into how it has worked over the last 15 to 20 years with respect to being down range. So to begin with… also by the way, I know you mentioned it earlier, but let's also not fail to point out that USAID is also part of the Foreign Service because when we're talking about and I get to that a little further down, when I talk about kind of being forward deployed or whatever, you'll have USAID people

and Foreign Agricultural Service people as well, so that's important to remember too. They are also elements of the Foreign Service and those agencies. But to back it back up, when you're in an embassy, every foreign service person that goes to an embassy is going to be somewhat familiar with the military if nothing else, because they're Marine security guards at pretty much every embassy. Now that's a small detachment that's usually led by a Staff Sergeant, a Marine Staff Sergeant, or a Marine Gunnery Sergeant, not an officer or such. So there will be some contact and of course pretty much every embassy has a Defense Attaché and, in many cases, an Office of Defense Cooperation that will be staffed by some kind of field grade officer, in large cases maybe a general officer. So there's some familiarity, but really the ratio is still broadly in the favor of the civilians in terms of staffing. So they'll be 70 American direct-hire staff and five or six of them might be the Senior Defense Officer and his or her staff. You go back to Washington, there's a lot of interagency coordination that goes on. Every geographic bureau at the State Department. So the bureaus that cover… If we sliced the world up into several different categories by region and those all have a military liaison working in there, usually in their regional security policy offices and then we have a Bureau of Pol-Mil Affairs at main State as well that handles a lot of those things. That's a long standing, long existing relationship, but what is relatively recent… well I mean it happened in Vietnam as well, but since 9/11 what you had was then diplomats and development professionals situated downrange in austere combat environments with active-duty military personnel, then the ratio is completely flipped on its head. I spent two years as a political adviser based at Bagram Airfield from 2012 to 2014 working with the Army Division Commands that were there, and the ratio was probably 12:1 green suiters to us. And then of course of civilians in a place like that, there are a lot of contractors. So at first, they don't know if you're a contractor or not because you're not wearing a military uniform. So you have to establish what you do. And in that situation, when you are working in embassies, a lot of the people you're working with on the military side are foreign area officers who are basically the military's diplomats who are a bit more indoctrinated into our ways of working and our corporate culture and all that. You get the other way around and suddenly we're on their territory as it were, and we have to adapt a little bit to that corporate culture. And there's not as much of that happening now but it's still happening in lots of places around the world. For example, in Afghanistan—I'll draw mostly on my experience in Afghanistan because I wasn't in Iraq or in other places where we might be working together—you had provincial reconstruction teams, in some places you had district reconstruction teams or district support teams I should say, and they would have people under Chief of Mission Authority, under the Ambassador's authority based out of Kabul, and you'd have a mix, you'd have State Department, you'd have USAID and usually some Foreign Agricultural Service people too, not always Foreign Service officers. Sometimes brought on like a five-year limited noncareer appointment but often Foreign Service Officers as well. And then they're working, from my perspective, they had two different roles. One was to do diplomacy, to work with your foreign counterparts and your host government counterparts as we do all over the world and to provide them advice and guidance on how to, in the case of Afghanistan for example, really

rebuild their country after war that started in 1979, I believe, decades of war. But then you also had to work internally to develop relationships with your military counterparts because invariably, if you wanted to go somewhere, you needed MRAPs or helicopters and security and all that came from the military in most cases when you're out in the field. And so you had two different kinds of interpersonal relationships or two different kinds of diplomacy to practice—your external diplomacy and internal diplomacy. And you had to develop relationships with both sides. And as I alluded to earlier, as I was preparing for this discussion, I was thinking about where are we similar and where are we different and I think the first thing is, you alluded to the pay system that we cribbed from the Navy and so we do have that rank-in-person system and we do have a competitive promotion system. It's not quite engineered the same way the Army's is in that if you miss your primary zone, if you're an Army officer, you're basically out. It's very rare that you don't get promoted or will get promoted if you miss your primary zone. But here in the Foreign Service, you have a certain number of years in class, and if you don't get promoted in that period of time, you get dumped out. And it does happen. So we do have a similar kind of promotion system. And then we also, like I alluded to earlier, we are very mission focused in the same manner in some respects that the military is. It may come across a little bit differently and we may use different terms of discussing it, but you know Foreign Service Officers are by and large very mission driven, very service oriented and really hard working. So you do have some similarities there. I think the differences that I had to kind of negotiate were first and foremost in how much more direct and directive the military is. That's probably one of the biggest things. You could be a lot more direct with military colleagues than you can with State Department colleagues and how much less comfortable with ambiguity the military really is, whereas we're very comfortable, we deal with ambiguity all the time. The military is all about achieving discrete and defined objectives, and sometimes, to paraphrase what one of our presidents said about economists, you could find a foreign service officer with only two hands, on the one hand and on the other hand, and on the third hand. And so those are kind of gaps you have to bridge. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. I like to think by and large it works, but sometimes when you have that kind of that intense environment you have tension and people handle it better or worse and we had to deal with the fallout when it didn't work as well.

AC: Can you think of any particular interactions with the military in your 20 years that stand out that you think might highlight how State and Defense work well together?

AAL: My sense is that, especially if we're talking about uniform military and not necessarily the political leadership of either organization but the uniform military and the rank-and-file diplomats, one thing I noticed… I sat in two different locations when I was at Bagram, I sat in the CJ-9 the Civil Affairs Shop and I also had an office in the Senior Civilian Reps Office which is like our equivalent of the Division Commander. And at the time, we had to 260 Chief of Mission people in the fields in the eastern part of Afghanistan. Of course there was a division plus. There were like five or six brigade combat teams in the same area in terms of military size,

so obviously again the ratio is way skewed in front of our military colleagues, but I noticed I was sitting in the civil affairs shop and a new group of civil affairs guys ripped in and I hadn't been there that long and I was still kind of learning my way around but I got to know these people really well and I appreciated a couple of things. One is that they had an understanding of what the limitations of bureaucracy were that was pretty similar to ours. And that sounds kind of weird, but at first it's easy to come in and just say, we can do whatever we want, the sky is the limit, but there are limitations both based in reality and based on what our bureaucracies will do and we both had come from large, fairly impersonal bureaucracies that made achieving things quickly somewhat difficult just by the bureaucratic inertia and they understood really well the limitations of that as well as we did, because this time in Afghanistan was kind of the winding down at the end of the surge, and there's still a lot of good idea fairies kind of sprouting around, and people were like, hey, what if we try this and you would say, well hold on, before we try that, let's go look two years ago and see if we tried it then, oh we did, and what happened? Oh it failed. So these guys came in and some had probably been through the AOR before and all that and they kind of understood the limitations of the good idea fairy in a good way so we weren't spinning up and wasting time being spun up, trying to do stuff that was not going to work or had tried been tried before and whatever so that that was good. I know it's not a specific example, but that mindset, it was really useful. I should also say some of the commanders that cycled through at the time, some of them were still at very senior levels in the military, had been deployed in the eastern Afghanistan before, and so they had that same kind of, I want to say in a good way, world weariness, an understanding of what's feasible and possible. So for example, in the first round of elections in 2014, we said our vision is that we know that we can provide support to the Afghans so they can deliver and retrograde all their ballots, but we also know that if we take our foot off the gas, they can probably do it too because they've assessed that it's a priority, and so we got the Regional Command, East leadership on board with that and we were able to hold off all these do-gooding attempts to valiantly help the Afghans and not let them fail by providing airlift support or whatever and it worked. It's one of the things I'm really happy we managed to accomplish because we were in sync with our military colleagues, as it's mostly Army people there. And the Afghans were able… I mean there are pictures of them taking ballots back from Nuristan on donkeys, but it worked, and it was a local solution that didn't involve us throwing a lot of money at it. And we agreed, for example, at that point and you can read about a lot of this in the Washington Post, the Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction put out a report, a series of reports, it got reported on in the Washington Post about a year ago, and a lot of people were talking about it at the time, where the money was going and how much concern there was about the money that was being spent and both our side and the military side agreed that this CERP fund, the Commanders Emergency Response Program funding had already kind of saturated the area, so we agreed to not use it because there was already enough money flowing around there that they had a hard time tabulating and keeping track of it, and it was kind of beyond its useful service life. And so we were able to hold that off and that allowed, at some levels and in some respects, it allowed the Afghans to start having to make funding decisions

using somewhat more limited resources, which is really an important kind of bureaucratic exercise. How do we come to a consensus about how to spend limited resources because then you have to really articulate priorities and that's quite important. So there are a couple of good examples I think that are a bit more specific, but generally speaking, when you align instead of trying to find the good next good idea fairy that's just going to magically fix everything, you take a more realistic approach, and when you could get your military colleagues to buy into that approach or vice versa, then we tended to be a lot more effective at using the tools of State to gradually bend the curve in the right direction.

AC: So I want to turn back to what you said about consular work and helping Americans. Obviously 2020 and 2021 have been very difficult years for the entire world and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how consular officers have been helping both American citizens with the pandemic and how diplomacy has been during the pandemic.

AAL: Yeah, so I think it's actually a great success story and it starts with the Consular Corps but it's not exclusive to consular work but is largely spearheaded by consular work and what that's been able to do for Americans. When the pandemic started, a lot of things, a lot of countries started closing and lockdown started happening really quick and embassies all over the world started realizing the need to repatriate Americans back to the United States so they could hunker down, they could have access to better medical care, they could be safer. And so that's a pretty immense undertaking and at no small risk to the officers and the staff themselves that were working on it. And again, it wasn't just consular work, the Bureau of Medical Affairs back in Washington was involved, the logistics planners in our Bureau of Management were involved and organized a whole bunch of charter flights worldwide to repatriate Americans back to the United States. When I was in Kabul, I was actually not working in the consular section at that time, I didn't have a consular commission or anything like that, I was working on something else and I was still drafted in to help out repatriate people from Kabul. So we went to Kabul airport with our N-95 masks and just completely kitted out in as much protective gear as we could manage and we loaded up about a third of a plane, it was a charter plane that was stopping in a bunch of different locations and a third of it I think was allocated to Kabul and we filled it with hundreds of Americans and also green card holders by the way and shipped them back to the United States so they could be there. So that's just off the top. It’s one really great success story and in difficult times we were able to do that and keep our own people pretty safe. We're still doing it right now. We're not repatriating people en masse, but we've had to cut down a lot of consular services, specifically the visa services I was referring to in order to minimize the exposure people have coming into the embassy coming out, and also because up until fairly recently there were a few presidential proclamations that limited who could travel to the United States and how they could route themselves in order to keep down the number of people with COVID coming into the United States. And yet, in spite of that, we still are out there taking care of Americans as best we can, within those limitations and providing services and that always

remains our top priority, in so far as what we do for any embassy in the world is taking care of Americans overseas, and so we're still doing that a whole lot. I think pivoting to larger diplomatic efforts, now the big thing is vaccine diplomacy and our government has pledged up to $4 billion to this COVAX program to the WHO to help people around the world get vaccines and a lot of countries in the world specifically. And just to give an example here in Zimbabwe, we provide a lot of assistance to the healthcare sector. Now that's traditionally not earmarked for COVID, but for things like malaria and HIV and stuff like that, but when you're building healthcare infrastructure, you're building healthcare infrastructure, and it can be used for multiple purposes. Likewise in Afghanistan where I just came from, same deal. We basically helped build the country's healthcare infrastructure from scratch. And to the extent that it is able to address people with COVID, it's largely due to a lot of the assistance we provide.

AC: What would you tell a young person thinking about a career in public service? If you could talk to yourself before you took the Foreign Service exam or when you were in high school or college debating the Foreign Service or the military, what would you tell someone thinking about about taking on a public sector job?

AAL: I would say do it. Everyone is different but I think in my personal opinion we spent a lot of time in our discourse as citizenship, as a citizenry in the United States, demeaning public service, and it's easy to blame the government for this or the government for that. I'll just say when I joined the Foreign Service and I was in my 100 class, I was just really struck with how sharp everyone was, how dedicated everyone was and that continues to be the case. You certainly meet duds but by and large the people you meet are driven and highly dedicated people. I found this also when I was working again in Bagram with the two-star general down and the division staff and their command sergeant's major and their senior enlisted people and all the people were really driven, hardworking people that we're really trying to do the right thing for our country. And so I would say first, and I actually have said this, I do outreach and talks with student groups and stuff like that, I say, when you hear people demeaning the government, think twice about what they're saying. Public service is an important and honorable vocation, and I stand by that for all the good and the bad and all the successes and failures. I was just in a leadership training course actually and our class mentor who was the former Assistant Secretary of State, Ambassador Maura Hardy, and she said, you could wake up, let's say you work for a corporation, every morning you wake up, you're basically thinking how well you're going to do your job so you can make some billionaire richer or you could wake up and think about how you can advance the American interest and serve a mission and serve a purpose.

AC: Well thank you, Mr. Avé Lallemant for joining us today on A Better Peace. Listeners, as Alex mentioned, the Foreign Service is very selective. If you would like to learn more about the Foreign Service exam, the State Department website can tell you about that. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and send us suggestions for

future programs and rate and review this podcast on your podcaster of choice, which helps others to find us. We're always interested in hearing from you. Until next time from the War Room, I'm Amanda Cronkhite.