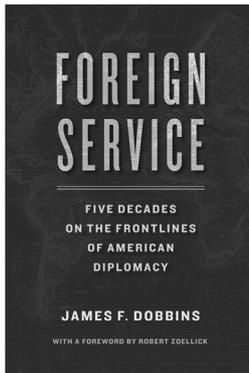


Book Review



**Foreign Service: :
Five Decades on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy**
James Dobbins

Brookings Institution Press, 2017, 329 pp.

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Whither American diplomacy? If one were to judge by reporting and commentary over the past months (for example, “The Desperation of Our Diplomats” and “How the Trump Administration Broke the State Department”), the situation seems rather grim. President Trump’s comments following Moscow’s decision to reduce the United States’ diplomatic presence in the Russian Federation, in which he thanked President Putin for helping to reduce the State Department’s budget, cast further doubt on the short-term prospects for the role of the diplomatic instrument of power in American statecraft. To sort through this angst, we need to understand the nuts and bolts of diplomatic practice and how the nation’s Foreign Service officers support United States policy. Fortunately, retired Ambassador James Dobbins has given us such an understanding through his sweeping memoir *Foreign Service*, which spans the spectrum of foreign policy challenges from the Vietnam War to the aftermath of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Ambassador Dobbins, as the expression goes, has been around the block a few times in American diplomacy. His insights bear our attention.

Ambassador Dobbins’s aim is not to debate the merits of various policies through the years. Rather, he chronicles American diplomacy from a foxhole perspective (even noting the work of John Keegan and other military historians who depict warfare from a similar viewpoint) and “focuses on the tactical and operational levels of diplomacy, describing what individual American diplomats actually do, how policies are made and executed, and what it is like to be caught up in the process.” Dobbins draws on rich experience as a naval officer serving off the coast of Vietnam during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, a Foreign Service officer posted to multiple embassies and other diplomatic missions (although never as a Senate-confirmed ambassador – more on that below), as well as in the State Department’s bureaucracy at Foggy Bottom, and finally answering more than one summons to trouble-shoot some of the toughest foreign policy challenges, to take the reader through the ins and outs and ups and downs of American diplomatic practice over roughly 50 years. Having completed *Foreign Service*, one is left with a greater appreciation of life as a Foreign Service officer as well as the internal procedural and personal dynamics of United States embassies, Foggy Bottom, and delegations to negotiations and international organizations.

Foreign Service is exceptionally well written, a testament to Dobbins's years of experience writing diplomatic cables, policy papers for the government and research reports from his post-State Department home, the RAND Corporation. His descriptions of routine interactions with colleagues as well as conversations with secretaries of state, national security advisors and a host of foreign interlocutors give the reader a sense of being in the room as they occur. He deals candidly with the good – for example postings to both Paris and Strasbourg, France – and the ugly – an allegation of misleading Congress in testimony about Haiti that earned him the eternal enmity of Congressman Dan Burton and Senator Jesse Helms, the latter the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and resulted in him never receiving a Senate-confirmed ambassadorial post. While honest in his assessments of people with whom he has worked, Dobbins has no axes to grind and even concludes that Burton and Helms might have done him a favor by inadvertently opening doors to assignments in the Balkans and Afghanistan that have enriched his work inside and outside of government service.

Foreign Service is more than a memoir, however. It is also a history of United States diplomacy from the end of the Vietnam War, through the end of the Cold War in Europe and conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia, and on to the current challenges of democratization and state building in, for example, Afghanistan and Iraq. Some might see Dobbins's lack of experience in Asia and Africa (less Somalia) as a significant limitation. However, given Europe's centrality to the Cold War after Vietnam and Dobbins's experience in Haiti, Somalia and Afghanistan, the value of the book as a chronicle of contemporary American diplomacy remains undiminished.

Who will benefit from reading this book? First, citizens in general who are interested in looking beyond stereotypes of a bloated and overfunded State Department to understand the contribution of commissioned officers who do not wear uniforms – Foreign Service officers – to the security of the United States. Second, practitioners from other government agencies who want a better grasp of the role of the State Department at the tactical and operational levels of policy development and execution. Finally, military professionals, to better understand the role of diplomacy in not only supporting military operations but also working to precluding situations from developing to the point that the military instrument of power must come into play. In this reviewer's experience, too many military officers assess their State Department peers based on service in a provincial reconstruction team or similar capacity either in Afghanistan or Iraq. Thanks to James Dobbins and *Foreign Service*, we can better appreciate American diplomats' service on the front lines of protecting our nation's security. We should bear in mind their contributions and capabilities when looking for ways to tackle the challenges of the twenty-first century. **IAJ**

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