

**A REVIEW OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC READINESS:  
ADDRESSING THE STAFFING AND FOREIGN  
LANGUAGE CHALLENGES FACING  
THE FOREIGN SERVICE**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT,  
THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SUBCOMMITTEE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND  
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

U.S. SENATE,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT  
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE,  
AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,  
OF THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:34 p.m., in room SD-342 Dirksen, Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka and Voinovich.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR AKAKA**

Senator AKAKA. I call this hearing of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia to order.

I want to welcome our witnesses. I look forward to a good hearing today, and thank you very much for being here.

Today's hearing, "A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language Challenges Facing the Foreign Service," will examine the results of two Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviews of diplomatic readiness at the State Department.

Diplomatic readiness means having the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time, to carry out America's foreign policy. And before I continue, I just want to say, while I was saying that, I couldn't help but think about anybody but Senator Voinovich, because this is his statement.

Senator VOINOVICH. I stole it from David Walker. [Laughter.]

Senator AKAKA. GAO's reports make it clear. The State Department's diplomatic readiness has been consumed by current operations and now it must focus on rebuilding its capabilities.

The State Department struggles in particular with staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts. Mid-level gaps in public diplomacy are especially acute. GAO found that an ongoing shortage of Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) has led to an over-reliance on junior officers working in positions meant for more senior officers. This undermines diplomatic readiness as junior officers handle duties

without adequate preparation and experience and senior diplomatic leaders spend more time assisting junior officers.

I urge the Department to follow GAO's recommendation to fill hardship post positions with at-grade officers and thoroughly evaluate the incentives that it offers to FSOs considering these assignments.

Foreign language gaps aggravate the staffing shortfalls and are limiting the effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy. According to GAO, 73 percent of Foreign Service Officers serving in Afghanistan and 57 percent of FSOs serving in Iraq do not meet the language proficiency requirements of their positions. One number that especially troubles me for strategic reasons is the 40 percent language shortfall among FSOs serving in the Near East and South and Central Asia.

This is the third time this decade that GAO has recommended that the State Department take a strategic and systematic approach to addressing its language shortcomings. I believe the Department needs to fully commit to a strategic effort that involves its senior leadership and produces the meaningful performance measures and objective language proficiency analysis that GAO has called for.

The State Department is not alone in its struggle for language proficiency. As a Nation, the United States lags far behind other nations in foreign language proficiency, with less than 10 percent of its citizens being able to speak another language fluently. While the State Department needs a strategy for addressing its language shortfalls, the Nation as a whole needs one too. We need more Americans both inside and outside of government to have the language skills that will support our national security and economic stability.

Earlier this year, I reintroduced the National Foreign Language Coordination Act to address our government-wide language gaps. This bill would require the appointment of a National Language Advisor, the formation of a National Foreign Language Coordination Council, and the development of a National Foreign Language Strategy. Leadership in this effort must be comprehensive, as not one sector of government, industry, or academia has all of the needs for language and cultural competency or all of the solutions.

The Obama Administration and the State Department understand the need and have requested funding for hundreds of additional Foreign Service Officers. This growth in officers will provide sufficient staff and resources to allow for long-term foreign language training and other professional development without interfering with the Department's operations.

But as we saw earlier this decade, with the former Secretary of State Colin Powell's Diplomatic Readiness Initiative, these personnel and training gains can be quickly depleted if the strategic situation changes and long-term strategic workforce planning and resourcing are not firmly in place.

I look forward to hearing more about the issues affecting diplomatic readiness. We are fortunate that momentum is on our side and that there is a broad consensus that our Foreign Service needs to be supported.

Let me now call on Senator Voinovich for his opening statement. Senator Voinovich.

#### **OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR VOINOVICH**

Senator VOINOVICH. First of all, Mr. Chairman, I am deeply grateful that you are holding this hearing, as you have held hearings since you have been the Chairman of this Subcommittee.

I have been very concerned about the management of the State Department. I was a member of the Foreign Relations Committee and got involved with Colin Powell and Dick Armitage about the management of the Department, the human capital challenges that it faced, and the concern I had for the esprit de corps within the Department.

When Secretary Rice took over, I was very concerned whether or not we would continue the effort that was made by Colin Powell and by Armitage, and unfortunately, it wasn't. I think we fell behind on some of the things that should have been done, and at the same time we were doing that, our public diplomacy also hit its lowest level.

I think with the election of President Obama, we have a new lease on life in terms of our public diplomacy, but our smart power must be supported by the infrastructure in the State Department.

So I just thank you, Senator Akaka, for what you have done. Last year, this Subcommittee held several hearings examining the impact of chronic understaffing. At that time, one out of every five employees held a job designated for a more experienced person. The State Department had identified a training and readiness gap of 1,030 positions, about 15 percent of its workforce.

After that hearing, Congress received the American Academy of Diplomacy's report, "A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future," which found that the State Department lacked the people, competencies, and funding to meet the U.S. foreign policy demands effectively. And that report, which we shared with Secretary Clinton before her confirmation, called for an increase of more than 4,000 employees in the Department by 2014, accompanied by a significant investment in training. As Secretary Gates observed, we faced a situation that no longer could be ignored because of our reliance on hard power.

The Commission on Smart Power emphasized the fact that our success in public diplomacy depends in large part upon building long-term people-to-people relationships. Nine months into office, the Administration, through the leadership of Secretary Clinton and General Jones, has rightly focused on strengthening our smart power. Our best military strategies will do little to meet new realities and emerging challenges without the personnel to improve our global posture through diplomacy.

Congress heard the message and I believe will continue its effort to provide for an increase in personnel and enact a permanent solution to the pay gap facing junior employees assigned to overseas posts. I applaud Secretary Clinton's efforts to rebuild our diplomatic corps and know our Nation will benefit from the men and women who have joined the Foreign Service, motivated by the ideals of public service. I am pleased she recognized the importance

of the Deputy Secretary for Management Position, and I am encouraged by Jack Lew's efforts.

I would like to say, Senator Akaka, I was with Ben Cardin and went to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) meeting in Lithuania, and then I traveled for a day up to Latvia. It is just unbelievable how happy the people in the State Department are that we finally recognized the locality pay situation that they face and I think it is really important that we understand how important it has been to them and try to make sure that we talk to the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator John Kerry, about enacting a permanent solution.

So many of the challenges that we face are ones we had not anticipated. However, additional resources are a part of the solution. Our increased investment and growing overseas presence requires more careful attention to be given to the type of strategic planning required to make measurable progress in our diplomatic readiness. Although it may be tempting to rush personnel to post, the opportunity to rebuild the Foreign Service doesn't come along too often. Otherwise, we diminish our ability to foster democratic principles that will affect both our children and our grandchildren.

Each of us are gathered in this room today because we know that strengthening our diplomatic corps is critical to ensuring American national security and economic vitality. While some might tire at the thought of crafting a remedial strategic plan, we all know that which gets measured gets done. I am hoping, Mr. Chairman, that we get a plan from the State Department with some measurable goals and, of course, metrics, so that there is no difference of opinion between the Government Accountability Office folks and the State Department—which we have seen too often. We come to a meeting and the Government Accountability Office says one thing, the State Department says another, and I always say to them, why don't you just get your heads together and try to work something out, agree on a plan, agree on the goals, agree on the metrics, and we can make music.

So I am hoping that as a result of this hearing, that we will maybe see that plan so that 6 months from now, the Chairman of this Subcommittee and I, can see how the State Department is doing, and also during that period of time have you give us a chance to see, if there are some things that we can do to help. That is what we are here for. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Senator Voinovich.

And now, I want to again welcome our panel and to introduce you. Nancy J. Powell, who is the Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources at the Department of State, and Jess T. Ford, the Director of International Affairs and Trade at the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

It is the custom of this Subcommittee to swear in all witnesses and I would ask you to please stand and raise your right hand.

Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give the Subcommittee is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?

Ms. POWELL. I do.

Mr. FORD. I do.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Let it be noted for the record that the witnesses answered in the affirmative.

Before we start, I want you to know that your full written statements will be part of the record. I would also like to remind you to please limit your oral remarks to 5 minutes.

Ms. Powell, will you please proceed with your statement?

**TESTIMONY OF NANCY J. POWELL,<sup>1</sup> DIRECTOR GENERAL OF  
THE FOREIGN SERVICE AND DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RE-  
SOURCES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Ms. POWELL. Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member Voinovich, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to address the Department of State's efforts to meet the staffing and foreign language challenges we face as we strive to meet our Nation's foreign policy objectives.

I appreciate your interest in the issues raised by the two GAO reports we are considering today. The Bureau of Human Resources worked closely with the GAO teams over a period of months and welcomed their recommendations. The Bureau has the critical responsibility of strengthening American diplomacy through our people.<sup>1</sup>

As you stated, our principal task is ensuring that we have the right people with the right skills in the right places at the right time. We are very grateful that Congress has appropriated funds to improve our ability to accomplish this mission in a highly dynamic global environment. I am confident that these resources have set us on the right path to address the diplomatic challenges of today and tomorrow. That said, we have much catching up to do, as reflected in some of the GAO's findings.

We know that we must continue to reach out beyond the embassy to influence public opinion and expand our diplomatic presence where our interests are most at stake. We have increased the number of positions at difficult, potentially dangerous posts that are essential to our foreign policy objectives. We have also increased the language designated positions by 33 percent since 2002.

While our mission has grown considerably over the past 10 years, our staffing has not kept pace. Due to a lack of resources, we have had to make difficult decisions as to which positions to fill and which to leave vacant, whether to leave a position empty for the months it takes to train a fully language qualified officer or sacrifice part of or all of the language training. These have not been easy choices. We prioritize as dictated by our foreign policy goals. As a result, we have fully staffed high priority posts, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but have not been able to meet all the needs of other posts or even of our Washington headquarters.

Fortunately, that is beginning to change. With the additional hiring authorized by Congress, we launched Diplomacy 3.0 in March 2009 and expect to bring on board 1,200 new Foreign Service and civil service employees above attrition in fiscal year 2009. With your continued support, we will hire another 1,200 more in fiscal

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<sup>1</sup> The prepared statement of Ms. Powell appears in the Appendix on page 33.

<sup>1</sup> The GAO reports referred to appear in the Appendix on pages 68 and 116 respectively.

year 2010. This is the first step in achieving a downpayment on Secretary Clinton's goal to increase the size of the Foreign Service by 25 percent by 2013.

Our professionals are working to ensure that these new employees will be fully prepared to meet the challenges at hand and trained to pursue their work as effectively as possible. As these much-needed new hires, and those yet to come, are trained and move into positions, the system should come into alignment and the gaps in diplomatic staffing should be reduced. That is our goal, and, I am sure, yours, as well.

Many of the issues raised by GAO are directly related to these staffing shortages. Additional staffing will enable us to begin filling vacancies at posts as well as ensure our employees can complete the training they need to most effectively fulfill our mission.

Approximately two-thirds of our Foreign Service posts are now designated as hardship posts, a considerable increase from 32 years ago when I joined the Foreign Service. In addition, more than 900 positions are designated as unaccompanied or limited accompanied for reasons of hardship or danger, an increase from just 200 such positions in 2001.

With insufficient officers to fully staff all of our posts, we have had to prioritize which positions to fill and which to leave vacant. We value service at hardship posts, and I am proud to say that our dedicated employees continue to step forward. We agree with GAO that we can better assess the impact of our individual incentives and allowances and are seeking more effective methods to do so. I would like to emphasize that many of these incentives may not be quantifiable, but we will be working to try to take a look at all of them.

We appreciate that GAO acknowledged our success in staffing Afghanistan and Iraq, the two unaccompanied posts that are among our highest foreign policy priorities. We also agree with GAO that the Department should link all of its efforts to meet foreign language requirements. We are in the process with a working group that I have established in the last 2 weeks to put together a more strategic look at the language staffing needs and our training capabilities.

It is appropriate that we are reviewing these two GAO reports together, and they come at a most welcome time. The new State Human Resources (HR) Department leadership team looks forward to using these reports to help guide our efforts to address our staffing and readiness challenges.

On behalf of the State Department, I want to again thank the Congress for the resources provided through Diplomacy 3.0 that are beginning to allow us to address our human resource needs and encourage you to continue that with the 2010 budget.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Ambassador Powell.

Mr. Ford, will you please proceed with your statement?

**TESTIMONY OF JESS T. FORD,<sup>1</sup> DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRADE, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE**

Mr. FORD. Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to discuss U.S. diplomatic readiness, in particular, the staffing and foreign language challenges facing the Foreign Service.

The State Department faces an ongoing challenge in ensuring that it has the right people with the right skills in the right places overseas. In particular, the State Department has had a long, difficult time of staffing its hardship posts, many in places that are difficult to work, such as Beirut and Lagos, Nigeria, where conditions are difficult, sometimes dangerous, and living conditions can be extreme. But many of them also need a full complement of staff because they are part of our foreign policy priorities.

The State Department has also faced persistent shortages with staff in critical language areas, despite the importance of foreign language proficiency in advancing U.S. foreign policy and economic interests overseas.

My statement today is based on two GAO reports which were issued 2 days ago. I am going to briefly summarize them.

We found that despite a number of steps taken over the years, the State Department continues to face a persistent staffing and experience gap at hardship posts, as well as notable shortfalls in foreign language capabilities. A common element of these problems has been a longstanding staffing and experience deficit which has both contributed to the gaps at hardship posts and fueled the language shortfall by limiting the number of staff available for language training.

The State Department has undertaken several initiatives to address these shortfalls, including multiple staffing increases intended to fill the gaps. However, the Department has not undertaken these initiatives in a comprehensive and strategic manner. As a result, it is unclear when the staffing and skill gaps that will put our diplomatic readiness at risk will close.

I am going to cite some of the numbers in our reports. As of September 2008, the State Department had a 17 percent average vacancy rate at its greatest hardship posts overseas. Posts in this category include such places as Peshawar, Pakistan, and Shenyang, China. This 17 percent vacancy rate was nearly double the average vacancy rate at posts with no hardship differential.

About 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at the posts with the greatest hardship are filled with officers at grades below the requirement. For example, over 40 percent of the officers' positions in Iraq and Afghanistan were filled by Foreign Service Officers at grades below the assignment requirements.

In the area of foreign language, 31 percent of Foreign Service Officers did not meet the foreign language requirement for their position. Forty percent of them in Near East, South, and Central Asia did not meet the requirement. As you noted in your opening statement, 73 percent in Afghanistan and 57 percent in Iraq did not meet the language requirement. Over half of the State Depart-

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<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Mr. Ford appears in the Appendix on page 39.

ment's Foreign Service specialists do not meet the foreign language requirement, and that is 740 people.

Mr. Chairman, this has serious implications for our diplomatic readiness. During our overseas field work and in conversations with a number of former and current senior officials at the State Department, we found that staffing inexperience and foreign language gaps diminish diplomatic readiness in several ways, including decreasing our ability to get good reporting coverage, loss of institutional knowledge, and general experience in conducting our foreign policy overseas.

To cite a couple of examples, in Russia, there was a vacant position there because the officer left for a tour in Afghanistan, and as a consequence, according to officials there, the vacancy slowed negotiations between the Russians and the U.S. Government, and the Russians regarding military transit to Afghanistan. Consular officials in other posts we visited cited language skill gaps that indicated that they were not sure whether they made appropriate adjudication decisions on visas. We had a number of other examples which we cited in our reports, but I won't go into them now.

Mr. Chairman, the State Department is taking actions to address many of these gaps. You have just heard the Director General talk about some of the things that they are doing to address issues in our report, so I am not going to go over those, but there are two key findings in our report that I want to touch on.

First, we believe the State Department needs to systematically evaluate its incentive programs to staff hardship posts. The financial incentives cost millions of dollars every year, but the State Department has not evaluated whether these financial incentives have been effective. We cited in our report that the State Department did not comply with a 2005 Congressional requirement to report on the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay to fill difficult positions. The State Department has also not evaluated its non-financial incentives, such as promotion consideration and shorter tours of assignments. Without full evaluation of hardship incentives, the Department cannot obtain valuable insights that could help them guide resource decisions and address some of the gaps that I cited earlier.

The second major issue in our language report is that the State Department has not developed a comprehensive, strategic approach to dealing with its foreign language requirements. The State Department's workforce and other planning documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, or milestones for reducing the foreign language gap. Moreover, as with the case of hardship post staffing, the State Department has not assessed the Foreign Language Incentive Programs to determine whether they are attracting sufficient staff to meet their foreign language needs.

We made several recommendations in our report to address these two problems. Mr. Chairman, I am going to stop here and would be happy to answer any of your questions.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Mr. Ford.

Ambassador Powell, the American Academy of Diplomacy recommends that the State Department's priorities for allocating all new personnel should be to first fill existing gaps and vacancies

and then move forward with establishing training positions. How does the Department plan on allocating its increased number of Foreign Service Officers?

Ms. POWELL. Mr. Chairman, with the Diplomacy 3.0 personnel that have come in during this fiscal year, we have taken care of the gaps and vacancies that were appropriate at that level for our entry-level people. The positions that had been frozen are being thawed this year. They will not be frozen. Where an entry-level person or an arrangement could be made for a mid-level person to take a more senior position, we have moved it down, and we have been able to use the new hires this year to close most of those gaps at those levels.

Second, we are now in the process, since I came on board, of looking at new positions that will be created for the entrants coming in, starting in January next year. We are in the process of working with our posts, with our regional bureaus, and with others in the State Department to take the Secretary's foreign policy priorities, to take the needs that had been identified in our planning documents over the past 3 years, and to take a look at our training needs, particularly for language, and then ask each of these participants in the process to present us with their list of proposed positions based on the fact that in January, there will be approximately 200 positions, and then in June, there will be approximately 300 positions.

We will be reviewing the first tranche of those to see if they have met those criteria starting right after the first of October. We hope to have those assignments made in early January with the class that is coming in at that time, and then throughout the fiscal year 2010.

Senator AKAKA. Ambassador, in your response to GAO's report findings, the State Department indicated that it will begin to close language gaps in 2011. Also, according to your written testimony, the State Department plans on significantly reducing its mid-level experience gap by 2012. How long will it take before the State Department can expect to fully eliminate both its language and mid-level experience gaps, and does the Department have a strategy in place to do so?

Ms. POWELL. This is what we are trying to develop with Diplomacy 3.0 as we create these new positions. I don't have a precise answer to your question, partially because one of the things we are dealing with is the group from the mid-1990s when we had very little hiring. We were below attrition. That is going to continue to follow through their careers. That right now is at the mid-level. It will continue to go.

We anticipate that those who have followed over the past few years will be entering into the mid-level years, as indicated in the testimony and in the response, starting in 2012 in particular. Using the training float or the training positions that we anticipate being created starting this next year with fiscal year 2010 money and positions, many of those people will not reach post for approximately a year. They are going into hard language training. Some of the mid-level training is, in fact, for 2 years. So you will see improvements in the numbers, but it is going to take some time be-

cause of the length of training for our hard and super-hard languages.

Senator AKAKA. Ambassador, in 2006, the Bush Administration launched the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) in response to the findings of the Department of Defense National Language Conference. NSLI was to shore up our national security language needs by coordinating efforts through the Departments of State, Defense, and Education, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. While I support the intent of NSLI, I felt that it was too limited to be truly effective.

Can you tell me if NSLI is continuing in this Administration and if coordination among agencies is being expanded to address the government's language needs?

Ms. POWELL. Mr. Chairman, this is the first time I have heard of NSLI. I will have to go back and get you details. I apologize, but it is something I don't know the answer to.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Will you please do that?

Ms. POWELL. I will do that.

Senator AKAKA. Yes. Ambassador, we will look forward to that.

Mr. Ford, in your report on the State Department's language capabilities, you state that there is a widely-held perception among FSOs that the State Department does not adequately account for time spent in language training when evaluating officers for promotion. This could inhibit the improvement of the State Department's language capabilities. Could you please elaborate on this perception and steps the Department could take to correct it?

Mr. FORD. Sure. The issue you are referring to, in our conversations with a number of senior former and current State Department officials and with the number of officers we met overseas at all different levels, including junior officers, there is a perception that going away for training for a year or possibly 2 years, in the case of the very difficult languages, is not an incentive for promotion, that the Department tends to value people who are on the job doing their jobs and doesn't give as much credit to people who are in training.

The fact of the matter is, we have not seen any good data from the Department to verify or refute that perception. I can tell you that perception exists among several Foreign Service Officers that we met with in the course of doing our work, but we haven't seen good data from the Department about whether or not, in fact, in their promotion consideration process, people that have, in fact, gone away from training have been fairly treated compared to those who were serving in their positions overseas.

So, yes, the perception is real, but I can't tell you whether or not the data would suggest that it is real, that, in fact, they are being treated fairly or not.

Senator AKAKA. Before I call for questions from Senator Voinovich, let me finish this question by asking Ambassador Powell, I understand that the Department disputed this finding. Would you like an opportunity to address this issue as well as what you are doing to encourage language training?

Ms. POWELL. Mr. Chairman, I would agree that the perception persists. I am hoping that as we finish our promotion cycle—we are almost done with it this month—that I will be able to come back

to you with data that establishes a baseline for us to look at as to how many people who are in training got promoted.

I think there are two things to be considered with this. Most Foreign Service officers who are doing language training understand that they are going to be better officers and be able to perform better as a result of that. That certainly is documented when they get to their assignment. It is part of the precepts of our promotion process of how well and effectively they use their language capabilities. I think our promotion panels take that precept very seriously as they look at it. But I cannot cite for you today statistics to back that up. That would be my perception in terms of the performance that is enhanced by people who have spent time in language training.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you, Ambassador. Senator Voinovich.

Senator VOINOVICH. In my opening statement, I talked about having a strategic plan with milestones and metrics to respond to the recommendation of GAO. The GAO works for the Legislative Branch of the Federal Government. We ask them to go out and do reports and I would like to have in writing a response back from the Department in regard to the recommendations that they have, and if there are some that you feel that aren't relevant or are not correct, I would like to know that. But more important, the ones that you do agree on and what you intend to do about moving forward with them.

I would also like to know to what extent are human capital needs included in the Department's ongoing quadrennial diplomacy and development review. One of the things we found out over the years is that in too many instances, human capital just wasn't even mentioned. Ambassador Powell.

Ms. POWELL. In our formal response to the GAO draft we agreed with the recommendations and have already started to work on the language designated one. We have started a working group to examine the issues that we need to plan strategically and, as I mentioned, we are obviously including this as a very important part of our Diplomacy 3.0. We will put the metrics into that and provide those in our more formal response as a follow-up to the GAO report and in our own planning.

We have been examining the alternatives for looking particularly at the incentives, both for language and for hardship, which was documented in the GAO report. We have been using the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) survey and our own internal employee satisfaction surveys in alternating years as a measure of that. The conclusion that we have come to, I think, which was backed up by the GAO, is that those are not sufficiently detailed. We are looking at what impact the annual OPM survey is going to have on our own survey, the possibility that we may need to devote resources to a study of this in particular, defining in much greater detail what the incentives are and what seems to influence people most.

Senator VOINOVICH. Thank you. As Senator Akaka and I support a permanent legislative remedy to address the locality pay gap for folks overseas, a byproduct of this increase in basic pay is an increase in the cost of existing incentives, such as hardship differentials, which are computed as a percentage of base pay. I know that

Congress is committed to growing our diplomatic strength, but we need reassurance that our limited dollars produce positive gains. What is the cost impact of overseas locality pay to the State Department's budget? Is the State Department reconsidering its existing incentives? And when will the State Department complete its review of the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay incentives?

Ms. POWELL. I would say two things. First of all, a very big thank you to all of those who supported the efforts to work with us on locality pay and all of those who have been involved in it.

I have just come back from a 25 percent differential post when there was no locality pay for the employees under my supervision. They, in essence, got a 2 percent differential for serving in a 25 percent hardship post. This goes a long way in addressing that. They were all there as volunteers, no one was complaining, but it was obviously noted by people.

We will be using the study, particularly using our look at our hardship statistics. I will take back your interest in having a review of what the locality pay difference will make on our budget. I don't have those figures with me.

Senator VOINOVICH. I know I have talked to Senator Kerry about getting something permanent.

The other thing that I would like as part of this overall response to GAO would be to capture in writing the costs and the budget implications of what it is that you want to do, so again we have some kind of idea of what commitments are we going to have to make in order—continued commitments to move forward with this new approach that we are making. I think, too often, what happens during the budget period is that people hold back on expressing themselves as to the money that they are going to need to do their work, and I think that it might be real good to look down the road a year, 2 years, 3 years, maybe 4 years to get it down on paper about what it is that you folks really think you are going to need to get the job done so that gets widely disseminated so everybody gets an understanding that if we are going to do the job that we have asked you to do, that we are going to come back with the money to pay for it.

One of the things that came up in one of our last hearings was the issue of the float. Could you give us a little insight into that? My understanding is that you have got to have enough people so that you can give some time off to folks so that they can go out and get the training and upgrade their skills so that they feel like they are continuing to grow in their job. Could you share with us how that fits in with where you are in terms of the employees that you are trying to bring on?

Ms. POWELL. This is an incredibly important piece. We thought we were capturing that back with the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative under Secretary Powell, as mentioned. Many of those positions have been required to go to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. We now believe that for fiscal years 2009 and 2010, we need approximately 500 positions to be put into the float that will allow people to do language training. We had 300 in 2009 and there will be an additional 200 in 2010.

Some of this may change as we look at specific positions in this review that we are undergoing right now as to which positions may need to be upgraded, what perhaps at the current level is a two-two level, perhaps needs to be a three-three level. With the additional resources, we will have the ability to do that. Some positions weren't designated previously, and we are looking at the ones where we have not been able to meet the necessary level. But we believe these are the ballpark numbers. They will be adjusted as we get the precise assignments.

I would comment that in the course of my career, the shift away from the Romance languages where we did 20 weeks and you could be at a level where you could conduct visa interviews and perhaps 36 weeks got you to a very professional level, those positions, many of them still exist, but many more have been created in the harder languages, where you need a minimum of 44 weeks and quite often 88 weeks to achieve minimum professional capabilities. And so the float will take into account that mix, as well, that these are much longer training periods than for the Romance languages.

Senator VOINOVICH. Could I ask one more question, Senator Akaka—

Senator AKAKA. Go ahead.

Senator VOINOVICH [continuing]. Following up on that. What effort is the State Department making to get out across the country the need for language proficiency to the universities so there is some kind of an incentive say, here are languages that we really need and if you don't have courses in those languages, you ought to think about it. This will prepare your folks that like to go to the private sector as well. We should give them some kind of incentive to set up departments, or in the alternative, where they have them, to go out and recruit some folks to do that.

I know I am very much involved in the nuclear industry and we have been working for the last 7 years to get the universities to start to improve upon their engineering schools so that we have got the people that we are going to need as we increase the number of nuclear power plants in the country, and it is working, because if you get it, you have got a job. I think that is a big incentive.

Ms. POWELL. I would agree, and we are working at it actually from two angles using the same group of people. The State Department has a group of people that we call diplomats in residence, who are our main recruiters on college campuses, but they also work with the political science departments and the deans and others to identify those skills that are going to be important for people to be able to pass the Foreign Service Test.

We have also used an enormous amount of the new media to reach a group of people that use Twitter and Facebook and the Web pages and the blogs to let them know that we have a program that has identified groups of languages—Arabic, Chinese, Indic languages, Iranian languages, Korean, Russian, Turkic languages, Urdu, Uzbek, and Japanese—and that if you come in with a verifiable ability to speak those languages, you get a plus-up on your score in the oral examination. This is a huge incentive. I think that people who want to join the Foreign Service are going to be looking at universities where they can get that training.

We are also looking at that pool of people that allow us to bring people in that we don't have to train for these long periods of time if they have already got a basic understanding. We have also required that they serve one tour as junior officers and then a subsequent tour in one of the places where they can use that particular language.

Senator VOINOVICH. Great. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Senator Voinovich.

According to one of the GAO reports being discussed today, Foreign Service Officers interviewed said that instructors at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) were not well equipped for training beyond the general professional proficiency level. Additionally, my staff reported that Foreign Service Officers they interviewed at overseas posts were concerned about not having the opportunities to continue language training while they were at post and that their training at FSI did not fully prepare them for their job.

Do you have recommendations for how the State Department could improve its foreign language training programs? Mr. Ford.

Mr. FORD. Yes. There are a couple of issues here that we think would bear some further examination by the Department. With regard to the training, the issue is whether or not—when we conducted interviews overseas, a lot of the officers there felt that they would like to get additional training but that they were—in many cases, their duties took them away from the opportunities to get training. Some of them on their own dime would go out and hire local folks there to learn the language, but in many cases, they indicated that the post didn't have sort of a training program that they could use to further their skill from what they had learned at FSI. So that was one issue.

A second issue had to do with the proficiency levels that officers felt they needed to fulfill their responsibilities at the post, and several of them felt that the level of their proficiency that they had obtained from FSI was not sufficient for them to carry out their job as best as they could. For example, a public affairs officer in one of the posts we met with indicated they would like to have a proficiency level up to a four, which is just below fluent, in order to be able to effectively communicate with local government officials and local government people that they were trying to influence through our public diplomacy mechanisms, that they don't have that level of training at FSI in general.

So we didn't recommend in our report that the State Department specifically enhance its training overseas, but I can say based on the anecdotal information we obtained from a number of officers overseas, it is something they should look into in our view. We also think they ought to look into the whole question of proficiency levels for their officers overseas because we had a lot of feedback from officers that they didn't think that the proficiency levels they had were adequate for them to really effectively carry out their job.

Senator AKAKA. Do you wish to comment?

Ms. POWELL. Mr. Chairman, just a couple of comments. I think this is where we find these trade-offs that we have been forced to make over the past few years, that all of us, I think, who have studied hard languages or any language would like to have a higher level of proficiency. We wish we had had more time. But we also

have to recognize at the same time that we have to fill these positions and we have to get the work done. So it is a constant balancing act.

I am not familiar with all of the posts that the GAO teams went to. It is my hope that most of them had post language programs. We certainly encourage every embassy where English is not spoken to have a post language program in which they can enhance their skills. Those who didn't have training before they went to post can get the basics. And certainly, again, you are trading off because you have got a full-time job and you are trying to squeeze in an hour of language a day or several times a week.

The Foreign Service Institute has really taken up the technical challenge over the past few years and greatly enhanced what it can offer online now. This is to our employees and to their eligible family members, and this has been a big benefit for particularly getting a jump on an assignment. If you know that you are going to Peshawar on your next assignment, you can begin to study Urdu on your own at your previous post or you can brush up on it if you had it earlier. These are available to all employees.

As I noted, part of the Diplomacy 3.0 exercise that we are engaged in right now is to ask each of our regional bureaus to look at their designated language positions, identify those where a higher proficiency might be warranted now that we have the potential for providing that training without taking the position out of the job market. So I think we will see some of them upgraded as a result of the float being created.

Senator AKAKA. Ambassador, you testified that the State Department is seeking additional incentives and allowances to help fill hardship posts. Please elaborate on what incentives you need, including whether Congressional action is needed to help you do that.

Ms. POWELL. The reference was to some of the other things other than just the hardship allowance. We found, for example, in filling our positions in Afghanistan and Iraq that many people have been attracted to these because we have linked that assignment to a follow-on assignment. They know when they bid on this job that they are then going to go on to a designated position. That has been important. We are finding that the student loan program for some of our younger officers, where if they serve at a 20 percent or higher differential post, the repayment of some of their student loans is a major incentive.

The other thing that I was referring to was that I think many of these are intangible. We find still a huge number of people who are doing this out of a sense of patriotism and duty, a real feeling in hardship posts that you are making a difference and people very much appreciate that. I, for one, like the sense of community that comes at some of these smaller posts and I, in my career, sought those kinds of posts.

Many of them do it because they have additional responsibilities, and I recognize there is a trade-off here. This is the experience factor. But if you want to stretch yourself and have a greater sense of responsibility, you can do it at the hardship posts in many cases. For many of them, it is pursuing an area of expertise. In my own case, South Asia. All of our South Asian posts are hardship posts, so it required me to serve at those posts.

I think as we look at the incentives, we are going to have to factor in these things that are also spurring people to take these assignments. They look to the hardship pay in many cases as a way of offsetting—or the danger pay—those instances where they have been ill as a result of living in a very polluted environment. They have wondered if the motorcycle coming up along the motorcade is going to be the one with the bomb in it or not. All of those things are seen as being compensated for by our differential payments, but may not have been the incentive for many people.

Senator AKAKA. Senator Voinovich, any further questions?

Senator VOINOVICH. Yes. Ambassador Powell, GAO found that the State Department's designated language proficiency requirements do not necessarily reflect the actual language needs of its overseas posts. They reported officers who met the requirement for their position frequently stated their proficiency level is not always enough for them to do their jobs. They have described some of the folks saying, it is enough to get by. Frankly, I ask the same question wherever I go and that is what I get. I am not proficient, but I have enough to get by.

Has the Department really looked at this? In many instances, when I meet people from other countries, I find they are very proficient in English. These countries are very fortunate in that they start kids in kindergarten, first grade, in English language instruction. It seems to me as you look at the number of overseas posts there may be certain areas where States will need more skilled people where English proficiency is low.

And then it seems to me that in those areas with higher rates of English proficiency that you would have fewer language speakers, hopefully, one position would be the ambassador or the consul general because I think so often you miss the nuances of things if you don't have somebody that really has the language skills. Have you done that kind of an analysis?

Ms. POWELL. There is an annual review that begins at post level. I have been on the other end of it and looking at which positions in my missions I felt needed to be language designated. I have always had a consultative process with those officers who had studied, whether they had enough, whether they thought that they had wasted their time and the government's money in acquiring the language. Quite often, there is a give and take on this. But it is an annual review. It is then brought back to the Department. Each of the regional bureaus responsible for the missions abroad presents HR with a consolidated list.

As I mentioned, we are trying to do a much deeper dig this year, asking the posts and the bureaus to really look at this and see if they need to expand the number of positions, if they need to up the level.

At the same time, we are also taking a look at a new concept in language as to whether or not we need to have the same reading and speaking skills at the same level. I know in my own case, if I had spent a little more time learning to speak Urdu, I think I would have been more effective than all of the time I spent learning to read it. I didn't really need the reading level unless I was going to get to the four or five level. I had people on my staff who could help me with the reading. The speaking, I spent an incredible

amount of time learning to read at the three level that might have been better used to get me to the four level on the speaking side.

We are taking a look at that concept. It is a new one. We would need to look at the compensation and how you determine which positions—in some of our consular positions, it is very important that you be able to read because you have got to look at the documents that people bring. But for a political officer, it may not be quite as important to have the reading skills that are very difficult to acquire. So that is another area that we are looking at right now. It would be part of our strategic review as recommended by the GAO. It would include that as part of it.

Senator VOINOVICH. I call that working harder and smarter and doing more with less.

This is just an interest of mine. I would think from a public diplomacy point of view that having people that are proficient in the language of the country in which they are located is a very positive thing, in addition to being able to communicate better, but just in terms of flattering individuals, that you paid enough attention to their country that you have someone that could speak the language.

I studied Russian for 3 years in undergraduate school and I still remember a little bit of it. It is amazing how just a few words make a big difference with some folks.

But would you care to comment on that aspect of it in terms of, people being a little bit more receptive because you think enough of them to have someone that can speak the language?

And the other issue that I would like to raise, and probably you won't respond to it, but I have always been concerned that we send these political ambassadors all over the world and in most cases none of them speak the language of the country. I thought it might be a good idea that maybe you would put a qualification out there, if anybody wants to be a political ambassador, that they had better know the language of the country.

I will never forget, we had someone in Ohio that could speak—what is it in the Netherlands, Dutch? Yes. A really good guy, and somebody else got the job and he was really offended. He could have made a good ambassador. If you would care to comment on that and the other question.

Ms. POWELL. Let me take the first one first. Certainly, the ability to—even if what we call a courtesy level, of being able to say the greetings, to say thank you, will open an incredible number of doors and ears to you. Obviously, if you can do it at a more senior and professional level—I just watched a former Peace Corps volunteer who came and worked with us in Nepal who was able to conduct radio interviews, explain complex visa regulations in Nepali. It made all the difference in the world. But even my ability just to say a few sentences, to be able to talk to people.

I think we are seeing a world in which we are going in two directions. The number of English speakers is expanding enormously. The ability of people around the world to use the Web, to use CNN, and the English language media has expanded greatly. At the same time, we have a desire not to be just communicating with those people who only have English language skills and the desire to reach out to the population that may not be comfortable in English

or have access to a television that has CNN on it. So it is a constant balancing act of using our resources appropriately to reach those audiences that don't have English, but also using those technical means where you can use English and we don't have to train someone in very complicated foreign languages.

I would say on the presidential appointees, they are presidential appointees. My responsibility is to help get them ready. We certainly, to the extent possible, offer them language training before they go to post. Obviously, most of them don't have the length of time. But I think—I get a weekly update of which ones are in language training. Many of them take advantage of it while they are waiting for their Senate confirmation process, their security papers to clear, and I think have those courtesy levels by the time they get to post if they at all can do it.

Senator VOINOVICH. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Senator Voinovich.

I want to thank our panelists for your responses. Your responses have been valuable to us this afternoon. I want to say that we want to try to address this as quickly as we can.

So again, thank you so much for being here. We may have some additional questions for you and some comments from other Members that we will include in the record. Thank you.

I would ask our second panel to please come forward.

[Pause.]

I want to welcome the second panel of witnesses. They are Ronald E. Neumann, President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, and Susan Johnson, President of the American Foreign Service Association.

As it is the custom of the Subcommittee to swear in all witnesses, will you please rise and raise your right hand?

Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give the Subcommittee is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?

Mr. NEUMANN. I do.

Ms. JOHNSON. I do.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Let the record note that the witnesses responded in the affirmative.

Before we start, I want you to know that your full written statements will be made a part of the record and to remind you to limit your oral remarks to 5 minutes.

So, Ambassador Neumann, will you please proceed with your statement?

**TESTIMONY OF RONALD E. NEUMANN,<sup>1</sup> PRESIDENT,  
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF DIPLOMACY**

Mr. NEUMANN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich. I have submitted the testimony of my colleague, Ambassador Tom Boyatt, and he and I agreed that I speak for us both.

Our report of last October, "A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future," clarified the dire shortages in human and financial resources faced by the foreign affairs agencies. My colleagues and I would

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement by Hon. Thomas D. Boyatt submitted by Mr. Neumann appears in the Appendix on page 50.

like to thank you, Senator Akaka and Senator Voinovich, for your interest, support, and direct participation in carrying out that study. We are likewise grateful to Joel Spangenberg and Jennifer Hemingway for their advice and participation in that.

Progress has been made in the last 2 years by both Democrats and Republicans in fixing the problems we documented. Your support and that of the Subcommittee, has been critical to this process and will be vital in the months ahead.

I now turn to questions you asked us. First, you asked about experience gaps. We believe elimination of staffing gaps and the filling of vacancies is the first priority in using increased personnel, but cannot alone solve the experience gaps. These are more complicated. We know the Director General and her staff are working on how to bridge the gap between recruitment at the bottom and building the necessary levels of expertise. We hope the Congress will support creative solutions, such as utilizing retired officers. I recognize that there are concerns about allowing retired officers to double-dip, and that is why I suggest that flexibility could be time limited to focus specifically on immediate needs until experience can be expanded to meet numbers in the professional service.

In particular, I want to note a specific idea that Ambassador Boyatt and I expressly endorse but neglected to include in our prepared testimony, and that is the expansion of the definition of personnel under Section 1603(5) of the Reconstruction and Stabilization Civilian Management Act of 2008, which is—I won't bother with the full public title. As currently legislated, only civil service and Foreign Service can be members of the Civilian Response Corps (CRC). This limitation prevents our partner agencies, USAID in particular, from recruiting personnel service contractors (PSCs) and Foreign Service nationals as members of the stand-by component.

Both PSCs and FSNs have extensive experience in stabilization crises that would be of tremendous value to the CRC. By expanding 1603 to add FSNs and PSCs to the definition, we will be able to realize a more robust stand-by component.

You have my full testimony, but in closing, let me focus particularly on the Academy's recommendations of language positions which occupied so much of the first panel and your discussion. The situation is awful, as the GAO is independently documenting, and it is going to take time to repair. We strongly need new positions. We have for years faced the choice of losing capacity in current operations to train or maintain current operations and losing future capacity.

That is why we have recommended a training float and why the progress made this year must be sustained in the future. I think as we look at this over time, we are going to have to go beyond language skills, as well, and look at the broader gamut of professional training, which our military colleagues do so well, and we, never having had the opportunity to do any, don't.

But on language skills, Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich, the skills and capacity we discuss are not simply esoteric demands of the striped-pants set. They are basic to our ability to serve the Nation and sometimes to survival itself. Ambassador Boyatt recounted in his prepared testimony how language was critical to his

mission and keeping him alive in Cyprus. I would like to end with an anecdote from Iraq.

I had probably the last conversation with the Iraqi sheiks in Fallujah before the very bloody second battle of that name. I had the Marine Division Commander's interpreter, the best we had, and I stopped him three times because he was leaving out a critical point that he just didn't understand. Fortunately, my Arabic was sufficient to note the lack. I wonder how many people we have killed because we think we have told them something that they, in fact, have never heard.

We have to have the language skills to fill this gap, and this is going to take time.

Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich, thank you both very much for the opportunity to record my views on these critical matters you are discussing today. Your support over the last 3 years as the Foreign Affairs Council and the Academy have worked to overcome the problems of an understaffed and dangerously weakened diplomatic capacity have been enormously appreciated and served this Nation very well and I will be pleased to take your questions.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Ambassador Neumann.

And now, Susan Johnson, will you please proceed with your statement?

**TESTIMONY OF SUSAN R. JOHNSON,<sup>1</sup> PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION**

Ms. JOHNSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Voinovich. On behalf of the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) and the employees of all of our member agencies, I both welcome and thank you for this opportunity to speak before this Subcommittee on the subject of diplomatic readiness and Foreign Service staffing and language challenges. We deeply appreciate your interest in these issues. And on behalf of our members and all affected, I would like to thank you again for your support for ending the overseas comparability pay inequity.

Diplomatic readiness goes to the very heart of building the strong professional Foreign Service the United States needs to play an active role and effective role in the 21st Century. There is a pressing need for clearer recognition that diplomacy is an indispensable instrument of national security. As Secretary Clinton has often said, if we don't invest in diplomacy and development, we will end up paying a lot more for conflicts and their consequences.

AFSA welcomed and strongly supports the recommendations in the foreign affairs budget for the future. AFSA has long held that the Foreign Service is underfunded and lacks the people and resources to perform its mission effectively. The serious staffing gaps that we face today reflect the consequences of neglect, on the one hand, and expanded mission on the other. The tremendous increase in the scope of the Service's mission caused by the critical staffing demands in Iraq and Afghanistan has brought the situation to a head. Hiring at the State Department and USAID is finally on the upswing, but this momentum will need to be sustained and steps

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Ms. Johnson appears in the Appendix on page 55.

taken to ensure that this sudden and massive intake of new personnel is well managed.

I would like to underscore that AFSA sees a strong case for expanding our Foreign Commercial and Agricultural Services, as well. Their critical functions are often overlooked and should not be.

AFSA strongly agrees with the recommendations in the two Government Accountability Office reports that this hearing is focused on. Staffing shortages are at the root of the problems of unfilled positions and experience gaps and are a strong contributing factor to the language proficiency deficiencies the reports identify. These problems combine to undermine our diplomatic readiness and effectiveness.

We believe that training in critical need and other hard languages should be more closely linked to assignment patterns and career planning. Language proficiencies should enhance, rather than undermine, prospects for promotion. We also urge that basic language training be provided to all Foreign Service personnel assigned overseas, including specialists, to enable them to function more effectively, as well, even in non-language designated positions.

The Department of State has made good faith efforts over the years to identify the right language designated positions and the right levels, but AFSA believes that a comprehensive review of language designated positions is long overdue. It should be undertaken now in light of new global realities and our strategic priorities. It is important to get this right.

AFSA, therefore, strongly supports the GAO recommendations for a full review of the ratings system and identification of language designated positions. We also endorse the GAO recommendations on staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts. We consider the recommendation that the Department develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments to be particularly important, and AFSA would like to participate in some way in an effort to evaluate existing incentives and to identify others.

The results of AFSA's last electronic opinion poll of its members, published in January 2008, suggests that extra pay and benefits are certainly a factor contributing to willingness to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, but so are patriotism and duty, career enhancement, adventure and challenge, and a host of other factors that Director General Powell, Ambassador Powell, identified and spoke to.

It is worth noting that the poll data revealed a widespread perception that the Foreign Service is less and less family friendly, suggesting that incentives to address this deficiency would be well received. And I have in mind here looking again to the military model of Military OneSource, the support given to family members here that are our colleagues in the military enjoy. Often, that is a concern when people are considering assignments to unaccompanied posts for one or more years.

The quality and effectiveness of U.S. diplomacy will surely be impaired if language and staffing gaps are not addressed seriously and persistently, and AFSA welcomes your interest and supports all efforts to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your support. We appreciate very much your leadership on these issues, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Ms. Johnson.

As you know, I asked Ambassador Powell how the State Department plans to allocate its new FSOs. Could you please respond to the State Department's plans for allocating its new FSOs?

Mr. NEUMANN. Go ahead.

Ms. JOHNSON. Well, I would like very much to be able to respond to that in more detail. I do not yet know a lot about the State Department's plans and hope that they will become more transparent or have more detail to them. Right now, I know little more than we heard the Director General say today.

We are, as the American Academy of Diplomacy (AAD) and as Ambassador Neumann mentioned in his testimony now, we are particularly concerned with the experience gap and what kind of a strategy or what plans the Department may have for addressing that.

Senator AKAKA. Ambassador Neumann.

Mr. NEUMANN. We also have a bit of a knowledge gap here, but as we indicated in Ambassador Boyatt's written testimony, we agree that the first priority is to plug the immediate gaps. That is a hemorrhage that has to be dealt with.

We have recommended a balanced approach to proceeding, as much as one can, with staffing positions, or with the new positions in training in long-term training in creation of new positions. There are several different needs. Obviously, the Response Corps is another piece of this and we have got to be able to move simultaneously on all of them.

To that end, we have recommended, and this seems to be very much in consonance with your own thinking, that the State Department prepare a plan for the out years as to how the additional positions that are going to come on board, funding permitting and future requests being made, how those positions would be worked in so that one can see what the picture over several years would look like and then be able both to judge how much progress you are making on individual pieces of that, but at the same time, that would act, in our view, as a way of validating the total requirement for the additional positions.

Personally, I think many of my colleagues are concerned that next year or the year after, as deficit shock really strikes in the Congress, that it may be much more difficult than it has been in this year and last year to maintain the pace and to finish the process of rebuilding the Department's and AID's personnel. If we don't do that, then I believe what will happen will be a repeat of what we have seen before. We will not correct institutional problems. We will start pulling apart whatever corrections we have made in order to fill individual gaps, and so we will have a better situation, but not a repaired one.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. The vacancies and experience gaps at hardship posts need immediate attention to ensure that diplomacy can be carried out effectively. What recommendations would you make to the State Department in immediately addressing these challenges? Ambassador Neumann.

Mr. NEUMANN. I will have a first crack, but Ms. Johnson is part of the active service and I defer to them. But many of the gaps are not a function of incentives or steps but of the simple lack of personnel. And so some of those probably can't be filled immediately, no matter what your plan is. But that takes me back to the question of utilizing retired officers, when actually employees (WAEs), and the like, because many of the gaps are not simply at the junior positions or they are unrealistically junior because positions have been down-rated in order to try to fill them, and then even so, not filled. So there is a knowledge gap that multiplies the effect of the staffing gap.

We are very handicapped in the use of retired officers for reasons which I understand. People are drawing a pension and there is a question of drawing two checks. But what we are getting now is a double-negative. On the one hand, we lack the ability to use the experience. On the other hand, in critical places, we pay contractors a substantial overhead in order to pay the people the money that we don't want to pay them ourselves so that we can still hire them to use them in some way. So the taxpayer is not really benefiting, but the Nation is hurting.

I think we need to examine seriously the limitations on how we can use retired officers. I also believe personally—not speaking for the Academy because we haven't looked at it—that the State Department needs to complete something which has been discussed in the past, and that is a global register for WAEs, for retired officers willing to serve, rather than the Bureau-maintained rosters now, which simply don't give you the most efficient handle on grabbing people.

Senator AKAKA. Ms. Johnson.

Ms. JOHNSON. Well, I would like to thank Ambassador Neumann, because he has answered a lot of the things and made a point that I certainly would like to strongly endorse. We think that this is a way that should be seriously considered in terms of meeting the mid-level staffing gaps.

As Ambassador Neumann said, we simply do not have the mid-level officers, and that is partly because of the consequences of the under-attrition level hiring in the mid-1990s. There is no easy way out except perhaps to look at the solution that he just mentioned, which is to bring back retirees to serve in those positions until this new influx of entry-level folk have gotten the required experience.

And I would like to say with regard to your earlier question, one concern that we are already hearing from the new entrants is they are concerned about cutbacks in training, and the initial training that they get at FSI, which is being cut back from 7 weeks to 5 weeks, and they thought 7 weeks was a bare minimum. So I think this is a concern that the brand new entry-level personnel is already expressing to us.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Ms. Johnson, you stated your concern that long-term language training could disadvantage FSOs from potential promotions. Could you please elaborate on this problem and how AFSA might be able to work with the State Department to address this issue?

Ms. JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Yes, I think AFSA members and I have certainly heard the same sort of feedback that

the GAO officials heard, that Ambassador Powell had also mentioned that she had heard. There is a widespread perception that particularly language training for hard languages that takes a year or two is not an advantage for promotion and in some cases a disadvantage.

Now, unfortunately, I don't think we have any collected statistics or numbers that would verify whether that perception is correct or not, and I think it could be relatively easily done, to take a look at promotion rates over the threshold or ambassadorial nominations or any other thing and take a look at what kind of training they had and did that affect their promotion levels, and what has happened to people who have invested in hard language training. But that perception is out there and we can confirm that from what our members tell us.

Senator AKAKA. Another part to that question was how can AFSA work with the State Department in addressing this problem?

Ms. JOHNSON. We would be happy to work with the Department on a study and analyzing and sort of collecting the facts. And once we know the facts, I think we would be better positioned to come up with recommendations on effective solutions.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Senator Voinovich.

Senator VOINOVICH. Thank you very much for all of your help in this area. Ambassador Neumann, thank you for your leadership. It must be nice to know that after you finished up your report somebody read it and is taking some action upon it.

You had an opportunity to hear some of the questions of the previous panel. I wonder if you both would be willing to, in the event we get this plan that I have asked for in terms of how they intend to implement the recommendations of GAO, and many of them are contained in the recommendation of the American Academy of Diplomacy, to kind of look that over and give us your two cents on what you think about it.

Mr. NEUMANN. The short answer, of course, is yes. I just wanted to tell you, as well, that we feel a sort of godfatherly responsibility for what the State Department is going to do with the new positions they have got. Obviously, we are not in any legal or professional way responsible.

But this has led us in the Academy to think that it may be time for some serious additional reflection on what it means to be professional in the 21st Century. We have had a model, which is sort of a British 19th Century model, that you are going to get an educated person, send them forth, and anything they don't already know, they will figure out. It is not adequate, I think, for the 21st Century, and it isn't just about language training.

Our military colleagues, I think, have gone well beyond us in developing the concept of professional training. I think we, in the diplomatic service, need to be looking at what kinds of professional development one needs aside from work in the career. Some of that, obviously, the core of that is language, but it is more than language. It is how do you deal with the needs of the 21st Century.

I think this is going to be a lot easier to pontificate about than it will be to come up with specific recommendations, and we are only getting ourselves together now. We have not really had a chance to begin talking to the Department and see if they would

welcome such a study, but we hope that we might be a bit of a force multiplier, since I know they are pretty beleaguered in trying to cope with putting out fires as well as looking at the long term and the future.

So we would very much like to look at their response and we, resources permitting, would hope that we might contribute our own views, as well, in a larger context.

Ms. JOHNSON. The answer, of course, for AFSA is also yes. We would be pleased to do what we can to take a look at that and give our two cents.

Senator VOINOVICH. How long is your term in office?

Ms. JOHNSON. Two years.

Senator VOINOVICH. That is good.

Ms. JOHNSON. I hope that is long enough to at least get started and see some results.

Senator VOINOVICH. I am out of here at the end of next year, so I am trying to get as much stuff done as possible that you can put in writing and set your milestones and metrics so you have got something that you can look at, and I think once it is signed off, then you can continue to market it. What I am always worried about is when we get started around here, we get some good ideas, and then interest runs out and it doesn't happen.

I have had lots of talks with General Jones as far back as Brussels 2 or 3 years ago about his ideas in terms of smart power and I think that is the way we need to go. If we are going to get that done, we are just going to have to follow through on these recommendations that we have got that have been made in regard to the State Department.

The issue of annuitants, we got that language passed by the Senate as part of the FY2010 National Defense Authorization Act and we are going to do some work and get it accepted by the House. Ms. Johnson, you could help a great deal on that, your organization, to kind of lobby them and say that we don't object to that.

It is interesting that we have been able to get that language put in. I know, again, I have been working on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for 10 years and that language has really helped a great deal in terms of their problems, because they not only have to replace the people who are retiring, but they have to bring on new people in order to take on the new responsibilities of these combined license applications that are coming in. Being able to bring folks back has been terrific because you are talking about training and you need the people to train these folks.

So I am hoping that we can get that done. Would you like to comment on the importance of that?

Ms. JOHNSON. Well, thank you. Those are all very important things. AFSA will be happy to lobby with whoever we can on the House on this issue.

But I wanted to just step back and say that I think we have all agreed that the United States is facing a particular new set of challenges and we have to take a new look at our institutions and what are the requirements for them to be effective and for the people who staff them. What kind of training and professional education do they need?

AFSA is both the professional association of the Foreign Service and its bargaining unit and union, so we have a dual role and responsibility and we want to strengthen both. And we think that it is important right now that AFSA and the management of the State Department forge kind of a constructive working relationship where we are working together to get some of these things done. They are not easy and they need unity, and so we are looking to sort of recalibrate a little bit the AFSA relationship so that we can be more involved in these studies and processes as they go along, sort of not necessarily only afterward, which takes a longer time.

So we are looking at a number of alliances. We certainly have a close working relationship with the Academy and we want to maybe be a bridge and bring in some of our fellow associations, I guess, who share common goals to work with management as they undertake some of these studies, be able to give our input as we are doing it, not afterwards and reacting to it.

Senator VOINOVICH. That is smart. I think the fact that the Academy is made up of folks who have had experience within the State Department, has been very worthwhile. But the key to it is to try and make sure that your members who are actually out there have input into some of the changes that are made. I have observed over the years as mayor, governor, and here, that so often, the people that really know what needs to be done are never consulted. Somebody comes in and says, this is what we think needs to be done, and then—you have a better idea, I think, of what needs to be done than some new folks that are coming on board.

So if there is anything I can do to move that along, and I am sure Senator Akaka feels the same way, I think it is absolutely essential. How often do you meet with these folks?

Ms. JOHNSON. Well, we have a particular challenge because our folks are spread all over the world. I would say 85 percent of active duty personnel are now members of AFSA, which is higher than it was, and we are looking at ways right now to improve communications with them and to be able to mobilize them on issues that they are concerned about or knowledgeable about, and we are trying to do that through a number of ways.

One of them is through regular and more frequent surveys that we can send to them directly through something called AFSA Net, directly, electronically to their in-box. So we had annual surveys, but now we are looking to supplement those with some specific ones on specific issues.

We are looking at a number of others ways. I won't take your time right now to go into them. But certainly we are interested in improving communication with our members and within the Department and looking at ways to use new technologies to do that more effectively.

Senator VOINOVICH. Well, we would like to move ahead on a permanent overseas locality pay fix. I have talked to Senator Kerry about it. But you know and I know that most of us are so darn busy that unless somebody kind of puts it right in front of our nose, we don't pay attention to it. I think it would be really great if you put together a little program where you would be contacting the members of the Foreign Relations Committee and others here to

talk about how much good this change has made in terms of your folks out there in the field and try to work on that issue and make sure it gets done so that it is not just a one-shot deal and then you build them up and then, whoosh, goodbye.

The other thing is this training thing that you talked about, you are saying you think that they are being shortchanged. Again, I think that is really very important that training get done. Again, you get to the issue of you have got to have the trainers. And if you were able to bring back some folks on a temporary basis that would be able to come in and do that, it would, I think, make a big difference.

Ms. JOHNSON. Thank you. We are concerned with that. As a matter of fact, I have just requested a number of meetings with some of the very people that you have mentioned, both to introduce myself and to talk to them about this issue.

I would like to say something on language training, too. Our members have given us quite a bit of feedback. I went out to the board members in preparation for this hearing to ask them about some of the issues you had raised, and we have 24 people on the board, our governing board of AFSA, and they are in touch with all the different constituencies. I was surprised to see how many of them came back passing on expressions of concern about quality and quantity of language training at FSI, particularly in Arabic. That seems to be an area where more focus is needed and we would like to follow up with the Department on that.

Senator VOINOVICH. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. NEUMANN. Could I add one word on Arabic training, sir, because that is a language with which I have done battle for many years. I think the language won, not me. But it has some particularities that both the Department and, I think, others will have to look at. There is a need for a level of grammatical comprehension to get to top levels. The people I have known over the years who were really good Arabic speakers, like Robert Ford, our current, or past Ambassador to Algeria who is now back in Baghdad for his fourth year, had university language training, and the best people I know in it have gone to university training.

We have a structural problem that I don't know if FSI can fix, which is with a lot of languages, you get to a certain point and then you go work in the country and your language gets better. However, in a lot of the Arab world now, elites speak very good English. If your Arabic isn't fairly good, it actually deteriorates at post because so many of the elites speak good English. They would rather speak Arabic with you if your Arabic is really good, but they don't have the patience if you are still kind of blundering your way along, as many of us are.

So the result is we have to go beyond FSI, I think, when we look at wanting to produce top-quality Arabists. It may be true of other languages, but I know it is true there, that the basic theory of our training isn't meeting the reality in the world.

The other thing is, Senator Voinovich, you were talking about whether you need people—how many people do you need to speak the language. The only thing I would call to your attention is you only have the time to learn languages well when you are a younger officer, not because necessarily—I hope not because your brain is

younger, but the more senior you are, the more pressed you become, the more you are a short commodity for the Department that needs to get you to post, the harder it is to pull you out to do refresher or expansion training, no matter how much the officer would want it.

And you can play with a language. When I was a younger officer, I really enjoyed being out and being able to use it. When I was Ambassador to Afghanistan, I had to be extremely careful that I was clearly understood in anything I said, no matter what the context, and that I clearly understood what people were saying to me. And at that point, it is too serious to be using conversation as a language enhancement. I could do that with my language instructor, I could do it in social chit-chat, but I couldn't afford to be doing it for substantive subjects as I could when I was a younger officer.

So I think these things drive us to need to look at different levels of training and at pushing it out even where the immediate job might not have the same requirement because we can't get it later.

Thank you for letting me make that personal intervention.

Ms. JOHNSON. If I could say one thing, also, on language that a number of our members have raised, and that is in-country training, in the country that you are going to be assigned to, to supplement the basis that you get at FSI. I think a lot of people have found as linguists that they get better results in shorter periods of time by being able to get a basis maybe at FSI and then spend 6 months or something in country not right at the embassy, but studying the language, perfecting it. Certainly, that has been my experience, that produces a better level of proficiency.

Senator VOINOVICH. Send them in 6 months early or something like that and just put them into the bathtub and immerse them in language training.

Ms. JOHNSON. No. They actually would go into a training, continued language training program in that country. There are different variations on that country to country, but no, they would be in a context. But it has multiple advantages because of not only the language skills. They make a lot of contacts. They develop a lot of knowledge about the country, so when they do come into their job, they are markedly more effective than they would have been had they come immediately into the job with a lower language level.

Senator VOINOVICH. Thank you. Thanks, Senator Akaka.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much, Senator Voinovich.

I would like to follow up with Ambassador Neumann and what he mentioned about an officer not being as proficient in another language and the foreign person he is speaking with being proficient in English. Therefore, they might end up having a discussion in English instead.

Due to the staffing shortage at Foreign Service, officers are being sent to post before completing their language training. Due to insufficient training, officers have used locally-employed staff as translators. What are the risks of an over-reliance on locally-employed staff to translate for Foreign Service officers?

Mr. NEUMANN. I am just smiling because I am going to have to contain myself to a short answer here for a question I love.

First is that in many countries, your locally-employed staff has no choice but to report to the local intelligence people. So you cut

off a lot of information. When I first went to Iran—that was before the revolution, so you can tell how long ago that was—initially, I was a little lazy and I had French and I had an interpreter, and then the first Kurdish rebellion of 1974 got going. All the Kurdish areas of the Iranian side were in my consular district and I very quickly realized that I would get so much more working in Farsi, even bad Farsi, than having an Iranian translator in the room because the locals had no idea who the translator might report to besides me, but they were darn suspicious about it. And it was true. I mean, the amount of information I gathered—some of which I wasn't supposed to have access to, like our covert involvement—just ballooned even though I was struggling sometimes with the language.

When you expand beyond our immediate local employees, at least some of whom do have very good language skills, then you get into another whole area of problem that we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, that I have watched repeatedly. We are using people, often Arab Americans or Afghan Americans, who have learned Arab or Farsi, or Pashto, as a kind of kitchen language at home. It is not an educated language, so they are not—they are either not educated in English at a university level or they are not educated in their own language, their native language, at that level.

The result is they are fine for simple interaction, but when you start getting into more complicated conversations and concepts, they often don't actually have the educated vocabulary in one of the two languages, or sometimes in both, to really handle those concepts.

So there are places to use interpreters. I know Ambassador Crocker, who has excellent Arabic, used an interpreter a great deal in Iraq. He used a non-Iraqi interpreter much of the time to get away from the issue of who the interpreter reported to, and he could check the interpreter because his Arabic is good. But he wasn't wholly dependent on the interpreter.

When we start using them as a substitute for doing our own work, we are just hurting every way you can imagine. And again, I am sorry, that is kind of a long answer, but it is a really important question.

Senator AKAKA. Ambassador, the State Department has had to rely on short tours of one year to fill critical FSO positions in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, GAO identified significant language shortfalls for the FSOs who serve in these assignments. As a former Ambassador to Afghanistan, you probably have had to deal with these types of issues firsthand. In your view, how should the State Department ensure that it staffs these posts with FSOs who have the needed language training and experience?

Mr. NEUMANN. Yes, I have been there, done that. We have never managed to do this. Neither we nor the military have ever done this well. We didn't do it well in Vietnam, where we recycled people to different jobs.

We have to bridge between the fact that we cannot—I think we cannot get all the jobs filled at the requisite levels of knowledge and language and length of time and the fact that we must break out of this phenomenon of not 8 years' work in Afghanistan, but one year eight times.

I think we have to begin by recognizing that certain jobs—and some of this—a little bit, I think, may be being done in the State Department. I am not up to date. I know it is being done more in the military, recognizing that a certain number of jobs are going to require levels of both language and experience in the country—the two come together—which need longer periods of service.

Once we accept that requirement and go through the process of designating jobs, I think there are a variety of creative solutions that can work in combination. People can come back for repeat tours. Some people can stay. Some jobs can be 2-year tours. Some people can agree that they will—you can have linked positions where you have a couple of people who spend, say, a 3-year tour swapping out with each other so that you bring back the expertise. You may be swapping them out on 6-month bases, but over 3 years, you are getting the same two people in the same job.

In fairness to the Department, it is extremely hard for a large institution running a complex personnel system to manage this kind of pre-industrial piecework assignment process, but I believe it is really essential to our Nation that we confront this, particularly in a war. It was a huge problem, and the amount I knew—I had more experience than most in the Foreign Service, and having first visited Afghanistan almost 40 years before I ended up there as Ambassador; but I knew a heck of a lot more by the second year than I did the first year. And I drew enormously on a very few people that had even more experience.

So it is a critical, critical need and we need to look at it and not blink and put meeting it in the “too hard” box. We have got to do better.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you. Thank you very much. Senator Voinovich, do you have any further questions?

Senator VOINOVICH. I have no questions. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Mr. Johnson, according to GAO, several State Department human resources officials and Foreign Service Officers expressed their view that the State Department’s designated language proficiency requirements may not reflect the actual language needs of the posts. For example, officers learning Arabic may need an advanced professional level instead of the required general professional level to perform their jobs. Have your members expressed this same concern, and what do you recommend the Department do to make sure language training adequately prepares FSOs for their duties?

Ms. JOHNSON. Mr. Chairman, we have heard from some members on this issue, but we haven’t gone out recently in a more comprehensive way, and perhaps this is something we want to make sure we address in our surveys.

Generally speaking, my own experience has been that the three-three level, or even the three-plus-three-plus level, is not sufficient to be able to do your job at some responsible level in the Department. You can get along. You can talk. You can have conversation. You can understand people. You cannot negotiate. You cannot really deal on, let us say, complex or sensitive matters, I think as Ambassador Neumann was talking about.

So I, myself, have some questions about the designations and what we think what they mean. In a number of instances, as Am-

bassador Neumann was saying, I think the language designation for particular jobs in certain countries probably needs to be a four-four level or something close to that and we have to really pay attention, because, generally speaking, that three-three level is not really professional competency.

I learned Russian. I taught myself Russian. I got to a three-three level. I could do a lot. It was very valuable. I was a better officer as a result. I could not negotiate and do complicated issues in Russian, and that applies for other languages, as well.

So I think that whole system today needs to be recalibrated in light of today's demands, and different for different countries, depending what kinds of issues the United States needs to negotiate with that country. So we have to be a lot less cookie-cutter and more customized, and as Ambassador Neumann said, that is not easy, but I think we need to do it.

Senator AKAKA. Well, thank you.

I want to ask a final question to both of you. The GAO has repeatedly recommended that the State Department develop a comprehensive strategic plan regarding foreign language capabilities. What elements do you believe should be in the State Department's foreign language strategic plan?

Ms. JOHNSON. Well, first of all, we certainly agree, Mr. Chairman, that it would be valuable to develop that sort of strategic plan. So we strongly support the GAO recommendation.

Now, as to what elements, and I am just going to sort of speak right now my own feelings responding to that, I think the elements can be drawn from several of the comments that we have made here this afternoon, that the language training—first of all, our methodology needs to be looked at, and whether it is all at FSI or whether we draw on universities or in-country training.

Then we need to look at who we are training for what. What are we really training this officer to do in that country?

Third, I think we need to look at who we are hiring to do that training. Maybe we also need to look at the range of languages that we are training in and at what levels, because we train in a lot of languages and maybe we need to reconsider that because there are costs associated with all of this.

So, I mean, there are a number of elements that should be addressed in a comprehensive strategy and we would be happy to give further thought to that and get back to you on it or the GAO or the Department. We would like to be involved in some way and to assist the Department in doing that study, that kind of a study.

Mr. NEUMANN. I agree, Mr. Chairman. I think we need to look again at what are we trying to do. That is the starting point. I think we have been hampered over the years because our resources were so few that when we began to talk about things like that, we then had to have a kind of procrustean bed exercise in which we then hammered the result back in to the resource and the form available.

I think now we are getting to a place where we need to do an unconstrained review and the results are going to be very different for different languages, for different countries. We have always, in my experience, had a great reluctance to designate language posi-

tions at the four-four level because that drives another whole level of resources that FSI didn't have.

So I think this exercise probably has to be done really in two parts. One is what are you trying to accomplish, and then the how do you accomplish it so we don't get our feet tangled.

It is an excellent idea. I would only add the caution that it shouldn't become a straightjacket because that needs change. We close posts. We open posts. Proficiencies change. We get into wars. So we should do a plan—we should do a strategic plan. We shouldn't either delude or lock ourselves into the belief that it is going to be a perfect plan. Thank you.

Senator AKAKA. Thank you very much. Your experience and your service, as reflected in your responses, have been very valuable to this Subcommittee and I want to thank you.

We are committed to trying to make a difference in this area, and it is clear to me that this Administration is firmly committed to reenergizing U.S. diplomacy and understands the need to invest in diplomatic readiness. I am hopeful that the State Department will eliminate its language and experience gaps with its planned increase in Foreign Service Officer staffing. It should also commit itself to taking a more strategic approach to meeting its current requirements and preparing to respond to new challenges.

We will keep the hearing record open for one week for additional statements or questions other Members may have. And again, I want to thank you very much for your part in this hearing.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:34 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

**A P P E N D I X**

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**STATEMENT  
OF  
AMBASSADOR NANCY J. POWELL**

**DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE FOREIGN SERVICE AND  
DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**BEFORE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT  
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT  
OF COLUMBIA  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

**HEARING  
ON  
A REVIEW OF DIPLOMATIC READINESS: ADDRESSING THE  
STAFFING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CHALLENGES FACING THE  
FOREIGN SERVICE**

**SEPTEMBER 24, 2009**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to address the Department of State's efforts to meet the staffing and foreign language challenges we face as we strive to meet our nation's foreign policy objectives. I appreciate your interest in the issues raised by the two GAO reports we are considering today, "Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts" and "Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls". We worked closely with the GAO teams, over a period of months, and welcome their recommendations.

The Bureau of Human Resources (HR) has the critical responsibility of strengthening American diplomacy through our people. Our principal task is ensuring that we have the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time. We are grateful that Congress has appropriated funds in the last several years to improve our ability to accomplish this mission in a highly dynamic global environment. I am confident that these resources have set us on the right path to address the diplomatic challenges of today and tomorrow. That said, we have much catching up to do, as reflected in some of GAO's findings.

The last decade has been marked by the growing number of global threats to our security, including international terrorism and crime, trafficking in narcotics and persons, and pandemics that thrive on the inability of failed and failing states to perform even basic sovereign responsibilities. Managing these threats depends as much on strengthening states and societies as on defeating enemies. We know that we must continue to reach out beyond the embassy to influence public opinion and expand our diplomatic presence where our interests are most at stake. Therefore, we have increased the number of positions at difficult, potentially dangerous posts that are essential to our foreign policy objectives. We have also increased the language-designated positions by one-third since 2002.

While our mission has grown consistently over the past 10 years; our staffing has not kept pace. As a result, we have had to make difficult decisions repositioning global staff from one region to another; deciding which positions to fill and which to leave vacant; choosing whether to leave a position empty for the months it takes to train a fully language-qualified officer or curtail part or

all of the language training. These have not been easy choices. We prioritized – as dictated by our foreign policy goals. As a result, we have fully staffed high priority posts such as Afghanistan and Iraq, but have not been able to meet all the needs of other posts, or even some of our Washington headquarters.

Fortunately, that is beginning to change. With the additional hiring authorized by Congress, we launched Diplomacy 3.0 in March 2009 and expect to bring on board 1,200 new Foreign Service and Civil Service employees above attrition in fiscal year 2009. With your continued support, we will hire another 1,200 more in fiscal year 2010. The increase of over 2,400 positions in fiscal years 2009 and 2010 goes a long way to achieving our goal of having the right people with the right skills in the right places at the right time. Regarding the Foreign Service, the increase of almost 1,500 in 2009 and 2010 provides a significant step to achieving Secretary Clinton’s goal to increase the size of the Foreign Service by 25%. Our HR professionals are working to ensure that these new employees will be fully prepared to meet the challenges at hand, and trained to pursue their work as effectively as possible. As these much-needed new hires, and those yet to come, are trained and able to move into positions, the system should come into alignment and the gaps in diplomatic staffing should be reduced. That is our goal and, I am sure, yours as well.

Many of the issues raised by the GAO are directly related to these staffing shortages. The additional staffing levels enables us to fill vacancies at posts as well as ensure our employees can complete the training – language, tradecraft, and other job-related – they need to most effectively fulfill our mission.

#### **Staffing Hardship Posts**

Approximately two-thirds of our Foreign Service posts are now designated as hardship posts, a considerable increase from 32 years ago when I joined the Foreign Service. In addition, more than 900 positions are designated as “unaccompanied” or “limited accompanied” for reasons of hardship or danger – an increase from just 200 such positions in 2001.

With insufficient numbers of officers to fully staff all of our posts, we have had to prioritize which positions to fill and which to leave vacant. This deliberative process, based on our foreign policy priorities, has resulted in full staffing in our most critical posts – which include Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – and shortages elsewhere, including at hardship posts.

GAO has recommended that our positions should be filled by employees at the designated grade level and we agree. However, this has not always been possible. We have a particularly acute staffing gap at our mid-level Generalist grades that resulted from several successive years of hiring rates well below attrition in the mid-1990s, particularly at USIA in the public diplomacy area before State integration. We expect the gap to significantly lessen by 2012 as the 1,474 Foreign Service generalist employees brought in under the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative between FY 2002 and 2004 move into the mid-level positions. In the interim, we are better capitalizing on the significant number of our entry-level employees who are on their second or third professional career. They bring a wealth of experience that, together with several years of Foreign Service background, may enable them to fill stretch positions. For example, we have a former Army colonel who had served as a Defense Attaché and whose previous experience in the military and in our embassies overseas made him a perfect fit for a key political-military assignment in Iraq. Similarly, a former oil executive's understanding of "oil economics" allowed him to quickly provide critical support first on the Iraq desk and subsequently in the field. Likewise, a former immigration attorney may be well-suited to a mid-level consular position where fraud is a serious concern, or a former NGO project manager could be an excellent fit in a position that is engaged in foreign assistance, working closely with local government officials. When this synergy occurs, both the employee and diplomatic readiness benefit.

We value service at hardship posts, and I am proud to say that our dedicated employees continue to step forward. To encourage and support that service, we are thinking creatively. Eligibility to receive student loan repayments, extra pay to serve an additional year or two, and the possibility of professional level employment for qualified family members are among the incentives we have made available in conjunction with an assignment to certain hardship posts, in addition to the usual hardship/danger pay differentials.

We agree with GAO that we can better assess the impact of our individual incentives and allowances and are seeking more effective methods to do so. I would like to emphasize, however, that many of these incentives may not be quantifiable. As someone who spent the majority of my career in hardship posts, I can attest to the allure of the work, the challenges, and the opportunity to make a difference that are unique to many of our hardship posts. We should not overlook the role that these factors play in employee decisions.

We appreciate that GAO has acknowledged our success in staffing Afghanistan and Iraq, two unaccompanied posts that are among our highest foreign policy priorities. These assignments, together with the addition of Pakistan in the current assignment cycle, are made during a separate “season” and volunteers continue to answer the call to service.

#### **Meeting our Foreign Language Needs**

Sustaining the Department’s high standards for foreign language capability—always a crucial component of our diplomatic readiness—has become increasingly challenging. New policy priorities require our employees to enhance their levels of proficiency in languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, which involve at least two years of study to achieve a professional level of fluency. Moreover, the number of language designated positions (LDPs) has increased by 33% since 2002 and, we believe, will continue to rise. I am also looking at how best to build professional level proficiency in those who already have a solid foundation.

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) has expanded its foreign language training capacity to meet this demand and to raise the proficiency of existing foreign language speakers, particularly those staffing our new public diplomacy hubs. Enrollments in full-time Arabic language courses, for example, have almost doubled since 2004. FSI uses domestic and overseas immersion opportunities to supplement classroom training. In addition, to meet increased demand, FSI is also running a two-shift schedule and expanding on-line offerings.

More targeted recruiting can also help address the current challenges, and we are recruiting aggressively for certain critical language proficiency skills at this time. Those with these language proficiencies who pass our stringent Foreign Service Officer written exam are given preference points in the hiring process. Through this program, we have hired over 400 officers since 2004. For current employees, we have incentivized hard and super-hard languages such as Chinese, Pashto and Hindi. Such incentives underscore the value placed by the Department on obtaining capacity in our most challenging and needed languages.

We agree with the GAO conclusion that the Department should link all of its efforts to meet foreign language requirements. HR and FSI recently have formed a working group to develop options. The Department remains committed to supporting our foreign policy priorities by developing robust foreign language skills.

#### **Conclusion**

It seems appropriate that we are reviewing these two GAO reports together – they demonstrate that today’s foreign policy requires us to expand our resources in numerous new directions simultaneously. While we work aggressively to recruit and retain the talented staff needed in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, we also must ensure that our workforce has the skills necessary to be successful in these challenging environments.

The men and women of the State Department are answering their nation’s call to service. They are doing tough jobs in remote areas of the world, and putting their lives at risk for the American people. Secretary Clinton and I are justifiably proud of their record of service, and we are committed to ensuring that they receive all of the training, resources, and support they need to succeed in their important work. Further progress toward Diplomacy 3.0 will allow us to continue to address the shortages created by the policy priorities of recent years. We will continue to strive to staff all of our high priority positions with officers who are ready to communicate with their host country counterparts and otherwise further our mission in the best possible ways.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today and I would be happy to answer your questions.

United States Government Accountability Office

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**GAO**

**Testimony**

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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For Release on Delivery  
Expected at 2:30 p.m. EDT  
Thursday, September 24, 2009

**DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**Persistent Staffing and  
Foreign Language Gaps  
Compromise Diplomatic  
Readiness**

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director  
International Affairs and Trade



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss U.S. diplomatic readiness, and in particular the staffing and foreign language challenges facing the Foreign Service. The Department of State (State) faces an ongoing challenge of ensuring it has the right people, with the right skills, in the right places overseas to carry out the department's priorities. In particular, State has long had difficulty staffing its hardship posts<sup>1</sup> overseas, which are places like Beirut and Lagos, where conditions are difficult and sometimes dangerous due to harsh environmental and extreme living conditions that often entail pervasive crime or war, but are nonetheless integral to foreign policy priorities and need a full complement of qualified staff. State has also faced persistent shortages of staff with critical language skills, despite the importance of foreign language proficiency in advancing U.S. foreign policy and economic interests overseas.

In recent years GAO has issued a number of reports on human capital issues that have hampered State's ability to carry out the President's foreign policy objectives (see appendix I for a complete list of related GAO products). My statement today is based on two GAO reports that were released on September 22.<sup>2</sup> I will discuss (1) State's progress in addressing staffing gaps at hardship posts, and (2) State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

To address these objectives in our two reports, we analyzed key planning documents and other data provided by State; reviewed relevant reports by GAO and other agencies and organizations; and met with a number of State officials from various bureaus in Washington and overseas. We also conducted fieldwork in China, Egypt, India, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia,

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<sup>1</sup>State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives—an additional 5 to 35 percent of basic salary, depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions—to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter. For the purposes of this statement, we refer to these differential pay incentives as hardship differentials. We define posts with no differentials as those where the hardship differential is 0 percent. We define posts with low differentials as those where the hardship differential is 5 or 10 percent. We define hardship posts as those posts where the hardship differential is at least 15 percent. We define posts of greatest hardship as those where the hardship differential is at least 25 percent.

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, GAO-09-874 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009); and GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, GAO-09-955 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

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and Turkey, and convened an expert roundtable of several retired senior State officials, all of whom previously served as ambassadors to hardship posts. We conducted these performance audits in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. See our reports for a complete scope and methodology.

In brief, Mr. Chairman, we found that, despite a number of steps taken over a number of years, the State Department continues to face persistent staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts, as well as notable shortfalls in foreign language capabilities. A common element of these problems has been a longstanding staffing and experience deficit, which has both contributed to the gaps at hardship posts and fueled the language shortfall by limiting the number of staff available for language training. State has undertaken several initiatives to address these shortages, including multiple staffing increases intended to fill the gaps. However, the department has not undertaken these initiatives in a comprehensive and strategic manner. As a result, it is unclear when the staffing and skill gaps that put diplomatic readiness at risk will close.

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### State Faces Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts

Despite some progress in addressing staffing shortfalls since 2006, State's diplomatic readiness remains at risk for two reasons: persistent staffing vacancies and experience gaps at key hardship posts that are often on the forefront of U.S. policy interests. First, as of September 2008, State had a 17 percent average vacancy rate at the posts of greatest hardship (which are posts where staff receive the highest possible hardship pay). Posts in this category include such places as Peshawar, Pakistan, and Shenyang, China. This 17 percent vacancy rate was nearly double the average vacancy rate of 9 percent at posts with no hardship differentials.<sup>3</sup> Second, many key hardship posts face experience gaps due to a higher rate of staff filling positions above their own grades (see table 1).<sup>4</sup> As of September 2008, about 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at posts of greatest

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<sup>3</sup>As of the same date, the average vacancy rate for all hardship posts was 15 percent, as compared to an average rate of 10 percent for all posts with no or low differentials.

<sup>4</sup>We used data from State's GEMS database to calculate rates of staff filling positions above their own grades. Due to limitations in the GEMS data on positions in Iraq, we do not include Iraq in these calculations of staff filling positions above their own grades or in Table 1.

hardship were filled by officers in such above-grade assignments—15 percentage points higher than the rate for comparable positions at posts with no or low differentials. At posts we visited during our review, we observed numerous officers working in positions above their rank. For example, in Abuja, Nigeria,<sup>5</sup> more than 4 in every 10 positions were staffed by officers in assignments above grade, including several employees working in positions two grades above their own. Further, to fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, State has frequently assigned officers to positions above their grade. As of September 2008, over 40 percent of officers in Iraq and Afghanistan were serving in above-grade assignments.

**Table 1: Number and Percentage of Mid-Level Generalist Positions Filled by Officers Working above Grade, as of September 2008**

| Posts with no or low differentials | Hardship posts            | Posts of greatest hardship |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 210 of 1,093 (19 percent)          | 328 of 1,053 (31 percent) | 189 of 551 (34 percent)    |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

**Several Factors Contribute to Staffing Gaps**

Several factors contribute to gaps at hardship posts. First, State continues to have fewer officers than positions, a shortage compounded by the personnel demands of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have resulted in staff cutting their tours short to serve in these countries. As of April 2009, State had about 1,650 vacant Foreign Service positions in total. Second, State faces a persistent mid-level staffing deficit that is exacerbated by continued low bidding on hardship posts. Third, although State's assignment system has prioritized the staffing of hardship posts, it does not explicitly address the continuing experience gap at such posts, many of which are strategically important, yet are often staffed with less experienced officers. Staffing and experience gaps can diminish diplomatic readiness in several ways, according to State officials. For example, gaps can lead to decreased reporting coverage and loss of institutional knowledge. In addition, gaps can lead to increased supervisory requirements for senior staff, detracting from other critical diplomatic responsibilities. During the course of our review we found a number of examples of the effect of these staffing gaps on diplomatic readiness, including the following.

<sup>5</sup>At the time of our visit, Abuja had a 25 percent hardship differential.

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- The economic officer position in Lagos, whose responsibility is solely focused on energy, oil, and natural gas, was not filled in the 2009 cycle. The incumbent explained that, following his departure, his reporting responsibilities will be split up between officers in Abuja and Lagos. He said this division of responsibilities would diminish the position's focus on the oil industry and potentially lead to the loss of important contacts within both the government ministries and the oil industry.
  - An official told us that a political/military officer position in Russia was vacant because of the departure of the incumbent for a tour in Afghanistan, and the position's portfolio of responsibilities was divided among other officers in the embassy. According to the official, this vacancy slowed negotiation of an agreement with Russia regarding military transit to Afghanistan.
  - The consular chief in Shenyang, China, told us he spends too much time helping entry-level officers adjudicate visas and, therefore, less time managing the section.
  - The ambassador to Nigeria told us spending time helping officers working above grade is a burden and interferes with policy planning and implementation.
  - A 2008 OIG inspection of N'Djamena, Chad, reported that the entire front office was involved in mentoring entry-level officers, which was an unfair burden on the ambassador and deputy chief of mission, given the challenging nature of the post.<sup>6</sup>

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**State Has Not Systematically Evaluated Incentive Programs for Hardship Post Assignments**

State uses a range of incentives to staff hardship posts at a cost of millions of dollars a year, but their effectiveness remains unclear due to a lack of evaluation. Incentives to serve in hardship posts range from monetary benefits to changes in service and bidding requirements, such as reduced tour lengths at posts where dangerous conditions prevent some family members from accompanying officers. In a 2006 report on staffing gaps, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its incentive programs for hardship post assignments. In response, State added a question about hardship incentives to a recent employee survey. However, the survey does not fully meet GAO's recommendation for several reasons,

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<sup>6</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy N'Djamena, Chad*, ISP-I-09-02A (Washington, D.C., December 2008). As of December 2008, N'Djamena had a 30 percent hardship differential.

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including that State did not include several incentives in the survey and did not establish specific indicators of progress against which to measure the survey responses over time. State also did not comply with a 2005 legal requirement to assess and report to Congress on the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay from 25 percent to 35 percent in filling "hard to fill" positions. The lack of an assessment of the effectiveness of the danger and hardship pay increases in filling positions at these posts, coupled with the continuing staffing challenges in these locations, make it difficult to determine whether these resources are properly targeted. Recent legislation increasing Foreign Service officers' basic pay will increase the cost of existing incentives, thereby heightening the importance that State evaluate its incentives for hardship post assignments to ensure resources are effectively targeted and not wasted.

Although State plans to address staffing gaps by hiring more officers, the department acknowledges it will take years for these new employees to gain the experience they need to be effective mid-level officers. In the meantime, this experience gap will persist, since State's staffing system does not explicitly prioritize the assignment of at-grade officers to hardship posts. Moreover, despite State's continued difficulty attracting qualified staff to hardship posts, the department has not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of its incentives for hardship service. Without a full evaluation of State's hardship incentives, the department cannot obtain valuable insights that could help guide resource decisions to ensure it is most efficiently and effectively addressing gaps at these important posts.

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### State Faces Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls

State continues to have notable gaps in its foreign language capabilities, which could hinder U.S. overseas operations. As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of officers in all worldwide language-designated positions did not meet both the foreign language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions, up slightly from 29 percent in 2005. In particular, State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions did not meet requirements. Gaps were notably high in Afghanistan, where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, with 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacking sufficient language skills. State has defined its need for staff proficient in

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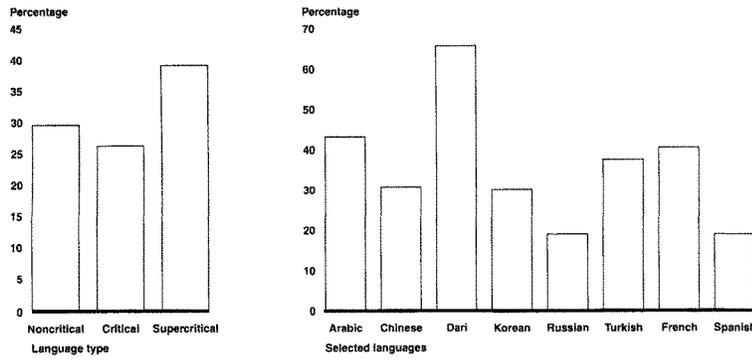
some languages as “supercritical” or “critical,” based on criteria such as the difficulty of the language and the number of language-designated positions in that language, particularly at hard-to-staff posts.<sup>7</sup> Shortfalls in supercritical needs languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent, despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in these languages (see figure 1). In addition, more than half of the 739 Foreign Service specialists—staff who perform security, technical, and other support functions—in language-designated positions do not meet the requirements. For example, 53 percent of regional security officers<sup>8</sup> do not speak and read at the level required by their positions. When a post fills a position with an officer who does not meet the requirements, it must request a language waiver for the position. In 2008, the department granted 282 such waivers, covering about 8 percent of all language-designated positions.

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<sup>7</sup>Currently, supercritical needs languages are Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Chinese (Mandarin), Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Critical needs languages are Arabic (forms other than Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese (Cantonese), Kazakh, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek.

<sup>8</sup>Regional security officers are special agents operating out of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security assigned to U.S. diplomatic missions overseas, responsible for the protection of personnel and their families, facilities, and classified information.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Foreign Service Officers Who Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions, by Language Type and Selected Languages**



**Foreign Language Shortfalls Could Compromise Diplomatic Readiness**

Past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, and intelligence-gathering efforts. Foreign Service officers we spoke to provided a number of examples of the effects of not having the required language skills, including the following.

- Consular officers at a post we visited said that because of a lack of language skills, they make adjudication decisions based on what they "hope" they heard in visa interviews.
- A security officer in Cairo said that without language skills, officers do not have any "juice"—that is, the ability to influence people they are trying to elicit information from.
- According to another regional security officer, the lack of foreign language skills may hinder intelligence gathering because local informants are reluctant to speak through locally hired interpreters.

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- One ambassador we spoke to said that without language proficiency—which helps officers gain insight into a country—the officers are not invited to certain events and cannot reach out to broader, deeper audiences.
  - A public affairs officer at another post said that the local media does not always translate embassy statements accurately, complicating efforts to communicate with audiences in the host country. For example, he said the local press translated a statement by the ambassador in a more pejorative sense than was intended, which damaged the ambassador's reputation and took several weeks to correct.

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#### State's Approach to Meeting Foreign Language Requirements Faces Several Challenges

State's current approach for meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements involves an annual review process to determine language-designated positions, training, recruitment, and incentives; however, the department faces several challenges to these efforts, particularly staffing shortages. State's annual language designation process results in a list of positions requiring language skills. However, the views expressed by the headquarters and overseas officials we met with suggest State's designated language proficiency requirements do not necessarily reflect the actual language needs of the posts. For example, because of budgetary and staffing issues, some overseas posts tend to request only the positions they think they will receive rather than the positions they actually need. Moreover, officers at the posts we visited questioned the validity of the relatively low proficiency level required for certain positions, citing the need for a higher proficiency level. For example, an economics officer at one of the posts we visited, who met the posts' required proficiency level, said her level of proficiency did not provide her with language skills needed to discuss technical issues, and the officers in the public affairs section of the same post said that proficiency level was not sufficient to effectively explain U.S. positions in the local media. State primarily uses language training to meet its foreign language requirements, and does so mostly at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, Virginia, but also at field schools and post language training overseas. In 2008, the department reported a training success rate of 86 percent. In addition, the department recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program and pays bonuses to encourage staff to study and maintain a level of proficiency in certain languages. The department has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004.

However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, two main challenges are overall staffing shortages,

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which limit the number of staff available for language training, and the recent increase in language-designated positions. The staffing shortages are exacerbated by officers curtailing their tours at posts, such as to staff the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has led to a decrease in the number of officers in the language training pipeline. For example, officials in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs told us of an officer who received nearly a year of language training in Vietnamese, yet cancelled her tour in Vietnam to serve in Iraq. These departures often force their successors to arrive at post early without having completed language training. As part of its effort to address these staffing shortfalls, in fiscal year 2009, State requested and received funding for 300 new positions to build a training capacity, intended to reduce gaps at posts while staff are in language training. State officials said that if the department's fiscal year 2010 request for 200 additional positions is approved, the department's language gaps will begin to close in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met. Another challenge is the widely held perception among Foreign Service officers that State's promotion system does not consider time spent in language training when evaluating officers for promotion, which may discourage officers from investing the time required to achieve proficiency in certain languages. Although State Human Resources officials dispute this perception, the department has not conducted a statistically significant assessment of the impact of language training on promotions.

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**State Lacks a Comprehensive, Strategic Approach for Meeting Foreign Language Requirements**

State's current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements has not closed the department's persistent language proficiency gaps and reflects, in part, a lack of a comprehensive strategic direction. Common elements of comprehensive workforce planning—described by GAO as part of a large body of work on human capital management—include setting strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals.<sup>9</sup> In the past, State officials have asserted that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed. More recently, State officials have said the

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<sup>9</sup>GAO *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

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department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these requirements, including the department's Five-Year Workforce Plan. However, these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. We believe that a more comprehensive strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide and assess progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.

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### Recommendations for Executive Action

In our recently-issued reports we made several recommendations to help State address its staffing gaps and language proficiency shortfalls.

- To ensure that hardship posts are staffed commensurate with their stated level of strategic importance and resources are properly targeted, GAO recommends the Secretary of State (1) take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of experienced officers to such posts an explicit priority consideration, and (2) develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments.
- To address State's long-standing foreign language proficiency shortfalls, we recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

State generally agreed with our findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In addition, State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

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### GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov). Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Godwin Agbara and Anthony Moran, Assistant Directors; Robert Ball; Joseph Carney; Aniruddha Dasgupta; Martin de Alteriis; Brian Hackney; Gloria Hernandez-Saunders; Richard Gifford Howland; Grace Lui; and La Verne Tharpes.

Testimony of the Honorable Thomas D. Boyatt  
President of the Foreign Affairs Council  
Chairman, American Academy of Diplomacy Foreign Affairs Budget Project

*Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the  
Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia*

Hearing:  
A Review of Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign  
Language Challenges Facing the Foreign Service  
September 24, 2009

Chairman Akaka, Senator Voinovich, Senators,

This is the third occasion I have had the honor to testify before this subcommittee on the general subject of diplomatic readiness and the efforts of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and the American Academy of Diplomacy (the Academy) to clarify the dire shortages in human and financial resources recently faced by the Foreign Affairs agencies of the United States, and to recommend major remedial steps. Last year at your July hearings I reported on the general contents of the then unpublished Report of our Project, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness*. In October we published *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future* (FAB Report) and distributed copies to all members of this subcommittee and the staff. My colleagues and I would like to thank you Senators Akaka and Voinovich for agreeing to be members of our Advisory Group and for your interest and support. We are likewise grateful to Joel Spangenberg and Jennifer Hemingway for advising us and joining in our working meetings along with other Senatorial colleagues.

As you know, the FAB Report drew on the vast Foreign Service experience of our Academy members and the budget expertise brought together by the Henry L. Stimson Foundation to produce a bottom-up analysis of the International Affairs Function 150 Account of the national budget designed to achieve all the missions under the Secretary of State's authority. Our major recommendations to fix glaring deficiencies are: to increase U.S. direct-hire

staffing in core diplomacy, public diplomacy, foreign assistance and stabilization and reconstruction by 4,735 officers over a five-year budget cycle - FY 2010 - 2014 (a 46 percent increase) to be accompanied by significant increases in training and local staff ; to establish funding for Ambassadors' emergency activities; to dramatically increase public diplomacy programs; and to return authority over several security assistance programs from the Secretary of Defense to the Secretary of State.

I am pleased to report that the FAB Report was well received by both Presidential candidates, by the State Department Transition Team, by Secretary Clinton, by appropriations and authorizations committees in both houses among Democrats and Republicans alike, and by the media and the public. In less than a year four funding bills have passed (or almost passed). The FY'08 supplemental, the FY '09 budget and the FY'09 supplemental are the law of the land and contain robust increases for the 150 account. The FY'10 budget has been authorized by both houses and appropriations approved in the House. Taken together funds for about 3,500 additional positions are contained in these bills. The reality is that we have made very substantial progress in alleviating personnel shortages in the foreign affairs agencies. Your support and that of this subcommittee have been critical to our success thus far, and will be vital in the months ahead as we seek to maintain momentum.

I would now like to turn to the four issues you asked me to elaborate on in my capacity as Chairman of the FAB.

The Academy report's findings and recommendations for increasing language positions and opportunities for FSO's.

As detailed on page 12 of the FAB Executive Summary our analysis indicates that there is a deficit of 334 staff years for needed language training. Secretary Rice's FY2009 budget request called for 300 new training positions for "critical need" languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Urdu in its total request for 1,000 above attrition positions. In the event, the Congress approved 500 new State positions in the '09 budget. The passage of the '09 budget occurred after Secretary Rice's departure. While we are sure that Secretary Clinton is very supportive of increased training in general, and more "hard-language" capability in particular, we do not know whether, or to what degree, recently added staff years/positions have been allocated to language training. Our colleagues testifying before you today for the State Department will be able to clarify this matter.

Periodic reports from the GAO in previous years have shown that language designated positions - primarily at our Embassies and Consulates

overseas – are only 70 percent filled by language capable personnel. This is clearly unacceptable and all concerned understand that. The challenge will be to remedy the situation. To some small extent the language gaps can be filled in the recruitment process. The problem here is that demand for critical language personnel far exceeds supply. The Foreign Service will almost always be outbid by the private sector in this competition. We will have to rely on our own language training programs. In the years since the end of the Cold War adequate language training has been defeated by severe personnel shortages in the 20-30 percent range. Consequently, the Foreign Service Director General and State’s personnel managers have been faced with a terrible “Hobbesian choice”: Do you increase the shortages in current operational personnel by taking some “out the line” to learn languages ; or do you sacrifice future capability (languages) to maintain already weakened current operations? For 20 years managers have not been able to have both. The FAB recommendations on training are designed to end this intolerable situation by providing a permanent training “float” of about 15 percent like that enjoyed by our military colleagues.

Ways to address staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts.

Currently, the State Department/Foreign Service is still severely understaffed globally. Staffing and experience gaps exist at hardship and non-hardship posts alike. As we argue in FAB – we hope convincingly – staffing and experience gaps across the board can only be dealt with in the context of a 46 percent increase in personnel in all of the entities under the Secretary of State’s authority in the 150 account. As we detail in the next section significant progress is being made in increasing staff levels. Of the 4,735 above attrition positions we have called for, about 3,500 will have been funded with the approval of Senate appropriators of Secretary Clinton’s FY2010 budget. It is our fervent hope that Secretary Clinton will request the remaining 1200 positions in the FY2011 budget now under consideration and that the Congress will support that.

With respect to staffing gaps, we would argue that State Department managers should make the elimination of staffing gaps and the filling of vacancies the first priority in using the increased personnel now being funded by the Congress. In addition, as detailed on page 12 of the FAB Executive Summary, we call for 199 staff positions to ensure overlap between departing and arriving personnel. We also call for 135 positions to provide sufficient personnel to address staffing gaps at posts that lose personnel to temporary reassignment to crisis hot spots around the world. Experience gaps are a more complicated problem. Virtually all increased personnel in the Foreign Service will come from the traditional exam based recruitment process. There will necessarily be a bulge in the lower ranks as new officers enter the service, receive language and basic training and accumulate experience in their initial

assignments. Many of these new officers will replace slightly more senior colleagues who will enter the training float that will significantly enhance the Foreign Service's language (and other) capabilities in the years ahead. Nevertheless, the positive impact of current and hoped for personnel increases is a matter of years, not months.

The State Department's current efforts to increase the number of FSO's and its progress in meeting the Report's recommendations.

As mentioned above Secretary Clinton has obtained funding for about 3,500 positions in the FY'08 supplemental, the FY'09 budget, the FY'09 supplemental and the FY'10 budget (with the Senate Appropriations Committee final approval). She and her team deserve great credit for their persistence in pursuing robust remedies for the problem of staff shortages. It is also fair to give credit to former Secretary Rice for her efforts just prior to her departure. Before analyzing the situation in the Foreign Service/State Department, about 1,200 positions must be deducted from the total as the Congress reserved funding for about 1,000 new personnel for AID and 200 for the Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction and the establishment of a Civilian Reserve. Regarding the 2,300 positions available for additional FSO's the processes of recruitment, training and assigning are underway. The fundamental issue is one of prioritization. The FAB Report is not explicit about which problems/functions should receive personnel allocations in what order. Implicit in the FAB Report and very explicitly as far as I personally am concerned, the priority should be: first, fill existing gaps and vacancies; second, move forward in a balanced way to establish training positions thus making the training float a reality, while simultaneously moving to stand-up the Reconstruction & Stabilization Bureau and the Civilian Reserve Corps; third, all other requirements. The Department needs to present a plan to make clear how the training and Reconstruction & Stabilization Bureau will complete their staffing with positions to be established in the next fiscal year.

The Academy is not clear about how the Department will proceed and what its priorities are. Perhaps all of these decisions have not yet been taken. Mr. Chairman, I hope that you and Senator Voinovich will ask the State Department representatives at this hearing how they intend to allocate the increased personnel now entering the system and in what order. For instance, the Academy's recommendations would not be met if a large percentage of the new positions goes to administrative support, e.g., security. We do not expect this to be the case and we understand that our recommendations have broad support. Be that as it may, it would be useful for the Department to clarify its views on the way ahead.

The importance of sufficient staffing and language training in meeting U.S. diplomatic objectives.

The importance of adequate staffing of the foreign affairs agencies is fundamental to the success of U.S. national security policy. Regrettably the administrations that followed the end of the Cold War neglected the diplomatic and development dimensions of national power. When President George W. Bush needed diplomatic and development capability in Iraq and Afghanistan, the human and financial resources were simply not there. Accordingly, the government turned to the military to perform such tasks given their abundance of people and money. The "militarization" of diplomacy was the result.

Today there is a broad consensus in Washington, including Secretary of Defense Gates and Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen, that an effective, professional and properly resourced diplomatic/development capability is indispensable to U.S. national security. Failure to strengthen smart power now while this consensus is in place will mean failure to achieve our diplomatic objectives in the future in a very dangerous and fast-changing world.

With respect to the importance of language training in meeting U.S. diplomatic objectives, I share the view of many colleagues that language ability is the basic skill for a diplomat comparable to weapons skills for the armed forces. Our government would not think of sending a soldier into combat without appropriate weapons training. The same imperative applies to diplomats and language. We all have war stories about the importance of language training in our real-world experiences. My best example involves my Greek language capability and my colleagues' ability in Turkish when we were crossing lines in 1967 trying to arrange a Greek-Turkish ceasefire during a very savage incident on Cyprus. Without our language abilities U.S. policy objectives would not have been achieved and our personal objectives of staying alive would also have been in doubt. We now have, or soon will have, the capability to create and maintain a total training "float," including language training, with the concomitant major increase in our diplomatic capacity. I hope the subcommittee will express its desire that the State Department ensure that this happens given the new resources being provided.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Voinovich, thank you both very much for the opportunity to record my views on the very critical matters you are discussing today. Your support over the last three years as the FAC and the Academy have worked to overcome the problems of an understaffed and dangerously weakened diplomatic capacity has been enormously appreciated and served this nation very well. I will be out of Washington on September 24<sup>th</sup>. I have asked my distinguished colleague and President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, Ambassador Ron Neumann, to speak during my allotted five minutes and answer questions during the hearing.

Thomas D. Boyatt  
Ambassador (R.)  
President, Foreign Affairs Council  
Chair, Academy of Diplomacy FAB Project  
September 15, 2009



Testimony of Susan Rockwell Johnson  
President, American Foreign Service Association

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the  
District of Columbia  
Chairman Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI)

Hearing on:  
*A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language  
Challenges Facing the Foreign Service*  
September 24, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Senator Voinovich, and distinguished subcommittee members, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) welcomes the opportunity to speak before this subcommittee on the subject of diplomatic readiness. These substantial staffing and foreign language challenges confront the entire Foreign Service that AFSA is proud to represent, which encompasses employees not only of the State Department but also of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Foreign Commercial Service, the Foreign Agricultural Service and the International Broadcasting Bureau. We are grateful to you for again convening a hearing on this important issue.

The question of diplomatic readiness goes to the heart of building a strong, professional Foreign Service that will equip the United States to lead an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

In this regard, there must be a clear recognition that diplomacy is the primary tool for anticipating, containing and addressing tension, instability and conflict. While it does not always succeed, experience shows all other approaches, including military intervention, are considerably more costly and complicated, and less likely to work.

The prerequisites for a strong State Department and effective diplomacy start with a corps of professionals available for worldwide service. These individuals should possess a range of skills and abilities including foreign language proficiency, advanced area knowledge including history, culture, politics and economics, leadership and management, negotiating, public diplomacy,

project management and job-specific functional expertise. They should be able to provide expert advice to the president, Secretary of State and our political leadership.

#### **PERSISTENT UNDERINVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND RESOURCES**

##### ***Staffing and Experience Gaps***

AFSA has long held that the Foreign Service is underfunded and does not have the necessary tools to perform its mission, as two recent Government Accountability Office reports point out. Quite simply, we lack people. The staffing issues at hardship posts clearly reflect the results of neglect on the one hand and significantly expanded missions on the other.

Over the past two decades the Foreign Service has been facing increasingly serious personnel shortages. The tremendous increase in the scope of its mission caused by critical staffing demands in Iraq and Afghanistan brought the situation to a head. The Foreign Service is proud to serve, but the demands of these two war-zone countries have put enormous strain on the rest of the State Department, compromising its ability to produce language-proficient personnel. Yet until recently, little was done to provide funding or authorization to hire new personnel, leading to the global repositioning initiative that left gaping vacancies at posts around the world.

Foreign Service hiring at State and USAID is finally on the upswing after years of flat funding during which new mission requirements vastly outstripped staff resources. The Fiscal Year 2009 omnibus appropriations bill provided for 500 new positions at State (and 300 at USAID), and the House-passed version of the FY 10 State foreign operations appropriations bill will fund an additional 1,000 new positions at State and another 300 new positions at USAID.

This continued expansion is badly needed. The American Academy of Diplomacy documented the need for 2,848 additional State positions for core diplomatic functions and a training complement, as well as for 1,250 additional USAID positions, by Fiscal Year 2014 in its report, "A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness." Mr. Chairman and Senator Voinovich, I recognize you both for serving on the advisory board of this initiative. Achieving the ambitious goals of the report will require a sustained commitment from Congress to authorize and fund an average of 450 new positions at State and 160 new positions at USAID each year for the next five years, a commitment we were pleased to see meet and exceeded in FY 10.

I would also like point out that AFSA sees a strong case for expanding the Foreign Commercial Service and the Foreign Agricultural Service, which were not looked at in either of these reports. Both these entities are comprised of many dedicated and patriotic Foreign Service personnel, yet their critical functions are sometimes forgotten and overshadowed by State and USAID.

As the GAO reports highlight, understaffing often leads to the use of upstretch assignments at hardship posts, thereby, diminishing diplomatic readiness and effectiveness in critical-need

countries. AFSA concurs wholeheartedly with this concern. Increased workloads, increased need for supervision of inexperienced junior personnel, and a general lack of institutional knowledge are all aspects that must be addressed. Persistent and recurrent staffing gaps undermine the ability of overseas personnel to focus on their primary responsibilities. They are already impeding our effectiveness in some of the most important areas of the world.

In a 2007 survey conducted by AFSA, we asked what factors would motivate, and deter, Foreign Service members from serving in Iraq, where all positions are designated for unaccompanied service. While that case does not necessarily fit the many posts of greatest hardship that State struggles to fill, there are some reasonable correlations. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said that extra pay and benefits were the main motivation; 59 percent identified patriotism and duty as their main motivations. The two main deterrents were separation from family (64 percent) and security concerns (61 percent).

The issue of greatest importance to the Foreign Service, and one that is affecting morale, recruitment and retention, is the overseas pay gap. This inequity was inadvertently created by the Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990 which added to the base pay of almost all federal employees a "locality" adjustment that represented the cost of attracting talent in a given geographical area. Since Washington, D.C. is where Foreign Service members are hired, initially posted and frequently reassigned, their locality pay is based here. However, the law unfairly excluded overseas Foreign Service members from receiving this standard component of base pay. As the Washington, D.C., locality pay rate has risen from an initial 4.23 percent to 23.10 percent in 2009, Foreign Service personnel continue to see their compensation shrink.

This overseas pay gap represents a major inequity, has a serious impact on compensation, and often negates traditional hardship and danger pay allowances. Thus, junior and mid-level Foreign Service members now take a pay cut to serve at 183 of 268 overseas posts (68 percent) including 20-percent hardship differential posts such as Damascus, Tripoli, Libreville, La Paz and Ulaanbaatar and even danger-pay posts like Amman, Bogota and Tel Aviv. Losing the equivalent of one year's salary for every four or five years served overseas poses serious long-term financial consequences for all Foreign Service personnel across the U.S. government, particularly in these times of economic trouble..

AFSA is pleased that the first step in resolving this issue has been taken, but the difficult effort to ensure fair compensation for the Foreign Service is still ongoing. The FY 2009 supplemental contained a provision giving State the authorization to begin to close the locality pay gap, and has recently begun implementing the first one-third of the 23.10-percent. Additionally, the House passed version of H.R. 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, contained the required authorization language to close this disparity once and for all. We hope that the Senate will soon introduce its version of the bill.

However, this authorization expires in just a few days, at the end of FY09. New language is required to allow State to close the final two-thirds in FY10 and FY11 Failure to implement this authorization would be a tremendous blow to the Foreign Service. As a key player in forging

movement on the first historic steps to begin eliminating this inequity, we very much appreciate the special efforts made on our behalf by you both, Mr. Chairman, and Senator Voinovich. We respectfully urge all members of this subcommittee to encourage your colleagues on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to see to it that a foreign relations authorization bill is signed into law -- and that the appropriators ensure that each agency has the funds necessary to rectify this unintended inequity.

***Language Gaps***

Foreign Service members pride themselves on performing their duties as capably as possible. Accordingly, when requests for language training cannot be accommodated, at least partly due to staffing gaps, this is a great source of frustration.

As the GAO rightly points out, there are many instances where officers overseas do not have the required level of linguistic proficiency to accomplish their mission. They cannot converse with their counterparts in that country to establish key contacts or function well in society. They cannot communicate the United States position on important policy issues. And they sometimes have to hope that they correctly understood a foreign applicant's responses during a visa interview.

Despite valiant efforts to close the language gap at overseas posts and to fill vacant language-designated positions, the Department of State continues to struggle with mounting personnel demands, without any increase in resources. To cite just one statistic from the GAO report, there was an "overall increase of 332 overseas language-designated positions between 2005 and 2008, many of which are in hard and super-hard languages."

**GAO REPORTS**

The two GAO reports prepared for this hearing -- "Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Language Shortfalls" and "Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts" -- identify continuing problems facing the Foreign Service. They also make helpful recommendations.

Statistics documenting the problems:

- Higher staffing gaps at hardship posts: As of September 2008, State had a 17-percent average vacancy rate at the posts of greatest hardship -- nearly double the average rate of 9 percent at posts with no hardship differentials. (GAO-09-874)
- Significant shortages of mid-level officers concentrated in hardship posts: As of September 2008, about 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at posts of greatest hardship were filled by officers in up stretch assignments. (GAO-09-874)

- A sharp rise in number of unaccompanied tours: The number of positions in locations too dangerous for family members to accompany a Foreign Service member has shot up from around 700 in 2006 to more than 900 at the end of Fiscal Year 2008. (GAO-09-874)
- Overall staffing gaps: Approximately 670 positions have gone unfilled since 2005 due to the overall shortage of Foreign Service personnel and the high priority given to staffing positions in Iraq and Afghanistan. (GAO-09-955)
- Significant language proficiency gaps: As of October 2008, 31 percent of FSOs in language-designated positions did not meet either the foreign-language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions. (GAO-09-955)
- Critical language proficiency gaps in areas of high strategic interest: State continues to face serious foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest, such as the Near East and South and Central Asia. In those regions, about 40 percent of personnel in LDPs did not meet requirements. Gaps were particularly high in Afghanistan where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, where 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacked adequate language skills. (GAO-09-955)

#### **KEY GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

The GAO Report on "Additional Steps Needed to Address Continued Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts" recommends that the Secretary of State take two actions:

- (1) Take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of at-grade, mid-level officers to such posts a priority.
- (2) Develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments.

AFSA strongly endorses with these recommendations, and concurs with the State Department's explanation that the continued overall shortage of Foreign Service generalists and specialists contributes to the difficulty in staffing missions and forces difficult choices. Until staffing levels meet needs, the department will have to continue to prioritize both positions and posts.

AFSA has long maintained that the Foreign Service is underfunded and understaffed. We are pleased that this dangerous neglect has now been recognized and that steps are beginning to be taken to rectify the situation. However, we would like to hear more specifics from State about how the new entry-level personnel will be allocated and according to what priorities.

AFSA understands that the department has been collecting and analyzing data on incentives for hardship-post assignments. We would like to see this study, as well, and have an opportunity to comment.

The GAO Report on a "Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls" recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan,

consistent with GAO and OPM work-force planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. It should include the following elements:

- Clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives for the language-proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy;
- A transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based on objective criteria that go beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language-designated and to set the proficiency level needed for each;
- A more effective mechanism within State that allows the department to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of foreign-language training to their jobs and the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical-needs foreign-language speakers.

The report also recommends that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its congressional budget justifications and annual reports to Congress on language proficiency.

AFSA welcomes the initiatives the Department of State is taking to address these recommendations. We look forward to learning more about specific responses.

#### **CONCLUSION**

More basic language training should be provided to all Foreign Service personnel being assigned overseas to enable them to function more effectively in the host country, even if their position is *not* language designated. Training in critical-needs and hard languages should be more closely linked to assignment patterns and career planning.

We also strongly agree with the GAO that a full review of the rating system for language-designated position proficiency is badly needed. A standard rating across all positions or posts is not in the best interest of the mission of the Foreign Service.

Additionally, AFSA believes that language proficiency should enhance, not undermine, prospects for promotion. We are concerned about evidence in the GAO report that State Department human resources officials acknowledge a potential disadvantage for competitiveness for promotions for those in long-term training.

Much is being said about the 3 D's of Diplomacy, Development and Defense as the key pillars of US engagement abroad. It is fair to ask if adequate resources are being invested in diplomacy and development when according to reports, 96 percent of our investment goes to defense and intelligence, with only 4 percent for diplomacy and development.

A December 2006 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report, "Embassies as Command Posts in the Anti-Terror Campaign," notes that the 12:1 ratio of military spending to funding for civilian foreign affairs agencies encourages the further encroachment of the military, by default,

into areas where civilian leadership is more appropriate and effective. This growing imbalance does not bode well for the policy commitment of strengthening the State Department and other civilian foreign affairs agencies with Foreign Service personnel.

AFSA welcomes the growing recognition of the urgent need for increased investment in the Foreign Service as an institution. It is equally important that attention be paid to how this investment is used to build the high-quality, professional Foreign Service that our nation needs to maintain our leadership role in an increasingly complex, competitive and interdependent world.

To continue to strengthen the development of our diplomatic corps, State must do more than simply fill existing staffing gaps. The State Department and the Foreign Service are at a unique and critical crossroads seeing a vast increase in staff, and this opportunity must be treated as a marathon, not a sprint, to ensure that the Foreign Service has the right number of people with the right skills and experience, in the right locations to meet the challenges of 21st-century diplomacy and create "smart power."

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. AFSA values your longstanding support of initiatives to enhance the diplomatic readiness of our civilian Foreign Service agencies. We particularly appreciate the leadership you have shown in convening this hearing, and we look forward to continuing to serve as a resource for you and your colleagues.

**BACKGROUND**  
**A REVIEW OF U.S. DIPLOMATIC READINESS:**  
**ADDRESSING THE STAFFING AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE**  
**CHALLENGES FACING THE FOREIGN SERVICE**  
**SEPTEMBER 24, 2009**

**BACKGROUND**

The State Department's diplomats help formulate and lead the implementation of the nation's foreign policy, and they represent the United States abroad through public outreach, consular services, economic relations, and other activities. Diplomatic readiness, which the Department defines as "its ability to get the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills to carry out America's foreign policy,"<sup>1</sup> provides the U.S. these capabilities. Over the past decade, many challenges have confronted U.S. diplomatic readiness, including significant staffing challenges such as language proficiency gaps among Foreign Service officers (FSOs) in regions vital to U.S. interests, the reassignment of diplomats from lower- to higher-priority missions, and experience gaps at hardship posts. This memo provides an overview of recent staffing initiatives at the State Department, relevant GAO reports, some key findings and recommendations from a comprehensive report on diplomatic readiness, and relevant legislation.

**Staffing Initiatives at the State Department during the Past Decade**

The 1990's were a tumultuous time for the State Department. As a result of the post-Cold War "peace dividend" and the expansion of embassies into Eastern European nations, the State Department faced significant workforce shortfalls. By September 11, 2001, the Department had approximately a 20 percent staffing shortfall.<sup>2</sup>

To begin to address this, then Secretary of State Colin Powell implemented the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI) in 2002, which increased personnel to support critical training needs and respond to emerging crises. Between 2002 and 2004, DRI allowed the State Department to hire 1,069 employees, the majority of whom were FSOs. Despite this increase, by 2004, staffing demands principally in Iraq and Afghanistan required an increased number of FSOs and prevented the Department from adequately investing in longer-term training efforts.<sup>3</sup>

In 2006, the Department started the Transformational Diplomacy Initiative (TDI). According to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, TDI would focus on U.S. diplomats working "on the front lines of domestic reform as well as the back rooms of foreign ministries" to help build more democratic and well-governed states. One aspect of this effort was the Global Repositioning Program (GRP), which was implemented to increase U.S. diplomatic engagement

<sup>1</sup> GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, Report to the Chairman and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, GAO-09-874, September 2009, at pg. x.

<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Diplomacy, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness*, October 2008, at pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, Report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, GAO-06-894, August 2006, at pp. 2 and 50.

in countries that the U.S. considered high interest and involved significant repositioning of FSOs.<sup>4</sup>

The State Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of GRP in 2008. The report concluded that GRP "produced the desired results in that it broke through various constraints to achieve, in a short period time, a significant reallocation of positions across regional and bureau lines." Among the key OIG findings were that the program strengthened diplomatic engagement in some key countries, such as China and India, by creating new positions while impairing the ability of posts and bureaus that lost FSOs. However, the OIG found that the effectiveness of those newly-aligned FSOs had been limited by a lack of resources to support their work. OIG recommended that if repositioning is continued, it should be integrated into the Department's human resources practices and it should be supported by strategic planning efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, the State Department has again focused on hiring additional personnel to support its broad mission. Through the Department's Human Resources Initiative, the Secretary plans a 25 percent increase in Foreign Service staffing by FY 2013. Its fiscal year (FY) 2009 request, which was funded in FY 2009 appropriations, included 1,168 new direct-funded positions, including over 500 new Foreign Service positions. For FY 2010, the Department requested 1,187 new direct-funded positions, including over 700 additional FSOs. One hundred eighty of these new positions would be used to support additional training, with more emphasis on languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and Urdu.<sup>6</sup>

| OVERALL BUDGET HIRING-NEW AMERICAN SALARIES POSITIONS ABOVE ATTRITION |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |                 |                 |                     |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
|   | 2002       | 2003       | 2004       | 2005       | 2006       | 2007       | 2008       | Request<br>2009 | Request<br>2010 | Total<br>FY 01 - 10 |
| <b>D&amp;CP</b>   |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |                 |                 |                     |
| CRF / Global Engagement / Human Resource Initiative (HRI)             | 360        | 396        | 310        | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 520             | 566             | 2,154               |
| Operational Readiness / Overseas Programs                             | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 140        | 0          | 0          | 0               | 123             | 263                 |
| Diplomatic and Policy Support   | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0               | 114             | 114                 |
| IT Security (FSN Replacements)  | 51         | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0               | 0               | 51                  |
| Counterterrorism (ERF Funds)  | 12         | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0               | 0               | 12                  |
| <b>Subtotal</b>   | <b>423</b> | <b>396</b> | <b>310</b> | <b>0</b>   | <b>140</b> | <b>0</b>   | <b>0</b>   | <b>520</b>      | <b>802</b>      | <b>2,694</b>        |
| <b>Border Security/Consular</b>                                       |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |                 |                 |                     |
| Consular Associates Replacements                                      | 0          | 0          | 68         | 63         | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0               | 0               | 131                 |
| Border Security Program (MRV Fees)                                    | 98         | 51         | 93         | 82         | 55         | 46         | 880        | 448             | 45              | 1,798               |
| Border Security Program/Passport (MRV Fees)                           | 0          | 0          | 0          | 105        | 130        | 489        | 0          | 0               | 0               | 724                 |
| <b>Subtotal</b>   | <b>98</b>  | <b>51</b>  | <b>161</b> | <b>250</b> | <b>185</b> | <b>535</b> | <b>880</b> | <b>448</b>      | <b>45</b>       | <b>2,653</b>        |
| <b>Worldwide Security Upgrades</b>                                    |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |                 |                 |                     |
| Security Agents (ERF Funds-WSU)                                       | 203        | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0          | 0               | 0               | 203                 |
| Security Readiness Staffing-WSU                                       | 188        | 134        | 85         | 71         | 55         | 0          | 52         | 200             | 340             | 1,123               |
| <b>Subtotal</b>   | <b>391</b> | <b>134</b> | <b>85</b>  | <b>71</b>  | <b>55</b>  | <b>0</b>   | <b>52</b>  | <b>200</b>      | <b>340</b>      | <b>1,326</b>        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>910</b> | <b>584</b> | <b>566</b> | <b>321</b> | <b>380</b> | <b>535</b> | <b>932</b> | <b>1,468</b>    | <b>1,187</b>    | <b>6,573</b>        |

**Table 1: Staffing at the State Department, FY 2002-2010<sup>7</sup>**

(Key - FSN means Foreign Service Nationals; ERF means Emergency Response Funds; MRV means Machine Readable Visa; and WSU means Worldwide Security Upgrades)

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General, *Report of Inspection: Interim Review of the Global Repositioning Program*, ISP-1-09-09, November 2008, at pg. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* at pp. 3-8.

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of State, *The Budget in Brief: Fiscal Year 2010*, pp. 2 and 21.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Research Service, briefing materials provided to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, August 6, 2009.

### Staffing at Hardship Posts

The Department defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. Government provides differential pay incentives to encourage employees to bid on those posts and compensate them for hardships they may encounter. Some of these hardships include inadequate medical facilities, severe climate, and high crime.

GAO has conducted two reviews of hardship post assignments for FSOs during the past four years. In its first report in 2006, GAO found that DRI helped address some staffing shortages at these posts, but the initiative failed to meet its goals and mid-level vacancies at a number of critical posts remained. As a result, mid-level positions were being staffed by junior FSOs. Often these junior FSOs had little guidance and experience to handle the full scope of their duties. GAO's top recommendations were for the State Department to consider using directed assignments to fill critical positions, evaluate its incentive programs for hardship post assignments, and consider changing the assignment system to allow for longer tours and more regional specialization.<sup>8</sup>

In its September 2009 report on staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts, GAO found that the State Department's diplomatic readiness remained at risk. GAO attributed this to an insufficient number of FSOs, an ongoing mid-level experience gap, and an assignment system that does not specifically address the continuing experience gaps at hardship posts. In addition to focusing on staffing, GAO reviewed the Department's evaluation of incentives offered to FSOs for service at hardship posts, and found that it had neither conducted sufficient evaluations nor complied with legal requirements to assess special pay provided for service at these posts. GAO recommended that the Secretary of State make it an explicit priority to assign experienced officers to hardship posts and put a plan in place to evaluate the incentives the Department provides for hardship post assignments.<sup>9</sup>

### Language Proficiency

GAO has reviewed State Department language proficiency on three occasions during the past decade. The first report of the three was released in January 2002. In that report, GAO found that the Department had a shortage of FSOs who met the language proficiency requirements of their positions and recommended that the Department adopt a strategic approach to its human capital management and workforce planning.<sup>10</sup>

GAO reviewed the State Department's progress in meeting its foreign language capability requirements in the 2006 report discussed above, finding that its recommendation to the Department to take a strategic approach for human capital management was not fully addressed. Among GAO's other findings were that almost 30 percent of the staff assigned to language-designated positions failed to meet language requirements, with much greater gaps at such posts as Cairo, Egypt and Sana'a, Yemen, and that language requirements for such assignments may

<sup>8</sup> GAO-06-894, at pp. 2-6.

<sup>9</sup> GAO-09-874, at pp. 26-29.

<sup>10</sup> GAO, *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Need to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, Report to Congressional Requesters, GAO-02-375, January 2002, pp. 9-10 and 27.

be inadequate. GAO cited factors that may have inhibited greater FSO language proficiency, including short tour lengths, limitations on consecutive tours at the same post, and the perception that regional specialization may hurt one's career. GAO's primary recommendations to enhance language proficiency among FSO's were for the Department to take a systematic approach in evaluating the effectiveness of its efforts to improve language proficiency and take a more strategic approach, taking into account risk, in filling critical gaps in language proficiency.<sup>11</sup>

GAO's September 2009 report demonstrates that the State Department continues to struggle in meeting its language capability requirements. For instance, GAO found that 31 percent of FSOs in overseas positions requiring foreign language proficiency did not meet the language proficiency requirement for those positions. Regions of strategic interest including the Near East and South and Central Asia faced language capabilities gaps in about 40 percent of FSOs in language-designated positions. Despite these language gaps, the Department had not taken a comprehensive, strategic approach to addressing language proficiency. GAO found that the State Department's effort failed to provide a linked, strategic focus, relying on a large number of separate policies and initiatives to address different aspects of this challenge. Further, language gaps may have been exacerbated by ongoing staffing shortages. GAO recommended that the Department develop a strategic plan to links all of its efforts in meeting foreign language requirements, including measurable performance goals, a comprehensive process to identify foreign language requirements based on objective criteria, and a more effective mechanism to gather feedback from FSOs on the effectiveness of their language training.<sup>12</sup>

#### Looking to the Future

The American Academy of Diplomacy released a report entitled *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness* in 2008. Although this report covered a broad range of diplomatic readiness issues, it highlighted staffing challenges at the State Department that are especially relevant. For instance, the report recommended that the Department hire approximately 1,100 additional personnel by FY 2014 to support core diplomatic functions. According to the report, these functions include the conduct of diplomatic relations, the conduct of consular relations, policy formulation, and multilateral diplomacy. It also advocated an additional increase of 1,287 personnel by FY 2014 to provide staffing flexibility for greater training and professional development opportunities. Included among these opportunities were more positions available for language training, which will improve diplomats' foreign language fluency.<sup>13</sup>

#### Relevant Legislation

**S. 1010, National Foreign Language Coordination Act of 2009**, was introduced by Senator Daniel K. Akaka on May 7, 2009, to establish a National Foreign Language Coordination

<sup>11</sup> GAO-06-894, at pp. 2-6.

<sup>12</sup> GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, Report to the Chairman and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, GAO-09-955, September 2009, at pp. 3-5 and 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> The American Academy of Diplomacy, at pp. 6 and 21.

Council and a National Language Advisor, and develop a national foreign language strategy. This Act was referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. S. 1010 has four cosponsors: Senators Thad Cochran (R-MS), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Richard Durbin (D-IL), and Russell Feingold (D-WI).

**S. 1434, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2010**, was reported out of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar on July 9, 2009. According to the committee report (Report No. 111-44), the Committee supports an increase of 565 Foreign Service officer positions at the State Department, under the Human Resources Initiative. Additionally, the Committee has required the Secretary of State to submit a report on how FY 2010 personnel and training requirements contribute to a three-year strategy for personnel growth and training.

**H.R. 2410, Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011**, passed the House of Representatives on June 10, 2009, and was referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Section 301 authorizes the Secretary of State in both FY 2010 and 2011 to hire an additional 750 FSOs above attrition. Additionally, the Foreign Service Act would be amended to expand Foreign Service functions, require that all FSOs be available for worldwide assignment, provide conflict resolution training, provide for recruitment of candidates with experience in unstable situations, and provide for advanced academic training. Section 312 authorizes Washington, D.C. locality-based comparability payments for non-Senior FSOs who are stationed overseas over a two-year phase in period.

**H.R. 2346, Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-32)**, was signed into law by President Obama on June 24, 2009. Section 1113 allowed non-Senior FSOs who are stationed overseas to receive the Washington, D.C. locality-based comparability payment. This funding will be available until the end of FY 2009.

#### **Resources and Additional Information**

Center for Strategic & International Studies, *The Embassy of the Future*, 2007.

GAO, *Department of State: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts*, Report to the Chairman and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, GAO-09-874, September 2009.

GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, Report to the Chairman and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, GAO-09-955, September 2009.

GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, Report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, GAO-06-894, August 2006.

GAO, *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Need to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, Report to Congressional Requesters, GAO-02-375, January 2002.

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, *A Domestic Crisis with Global Implications: Reviewing the Human Capital Crisis at the State Department*, July 16, 2008. Written statements available at [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing\\_ID=c9ea51d4-b78d-4745-bfb7-0f10f3edda6e](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_ID=c9ea51d4-b78d-4745-bfb7-0f10f3edda6e).

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, *Building a Stronger Diplomatic Presence*, S. Hrg. 110-242, August 1, 2007.

The American Academy of Diplomacy, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Readiness*, October 2008.

United States Government Accountability Office

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**GAO**

Report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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September 2009

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**DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts**



September 2009



Highlights of GAO-09-874, a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

**Additional Steps Needed to Address Continuing Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts**

**Why GAO Did This Study**

The Department of State (State) has designated about two-thirds of its 268 overseas posts as hardship posts. Staff working at such posts often encounter harsh conditions, including inadequate medical facilities and high crime. Many of these posts are vital to U.S. foreign policy objectives and need a full complement of staff with the right skills to carry out the department's priorities. As such, State offers staff at these posts a hardship differential—an additional adjustment to basic pay—to compensate officers for the conditions they encounter and as a recruitment and retention incentive.

GAO was asked to assess (1) State's progress in addressing staffing gaps at hardship posts since 2006 and the effect of any remaining gaps, and (2) the extent to which State has used incentives to address staffing gaps at hardship posts. GAO analyzed State data; reviewed relevant documents; met with officials in Washington, D.C.; and conducted fieldwork in five hardship posts.

**What GAO Recommends**

GAO recommends the Secretary of State (1) take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of experienced officers to such posts an explicit priority consideration, and (2) develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments. State generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.

View GAO-09-874 or key components. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov.

**What GAO Found**

Despite some progress in addressing staffing shortfalls since 2006, State's diplomatic readiness remains at risk due to persistent staffing and experience gaps at key hardship posts. Several factors contribute to these gaps. First, State continues to have fewer officers than positions, a shortage compounded by the personnel demands of Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, while State has reduced its mid-level experience gap, the department does not anticipate eliminating this gap until 2012 and continues to face difficulties attracting experienced applicants to hardship posts—especially posts of greatest hardship. Third, although State's assignment system has prioritized the staffing of hardship posts, it does not explicitly address the continuing experience gap at such posts, many of which are strategically important, yet are often staffed with less experienced officers. Staffing and experience gaps can diminish diplomatic readiness in several ways, according to State officials. For example, gaps can lead to decreased reporting coverage, loss of institutional knowledge, and increased supervisory requirements for senior staff, detracting from other critical diplomatic responsibilities.

Examples of Overseas Posts with Various Hardship Differentials, as of September 2008

| Posts                             | Hardship differential (percentage of base pay) | Hardship | Greatest hardship |
|-----------------------------------|--|----------|-------------------|
| Buenos Aires, Osaka, Paris        | 0  |          |                   |
| Amman, Bogotá, Windhoek           | 5  |          |                   |
| Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, Sao Paulo | 10   |          |                   |
| Lima, Mexico City, Moscow         | 15   | *        |                   |
| Jeddah, Manila, Sofia             | 20   | *        |                   |
| Beirut, Kathmandu, Lagos          | 25   | *        | *                 |
| Monrovia, Nairobi, Shenyang       | 30   | *        | *                 |
| Baghdad, Dushanbe, Kabul          | 35   | *        | *                 |

Source: State.

State uses a range of incentives to staff hardship posts, but their effectiveness remains unclear due to a lack of evaluation. Incentives to serve in hardship posts range from monetary benefits to changes in service and bidding requirements, such as reduced tour lengths at posts where dangerous conditions prevent some family members from accompanying officers. In a 2006 report on staffing gaps, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its incentive programs for hardship post assignments. In response, State added a question about hardship incentives to a recent employee survey. However, the survey does not fully meet GAO's recommendation for several reasons, including that State did not include several incentives in the survey. State also did not comply with a legal requirement to assess the effectiveness of increasing danger and hardship pay in filling certain posts. Recent legislation increasing Foreign Service Officers' basic pay will increase the cost of existing incentives, thereby heightening the importance that State evaluate its incentives for hardship post assignments to ensure resources are effectively targeted and not wasted.

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### Abbreviations

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| DRI    | Diplomatic Readiness Initiative              |
| FSO    | Foreign Service Officer                      |
| GEMS   | Global Employee Management System            |
| HR/CDA | Office of Career Development and Assignments |
| MC     | minister counselor                           |
| OC     | counselor                                    |
| OIG    | Office of Inspector General                  |
| OPM    | Office of Personnel Management               |
| SND    | Service Need Differential                    |

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

September 17, 2009

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Chairman  
The Honorable George V. Voinovich  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight of  
Government Management,  
the Federal Workforce, and the  
District of Columbia  
Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

The Department of State (State) has designated roughly two-thirds of its 268 overseas posts as hardship posts.<sup>1</sup> Staff working in such locations often encounter harsh environmental and living conditions that can include inadequate medical facilities, limited opportunities for spousal employment, poor schools, high levels of crime, and severe climate. In addition to the high number of hardship posts State must staff, the number of positions in locations too dangerous for some family members to accompany an officer has grown considerably in recent years, from more than 700 in 2006 to over 900 at the end of fiscal year 2008. Many hardship posts are of critical importance to U.S. foreign policy objectives and necessitate a full complement of staff with the right skills to carry out the department's priorities.

In recent years we have reported on a number of human capital issues facing State, including staffing deficits at hardship posts that negatively

<sup>1</sup>State defines hardship posts as those locations where the U.S. government provides differential pay incentives—an additional 5 to 35 percent of basic salary, depending on the severity or difficulty of the conditions—to encourage employees to bid on assignments to these posts and to compensate them for the hardships they encounter. For the purposes of this report, we refer to these differential pay incentives as hardship differentials. We define hardship posts as those posts where the hardship differential is at least 15 percent. We define posts of greatest hardship as those where the hardship differential is at least 25 percent. We define posts with low differentials as those where the hardship differential is 5 or 10 percent. We define posts with no differentials as those where the hardship differential is 0 percent.

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impact diplomatic readiness.<sup>2</sup> We reported in 2002 that State's staffing shortfalls and ineffective assignment system compromised diplomatic readiness at hardship posts.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, we reported in 2006 that State had made progress in addressing overall staffing shortfalls since implementing its Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI), which enabled the department to hire and train more than 1,000 employees above attrition from 2002 to 2004; however, the initiative did not fully meet its goals and mid-level vacancies remained a problem at critical posts.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the department faces the continuing challenge of staffing embassy compounds in the conflict zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. To help meet these challenges, the Congress authorized additional positions for State in 2008—the first new positions outside the department's consular and worldwide security upgrade programs since 2004, according to State. Moreover, State has requested over 700 additional Foreign Service Officer (FSO) staff in its fiscal year 2010 budget request.

In response to your request, this report discusses (1) State's progress in addressing staffing gaps at hardship posts since 2006 and the effect of any remaining gaps, and (2) the extent to which State has used incentives to address staffing gaps at hardship posts.

To address these objectives, we reviewed GAO and State Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports and analyzed staffing, bidding, and position data. We also examined surveys conducted by State, analyzed State documents that outline incentives for hardship service, and collected data on participation in and funds expended on hardship incentive programs. Additionally, we met with officials in State's Bureau of Human Resources, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Bureau of Administration, six regional bureaus, and the American Foreign Service Association. To assess the impact of staffing gaps and State's use of hardship incentives firsthand, we conducted fieldwork in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria; Shenyang, China; and Riyadh and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. We selected these posts for their level of hardship, their strategic importance to the United States, and the

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<sup>2</sup>State defines diplomatic readiness as its "ability to get the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills to carry out America's foreign policy."

<sup>3</sup>GAO, *State Department: Staffing Shortfalls and Ineffective Assignment System Compromise Diplomatic Readiness at Hardship Posts*, GAO-02-626 (Washington, D.C.: June 18, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, GAO-06-894 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2006).

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low number of staff applying for each position. Specifically, the locations in Nigeria and Shenyang are posts of greatest hardship and the locations in Saudi Arabia are hardship posts which, at the time of our visit, had 1-year tours. In addition to our fieldwork, we conducted telephone interviews with senior officials in several additional hardship locations, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Liberia, and Tajikistan. We also convened an expert roundtable of several retired senior State officials, all of whom previously served as ambassadors to hardship posts.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2008 through September 2009, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

State is the lead agency responsible for implementing American foreign policy and representing the United States abroad. It staffs approximately 268 embassies, consulates, and other posts with over 8,000 Foreign Service positions overseas.<sup>5</sup> Roughly two-thirds of these posts are in locations that qualify for a special salary differential<sup>6</sup> to compensate officers for the harsh living conditions experienced there. The differential ranges from 5 to 35 percent of basic pay and is determined by a number of factors including extraordinarily difficult living conditions, excessive physical hardship, or notably unhealthy conditions affecting at least a majority of employees stationed at such a post.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 shows the distribution of overseas posts and positions by hardship differential. In general, tours of duty are two years in the United States and at 20 percent and 25 percent

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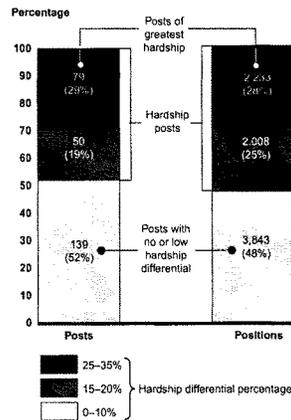
<sup>5</sup>State's overseas workforce also includes locally employed staff. This report focuses on the Foreign Service.

<sup>6</sup>A post differential may be granted on the basis of conditions of environment which differ substantially from conditions of environment in the continental United States and warrant additional pay as a recruitment and retention incentive. 5 U.S.C. § 5925. For the purposes of this report, we refer to State's post differential as hardship differential.

<sup>7</sup>State pays an additional 15 percent to 35 percent of salary for danger pay at designated posts. The danger pay allowance is designed to provide additional compensation above basic compensation to all U.S. government civilian employees, including chiefs of mission, for service in foreign areas where there exist conditions—such as civil insurrection, civil war, terrorism, or war—that threaten physical harm or imminent danger to employees.

hardship posts. Tours at other posts are generally three years, although a number of posts in locations too dangerous for some family members to accompany an officer carry 1-year tours.

**Figure 1: Distribution of Overseas Foreign Service Posts and Positions by Hardship Differential, as of September 30, 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.  
 Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

FSOs serving abroad fall into two broad categories: generalists and specialists. FSO generalists help formulate and implement the foreign policy of the United States and are grouped into five career tracks: management, consular, economic, political, and public diplomacy. FSO specialists provide support services at overseas posts worldwide or in Washington, D.C., and are grouped into seven major categories: administration, construction engineering, information technology, international information and English language programs, medical and health, office management, and security. State requires its FSOs to be available for service anywhere in the world, and reserves the ability to direct officers to any of its posts overseas or to its Washington headquarters. However, directed assignments are rare. The process of

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assigning FSOs to their positions typically begins when the staff receive a list of upcoming vacancies for which they may compete. Staff then submit a list of positions for which they want to be considered, or "bids," to the Office of Career Development and Assignments (HR/CDA) and consult with their career development officer. The process varies depending on an officer's grade and functional specialty:

- Entry-level officers' assignments are directed by the Entry Level Division of HR/CDA with little input from the posts or bureaus.
- Mid-level officers consult with bureaus and overseas posts to market themselves for their desired positions. Subsequently, HR/CDA convenes panels to finalize the assignments.<sup>8</sup>
- Senior-level officers are selected for their positions by the Director General,<sup>9</sup> following approval of policy-level positions by a special committee. As with mid-level officers, HR/CDA convenes a panel to finalize the assignments.

In recent years, State has taken a series of measures to address gaps and reallocate staff to emerging priority nations. In 2002, State implemented the Diplomatic Readiness Initiative (DRI) to address staffing and training gaps that, according to the department, endangered U.S. diplomatic readiness. Through the DRI—a 3-year, \$197 million program—State hired 1,069 new foreign and civil service employees above attrition. However, as we previously reported, most of this increase was absorbed by the demand for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2006, State introduced the Global Repositioning Program, which reallocated existing positions to emerging high-priority countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The primary focus of this program was to move political, economic, and public diplomacy officers from places like Washington and Europe to countries of increasing strategic importance such as China and India.

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<sup>8</sup>In terms of the Foreign Service grade structure, mid-level positions include FS-03, FS-02, and FS-01 and are equivalent to the civil service GS-13, GS-14, and GS-15, respectively.

<sup>9</sup>The Director General is the official who heads State's Bureau of Human Resources.

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### Persistent Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts Can Compromise Diplomatic Readiness

Despite some progress since we last reported in 2006, State has continued to face staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts that may compromise its diplomatic readiness. Several factors contribute to gaps at hardship posts, including State's overall staff shortage, which is compounded by the significant personnel demands of Iraq and Afghanistan, and a mid-level staffing deficit that has been reduced, but not eliminated. Moreover, State continues to experience difficulty in attracting officers to hardship posts and its assignment system does not explicitly address the experience gap at these posts. Staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts can diminish diplomatic readiness in a variety of ways, according to current and former State officials, including by reducing reporting coverage, weakening institutional knowledge, and increasing the supervisory burden on senior staff.

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### Staffing and Experience Gaps Remain at Key Hardship Posts

State continues to face staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts, including many of significant strategic importance to the United States. First, State has faced difficulty in filling critical positions at hardship posts. In its FY 2007 Annual Performance Report, State identified staffing of critical positions—designated positions at the posts of greatest hardship (those with hardship differentials of at least 25 percent)—as a key priority, noting that such positions are often on the forefront of U.S. policy interests. As such, State established a target for fiscal year 2007 of filling 90 percent of such critical positions with qualified bidders by the end of the assignments cycle.<sup>10</sup> However, State reported filling 75 percent of its critical positions, thereby missing its target. State further noted that it would be unable to fill more than 75 percent of critical positions until its resource needs were met. Subsequently, the department lowered its target to 75 percent for fiscal year 2008, which it reported it met.

In addition to staffing gaps specific to critical positions, State faces its highest rate of vacancies at the posts of greatest hardship.<sup>11</sup> As of September 2008, State had a 17 percent average vacancy rate at the posts of greatest hardship—nearly double the average rate of 9 percent at posts with no hardship differentials.<sup>12</sup> Vacancies at posts we visited during our

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<sup>10</sup>According to State, the assignments cycle for a given year includes both the summer and winter assignments cycles.

<sup>11</sup>We used data from State's Global Employee Management System (GEMS) database to calculate vacancy rates. Due to limitations in the GEMS data on positions in Iraq, we do not include Iraq in our vacancy rate calculations or figures.

<sup>12</sup>As of the same date, the average vacancy rate for all hardship posts was 15 percent, as compared to an average rate of 10 percent for all posts with no or low differentials.

review included a mid-level public affairs position in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,<sup>13</sup> that was vacant as of September 2008 and, at the time of our March 2009 visit, was not expected to be filled until June 2009. Similarly, a section chief in Lagos, Nigeria,<sup>14</sup> stated that prior to his arrival at post in August 2008, his position had been vacant for nearly a year. Although there were few vacancies in Shenyang, China,<sup>15</sup> at the time of our visit, nearly one-quarter of the staffed positions had been vacant for 4 months or more before their current incumbents arrived.

Beyond higher position vacancy rates, posts of greatest hardship face experience gaps due to a higher rate of staff filling positions above their own grades (see table 1).<sup>16</sup> As of September 2008, about 34 percent of mid-level generalist positions at posts of greatest hardship were filled by officers in upstretch assignments<sup>17</sup>—15 percentage points higher than the upstretch rate for comparable positions at posts with no or low differentials. Furthermore, as of the same date, 25 of 34 (over 70 percent) of all overseas generalists working two grades above their rank were located at hardship posts.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1: Number and Percentage of Mid-Level Generalist Positions Filled by Officers Working above Grade, as of September 30, 2008**

| Posts with no or low differentials | Hardship posts            | Posts of greatest hardship |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 210 of 1,093 (19 percent)          | 328 of 1,053 (31 percent) | 189 of 551 (34 percent)    |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

<sup>13</sup>At the time of our visit, Jeddah had a 20 percent hardship differential and a 25 percent danger pay allowance.

<sup>14</sup>At the time of our visit, Lagos had a 25 percent hardship differential.

<sup>15</sup>At the time of our visit, Shenyang had a 30 percent hardship differential.

<sup>16</sup>We used data from State's GEMS database to calculate rates of staff filling positions above their own grades. Due to limitations in the GEMS data on positions in Iraq, we do not include Iraq in these calculations of staff filling positions above their own grades or in table 1.

<sup>17</sup>An upstretch assignment is an assignment to a position above one's current grade.

<sup>18</sup>By comparison, slightly fewer than half of all overseas generalist positions are located at hardship posts.

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At posts we visited during our review, we observed numerous officers working in positions above their rank. For example, in Abuja, Nigeria,<sup>19</sup> more than 4 in every 10 positions were staffed by officers in upstretch assignments, including several employees working in positions two grades above their own. We also found multiple officers in upstretch assignments in Shenyang, including one mid-level consular position that officials stated has never been filled at grade.

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**Several Factors Contribute to Gaps at Hardship Posts**

A number of factors lead to gaps at hardship posts, including:

- State's overall staff shortage, which is compounded by the significant personnel demands of Iraq and Afghanistan;
- a persistent mid-level staffing deficit exacerbated by continued low bidding on hardship posts; and
- an assignment system that does not explicitly address the continuing experience gap at hardship posts.

**Overall Foreign Service Staffing Shortage Compounded by Personnel Needs of Iraq and Afghanistan**

As of April 2009, State had about 1,650 vacant Foreign Service positions in total. Approximately 270 of these vacancies were due to State not having enough employees to fill all of its positions—a shortfall that has grown since our last report.<sup>20</sup> Officers attending training or rotating from post to post without replacements to fill their positions accounted for most of the remaining 1,380 vacancies.<sup>21</sup> As we reported in 2006, State implemented DRI with the intention of hiring enough new employees above attrition to allow staff time for critical job training—also referred to as a “training float”—and to respond to emerging crises. However, as we previously reported, this goal became quickly outdated largely due to staffing demands for Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, due to the overall shortage of FSOs and the high priority of meeting Iraq and Afghanistan's

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<sup>19</sup>At the time of our visit, Abuja had a 25 percent hardship differential.

<sup>20</sup>In August 2006, we reported an overall staffing shortage of about 200 employees, based on State data from September 2005. According to a senior State official, the current shortfall of about 270 will decline over the course of 2009 as several cadres of new hires are brought on board.

<sup>21</sup>Of the approximately 1,380 additional vacant positions, about 1,020 were due to officers serving in training or rotating from post to post without replacements to fill their vacated positions. The approximately 360 remaining vacancies were due to officers on medical leave, temporary duty, or short tours.

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staffing needs, bureaus have had to identify nearly 670 positions to leave unfilled, or “frozen,” since 2005. As a result, State has generally been able to find candidates to fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>22</sup>—its top priority posts—but doing so has created gaps elsewhere, including at other hardship posts. For instance, positions that bureaus decided not to fill in the 2009 assignments cycle included several positions at hardship posts, such as an economic officer in Lagos, a management officer in Shenyang, and three or more positions each in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Mexico City, Mexico; and Moscow, Russia.

State officials also noted that the pressing need to staff Iraq and Afghanistan has led officers serving elsewhere to interrupt or cancel their current tours and volunteer for service in those two countries, thereby leaving other posts with unexpected gaps. For example, a senior official stated that a key political/military officer position in Russia was vacant due to the incumbent volunteering for a year of service in Afghanistan. The senior official further stated that he anticipated it would be difficult to find a temporary replacement for the unexpected vacancy. Similarly, officials in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs told us an officer who received nearly a year of language training in Vietnamese cancelled her tour in Vietnam to serve in Iraq.

Although State recently received a significant increase in resources and has requested more, the extent to which this influx will allow the department to eliminate vacancies is unclear. State received funding for about 140 additional Foreign Service positions in fiscal year 2008. Subsequently, in fiscal year 2009, State received about 720 additional Foreign Service positions that, according to the department, largely allowed it to fill vacancies created by personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and increases in language training.<sup>23</sup> The department has requested nearly 740 additional Foreign Service positions for fiscal year 2010 that, according to State's 2010 Congressional Budget Justification, will allow it to begin expanding its presence according to strategic priorities. However, given that about 1,650 positions were vacant as of

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<sup>22</sup>To fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, State has frequently assigned officers to positions above their grade. As of September 2008, over 40 percent of officers in Iraq and Afghanistan were serving in upstretch assignments.

<sup>23</sup>A forthcoming GAO report discusses challenges State faces in meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements in further detail. See GAO, *Department of State: Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls*, GAO-09-955 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

April 2009, it is unclear if the approximately 1,600 positions received or requested will enable State to both eliminate vacancies and expand its operations as stated.<sup>24</sup>

**Despite Some Progress, Mid-Level Experience Gap Remains**

While new resources may enable State to partially address vacancies and the department has reduced its mid-level deficit since 2006, the remaining shortage of mid-level officers represents a continuing experience gap. As of December 2008, State had 85 fewer mid-level generalist officers than positions (see table 2)—an improvement on the deficit of 316 that we previously reported. However, as of the same date, State faced a 28 percent greater deficit at the FS-02 level than it did in 2006, with mid-level positions in the public diplomacy and consular cones continuing to experience the largest shortages of staff overall.

**Table 2: Foreign Service Mid-Level Generalists' Surplus/(Deficit) across Career Tracks, as of December 31, 2008**

| Grade level  |   | Management  | Consular    | Economic  | Political | Public diplomacy | Surplus/(Deficit) by grade level | Total Surplus/(Deficit) |
|--------------|---|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Mid level    | 1 | (37)        | 17          | 44        | 57        | (67)             |                                  | 14                      |
|              | 2 | (84)        | 51          | 36        | 16        | (223)            |                                  | (204)                   |
|              | 3 | 87          | (129)       | 19        | 8         | 120              |                                  | 105                     |
| <b>Total</b> |   | <b>(34)</b> | <b>(61)</b> | <b>99</b> | <b>81</b> | <b>(170)</b>     | <b>(85)</b>                      |                         |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

According to a senior State official, the department will continue to face a deficit at the FS-02 level until 2012. The official told us that the department plans to manage this experience gap by assigning officers in the FS-03 grade to stretch positions. However, as we discuss later in this report, positions filled by officers in upstretch assignments can compromise diplomatic readiness. State has also accelerated promotions of FS-03 officers to address the experience gap. For instance, State's *Five-Year Workforce Plan for Fiscal Years 2008 through 2012* projects that it will take about 8 years for officers hired in 2008 to be promoted to the FS-02 level. By contrast, officers promoted to the FS-02 level in 2003 had an average time-in-service of 10.7 years. However, according to State,

<sup>24</sup>State has attempted to temporarily address vacancies through its Expanded Professional Associates Program. According to State, 105 positions, equivalent to entry-level officer positions, were established through this program in 2009 and filled by eligible Foreign Service family members.

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Despite Improvements, Low Bidding on Hardship Posts Continues to Exacerbate Mid-Level and Other Staffing Deficits

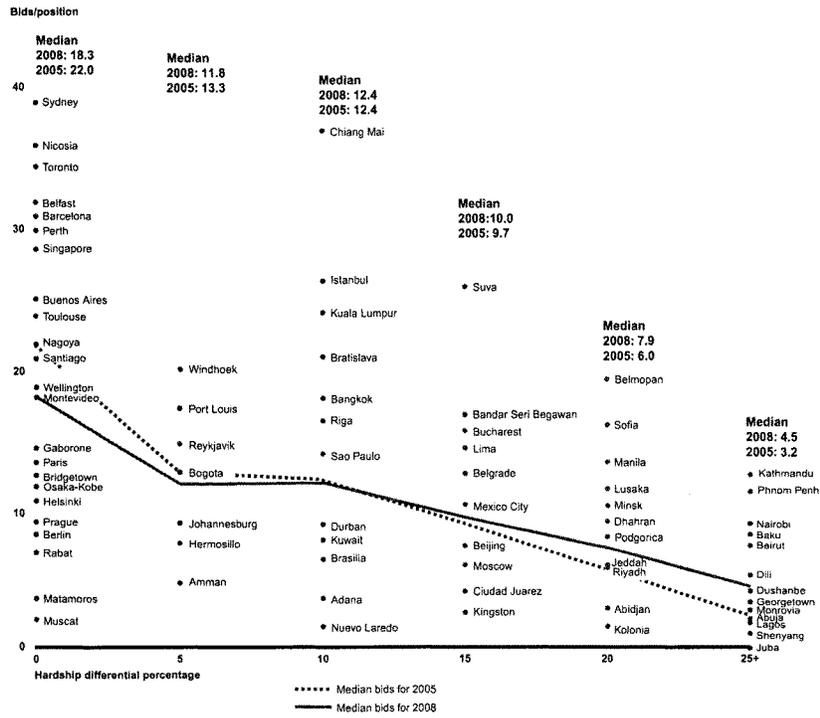
additional acceleration of promotions is unlikely given the potential risks associated with promoting officers with insufficient experience.

Although hardship posts have experienced an increase in bidding since we last reported, they continue to have difficulty attracting bids from experienced officers. Figure 2 shows the average number of bids on FS-02, FS-03, and FS-04 positions at overseas posts by differential rate for the 2008 summer assignments cycle.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>We analyzed bidding for these positions to remain consistent with our 2006 report, which included our analysis of bids on FS-02, FS-03, and FS-04 positions in the 2005 summer assignments cycle. Because State staffed Iraq through a special assignments cycle in 2008 separate from the regular summer assignments cycle, we did not include Iraq in our analysis of bidding.

**Figure 2: Average Number of Bids per Position by Hardship Differential for Grades 2, 3, and 4 for 2008**



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Since our 2006 report, the median average<sup>26</sup> of all bids on hardship posts has increased by about 20 percent (from 5 to 6).<sup>27</sup> The increase has been more pronounced for posts of greatest hardship, which received a median average of 4.5 bids per post in 2008—about 40 percent higher than the median average of 3.2 bids we previously reported. However, hardship posts continue to have difficulty attracting bids from experienced officers. Specifically, positions at hardship posts received a median average of 4 bids from at-grade officers, including a median average of 2.7 at-grade bids for positions at the posts of greatest hardship. By contrast, posts with no or low hardship differentials received a median average of over 9 at-grade bids. Furthermore, as of September 2008, hardship posts comprised over 90 percent (62 of 67) of posts that State classified as historically difficult to staff<sup>28</sup> for 2009.

Low bidding on hardship posts exacerbates State's staffing deficits—particularly its shortage of mid-level consular and public diplomacy officers. Figure 3 shows the average number of bids per generalist career track for each hardship differential in the summer 2008 assignments cycle. While all generalist career tracks received about 3 to 4 times fewer bids at the posts of greatest hardship than at posts with no differentials in 2008, consular and public diplomacy positions received among the fewest bids on average—3.6 and 4.3, respectively. Given that State faces its largest staff shortages in mid-level consular and public diplomacy positions, low bidding for such positions at hardship posts increases the difficulty of filling them.

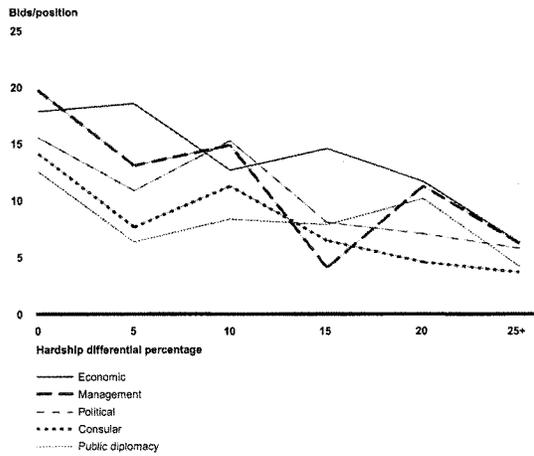
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<sup>26</sup>We use the term median average to refer to the midpoint of the average number of bids per post for each differential rate. For example, if there are three posts with a hardship differential of 25 percent and their average bids are 4, 5, and 7, the median average is 5.

<sup>27</sup>This calculation includes bids on all posts with hardship differentials of at least 15 percent.

<sup>28</sup>The list of historically difficult to staff posts for a given year is created the prior year. A post is considered historically difficult to staff if it is designated most difficult to staff for 3 out of the last 4 years. Most difficult to staff means that over half of the jobs available for that post in a given bidding cycle are designated hard to fill. A position is considered hard to fill if it attracts fewer than 3 at-grade, in-cone bids in a given assignments cycle.

**Figure 3: Average Bids per Generalist Career Track by Hardship Differential for 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

**State's Assignment System  
Prioritizes Staffing of Key  
Hardship Posts, but Does Not  
Explicitly Address Continuing  
Experience Gap**

State has taken steps in recent years to prioritize staffing of hardship posts. For example, in the 2007 assignments cycle, State assigned staff to hardship positions it considered critical—including in Iraq and Afghanistan—prior to assigning staff to positions elsewhere. Similarly, in the 2008 assignments cycle, State assigned staff to the posts of greatest hardship before assigning staff elsewhere. However, as we noted earlier in this report, hardship posts face a higher rate of upstretch assignments than posts with no or low differentials—an experience gap that State's assignment system does not explicitly address. For example, while State's instructions to bidders for the 2007 and 2008 assignments cycles did emphasize the staffing of hardship positions, the instructions did not differentiate between filling the positions with at-grade officers and filling them with officers below the positions' grades. Although State's instructions to bidders clearly state that employees bidding on stretch assignments compete against at-grade bidders, the low number of at-grade bids on hardship positions limits the likelihood that such positions will be

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filled by at-grade officers. Furthermore, in the assignments cycles for 2007 through 2009, State consistently permitted upstretch assignments to hardship posts 1 to 3 months prior to permitting upstretch assignments to posts with low or no hardship differentials, which may have encouraged officers with less experience to bid on hardship posts. According to State, upstretch assignments can be career-enhancing in some cases; however, the experience gap they represent—particularly at the mid-levels—can compromise diplomatic readiness.

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**Staffing and Experience  
Gaps at Hardship Posts  
Can Compromise  
Diplomatic Readiness**

Current and former State officials, including recently retired ambassadors and former directors general who participated in a GAO expert roundtable, staff currently posted overseas, and officials in Washington told us that staffing gaps at hardship posts diminish diplomatic readiness in a variety of ways. According to these officials, gaps can lead to decreased reporting coverage, loss of institutional knowledge, and increased supervisory requirements for senior staff, which take time away from other critical diplomatic responsibilities.

Senior management at selected posts had concerns that vacant positions caused an increased workload on officers at posts, which may detract from important functions. For example, the economic officer position in Lagos, whose responsibility is solely focused on energy, oil, and natural gas, was not filled in the 2009 cycle. The incumbent explained that, following his departure, his reporting responsibilities will be split up between officers in Abuja and Lagos. He said this division of responsibilities would diminish the position's focus on the oil industry and potentially lead to the loss of important contacts within both the government ministries and the oil industry. A 2008 Office of Inspector General (OIG) inspection of Freetown, Sierra Leone, noted concern over the effect of a sudden vacancy when the embassy's sole political/economic officer cut his tour short to serve in Iraq.<sup>29</sup> This vacancy deprived the embassy of its only reporting officer and the resulting transition period caused officials in Washington to be dissatisfied with economic reporting on issues such as the diamond industry and its impact on political instability, money laundering, drug smuggling, and, perhaps, terrorism. Similarly, an official told us that a political/military officer position in

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<sup>29</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy Freetown, Sierra Leone*, ISF-I-08-18A (Washington, D.C., March 2008). As of March 2008, Freetown had a 30 percent hardship differential.

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Russia was vacant because of the departure of the incumbent for a tour in Afghanistan, and the position's portfolio of responsibilities was divided among other officers in the embassy. According to the official, this vacancy slowed negotiation of an agreement with Russia regarding military transit to Afghanistan.

Another potentially adverse effect of staffing gaps is that important post-level duties, such as reporting and staff development, may suffer from inexperience when entry-level officers are staffed to mid-level positions. While officials at post said that some officers in stretch positions perform well, others told us that the inexperience of entry-level officers serving in mid-level capacities can have a negative impact. For example, the economic section chief at one post we visited stated that reporting produced by an entry-level officer in a mid-level position lacked the necessary analytical rigor. The political section chief at the same post noted that a mid-level position responsible for reporting on terrorism was staffed by an officer serving two grades above his current grade level with no previous reporting experience. A 2008 OIG inspection of N'Djamena, Chad, found that difficulties attracting staff with the requisite skills and experience contributed to deviations from standard operating procedures.<sup>30</sup>

Another consequence of staffing gaps is that senior-level staff at posts with no experienced mid-level officers are diverted from key responsibilities by the need to supervise inexperienced entry-level staff. In 2006, we found that senior staff at several posts spent more time on operational matters and less time on overall planning, policy, and coordination than should be the case. On our recent visits, we found that there are still inexperienced officers taking on mid-level responsibilities and that these officers require more supervision and guidance from senior post leadership than more experienced mid-level officers would require; as a result, the senior officers have less time to perform high-level planning and policy implementation. According to officials we met with, inexperienced officers sometimes perform essential tasks such as adjudicating visas, identifying political trends, and assisting American citizens abroad; therefore, they often require guidance on how to carry out such activities. When senior-level officials must serve as the only source of guidance, post

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<sup>30</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy N'Djamena, Chad*, ISP-I-09-02A (Washington, D.C., December 2008). As of December 2008, N'Djamena had a 30 percent hardship differential.

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officials explained, they have less ability to plan and coordinate policy. For example, the ambassador to Nigeria told us spending time helping officers in stretch positions is a burden and interferes with policy planning and implementation. The consular chief in Shenyang told us he spends too much time helping entry-level officers adjudicate visas and, therefore, less time managing the section. A 2008 OIG inspection of N'Djamena, Chad, reported that the entire front office was involved in mentoring entry-level officers and that this was an unfair burden on the ambassador and deputy chief of mission, given the challenging nature of the post.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to gaps in established positions, some State officials at overseas posts told us that there are not enough authorized positions to manage the heavy workload at some posts. These officials stated that even if the department had an adequate number of people to fill all current positions, there would still be a need for additional positions and officers to fill them because the current workload outweighs the workforce. For example, a senior official at one post told us that her embassy did not have enough authorized management positions to support the rapid increase in staff for all government agencies located there. As a result, the ambassador placed a moratorium on the addition of any new staff from any agency until the embassy received more management officer positions. The official explained that the moratorium has prevented some agencies from adding staff to implement important programs related to health, education, and counternarcotics efforts. During the GAO expert roundtable of former ambassadors to hardship posts, a former director general said that one of his former posts had so many visitors that four officers had to deal primarily with visits and not their other responsibilities. In addition, according to the ambassador to Liberia, the embassy in Monrovia lacks adequate staff positions to meet its goals. She said it is not uncommon for one section to work twenty hours of overtime in one week. The ambassador listed four new positions that she believes should be authorized but, according to her, will not likely be added in the next few years. The State OIG also commented on the need for reasonable growth in Monrovia in a 2008 mission inspection.<sup>32</sup> A 2009 OIG inspection of Nouakchott, Mauritania, noted concern that without another political officer in the embassy, the post would not have the depth needed to

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<sup>31</sup>ISP-I-09-02A.

<sup>32</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy Monrovia, Liberia*, ISP-I-08-20A (Washington, D.C., March 2008). As of March 2008, Monrovia had a 30 percent hardship differential.

adequately cover the rapidly evolving political situation and achieve department goals in the country.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, officials in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, noted that the creation and filling of a political/economic section chief position, as they have requested in their Mission Strategic Plan, would alleviate the current need for entry-level officers to report directly to the consul general.

### State Has Wide Range of Measures and Incentives to Staff Hardship Posts but Their Effectiveness is Unclear Due to Lack of Evaluation

State uses a range of incentives to staff hardship posts, but their effectiveness remains unclear due to a lack of evaluation. Incentives to serve in hardship posts range from monetary benefits to changes in service and bidding requirements. In 2006, we recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its incentive programs for hardship post assignments, but the department has not yet done so systematically. Further, recent legislation will increase the cost of existing incentives, thereby increasing the need for State to fully evaluate its incentives to ensure resources are effectively targeted and not wasted.

### State Has a Wide Range of Measures and Other Incentives to Staff Hardship Posts

State has created a wide range of measures and financial and nonfinancial incentives to encourage mid-level officers to seek assignments to—and remain at—hardship posts around the world. These have included some measures designed for all hardship posts, as well as others tailored specifically to fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, posts State has declared to be the highest priority.

In addition to hardship and danger pay, incentives to bid on—and remain in—hardship posts, particularly those considered historically difficult to staff, include:

- *The opportunity to include upstretch jobs on core bid list.* Mid-level officers may include bids for upstretch positions in their "core bid" list, provided that the position is at a hardship post or the officer is serving at a hardship post when the bid list is due.<sup>34</sup> State generally requires employees

<sup>33</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Embassy Nouakchott, Mauritania*, ISP-I-09-23A (Washington, D.C., March 2009). As of March 2009, Nouakchott had a 25 percent hardship differential.

<sup>34</sup>A core bid is one on a position in an employee's cone/skill code and grade for which the employee has either the required language proficiency, or time to acquire it, between his or her transfer eligibility date and that of the incumbent.

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to maintain a list of six "core bids" on positions at their grade level. State often offers upstretch assignments as a reward for strong performance and as a career-enhancing opportunity.

- *Eligibility to receive student loan repayments.* Officers who accept assignments to posts with at least a 20 percent hardship differential or any danger pay allowance may be offered student loan repayments as a recruitment or retention incentive.
- *Extra pay to extend tour in certain posts.* Employees who accept a 3-year assignment at certain historically difficult to staff posts qualifying for the Service Need Differential (SND) program are eligible to receive an additional hardship differential over and above existing hardship differentials, equal to 15 percent of the employee's basic compensation.<sup>35</sup>
- *One year of service at unaccompanied or certain difficult to staff posts.* State has established a 1-year tour of duty at posts considered too dangerous for some family members to accompany an officer, in recognition of the difficulty of serving at such posts. Additionally, employees may negotiate shorter tours to historically difficult to staff posts, provided it is in the interest of the service.
- *Consideration for promotion.* State instructs the selection boards who recommend employees for promotion to "...weigh positively creditable and exemplary performance at hardship and danger posts..." However, the instructions only identify Iraq and Afghanistan by name.

State has taken special measures to fill positions in Iraq and Afghanistan, including assigning officers to these two posts before assigning them to other posts. Incentives for officers to serve in Iraq and Afghanistan include:

- *Priority consideration for onward assignments.* State has instituted a program whereby a Foreign Service employee may be selected for his/her assignment for 2010 at the same time as he/she is selected for a 2009 Iraq assignment.

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<sup>35</sup>State regulations say that in order to qualify for SND, an employee must be assigned to a post that has at least a 15 percent differential and the combined SND and danger pay allowance do not exceed 35 percent.

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- *The option to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan on detail and extend current assignment.* State allows officers to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan on detail from Washington or their current post of assignment, which provides financial and other benefits. For example, officers serving on detail from Washington, D.C., retain locality pay.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, according to State officials, officers who leave their families at their current post of assignment to serve on detail avoid the disruption of moving their families and may extend their tour at their current post of assignment from 3 years to 4 years, which may be particularly attractive for officers with school age children as it enables more educational continuity.<sup>37</sup>
  - *Favorable consideration for promotion.* State's selection boards that recommend employees for promotion are expected to look favorably on service in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, State instructs the boards to "particularly credit performance in Provincial Reconstruction Teams and other regional operations in Iraq, which the President and Secretary of State have determined to be of the highest priority."

In addition to incentives, State has rules requiring certain employees to bid on positions at hardship posts. These Fair Share rules require designated FSOs to bid on a minimum of three posts with a 15 percent or higher differential pay incentive in two geographic areas.<sup>38</sup>

Table 3 lists the various incentives and requirements across posts, based on hardship differential.

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<sup>36</sup>Locality pay is a salary comparability benefit, typically available to domestic federal employees only to attract workers in the continental United States to the federal government versus the private sector. Historically, FSOs posted overseas have not received locality pay. Current locality pay for Washington, D.C., is 23.1 percent.

<sup>37</sup>The standard tour of duty at posts with no differentials is three years.

<sup>38</sup>An employee is considered Fair Share if he or she has not served at least (1) 20 months at a post with a combined hardship and danger pay differential of 15 percent or greater, or (2) 10 months at a post with a 1-year standard tour of duty during the 8 years prior to the employee's upcoming transfer eligibility date.

**Table 3: Financial and Nonfinancial Incentives and Requirements for Service at Hardship Posts**

| Category     | 5% & 10%              | 15%  | 20%  | 25% to 35%   | Combat Zones   |
|--------------|-----------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Financial    | Hardship differential | Hardship differential  | Hardship differential  | Hardship differential  | Hardship differential  |
|              |                       | Danger pay   | Danger pay   | Danger pay   | Danger pay   |
|              |                       | SND  | SND  | SND  |  |
|              |                       | Student loan repayment program*  | Student loan repayment program   | Student loan repayment program   | Student loan repayment program   |
|              |                       |  |  |  | Retain DC locality pay   |
|              |                       |  |  |  | Family stays at post if sent on 1-year TDY OR can elect separate maintenance allowance           |
|              |                       |  |  |  | Special differential (20% for FS-01, FS-02, FS-03, and FS-04 levels if serve more than 180 days) |
| Nonfinancial |                       | Meets Fair Share requirements  | Meets Fair Share requirements  | Meets Fair Share requirements  | Meets Fair Share requirements (after 6 months in Iraq, 10 months in Afghanistan)                 |
|              |                       | Staff eligible to bid for a position one grade higher than their current grade level | Staff eligible to bid for a position one grade higher than their current grade level | Staff eligible to bid for a position one grade higher than their current grade level | Staff eligible to bid for a position one grade higher than their current grade level             |
|              |                       |  |  |  | Onward assignments   |
|              |                       | Negotiated tours <sup>†</sup>  | Negotiated tours   | Negotiated tours   | Negotiated tours   |
|              |                       | Favorable consideration in promotion boards  |
|              |                       |  |  |  | Extension of previous assignment   |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

\*Officers who accept assignments to posts with at least a 20 percent hardship differential or any danger pay allowance are eligible for student loan repayments.

†Nonstandard tours of duty may be negotiated if a post is historically difficult to staff and the tour length is in the interest of the service.

Although State offers a range of incentives, it does not routinely track or report on their total cost. In response to our request for cost information, State queried its payroll system and estimated that it spent about \$83 million on hardship pay, \$30 million on danger pay, and about \$3 million on SND in fiscal year 2008. The cost information indicates that the amount spent on financial incentives has increased in recent years. According to the State OIG, in fiscal year 2005, the department spent about \$65 million

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on hardship pay, \$16 million on danger pay, and \$3 million on SND.<sup>39</sup> Separately, State reports the amount spent on student loan repayments to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) as part of that office's statutory requirement to report annually to the Congress on agencies' use of student loan repayments.<sup>40</sup> According to our analysis of data from OPM's report for 2007, State repaid about \$2.5 million of student loans to FSOs in that year.

Although not all incentives cost money, they may present other tradeoffs. First, State officials report that the 1-year tour of duty to Iraq has been a useful recruitment tool.<sup>41</sup> However, these and other officials told us that the 1-year tour length makes it difficult for FSOs to form the relationships with their counterparts in other governments necessary for the conduct of U.S. diplomacy. For example, a State official told us of a recent instance where the U.S. government needed information on a Middle Eastern country's relationship with another nation in the region. However, none of the four political officers at the U.S. embassy in the country had sufficient contacts with the host government to obtain the information required. Consequently, the U.S. embassy needed to ask State headquarters to obtain the information from the host government by way of that country's embassy in the United States, resulting in delayed reporting of the information. A former Director General told us that 1-year tours result in a loss of institutional knowledge and program continuity. Second, the opportunity to bid on stretch assignments is an incentive because such assignments may be career-enhancing. However, as noted earlier in this report, senior officials may need to supervise and guide officers in stretch positions more than officers in positions at their current grade levels.

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**State Has Not Systematically Evaluated Effectiveness of Incentive Programs for Hardship Post Assignments**

State has not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of its incentive programs, despite recommendations to do so. Agency officials cited the difficulty of evaluating the impact of any single incentive because of the numerous factors involved, but State has not taken advantage of available tools to evaluate incentive programs. State has not generated sufficient data to evaluate the impact of the favorable consideration for promotion

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<sup>39</sup>Department of State, OIG, *Report of Inspection: Bureau of Administration, Office of Allowances*, ISP-1-06-51 (Washington, D.C., September 2006).

<sup>40</sup>5 U.S.C. § 5379.

<sup>41</sup>One year is also the standard tour of duty in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

**State's Effort to Evaluate Effectiveness of Incentive Programs for Hardship Posts is Insufficient**

and the SND program in attracting employees to bid on, or remain in, hardship post assignments. State also did not comply with a congressional mandate to evaluate recent increases in hardship and danger pay.

State's efforts to evaluate hardship incentives remain insufficient. We previously reported that State created a number of incentives to address the growing number of vacancies at hardship posts to achieve its goal of having the right people in the right place with the right skills.<sup>42</sup> However, in 2006, we reported State had not measured the effectiveness of hardship incentives, and recommended State systematically evaluate the effectiveness of such measures, establishing specific indicators of progress and adjusting the use of the incentives based on this analysis. State responded to this recommendation by including a question on the impact of incentives to its biennial employee quality of life survey, but this step does not fully respond to our recommendation for three reasons.

First, the survey's incentive question is not specific enough. State included the question "How important was each of the following in your decision to bid on overseas positions during the last assignment cycle in which you submitted bids?" in its most recent Quality of Life at Work survey. The question then listed 11 items, some of which are incentives (e.g., hardship pay) and others are generic aspects of overseas assignments (e.g., security). While the survey provides some limited information, the survey question does not ask about the influence of the incentives on officers' willingness to bid on—and remain in—hardship post assignments. Further, by mixing incentives and other aspects of hardship post assignments, the question dilutes the focus on the incentives. Moreover, the list of incentives included is incomplete. For example, it does not ask employees about the extent to which the opportunity to include upstretch jobs on their core bid list or the favorable promotion consideration by selection boards impact their decisions to bid on hardship post assignments. Excluding some incentives from the survey hampers State's ability to evaluate the effectiveness of programs for hardship post assignments individually and collectively.

Second, the overall survey design has limitations preventing State officials from segregating responses by post and also does not collect key demographic information. For example, the survey data do not allow State officials to determine which responses came from posts with no hardship

<sup>42</sup>GAO-06-894 and GAO-02-626.

differential, such as London, United Kingdom, and which came from posts of greatest hardship, such as Lagos, Nigeria. The survey also does not ask respondents for key demographic information, such as age and family status. The absence of this information makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the incentives as they apply to posts differently. Further, the appeal of one incentive relative to another incentive may differ based upon an officer's personal circumstances.

Third, State did not establish specific indicators of progress against which to measure the survey responses over time. As previously noted, State tracks the percentage of critical positions filled with qualified bidders by the end of the assignments cycle. However, State has not attempted to link this information to the survey results, as suggested by government management standards.<sup>43</sup> Since the survey incentive question is so vague, tracking it over time would not provide a useful indicator of progress to assess the outcomes of its programs for hardship post assignments.

**While State Cites External Constraints for Evaluating Incentives, Proper Evaluation Design and Execution May Help Meet This Challenge**

State has not taken advantage of available tools to evaluate incentive programs for hardship post assignments. State officials maintain that external constraints make it challenging to evaluate the department's incentive programs. They reported that, in their view, it is not possible to isolate the effectiveness of a single incentive because of the large number of factors staff consider when bidding on assignments. Specifically, the department cited the difficulties of capturing the personal and family preferences and values that influence bid decisions in a database.<sup>44</sup> While acknowledging the challenges of this type of analysis, there are statistical methods and procedures to help determine the extent of association between the key variables of interest, while controlling for the effect of other measurable factors that could influence outcomes. Further, cost-effectiveness analysis—which attempts to systematically quantify the

<sup>43</sup>In conjunction with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and GAO, OPM issued a strategic human capital framework—called the *Human Capital Assessment and Accountability Framework*—to provide a consistent, comprehensive representation of human capital management to guide federal agencies. OPM's framework provides six standards, along with associated indicators, or practices, for achieving success. One of the effectiveness indicators under the Talent Management standard is the reporting of appropriate metrics to senior managers and human resource executives to assess the outcomes from retention strategies.

<sup>44</sup>At posts we visited in 2008 and 2009, we heard concerns similar to those we reported on in 2006, when we found that family considerations—child-related and spousal employment concerns, in particular—were a significant obstacle to attracting mid-level officers to hardship posts.

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State Has Not Generated Data to Measure Key Incentives

costs of alternatives and assumes that each alternative results in achieving the same benefits—can be an appropriate evaluation tool when dollar values cannot be ascribed to the benefits of a particular program.

While State has taken steps to improve its data collection effort, it does not collect sufficient information to determine whether the SND program or the instructions to selection boards to weigh service at hardship posts positively are having an impact on bidding on hardship posts. State has increased the amount of data it collects on the SND program since we last reported in 2006, but more information is needed to evaluate the program's effectiveness. In 2006, we reported State was able to provide information on the number of officers who actually enrolled in the program, but was not able to provide information on the number of eligible officers who did not. Since we last reported on this issue, State has begun collecting data on which officers decline SND. However, State has not gathered the additional information necessary to measure the effectiveness of the program. According to a department official, State has considered the calculation of the worldwide rate at which officers extend their tours of duty to be a lower priority than other human resources initiatives. The State official said that it is not possible to evaluate the program's effectiveness without this information.

The manner in which State tracks employees serving in Iraq and Afghanistan makes it difficult to analyze the impact of the promotion consideration outlined in the instructions to selection boards. As previously noted, officers may serve in Iraq and Afghanistan on detail from Washington or another post of assignment; however, while they are on detail, State's personnel database continues to reflect the officer's current post of assignment. Furthermore, we reported in June 2009<sup>45</sup> that State does not have a mechanism for identifying and tracking its employees deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and recommended the department

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<sup>45</sup>GAO, *Human Capital: Actions Needed to Better Track and Provide Timely and Accurate Compensation and Medical Benefits to Deployed Federal Civilians*, GAO-09-562 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2009). State officials compiled their list of civilian employees who had been deployed to and returned from Iraq or Afghanistan between January 1, 2006, and April 30, 2008 by querying GEMS. According to a responsible State official, GEMS is a human resources system designed to document a personnel action from its initial request until it is completely processed.

State Did Not Undertake  
Congressionally Mandated  
Report to Assess Impact of  
Increased Hardship and Danger  
Pay on Staffing Shortfalls

establish policies and procedures to do so.<sup>46</sup> The lack of readily available data on FSOs deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan may make it difficult to comply with a June 2009 congressional direction to State that it report on the promotion process at the department as it relates to any preferential consideration given for service in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as compared to other hardship posts.<sup>47</sup> According to officials, State has not yet attempted to analyze the impact of the instructions to the selection boards on promotions.

State has not complied with a congressional mandate to assess the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay ceilings to recruit experienced officers to certain posts, hampering oversight of State's use of the authority to increase such differentials. In December 2005, Congress passed legislation authorizing State to raise the hardship differentials and danger pay allowances from 25 percent to 35 percent as a recruitment and retention incentive.<sup>48</sup> The law required the department to (1) notify several congressional committees of the criteria to be used in adjusting the hardship and danger differentials and (2) study and report by 2007 on the effect of the increases in hardship differential and danger pay allowance ceilings in filling "hard to fill" positions.<sup>49</sup> In response, State notified Congress in March 2006 that it would increase the threshold for posts to qualify for the 30 and 35 percent differentials and allowances under the present criteria it uses to calculate its hardship and danger pay differential calculations, rather than add new criteria.<sup>50</sup> However, State officials confirmed that the department did not study the effect of these increased differentials and allowances on filling "hard to fill" positions and did not provide the required report to Congress. A State official said that, as of July 2009, the department had begun an effort to comply with the

<sup>46</sup>In response to our recommendation, State committed to consulting and coordinating with the Department of Defense and other executive agencies to determine the best way to establish policies and procedures to accurately identify and track standardized information on deployed civilians.

<sup>47</sup>H.R. Rept. No. 111-151, at 123 (2009) (Conf. Rept.).

<sup>48</sup>To provide certain authorities for the Department of State, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 109-140, § 4, 119 Stat. 2650, 2651 (2005).

<sup>49</sup>*Id.*

<sup>50</sup>State uses a point system to determine the appropriate differential and danger pay rates for posts. State informed Congress that posts would need to reach higher thresholds to qualify for the 30 and 35 percent levels.

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congressional mandate. According to State's comments on this report, the department expects to fulfill the mandate by October 2009.

Despite the hardship and danger pay increases, these high-priority posts continue to have difficulties attracting bidders. Specifically, 17 of the 26 posts with either danger or hardship pay differentials above 25 percent were designated historically difficult to staff as of May 2008. The lack of an assessment of the effectiveness of the danger and hardship pay increases in filling positions at these posts, coupled with the continuing staffing challenges in these locations, makes it difficult to determine whether these resources are properly targeted.

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**Legislative Changes May Result in Increased Expenditures on Incentives for Hardship Post Assignments**

Several measures passed by Congress this year may raise the cost of hardship post incentives already in place and provide additional incentives. Legislation enacted in 2009 authorized locality pay adjustments for fiscal year 2009 for members of the Foreign Service stationed overseas comparable to that if such member's official duty station were in the District of Columbia, and appropriated \$41 million for this purpose.<sup>51</sup> According to a State official, the legislative change will result in an approximately 8 percent increase in basic pay for FSOs, beginning in August 2009. Locality pay is not itself an incentive for hardship post assignments. However, the resulting increase in basic pay will lead to an increase in hardship pay, danger pay, and SND, all of which are calculated as percentages of basic pay. Officials we interviewed, both at hardship posts and in Washington, D.C., cited the lack of locality pay as a deterrent to bid on overseas positions. We have reported in the past that differences in the statutes governing domestic locality pay and differential pay for overseas service created a gap in compensation, which State officials, the American Foreign Service Association, and many officers have reported effectively penalizes overseas employees compared to employees based in Washington, D.C.<sup>52</sup>

Congress also recently enacted legislation authorizing State to pay recruitment, relocation, and retention bonuses to all FSOs other than

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<sup>51</sup>See Pub. L. No. 111-32, § 1113; Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-8, § 4, 123 Stat. 524, 525 and Explanatory Statement, submitted by Mr. Obey, Chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations, Regarding H.R. 1105, Omnibus Appropriations Act, 2009, 155 Cong. Rec. H 1653, 2404 (daily ed. Feb. 23, 2009).

<sup>52</sup>GAO-06-894 and GAO-02-626.

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ambassadors and chiefs of mission who are on official duty in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> Previously, Foreign Service generalists were not entitled to receive recruitment, relocation, and retention bonuses.<sup>54</sup> As of the end of fiscal year 2008, there were about 340 Foreign Service generalist positions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Further, State also plans to increase the number of FSOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The large—and growing—number of FSOs serving at these posts represents a potentially significant increase in recruitment, relocation, and retention bonus payments.<sup>55</sup>

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## Conclusions

The conduct of U.S. diplomacy compels State to assign staff to hardship posts where conditions are difficult and sometimes dangerous, but that nonetheless are at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy priorities. State has made progress since 2006 in reducing its deficit of mid-level officers and increasing the average number of bids at hardship posts. Despite these advances, State continues to face persistent staffing and experience gaps at such posts—especially at the mid-level—which can compromise its diplomatic readiness. The department has generally been able to fill its top priority posts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but key positions at other hardship posts remain vacant or are filled by officers who may lack the necessary experience to effectively perform their duties, potentially compromising State's ability to advance U.S. international interests. Although State plans to address staffing gaps by hiring more officers, the department acknowledges it will take years for these new employees to gain the experience they need to be effective mid-level officers. The department plans to manage this experience gap in the near term by continuing to assign officers to positions above their current grade level. However, the frequent assignment of officers to stretch positions in hardship posts brings some risks, which will likely persist since State's assignment system does not explicitly address the continuing experience gap at hardship posts as a priority consideration in making assignments. Furthermore, despite State's continued difficulty attracting qualified staff to hardship posts, the department has not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of

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<sup>53</sup>See Pub. L. No. 111-32, § 1115(d).

<sup>54</sup>State has had the authority to offer recruitment, retention, and relocation bonuses to Foreign Service specialists and civil service employees.

<sup>55</sup>According to OPM, in calendar year 2007, State paid approximately \$6 million in retention bonuses to 594 informational technology specialists, unrelated to FSO staffing in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

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its incentives for hardship service. These incentives cost the department millions of dollars annually—an investment that will grow given recent legislative initiatives that raise FSO basic pay and expand the use of bonuses for recruitment, relocation, and retention. Without a full evaluation of State's hardship incentives, the department cannot obtain valuable insights that could help guide resource decisions to ensure it is most efficiently and effectively addressing gaps at these important posts.

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### Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure that hardship posts are staffed commensurate with their stated level of strategic importance and resources are properly targeted, we recommend the Secretary of State take the following two actions:

- Take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of at-grade, mid-level officers to such posts an explicit priority consideration.
- Develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments. Such a plan could include an analysis of how the hardship assignment incentive programs work individually and collectively to address the department's difficulty in recruiting staff to accept—and remain in—positions at hardship posts.

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### Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State provided written comments on a draft of this report. The comments are reprinted in Appendix IV. State generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations. For example, the department acknowledged that many hardship posts may face experience gaps. State also provided us with a draft analysis of the impact of increased hardship and danger pay on staffing shortfalls and indicated that it plans to continue tracking employee attitudes toward hardship incentives through future surveys. While these are positive steps, they do not fully respond to our recommendation to implement a plan to evaluate hardship incentives. In addition, State provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

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As agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the Secretary of State and interested congressional committees. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on our Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staffs have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4268 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix V.



Jess T. Ford  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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## Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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To assess the Department of State's (State) progress in addressing staffing gaps at hardship posts since 2006 and the effect of any remaining gaps, we

- reviewed GAO and State Office of Inspector General reports (OIG), as well as applicable legislation and budget documents;
- analyzed staffing, bidding, and position data; and
- interviewed officials in State's Bureau of Human Resources, Bureau of Consular Affairs, and six regional bureaus regarding staffing issues.

To determine State staff surplus/deficit figures, we analyzed State staffing data and compared the number of positions in each career track with the number of Foreign Service Officers (FSO) in each track. For example, if the total number of employees in the consular career track is 1,055 and the total number of consular positions is 1,866, the deficit in officers would be 811.

We analyzed bid data from the 2008 summer assignments cycle to determine the average number of bids per post, the median number of bids for each differential rate, and the average number of bids per generalist career track for each differential rate. In order to compare 2008 data with the 2005 data from our previous report and remain consistent, we used FS-04, FS-03, and FS-02 bid data. The bid data include the number of positions to be filled at each post and the number of bids received for each position. We used the bid data for the summer assignments cycle because, according to State officials, most employees are transferred during this cycle, compared to the winter cycle. Because State staffed Iraq through a separate assignments cycle in 2008 that involved a different bidding process than the regular summer assignments cycle, we did not include Iraq positions in our analysis.

We used the following methodology to obtain our results:

- To obtain the average number of bids per post, we took the total number of bids received on all positions at each post and divided it by the total number of positions to be filled at the post. For example, in the 2008 summer assignments cycle, Lagos had 9 positions to be filled and received a total of 23 bids, resulting in an average of 2.6 bids for this post.
- To obtain the median number of bids at each differential rate, we arranged in ascending order the average number of bids for each post at the corresponding differential rate and used the middle average. For example,

assuming there are 5 posts at the 25 percent differential rate and their average bids are 3, 5, 7, 9, and 16, the median of the average bids is 7.

- To obtain the average number of bids per generalist career track at each differential rate, we took the total number of bids received on all positions in each career track per differential and divided it by the total number of positions to be filled in the career track per differential. For example, assuming there are 3 management positions at the 15 percent differential rate receiving a total of 12 bids, the average number of bids for management positions at 15 percent differential posts is 4.

We also analyzed data on all State Foreign Service positions as of the end of fiscal year 2008 to determine the vacancy rate for each post, the average vacancy rate for each differential rate, and the proportion of mid-level generalist positions filled by officers working above their grades for each differential rate. The position data include the number of positions at each post, the career track and grade of each position and, for positions that are staffed, the career track and grade of the incumbent. We used position data as of the end of the fiscal year because, according to State officials, most employees moving on to their next assignments have arrived at their new posts by that time. Due to limitations in the position data for Iraq, we did not include Iraq positions in our analysis.

We used the following methodology to obtain our results:

- To obtain the vacancy rate for each post, we took the total number of vacant positions at each post and divided it by the total number of positions to be filled at the post. For example, assuming there are 10 total positions at a given post and 2 vacancies, the vacancy rate is 20 percent.
- To obtain the average vacancy rate for each differential rate, we took the sum of all vacancy rates for posts with a given differential and divided it by the total number of posts with that differential. For example, assuming there are 5 posts at the 25 percent differential rate and their vacancy rates are 10 percent, 12 percent, 15 percent, 17 percent, and 20 percent, the average vacancy rate is 14.8 percent.
- To obtain the proportion of mid-level generalist positions filled by officers working above their grades for each differential rate, we took the total number of generalist positions at the FS-03, FS-02, and FS-01 levels filled with officers in upstretch assignments for each differential and divided it by the total number of generalist positions at those levels with that differential. For example, assuming there are only 7 mid-level generalist

positions at posts with a 20 percent differential and 2 are filled by officers in upstretches, the upstretch rate is 29 percent.

To assess the extent to which State has used incentives to address staffing gaps at hardship posts, we

- reviewed GAO and State OIG reports, as well as applicable legislative documents and guidance from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Office of Management and Budget;
- examined surveys conducted by State;
- analyzed State documents that outline incentives for hardship service, including those available to officers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- collected data on participation in and funds expended on hardship incentive programs; and
- interviewed officials in State's Bureau of Human Resources, Bureau of Administration, and six regional bureaus regarding State's use of incentives.

We obtained bidding data from State's FSBID database and staffing and position data from State's Global Employee Management System (GEMS) database. Since we have previously checked the reliability of both these databases, we inquired if State had made any major changes to the databases since our 2006 report. State indicated that it had not made major changes to either. We also tested the data for completeness and interviewed knowledgeable officials from the Office of Resource Management and Organizational Analysis and the Office of Career Development and Assignments (HR/CDA) concerning the reliability of the data. Based on our analysis of the data and discussions with the officials, we determined the bidding and staffing data to be sufficiently reliable for our purposes. We also determined that the position data for all posts but Iraq were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this engagement. Given the limitations associated with Iraq positions in the position data, we obtained a separate set of Iraq-specific position data from the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) to use to analyze staffing in Iraq. To assess the reliability of the Iraq position data provided by NEA, we asked State how the data are collected, entered, and checked. State indicated that the data are collected and maintained manually by authorized assignment personnel and constantly updated through coordination between NEA and human resources officials in Iraq, among others. Based on this assessment

and our analysis of the data, we determined NEA's Iraq position data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this engagement.

We conducted fieldwork in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria; Shenyang, China; and Riyadh and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to study the impact of staffing gaps at selected hardship posts and State's use of incentives for hardship service. In deciding where to conduct our fieldwork, we considered factors such as the historic difficulty of staffing a given post; the mix of incentives available; strategic importance; and recommendations from cognizant State officials. We selected the posts in Nigeria because of their historically low bidding, their 25 percent hardship differentials, and because each offers Service Need Differential (SND). We selected Shenyang because of the post's 30 percent hardship differential, historically low bidding, and SND. We selected the posts in Saudi Arabia because, in addition to their historically low bidding and 20 percent hardship differentials, both were unaccompanied 1-year posts at the time of our review. In addition to our fieldwork, we conducted telephone interviews with senior officials in several additional hardship posts, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Liberia, and Tajikistan. We also convened an expert roundtable of several retired senior State officials. The participants in the roundtable had all served as ambassadors to hardship posts in the last 10 years. Two participants were also former directors general.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2008 through September 2009, in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## Appendix II: Department of State Generalist Staffing Surplus/Deficit by Career Track

Table 4 shows staffing surpluses and deficits by career track for foreign service generalists as of December 31, 2008.

**Table 4: Foreign Service Generalists' Surplus/(Deficit) across Career Tracks, as of December 31, 2008**

| Grade level     |    | Management  | Consular           | Economic   | Political  | Public diplomacy | Surplus/(Deficit) by grade level | Total Surplus/(Deficit) |
|-----------------|----|-------------|--------------------|------------|------------|------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Senior level    | MC | (8)         | 13                 | -          | 7          | (4)              |                                  | 8                       |
|                 | OC | (34)        | (14)               | 31         | 40         | (29)             |                                  | (6)                     |
| <b>Subtotal</b> |    | <b>(42)</b> | <b>(1)</b>         | <b>31</b>  | <b>47</b>  | <b>(33)</b>      | <b>2</b>                         |                         |
| Mid level       | 1  | (37)        | 17                 | 44         | 57         | (67)             |                                  | 14                      |
|                 | 2  | (84)        | 51                 | 36         | 16         | (223)            |                                  | (204)                   |
|                 | 3  | 87          | (129)              | 19         | 8          | 120              |                                  | 105                     |
| <b>Subtotal</b> |    | <b>(34)</b> | <b>(61)</b>        | <b>99</b>  | <b>81</b>  | <b>(170)</b>     | <b>(85)</b>                      |                         |
| Jr. level       | 4  | 165         | (595) <sup>a</sup> | 108        | 152        | 199              | 29                               | 29                      |
| <b>Total</b>    |    | <b>89</b>   | <b>(657)</b>       | <b>238</b> | <b>280</b> | <b>(4)</b>       | <b>(54)</b>                      | <b>(54)<sup>b</sup></b> |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Note: Senior Foreign Service grades include minister counselor (MC) and counselor (OC).

<sup>a</sup>Although there is a deficit of 595 entry-level officers in the consular cone, State does not consider this a true deficit because nearly all entry-level generalists serve in consular positions during their first or second assignment, regardless of cone.

<sup>b</sup>The total deficit decreases from 54 to 42 when junior grades 05 and 06 are included. We omitted these positions from the table to remain consistent with our 2006 report, in which we noted that we did not include these grades because we were told that they were training positions that are not counted against the deficit.

## Appendix III: 2009 Historically Difficult to Staff and Service Need Differential Posts

Table 5 lists posts that State designated as historically difficult to staff or eligible for Service Need Differential (SND) for the 2009 summer assignments cycle.

| Regional bureau/<br>country          | Post        | Historically<br>difficult to staff (✓) | SND (✓) |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--|---------|
| <b>Bureau of African Affairs</b>     |             |  |         |
| Angola                               | Luanda      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Benin                                | Cotonou     | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Burkina Faso                         | Ouagadougou | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Burundi                              | Bujumbura   | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Cameroon                             | Douala      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
|                                      | Yaounde     | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Cape Verde                           | Praia       | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Central African Republic             | Bangui      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Chad                                 | N'Djamena   | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Congo, Democratic<br>Republic of the | Kinshasa    | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Congo, Republic of                   | Brazzaville | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Cote d'Ivoire                        | Abidjan     | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Djibouti                             | Djibouti    | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Equatorial Guinea                    | Malabo      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Eritrea                              | Asmara      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Gabon                                | Libreville  | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Gambia, The                          | Banjul      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Guinea                               | Conakry     | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Liberia                              | Monrovia    | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Malawi                               | Lilongwe    | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Mali                                 | Bamako      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Mauritania                           | Nouakchott  | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Niger                                | Niamey      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Nigeria                              | Abuja       | ✓                                      | ✓       |
|                                      | Lagos       | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Rwanda                               | Kigali      | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Sierra Leone                         | Freetown    | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Sudan                                | Khartoum    | ✓                                      | ✓       |

Appendix III: 2009 Historically Difficult to Staff and Service Need Differential Posts

| Regional bureau/<br>country                      | Post                | Historically<br>difficult to staff (✓) | SND (✓) |
|--|---------------------|--|---------|
| Togo   | Lome                | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| <b>Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs</b>  |                     |  |         |
| Brunei   | Bandar Seri Begawan | ✓                                      |         |
| China  | Guangzhou           | ✓                                      | ✓       |
|  | Shenyang            | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Indonesia  | Medan               | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Japan  | Naha                | ✓                                      |         |
| Marshall Islands                                 | Majuro              | ✓                                      |         |
| Micronesia                                       | Kolonia             | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Papua New Guinea                                 | Port Moresby        | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Timor-Leste                                      | Dili                | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| <b>Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs</b>   |                     |  |         |
| Armenia  | Yerevan             | ✓                                      |         |
| Belarus  | Minsk               | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina                           | Banja Luka          | ✓                                      |         |
| Kosovo   | Pristina            | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Moldova  | Chisinau            | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Montenegro                                       | Podgorica           | ✓                                      |         |
| Russia   | Vladivostok         | ✓                                      | ✓       |
|  | Yekaterinburg       | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| <b>Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs</b>            |                     |  |         |
| Iraq   | Baghdad             | ✓                                      |         |
| Israel   | Jerusalem           | ✓                                      |         |
| Jordan   | Amman               | ✓                                      |         |
| Saudi Arabia                                     | Jeddah              | ✓                                      |         |
|  | Riyadh              | ✓                                      |         |
| Yemen  | Sanaa               | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| <b>Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs</b> |                     |  |         |
| Afghanistan                                      | Kabul               | ✓                                      |         |
| Bangladesh                                       | Dhaka               | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| India  | Calcutta            | ✓                                      |         |
| Kazakhstan                                       | Astana              | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Pakistan   | Islamabad           | ✓                                      |         |
|  | Lahore              | ✓                                      |         |
| Tajikistan                                       | Dushanbe            | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Turkmenistan                                     | Ashgabat            | ✓                                      | ✓       |

**Appendix III: 2009 Historically Difficult to Staff and Service Need Differential Posts**

| Regional bureau/<br>country                 | Post           | Historically<br>difficult to staff (✓) | SND (✓) |
|---|----------------|--|---------|
| <b>Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs</b> |                |  |         |
| Guyana                                      | Georgetown     | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Haiti                                       | Port-au-Prince | ✓                                      | ✓       |
| Jamaica                                     | Kingston       | ✓                                      |         |
| Mexico                                      | Ciudad Juarez  | ✓                                      |         |
|   | Hermosillo     | ✓                                      |         |
|   | Nogales        | ✓                                      |         |
| Suriname                                    | Paramaribo     | ✓                                      | ✓       |

Source: State

## Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of State

Note: GAO's comment supplementing those in the report text appears at the end of this appendix.



United States Department of State  
Assistant Secretary for Resource Management  
and Chief Financial Officer  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Ms. Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

SEP - 2 2009

Dear Ms. Williams-Bridgers:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "DEPARTMENT OF STATE: Additional Steps Needed to Address Continued Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts," GAO Job Code 320585.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

If you have any questions concerning this response, please contact Bert Curtis, HR Specialist, Bureau of Human Resources at (202) 647-2655.

Sincerely,



Sid Kaplan (Acting)

cc: GAO – Goodwin Aghara  
DGHR – Nancy Powell  
State/OIG – Mark Duda

Department of State Comments on GAO Draft ReportAdditional Steps Needed to Address Continued Staffing and Experience  
Gaps at Hardship Posts  
(GAO-09-874, GAO Code 320585)

The Department thanks GAO for its evaluation of the Department's challenges regarding staffing and experience gaps at hardship posts. As GAO has reported, we have continuously strived throughout much of this decade to ensure that hardship posts are filled as effectively as possible. Our tools have included aggressive recruitment, assignment rule adjustments, and a varied menu of programs including monetary, professional and even (for the most difficult to fill positions) family-oriented incentives.

As GAO acknowledges, we have been successful in staffing our highest priority posts at or near 100%. As GAO also recognizes, and we would like to emphasize, the underlying causes of staffing shortages, i.e., the growth of our mission without a commensurate growth in resources, must be addressed to ensure diplomatic readiness.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to respond to the GAO recommendations and looks forward to continued engagement.

GAO Recommendations for Executive Action & DOS Response

To ensure that hardship posts are staffed commensurate with their stated level of strategic importance and resources are properly targeted, we recommend the Secretary of State take the following two actions:

1. Take steps to minimize the experience gap at hardship posts by making the assignment of at-grade, mid-level officers to such posts an explicit priority consideration.

We concur with this recommendation and would like to assure GAO that the staffing of hardship posts is a priority for the Department. However, as GAO continues to note (as in a related 2006 study), we have more positions than available officers. The overall shortage of Foreign Service officers and specialists contributes to the difficulty in staffing our missions and presents the Department

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with difficult choices. When there are overall service deficits at the mid-levels, many positions will go unfilled and/or training may be sacrificed.

While we acknowledge that this may result in an experience gap at many hardship posts, we would point out that not all hardship posts are top policy priorities. Conversely, not all non-hardship posts are low policy priorities. Until staffing levels meet our needs, we will have to prioritize both positions and posts.

In recent years, the Department has frozen positions around the world to ensure that our highest priority jobs were indeed filled globally. As those hired under Diplomacy 3.0 begin to enter the workforce, many of these positions will be filled, albeit with entry-level officers. Diplomacy 3.0 is our first infusion of additional positions in several years and the beginning of the Secretary's efforts to build the size of the Foreign Service by 25%.

2. Develop and implement a plan to evaluate incentives for hardship post assignments. Such a plan could include an analysis of how the hardship assignment incentive programs work individually and collectively to address the department's difficulty in recruiting staff to accept – and remain in – positions at hardship posts.

We concur with this recommendation and agree with GAO and the Congress that the question of effectiveness of incentives to staff hardship posts is important. In response to Public Law 109-140 Section 4(e), the Department has been collecting and analyzing data on differential and danger pay increases. This study will be completed by early October 2009, and we have provided GAO with a preliminary draft.

We had expected to continue to track employee attitudes toward these incentives through future surveys. While we traditionally have not been able to add questions to OPM's biennial Human Capital Survey, we have done so to the similar survey we conducted in the odd-numbered years. OPM has advised, however, that it expects to conduct its survey annually, thus complicating our ability to collect needed data. We have expressed this concern to OPM and understand it is considering our request to include customized questions, at least every other year, within the OPM-administered Federal Human Capital survey.

On a related matter, we found GAO statements regarding overseas pay comparability misleading and would like to clarify some of the basic facts. Comparability pay is not a function of, nor is it offered as, compensation for

See comment.

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Appendix IV: Comments from the Department  
of State

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3

hardship posts. Rather, it applies regardless of overseas location to certain categories of members of the Foreign Service. Its purpose is to eliminate the loss in basic pay that certain Foreign Service members incur while serving abroad. That gap was created by the introduction of locality pay in 1994 and has undermined the value of our hardship incentives, even eliminating that value at certain hardship posts. We would also note that comparability pay has not been permanently authorized by Congress.

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Appendix IV: Comments from the Department  
of State

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The following is GAO's comment to the Department of State's letter dated September 2, 2009.

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**GAO Comment**

While State's analysis of hardship differential and danger pay increases and its request to OPM to include customized questions about hardship incentives in future surveys are positive steps, they do not fully respond to our recommendation to implement a plan to evaluate hardship incentives. State expects to fulfill the mandate to study and report on the effect of the increases in hardship differential and danger pay ceilings in filling "hard to fill" positions in October 2009. However, as noted earlier, State offers other incentives which it has not evaluated. Furthermore, we also note that State's last survey had several limitations. For example, the survey lacked the requisite specificity, included an incomplete list of incentives, and did not collect key demographic information. Unless State addresses these issues, the survey's utility as an evaluation tool will remain limited.

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## Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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### GAO Contact

Jess T. Ford, (202) 512-4268 or fordj@gao.gov

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### Staff Acknowledgments

Key contributors to this report include Anthony Moran, Assistant Director; Richard Gifford Howland; Aniruddha Dasgupta; Brian Hackney; Joseph Carney; Martin de Alteriis; Grace Lui; Michael Courts; Zina Merritt; Gloria Hernandez-Saunders; and John Brummet. Technical assistance was provided by Robert Alarapon, Gena Evans, and Thomas Zingale.

United States Government Accountability Office

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**GAO**

Report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

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September 2009

**DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls**



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GAO-09-955

September 2009



Highlights of GAO-09-955, a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language Shortfalls

Why GAO Did This Study

Proficiency in foreign languages is a key skill for U.S. diplomats to advance U.S. interests overseas. GAO has issued several reports highlighting the Department of State's (State) persistent foreign language shortages. In 2006, GAO recommended that State evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to improve the language proficiency of its staff. State responded by providing examples of activities it believed addressed our recommendation. In this report, which updates the 2006 report, GAO (1) examined the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfall, (2) assessed State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and described the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assessed the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements. GAO analyzed data on State's overseas language-designated positions; reviewed strategic planning and budgetary documents; interviewed State officials; and conducted fieldwork in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey.

What GAO Recommends

To address State's persistent foreign language shortfalls, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, strategic plan that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. State generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

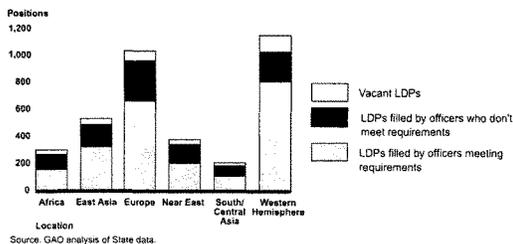
View GAO-09-955 or key components. For more information, contact Jess Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of Foreign Service officers in overseas language-designated positions (LDP) did not meet both the foreign languages speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions. State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in regions of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in LDPs did not meet requirements. Despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in critical languages, shortfalls in supercritical languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent. Past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, and others have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. activities overseas. Overseas fieldwork for this report reaffirmed this conclusion.

State's approach to meeting its foreign language requirements includes an annual review of all LDPs, language training, recruitment of language-proficient staff, and pay incentives for language skills. For example, State trains staff in about 70 languages in Washington and overseas, and has reported a training success rate of 86 percent. Moreover, State offers bonus points for language-proficient applicants who have passed the Foreign Service exam and has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004. However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, a primary challenge is overall staffing shortages, which limit the number of staff available for language training, as well as the recent increase in LDPs.

State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements have yielded some results but have not closed persistent gaps and reflect, in part, a lack of a comprehensive, strategic approach. State officials have said that the department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is spread throughout a number of documents that address these needs; however these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, or milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. Because these gaps have persisted over several years despite staffing increases, we believe that a more comprehensive, strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide its efforts and assess its progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

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**Abbreviations**

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| FSI   | Foreign Service Institute                 |
| FSO   | Foreign Service officer                   |
| HR    | Bureau of Human Resources                 |
| ILR   | Interagency Language Roundtable           |
| LDP   | language-designated position              |
| OPM   | Office of Personnel Management            |
| USAID | U.S. Agency for International Development |

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

September 17, 2009

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Chairman  
The Honorable George V. Voinovich  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government  
Management, the Federal Workforce,  
and the District of Columbia  
Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

Proficiency in foreign languages is a key skill for U.S. Foreign Service officers (FSO) to advance U.S. foreign policy and economic interests overseas. The Department of State (State) seeks to develop employees who are able to competently and credibly convey America's message to foreign audiences and understand the perspectives of our interlocutors in foreign languages and requires foreign language proficiency for thousands of positions overseas. In 2008, approximately 45 percent of all Foreign Service positions overseas were designated as requiring foreign language skills. Over the years, we have issued several reports highlighting State's persistent shortages in staff with critical foreign language skills,<sup>1</sup> including most recently in 2006, when we reported that almost one-third of staff in language-designated positions did not meet the language requirements of their positions despite a number of initiatives to improve the department's foreign language capabilities. We recommended that State systematically evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts to increase the language proficiency of its officers. State responded by providing examples of activities it believed addressed our recommendation. In fiscal year 2009, State received funding for 300 additional positions to rebuild its training

<sup>1</sup>See GAO, *State Department: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, GAO-07-1154T (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 1, 2007); *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, GAO-06-894 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2006); *State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages*, GAO-04-139 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 19, 2003); *Foreign Languages: Human Capital Approach Needed to Correct Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls*, GAO-02-375 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 31, 2002); and, *More Competence In Foreign Languages Needed By Federal Personnel Working Overseas*, ID-80-31 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 15, 1980).

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capacity, or "float," to limit the number of overseas positions that are vacant while employees are in language training.<sup>2</sup>

You asked us to build on and update our previous studies on State's foreign language proficiency challenges and measures to address them. Specifically, this report (1) examines the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, (2) assesses State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and describes the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assesses the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements.

To identify the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements, we analyzed data provided by State that listed all overseas language-designated positions and the language skills of the incumbents filling the positions as of October 31, 2008.<sup>3</sup> To describe the potential impact of language proficiency shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, we reviewed previous GAO reports, as well as reports by State's Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks, and interviewed several current and former senior State officials. To assess State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and related challenges, and the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet its foreign language requirements, we reviewed State's planning documents, including strategic plans, performance reports, and budget justifications and compared these documents with guidance on comprehensive workforce planning developed by GAO and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). For all three objectives, we interviewed officials from State's Bureaus of Human Resources (HR), Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, and the geographic bureaus; the Foreign Service Institute (FSI); and officials at overseas posts in China, Egypt, India, Tunisia, and Turkey. Appendix I provides a detailed description of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2008 to September 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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<sup>2</sup>"Float" is an informal term to describe having additional staff on hand to cover the workload given a percentage of staff not present because of training or transition.

<sup>3</sup>A large number of Foreign Service officers transfer from one post to another over the summer. Most officers have arrived at post by October; thus, according to State officials, data as of October 31 provide the best snapshot available.

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Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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### Results in Brief

State continues to have notable gaps in its foreign language capabilities, which could hinder U.S. overseas operations. As of October 31, 2008, 31 percent of officers in all worldwide language-designated positions did not meet both the foreign language speaking and reading proficiency requirements for their positions, up slightly from 29 percent in 2005. In particular, State continues to face foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest—such as the Near East and South and Central Asia, where about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions did not meet requirements. Gaps were notably high in Afghanistan, where 33 of 45 officers in language-designated positions (73 percent) did not meet the requirement, and in Iraq, with 8 of 14 officers (57 percent) lacking sufficient language skills. Shortfalls in supercritical needs languages, such as Arabic and Chinese, remain at 39 percent, despite efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in these languages. Past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks have concluded that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting U.S. national security, diplomacy, law enforcement, and intelligence-gathering efforts. Our fieldwork for this report indicates these conclusions are still relevant. For example, consular officers at a post we visited said that because of a lack of language skills, they make adjudication decisions based on what they "hope" they heard in visa interviews, consistent with findings of State's Office of the Inspector General and our 2006 report, altogether covering seven posts.

State's current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements involves an annual review process, training, recruitment, and incentives; however, the department faces several challenges to these efforts, particularly staffing shortages. State's annual language designation process results in a list of positions requiring language skills. State primarily uses language training to meet its foreign language requirements, and does so mostly at PSI in Arlington, Virginia, but also at field schools and post language training overseas. In 2008, the department reported a training success rate of 86 percent. In addition, the department recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program, and pays bonuses to encourage staff to study and maintain a level of proficiency in certain languages. The

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department has hired 445 officers under this program since 2004. However, various challenges limit the effectiveness of these efforts. According to State, two main challenges are overall staffing shortages, which limit the number of staff available for language training, and the recent increase in language-designated positions. The staffing shortages are exacerbated by officers curtailing their tours at posts, for example to staff the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has led to a decrease in the number of officers in the language training pipeline. These departures often force their successors to arrive at post early without having completed language training. As part of its effort to address these staffing shortfalls, in fiscal year 2009 State requested and received funding for 300 new positions to build a training capacity, intended to reduce gaps at post while staff are in language training. State officials said that if the department's fiscal year 2010 request for 200 additional positions is approved, the department's language gaps will begin to close in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met. Another challenge is the widely held perception among Foreign Service officers that State's promotion system does not consider time spent in language training when evaluating officers for promotion, which may discourage officers from investing the time required to achieve proficiency in certain languages. Although HR officials dispute this perception, the department has not conducted a statistically significant assessment of the impact of language training on promotions.

State's current approach to meeting its foreign language proficiency requirements has not closed the department's persistent language proficiency gaps and reflects, in part, a lack of a comprehensive strategic direction. Common elements of comprehensive workforce planning—described by GAO as part of a large body of work on human capital management—include setting strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals.<sup>4</sup> In the past, State officials have asserted that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed. More recently, State officials have said that the department's plan for meeting its foreign language requirements is

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<sup>4</sup>GAO *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning*, GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

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spread throughout a number of documents that address these requirements, including the department's Five-Year Workforce Plan. However, these documents are not linked to each other and do not contain measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gaps. We believe that a more comprehensive strategic approach would help State to more effectively guide and assess progress in meeting its foreign language requirements.

To address State's long-standing foreign language proficiency shortfalls, this report recommends that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan with measurable goals, objectives, milestones, and feedback mechanisms that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements.

State generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In addition, State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations. State also provided technical comments, which we have included throughout this report as appropriate.

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## Background

State is the lead agency for the conduct of American diplomacy, and its foreign affairs activities seek to promote and protect the interests of American citizens. State requires that Foreign Service officers assigned to certain positions worldwide meet a specified level of proficiency in the language or languages of the host country. As of October 31, 2008, State had about 3,600 positions worldwide that required language proficiency and 530 positions worldwide where such proficiency was preferred but not required (language-preferred positions). (See table 1.) State categorizes these languages as "world" (for example, Spanish or French), "hard" (for example, Urdu), or "superhard" (for example, Arabic or Chinese) based on the time it generally takes individuals to learn them. State has also defined its need for staff proficient in some languages as "supercritical" or "critical," based on criteria such as the difficulty of the language and the number of language-designated positions in that language, particularly at

hard-to-staff posts.<sup>5</sup> About 970, or 27 percent of, language-designated positions are for supercritical or critical needs languages.

**Table 1: Overseas Language-Designated Positions, by Language Type and Region as of October 31, 2008**

|                      | Number of language-designated positions |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Language type</b> |   |
| Critical             | 373                                     |
| Supercritical        | 600                                     |
| Other                | 2,626                                   |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>3,599</b>                            |
| <b>Region</b>        |   |
| Africa               | 301                                     |
| East Asia/Pacific    | 532                                     |
| Europe               | 1,033                                   |
| Near East            | 377                                     |
| South/Central Asia   | 206                                     |
| Western Hemisphere   | 1,150                                   |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>3,599</b>                            |

Source: GAO analysis of State data.

**Proficiency Scale**

State uses the foreign language proficiency scale established by the federal Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) to rank an individual's language skills.<sup>6</sup> The scale has six levels, from 0 to 5—with 5 being the most proficient—to assess an individual's ability to speak, read, listen, and write in another language. State sets proficiency requirements only for speaking and reading, and these requirements tend to congregate at proficiency

<sup>5</sup>Currently, supercritical needs languages are Arabic (Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Chinese (Mandarin), Dari, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu. Critical needs languages are Arabic (forms other than Modern Standard, Egyptian, and Iraqi), Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese (Cantonese), Kazakh, Korean, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Nepali, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Tajik, Turkish, Turkmen, and Uzbek.

<sup>6</sup>The ILR is an unfunded federal interagency organization established for the coordination and sharing of information about language-related activities at the federal level. State is a member of ILR's steering committee, and FSI officials said that they occasionally host ILR meetings. According to ILR, its guidelines are accepted by all agencies of the federal government and are used as a primary reference in the different government tests of language ability.

levels 2 and 3.<sup>7</sup> Table 2 shows the language skill requirements for each proficiency level.

**Table 2: Proficiency and Language Capability Requirements**

| Proficiency level       | Language capability requirements   |
|-------------------------|--|
| 0-None                  | No practical capability in the language.   |
| 1-Elementary            | Sufficient capability to satisfy basic survival needs and minimum courtesy and travel requirements.  |
| 2-Limited working       | Sufficient capability to meet routine social demands and limited job requirements. Can deal with concrete topics in past, present, and future tense.   |
| 3-General professional  | Able to use the language with sufficient ability to participate in most formal and informal discussion on practical, social, and professional topics. Can conceptualize and hypothesize.     |
| 4-Advanced professional | Able to use the language fluently and accurately in all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Has range of language skills necessary for persuasion, negotiation, and counseling. |
| 5-Functionally native   | Able to use the language at a functional level equivalent to that of a highly articulate, well-educated native speaker.  |

Source: Compiled by GAO from Interagency Language Roundtable documents.

The difference between the second and the third proficiency levels—the ability to interact effectively with native speakers—is significant in terms of training costs and productivity. For example, State provides about 44 weeks of training to bring a new speaker of a so-called superhard language such as Arabic up to the second level. Moving to level-3 proficiency usually requires another 44 weeks of training, which is generally conducted at field schools overseas.

<sup>7</sup>Proficiency levels are often abbreviated. For example “S-3/R-3” or “3/3” refers to level-3 proficiency in speaking and reading.

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**State Continues to Face Shortfalls in Meeting Its Foreign Language Requirements, with Potentially Adverse Effects on Department Operations**

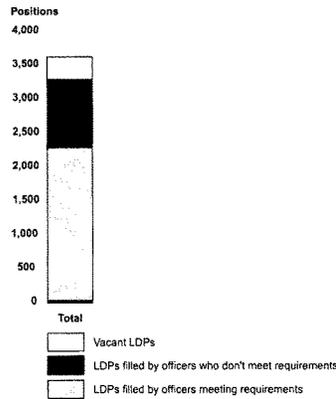
State faces notable shortfalls in meeting its foreign language requirements for overseas language-designated positions. Overall, 31 percent of Foreign Service generalists and specialists in language-designated positions worldwide did not meet the speaking and reading proficiency requirements of their positions as of October 31, 2008. While the extent of these shortfalls varies, they are found in all regions, in all languages, and in all types of positions. These shortfalls may have adverse impacts on security, public diplomacy, consular operations, economic and political affairs, and other aspects of U.S. diplomacy.

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**Some Foreign Service Officers Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions**

As of October 2008, 31 percent of Foreign Service generalists and specialists in language-designated positions worldwide did not meet both of the speaking and reading proficiency requirements of their positions, up from 29 percent in 2005. The percentage decreases to 25 percent if officers who meet at least one of the requirements are included. Overall, 1,005 officers in language-designated positions did not meet both of the requirements of their positions, and an additional 334 language-designated positions were vacant (see fig. 1). The persistence of these shortfalls is partially attributable to an overall increase of 332 overseas language-designated positions between 2005 and 2008, many of which are in hard and superhard languages. At the same time, State increased the overall number of language-proficient officers who meet the requirements for their positions by about 240 officers between 2005 and 2008.

**Figure 1: Number of Overseas LDPs Filled by Officers Meeting the Requirements, Filled by Officers Who Do Not Meet the Requirements, and Vacant, as of October 31, 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

State reports annually to Congress on foreign language proficiency in the department; however, its methodology for calculating the percentage of officers who meet the requirements is potentially misleading and overstates the actual language proficiency of FSOs in language-designated positions. For example, State has reported that over 80 percent of employees assigned to vacant language-designated positions met or exceeded the proficiency requirement in each year since fiscal year 2005. According to HR officials responsible for compiling and analyzing these data, however, this figure is not the percentage of officers currently in language-designated positions who have tested scores at or above the requirements for the position; rather, it measures the percentage of officers assigned to language-designated positions who are enrolled in language training, regardless of the outcome of that training. Because several officers do not complete the entire training, while others do not achieve the level of proficiency required even after taking the training, the actual percentage of officers meeting the requirements for their positions is likely lower.

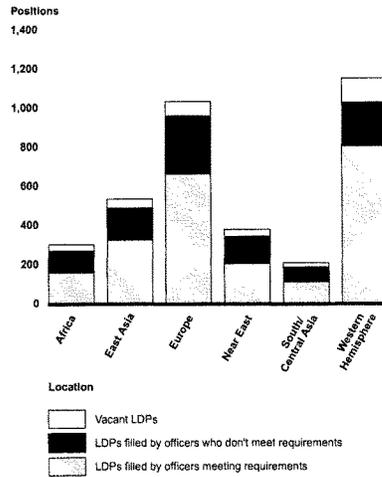
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While the extent of language deficiencies varies from post to post, some of the greatest deficiencies exist in regions of strategic interest to the United States (see fig. 2). For example, about 40 percent of officers in language-designated positions in the Middle East and South and Central Asia did not meet the requirements for their positions. Further, 57 percent (or 8 officers) and 73 percent (or 33 officers) of officers in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, did not meet the requirements for their positions.<sup>8</sup> Other missions with notable gaps include Pakistan (45 percent/5 officers), Egypt (43 percent/13 officers), India (43 percent/12 officers), and Saudi Arabia (38 percent/12 officers).

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<sup>8</sup>Staffing has increased at posts in these countries. For example, positions in Baghdad increased from 216 in 2006 to 329 in 2009 and positions in Afghanistan increased from 100 in 2006 to 170 in 2009.

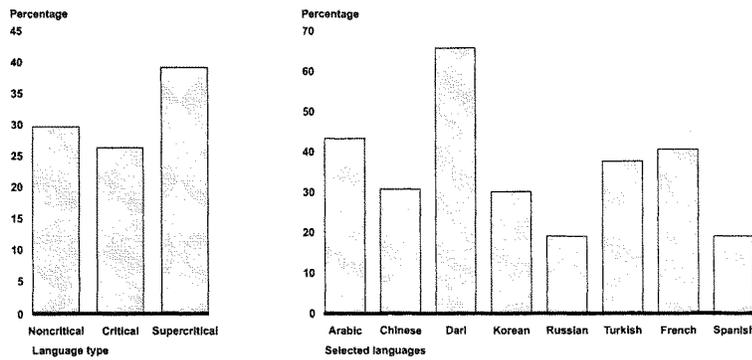
**Figure 2: Number of Overseas LDPs, by Region, Filled by Officers Meeting the Requirements, Filled by Officers Who Do Not Meet the Requirements, and Vacant, as of October 31, 2008**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Despite State's recent efforts to recruit individuals with proficiency in supercritical and critical languages, and some improvement in filling language-designated positions in certain critical languages since 2005, the department continues to experience notable gaps in these languages (see fig. 3). In 2008, 73 more positions in supercritical needs languages were filled by officers meeting the requirements than in 2005. However, 39 percent of officers assigned to LDPs in supercritical languages still do not meet the requirements for their positions, compared with 26 percent in critical languages and 30 percent in all other languages. Specifically, 43 percent of officers in Arabic language-designated positions do not meet the requirements of their positions (107 officers in 248 filled positions), nor do 66 percent of officers in Dari positions (21 officers in 32 positions), 38 percent in Farsi (5 officers in 13 positions), or 50 percent in Urdu (5 officers in 10 positions).

**Figure 3: Percentage of Foreign Service Officers Who Do Not Meet the Language Requirements for Their Positions, by Language Type and Selected Languages**



Source: GAO analysis of State data.

Shortfalls vary by position type. Foreign Service specialists—staff who perform security, technical, and other support functions—are less likely to meet the language requirements of their position than Foreign Service generalists. More than half of the 739 specialists in language-designated positions do not meet the requirements, compared with 24 percent of the 2,526 generalists. For example, 53 percent of regional security officers do not speak and read at the level required by their positions.<sup>9</sup> According to officials in Diplomatic Security, language training for security officers is often cut short because many ambassadors are unwilling to leave security positions vacant. Further, among Foreign Service generalists, 58 percent of officers in management positions do not meet the language requirements, compared with 16 percent of officers in consular positions and 23 percent of officers in public diplomacy positions.

<sup>9</sup>Regional security officers are special agents operating out of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security assigned to U.S. diplomatic missions overseas, responsible for the protection of personnel and their families, facilities, and classified information.

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When posts are unable to fill language-designated positions with language-qualified officers, they must decide whether to request a language waiver and staff the position with an officer who does not meet the language requirements or to leave the position unstaffed until an officer with the requisite skills is available. In some cases, a post chooses to leave a language-designated position vacant for a period of time while an officer is getting language training. In other cases, when a post has requested repeated language waivers for a specific position, it may request that the language requirement be eliminated for the position. According to State, in 2008 the department granted 282 such waivers—covering about 8 percent of all language-designated positions—down from 354 in 2006. State granted a disproportionate number of waivers for South and Central Asia, where the language requirement for about 18 percent of the region's 206 language-designated positions was waived in 2008, compared with 5 percent in both East Asia and the Western Hemisphere.

---

**Language Shortfalls May Negatively Affect Aspects of U.S. Diplomacy**

Our fieldwork for this report, in addition to past reports by GAO, State's Office of the Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks, has indicated that foreign language shortfalls could be negatively affecting several aspects of U.S. diplomacy, including consular operations, security, public diplomacy, economic and political affairs, the development of relationships with foreign counterparts and audiences, and staff morale. It is sometimes difficult to link foreign language shortfalls to a specific negative outcome or event, and senior officials at State have noted that language shortfalls neither prevent officers from doing their jobs nor have catastrophic consequences. However, these officials acknowledged that the cumulative effects of these gaps do present a problem, and the department has not assessed their impact on the conduct of foreign policy. Table 3 presents some examples of such impacts from our current fieldwork, previous GAO reports, and reports by State's Inspector General, the National Research Council, and the Department of Defense.

**Table 3. Examples of the Potential Impact of Language Shortfalls from GAO Fieldwork, Previous GAO Reports, and Reports by Other Organizations**

|                     | GAO (2009)   | Previous GAO reports   | Other reports   |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Consular operations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consular officers in Cairo said that because of a lack of language skills, they make decisions based on what they "hope" they have heard and, as a result, may be incorrectly adjudicating visa decisions.</li> <li>• A consular officer in Istanbul proficient in Turkish said she has seen cases where adjudicating officers have refused visa applications because they did not fully understand the applicant.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Officials at one high-fraud visa post stated that, because of language skill deficiencies, consular officers sometimes adjudicate visas without fully understanding everything visa applicants tell them during visa interviews (2006).</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State's Inspector General found that the ability of consular officers in at least two Arabic-speaking posts to conduct in-depth interviews necessary for homeland security is limited (2005).</li> <li>• State's Inspector General found that insufficient Chinese language skills were a serious weakness in the U.S. Mission to China's consular operations (2004).</li> </ul> |
| Security            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A security officer in Istanbul said that inability to speak the local language hinders one's ability to get embedded in the society and develop personal relationships, which limits officers' effectiveness.</li> <li>• A security officer in Cairo said that without language skills, officers do not have any "juice"—that is, the ability to influence people they are trying to elicit information from.</li> <li>• An officer at a post of strategic interest said because she did not speak the language, she had transferred a sensitive telephone call from a local informant to a local employee, which could have compromised the informant's identity.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to one regional security officer, the lack of foreign language skills may hinder intelligence gathering because local informants are reluctant to speak through locally hired interpreters (2006).</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A study commissioned by the Department of Defense concluded that gaps in governmentwide language capabilities have undermined cross-cultural communication and threatened national security (2005).</li> </ul>   |
| Public diplomacy    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A public affairs officer in one post we visited said that the local media does not always translate embassy statements accurately, complicating efforts to communicate with audiences in the host country. For example, he said the local press translated a statement by the ambassador in a more pejorative sense than was intended, which damaged the ambassador's reputation and took several weeks to correct.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to an information officer in Cairo, the embassy did not have enough Arabic-speaking staff to engage the Egyptian media effectively (2006).</li> <li>• Foreign officials we met with noted that speaking the host country's language demonstrates respect for its people and culture; thus fluency in the local language is important for effectively conducting public diplomacy (2003).</li> </ul> |   |

|                                | GAO (2009)   | Previous GAO reports  | Other reports   |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Economic and political affairs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Shenyang, a Chinese city close to the border with North Korea, the consul general told us that reporting about issues along the border had suffered because of language shortfalls.</li> <li>In Tunis, officers told us that Arabic-speaking staff sometimes work outside of their portfolio to cover for colleagues without Arabic skills, which places a larger burden on officers with language skills.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An economics officer at one post said that months-long negotiations with foreign government officials were making little progress until American officers began speaking the host country language and a local official who did not speak English could convey valuable information (2006).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Vladivostok, State's Inspector General reported that lack of proficiency in Russian limited the political/economic officer's reporting (2007).</li> </ul>   |
| Developing relationships       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The U.S. ambassador to Egypt said that officers who do not have language skills cannot reach out to broader, deeper audiences and gain insight into the country.</li> <li>Other officials in Cairo noted that the officers in Egypt who do not speak the language tend to inherit the contacts of their predecessor, leading to a perpetually limited pool of contacts.</li> <li>In China, officials told us that the officers in China with insufficient language skills get only half the story on issues of interest, as they receive only the official party line and are unable to communicate with researchers and academics, many of whom do not speak English.</li> <li>The deputy chief of mission in Ankara said that officers who do not have sufficient Turkish skills are reading English-language newspapers rather than what Turks are reading, further limiting their insight into what is happening in the country.</li> </ul> |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Afghanistan, State's Inspector General reported that less than one-third of political and economic officers were proficient in a national language, which has led to difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with Afghan contacts (2006).</li> <li>The Inspector General has also reported that in Lebanon, political, economic, and public diplomacy officers went to post without sufficient language skills, limiting their efforts to expand their contacts among audiences that do not speak English (2005).</li> </ul> |
| Morale                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several officers noted that life in Turkey without any Turkish language skills is very inhibiting, particularly for family members who are out in the city every day.</li> <li>The head of the Political/Economic Section in Shenyang said that families are very isolated without Chinese language skills.</li> </ul>  |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State's Inspector General found the lack of Russian language skills inhibits social interaction by many new arrivals in Moscow and by some other community members, many of whom rarely venture out of the embassy compound (2007).</li> </ul>   |

Source: GAO.

Furthermore, as a result of these language shortfalls, officers must rely on their locally engaged staff to translate for them. Officers at each post we visited said that they frequently take local staff with them to meetings to

help translate. For example, a security officer in Cairo said that this tendency makes him feel irrelevant in meetings he should be leading. In Tunis, some officers said that they must use local staff to translate meetings outside of the embassy, but some contacts are reluctant to speak freely in front of other Tunisians. In addition, State's Inspector General has noted that sections in several embassies rely on local staff to translate, monitor the local media, and judge what the section needs to know. The Inspector General also noted problems with this tendency, as overreliance on local translators can make conversations less productive and imposes a significant overhead cost that adequate language training could reduce. Furthermore, in its 2004 inspection of the U.S. embassy in Seoul, the Inspector General found that visa adjudications may be based on incorrect information if a consular officer who does not understand basic Korean must rely on translations from locally engaged staff.

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### **State Efforts to Meet Foreign Language Requirements, Which Include Training, Recruitment, and Incentives, Face Several Challenges**

State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements include an annual review process to determine the number of language-designated positions, providing language training, recruiting staff with skills in certain languages, and offering pay incentives to officers to continue learning and maintaining language skills. However, several challenges—such as staffing shortages, the recent increase in language-designated positions, and perceptions about the value of language training in State's promotion system—limit State's ability to meet these requirements.

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### **State Determines Its Foreign Language Requirements through an Annual Review Process, but These Requirements May Not Reflect Actual Needs**

State determines its foreign language requirements through an annual review process that results in incremental changes but does not necessarily reflect posts' actual needs. Every year, HR directs posts to review all language-designated positions and to submit requests for any changes in the number of positions or level of proficiency. Headquarters officials from HR, FSI, and the regional bureaus then review and discuss these requests and develop a list of positions identified as requiring foreign language skills. However, the views expressed by officials from HR and FSI, and FSOs at overseas posts during our meetings with these officials, and our findings in previous work on this issue, suggest that State's designated language proficiency requirements do not necessarily reflect the actual language needs of the posts. State's current instructions to the posts suggest the language designation review be tempered by budgetary and staffing realities. Consequently, some overseas posts tend to request only the positions they think they will receive. For example, a senior

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official at one of the overseas posts we visited said that although he would like several positions at the 4/4 proficiency level in his section, he knows the positions will not be designated at that level, so he does not request them. A senior official at another post we visited said he does not request language-designated positions at a higher proficiency level because he knows that ultimately the post will not get enough applicants for the positions. This view was echoed by HR officials who stated that overseas posts must often weigh the desire to attract a large number of applicants against a desire to draw bidders with a higher level of language proficiency. The public affairs officer at one of the overseas posts we visited said he tried to have some language-designated positions in his section downgraded to language-preferred because he had a hard time filling them. Further, HR officials told us that State should conduct a more thorough assessment of language requirements regardless of resource requirements.

Concerns about the process have been a long-standing issue at State. A 1986 State report noted that the language designation system needed to be overhauled on a worldwide basis and recommended that posts carefully review their language-designated positions with the geographic bureaus, eliminating positions that seem unnecessary, adding more if required, deciding how many positions at the 4 proficiency level are needed, and defining what kind of fluency each language-designated position requires.<sup>10</sup> For example, one senior official said there should be a systematic review of which positions need language proficiency and which do not, and then the department should decide whether it gives some language training to a lot of people or extensive language training to a select few.

Moreover, officers at the posts we visited questioned the validity of the relatively low proficiency level required for certain positions, citing the need for a higher proficiency level. Officials at most of the posts we visited said that a 3/3 in certain critical languages is not always enough for officers to do their jobs, although they acknowledged the difficulty State would have filling positions at a higher proficiency level. For example, an economics officer at one of the posts we visited said that she could start meetings and read the newspaper with her 3/3 in Arabic, but that level of proficiency did not provide her with language skills needed to discuss technical issues, and the officers in the public affairs section of the same

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<sup>10</sup>Monteagle Stearns, *Report on Hard Language Proficiency in the Foreign Service* (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 1986).

post said that a 3/3 was not sufficient to effectively explain U.S. positions in the local media. Officers in the public affairs section of another post we visited said that they were not comfortable making statements on U.S. foreign policy with a 3/3 proficiency level. Senior officials at a third post said 3/3 is adequate to ask and answer questions but not to conduct business. An officer with a 4/4 in Chinese said officers in his section did the best job they could but a 3/3 was not enough. He said he sometimes had difficulty at his level, for example, when participating in radio interviews broadcast to local audiences. In addition, consular officers at some of the posts we visited questioned whether a proficiency level of 2 in speaking was sufficient for conducting visa interviews. They said they could ask questions but did not always understand the answers and sometimes had to rely on locally engaged staff to translate. HR officials explained that a position may be classified at 2 when, in reality, a higher level of proficiency is needed. For example, proficiency requirements for untenured positions in certain languages cannot be higher than 2 because of the limits on training for untenured officers.

**State Uses Language Training and Other Means in Its Effort to Meet Language Requirements**

**Training**

State uses a combination of language training—at FSI, at advanced language institutes overseas, and through each post's language program—recruitment of officers fluent in foreign languages, and incentive pay to meet its language requirements.

State primarily uses language training, typically at FSI, to meet its foreign language requirements. FSI's School of Language Studies offers training in about 70 languages. State also offers full-time advanced training in superhard languages at a few overseas locations, including Beijing, China; Cairo, Egypt; Seoul, South Korea; Taipei, Taiwan; Yokohama, Japan; and Tunis, Tunisia. In addition, overseas posts offer part-time language training through post language programs and FSI offers distance learning courses to officers overseas. Finally, FSI offers overseas and domestic mid-course opportunities in many languages, including programs in countries such as Turkey, Russia, and Israel, including activities such as classroom study overseas, field trips, and home visits with local families. These immersions serve either as a substitute for some portion of the Washington training or as a complement or refresher to enhance the learner's ability to achieve a higher degree of facility in dealing with the local community and to increase the return on the department's training investment.

State measures the effectiveness of its training in a variety of ways; however, concerns about several aspects of FSI training persist. State collects data and reports on the percentage of students who attain the

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intended proficiency level in all critical languages when they are enrolled in language training for at least the recommended length of training as an indicator of the success of FSI training. For 2008, State reported a language training success rate of 86 percent.<sup>11</sup> State also tracks overall satisfaction with all training at FSI and reported a 94 percent satisfaction rate for fiscal year 2008. Officials we met with overseas, however, expressed mixed experiences with FSI language training. For example, consular officers in Istanbul described the FSI training as outstanding. Entry-level officers in Cairo said that instruction at the beginning levels at FSI is very good, but that FSI is not well equipped for beyond-3 training. However, FSI officials explained that because there are only 2 4/4 language-designated positions in the department, there is almost no formal requirement for FSI to provide such training. FSI officials also stated that without a mandate or the necessary resources, FSI provides beyond-3 training on an ad hoc basis. A few officers questioned the relevance of the foreign language training that they received to their jobs. Several officers also stated that they were not aware of a formal mechanism for them to provide feedback on this issue to FSI. A few officers said that they provided feedback to FSI, but they were not sure if their concerns were addressed. FSI officials stated that FSI provides several opportunities for feedback. For example, the institute administers a training impact survey eliciting the respondent's opinion of the effectiveness of the training for the respondent's job several months after it is completed. However, the response rate for this survey has been low: for 2005, State received 603 of 1,476 possible responses; for 2006, 404 of 1,450 possible responses; and for 2007, 226 of 1,503 possible responses. FSI officials said that another opportunity for feedback is the evaluation students complete at the end of every class.

#### Recruitment

State also recruits personnel with foreign language skills through special incentives offered under its critical needs language program; however, some officials noted the department believes it is easier to train individuals with good diplomatic skills to speak a language than it is to recruit linguists and train them to be good diplomats. Under the critical needs program, State offers bonus points for applicants who have passed the Foreign Service exam and demonstrate mastery in a foreign language. The additional points can raise the applicant's ranking on the Foreign Service registry, improving the chances of being hired. Officers recruited

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<sup>11</sup>State defined this measure as the percentage of students who attain the intended proficiency level when they are enrolled for at least the recommended length of training.

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for their proficiency in supercritical and critical needs languages are obligated to serve at an overseas post where they can use the language during their first or second tour. Officers recruited since 2008 are also required to serve at a post where they can use the language a second time as a midlevel officer.

The effects of this program on State's language proficiency gaps are unclear, in part because State has not established numerical targets for its critical needs hiring and has not yet performed an assessment of its effectiveness. An Office of Recruitment official, who was involved in the development of the list, stated that the department could not yet assess the program's effectiveness because the program, which started in 2004, is still new and the department does not have sufficient data to perform such an assessment. The official pointed out that there have been only about five hiring cycles since it started. However, State data show the department has recruited 445 officers under the program since 2004, and about 94 percent of these officers who have had at least two assignments have completed their obligation to serve at an overseas post where they were able to use the language. A total of 19 officers that have either served two tours or at least have the second tour onward assignment arranged have definitively not filled the obligation and most of those were due to medical or security reasons. The Office of Recruitment official said that since the requirement for the second tour for midlevel officers is still new, there are few, if any, officers recruited under the critical needs program who have reached the middle level.

State also does not have a formal schedule for reviewing and adding or removing languages from the list of critical needs languages. Officials from the Office of Recruitment said the list has been reviewed informally and Japanese was removed because State is hiring sufficient numbers of Japanese-speaking officers and there are few entry-level language-designated positions at Japanese posts.<sup>12</sup>

#### Incentive Pay

State also offers bonus pay to members of the Foreign Service with proficiency in certain languages under the Language Incentive Pay program. To qualify for language incentive pay, officers must

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<sup>12</sup>Five of the 19 officers who did not complete their critical needs language obligation were Japanese speakers.

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- have a proficiency of at least a 3/3 (for generalists) or 2/2 (for specialists) in selected languages and
  - be serving in any position (either language designated or non-language designated) at a post abroad where a language currently on the list of incentive languages is a primary or primary-alternate language, or in any language-designated position requiring an incentive language.

The incentive pay varies according to the officer's salary and tested scores. For example, an officer with a 3/3 in Turkish in a language-designated position in Istanbul would be eligible for a bonus of 10 percent of the base salary abroad of an FS-01/step 1 member of the Foreign Service.<sup>15</sup>

State has not measured the impact of the pay incentive on increasing foreign language proficiency, and the officers we met with expressed mixed opinions on the effectiveness of the program. For example, a few officers said it is difficult and takes a long time to advance from a 2 to a 3 to qualify for the incentive, while others said the pay was a very good incentive. Others offered suggestions for improvement. For example, one officer said the requirements for the language incentive program discourage some people from participating and that State should provide incentives for people in increments, for example, for going from a 2 to 2-plus. He also suggested that State provide incentives separately for speaking and reading, because it takes time to increase proficiency in reading, which is often not needed for the officer to perform his or her job. HR and FSI officials said that State is considering proposals to improve the incentive pay program.

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#### Staffing Shortages and Other Challenges Have Limited State's Ability to Reduce Its Language Shortfalls

According to senior State officials, the primary challenge State faces in meeting its foreign language requirements is the department's continued staffing shortages. Specifically, State's lack of a sufficient training float has limited the number of officers available for language training. As a result, State has had to choose between assigning an officer to post who may not have the requisite language skills or allowing the position to remain empty while the incoming officer is in language training. As noted above, in October 2008, 334 language-designated positions (9 percent of all language-designated positions) were vacant in addition to 1,005 positions that were filled by officers who did not meet the language requirement for

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<sup>15</sup>In the Foreign Service grade structure, an FS-01 is equivalent to the civil service GS-15.

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the position. For example, in fiscal year 2006, State's Director General was unable to fill a request by the embassy in Riyadh for two additional language-proficient officers, as recommended by the Inspector General, because of overall staffing shortages. Furthermore, a 2008 report on State resource issues noted that personnel shortages result in training lags, and that ongoing tension over whether staff should complete training assignments or fill positions complicate efforts to create a well-trained workforce.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these overall staffing shortages, State has doubled the number of language-designated positions overseas since 2001. Department officials noted that the recent increase in positions requiring a superhard language—that is, one that requires 2 years of training to reach the 3 level—and the number of 1-year tours in these positions have compounded these shortages. For example, State must budget three people for a 3/3 Arabic language-designated position in Riyadh, which is typically a 1-year tour: one to fill the position, one in the second year of language training to arrive at post the next year, and one in the first year of training to arrive the following year.

Other staffing-related challenges include the following:

- *Staff time.* In some cases, Foreign Service officers lack the time necessary for maintaining their language skills upon arriving at post. Officers we spoke to in Tunis, Ankara, and Cairo said that they do not have enough time in their schedule to fully utilize the post language program. In addition, in 2006, State's Inspector General reported that most political and economic officers in Kabul find that a routine 6-day workweek precludes rigorous language training.
- *Curtailments.* When officers cut short their tours in a language-designated position, there is often no officer with the requisite language skills available to fill the position. Some officers we spoke to said that in some cases, they had to cut short their language training to come to post earlier than expected in order to fill a position vacated by an officer who had curtailed. For example, the regional security officers in Ankara and Tunis said that they left language training after only a few months in order to

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<sup>14</sup>American Academy of Diplomacy and Stimson Center, *A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future* (Washington, D.C.: October 2008).

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replace officers who had curtailed to Iraq or elsewhere. In addition, several officers in Shenyang said that they had to leave language training early in order to fill gaps at post.<sup>15</sup>

- *Position freeze.* In recent years, State has left dozens of positions vacant—or “frozen” them—in order to fully staff missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Officers at several posts we visited said that in order to avoid further shortages at post, the geographic bureaus, at times, have chosen to freeze training positions, rather than overseas positions. Consequently, there is no officer currently in language training for these positions, and posts will either have to request a language waiver or hope that the incumbent already has language skills when filling the position.

In 2009, State received funding for an additional 450 positions, including 300 dedicated to language training. According to the department, these positions will help to increase the training float and reduce gaps at post while officers are in language training. State officials have said that if their fiscal year 2010 request for an additional 200 training positions is approved, they expect to see language gaps close starting in 2011; however, State has not indicated when its foreign language staffing requirements will be completely met, and previous staffing increases have been consumed by higher priorities. For example, in 2003, State officials stated that the increased hiring under the department’s Diplomatic Readiness Initiative would create a training float to help eliminate the foreign language gaps at overseas posts within several years. Although the initiative enabled State to hire more than 1,000 employees above attrition, it did not reduce the language gaps, as most of this increase was absorbed by the demand for personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus the training reserve was not achieved.

Another challenge to State’s efforts to address its language shortfalls is the persistent perception among Foreign Service officers that State’s promotion system undervalues language training; however, while HR officials told us that the system values language training, the department has not conducted a systematic assessment to refute the perceptions. Officers at several posts we visited stated a belief that long-term training, specifically advanced training in hard languages, hinders their promotion

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<sup>15</sup>A forthcoming GAO report discusses challenges of staffing hardship posts in further detail. See GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Experience Gaps at Hardship Posts Continue to Compromise Diplomatic Readiness*, GAO-09-874 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 17, 2009).

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chances. For example, officers in Beijing said that some officers are reluctant to study a foreign language that requires a 1- or 2-year commitment because they believe it makes them less competitive for promotion, and one officer said that she would not have bid on her current position if she had had to take Chinese first. A former ambassador told us that many officers feel that language training is a "net minus" to their careers, as the department views this as a drain on the staffing system. We reported similar sentiments in 2006, when several officers said they believed that State's promotion system might hinder officers' ability to enhance and maintain their language skills over time.<sup>16</sup> Although senior HR officials told us that the promotion system weighs time in training as equal to time at post, they acknowledged that officers applying for promotion while in long-term training were at a disadvantage compared with officers assigned to an overseas post. Although promotion boards are required by law to weigh end-of-training reports for employees in full-time language training as heavily as the annual employee evaluation reports,<sup>17</sup> officers in Beijing, Shenyang, Istanbul, and Washington expressed concern that evaluations for time in training were discounted. State officials said they have reviewed the results of one promotion board and found a slightly lower rate of promotions for officers in long-term training at the time of the review. However, these officials were not sure if these results were statistically significant and said that the department has not conducted a more systematic assessment of the issue.

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<sup>16</sup>This challenge dates to at least 1986, when a report on hard language proficiency in the Foreign Service identified several bureaucratic biases adversely affecting hard language training, including State's promotion system, which, according to the report, "convinced many Foreign Service officers that they cannot afford to take time out for training, especially in hard languages which require two years or more to achieve even limited proficiency." See Monteagle Stearns, *Report on Hard Language Proficiency in the Foreign Service*.

<sup>17</sup>Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993, Pub. L. No. 102-138, §.155, 105 Stat. 647, 675 (1991).

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**State Lacks a Comprehensive Strategic Plan to Address Foreign Language Requirements**

State's approach to addressing its foreign language proficiency requirements does not reflect a comprehensive strategic approach. As we previously mentioned, State considers staffing shortfalls and the lack of a training float to be the primary challenges to achieving the department's language proficiency requirements. However, prior work by GAO and others has shown that addressing a critical human capital challenge—such as closing or reducing the long-running foreign language proficiency gaps within State's Foreign Service corps—requires a comprehensive strategic plan or set of linked plans that sets a clear direction for addressing the challenge.

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**Prior Work by GAO and Others Could Guide State's Strategic Plan for Addressing Foreign Language Requirements**

GAO, OPM, and others have developed a variety of strategic workforce planning models that can serve as a guide for State to develop a comprehensive plan to address its language proficiency gaps. Common elements of these models include setting a strategic direction that includes measurable performance goals and objectives and funding priorities, determining critical skills and competencies that will be needed in the future, developing an action plan to address gaps, and monitoring and evaluating the success of the department's progress toward meeting goals. In 2002, we reported that State had not prepared a separate strategic plan for developing its foreign language skills or a related action plan to correct long-standing proficiency shortfalls and recommended that the department do so. State responded by noting that because language is such an integral part of the department's operations, a separate planning effort for foreign language skills was not needed.<sup>18</sup> During this review, State officials told us that a comprehensive strategic approach to reducing foreign language gaps would be useful. The officials mentioned a number of documents where the department has addressed State's foreign language proficiency requirements in various forms, including the Foreign Language Continuum, the Strategic Plan, a 2007 training needs assessment, and the Five-Year Workforce Plan, but acknowledged that these documents are not linked to each other and no one document contains measurable goals, objectives, resource requirements, and milestones for reducing the foreign language gap.

We reviewed these documents and found that while some include a few of the aforementioned elements of a strategic plan, none of the documents present a comprehensive plan for State to address its foreign language

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<sup>18</sup>GAO-02-375.

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proficiency requirements. For example, the Foreign Language Continuum—a document developed by FSI for FSOs—describes foreign language training opportunities provided by State and, according to FSI officials, was meant to serve as a guide for FSOs and not a plan for reducing language gaps. The joint State-U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Strategic Plan contains seven priority goals for achieving State's and USAID's overall mission but only tangentially addresses the issue of foreign languages by stating that the department will expand opportunities for classroom training and distance learning in a number of areas, including foreign languages. It does not discuss if and how expanding this training will contribute to reducing the department's language proficiency gaps, or establish measurable goals, objectives, or time frames for its performance. The training assessment—a 2007 training study conducted by HR and FSI to assess State's current and future training needs—identified additional positions to be requested in future budget justifications to increase the training float.

State's Five-Year Workforce Plan, which describes the department's overall workforce planning, including hiring, training, and assignment plans, is a step in the right direction. The plan addresses language gaps in the Foreign Service workforce to a greater extent than any of the other documents. However, the plan falls short in several respects. First, the document states that State has established an ongoing monitoring process to identify and set goals for reducing language skill gaps in the Foreign Service. This process resulted in the development of an officer-to-position ratio target of at least 2.5 officers with the required language proficiency for each language-designated position at the 3/3 proficiency level. State reports this ratio as a target for meeting its critical needs language requirements; however, the ratio is not based on quantitative analysis but on the consensus of a working group consisting of HR and FSI officials. In developing the ratio, State assumed that the 2.5 officers already have the required languages and did not link the ratio to the number of officers that should be in language training and the size of the training float needed to achieve the 2.5 ratio. Further, State assumed that 3/3 is the appropriate skill level for the positions, although, as we discussed earlier, some officers have questioned the validity of that level for certain positions. Moreover, an HR official responsible for workforce planning at State said that the 2.5 ratio is very broad and not sufficiently detailed or specific. For example, the ratio does not take into account the different tour lengths. More Arabic-speaking officers would be needed for 1-year tours than Russian speakers for 3-year tours, so the languages should not have the same target ratio. Also, the assessment treats Foreign Service officers at all levels equally, even though more senior officers would not fill lower-

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graded positions. Therefore, even if State achieved the 2.5 ratio for each language-designated position, not all of the language-designated positions would be filled. The HR official explained that State is in the process of improving its methodology for critical needs language assessment.

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## Conclusions

Despite the various measures that State uses to determine and fill its language-designated positions, it continues to experience persistent gaps in its foreign language skills at many posts around the world, and questions remain about the adequacy of the proficiency requirements. State recognizes the importance of staffing language-designated positions with FSOs who possess the requisite language skills to perform their duties, and has taken some measures intended to address its foreign language shortfalls, including requesting and receiving funding in 2009 to build a training capacity, establishing a career development program that requires FSOs to have sustained professional language proficiency for consideration for promotion into the senior ranks, and offering special incentives to attract speakers of foreign languages under its critical needs language program. However, these individual actions, which State has relied on for several years to address its language proficiency requirements, do not constitute a comprehensive strategic approach to addressing the department's persistent gaps in language proficiency within the Foreign Service, and they are not linked to any targets, goals, or time frames for reducing State's language gaps. Also, State is not fully assessing the progress of its efforts toward closing the language gaps. Actions described in State's Five-Year Workforce Plan, such as the department's attempt to establish an ongoing monitoring process to identify and set goals for reducing the language skill gaps, are a step in the right direction that could be built upon to develop a more comprehensive plan. Given the importance of foreign language competency to the mission of the Foreign Service, any measures taken to address State's language proficiency shortfalls should be part of a comprehensive strategic plan that takes a long-term view and incorporates the key elements of strategic workforce planning. Such a plan will help State guide its efforts to monitor and assess its progress toward closing its persistent foreign language gaps.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To address State's persistent foreign language proficiency shortfalls in the U.S. Foreign Service, this report is making two recommendations. We recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive strategic plan consistent with GAO and OPM workforce planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. Such a plan should include, but not be limited to, the following elements:

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- clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives of the department's language proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy;
  - a transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based on objective criteria, that goes beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language designated and the proficiency level needed to enable officers to effectively perform their duties; and
  - a more effective mechanism that allows State to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of the foreign language skills that they acquired at FSI to their jobs, and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical needs foreign language speakers, and language incentive payments, as well as future efforts toward closing the department's language proficiency gaps.

To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, we also recommend that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its Congressional Budget Justifications and annual reports to Congress on foreign language proficiency. Specifically, we recommend that the department measure and report on the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to language training but who have not yet completed this training.

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### Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

State provided written comments on a draft of this report. The comments are reprinted in Appendix II. State generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations and described several initiatives that address elements of the recommendations. In further discussions with State to clarify its response, an official of HR's Office of Policy Coordination stated that State agrees with GAO that it needs some type of plan or process to pull together its efforts to meet its foreign language requirements, but that it has not yet determined what form this action will take. The official further explained that State recently convened an inter-bureau language working group, which will focus on and develop an action plan to address GAO's recommendations. State also provided technical comments, which we have included throughout this report as appropriate.

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As we agreed with your offices, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution of it until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State and interested congressional committees. The report also is available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-4128 or [fordj@gao.gov](mailto:fordj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in Appendix III.



Jess T. Ford, Director  
International Affairs and Trade

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## Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

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In this report, we (1) examine the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements and the potential impact of any shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, (2) assess State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements and describe the challenges it faces in doing so, and (3) assess the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet these requirements.

To analyze the extent to which State is meeting its foreign language requirements, we obtained data from State on all overseas language-designated positions and the language skills of the incumbent filling the position as of October 31, 2008. We compared the incumbent's reading and speaking scores with the reading and speaking levels designated for the position, and determined that the incumbent met the requirements for the position only if his or her scores equaled or exceeded both the speaking and reading requirements. A limited number of positions are designated in two languages. We determined that the officer met the requirements of such positions if he or she met the speaking and reading requirements for at least one of the designated languages. We also interviewed State officials responsible for compiling and maintaining these data and reviewed data maintained by some of the posts we visited on their language-designated positions, and determined the data to be sufficiently reliable for identifying the number of language-designated positions filled by officers who met the requirements of the position.

To assess the potential impact of foreign language shortfalls on U.S. diplomacy, we reviewed previous GAO reports, as well as reports by State's Inspector General, the National Research Council, the Congressional Research Service, the Department of Defense, and various think tanks. We interviewed officials from State's Bureaus of African Affairs, Consular Affairs, Diplomatic Security, European Affairs, Human Resources, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Near Eastern/South and Central Asian Affairs, Public Affairs, and Western Hemisphere Affairs, and the Foreign Service Institute. We also interviewed officials at overseas posts in Beijing and Shenyang, China; Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt; New Delhi, India; Tunis, Tunisia; and Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey. We selected these posts based on the number of language-designated positions in supercritical (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi) or critical needs (e.g., Turkish) languages, the extent of language gaps, and the location of FSI field schools. We also met with former senior State officials, including former ambassadors to Russia, Afghanistan, and Armenia; a former dean of FSI's School of Language Studies; and the former acting Director General of the Foreign Service to gain their insights on the consequences

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of language shortfalls at overseas missions. In total, we interviewed about 60 officials in Washington, D.C., and over 130 officers overseas.

To assess how State determines and meets its foreign language requirements, we reviewed past GAO reports; State planning documents, including the strategic plan, the performance report, and budget justification; State cables on the language designation process; and workforce planning guidance. We also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and at overseas posts.

To describe the challenges that State faces in meeting its foreign language requirements, we reviewed State department budget and planning documents. We analyzed State's promotion precepts, Career Development Program, and instructions provided to Foreign Service promotion boards.<sup>1</sup> We also interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and at overseas posts.

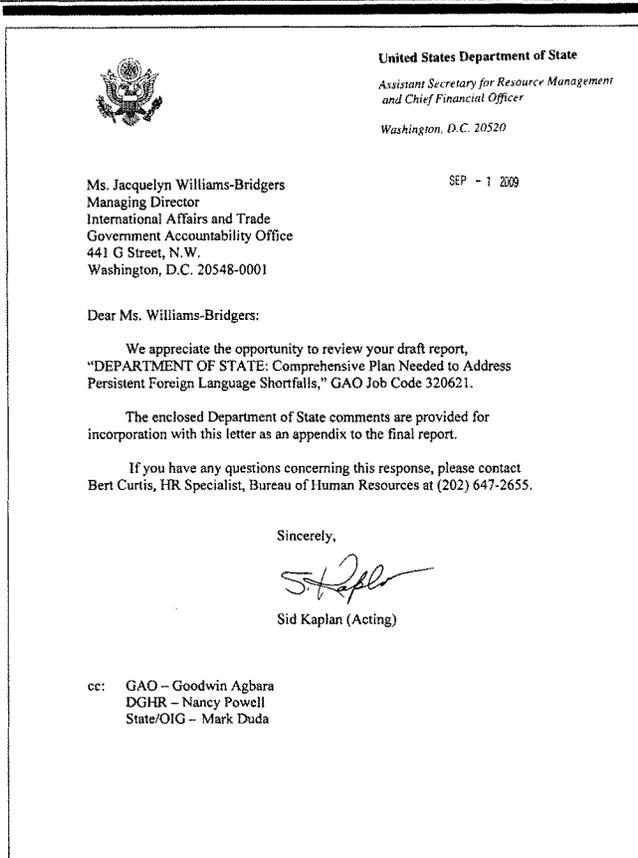
To assess the extent to which State has a comprehensive strategy to determine and meet its foreign language requirements, we reviewed prior GAO reports on strategic workforce planning and State planning documents, including the department's strategic plan, the Language Continuum, and the Five-Year Workforce Plan. We compared State's planning efforts to reduce foreign language gaps with guidance on comprehensive workforce planning developed by GAO and the Office of Personnel Management. We also interviewed officials from the Bureau of Human Resources and others.

We conducted this performance audit from August 2008 to September 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>1</sup>State's promotion precepts are guidelines by which the department determines the tenure and promotability of Foreign Service employees.

## Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



**Department of State Comments on GAO Draft Report****Comprehensive Plan Needed to Address Persistent Foreign Language  
Shortfalls**  
(GAO-09-955, GAO Code 320621)

The Department thanks GAO for its evaluation of the Department's efforts to fill language designated positions. The Department appreciates GAO's recognition of our efforts to prepare staff to be proficient communicators at posts where foreign languages are required. We would also like to assure Congress that effective identification and staffing of language designated positions is a serious priority within the Department of State. However, such staffing goals are tempered by overall Foreign Service staffing shortages, driven largely by the competing demands of increased language expertise (and thus substantial staff time devoted to training) and an expanding mission.

It will take time to increase hiring and to fill the gaps created by opening more language positions at FSI, training the officers and deploying them to the field. The additional hiring in 2009 is an essential first step but we will need successive years of funding to close the gap. The new hires (above attrition) funded for 2009 will not be on board until January 2010. Furthermore, it will not be until 2011 that we begin to deploy additionally trained language officers to the field.

**Recommendation for Executive Action**

To address State's persistent foreign language proficiency shortfalls in the U.S. Foreign Service, we recommend that the Secretary of State develop a comprehensive, strategic plan consistent with GAO and OPM workforce planning guidance that links all of State's efforts to meet its foreign language requirements. Such a plan should include, but not be limited to the following elements:

- Clearly defined and measurable performance goals and objectives of the department's language proficiency program that reflect the priorities and strategic interests of U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy;
- A transparent, comprehensive process for identifying foreign language requirements, based upon objective criteria, that goes beyond the current annual process, to determine which positions should be language-designated

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Appendix II: Comments from the Department  
of State

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and the proficiency level needed to enable officers to effectively perform their duties; and

- A more effective mechanism that allows State to gather feedback from FSOs on the relevance of foreign language training to their jobs, and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of State's recruitment of critical needs foreign language speakers, and language incentive payments, as well as future efforts towards closing the department's language proficiency gaps.

To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, we also recommend that the Secretary of State revise the department's methodology in its Congressional Budget Justifications and annual reports to Congress on Foreign language proficiency. Specifically, we recommend that the department measure and report on the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to language training but who have not yet completed this training.

**Department Response**

We concur with the GAO conclusion that the Department should link all of its efforts to meet foreign language requirements. We believe the areas noted below will allow us to begin to address both the individual and the strategic elements mentioned in the GAO recommendations. We welcome GAO's recommendations regarding the need for thorough planning, just as we begin to take a comprehensive look at the full range of foreign language requirements and how best to fulfill our mission. The Department appreciates the opportunity to respond to the recommendation presented in this draft and thanks GAO for its team's assistance in determining where we might focus our efforts.

**Enhance the Department's Ability to Project Its Language Requirements:**

The Bureau of Human Resources is in the process of developing a "trained personnel" simulation model utilizing data on language designated positions, competency requirements, tour lengths, and assignment rules. Such a model would allow State to more accurately determine:

- a) How many Foreign Service employees we need trained in each languages
- b) How many positions are required for a training float to avoid staffing gaps

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c) How changes in assignment rules impact the number of trained personnel needed

**Assessing the Language Incentives Program:** The Department also agrees that we must overcome the challenges inherent in fully assessing the effectiveness of the bonus payments offered under the Language Incentives Program. Such assessment would require both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the recruitment and language incentive program.

**Convening Language Issues Working Group:** The Bureau of Human Resources has convened an inter-bureau language working group with members from the Foreign Service Institute and several regional bureaus with key language interests to further department-wide communication and collaboration on all language-related issues, including language proficiency and incentivized languages. This working group held its inaugural meeting on August 31, 2009. A discussion of GAO's recommendation was the first agenda item and will shape a significant portion of the work of this group in the coming months.

**Department Methodology on Foreign Language Proficiency:** To more accurately measure the extent to which language-designated positions are filled with officers who meet the language requirements of the position, the Department agrees with the GAO's recommendation that it measure and report the percentage of officers in language-designated positions who have tested at or above the level of proficiency required for the position, rather than officers who have been assigned to a full course of language training but who have not yet completed the training.

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## Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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### GAO Contact

Jess T. Ford, Director, (202) 512-4128, fordj@gao.gov

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### Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Godwin Agbara, Assistant Director; Robert Ball; Joseph Carney; and La Verne Tharpes made key contributions to this report. Martin de Alteriis and Elizabeth Singer provided technical assistance.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador Nancy J. Powell by  
Senator Daniel Akaka (#1)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

In its reply to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on foreign language gaps, the State Department described a trained personnel simulation model that is under development.

Please elaborate on how this model will take into account challenges in staffing hardship posts in addition to ensuring enough Foreign Service officers (FSOs) have received sufficient language training.

**Answer:**

The Department recognizes the need to more precisely estimate training requirements to meet the current and future challenges faced by its workforce, including the ability to staff hardship posts. A simulation model is under development that will help the Department answer such questions as *“How many personnel do we need trained in each language, at each grade to fully staff all language-designated positions?”* or *“What is the impact on the remaining posts of filling the highest priority hardship posts with fully-trained personnel?”* The Language Training and Assignments Model (LTAM) model will incorporate factors including position language requirements, tour lengths, hardship levels, and other assignment/staffing

policies to provide the Department with the capability to answer questions relating to the overall number of language-proficient officers and specialists required, where they are needed, the point in their careers they must be trained to fill the demand, the training float required as well as estimating how long it will take the Department to meet its goals. The model will provide us with the ability to perform “what-if” analyses relating to changing conditions around the world or changed assignment policies including hardship levels and fair-share rules. Government analysts will be trained in the use of the modeling tool, which could also be adapted in the future to model other HR policies.

The Department is currently searching for appropriate modeling software as well as for the funds necessary to complete the actual modeling. Once the modeling begins, it will take approximately seven months to complete.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador Nancy J. Powell by  
Senator Daniel Akaka (#2)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

In 2006, the Bush Administration launched the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) in response to the findings of a Department of Defense national language conference. NSLI was supposed to address U.S. national security language needs by coordinating efforts through the Departments of State, Defense, and Education and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

- a. Is NSLI continuing in this Administration?
- b. If so, is coordination among agencies being expanded to address government-wide language needs?
- c. If not, what are this Administration's plans to improve Executive Branch coordination to enhance foreign language skills within the Federal government?
- d. Has the State Department worked with the Office of Personnel Management, the Chief Human Capital Officers Council, universities, or other stakeholders to identify ways to increase the number of potential employees with strong language skills?

**Answer:**

The efforts of the four federal agencies launched under the National Security Language Initiative to address critical language needs are continuing, and have contributed over the past four years towards a significant increase in the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching critical-need foreign languages. The initiative was developed

through an inter-agency planning process led and coordinated by the Department of State.

Department of State programs begun under NSLI are currently providing new opportunities to more than 1,500 high school and university students and teachers each year to study critical languages abroad, and are strengthening foreign language teaching in the U.S. through exchange and professional development.

Ongoing consultation and collaboration among the four federal agencies under NSLI in the implementation of these programs has allowed the agencies to advance common goals, while leveraging individual agency strengths, fulfilling unique agency missions, and using models and procedures appropriate to each institution's mandate. This approach, which recognizes and accommodates the diversity and specific mission of each agency, has been key to its success.

The Department of State will continue to strengthen its support for foreign language learning through all its programs of study abroad and exchange, and will continue to coordinate our efforts with other federal agencies pursuing similar goals.

State has long recognized that foreign language skills are essential for engaging foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical world regions, and for promoting understanding, conveying respect for other cultures, and encouraging reform. These skills are also fundamental to the economic competitiveness and security interests of the nation.

In addition to administering the exchange and educational programs launched under NSLI, we will continue to work with the Office of Personnel Management, the Chief Human Capital Officers Council, universities, and other stakeholders to identify ways to increase the number of potential employees with strong language skills.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Director General Nancy Powell by  
Senator Daniel Akaka (#3)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

Encouraging officers to specialize in languages and develop expertise about countries and cultures in a particular region may help enhance our diplomatic readiness, especially in regions vital to our strategic interests.

What steps has the State Department taken to encourage regional specialization through the assignment process and career planning for FSOs?

**Answer:**

The Department encourages Foreign Service Generalists to develop regional expertise through the Career Development Program (CDP), which provides guidance to both generalists and specialists on the requirements to gain entrance into the senior ranks. In order to cross the senior threshold, FS generalists are required to develop "major" regional and "minor" regional or bureau expertise. A "major" is three tours or six years dealing with one region, either overseas or in Washington, while a minor can be completed with two tours or three years. A second year of superhard language training, such as in Arabic or Chinese, may be counted towards either a major or a minor in the region in which the language is spoken.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Director General Nancy Powell by  
Senator Daniel Akaka (#4)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

The State Department's Global Repositioning Program moved FSOs from lower- to higher-priority posts. According to the State Department's Office of Inspector General, this left staffing gaps at posts that lost positions, and FSOs assigned to new posts did not always have sufficient resources to accomplish their duties.

What has the Department done to ensure that future FSO repositioning accounts for the resource challenges on both posts gaining and losing personnel?

**Answer:**

We agree that the Department has had insufficient resources to address fully the range of needs at our posts around the world. The funding that the Congress provided in the 2009 budget – and that we hope it will provide in the 2010 budget – will enable us to address this problem, both by staffing urgent vacancies in priority areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan and closing overseas staffing gaps resulting from previous repositioning exercises or from our general personnel deficits.

We are taking a strategic approach to the allocation of these new positions. All of our Bureaus have been engaged in our analysis of which

previously frozen positions should be filled and which new positions need to be created as a matter of priority. Among the factors this analysis takes into consideration: the Secretary's foreign policy priorities; our Department, Bureau and mission strategic plans; training needs, especially as they relate to language capability; and the ability of individual posts to accommodate additional staff given available resources.

We are confident that this approach will result in the efficient and effective allocation of our staff to meet our foreign policy challenges and opportunities. That said, we will regularly review our efforts to ensure they are producing the results we expect.

**Question for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador Nancy J. Powell by  
Senator Daniel K. Akaka (#5)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

Ms. Johnson testified that initial training for FSOs at the Foreign Service Institute has been cutback from seven weeks to five weeks. Was there a cutback in initial training? If so, why did the State Department make this decision?

**Answer:**

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) shortened the Foreign Service Officer orientation course to accommodate more annual offerings in response to the hiring surge. FSI was able to preserve content by leveraging technology to provide some materials in an alternative format such as required distance learning courses, and by streamlining the course for greater efficiency. Other material was moved into job-specific tradecraft courses, which new Foreign Service Officers receive after orientation and before going to their assignments.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Director General Nancy Powell by  
Senator Daniel Akaka (#6)  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

In his testimony, Ambassador Neumann suggested that the State Department would benefit from FSOs serving in areas of conflict, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, for longer tours. He suggested that repeat tours and tandem tours, in which two officers rotate in and out of an area of conflict over a three-year period, may be effective ways to accomplish this.

- a. What are your views on this issue?
- b. What are the State Department's plans with respect to tour length in areas of conflict?

**Answer:**

Having served as an ambassador at a one-year-tour post (Pakistan), I can attest that there are numerous benefits to longer tours of duty in areas of conflict, among them deeper understanding of the politics and culture, stronger relationships with host nation counterparts, and institutional memory. We have to weigh these benefits against the impact of extended unaccompanied tours in the most dangerous, difficult, and stressful conditions on the well-being of our employees and their families.

My deputies and I are visiting posts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to speak directly to employees and Mission leadership about the range of issues surrounding assignments in these challenging environments, including length of tours. We also are consulting within the Department, including the Office of Medical Services, on this issue to determine whether any changes would be appropriate for the 2011 assignment cycle. In addition, I have met with Ambassador Neumann and others in the foreign affairs community and always welcome their suggestions and perspectives on this and other issues.

As we consider the benefits of offering extended assignments, we continue to use financial and assignment incentives to encourage employees to serve in areas of conflict for two years, while retaining a no-fault curtailment policy for those who may find that 24 months is more than they ultimately can manage.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Ambassador Nancy J. Powell by  
Senator George V. Voinovich (#1)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

Senator Akaka and I supported a permanent legislative remedy to address the locality pay gap for Foreign Service Officers stationed overseas. A byproduct of this increase in basic pay is an increase in the cost of existing incentives, such as hardship differentials, which are computed as a percentage of base pay. I know that Congress is committed to growing our diplomatic strength, but we need reassurance that our limited dollars produce positive gains. What's the cost impact of the overseas locality pay solution on State's budget? Is State reconsidering its existing incentives? When will State complete its review of the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay incentives?

**Answer:**

We very much appreciate the support you and the Committee have shown for the Department of State and its employees. With your help, we will fully close the overseas pay gap by August 2011, at a total cost of approximately \$440 million (\$75.2 million of which covers danger pay and some other allowances).

We fully agree that we must use our limited resources wisely. To that end, we have begun a comprehensive review of the full spectrum of Foreign Service assignment incentives. This analysis will take approximately nine to twelve months to complete and will have several objectives, including evaluating the impact of each existing incentive, establishing indicators to monitor the impact of incentives, and exploring additional/alternative monetary and non-monetary incentive options. Data will be collected from the personnel and payroll systems, interviews and focus groups, and a targeted survey. In addition, the study of the effectiveness of increasing hardship and danger pay incentive increases required by Public Law 109-140 Section 4(e) is complete and should reach you shortly..

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Director General Nancy Powell by  
Senator George V. Voinovich (#2)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

The Department spends \$60,000 per student for training in a super hard language, such as Arabic or Chinese. This amount is in addition to the salary and benefits of each employee in language training. This type of investment is important since State faces a 39 percent gap in individuals with proficiency in super hard languages. From GAO's report and in speaking with Foreign Service Officers, it seems that our return on investment is less than desired. Many officers are not using their language skills in their assignments. What is the solution?

**Answer:**

We agree with GAO that the State Department needs a more strategic approach to languages, and we recently established an intra-Departmental working group both to review our current efforts and identify possible reforms.

Currently, the Department provides language training based on the needs of our overseas missions. Certain overseas positions (LDPs) are designated as requiring language proficiency, based upon an evaluation by both the post and our Regional Bureaus. A Foreign Service Officer (FSO) must be assigned to an LDP in order to receive a complete course of

language training. This ensures that our training funds are efficiently utilized to train FSOs in the language skills necessary for their assignments. Additionally, many of these officers serve multiple tours in countries where they can use these same language skills. We also have programs in place to bring into the Foreign Service more officers who already have proficiency in key languages.

Our review, in addition to the good work already done by GAO, will help us determine what is working well, what is not, and what improvements we might make. I look forward to discussing the results with you in the months ahead.

**Questions for the Record Submitted to  
Director General - Designate Nancy Powell by  
Senator George V. Voinovich (#3)  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
June 24, 2009**

**Question:**

GAO reported that State has not evaluated the effectiveness of its pay incentives to encourage officers to study and maintain proficiency in certain foreign languages. Moreover, State has not conducted an assessment to determine whether engaging in long-term language training disadvantages officers in terms of promotion, a longstanding perception among Foreign Service officers. What actions, if any, does State plan to take to address these issues? Should the Department consider an assignment system that allows longer tours of duty and consecutive regional assignments?

**Answer:**

The Department agreed with the GAO's assessment that we must overcome the challenges inherent in fully assessing the effectiveness of the bonus payments offered under the Language Incentives Program (LIP). In this regard, we are using both qualitative and quantitative analysis methodologies to begin evaluating the effectiveness of LIP. We are also beginning a comprehensive study on the effect of long-term language training on the rates of promotion rates for Foreign Service Officers.

Regarding language training and the assignment system, the length of an employee's tour is not affected by whether the employee has or has not had language training, but rather by a number of factors including the danger and hardship conditions at the post. For most mid-level and senior employees, there are no procedural restrictions in the assignment process that would prevent follow-on regional assignments or follow-on assignments at other posts in that mission. Additionally, the Department encourages multiple regional assignments through the Career Development Program which requires the development of both a major and minor regional expertise in order to be promoted into the Senior Foreign Service.

**Post-Hearing Question for the Record  
Submitted to Mr. Jess T. Ford  
From Senator Daniel K. Akaka**

**“A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign Language  
Challenges Facing the Foreign Service”  
September 24, 2009**

**Question:**

A very high percentage of the Foreign Service officers in Iraq and Afghanistan do not have the language proficiency required for their positions. These are critically important posts, but are very difficult to staff because of the unusual hardships and dangerous conditions, and the languages required are exceptionally difficult to learn.

Do you have any specific recommendations on how State could better meet the language challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**GAO Response:**

Our review did not include an in-depth analysis of the reasons for language shortfalls in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, as we stated in our recommendation, State should make a comprehensive assessment of its foreign language requirements to determine which positions should be language designated and the level of proficiency needed for officers to perform their duties. State may also consider such measures as building in a one-year advance period before posting officers to these posts to allow time for language learning and extending the tour period beyond one year. We have previously recommended that State consider longer tours, among other actions, to hone officers' skills in certain languages.<sup>1</sup> State has taken some steps that address this recommendation, including extending the tours of duty in at least two posts in the Middle East, but a senior State official cautioned that State cannot extend the tour length at some posts because of the dangerous conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, GAO-06-894 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2006)

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record  
Submitted to Ms. Susan R. Johnson  
From Senator Daniel K. Akaka**

**“A Review of U.S. Diplomatic Readiness: Addressing the Staffing and Foreign  
Language Challenges Facing the Foreign Service”  
September 24, 2009**

1. In your written testimony, you stated that more basic language training should be provided to all Foreign Service personnel, including positions that are not language designated.

Please elaborate on what you see as the value of additional language training for all Foreign Service officers (FSOs).

**I was referring to basic language training for all personnel assigned overseas. Ability to function in a foreign environment depends on some minimal language capability for every day needs – to take a taxi, shop, ask directions, explain basic problems, make a simple telephone call and to read basic road and other signs conveying public information. Not being able to function even at this basic level adds to morale problems and creates other costly burdens on posts.**

2. In his testimony, Ambassador Neumann suggested that the State Department would benefit from FSOs serving in areas of conflict, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, for longer tours. He suggested that repeat tours and tandem tours, in which two officers rotate in and out of an area of conflict over a three-year period, may be effective ways to accomplish this.

Do you agree with Ambassador Neumann that the Department should begin assigning FSOs to longer tours in these areas?

**Yes. Tandem tours is one way to address the need for longer tours and for being able to benefit from experience accumulated over a longer period. It takes on the average about a year to reach optimal performance levels.**

**I also think that the Department would benefit from taking a closer look at the level of support that the US military provides to families left at home during unaccompanied tours.**