

Interview with Stephen Low

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR STEPHEN LOW

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Q: Steve Low was the director of the Foreign Service Institute at the time the National Foreign Affairs Training Center vision began to be converted into a reality. Steve, if you would give us some idea of what in 1982 Arlington Hall was about and what indeed was happening in the Foreign Service Institute.

LOW: I came to FSI in 1982; I had never heard of Arlington Hall. Secretary Haig selected me. He felt very strongly about training and he interviewed personally all the candidates. He selected me and I came in following a year as Diplomat in Residence at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

It didn't take very long to realize there were three or four things that I could do that were important in terms of training. I felt then, as I feel now, that we were a unique institution. We were a training institution as opposed to an educational one. By that, I mean, we took educated people and provided them with a skill which would permit them to perform their job better. One exception was our economics course which was a basic education course. But for the most part, we were a training institution.

In the three areas of language, area studies, and professional studies, I had a very strong feeling that we should be the best there is in the United States. We should provide

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leadership and be respected as an institution of excellence. To do that meant, it seemed to me, opening doors, being sure that we had within us the best people. That was a major thrust and meant doing a number of things. One of the things we did was to create the Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs. It was to be kind of a think tank where we would bring in private sector (business, labor, media) and academia to discuss issues of current policy concern with people in government. FSI provided the perfect forum for this kind of thing. Everyone felt at ease, the people in government and out of government. That was central to the concept of an effective FSI, a place where one could come and feel at ease to discuss frankly the major issues we were concerned about. It was a place for individuals, both inside and outside of government, to spend a few months, particularly Foreign Service Officers, if they had an interval and there was something they really wanted to study.

Second was the home for FSI. I don't know at what point John Sprott and I talked about this at great length. We decided we were never going to have a first class institution in the physical surroundings in Rosslyn. We were spread all over, there was no feeling of unity. For an entry level class of Foreign Service Officers, the training facilities must have represented their first deception. After all, there was the tremendous build up of a year and a half of selecting only 150 out of 15,000 applicants. He or she then walked into a windowless room with a poster on Greece, and that was the entire relationship with 200 years history of American Diplomatic experience.

An article I ran across showed a picture of one of the most attractive buildings I remember seeing on an island in a lake. That building had the name of Hamburger University and it was where McDonald's did its training. I wrote McDonald and got a picture of the building and a letter from them describing their degree in "hamburgerology." I hung that on my wall. I used to say to visitors that if American society could afford to put this kind of resources into those who make its hamburgers, it should be able to do better for those who conduct its foreign policy. The postal union, the FBI, everyone had training institutions.

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My training at FSI started off in an apartment building then moved to the garage of Arlington Towers. Then for 25 years we were in the Rosslyn high rise where we spent a significant amount of time waiting for elevators; where the population density of the rooms were such that you couldn't move easily; restroom facilities were inadequate to take the volume at breaks. It was simply unsatisfactory. It contributed to the old, I think unfortunate, proclivity of Foreign Service Officers to feel sorry for themselves and feel American society did not appreciate their contributions. We felt very strongly that the new training center should be a U.S. government facility much more than a narrow Foreign Service or State Department facility. For a start we brought in an USIA officer as one of the deans of one of the schools.

But to get back to the facilities, it was very shortly after we were there that we went down three paths. One, creating the center; two, finding a new site; and three, setting up a little later a non-profit organization which would support training and do things for training that the government couldn't do. Secretary Haig, when he left, had someone in his office whom they needed to find a place for. They asked us to take him, he came to work for us and we had absolutely nothing for him to do. We told him to look around, to see if there wasn't some spot somewhere that we could consider moving to. For two or three months he inquired.

I recall going up to Mt. Vernon Girls' School, which was in desperate straits at that point, to ask how permanent they were. And there was some other property up on Foxhall Road that was vacant. He did quite a bit of research on various places. But, I have to say, the under secretary wasn't terribly interested in this proposition and we didn't push it very hard. We were just inquiring. That individual left and we got a new executive director who was more interested. At that point John Sprott had said, "Well, there is always Arlington Hall. People always mention that in connection with us." It was an 87 acre plot of rolling land and trees about 10 minutes from the State Department out route 50. At the time it housed SIGCOM—the Army signals command which, we were to discover, was rapidly

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being outgrown. I suggested we go out there for lunch. So we inquired and went out to the Officers' Club for lunch, and we became very interested. This was maybe early to mid 1983.

We had always heard, John said, that there was no chance of our getting Arlington Hall. There was a provision in the contract or an understanding that if the Army moved out it should revert to Arlington County. I found in this whole effort that one of the biggest elements is getting the information. It took a good six months to find out what the real state of affairs was with regard to this place.

The most important thing that happened, I think, was that we got a new Under Secretary for Management, Ron Spiers. He was very supportive and very interested in training, as had been his predecessor. But Ron had imagination and was a believer that things could be done. The FSI executive officer, Frank Ravndal, went out to see the Arlington County people. The person he talked to, Bill Hughes, told him a little bit about the set up here. He said that as far as he could see the Army had to move because it wanted to expand and do things that the County said they could not do. The County never really expected that the federal government would really turn the property back to it. He thought that having FSI there would be about the best alternative the County could hope for. He thought it was a good idea. Frank Ravndal came back with that piece of news. Then we went to Ron Spiers. But there were two other things that happened that peeked our interest.

In my first presentation of the budget, I went to the OMB and was explaining what we were planning to do. OMB asked whether what we wanted to do would be possible once we moved to Columbia Plaza. I knew nothing about moving to Columbia Plaza. They insisted it was right there in the submission from the controller. FSI would move to Columbia Plaza. Well, that was the first I had heard of it and I would have to consider it. I knew in my own mind immediately that was an impossible suggestion. No training school could exist across the street from the State Department. People would come to class and leave in the middle of it to go to a meeting, or they would rush out to finish a memo. To be effective, a training

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institution must be far enough away so that it is independent and people will commit themselves to the learning process, but close enough so that you can get people to come out to teach, lecture and attend classes. In other words, ten or fifteen minutes away, if it was going to work. Anyway, Columbia Plaza was still another rented office building. It would be the last place in the world we should move to. Still we didn't entirely abandon the idea of being across the street.

One of the things we looked into at great length was the naval medical facility. I think the CIA has part of it and we looked at that. We also looked across the street at the pharmaceutical building just to see if there were any possibilities there. But Columbia Plaza seemed to me to be a crazy idea and I said under no circumstances as director would I consider it. And then, about six months later, still in 1983 or early 1984 I was walking down the hall and there was a mock-up of the new State Department building which was to be put up by private enterprise and leased back to us. It had a big sign—The new FSI. I wondered whether anyone ever consulted FSI on this kind of thing?

This was to be a great opportunity, a marvelous place, L'Enfant Plaza, right in the middle of the city. And we could have the upper two floors. We had a staff meeting and tossed it around. Two or three of our deans were quite enthusiastic about the idea, anything to get out of where we were. And again I said it didn't make sense to go to another office building, leased quarters. I guess we went around the table and I think the majority were in favor. I'm afraid, I said, I vote against it and the no's have it. The Assistant Secretary for Administration, a good friend, would hardly speak to me for weeks after that. Ron Spiers at that point called me in and told me he had sent his goals and objectives to the Secretary and his number one goal was a new facility or new campus for FSI. That really blew me away because to have the Under Secretary for Management really take an interest like that was a completely new thing and important.

We had one other interesting ally on the Hill. Congressman Fascell was Chairman for the Subcommittee on Government Operations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and

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he had a staffer, Ginny Schlundt, who could be difficult but had a very strong feeling of proprietorship as far as the State Department was concerned and was very supportive of training. Ginny, without consulting us, put in her report to the subcommittee that FSI should be moved to an appropriate location in a campus setting. That helped us enormously. I got lots of copies of that and used it to show we had congressional support.

We discovered yet a new possibility. Somewhere along the line, the Pentagon said there were eleven acres at the north end of the Pentagon parking lot which they would give us. I reported this to Ron and he said maybe we should grab it. There was a lot of pressure beginning to mount for us to take advantage of the offer. It was available "tomorrow" and we could move quickly while we had the opportunity. At this point I guess, (my chronology is faulty because I don't remember exactly just when some of these meetings occurred) I got a call that the Secretary wanted to see me. I went into George Shultz's office and he had the Counselor of the Department, Ed Derwinski, with him. He said something to the effect that, "Steve, I have been thinking about this training thing. As you know, it is a subject that greatly interests me. FSI is not in an appropriate place. I want you to find a place and take the responsibility of getting FSI an appropriate location. I want you to do it. Ed Derwinski is here, and I am charging him to help you in whatever way you need help and I will be checking up on the progress."

Well, Ron had put him up to it. That is why there are so many elements to this. Shultz was a manager, he planned personnel. He tried to get Personnel to do what he had done in Bechtel; planning ahead for needs and training. He was a firm believer in the importance of training and he saw the importance of this to the Foreign Service. So I had my marching orders. Without these people above me, we wouldn't have had a chance.

Then, another element came along, it was Arlington County. Bill Hughes, the person Ravndal talked to who was at FSI for the inauguration went to his bosses and got confirmation of his view that if the County couldn't keep Arlington Hall, they would prefer FSI to any other government entity. They went to Congressman Frank Wolf. Mr.

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Wolf called me in and we had long conversations on the subject. He became a strong supporter. We had our ups and downs. In part, he wanted the County to benefit from this and we talked about it getting use of some of the property. In the initial moments, the idea of our using the whole 87 acres was inconceivable. Ron and I talked about splitting it in half and giving half to someone else. We had no idea that we could use all this space. It seemed extravagant. And OMB was scoffing at the idea. It was not at all positive on the idea. There were others that thought it was extravagant and unnecessary. But the Secretary pushed hard. He started his weekly staff meetings by asking what was happening at FSI? People wondered what I had been doing behind their backs to get the Secretary so charged up on the subject. And I must admit, I didn't do anything to discourage it.

We had a meeting. I guess I had brought up the issue of the Pentagon parking lot. We had the whole senior staff in; there must have been about twenty people. Again, I told them I wasn't going to have my name associated with a building that was at the end of the runway at National Airport, where every time a plane took off someone would ask who was the bright guy who chose this idiotic location. It just didn't make any sense to me and I said I would rather not move. We had only one chance and if we didn't make it right we wouldn't get another. It was better to stay put than take some place that was unsatisfactory. Reluctantly, people went along with me. At that point we got legislation drafted, with Derwinski's help.

Yet another amusing incident, I got a call from the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Administration. I had been to see him a couple of times and he had shown himself sympathetic to our interest. It was pretty clear he thought we could help what he knew he had to do—move the Army out of Arlington Hall. He wanted SIGCOM to move to Fort Belvoir but was having little luck getting congressional support. We alerted the House Foreign Affairs Committee which asked the Armed Services Committee staff about it. For the first time the latter became interested in the matter and went out to take a look. Not surprisingly it was appalled at conditions there, for truly the World War

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temps in which people were working were falling apart. So the Army saw a positive value in cooperating with us. I should mention that throughout our effort the H Bureau (Congressional Relations) gave us a free hand. I tried to keep them informed of what we were doing but they let us pretty well alone—no doubt because of the Secretary's well known interest. For the most part I handled the matter by myself with John Sprott's constant support and advice and frequently action to cover me with his wide circle of contacts in the Department, particularly in the Comptroller's office and Administration. Anyway, the Army Assistant Secretary—I believe his name was Johnson—called me one day and said he needed fifteen acres of the property back. I told him I didn't have fifteen acres to give him. He said if we would agree that the National Guard could have fifteen acres he would support us. We had been up to talk to Ginny and others in the House Foreign Affairs committee and told them of the importance of getting army support. So we had yet another important backer at that point. If we hadn't lined up all that support we could never have gotten the legislation approved. We lined up Senator Warner, both because of the County and the Army. He was the senior Republican and minority leader of the Armed Services Committee.

At that time the Executive Director changed and Bill Kemp came in. John, Bill and I would meet each evening. We had an imaginary chart on the wall which was a line of progression of our expectations. And we'd speculate what percentage of chance we had of getting this in the final analysis. Never did we get it above 20 percent chance of eventually getting this campus, a new building, and a new facility. I don't know when that changed because it was very difficult to follow the progress. We were very distant from Congress and it is hard to keep informed on these things. But everyone in the Department knew this was my project. People would duck when I entered the room because they saw me as a single-issue person. In fact we had created our Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs and had created the Association for Diplomatic Studies. But it was true that we were spending about half of our time on the question of relocation.

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Support for the new facility got past the House and went into conference. It was part of the Armed Services bill. The State Department Foreign Affairs Committee supported it but the initiative had to come from the Army. The Army wanted our school.

Q: Was there another party that wanted this property?

LOW: Not that I ever heard of. There was one major fly in the ointment. That was the Committee on Government Organization, Jack Brooks of Texas was chairman and he was tough. There was a piece of legislation of which he was the parent which said that any government property which was no longer needed by its occupant must go through a process by which it is advertised to all government agencies. Anyone interested in the property could then state their needs which would be examined and on the basis of that, awarded to the most deserving. I knew that if we had to go through that process, there was no way the State Department would end up with the property. In the middle of the proceedings, Brooks raised a fuss. We were at the edge of the precipice and he said he was going to amend the legislation to read if the Army transfers the property to the State Department then it would have this, that and the other thing. Well, we had a difficult time following it, but we knew there was a terrible threat. I can't tell you to this day what happened in that conference committee, but Warner and Wolf together thwarted that effort to derail advertising to all government agencies about the property.

It took us two weeks to learn whether the bill had passed and that the provision in fact transferred the property from the Army to the State Department. That was a turning point. We then realized we had a good chance that the whole project would go through. The momentum then started to build.

Q: It is curious, you were offered nine acres of land in back of the Pentagon's parking lot, and here you have 72+. Did it occur to you that maybe this was much vaster than we could justify occupying?

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LOW: Yes, that was true and what my answer when people raised that was the County wanted to use part of it and we would let them do so. Of course, after I left it became evident that we were going to use virtually all of it. I remember Congressman Wolf called me out of the blue one day after I had retired and was in Bologna Italy as Director of the Johns Hopkins University Graduate School—International Relations there. He reminded me of our “promise” that they could have some of the property. I admitted only that I had said that whatever part we weren't using would make available to the County.

I didn't mention the fact that part of Wolf's support was a quid pro quo that we go to town meetings around the County explaining how we were going to use the property. Generally, we were effective in getting support from the communities and that allowed us to keep Wolf's support. He felt that if we could satisfy his constituents he would support us. We had a terrible time with the intelligence alumni. They wanted that building, Old Main, preserved and they argued with me about all kinds of things.

I remember coming out here with the prominent Washington architect, Hugh Jacobson, and going through the building. After we were all finished he stood and said, and I remember his words exactly, “charming but expendable.” We said at that point we were not going to keep it because it would cost us a fortune. We knew it was full of asbestos and would be a lot cheaper to tear down and start from scratch. The intelligence officers association won that argument, the building was saved. In the event they were right and we were wrong. It is a beautiful building and I think it is a great asset to the complex.

I don't know what the ultimate disposition of the nine or ten acres on the other side of George Mason will be. But we had promised what we didn't use we would make available.

I left in early 1987, I was at FSI for five years.

Q: The Armed Services legislation was in 1986?

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LOW: Yes, then the spotlight moved to getting appropriations. By that time Secretary Shultz realized we had made enough progress that this was a real possibility. He really went to bat for us. We were told that the Secretary said the relocation of the school was his first priority. When a Secretary of State says that, Congress is very supportive. So we did get the initial funds to develop the site plan. The conceptual design on the site plan showed a building in a donut shape. If I am not mistaken, there is a picture of it on the cover of the Foreign Service Journal showing me standing in front of the mock-up of the donut-shape building.

The initial conceptual survey we had done concluded that the project was practical, that we could use this space for this purpose. Later John Sprott and directors Charles Bray and Brandon Grove did a lot of work on providing Congress and later administrations cost benefit studies indicating that in the long run this would save money for the U.S. Government. We were paying almost a million annually in rent, so it was demonstrable that a permanent home would be cost beneficial.

The next step was the site survey, which took an incredibly long time—six months or something. Then we moved to the design competition which was an interesting process. I think the GSA took over at that point and advertised an RFP in the Federal Register. There were something like 184 applications. GSA said they had never had such a high number of applications to bid on a federal government structure. Nobody submitted any concepts at all. GSA studied the 184 and reduced it to 30, then ten, and finally five, on the basis of studying the firms and their capabilities and records. It was only at that point they invited competition.

The five firms submitted their design concepts. A board of architects and contractors, all government people, of which I was a member met to consider the designs. I think there was a recognition that my decision would be pretty important. Initially I leaned toward a single building, in the shape of a cross, would be the best for us, less expensive. I was very concerned to get as much building for the least money. Two or three of the other

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board members were architects. During a coffee break they pulled me aside and told me I was making a terrible mistake. They felt one design in particular was head and shoulders above the others. So I started studying it and the more I looked at it, the more impressed I became about it. I had come to the realization a few months before that even with the best piece of real estate in the world, and all the money you need, you could still come up with a design that was quite unsatisfactory. That had not occurred to me before. It seemed to me, if you could start from scratch, you could produce what you wanted. So I was very careful to listen to people who knew what they were talking about. They were very persuasive and very bright and I went along with them. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. Our experience with Mitchell-Ginsgela(?) was very good and the design turned out to be superb.

Q: This was the board of architects?

LOW: This was the board the GSA set up. There were four or five who were voting members, they were GSA people. I don't know whether there was an outside person. But, they were all building experts. I was the only foreign affairs person. I never regretted this decision. Once the firm was signed up by GSA, then they showed me things they had done. The time frame was probably January, 1987.

Q: How long did it take to make a decision on the architectural design?

LOW: I think it was two or three days. The firms had 30 days to come down, look at the place, and develop their proposals. I think GSA gave each firm \$50,000. They each made presentations that took a day or two. It was a very serious business.

You know, this has nothing to do with the story I am telling, but something else has come up that has the same kind of possibilities.

Early last week we went to Annapolis and visited the Naval Institute to inquire how they operate. And in the course of the visit, we were asking about the museum. The Naval

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Institute houses a naval museum on the Annapolis campus. The oral historian said the Congress required that each service designate one of its museums to receive appropriate funds. He suggested that we ask the naval historian about the requirement and funds. So, I called the naval historian and he said he would fax the information over to me. It was a report of the conference committee and it said they had a terrible time deciding who should get funds. They decided that each service secretary should designate one of its museums to receive appropriated funds for its construction. The others could get appropriate funds for the exhibit but not for construction.

I am taking this document up to Senator Pell in the next few days and demonstrate there are 70 Army, 11 Navy and 30 or 40 Air Force museums. We don't have anything that demonstrates the history of U.S. diplomacy. And then suggest that perhaps he would like to be the patron saint for us. It is always a matter of trying every way you can to find an opening to get through all this. And as you said, if one keeps looking one can find enough support.

End of interview