Testimony of Susan Rockwell Johnson
President, American Foreign Service Association
December 9, 2009
Before
The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia
On
The Diplomat's Shield: Diplomatic Security in Today's World

Chairman Akaka, Senator Voinovich, thank you for once again inviting the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA) to testify before you. We are pleased to offer our views on the current state of diplomatic security, and are happy to once again share the panel with Ambassador Ronald Neumann. AFSA is proud to represent the brave men and women who serve as diplomatic security specialists at the State Department. Their dedication, courage and hard work have saved countless lives, not only of Foreign Service employees but other civilians. Like many of my Foreign Service colleagues, I have personally benefited from their service during my assignments abroad, especially in Iraq and Bosnia.

The challenges and demands facing our diplomats and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) have grown exponentially over the past decade. The tragic bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the 9/11 attacks, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and all the other attacks carried out or threatened against our overseas missions have all required a substantial increase, both in the number of security measures that we must take and in their sophistication. These safeguards have not only been for personnel, but also for vehicles, communications and the physical structures of our missions.

The call for increased vigilance at missions and governing travel outside the mission, along with the high standards for building security and access identified by the Inman Report and other

studies, has strained the Diplomatic Security Bureau's resources and personnel. DS must constantly reassess the balance between providing adequate protection and allowing the day-to-day work of diplomacy to proceed.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, *Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review*, accurately highlights the difficult choices that DS currently faces. We strongly agree with and support the GAO's recommendations. AFSA also supports the proposals Amb. Neumann and the American Academy of Diplomacy presented in their testimony. I will do my best to not be repetitive in AFSA's recommendations, focusing mainly on the importance of the need for the State Department' need to find an optimal balance between securely protecting our diplomats while still giving the members of the Foreign Service the flexibility to perform their assignments.

Another term for this dilemma is "risk versus reward." Some risks in carrying the U.S. mission in a country are unavoidable, but like Amb. Neumann, AFSA is *adamantly opposed* to underestimating or minimizing those threats. Nor do we support requiring officers to take unnecessary risks.

As the GAO report highlights, the "Transformational Diplomacy" initiative has required the United States to maintain a diplomatic presence in countries we would have otherwise evacuated, escalating the amount of risk Foreign Service personnel' face when deployed. Members of the Foreign Service understand and accept that at any point during their career they may be posted to a country that is dangerous, but they remain committed to fulfilling their duties as professionally as possible. People are willing to accept risk if they believe what they are doing matters and they can accomplish the job they were sent to do.

As the State Department embarks on establishing a 21st-century diplomatic corps, AFSA believes that it must perform a comprehensive review of worldwide security requirements that will provide for more flexibility at individual posts, while still maintaining a high level of protection. At a time when our commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq continue to grow, State needs to have a strategic plan for how it will meet these growing demands and to address staffing and training shortages by giving Diplomatic Security the resources to be proactive, rather than reactive. The goal should be responsible risk management, not a zero tolerance policy.

A one-size-fits-all approach does not take into account the dynamic nature of diplomacy and the different situations on the ground. This approach often tie the hands of the Foreign Service and compromises the ability to do its job successfully. Again, let me be clear that this is about finding a balance that works for the unique nature of the jobs performed by members of the Foreign Service, which often require face-to-face meetings with local nationals at all hours. Let me give two examples from my personal experience.

I served as a senior adviser to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry from July through December 2003. Broadly stated, my mission was to rebuild the Iraqi Foreign Ministry as a genuine diplomatic force, rather than allowing it to be nothing more than a state security/underground banking operation for the State Security Ministry. In the process our goals included rebuilding the heavily damaged headquarters and recovering its records; regaining financial assets stashed in Iraqi embassies abroad; re-establishing limited U.S. consular operations in Iraqi consulates in the region to deal with problems of Iraqi refugees in the diaspora; issuing official passports to Iraqis working with us in the Governing Council; developing and implementing a strategy for ensuring that the Iraqi Interim Government would be seated and allowed to speak at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA); dealing with the rising security concerns of other embassies in Baghdad, including their ability to carry weapons to defend themselves; and establishing and managing a Coalition Provisional Authority task force to oversee the first post-Saddam Hajj. I mention these details to explain why our diplomatic "mission" required travel outside of the Green Zone to the Foreign Ministry in order to build effective relationships and cooperation with the Iraqi ministry officials. All of these goals were partially or fully achieved, including that of getting the Iraqi Delegation seated at the U.N. with the right to address the UNGA.

The security policy at the time was that travel outside the Green Zone required a military escort composed of several vehicles, wearing of standard-issue camouflage uniform, armored vest and helmet, and at least 48 hours' notice to the military that included justification of the importance of meeting outside the Green Zone. To be effective as senior adviser required, at a minimum, the ability to visit the Foreign Ministry on a regular basis, as well as to be able to travel to other embassies. Due to the enormous demand placed on our military, it became understandably apparent to me and to my colleagues that the military simply did not have the capacity (either in terms of vehicles or personnel) to provide regular escorts to U.S. civilian advisers at the various

Iraqi ministries. So our choice was to stay in the Green Zone and not do the jobs we had come to do – or to find other ways to visit our ministries and interact with Iraqis.

I concluded that I would in fact be safer if I traveled to the ministry, usually a five-to-seven minute drive from the Green Zone checkpoint, in an Iraqi government vehicle with local plates, rather than in a U.S. military escort convey (which, in any case, was seldom available). For travel to other embassies, I relied on transport provided by each country's chargé d'affaires, usually in their government-provided armored vehicle, with one or more bodyguards.

By November 2003, the security equation had shifted and the risk of traveling anywhere outside the Green Zone was rising steadily. I curtailed official travel but continued to venture out informally beneath the radar. That flexibility was the only way I could do the job I'd been sent there to do. This practice was widespread among advisers, but despite individual and collective efforts, we were unable to persuade post management to address the situation formally through real dialogue between the policy and "security" sides of the country team.

That experience highlights the serious issue of insufficient planning and resources to provide timely, adequate and secure mobility for diplomats and other civilians. Amb. Neumann made the same point in his testimony, and it is one that State must address as we begin a huge influx of personnel into Afghanistan. It also highlights the need for more thoughtful consideration of what sort of mobility is most appropriate.

Following my six months in Iraq, I served as Deputy High Representative and Supervisor of Brcko District in Bosnia, with the Office of the High Representative (OHR). This was a high-profile position that came with a 24/7 Close Protection Unit headed by a rotating American team leader and deputy and seven local security personnel, provided via a Dyncorp contract. I want to pay tribute to the professionalism, dedication and hard work of this unit, both its locals and Americans.

However, I served in Bosnia at a time when this particular configuration and the 24/7 rules it came with did not seem appropriate, necessary or cost-effective. In fact, they interfered with the mission. The fully armored vehicle was old and had repeated brake and steering wheel problems. Our main security concern was avoiding a dangerous road accident during frequent travel over the mountains on the four hour drive from Brcko to Sarajevo, where the OHR

headquarters and the U.S. Embassy were located. The single most dangerous incident during my three years in Bosnia was not the result of a security threat. In 2005, during an early morning drive to the Belgrade Airport, from where I was to fly to Brussels for a Peace Implementation Council meeting. My armored vehicle hit a patch of black ice, skidded and overturned into a deep, snow-filled ditch. Fortunately no one was injured.

Both in Brcko and throughout Bosnia, this standard security configuration raised my profile to the point that I could not visit anyone discreetly Any time I left my office compound, where my small apartment residence was co-located, I had to travel with my full CPU escort. So if a contact called to invite me for a coffee or to have dinner, I had to tie up the entire unit after hours, often pulling them away from their families and adding to their already long working hours.

This also meant that I had to forgo opportunities to build relationships, hear from a wider range of contacts, and strengthen my language skills. In short, it handicapped me as a diplomat. After six months in country, I explored the possibility of a different, more flexible and lower-profile approach that would not always require an armored vehicle (which was highly identifiable, of course) and deployment of the full team. Regrettably, the rules did not allow for a more customized approach.

These two examples are to me, symptomatic of a twofold problem. 1) The need for more internal dialogue between the policy side and the security side in each post to develop more customized security approaches. 2) The value of giving the ambassador and senior diplomats who have the appropriate situational experience in country the flexibility to take into account the situation on the ground and recommend an appropriate security postures. This philosophy should apply to both building security and personal security issues.

Another issue which would benefit from more genuine internal dialogue has to do with the decisions on where to locate new embassies that meet the rigorous security standards that we have established. U.S. embassies -- once centrally located and accessible -- have increasingly become located on the outskirts of capital cities and much less welcoming. This now-familiar “Fortress America” profile sends a signal of a militarized America, on the defensive.

Diplomatic Security personnel must have the adaptability to adjust to the soft skills of the diplomatic mission. There are times and countries where an big black SUV may not be the safest or most secure method of transportation, both because it makes clear that it is carrying an American diplomat and because it could compromise the identity of a contact providing key information.

One critical part of this systemic review and strategic planning should include input from the affected individuals who must live out these security requirements at missions with various threat ratings. These officials include Regional Security Officers and their assistants, Ambassadors, Deputy Chiefs of Mission and Senior Foreign Service officers. In particular, those who have served in some of our most high-risk posts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan have valuable insights to contribute.

We at AFSA encourage the State Department, particularly officials in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, to utilize us as a resource to survey these individuals to provide unfiltered feedback. In order to better develop and advance diplomatic security, we need to find out whether members of the Foreign Service believe there is enough security for them and their family members at post, whether they feel physically safe, what aspects of security help or hinder their ability to fulfill their mission, and what recommendations they would make to improve security.

On a related note, AFSA remains concerned about the high cost of using contractors and encourages State to continue to explore the idea of hiring and training local employees to perform those functions in some of the more dangerous countries. This must obviously be done with a high level of vetting and coordinated training by Diplomatic Security, but it offers two clear benefits. First, local employees are more cost-effective than contractors. Second, they possess unique, invaluable “on the ground” knowledge -- insider information. During my time in Bosnia, it made a huge difference having locals who knew the language and the customary. However, this should not be seen as a alternative to Diplomatic Security agents having the necessary language skills, which a majority does not have.

Finally, State must work with Congress to enhance their ability to be flexible in their funding mechanism. As Amb. Neumann pointed out, DS’s budget – specifically, their lack of a dedicated reserve -- ties its hands and, in the long run, leaves them with few or not options when

contractors are not performing well. It also prevents them from making timely repairs or improvements to vehicles or structures. As the Foreign Service serves side by side with the military in Iraq and Afghanistan, unforeseen problems will arise, and State must have to financial tools to address these problems. Any congressional action on this should come with clear parameters for use of these funds and a transparent review of its use.

I would like to thank you once again, Chairman Akaka and Senator Voinovich, for the invitation to testify. The GAO report and the on-the-ground experience represented by this panel have clearly highlighted major issues within the Bureau of Diplomatic Security that need to be addressed. In that regard, I testified last month at a hearing to discuss another GAO report highlighting serious staffing and language gaps that exist among Foreign Service generalists and recommending that the State Department create a strategic, long-term plan to solve these two serious issues. These issues also affect DS specialists.

In particular, AFSA is seriously concerned at the GAO finding that some 34 percent of diplomatic security positions are being filled by officers below grade, and 53 percent of Regional Security Officers lack adequate language skills to do their jobs. This not only hinders the professional development of these individuals, but can compromise the quality of their work and the security of the mission.

While we understand the pressure that State is currently under, both with staff and resources, these issues cannot be handled as they have been in the past. With the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review currently under way, we hope that this will move State in the right direction, toward long-term strategic planning. We appreciate Congress' continued effort to hold State and other foreign affairs agencies accountable to the GAO recommendations.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to testify. I will be happy to answer your questions.

BIOGRAPHY OF SUSAN R. JOHNSON
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION

Susan R. Johnson is a member of the Senior Foreign Service and a seasoned diplomat and manager. She was twice Deputy Chief of Mission, and served in Iraq as Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina as Deputy High Representative and Supervisor of Brcko District. Her Foreign Service career has integrated traditional bilateral and multilateral diplomatic work with assignments of a non-traditional nature including first Director of the Ambassador's Assistance Coordination Unit in Embassy Moscow, and first Director of the USAID funded International Executive Service Corps (IESC) in Central Asia, establishing programs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Earlier in her career she served at the US Mission to the United Nations in New York, and at the US Interests Office in Havana. In Washington she has served as senior coordinator in the Resources, Plans and Policy Office of the Secretary of State, as Special Assistant in the Office of the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, in the office of Senator Bill Bradley on a Pearson Fellowship, and on detail to the National Endowment for Democracy. She recently served as Senior Coordinator in the Front Office of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. She is an alumnus of the Department's 45th Senior Seminar, and received the Department's Deputy Chief of Mission of the Year Award. She speaks French, Italian, Russian and Spanish. She holds an M.A. degree in International Relations from SAIS and a B.A. in history from Principia College. Her term as AFSA President began on July 15, 2009.