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INTERVIEW

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Nicholas Kralev is a former correspondent for the Washington Times and Financial Times, founder of the Washington International Diplomatic Academy (WIDA), and author of America's Other Army: Diplomats in the Trenches



Q: What did you do during your decade as a foreign correspondent for the Washington Times and the Financial Times?

The main part of my job was to cover U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy, as a correspondent based at the State Department in Washington. That included accompanying Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton on their travels around the world. The other part of the job was to cover other major foreign stories in various countries, for which I didn't have a government plane to ride on and flew commercially.

Q: How did you come to be at the heart of the U.S. diplomatic service, especially since you weren't born in the United States?

I grew up in Bulgaria and was 15 when the Berlin Wall fell. I quickly took great interest in both journalism and diplomacy -- the former thanks to the excitement of having free press for the first time in my life and a desire to tell the story of Bulgaria's transition to democracy, and the latter because of the role American and Western diplomacy played in ending the Cold War. Eventually, I became a journalist who covered diplomacy and wrote a book about the U.S. Foreign Service titled "[America's Other Army](#)." During my travels with the above-mentioned secretaries of state, and while researching my book, I visited more than 80 embassies and consulates and interviewed about 600 diplomats. At one point, I decided I could make a bigger impact by getting more involved in diplomacy, short of actually being a diplomat -- I don't have much patience with enormous bureaucracies.

Q: What has been your most rewarding professional experience?

I accomplished what I just mentioned when I created the [Washington International Diplomatic Academy](#) four years ago to train the next generation of diplomats. Running the academy and teaching our trainees practical professional skills they can otherwise only learn by practicing diplomacy for years, with the help of some of the best career ambassadors, is most rewarding.

Q: What are the biggest changes in the Foreign Service you have seen?

Diplomacy has become more operational. It's no longer enough to represent your country and report on developments in the host-country -- you have to get specific things done across a foreign society and move the ball down the field, in order to serve your national interest. Another big change in the U.S. Foreign Service after 9/11 was the focus on "expeditionary diplomacy" -- sending diplomats to active war zones to help rebuild Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries. That focus has diminished significantly.

Q: How does the United States do diplomacy differently from other countries?

Although the last four years were an exception, the United States is known as the 500-pound gorilla when it comes to global diplomacy, which is not always the best position to be in. Even with a reduced leadership role, it's still the dominant power in world affairs -- that's not guaranteed, by the way, and only effective diplomacy that carries out wise policies will make sure that power doesn't decline further. The United States has more embassies, consulates and other diplomatic missions than any other country. And no other Foreign Service has the expansive and ambitious agenda set by Washington. It won't be an exaggeration to say that it amounts to changing the world.