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The Honorable Jesse A. Helms  
Chairman  
The Honorable Claiborne Pell  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate

The Honorable Benjamin A. Gilman  
Chairman  
The Honorable Lee Hamilton  
Ranking Minority Member  
Committee on International Relations  
House of Representatives

This letter responds to a legislative requirement<sup>1</sup> for us to review the classification of Senior Foreign Service (SFS) positions in the Washington, D.C., offices of the Department of State (State), the Agency for International Development (AID), and the United States Information Agency (USIA). On February 14, 1995, we discussed the results of our work with your offices and agreed that this summary of the information presented would satisfy the legislative requirement.

The Foreign Service was established in 1924 to help plan and implement U.S. foreign policy and to represent U.S. interests in foreign countries and international organizations. The Foreign Service Act of 1980 established the SFS to provide strong policy formulation capabilities, outstanding executive leadership qualities, and highly developed functional, foreign language, and area expertise.

Our objectives were to determine how State, USIA, and AID classified SFS positions and to provide information on issues related to management of these positions. At the USIA, we reviewed standard position descriptions and officer evaluation reports on all of its SFS positions in Washington, D.C. At the other two agencies, we reviewed a sample of position

<sup>1</sup>Section 175 of P.L. 103-236 dated April 30, 1994.

descriptions and evaluation reports and corresponding classification standards. We also reviewed criteria for establishing SFS positions and interviewed personnel officers and reviewed policies, procedures, regulations, and guidelines for classifying positions and assigning SFS officers to positions. Our work was done in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Overall, the three agencies used broad criteria or standards to classify their senior positions. State has published broad benchmark position classification standards for assigning salary class levels to headquarters and overseas positions. Headquarters positions at USIA are classified by reference to standard position descriptions. AID classifiers use a benchmark approach to assign salary class levels to Foreign Service positions in Washington, D.C. All of the agencies also set salary class levels for headquarters positions based, in part, on relationships with overseas positions.

SFS is a rank-in-person rather than a rank-in-position system. Although similar to the Senior Executive Service (SES) as a rank-in-person system, SFS is not subject to oversight by the Office of Personnel Management as is the SES. Under the SFS rank-in-person system, officers are appointed to a salary class and retain their rank and pay regardless of the position they occupy. Therefore, an SFS officer with a certain salary class can occupy a position that has been classified at a different salary class. Independent judgments by our office about the matching of positions to incumbents' class levels in a rank-in-person environment would be arbitrary in the absence of more stringent criteria for federal executive positions in general or the SFS in particular. In other federal agencies, criteria for SES positions are similarly broad.

SFS employees may be assigned to positions which are classified above or below their personal pay grades. Up-stretches occur when employees' personal pay levels are lower than the pay levels of the positions to which they are assigned. This can occur when an officer at a lower rank than called for by a position possesses a needed skill or expertise and an appropriately graded officer is not available for assignment. Down-stretches occur when employees' personal pay levels are higher than the pay levels of the positions to which they are assigned. This can occur, for example, as a result of rotation from overseas to an available position in Washington, D.C. at a lower salary class level if a position more commensurate with the personal pay level is not available. According to State's standard operating procedures manual, stretch assignments must be well justified and are to be kept to a minimum. AID advised us that it has a general rule which routinely allows for assignments one level

higher or lower than the employee's pay level, but an assignment to a position more than one level higher or lower requires substantial justification.

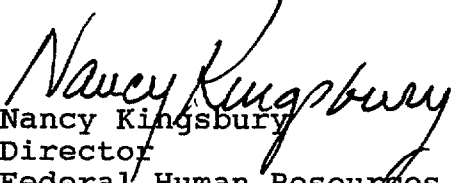
In addition to stretching, SFS employees may be placed in overcomplement status and are not assigned to regular positions. State has taken steps during the past year to reduce the number of overcomplements. In April 1994 State required unassigned SFS officers, except presidential appointees, to apply for special projects in the short-tour program. Examples of short-tour special projects include overseeing the release of classified State documents to the Congress, public, and others and developing and issuing detailed human rights reports on foreign countries. Previously, State met its short-tour staffing needs primarily by reemploying retired foreign service officers. AID and USIA officials told us that overcomplement situations rarely occurred in their agencies.

All three agencies have reviewed their classification practices. In 1986, State completed an intensive review of SFS positions. State has informed us that it currently is in the process of conducting a classification review that will include the revalidation and/or reclassification of all domestic and overseas generalist positions. AID said it periodically reviews its global allocation of positions to the SFS, and it will be doing so again in 1995. USIA conducts an annual review of all posts and SFS positions to maintain internal alignment.

We discussed the contents of this letter with senior personnel officials of the three agencies and have included their comments where appropriate. They generally agreed with the facts presented.

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Copies of this letter will be sent to the Secretary of State, the Director of USIA, the Administrator of AID, and other interested parties. Also, we will make copies available to others upon request. Please call me on (202) 512-5047 if you have any questions about this information.

  
Nancy Kingsbury  
Director  
Federal Human Resources Management  
Issues

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