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# Use Your Connections

BY JIM MEENAN



**Jim Meenan (right), with his wife, Vera, advocates for the Foreign Service with Representative Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) at the congressman's annual St. Patrick's Day event.**

*Courtesy of Jim Meenan*

All too often, Foreign Service personnel don't think about planning for retirement when we begin our careers. As a result, retirement sneaks up on many of us.

What is it that you would really like to do now that you have a retirement annuity to help meet your daily needs? The earlier you can answer that question, the better positioned you will be to achieve your dreams, by ensuring the skills you are developing and the training you are receiving will furnish you with the qualifications you'll need during retirement.

While in college, I had the pleasure of briefly meeting John F. Kennedy during his presidential campaign stop in Los Angeles. He proved most inspiring and sparked a desire to do more in my career than just hold down a job. I wanted a challenging international career where I could make the most use of my education. Shortly after graduation, *The Wall*

*Street Journal* ran an ad announcing openings in my field of expertise in more than 87 countries with an organization called the U.S. Agency for International Development.

My first assignment after joining the Foreign Service in 1965 was Saigon, so I realized right away that my career would prove to be challenging, as well as rewarding. I served in a variety of hot spots, from Chile and Panama to Sri Lanka and the Philippines. What I learned throughout my career is the need to stay flexible and seek new ways to contribute to the U.S. objectives in each particular country or environment. Toward that end, I changed my career path from one pointing out areas for program improvement to actually designing the programs and managing their implementation. As a bonus, I figured that would give me employable skills later in my life.

I also observed, during my Vietnam assignment, the importance of staying in touch with one's congressional representatives. One senior officer was promised his next assignment would allow his family to accompany him, and when that did not happen he contacted his representative, who happened to be Tip O'Neill Jr., the Speaker of the House. His situation was quickly corrected.

Although my Foreign Service career had focused heavily on private enterprise development, I was fortunate to have secured (under the Foreign Service Act) a three-year assignment as legislative assistant for trade and economic development to [Senator Max Baucus \(D-Mont.\)](#). This assignment helped pave the way for a post-Foreign Service career in international trade, with both private firms and trade associations. I also joined the U.S. Department of Commerce private sector trade advisory group for small and minority business, as well as its intellectual property sister committee.

I later received a call from the chairman of the [U.S. House Committee on Small Business](#) to join his staff as its senior trade adviser, which led to useful hearings about the shortcomings in U.S. trade promotion. (I continue to maintain some congressional contacts as I volunteer on the AFSA Political Action Committee Advisory Board.)

My concluding advice: As one proceeds through a Foreign Service career, one should stay alert to making the most of the skill sets that are being developed, with an eye to ensuring they will be of assistance during retirement.

*Jim Meenan is a retired USAID Foreign Service officer. His overseas postings included Monrovia, Saigon, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Colombo and Manila. He lives in Arlington, Virginia, and is a member of the AFSA-PAC Advisory Board.*