

PAVING THE WAY FOR WOMEN

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By Phyllis E. Oakley

I am constantly amazed at the changes in women's demeanor as I walk through the State Department. Today's female FSOs look sharp, determined and confident, a far cry from what I remember of myself and a few intrepid friends from graduate school when we dared to brave the male bastion that was the 1957 State Department. Indeed, I was the only woman in my orientation class of 30.

I recall how I felt at that time, not quite sure how I would be treated and as something of an interloper, a brazen intruder, if you will, trying to put a female presence in the Foreign Service, a career so clearly dominated and controlled by men.

Also, I did exactly what had been foretold would happen if the Foreign Service started to accept more women: I met and became engaged to another FSO. My consciousness being at the prevailing low level of the time, it didn't occur to me to protest or fight the unspoken rule that required women officers who married to resign their posts. And so I resigned, prepared my trousseau, wed Bob Oakley in Cairo — thanks to a ticket from my father — and we started our great adventure to his postings in the Sudan, Ivory Coast, Vietnam, Paris, New York and Beirut. By 1962, we had two children in tow.

By then, it was the early '60s, and America was changing. There was a sexual revolution, a feminist revolution, a political revolution — thanks to Vietnam — and even the State Department changed. To avoid discrimination lawsuits, in 1974, the State Department offered re-entry to women like me, female FSOs who chose to come back to the Foreign Service.

I found it a great advantage to be a woman in the mid-'70s. Officials were striving to advance women and to demonstrate that they were moving with the times. I became the first female staff assistant on the Seventh Floor, the first spouse permitted to work in her husband's embassy in Kinshasa and the first woman spokeswoman in the State Department. It has been a rewarding path — providing both time for my children when they were young and a fulfilling career.

I understand that entering classes of the Foreign Service now have a majority of women. I now see women in meetings presenting their views without a hint of deferral to men or a desire to hold back. I attend sessions where women dominate and sometimes make up the entire staff. And tandem couples — in which both spouses are FSOs — have become commonplace.

There is no way I can describe how different all this is from when I began as the only woman in my A-100 class in September 1957. If change is the mark of life, there may be hope yet for the Foreign Service.

Phyllis E. Oakley became one of the first women appointed to high-level management in the State Department. She served as State's Deputy Spokesman from 1986-89, as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Regional Analysis in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research from 1991-93, and as Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration since 1994. Since rejoining the Foreign Service in 1974, her foreign posts have included Kinshasa, Zaire, and Islamabad, Pakistan.