Syracuse Program

National security knowledge pays dividends

By Tony Fernandes

One way the Department prepares employees for the national security challenges facing the United States is by sponsoring two slots in the two-week National Security Management Course, part of the National Security Studies program at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

The National Security Studies Program, launched in 1981, serves as a developmental opportunity for Foreign Service officers and those in the candidate-development programs of the Senior Executive Service.

From April 25 to May 6, I participated in the course titled “New Threats—New Thinking.” It addressed such issues as intelligence, terrorism and counterterrorism, foreign policy, management, leadership, homeland security, global economics, world trouble spots and U.S. challenges, and aimed to address lessons of history and issues of contemporary relevance to national security.

The course's teaching methodology blends theory and practice with substantive content. Participants hear from and interact with Maxwell faculty members and outside experts. The 42 guest speakers of the latest course had extensive experience in government, private industry, journalism and other professions related to national security. They included the vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a former NBC News foreign correspondent, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, Atlantic Magazine National Correspondent James Fallows, CNN National Security Analyst Peter Bergen and Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Michael Morell, who spoke just days after Osama bin Laden’s killing.

Case studies and small-group decision-making develop the ability to lead small, multidisciplinary strategy and decision-making teams, a critical skill for security-related work. The small-group case-study discussions and assignments allowed me to consider and practice analytical, management and leadership skills. The course’s simulations promote thinking that goes beyond attendees’ current work environments and lets them examine the decision-making process in planning and crisis management. Many simulations integrate all of the analytical
and managerial techniques discussed in the course and focus on the interorganizational and institutional dynamics that shape strategic plans and long-range resource considerations. Working closely with my classmates gave me invaluable insight into how other agencies and departments understand and tackle challenging security issues. This training helped me better do my job in Ankara in my work within the interagency community regarding bilateral and multilateral Turkish political-military issues.

The simulations allow students to examine national security decision-making in crises. In an intense two-day off-site exercise, participants assessed a rapidly evolving situation that threatened U.S. national interests and challenged U.S. foreign policy. It required them to plan for diplomatic and/or military responses, and address the interplay of political, institutional, organizational and interpersonal dynamics that influence policy and strategy.

The media sessions in the simulations were especially enjoyable. Each of us was unexpectedly assigned to give press briefings that were recorded, letting us review some of our less-than-smooth appearances. It was also great training for handling the media on topics in which one may not be an expert.

My 51 classmates represented several U.S. agencies, including the Department of Defense, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the Government Accountability Office, as well as private companies and the nations of The Netherlands and United Arab Emirates.

In this dynamic, not-for-attribution setting, participants talked about a host of issues—I found I learned as much from my classmates as I did from the speakers. Participants were at least at the 06/GS-15 or FS-1 levels, and also included members of the SES, general-ranked military officers and non-Defense staff having equivalent status. They were friendly, dedicated to their work and open to my opinions, and I will definitely stay in touch with them. I found them to be highly motivated and experienced security professionals. One, an astronaut, showed attendees a remarkable short home video of her last Space Shuttle mission.

The program helps the Department shape national security policy development and illustrates National Security Professional Development Program’s aim of building a cadre of experts across agencies who have shared training and, therefore, can further understanding and collaboration. The course is also an excellent companion to the Foreign Service Institute’s National Security Executive Leadership Seminar (State Magazine, December 2010).

The Department has only two slots per year in the course, typically filled by one FSO-01 and one GS-15. That means selection is highly competitive. Candidates are nominated by the organization employing them and should currently be dealing with national security issues. The call for nominations for the 2012 course is planned for December.

The 2012 NSMC runs from April 22 to May 4. Information is at www.nss.edu or from NSS Director Bill Smullen (bsmullen@maxwell.syr.edu), former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell; or from Administrative Supervisor Sue Virgil (svirgil@maxwell.syr.edu).

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