As I write this review, the airwaves are abuzz (let’s amend that: Twitter is abuzz) with reports that the Democrats’ “oppo file” on Donald Trump has been hacked by Russians or someone-or-other and will be imminently released to great consternation and gnashing of teeth. And, separately, Wikileaks has announced that it will release some apparent trove of damning documents on Hillary Clinton and her email server. Whether any of this turns out to be more than Gawkerism, I have no idea, but they are what came to mind as I finished reading the newly-arrived To the Secretary: Leaked Embassy Cables and America’s Foreign Policy Disconnect, by former foreign service officer and current director of Northeastern University’s global studies program, Mary Thompson-Jones.

What also came to mind, midway through the book, was a trip I made to Tajikistan in the mid-1990s for a US NGO. The best (more or less only) hotel in the capital housed the Russian embassy on one floor, the EU’s combined embassy on another floor, and the US embassy on still another. I had a room on what was informally the NGO floor. The US embassy staff invited me for dinner, on which occasion I found to my surprise that the ambassador – indeed an Ambassador – was a DEA agent, seconded to State. His wife was also a diplomat (whether from State or DEA or USAID, I don’t recall). Dinner was lovely and lively as only an ex-pat meal can be in the middle of (from my perspective) nowhere, before the distractions of the Internet, streaming Netflix to any hotel room anywhere in the world, and the age of instant global communications.

I mention this because it runs loosely to a theme of this book: American diplomats in the field are not usually in Paris or Tokyo or even Moscow. They are (ever more) frequently out in quite grim places in the world (including many types and intensities of conflict). They face pressures to meet with local people and not just government representatives, get out into the countryside, meet with NGOs and civil society representatives – and also not get killed or taken hostage. It’s a world of multiple, contrary demands on today’s diplomats – a condition that this book illustrates very effectively with its use (particularly by filling in the real world context) of the vast trove (251,287, according to the book) of diplomatic cables made public by Wikileaks in 2010.
II

Not all the situations described in *To the Secretary* are about conflict, war, or natural disaster. The late 2000s global financial crisis and the role played by on-the-ground US diplomats (the book’s section on the financial collapse and rescue of Iceland, for example), registered from the perspective of internal diplomatic cables is fascinating all on its own. Nor is the book all about “crises,” whether security, humanitarian, financial, or anything else. The chapter titled “Travel,” for example, is really about diplomats as anthropologists or geographers or even naturalists. It opens with the efforts of a Lagos embassy officer setting off to assess tourism prospects for seekers of *Picathartes oreas*, the gray-necked rockfowl that is one of Africa’s most prized birds, in the company of a Discovery Channel producer, the owners of a birding tour company, a naturalist, and BBC correspondent … the officer described a trek over barely passable clay track and rickety bridges … [reaching Okomu National Park access road] even the BBC’s 4x4 was stuck for hours … The bird-viewing canopy platforms offered great views, but the intrepid diplomat had to climb one hundred and thirty feet up the side of a tree to reach one.

Out of this and other accounts, Thompson-Jones draws several serious conclusions. For many diplomatic officers, she notes, the “same yearnings that led them into the foreign service also tempt them to leave the comforts and confines of the capital … another world awaits on the back roads.” Why does that matter? Diplomats who travel beyond the “official” world of the capital, she says, illustrate one of the great divides between officers serving abroad and their colleagues in Washington. Their cables about rural realities challenge assumptions about what matters most. Washington’s bias as a capital city inclines those working there to seek out interlocutors in power or those who might likely come to power. These are often Western-educated “people like us” who work in ministries, parliaments, universities, or newsrooms that resemble the Washington work environment. It’s easy to see them as the logical counterparts to any foreign policy conversation.

Whereas, she concludes, important as conversations with those wielding political power are, Mao “did not find his followers among the Mandarins. Diplomatic encounters with Turkmen truckers, Papuan separatists, and the garage bands of Tehran” have the ability to widen Washington’s worldview.

III

There are limits to this, of course, as the book takes care to note. One is simply personal risk – not just the personal risk, but additionally the risks and potential harms to US interests if the attention of the US government has to focus itself on a diplomat taken hostage. There are difficult tradeoffs to be made, and it is only too easy to play Monday morning quarterback if something goes wrong with fieldwork.

Another limiting consideration, however, is that contact by US diplomats with some of the most important voices and actors beyond a host country’s officialdom might
put those people in danger – though of course it might instead serve to protect them. There is also the risk that diplomatic contact, even “unofficial” contact, might serve to legitimize causes and actors that are counter to US interests – even though such contact might well serve to educate and inform the US government.

Moreover, Thompson-Jones says, it “takes good writing to demonstrate the many ways cultural traditions trump political ideology.” “Good writing” is a shrewd phrase in this context. Culture can often trump politics; the deeper task in any given place and circumstance is to identify when, how, by what actors, and with what likely political consequences. This is part of what Thompson-Jones means by this requirement of “good writing” – what we might call the diplomat’s task, sometimes, of being cultural anthropologist or political geographer.

The difficulty with this is not that these diplomats (typically) lack professional credentials in those fields. The “good writing” problem, rather (though she does not put it exactly this way), is that something genuinely novel or revelatory of the society – beyond what one might read in a tourist guidebook, or lying below the layers of officialdom, lying below the layers of politics and power in that country’s capital – almost inevitably has to engage in analysis and observations that are pertinent mostly because they make descriptive assessments and judgments. Which is also to say, however, that they might be wrong, might be a misinterpretation, or might analytically focus one cultural bit over another bit in ways that are intellectually contestable and open to dispute. Producing “good writing” can be a fraught enterprise when it involves judgments of culture, society, and politics internal to a place.

This is an important caution. Diplomatic analysis in internal cables tends to be insightful when it has sufficient bite that it could be disputed – but usually only by others also having expertise or experience on the ground. Sometimes, too, To the Secretary sounds as though these social and cultural analyses are a bit like “doing Tocqueville” (my phrase) in some given country. Whereas Democracy in America But Somewhere Else is harder than it looks – though this is not a point Thompson-Jones would think to dispute, since it is the promise and peril she notes about “good writing.” Still, one feature of To the Secretary is that it perhaps too uncritically favors what is cabled from the periphery over the descriptive and policy views of the center. Yet overall policy judgments, even if badly informed, finally have to come from the center, from Washington. Why? Because US government policy finally has to reflect not just a given local situation, but that situation set in the context of overall US foreign policy goals.

In any case, despite the plethora of examples the book offers of incisive and deeply informed cables sent to Washington from the field – “good writing” – many diplomats would surely prefer to send “to the Secretary” memos consisting of incontestable generalities and platitudes. It’s institutionally much safer – especially in today’s world in which there are no eternal secrets and the writer knows supposedly internal cables might be leaked to the public and press with his or her name on them.

It has to be recognized that such generalities, even platitudes, might well be correct as description sufficient to fashioning US policy in lots of situations. The lingering problem with generalities and platitudes, however, is that much of the time they aren’t
sufficient because they don’t provide a differential guide to policy, and that is precisely because they don’t differentiate. Moreover, certain topics always involve contentious issues of description, valuation, and judgment. As the book illustrates well, many of the most contentious issues arise in assessing when “culture might trump political ideology.” Among the categories of culture Thompson-Jones considers, religion – the beliefs, practices, and roles of any given religion in any given place – is the closest To the Secretary gets to probing the difficulties of layered, contextual observation of local culture, society, and politics.

IV

Washington, Thompson-Jones says, “ought to consider the world’s faiths more frequently than in the once-a-year International Religious Freedom Report.” She goes on to describe a wide variety of situations in which diplomatic officers got involved with local religious issues or made observations in cables to Washington about local religions – well beyond, she notes, today’s focus on Islamic fundamentalism. In many situations described in the book, the attention of US diplomats arose on account of issues of religious freedom and practice, particularly for minority religions. But in other cases, the role of diplomats abroad was a quite different one – observing and keeping Washington informed of the nature of some particular religion, its beliefs and institutional attitudes, and the possible impacts on politics and policy.

Obviously, this is a hugely important task in today’s world, and not just with regards to “radical Islam” and all the controversies in the newspapers today. One might hope, for example (I certainly hope), that some American diplomat in the UK is sending home cables today on possible scenarios involving Northern Ireland in case of Brexit. It is, after all, an intertwined matter of politics, international and EU law (the settlement is tied to EU human rights law and institutions), sectarian political groups, the possibility (one hopes remote) of resurgence of conflict and terrorism – and, yes, religion, religious institutions, and religious leaders and their followers.

Yet the problem – the risk – for the diplomat writing such cables is clear. Write what you think, give it analytic bite – differentiation – and it might be wrong or at least might be contestable as an interpretation. Why do that if offering instead a generality or a platitude runs no risks – except, of course, the risks resulting from the failure of the agent to inform the principal, even if the agent might be wrong?

Worse (for the diplomat), because the topic here is religion and its intersection with politics, what the diplomat puts into a cable might simply jam up against the understandable, certainly appropriate desire within US government institutions to avoid, as much as possible, putting religion on political trial. That is to avoid, to the extent possible, putting religious belief, religious ideology, sectarianism, particular religious leaders and what they urge their followers to do over the Internet, and so on – particularly a religion’s confessional content – up for assessment or judgment by organs and agents of the US government. But not just the content of doctrine and faith – there is also the US government’s desire not to put a religion’s beliefs, doctrines, edicts, and confessional requirements at the motivational center of political violence.
This is true with respect to Islam and Muslims worldwide – but presumably also with respect to Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Buddhists and Muslims in Burma or Thailand, etc. The argument today, of course, is whether the US government’s disinclination to judge or opine, at least with any serious bite, on the role of faith in motivating or justifying political violence and terrorism must give way in some particular cases to a straight-up evaluation of the content of religious beliefs and their putative motivational role.

Hence, in today’s bitterly contested political world of national security and counterterrorism, what an American diplomat writes in an internal diplomatic cable to Washington about the culture of religion in any given place and its intersection with politics has to start with him or her divining, in advance of putting pen to paper, whether it is institutionally acceptable even to take as an open question the possibility of religious belief and practice, as such, being a causal driver of political violence, terrorism, and war. Moreover, this includes political violence, terrorism, and war, not to put too fine a point on it, waged against the United States of America, its people and territory, and those of its allies. And if it is open for a diplomat to address those issues in an internal cable, then it further falls to him or her to offer an analysis that has bite – an analysis that differentiates, and leads to this policy outcome but not to that.

But if it isn’t open, well, better to stick with generalities, platitudes, and pieties about how all religions are at bottom the same with respect to basic morality (excepting perhaps Joseph Kony and the Lord’s Resistance Army).

V

Thompson-Jones doesn’t really take up the difficult and unsettling possibilities that might – and today do – arise with respect to what she calls the “many faces of God.” She sees the interventions of diplomatic officers in a broadly positive light – which, I should add, is quite certainly true. She describes favorably their ability to see below the surface of religious beliefs and practices in a society in order to describe a more complex reality. And she likewise sees favorably their role in seeking to promote religious freedom of practice globally in accordance with US government policy. I do too. But one doesn’t have to be a professional anthropologist to wonder about the objectivity, knowledge and expertise, underlying cultural assumptions, and underlying institutional political assumptions that might be in play in these memos to Washington.

She quotes, in one example, from diplomatic cables from several years back, describing the Irish Catholic Church as an institution in response to the revelation of Ireland’s clerical sexual abuse scandals, the revelation of which rocked Irish society. Given the church’s formal place in the Irish constitution, and the intense focus of the Irish public, government, and politicians on the abuses, discussion of the church’s role of course has to be given by any diplomat seeking to inform Washington.

Yet, strikingly, she does not quote directly from diplomatic cables in the course of describing a different situation that also involved the Catholic Church – the controversies over Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Israel in 2009. The book says merely that US diplomats in the Holy See “wrote about the complexity of managing church-state relations … the cables also
An American (Diplomat Not) in Paris | K. Anderson

shed light on patriarchs, rabbis, imams, and other religious leaders.” What the book doesn’t tell us, however, is exactly what US diplomats said to Washington regarding Pope Benedict, or what light exactly they shed on patriarchs, rabbis, imams, and other religious leaders. The reader is unable to judge whether he or she thinks this diplomatic analysis is actually any good – is it “good writing” or not?

VI

This is a missed opportunity, it has to be said. The book might have shown, through a willingness to go into what was said in internal cables, how US diplomats address intersections of religion and politics – at the point where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Obviously, it is a topic that has considerable importance in today’s political circumstances – circumstances today in which (skipping over the complexities) the possibilities and roles of religious motivation, justification, and authority as such for terrorism and political violence are, for many today, unavoidably on the table. It’s a debate seemingly no longer possible to elide.

But this criticism, I’ll acknowledge, is unfair to this book and its own agenda. It’s unfair to demand that To the Secretary take up a fundamental, urgent question of the day – but a question that isn’t, however, the fundamental question of the book on its own terms. But, in that case, what is the question?

As a former career diplomat in the State Department, Thompson-Jones offers an insider’s richly detailed understanding of how these diplomatic institutions work. By contrast, she is not very interested in the scandal, outrage, or anger, surrounding the stealing or release of secret government documents. Nor is she very interested in the narrow substance of the documents or their “revelations.” These are strengths of the book, part of what makes it not just highly readable, but even – nota bene – surprisingly entertaining. (At least given what I would have thought to be the distinctly unpromising source material – though that, too, is part of Thompson-Jones’ point about internal diplomatic memos.)

The deeper question To the Secretary addresses is the nature of the diplomatic cable as a means of communication. Or rather, to be true to the book’s fundamental conclusion, the diplomatic cable as a means of disconnect – an unbridged gap between diplomats on the ground and State Department officials in Washington, DC. The serious point of the book is to illustrate this disconnect and its consequences. It does so with vignettes and stories and a wide variety of examples. These stories are studded with telling details, often amusing but sometimes grim. (The latter include unheeded, indeed rebuffed, warnings to Washington describing inadequate embassy security before the 1998 Kenya and Tanzania embassy bombings. Readers, including this one, also might wish for more attention than the brief reference to the Benghazi disaster, to mention another grim situation, but that would require an entire book on its own.)

We might also want to discuss a still further question – one that has likely already occurred to Lawfare readers. To what extent are the virtues of the internal diplomatic cable (virtues that this book so ably documents) dependent, alas, on the cables being secret, understood by their drafters to be secret, and remaining secret? That’s a question for another day, however. To the Secretary is an entertaining, informative read about the nature of contemporary American
diplomacy, in the field and back at home. His Serenity, Lawfare Book Review Editor, would not go quite so far as to suggest it as summer beach reading – but many Lawfare readers would find it illuminating and engaging.

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