



Auditor General

AID FOREIGN SERVICE ASSIGNMENT AND ROTATION

Over 50 percent of assignment actions in our sample involved non-conformance with the Agency's specified precepts. Some employees leave post before their tour is up; a number of FS employees remain in Washington longer than they should; but others stay overseas longer than the policy allows. Personnel and Assignment Board procedures need to be strengthened to limit deferral, improve documentation, and give greater consideration to technical qualifications of employees in assignment actions. The Reassignment Complement can also be further reduced.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<u>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</u>	1
<u>BACKGROUND</u>	1
Introduction	1
Prior Audits	3
Scope	3
<u>FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	4
<u>ASSIGNMENT PRECEPTS SELECTIVELY OBSERVED</u>	4
Many Foreign Service Personnel Serve Less Than Two Full Tours at Post	4
A Single Tour at Hardship Posts is Acceptable	6
Extended Rotational Tours Are a Problem	6
Many Employees Serve More than Ten Years Overseas	10
Other Precepts Were Not Always Observed	13
<u>ASSIGNMENT BOARD AND RELATED PM PROCEDURES</u>	14
Excessive Deferrals of Assignments Were Made	
Prescribed Forms Not Used Properly	15
Need for More Technical Representation on the Assignment Board	17
<u>THE REASSIGNMENT COMPLEMENT NEEDS TO BE FURTHER REDUCED</u>	19
LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS	
LIST OF REPORT RECIPIENTS	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

AID assigns Foreign Service employees with highly diversified and specialized occupational skills to appropriate positions worldwide. These jobs are in countries with differing cultures, languages, health conditions, and living conditions for the employees and their families. As a condition of employment, FS employees must accept assignment on a worldwide basis at AID's discretion. Except for executive and Auditor General employees, all FS assignments are made by the Foreign Service Assignment Board (AB) under authority delegated to the Director, Office of Personnel Management. Assignments are made within specified Agency policies, criteria, and precepts.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this review was to determine whether the Agency assignment process is efficient and effective; whether Agency regulations and procedures are followed; and how appropriate the policies and procedures are. The scope included a review of current policies and procedures and actual AB actions over an 8-month period from July 1979 to February 1980.

Assignment Precepts Are Observed Selectively

A significant portion (54%) of the assignment actions in our sample involved non-conformance with the Agency's specified assignment precepts. The significance of these variances is hard to measure, but disregarding established guidelines can give the impression that the assignment process is arbitrary and iniquitable. In 31% of our sample, the four-year normal overseas assignment was not completed. In about 9% of the cases, the employee did not spend even 18 months at post. Written justification is not required for mid-tour transfers and generally was not available. Because the average cost of a transfer is currently almost \$20,000, we believe written justification should be required to reduce the number of such transfers to the minimum.

A significant number of FS personnel remain in AID/W longer than the three-year rotational tour prescribed in the precepts. Seventy-one have remained over four years, 24 over five years, and 12 over eight years. Personnel are hired as FS employees because of the requirement for overseas service and AID's policy is to require FS employees to accept worldwide assignment

as a condition of employment. Justifications for extensions of tours beyond three years are required to be approved by the AB (to 4 years), the PM Director (to 5 years), the Deputy Administrator (to 8 years), or the Administrator (over 8 years). We found that proper approvals were not always being obtained. Sometimes requests were not even submitted and where they were, justifications were frequently weak. We recommend that PM, with the support of the Administrator and Deputy Administrator, take firm steps to implement the policies.

Similarly, employees are retained overseas longer than the four consecutive tours, which should give them special consideration for a Washington assignment. Service overseas of more than five tours requires written justification based on urgent programmatic needs and approval of the Deputy Administrator. There are 103 employees who have been overseas more than ten years, but few written justifications. Many of these are in occupations where the overseas positions significantly exceed the AID/W positions, limiting opportunities for rotation. We recommend that the policies and procedures recognize the differing requirements for various occupations in Washington and overseas.

Personnel and Assignment Board Procedures Need Strengthening

The Assignment Board generally functions as an effective mechanism for making assignments, but we noted an excessive number of deferrals, incomplete documentation, and a need to give greater consideration to technical qualifications of employees in assignment actions. We recommend that PM establish a limitation on the number of times a specific nomination for assignment can be deferred. We also recommend that procedures for submission of COARs and filling out Nomination for Assignment forms be strengthened. Procedures should also be established to assure that employees in occupations not currently represented on the Assignment Board are adequately represented.

The Reassignment Complement Needs to be Further Reduced

The Reassignment Complement has been reduced from 154 six years ago to 31. This is good progress, but further reductions appear feasible. Using the Complement to retain hard to place employees for long periods of time only takes the pressure off management to make the hard but necessary decisions regarding their placement. There is currently no limit on the length of time an employee can be kept on the Reassignment Complement, although there previously was a limit of three months. We recommend that the three-month limit be reinstated and enforced by direct assignment when necessary.

Management Comments

Comments were received from the Asia, Africa, and DS Bureaus as well as the Office of Personnel Management. We have revised the report where appropriate to consider these comments. In addition, the Asia Bureau comments objected to the documentation requirement we recommend for mid-tour transfers and expressed the opinion that technical representation on the AB is adequate. The DS Bureau also believes there should not be additional voting memberships on the AB for technical representatives.

PM agrees with most of the recommendations and has taken action to implement a number of them already (Recommendations 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7).

While generally agreeing with Recommendation 2 that firm and immediate steps be taken to limit the length of assignments of FS personnel to AID/W, PM believes they have made significant progress in this area. We agree that there has been concerted attention to this problem, but believe further action is required.

PM does not agree with Recommendation 8 which would limit the time an employee can be kept on the Reassignment Complement to three months unless an extension is approved by the PM Director. They maintain that every effort is made not to place personnel on the complement and that aggressive action is taken to identify a permanent assignment which fits the employee's qualifications and serves Agency needs. They are willing to direct assignment when an appropriate position has been identified. In our opinion, three months should be adequate in almost all cases to identify such an assignment considering that the employee was generally known to be available long before that and assignment action under consideration at least six months prior to assignment to the complement. If continuation on the complement is justified for more than three months, the recommendation allows for exceptions to be approved by the PM Director. We believe the fact that three employees have been on the complement for over eighteen months, seven over a year, and 21 over three months is convincing evidence that stronger measures are required.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

The purpose of AID's Foreign Service (FS) assignment system is to place qualified employees in appropriate positions worldwide. It requires timely planning and action to assign personnel with highly diversified and specialized occupational skills to positions in many countries under differing program and cultural conditions. The process is further complicated by other factors including language requirements, health considerations, the availability of schooling and other support systems for families, and personal security.

AID draws its legal authority to employ and assign personnel from the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 as amended (Section 625d 2) and the Foreign Service Act of 1946 (Section 571). As specified in Handbook 25, AID FS employees are employed and promoted according to a personal rank system. AID may assign its FS employees to positions which are no more than one grade above or below the employee's grade. Civil Service employees on the other hand are employed based on a "rank in position" concept.

All AID personnel assigned overseas are in the Foreign Service. As a result of the Obey Amendment (Section 401 of the International Development and Food Assistance Act of 1978), AID has designated 803 positions in Washington to be filled only by FS employees. While GS employees filling those positions at the time will be allowed to retain them until they leave, only FS employees may be appointed to them in the future. This will have the effect of almost doubling the number of FS personnel in Washington over the next few years.

As of April 30, 1980, approximately 54% of AID's total full-time American employees were Foreign Service, and of these 73 percent were overseas. In 1961, when AID was established, over 94 percent of FS personnel served overseas. By 1968 the percentage overseas had fallen to about 86 percent. Approximately 24 percent of AID/Washington (AID/W) employees are now FS. In 1961 less than 10 percent of AID/W employees were FS, while by 1968 this had risen to over 18 percent.

As a condition of employment, AID FS employees are required to accept assignment on a worldwide basis at AID's discretion. Handbook 25 recognizes that in making assignments, AID should try to consider the employee's preferences, long-range career interest, family status, health limitations of the employee and family member, etc. Except for executive personnel

and personnel of the Auditor General, all FS assignments, both overseas and AID/W, are made under the review and approval of the Foreign Service Assignment Board (AB). Prior to the establishment of the Board in 1973, assignments were made by mutual agreement between PM and the respective Bureau/Office.

The AB is composed of representatives from each of the four Regional Bureaus, the Development Support Bureau, the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs, and the Associate Director of the Office of Personnel Operations (PM/PO), who serves as Chairman.

The Overseas Division (PM/PO/OS) provides AB members with a list of current and projected vacancies, when possible at least six months prior to the assignment requirement. Placement Officers of the Overseas Division, in consultation with the Regional Bureaus and other central staff offices, propose one or more candidates for vacant positions. The employee's Completion of Assignment Report (COAR) provides current information on the employee's status and preferences for assignment. The Board meets on a weekly basis to consider assignments for one or more backstop categories. (A backstop category is an occupational area into which similarly qualified employees are grouped for convenience of assignment and support by PM.) Usually each backstop is presented to the AB once each month. Assignment Board decisions are made by a majority vote of the members. The employee, Mission, or Bureau/Office can appeal a decision of the AB to the Board and to the PM Director.

Chapter 6 of Handbook 25 specifies that assignments should reflect the following concerns and criteria:

1. The program needs of the Agency;
2. Individual career development needs and personal preferences;
3. The need for assignment continuity;
4. The need for a U.S. Government perspective;
5. The need for an American and AID-wide perspective; and
6. Balancing program needs with employee experience.

The Handbook also provides precepts which limits timeframes for tours of duty overseas and in AID/W.

In recent years some Congressional Committees have expressed concern with the high number of AID personnel who are stationed in Washington

rather than overseas. They have also been concerned with the high cost of assigning and retaining personnel overseas. The Congress is currently considering the Foreign Service Act of 1980 which, among other things, makes it clearer that FS status should be provided only to those individuals who are available to serve overseas.

Prior Audits

The Office of the Auditor General has performed only limited audit work on AID's personnel operations within recent years. The Reassignment Complement was the subject of Auditor General reports in 1972 and 1974. Both reports focused on the lack of procedures in assigning personnel from this Complement.

In 1974 and 1978 the General Accounting Office reported that a large number of FS personnel were assigned to Washington for more than the normal three-year tour. They also found that many FS employees were not assigned to permanent Washington positions because of their rank and occupational background, and that assignments were frequently made to positions lower than their personal grade.

Scope

The objectives of our review were to determine:

- How well AID observes assignment precepts in practice and the major reasons for exceptions;
- How appropriate these precepts are considering AID's varied and complex needs; and
- How equitable and how effective, from the perspectives of cost and overall efficiency, the AID assignment process is.

In order to accomplish these objective, we reviewed Assignment Board agendas and minutes and, where available, documentation for the assignment actions taken during the eight-month period from July 1979 to February 1980. We attended Board meetings during March and April 1980 and examined documentation relating to the assignments during this period. We reviewed other information maintained in the Office of Personnel Management (PM) and interviewed representatives of PM, the Office of Financial Management and the Bureaus for Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Near East, and Development Support.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ASSIGNMENT PRECEPTS SELECTIVELY OBSERVED

We found that a substantial number of cases acted upon by the Assignment Board (54%) were not in conformance with all the established precepts. This was caused by a variety of factors ranging from an uneven distribution of occupational categories between Washington and overseas to the Board not insisting more strongly on adherence to the precepts. As a result, increased costs are sometimes incurred by the Agency, and the utility of the precepts as a guide for managers and employees is diminished.

Our analysis of Board actions during the eight-month period July 1, 1979 through February 29, 1980 identified a number of actions which illustrated non-conformance with the Agency's assignment precepts, as found in Handbook 25, Chapter 6. In the 619 assignment actions, we found that certain precepts were violated with the following frequency:

At post less than four years	31%	(192)
In AID/W over three years	11%	(69)
Overseas more than ten years	8%	(49)
Third tour at same post	4%	(26)

Total cases not in accordance with precepts	54%	(336)

This analysis is based upon information contained in the record of the AB. We verified this information by checking actual personnel files in selected cases. Some errors in the data base were found through further reference to staffing patterns, biographical registers or RAMPS printouts. However, even if allowance for error in the data base is made, it is clear that the precepts are not consistently observed.

In some skill categories, the distribution of jobs between Washington and overseas makes it impossible to expect the AB to observe certain precepts. In other cases, sound reasons for not observing the precepts were not readily identifiable. Disregarding assignment guidelines can give the impression to employees that the assignment process is arbitrary and inequitable.

Many Foreign Service Personnel Serve Less Than Two Full Tours at Post

The precepts state that a normal overseas tour should be two years, and that an employee should normally be returned following home leave for a

second tour at the same post. This was not done in 31% of the cases we examined. We also found that little or no written information was available on the reasons for many mid-tour transfers.

In the 53 cases where the individual did not spend even one curtailed tour at post (i.e., was there less than 18 months prior to transfer), we categorized the reasons as follows:

(a) Political or Medical Evacuation	19
(b) Compassionate	3
(c) Transfer of Spouse	2
(d) Training	2
(e) Position Abolished	7
(f) Mission Phased Down	7
(g) Programmatic	6
(h) Personal or Career Related	4
(i) Could not be Determined	3

Based on our conversations with the respective Placement Officers, most of the mid-tour transfers were probably unavoidable (62%), but there were cases where a mid-tour transfer might have been avoided (38%). However, we could not conclude, on the basis of evidence available in PM, that any of them should not have taken place. We were in fact constrained because there was little or no evidence available with which the merits of making the transfers could be judged.

If an employee requests a shortened tour, approval of the Chief, PM/PO/OS is required. If the tour is shortened for his own convenience and the employee has taken R & R, he is required to pay back the funds. There is no such requirement in the case of mid-tours which are initiated by management. Written justification is not required and generally unavailable. In the case of three of the above mid-tours, neither the Placement Officer nor the personnel files shed any light on the reasons involved.

In view of the costs involved in an average transfer, estimated by the Controller's Office as having gone from \$17,400 in FY 1979 to \$19,900 in FY 1981, we feel that this area should be subject to greater control. Since our eight-month survey surface 192 persons leaving post prior to two full tours (i.e., four years), as many as 280-290 early transfers may be involved each year at an annual cost of over \$5.5 million. We recognize that in some of these cases, the transfer may have taken place not too long before the employee was scheduled to transfer. We also recognize that most of the transfers were probably unavoidable, or for sound programmatic reasons. However, if mid-tours were reduced by even 10%, savings of over half a million dollars could be achieved. Requiring written justification for mid-tour transfers would force managers and personnel making assignments to more thoroughly consider the merits of these transfers, which in turn might reduce their incidence.

Recommendation No. 1

Written justification should be required by PM in all cases of mid-tour transfers and where a term is shortened by more than three months. The action should be taken only if fully justified.

A Single Tour at Hardship Posts is Acceptable

We also noted that there is an unwritten policy observed by AID with regard to Sahelian posts. Employees are not required to return for a second tour if they are unwilling to do so. Considering the hardships involved in such assignments, we believe that this is a reasonable practice. There were 20 such examples of the 192 in our sample who were at post less than four years. We were told that a similar practice exists for some countries in other regions. We suggest that this practice be institutionalized and applied equitably to all hardship posts. While PM officials have told us that they look at hardship post service as part of the assignment criteria, we did note examples of persons sent from one hardship post to another. There is no formal systematic way that the individual can be assured that his prior service in a hardship post is taken into consideration during the assignment process.

Extended Rotational Tours Are a Problem

A significant number of FS personnel remain in Washington longer than the three-year rotational tour prescribed in the precepts. Extensions beyond the normal rotational tour are sometimes granted on the basis of unconvincing reasons, are approved at management levels lower than required by regulations, and occasionally continue without any valid approval at all.

AID Regulations (Handbook 25, Chapter 6 D4a-d) allow approval of rotation extensions to four years by the AB, five years by the PM Director, eight years by the Deputy Administrator, and beyond eight years by the Administrator. Extension of a rotation to a fourth year is almost routinely granted and is not a problem; however, 71 FS personnel have remained at AID/W over four years. Of these, 24 have remained over five years and 12 over eight years. Allowing FSRs to avoid overseas service for lengthy periods of time can have a damaging effect upon the morale of those who are assigned overseas for long periods, particularly now that overseas service is becoming more difficult in terms of economics as well as personal security. Personnel are hired into the Foreign Service rather than the Civil Service because of the requirement for overseas service. Benefits, including retirement,

are better under the FS system. For personnel to receive these benefits, they should serve overseas for a significant portion of their careers.

Retention of a few FS officers in Washington for extended periods of time has been a longstanding problem. In January 1977, the Acting Administrator of AID expressed concern with the number of exceptions to rotational rules being presented to him. In May 1977, a special meeting of the AB was held to attempt to deal with these and other difficult-to-place personnel. At that time one personnel official stated:

"Some Foreign Service employees do not want to return overseas, but want to remain in the Foreign Service. There is no legal basis to retain these employees in the U.S. beyond the approved period of rotation. They are having an adverse effect on the promotion and assignments for other Foreign Service personnel and also on GS employees."

Although the AB attempted to resolve the situation through direct placement of some individuals overseas, Reduction-in-Force (RIF), or conversion to GS status, mixed results were achieved. Many of the same FS personnel are still in AID/W three years later. For example, two Capital Development Officers who had expressed an unwillingness to serve overseas have continued in their FSR position to this day. An FSR-3 who had been recommended for Reduction-in-Force (RIF) in 1977 is still in AID/W. He had been granted an extension of rotation in 1969 on the basis that he would convert to GS. In 1971, yet another extension was requested, stating the employee anticipated converting by the end of the year. In 1974, another extension was requested by the employee stating that conversion was not an appropriate and desirable action to pursue at that time.

An FSR-1 employee assigned to AID/W in 1972 received an extension of his rotation assignment until January 1977 with the understanding that he would retire should no assignment be available at the end of the period. The employee confirmed this in writing. In early 1977, the employee was proposed for assignment to Africa. He declined the assignment and also advised PM that he now wished to remain with AID and did not intend to submit his retirement. Nevertheless, he was still granted another extension in AID/W at that time.

Although approval memoranda to support such extensions are required by the Handbook, on several occasions we could not locate any evidence they were submitted. PM officials have acknowledged that in the past they did not always follow the practice of obtaining approval of extended rotation assignments. For example, one employee currently assigned to AID/W has not had an extension approved since 1977.

The reasons for extending AID/W tours advanced in memoranda that are submitted range from barely adequate to, in our opinion, totally unconvincing. In most cases, the rationale is very general. Some typical examples (with underlined names and offices changed to preclude identification of the individual) are:

- "Mr. A is chief of the Washington Support Center. . . . There are almost no support positions overseas, so that placement would be almost impossible."
- ". . . Mr. B, Deputy Director, Office of Domestic Security, a position he has held for less than a year. With 100 employees on the ODS rolls, Mr. B's services are far more important here than they would be at any post as a loan officer. . . . Forcing an overseas assignment on B. . . will result in his resignation - a loss that AID and the Office of Domestic Security can ill afford."
- "Mr. C's specialized background, and his senior FSR-2 grade, severely limit overseas placement opportunities. . . . We are not optimistic about transfer overseas in the foreseeable future."
- "Mr. D's grade level makes it extremely difficult for us to identify permanent assignment for him either here in AID/W or at an overseas post."
- "Mr. E was assigned to AID/W as a Program Analysis Administrator. PA is engaged in several major program activities, some of which are actively under way in a number of USAID missions. Continuity in the employee's current assignment is very much in the best interests of the Agency."

On several occasions where the Handbook regulations call for an extension to be approved by a certain official (i.e., the Director of PM for over 4, the Deputy Administrator for over 5, and the Administrator for over 8 years), the memorandum was signed by another, lower level official. Our examination of the twelve cases involving individuals whose rotation assignment had been extended over eight years shows that none had been signed by the Administrator. Four were signed by the Acting Administrator, one by the Deputy Administrator, and one by an Acting Deputy Administrator. The remaining six did not even have a current extension, earlier ones having expired, some as long as three years ago.

AID regulations provide for the Director of Personnel Management and the Deputy Administrator to delegate their approval authority. Such a delegation is specifically not provided for the Administrator. AID derives its authority to grant such extensions directly from the Foreign Service Act of 1946, which requires approval of the Secretary "personally" when an extension of over eight years is granted. Delegations of authority from the State Department give the Administrator similar authority for AID personnel. In our view, AID is not adhering to the specific intent of the legislation.

FS employees who are in AID/W for long periods sometimes encumber positions to which others who have been overseas in excess of the precepts could be brought back. In our view, individuals who are unwilling or unable to serve overseas should not be allowed to enjoy the advantages of the FS retirement system, whose earlier retirement and more generous benefits are based on the fact that overseas life makes greater demands on the individual. An earlier regulation which required five years of service overseas for eligibility under the FS retirement system has now been dropped, making it possible for an individual to retire under this system without having ever set foot overseas.

PM officials believe the report should give greater recognition to the need to give extensions to employees who cannot be assigned overseas because of medical problems they or their family may have. If these people have prior overseas service, PM believes they have earned the right to stay in the FS. In other cases, the employee's occupational specialty may have been practically eliminated overseas. PM believes retaining them in the FS is justified.

The ability to retain these individuals in the FS exists under current regulations and would not be changed by recommendations in this report. We do believe that the appropriate procedures for justifying these actions should be followed and approvals obtained from authorized officials. For those retained in Washington over eight years, only the Administrator has approval authority.

We maintain that the number of such exceptions should be kept to a minimum. The House Post Office and Civil Service Committee report on the proposed Foreign Service Act of 1980 (p. 27) states "The continued use of Foreign Service designations for positions which do not require rotation and for individuals who are not available for worldwide assignment is unacceptable." It further states (p. 68), "all career members of the Service shall be

obligated to serve abroad. . .and individuals not available for worldwide service will be converted to the Civil Service. . . ." While this bill has not yet been enacted, provisions of the foreign Service Act of 1948 also make it clear that rotational assignments of more than four years are the exception and more than eight years requires approval of the Administrator.

In order to hold to a firm position on this issue, PM requires the support of the Administrator and Deputy Administrator.

Recommendation No. 2

Firm and immediate steps should be taken by PM to implement AID's policy limiting assignment of FS personnel to AID/W and ensuring that substantive justification is required for any assignment beyond four years.

Many Employees Serve More Than Ten Years Overseas

The Handbook entitles an employee who has been overseas for longer than four consecutive tours to "special consideration" for a Washington rotational assignment. Service overseas of more than five tours requires written justification based on urgent programmatic needs and approval of the Deputy Administrator. Printouts supplied by RAMPS indicated 103 individuals as of April 1980 who had been overseas over 10 years. It should be noted that the precepts are stated in terms of tours while the data provided by RAMPS and in the Assignment Board agendas was usually expressed in years. While it was thus not always readily evident exactly how many tours were included, since tours can be either shorten or extended, we assumed that ten consecutive years was the equivalent of five tours.

It was evident that individuals remaining overseas for long periods tended to be found in certain occupational categories. The major groupings were:

	<u>Total Positions</u>	<u>Positions in AID/W</u>	<u>% of Total</u>	<u>Overseas Over 10 Yrs.</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
25 Engineering	128	35	27	17	13
10 Agricultural	257	57	22	13	5
04 Budget and Accounting	150	34	23	10	7
09 Program Management	195	37	19	10	5

In each of these categories the number of positions in Washington is smaller than the number of positions overseas. There is, therefore, no realistic way that such personnel could be brought back into valid positions as often as stipulated by the precepts.

In some selected categories the situation is even worse. For example, within the Engineering and Budget and Accounting backstops, the following situation exists for three job skill categories:

<u>Job Skill</u>	<u>Positions</u>		<u>FSRs Over 4 Years at Post</u>	<u>FSRs Over 10 Consecutive Years Overseas</u>	<u>FSRs Over 4 Yrs. at Post & Over 10 Consecutive Yrs. Overseas</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Overseas</u>	<u>Wash.</u>					
General Engineer- ing Officer	24	1	2	4	2		8
General Engineer- ing Advisors	32	2	3	6	2		11
Controllers	50	6	4	6	1		11

In addition, another 11 employees will exceed the time limits for overseas tours in these three job skill categories within the next few months, unless the AB acts to bring them home.

For several job categories the Agency is obviously already employing different assignment policies in practice than specified in the precepts. We believe that this de facto practice should be reflected in official policies. The regulations implementing the Obey Amendment provide AID with the authority to establish different tours of duty for different job skill categories. We suggest that this be done, so that AID employees in these technical occupations will have a more realistic idea of the amount of time they will be required to spend overseas.

At present, AID regulations require that service overseas of more than five tours receive "written justification based on urgent programmatic need" approved by the Deputy Administrator. It was difficult to monitor the exact extent of compliance with this requirement, since the regulation was apparently not in force until February 1979. Some confusion existed among placement officers as to how current a requirement it is and whether or not it is really necessary. Memos had been prepared for only one of 12 persons in the agricultural backstop and only two of eight in the secretarial backstop. The problem in these types of cases may be unavoidable. We suggest that the precepts themselves be changed or a blanket exemption from this precept be given to certain occupational skills.

We also noted that the data in the RAMPS system was often incorrect, and may be understating the extent that people have served overseas without a rotational assignment. On some occasions, the date that a person arrived at his post would be substituted for arrival date overseas, and vice-versa. One individual who had served at least 13 consecutive years overseas did not appear on a requested printout, since he had returned to Washington for a short period of time and was placed on the complement. Also, language training or assignments to the long-term training complement sometimes were considered to constitute a "return" to Washington.

Further data problems were evident elsewhere. One analysis determined that about 700 of the 2,000 personnel entries in the system were in error in some respect. Printouts of vacancies contained many invalid positions because subsequent changes were not entered.

RAMPS personnel told us that the problem derived partly from the fact that whereas data on GS employees in Washington was channelled through a Supervisory Personnel Assistant who coordinated input into the data base, data on FS employees was provided by the many PM/OS placement officers, some of whom used different methods of classification or coding of data. In addition, FS employees, due to frequent reassignments and relocations involve more complex data than GS employees.

Recommendation No. 3

PM should introduce policies and procedures that recognize the differing requirements for various occupational groups in Washington and overseas.

Recommendation No. 4

PM should assign a staff member the responsibility of coordinating and standardizing all FS data input into the RAMPS system, with the objective of providing more complete, accurate and timely data.

Other Precepts Were Not Always Observed

We found other precepts were also not always observed. Failure to apply the precepts consistently has an impact on employee perceptions of the fairness of the system, since these decisions are sometimes controversial and widely discussed.

Third tour at post

The third tour precept has recently become an issue. The precept states that employees should be assigned to another country after two tours unless there is a "compelling justification" for an additional tour. We noted some disagreement during Assignment Board meetings between those who feel that a "third tour precedent" has been established, and others who felt that it had not. In one recent case involving the Philippines, the Mission Director strongly urged the reassignment of three employees for a third tour. Placement Officers did not feel that there was a compelling reason for the return of certain employees, the Mission Director's strong pleas notwithstanding. In the words of one Placement Officer, "The wealth should be distributed more evenly. Why should employees stationed in some posts (particularly Asia) return for third tours, while other employees who have served in hardship posts are forced to serve in other hardship posts?"

Since there were many well qualified employees who could have been considered to replace the employees in question (11 were mentioned in one memorandum), as well as other employees stationed in Asian posts who were requesting third tours, Placement Officers considered this recent case as a test case. "If it is granted, it is difficult to deny other employees third tours."

The Assignment Board did approve one of the requests in January 1980. The Director of Personnel, however, approved only a one-year extension of tour. The Mission Director protested this action to the Administrator, whose intercession led to PM's approving the full third tour.

In our sample, the most frequent third tours were served at Cairo or Manila. We did find that some people requested third tours in African posts, a phenomenon Placement Officers attributed to the hardship differential. The third tour is not so frequent as to be a major problem, and it is more economical to keep the employee at post. The damage is to the morale of other Foreign Service employees, many of whom are now serving in hardship posts.

Personal grade different from position grade

In several cases a Foreign Service employee was assigned to a position more than one grade higher than his personal rank. In two of these cases (where an FSR-5 was assigned to an FSR-3 position), the new position was at the same post and the argument was invoked that it was cheaper to fill the position with someone "on the scene." As pointed out by Placement Officers, however, there is a demoralizing effect upon employees in the FSR-4 and

FSR-3 categories when they are not considered for an FSR-3 position for which they are qualified. There were other qualified personnel at FSR-3 and 4 levels available. Service in a position graded higher than one's personal rank is perceived as constituting a persuasive argument justifying promotion.

In general, abuses of these precepts were not widespread, although we noted a high degree of visibility and some sensitivity attached to exceptions to them. These precepts are Agency policy established for solid management purposes. We suggest that they be supported even more strenuously by the AB, PM and the Administrator so that the appearance of favoritism and individual preference can be avoided.

ASSIGNMENT BOARD AND RELATED PM PROCEDURES

The Assignment Board (AB) nominating process, while clearly preferable to the prior system without such a Board, does have a few operating deficiencies. In particular, we noted an excessive number of deferrals, an incomplete documentation of employee and Bureau preferences, and an imbalance between regional and technical concerns.

Placement Officers had mixed feelings about the Assignment Board's utility, although most felt that it served a useful purpose. We believe that the Board is a vital part of the assignment process, whose major contribution is that of serving as a forum where controversial issues or assignments can be openly and candidly discussed and, where necessary, brought to the attention of the Director of Personnel Management or higher authority. The presentation of opposing views appears to be by and large healthy, and to a limited extent the different vested interests act as a check upon each other. A certain amount of negotiating and trade-off clearly takes place prior to and following AB sessions. We found that nearly all actions do come before the Board and the number of times that AB actions are overridden by the PM Director is relatively small.

Excessive Deferrals of Assignments Were Made

The Agendas prepared prior to AB Meetings consist of vacant positions or projected vacancies matched with names nominated against those positions. At one Board Meeting we attended, 32 of the 57 nominations made in advance were deferred. We observed that deferrals were often made to allow Mission Directors a chance to consider the various candidates. On other occasions the Bureau stated that they were abolishing the position or in the process of creating another. The fact that a COAR had not yet been received was also cited.

The large number of deferrals does represent a waste of the AB's time and is indicative of the need for more streamlined procedures within the Bureaus. The agendas are available for at least one week prior to the meeting, affording adequate time for consultation with the desk officers and Bureau technical representatives. The EMS Directors often try to consult with the Mission Directors, either by telephone or during their Washington TDYs, delaying the process somewhat. We recommend that PM establish a limitation on the number of times a specific assignment nomination can be deferred. A rule that no AB Member can defer more than a certain percentage of the nominations may also be appropriate. Such limitations might help reduce the need for "forced" or directed assignments on the part of PM. A special Board meeting to deal with "problem cases" had to be held in May 1977, and another may be needed in the near future.

Recommendation No. 5

PM should establish a limitation on the number of times a specific nomination for assignment can be deferred.

Prescribed Forms Not Used Properly

The process might be expedited by greater use of two existing documents, The Completion of Assignment Report (COAR, form 4-253), and the Nomination for Assignment (Form 4-508). The COAR should be submitted by all FS employees approximately 8 months prior to the end of their tour. We observed that a COAR was very often not submitted by the employee, despite several attempts by PM to encourage their submission. A review of 227 assignments conducted by PM in 1977 turned up 40 in which no COAR was submitted. Many times decisions on an individual were deferred due to a lack of a COAR.

Placement Officers stated that some employees may deliberately not submit a COAR in the belief that they will have more input into the assignment process if they are contacted directly by the Placement Officer or will have more flexibility if they are not committed to any particular locations in advance. Some employees also feel that they can appeal an assignment better if it is made without reference to their preferences. Placement Officers state that sometimes they will be unable to obtain a COAR from an individual "at any price" but that a few days after a Bureau decides on an assignment for the individual, a COAR with that specific preference will suddenly materialize.

Handbook 25 requires that Missions/Offices maintain adequate controls to assure that COARs are completed and forwarded to PM not less than eight months prior to the completion of an employee's tour. PM has been diligent in repeatedly requesting submissions. However, it appears necessary that even greater efforts be made to ensure compliance. The use of even stronger language in the Handbook reinforced by other appropriate notices should help. It should be made clear to employees that they will be assigned whether they submit a COAR or not. Their preferences cannot be considered, however, if the COAR is not received in a timely manner.

The Nomination for Assignment form, (AID 4-508), also called the "blue sheet," goes with the employee's file to the various Regional or Technical Bureaus for review. After reviewing the file, the reviewer should indicate concurrence or nonconcurrence with the proposed nominee by checking the appropriate box, provide reasons in the case of nonconcurrence, and return the form and file to PM. The Placement Officers have indicated that, properly filled out, the forms are very helpful to them in (1) indicating why the employee is unacceptable, thereby enabling them to present a more suitable candidate on the next round, and (2) helping them explain to the candidate why he or she was not chosen for a position when the inevitable inquiries are made.

We reviewed a random sample of 40 such returned forms. Eleven were returned completely blank. Two others were blank except for a signature. In two cases, nonconcurrence was checked but no reasons given. In 17 cases, neither box was checked and only a short phrase, such as "no action required," "reviewed for assignment," "considered but not chosen," "under consideration," or "job abolished" was used. In five others, the reviewer concurred with the nomination. In only three cases did we note any constructive explanation as to why the Bureau did not concur in the nomination.

Recommendation No. 6

PM should amend the Handbook language regarding submission of COARs to clearly indicate that the AB will take assignment action whether a COAR is received or not.

Recommendation No. 7

PM should establish procedures to assure that Nomination for Assignment forms are adequately filled out by reviewers and reasons supplied for rejection of all PM-nominated candidates.

Need for More Technical Representation on the Assignment Board

The Regional Bureaus tend to vote as a block and as a result can control Assignment Board actions. We found on occasions that voting members representing specific backstop codes provide legitimate checks on the Regional interests. However, all the backstop codes are not represented on the AB. We believe that such membership should be extended to the backstop codes so that the professional technical interests of AID's employees are represented in assignment actions.

We noted a tendency for the Regional EMS members to coordinate their positions prior to or during AB Meetings. During our review, we observed that on almost all votes when the Regional Directors were in agreement they prevailed, (since they control 4 of the 7 regular votes). Even when a special technical representative is added to the AB for particular backstops, the Regional EMS Directors can prevail through concerted action. On some occasions where a particular precept was being blatantly violated, PM would cast the only dissenting vote; or in cases where a technical representative launched a strong protest against an assignment, he would cast the only negative vote. Thus, the same degree of cohesion does not exist among non-Regional interests.

Handbook 25, Chapter 6, provides voting membership on the AB to the following Offices when specific backstop assignments are discussed:

<u>Backstop</u>	<u>Office</u>
Admin./Mgt.	SER/MO
General Services	SER/MO
Admin./Sub Professional	SER/MO
Controller	Office of Fin. Mgt.
Food for Peace	PDC/FFP
Procurement and Supply	SER/CM & SER/COM
Legal	General Counsel

As the result of agricultural employee dissatisfaction with the personnel management system, including dissatisfaction with their lack of representation on the AB, a pilot program was established in October 1979 to provide these employees with more input into the system. One of the functions of this program was the authorization of an agriculture voting member on the Assignment Board.

In January 1978 the Bureau for Development Support (DS) justified and gained approval for full voting membership on the AB based on the need to represent technical specialties not specifically represented. These specialties included engineering, nutrition, population, housing, health, etc. However, with the exception of an engineering officer, the technical specialties were represented during the AB meetings for the period 4/79-3/80 only by the Director of the DS Office of Management. We question whether a management officer would be capable of addressing or assessing unanticipated technical matters presented.

In representing the technical aspect of a proposed assignment for the Agency and the employee, the voting backstop members can serve as a counterbalance to the vested interests of the Regional Bureaus. For example, during the AB meetings we attended, backstop voting members objected, although unsuccessfully, to the assignment of:

- an individual to a position two grades in excess of his own grade when comparably graded employees were available;
- an individual to an overseas post who had already served over 13 years overseas and who had requested a Washington assignment.

In one case two Foreign Service Officers not represented by a Technical Specialist on the AB were nominated to fill a vacancy in AID/W at the FSR-2 level. One candidate, an FSR-3 currently serving in an African post, had been overseas ten years, and had indicated rotation to AID/W as one of the choices in his COAR. The other candidate was an FSR-4 who had been in AID/W 11 of his 15 years with AID. The AB Board approved, without discussion or disagreement, the latter individual, violating three precepts in the same action. The employee who should have been rotated to AID/W was not. The employee who should have gone overseas, was kept in AID/W and assigned to a position two grades above his personal rank. There was no objection put forth on behalf of the precepts by PM or any other member of the AB.

In some cases we felt that the Mission Director's desire to name their staff took precedence over the precepts that are necessary in maintaining an equitable career service. We have already alluded to the retention of favored employees in a desirable post for a third tour (above). At one AB meeting, criticism was made by a technical representative of the AB's decision not to assign a qualified candidate for a position and instead assign another candidate from a different backstop who had never served in that type of position before. He had not even received the training considered part of the career development process for making such a jump in occupational codes. The reason for the substitution was an objection posed by the Mission Director during his review of the individual files

while in Washington. The technical representative objected to the Mission Director taking such actions based on considerations other than the employee's qualifications. The Mission Director's preference was upheld and the Technical Bureau's objection eventually withdrawn.

It appears inconsistent that there is now representation for some technical fields and not others. The pilot program which established an Agricultural member on the AB includes more than this representation. While we have not assessed the whole program, we believe the merits of this portion and the assignment problems we noted warrant giving greater representation to the other back stop codes.

The DS Bureau objects to giving each backstop category a vote and has pointed out complications that would result. We recognize that there is no easy solution to this problem, but believe management attention is required.

Recommendation No. 8

PM should assure that technical backstops not currently represented on the AB by voting members are adequately represented.

THE REASSIGNMENT COMPLEMENT NEEDS TO BE FURTHER REDUCED

We observed that considerable progress had been made in reducing the number of employees on the Reassignment Complement to 31, as of April 1980, down from 154 six years ago. The Complement is currently 6 above its Financial Management-authorized ceiling of 25. While progress has been made, further reduction of this Complement would appear feasible and desirable.

The Reassignment Complement is used to cushion problems in assigning personnel in a complex placement system involving numerous countries, a great variety of occupational skills, and a communications burden. There is no question as to the need for the complement in a career system such as the AID Foreign Service. Retention of personnel on Mission rolls who have completed their assignment but for whom no other assignment is immediately available is not desirable from a management viewpoint.

The FS Reassignment Complement cannot be separated from the total AID placement system, as it is the failure of the system to operate optimally that gives rise to the need for this complement. Emergency

situations requiring placement of an employee on the Reassignment Complement are, however, rare. Most of those on this complement were known to be available long before they were placed there. When the normal placement procedures fail the complement is used as a "parking lot" until some other action can be taken.

Most personnel on the Reassignment Complement are FSRs for whom no permanent job has been identified. The inability to place these employees stems from one or more of the following problems: (1) their low performance ratings, (2) the scarcity of suitable jobs, and (3) the inability or unwillingness of the AB to place these employees into existing jobs.

There is no plausible solution for finding assignments for some personnel on the Reassignment Complement other than force-placement where a permanent employee meets the minimum requirements of an available job. If such a procedure were imposed, the Reassignment Complement could be significantly reduced.

Having a career system means that the relatively marginal employees must be placed along with those well qualified until and unless they are separated. Use of the Complement as a "parking lot" for marginal employees only takes the pressure off management to make the hard but necessary decisions regarding retention and placement.

In most cases, assignment to the FS Reassignment Complement is not to the advantage of the employee, especially when this assignment is for an extended period of time. He is forced to take temporary work assignments and live in temporary quarters, unsure as to his next assignment. This causes considerable dissatisfaction among personnel.

Assignment to the complement is made by the AB when no appropriate permanent assignment for an employee is found. They are enjoined to continuously seek an assignment for the employee throughout the period of assignment to the Complement, but otherwise have no particular motivation or tools to assure proper placement.

The length of time spent on the Complement was excessive in some cases. Three employees had been on the Complement for over eighteen months, seven over a year, and 21 over three months. There is at present no limitation on the length of time that an individual can be kept on the complement. Handbook 25 (18D2 b) states only that "The duration of complement assignments is held to a minimum."

Employees on the Complement are not generally assigned to valid, authorized positions. It can be assumed that the work performed has a

lower priority than that of positions approved by proper Agency authorities. We estimate that the salaries and benefits of the personnel assigned to the Complement are about \$1,500,000 a year. This is a significant resource that needs to be used more effectively.

The Agency previously had a policy that an employee could not be kept on the Reassignment Complement more than three months. This provision was dropped from the Handbook, apparently during the period of significant reductions in overseas staff when it was more difficult to arrange assignments for personnel, but a continuing need for their services was anticipated. There does not appear to be any valid rationale for long term assignments to the Reassignment Complement at this time.

Recommendation No. 9

PM should limit assignments to the Reassignment Complement to three months, unless specific approval for an extension is obtained from the PM Director. Where necessary, PM should direct assignment.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation No. 1

Written justification should be required by PM in all cases of mid-tour transfers and where a tour is shortened by more than three months.

Recommendation No. 2

Firm and immediate steps should be taken by PM to implement AID's policy limiting assignment of FS personnel to AID/W and ensuring that substantive justification is required for any assignment beyond four years..

Recommendation No. 3

PM should introduce policies and procedures that recognize the differing requirements for various occupational groups in Washington and overseas.

Recommendation No. 4

PM should assign a staff member the responsibility of coordinating and standardizing all FS data input into the RAMPS system, with the objective of providing more complete, accurate and timely data.

Recommendation No. 5

PM should establish a limitation on the number of times a specific nomination for assignment can be deferred.

Recommendation No. 6

PM should amend the Handbook language regarding submission of COARs to clearly indicate that the AB will take assignment action whether a COAR is received or not.

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LIST OF REPORT RECIPIENTS

Deputy Administrator	1
Director, Personnel Management	10
IDCA/LPA	1
General Counsel	1
Auditor General	1
Assistant Administrator, Office of Legislative Affairs	1
Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Program and Policy Coordination	2
AA/ASIA	2
AA/AFR	2
AA/NE	2
AA/LAC	2
AA/SER	2
AA/DS	2
AA/PDC	2
Office of Financial Management	1
DS/DIU	4
AG/PPP	1
AAGs	1 @
AG/IIS	1
AG/EMS/C&R	13