

Ethan Gacek – Class of 1960 John Heinz Government Service Fellowship Final Report

25 August 2017

To whom it may concern:

This summer, I interned at the U.S. Department of State in the Office of Security and Human Rights, which is in the Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. This unpaid internship was made possible through the generous support of the Class of 1960 John Heinz Government Service Fellowship. I formally thank the Heinz Fellowship donors, committee, and administrators, as well as the Yale fellowships staff, for making this opportunity to work at the Department of State a reality.

I have long been motivated by a desire to serve others, and I viewed the opportunity to work at the Department of State as a chance to delve into public service. Prior to working at the Department of State, I had worked in private sector nonprofits and civil society organizations, both of which were mission-based and service-oriented. Yet, I still lacked public sector service experience, and as I looked towards a service-based career, I wanted to explore this sector as well. With the funding from the Heinz Fellowship, I was able to do so at the Department of State.

I outlined two specific goals to fully take advantage of my time at the Department of State this summer. First, I aimed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how the federal government operates and how policy is pushed through the Department of State. Related to this goal, my second goal was to observe how my Department of State colleagues worked in an environment of considerable upheaval. Presidential transitions – especially to an administration that has expressed skepticism about diplomacy's efficacy, and a new Secretary of State focused on streamlining the Department – always present challenges, and this transition was no different. I hoped to use my time to see how my colleagues worked to affect change in spite of difficult circumstances.

My actual experience working in the Office of Security and Human Rights allowed me to wholly realize these goals. Before arriving for my internship, I was familiar with the general work of the Office of Security and Human Rights, but unaware of what my specific responsibilities or projects would be. Upon arriving, I was made aware that my supervisor would be taking planned leave starting the following week for the next five weeks, and due to our office already being understaffed, I would be assuming responsibility for her portfolio. I had one week to get up to speed on her work and get ready to become a lead for her portfolio, which focused on child soldiers in the Middle East and Africa, all while getting used to how the Department of State functions as a whole. It was an exciting, intense, immersive onboarding that set the foundation for a summer of meaningful work on the front lines of the Department.

As a lead on the child soldiers portfolio, it was my responsibility to meet with officials throughout the Department to arrive at a consensus on how to restrict U.S. funding to countries whose governments use child soldiers. My work involved research of NGO and nonprofit reports, meeting with Department country experts, and briefing senior level officials, including the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Ambassador Michael Kozak. Working with Ambassador Kozak, we developed a modified, unique diplomatic approach to restrict assistance for a specific country that uses child soldiers, but is also critical to U.S. regional security interests. I am proud to say that this approach is currently being worked through the higher levels of the Department, in advance of being sent to the National Security Council and the White House for approval of the President.

Once my supervisor returned, she and I continued to work on the child soldiers portfolio. She remarked how impressed she was with the work I had been able to accomplish, especially in light of the Department of State's notoriously intimidating bureaucracy. When she went on leave, I was still getting used to Department protocols and procedures, but when she came back, she said I appeared and worked like a full-fledged officer in the Department.

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In taking advantage of the increased responsibility I received in her absence, I was able to accomplish both of my fellowship goals. I certainly developed an increased understanding of how the federal government operates and how to actually affect change within the Department. Furthermore, a large part of my work, aside from policy, was figuring out how to function in a Department that was understaffed in key positions and still getting accustomed to the practices of the new Secretary of State. I learned that even in times of transition, Department officers are committed to getting their work done and advocating for policy, and that continuing to affect change in such a time requires a fierce determination to the causes one cares about. Although the Department is still in a state of flux, the overwhelming takeaway from my work is a positive one – so many people in the Department of State are so committed to what they do, that even in times of change, policy will move forward. So, even though there continues to be anxiety over potential shakeups at the Department of State, the devoted officers working both in Washington, D.C. and around the world leave me optimistic for the future of our country's diplomacy.

This internship has clarified and solidified my commitment to work in public service. Compared to the work I have done in nonprofits and think tanks, I learned that working in an actual federal government agency is more in line with my long-term goals. I truly appreciated the opportunity to work on actual policy that will be implemented by our government. Of course, the work of nonprofits and think tanks is immensely important, and their advocacy is not always subject to limitations faced by the public sector, but this experience has shown me that my true passion for service lies directly on the front lines of public government service. To this end, I am preparing to take the Foreign Service Officer Test in October 2017, in hopes of becoming a foreign service officer with the Department of State and serving at diplomatic missions abroad and in Washington, D.C.

Academically, my work on child soldiers in the Middle East and Africa was my first earnest exposure to those regions (I have previously focused on South and East Asia), and it inspired me to learn more about these areas of the world. This term at Yale, I am enrolling in a seminar on Iraq, and planning on writing my thesis on corruption and development in Africa. In the longer term, I envision enrolling in graduate school to further study international affairs and global politics. Most officers at the Department of State possessed graduate degrees, and my internship helped me explore how going to graduate school would make sense with my future professional public service goals.

As a final note, I would once again like to express my sincere gratitude to the donors and administrators of the Class of 1960 John Heinz Government Service Fellowship. The fellowship was designed for students whose “intellectual or personal development would be significantly be enhanced by an American government service internship,” and I can confidently say that this fellowship has allowed me to grow academically, professionally, and personally. Aside from the policy knowledge I gained, the personal clarity about my professional goals that I arrived at during my internship is invaluable. I am deeply appreciative of the experience I gained this summer and the growth I accomplished, none of which would have been possible without the Class of 1960 John Heinz Government Service Fellowship.

Sincerely,

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