Bowdoin College Submission
Interview with Ambassador Pickering '53

By Mariya Ilyas '13
Dated May 17, 2019

Mariya Ilyas '13—Foreign Service Officer serving as Vice Consul in Amman, Jordan—sat down with Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering '53 in an exclusive interview about his early life and time at Bowdoin, his career in the U.S. Foreign Service, and global challenges facing the world today.

Mariya: To many people, Ambassador Pickering is known as a five-star diplomat, but to me he has proved to be a mentor and a role model. I first met Ambassador Pickering in summer 2013, when he came to Bowdoin campus for a talk, I was lucky to shake his hand and take a photo with him. Later in 2016, when I was doing an internship at the State Department, the Bowdoin Alumni Office had connected us formally and I sat across from him over breakfast, feeling this immense sense of awe and gratitude that he had made time for me, and that I was having the opportunity to sit with him. That feeling, Ambassador, never goes away, so I'm humbled by this opportunity. Thank you again.

Amb. Pickering: Thank you.

Bowdoin College

Mariya: I'd like to start with your early life and educational background. You graduated from Bowdoin College in 1953 with a degree in history. What made you want to go to a small liberal arts college in Maine?

Amb. Pickering: Well, I had a real choice between going to Cornell and doing mechanical engineering, and going to Bowdoin and doing liberal arts. It was really the opportunity to visit Bowdoin ahead of time that convinced me that it was the right place for me.

Mariya: From our previous conversions, you had mentioned that you had plans to join the military. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Amb. Pickering: Well, my plans were, in fact, mainly legislated by the fact that we had to do obligatory military service. So, I did two years of graduate study before going into the navy, and had actually looked at the navy while I was at Boeing, and I looked at flight programs. After two years of graduate school, my eyes weren't up to it, but the navy made me a photo interpreter.

Mariya: And what did you decide to study history?

Amb. Pickering: I studied history because I thought that it was, for me, one of the most fascinating subjects I dealt with. As a young student in high school and before, I kind of inhabited a local library and was really fascinated by reading books about history, so it came naturally.

Mariya: What types of activities were you involved with on campus?

Amb. Pickering: I played a role in my fraternity—which almost everybody did, in one way or another. I was in Theta Delta Chi. I managed the glee club and was also a manager at the Bowdoin drama organization. I didn't think I had any scope or talent, either musically or artistically, although at the end of my senior year, I got 5 lines in a play "The Merchant of Venice," at the time of graduation as kind of honoring me for my service. I was also a manager of the track team. So, I did a number of things, I enjoyed them and I learned from each of them.

Mariya: Did you have a favorite dining hall, Moulton or Thorne?

Amb. Pickering: Well, because we all ate at fraternities, we had no choices. But the Moulton Union was then still very good, not nearly as good as it is today.

Mariya: Did world events at the time effect the climate on campus? We often find college campuses to be hubs for social change or political change?

Amb. Pickering: I think less than they do today, in part because I think that's the influence of social media. But those of us interested in the world outside Bowdoin, were interested in what was going on. I remember listening on the radio to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, for example, which took place I think my last year. I can remember in 1950, in June, I was running a camp for my old hometown Boy Scouts troops when the Korean War broke out and that certainly had a lot of influence on us.

Why Foreign Service?

Mariya: Did studying abroad in Australia through the Fulbright Scholarship delay your plans for joining the State Department?

Amb. Pickering: I had taken the State Department written exam the June after my graduation from Bowdoin in 1953 and passed. But it was Army McCarthy Hearings time, which all watched with adamant interest and the State Department was not taking any people in. I then applied for a Fulbright to Australia, because I thought, "gee I gotta fill the time," and it's something to do and I can learn something.

Mariya: Why did you want to take the Foreign Service test? What was the appeal?

Amb. Pickering: I thought a lot under the influence of my mother, interestingly enough, that public service was a good career. She actually wanted me to be a minister of religion. I thought fairly early on I didn't have the calling for that, but I thought public service was something that perhaps had some of the same rewards, which I knew were psychic and not monetary. And then at Bowdoin, a number of people under whom I studied, encouraged me to look in that direction as well. So I was, in fact, propelled, by this combination of interest to look at the State Department, take the exam, see how I did, and move in that direction. And it worked, and I

enjoyed it, and I never looked back. **It was perhaps the wisest decisions I've made, but also one of the luckiest decisions I've made**.

Mariya: You've had a chance to serve under many administrations, see the department evolve over the years, see new policies implemented. What are the top three major changes you have witnessed at the State Department?

Amb. Pickering: First, internal changes that perhaps made the most sense was an effort back before the 1970s, to look at how to organize and formulate our diplomacy. In the 1970s, the State Department produced a report which had a very seminal influence and led to the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

Second, before I came in, the State Department was literally bifurcated by the Second World War with the foreign service officers serving perpetually overseas and the Washington jobs occupied increasingly by civil servants. The Wriston Report said, in effect, we need a professional foreign service and that they should serve both in Washington and overseas, not too long in either place, they should be prepared and be able to go anywhere and be selected and promoted on merit. And I think that was extremely important.

And then I would say the third—and you might think this is strange, but I think was true—the actual challenge of somebody like Henry Kissinger, followed by George Shultz and by others that we needed to think strategically. We were dealing with a world that had radically changed. We had many obligations as a leading country and [that] diplomacy was in forefront of our national capacity both to survive and prosper which I think were interesting lessons that many of us took to heart, strove to compile a record to do that equally well, and to constantly learn. **And I think one of the great jobs of a diplomat is the experience of constantly learning.**

Mariya: Some people argue that technology and spread of information are changing the role of diplomats. Do you agree with this, insofar as diplomats are the eyes and ears on the ground?

Amb. Pickering: I think we were all eyes and ears on the ground, we just had a slower method of reporting. We tended, in those earlier days, to compete with the press, which is now I think not necessary. At the same time, we had basically slower mechanics for preparing our reporting and writing.

Email has certainly replaced that. I remember in my assignment in the Foreign Service looking at new technology and reading something about email. I quickly learned email provided rapid and complete communication with chosen listeners, so the value of email was the rapidity and indeed the succinctness which you could employ to report changing events, particularly those you had selected which would be meaningful in supplementing press reports. You could select your listeners rather than address all listeners and have the Department system select them for you. And I think that lost a good bit of capacity to connect.

I also think it lost a little bit of what we all counted on, which was making sure that when we received instructions by State Department cable, they were carefully vetted and approved in the State Department. Part of that change took place when we had phones, then secure phones, and then secure email.

Mariya: In addition to ambassadorships, you've had many roles within the State Department. One particular assignment that caught my attention was your role as the Assistant Secretary of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs from 1978 to 1981. What does this bureau do?

Amb. Pickering: This bureau, when I ran it, covered a big waterfront. It was created just a few years before I became the Assistant Secretary by Henry Kissinger, who took a large number of special assistants to the Secretary, and combined them into a bureau that was linked together essentially by science-dominated subjects of foreign policy.

In those days, environment was just beginning to come up. It's become perhaps more a bureau of environmental affairs than it was in my day. But we covered, for example, a wide range of scientific agreements, which the American domestic agencies had with foreign countries, and we oversaw the foreign policy significance of those.

We covered the nuclear non-proliferation, both as a subject of negotiation and particularly, the whole business of selling U.S. nuclear reactors abroad and some of the implications of doing so. We had a section that dealt that with population, and population problems. We had a section that dealt with health issues and how and what way they affected our national activity. So it was an absolutely fascinating job!

Kashmir & South Asia

Mariya: You mentioned the importance of nuclear non-proliferation especially as it relates to new environment. One region of the world that I'm particularly interested in is South Asia. Last year we saw both India and Pakistan, two nuclear countries on brink of war yet again. So with the hypertension that exists on the subcontinent, from your experience of having worked on these issues, what do you as the potential to solution in the region—either for Kashmir or easing diplomatic relations between the two countries?

Amb. Pickering: I had not only all the work I did in the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental & Scientific Affairs on nonproliferation, but some previous work I did as deputy director of the Bureau of Political Military Affairs on the same subject matter, and then subsequently as ambassador to India, at the UN, and then my son-in-law was political counselor in Pakistan. So, we used to trade notes, and talk to each other.

I think Kashmir has to be dealt with by India and Pakistan jointly as an autonomous area, that the Line of Control needs to be emptied of political meaning, and that perhaps the two pieces of Kashmir could be then joined for governance and legislative purposes. I had the kind of the crazy idea, but I still think it should work: the Kashmir that joins together should have the

opportunity to be a state of both India and Pakistan, with all of that implies in terms of citizenship and other questions. That could force India and Pakistan because of trade issues to have a customs union at least. And that Kashmiris could be responsible for security, and that the military influence on both sides would be entirely neutralized.

Russia & Cybersecurity

Mariya: During spring of my final year at the Fletcher School, I went to Moscow and St. Petersburg and had the incredible opportunity to work jointly with MGIMO students on two issues: cybersecurity and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. What was so fascinating to me was how vastly different sometimes the perspectives can be even though the interests are the same. From your time having served as Ambassador to Russia, how do think Russians see their role in world affairs? And also, on cybersecurity, do you see the virtual space as an area where we will be having to do more diplomacy or warfare?

Amb. Pickering: Both are really trenchant and important questions. I was in Russia from May of 1993 to the end of November 1996. It was a time when President Yeltsin was in charge and our relationship was a more open, but the Russians were seriously hurting. The food situation was disastrously bad, they were beginning to try to pick up the pieces after the collapse of communism a year and half before, questions of trade were very tight, the then former Soviet economy had kind of diminished to the size of Hungary, and people had multiple jobs and were able to stay alive living on home grown potatoes and multiple jobs— shoe strings.

But we had a lot to do with how and in what way we can try to introduce ideas. A lot of people were, in one way or another, engaged in how can Russia develop economically? And at the same time, we had no sovereign answers. A Polish economist once said that going from capitalism to communism was like making fish soup out of a fishbowl, but we didn't know how to reverse the effort. So that meant that there was a real struggle, and that particular period has come in for historical reflection and re-reflection a number of times. It was not as terrible as the pessimists like to portray it; it was not nearly as good as the optimists would hope it might become.

I was there near the end of the Yeltsin's period with his heart operation turn, and he survived that; and I left, and so we were in a situation where we had more of Yeltsin and then Putin and Putin made some very serious changes in Russia and the outlook. But Russia at that point lamented its inability to become a major player on the world scene. President Clinton worked hard to treat Yeltsin as if he was a significant player, he made Russia a member of the G7 to become the G8, treated him I thought politely and well on many bilateral meetings, and many of the multilateral meetings, but it was clear as well that Russia's capacity to punch up to its own weight was not really there.

On cyber and cyber issues, they've of course evolved immensely since the time that I was there. Cyber questions are like a lot of issues: If they are open for foreign management by a combination of both covert intelligence and overt direct plays, it is hard to believe that countries will shy away from exploiting them. That's part of the reality of the international

community. And until countries feel that over-exploitations in a very narrow, nationalist way will harm them as much as it is harming somebody else, they will continue to do that. So we have developed an interesting parallel.

We just talked about Joe Nye, he's written about this and I've thought a lot about it. It is, in fact, the damage that manipulation of cyber by outside players can do to a country and its economy in particular, so serious that it rivals, to some extent, what in fact an exchange of nuclear weapons would do. And therefore, should we move down the track of saying "we can do to you what you can do to us"— does deterrence work? And is it something we should pay attention to? Because the reckless destruction in a wide-ranging way of major economies and beyond, by cyber intrusion, is not in anybody's interest. And so, can you develop also a system in which you can protect your own cyber environment while exploiting your ability to damage somebody's else's? Those are the key questions, we are after the answers, they have not been answered; but they're very important to look at because I would strongly favor, as we develop increasing capability in this area, [of] an approach of mutual respect rather than mutual destruction. [31:17]

Pickering Fellowship & Diversity

Mariya: There is a Congressionally mandated fellowship [endowed] in your name. The Thomas R. Pickering Graduate Foreign Affairs Fellowship, established in 1992, is funded by the U.S. Department of State and it prepares young people for careers in the U.S. Foreign Service. I am a proud Pickering Fellow myself and I really would not have been able to achieve my dream of serving my country as a diplomat had it not been for financial support, mentorship, and the training the training that this fellowship program provides. Why is diversity important in the State Department and what compelled you to speak out about it, in addition to having the program exists for almost 20 years? [32:31]

Amb. Pickering: Well, I think it goes without saying almost that any successful foreign policy has to be reflective of national interests. And national interests is not the captive of a few bright people. It is, in many ways, also something that has to be a part of our national ethic. And how various Americans of various backgrounds, educational experience, and cultural traditions, look at foreign policy, is an important ingredient in the confection of a foreign policy that meets test one, that it supports our national interests. Harry Truman said once our vital interests are survival and prosperity, and I think he's probably right—while at the same time it has to be understood by and appeal to the American public. The American public has to be satisfied that we are aiming our foreign policy, the President is doing this and Congress is supporting it in the right direction. So, I think bringing in wider diversity in the State Department is very important.

Advice for 21st Century Diplomats

Mariya: And my final question for you, Ambassador, is one that I hope many take away from. And that is, what advice do you have for diplomats of the 21st century? As I prepare to go out to Amman as a consular officer, I know that I'm incredibly excited to represent my country and show the world that an immigrant from Pakistan can also represent one of the most powerful

countries in the world. Folks like myself and others taking the oath of office, what should they keep in mind?

Amb. Pickering: We should first be very proud of you and the others, both at the Pickering program and beyond, who have survived what is a very tough vetting program to become Foreign Service Officers. Secondly, we should be proud of the fact we have a Foreign Service that it is based on people who will go anywhere, people who will compete for promotion, people who are not limited by the rigidities of bureaucracy.

- **Learn**: But I think for Foreign Service Officers, my best advice is quite simple: learn. Your previous education is only the preliminary. It's only the beginning. Every day you learn something new. That in many ways we can teach you a great deal, and we don't do enough of this – the profession of diplomacy and how to conduct it. But in many ways, all of us, and I think it's true today as it was in the past, learn from the people that we work *for* and *with*, about how to be both good and bad at diplomacy, and how to make it work.
- **People**: The Foreign Service is a people-centric function. Diplomats and the people they work with are their most important piece of the endeavor that they're engaged in, and so learning to deal with people is very significant.
- **Innovation**: I think thinking innovatively is very important. Constantly drive yourself to say that "if this is the problem, what are the solutions?" No solution in one sense is the dramatic silver bullet; it often has to come with a lot of give and take. You will find that success in foreign policy is not the private preserve of a single individual, but of a great deal of grinding, pushing, shoving, and thinking.
- **Failure**: Failure, of course, tends to attach to individuals, so the risk you take as a Foreign Service Officer and American diplomat, is that if you fail, you become responsible for it. My own view is that you need to be able to take the risk. And if you fail, that's fine, your ability to get up off the ground and start again is what people admire more than deprecate you for the fact that you may have lost.
- **Teamwork**: But my other feeling is that recognize that this is a team sport. That individual exemplary athletes in diplomacy have all of the same problems in any team sport that individual athletes have – if they don't play together, if they don't learn from each other, and if they don't organize themselves to work as a team, they will be much less effective than the alternative—which is basically to do things cooperatively.

Mariya Well, thank you so much again Ambassador Pickering. It's been a pleasure to speak with you, learn from you, and I'm very grateful for this opportunity.