

MAKING WAVES AT DCS



Former US Ambassadors Share Foreign Service Experiences with DHS Students

In early October, Dexter High School had the honor of hosting four former US ambassadors for an open panel discussion with DHS students. Each year, the Weiser Diplomacy Center at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan partners with the American Academy of Diplomacy for a series of events. The Academy's goal is to offer outreach about careers in the state department to high school students in the area, and U-M's Weiser Diplomacy Center helps to identify the school. Events have been previously held at Pioneer High School and the Chelsea Public Library. Ambassadors share career experiences in the state department and talk on a more substantive policy topic; this year, the topic was the Global Implications of the War in Ukraine.



DHS teacher and Model UN advisor Angela Chea was thrilled when the Weiser Diplomacy Center reached out to Dexter as a possible host for this year's local outreach event. The Model UN Club is in its 5th year at DHS; student participants debate and draft resolutions on current world issues at several conferences throughout the academic year. In both Model UN and her history classes, "the topic of the war in Ukraine is of high interest to our students given the current crisis," Chea says. For this reason, she opened the event to all interested DHS students as well as inviting students from Chelsea High School's AP Government class.

Panelists from the American Academy of Diplomacy (AAD) included retired US Ambassadors Susan Elliott, Robert Cekuta, Richard Boucher and Ronald E. Neumann, who also serves as president of the AAD. Introducing the panelists and posing discussion questions was University of Michigan Professor John Ciorciari, Associate Dean of Ford School and Director of Weiser Diplomacy Center and International Policy Center.

After some introductory remarks from each panelist, Dr. Ciorciari posed an initial question to begin the discussion: “The US is always facing a wide range of challenges and opportunities, with the special added dimension of the Russian challenge to international norms in Ukraine. In your expertise, what do you see as some key American diplomatic priorities in the months ahead?” Other topics discussed included how the war in the Ukraine will influence energy during the winter months (as Russia is a major provider of natural gas), the revival of countries that don’t want to take sides in the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine, and lessons China can learn from the UN’s sanctions on Russia.



Following a lively panel discussion on these subjects, Dr. Ciorciari opened the floor for student questions. The first student to speak (from Chelsea High School) asked panelists about the path which led them to this field of work. Ambassadors Neumann and Boucher shared they had family who worked in foreign service, and Neumann said that he and his father are one of three father/son ambassadors to the same country (Afghanistan). Ambassador Cekuta relayed that he was interested in history in school, and started on his career path by joining the Model UN club. Ambassador Elliott had a very different story in that she had a PhD in nursing and was working as a college professor when her husband (a professor of international economics) decided to join the foreign service, and she chose to jump in as well. Diplomacy, Elliott emphasized,

is about communication, understanding others’ points of view and getting your point across; a degree in international relations isn’t vital to a career in foreign service. Neumann agreed, saying that there is no ‘one path’ to diplomacy. Ambassador Boucher shared that science is becoming more and more important in our global relations (climate change, population growth, etc.), so a background in the sciences is yet another route.

A Dexter student followed up on these comments by asking panelists to elaborate on the specific positions they’ve held during their career. Ambassador Neumann shared his first job was as a visa officer in Senegal, after which he became a one-person embassy in Gambia, performing the duties of cashier and chauffeur in addition to working directly with the president of Gambia. Ambassador Elliott related how her knowledge of several languages and willingness to try new things led to many different positions including political officer and economics work. All panelists talked about how diplomatic work is meeting and talking with people, asking how the US can help them and looking after the American community and interests in foreign countries. Neumann ended his remarks with the wry understatement, “you will never be bored.”

Following a short discussion about the countries panelists’ forecast to be on the world stage in 10-20 years, another student brought the conversation back to the topic of the ambassadors’ careers. Asked how a student could prepare themselves for a career in foreign service, panelists

responded to be ready for unpredictability and able to handle crises. They cautioned that diplomats may have to work on policies with which they don't agree, but still give it their best effort, and not everything they work on succeeds. When asked about career highlights, Ambassador Boucher shared that one of his proudest moments was when serving as ambassador to China during the 1979 cultural revolution. At that time, many Chinese people had grown up with communist propaganda about Americans and, as he traveled around southern China, he met many people who had never seen or met an American in person. Boucher was proud to shake their hands and say, "Hi, I'm [from] the United States," and counteract the negative stereotypes they held.



Students were inspired by the wide range of experiences shared by the four former ambassadors. Ms. Chea revealed that she had three separate students tell her the panel discussion made them consider more seriously a career in international affairs, diplomacy and/or the foreign service. Another of her students noted how much it related to their Global Politics class discussions about Ukraine.

From the speakers' bios

Ambassador (ret.) **Susan M. Elliott** is an accomplished diplomat with a doctorate from Indiana University. During her 27-year diplomatic career, Ambassador Elliott held a variety of leadership positions at the U.S. Department of State, including Civilian Deputy and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Commander of the United States European Command, Deputy Executive Secretary and Director of the Executive Secretariat Staff for former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan from 2012 to 2015, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. Earlier in her career she reported on conflicts in the countries of the former Soviet Union when she worked in the Office of the Coordinator for Regional Conflicts in the New Independent States. She became President and CEO of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in August 2018.

Ambassador (ret.) **Richard A. Boucher** is a senior U.S. diplomat turned teacher. Over a thirty-two-year career, he served in numerous leadership positions, including Ambassador to Cyprus (1993-1996) and U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong (1996-1999). In his later career he became the longest serving spokesman in the history of the State Department, serving six Secretaries of State. From 2006 to 2009 he served as Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia. After retiring from the State Department Ambassador Boucher served as Deputy Secretary-General for Global Affairs at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris. Since 2014 he has taught diplomacy and foreign policy at Brown University, University of Michigan and George Mason University.

Ambassador (ret.) **Robert Cekuta** has long and extensive experience as a top-level U.S. diplomat. His positions in the State Department included Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy Resources, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Energy, Sanctions, and Commodities, and U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2015 to 2018. In addition to numerous overseas postings, Ambassador Cekuta established the Economic Policy Analysis and Public Diplomacy Office in the State Department's Bureau for Economic and Business Affairs, and served on the boards of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the International Energy Agency (IEA), where he also chaired the IEA Board's Standing Group on Long-term Cooperation charged with anticipating global energy developments.

Ambassador (ret.) **Ronald Neumann** is President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and former Ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain and Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007. Before Afghanistan, Ambassador Neumann served in Baghdad with the Coalition Provisional Authority and as liaison with the Multinational Command, where he was deeply involved in coordinating the political part of military actions. In addition to his multiple overseas postings he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs and Director of the Office of Northern Gulf Affairs. He was an Army infantry officer in Viet Nam and holds a Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal and Combat Infantry Badge. Ambassador Neumann is the author of *Three Embassies, Four Wars: a personal memoir* (2017) and *The Other War: Winning and Losing in Afghanistan* (Potomac Press, 2009). As President of the American Academy of Diplomacy he has focused on maintaining adequate State Department and USAID budgets and staffing.