

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cari E. Guittard](#)

My Presidential Management Fellowship – From Cyber Security to Grilling Madeleine Albright ^[1]

Background

In 1998, while completing my Masters of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Dallas, I was nominated and then selected for the Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF). The PMF which began in 1977 is a flagship leadership development program for advanced degree candidates, accelerating careers in public service. As my students know, I am a fervent ambassador for the program, as I know the PMF has made all the difference in my and many of my friends' careers. I began my PMF journey at the US Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security and this is my story.

Future blogs of this nature will be housed under a series of posts titled "Alumni Perspectives" and will highlight the careers of my students from the USC Annenberg Master's of Public Diplomacy program.

From the PMF Job Fair to the State Department

The PMF process, once selected, begins with a massive job fair just for PMFs in Washington, DC. I went on nearly 60 interviews in three days to get a sense of all that was out there. Given my background and interests which included a wide range of issues – international affairs, political science, foreign policy, national security, and cyber security – State was a natural fit though everyone wanted to work at State. So I threw my resume on pile at State's recruiting desk and furthered conversations with the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice. On my last day in DC, I received a call to interview at State with Diplomatic Security (DS) which was just launching a new cyber security initiative in the wake of the bombings of two US Embassies in Africa that summer. Shortly thereafter, I received and accepted an offer to begin work as a Cyber Security Specialist with DS that fall.

One Wild Ride – PMF Rotations, Promotions & Grilling Secretary Albright

Due to the nature of my work with DS, I never took a traditional two-three month rotation to another agency that the PMF typically guarantees. In exchange, I travelled overseas on a near constant basis, attended some of the top U.S. Government 'hacking' and cyber programs, began teaching cyber security at the Diplomatic Security Training Center (DSTC), Marine Security Guard School in Quantico and the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Georgia, and had the opportunity to work with Richard Clarke at the National Security Council.

In so many ways the PMF was teaching me to lead in small and big ways, to choose my

moments and stand for what I believed in. I capped off my two-year PMF appointment with a now infamous (at least in my family) encounter with then Secretary of State Madeline Albright on the lack of computer security awareness at our posts abroad. Secretary Albright hosted a Town Hall on Computer Security which invited the entire department to an all hands on deck 'conversation', a carefully orchestrated series of planted questions and themes focused on how the department was on top of any and all computer security issues. Having just returned from an overseas compusec assessment I couldn't resist challenging her, especially as one of the microphones was positioned right next to my chair. When I asked the Secretary why so much of our diplomatic leadership, particularly our appointed Ambassadors at the time, had so little regard for computer security, she brushed me off, said the Department was 'working on the issue' and politely moved to the next questioner. Having participated in numerous reviews of our posts and seen systematic lack of security awareness and preparedness in several regions, I pressed on, advising the Secretary that she didn't answer my question and that there were numerous reports prepared by DS which outline these critical concerns in detail. We went back and forth on this thread for several minutes. Unbeknownst to me at the time, our entire exchange was being covered live, nationally and globally, by the press pool positioned two rows behind me. I knew I was pushing the envelope and I knew I may have just crossed a line. I stood on principle that day and knew if my bosses at DS didn't back me up, perhaps government service really wasn't the career for me after all. Even though I was put on a plane to Germany the next day to get me out of the onslaught of press inquiries that followed, my DS bosses did in fact back me up and behind closed doors shared quiet appreciation for my standing up and speaking out. So, incredibly, I wasn't fired. On her last day at the Department as she was saying her goodbyes, I'll never forget Secretary Albright shaking my hand, looking at me dead on, the recognition flooding back to her as she tightened her grip and just said, "Oh....it's YOU, you're a PMF aren't you?", gave me a wink, practiced smile and quickly moved on to the next well-wisher.

From Diplomatic Security to Public Diplomacy -- Final PMF Reflections & Takeaways

At the end of my second year as a PMF, I received my GS-12 promotion and continued on with DS until September 11th, 2001. For so many of us 9/11 forever changed our global view and re-directed our careers. After briefing various members of Secretary Powell's transition team, I went to work for then Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, during her tenure, rounding out my portfolio of work to include press and public affairs, political-military affairs, work with several regional bureaus, and work with then Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, the venerable John Bolton. By the time I left State in 2003, at the age of 27, I had achieved a GS-14 rank which I doubt would have been possible had I not had the PMF experience.

When I reflect on that time in my career and what I came away with, four words come to mind again and again: **Tenacity, Resiliency, Persistence, and Scar Tissue** (*in a good way...I came away tougher, stronger and ready to take on the world*).

No two PMF journeys are ever the same and yet once you've been through it you are part of the PMF family forever...an astonishingly large and growing family that you stay in touch with throughout your career. Think of the PMF like civil service on steroids. There is no fellowship quite like it and it will forever change the trajectory of your career. If you're considering public service, take a second look at the Presidential Management Fellows Program.

FOR MORE INFORMATION visit [Presidential Management Fellowship](#).

