

Dick Murphy Celebration of Life Remarks

By Bill Burns - March 1, 2025

Good morning. I am deeply honored to offer a few reflections about an extraordinary American diplomat and public servant, Dick Murphy, who had an extraordinary impact on my life and on a whole generation of Foreign Service Officers. In honoring Dick, I am also honoring his beloved wife Anne, a full partner in their adventures over three and a half decades across the Middle East, Africa and Asia — and in that most unforgiving of hardship posts, Washington DC.

My greatest good fortune over a long and very fortunate career at State and CIA was to start with the best. Barely one tour into my own three and a half decades as an FSO, I served as one of Dick's staff assistants in the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs, the storied "mother bureau" in the Department of State, home to a disproportionate share of America's best diplomats and most impossible challenges.

Being a staff assistant in NEA in those days was a form of indentured servitude, with an unrelenting pace, long hours, high pressure and frequent travel. But I learned a great deal about diplomacy that year, and a great deal from Dick Murphy about how to conduct it. He was the embodiment of American diplomatic excellence, combining three critical qualities — expertise, professionalism and humanity — in a way that I have rarely seen since. It was also the beginning of a lifelong friendship which has both shaped and inspired my own career in public life.

Dick wore his expertise on the Middle East lightly and with humility, but it nevertheless left a profound impression on me as an unformed young diplomat with pretensions to navigate the treacherous terrain of that region. In 1985, just as forty years later in 2025, it was full of combustion and dysfunction.

Fluent in Arabic and adept at understanding the complicated personalities who drove events in that troubled region, Dick had learned Arabic in Beirut, served in Amman during the 1967 war, and led our embassy in Damascus during Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy. He had mastered the history and tribal complexity of the Middle East, and his relentless pursuit of American interests was grounded not in magical thinking about the region, but in the hard realities that U.S. policymakers too often think they can evade.

All these years later, I still remember vividly the respect in which Dick was held by his counterparts, in large part because of his expertise.

I watched him maneuver through the minefield of Middle East leaders, from Syria's President Hafez al-Assad (who barely cleared his throat in the first couple hours of marathon meetings; to the ruthless and wily Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz over a masgouf lunch on the banks of the Tigris; to Israel's stubborn and suspicious Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir at his residence in Jerusalem; to long discussions through a haze of cigar smoke with Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar in Dick's office on the Sixth Floor of the State Department.

When I did a pale imitation of Dick's job as Assistant Secretary fifteen years later, sitting in that same office, I swear I could still smell the cigar smoke.

Dick Murphy's professionalism — his ability to marry that rare expertise with diplomatic skill and integrity — was the second quality which left a deep impression on me. He understood the critical importance of drive and persistence in resolving conflicts. That's what helped him bring about the Taif Accords at the end of his tenure as Assistant Secretary, ending Lebanon's bloody, fifteen-year civil war.

In countless shuttle missions on the rickety little C-12 aircraft we used, he wore down the difficult protagonists in Lebanon's tortured political drama — some of whom still bedevil that country four decades later. Dick wasn't content just to admire problems, he wanted to solve them, or at least cut them down to more manageable size.

It was Dick's professionalism which built trust, even in a Middle East in which most people hated American policy and most leaders were bent on undermining it. People and leaders may have resented our policies, but they knew Dick Murphy was an honorable professional, doing his duty as best he could.

Dick's quiet leadership was a mark of professionalism I never forgot and always tried my best to emulate, however imperfectly. He surrounded himself in NEA with strong professionals, and then trusted and empowered them. He knew that their success would be the bureau's success, and he didn't care at all who got the credit.

Beyond expertise and professionalism, it was Dick's humanity which set him apart. He cared about young officers like me, always taking time to mentor and encourage. On one trip to Damascus, I remember him patiently explaining to me that the best way to

comprehend the Assad regime was to see it as an organized crime family. As we left a particularly nasty meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam, Dick nudged me and said with his usual wry humor “doesn’t he remind you of Pretty Boy Floyd ?”

Dick always taught that diplomacy in the Middle East is not an abstraction, not just a matter of brackets in negotiating texts. It was about real human beings — their suffering, their aspirations, their deep-seated grievances, their often pathological insecurities, their hopes and their dreams. He struggled mightily to find a pathway to a just, secure peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and his efforts set the stage for more tangible progress a few years later — the Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo Accords which followed.

Dick Murphy’s humanity shone through in NEA, and in each of the embassies he led. He knew that taking care of your people was as important to success in American diplomacy as artful negotiations, and he created an atmosphere in which every officer was treated with dignity and respect, encouraged to perform to their maximum capability. He set high standards and expected high performance, but he was a kind and considerate man. As a young officer, I would do anything to avoid letting him down, and as I took on more senior jobs I always tried to model his decency and integrity — his humanity.

I never knew a better leader, a more skillful diplomat or a finer man than Dick Murphy. His entire professional life was a demonstration of why expertise, professionalism and humanity matter in public life; of why it’s one of life’s great honors to be in the arena and do your best to defend American interests and values; of why public service matters.

At a moment in our history when public service is truly in peril, Dick Murphy’s extraordinary example — seen through the eyes of that very young staff assistant all those years ago — carries special significance. Dick was never a partisan person. He simply believed in the value of public service, and the importance of a healthy Foreign Service.

We live in a world today in which expertise is too often dismissed or belittled; in which professionalism is derided or distrusted, the mark of a “deep state” of suspect reliability; in which humanity and humility are for suckers.

That was never Dick Murphy’s world, nor was it the world he taught me and my generation of American diplomats to respect and sustain. It is his model of decency and skill in public service, his model of quiet and unassuming leadership, that will inspire many more generations to come.

Dick Murphy was the best of American diplomacy, a good man of uncommon ability and dedication. I cannot think of a better example to remember and honor in these trying times.

Thank you.