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Friend remembers Ambassador Stevens fondly

By Sean Foley

J. Christopher Stevens, U.S. ambassador to Libya, died this week after an attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi.

In May 2002, I was a Fulbright scholar in Damascus, Syria, and I loved to walk through the city's medina adima (or old city) neighborhood on Friday afternoons. On one of these trips, I ran into Chris, an American diplomat then serving at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. I met him through the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Office. It was a decade before his picture was splashed across the front pages of newspapers around the world.

Although he was a generation older than I, Stevens and I had an easy rapport and several important things in common. We were both from the San Francisco Bay area; had studied history and languages at the University of California, Berkeley; and were committed to understanding the modern Middle East.

In the 1990s, I also had been an intern at the State Department in Washington and the Political Section of the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Had I not decided to pursue a doctorate in history at Georgetown University and a career as an academic, I would have very likely joined Stevens in the U.S. Foreign Service. Indeed, more than a year after earning tenure and promotion to associate professor in the history department at Middle Tennessee State University, I am still asked if I have thought about working for the U.S. State Department.

That afternoon 10 years ago, Stevens was sitting in Cafe an-Nawfra, which was a defining landmark in the old city and just behind Damascus' massive and fabled Umayyad Mosque. He was speaking fluent Arabic with other customers and motioned for me and my fiancée Kerry to join him. She was visiting me in Damascus that week, and the three of us had a nice extended conversation. Before leaving the cafe, he insisted on paying for our coffee and had the waiter take a picture of the three of us huddled at one of the cafe's small outside tables. I have no idea if I ever shared the picture with him, and we lost contact after he left Damascus.

Earlier this month, I came across that picture while looking through old pictures from my time in Syria and I wondered what had happened to him. I had heard that he had been in Libya during its recent revolution and I figured I would look him up after I returned home from a brief trip overseas. I was especially curious about his view of the new Libyan president, Mohamed Magariaf. The president's son, Tarik, is a Harvard-educated economist of the Middle East and had been one of my mentors at Georgetown. His daughter, Asma, was a friend and one of my colleagues in a master's program in Arab studies there.

Tragically, I found out the nature of Stevens' work long before I returned home. As I checked Facebook Thursday morning at Narita Airport in Japan, I noted that my Libyan friends were posting pictures of the U.S. ambassador who had been killed. Many of them, including the president's daughter, Asma Magariaf, had switched their identifying Facebook photo to the official picture of the late ambassador. Arabs in other countries were doing the same thing. To my horror, I realized that the man in those pictures was the same man whose 2002 picture I had recently found.

Here it is worth noting that I am not the only person in Middle Tennessee tied to the events in the Middle East. Not only are there Libyans in the region, but there are thousands of Christians and Muslims in Middle Tennessee of Egyptian heritage. Many more in our region are tied to those serving in the armed

forces, the Foreign Service and many other activities in the Middle East and wider Muslim world. It is important that we remember these individuals and bear in mind how we can help them in these trying times.

Next week, I will be teaching my upper division course on the history of the Middle East. I will return to the classroom with a heavy heart. I hope that my work there and elsewhere will uphold the memory of Ambassador Stevens and honor his commitment (and that of thousands of other Foreign Service officers) to building a better future for America and the Arab world — for the world at large.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was right to say, “We need many more Chris Stevenses.” Perhaps even more telling is the statement posted on Facebook and Twitter by the popular Swedish-Lebanese singer, Maher Zain: “I am Libyan and I am against terrorism.”

For me, J. Christopher Stevens was not only an exemplary diplomat but a personal memory, a warmth, a human connection that will stay with me throughout my life. His life — and so, his death — might have been mine. Might have been anybody’s.
