

Meaningful State Department Reform Long Overdue

America faces daunting diplomatic challenges in the 21st century. It seeks to make the world more secure, free, and prosperous for the benefit of Americans and international community. However, it cannot accomplish these noble objectives until the nation's foreign policy apparatus is overhauled, which is something the State Department's vaunted Foreign Service diplomatic corps appears disinclined to do.

The diplomatic corps (e.g., Foreign Service generalists) and the sole bargaining agent for 23,000 active and retired officers, the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), have stymied efforts to substantively reform the Department – even though evidence emanating from various commissions, groups, and individuals strongly suggests the Department's foreign policy apparatus is not sufficiently disciplined, organized and staffed to effectively carry out President George W. Bush's agenda and to cope with contemporary challenges.

The Hart-Rudman Commission reported in February, 2001, "The Department is a crippled institution, rarely speaking with one voice, thus reducing its influence and credibility in its interactions with the Congress and in its representations abroad."

The Council on Foreign Relations/Center for Strategic and International Studies (CFR/CSIS) Non-Partisan Task Force observed in February, 2001, "In the post Cold War era, the Department simply falls short in mission, organization, and skills relative to what is needed to navigate our way sensibly through the new international universe."

The General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a series of reports over a 22 year span concluding in 2002, "Diplomatic readiness and effectiveness have been compromised because of serious staffing shortfalls caused by an ineffective assignment system."

The Foreign Affairs Council noted in November, 2004, "Countless reports have been produced to make the Department perform its diplomatic missions more effectively, but these reports have been duly filed and forgotten."

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich said in July, 2003, "The Department needs a top-to-bottom transformation that will make it a more effective communicator of U.S. values around the world, place it more directly under the control of the U.S. President, and enable it to promote freedom and combat tyranny."

The diplomatic corps' imperviousness to presidential control and direction is legendary, dating as far back as the FDR/Truman era. Its lack of discipline reinforces the perception of many, like Gingrich, who believe it runs a "rogue" foreign policy operation counter to presidential foreign policy dictates and American security interests.

In recent years, certain career Foreign Service Officers (FSO's) have been credited with attempting to undermine stated presidential policies relating to bringing freedom and democracy to Middle East countries, the Iraq War; Israeli-Palestinian conflict; International Criminal Court, Anti-Ballistic Missile, and Kyoto treaties, negotiations with North Korea, among others.

Prominent members of the Foreign Service community, like AFSA, consider such behavior “constructive criticism” and reward it. Others like the Hart-Rudman Commission observed similar behavior and commented that FSO’s “needed reminder that their group does not serve the interest of foreign states, but is a pillar of U.S. national security.” Former U.S. Ambassador, Laurence H. Silberman, argued 25 years ago that many of the difficulties stem from the Foreign Service rejecting “presidential control and the legitimacy of political direction.”

The CFR/CSIS Task Force examined the Department’s foreign policy apparatus, which extends from Washington DC to U.S. embassies, consulates and missions to international organizations in 180 countries and which is interconnected to 30 U.S. agencies operating abroad, and deemed it in a state of serious disrepair. The Task Force reported, “The Department suffers from institutional dysfunctions, the interagency system responsible for policy development and coordination is inefficiently structured, and the U.S. foreign policy apparatus is increasingly ill-equipped to shape and respond to the realities and challenges of the 21st century.”

The GAO and State Department Inspector General (IG) revealed serious deep-rooted and long-standing problems with the way the Department staffs positions at strategically important overseas posts. Primarily because the 30 year-old assignment system is employee driven, hardship posts in places like China, Russia and Saudi Arabia typically experience significant staffing shortfalls while other posts such as Paris and Berlin do not. According to the State IG, over 50 percent of language designated positions were not filled with qualified linguists, even though the Department had an abundance of trained resources in the workforce.

Without proper staffing, overseas missions cannot perform such important tasks as collecting information for national security and foreign policy purposes, properly screening visa applicants, and detecting fraudulent activity in consular operations. Amazingly, the Department does not require FSO’s to serve at hardship posts and rarely uses directed assignments to fill staffing shortfalls and critical language designated positions.

America faces enormous diplomatic and national security challenges operating in this difficult, dangerous and unfriendly world. Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network reportedly has cells in 60 countries. Regimes in Iran, North Korea and China are engaged in obtaining and/or exporting nuclear weapon technology. The European Union wants to sell lethal weaponry to China. 102 of 191 U.N. members do not have truly free and democratic governments and most harbor deep anti-American sentiments.

Americans deserve to have a foreign policy apparatus fully capable of meeting all of these 21st century challenges and threats. The time to give them one is long overdue. The transformation must include a plan to develop and execute a foreign policy strategy, articulated to Americans, to win the War on Terror and spread freedom and democracy. It will require outside intervention for transformation to occur. Congress and the White House must act now before it is too late.

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