

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 16, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson,

Congratulations on your confirmation as our nation's 69th Secretary of State. Although there were tough issues that we worked through as the Senate exercised its advice and consent on your nomination, we look forward to the opportunity to work with you to safeguard our nation's interests, extend our nation's values, and ensure our nation's prosperity.

As you assume your duties as Secretary of State, we want to urge you to take full and appropriate advantage of the State Department's "Dissent Channel." We were deeply concerned when White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer stated on January 30, that Foreign Service Officers using the "Dissent Channel" to express their views on the Immigration Executive Order should "either get with the program or they can go." The White House statement seems intended as a veiled threat to State Department employees, intended to have a chilling effect.

As you may know, the Dissent Channel was set up during the Vietnam War era as a way for foreign service officers and civil servants to raise concerns with senior management about the direction of U.S. foreign policy, without fear of retribution. According to the Foreign Affairs Manual, the Dissent Channel is for "*...consideration of responsible dissenting and alternative views on substantive foreign policy issues that cannot be communicated in a full and timely manner through regular operating channels or procedures.* Moreover, the FAM is clear that "*Freedom from reprisal for Dissent Channel users is strictly enforced*".

We believe strongly that good policy emerges from a healthy and substantive debate, including the review and consideration of alternative viewpoints and perspectives. A narrow approach in which no consideration of alternative options, no discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, no consultation with individuals who may have expertise or insight to offer, and no opportunity for the expression of dissent may appear to offer short term efficiencies, but, as we have learned all too often, leads to an impoverished policy environment which does not serve the interests of the American people well. In a democracy such as our robust debate is essential – indeed required – as we determine what policy to chart for our nation.


It is precisely for this reason that the Dissent Channel is vital. Even when not needed, it serves as an important symbol for the thousands of career men and women in our Foreign Service who serve on the frontlines in dangerous and difficult places around the world to advance and protect U.S. interests and values, and build meaningful alliances and partnerships for our nation.

As you know, in addition to recent events, the Dissent Channel was used just last year to question the Obama Administration's Syria policy. So we do not view this as a partisan issue. This is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. This is a question of how a healthy and robust Constitutional Democracy functions. Crushing dissent is what happens in Russia, not here in the United States.

As Secretary of State you will be taking over as the leader of one of the most skilled, loyal, and motivated workforces of any organization on the planet. Our foreign affairs and development professionals are truly among the most dedicated of our public servants, on the front lines safeguarding our nation's security. As Members of the Foreign Relations Committee, we have benefitted greatly from their insight and counsel over the years.

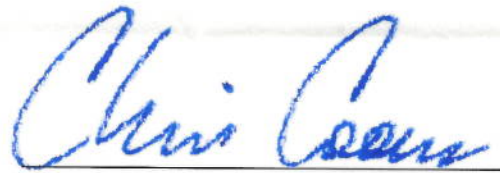
We hope and trust—and encourage—you to take full advantage of the dedicated public servants of the Department of State and USAID, including by forcefully affirming your respect for their use of the Dissent Channel, without fear of reprisal. Our diplomacy and development professionals are deeply committed to protecting and extending our nation's values and interests, and we are certain that you and our nation will benefit greatly from a full and robust partnership between you and the staff of Department you lead.


Sincerely,

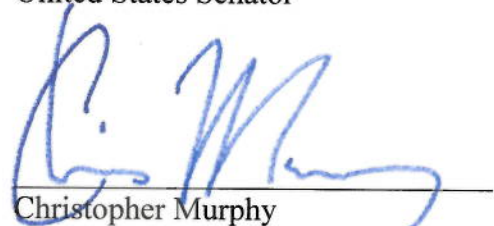

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

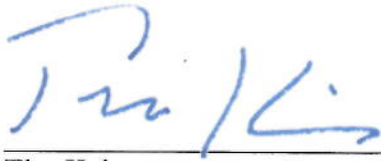

Robert Menendez
United States Senator


Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

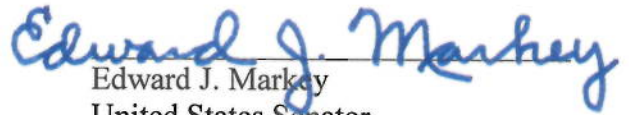

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator


Tom Udall
United States Senator


Christopher Murphy
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator