

Testimony of  
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before the  
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Subcommittee on State Department and USAID Management, International  
Operations and Bilateral International Development  
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Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Hagerty, thank you for the invitation to testify today. This Subcommittee's inquiry into "Modernizing the State Department for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" is a welcome initiative, and I am honored to have been invited to participate.

In November 2020, the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs published a report entitled "A U.S. Diplomatic Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," for which I was one of three co-authors. Let me begin by recounting a little of the background to the project.

Going back to 2019, several retired members of the Foreign Service who together had almost a century of service got together to discuss the state of the Foreign Service and the need for far-reaching reforms. Finding a commonality of purpose, we decided to solicit ideas from a broad spectrum of practitioners, stakeholders, and representatives of other foreign affairs agencies on what should be done to reform and rebuild the Foreign Service.

An element in our thinking was that both the military and the intelligence community have undertaken major reforms in recent years, whereas the last major piece of legislation governing the Foreign Service was forty years ago in the form of the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

Initially the project, which was located at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, was to consist of a handful of conferences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the West Coast and elsewhere in the United States to gather information and ideas. However, the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic compelled us to rethink our plans. Instead of in-person conferences, we switched to virtual meetings. The imperative for virtual gatherings probably enabled us to interact with more people and gather a wider range of opinions and viewpoints.

Ultimately, we held 40 meetings with over 200 participants, including current and former foreign service officers, former officials in partner agencies, as well as from the National Security Council, the intelligence community and uniformed military and civilian leadership at the Pentagon. We held sessions with serving officials of the Trump Administration, members of the Biden transition team, and Members of Congress and staff of both parties. We also had discussions with former top leaders, including former Secretaries of State, two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and leaders of the Intelligence Community. Finally, we solicited ideas from the interested public via virtual meetings with think tanks, business-people, academics, and with World Affairs Councils both at a national meeting and with individual chapters in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas; Peoria, Illinois; Nashville, Tennessee; Cleveland, Ohio; and Boston, Massachusetts, for a total of 800 interested Americans.

Our conclusion was that the Foreign Service was facing a crisis that has been developing over multiple years and through successive administrations. Specifically, we assessed our career diplomats lacked the support, funding, training, flexibility, and leadership development opportunities they needed to be as effective as they should be in policy development at home and in representing and assisting the American people abroad.

More concerning, this is happening at the same time the United States is facing especially complex challenges that require vigorous diplomacy to address.

Morale in the Foreign Service was low, we were told. The failure of the State Department to make progress on recruiting, retaining, and promoting a diverse workforce, despite years of effort to do so, was a contributing factor.

After a period of reflection and analysis, we concluded that just as the nation invested time and resources in ambitious programs to renew both its military and intelligence agencies in recent years, the same should be done for our Foreign Service. A non-partisan initiative should be launched immediately by the President and the Congress to revive, reform, rebuild, and reimagine the Foreign Service of the United States.

Our report includes ten specific actions that we considered were key to giving the nation the diplomatic capability it will need to successfully navigate the foreign policy challenges of the next decades.

**Our first recommendation** is that the President and the Congress redefine the Foreign Service's mission and mandate. Specifically, we proposed formally designating the State Department as the lead U.S. government agency in executing relations with every country and international organization on the full range of diplomatic, political, security and other issues.

Underlying this recommendation was the idea that the State Department should have a major, designated role in formulating U.S. foreign policy along with other Cabinet agencies and the National Security Council but take the lead role in implementing those policies.

In addition, the President should reaffirm and reinforce the role of all Ambassadors as his personal representatives. This is essential to the proper and successful functioning of our embassies abroad, which often have representatives of many government agencies.

At the beginning of his or her mission, all ambassadors receive a letter from the President describing their responsibilities and authorities over U.S. policies and personnel. Our embassies work very well when the role of the Ambassador is well understood and respected by all under their authority. Confusion in this regard can lead to internal disarray or, worse, confusing signals to foreign counterparts.

**Our second recommendation**, closely related to the first, is to suggest that Congress pass a new Foreign Service Act. In our discussions with Pentagon leaders, they strongly recommended that significant changes be included in legislation as was done for the military in the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 and

for the Intelligence Community in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act of 2004.

Forty years on from the Foreign Service Act of 1980, the United States faces many new challenges that call for highly sophisticated and complex diplomacy, including great power rivalry with China and Russia, the global pandemic, the continuing threat of terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the systems to deliver them, and all of this in an era of instant communication and much disinformation. There are also an array of challenges brought on by new developments in science and technology including cyber, biotech, artificial intelligence, internet commerce and data flows, and social media. The globalized economy has benefitted some and left others behind in tandem with huge changes in technology, fueling political challenges in the world.

We used to train our diplomats to focus on observing geo-political developments, advocating for U.S. interests, and reporting back to Washington. But in our increasingly complex world, they need an ever-evolving knowledge set and new tools and partners to address these new challenges with the strongest possible hand.

Not everyone agrees that a new Foreign Service Act is needed. Indeed, our report emphasizes that a new Act should preserve what was positive and remains fundamental in the previous Acts, including the vital leadership role of Ambassadors, the requirement that the Service be based on merit principles with admission through impartial and rigorous examination, ratings and rank orderings by peer promotion boards, worldwide availability, and the separation of those who do not meet standards of performance. The report argues for preserving provisions related to distinctive pay and benefits for those willing to meet the demands and risks of serving their country overseas, a separate and fully funded retirement system; and recognition of the role of the American Foreign Service Association in the employee-management system.

Another important piece of advice we heard from leaders in the private sector -- as well as our government colleagues -- is that transformational change cannot be achieved without vigorous internal self-examination.

This led us to **our third recommendation** which was the need to change our own Foreign Service culture.

There is much to commend about Foreign Service culture, including a deep, patriotic commitment to country and to service to that country, even if it involves, at times, personal risk. Our partners and families, too, often must make sacrifices in their personal lives and livelihoods. Foreign Service officers are committed to upholding their oath and the best diplomats are extremely hard-working and highly professional.

Yet, there are some aspects of the culture that can make our diplomats lives more difficult and the changes we propose challenging to achieve. These include, for instance, a belief that additional training and professional education are dispensable and a costly diversion from career advancement, coupled with a conviction the “learn by doing” model is sufficient. There is insufficient value attached to strategic thinking and to technical and scientific expertise, to planning, and to program management.

A more fundamental problem is the debilitating lack of diversity and the absence of an institutional culture of inclusion in the Foreign Service. **Our fourth recommendation** is that this problem be addressed urgently and as a matter of priority by Department leadership.

The issue that came up most frequently in our meetings and roundtables was the problems engendered by the lack of a diverse work force and failure to provide an atmosphere of inclusion for differences in race, gender, identity, and different kinds of skills and thought. Business leaders pointed to the wealth of research showing that a diverse workforce is likely to be more productive and more efficient. This would seem to be especially true in the Foreign Service where people of diverse backgrounds can make an important contribution to our understanding of the cultures with whom our diplomats must interact to be successful.

Clearly the high-performing, reformed, and rebuilt Foreign Service we are aiming for cannot succeed without a vigorous plan to make the Service more diverse and inclusive.

The former and current State Department leadership have made a start by convening discussions of the problem, including consulting the very active “affinity groups” and appointing a Chief Diversity Officer who reports to the Secretary. Amongst the nominees for high-level positions in the Department and

as ambassadors there appears to be a commendable commitment to increasing diversity.

However, much more needs to be done at every level, including recruitment, retention, assignments, and promotion. Our report provides many specific recommendations for each. For example, in the area of recruitment, our interlocutors commended the Payne, Rangel and Pickering fellowships but thought more needed to be done, including much broader and deeper outreach to institutions and students from around the country, starting even at the high school level.

This led to our proposal for an ROTC-like program for the Foreign Service similar to the programs the military has at multiple colleges and universities to attract recruits and give them a head start on their service. We also suggested creating paid internships in order to extend the opportunity to preview a foreign service career to those who cannot afford to pay their own way, much less forgo a summer job while also paying for education.

Based on our discussions of the problem of retention, we strongly recommend that measures be taken to make leaders at every level accountable for creating an inclusive environment in their work units from the smallest to the Department as a whole. This means inculcating in our managers from their first time supervising the notion that part of their responsibility is recruiting, carefully managing, mentoring, and preparing for higher levels of responsibility a diverse work force and that in appraising their performance, their success will be measured.

As we said in our report, “Good intentions are no longer sufficient. Tangible action by each officer must now be the norm.”

We also mentioned the importance of transparency. Publishing statistics for all to see will both encourage progress and serve as a concrete indicator of whether there has been real improvement.

**Our fifth recommendation** is that professional education and training should be viewed as a career-long commitment. Having a diplomatic service that is at the top of its game is a necessity for the United States in a world of increasingly complex challenges, new technologies, and new frontiers such as the arctic and space. We were reminded by a military colleague that the Foreign Service does

not have tanks, ships, or fighter aircraft: its most valuable assets and the source of its greatest strength are the people who seek to serve as America's diplomats. They need and deserve professional education and training to thoroughly equip them for the breadth of management and policy challenges they face in conducting America's diplomacy and leading American embassies abroad.

Currently, there are few opportunities for study at outside academic institutions or to earn degrees. We noted in our report that the Harvard Kennedy School last year had over 50 military and intelligence officers enrolled and just two foreign service officers.

Both the American military and diplomats in other, friendly, or rival, diplomatic services receive significantly more training upon entry and throughout their careers than American diplomats. Chinese junior diplomats, for example, receive six months training upon entry focused on learning about their Ministry and Chinese diplomacy. About ten years ago, the French introduced significant mid-career training which mixes leadership and management with current broad issue-areas. Former Secretary Powell told us that he spent about seven years total in training, while most Foreign Service Officers, even including language training, have had far less.

Our Foreign Service Institute has made a significant start on providing a sequence of required courses at intervals throughout a career. This should be expanded so that all officers receive significant blocks of training lasting several months at four points in their careers – upon entry, before promotion to mid-level, at the level at which they choose to become a senior officer or retire, and when they become senior officers. These should include leadership and management skills, but such training should also address current and emergent policy issues and strategic thinking, diplomatic skills, and tradecraft.

For such a program to succeed, there would need to be a significant change both in service culture to one that sees education as a stepping-stone to advancement and by management to weigh more heavily knowledge and technical skills, including strong language skills, in assignments and promotions.

There would also need to be more resources devoted to education, and more officers for the Service.

For career-long education to succeed, it would have to be supported by a “training float” to provide job coverage while officers are in training or transitioning. Once authorized and funded, it would be critical to “protect” these positions for the educational purpose described, and not allow them to be usurped to fill ordinary personnel vacancies. To avoid this outcome, we suggested a simultaneous objective look at staffing worldwide, including persistent and projected vacancies. Our supposition was that an additional plus-up would be needed to fill those positions.

**Our sixth recommendation** is to undertake a determined effort to make the personnel system more modern and flexible.

A first step should be making a serious, global assessment of staffing, with the presumption that the majority of foreign service officers and specialists should be overseas and that the mega-embassies associated with the land wars of the 2000s and other enormous outposts of U.S. government presence abroad should be reduced in size.

More priority should be put on family needs, including spousal and partner employment.

The perception that the assignment and promotion processes still rely on an “old boys’ network” must be addressed and processes put into place that are perceived as valuing professionalism and transparent and fair for all.

The underlying assumption of these proposals is that effective diplomacy requires a cadre of practitioners who have been rigorously selected, developed deep knowledge and professional skills via years as practicing diplomats and are committed to a full career of worldwide service.

Nonetheless, it is a reality that the Service needs the means to acquire specific expertise in new scientific and technical fields such as cyber, artificial intelligence, data analytics and financial technologies.

This led to **our seventh recommendation**: a mid-level entry program with very specific and rigorous requirements for entry.



In fact, previous legislation, including both the Foreign Service Acts of 1946 and of 1980 have included provisions for mid-level entry. The former was used in the 1950s to bring more women into the Service.

In exchanges with currently serving officers, the concept of mid-level entry came in for considerable criticism on the grounds that promotion was currently slow in the mid-levels and that adding a new cohort to the mix would exacerbate the problem. These concerns argue for a program that is clearly defined, introduced slowly and which is used only for the purposes for which it was designed.

**Our eighth recommendation** is to establish a diplomatic reserve corps which would augment Foreign Service capabilities. A diplomatic reserve corps would allow the Foreign Service and the State Department to surge to meet unexpected requirements for additional personnel to respond to natural disasters, pandemics, or conflict situations. Like military reservists, diplomatic reservists would have regular service obligations aimed at maintaining or developing specific skills and would be prepared to be deployed on short notice.

In normal times the Diplomatic Reserve Corps, like its military counterparts, would provide people to fill specific needs that the regular organization might be unable to meet, including at the State Department in Washington D.C.

Having a Reserve Corps would have the additional advantage of giving more Americans the opportunity to serve and would forge a direct connection to citizens and communities who might not otherwise be aware of the activities of United States diplomats.

We cannot hope to cultivate and retain the best officers if we do not give them the opportunity to serve at progressively senior levels.

**Our ninth recommendation** is that the State Department and the Foreign Service would be stronger and more non-partisan if the number of senior Washington and ambassadorial assignments for career professionals were expanded. At the time our report was written there were more political appointees serving at State than in any other cabinet department. To bring the State Department more in line with other cabinet agencies, we proposed setting goals for the numbers of career professionals in the top leadership positions in Washington and appointing career professionals to 90% of all ambassadorial positions by 2025.

This approach would bring the Foreign Service in line with the military, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency in terms of the ratio of non-career to career employees at senior levels.

Finally, **our tenth recommendation** is to give to the Foreign Service a new, more modern name. Most of our project participants agreed it would be appropriate and it would give a strong signal of significant transformation.

We propose “The United States Diplomatic Service” as it puts the United States first, it correctly labels all employees diplomats, and it describes what all are engaged in – service to their country.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.