

Where Are the Civilians?

How to Rebuild the U.S. Foreign Service

J. Anthony Holmes

WHEN THE State Department threatened to forcibly assign U.S. Foreign Service personnel to Iraq in late 2007, many diplomats read about it in the press before hearing about it from their superiors. The rank and file were irate. On October 30, 2007, the director general of the Foreign Service, several hundred employees, and union representatives held a meeting that quickly degenerated into a shouting match. A journalist's surreptitious recording of the gathering was widely publicized soon afterward, conjuring up an image of disloyal, cowardly diplomats, which stood in stark contrast to that of brave soldiers protecting the United States abroad. By stripping away the complex and highly political context surrounding the presence of civilian government officials in Iraq, the media made Foreign Service officers (FSOs) appear unreasonable and unwilling to serve.

In fact, the Bush administration had effectively engineered the dispute in an effort to publicly embarrass the diplomatic corps. By demanding that FSOs take on the unprecedented, open-ended, and fundamentally impossible challenge of nation building under fire without adequate training or funding, the White House was continuing a myopic tradition of shortchanging the civilian institutions of foreign policy while lavishing resources on the military. Furthermore, the Bush administration's

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general efforts to stifle dissent and to reward those serving in Iraq with promotions and choice assignments has led to the unmistakable politicization of the Foreign Service.

Before the Iraq war, Washington's priority was to get diplomats out of war zones on the understanding that diplomats had to be protected and preserved for when the fighting was over. (Pentagon veterans such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell and former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage felt particularly strongly about this when they ran the State Department from 2001 to 2004.) During the Bush administration's second term, however, the imperative to protect was trumped by domestic political considerations. In late 2005 and early 2006, an ugly "Who lost Iraq?" game played out inside the administration. In an effort to escape blame, the Pentagon argued that it had won the war but that the State Department was losing the peace. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, determined to avoid the charge that the State Department had not "stepped up," responded by ramping up staffing both at the embassy in Baghdad and on the newly created Provincial Reconstruction Teams deployed throughout the country. Abandoning traditional State Department practice, she dramatically increased the number of U.S. diplomatic positions in Iraq when the level of violence was at its worst. The U.S. government began carrying out a largely unnoticed and little analyzed shift in policy, assigning large and growing numbers of unarmed diplomats and aid workers to Afghanistan and Iraq, despite security conditions that often made it impossible for them to do their jobs.

The controversy over mandatory assignments to Iraq—which quickly dissipated as volunteers stepped forward to fill all 327 State Department positions there—was merely one episode in a broader pattern of neglect and mismanagement of the United States' civilian foreign policy institutions. During the Bush administration's eight years in power, the military has come to dominate U.S. foreign policy, while other arms of the U.S. government operating abroad—such as the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—have been ignored, underfunded, and gravely weakened. Neglect of these critical civilian national security institutions will haunt the new administration as it tries to resurrect diplomacy and repair the United States' image across the globe.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

THE CHRONIC underfunding of diplomacy and foreign assistance has had a major impact on how the United States wields power abroad. Over the past decade, U.S. military missions have expanded from providing humanitarian relief and training foreign militaries to running economic and social development programs and leading multilateral nation-building efforts. Thanks to massive amounts of reconstruction funding for Afghanistan and Iraq, the Defense Department received 26 percent of the U.S. foreign assistance budget in 2008. Because the military has the funding and the personnel, it dutifully takes the lead. But the Pentagon has no comparative advantage or particular expertise in postconflict stabilization and reconstruction, and its nation-building attempts often fail. Many people both inside and outside the military have begun to wonder why the U.S. government continues to burden the armed forces with nondefense responsibilities and ask, "Where are the civilians?" The answer is: they do not exist.

The number of lawyers at the Defense Department is larger than the entire U.S. diplomatic corps, there are more musicians in the military bands than there are U.S. diplomats, and the Defense Department's 2008 budget was over 24 times as large as the combined budgets of the State Department and USAID (\$750 billion compared with \$31 billion). A mere \$7.5 billion went to the State Department's diplomatic and consular programs, including its large operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the 265 other diplomatic posts around the world. In fact, the Pentagon spends more on health care for military personnel than the U.S. government allocates to diplomacy and foreign assistance. When defense-related programs from other U.S. government agencies, such as the Energy Department and NASA, are factored in, defense and intelligence account for 99 cents of every dollar Washington spends on national security and foreign affairs; just a penny goes to diplomacy and foreign aid.

The U.S. Foreign Service—the civilian professionals who staff State Department and USAID missions abroad and those agencies' headquarters in Washington—is simply not able to do its job. It has nowhere near the number of people it needs to carry out its traditional duties, much less the new demands the Bush administration has imposed

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on it. Many FSOS simply lack the skills and training they need to do their work. The Foreign Service has been starved of the resources it needs to have the impact abroad that both political parties want it to have. And apart from a minimal last-minute increase in the 2008 fiscal year supplemental appropriation for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has not received the major new investments that would allow it to engage in the sort of nation-building activities that many believe are fundamental to protecting the United States in the twenty-first century.

Diplomacy is not capital intensive; its primary resource is the people who carry it out. In June 2008, there were only 6,636 FSOS and 4,919 support staff in the State Department—

just ten percent more than 25 years ago, when there were 24 fewer countries in the world and U.S. national interests were far more concentrated in Europe and Northeast Asia. By comparison, in mid-2008, there were 1.6 million active-duty military personnel, nearly 1.6 million members of the Reserves and the National Guard, and 673,000 civilian employees in the Defense Department.

Unlike the U.S. military, which presently bases only 21 percent of its personnel abroad, 68 percent of the Foreign Service is “forward deployed” overseas. As a result, it has no surge capacity at all. The personnel situation is so tight that FSOS receive little training because providing it would mean leaving a position empty in the interim. Given that regional expertise and knowledge of obscure languages are among the service’s core strengths, the lack of funding has a pernicious long-term impact. Presently, the vacancy rate overseas is 21 percent; in Africa, it is 30 percent. With such shortages, a lot of work must simply be ignored. The staffing situation is even worse at USAID, which houses the government’s few experts in postconflict reconstruction; the number of FSOS in the agency’s ranks has declined by 75 percent since the 1970s.

To do what is expected of it, the Foreign Service needs two to three times as many people as the 11,555 it currently has. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has repeatedly called for increased funding for the State Department and USAID. He has testified to Congress that “the State

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Department is the proper place to oversee all of the elements of American foreign policy” but that “Congress has not been willing, decade in and decade out, to provide the kind of resources, people and authority that it needs to play its proper role in American foreign policy.” Diplomacy is, as the old adage goes, a nation’s first line of defense. The U.S. government is shortsightedly neglecting this basic and inexpensive tool of national security at its peril.

As bipartisan groups of experts call for greater use of “soft power,” the United States’ capacity to meet traditional diplomatic responsibilities—such as engaging with Iran and guiding Russia back toward the international mainstream—is rapidly deteriorating. And despite the Bush administration’s ambitious pledge to transform U.S. diplomacy, Foggy Bottom continues to suffer from a lack of people, programs, and training.

CONDI’S FALSE HOPE

WHEN RICE became secretary of state in early 2005, she set out to make fundamental changes at the State Department. President Bush had just given his second inaugural address, and democracy promotion quickly became the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. Rice immediately began using the term “transformational diplomacy” as code for a new State Department modus operandi. This caused considerable confusion because she did not define the term for almost a year; meanwhile, earnest functionaries scurried about trying to give it meaning beyond the simple promotion of democracy. Eventually, in a speech at Georgetown University on January 18, 2006, Rice spelled out what she had in mind. She contrasted her activist vision of a “bold diplomacy . . . that seeks to change the world” with what she viewed as the passive status quo: writing analytic reports and delivering polite *démarches* to foreign governments. The United States, she stated, needed a diplomatic approach that integrated “our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals” in an effort “to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.” Mainly, she wanted her diplomats to be “administrators of programs” that promoted U.S. values rather than the passive observers she believed them to be.

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To set the stage for the new “transformational” mission, Rice announced several significant changes at the State Department. There would be a major shift of personnel from Washington and Europe to important countries in the developing world; she would create regional teams rather than having diplomats operate only in individual countries; and she would “localize [the United States’] diplomatic posture” by getting U.S. diplomats out of embassies in national capitals, where they tended to focus on government officials and national elites, and base more of them in large noncapital cities. Rice also called for an expansion of public diplomacy in an effort to increase U.S. influence and advocated a closer partnership between the Foreign Service and the U.S. military.

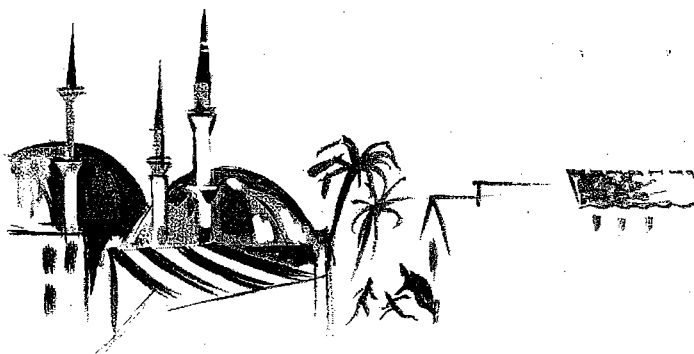
Rice’s initiative was well received by the Foreign Service. Shifting people from Washington and Europe to understaffed embassies in important developing countries made sense. The idea of having diplomats spend more time outside of capitals sounded fine, too, even if in many cities where she now wanted to put them, U.S. consulates had been closed in recent decades for budgetary reasons.

But Rice’s plan had two serious shortcomings. First, she provided no additional funding for her ambitious new agenda. State Department veterans were well aware that changing the world could not be done on the cheap by an already woefully underfunded agency. And second, adding insult to injury, Rice seemed to have no idea that the Foreign Service had been focusing ever since the end of the Cold War on many of the “transformational” activities she was proposing. Rice’s false image of a Foreign Service devoted to passive report writing instead of active engagement made many FSOs wonder if the secretary of state, already a year into the job after serving four years as the president’s national security adviser, understood what her people overseas were actually doing and if she was simply creating a straw man for political purposes.

Today, almost three years after its formal unveiling and despite a high-profile rollout and a generally favorable reception, Rice’s signature initiative to transform U.S. diplomacy has failed. Missing from Rice’s

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vision was the recognition that to transform bilateral relationships, diplomats must have the means to engage with the governments and citizens of their host countries. Whether the objective is immediate postconflict stabilization and reconstruction, democracy promotion, advancing the rule of law, fighting infectious disease, facilitating economic development, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or deterring human trafficking, diplomats need well-funded programs in order to have more than a symbolic impact. These programs do not exist. They were never requested, and the almost 300 people reassigned to strategically important developing countries over the past three years have had virtu-



ally no new resources to work with. For example, the 15 new FSOS assigned to Beijing with considerable fanfare in the summer of 2006 did not receive any new funding to undertake the activities Rice advocated. They have still not received funding. Ironically, these FSOS have been largely relegated to the reporting-and-analysis role that Rice derided in her Georgetown speech. Only those parts of Rice's initiative that involve negligible costs, such as internal bureaucratic tinkering, have advanced; efforts to implement the crucial elements of her agenda have foundered.



The much-vaunted Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, which was created in 2004 to manage postconflict situations around the world, had fewer than ten employees in mid-2008 to accomplish what Rice described as a vital component of her vision of a new diplomacy. Only a few of the tiny diplomatic posts planned for key noncapital cities have been set up. Many embassies have sought instead to use technology to fill the gaps by creating a virtual presence on the Internet, with limited results.

Rice's idea of creating a more expeditionary Foreign Service has met a similar fate. She has noted that some of the support systems that the U.S. military provides to soldiers and their families during overseas deployments—such as housing, medical care, and employment services for spouses—should be extended to the Foreign Service. However, Rice will leave office without having made any effort to provide Foreign Service personnel with the support systems that are indispensable for any military deployment overseas. U.S. military and civilian personnel sent to the same combat zones are treated completely differently. For example, soldiers are automatically granted \$500,000 of life insurance, whereas civilians assigned to the same areas receive none at all. Civilians' preexisting life-insurance policies are immediately canceled if the underwriters discover that they are living in a war zone; if injured or wounded, they are on their own when it comes to health insurance. When military service members are assigned to Afghanistan, Iraq, or other combat areas, they receive additional "combat pay," but Foreign Service members in the same countries, or at any other overseas mission, actually earn 21 percent less than those working in Washington. Danger-pay bonuses are then added to this reduced base salary. Such a pay differential, much less one of this magnitude, discourages employees from serving abroad and creates a huge morale problem.

No one in the Foreign Service would contend that working in embassies in Baghdad or Kabul, or even on a Provincial Reconstruction Team headquartered at a forward operating base, is equivalent to the dangerous service undertaken by the 15–20 percent of U.S. military personnel in combat units. Many do believe, however, that the job of unarmed and negligibly trained diplomats working in combat zones is basically akin to the service of the other 80–85 percent of U.S. military personnel, who have noncombat functions, and that these diplomats should therefore be treated similarly by the U.S. government.

If the United States wants an expeditionary Foreign Service that can perform both traditional diplomatic functions and the type of nation-building tasks last undertaken by the British colonial service, it will have to pay for it. But the Bush administration has shortchanged the Foreign Service and has thus directly undermined its own key foreign policy initiative.

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GREEN-ZONE BLUES

THE WORLD in which U.S. diplomats work has become steadily more dangerous, and this has affected every aspect of their lives abroad. The threat of terrorism long predates 9/11 and the war in Iraq. The Iran hostage crisis of 1979–81, the related sacking and burning of the U.S. embassy in Pakistan in 1979, the Hezbollah bombings of the U.S. embassy and the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983, and the al Qaeda bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 all had a profound effect on U.S. missions abroad. As early as 1983, U.S. embassies were forced to assume increasingly isolated and defensive postures. Today, the Foreign Service has largely retreated into fortress embassies located far from city centers. For local populations, these buildings are difficult to access and daunting to approach. The inevitable result of this security-driven isolation is that diplomats and other embassy employees spend less time cultivating relationships with the host countries' populations. In war zones, where diplomats must hunker down much of the time to survive, contact with locals has been even more limited.

Nearly 25 percent of the vacancies that the Foreign Service must fill each year are for one-year tours to places so dangerous that employees cannot bring their families with them. Thirty years ago, there were only two danger-pay posts; today, there are 28. Many FSos face serious barriers to volunteering in these countries. Some are single parents; others have limited medical clearances, spouses with their own careers, or families they cannot leave behind. Iraq is the most dangerous of these posts. Potential volunteers have few illusions about the nature of the work there. They understand, for example, the futility of promoting economic development in the middle of a civil war; instead, they tend to focus on ephemeral micro-objectives, such as digging wells in villages and improving local governance. FSos in Baghdad are required to notify the embassy's security team 48 hours before holding meetings with Iraqis outside the Green Zone, and permission is often denied or revoked at the last minute for security reasons. During the worst of the violence, from 2004 to 2007, many diplomats realized that showing up in an armored convoy could jeopardize the lives of the Iraqi officials they were meeting with, which

further discouraged such contact. Building relationships with locals is the reason diplomats are sent abroad in the first place, and such contact was meant to be the foundation of the Bush administration's transformational diplomacy. In reality, by placing poorly trained and underfunded diplomats in war zones where they cannot do their work properly, the initiative has become largely an exercise in symbolism.

The Bush administration has tried to recruit more volunteers for Iraq by continuously changing the Foreign Service's reward system. There were many volunteers during the first two years of the Iraq war, but Rice sharply increased staffing in Baghdad just as the conflict was degenerating into a bloody civil war. Faced with a shortage of willing FSOS, she turned to the two main incentives in the personnel system: future assignments and promotions. Rice insisted that Iraq volunteers be awarded with automatic promotions, but that proved legally impossible. However, she was able to ensure that the most desirable positions would go to FSOS departing Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, to those leaving Afghanistan), while those not volunteering are overlooked. This preferential treatment, coupled with the disproportionate number of ambassadorial posts awarded to senior FSOS in Iraq, has eroded the meritocratic culture of the Foreign Service. The best and the brightest no longer necessarily move ahead. Instead, those willing and able to volunteer in war zones are now more likely to be promoted, regardless of how relevant that experience is for their future responsibilities or for future U.S. foreign policy.

In a particularly blatant effort to politicize the Foreign Service, the Bush administration sought in 2006 to implement a "pay for performance" personnel system. This proposed reform would have replaced the decades-old system of peer evaluation with an undefined new system permitting political appointees to reward subordinates based on subjective political considerations and personal loyalty. Congress rejected the proposal, but the implications were clear: President Bush and Secretary Rice wanted a Foreign Service that saluted and obeyed, deployed to war zones without a fuss, and held its tongue about policy decrees from above.

This favoritism has led to a marked decline in constructive dissent in the Foreign Service. Officers who have dared to offer unvarnished analysis of policy options have been ignored, penalized, or banished. In

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some bureaus, the number of politically appointed “special advisers”—who in effect function as political commissars by enforcing policy discipline regardless of events on the ground—has increased dramatically. There is a palpable and widespread fear that expressing dissenting views or offering negative appraisals of current U.S. policies might jeopardize one’s career prospects. The State Department has quietly permitted its once-proud, four-decades-old Open Forum system, which promoted vigorous internal policy debate, to atrophy and disappear. Likewise, it has become increasingly difficult for the American Foreign Service Association, the exclusive representative of the entire Foreign Service, to elicit nominations for its annual Constructive Dissent awards, because voicing criticism of U.S. policy is now so rare.

REBUILDING STATE

IN ORDER to revitalize the Foreign Service and make it a powerful tool of U.S. foreign policy, the Obama administration will have to make major long-term investments in expanding and training its staff. Although a number of independent, bipartisan groups have called for more funding and personnel for the State Department and USAID, they have limited themselves to recommending what they regard as politically feasible under perennially tight budget conditions. Recent recommendations from the American Academy of Diplomacy and the Foreign Affairs Council, for example, were conceived to fill only what the Bush administration, with its disdain for diplomacy, already views as basic personnel shortfalls. The expansion these organizations call for would cost about \$2.5 billion annually, amounting to a 33 percent increase over the 2008 budget for diplomatic operations. But such spending would hardly begin to provide what the State Department needs in order to advance U.S. interests.

As president, Barack Obama must not subject himself to the budgetary constraints and the status quo of the Bush years. The White House should instead apply zero-based budgeting by drawing up its list of diplomatic objectives and then working with Congress to allocate the funds and hire the people necessary to achieve them. Obama will inherit a State Department and a USAID so underfunded and understaffed that he will not be able to undertake even some basic diplomatic

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tasks, let alone engage in nation building, without reinvigorating these debilitated institutions. Thus, he should double the number of FSOS, increase the number of specialists at the State Department by 50 percent, and boost USAID's Foreign Service staff by 150 percent. All of this would cost approximately \$5-\$6 billion annually—or little more than two weeks' worth of what the government currently spends on the war in Iraq. Although this would represent a sizable increase over current spending on diplomacy, it is a negligible sum in the context of the total U.S. national security budget.

The Obama administration faces a stark choice: either continue on the same path of the past eight years and rely almost exclusively on the military or invest in the government's traditional diplomatic capacity and build the bureaucratic infrastructure needed to deal with postconflict stabilization, reconstruction, and nation building. Even if Obama moves boldly in this direction, results will not come immediately; the extent of degradation in the U.S. diplomatic corps means that hiring and training FSOS and rebuilding capacity will take many years. But the investment is well worth it. In order to reverse the decline of U.S. influence in the world, the new administration will have to address the profound systemic weaknesses that currently impede U.S. diplomacy. If the United States is to remain a superpower, it must rebuild the once-robust civilian diplomatic and development capacity that has since disappeared. ●