

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere**

**SPREAD FREEDOM, NOT WOKE VALUES:
AN AMERICAN AGENDA FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS
Thursday, May 8, 2025**

**Statement of Robert A. Destro*,
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(2019-2021) and Special Representative for Tibetan Issues (2020-2021)**

Madam Chair Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for scheduling this hearing, and for inviting my predecessor as DRL Assistant Secretary, the Honorable Tom Malinowski, and Dr. Patrick Quirk., the Vice President of Strategy, Innovation, and Impact for the International Republican Institute (IRI). I am honored to be with them and with you today. I look forward to hearing not only what my colleagues have to say, but also to responding to your questions.

A year ago, on June 4, 2024, I testified before the HFAC Subcommittee on Oversight and Accountability about the need for Congress to enact legislation requiring transparency and accountability in all unclassified foreign assistance programs. I want to renew that call today. The findings made by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and Secretary Rubio's proposed reorganization plan for the State Department underscore the need for Congressional action.

During my June 2024 testimony, I made the following points.

1. **Money is one of the most important tools used by the United States Government [USG] to project power and influence. Foreign assistance flows provide the “carrot” and economic sanctions provide the “stick.” They are opposite sides of the same coin.¹**
2. **Most Americans have no idea a) how much “foreign assistance” the USG provides; b) for what purposes; or c) for what ends.**
3. **Congress has not imposed any enforceable transparency and accountability standards.**
4. **There is no meaningful transparency or oversight *within or among* the agencies administering foreign assistance programs.**
5. **When Congress writes what are, in effect, blank checks to grant-making bureaucracies, each bureaucracy that administers foreign assistance funds has its own foreign policy.**
6. **Lack of transparency in Washington has real-world consequences overseas.**
7. **Congress has the power of the purse but has effectively ceded control over the expenditure of billions of dollars in domestic or foreign grant and contract programs**

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¹ See Nicholas Mulder, *THE ECONOMIC WEAPON: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern Warfare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

to an unelected bureaucracy that rejects transparency and accountability to *both* Congress and the President.

The bottom line: Federal bureaucracies have their own foreign policies. The NGOs and “Beltway Bandits,” to whom they subcontract the field work, carry it out.

I. HARMONIZING FOREIGN ASSISTANCE WITH THE PRESIDENT’S VISION OF AN AMERICA FIRST FOREIGN POLICY

On January 20, 2025, President Trump ordered Secretary Rubio to “issue guidance bringing the Department of State’s policies, programs, personnel, and operations in line with an America First foreign policy, which puts America and its interests first.”²

From my perspective as former Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the President’s order is welcome – and long overdue. So too is this hearing. Thank you, Madam Chair, for inviting me to participate and to share my views and experience.

A. Unpacking the title: “Spread Freedom, not Woke Values: An American Agenda for Democracy and Human Rights.”

According to the published notice for the hearing, our focus today is how a truly *American* foreign policy can get back to its traditional focus on “spreading freedom.” Whether intended or not, the Subcommittee has implicitly suggested that an “American Agenda for Democracy and Human Rights” *requires* an American foreign policy that “spreads freedom.”

I agree. So too, I argue below, did both our first and third Presidents, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. The question on the table is *how*.

B. The “DOGE” Effect: Transparency and Accountability

The answer to the “*how* question” is easy: Presidential leadership and a Secretary of State empowered by the President to exercise *tight* control over *all* personnel who conduct American foreign policy. President Trump’s executive orders, memoranda, and speeches provide that leadership, and he has made it clear that Secretary Rubio has all the powers he needs assert control, not only over the State Department, but also over USAID and the National Security Council.

Unleashing DOGE on State, USAID, the Treasury, HHS, and other federal agencies was a necessary “first step.” As I testified in June 2024, without knowing where the money goes, who spends it, and for what purpose(s), we have no idea what our foreign policy *is*, much less whether it spreads “freedom” or “woke values.” And – unless we know what our policy *is*, we cannot even begin to evaluate whether it has been “successful.”

So, let me take this opportunity to thank the President for authorizing Elon Musk and his DOGE team to conduct their long-overdue audit of federal expenditures. No matter who conducts an audit – whether it be DOGE, the IRS, or an independent auditor for a small business – the process can be a tense, unpleasant, and have dire consequences. Rather than blame Elon Musk and his team for what some in the legacy and social media decry as “chaos”, we should have the courage and intellectual

² America First Policy Directive to the Secretary of State at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/america-first-policy-directive-to-the-secretary-of-state/> (accessed May 6, 2025).

honesty to start asking hard questions. *Someone's* questionable behavior over the generations years has put the present livelihoods and job security of highly qualified, dedicated public employees and private contractors at risk. Let us use the present moment to identify the oversight and accountability problems DOGE has highlighted and then go fix them!

II. FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY REQUIRE THAT THE PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY RUBIO GET THE BUREAUCRACY – AND THE NGO-INDUSTRIAL FOREIGN POLICY COMPLEX IT SUPPORTS – UNDER THE CONTROL OF POLITICALLY ACCOUNTABLE “OFFICERS OF THE UNITED STATES.”

The Founders of our great Nation understood that *fiscal* accountability and transparency are among the prerequisites for maintaining freedom possible within the structures of our representative democracy. Among the checks and balances that make our votes count are the reservation of the power to initiate tax bills to the House, U.S. Const. art. I §7, and the reservation to Congress of the power of the purse in art. I §9, cl. 7: “No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law”. Article I §9 also presumes that the Executive will cooperate in the auditing and oversight process. The President has the veto power, art. I §7, cl. 2, and the command of art. I §9, cl. 7 that “a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time” necessarily requires the Executive Branch participate in the effort. Freedom also abhors corruption of any sort, particularly those involving financial and positional conflicts of interest by both Members and Senators and by any “Person holding any office or Trust under” the United States. *See* art. I §6, cl. 3-4; art. I §9, cl. 8.

President Trump, Secretary Rubio, and Chairman Mast have condemned the bureaucratic excesses uncovered by DOGE. I will not recount them here, but I do thank Chairman Mast for highlighting some of those excesses in a closed-door briefing held on January 16, 2025, shortly before the Inauguration. I attach the briefing document for the record.³ The excesses and counter-productive uses supported with the hard-earned money of American taxpayers are, to say the least, “disturbing.”

But my focus today is not on “excess;” that is, what is commonly called “fraud, waste, and abuse.” I am happy DOGE has been able to do the sleuth work. I hope it continues, and hope that those responsible for “fraud, waste, and abuse” will be held accountable.

Today, however, my testimony is about the need for the President and Secretary Rubio to get our foreign policy bureaucracy under *policy* control. Without full transparency to those whose commissions invest them with the authority to assist the President in his constitutional duty under Article II to ensure that the laws are “faithfully executed,” there is neither Presidential control over foreign policy, nor any meaningful power of the purse.

Ensuring political accountability is neither an abstract concept nor an academic question. Lack of transparency and accountability in foreign affairs has “real world” consequences, including, but not limited to, useless, forever wars, cultural imperialism, unfettered migration, and human misery. All governments, including our own, are suspicious of individuals and organizations who operate within their respective territories and serve the interests of a “foreign principal.”⁴

³ Republican Guidance Memorandum, “America First Diplomacy: Examining Spending in the Biden State Department & Ensuring Future Aid Advances America’s National Security, January 16, 2025, at 9:00 AM, 2172 Rayburn House Office Building (copy attached and submitted for the record).

⁴ *See* Foreign Agent Registration Act [FARA], 22 U.S.C. §611(c)(d) (requiring registration by any person, entity, or organization serving as an “agent of a foreign principal”); <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara/frequently-asked-questions>

By statute, Congress has provided that, subject to the supervision of the President and the Secretary of State,

The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor *shall maintain continuous observation and review all matters pertaining to human rights and humanitarian affairs (including matters relating to prisoners of war and members of the United States Armed Forces missing in action) in the conduct of foreign policy*” [22 U.S.C. §2651a\(c\)\(2\)\(B\)](#) (emphasis added)

Although the plain language of the statute grants the DRL Assistant Secretary authority to require all Bureaus and Offices across the *entire* federal government – not just in State and USAID – to provide detailed information about the nature, purposes, impact, and amounts of their spending *and international activities* on the listed subjects, there is currently no readily accessible way for the Assistant Secretary either to access the information, or to compel its production. I will provide specific examples in my oral testimony.

The DOGE examination, which is ongoing, was a good start. So too was the merger of USAID into the State Department. The President’s Order reinstating “Schedule F” in the excepted service “for those who are in policy-influencing positions,” especially those who control large sums of money, was a further necessary step.⁵

But the biggest challenge lies within the State Department itself. As Secretary Rubio has recently written, we have “a State Department that stifles creativity, lacks accountability, and occasionally veers into outright hostility to American interests.”⁶ And, as I can attest from my own experience, my own policy staff in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor were denied access to information concerning grants and subgrants that had a direct and palpable impact on the policies that the Secretary was trying to implement. When, in December 2019, I promised one of our office directors that I would get her access to the data she needed, her admonition was: “Good luck, sir.”

Even after spending an enormous sum to automate the process by creating a “DRL Dashboard” designed to give the Assistant Secretary and others “real time” access to data drawn from the Office of Foreign Assistance (“F”) database, the prototype was shelved in January 2021 *by the then-DRL front office leadership* as soon as the Trump 45 Administration came to a close. Accountability and transparency, it appears, is too much to ask of bureaucrats who believe (or who have been encouraged by policy experts to believe) that they are “independent.” The result is the unseemly mess in which we find ourselves. No matter how well-qualified and dedicated, neither foreign service officers nor civil

(accessed May 5, 2025). As I pointed out in June 2024, Georgia was, at the time, the most recent country to adopt a law requiring all “organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power” to register with its government. India’s Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) speaks to the same issue. **Georgia:** See JAM News, “Venice Commission urges Georgia to repeal ‘foreign agents’ bill”, *JAM News*, 25.05.2024 at <https://jam-news.net/venice-commission-to-georgian-dream/> (accessed May 30, 2024). Links an English translation of Georgia’s new law can be found in the Venice Commission Report. See European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission: Georgia: Urgent Opinion on the Transparency of Foreign Influence issued on 21 May 2024 at [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdfid=CDL-PI\(2024\)013-e#page23](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdfid=CDL-PI(2024)013-e#page23) (accessed May 30, 2024). **India:** Ministry of Home Affairs, at <https://fcraonline.nic.in/home/index.aspx> (accessed May 30, 2024)

⁵ Executive Order, “Restoring Accountability to Policy-Influencing Positions within the Federal Workforce”, January 20, 2025, reinstating Executive Order 13957 of October 21, 2020 (Creating Schedule F in the Excepted Service) at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/restoring-accountability-to-policy-influencing-positions-within-the-federal-workforce/> (accessed May 6, 2025).

⁶ Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, “A New State Department to Meet the Challenges of a New Era”, U.S. Department of State, Substack at <https://statedept.substack.com/p/a-new-state-department-to-meet-the> (accessed May 6, 2025).

servants are authorized under the Constitution to have their “own foreign policies.” Using taxpayer funds to conduct rogue policies of this type is both illegal *and* unconstitutional.

I fully expect that my colleagues on the panel today will loudly and strenuously disagree. They are participants in what others have dubbed the NGO-Industrial Complex: a revolving door that spins between executive agencies, domestic and foreign NGOs, domestic and foreign think tanks, government contractors, and Congressional offices. But let me be clear. A revolving door saves time and energy by providing highly qualified and experienced foreign policy professionals when and where needed. We want experienced people.

The problem is lack of supervision and the sense of entitlement that comes with not having been subject to meaningful oversight by either the Secretary or the President. So, ignore the complaints about lack of “independence” and “authoritarian” behavior. As Elon Musk aptly observed:

One lesson I remember from the PayPal days: Do you know who complained the loudest? The Fraudsters. There would be immediate over the top indignation from the fraudsters. Normal people will say “I think there’s something wrong,” Fraudsters will come hot out the gate with fake outrage. They’ll claim that they’re a single mom with kids trying to make ends meet, but it’ll be some dude in another country scamming others. We’re going to see some pretty outrageous stuff from the fraudsters as we continue cracking down, they’re going to be the loudest.⁷

Good programs can and will survive, but before reauthorizing them, we need serious, transparent outcome evaluations.

In sum, whatever reorganization plan Secretary Rubio decides to implement, one thing is certain: All foreign policy must be aligned with the President’s vision of an “America First” agenda, and all State and other Department officials who are entrusted with authority to allocate and spent foreign assistance funds – or who administer the ultimate economic weapon: sanctions – *must* be subject to full transparency and accountability by a Senate-confirmed “officer of the United States” who reports to the Secretary of State.

III. Q: HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES “SPREAD FREEDOM” ABROAD?

A: By modeling it at home and in our dealings with foreign nations.

President Trump’s repeated demand that other countries respect our borders, our laws, and the integrity of our institutions is non-negotiable. When we demand that other countries respect our national security and the outcomes of our internal political debates, we are defending representative self-government, as well as *our freedom to disagree among ourselves*. That’s what self-government is all about.

Americans cannot, in good conscience, demand that other nations and peoples respect our sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedoms unless we respect theirs. Self-government is a fundamental human right.⁸

⁷ Noah, “Elon Musk Explains The #1 “Tell” of Those Who Are Guilty”, at <https://100percentfedup.com/elon-musk-explains-1-tell-those-who-are/> (accessed May 5, 2025).

⁸ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 21, provides:

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

We are wise, therefore, to bear in mind the wisdom embodied in President George Washington's *Farewell Address*. Our Nation must ...

Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct.

... Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people to surrender their interests.

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.⁹

President Washington's wisdom echoes in the words of our third President, Thomas Jefferson, who believed that our Declaration of Independence was a fundamental choice that, he hoped, would ...

be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all.) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self-government. The form which we have substituted restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view *the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born, with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few bootied and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others.*¹⁰ (emphasis added)

An "America First" foreign policy that respects "democracy" *at home* acknowledges that we, the citizens of the United States, have elected a Congress to represent us here in Washington, and a President to represent us at home and abroad. An "America First" foreign policy demands that our Nation's foreign policy "establishment" – also pejoratively known as "The Blob"¹¹ – accept the proposition that Article II of the Constitution confers upon the President *alone* the power to control American foreign policy, including the expenditure of foreign assistance funds.

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2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
 3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

⁹ George Washington, *Farewell Address*, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-address> (accessed May 6, 2025)

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Roger Chew Weightman, written on the occasion of the upcoming 50th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, 18 June 1826, in THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON, at <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-6179> (accessed May 6, 2025) (capitalization and hyphenation changed from the original).

¹¹ Christopher J. Fettweis, "The Beliefs of the Blob", *Orbis*, *v.* 67:1, 2-44 (2023) at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2022.12.006> (accessed May 6, 2023).

An “America First” foreign policy demands that the House and Senate not only exercise the powers entrusted to them by Article I, but that they actually use them as “checks and balances.” The Senate should promptly confirm pending nominations, and Congress must empower Senate-confirmed “officers of the United States” with the authority to exercise oversight and control what has become an out-of-control bureaucracy.

Whether the issue is foreign policy at State, surveillance policy at the FBI, immigration policy at Homeland Security, refugee policy at HHS, or False Claims Act enforcement at the Department of Justice, the efforts of DOGE have opened a window on a problem that those of us who have served in government know from experience.

There is no other way to say it: Many of those who have supervised the grant- and contract-making arms of our federal bureaucracies have run them as ATM and money laundries for domestic and foreign NGOs whose programs either make our international relations problems worse or have no measurable effect on them at all. These entities talk a good game on “democracy,” on the environment, and on the rights of workers, but the *outcomes* of all this spending and cultural manipulation – to the extent measured at all – are, in most cases, minimal. I shall provide examples in my oral testimony.

IV. CONCLUSION

I will close these written remarks with the observation that I strongly agree with the other assumption that gave this hearing its title. “Woke Values” (however defined) are, by their nature, inconsistent with human rights and freedoms. Those who proclaim – and ruthlessly enforce – “woke values” deny the very propositions on which this nation was founded.

If all persons are “created equal” and are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, it follows that the very *purpose* of government – and hence of our foreign policy – is “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity”.¹²

However one defines the term, “freedom” cannot exist in a culture driven by “Woke Values.” The structural and substantive protections for individuals and associations provided by institutions of representative self-government – including “due process” – guarantee equal *protection* of the laws. Our Constitution and laws do not, empower a permanent, elite class of professional managers and policy “experts” to command the resources – and hence the labor – of their fellow citizens. Most Americans would never, voluntarily, swear allegiance either to the agenda advancing “Woke” or “Globalist” Values,” or to the spending priorities of their adherents. Those who believe in a “woke” or “globalist” agenda are free argue the merits of these agendas (however dubious they may be), but they may not impose that agenda on the rest of us or hijack our hard-earned tax dollars to impose (or bribe) the leaders and citizens of other countries to adopt them.

In sum, the very best way for The United States to “spread freedom” is for the President and the Secretary to get firm control over the foreign policy “establishment” in Washington and abroad; to stop “contracting out” our efforts to “spread freedom”; and to engage friends, neighbors, and geopolitical rivals, as partners, on a bilateral basis.

¹² U.S. Const. Preamble (1878) at <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/> (accessed May 6, 2025)

Writing in Federalist 4, John Jay put it this way:

the safety of the people of America against dangers from FOREIGN force depends not only on their forbearing to give JUST causes of war to other nations, but also on their placing and continuing themselves in such a situation as not to INVITE hostility or insult; for it need not be observed that there are PRETENDED as well as just causes of war.”¹³ (emphasis in the original)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this information, and for the opportunity to testify in person. My oral testimony will provide concrete examples supporting the recommendations I have made in these written comments, such documentation as I have been able to gather to date.

¹³ John Jay, *The Federalist* #4, “Concerning the Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence”.