

Leading by Action: The Fierce Urgency for Diversity and Inclusion in the
Foreign Policy Workforce Hearing

Thursday, March 25, 2021
The House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs

Ambassador (Ret.) Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley

Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the SubCommittee, thank you for allowing me to speak today on this urgent topic. As an African American and as woman who worked her way up through the service, I know the weight of being othered that many employees in the Department carry.

I had to ignore those who silently questioned my suitability, my capability and whether I was a good “fit” —based solely on my color and gender. I know what it is to not get an opportunity because I don’t look a certain way or to be dismissed before I’ve made it through the door, —let alone taken a seat at the table.

And I know that my eventual success in the Department is all too rare. I have seen too many of my colleagues start their journey of service to the American people with dedication and joy, only to struggle without support, without mentors and without recourse when things go wrong. And then slowly lose trust that the system will treat them fairly. This knowledge fuels my passion to speak out and to work for the changes the Department needs to become an organization that deserves the devotion, sacrifice and dedication so many of us have freely given.

I am thrilled that today’s discussion is focused on what works. I know from experience that it’s important to frame any recommendation around three specific anchors. Intentionality: it must be connected directly to the change sought, Transparency: everyone must understand what is being asked of them and why, and finally, Accountability. Once action is determined to be necessary, leadership —up and down the ranks— must BE accountable for doing the work, or HELD accountable if they do not.

The GAO report released in 2020 is a disheartening picture of the progress that has not been made at State, but one that needs greater detail. The repair and improvement efforts that we all support must touch every bureau, every office, every action and every person at State. It requires a change in State's "business as usual." Secretary Blinken has shown strong commitment and I know I speak for many past, current, and future employees who are grateful for his leadership and the strong allyship from most State employees and Congress in this undertaking. The Bills introduced by Representatives Castro, Bass and Spiers to increase diversity and eliminate barriers to successful careers for women and minorities are strong. Coupled with your willingness to drill down on what works we can improve the professional lives of almost every group of employees within the Department, including LGBT+ colleagues and those who serve with a disability.

I have been privileged to participate in discussions that underpinned recommendations in several reports including the Academy of Diplomacy, The Association of Black Ambassadors and the recently released Truman Center report which I ask to be entered into the record. Among the many outstanding recommendations offered up from these and other sources, I would cite five recommendations that will launch a change in best practices for what must be done to improve diversity and inclusion at the State Department. I would be happy to expand on them in the Q and A period.

1. The Department needs to re-energize and strengthen its mentorship program.
2. The Department needs to re-energize a selective and focused mid level entry program.
3. The Department must include diversity and inclusion precepts for promotion from the mid level to the senior ranks.
4. The Department must ensure that employees found to harass or discriminate against minorities and women be held professionally accountable.
5. Ensure the already announced Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer has full access to data, staff and resources.