



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

Hearing

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Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs

U.S. House of Representatives

Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns

Westport, Massachusetts

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Madam Chairwoman and ranking member Rogers, thank you for this invitation to testify on the crisis in diversity and inclusion in the U.S. Department of State and USAID. The committee’s commitment to expanding diversity and inclusion in the U.S. Foreign Service and State Department is right and commendable and urgently needed.

I am honored to testify today with Ambassadors Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley and Harry Thomas and with Ms. Abigail Golden-Vazquez. I am certainly mindful of the fact that they have faced barriers of discrimination in their careers that I did not. Their testimony will be especially valuable to you and the committee as each of them has contributed many thoughtful proposals to reform the Department of State on this and other issues.

In November 2020, two retired colleagues from the State Department, Ambassadors Marc Grossman and Marcie Ries, and I published a comprehensive report advocating the adoption of major reforms to strengthen the Foreign Service.

Our Harvard Kennedy School report, “A U.S. Diplomatic Service for the 21st Century”, made ten recommendations to strengthen the Foreign Service—including a new Foreign Service Act to be passed by Congress, the creation of a 15 percent training float, an overhaul of an overly rigid personnel system, a new mid-level entry program, a diplomatic reserve corps, expanding the number of Ambassadorial and senior Washington appointments in favor of career professionals, and even a new name for the Foreign Service—the United States Diplomatic Service. Much of my testimony is based on the findings of this report.

During the forty workshops we held with more than 200 currently serving State Department officers and others from outside the department, however, one subject dominated our discussions more than

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any other—the crisis of diversity and inclusion in the Foreign Service and in the State Department as a whole.

In meeting after meeting, we heard from senior, mid-level and junior officers and from the ranks of retired officers, that this was a cancer eating away at the strength and future of the State Department. We listened as officers spoke with more genuine passion about the imperative of change on this issue than any other facing the Department and its Foreign and Civil Service.

Most of the recommendations in our report on diversity and inclusion came from these conversations, email exchanges and offline discussions.

My colleagues and I recommend that the current State Department leadership and the Congress “focus relentlessly on diversity as a first-order strategic priority” for the future.

We also believe, as we stated in our report, that “a revived, rebuilt and high performing Foreign Service must reflect the diversity and inclusivity of America.”

The United States is currently failing to meet that standard.

The most important argument for greater diversity and inclusion is that it is the correct reform to make based on American values, specifically the promise that all Americans should enjoy the same rights of equality, opportunity, belonging and participation in our society. It is also true that greater diversity and inclusion will strengthen the Foreign Service’s effectiveness as our primary vehicle to interact, through our 273 embassies and consulates, with the rest of the world.

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The crisis of diversity and inclusion, of course, has been with us for a very long time in both Democratic and Republican Administrations.

It was brought back into full view during the last four years when only two of the confirmed or acting of the 23 Assistant Secretaries of State were women or people of color. Only five of the 189 Ambassadors were African American compared to 46 African American Ambassadors in the Obama Administration and 44 in the George W. Bush Administration. There has been very little progress made in opportunities for Latinx officers for decades. Much more needs to be done for our Asian American, Native American and LGBTQ officers. Major steps must also be made to provide for greater opportunities for female officers, especially at the senior levels of the Foreign Service.

Indeed, we highlighted data in our report that there has been little progress in the diversity of employees of the Department of State across the board during the last sixteen years.

The Biden Administration is already taking steps to address this crisis.

Secretary Tony Blinken has made clear that this issue will be a major priority. He has met with the affinity groups and others in the Foreign and Civil Service to listen to their ideas on how this problem can be resolved. President Biden has already appointed the most diverse cabinet in American history. Vice President Harris is a leader on this issue. There is no doubt that driving further change on diversity and inclusion will continue to be a major priority for the new leadership at the State Department.

As you consider what Congress can do, it is clear that this issue will be addressed most effectively on a bipartisan basis. Both parties, and all Americans, have an interest in seeing a major transformation in favor of far greater diversity in our foreign affairs agencies.

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One of the major takeaways from our report is that good intentions will not be sufficient to produce the change we need. Change has to be ambitious, deeply rooted and ongoing. A commitment to far-reaching and historic change must reside both in the leadership of the Department but also in the work of every employee of the Department of State.

With this in mind, our Harvard report made the following major recommendations on diversity and inclusion.

First, we believe leadership on this issue must start at the very top of the executive branch with the President, Vice President and Secretary of State, along with both parties in Congress, to reform the way the U.S. government recruits, trains, retains and promotes members of the Foreign Service.

Second, there are steps the State Department, led by the Secretary of State and his leadership team, can take on their own authority for immediate impact.

- Secretary Blinken deserves credit for his early leadership in creating the position of Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer who will report directly to him.
- The Department can also rest responsibility for progress squarely on the shoulders of each member of the Foreign and Civil Service. We advocated in our report that, to be promoted, all officers at every level of the service should be able to point to specific actions they have taken to promote a more diverse Department. The standard for what constitutes “actions” should also be high. It is not sufficient to certify that one is sensitive to these concerns. Specific actions, large and small, to help resolve the problem will be more meaningful and long-lasting.

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- As some of the State Department’s affinity group members advised us: “Structural problems require structural solutions.” With that in mind, the Department should commit to increased transparency and set ambitious metrics to mark progress for all to see.
- The Department must also make a far greater effort to recruit minority diplomats. I know from my own teaching at the Kennedy School that the Rangel, Pickering and Payne Fellowship programs work. We are teaching students of genuine academic, professional and personal distinction who will strengthen the Department for years to come. The Trump Administration was right to propose in its final months that this program be expanded thanks to the leadership of the Director General of the Foreign Service, Carol Perez, and others. The new Administration and Congress should consider an even more ambitious expansion of these programs.
- We were advised by many of the experts with whom we met that the State Department must begin recruiting students, as the military does, at the high school level and in colleges throughout the United States. A greater focus must be made to recruit throughout all of the fifty states at both public and private universities and at historically Black colleges.
- One of the problems that the Rangel, Pickering and Payne Fellows have identified is the stigma they feel is linked to these programs. The Department, through training at the Foreign Service Institute and in the statements and actions of its leadership, must push against this and confront both conscious and unconscious bias in the ranks.
- As we emphasized in our report: Accountability should be a watchword. Leadership should hold managers accountable for diversity and inclusion within their staffs at every level. Every Foreign and Civil Service Officer must help to resolve this problem.
- There is more the Department can do – including creating official mentorship programs for all minority employees, intensified training on the issue of race, and interviewing each departing employee for advice on how progress can be best achieved. A much greater effort should be made to retain those officers we take such care to recruit. Too many are leaving

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during the first decade of their careers. We underscored in the report that a successful program should address structural and procedural bias across the board, including recruitment, entry, assignment and promotion processes.

Third, there are actions Congress can take, working with the State Department, to make meaningful progress, as well.

- Congress can help recruitment of minority college and graduate school students by ensuring the Department has the funds to ensure all internships are paid at our embassies and consulates overseas as well as in Washington. This single step will help to ensure fairness so that students of all income levels can compete fairly for these prized positions.
- Congress and the Department leadership should work together to create a Reserve Officer Training Corps for the State Department. This would help to recruit many additional minority employees who, like those in the military reserves, would train annually in civilian functions for service overseas during emergencies.
- We also recommended in our report the creation of a Mid-Level Entry program. This would help the State Department to recruit American citizens with skills in high demand today, including in information technology, public health, cyber security and other areas. In doing so, the Department could diversify its workforce more quickly and at a higher level than the junior officer ranks. We advised in our report that the Department will have to work hard to ensure that those in underrepresented communities are aware of these opportunities. We also cautioned that this program should be administered rigorously to avoid it becoming a path for politicization.

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Finally, the leadership of Congress this year and next will continue to be vital if progress is to be achieved in diversifying and making more inclusive the ranks of the Foreign and Civil Service at the State Department.

Your own comments, Madam Chairwoman, that our lead foreign affairs agencies should “reflect the diversity of the country” are an important signal of how Congress can help to lead this effort. Your decision to hold this hearing is another example of Congressional interest and commitment.

In addition, bills introduced by Representatives Meeks, Bass and Castro would all help to produce the kind of progress many of us hope to see.

In addition to the testimony of the four of us today, your committee’s deliberations on the diversity and inclusion issue will be helped by many of the very good reports made public during the past year including by the American Academy of Diplomacy, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Truman Center and the Partnership for Public Service.

The road to reform will not be easy but it is essential that the Congress and Executive Branch walk it together. The future effectiveness of the State Department and American diplomacy is at stake as well as our American values of equal opportunity and equality for all.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.