
Diversity and Inclusion at State: The Time to Act Is Now

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The murder of George Floyd, among many other disturbing examples of police violence against people of color, has awakened a renewed desire to address the continuing legacy of racial and social injustice in the United States. This tragic event has also provided new impetus for looking at racial bias, diversity and inclusion in the State Department with an eye toward concrete action. The result we all seek is a Department which truly reflects the rich diversity of America where no one feels left out or undervalued.

Few have accused the State Department of being in the forefront of social change. At times, it has had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the modern age, usually by court order. Indeed, as late as the early 1970s, female Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) were obliged to resign their commissions when they married, the idea being that there was no possible way they could be a wife, mother and FSO at the same time.¹ Things changed only when a successful class-action suit by the female officers forced the Department to stop this backward practice and re-instate them.

In 1986, African American FSOs filed a class-action lawsuit alleging that State kept them from being promoted and advancing to top positions. The Department fought the lawsuit tooth and nail, with one federal judge in 1994 criticizing State's arguments and delaying tactics as "beyond belief" and a "disgrace." These FSOs finally prevailed in 1996 and received backpay and reinstatements.

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PROBLEMS IN MID-LEVEL AND SENIOR LEVEL PROMOTIONS

While there has been some progress since these two key examples, and the Department is less “male, pale and Yale” as the phrase goes, there is still the nagging problem of underrepresentation of minorities, especially Black and Hispanic Americans, particularly at the senior levels. One former ambassador of Hispanic origin has noted that there are now fewer Hispanic officers in the Foreign Service than when he entered in 1977.

A January 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report has detailed the problem, noting that while there was not enough information to suggest a direct causal relationship, racial and ethnic minorities in both the Foreign Service and Civil Service at State were less likely to be promoted through the mid-career ranks than their white counterparts. The report also discussed the persistent issue of underrepresentation of minorities and women at the senior ranks in both services.

Congress took an active interest in the GAO report in June 2020, when the House Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight held a hearing to discuss it. Among the witnesses were retired Ambassadors Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley and Peter Romero, respectively, the first African American woman to serve as ambassador to Malta and the highest-ranking Hispanic official in the Department at the time as Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Both laid out the problems they had experienced personally as minorities in the Foreign Service, including being considered somehow less able than their white counterparts. Their prescriptions focused on making the promotion of diversity and inclusion an additional part of promotion criteria in the Foreign Service, establishing accountability of supervisors via a 360-degree evaluation process, and including more minorities on the boards that determine intake and promotions.

The House subcommittee held a second hearing in September 2020 at which Carol Perez, the Director General of the Foreign Service, said the Department had recently expanded the Pickering and Rangel Fellowship programs; prioritized training to recognize the problem of unconscious bias; and would ask for funding to provide paid summer internships to attract students from underprivileged communities.²

THE ROLE OF THE AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION (AFSA)

The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the labor union and professional association of over 80 percent of America’s active-duty diplomats, employs both FSOs and specialists across five foreign affairs

agencies. Hence, AFSA has a critical role to play. We have engaged with employee affinity groups within the State Department. Our members include African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, women, disabled officers, the LGBT community, and others to hear what they think should be done to promote diversity and inclusion. We discuss these issues regularly with high-level officials, including the Deputy Secretary and the Director General of the Foreign Service. In 2020, we devoted the September and October editions of our award-winning monthly *Foreign Service Journal* to the ideas and experiences on the way ahead of individuals, employee affinity groups, and Department officials.³

HOW TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY IN THE STATE DEPARTMENT

Among the many good ideas currently being considered, AFSA believes the following should be pursued to put in practice policies that will help diversify the State Department:

- ***Expand the Pickering and Rangel Fellowships:*** These fellowships, named after a distinguished former senior career diplomat and an influential former member of Congress, respectively, were established to bring members of underprivileged and underrepresented communities, including many people of color, into the Foreign Service. On September 2, AFSA was gratified to learn that, beginning in FY-2021, the Department will increase both Pickering and Rangel Fellowships by 50 percent; from 30 Fellows per program to 45 Fellows per program.
- ***Formalize a leadership program for mid-level employees of color:*** Intake is important, but equally if not more so is retention, promotion and mentorship. The retention problem for African American officers at the mid-level is clear, which has translated into far fewer senior FSOs of color. Thus, establishing a formal mid-level leadership program, to be administered by the Foreign Service Institute, State's world-class training facility in Arlington, Virginia, would provide career guidance to FSOs, as well as hone their managerial and supervisory skills. Coupled with senior-level mentors, this initiative would likely create a more diverse pipeline of officers who are prepared for future Deputy Chief of Mission and Chief of Mission positions.
- ***Provide paid summer internships, abroad and domestically:*** Another way to attract underrepresented and underprivileged communities to the Foreign Service is to ensure paid summer internships for college

and graduate students at our embassies abroad and domestic facilities. With the exception of a small needs-based program that currently exists, the vast majority of these internships are unpaid and housing is often not included. As such, these internships cater to those students who do not require an income during the summer. AFSA was pleased that during the aforementioned September 2020 subcommittee hearing, participants voiced bipartisan support for funding these summer internships.

- ***Include more minority employees on boards and promotion panels:*** Right now, these boards, which decide who enters the Foreign Service and who gets promoted, encourage participation of minority participants and women. However, such participation is not mandated. Perhaps, as Ambassador Abercrombie-Winstanley has argued, the time has come, for example, to require that of the four Assessors who examine new candidates, at least two hail from under-represented communities.
- ***Hold supervisors accountable:*** Right now, the yearly evaluation reports for Foreign Service employees at supervisory grades do not analyze how these employees are perceived by their subordinates and peers as contributing to diversity and inclusion initiatives. Having this 360-degree view could help supervisors (and their supervisors) understand where employees might be falling short. The Foreign Service already has a well-developed 360-degree process that includes narrative and numerical ratings from subordinates, peers and supervisors to decide leadership assignments—why not do the same for yearly evaluations?

AFSA'S OWN INITIATIVES

Aside from weighing the creative ideas out there at present, AFSA has taken the following initiatives:

- ***Emphasizing Diversity and Inclusion in the Core Precepts:*** These Precepts, which include a number of criteria that discuss the employee's leadership, substantive, interpersonal, intellectual, and other skills, are the basis by which Foreign Service employees are promoted. However, there is little that discusses how an employee advances diversity and inclusion. In 2021, AFSA will renegotiate these Precepts with Department management and push to include diversity and inclusion as a key criterion. Also, in 2021, AFSA will

renegotiate the Procedural Precepts, which govern the work of the Foreign Service promotion boards, to make certain the composition of these boards is as diverse and inclusive as possible.

- ***Data on Why Mid-level Officers of Color are Leaving:*** In April, at AFSA's urging, the Department revamped the exit interview process to include more specific questions that could shed light on, for example, why mid-level FSOs of color appear to be leaving the Foreign Service in relatively greater numbers. We expect to see the first results of this Department-level data in the last quarter of 2020.
- ***Racial Bias Survey:*** In mid-July AFSA sent out a survey to all of our members asking them if they had been the subject of racial (or other) discrimination. Over 1600 of our members responded, and AFSA published the results in the October 2020 Foreign Service Journal.⁴ Preliminary data show that of all forms of bias, intentional microaggressions was the most common category of complaint. In aggregate, 27 percent of respondents reported experiencing what they perceived as intentional microaggressions. However, the spectrum of answers varied widely based on race and gender: 0 percent of white males reported being the subject of intentional microaggressions, while 14 percent of women, 63 percent of black males and 72 percent of black female respondents reporting being the target of intentional microaggressions.

Regarding bias in the workplace, 51 percent of respondents reported experiencing no bias in the workplace. But when those numbers are broken down, the picture varied greatly depending on the demographic group of the respondent. For example, 73 percent of all males who took the survey reported no experience of bias, as did 64 percent of all women of all demographic groups. However, only 11% of black females and 20% of black male FS members reported experiencing no bias in the workplace. AFSA hopes to use this data to shape programs and policies, including augmenting existing training that deals with unconscious bias, that could help the Department bridge the racial, ethnic and gender gap described above.

LET'S SEIZE THIS MOMENT

At this watershed moment in our nation's history, with so many focused on racial and social injustice, the State Department has a unique opportunity to promote policies for the Foreign and Civil Service that attract, retain, and promote to the highest levels those from underrepresented communities. AFSA will support Department officials in this

endeavor, while holding them accountable for outcomes that address long-standing biases that keep this most senior cabinet department from realizing its full potential.*f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Andrea Strano, "Foreign Service Women Today: The Palmer Case and Beyond," *The Foreign Service Journal* (March 2016).
- 2 U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Diversity and Diplomacy: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., September 22, 2020.
- 3 See further AFSA, eds., *The Foreign Service Journal*, (The American Foreign Service Association, 2020) <<http://afsa.org/fsj-archive>> September and October editions.
- 4 AFSA News, "AFSA Member Survey on Bias in the Foreign Affairs Agencies," *The Foreign Service Journal* (October 2020): 68.