
Hitting Bottom in Foggy Bottom

The State Department Suffers from Low Morale, Bottlenecks, and Bureaucratic Ineptitude. Do We Need to Kill It to Save It?

By
Matthew Armstrong
Armstrong Strategic Insights Group

[The following article originally appeared in *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2009.]

Discussion over the fate of Foggy Bottom usually focuses on the tenure of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the troubles of public diplomacy, and the rise of special envoys on everything from European pipelines to Afghanistan and Pakistan. But Americans would benefit more from a reassessment of the core functionality of the United States Department of State (DOS).

Years of neglect and marginalization, as well as a dearth of long-term vision and strategic planning, have left the 19th-century institution hamstrung with fiefdoms and bureaucratic bottlenecks. The Pentagon now funds and controls a wide range of foreign-policy and diplomatic priorities—from development to public diplomacy and beyond. The world has changed, with everyone from politicians to talking heads to terrorists directly influencing global audiences. The most pressing issues are stateless: pandemics, recession, terrorism, poverty, proliferation, and conflict. But as report after report, investigation after investigation, has highlighted, the DOS is broken and paralyzed, unable to respond to the new 21st-century paradigm.

How did it get so bad? Is it possible to fix? Or should we just push it over the wall like a great Humpty Dumpty and reassign the pieces?

There is growing evidence that the internal machinations of the DOS have corrupted its “core missions” of traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy. This year, for example, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the department completely failed in its now four-year-old attempt to reorganize its nonproliferation bureau (a bureau that remains leaderless). [This referenced GAO report is available at www.gao.gov/new.items/d09738.pdf.] Besides failing to address mission overlap, low morale, and lack of career opportunities, the failed reorganization caused a significant drop in expertise in offices focused on proliferation issues—including “today’s threats posted by Iran, North Korea, and Syria,” the GAO’s report said—and coordination with bodies like the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Another report by the DOS’s Inspector General this year [available online at <http://oig.state.gov/documents/organization/127270.pdf>] described severe and broad dysfunction within the Africa bureau, while ignoring—perhaps considering it a given—the lack of department wide integration and leadership in operations. Examples of the dysfunction range from not providing public diplomacy personnel with computers capable of reading interoffice memos to a failure to effectively work with the new Africa Command.

By necessity, the Department of Defense (DOD) has stepped in where DOS has tuned out: Foggy Bottom relies on Pentagon funding and even personnel for basic operations central to its mission. For example, the DOD now performs much strategic communications work traditionally the purview of the DOS. In Somalia, for example, the DOS’s budget for public diplomacy is \$30,000. The

Pentagon's is \$600,000. And, in the DOS's bureaucratic wisdom, the \$30,000 does not even belong to its Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Further, rivalries between the different “cones”—or career tracks, referred to by one insider as the “conal caste system”—at the DOS severely impacts morale, career growth, and even operations. The report on the Africa bureau noted that in 2002, public affairs and public diplomacy was a “failed office”—and that the situation is worse in 2009. Public outreach workers said the bureau's leadership “does not understand public diplomacy.” The sentiment is widespread. A 2008 report by a congressional ombudsman, the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, [available online at www.state.gov/documents/organization/106297.pdf] described a systemic failure to support and train public diplomacy officers in the field, as well as professional discrimination against those in the career track.

Attempts to fix the DOS have focused on short-term issues, such as ameliorating its shortages in human and financial resources. The last eight Secretaries of State have attempted to bolster the department by bolstering its bottom line. No less than Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, have long suggested transferring funds from the DOD to SOS. But the situation is so dire that the DOS, at this point, could not even absorb and spend that much-needed infusion of cash. If there were a wholesale transfer of funds tomorrow, the lack of capacity and skills at the DOS would mean it would have to give it back to the DOD or dole it out to contractors.

The creeping militarization of United States foreign policy is itself deeply worrying, not just to Gates and Mullen, but also to such luminaries as Secretary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden. In 2008, then-Senator Biden questioned the “expanding role of the military in United States foreign policy.” He said he was concerned by the “migration of functions and authorities from United States civilian agencies to the DOD.”

Some commentators have even wondered aloud whether the best way to fix the DOS might be to destroy it. Foggy Bottom could retain a small core staff for its embassies and ambassadors. All other functions—such as public diplomacy; countering misinformation and propaganda; and development, including provincial reconstruction staffing—could migrate to the Pentagon or become wholly independent agencies.

But atomizing the DOS would ultimately prove dangerous and further the militarization of foreign policy. The Pentagon needs a counterbalance, a vertically integrated DOS that the President, Congress, and the United States public can count on. Change, rather than creative destruction, is what Foggy Bottom needs.

Envision a DOS capable of leading whole-of-government initiatives with a strategic focus instead of one hidebound department geared by structure and tradition to execute state-to-state diplomacy. This “DOS and Non-State” would be as deft at tackling stateless terrorist networks and hurricanes as it would be at fostering and upholding alliances with foreign ministers. To transform Foggy Bottom in this way will require breaking the rigid hierarchy, stovepipes, and bottlenecks which make the Pentagon look lean and dynamic in comparison.

Modern global affairs are not compartmentalized by political borders. Besides expanding the overly shallow and narrow authorities of the public diplomacy bureau, Clinton must restructure the DOS to focus less on countries and more on regions. Currently, each of Foggy Bottom's regional bureaus, such as Near East Affairs, is configured to oversee its patch of embassies. Country Desk

Officers, and most ambassadors, report to an Assistant Secretary, the regional head. The Assistant Secretary in turn reports to an Undersecretary, who reports to Clinton.

Clinton should name the regional bureau heads, currently Assistant Secretaries, to Undersecretary status. This would help eliminate an unnecessary bureaucratic layer and would also align the DOS with the DOD (which has powerful regional commands, such as United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)). The DOS's regional leaders would hold an equivalent civilian rank to Four-Star Combatant Commanders like General David Petraeus. These changes would promise to improve communications, synchronize missions, and put the department on the right path for today's requirements.

But Clinton should beware reforming the DOS too quickly from within—her efforts could be paralyzed by a bureaucracy in mutiny that would simply wait her out. United States national security would suffer, and the Pentagon's growing power would become more entrenched. Clinton will need the clear and unequivocal support of the President and more importantly Congress, which authorizes DOS spending bills, to have a chance at success.

In a burst of activity after Barack Obama's election, Congress authorized more money and people for the DOS and pushed for greater public diplomacy. Still more is required. The question asked over the last eight years as the DOS abrogated its various responsibilities—if not Defense, then who?—will not, indeed cannot, be answered until the department steps up to the plate and becomes effective and visible in leading and implementing United States foreign policy. This will take time. But, as the saying goes, there is no time like the present. The United States now has a Congress that supports change, Secretaries of State and Defense who want change, a President whose entire election platform was built around the word “change,” and an American public that would be outraged at the dysfunction if it only knew the details.

About the Author

Matthew Armstrong is a principal with Armstrong Strategic Insights Group and a member of the Public Diplomacy Council. He publishes the public diplomacy and strategic communications.