

The State Department's Future: Does It Have One?

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I spent over 30 years in the State Department and was proud to be a part of that institution for every day of those 30 some years. That pride derived in large part from the superb and dedicated people with whom I worked, and the purpose we all sought to foster—our national security.

Were I still in the Department (relax, I'm not coming back) would I still be proud? I doubt it. Why? The people are still of exceptional quality. The national security is still the purpose. But the institution is withering on the vine.

A few examples:

- ◆ The current attrition rate for Foreign Service Officers with eight to ten years of service is 38 percent;
- ◆ The international affairs budget (which includes State's budget) is now, in real terms, about 20 percent less than its average during the late 1970s and the 1980s.
- ◆ The Department's communications and computer technology may have been adequate for much of the 20th century; it is woefully inadequate for the 21st.
- ◆ Some 80 percent of our Embassies (despite Admiral Crowe's excellent efforts) are inadequately secured. State's front-line personnel are unnecessarily put in harms way.

This is but a thin list of the obvious facts. Yet, even more disturbing is the unquantifiable but none-the-less real diminution of respect for the Department within the counsels of government. Increasingly the advice of the experts is not asked, is given short shrift, or ignored.

If the trend continues the Department and the Foreign Service will soon be responsible for little more than "rations and quarters."

What is to be done?

Any "cure" must begin within the Department itself. There is not space here to do more than suggest some of the areas deserving of reform: (1) Recruitment needs a major overhaul. It is, for example, insane to expect first class people to wait for months before they are brought into the Foreign Service. (2) The personnel system needs streamlining. Everyone knows this is true, but the agony of attempting reform makes the most

courageous cavil. (3) The Department needs a “cultural” reformation of major proportions. Few in the Congress understand the Department or the Foreign Service, much less the issues they deal with. Few in the Department or the Foreign Service understand the Congress or its concerns. If the Pentagon can manage an effective relationship with Congress, State ought to be able to do so as well.

The need for a more effective relationship with Congress is glaringly obvious. Many of State’s most serious problems are directly attributable to the Congress; they will not be resolved until the Congress takes its obligations in foreign affairs as seriously as it used to do. It has grown increasingly irresponsible in recent years. First and foremost, inadequate budgets year upon year; inexcusable failure to appropriate funds for security improvements for our Embassies; failure to move or reject ambassadorial appointments in a timely manner (see tables in the Annex)¹; growing inattention to and ignorance of international trade, economic, and political affairs. Senators and Congressmen and women of an earlier time who knew and were involved in world affairs have been replaced by those who never served in the military and never traveled abroad. Some even brag about never having had a passport.

What is to be done?

Get tough. The Department needs to be far more forceful, publicly and privately, in its demand for funds and support for its role in the formulation and conduct of America’s foreign policy. We all know that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Well, State, start squeaking, regularly and loudly! It can make a difference.

An associated activity—public outreach—should be enhanced. The existing program should be strengthened. Ambassadors should meet regularly with members of Congress, and be sent around the country to speak to anyone who will listen. Also, retired ambassadors—particularly non-career ambassadors—are a resource that could be far more effectively used than is now the case.

If State’s budgetary problems are ever to be other than hand-to-mouth, fundamental reform of the Congressional budgetary process will be necessary. The State Department’s budget, now a part of the so-called 150 Account, should be considered by the Congress as part of the national security budget, rather than linked, as it now is, to the Commerce and Justice budgets. State is as much a part of the national security apparatus as Defense; it is more than time that this reality be reflected in the way we think about its budget.

This proposal has been made before, but it has always run aground thanks to Congressional reluctance to shift committee responsibilities or think differently even as conditions change. But the idea makes eminent sense, and should be put forward at every opportunity.

As I have read over all of the above I realize how much remains unsaid about the state of State. This venerable institution has served the country well for over two centuries.

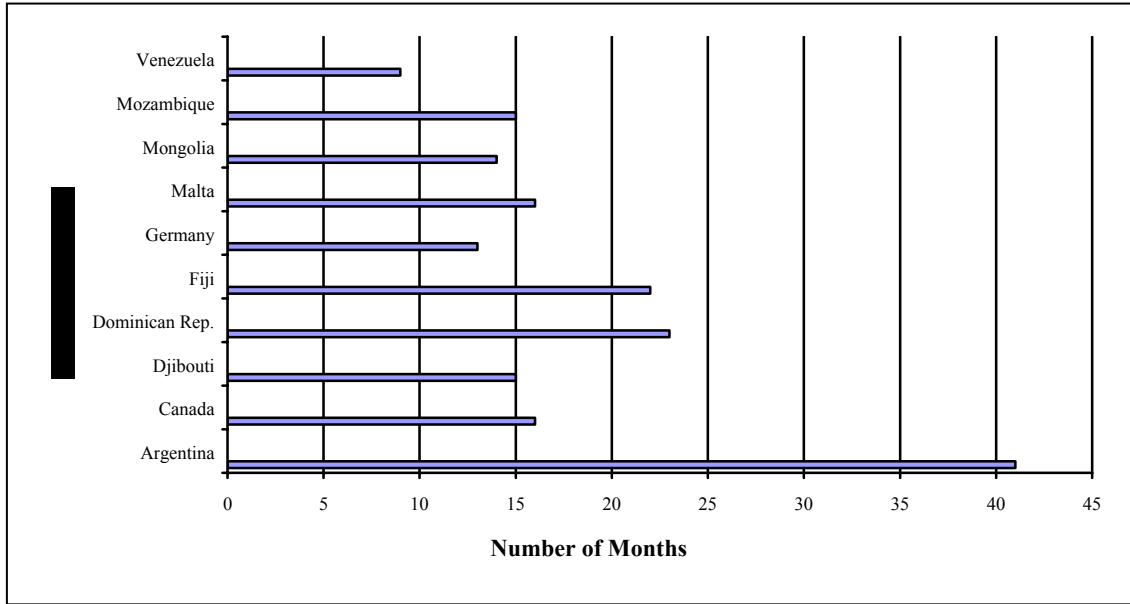
¹ *The Administration is also guilty, often taking far too long to send nominations to the Senate.*

But that its influence has dimmed over the past few years is undeniable. Admittedly, much of the responsibility for this state of affairs rests with the Department. Something is wrong when the Department that should be at the center of our foreign policy apparatus cannot even claim to be primus inter pares. So change—reform if you will—must begin at home. The next administration, Bush or Gore, should put that issue at the top of its foreign policy agenda.

But State Department reform without some fundamental changes in the way the Congress deals with—and thinks about—foreign affairs will leave us standing on one foot. The challenges of the first decades of the 21st century will be intense. The end of the Cold War has not made America's international role any less difficult to manage; superpower confrontation is gone, but the complexities of a world in the midst of technological revolution, rampant nationalism, and local instabilities will demand a sophisticated American foreign policy whether we like it or not. Amateurism won't do. Either we put the State Department—an effective State Department—back at the heart of the foreign policy apparatus, or we will, in time, pay a heavy price.

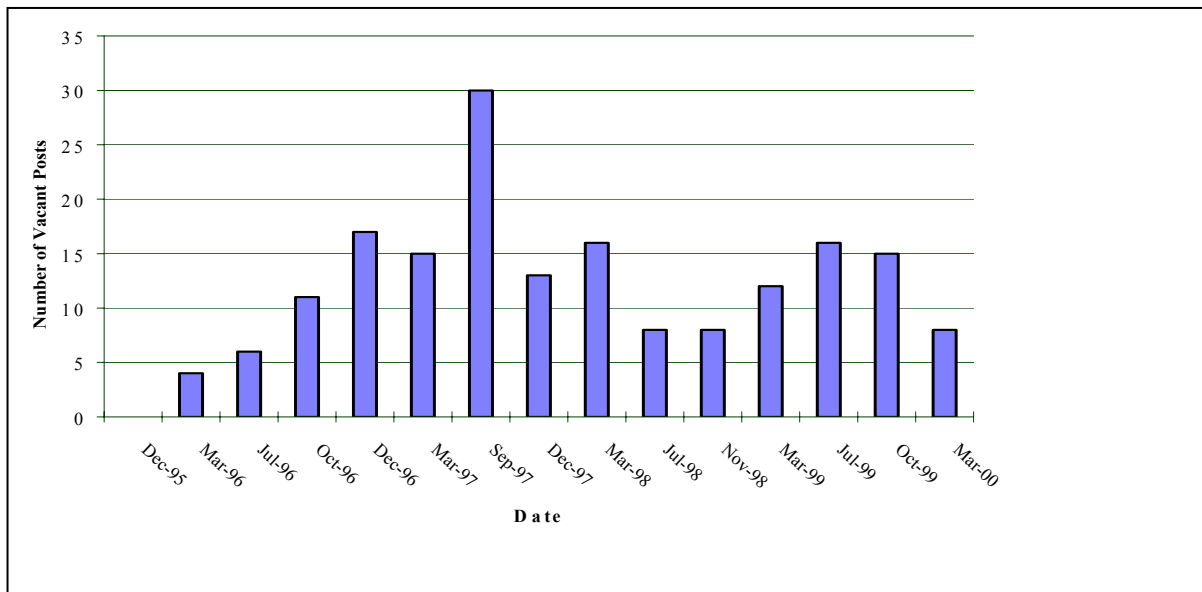
Annex: Tables

Length of Vacancies at Selected US Chiefs of Mission Posts*



*The length of vacancy is calculated from the date that the previous Chief of Mission left post through the appointment date of the new Chief of Mission.

**Number of US Chiefs of Mission Post Vacancies:
December 1995 – March 2000**



Sources: United States Department of State, List of Chiefs of Mission, 1995-2000, and the US Department of State Office of the Historian's Web site.