

# Foreign Policy

## HOW THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION BROKE THE STATE DEPARTMENT

**Morale has hit rock bottom at Foggy Bottom, as American foreign service officers languish and Rex Tillerson builds a mini-empire.**

---

**BY ROBBIE GRAMER, DAN DE LUCE, AND COLUM  
LYNCH**

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS DANGER FOR FOREIGN POLICY

JULY 31, 2017

The office furniture started appearing weeks ago.

Employees at the State Department couldn't help but notice the stacks of cubicles lined up in the corridor of the seventh floor.

For diplomats at the department, it was the latest sign of the "empire" being built by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's top aides. The cubicles are needed to accommodate dozens of outsiders being hired to work in a dramatically expanded front office that is supposed to advise Tillerson on policy.

Foreign service officers see this expansion as a "parallel department" that could effectively shut off the secretary and his advisors from the career employees in the rest of the building. The new hires, several State officials told **Foreign Policy**, will be working for the policy planning staff, a small office set up in 1947 to provide strategic advice to the secretary that typically has about 20-25 people on its payroll. One senior State Department official and one recently retired diplomat told **FP** that Tillerson has plans to double or perhaps triple its size, even as he proposes a sweeping reorganization and drastic cuts to the State Department workforce. Veterans of the U.S. diplomatic corps say the expanding front office is part of an unprecedented assault on the State Department: A hostile White House is slashing

its budget, the rank and file are cut off from a detached leader, and morale has plunged to historic lows. They say President Donald Trump and his administration dismiss, undermine, or don't bother to understand the work they perform and that the legacy of decades of American diplomacy is at risk.

By failing to fill numerous senior positions across the State Department, promulgating often incoherent policies, and systematically shutting out career foreign service officers from decision-making, the Trump administration is undercutting U.S. diplomacy and jeopardizing America's leadership role in the world, according to more than three dozen current and former diplomats interviewed by FP.

## **TILLERSON “BROKE THE DAMN PROCESS.”**

“I used to wake up every morning with a vision about how to do the work to make the world a better place,” said one State Department official, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. “It's pretty demoralizing if you are committed to making progress. I now spend most of my days thinking about the morass. There is no vision.”

Foggy Bottom initially had high hopes for Tillerson, the former ExxonMobil CEO Trump tapped to become his diplomat-in-chief. But those hopes have evaporated as diplomats grow increasingly exasperated by his isolation and aloofness, all while the White House and Pentagon steamroll the State Department's role in foreign-policy making.

Current and former senior foreign service officers say the Trump administration is hollowing out and marginalizing the State Department, with a dismissive attitude to diplomacy and the civil servants who execute it. They say the diplomatic corps is facing an unprecedented crisis. When Tillerson has tried to defend his ailing department, he has gotten stonewalled and outmaneuvered by the White House.

“If you break the way the State Department actually functions, then you're going to have chaos,” said one official who recently quit, speaking on condition of anonymity. “People aren't going to make decisions — you haven't empowered anyone to make decisions. People don't trust anyone, so then it all has to run through you.”

Tillerson, the official said, “broke the damn process.”

Even before Trump was inaugurated, State Department employees worried that diplomacy would be given short shrift in the new administration. Trump's transition team appeared disorganized and lacked a clear plan, civil servants who worked with them said. While Trump's “America First” rhetoric unnerved many diplomats, they welcomed Tillerson and viewed his corporate experience as an asset.

Just weeks into the administration, however, came a series of blows for Foggy Bottom. In February, the administration sacked several senior career diplomats without naming their successors. That sent a chilling effect throughout the department's senior ranks: They could be next.

Not too long after, the White House rolled out a [proposed budget](#) that called for drastic cuts of up to 31 percent to State Department funding and even included language to suggest folding the U.S. Agency for International Development into State. Although lawmakers from both parties quickly pushed back and indicated that the budget request was dead on arrival, the spending plan sent a clear message from the White House about how it prioritized the State Department — it didn't. "There's no one protecting the institution of the State Department," vented one foreign service officer. "They don't give a shit about what's happening to us."

In early spring, as the Trump administration readied to gut the State Department of funding, Tillerson recruited a small private consulting company, Insigniam, which markets itself as a "breakthrough management consulting firm," to conduct a department-wide employee survey.

## **“THEY JUST DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE FUNDAMENTAL REASONS OF WHY THE STATE DEPARTMENT EXISTS.... IT'S JUST SO AMATEURISH.”**

The survey, derided by many officials, asked employees questions and prompts like, "To optimally support the future mission of the Department, what one or two things should your work unit totally stop doing or providing?" and "Help us build a word cloud." Many questions presupposed offices needed to be cut. More than half of the 75,000-person workforce didn't bother to fill out the survey.

"People opened it up and were like, 'Um, holy shit, what is this?'" one mid-level State official told [FP](#). The survey questions showed that "they just didn't understand the fundamental reasons of why the State Department exists.... It's just so amateurish." Tillerson assured employees — and Congress — that there were "no preconceived notions on the outcome" of the survey, which was meant to help modernize and streamline the sprawling bureaucracy in Foggy Bottom. Yet even State Department employees who acknowledge the necessity of trimming down the unwieldy bureaucracy still worry that Tillerson's "redesign" is a Trojan horse for the administration's efforts to sideline the State Department.

While the administration drafted up plans to slash State and foreign aid funding and to let go of top career professionals, Insigniam spent two days crafting a new mission statement for the department.

For career diplomats, the consulting exercise was a bad joke, a microcosm of how the Trump administration is attempting to force-feed corporate jargon with no clear understanding of its mission or the foundations of American diplomacy.

Tillerson's team disputes that portrayal. "The listening report showed that Department employees view their work as a calling, a duty and an obligation to represent what is best about America to the world," Tillerson's communications advisor, R.C. Hammond, told FP in an email. "Department employees experience their work with great pride, with honor and as a calling on behalf of our country. They also clearly expressed a desire to see the Department be more effective." Yet State Department employees point to the swelling power of the policy planning staff as a prime example of how they're being shut out of decision-making.

"The policy planning staff has become the backroom staff for the secretary. This shuts out bureaus — it shuts out new and interesting ideas. It leaves no forward thinking or fresh ideas," said Max Bergmann, who spent six years at the State Department, including time on the policy planning staff, before leaving in January at the end of the Barack Obama administration.

The plans to bolster the policy planning staff reflect Tillerson's reliance on a close coterie of advisors, closing himself off from the rest of the department. Top among them are his enigmatic chief of staff, Margaret Peterlin, and his director of policy planning, Brian Hook, a mainstream Republican who worked in the State Department and the White House during the George W. Bush administration.

"The seventh floor has walled itself off with Brian Hook, Margaret Peterlin, and some others," a senior foreign service officer told FP, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Some people get through the wall, but it's few and far between." More than one official referred to them as the "praetorian guard."

Apart from Hook, none of Tillerson's top confidants has ever served in the department.

"This praetorian guard isn't experienced. It seems like a conscious effort to start getting rid of people who have experience and expertise," the senior foreign service officer said. "They're not interested in it."



As the department builds word clouds and expands the policy planning staff, the Trump administration has shown little urgency in filling an array of senior State positions, including crucial ambassadorships in the Middle East and regional assistant secretaries who oversee Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. When Colin

Powell served as secretary of state under President George W. Bush, he referred to his assistant secretaries as “battalion commanders.” But only one assistant secretary has been nominated so far, A. Wess Mitchell for European and Eurasian affairs.

He has yet to be confirmed and start the job.

Career officials are stretched thin covering the positions as acting assistant secretaries in the interim but confide to colleagues that they don’t have the clout of political appointees — from inside the department or outside of it. The lack of senior leaders has grinded the gears in decision-making and further damaged morale, career diplomats said.

One example officials pointed to was Tillerson’s front office sitting on memos that would unlock \$79 million for the department’s Global Engagement Center to counter Islamic State messaging and narrative. Bureaucratic rules required that Tillerson simply write and sign two memos — one for \$19 million from Congress and one for \$60 million through the Defense Department — saying State needed the funds. But he hasn’t, leaving some career officials at a loss.

“The memos have been written and rewritten ad nauseum, sometimes with conflicting guidance from the seventh floor,” one official briefed on the program vented to FP, referring to the department floor Tillerson and his staff occupy. “And it just sits there.”

And that is just one example, officials say.

“You describe a normal review process for budget and financial resources in government,” Hammond, Tillerson’s spokesman, told FP when presented with this issue. “The Center’s leadership is identifying spending priorities for current and future year funds.”

But other key decisions remain stalled. “Last I checked, there are over 150 action memos stuck in the secretary’s office,” a mid-level official told FP. Decisions that otherwise would take hours to process are “just languishing,” said the official. “Because no one’s been empowered to make decisions, there’s no longer a back-and-forth exchange of information in a routine way,” another recently departed official said.

Hammond dismissed claims that the lack of political appointees in senior positions was a problem. “The Secretary believes that the ability to lead is [the] most important quality and no one category has a monopoly on that,” he said.

Yet foreign embassies have also taken notice of the leadership vacuum. More than a dozen foreign diplomats told FP that they often do not know whom they should speak to in the administration to convey messages from their governments.

## “I KNOW THE WHITE HOUSE ISN’T HAPPY WITH HIM AND HE ISN’T LIKING THE JOB.”

Some ambassadors found their phone calls to Tillerson’s front office never returned, while diplomats have sought to bypass the tottering State Department, instead delivering messages to the White House or Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, or daughter Ivanka.

One European diplomat said his “embassy has had limited contacts with the [State Department] leadership in general since Trump took office, because Tillerson does not seem very involved and because we don’t feel State is where policy is really decided.”

“That sounds like a regular weekday in Washington,” Hammond told FP in response. “Ambassadors are here on behalf of their countries with their countries’ agendas, and their job is to figure out every day what is the best way to advance that.”

Even when embassies do break through the administration’s opaque foreign-policy making, Trump has sometimes contradicted Tillerson on major policies and undermined him on others. White House aides and administration allies have also undercut Tillerson in anonymous comments to reporters.

The incoherence and confusion of the Trump administration’s foreign policy were on stark display in the first week of June when Tillerson, the Pentagon, and Trump all gave [conflicting stances](#) on the simmering diplomatic rift between Qatar and its Arab Gulf neighbors. Tillerson then embarked on a week of frenzied shuttle diplomacy around the Gulf in July to defuse tensions. But while he tried to walk the political tightrope of fraught Gulf relations, the president slammed Qatar on Twitter, appearing to take sides with Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners.

“The White House has done everything to undermine him,” another senior State Department official told FP. “The president undermines him. Qatar was seven days of work only to fall apart with a single tweet by the president.”

More than six months into the Trump presidency, career diplomats worry that the administration’s assault on the State Department will cause lasting damage to the workforce.

Tillerson’s controlling front office — and its focus on squeezing the budget — threatens to slow the hiring and assignment of new foreign service officers to positions around the world. All the while, numerous top career officials with decades of experience have quit, leaving a vacuum of talent and institutional knowledge in their wake.

While the State Department hemorrhages its own talent, it has also cut itself off from new talent by [ending](#) several distinguished fellowship programs to recruit top university graduates during its redesign.

The cumulative effect of a marginalized State Department, coupled with a freeze on hiring and budget pressures, could mean the next generation of diplomats will wither on the vine, current and former officials warn.

In a May 5 speech celebrating foreign affairs day at the State Department, William Burns, who retired in 2014 after a long diplomatic career that included a stint as ambassador to Russia, sounded the alarm bells.

## **“I SOUGHT TO ENCOURAGE THEM BY REMINDING THEM THAT NO ADMINISTRATION LASTS FOREVER.”**

Without mentioning the Trump administration, Burns warned against “pernicious” attempts to question the loyalty of career diplomats “because they worked in the previous administration,” as well a dismissive attitude to the role of diplomacy. Political and economic openness and a “sense of possibility” enabled America’s success abroad, but that is now threatened by a “nasty brew of mercantilism, unilateralism, and unreconstructed nationalism,” Burns said.

“Morale has never been lower,” said Tom Countryman, who retired in January after a diplomatic career serving under six presidents.

In the past, politically charged issues, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, created moral dilemmas for some diplomats, he said, but this is a problem of a different magnitude.

Countryman said he has been approached for advice by younger members of the diplomatic corps, many of whom are deeply disheartened. “My advice was to do your best to stay and serve the American people until it becomes truly unbearable for you in a moral sense,” he said. “I sought to encourage them by reminding them that no administration lasts forever.”

Tillerson himself appears to be exasperated by the job, caught between ideologues in the White House, competing congressional interests, and shell shock after jumping from the private sector, where he ran the U.S. oil giant ExxonMobil as a powerful executive in a highly centralized organization.

“He doesn’t have the same authority as a CEO,” one Trump insider told [FP](#). “I know the White House isn’t happy with him and he isn’t liking the job.” Trump’s growing frustration with Tillerson was evident in a heated meeting between the two this month over recertifying Iran’s compliance with the nuclear deal brokered under his predecessor, [FP](#) has [previously reported](#). Unhappy with Tillerson,

Trump set up a White House team to sideline the State Department and scuttle the nuclear deal.

Last week, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert unexpectedly announced that Tillerson would be “taking a little time off,” sparking rumors of a “Rexit.” Tillerson dismissed the claims. “I’m not going anywhere,” he told press during a brief photo-op with the Qatari foreign minister.

But a top aide has confided to colleagues that Tillerson and his inner circle are growing deeply frustrated by “media attacks, their inability to control the policy, and a lack of support from the Senate.”

“I think he hates the job and won’t stay long,” the aide said.

**FP** staff writer *Emily Tamkin* contributed to this story.

---

*Robbie Gramer is a staff writer at Foreign Policy focusing on the State Department.*

*Dan De Luce is Foreign Policy’s chief national security correspondent.*