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America's Diplomats Should Look Like America

The country can no longer afford a State Department that is “pale, male, and Yale.”

By [Karen Bass](#)

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Former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell and Hillary Clinton participate in the ceremonial groundbreaking of the future U.S. Diplomacy Center at the State Department's Harry S. Truman Building Sept. 3, 2014 in Washington. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The stereotype that the State Department is overwhelmingly “pale, male, and Yale” has persisted through both Democratic and Republican administrations. Even as the United States—and the federal government—has grown more diverse, the State Department has remained behind the times. Between 2002 and 2018, the proportion of State

Department staff identifying as racial or ethnic minorities increased by only 4 percent, well below the federal workforce average. The proportion of Black employees actually fell.

When President-elect Joe Biden and Kamala Harris take office in January—and when Antony Blinken is confirmed as secretary of state—they will inherit a State Department and a foreign service that has been both demoralized and diminished over the course of the Trump administration. To rebuild it—and to reassert America’s leadership and values abroad—they must make diversity a priority across the board, and especially within the State Department and foreign service.

The lack of diversity at the State Department predates the Trump administration—although the past four years haven’t helped. In late October, the department confirmed it had suspended employee training on diversity and inclusion. Of 189 ambassadors serving overseas today, just four are Black career foreign service officers and only another four are Latino. The career pipeline of future ambassadors of color is running low, too—in 2008, 8.6 percent of senior foreign service officers were Black; this March, that figure stood at just 2.8 percent. And the Trump administration has made a number of highly questionable ambassadorial appointments to important countries—like the white South African-born handbag designer and Mar-a-Lago member who has been representing the United States in post-apartheid South Africa for the last year.

Things aren’t any better in the lower ranks, either. Racial and ethnic minority staff are up to 29 percent less likely to be promoted within the State Department, compared to their white counterparts, according to a Government Accountability Office study released earlier this year. And stories of hostile work environments abound. Black foreign service officers posted to consulates in northern Mexico have reported being harassed by Border Patrol officials, despite carrying State Department credentials. Others report enduring racist comments from colleagues, and, if they complain to their supervisors, having the onus put on them to educate their colleagues. So it’s not surprising that during the Trump administration, foreign service applications have seen their biggest decline in more than a decade.

Throughout my career in Congress, I’ve traveled to 30 African nations. On those trips, my colleagues and I have often been disappointed to find that the foreign service staff of our embassies in Africa are overwhelmingly made up of white men and occasionally a smattering of white women. This lack of diversity in our diplomatic ranks “not only undermines the power of the United States’ example, it also suffocates the potential of the country’s diplomacy,” in the words of former Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns and former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who is now Biden’s nominee to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

The fact is, foreign service personnel are often the first—and sometimes the only—Americans whom citizens of other countries meet in person. Those meetings create openings for education, exchange, and increased understanding between nations. When foreign service officers actually reflect the diversity of the U.S. population—and look

more like the locals than like the cast of “Leave it to Beaver”—they have the opportunity to explain that in the United States, no matter your race, religion, creed, or even national origin, you, too, can become the face of America abroad. As foreign service veteran Uzra Zeya wrote, “A young Syrian’s reaction captured the usual outcome of such exchanges: “The fact that *you’re* an American diplomat is what I love about America.”

That is why my colleagues in the House of Representatives and I introduced the Represent America Abroad Act of 2020 to create mid-career pathways into the State Department and the foreign service. Instead of having to start at the entry level—and stomach huge cuts in pay and responsibility as a result—our idea is to create a program to recruit accomplished professionals from underrepresented groups, so they can bring their experience and expertise to bear from their first day on the job.

Building more diversity in the mid-career ranks will also help expand the pool of diverse candidates for posting to U.S. embassies overseas and could even help improve retention of entry-level staff of color by expanding mentorship and coaching opportunities. These mid-career pathways will complement the successes of the Rangel and Pickering Fellowships, which have helped increase diversity at the entry level where traditional recruitment measures have fallen short. Mid-career recruits will, of course, need to receive training to bring them up to speed in the duties and practical knowledge that are essential for success in the State Department and foreign service. Our bill provides flexibility for the department to design training programs for these recruits, so they become familiar with the duties of serving overseas and in Washington, D.C. in their first years on the job.

Some State Department traditionalists might think this approach is misguided, preferring instead to focus on recruiting entry-level diplomats or retaining existing staff. But our bill isn’t an either-or proposition. The decimation of the State Department and the foreign service under outgoing President Donald Trump has been widespread and devastating—especially for employees of color and those from other marginalized groups, like LGBTQ staff. The agency will need to exercise considerable creativity to rebuild the ranks, especially at the mid-career and senior levels, to meet the diplomatic priorities of the incoming Biden-Harris administration. In a recent article, Burns and Thomas-Greenfield—both of whom devoted decades of their lives to the State Department—write that the department needs a “top-to-bottom diplomatic surge” that “will have to incorporate ideas that in the past have seemed heretical ... but that today are inescapable.”

Offering mid-career pathways to qualified, diverse candidates to enter the State Department and Foreign service is one piece of the solution—one the agency will need new legal authority to launch. That’s what our bill provides. But Blinken should also retool existing entry-level programs—not just the Rangel and Pickering Fellowships—to prioritize diversity and to take more innovative approaches to recruiting candidates for career positions. Existing flexible hiring authorities could provide pathways back into the State Department and foreign service for career staff from underrepresented groups who resigned in recent years, and the Secretary can immediately move to reinstate the

diversity, equity, and inclusion training programs that were scuttled by the Trump administration.

And the new secretary should order an internal review of past promotion decisions, to identify systemic barriers to advancement for underrepresented groups and make appropriate reforms, including restarting review and promotion processes for qualified staff who were previously passed over.

Taken together, our bill and these administrative reforms will increase diversity at all levels of the State Department and foreign service within a matter of years, rather than decades—to the benefit of the agency, its employees, and our nation.

It is our hope that the Represent America Abroad Act will pass the House before the end of the year. It won't solve all of the problems at the State Department—not by a long shot. But passing this bill is a vital step for building diversity, restoring the career ranks, and enabling better U.S. diplomacy. And the face America presents abroad—including, crucially, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—will at last begin to look more like the country we actually are.

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