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New US Secretary of State Stresses Teamwork in Speech to Staff

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WASHINGTON – Just-confirmed US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Thursday appealed for unity in a speech to State Department employees amid a widespread rebellion by career diplomats against President Donald Trump’s suspension of refugee admissions and of visas for citizens of seven mainly Muslim countries.

Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, was sworn-in Wednesday night, hours after the Senate confirmed him by a margin of 56-43, the narrowest of any secretary of state.

“Each of us is entitled to the expression of our political beliefs, but we cannot let our personal convictions overwhelm our ability to work as one team,” he said in his first address to staff at the State Department.

The 64-year-old Texan did not specifically refer to the controversy over Trump’s executive order imposing a moratorium on admission of refugees regardless of country, a permanent prohibition on Syrian refugees, and a temporary bar on visas for residents of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

The measure is meant to provide time to develop a procedure for the “extreme vetting” of Muslims seeking to enter the United States, something Trump proposed during the presidential campaign.

“Regardless of the circumstances shaping our country or our department, we must all remain focused on the mission at hand before us. I remind you that our undertakings are larger than ourselves or our personal careers,” Tillerson said, after praising State Department employees as “among the finest public servants in the world.”

Tillerson, who has no prior experience in government, said that in running the department, he would be guided by the “core principles” of accountability, honesty, and respect.

While opening the door to making adjustments in how the department operates, the new secretary added: “Change for the sake of change can be counterproductive, and that will never be my approach.”

Roughly 1,000 State Department career employees have signed a document denouncing Trump's executive order on refugees and visas.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank in Washington, has pointed out that since at least 1975, no terrorist attacks have been carried out on US soil by nationals of the seven nations affected by the visa suspension.