

Rex Tillerson Is Running the State Department Into the Ground

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On November 10, 2016, my colleagues and I at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations gathered on the top floor of the building, which overlooks the U.N. General Assembly. My boss at the time, Ambassador Samantha Power, had convened the staff to discuss the transition in the aftermath of the election, the results of which had caught many of us by surprise. The U.S. Mission, like the State Department as a whole, brings together career Foreign and Civil Service officers with a handful of political appointees chosen by the president. Out of a staff of roughly 150 people, I was one of a few dozen political appointees.

It was an emotional gathering for all, but there were differences in the staff's reactions that day. The political appointees spoke mostly about the deep divisions exposed by the election, and expressed concern that many of the issues we'd worked hardest on during our time in government – such as rallying a global response to the refugee crisis and marshaling support for a landmark agreement on climate change – would be undone by a president-elect who had campaigned against those efforts.

The career officers, in contrast, tended to focus on a point of continuity. They talked about how, whether serving in a Republican or Democratic administration, their responsibility was to offer the best advice they could on how to advance America's interests in the world. As one Foreign Service officer put it: "We will keep serving this country. That's what we do."

I've thought a lot about those former colleagues during the first eight months of the Trump administration. The seriousness with which they approach the job of representing our country, and the fact that many of them continue to serve, has been a source of profound solace to me in an otherwise bleak period.

Yet over the last few months, I've watched as more and more of the brightest, most dedicated up-and-coming officers I know resign from their posts. The U.S. government is quietly losing its next generation of foreign policy leaders – an exodus that could undermine our institutions and interests for decades to come.

I saw firsthand the incomparable expertise these individuals bring to our government. Like the sanctions expert who, each time North Korea carried out an illicit nuclear or ballistic missile test, could walk us through previous negotiations of U.N. sanctions – where China had resisted tightening the screws, and where Beijing might be pushed to apply more pressure – because he'd sat on our side of the table during many of those discussions. Or the former military officer who,

when we were scrambling to determine the most efficient way to airlift supplies into West Africa during the Ebola outbreak, knew offhand the logistical capacities of every U.N. peacekeeping base in the region. Or our Syria expert, a native Arabic speaker who had developed a network of aid workers and civilians on the ground, providing a crucial source of information about the ongoing sieges and chemical weapons attacks. Or the legal advisor who knew the U.N. Charter by heart, and had an encyclopedic knowledge of precedents that could be called upon for drafting Security Council resolutions in a crisis, as when Russia invaded Crimea.

These people had also developed strong relationships with their counterparts from other countries, which were critical to building support for our diplomatic efforts. And they brought the unique knowledge that comes from having served across multiple administrations.

That doesn't mean we always saw eye-to-eye. At times, there were serious disagreements between career officers and political appointees. But the tension was constructive, forcing each side to see opportunities and risks they otherwise might have missed, and it played a steadying role in our policymaking.

All of which is why I've been so alarmed to see a growing number of these individuals reluctantly leaving the U.S. government. To be fair, my sample size is small, limited to the people I had the privilege of working with during my time at the State Department—a few hundred out of many thousands. But within that group, I know far too many people at the beginning or middle of their careers—with many diplomatic tours ahead of them—who have decided they can no longer bear to serve in the current administration.

While the State Department does not publish statistics on such resignations, one former official told me that when he was going through out-processing (the procedure by which departing staff are read out of their posts), one of the people debriefing him said the rate of career officers leaving government during recent months far surpassed anything the individual had seen in years working at the department.

And there are many people who want to leave, but have stayed on because they have been unable to find other jobs. One Civil Service officer told me that when he met with a headhunter, he was told, "It's a bad market for resumes like yours. Too many people like you are looking for work." Some have had the surreal experience of discovering during interviews that they are competing against their colleagues for positions at places like the U.N., the World Bank, and other international institutions.

Yet the exodus continues. Among the career officers who spoke most passionately in that Nov. 10 meeting about the importance of staying in government were people for whom the rhetoric of the Trump campaign felt personally searing, like some of my Muslim and African-American colleagues. And yet, on the day after the election, I watched those same individuals walk across the street to the U.N. to continue representing our country. It was one of the most patriotic acts I've ever seen.

But even for individuals who had every intention of staying on, serving in this administration has proven challenging in ways they could never have imagined. None of them have served a president like this before – and that includes the most seasoned hands, who have spent decades in the department. One told me how, less than a week into the administration, he received an email asking him to sign off on an attached document. It was a draft version of the executive order

banning travel from seven Muslim countries. He was dumbfounded. *What was he supposed to do*, he wondered, *send it back with tracked changes?* Another described having to explain to diplomats and civil society groups why the delegation the Trump administration had selected to represent the United States at a key U.N. summit on gender equality and women's empowerment—a delegation led by U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley—included the vice president of an organization that routinely calls for passing laws to criminalize homosexuality.

In addition to these personal indignities, there are the institutional ones. Like President Trump proposing to slash roughly a third of the State Department's budget, a cut Secretary Tillerson has embraced. Or seeing President Trump thank a foreign leader (the same one whose government interfered in our most recent election) for forcing the U.S. to cut more than 750 of its embassy staff, on the grounds that it would "save a lot of money." Or the fact that so many of the department's senior posts remain vacant, which not only underscores the lack of value this administration places on its diplomats, but also deprives officers of a key channel for sending recommendations up the chain. (According to the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service, of 148 senior positions at the State Department, only 28 officials have been confirmed, and in 80 of those positions, the Trump administration has not even put forward a nominee.)

Equally challenging has been what career officers have not been asked to do, like provide input in policymaking processes. During my time at the U.S. Mission to the U.N., Ambassador Power convened a daily morning meeting to help inform her most important decisions, where the attendees included a mix of political appointees and career officers, including the working-level experts who covered issues on that day's agenda. Under Ambassador Haley, senior staff meetings are mostly limited to political appointees, several people who have left the U.S. Mission told me. The same pattern that holds across much of the State Department—when meetings are held at all.

Experts on complex issues and regions have repeatedly found themselves left out of policy debates and drafting processes, as when Ambassador Haley gave a speech in early September at the American Enterprise Institute that panned the Iran nuclear deal. Iran experts in the State Department, including those who had helped craft the agreement and knew its inner workings, were never even given a chance to review the speech, which contained multiple inaccuracies and whose arguments – in the words of the libertarian Cato Institute – "carefully skirted around the actual facts."

At best, such omissions are the result of hubris – the belief that a newcomer could not possibly have something to learn from people with more experience and expertise. At worst, they reflect a broadly held view under Trump that career officers who worked on Obama administration priorities are inherently untrustworthy, or even "tainted," as one former colleague put it. The irony of this view is that it writes off a whole team of capable public servants who could be helping the Trump administration achieve its goals, and instead projects onto them its own cynical motives. It also reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of why people join the Foreign and Civil Service in the first place, which is not to advance any president or ideology, but to serve the country by sustaining core values and expertise across administrations.

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When career public servants are not given a seat at the table, not only are mistakes made and policies are worse off, but opportunities are missed. One of Ambassador Power's most effective campaigns focused attention on the cases of 20 political prisoners in some of the world's most repressive countries, including China, Russia and Egypt. Sixteen of those 20 prisoners were eventually released. The idea for the campaign came from two career officers, one of whom recently left the government, reluctantly, after 17 years.

Making matters worse, as more people leave, fewer are coming in. In June 2017, the number of Americans who took the Foreign Service exam fell by 26 percent compared with June 2016, the lowest number in nearly a decade. So not only is the Trump administration losing some of the best diplomats from our current generation, but it is also failing to attract top talent from the next generation.

One reason we have heard so little about the departures of these career officers is that most have left as they served—quietly, and with a sense of humility. No public resignation letters. No explanation for why they no longer felt they could serve this administration and remain true to their principles. For the people I know who have left, the decision to resign was a fraught one—arrived at after careful consideration—and one that continues to cause them pain.

I don't fault them for leaving this way, or for leaving at all. Nor do I judge those who have stayed on; on the contrary, I am grateful as ever for their service. And I would not presume to advise the career public servants officers who are currently debating whether or not to stay in an administration that shows so little respect for their contribution and for the values that motivate them.

But it would be a mistake not to recognize their mounting departures for the serious problem it is. What makes our nation's institutions strong is not just the core principles that have evolved over the course of our history, but the individuals who put those principles into practice, no matter who the president is. Our institutions will be effective in advancing our interests only if they can continue to attract and retain the public servants who represent what is best in us and in our country. That more and more of those individuals do not see a place for themselves in the Trump administration should concern us all.