

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 15, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write today to express our deep reservations regarding a number of recent management decisions at the Department of State that threaten to undermine the long-term health and effectiveness of American diplomacy.

The Foreign Service's "up-or-out" personnel system, which is mandated by the Foreign Service Act of 1980, is designed to ensure a predictable and orderly flow of officers progressing through the ranks and to provide promotion opportunities for the best officers at all levels. Like the military services, the Foreign Service depends on the steady intake of entry-level officers, some of whom will become the next generation of Senior Foreign Service officers. The Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development, alone among executive branch departments, continue to implement a hiring freeze that began on January 23, 2017. As a result, the hiring of new Foreign Service officers has been almost halted. To the best of our knowledge, the military services have never ceased to commission new second lieutenants and ensigns, even during drastic drawdowns in personnel--and for good reason. We know from experience that shutting off the intake of entry-level Foreign Service officers will inevitably result in shortages of appropriately experienced personnel at specific grades in future years.

According to the America Foreign Service Association (AFSA), since January of this year the number of Career Ambassadors (equivalent to four-star generals) has fallen by 60 percent, the number of Career Ministers (equivalent to three-star generals) has decreased by 42 percent, and the number of Minister Counselors (equivalent to two-star generals) has decreased by 14 percent and is still falling. Promotion rates for Senior Foreign Service officers have also decreased markedly, with 29 Counselors promoted to Minister Counselor in 2017, compared to 61 in 2016, and 41 officers promoted to Counselor (equivalent to one-star generals), compared to 96 in 2016.

The failure to replace losses from the ranks of the Foreign Service due to attrition and resignations with promotions and the recruitment of new entry-level officers appears to be intended to reduce staffing levels. To date, however, Congress has not been consulted on the rationale for these decisions or the details of Department of State's reorganization plan.

The cumulative effect of management decisions taken at the Department of State has already taken a toll. According to AFSA, from October 2016 to October 2017, the number of applicants for the Foreign Service test has dropped by one third. Upholding the Foreign Service's well-deserved reputation for excellence depends, in part, on attracting a large, diverse and talented applicant pool, from which at least 250 to 300 new officers are usually hired annually.

Taken together, questionable management practices at the Department of State; the attitudes of some in the Administration on the value of diplomacy; declining morale, recruitment and retention; the lack of experienced leadership to further the strength and longevity of our nation's diplomatic corps; and reports of American diplomacy becoming less effective paint a disturbing picture. These factors lead us to conclude that America's diplomatic power is being weakened internally as complex, global crises are growing externally. These decisions ultimately will not only degrade the United States' leadership role in the world, but will also impact our constituents who have come to rely on the Foreign Service to keep them safe while traveling overseas; to provide timely information and guidance in the event of a manmade or natural disaster overseas; and to lead our diplomatic efforts to address a myriad of international challenges, including emerging nuclear crises, the threat of war and outbreaks of global pandemics.

In light of our concerns, we request you to take the following actions:

- 1) Consult with Congress prior to implementing any additional measures that could potentially have long-term impacts on the recruitment, staffing and retention of State Department personnel.
- 2) Remove the arbitrary hiring freeze on both lateral transfers and the intake of new Foreign Service and Civil Service officers to maintain a smooth, predictable flow of new talent.
- 3) Resume promotions for the best and the brightest to avoid losing our top officers.

The State Department's non-partisan Foreign Service and Civil Service career professionals represent a unique national asset that belongs to all Americans. They are America's front line, promoting our safety, security and prosperity, often in difficult and dangerous places. Their expertise, carefully cultivated over decades, is an integral part of our government's national security architecture. While we support reasonable steps to improve the efficiency of the State Department, such efforts must be fully transparent, with the objective of enhancing, not diminishing, American diplomacy.

We appreciate your prompt attention to these important matters and look forward to working with you to strengthen America's national security.

Sincerely,



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



John McCain
United States Senator