

Inter Agency Essay



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Preparing to Lead in 21st Century Diplomacy

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In the 2010 National Security Strategy, President Obama wrote, “We live in a time of sweeping change.” Secretary Clinton underlined that reality in issuing the Department of State’s first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), *Leading Through Civilian Power*, in December 2010. In January 2011, the American Academy of Diplomacy and the Stimson Center released a report looking at one aspect of the challenge of managing change: professional education and training for the United States Foreign Service.¹

The recommendations of the Academy/Stimson report are largely consonant with the QDDR’s central emphasis on the importance of training – and the resources to support training – for our diplomats, if they are to lead an increasingly complex multi-agency foreign policy apparatus. The report adds that in addition to *training*, Foreign Service officers today need *professional education*; not just training for the immediate task at hand but also a period of reflection and thought, in preparation for leadership in an increasingly complex and uncertain foreign policy arena. The report argues:

Professional education and training are essential to raise the overall level of performance of our Foreign Service. This need is made even more acute by the shifting dynamics of international relations, characterized by geo-strategic change, rapidly evolving technology, and the urgency of leadership within a foreign affairs community vastly more varied than was the case even 10 years ago. For America’s diplomats, the principal responsibility must be to manage change and minimize instability and conflict and, when conflict has occurred, to take a leading role in post-conflict stabilization.²

A period of study, free from the demands of often hectic operational life, creates an opportunity for strategic thinking, necessary for senior leadership, away from the tactical demands of normal assignments.

The Academy/Stimson report recognizes that heavy budgetary pressures constrain the State Department’s ability to build new programs. Those pressures have grown even more crushing with Congressional efforts to bring down the budget deficit, this at a time when civilians and, specifically the State Department, are assuming greater responsibility in areas like Iraq that were previously dominated by the U.S. military. The first recommendation in the report is to “redress

the under-investment in diplomacy and the consequent imbalance between defense, on one side, and diplomacy and development, on the other, by fully funding Diplomacy 3.0,” that is, the hiring surge begun in 2009 under which the State Department planned to increase the size of the Foreign Service by 24% by Fiscal Year 2013. If completed, the hiring surge would allow the Department to maintain a personnel training float of 15% above that required to fill regular assignments. That objective is under serious threat today because of the budget.³

Even within budgetary constraints, mission-focused training and reflective periods of education can accomplish a great deal to prepare our diplomats, at all levels, to lead and excel. The Academy/Stimson report recommends the State Department make a long-term commitment to investing in the professional education and training of its Foreign Service officers beginning early in their career. Such a recommendation seems self-evident, but training, except for language training, has often been an afterthought in the Foreign Service, squeezed in when operational needs allowed. And continuing professional education was rarely considered. One reason for this was simply the lack of resources to free people to train, but Foreign Service cultural attitudes towards training and education, not always positive, were also a factor.

The traditional stand-offish attitude toward training seems to be changing as the Department requires specific training, for example in leadership and management, for advancement. And certain assignments, for example, to danger posts and hardship posts, require training tailored to their particular needs. The QDDR also stresses the importance of training to enhance leadership capacities at all levels, including Chief of Mission. Attitudes towards education need to take a similar shift if we are to participate effectively in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

Preparing ambassadors to lead multi-agency missions is a central theme of the QDDR. The Academy/Stimson report also stresses the critical role of the ambassador and the need to choose – and train – the very best for these positions. Reflecting the view it shares with the QDDR, the report recommends thorough, targeted consultations and, where appropriate, courses in preparation for the ambassador’s taking up his or her position. The report further recommends that all non-career senior officials taking up their duties, either overseas as ambassadors or in Washington, should take a course on “the structure and procedures of the Department, the interagency process, and Washington power relationships.” Too many officials come into office well versed in policy but not well informed about how to work effectively in the sometimes labyrinthine corridors of interagency policymaking. They do not have time to learn on the job. They need to be prepared.

In addition to senior leadership issues, the State Department has faced a problem from leadership gaps in mid-level positions. Because of shortfalls in hiring and staffing going back nearly twenty years, the State Department has had to move relatively inexperienced officers into managerial, supervisory positions earlier than optimal. Training has helped, and the Department has instituted more focused training, including regional workshops, for first time supervisors. The Department has also instituted a pilot program employing retired senior officers to act as mentors for supervisors in the field. The Academy/Stimson report recommended and strongly supports these programs, which are also in line with QDDR mandates.

The issues addressed in the Academy/Stimson report, like the broader issues of civilian power in the QDDR, reflect an out-of-kilter reality in the way the United States has managed its international relations. As the Academy/Stimson report states:

Since at least 2001, America's 'smart power' equation has been out of balance. Increasingly, underinvestment in diplomacy and development has led to our military taking on responsibilities traditionally met by diplomats and development experts. Driven by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the need to respond to the global threat of terrorism, resources and influence have flowed, abundantly and too often uncritically, to the Defense Department, which more than anyone has pointed to the limitation of bullets in addressing the challenges in this region.

Training and education alone will not right the balance. Some observers have suggested a comprehensive review and reform of America's national security structure akin to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, if not the National Security Act of 1947. Such review and reform being unlikely, the Department will have to take whatever steps it can to strengthen civilian power -- through training to improve execution, through education to improve creative thinking, through adequate funding to ensure necessary capacity, and, quite simply, through improving understanding and cultural awareness among our foreign affairs agencies. The QDDR emphasizes interagency experience in selection for senior positions and the follow-on process is seeking ways to increase interagency assignment and rotations. The American Academy of Diplomacy and Stimson Center support this initiative. The Col. Arthur D. Simons Center for the Study of Interagency Cooperation is, of course, dedicated to this very objective.

The upheavals in the Arab world, continuing concerns about Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and the current worldwide economic crisis, to cite just a few examples, underline the fact that a period of unusual challenge for America's diplomacy and soft power in the world lies ahead. The Department of State has the leadership and vision to respond. The challenge now is to build public and, especially, Congressional support, in order to restore the balance among diplomacy, development, and defense in the conduct and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. *IAE*

ENDNOTES

1 *Forging a 21st-Century Diplomatic Service for the United States through Professional Education and Training* (The American Academy of Diplomacy and the Stimson Center, Washington, DC, February 2011)

2 AAD/Stimson p. 10. The U.S. military has a concise way of expressing the different goals of training and education: “We train for certainty, but we educate for uncertainty.” See BG Volney J. Warner, USA, and Lt Col James H. Willbanks, USA (ret) “Preparing Field Grade Officers for Today and Tomorrow,” *Military Review*, Jan – Feb 2006, pp. 104 – 111.

3 Through FY-2011, the State Department will have increased the size of the Foreign Service by 17% over FY-2008 levels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador Robert M. Beecroft is a Supervisory Senior Inspector with the U.S. Department of State where he leads inspection teams of U.S. embassies overseas and State Department offices in the U.S. From 2001-2004 he served as Ambassador and Head of Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. He was Project Chairman for the American Academy of Diplomacy and Stimson Center report *Forging a 21st Century Diplomatic Service for the United States through Professional Education and Training* released in February 2011.

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