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Reflections for the Army from a year at the State Department

By Evan Ellis / July 16, 2020

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GLOBAL AMERICANS

From May 2019 through May 2020, I had the opportunity to serve on the U.S. State Department Policy Planning Staff (S/P) with responsibilities for Latin America and the Caribbean (WHA) and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL). My time there coincided with a change in directors at S/P and the reorganization of the Office. During my year there, I had the opportunity to work on a range of major policy issues affecting the Western Hemisphere, including the Department's response to the People's Republic of China's engagement with the region, major trade and migration-related interactions with Mexico and Central America, mass

protests in Ecuador, Colombia and Chile, the deepening crisis in Venezuela, the ouster of Evo Morales in Bolivia, new opportunities in the relationship with Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, the political-electoral crisis in Guyana, the return of the left in Argentina, and on top of everything else, the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the Army agreed to lend me to the State Department to work Latin America issues at the request of then Director of Policy Planning Dr. Kiron Skinner, I accepted the honor with the promise to return at the end of the one-year detail, and share and apply the knowledge gained through my academic work for the Army. This article is part of my commitment to do so.

Reflections on the role of state in advancing U.S. foreign policy goals

Throughout my time at S/P, I reflected on the contradiction between the competency, professionalism and dedication of those with whom I worked, our successful execution of countless activities, and the uncomfortable sense that despite everything, we were not achieving significant advances in important U.S. policy goals.

Part of the contradiction, I believe, simply owes to the limits of U.S. power. Based on our historically rooted national self-concept of exceptionalism, and faith in science, we in

the U.S. have an inherent faith that with sufficient resources, the right plan, and good intentions, we can change the world around us in a positive direction. In Latin America, this dilemma is also a function of the minimal amount of resources and high-level attention we have dedicated to the region. Yet in areas such as the Middle East and Southwest Asia, we have dedicated enormous resources to only produce problems on a greater magnitude. Moreover, if only at the margins, history shows that policy, strategy and leadership does matter.

Some ascribe part of the problem to inadequate formulation and execution of plans, arguing that the State Department does not have a "culture of planning." Having contributed to and edited a number of State Department planning documents during my time at S/P, I believe that this is only partially true. In regional bureaus such as WHA, there is planning about how to move toward select policy objectives, planning on budgetary matters, and planning for near-term activities like senior leader visits and votes in multilateral fora. In functional bureaus such as INL, there is planning tied to programs. Yet my informal perception is that the belief in the complexity of politics and relationships, inherent in the State Department culture, causes its leaders to rebel against the concept of planning to "systematically move country X from point A to point B."

Complicating the question of planning, I observed the same natural tendency at State that I also saw at the Department of Defense (DoD) from my very competent and dedicated colleagues under time pressure in a complex environment, which was to concentrate attention on the successful execution of the task at hand, leaving until later, and to others, questions of whether we were making a difference, and if not, what needed to be changed.

The dynamics and bureaucratic incentives of reporting on the execution of activities and programs further suppressed the identification and posing of

such hard questions. In my year at S/P, I read thousands of cables from our WHA country teams and was impacted by the predictability of their declarations that the activity with our partner had gone well, or that our partner really appreciated us, and didn't really want the alternative that competitors were offering. Such understandable "everything is under control, nothing to look at here" messages arguably reinforced senior leadership disposition to believe that our policies and activities were indeed making a difference, even while numerous media accounts—and my ongoing conversations with friends and colleges from the country involved—indicated exactly the opposite.

The problem is also compounded by the fundamental orientation of the State Department to tell our partners what we think and want, rather than listening to what they think and want. While seasoned diplomats know better in their personal interaction, I observed the balance of the work that came across my desk to be about "transmitting" rather than "receiving." Every high-level meeting involves the preparation of "talking points" seeking to advance an agenda, too seldom did they include questions about what our partners thought or needed.

State Department personnel and culture

I was genuinely impressed by the abilities, professionalism, and intellectual culture of the persons with whom I worked with at the State Department. The organization is an intermingling of three "tribes": Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), Civil Servants, and "Politicals." For FSOs, not unlike DoD Foreign Area Officers, the career path involves an alteration between assignments of increasing seniority in country teams (at "post") then "in the building" (at State Department headquarters). While FSOs form the core of State Department culture of diplomacy, Civil Servants, with a different personnel system, play a particularly important

role, particularly in bureaus requiring technical expertise, from science and technology, to economic, environmental and legal matters.

"Politicals" is the informal term to describe those brought into the organization at a senior level through their combination of expertise and connection with the Administration. They are often from a distinguished academic, think tank, or business background. In theory, these members, distributed through senior levels of the State Department, help to ensure that the work of the building is aligned with the wishes of the Administration. In my experience, however, FSOs, civil servants and politicals all provided their informed inputs with regard to day-to-day policy decisions but were clear on executing the will of the Administration once a senior level decision was made. In the gray area of minor day-to-day decisions, however, I did in practice look to those of my colleagues closely connected with the Administration for insight with respect to the preferences of the White House before a difference in perspectives forced a formal senior-level decision.

During my time at State, I was affected by the "culture of ideas" that exists within the institution. Among most of my colleagues, there is a deeply rooted interest in knowledge about the countries and cultures in one's area of responsibility and beyond, and an enthusiasm for sharing that knowledge and gaining the perspectives of others. I benefited enormously from my colleagues who showed sincere enthusiasm for sharing with me their subject matter knowledge and the functioning of the State Department system. Just as military officers take professional pride in their development of skills as soldiers, FSOs take pride in their knowledge of the countries, cultures, and issues for which they are responsible.

A glimpse at the organization

The work of the State Department, within the broader interagency, and the dynamic of the careers of its officials, is defined by the symbiotic relationship between the U.S. diplomatic missions abroad ("Post") and headquarters functions ("the Building").

In each embassy, the Ambassador manages the relationship with the host nation with the help of resources from the Interagency. While he or she receives guidance from The Building, it is the Ambassador, as the President's representative to the country, who has the final authority and responsibility over all U.S. government actors and entities operating in the country—from FSOs interfacing with the host government on political, economic and other issues, to representatives of other organizations, who may be executing aid, governance-strengthening or other programs with the host nation.

Within "the building," the U.S. government interfaces with partner nations, activities and conditions therein, are dealt with through a series of organizations with often cross-cutting responsibilities. Perhaps best known, the "Regional Bureaus," such as Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA), under the Undersecretary for Political Affairs (P), are where the relationships with individual nations and the U.S. country teams are rolled up. By contrast, "Functional Bureaus" are organized by themes which often cross-cut international boundaries. Those grouped under the Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights (J), for example—and including the INL—tend to focus more on the execution of programs. Bureaus under the Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment (E) include Economic and Business Affairs (EB), Energy Resources (ENR), and Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES). Under the Undersecretary for Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R) is the Global Public Affairs (GPA) bureau, focused on DoS global messaging. With the overlapping responsibilities of these organizations, the process of reviewing and

approving documents involving a specific event or statement may involve tens of organizations with equities who, in the State Department tradition, have the opportunity for input.

Policy planning office

During my time at the State Department, I was a member of the Secretary's Policy Planning Office (S/P). The role of the organization has evolved since its establishment in 1947, but in general terms is the Secretary of State's "think tank." Its first Director, George Kennan, forged the U.S. doctrine of Containment that shaped the Post World War II world. The walls of S/P are adorned by photos of every person who has occupied the post, reminding those who work there of the legacy of "big ideas" that characterizes the organization. It is a relatively small organization, with approximately 15 "members" at any time, plus supporting staff. The tradition of S/P as the place in the building where "big ideas" are thought, makes its billets relatively attractive for both FSOs and Civil Servants.

I was brought into S/P in May 2019 under Dr. Kiron Skinner, although in August, she was replaced by Dr. Peter Berkowitz. For me the choice of Berkowitz, previously a respected member of the Policy Planning Staff, was a positive, defining moment for the organization. In addition to his academic credentials and holding the confidence of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Dr. Berkowitz set a tone of intellectual openness and exchange among members, as well as freedom to engage and coordinate with the other regional and functional bureaus. This dramatically changed the tone and raised the morale of the organization, helping to restore the healthy relationship that it traditionally had with the rest of the building. With the change in leadership, S/P was also modestly reorganized, establishing a Subdirector for Operations and a Subdirector for Personnel, facilitating greater attention to formal processes involving its work product and attention to the personnel needs of its staff.

The Policy Planning Office has several ways of shaping U.S. Foreign Policy. These include writing notes to the Secretary of State, the review and clearance of papers, involvement in State Department projects by S/P members, personal relationships with senior State Department leaders, location of the speechwriting function within S/P, and responsibility for the "dissent channel."

S/P is the only organization in the State Department who can send a note directly from its members, through the director, to the secretary without review by other stakeholders. The intent is to protect its role in providing perspective to the secretary, without input or alteration from other organizations. In my own experience, however, I found it beneficial to coordinate with my counterparts in WHA, INL and other bureaus affected by my notes before sending them through our director to the secretary. First, however well one researches a note, it is difficult to have the same level of detailed information and currency of knowledge as the FSOs at post, or the desk officer covering the country. Thus soliciting their inputs through WHA and INL leadership was important in getting the facts right, as well as accurately representing the work and position of the bureaus, to the secretary. Reciprocally, once the secretary receives a note, his staff channels it to the organizations to which it is relevant. Because being effective as a member of the Policy Planning Staff is greatly helped by fluid interchange and a relation of trust with the bureaus for which he or she is responsible, it is better for their senior leaders to be aware of, and have the opportunity to provide feedback on S/P notes involving their equities before they go to the secretary, rather than after he has seen them and responded with his comments.

Reviewing and clearing documents ("paper") is the second vehicle through which S/P affects the policymaking process and day-to-day affairs at state. In addition to conversations and relationships between senior officials, the generation, reviewing, editing and clearing of "paper" is the primary

vehicle for managing the activities and relationships for which the department is responsible. It is thus important that S/P is one of a small number of "7th Floor Clearers" whose approval is required on virtually all documents, especially those involving high-level interactions with foreign government officials, Congress, and the public. It extends to the review of press statements, memos advocating policy action by senior leaders, information memos, "talking points" for meetings between senior leaders and foreign officials and business leaders, hearings and congressional testimony, reports to Congress, policy and strategy documents, changes to budgets, and even statements to partner nations in celebrating their national holidays. In reality, there is not time to thoroughly read and edit every page of every document that comes to a S/P member. Moreover, their substance and style is subject to multiple other levels of review from desk officers, legal office representatives, and numerous bureaus with equities in the document.

I found that learning how to prioritize and interact with the deluge of documents is an important part of effectively shaping policy. My choices evolved considerably during my time at S/P. During my first months, I probably drove press and desk officers crazy with my extensive edits of items that had been accepted material for some time. Over time, I came to concentrate on areas where an action or statement seemed to contradict the administration's approach to the topic or region or might otherwise create problems. In some cases, where I had particular knowledge I intervened more extensively. In others, I tried to use my edits and comments to call the attention of senior decisionmakers to an important issue or point.

While an S/P "clearance" is technically always required, there are a myriad of ways to circumvent members who are overtly obstructionist, including sending them to a different member of the S/P staff—where there is ambiguity regarding who has overlapping responsibilities for the topic—or

sending the document minutes before the deadline, making an extensive review of the document almost impossible.

I learned that there is also a social art to intervention. Because one works regularly with the same people on multiple documents, I learned quickly that often maintaining a relationship is as important as forcing one's position on a particular clearance. Oftentimes, that meant picking up the phone to discuss an issue, rather than blasting out a critically worded email for all copied stakeholders to see. I also learned the value of coordination among the "7th Floor Clearers." In my case, this included interactions with my counterparts covering WHA and INL on the staffs of the Deputy Secretary of State (D) and the Undersecretary for Political Affairs (P). While we did not always agree, there were numerous occasions when two or three of us coincided on the importance of an issue and backed up each other in calling for change, that an issue was particularly important and together held out to force action.

When stakeholders cannot agree on the substance of a document through editing, they can formalize their disagreement for a decision by the Secretary through a "split memo." Each side specifies its position and supporting arguments, and the Secretary makes the final decision. I had a role in a number of split memos during my time at S/P, on Venezuela, immigration, and a handful of other issues. The process highlighted a reality that often goes overlooked by media accounts of U.S. foreign policy: that critical decisions are often not clear to well-intentioned and well-informed people, and are indeed thoroughly debated.

The third mechanism by which S/P members may influence policy is through involvement in ongoing projects in the building. In my case, this involved my participation, on various occasions, in the drafting and editing of policy and strategy documents typically led by the policy planning arm of WHA (PPC). Such inclusion is not institutionalized, but reflects the

relationship of the relevant S/P member with the drafting organization, including whether they perceive his or her knowledge as making a useful contribution, as well as a desire to incorporate him into the process from the beginning to avoid receiving extensive edits after presenting the document for clearance. While not receiving much attention from scholars, I often felt that such involvement in drafting documents and defining initiatives from the beginning is one of the most significant ways in which S/P shapes the direction of policy.

A fourth and often overlooked mechanism of influence for S/P is through the secretary's speechwriters. In recent years, the Speechwriter function was incorporated into S/P. I came to have great admiration for our speechwriters, including the secretary's lead speechwriter David Wielezol, who could write eloquently on a broad range of topics on short notice, and who I observed to be consistently in the office (when not on a plane with the secretary) long after everyone else had gone home. While David and the other speechwriters actively reached out across the entire State Department organization to get the material they needed, their physical colocation within S/P created important opportunities for them to turn to the S/P member with relevant expertise when seeking some particular understanding or example.

Finally S/P management of the "dissent channel" allows it to facilitate the "reconsideration" of important issues by senior leadership, and to shape the definition for posterity, of those decisions which are not reversed. As a longstanding part of the State Department tradition, when the secretary or other senior leaders make a decision, those who see the issue as vital and have a principled disagreement with the decision have the opportunity to write it in a formal document called a "Dissent Memo." Responsibility for handling the memo and making a recommendation to, and a written response on behalf of the secretary, typically goes to the S/P member assigned to that regional or functional portfolio.

In my time at S/P, I handled dissent memos on issues in which I personally agreed with, but understood that the decisions taken were a fundamental part of the direction of the administration, and struggled to write a response that reflected respect for the validity of the argument, while also communicating that the policy direction would not change.

Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA)

During my time at S/P, WHA was the bureau with which I worked the closest. At WHA, like other regional bureaus at Main State, the desk officers generally have day-to-day responsibility for maintaining communication with, monitoring the situation in, and maintaining expertise on the country to which they are assigned. These FSOs are in practical terms the action officers who connect the embassy teams abroad to the bureaucracy at state. They draw on their expertise to play a key role in crafting information memos, action memos, press statements, national day congratulatory statements, talking points for senior leaders interacting with host country counterparts, senior leader testimony to congress on the country, preparatory materials for the congressional hearings of incoming ambassadors and other senior leaders requiring confirmation, and countless other documents that are the currency of the State Department in conducting and managing its relations.

The size of the organizations within WHA differ, but desk officers are generally organized into country teams, and above these, subregional groupings. Overseeing these groupings are the Deputy Assistant Secretaries (DAS'es). In WHA, as in other Regional Bureaus, the DAS'es are the equivalent of "Pentagon Coronels." They are also generally the first rung of the "senior officials" for high-level meetings with foreign counterparts. When dignitaries from partner nations visited the State Department, depending on the level of the delegation, often the assistant secretary (head of WHA) or higher level officials would receive them and

define the agenda and what cooperation was possible, but it was arguably the DAS-level meetings where the real work got done.

Within WHA, as in other regional bureaus, above the DAS'es is the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS), who effectively acting as Chief of Staff for the bureau, and above him or her, the Assistant Secretary (A/S), a Senate-confirmed presidential appointee who heads the bureau.

When I arrived at state, WHA was headed by Assistant Secretary Kimberly Breier. A/S Breier had previously held my position in S/P, with responsibility for WHA, and so came in (following a long delay in her confirmation process) knowing the region and its issues well. I had known A/S Breier and her work prior to coming to state, and recognized her as a gifted intellectual. As a person with experience in the state bureaucracy, but who had not come up through its ranks as a FSO or Civil Servant, I admired her ability to run the organization during a demanding period, which included significant White House involvement on matters affecting the WHA portfolio, such as trade and immigration issues with Mexico and Central America; and struggle to restore democratic governance to Venezuela.

An important contributor to Assistant Secretary Breier's effectiveness, in my judgement, was her PDAS, Julie Chung, a highly capable and experienced career FSO whose deep knowledge of the building complimented A/S Breier's intellect. Together they kept the organization running smoothly and effectively. PDAS Chung also brought her own impressive knowledge base to the position, including a deep understanding of Asia, which helped greatly in our coordination with a range of Asian partners at a time that the PRC was making worrying inroads in the hemisphere.

In August 2019, when A/S Breier resigned for personal reasons, she was replaced by Ambassador Michael Kozak, whose long and distinguished service in government included prior service on the National Security Council, a successful career in the State Department culminating in a range of senior level positions that included serving as Deputy to Special Representative for Venezuela (SRVZ) Elliott Abrams, and previously, as the head of the Democracy, Human Rights and Labor bureau (DRL) from 2017-2019. Ambassador Kozak's experience with the Department and government was apparent in the confidence and skill with which he managed WHA, with a warm, approachable personal style that, I believe, contributed to the morale and effectiveness of the organization as it continued to wrestle with a broad array of difficult issues. I also perceived that his prior work and close relationship with SRVZ Abrams also helped to align WHA efforts on Venezuela as it coordinated with other interagency players.

Beyond regular interactions with individual members of WHA to discuss work products and ongoing activities, one of my most important interfaces with the organization was the weekly "Extended Staff Meeting," bringing together WHA senior leadership with representatives from other State Department and U.S. government organizations affected by, and affecting, WHA activities. Despite my aversion to meetings, I found this one to be one of the most useful hours of my week, providing information on key developments in the region and our most significant ongoing interactions with its countries and multilateral organizations.

International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau (INL)

While I did not interact as extensively with INL as I did with WHA, its work was a very important part of our global engagement. My interactions with the INL team was an important part of my work, and learning process, at S/P.

As a functional bureau, relative to a regional bureau like WHA, INL focuses more on the execution of programs with partner nations than the relational business of diplomatic interactions. In comparing the documents that came to me for review and approval from INL versus WHA during my tenure at S/P, WHA had a magnitude of more items involving meetings by senior leaders in the region, press statements, communiques to the partner country, and information memos. The documents from INL generally included more reports to Congress about ongoing activities and country conditions, or authorizations for the spending or movement of program funds.

My time at state corresponded with President Donald Trump's suspension, and later resumption, of funds for Central America, including INL programs. Observing such an event gave me profound appreciation for the amount of work such policy actions generated with respect to the moving of money between accounts to meet all of the legal and administrative requirements implied by those decisions and then rapidly reversing the process once funding was restored.

As with WHA, INL held a weekly "Extended Staff Meeting," providing an opportunity for its senior staff to review activities and programs in their respective organizations in the presence of representatives of other State Department and interagency organizations with equities in them. As with WHA, I was impressed by the professionalism and competence of the team. I was also affected by the way in which the INL assistant secretary, Kirsten Madisen, set a tone that effectively combined seriousness and good humor, in a way that was contagious to the rest of the senior staff.

Intelligence and Research Bureau (INR)

The Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) is the department's internal organization for providing information and analysis to the

bureaus and senior officials, leveraging the insights from personnel serving in U.S. embassies overseas, other U.S. government agencies, and open source information. INR played an important role in supporting my work as I sought to make informed decisions on documents that I was responsible to review and approve, and as I prepared notes for our director and Secretary Pompeo.

I was always impressed with the dedication of the INR personnel who regularly briefed S/P on issues in our portfolio, as well as the quality of the events and products INR produced. In developing notes, I sought whenever possible to reach out to my INR colleagues responsible for the topic. Not once in my year in S/P did they fail to respond rapidly or without deep topic knowledge, professionalism, all of the material I had asked for, and then some.

Although INR was particularly valuable to my work, and an important resource to my S/P colleagues, I was also aware of perceptions in the building that the organization was not as fully utilized, or integrated into the day-to-day policy, strategy and decision support process as it could be.

State and the interagency process

During my time at S/P, I observed the role of the State Department in the interagency process in multiple levels, principally through participation in National Security Council Policy Coordination Committee sessions (PCC), other U.S. government meetings involving multiple U.S. government entities, and the development of documents involving multiple interagency players.

I particularly noted the important role played by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in policies and activities involving migration in Mexico and Central America. I also noted the significant role played by the

Departments of Treasury and Justice with regard to the criminal and anti-democratic activities of the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela.

In my observation, coordination between state and DoD is generally good on day-to-day issues, such as visits by U.S. military leaders to partner nations, or activities arising out of ongoing security programs in the region. DoD has details embedded within the bureaus, as well as the S/P and other organizations. State also has a Political Military Bureau (PM) dedicated to security issues and associated coordination. Representatives from DoD organizations with equities in the activities of functional bureaus such as INL and regional bureaus such as WHA were regularly present and made valuable contributions in the meetings that I attended.

In my own work, I did not see substantial evidence that the strategy and policy documents of each organization are actively used as guides to action by the other, beyond superficial references to fundamental documents such as the National Security Strategy. I also witnessed and participated in the drafting of some interagency documents, but beyond the somewhat useful exercise of meeting and coordinating about their wording, I did not perceive that the result meaningfully impacted the direction of either state or the other U.S. government entities involved.

One of my most insightful interagency experiences was participation in PCCs, as part of the State Department team. These meetings provided useful coordination, with each organization reporting what it was doing and how it affected the others, and all receiving instruction from the White House through the NSC Director for the Western Hemisphere. In those meetings, however, I did not often see an open exchange among those present at that level pooling their knowledge and agency perspectives to generate new ideas about how to coordinate and employ the capabilities of their organizations to more effectively advance U.S. policy goals.

I left my year at S/P with a deepened respect for the capabilities and professionalism of my State Department colleagues, the dynamics and culture of the organization, and the complexity of the challenges with which they wrestle. I will always be grateful to those who took the time to help me understand the institution and do my job there more effectively, and now back at the U.S. Army War College, am confident that my ongoing analytic contributions for the Army and the country are much strengthened from the experience.

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