

Managing State: Some Advice for John Kerry

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Jan 28, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Avoiding the next diplomatic crisis will require the new secretary of state to invest time and effort in the less-glamorous but essential task of effectively managing the department.

The back-to-back Senate testimonies of secretary of state nominee John Kerry and sitting Secretary Hillary Clinton served up quite a contrast: the former outlining the big policy ideas he intends to pursue; the latter delving into the details of bureaucratic information-dissemination and decision-making. There is an important lesson in this disparity: a secretary of state's legacy can depend just as much on management of the State Department as on foreign policy acumen.

America's foreign policy agenda has ballooned to encompass countless issues, many of which are little noticed domestically yet can consume enormous diplomatic effort for the U.S. government. The secretary of state is responsible for around 60,000 employees, hundreds of U.S. diplomatic missions, and a multi-billion dollar budget. It is inevitable that he will succeed or fail not merely on the strength of his personality or individual effort, but through the decisions and actions of those subordinate to him and often working at a vast distance from Washington.

Handed the responsibility for this sprawling diplomatic apparatus, it might be tempting for the new secretary of state to insulate himself within a loyal inner circle and leave management to others. This would be a serious error. It would likely exacerbate rather than ameliorate the management deficiencies identified by the recent Accountability Review Board (ARB), and lead to a disconnect between the secretary's personal diplomacy and the broader efforts of the State Department, weakening the efficacy of both. It would also limit the secretary's access to the enormous reservoir of talent found in the foreign and civil service, which can be a powerful instrument for American interests if provided with good leadership.

As he prepares to take the reins as America's top diplomat, Senator Kerry should therefore consider not just the foreign policy initiatives he will emphasize, but how to effectively manage the State Department to get the most out of U.S. diplomatic resources and ensure that he is aware not only of the issues on his agenda, but those not on his

agenda which might take him by surprise. Doing so will not only help him to avert or at least defuse the next unforeseen crisis, but to identify and seize opportunities which might otherwise remain hidden.

To that end, Senator Kerry should consider the following steps:

1. Set priorities, and communicate them clearly. Only the secretary of state can cut through the miasma of issues, initiatives, dialogues, and summits which can shroud the State Department and set priorities for American diplomacy. The secretary's strategic guidance should not only outline his vision of American interests, but his vision of how the State Department is to pursue them.

The secretary's words and actions can make the difference between a culture in which problems are brought to the surface quickly and resolved head-on, and one in which they are swept under the rug. As in the case of both Iraq and Libya, reality frequently can clash with an administration's preferred narrative; American diplomats must feel empowered to make policy based on the former rather than the latter.

To be useful to diplomats in the field, such guidance must be both concise and realistic. Current planning documents do not fit the bill. State's Congressional Budget Justification is 853 pages, with a 174-page executive summary. Another document titled "State-USAID Agency Priority Goals for 2012-2013" is commendably brief, but many of the priorities it lists stand at odds with the reality of how U.S. officials spend their time and resources.

In the real world, strategic guidance must also be adaptive. The secretary cannot just set priorities and put the Department on cruise control; he should implement a process of regular (if informal) review with his senior staff to assess progress and make any necessary adaptations to his strategic guidance.

2. Empower your lieutenants. It is not enough to merely issue sound guidance, however; it must be enforced through lieutenants.

This means, first and foremost, appointing a personal staff which understands both the State Department and the secretary, and can serve as an effective liaison between the two. In practice, this means employing a combination of political appointees and talented Foreign Service officers (FSOs) in the secretary's staff. Including the latter is key; political appointees are often wary of career FSOs, but their familiarity with the quirks of State and experience in the field can help the secretary and other appointees navigate the bureaucracy and bring to their attention issues which might otherwise pass unnoticed.

Beyond the secretary's personal staff, it is important that the secretary have an empowered and trusted cabinet of assistant secretaries. Much of the heavy lifting in the State Department is done by assistant secretaries, especially those responsible for the geographic regions. The secretary should place top-caliber officials in these roles, regardless of whether they are career officials or political appointees, meet with them regularly and work through them, and hold them accountable for their portfolios.

Special attention should be paid to the Policy Planning office. The director and staff of Policy Planning should be foreign policy scholars willing and able to challenge policy orthodoxy and mine the broader analytical community for fresh ideas. In particular, they should be comfortable dealing with critics of the administration and its policies; while foreign policy experts in Washington may be increasingly partisan, foreign policy ideas should not be.

3. Declutter and delay the bureaucracy. For assistant secretaries to be truly empowered, State needs to limit its use of special envoys to truly exceptional circumstances, and ensure clear lines of authority on key issues.

The overuse of special envoys increases the risk of a sort of diplomatic principal-agent problem. An envoy, with his focus on a single issue or conflict to which his professional fortunes are inextricably linked, has every incentive to prioritize it over issues which may have or develop a greater bearing on the national interest. On the flip side, the regional assistant secretary who has high-profile issues removed from his portfolio and handed to an envoy has

correspondingly less influence with diplomatic counterparts and authority within the bureaucracy he oversees.

There are occasionally issues that call for the appointment of a special envoy -- for example, when a negotiation is ripe for resolution or an issue arises which demands sustained high-level attention or cuts across regional boundaries and might otherwise not receive the focus it deserves. Envoy positions should be rare, should complement rather than duplicate the existing chain of command, and should not be used merely to signal that an issue is important. And whether or not an envoy is employed, it should be clear to all who is in charge of and accountable for an issue.

Just as important as empowering assistant secretaries is empowering the rank-and-file and ensuring that the secretary has access to them and their expertise. As currently configured, there can be eight layers or more between the drafter of a memo and its ultimate recipient, the secretary -- and this figure does not even account for the numerous offices which must "clear" a memo before it even begins to ascend that chain. A savvy desk officer can circumvent much of this bureaucracy by cultivating the right contacts on the Department's seventh floor, but in doing so risks alienating colleagues alongside whom they will work far longer than they will serve any particular secretary of state.

The new secretary should remove some of these layers of bureaucracy. A flatter organizational structure would not only close the gap between him and the subject matter expertise he needs to be effective, but it would make those experts' jobs far more challenging and rewarding and likely raise both the morale and performance of the State Department as a whole.

4. Emphasize training and review the Foreign Service business model. Removing layers of the bureaucracy should not mean shrinking the Foreign Service, however -- it should be used as an opportunity to increase amount of training provided to FSOs. It's frequently observed that FSOs receive far less training over their careers than their military counterparts; what is less well known is that a significant portion of the training they do receive has little to do with statecraft and is instead consumed with language learning and management workshops. To address this, the new secretary should order a review of the courses offered by the Foreign Service Institute and ensure that it adequately prepares FSOs for the challenges they will face in the field. The average FSO has likely taken the Myers-Briggs assessment multiple times, but has had few or no opportunities to engage in serious study of diplomacy or international relations once in the Foreign Service.

In order to effectively craft and target an expanded training regimen, the secretary should consider undertaking a broader review of how the Foreign Service does business. The much-touted Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) begins with an image of a "jeep wind[ing] its way through a remote region of a developing country," carrying a "State Department diplomat with deep knowledge of the area's different ethnic groups."

In fact, however, the State Department does little to cultivate such individuals. Instead, State emphasizes a generalist model, which discourages the sort of deep specialization evoked in the QDDR. While the generalist approach is not without advantages, many FSOs would argue that increasing globalization -- the increasing travel of Washington-based officials, and the ease of direct communication between capitals, for example -- paradoxically puts a greater premium on specialization and deep local knowledge.

They would also argue that security is as much a matter of possessing a deep familiarity and understanding of a place as it is of physical measures such as barriers and bodyguards, and that worthwhile intelligence analysis requires not just technical collection and academic study but on-the-ground experience that allows one to connect seemingly disparate dots. The FSO's frustration is that often he or she is restricted to a diplomatic compound rather than permitted to venture out in that jeep, and armed not with "deep knowledge" but with brief preparation and a

predecessor's rolodex.

Assuming he is confirmed, John Kerry will have a running start at being a successful secretary of state, armed both with the personal capabilities and human capital within State to do the job. But these elements -- the secretary and the bureaucracy he commands -- will not fall automatically into alignment. Avoiding the next diplomatic crisis -- and more importantly seizing the tremendous opportunities in America's path -- will require more than foreign policy virtuosity. It will require that the new secretary invest time and effort in the less glamorous but equally essential task of leading and managing.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)