



State of decay

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When Newt Gingrich launched his frontal assault on the State Department in 2003, in the context of the Iraq crisis, a lot of people applauded. "Without bold dramatic change at the State Department, the United States will soon find itself on the defensive everywhere except militarily. In the long run that is a very dangerous position for the world's leading democracy to be in. Indeed in the long run that is an unsustainable position." Four years later, you have to admire the man's prescience.

Not long after Mr. Gingrich broached the subject, Congress mandated a review of the State Department's structure and the effectiveness of U.S. foreign aid, oversight of which today is one of the functions of the department. In 2004

and 2005, a commission was set up to make recommendations and the fruit of its labors was published earlier this month in "Beyond Assistance: Helping to Enhance the Livelihood of People around the Globe." (The subtitle adds up to the acronym HELP.) The report comes out at a time when debate within the foreign policy community is centered on the concept of "smart power" -- a Joseph Nye-ish term that is also the title of a new report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The concept of smart power has been embraced by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, among others, who called for a "dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security -- diplomacy, strategic communication, foreign assistance, civic action

and economic reconstruction and development."

But how to achieve government-wide coordination of all these elements? The HELP commissioners provide two main options for State Department reform: One would remove foreign assistance from the department and make it a cabinet-level agency, greatly elevating its status and funding. This would effectively undo the reforms of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who has brought the U.S. Agency for International Development into State, precisely in the name of policy integration.

The other option, supported by the majority of commissioners, would elevate the State Department into a super department, with four sub-cabinet-level agencies that would report to the secretary. The four are: trade and long-term development; humanitarian crisis and post-conflict states; political and security affairs; and public diplomacy.

It is clear, though, from the experience of the past seven years, that unless the bureaucratic and political culture of the State Department undergoes fundamental change and actually becomes responsive to the sitting administration, it is a poor candidate to take on even more responsibilities. In fact, as matters stand today, it might be a better idea to shrink the State Department and limit it to the running of U.S. embassies. This would mean that foreign policy would be set in the Oval Office and the National Security Council, and that other functions

would stand alone again, as they did under USAID and the U.S. Information Agency.

As far as foreign aid is concerned -- a crucial component of "soft power" -- the problem is, as correctly identified by the HELP commission, that billions of U.S. dollars have been spent on foreign assistance with very little or no change in poverty worldwide. The commission recognizes the good governance approach of the Millennium Challenge Account as the only one that holds the promise of sustainable progress, which is the good news. The bad news is that Congress has been busy cutting funding for the MCA. The Senate has proposed to come up with just half of the president's \$3 billion request for the account. As it is, the MCA represents a mere 10 percent of the U.S. foreign aid budget.

As Sheila Herrington at the Center for Global Development noted in her blog, the HELP commissioners use the MCA as an example of good development assistance that meets their criteria for country-led development. The underlying problem, also identified by the HELP commissioners, may be that the timeline for the definition of success is too short -- reflecting impatience, which in the context of foreign policy has an awfully familiar ring to it.

You do not have to agree with the conclusions to acknowledge the fact that the structure of the State Department and the fundamental assumptions of U.S. foreign policy, foreign aid and international and

public diplomacy have to go hand-in-hand. Democrats and Republicans will come up with different

visions, but with a presidential campaign gearing up, there is no time like the present.

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