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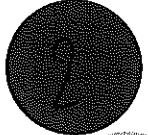
for Deeds

The Duty of Diplomatic Dissent

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Summary

The poor outcome of the Iraq War has highlighted the usefulness of 'reality-based' foreign policy. Yet the personal and professional consequences of dissent remain high in the US (and every other) diplomatic service. The Dissent Channel, currently underutilized, was designed to protect both the US State Department and its employees from bureaucratic retaliation for unwelcome real-world expertise. It should be reinvigorated. However, the unimpressive policy impact of dissent, whether through institutional channels or public resignations, makes it clear that effective dissent requires mobilizing the domestic political process as a force multiplier. Good dissent raises the political price of foreign policy blunders, and only through turning a bureaucratic system painfully against itself can blunders actually be prevented.

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Key Words

Diplomacy, dissent, bureaucratic competition, Iraq War, Greece, Bosnia, Macedonia, Dissent Channel, US State Department.

Introduction

Under normal circumstances, tight budgets and fierce domestic political competition leave democratic governments little room for dramatic, risky initiatives in their foreign policy. In international relations, both triumph and disaster are consequently rare.

The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 liberated the US government from traditional foreign policy cost-benefit constraints. One outcome was the Iraq War. That this war would be a disaster for US interests was predictable and even predicted. A few US diplomats loyally misunderstood a region that they were paid to understand. More did understand but kept silent, because no one had requested their professional judgement.

The Dissent Channel

Scarred by the debacle of Vietnam, which had included the resignation of a number of talented diplomats, the US State Department has tried to reduce to a minimum the cost, both to the dissenter and to the State Department, of dissenting opinion by its employees. Through the Dissent Channel, a State Department employee can send a message to the Secretary on any policy issue, and the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department must respond in writing. The existence of the message, its content, and the identity of its drafter are kept rigorously secret, including from the White House, unless the drafter specifies otherwise. Retaliation against the dissenter is a violation of official regulations, and is punishable with a career-blighting reprimand. The Dissent Channel is both a safety valve and protection against being blind-sided through the reluctance of US ambassadors to be the bearers of unwelcome news.

I used the Dissent Channel in 1992 while a mid-level political officer at the US Embassy in Athens. Politicians had goaded the Greek public into a nationalist frenzy over efforts by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to claim a share of the history and iconography of ancient Macedonia. Blackmailed by an ambitious foreign minister who controlled enough seats in the Greek parliament to topple the government, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis agreed that the Macedonians must abandon use of the name 'Macedonia'.

Many of my Greek contacts quietly agreed that the rational course was to help the Macedonians to consolidate their state under Greek tutelage. But they were helpless. The Greek government would fall if it failed to use its veto power to block EU diplomatic recognition and assistance to the Macedonians. With the EU stymied, only the United States had the power to broker a compromise that would maintain stability in Macedonia. Acting US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger was under pressure from well-connected Greek-Americans to influence the Macedonians to change their name. But by undermining Macedonia's fragile state identity, the United States would harm Greek interests and further destabilize the Balkans.

Only the US Embassy in Athens could credibly analyse the impact on US interests in Greece of any change in US policy towards Macedonia. Bureaucratic and personal self-interest dictated that the Embassy in Athens stay silent. My Greek-American ambassador had compelling personal, as well as

political, reasons not to challenge implacable nationalist orthodoxy. Other US diplomats would briefly face an unpleasant and conceivably dangerous backlash from Greek counterparts and the public.

US policy should reflect all of the available information. My Dissent Channel telegram laid out the arguments for US recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by that name or by a compromise name like *Nova Makedonija* (New Macedonia). I couched my argument in realist terms: Prime Minister Mitsotakis was doomed to lose the next elections whatever he or the United States did. He was thus immune to any further US harm. The United States would have to do the right thing on Macedonia eventually. By delaying, America would pay an inflated price: reduced ability to work with the next Greek government.

My use of the Dissent Channel kept my ambassador out of the awkward position of having to block or comment on my message. The secrecy of my telegram was protected and the US-Greek relationship did not suffer. My message later gave me some modest stature in the eyes of colleagues with similar views. I saw no evidence of retaliation from any quarter. The official reply to my telegram was polite but non-committal.

The US administration was unwilling to antagonize Greek-Americans in an election year, but was also unwilling to hurt the United States' other Balkan interests. Finally, to encourage a positive outcome for a crucial referendum on relations with Macedonia's Albanian minority, the United States recognized the Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name two days after the 2004 US presidential elections. Greeks and Greek-Americans, although furious at the political cynicism that the timing seemed to imply, were powerless to retaliate.

Collective Dissent

In 1994, as Romania Desk Officer in the US State Department, I participated in a collective act of dissent. The Clinton White House refused to overrule the Pentagon's reluctance to intervene to stop the bloodshed in Bosnia. Angry at the Yugoslav killings, our office focused on the one step that was bureaucratically uncontroversial — enforcing UN economic sanctions against Serbia. Sanctions, however, turned out to be a counter-productive tool in this case. They did not save the Bosnian lives that they were supposed

to save. They cost my Romanian clients more than their struggling economy could afford in lost trade. They impoverished ordinary Serbians while Serb warlords became rich off smuggled oil and cigarettes.

In April 1993, a dozen regional and functional experts met to draft recommendations to rebut the self-protective pessimism of the Pentagon. We judged that Bosnian Serb militants could not set their own limits to the ethnic cleansing of Muslims. Peace was politically possible only when Serbs had lost hope of further territorial gains. Our specific recommendation was to allow the Bosnian Muslims to rearm, while US airpower struck the Serb artillery batteries above Sarajevo. I contributed one paragraph to our memorandum to Secretary Christopher, arguing that we would reduce the odds that US military intervention would be needed by making the threat of that intervention as immediate, credible, and open-ended as possible, not excluding the use of US ground forces.

When a confederate on his staff placed the memo in his hands, Christopher invited the dissenters to a meeting and shared the memo with cabinet colleagues. The text of our protest was quickly leaked to *The New York Times*.¹ Our dissent, public along with our names, had little impact. We had suggested a policy that would save innocent lives, but we could not prove that vital US interests justified drafting the US military into a foreign civil war. Clinton was freed to act only after the shift in the domestic political climate caused by anger at the civilian corpses, which were spread across CNN. As we had recommended two years earlier, Clinton rearmed the Bosnian Muslims and struck Serb artillery positions from the air. The Dayton Agreement emerged a few months later.

Resignation

Late in 2002, as I contemplated the coming invasion of Iraq and a diplomat's responsibility to the American people and the world, nothing in my experience as a dissenter offered any hope. Foreign policy had become even more subservient to internal US political and bureaucratic competition, for which the real world was in essence merely a scenic backdrop.

¹ *The New York Times*, 23 April 1993, p. 1.

Five State Department officials had resigned during the Bosnia crisis. Their resignations sent a ripple through Washington, but the only visible impact was the convening of a pep talk for the survivors. When I chose to resign, however, it was in the hope of raising the political cost of a war that I knew to be inevitable.

I send a carefully crafted resignation letter through the Dissent Channel to Secretary Powell. The reply, which arrived one month later signed by Richard Haass, then head of the Policy Planning Staff, was a carefully bland recapitulation of the talking points on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that I and my colleagues had used, to so little effect, on our foreign contacts. Fortunately, I had in the meantime leaked the text of my letter to an acquaintance at *The New York Times*.

Resignation is a gesture that automatically buys fifteen minutes of rapt attention from the world. Making the most of those fifteen minutes requires considerable forethought and discipline. My letter was embraced by the anti-war community, a constituency that President Bush had already shown his willingness to ignore. Having an impact on other constituencies proved impossible for someone with no training as an effective media presence. To raise the political cost to a detectable level, I realized only too late, means using the brutal rules of Washington competition against it. I was too high-minded a dissident, and the White House could ignore me.

Greek foreign policy officials have more effective means of dissent than their US counterparts, because their domestic political system is a force multiplier. When the Greek Prime Minister or Greek Pentagon tries to take liberties with the national interest, some Foreign Ministry watchdog will leak a distorted version of the policy to opposition journalists. The story becomes banner headlines in the Athens press, immediately picked up by parliament. In the resulting uproar, the offending policy evaporates.

The same tactic is less effective in the United States. Secure in their gerrymandered districts and determined to hold on to a fair share of government largesse for their constituents, Congress opposition members seldom attack the President in unison or effectively. Commercial US media outlets shrink from policy criticism that might be construed as partisan. Relative immunity from bureaucratic sabotage is one of the reasons that the United States is a global superpower.

The Iraq War could not have been prevented unless the US Congress had demanded a genuine examination of the factual basis for war. To embolden

timorous Democrats, who still remembered the political price that they had paid for incorrectly opposing the 1991 Gulf War, a political scandal was needed. Such a scandal in practice can only be achieved by triggering the White House immune system. As with Watergate from 1972-1975 and the Iran-Contra scandal in 1983-1988, stupid policies tend to cross a line into criminal behaviour. The attempt in July 2003 to discredit Ambassador Joseph Wilson for his revelation of the Niger yellowcake deception launched the FBI against the White House, but months too late.

Fomenting an illegal war without leaving an incriminating paper trail is impossible, but in Athens I had no access to incriminating evidence. Only a well-organized dissent within the State Department, led by someone already resolved to lose his job, could have triggered such an auto-immune reaction before the United States became inextricably entangled in Iraq. This required recruiting allies within my service. If I had looked for them, they were there to be found. Failure to look remains — three years later — my chief regret in resigning.

Policy

Agencies and individuals have conflicting personal, political and organizational interests that make rational analysis of long-term collective interests problematic. We tend to give relatively little weight to rational assessment and greater weight to perceived social consensus when we absorb and process information about the world. Standing within a hierarchy — and the psychic and material rewards that flow from that standing — depends on an ability to demonstrate concern for the interests of superiors. Expert opinion or even objective information that weakens the case for a preferred course of action leaves both the individual and his/her agency open to a charge of disloyalty.

The Dissent Channel and its culture of tolerating, if not taking, unsolicited advice from its diplomats is one of the State Department's strengths. There is no downside to US national interests in looking at every side of an issue. When naivety, megalomania or bureaucratic isolation fuels the dissent, a reply sent back through the Dissent Channel offers a discreet way to correct it gently. More often, the dissent represents good foreign policy but bad domestic politics, and thus it must be discarded, but with no shame to the dissenter.

The number of Dissent Channel messages received by the US State Department has steadily declined. Dissent now focuses less on US policy and more on complaints about the bureaucratic structure for implementing it. This is not because US diplomats are happy with policy. Rather, the decline of the Dissent Channel is partly because of an accurate sense of helplessness, and partly because of the (mildly) exaggerated perception that senior positions, those controlled by the White House, go only to those disciplined enough to have kept non-conforming opinions to themselves.

This is an unhealthy development. Bureaucratically immune civil service employees and mid-level Foreign Service officers are the only professional sources of non-conforming analysis upon which the State Department can rely. The restoration of a corporate culture in which diplomats embrace a slight risk of career sacrifice in order to do their duty of reality-checking on behalf of the American people is a modest but necessary step to protect US national interests better from flawed human nature.

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John Brady Kiesling was an officer in the US Foreign Service from 1983 until 2003, serving in Israel, Morocco, Greece and Armenia, as well as Washington DC. He resigned as Political Counselor at the US Embassy in Athens in February 2003 with a widely published letter rebuking the foreign policy of the Bush administration and calling for a return to US-led multilateralism. He is the author of the book Diplomacy Lessons: Realism for an Unloved Superpower (Dulles VA: Potomac Books, 2006), from which this article is adapted. His website is www.bradykiesling.com.