

“Woke” Public Diplomacy Undermines the State Department’s Core Mission and Weakens U.S. Foreign Policy

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The State Department’s public diplomacy programs abroad are skewed toward fringe aspects of U.S. domestic social issues and away from core, enduring U.S. values.

“Woke” diplomacy does not fit within the State Department’s own strategic plan and does not advance U.S. national security.

Congress must establish sensible limits on the State Department’s use of resources and funding to ensure it reflects America’s national interests.

The State Department has drifted away from its core mission of protecting and promoting U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values abroad. In foreign political, cultural, and educational programs, the State Department is diverting its attention from the basic objectives of its Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) toward ideology-inspired fringe concepts that are not widely accepted domestically, and in many cases are opposed by U.S. allies as well as enemies. The State Department needs to return to vital American principles in its international programming and leave contentious, sex-based and race-based fixations to the non-governmental sphere.

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Public Affairs: The “Cultural Colonialism” of Exporting U.S. Social Justice

The mission of the State Department is “to protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive.”¹

According to the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) JSP for 2022 to 2026, the State Department “is the lead institution conducting American diplomacy,” which “protects and advances the interests of American citizens.”² Although the JSP spans 52 pages, its five Strategic Goals and 19 subsidiary Strategic Objectives can be boiled down roughly to: promoting the safety of U.S. citizens abroad, working with foreign allies, ensuring prosperity for all Americans, promoting international security, defending human rights, combating government and business corruption, providing aid and disaster relief, improving the State Department’s workforce and infrastructure, and building understanding and support for U.S. policies and values abroad.

This is a wide and ambitious range of priorities, and yet the JSP has few precise measurements of success or failure. For example, the measure of success for Strategic Objective 1.5—to “enhance foreign publics’ understanding of and support for the values and policies of the United States”—is that “by September 2026, [State and USAID will] increase support among foreign publics for U.S. foreign policies and the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.”³ There is no quantification of “increase” or clear definition of “support.”

This *Backgrounders* argues that, in pursuit of these wide-ranging goals, the State Department has become distracted by a leftist agenda that weakens its ability to carry out U.S. foreign policy now and in the future. Rather than concentrating on the “values at the heart of the American way of life,” as the JSP instructs, the State Department has allowed itself to be captured by ephemeral fixations that are tangential to America’s core values at best and inimical to them at worst.

More specifically, the State Department’s public diplomacy efforts—including foreign programs, grants, and public affairs outreach—have been diverted from pursuing key policy objectives and promoting the core national values of the United States. Instead, the department’s priorities have shifted toward divisive race-based and sex-based ideologies, which are not only contentious at home but counterproductive to export abroad.

In pursuit of its new ideology, the State Department has adopted a new 19-page Equity Action Plan (EAP) and created yet another special envoy position, this time for Racial Equity and Justice. The opening of the EAP sets the tone: “Addressing systemic racism...is a core tenet of President Biden’s foreign policy.”⁴ Clearly showing its roots in the academic world of critical theory, and critical race theory in particular, the EAP contains the word “intersectional/ity” 11 times, “underserved communities” 47 times, and “equity” 113 times. The word “equality,” meanwhile, can be found only seven times. Leaving aside the impenetrable jargon, the overarching problem with the State Department’s EAP is that it does not identify a clear set of problems, and it does not prescribe specific, measurable solutions. One area where it does identify concrete action, setting aside more contracts to “underserved” small businesses, arguably violates the Constitution and Civil Rights Act by using quotas to discriminate on the basis of race and sex.⁵

In June 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken created a new special position, the Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice, and nominated a relatively inexperienced former Foreign Service officer, Desirée Cormier Smith, as the first incumbent.⁶ In announcing Smith’s appointment, Secretary Blinken said, “Advancing equity and justice in our foreign policy is essential to national security and strengthening democracy.” Because budgets are linked to priorities and national security is always a priority, the State Department tries to place as many programs as possible under the national security umbrella. However, if “embedding equity into the State Department’s foreign affairs work” is really to be defined as “a strategic national security imperative,” as the EAP does, the case has yet to be made.

Washington has directed all U.S. embassies to push the Administration’s fashionable ideas on race, sex, and gender, as if America’s domestic history and internal social conflict were fully relevant in all contexts and exportable as values. For example, the State Department encourages embassies to hoist the Black Lives Matter flag in countries where the population is nearly 100 percent “of color,” and it champions fringe aspects of gender theory that are nowhere near settled at home, much less welcome abroad.

U.S. foreign policy rests on certain fundamental principles that remain constant irrespective of who occupies the White House. Current global challenges include countering Chinese and Russian aggression, bringing people out of poverty through economic growth and trade, and helping to develop food, water, and power supplies. U.S. public diplomacy overseas should foster support for these policies. U.S. diplomats should also concentrate on

advancing values that are agreed upon by the widest possible number of Americans, which include democracy, freedom of speech, the rule of law, and equal treatment under the law of all citizens. Contentious “critical” theories on race, sex, and “gender” should not be foisted upon foreign audiences at the expense of America’s fundamental, enduring principles.

The State Department’s focus on contentious social issues comes at a price. According to a Pew survey, 68 percent of Americans (81 percent of Republicans and 60 percent of Democrats) “believe the U.S. is less respected than in the past.”⁷ The mission of the State Department’s Bureau of Public Affairs is “engaging foreign publics to enhance their understanding of and support for the values and policies of the United States.”⁸ In this era of massive budget deficits and unprecedented national debt, money for foreign programs should be carefully husbanded and targeted toward the most accepted, and acceptable, themes.

The Woke Lens vs. Reality-Based Diplomacy

U.S. politics arise from this country’s own particular history and are not fully transferrable in the context of U.S. foreign relations. At home, Americans are embroiled in raging debates about crime, education, abortion, illegal immigration, and election integrity. Americans are far from agreeing on how to deal with race, sex, and “gender” in schools and workplaces. Because there is no national consensus, making policy on some of these matters will be left, as the Constitution provides, to state and local governments. What is certain, for now, is that none of these domestic questions is settled to the extent that the U.S. could possibly consider exporting the conclusions as part of its diplomatic engagement with foreign countries. Even when U.S. national consensus is there, restraint is always necessary in attempting to convince other nations that one’s own values should be theirs. The U.S. must balance the likelihood of convincing potential allies with the likelihood of hostile reactions to perceived interference or “cultural colonialism.”

Yet, the State Department often puts a contested social agenda at the forefront of its diplomatic outreach overseas, to the confusion, consternation, or even derision of U.S. allies as well as enemies. Spending time and money spreading views abroad that are highly divisive at home is detrimental to U.S. foreign policy, as doing so diverts resources away from sharing the more appealing and fundamental “democratic values at the heart of the American way of life” referred to in the JSP.⁹ As current and former Heritage analysts Max Primorac and James Roberts, respectively, wrote in February 2022, the Biden Administration’s foreign aid policy is

driven by a “rigidly ideological and domestically divisive agenda...that [is] likely to undermine the economic prospects and self-reliance of USAID’s beneficiaries, while also likely undermining the long-standing bipartisan congressional support for continued foreign aid funding.”¹⁰ Prioritizing contentious interpretations of “social justice” risks alienating the intended audience and undermining other, more vital efforts to win hearts and minds abroad.

Universal Values vs. Ephemeral Political Fads

Of the five goals in the JSP, the third is to “strengthen democratic institutions, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity.”¹¹ State Department political appointees who view foreign policy through a lens of domestic activism—that is not generally accepted in America, much less in other parts of the world—often fail to understand the complexities of other countries. They may not realize that the concept of “human dignity” in Cambodia or Cameroon is not the same as in California. This lack of cultural awareness can result in money being wasted or spread too thinly, or even being spent on programs that directly oppose a host country’s religious or social values. Career staff, should they want to advise department leadership to avoid unnecessarily controversial, politically sensitive messages, are discouraged from doing so by adverse consequences to their promotion and job assignments.

The State Department’s current obsession with critical theory¹² and related concepts such as “intersectionality” not only risks being seen as meddling, it spreads efforts too widely. The Prussian king Frederick the Great once said that “he who defends everything, defends nothing.” Likewise, to designate everything as a foreign policy priority means that nothing is. Following is an example from a State Department briefing on the annual Trafficking in Persons Report:

Vulnerable communities, such as displaced populations, migrants, indigenous communities, women, children, and minority populations, are more likely to experience impacts of climate change and, consequently, are even more vulnerable to exploitation, including human trafficking, largely due to lost livelihoods, displacement, and disrupted family arrangements.¹³

This definition of vulnerable people leaves out only adult, male members of dominant ethnic groups, as everyone else is part of a “vulnerable community.” In an African context, where some tribes are politically or

economically dominant, but do not hold the numerical majority in a country, this “intersectional” taxonomy is meaningless at best and politically divisive at worst. Picking sides in African tribal conflicts that originated long before the American Founding is not sound policy.

Gender Ideology: Exporting Progressive America’s Peculiar Obsession

Under both Republican and Democratic Administrations, and in keeping with America’s constitutional and legal protections, U.S. foreign policy advocates the fair and decent treatment of all individuals. In the modern era, the State Department has promoted equal opportunity and fair legal treatment of both sexes overseas and protested the persecution of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Over time, these positions have become consensus American values, and arguably they are “universal values” as described in Goal 3 of the JSP. However, under the Biden Administration, the State Department now also promotes a radical gender ideology that is not accepted by most Americans, let alone foreign publics.¹⁴

In February 2021, President Joe Biden issued a “Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Persons Around the World,” in which he directed U.S. government entities to “pursue an end to violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics.”¹⁵ Heritage Foundation scholar Grace Melton notes that President Biden’s memorandum—and thus his Administration’s official policy—“displaces biological sex with gender identity in domestic and international affairs.”¹⁶ More insidiously, it conflates the contentious term of “gender identity or expression” with sex and sexual orientation. American diplomats will now advocate for acceptance of synthetic sex identities,¹⁷ such as “non-binary” and “genderqueer,” which go against the beliefs and beyond the tolerance of the population in many of the countries with which the U.S. has other, crucially important, interests to promote. Rather than concentrating State Department efforts on spreading “universal values” per the JSP, “the United States will instead be promoting an ideology that conflicts with internationally recognized rights.”¹⁸

In that same February 2021 memorandum, the Biden Administration required each government agency to report on the implementation of measures to “protect and promote the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world.” This resulted in a 134-page *Interagency Report*.¹⁹ The State Department’s section alone takes up 50 pages, and it details a variety of activities that do little to advance the JSP’s five goals or 19 objectives.

The *Interagency Report* reveals an exhaustive focus on groups which, combined, are estimated to comprise no more than 5 percent of the global population, with sexual minorities other than lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals being collectively far less than 1 percent. In so doing, the *Report* makes it clear that the Biden Administration's focus is not on "fundamental rights grounded in human dignity," but on *ersatz* rights "based on membership in special identity groups."²⁰ The *Report* describes how U.S. embassies hosted or participated in special events for the month-long "Pride" festivities and how the State Department "celebrated Coming Out Day, Spirit Day, International Pronouns Day, Intersex Awareness Day, Intersex Day of Solidarity, and Ace week (celebrating those with asexual-spectrum identities), with many of these commemorative days highlighted for the first time in the Department's history."²¹

Leaving aside whether all these concepts merit their own respective days of commemoration, are they integral, or even relevant, to American foreign policy or national security? Might drawing official attention to obscure days of commemoration risk diverting the small audience for U.S. embassy social media content into a rabbit hole of contentious debate, instead of more adeptly using America's platform to "strengthen democratic institutions, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity" as called for in the JSP (Goal 3)? For instance, "Ace Week" celebrates asexuality, "a sexual orientation where a person experiences little to no sexual attraction to anyone and/or does not experience desire for sexual contact."²² Is there any evidence that the "community" of people with no sexual attraction to anyone is being oppressed anywhere? Is it necessary to spend limited diplomatic time and capital celebrating or supporting this group, as opposed to the many others who do experience discrimination?

International Pronouns Day's website claims that "referring to people by the pronouns they determine for themselves is basic to human dignity."²³ But many argue that allowing every person in the world to select his or her own, idiosyncratic pronouns (especially if adherence is then enforced by law) unreasonably burdens others and violates freedom of speech. Compelling individuals to go against long-standing grammar rules or their consciences—or else face consequences—is a feature of totalitarian ideologies, not of liberal democracies. It is ironic, then, that China and Russia, America's greatest adversaries in the competition to attract the alliance and cooperation of the developing world, criticize America's obsessive messaging on these topics as in stark contrast to their own doctrine of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and culture. In a 2021 speech, Vladimir Putin said that America's social justice warriors adhered

to a “dogmatism bordering on absurdity,” comparing their attempts at controlling public discourse to that of the Bolsheviks.²⁴

President Biden’s State Department is offering a \$50,000 grant to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that organize workshops in private companies in Hyderabad and Chennai (India) “to sensitize them towards the rights of the LGBTQI+ community broadly, and the transgender (TG) community specifically.”²⁵ The State Department also recently handed out \$20,600 to fund drag performances at a cultural center in Ecuador.²⁶ The obsessive focus on sexual minorities seems particularly jarring in Africa, where most societies are more religious and conservative than in the West. State Department efforts in Uganda, Ghana, and other countries have placed sex-based social causes, still highly contentious here at home, ahead of core interests, such as promoting democracy, encouraging economic growth, promoting U.S. exports and investment, countering terrorism, limiting corruption, and countering Chinese and Russian influence.

The U.S. embassy in Botswana sent out a grant opportunity for \$300,000 “to support LGBTQIA+ groups to inform Botswana’s population of the landmark 2021 decision decriminalizing same-sex relations; [and] to promote greater social acceptance, including among influential religious groups and traditional groups.”²⁷ While Botswana’s courts have ruled to protect same-sex relationships from criminal liability, it does not follow that they are ready to accept a redefinition of marriage, let alone the far more radical practices that the Biden Administration is pushing in the U.S., including experimental chemical and surgical “gender-affirming care” for children, or allowing biological men who identify as female to access spaces that are legally or customarily reserved for women.

During President Barack Obama’s 2015 visit to Kenya, a reporter asked President Uhuru Kenyatta to “respond to criticism about the state of gay rights in your country.” President Kenyatta replied that Kenya and the U.S. “share so many values—our common love for democracy, entrepreneurship, value for families [sic]... But there are some things that we must admit we don’t share.... It is very difficult for us to be able to impose on people that which they themselves do not accept.”²⁸

Even so, in May 2022, the U.S. embassy hoisted the Pride flag (or, rather, the expanded “Progress Pride” flag)²⁹ in Nairobi. In the previous Trump Administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had ordered that only the Stars and Stripes be flown at U.S. embassies. Under President Biden, not only was the Progress Pride flag flown at the State Department for “Pride” month last year, but U.S. embassies and consulates were given blanket permission to do so.

Rather than allowing countries like Kenya and Botswana to move freely through social change (or not) at their own pace and inclination, the U.S. is excessively promoting leftist sexual identity agendas, and thereby—to its own detriment—appears to such conservative societies as overbearing and intrusive. To conflate demands from radical activists with basic civil and political rights protected by U.S. law risks the U.S. being perceived as an agent of “ideological colonialism or humanitarian blackmail” by traditional societies, without making any progress on any of the five goals.³⁰

Inserting College Campus Ideology into the U.N. and Multilateral Fora

Within the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, the Biden Administration has likewise attempted to impose language or to redefine terms, with the goal that “sex,” “sexual orientation,” and self-professed “gender identity” would all fall under the same umbrella and be accorded the same protections. The aforementioned *Interagency Report* states that “since January 20, 2021, the United States has resumed a leadership role at the UN and other multilateral bodies, having joined every joint statement on LGBTQI+ issues at UN bodies.”³¹ The document also celebrates U.S. success, in coordination with like-minded countries, in inserting the term “sexual orientation and gender identity” into a U.N. General Assembly resolution in December 2021, as well as employing the phrase “women, in all their diversity” for the first time in U.N. history.

The phrase “women, in all their diversity” is code for including biological males who identify as women, which thus logically grants them unfettered access to programs and spaces reserved for women and girls in countries where the latter are significantly disadvantaged by comparison. By conflating sexual orientation with gender identity in U.N. documents, just as in the memorandum, the Biden Administration can export its fight to mandate that U.S. domestic law (Title IX) include “sexual orientation and gender identity” in the definition of “sex” (as in male or female).³² The State Department can then advocate that biological men in other countries have free admission, based on self-identifying as women, to women’s sports, bathrooms, crisis shelters, and prisons.

This official promulgation of American college-campus gender ideology, and the attempt to inject it into U.N. standards, is viewed by some countries—particularly those in the developing world—as patronizing and even colonialist.

“Conversion Therapy” and “Gender-Affirming Care”

The Biden Administration risks the most blowback to U.S. foreign policy when it pushes novel and unsound concepts that have been discredited. At a June 2022 reception at the State Department, Secretary Blinken touted an executive order from President Biden telling his employees “to develop a plan to promote an end to the profoundly harmful and medically discredited practice of so-called ‘conversion therapy’ around the world.”³³ As Ryan Anderson, author of *When Harry Became Sally*, writes, gender activists apply the label of “conversion therapy” to “any therapeutic service—including basic talk therapy—to help a gender dysphoric youth feel comfortable without ‘transitioning.’”³⁴ In other words, gender activists oppose any situation in which gender dysphoric people, including children, might be helped to accept their bodies as they are. In most of the world, it is an accepted biological fact that sex (male or female) is identified—not assigned—at birth and does not change, irrespective of self-identification, cross-sex hormones, or even surgery. The deliberately false characterization of any affirmation of biological sex as “conversion therapy,” with the purpose of banning sensible therapeutic methods, constitutes not only censorship and junk science, but also bad policy that will not sell well abroad.

President Biden’s 2021 memorandum states that “agencies involved with foreign aid, assistance, and development programs should consider the impact of programs funded by the Federal Government on human rights, including the rights of LGBTQI+ persons, when making funding decisions.”³⁵ It seems a short step from this policy to requiring that foreign aid recipients conform to the U.S. government’s definitions of terms like “conversion therapy” and policy objectives, such as “gender affirming care,” in order to receive financial grants or other forms of assistance. The Biden Administration wants to promote “gender-affirming” medical “care” in the U.S.³⁶ at a time when other developed countries, such as Finland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, are reversing their policies of “affirming” childhood gender dysphoria through prescribing (off-label) drugs to block puberty, cross-sex hormones, and surgeries for minors. The U.K. has recently shut down the Tavistock child gender clinic, and a group of 1,000 parents are reportedly suing the facility for negligence, claiming that the center permanently damaged their children’s health by precipitously providing medication and surgeries to their minor children.³⁷

It is tactically shortsighted for the U.S. intimately to associate itself with contentious policies that are not supported by long-term research

and evidence. To tie U.S. foreign aid, visitor exchanges, and other programs to compulsory acceptance of transitory social norms would be equally unsound strategy.

The “universal values” to which the JSP refers need to *be* universal, at the very least in the United States.³⁸ Each country has its own constitution, written or unwritten, that protects certain enumerated rights: Americans have the Bill of Rights in the Constitution, the French have their Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and so on. The United Nations operates according to both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which all member countries have ratified, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which most but not all have consented. The only human rights that are internationally recognized are those that are enumerated in the ICCPR and similar treaties that countries have negotiated and to which they have committed. U.S. foreign policy should promote the protection of these universally agreed rights, including “the right to manifest beliefs or religious convictions in public” over postmodernist, “newly emergent claims on behalf of sexual orientation and gender identity.”³⁹

Under former U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo, a Commission on Unalienable Rights was established to determine which essential rights should be at the core of U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy. The commission’s report⁴⁰ was released shortly before the 2020 presidential election. In March 2021, soon after taking over as Secretary of State, Antony Blinken publicly repudiated the report, saying that “[p]ast unbalanced statements that suggest such a hierarchy, including those offered by a recently disbanded State Department advisory committee, do not represent a guiding document for this administration.”⁴¹

Neglect of Other Populations

The practice of placing one particular minority, albeit one with great power in U.S. domestic politics, on a pedestal in cultural programming inevitably neglects other groups and is far from diverse or inclusive. For example, in June—which is now gay pride month in the U.S. and other Western countries—last year, U.S. embassies in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates flew Pride flags, and the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia tweeted a statement of support in honor of the festivities.⁴² Leaving aside the question of whether any flag but the Stars and Stripes should fly at U.S. government premises overseas, displaying a banner that represents an ever-changing list of identity groups seems to be putting the cart before the horse in predominately

Muslim countries, especially the Gulf states.⁴³ Women in Saudi Arabia, for example, still lack many freedoms—including the ability to marry without the permission of a male guardian—and were not even allowed to drive until three years ago.⁴⁴ Civil equality between men and women, let alone the de-criminalization or recognition of same-sex relationships, is clearly a long way off. A particular focus on sexual politics in diplomatic programs could also undermine our ongoing efforts to counter violent extremism in the Muslim world or push possible allies toward China and Russia.⁴⁵

As mentioned, under the Biden Administration, U.S. embassies have raised “Progress Pride” flags during Pride month. This flag adds white, pink, light blue, brown, and black chevrons to the original six-stripe rainbow flag that debuted in 1978. The white, pink, and light blue symbolize transgender rights, while the “black and brown stripes represent marginalized LBGT communities of colour [sic], community members lost to HIV/AIDS, and those currently living with AIDS.”⁴⁶ The flag’s reference specifically to “LGBT communities of color” seems exclusionary. The Progress Pride flag singling out “community members lost to HIV/AIDS, and those currently living with AIDS,” excludes those who have suffered from malaria, COVID-19, or other maladies that have killed far more people, of all identity groups, around the world than HIV.

State’s lack of inclusivity in public diplomacy programs extends far beyond the flags on embassy grounds. The city of Jaipur in India hosts Asia’s largest literary festival and the largest free literary gathering in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people attend the sessions each year, and speakers have ranged from Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee to Oprah Winfrey. In March of 2022, chargé d’affaires Patricia Lacina tweeted that the U.S. embassy in New Delhi would promote “global health security issues” and “Indian diaspora [and] LGBTQI+ voices” at this year’s event.⁴⁷ U.S. diplomats chose to specifically highlight only LGBTQ authors; yet as of 2021, over one billion people in India live in poverty, and the last census indicated that 2.2 percent of the total population suffered from a physical or mental disability.⁴⁸ People who are poor, handicapped, or come from a host of other backgrounds must also overcome great adversity and prejudice to become writers. So, too, would female authors from the state of Rajasthan, where the literacy rate among women is under 58 percent.⁴⁹

In July 2022, the State Department gave a \$10,000 grant to a film festival in Portugal that featured films about drag culture, incest, and sex between adults and minors.⁵⁰ These topics may be welcomed on the progressive left—but do they represent commonly accepted, enduring American values that should be promoted overseas at taxpayers’ expense?

In the interests of diversity and inclusion, should the State Department not also fund film festivals that promote traditional, religious, and morally restrained lifestyles?

In Lebanon, a conservative country reeling from a collapsing economy and rampant inflation, the State Department funded a “gender and sexuality library.”⁵¹ Moreover, the State Department has funded “diversity and inclusion” training for police forces in Latin America, where law enforcement could benefit much more from training in modern police methods and skills.⁵²

American diplomacy should concentrate on advancing American interests, one of which is to secure the most basic rights for the largest number of people. Americans must first aim to encourage freedom of assembly and speech, due process, and equality under the law everywhere before prioritizing any specific minority or community in the exercise of such rights.

Funding Abortion Abroad

The United States is deeply divided on the question of abortion. Domestically, the Hyde Amendment prohibits the use of federal funds for abortions. As for foreign policy, according to a 2022 Knights of Columbus/Marist poll, 73 percent of Americans oppose, or strongly oppose, using tax dollars to fund abortion services overseas.⁵³

Two generations of Republicans and Democrats have clashed on using U.S. foreign aid to fund abortions, and policy positions have often made an about-face after national elections. In the past, two policies have determined the use of U.S. government funding for organizations that provide abortion services: The first, known as the Helms Amendment, was passed in 1973 as an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act following the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roe v. Wade*. In essence, this amendment mandates that recipients of U.S. foreign aid may not use funds to perform abortions as “family planning,” although such groups are still eligible to receive funding for other purposes. Congress has renewed this amendment every year since 1973, but pro-abortion Democrats in Congress are increasingly opposed to it.⁵⁴

The second policy, referred to as the Mexico City Policy, was instituted under President Ronald Reagan in 1985 and expanded by President Donald Trump in 2017 as “Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance.” It prohibits aid to any foreign NGO that promotes or provides abortions, regardless of whether it offers other services. President Biden immediately rescinded the policy upon taking office in January 2021.

As the nation continues to navigate the implications of the Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs*, it is clear that abortion is anything but a settled issue in the mind of the American public. The Helms amendment still stands, but the State Department has found ways to sidestep restrictions on funding abortions abroad. Normally, countries that have defaulted on a U.S. government loan are barred from receiving more financial aid. However, in December 2021, the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources made an exception for Zimbabwe, citing the need to provide "targeted assistance" for "family planning and reproductive health," among other areas.⁵⁵ This loophole allows the U.S. government to channel funding to groups such as Marie Stopes International, whose Population Services Zimbabwe program has received multiple government grants from both the Biden and Obama Administrations to offer abortion and pro-abortion counseling.⁵⁶

It is only natural that policy priorities shift from one presidential Administration to another. That said, regardless of who runs the White House or Foggy Bottom, American diplomats should advance a relatively consistent outlook that reflects America's enduring, universal values. The U.S. should leave domestic policy disputes to be resolved at home. Attempting to export contentious current viewpoints held by slim and temporary political majorities does not advance U.S. national interests abroad and might very well induce opposition to them.

Recommendations for Congress

In order to better and more consistently promote U.S. national interests abroad, Congress should:

1. **Hold the Department of State accountable through oversight hearings** for adhering to its Joint Strategic Plan by promoting enduring, basic American values, the adoption of which by other countries would advance U.S. interests.
2. **Require the Department of State to report, within 30 days after each fiscal year, on the resources allocated** to and accomplishments of all special envoys, representatives, and coordinators whose portfolios overlap with responsibilities of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. (See list.)⁵⁷
3. **Set limits, as part of a new Foreign Service Act, on the number and funding of** special envoys, representatives, and coordinators, with the goal of avoiding redundancy and adding proven value to U.S. foreign policy.

Conclusion

The executive branch leads on foreign policy, but Congress funds the activities of the State Department directed at foreign audiences, and these activities must reflect the values of the American people as a whole and serve the national interest. Congress must exert greater scrutiny over the department's activities in public diplomacy messages, exchange and visitor programs, and grants, and it must establish sensible limits on the department's ever-growing number of special-interest envoys and representatives.

In an era of highly divided politics and thin electoral margins, only congressional oversight and limits can enforce a consistent message in U.S. public diplomacy abroad. Failing to exert such a restraining influence on the executive branch allows extreme agendas to infiltrate diplomatic programs, to the detriment of advancing U.S. interests.

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