

Blinken's Diversity & Inclusion Plan Erodes Equality & Excellence

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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On April 12, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [announced](#) the appointment of Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, a career Foreign Service Officer and former ambassador to Malta, as the State Department's first chief diversity and inclusion officer (CDIO). On July 21, Blinken sent an unclassified cable to U.S. diplomatic and consular posts around the world to introduce Abercrombie-Winstanley — who, in her new position, reports directly to the secretary of state — and to tout the new Office for Diversity and Inclusion.

A State Department that welcomes, and offers opportunities for advancement, to all Americans is a priority. Yet the lofty rhetoric of diversity and inclusion has often provided a cover for imposing ideological conformity and distributing benefits and burdens based on race. Therefore, Blinken's new undertaking gives cause for concern. His near silence in the two official pronouncements about the personal qualities, educational attainments, professional achievements, and areas of expertise that the State Department values in building a workforce that responsibly conducts American foreign policy heightens apprehensions.

To advance U.S. interests abroad, the State Department must live up to America's highest principles by ensuring that service in the nation's diplomatic corps is open to all citizens based on skills, talents, and character. Individuals with diverse experiences, opinions, and training

enrich understanding within the department of the vast array of jobs, opportunities, and threats that the United States faces abroad. These range from efficient processing of visa requests and effective operation within international organizations to protect health and the environment to cooperating with friends and partners to counter the Chinese Communist Party's aim in every region of the globe to reorient world order around Beijing's authoritarian imperatives.

But the soothing words "diversity and inclusion" mask a different agenda. Blinken seems to believe that turning race, ethnicity, and gender into crucial determinants of career advancement honors America's highest principles and will enhance the State Department's work.

His April 12 remarks stress the comprehensiveness of the new undertaking, saying that "our Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan" aims at "aligning and advancing diversity and inclusion efforts across the department." His July 21 cable emphasizes that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion has been structured, and provided with ample resources, to accomplish its ambitious task. An "11-person full-time staff" — including a "Deputy Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Chief of Staff, Chief Data Scientist, two Senior Advisors, two Strategic Communications Advisors, two Special Assistants, and two Staff Assistants" — reports to the chief diversity and inclusion officer. Supplementing the "core team" are "Foreign Service and Civil Service detailees, Presidential Management Fellow rotations, contractors, and interns."

The State Department must mobilize personnel and take decisive action because the problem is "systemic," Blinken explained in April. "It goes much deeper than any one institution or any one administration — and it's perpetuated by policies, practices, and people to this day."

Notwithstanding Blinken's blanket claim, even the government report that examines underrepresentation of minorities in higher levels of the State Department bureaucracy offers the remarkable acknowledgement that "some unobservable factors that our analyses may not have captured include employees' skills, motivation, performance, or abilities." In neither his April

remarks nor his July cable, moreover, does Blinken identify a single policy, practice, or person that perpetuates systemic racism in the State Department — where he served as deputy secretary of state from 2015 to 2017 and which for 16 of the last 21 years has been led either by an African American secretary of state or has been accountable to an African American president.

Nevertheless, Blinken insists that so pervasive and deep-seated is systemic discrimination at the State Department that “Promoting diversity and inclusion is the job of every single member of this department.” By asserting that advancing diversity and inclusion is “mission critical,” Blinken implies that systemic discrimination impairs the formulation and implementation of State Department policy. It would be useful, therefore, to know what role Blinken believes systemic discrimination played in the devising of an Iran deal that brought the ayatollahs billions of dollars and which supported their violent pursuit of hegemony throughout the region, in the failure to prevent North Korea’s acceleration of its nuclear program, and in the neglect of China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and around the world — all of which transpired while he served as deputy secretary of state.

All department employees should treat colleagues courteously and respectfully and judge one another based on character and competence. It is something else to demand that every member of the State Department workforce promote select minorities and women. This conscripts employees into an experiment in social engineering that, according to Blinken, aims to “change the culture” at the State Department including “our norms, our behaviors, and our biases.”

Blinken has put State Department employees on notice that whatever your task — from monitoring Islamic extremists to negotiating arms treaties to understanding China’s domestic tensions and global ambitions — you will be evaluated on your contribution to hiring, retaining, and promoting designated categories of people.

Here a lesson from abroad is instructive. Highlighting differences among individuals ostensibly engaged in a joint enterprise by allocating power based on membership in identity groups has not fostered a devotion to common purpose in Lebanon, the Balkans, or almost anywhere else it has been tried. There is little to reason to expect that it will foster a sense of shared mission among the State Department's tens of thousands of employees.

Nor is there is good reason to hope that the Office of Diversity and Inclusion will, as Secretary Blinken promises, improve the State Department's ability "to pursue U.S. national security interests in a world that grows ever more complex." By institutionalizing within Foggy Bottom's labyrinthine bureaucracy the imperative to focus on skin color, ethnic background, and gender in decisions about hiring, retention, and promotion, Blinken demotes questions of skill, talent, and character. Indeed, by reproducing within the State Department the education establishment's obsession with identity politics, Blinken runs the risk of diverting the State Department from its principal tasks, as our schools have been sidetracked from transmitting knowledge and cultivating students' ability to think for themselves.

This is a reasonable inference from Joel Kotkin's disquieting recent essay, "[The End of Merit](#)." A fellow at the Claremont Institute Center for the American Way of Life and a fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University, Kotkin argues that schools' concentration on systemic racism "both reflects and contributes to the 'systemic' decline of education itself." The decline is measurable and costly: "Over time, our educational deficit with other countries, notably China, particularly in the acquisition of practical skills in mathematics, engineering, medical technology, and management, has grown, threatening our economic and political pre-eminence," writes Kotkin. "In math, the OECD's 2018 Program for International Student Assessment found the United States [was outperformed by 36 countries](#), not only by China, but also Russia, Italy, France, Finland, Poland, and Canada."

The decline of our ability to compete will accelerate, suggests Kotkin, because the fixation on systemic racism in schools does not merely displace attention that would otherwise be focused on the acquisition of skills. It also vilifies the disciplined pursuit of excellence as itself an instrument of systemic racism. Educators imbued with the tenets of critical race theory assert, for example, “that ‘merit, meritocracy and especially meritocracy based on standardized testing’ are essentially ‘racist systems,’” observes Kotkin. “Some among [the new racial cadres](#) even denounce habits such as punctuality, rationality, and hard work as reflective of ‘racism’ and ‘white privilege.’”

Secretary Blinken is far from endorsing such folly. Yet where are his initiatives to promote integrity and excellence in the workforce? What undertakings has he showcased to enhance diplomats’ understanding of our partners as well as our competitors by, say, creating incentives to increase the number of officials who attain fluency in critical foreign languages? When will he boast of new programs to recruit to the State Department, and train within its ranks, individuals whose knowledge of science and technology enables them to comprehend the intricacies of, and devise policies to address, the commercial, conventional military, and cybersecurity threats posed by China’s quest for dominance in artificial intelligence?

Instead of dividing its workforce by race, ethnicity, and gender, the State Department should treat all employees with equal respect, which is also the best means of fostering a common sense of purpose and attaining excellence throughout the ranks.

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<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>

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