

If It Quacks Like a Duck ...

One of my favorite sayings goes like this: If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck. This is a good analogy for the situation facing us at USAID. Are we being merged with State or not? Some of us can remember the days when Senator Jesse Helms, R-N.C., was intent on forcing a shotgun marriage between the State Department and our agency. Congress did not go along, and we seemed to have dodged that bullet. We were fairly sure that the issue had been put to rest, and became complacent. But today, we see signs all around us that the camel's nose is again sneaking back into our tent.

While we have heard official protestations from the likes of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, USAID Administrator Randall Tobias and others that "No, we are not merging," the duck keeps waddling back. Is it a matter of semantics or am I just paranoid? How does one explain these facts: the USAID administrator now has an additional title — director of foreign assistance — and occupies a very high-level position at the State Department, where he is spending most of his time. A large contingency of our Policy and Program Coordination staff has physically established residency at Main State. There are close to 50 State management officer positions listed for USAID executive officers to bid on in our latest Assignment Cycle Major Listing? Let's look at each of these developments.

The USAID administrator's office has, in the organizational charts as well as physically, been merged into the State Department structure under something called the "F" office. Ambassador Tobias reports directly to the Secretary of State, and the USAID program implements her transformational diplomacy initiative. USAID's budget and planning function now falls under the direct control of State. The result is that development programs, which are now under increasingly centralized control, have been redefined and in some cases cut to accommodate political imperatives of State Department staff over the advice of USAID technical experts and even mission directors.

As I indicated above, the Policy and Program Coordination staff, about 40 of them, have already relocated in offices at Main State. Since PPC is the heart and brains of our organization, this is more than a symbolic act. It is major surgery. Another

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telling sign that a merger has been in progress was the creation of country core teams in which hundreds of USAID staff were combined into planning teams with State experts. The first big meeting at the Loy Henderson Auditorium created some awkward, even comical situations. When a mass of about 500 USAID employees showed up at the appointed time at the diplomatic entrance, the guards became so annoyed at the large, unruly crowd, most of whom did not have State badges, that there was actually chaos, mass confusion and lots of head-shaking. Eventually everyone got through the gates, but the meeting started more than 30 minutes late. Not a very good start to our partnership. Now there has been talk about whether there is a need to have duplicate country desk officers at both USAID and State.

The latest sign of the merger was the inclusion of over 50 State positions (primarily management officer jobs, those people who run our embassies overseas) in the USAID 2007 Foreign Service Assignment Cycle Major Listing. This is called the "CAP" (Crossover Assignment Program), a program in which State and USAID employees can bid on each other's jobs. A lot fewer positions are available to State officers, however, who wish to bid on USAID jobs. The interesting thing here is that it seems that State is willing to allow USAID executive officers to manage embassies and USAID missions overseas, but most of the positions are in Africa and predominantly at hardship posts. As far as I know, none are in Paris or London. It makes sense to do this for many reasons, but does anyone doubt this is also a merger? Or did I miss something?

You might think that I am against such a merger. Maybe yes, maybe no. There probably are many excellent reasons to merge, such as increased efficiency, cost savings, alignment of program strategies and so on. There are also many reasons not to do so, such as weakening long-term development achievement for short-term political gains, losing the good faith of the international community concerning our true goals, and reducing our technical edge.

This is a political decision that the president and Congress have a right to make, for us to implement. I am concerned, however, by this death by a thousand little cuts. Let's just admit to what is happening and stop trying to keep the merger under the radar. It's quacking, so it must be a duck. □

