



Special Envoys Recommendations

American Foreign Service Association
QDDR Special Envoys Working Group

INTRODUCTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Secretaries of State and Presidents have made excellent use of a limited number of special envoys to carry out specific, high-level policy objectives. In recent years, the number of special envoys and representatives has increased substantially, diluting the brand and reducing effectiveness. Overall, we propose paring back their number substantially to a few key positions that report directly to the Secretary, have clarity of mission, access to resources and communicate 360. We recommend:

- Retaining a handful of positions that truly merit being special envoys;
- Moving others into the bureaus' policy structure;
- Keeping those that already work within bureau structures;
- Eliminating others whose mandates can be accomplished as or more effectively through embassies abroad and bureaus at State; and
- Providing envoys with the assets and tools they need to succeed.

DISCUSSION

The term “Special Envoy” or “Special Representative” connotes someone chosen to work as a surrogate for the Secretary of State on a particular issue that requires sustained, high-level attention. In such a situation, the issue or mission is either not a good fit with the State Department’s existing bureau structure, or is a matter of such high priority and sensitivity that it benefits from separate, intense focus. The person encumbering that position functions best with a direct line to the Secretary and the imprimatur of high-level connections that assists that person in carrying out his or her role effectively.

The envoy is valued for his or her independence, ability to raise the profile of an issue, talk directly to decision-makers and negotiators, and get things done with a minimum of bureaucracy. The difference between an envoy and a representative may be semantic or substantive: an envoy can have a discrete mission abroad, whereas a representative runs policy on the issue both at home and abroad. Both fall under the purview of this paper.

Pitfalls

This works effectively when it remains the exception to the rule and focuses on a specific, circumscribed issue. The argument for the current large numbers – at least 30 – is that envoys’ ability to network, think outside the

box and have a direct line in to the Secretary make them creative, effective players and increase the reach of U.S. diplomacy. AFSA believes, in contrast, that their proliferation instead makes the State Department's – and the Secretary of State's – tasks more difficult in a number of ways. Specifically:

- Envoys from outside State may lack the institutional knowledge that would allow them to coordinate with key policy players; some may be well-versed in dealing with other Washington players, but working within the Department is key as well.
- Short-term perspective may create blinders. An absence of background, as well as the longer-term perspective of how action in one area can affect others down the road, can lead an envoy to function in isolation.
- A special envoy can pull away responsibility from the bureaus and senior FSOs, with the predictable effect on morale and the Building's ability to function effectively. In addition, the Secretary does not have the capacity to supervise them all.
- Communication is key. Without a doubt, a special envoy who enjoys the Secretary's confidence and brings expertise in a particular field will have a direct line to the Secretary. In an agency where geographic and functional bureaus provide useful contributions and context, and are connected with the embassies in the field, cutting them out of the loop is not good for overall institutional knowledge and can dilute the effectiveness of all concerned – or result in different actors working at cross purposes.
- In some cases, making a certain topic "special" risks marginalizing it. Work on such a topic, when a stated priority of the Secretary, can be better folded into the day-to-day outreach of bureaus and embassies. These envoys and representatives sap already scarce resources, and can be difficult to staff with experienced FSOs who see in many of them a limited career path, rendering them less connected and less effective.
- Envoys should not be appointed as a means to placate Congress on a particular issue, absent a solid policy justification.

The current long list of special envoys should be pared back substantially.

What a successful envoy needs

Those special envoy positions that deserve the distinction should operate as an integral part of a 360 degree organization, informed by and informing the relevant bureaus and vice versa. This will allow all to function as effectively as possible. They will enjoy the clout and backing inherent in the position – whether appointed by the Secretary or the President. These envoys can function effectively when they have:

- The authority to carry out their mission and clear lines of reporting authority (360); if the envoy reports to the President through the Secretary, there must be one aligned reporting structure, not two separate ones.

- Clarity of mission (something at least approaching a job description) – as with other jobs, this can and, in many cases, should change over time.
- Access to appropriate resources, both financial and human.
- Collegial working relationships – the envoy must get along with those above and below him or her – in short, chemistry matters. In many instances, it makes sense for a bureau to be involved with the selection.
- Alignment with the appropriate bureau or bureaus and an office director, who can make it his or her job constantly to ensure the envoy stays aligned with the bureau and vice versa.
- A time limit or sunset provision, especially for generalist envoys.

Recommendations

Three categories of special envoys and representatives, in limited numbers, can be helpful. The first will report directly to the Secretary, or in cases where the envoy is presidential, through the Secretary to the President; the second will be shifted into a bureau and in many cases, can be staffed by already designated officials at the ambassadorial or DAS level; and the third already reside within bureaus, including those that are legislatively mandated. Still others can be eliminated without having an adverse impact on the functioning of State.

Those who remain – and any new positions that are created – should have access to the appropriate resources to help them succeed in their mission. Ultimately, all envoys, in addition to or as part of their defined mission, should maintain, use and strengthen the machinery of the Department, and contribute to the Department’s overall effectiveness.

- **Category One:** A handful of positions at best truly merit being singled out as “special envoys” who are direct reports to the Secretary. This would include the special envoy dealing with the Middle East, for example.
- **Category Two:** Those currently under S, to be folded into the Under and Assistant Secretaries. One example would be the SRAP, which should move back into SCA after the 2014 drawdown.
- **Category Three:** Those already within the bureaus or are legislatively mandated, for example, EB’s Special Representative for Commercial and Business.
- **Category Four:** Eliminating a number of positions and folding their work back into the day-to-day work of embassies abroad and bureaus at home. This could include such positions as the Senior Advisor to the Secretary on Civil Societies and Emerging Democracies and the Special Advisor for Global Youth Issues.

In addition to the examples cited above, AFSA would be pleased to engage on further specific recommendation for placing positions in one of the four categories above.