

What Is Dissent?

(Approved by the Governing Board November 2, 2016)

We in the Foreign Service deploy worldwide—to protect and serve, yes, but also to understand the local context and call it like we see it. Sometimes Washington wants us to deliver something we know is not achievable in that context. Sometimes we know that even trying would cause a backlash and impede achievement of other goals.

It is our obligation to point that out, to offer our best judgment and, when possible, alternatives. This is the basis for constructive dissent as we have traditionally defined it. The State Department's Dissent Channel is one way—the institutional vehicle—to deliver that dissent.

The same obligations to speak up apply for matters related to the management of our own institution, not just for classic foreign policy issues. We must all think of ourselves as stewards of the Foreign Service and act accordingly, working to establish and maintain well-functioning embassy platforms and healthy career paths for the next generation. Because the Dissent Channel is restricted to “substantive policy” issues, dissent on management matters must be conducted through other channels.

The AFSA awards program recognizes constructive dissent on management issues as well as foreign policy issues. Jefferson Smith, the 2016 Rivkin Award winner, is a great example of the former.

Lest we come across as simply nay-sayers, it should be noted that we routinely add as much value pointing out what *will* work as we do pointing out what *won't* work.

We who typically understand the local context better than anyone else in the U.S. government are often the first to see that a long-shot goal might just be achievable if we frame the arguments a certain way, avoid that third rail, garner support from this key group while not alerting another too early. Delivering on those long-shot goals may show incredible, even unusual, initiative and innovation. ***It may be outstanding performance, but it's not dissent.***

The Foreign Service adds tremendous value every time we advise with precision about what will work and what won't work in the local context at our posts. This is a core role of the Foreign Service, and it is often the basis for well-founded constructive dissent.

There is something else to consider. Is the space for constructive dissent closing? This is both a fair question and a powerful, foundational one, given our role in the interagency “ecosystem.”

Pointing out that something Washington wants just won't fly requires courage and often risks repercussions. The perceived price for doing the right thing, for engaging in constructive dissent, rises when we feel insecure in our careers. Our dissent awards honor those who stand up and call it like they see it. We all need to defend the space for constructive dissent, which is inextricably intertwined with defending a strong, professional career Foreign Service.

Dissent as a duty flows from the Foreign Service oath of office. We swear “to support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Our loyalty must be first and foremost to the national interest, and that means we must give political leadership our best analysis and advice, whether such is welcome or not.