

# State Department, Meet the New Boss, Same/Worse as the Old Boss?

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*The rumors of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's demise may finally not be greatly exaggerated.*

*A marked man, it was only about a month ago the media speculated on how soon United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley would [replace](#) Tillerson. Two weeks ago a trial balloon [floated](#) up with Mike Pompeo's name in trail. But a burst of nearly-identical stories over the last few days, [spearheaded](#) by the New York Times, signals the end for Tillerson and names Pompeo, currently Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, as his successor. What lies ahead?*

The unique interplay between the Civil Service (non-diplomats largely stationed in Washington DC) and the Foreign Service (who have primary responsibility in Washington and who staff the embassies and consulates abroad) complicates Secretary of State transitions. Engaging both sides, with their different vested interests, can be tough. And unlike the military, where chains of command and internal procedures are written on checklists, State is a hybrid, half foreign and half domestic, with a structure that either conforms to a new Secretary or is conformed by a new Secretary. State is a vertically-oriented bureaucracy, with layers below the boss' office waiting for bits of policy to fall so as to inform them of what their own opinions are. One academic referred to this as "[neckless](#) government," a head and a body in need of an active connection.

A huge part of Tillerson's failure was in missing that last point. The traditional way of engaging the bureaucracy is for a new Secretary to fill key positions with political appointees, who will shape the rank and file below them. Bonus points to the Secretary who can pluck out career Foreign Service people with the approved ideological bent to act as a virtual political appointees, a strong point of Hillary Clinton's. Tillerson left too many slots vacant too long, and now finds himself without allies inside Foggy Bottom. Meanwhile, left on their own, his diplomats found ways to make trouble, including disclosing once-sacrosanct internal dissent memos. Soon after Tillerson took office his diplomats leaked a dissent [memo](#) opposing the State Department's role in Trump's immigration plans. Another dissent [memo](#) leaked some ten days ago, this time with Tillerson's people claiming their own boss was in violation of the law.

Alongside building their version of the organization, it is incumbent on a new Secretary to aim the State Department at some goal. State is an agency [without](#) primary agency; under one administration it focuses on arms control. Under another, State tries to rebuild Iraq and

Afghanistan. More recently, the emphasis has been on “soft power,” programs to empower women, the use of social media, promoting democracy, and the growth LGBTQ rights. Tillerson never articulated much of a goal beyond some unfocused thoughts on structural reform that will never again see daylight. Though it is fashionable to label Tillerson as the [worst](#) Secretary of State of modern times, in reality Tillerson will be remembered as perhaps the most pointless of Secretaries.

Based on my conversations with former State Department colleagues (I served 24 years as a diplomat) Tillerson’s successor will encounter a mood inside the State Department reminiscent of a rescue dog kennel; over there are the mutts who feel abused, wary of any new human. Off to the side are the ones who have given up; the need to log a certain number of years of service to get their generous pensions will keep many technically on the books but a new Secretary can expect very little from them. The majority of dogs will be open and waiting to see what happens (“Can’t be much worse, right?” is something many at State are [saying](#).) But watch out for a few who feel newly empowered, the ones who think they helped drive a bad Secretary out of office. They may still bite.

It is unclear Mike Pompeo, the heir apparent, will be able to succeed where Tillerson failed. The climate for political appointees in Washington today feels more like that of late in a moderately successful president’s second term; the good people have already been selected-served-moved on, many of the old standbys are not interested in signing up for what may turn out to be short-run jobs, and that leaves a small [pool](#) for Pompeo to fill State Department jobs from. Pompeo’s tenure at Central Intelligence was brief enough that he is unlikely to bring over many loyalists, and most at Langley see working for State as a kind of step down anyway (many at the Agency view themselves as the lacrosse team, with State as the nerd club.) Who will Pompeo staff with? And how can he do it quickly while the dogs are still weighing out their next moves?

There is also the issue of culture. Pompeo began his tenure at Central Intelligence on a relatively positive note. However, his hard line stances soon [rubbed](#) many the wrong way, leaving them wondering if the boss could navigate the nuances that drive good decision making. How poorly that will play out at the State Department, with its culture of discussion and deliberation, its love of what-ifs and may-be’s, is easy to imagine.

And there’s the record: Pompeo caught Trump’s eye in part for his tough stance on Iran. Inside the State Department, the Iran Nuclear Accords are seen as one of the institution’s modern-day signature accomplishments. Pompeo is a conservative, and State has always been the most “liberal,” as in committed to the global system of trade and democracy, part of modern administrations. Tillerson, weakly but in line with State-think, pushed for some sort of talks with North Korea and supported the Iran deal. Pompeo [opposes](#) both. That’s a big chip to have on your shoulder your first day at work.

But at the end of the day, the mismatch between State and Pompeo, or State and Haley, or State and Tillerson for that matter, is not really about who is Secretary of State, but who is president. A lot of the anger directed at Tillerson was actually using him as a stand-in for Trump. The primary driver of foreign policy remains the White House, and the White House appears to have little love for its diplomats. If as an establishment Republican Tillerson had within him a bit of divergent thinking from Trump on issues like Iran and North Korea, Pompeo as an old school hawk is nothing but a [loyalist](#), with a [personal](#) connection to Trump. If the president’s intention is indeed to [dismantle](#) the State Department, it is hard to imagine a person better suited to the task than a guy like Mike Pompeo. As the New York

Times editorial board has already [accused](#) Tillerson of “making war on diplomacy,” it will be interesting to see what words they have left to label Pompeo’s opening shots.

Rex Tillerson is still Secretary of State, even as people inside and outside of Foggy Bottom cheer his demise. The irony will be if in a few months from now some of those same people start wondering if they had not been better off under his leadership.

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