

Press Releases: Remarks to Marines, Scouts, and Tri-Mission Personnel

Remarks

Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

Bristol Hotel

Vienna, Austria

December 7, 2017

MR YOUNG: Good afternoon, good evening, everybody. All right. So let me give you my best “So let’s introduce the Secretary of State speech” I can possibly give. So one day, you’re a high school social studies nerd in Lockport, New York, and suddenly, the next day, you’re a 55-year-old Foreign Service officer introducing the Secretary of State in Vienna, Austria. You’ve gotta love that about America.

So I am thrilled on behalf of Harry, Nicole, and myself to see a great Tri-Missions Vienna turnout this evening. And Mr. Secretary, a big American-Austrian welcome to you and your team from all of us. Incredibly excited that you’re here to boost our efforts on multiple fronts in Vienna and honored that you’re spending time with our crew tonight.

Mr. Secretary, this is a room full of families and staff, Austrian and American, from a wide range of U.S. Government entities, every one of whom, from the littlest guys down in the front here has made – to the biggest folks in the room, is making major contributions toward reaching America’s goals at the UN, IAEA, and other international organizations, at the OSCE, and with our Austrian partners.

So traditionally, I’m supposed to now give your entire bio and tell everybody everything they’re ever going to – (laughter). But common sense and the look on your face says that’s probably a –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Wise move.

MR YOUNG: – probably just (inaudible). Sufficient to say I think you’ve had a hell of a successful run and we’re fortunate now to have you heading the State Department. Tri-Mission Vienna, I’m going to stop talking now. Our leader, our boss, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Thank you. (Applause.)

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, thanks. And it’s a – it is a real pleasure to be

in Vienna. Tough location for me to come to, but – (laughter) – I swam through it all; I got here. But in all seriousness, it's my seventh trip to Europe this year, so obviously, Europe's pretty important in our portfolio. And a lot of Europe finds itself, obviously, coming and going through Vienna as well due to the mission that – the missions that all three of you are engaged in. And that is what's unique about this. So you see a lot of elements of our foreign policy that's maybe occurring someplace else, but it makes its way through here because of the agencies that are located here, and how we execute against the policy as well. So what you do here is very important to our not just what happens here, but to our broader foreign policy elsewhere. And we appreciate all that you're doing for us.

I want to also recognize our three charge d'affaires, Young, Kamian, and Champaine, and thank them for their leadership of all three of these missions. I know, as I've said many times, and I want to say this because a lot of stuff gets written out there in the media about the hollowed-out State Department and the empty hallways that I'm walking in, where all I can hear are the echoes of my footsteps. (Laughter.) And it's not true. And I tell people everywhere it's not true. We have great, competent, capable career people that have stepped up in leadership positions while we're working to fill those roles, and we haven't missed a beat. Not one. And I want to thank all three for their leadership at the missions here. I know it's not the easiest thing to do when you're put in an acting role like that, but we have not missed a beat on the leadership. The three charges here are very competent with the team we have.

And that's true elsewhere. We have great career people and individuals that are helping us develop the policy, carry out the policy, execute the policy, and we've achieved a lot in the probably 10 months – 10 and a half months now, I guess, that I've had to work with this department and the great people in the department. And all of you are so important when you're here in these posts overseas. You are the face of the American people. You represent our values, you represent who we are. And people see that American face.

But equally important to us here is the locally employed staff, and I say this at every mission I go that, yes, all of us kind of come and go on our postings and our assignments. The locally employed staff are the continuity. They help us on board, they help us keep those connections in place, they solve our problems for us, and allow us to be effective. And so really appreciate the role that all of our locally employed staff plays as well.

So thank you. Thank you, thank you with your families. I know being employed overseas means you miss some things back home with family there. Hopefully when it's all said and done, you rack up the pluses and the minuses, there's going to be more things in the plus side for foreign deployment than there are on the minus side. That was my experience in my own life elsewhere in my foreign deployments. So again, thank you for that as well.

I want to say a real quick word, and I'm not going to talk long because you don't want me to talk long – (laughter) – but I want to say a little bit of a word about the redesign at the State Department because there's been – a lot of other people seem to want to say a lot about it, whether they know

anything about it or not. And so I want to tell you what's going on. And we are moving – we've completed phases one and two now, and this is an entirely employee-led effort. Your colleagues are the ones doing all the work, they're the ones making the recommendations, they're the ones developing the various projects that we're going to be undertaking.

And as you know, this all started in phase one, was the listening exercise where we had over 35,000 people respond to our early survey. And we had over 300 sit-down, face-to-face, lengthy interviews, and then we kept these portals open for people to throw their ideas or point of contact through those portals. And those have been very active areas of engagement with your colleagues and hopefully a lot of you as well to really feed this entire redesign effort. And so now we've allowed these teams have had many, many ideas and inputs from people and develop a very lengthy list of projects that we can undertake – over 170. Obviously, we've got to kind of whittle that down and prioritize.

But what it fundamentally comes down to – and we're going to start holding some town halls now that we're moving from phase two to phase three, which is execution, and share with you exactly what is being done. It's all around leadership and modernization of the State Department. And there are a lot of things that fall under those two categories, but some of it is process-type activities – how do we get duplication, how do we get at efficiencies, and it's just how do people get their work done? And this is, again, your colleagues are the ones that are fueling this. They're identifying areas where they say, "If we did it this way, it would save a lot of time." If you save time, one of two things happen: either you save money or you get more output because people have now time to do other things that are important to us.

So some of it is programmatic and some of it are projects. And on the project side, it's things like a modernized IT system. One of the priority actions is try to take the system we have and make it work better, but fundamentally longer term, we're going to have build a complete new platform because we're just not in the 21st century. And I'm preaching to people who already know this. I have experienced it now coming from a system that was in the 21st century to one that's not, and I understand your frustration. That's a long-term project. It ought to be a multi-year project. But we are going to do some things in the interim to try to make the system we have run better or run more smoothly, things like updated HR processes and HR systems that allow people to get the information they need much more quickly and much more efficiently with a lot less frustration, whether it be booking travel to understanding what postings are available and how do I understand what I want to pursue in my career.

So some of this, they're kind of – it takes some work. But they're very distinct projects, and they're things that we hear overwhelmingly through the portal and heard through the listening exercise. And I confirm a lot of these. When I'm back at the State Department, I try to have lunch with a group of about eight, a mix of Foreign Service officers and civil servants, and what it's really allowed me to do is understand at another level down what all this coming through the portal is really about. But it just

reconfirms that we're working on the things that are most important to you.

At the end of it, the entire objective is to make the department – and allow you – to be more efficient, more effective, and have a much more rewarding career, have a more satisfying career. If we do that, we're going to move our game up. I just know that because I – one thing I do know is I have a quality of people that if you unleash their talents, the quality of what we do moves up, and I don't have to have a bunch of consultants tell me that. I just know that's true.

And so some of this when – a lot of concern people have about we're going to reduce the staffing by X amount, or we're going to close this office or that office – there's nothing planned to close any embassies, and there's nothing planned in terms of a specific target for the staffing levels. What we did say is to the OMB, because we owe them a number and the reason we put the hiring freeze in place, is – and we said, look, we're going to at least capture what normal attrition would be through these efficiencies, and that's about 8 percent over the next few years.

And the reason I chose that approach is because we'll just let our numbers kind of go down naturally with normal retirements, people that are normally leaving to go do other things; I don't want to have a big layoff. I don't want to have to do a bunch of things to where we have to force the numbers down. Let's just get there naturally. Now, what will come out of some of the work are likely redeployments because we're going to find that we have too many people here and we need a lot more over here because our problems around the world, or the issues, are moving around faster than we're able to redeploy.

So there may be redeployments of talent, but we're going to use the talent, and we're going to use it and provide a system of how we do that that makes people say, we need to modernize our policies and recognize the amazing working families today. Our policies are stuck in about the 1980s, as I look at them. So we need to recognize it. In today's world, there's a lot of two-career families, and we need to have our policies that are responsive in recognizing both members of that couple are very talented and they have a lot they can do. So a lot of what we're getting at is capturing all that talent as well.

Let me just say, lastly, on the hiring freeze, just to correct a few numbers that are out there that scare people, I've approved over 2,400 exceptions to the hiring freeze for EFMs. I've approved a number of exceptions for promotions. We're hired 300 new Foreign Service officers this year already. The total number of Foreign Service officers in the department is within 10 of what it was in October 2016, and that's out of a base of about 1,080. We've actually had fewer people retire this year than we had last year.

So a lot of the statistics that – I don't know where they're getting them, but they're just wrong. And so we are providing that information out to certainly people on the Hill and others to know that this whole narrative that, somehow, people are leaving in droves is simply not true, and the numbers don't bear that out. But more importantly to me, the quality of the

work doesn't bear it out, because what we're doing in terms of policy development, in terms of executional policy, in terms of you meeting your mission every day, all elements of the mission – from consular affairs to policy to whatever it is, our DOD relationships – nothing is not getting done. It's all getting done because all of you are dedicated, and I know that.

So I appreciate your dedication to the mission. We're going to try to give you some tools and capabilities that are going to allow you to be more effective at it. That's really what the redesign is about. So you'll see some coming out of town hall meetings, and we'll be talking specifically now about what is it, what is the it, and we'll start sharing more of that with you. And again, all of this are – these are employee teams that are pushing these things out. And so for any of you that have been engaged in any of that, thank you. For the people that have been working on those teams, a lot have been doing that while doing their day job. To actually move into phase three, we're going to have to put some people on it full-time now. And we're going to – we're going to push this thing on through.

So I'm very excited about it. They've got great ideas. They're your ideas. We want to just unleash all of that. So lastly, thank you again. Thanks for what you do for us here day in and day out. And I appreciate every one of you. Thanks. (Applause.)

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.