

# DIPLOMACY REBOOTED: MAKING DIGITAL STATECRAFT A REALITY

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THE STATE DEPARTMENT IS NOW IN A POSITION TO BUILD NOVEL APPLICATIONS TO SUPPORT THE MISSION OF DIPLOMACY.

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BY CHRIS BRONK

**I**ncredibly heartening is the news that at the close of this decade, the State Department's top leadership is once again taking a serious look at the role of information technology in the mission of diplomacy. But the challenges will be very different than 10 years ago, when making the department a "wired" organization involved the deployment of digital infrastructure — mostly computer and networking hardware. The new thrust of digitized diplomacy will primarily involve software, which will likely stand at odds with State's current processes and culture.

New applications and structures are now changing the face of IT. Cloud and mobile computing, browser-based applications, weblogs and social media will change the way almost all information workers (including diplomats) do their jobs, and may challenge the method by which the entire department functions.

State is now connected, but must take stock and determine the best avenues for building on the digital foundation constructed nearly a decade ago. The most significant change in diplomacy since the advent of the telegram is at hand.

## Opening the Net

Wiring State was a project given highest priority by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who doggedly pursued the goal of getting Internet computers on the desktop of each em-

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ployee and deploying OpenNet Plus, not only inside the Harry S Truman Building but also in the hundreds of missions around the globe. Admirably, the project was completed in roughly 18 months and deepened linkages between Main State and overseas posts, as well as digitally connecting the department to the world.

Fernando Burbano, State's first chief information officer, prepared the foundation for what the late USIA-hand Wilson Dizard Jr. had begun to illuminate in his *Meganet* (Westview Press, 1998) and fleshed out in *Digital Diplomacy — U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age* (Praeger, 2001). As Dizard opined, "Digital diplomacy issues and techniques have had to be shoehorned into a policymaking system run by officials who were initially uninterested in and often suspicious of the subject." Nonetheless, Sec. Powell recognized that foreign affairs would have to go digital, and ordered that the infrastructure for making that transition be constructed at breakneck speed. Thanks to this executive interest, Burbano got the Internet onto the department's desktops, and did it quickly.

State is now in a position to build novel applications to support the mission of diplomacy. It does so in interesting times. After a few years of post-Internet bubble reflection, the pace of change and development in the IT sector is once again surging. While some technologies will fall into what IT consultancy Gartner, Inc., labels "the trough of disillusionment," many will thrive, becoming de facto standards for organizational communications and productivity. The department will need to make wise bets on what standards it can accept and which ones it should ignore.

In doing so, its leadership must stay focused on the information piece of IT, adopting technologies that more effectively accommodate the complexity of international affairs and man-

age the “information tsunami” that flows through the organization daily, threatening to swamp those charged with crafting our nation’s foreign policy.

### **IT and the Mission of Diplomacy**

We live at a time when half the planet is able to log on to a communications medium where there are almost no barriers to international exchange of information — the Internet. This connectivity, of course, has already changed the practice of diplomacy. For nearly a century we relied upon trusted envoys to serve the national interest in distant foreign capitals, employing the telegraph to stay in touch with the mother country, usually via the briefest of messages. Today, communications may flow from a BlackBerry to Berlin, Bamako or Baghdad instantaneously.

Yet though the department is connected, wired and wirelessly, by fiber and satellite, its official communication channel remains the same telegraphically-based cable format that George Kennan used to send his prescient analysis from Moscow in 1946. E-mail has replaced the telegraph, of course; but the organizational process built around it has yet to leave the building. For all the discussion of technology, ultimately its adoption and use are largely dependent upon how well it fits an organization’s process.

Organizational change rarely comes easily, and is often prompted by crisis. In industry, if companies fail to innovate or adapt, they soon decline and fade away, but government is different. Without a balance sheet by which to measure effectiveness, identifying metrics to evaluate the performance of an agency can prove elusive.

At the IRS or U.S. Postal Service, benchmarking efficiency can be as straightforward as counting tax returns or pieces of mail. And at NASA and the National Institutes of Health, success can be identified by scientific or tech-

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## *The most significant change in diplomacy since the advent of the telegram is likely at hand.*

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nical breakthroughs.

Diplomacy is harder to categorize in a spreadsheet or win-loss columns. We know that diplomacy is an information-intensive business, but we have not entirely figured out how to apply technology to meet the mission of statecraft, an area populated by an ever-increasing number of actors, many of whom are not states.

### **Getting the Balance Right**

Today, IT is the State Department’s electronic nervous system. Where it was once viewed as a career-enhancing skill to learn how paper moved around the department, it is probably more useful today to understand where the bits flow. E-mail is the overwhelmingly dominant form of communication, likely making up more than half of the digital traffic across the department’s network. Entrusted with delivery and storage of the bits is State’s IT organ, the Bureau of Information Resource Management, which runs the enterprise network that delivers cables and e-mail, accesses Web pages and completes telephone calls. IRM is the physical apparatus of the department’s digital nervous system, its interconnected system of links and nodes. But there’s a lot of IT at State that’s not in IRM; perhaps as much as half of the department’s \$1.2 billion IT budget resides in other bureaus.

Across the department, information technology is employed to transmit, process, digest and disseminate infor-

mation. IT facilitates political and economic reporting, is key to visa adjudication, and delivers new media for public diplomacy. Nearly a decade later, the words of former Director General of the Foreign Service and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman at the Net Diplomacy conference in 2001 remain true: “Vital to our ability to achieve [our diplomatic] goals will be an ability to create and, if we are lucky, lead a diplomacy for the 21st century. The ability to manage and master information technology will be vital if we are to succeed.”

So how well has State done at meeting Grossman’s mandate? I would argue that it has achieved what most government organizations have, in roughly the same period of time. It has implemented an IT strategic plan, with the emphasis on the capital T. That has brought a rise in data traffic and the need for larger digital “pipes” connecting Washington to the world.

Day-to-day expectations of big “T,” which falls under the auspices of the deputy chief information officer for operations, are straightforward, but daunting: keep the networks up and running 24/7, year-round; make sure no data are lost or corrupted; and strive for increased efficiency and declining cost.

The other side of IT in the mission of diplomacy is the big “I,” or information. As hard as IRM’s operations job may be, the information or knowledge piece requires not only an eye for efficiency, but a vision for the future of diplomacy. “Will Twitter be a good public diplomacy tool?” “Can blogs supplement cables?” “Is e-mail overloading desk officers?” These are just some of the many questions to be considered.

An organization can spend all the money in the world on hardware, but without ideas on how to adopt and harness game-changing technologies to distill a more useful information picture or manage relationships, that investment will produce scant returns.

As a key component of the nation's "soft power," diplomacy will need to harness the potential of big "I" technologies if Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's vision of "smart power" is to be realized. We know there is no reason for U.S. diplomats not to be the best-informed on the planet. The challenge is in finding new applications, ways of working and skill sets to do that. For the department, the information resources available must not only facilitate communication, but intense and rapid learning.

### Getting the Size Right

In computing, government has been present from the beginning. In 1946, the same year that Kennan transmitted his famous "Long Telegram," the University of Pennsylvania built ENIAC, the world's first true digital computer, for the United States Army. For every large mainframe that IBM or the Digital Equipment Corp. designed, Uncle Sam could be counted on as a major customer. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the U.S. government bought big systems, usually composed of large computing cores connected to large numbers of "dumb" terminals.

State was no different than the Department of Defense or the Federal Aviation Administration in seeing merit in automation. It rolled out the Foreign Affairs Information Management Effort, the first of many information management plans, in 1964. FAIME was an interagency effort, aimed at modernizing "the flow and handling of information within and among the Department of State, the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Agency, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency." Though well intended, it died quietly a few years later.

After significant investment in Wang hardware and software, the department eventually made its way to the same

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Windows-based personal computers just about everyone else in America was buying in the 1990s. This did not mean that State's big-project mindset had been relegated to the dustbin, however. Indeed, for most of the past decade, IRM has put considerable effort into SMART — the Department of State's Messaging and Archive Retrieval Toolset.

SMART represents an increasingly obsolescent orthodoxy of computer-driven productivity designed around applications on each user's PC and servers. When complete, SMART will probably be the last big IT project of its kind to be undertaken at the department, and probably the last one to cater to the networked personal computer, as well.

Three "Cs" conspire against such future projects: collaboration software, cybersecurity concerns and, finally, the potential of the computing cloud. Collaboration software is a necessity for work with other agencies, nongovernmental organizations, industry and academia, but it is confounded by many barriers to use, such as large on-computer software downloads or license costs. The vehicle for collaboration is the Internet browser, not something that comes in a box. Cybersecurity, for its part, will require more robust network controls, increased simplicity and limited functionality in which the browser replaces many client programs on each desktop PC.

The third "C" — the "cloud" — is a label for always-on networked resources, from spreadsheets and word processors to storage and e-mail. Cloud computing — what we thought of a few years back as "service-oriented architecture" — will exert a powerful force on government IT. It is back to the future, with massive server farms, the new mainframes of the day, supporting Web-connected smartphones, BlackBerrys and, the latest rage, netbooks, as well as desktops and laptops.

While State employees will proba-

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bly still want computers and monitors back at the office, the expectation is that wherever they go, their data will go with them. As anyone who has settled a trivia debate with an iPhone can tell you, we are moving toward a time of device-based augmented cognition (and distraction). In this environment, tools that quickly connect users to valuable information with minimal sorting and sifting are desirable. Users want programs that will tell them what they may want to read or watch based on prior-usage behavior and interests — which Amazon is already doing with its customer data. For the desk officer or press attaché, wouldn't it be nice to have machines doing some of the reading and flagging before messages hit the inbox?

### **An Information Plan**

News of the creation of innovation adviser positions at State is heartening, as well. It is already working with social media — Facebook, Twitter and YouTube — and strategies for engaging in many-to-many dialogue with foreign publics, revolutionizing the business of public diplomacy.

Also vital is adoption of this technology by the department's entire work force. IT is no longer simply the domain of the embassy communicator, toiling in some vault somewhere to

send and receive the day's cable traffic. All department employees should see their responsibilities and capabilities change due to the continuing march of progress, if they haven't already. If this means that each FS member should be a blogger for the department at one point or another, so much the better.

While State has made significant strides in the adoption of IT to perform the mission of diplomacy, they are modest in comparison with the investment the Pentagon has made in applying information technology to its missions under the "Revolution in Military Affairs" banner. An IT-driven overhaul of diplomacy will require still greater investment, outreach and acceptance of culture change.

On that last point, the stark reality remains that the transition at State from a Cold War posture to one able to cope with the multilayered contemporary international system is incomplete. The department will need to look more closely at multilateral diplomacy and the value of "intermestic" relations, where allegiance to country is on a relatively low rung.

To tackle this, a bulking-up of the department's big "I," little "t" components is needed. A revitalized information skunkworks built on the model of IRM's Office of eDiplomacy — preferably reporting high up the administrative chain, perhaps directly to the Deputy Secretary of State — would send an important message on efforts to infuse innovation into the practice of diplomacy. In addition, the department's CIO needs to become a *true* chief, not just the person at the helm of IRM.

Finally, career tracks that reward IT-savvy generalists and recruitment efforts designed to draw more technical and engineering graduates into the the department ought to be considered.

Tempering any vision for IT at State, we must recognize that science and technology have a somewhat tarnished history there. James E. Webb,

*We must recognize that science and technology have a somewhat tarnished history at State.*

who served as under secretary of State under Dean Acheson, devoted considerable effort to allocating additional resources to science and technology in diplomacy. But those pursuits took a back seat to the Cold War. Outmaneuvered by Paul Nitze, Webb abandoned this work and stepped down, eventually becoming President John F. Kennedy's pick to lead NASA through the run-up to the Apollo moon landings.

Now we are again at a pivotal point for diplomacy. The leaders of State and Defense recognize that soft power, engagement and options other than force are all vital to the U.S. position in the world. Sec. Clinton is not only firmly engaged in the business of diplomacy but attentive to the needs of the department. She has, in the words of David Rothkopf, "defined a role for herself in the Obamaverse: often bad cop to his good cop, spine stiffener when it comes to tough adversaries and nurturer of new strategies."

The department's IT leaders should do everything possible to see that advances in State's digital domain get a prominent place under the "new strategies" heading.

To meet its most important strategic goals — on global warming, the continuing economic crisis, nonproliferation and a host of regional issues — the department will require a practical, pragmatic digital strategy of the sort that Barack Obama employed to win the presidency. ■

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