

Opinion **Department of State US**

## The death of the diplomat in Trump's America

Sidelining the state department and relying on dealmakers will come at a cost

**ALEC RUSSELL**



Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law, has joined US special envoy Steve Witkoff in the latest round of Russia-Ukraine peace talks © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

**Alec Russell**

Published 6 HOURS AGO

---

A joke doing the rounds in Washington is that the busiest place in the state department these days is the canteen. The bittersweet punchline is that it is thronged with seasoned diplomats who have either been ordered to do less, or are fearful of doing anything meaningful lest it anger their political masters. Worse still, they could be tarred with the label “deep state”.

Similar stories are told about the CIA and the Pentagon under their ultra-Maga bosses. Veterans fret they are being policed over their beliefs, even though traditionally public servants felt they could leave their politics at the door when they clocked in each day. In the words of one experienced public servant, “everyone is fearful they are being investigated for what they said or did in the past”.

The tension between politicians and public servants is not new. Politicians have ever chafed at what they see as the administrative class’s instinctive caution and preference for debate over decisions — sometimes rightly so.

So yes, absolutely every now and then government departments need a shake-up, and the state department was overdue a streamlining. Diplomats’ authority has been in decline since the dawn of mobile telephones and the internet. It is not just America which is pruning their ranks. The UK’s Foreign Office is undergoing what insiders refer to as the “Hunger Games” as the new permanent secretary imposes radical cuts from the top down.

But what is unfolding now in Washington is more than a corrective; it is a purge. The Trump administration’s contempt for the foreign service is manifest in its lackadaisical approach to appointments: ten months after it took office, a swath of senior posts remain unfilled, including assistant secretary of state for Europe, and Africa.

Instead, America has moved into the age of the envoy. The current handling of the Russia-Ukraine talks embodies this shift. Joining Steve Witkoff, the real estate developer and Donald Trump-buddy who has been America’s lead negotiator with Russia, in the latest round of talks is Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and private equity mogul.

Both were key players in the quest for a lasting Middle East deal. Both, like their boss, are versed in cutting business deals, reinforcing the suspicion of European partners that securing investment opportunities is an American priority.

But what of a historical understanding of Russia, asks a western negotiator who has been exasperated by the pro-Russian tone of so many of America's public positions over the past year? The impact of the late Richard Holbrooke as a presidential envoy in the 1990s and 2000s was rooted in not just his bulldozing ways but his insights from long years as a diplomat.

It is easy to see why Trump likes having intimates as envoys. He can pick up the phone to them and bypass the state department with its reminders of the complexities of statecraft.

But America and the world will pay a price for this freewheeling style. This may be in the details and fairness of settlements. It was notable that Marco Rubio, the secretary of state and traditionally a Russia hawk, was distinctly equivocal in his first public appraisals of the terms of the proposed peace deal. (Rubio, seen in Washington as one of the few officials to have enhanced their reputation this year, adroitly did a U-turn after Trump embraced the plan.)

In an age of envoys, issues that do not excite the capricious president risk slipping between the cracks. In the pre-Trump era, assistant secretaries were trusted to know when to push troubling topics up the food chain. Now diplomats are encouraged to tell foreign delegations to prioritise three things: mineral deals, accommodating America's unwanted migrants, and evidence of how they can back Trump's quest for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Is anyone in Washington paying attention, for example, to the deteriorating state of Afghanistan or the Sahel and the risk of their becoming centres of terrorism?

Then there is the issue of trust. Disdaining partners may have a cost: they may not speak up when called on to back America in the future. A sign of the times came last month when the heads of Dutch civilian and military intelligence said they were wary of sharing material with the US.

Politicians have long liked to accuse diplomats of losing sight of whose interests they represent and championing the perspective of their host instead of their homeland. Sometimes that is true. But an America with a dyspeptic president surely more than ever needs diplomats to argue its case to the world.

[alec.russell@ft.com](mailto:alec.russell@ft.com)

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

---

## **Follow the topics in this article**

---

Alec Russell

US foreign policy

Department of State US

Central Intelligence Agency