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By: TA | AP Insight

Layoffs at the U.S. State Department - between savings and damage to American global influence

Major staff reductions will affect more than 300 offices and departments of the US diplomatic service. The administration believes it will increase efficiency, but critics worry that American diplomacy will suffer as it faces growing global crises.

The U.S. State Department fired more than 1,300 employees Friday in line with a dramatic reorganization plan from the Trump administration that critics say will damage America's global leadership and efforts to counter threats abroad.

The department sent layoff notices to 1,107 civil servants and 246 foreign service officers with assignments in the United States, according to a senior department official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss personnel matters.

Notices said positions were being "abolished" and the employees would lose access to State Department headquarters in Washington and their email and shared drives by 5 p.m., according to a copy obtained by The Associated Press.

As fired employees packed their belongings, dozens of former colleagues, ambassadors, members of Congress and others spent a warm, humid day protesting outside. Holding signs saying, "Thank you to America's diplomats" and "We all deserve better," they mourned the institutional loss from the cuts and highlighted the personal sacrifice of serving in the foreign service.

"We talk about people in uniform serving. But foreign service officers take an oath of office, just like military officers," said Anne Bodine, who retired from the State Department in 2011 after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. "This is not the way to treat people who served their country and who believe in 'America First.'"

While lauded by President Donald Trump, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and their Republican allies as overdue and necessary to make the department leaner and more efficient, the cuts have been roundly criticized by current and former diplomats who say they will weaken U.S. influence and the ability to counter existing and emerging threats abroad.

Antony Blinken, who served as President Joe Biden's secretary of state, posted on X late Friday: "Thinking today of the men and women of the State Department — Foreign Service and Civil Service. Their dedication to serving the national interest and the American people is second to none."

The layoffs are part of big changes to State Department work

The Trump administration has pushed to reshape American diplomacy and worked aggressively to shrink the size of the federal government, including mass dismissals driven by the Department of Government Efficiency and moves to dismantle whole departments like the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Education Department.

USAID, the six-decade-old foreign assistance agency, was absorbed into the State Department last week after the administration dramatically slashed foreign aid funding.

Late Friday, the U.S. Institute of Peace's 300 employees began receiving notices that they were being let go, marking the second time they have been terminated. USIP is an independent, nonprofit think tank funded by Congress.

A recent ruling by the Supreme Court cleared the way for the layoffs to start, while lawsuits challenging the legality of the cuts continue to play out. The department had advised staffers Thursday that it would be sending layoff notices to some of them soon.

> Foreign service officers affected will be placed immediately on administrative leave for 120 days

In a May letter notifying Congress about the reorganization, the department said it had just

over 18,700 U.S.-based employees and was looking to reduce the workforce by 18% through layoffs and voluntary departures, including deferred resignation programs.

“It’s not a consequence of trying to get rid of people. But if you close the bureau, you don’t need those positions,” Rubio told reporters Thursday during a visit to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. “Understand that some of these are positions that are being eliminated, not people.”

Foreign service officers affected will be placed immediately on administrative leave for 120 days, after which they will formally lose their jobs, according to an internal notice obtained by the AP. For most civil servants, the separation period is 60 days, it said.

Protesters gather to criticize the job cuts

Inside and just outside the State Department, employees spent over an hour applauding their departing colleagues, who got more support -- and sometimes hugs -- from protesters and others gathered across the street.

As speakers took to a bullhorn, people behind them held signs in the shape of gravestones that said “democracy,” “human rights” and “diplomacy.”

"It’s just heartbreaking to stand outside these doors right now and see people coming out in tears, because all they wanted to do was serve this country,” said Sen. Andy Kim, a New Jersey Democrat who worked as a civilian adviser for the State Department in Afghanistan during the Obama administration.

Robert Blake, who served as a U.S. ambassador under the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, said he came to support his peers at a very “unjust time.”

“I have a lot of friends who served very loyally and with distinction and who are being fired for nothing to do with their performance,” Blake said.

Gordon Duguid, a 31-year veteran of the foreign service, said of the Trump administration: “They’re not looking for people who have the expertise ... they just want people who say, ‘OK, how high’” to jump.

“That’s a recipe for disaster,” he added.

Losing more diplomatic expertise at this critical global moment is a catastrophic blow to our national interests - The American Foreign Service Association

The American Foreign Service Association, the union that represents U.S. diplomats, said it opposed the job cuts during “a moment of great global instability.”

“Losing more diplomatic expertise at this critical global moment is a catastrophic blow to our national interests," the AFSA said in a statement. “These layoffs are untethered from merit or mission.”

As the layoffs began, paper signs started going up around the State Department. “Colleagues, if you remain: resist fascism,” said one.

An employee who was among those laid off said she printed them about a week ago, when the Supreme Court cleared way for the reductions. The employee spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

She worked with about a dozen colleagues to put up the signs. They focused on bathrooms, where there are no security cameras, although others went in more public spaces.

“Nobody wants to feel like these guys can just get away with this,” she said.

The State Department is undergoing a big reorganization

The State Department is planning to eliminate some divisions tasked with oversight of America’s two-decade involvement in Afghanistan, including an office focused on resettling Afghan nationals who worked alongside the U.S. military.

Jessica Bradley Rushing, who worked at the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, known as CARE, said she was shocked when she received another dismissal notice Friday after she had already been put on administrative leave in March.

“I spent the entire morning getting updates from my former colleagues at CARE, who were watching this carnage take place within the office,” she said, adding that every person on her team received a notice. “I never even anticipated that I could be at risk for that because I’m already on administrative leave.”

> The State Department said the reorganization will affect more than 300 bureaus and offices

The State Department said the reorganization will affect more than 300 bureaus and offices, as it eliminates divisions it describes as doing unclear or overlapping work. It says Rubio believes “effective modern diplomacy requires streamlining this bloated bureaucracy.”

The letter to Congress was clear that the reorganization is also intended to eliminate programs — particularly those related to refugees and immigration, as well as human rights and democracy promotion — that the Trump administration believes have become ideologically driven in a way that is incompatible with its priorities and policies.