

Merit and Morale: The Unintended Consequences of DEIA in Foreign Service Promotions

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I. Introduction

The U.S. Foreign Service has long operated under a structured promotion system designed to advance officers based on merit, leadership, and diplomatic effectiveness. However, in 2022, the introduction of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) precept fundamentally altered the evaluation process, allowing officers to gain promotion points based on DEIA-related activities rather than purely on traditional core competencies.¹

While the intent behind the DEIA precept was to encourage inclusion and representation, the practical impact on promotions has been significant and problematic. Over the past two years, qualified officers may have been passed over for promotion because their DEIA scores did not meet the threshold for advancement. Now, with the 2025 executive order eliminating DEIA considerations from federal agencies, the Foreign Service faces a new challenge: what happens to those officers who were disadvantaged by the previous system?

Even more concerning is how this DEIA-driven promotion imbalance could affect Reduction-in-Force (RIF) decisions, potentially forcing out officers who were unfairly held back while retaining those promoted under a flawed system.²

II. The DEIA Precept and Its Effect on Promotions (2022–2024)

For decades, Foreign Service promotions were determined by a combination of leadership, management, interpersonal skills, communication and foreign language proficiency, intellectual skills, and substantive knowledge.³ However, in 2022, the core precepts were revised, consolidating these categories and introducing DEIA as a standalone precept. Officers were now rated on their contributions to diversity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives—an inherently subjective and likely inconsistently applied metric.⁴

The consequences were immediate:

- Officers who prioritized mission execution, crisis response, and operational leadership may have found themselves at a disadvantage if they lacked extensive DEIA engagement.
- The introduction of DEIA as a standalone precept in 2022 altered the promotion evaluation process, adding a new factor that influenced scoring. As a result, officers with strong leadership and technical expertise but lower DEIA scores may have been at a disadvantage in the 2023 and 2024 promotion cycles.
- With the introduction of DEIA as a standalone precept in 2022, officers who actively engaged in DEIA-related initiatives had an additional factor contributing to their overall

promotion evaluation, potentially giving them an advantage in rankings over those who focused primarily on traditional leadership and diplomatic competencies.

By 2024, the introduction of DEIA as a standalone precept had fundamentally altered the promotion evaluation process, requiring officers to demonstrate engagement in DEIA initiatives alongside traditional leadership and diplomatic competencies. While all precepts were weighted equally, this shift meant that officers who focused primarily on core diplomatic skills—such as mission execution, crisis response, and operational leadership—could find themselves at a disadvantage if their DEIA scores were lower than those of their peers.⁵

Now, with the executive order removing DEIA from consideration, those who may have benefited from its inclusion in past promotion cycles remain in senior positions, while those who perhaps should have been promoted based solely on traditional diplomatic competencies are left at a disadvantage in future career prospects and retention standing. Without a mechanism for reassessing past promotion decisions, the impact of DEIA-based evaluations will continue to shape the composition of the Foreign Service for years to come.

III. The Risk of RIF and the Point System's Unintended Consequences

The Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) establishes a point system to determine retention standing in the event of a Reduction-in-Force (RIF).⁶ Points are allocated based on:

1. Tenure of Employment (career status provides a baseline for retention, though other factors determine standing within the career officer pool)
2. Veterans' Preference (military service adds points)
3. Length of Service (total federal service time)
4. Performance Ratings and Promotions (evaluations and career advancement history)

One key factor in retention standing is promotions, as officers receive fifteen points for each promotion they have earned.⁷ As a result, officers who were promoted in 2022–2024 due to DEIA considerations now have fifteen more points over those who were not. Conversely, officers who were passed over for promotion due to lower DEIA scores now have fewer retention points, putting them at a disadvantage in a RIF scenario compared to their peers who advanced during that period.

IV. The Path Forward: Restoring Merit and Fairness

Now that DEIA has been removed from federal promotion considerations, the Foreign Service can take steps to ensure that those unfairly disadvantaged by the previous system are not further penalized.

To address these concerns, the Department of State could consider:

- Reviewing Promotion 2022–2024 Trends
- Adjusting RIF Retention Policies to Prevent Unfair Separations
- Implementing a Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) Program
- The Foreign Service is a much smaller institution than many other federal agencies, operating with approximately 15,600 members covering global diplomatic responsibilities.⁸ In contrast, the Department of Defense employs approximately 2.8 million personnel (active duty, reserves, and civilian staff).⁹ The Department of Homeland Security has around 250,000 employees,¹⁰ and the Department of Veterans Affairs currently employs around 448,170 staff.¹¹
- Instead of a RIF that could force out officers who were already disadvantaged by past promotion policies, a VERA program would allow senior officers to retire voluntarily, freeing up promotion slots for mid-level officers who may have been passed over due to DEIA considerations.

V. Conclusion: A Course Correction Is Needed

The removal of DEIA considerations from Foreign Service promotions is an important step toward restoring a merit-based advancement system. However, unless proactive measures are taken, the negative consequences of the past two years will continue to shape retention, morale, and leadership decisions for years to come.

By addressing promotion disparities, implementing a Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) program, and ensuring that the RIF process does not unfairly target officers disadvantaged by DEIA weighting, the Foreign Service can take meaningful action to correct course before permanent institutional harm is done.

Notes

¹ American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), Foreign Service by the Numbers, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://afsa.org/foreign-service-numbers>.

² U.S. Department of State, 3 FAM 2580 – Reduction in Force, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://fam.state.gov/fam/03fam/03fam2580.html>.

³ American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), New Core Precepts and What They Mean, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://afsa.org/new-core-precepts-and-what-they-mean>.

⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), Foreign Service Promotion Rubrics Report, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://files.gao.gov/reports/GAO-25-106956/index.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Department of State, 3 FAM 2583.2-3 – Reduction in Force Point System, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://fam.state.gov/fam/03fam/03fam2580.html>..

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ AFSA, Foreign Service by the Numbers.

⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2025 (Green Book), Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 2025, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FY 2025 Budget in Brief, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, March 2025, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/budget-brief-fy-2025>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, FY 2025 Budget in Brief, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2025-va-budget-in-brief.pdf>.