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First Speech to Staff as U.S. Secretary of State

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Well, good morning, all. We apologize for being late. It seemed that this year's prayer breakfast, people felt the need to pray a little longer. But I certainly welcomed them all, so -- thank you for such a warm reception. And it -- it's a pleasure to be here, obviously. I've been anxious to be here, and I'm so pleased to have my wife, Renda, of more than 30 years. And she has been just steadfast through this process, encouraging me on and reminding me what -- what this is really all about. And so, thank you.

Also want to thank Acting Secretary Tom Shannon, who has just been superb through this entire process. And Tom, thank you so much. It was -- It was truly and indeed an honor that Tom joined us in the Oval Office last night for my swearing-in, and -- and appreciated that he was there.

Obviously, I also want to recognize and thank all of you here at headquarters of our State Department, the staff and partners around the world, who have faithfully performed your duties regardless of who was in charge.



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It was so important. I know many of you have assisted ambassadors and other officials during the Senate confirmation process, and indeed some of you have been through it yourself. Having just come through it for the first time, I can assure you the Senate still takes it as serious as ever. They're as energetic as ever. They're as thorough as ever.

But we're here.

So in the days and weeks ahead we're going to have plenty of opportunity to discuss in more detail the goals, the priorities, and the strategic direction for our organization. But for now, I really want to take a few minutes to communicate my high regard for the men and women of the State Department and share with you some principles for all of us to live by as we pursue our shared mission.

The individuals who comprise this department are among the finest public servants in the world. Many of you serve our nation abroad and have served our nation abroad. State Department staffers in the field are not just conduits for policies and plans; you are our emissaries of our nation and the ideals we stand for. When people see you, they see America.

When I wake up each morning, the very first thing I ask myself is: Are all of our people safe? The safety of every single member of our State Department family, regardless of where he or she is posted, is not just a priority for me. It's a core value, and it will become a core value of this department. This means the State Department family here in the U.S. and all those agencies serving under chief of missions abroad, including Civil Service; Foreign Service; officers and specialists; locally engaged staff of host country and third-country nationals; interns, fellows, support contractors and implementing partners; and not least of all, the family members who support us at home and in our service to our country overseas.

The Foreign Service is not the only component of the State Department. The Civil Service workforce at the State Department plays an indispensable role in all we achieve, and we cannot attain success without the mission-critical services that you provide.

Though we often live in a world of headlines, working outside of the public eye does not make you any less essential to our operations. Your dedication, your intelligence, and your sound judgment are the brick and mortar elements of all we do. We all depend on your good work, and I know it will continue.



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One of the great -- One of the great challenges and thrills for the State Department staff is deciding how to confront changing conditions in every corner of the world. And I encourage all of you to use your natural and well-developed skills to adapt to changes here at home as well.

I know this was a hotly contested election and we do not all feel the same way about the outcome. Each of us is entitled to the expression of our political beliefs, but we cannot let our personal convictions overwhelm our ability to work as one team. Let us be understanding with each other about the times we live in as we focus our energies on our departmental goals.

As Secretary, I will deploy the talent and resources of the State Department in the most efficient ways possible. That may entail making some changes to how things are traditionally done in this department. Change for the sake of change can be counterproductive, and that will never be my approach. But we cannot sustain ineffective traditions over optimal outcomes. I will gather information on what processes should be reformed, and do my part to make sure we are functioning in the most productive and efficient way possible.

Regardless of the circumstances shaping our country or our department, we must all remain focused on the mission at hand before us. I remind you that our undertakings are larger than ourselves or our personal careers. Our duty is to faithfully represent our nation in the arena of foreign affairs. If we stay focused on the work before us, I promise I will work to ensure you achieve your own personal success and your professional satisfaction in what you are doing.

For every individual who works at the State Department, I ask that we adopt a few core principles.

First, I believe that any organization runs best when all of its members embrace accountability. From the mailroom to the boardroom, every member of a team has a job to do. I know nobody will always be perfect, and that certainly includes me. But I ask that everyone strive for excellence and assume responsibility for their actions and their decisions.

The New England Patriots have signs posted all over their team facilities that simply say, "Do your job." It is a brief message, but one with profound importance. If we all do our jobs and embrace a willingness to be held accountable for our performance, we work better as a unit -- move closer to attaining our goals. It's worked pretty well for the Patriots over the years, as I must admit.



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Secondly, I want us to be honest with one another. We're on the same team. We share the same mission. Honesty will undergird our foreign policy, and we'll start by making it the basis of how we interact with each other.

Lastly, we're going to treat each other with respect. No one will tolerate disrespect of anyone. Before we are employees of the State Department, we are human beings first. Let us extend respect to each other, especially when we may disagree.

What I ask of you and what I demand of myself -- I will embrace accountability, honesty, and respect no less than anyone.

Before President Trump called me, I thought I'd be entering retirement this spring, after four decades of business experience. Renda and I were ready to head off to the ranch and enjoy our grandchildren. But when I came back from my first meeting with President Trump and he asked me to do this, Renda said, "You didn't know it, but you've been in a 41-year training program for this job." So despite our own dreams, she said, "You're supposed to do this."

Well, my first day is here. I'm on the job. Hi, I'm the new guy.

As such, I will depend on the expertise of this institution. There are over 75,000 members of the State Department workforce, both Foreign and Civil Service employees, with an average of over 11 years of service in the department. I have 25 minutes. You have accumulated knowledge and experience that cannot be replicated anywhere else. Your wisdom, your work ethic, and patriotism, is as important as ever. And as your Secretary, I will be proud to draw upon all these qualities in my decision-making.

I ask that you join me in upholding high standards of ethics and professionalism, committing to personal accountability and honesty, and respecting your colleagues. There will undoubtedly be times of victory, but there will also be many times of difficulty. Let's go forward as a team through all of it. Let's make the American people proud of what we do in this building and beyond.

Inscribed on the walls in this lobby are the names of fallen Foreign Service personnel, who, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, gave their "last full measure of devotion."¹ They died in service of causes far greater than themselves.



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As we move forward in a new era, it is important to honor the sacrifices of those who have come before us, and reflect on the legacy that we inherit.

In closing, I'm honored to be serving alongside each of you as I serve our nation, as the Secretary of State. So now I am going to take a moment, pay my respects to those individuals that are memorialized on this wall, and then I look forward to making the rounds and greeting you personally. It may take me a few days. But in all sincerity, I do hope to have the opportunity to shake the hand of every one of you that's here.

Thank you so much.

¹ *Gettysburg Address*