

December 7, 2015

The Honorable Ed Royce
Chairman
The House Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Royce,

As retired U.S. Ambassadors, we have a deep appreciation for the work the House Committee on Foreign Affairs does and your bipartisan approach to legislation.

Having managed embassy teams, we also appreciate your commitment to passing a necessary State Department authorization bill. We also would like to urge you to include H.R.2533, the Protecting Americans Abroad Act, as part of the State Department authorization bill and to work with House appropriators to secure inclusion of its language as a provision in the FY 2016 Omnibus bill.

From a management perspective, we see this bill as an enhancement tool. But most importantly, from a security perspective, this bill will help protect lives. As you well know, the ambassador is held responsible for protecting the brave men and women of the Foreign Service and others who serve abroad under Chief of Mission authority. But sometimes technical issues get in the way. In this case, we are dealing with a set of arcane rules that limit the Department of State's ability to secure the best services available when contracting local guard forces.

Currently, when awarding contracts to security firms who protect our embassies, the State Department is required to choose the lowest-priced option, regardless of the security firm's additional qualifications. How could it be that the Department of State is allowed to use "best value" contracting for other embassy needs like landscaping and janitorial services but not security? That cannot be right. The fact that each one of us has stories that clearly show how the lack of this authority has caused problems, including placing American lives at risk, ought to be reason enough to pass the bill

Congress already did the responsible thing when it granted State this authority for "high risk areas". However, our experience tells us that this contracting flexibility should be extended to all embassies and consulates. Given current security threat levels, there are no "low threat" environments.

Our colleagues serve willingly and accept the risks of being deployed overseas for the vast majority of their careers. We simply ask you to help us add one more measure to ensure their safe return to their families after serving U.S. interests abroad.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Amb. Patricia Butenis (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Bangladesh, and Deputy Chief of Mission in Iraq and Pakistan

Amb. Ryan C. Crocker (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon.

Amb. James B Cunningham (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Israel, the UN and chief of Mission Hong Kong

Amb. Robert S. Ford (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Algeria

Amb. James F. Jeffrey (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Turkey, and Albania

Amb. Ronald E. Neumann (Ret.), former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Algeria