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SPOTLIGHT

GUEST COLUMN

Column: Invest in the U.S. Foreign Service, not more ammunition

Mark Cohen

Dec 18, 2025

Former secretary of defense and retired four-star Gen. James Mattis famously testified to Congress, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.” He was referring to our investment in diplomacy, the United States Foreign Service and its civil service professionals who daily, 24 hours a day, in some of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world, engage in the behind-the-scenes work of advancing American interests, protecting American citizens abroad, resolving differences before they escalate, and contributing to the betterment of the global community. They serve the American people and the interests of the United States and help assure the United States’ leading role in the world.

America’s diplomatic corps — the U.S. Foreign Service, led by the secretary of state — is facing an unprecedented crisis. Since January 2025, according to the American Foreign Service Association’s most comprehensive member survey and report ever compiled, as many as one in four career diplomats have been removed, retired or resigned following sweeping layoffs and agency dismantlement. The consequences are immediate: weakened global leadership, a diminished ability to serve and protect the American people, and a declining capacity to advance U.S. interests abroad.

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Changes to Department of State leadership have overwhelmingly “politicized” a historically non-partisan workforce. Foreign Service professionals fear voicing opinions that run counter to prevailing politics. Many of those subject matter experts have been squeezed out of their positions by rampant cuts across the Foreign Service. Ninety-eight percent of surveyed Foreign Service professionals report declining morale, and 86% report that these changes have affected their ability to advance U.S. diplomatic priorities.

The art of diplomatic engagement dates back at least as far as ancient Egypt and derives from the basic need of nation-states to interact with each other. In the relative youth of the United States, Ben Franklin, John Adams and John Jay worked to secure support for our revolution, and to bring it to its end with the Treaty of Paris. They, and others, provided the foundation for our Foreign Service.

And Auburn's own history is entwined with U.S. diplomacy. William Seward served as secretary of state under Presidents Lincoln and Johnson. Auburn graduate and esteemed athlete and scholar Jerome "Brud" Holland went on to serve as the U.S. ambassador to Sweden from 1970 to 1972. East High Stadium was renamed in his honor in 1971. Ambassador Harry Roberts Melone, a graduate of Auburn High, was a Foreign Service officer who served at posts in Tabriz, Yaounde, Paris, Niamey and the United Nations. He served as ambassador to Rwanda from 1979 to 1982.

And most recently, Brian McKeon, another Auburn High graduate, served as the deputy secretary of state for management and resources under President Biden. These distinguished Auburn natives are joined by a significant handful of retired diplomats currently living in Auburn and Central New York.

It is well past time to write to our representatives and senators and urge them to restore and maintain a strong, qualified and not-politicized U.S. Foreign Service. We need to stem the loss of resolute public servants, broad and specialized expertise, and the tools necessary to hold our place among the world's nations.

We do not need to buy more ammunition.



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A Report by the American Foreign Service Association

December 3, 2025

Mark Cohen lives in Owasco. He retired in 2021 as a U.S. Foreign Service regional medical officer. He served tours in Moscow, Russia; Nairobi, Kenya; Baghdad, Iraq; Washington, D.C.; and London, the United Kingdom. He was the Department of State's chief medical officer from 2018 through 2020, and returned to the department in 2024 as a contractor in the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts.

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