

## Black Leaders in American Foreign Policy: History and Prospects for Overcoming a Racialized Bureaucracy

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The U.S. State Department has not achieved diversity reflective of American society. The theory of racialized organizations helps to explain why, and the lens of institutional theory suggests elements that could contribute to achieving a more representative State Department bureaucracy. Data on Black Ambassadors from 1949 to 2020, presented as data visualizations inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois, supplemented with interview data, establish a record of historical discrimination in the U.S. State Department. The analysis confirms the State Department exhibits the features of a racialized organization. Institutional theory illuminates levers for progress. These include: 1) networks of institutional entrepreneurs; 2) accessing power and influence sources; as they work toward 3) establishing new norms; and 4) data for justice. A historical review of Black Americans' experience in the U.S. State Department illustrates how these elements of institutional theory have intermittently advanced progress and hold promise for future efforts.

Throughout American history, racism at home has hampered the United States' ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives and credibly ground them in purported universal values such as democracy and human rights (see Krenn 1999; Wilson 2004). Ledwidge (2012) argues that the civil rights laws of 1964 and 1965 were at least partially driven by U.S. foreign policy requirements. Black American activists, such as A. Philip Randolph, recognized these connections and mobilized the first march on Washington during World War II to "embarrass the U.S. administration into giving African Americans access to government employment" (11). As he put it, "Jim-crow is America's national disgrace. Its existence confuses and embarrasses our foreign policy" (Brown 1949–1950, 24–25; qtd. in Krenn 1999, 16). Organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIDA, founded in 1914), were dedicated to Black liberation both domestically and internationally (Ledwidge 2012). How can racial equality be incorporated in American foreign policy, both for the representation and promotion of the country's highest ideals abroad, as well as effectiveness in pursuing national interests?

Diversifying our bureaucracies is crucial to making better decisions and policies, drawing from the full measure of talent available, and inclusive of different perspectives and ways of thinking (see Bishu and Kennedy 2019; Meier

2019). A diverse foreign policy bureaucracy reflective of American society is imperative to representing to the world who we are, and to incorporating the breadth of Americans' thoughts and experiences. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and former Director General of the State Department, argues: "Our foreign service has to represent the face of the United States. People around the world have to know that we are many different faces. . . . that what we represent is not just white men. We come in many shades and many colors" (personal interview, July 16, 2019). Wilson (2004, 2) proposes that minorities' experiences, "gained through past exclusion and marginalization," can help us to "design better roadmaps to a more peaceful and cooperative global future." He emphasizes the increasingly high stakes, with the rise of terrorism, "to find better ways to enhance our security and our engagement with the racial mosaics of the developing world." These rationales informed the Obama Administration's Presidential Memorandum on Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the National Security Workforce (White House 2016).

Despite increasing numbers of people of color recruited into federal service, the leadership of our public bureaucracies continues to be populated primarily by white people. Federal government data show that only 22% of the senior executive service is comprised of people of color (White House 2016). GAO (2020a) documents similar trends in foreign policy specifically.

The percentage of people of color serving full time in the State Department increased from 28% to 32% from 2002 to 2018, driven largely by an increase from 17% to 24% in the foreign service. The odds for promotion were lower for people of color at every level and for both categories of employees (civil and foreign service), except the executive level of the foreign service (GAO 2020a). This skewed representation of American society persists despite a merit system, and despite numerous challenges to and subsequent efforts to modify recruitment and promotion systems.

Why do we see diminished returns at increasing levels of leadership on seemingly good-faith efforts to recruit a diverse public service? What is the historical evolution of representativeness in the State Department bureaucracy? What will it take to move closer to an American foreign policy bureaucracy more reflective of American society, and especially at leadership levels which are our face to the world? Data on Black American ambassadorial appointments illustrate the incremental progress yet continuing inadequate representativeness in the major U.S. public agency tasked with foreign policy. The theory of racialized organizations draws from institutional theory to diagnose and explain such results. A more thorough application of institutional theory—including institutional entrepreneurship—helps to nuance standard responses to racialized organizations and suggests a more comprehensive strategy for advancing just bureaucracies that are more representative of American society.

W.E.B. Du Bois inspires this work. In 1900, for the Paris World Exposition, Du Bois contributed roughly 60 infographics to the Negroes of America Exposition. Battle-Baptiste and Rusert (2018) collected and published the complete set of infographics in color in the hopes that “they might take on a new life today” to inform social justice work, “envisioning how data might be reimagined as a form of accountability and even protest in the age of Black Lives Matter” (22). Du Bois—a Black sociologist—inspires the use of data for justice. Battle-Baptiste and Rusert (9) define the infographics as data visualization that can “generat[e] new patterns and knowledge through the act of visualization itself.” Drawing from these infographics also honors Du Bois’

pioneering knowledge, giving him his due. As Munro (2018, 50) observed, “These data visualizations offer a prototype of design practices that were not widely utilized until more than a century later, anticipating the trends—now vital in our contemporary world—of design for social innovation, data visualization in service to social justice, and the decolonization of pedagogy.”

With data compiled from a variety of sources on Black American ambassadors from 1949 to 2020,<sup>1</sup> this article presents Du Bois-inspired data visualizations. Additional descriptive data and key informant interviews also inform the analysis. The visualizations expose the absence of representativeness in our American foreign policy leadership. An historical overview identifies the influence and insufficiency of past efforts to make the foreign policy bureaucracy more reflective of American society. The analysis confirms the State Department exhibits the features of a racialized organization. Institutional theory illuminates levers for progress. Replicating this effort to other facets of American public bureaucracy depends, in part, on the availability of data for justice.

### **Racialized Organizations, Institutional Theory, and Change Processes**

Ray’s (2019) racialized organization theory and institutional theory more broadly elaborate why formal structures can be both detrimental and insufficient to countering racism within organizations. They also point to how reform can occur.

#### ***Racialized Organizations***

King (1999) developed the concept of racialized bureaucracy and applied it to the federal bureaucracy from 1890 to 1945. The concept’s two defining features continue to apply to much of the federal bureaucracy today, though perhaps in more subtle ways. Racialized bureaucracies subordinate one group of employees to another based on race, either formally or informally; and segregate groups of employees based on race, including delimiting advancement and promotion. Ray (2019) develops a theory to describe how these two characteristics emerge. He builds his theory of racialized organizations on the concept of cognitive and cultural schemas. Schemas are “taken-for-granted” mental representations that help us

1. Data compiled by author, drawn from Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Association of Black American Ambassadors, and BlackPast.org; Remembered and Reclaimed; verified and augmented from data of the Office of the Historian, United States Department of State.

to make sense of and order our world. They often generate and legitimate inequality (DiMaggio 1997; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; qtd. in Ray 2019), as they represent a hierarchical ordering of what is and is not valued and important. Schemas are the scaffolds on which organizations are constructed. Racial hierarchies and related segregation are reinforced because racial structures connect organization processes to resources. Occupational or position segregation occurs as organizational systems and actors explicitly and implicitly assign racialized schemas regarding competence. Under the guise of neutrality and the application of “objective” and “neutral” organization processes, racial hierarchies are replicated and reinforced, for example, through position assignments and stereotype-reinforcing performance reviews.

Racialized structures distribute positions which enable or constrain influence over the organizational processes that connect to resources, and enable or constrain individuals’ time, “the amount of control they exercise over their time, their ability to plan non-work time, and their ability to plot the future” (Ray 2019, 36). While these structural features often reflect racial hierarchies, they may also yield agency benefits to those from disadvantaged groups who are able to attain positions higher in the hierarchy. Agency is enabled by positional influence, including discretion over time and opportunity to plan for a future that might include accessing increasingly more influential positions.

### ***Institutional Theory, Entrepreneurism, and Change***

Sustainable change requires reforming institutions in the fullest sense—beyond rules and formal structures to include changes in beliefs and corresponding ways of doing things (Greif 2006). Internalized beliefs, or schemas, inform how we make sense of our experience and surroundings (ibid.). Norms provide shared understandings and facilitate coordination. They define appropriate behavior within an identity group (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Most institutional change is slow, incremental, and path-dependent (North 2005), often in response to changing circumstances that create new incentives. Actors may perceive others will not abide by existing institutions, and/or existing institutions do not adequately respond to contextual changes, leading to a growing recognition of the need for change (Greif 2006). Once a new norm emerges, it may reach a tipping point that unleashes broad acceptance without question or de-

bate (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Organizations may adopt institutional reforms to maintain external legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977). External pressures may lead policymakers to adopt the visible shell of reforms—that is, civil service reforms that seek to level the playing field for entering public service and attaining higher office—without implementing them to achieve their intended function.

Institutional change can be more intentionally promoted through institutional entrepreneurship. Institutional entrepreneurship is an intentional and strategic process that responds to contextual opportunities and constraints. Institutional change requires learning, bargaining, and coordination. Institutional entrepreneurs often “announce” new norms, rationalizing why old norms no longer apply and becoming role models in the socialization of new norms (Greif 2006). They are also political actors who necessarily challenge existing power configurations (Seo and Creed 2002). And they operate within a network of other actors, some of whom may also be institutional entrepreneurs (Aldrich 2010). Networks provide institutional entrepreneurs access to power and other types of resources, including legitimacy, authority, skills/expertise, and material resources. Institutional entrepreneurs broker among different actors to achieve the framing, incentive negotiation, resources, and related commitments necessary to promote institutional reform (Brinkerhoff 2015).

Patashnik (2014) warns that seemingly successful reform efforts may be fragile, particularly those characterized by dispersed, uncoordinated constituencies. He emphasizes the importance of reinforcing coalitional patterns, sustained commitment of leadership and organized constituencies, the absence of organized resistance of those perceived to be harmed, and norm cascading (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 13) such that “opinions and values of the mass public” are engaged, and policy elites acknowledge “the rightness” of the reform.

In sum, institutional theory and institutional entrepreneurship delineate the following components to effective and sustainable institutional reform:

- a recognized need for change deriving from contextual changes that make previous norms inefficient or untenable;
- growing perception that others will no longer abide by the status quo;
- institutional entrepreneurs who become role models to help others adapt to new ways of thinking and behaving;

- reinforcing networks of change agents, internal and external, that together provide access to varied resources, including power and authority to legitimate, incentivize, and enforce new norms; and
- all to support the eventual development of self-enforcing norms, where new norms are broadly accepted, taken for granted, and socially supported.

### The History of the State Department: A Black American Perspective

Following are Du Bois-inspired data visualizations and related findings, and a review of State Department history relating to Black Americans.

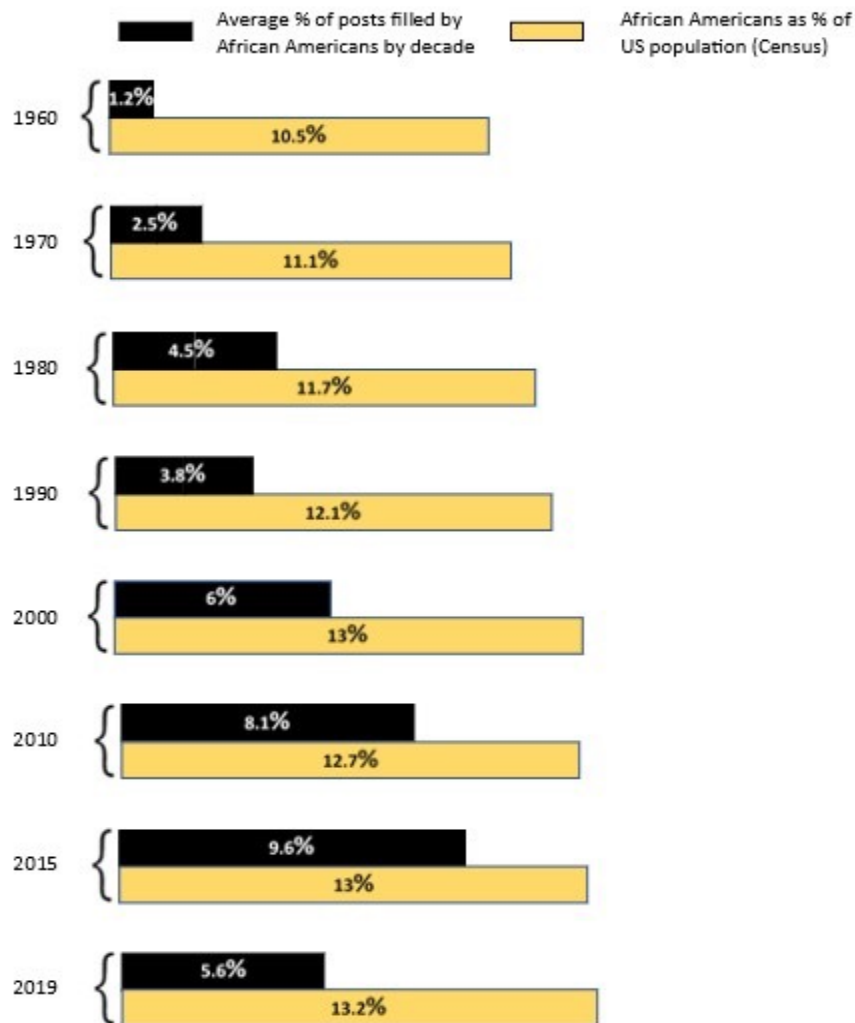
#### What the Data Show

Unless otherwise indicated, the data reflect person-years:

the number of Black Americans serving in ambassadorial posts in a given year. Person-years enable us to gauge how much our foreign service reflects overseas the demographics of our society at a particular time. Leadership appointment data include political and career foreign service ambassadors, as well as two secretaries of state.

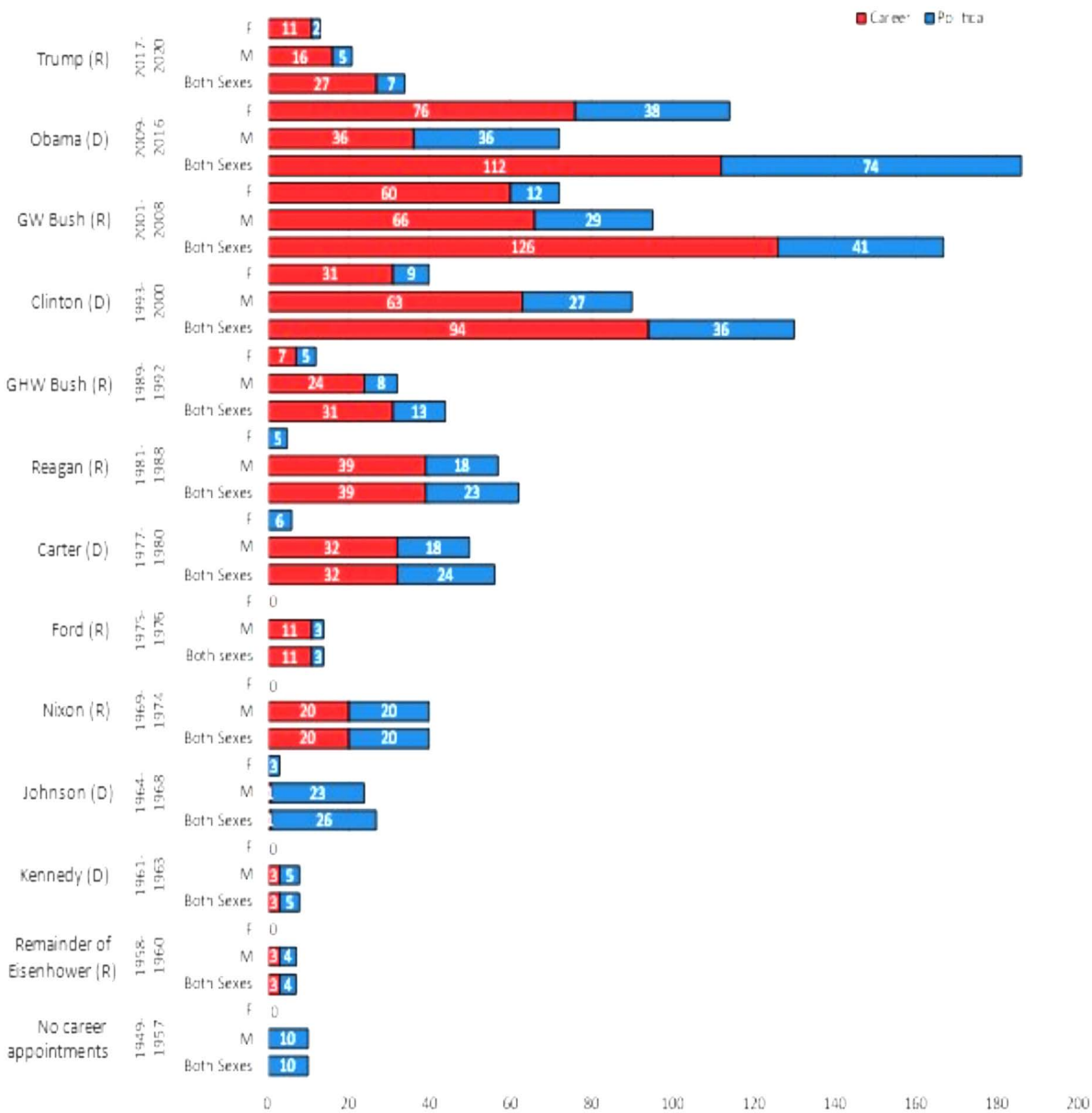
As Figure 1 confirms, the percentage of Black American ambassadors (career foreign service and political appointees) has never approximated the percentage of Black Americans in the U.S. population. For example, from 1951–1960 on average, 1.2% of ambassadors were Black American, while Black Americans comprised 10.5% of the U.S. population by 1960. Figure 1 shows mostly incremental progress, with a peak in 2015 (based on the average of the first half of the decade), and a decline in more recent years. Since the Civil Rights Act of 1964,

**Figure 1. Percentage of African American Ambassadors Compared with the United States Population**



Note: Inspired by Plate 9, W.E.B. Du Bois, 1900 (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018).

**Figure 2. African American Ambassadorial Person-Years Disaggregated by Gender and Category, 1949–2020**



Note: Inspired by Plate 43, W.E.B. Du Bois, 1900 (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018).

Black American person-years comprise less than 6% of total person-year leadership abroad.

Since the first appointment of a Black American ambassador (Edward Dudley, Liberia 1949), 46% of Black

American ambassadors have been political appointments. As depicted in Figure 2, the number, gender, and breakdown between political and career foreign service ambassadorial appointments is unrelated to political party.<sup>2</sup>

2. Political appointments can temporarily influence diversity within the bureaucracy; they represent the will of particular presidential administrations. Career service ambassadorial appointments represent a more sustained and institutionalized commitment to diversity.

Nixon's administration (1969–1974) was the turning point for person-years, with equal numbers of person-years of political and career foreign service appointments. Career foreign service appointment person-years have exceeded those of political appointments in every administration thereafter. Female person-years have only exceeded males during the Obama administrations (2009–2016).

A total of 152 Black Americans served as ambassadors or secretaries of state from 1949–2020. During the Nixon administration (Republican, 1969–1974), Black American career foreign service ambassador appointments (58% of 12 appointments) exceeded political appointee counterparts for the first time. This progress was immediately reversed during the Carter Administration (Democratic, 1975–1980), when 69% (of 13

appointments) of Black American ambassadorial appointments were political. In Reagan's administrations (1981–1988) these appointments (10 total) were evenly divided among political and career foreign service. Ever since, there have always been more career foreign service Black American ambassadors than politically appointed ones, though the Obama administrations' (2009–2016) came close to an even split with 51% career foreign service and 49% political appointments (of 35 total). The greatest number (24) and percentage (73% of 33) of Black American career foreign service ambassadorial appointments occurred during the George W. Bush administrations (2001–2008).

The first female Black American ambassador, a political appointee, was appointed by Lyndon Johnson in 1965 (Patricia Harris to Luxembourg). The first female

**Figure 3. Person-Years of African American Ambassadors by Region, 1949-2020**



*Note:* Inspired by Plate 17, W.E.B. Du Bois, 1900 (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018).

Black American career foreign service ambassadors were appointed by George H.W. Bush in 1990 (Arlene Rander to Gambia; Aurelia Erskine Brazeal to Micronesia). Eisenhower, in 1961, appointed the first male Black American career foreign service ambassador (Clifton R. Wharton, Sr., to Norway).

Geography is also important to globally reflecting American society. Krenn (1999) describes the evolution of the “Negro circuit” that began in the 1920s–1940s. While the custom was and is to transfer foreign service officers (FSOs) to other posts from term to term, many Black Americans were relegated to Liberia, where they lived out their entire foreign service careers. If they enjoyed subsequent appointments, it was largely on a circuit that included Haiti, other African countries, and eventually Portuguese-speaking posts (e.g., Azores and Portugal), and some others (such as the Canary Islands, Cuba, Egypt, and Turkey). Throughout this history, Black American ambassadors have overwhelmingly served in Africa, as Figure 3 illustrates.

Black Americans have been assigned to 11 countries at least five times. All of these were in Africa except Trinidad and Tobago. Liberia tops the list with eight Black American appointments. Gambia, Niger, and Senegal follow with seven appointments each. Of all countries where Black Americans have served as ambassadors, 37.4% were in Africa and 58.5% of all Black American-assigned posts (234 since 1949) were in Africa. The proportion of Africa posts among all geographical posts where Black Americans served was the greatest during the Ford (78.6%) and George H.W. Bush (77.8%) administrations; and the lowest was during the Carter (45.8%) and Obama (44.7%) administrations. Among all geographical ambassadorial posts, the Obama administration had the greatest number of countries where Black Americans served (56), with 37.5% serving in Africa; the George W. Bush administration is a close second with 51 countries with Black American ambassadors, though 60.8% served in Africa. This disproportion extends to small island states: 23.5% of all countries where Black American ambassadors have served, although they represent 18.8% of all posts.

### ***Efforts to Increase Black American Participation in American Foreign Policy***

History demonstrates both progress and setbacks. As illustrated in Figure 1, until recent years this arc did “bend towards justice” to quote Martin Luther King,

Jr. (1968). The following review identifies key moments that represent impactful factors, including: milestone legislation and lawsuits, the ascension of Black Americans into positions of influential authority, and emerging pressures external to the formal State Department bureaucracy. The Appendix provides a timeline.

The Pendleton Act of 1883 established the federal government as a meritocracy, and the 1924 Rogers Act established a merit system for the Foreign Service. Nevertheless, the State Department was called out in the 1948 Report of the National Committee on Segregation; at the time, it hired Black Americans only for menial jobs (King 1999). In 1950 only 25 Black Americans served in the foreign service (Davis 1969); in 1960 there were only 17 Black Americans among 3,732 FSOs (Moddero 1996). Secretaries of State have repeatedly confirmed the importance of the State Department reflecting American society, lamenting the paltry numbers of Black Americans serving (e.g., Secretary Dean Rusk in 1961, and Secretary George Schultz in 1986 (Krenn 1999)). The 1980 Foreign Service Act called for a career diplomatic service reflective of American society.

Individuals have advocated and fought for change. Edward Dudley, the first Black American ambassador (Liberia 1949–1953), worked to ensure that Black American FSOs had opportunities to serve outside of Liberia and outside of Africa. Through his efforts, Black Americans secured posts in Lisbon, Paris, Copenhagen, New Delhi, London, and Rome (Krenn, 1999); some went on to become ambassadors. Terence Todman—the first Black American career ambassador—practiced “bureaucratic disobedience” by refusing to accept further appointments in Africa (Shapiro 2004, 93). In the 1950s, he insisted the State Department arrange for a place for him to eat lunch during his Foreign Service Institute training in segregated Virginia, which ultimately led to the State Department leasing one-half of a private restaurant (interview with Michael Krenn, qtd. in ADST 2020a).

The 1980s and 1990s brought legal challenges. Their impacts can be seen in Figure 2. The first appointments of career foreign service female Black American ambassadors followed the final court order in 1989 for the Palmer class action suit alleging sex discrimination (*Alison Palmer v. Warren Christopher*). The George H.W. Bush administration (1989–1992) appointed seven female ambassadors. The number of career foreign service Black American ambassadors (of both genders) signifi-

cantly increased starting in the Clinton administration (1993–2000), perhaps following the 1996 settlement of the *Thomas v. Christopher* class action suit brought by Black Americans for race discrimination. Ambassador Anthony Quainton, Director General from 1995–1997, confirmed: “We have been required by the courts to promote officers, women officers, and African-American officers who were not promoted by their peers under the previous system” (interview by Stephanie Smith Kinney 1997; qtd. in ADST 2020b).

Former Black American ambassadors recount resistance and hostility to their presence and leadership. In the early years, Black Americans who attained leadership positions could experience sluggish or non-responsiveness. Mercer Cook, when U.S. Ambassador to Senegal, discovered that a letter he forwarded to the State Department from Senegal’s President Léopold Sédar Senghor never reached President Johnson (Krenn 1999). When asked about resistance Black Americans might experience from locals, Terence Todman replied, “The only question that people ever had . . . ‘Does this person have the influence with his own country to be able to get for us what we need?’” (interview by Michael Krenn 1995; qtd. in ADS 2020a).

Black American Directors General (DGs) and Secretaries of State initiated and/or championed efforts to increase Black American ambassadors. The Foreign Service Act of 1980 designates the Director General of the Foreign Service as a presidential political appointment, even though it is held by career FSOs. Thus, selected DGs may reflect the agenda of the president or his or her Secretary of State. Five Black Americans have so served, representing 13% (approximately 9 ½ years) of the time from 1949–2020. Collectively, they oversaw the appointment of over 26% of Black American career foreign service ambassadors. Of the 10 years, 15 or more career foreign service Black American ambassadors were appointed, six occurred when Black Americans served as DGs. President George H.W. Bush appointed the first Black American DG (Edward Perkins in 1989), coinciding with the final court order in the Palmer suit and three years after the Thomas suit filing. Ambassador Perkins advanced the candidacy of the first female Black American ambassadors, as well as five male Black American ambassadors. George W. Bush appointed three Black American DGs, including the first female (Ruth A. Davis). DGs can set a tone and potentially influence others’ thoughts and beliefs.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield (DG 2012–2013) called it, “the most important job that I’ve had in my career” (personal interview, July 16, 2019). She visited junior high and high schools, explaining, “I wanted to put in their heads that this was an option for them.”

Black American leaders often networked with others to work toward common goals. In the 1980s, Ambassador Edward Perkins recognized the importance of the Congressional Black Caucus. He and others “made it our business to get to know members of the Black Caucus and tell them. . . why it was necessary that the Foreign Service be representative of what the United States stood for and that it represent who its citizens were in the United States, which meant that it had to be totally integrated” (personal interview, June 26, 2019). In advance of her Congressional confirmation hearing for the DG position, Linda Thomas-Greenfield encountered Senator Menendez’ skepticism about the State Department’s intentions to diversify. She moved quickly to establish a partnership, responding, “I don’t see it as my job to do it alone. Diversity is an issue that we all have to take on. And if you think diversity is important, you’ve got to help me” (personal interview, July 16, 2019).

These networks—internal, and those that bridge internal and external actors—are most visible concerning pipeline programs. Several programs were introduced starting in the 1960s, including government-funded summer internship programs, and the Ford Foundation-funded Foreign Affairs Scholars Program. At least part of the increase in Black American career foreign service ambassadors during Nixon’s administration (1969–1974) might be attributable to the entry-level efforts introduced and championed by the Kennedy administration (1961–1963). These programs were reinforced in the 1990s, with the Foreign Affairs Scholars Program later becoming the federally-funded Pickering Fellowship and Rangel Fellowship.

When the Congressional Black Caucus helped to develop the first federally-funded Foreign Affairs Fellowship program (1990), the legislation was authorized, but without funding. As DG, Edward Perkins formed a close relationship with the State Department chief financial officer, who found the budget to fund it year-to-year (Perkins 2006). After he left the DG position, Perkins was alerted to a funding crisis and intervened with the current DG, threatening to inform Congress if needed. He reported that this pattern repeated from



1992–2006. The efforts persisted through “An unofficial watchdog activity,” which included Ruth A. Davis, among others. He stressed the need for a budget line item to support the program. Congress has expanded authorization for the Pickering and Rangel fellowships but continues to leave the funding to the discretion of the State Department. When fellows were included in the 2017 State Department hiring freeze, external actors, including international affairs school deans, mobilized quickly to ensure continued funding.

Internal actors in positions of influence and power have made a difference. Before he became DG, Ambassador Harry Thomas, Jr. was Executive Secretary to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. He reports that Ambassadors Ruth A. Davis and Aurelia Brazeal approached him about a need for funding for the Pickering Program. He, in turn, approached Secretary Rice, who supported the idea and suggested naming it for Congressman Rangel. Ambassador Thomas later proposed a paid summer internship program for college students from underrepresented groups, including those based on poverty levels. Secretary Rice supported that too. He noted several pending Black American ambassadorial appointments during the transition from the George W. Bush to the Obama administration. He concluded, “We don’t need conferences on diversity and kumbaya. We need the Secretary of State to appoint people to positions” (personal interview, June 18, 2019).

Individuals and networks also operate at decentralized levels. The Thursday Luncheon Group (TLG) started in 1973 as an affinity support group. It evolved into strategizing for affirmative action, varied postings, and fundraising to support minority recruitment fellowships (Shapiro 2004). The 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that many State Department bureaus undertake specific minority recruitment initiatives—independent from department-wide efforts. The Senior Advisor for Diversity, Inclusion, and Outreach reports: “bureau leaders set the tone and provide support for bureau-level initiatives” (GAO 2020b, 5).

The Congressional Black Caucus, Black American senators, and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs have provided significant pressure regarding representation in the State Department. As early as 1949, Black Congressman Arthur Mitchell campaigned for the removal of portrait photographs as part of the ap-

plication process for federal employment (King 1999, 35). Members of Congress and senators can stymie hearings and withhold approvals and funding, and they have access to other levers of accountability within the federal government. They have repeatedly called for investigations and commissioned reports. Senators Bob Menendez (D-NJ), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) were co-requesters of a recent GAO (2020a) report on diversity in the State Department.

External actors can also obstruct progress, whether elected officials with different priorities, or civil society and other affinity groups. The American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the collective bargaining unit for FSOs, has been obstructionist. Given the demographics of the State Department, protecting and serving its members historically meant protecting a status quo. Goodman (1997, B6) argued AFSA has “a vise-like grip on the flexibility that managers have to change promotion and assignment systems.”

The State Department’s up-or-out promotion system has been highly scrutinized over the years. Nevertheless, a 2010 Inspector General Report concluded, “the processes . . . are fundamentally fair and trustworthy.” A 2013 GAO report found only that the process was not meeting all documentation requirements. The 2019 appeals court ruling of *Figuerro v. Tillerson* found the State Department’s stated criteria for promotion lacked specificity and were primarily subjective—by extension, opening the door for discrimination or at least implicit bias. Promotion requirements now include “Support for Equal Employment Opportunity and Merit Principles,” with related criteria specified at entry, mid-, and senior levels (U.S. Department of State 2020).

Performance evaluations inform promotion review boards. As per Ruth A. Davis (personal interview, July 12, 2019):

The reports that are written on White male officers are certainly more glowing generally than they are on females and on minorities. That’s just kind of a fact. And although we do get promoted, we don’t get promoted at the same rate that the White males get promoted, because they have better efficiency reports. That is a systemic thing, and it comes from unconscious bias, I think. . . . The other thing is, where are people assigned? Are they assigned to places that are the hot spots where you are going

to know if you do a good job, you're going to get promoted? Generally, women get positions and minorities get positions out in consulates or in countries that are not the real hot spots.

The State Department implements blind review for promotions and awards and promotion boards include a member of the public. Michael Krenn, who served on a board, was surprised that not a single Black American was promoted from his review board. Reflecting on the experience he observed: "I can tell you with about 90% accuracy who the African Americans were because of their assignments. They had all been assigned to small, "insignificant" African posts. Assigned to a lot of personnel jobs. Assigned to a lot of sort of civil rights jobs. All of those, as I came to understand, were career killers" (personal interview, February 24, 2020).

Individuals who sit on promotion boards and understand these dynamics can make a difference. As Aaron Williams, former senior U.S. Agency for International Development official, reports: "I can't remember how many times in promotion panels I would just fight to the death for somebody who deserved to be on the promotion list. . . . And it's not that anybody was overtly racist or discriminatory. They just didn't think this person should be pushed to the next level. They didn't think the justification was there" (comments in personal interview with Ruth Davis, July 12, 2019).

The 2020 GAO report confirms continuing diversity challenges within the State Department, including, from 2002 to 2018: a reduction in the percentage of Black American employees (from 17% to 15%); reduction in the percentage of Black Americans serving at the foreign service executive level (from 7% to 3%); promotion rates for minorities that, depending on the rank, are 16% to 42% lower than for whites; and a near doubling of Black Americans among FSOs who leave the State Department for reasons other than retirement or death (from 4% to 7%). The report identifies many of the same challenges the GAO identified in its 1989 report (Heckman 2020).

### Prospects for Change in a Racialized Bureaucracy

The continued under-representativeness of the State Department cannot be attributed to any single factor. However, the data show that standard interventions—changes in leadership, lawsuits, and adjustments to

organizational processes for recruitment, review, and promotion—have not resulted in an unsegregated State Department bureaucracy that reflects American society. Despite repeated acts of Congress, lawsuits, and seemingly well-intended presidents, secretaries of state, and directors general, the proportion of Black American ambassadors continues to lag behind the proportion of Black Americans in the U.S. population, and Black American ambassadors continue to disproportionately represent the United States in Africa, and to a lesser extent small island states—effectively segregating Black Ambassadors within the bureaucracy leadership. Legal frameworks have created formal rules to support diversity. Lawsuits have helped to create organizational rules and processes, including blind review, that better ensure equity and fairness and incentivize intentional recruitment efforts. Leadership, including presidents, secretaries of state, and appointed directors general, have supported only incremental progress that is also reversible. Commitments are not always sustained, such as the fluctuating funding of fellowships and proactive pipeline efforts. Why is this so and what can be done about it?

### *Why Underrepresentation in Leadership and Segregation Persists*

The State Department demonstrates the components of a racialized organization. It has occupational segregation, with fewer and fewer Black Americans ascending to higher ranks relative to their peers, and an historical and continuing preponderance of assignments in Africa and small island states. Assignment to Africa could reflect cultural schemas that suggest Africa is the only region where Black Americans might "belong." Both Africa and small island states are also posts considered less strategic to national interests and therefore less prestigious. These hierarchies are reinforced through the promotion system, despite blind review to promote "neutrality," and requirements of skills and training related to diversity as prerequisites and criteria for promotion. Occupational distribution early in one's career sets the path for future assignments. Perceptions of Black Americans' "appropriateness" for various appointments may seep through in performance evaluations, career guidance, and recommendations for posts.

Greif (2006) emphasizes the challenge of successfully and sustainably changing beliefs and norms. Despite repeated challenges through lawsuits and findings

of congressionally-commissioned studies, the State Department culture has changed only incrementally. Key actors—including political appointees—may not believe there are sustained consequences for noncompliance with diversity imperatives, and organizational processes seem to continue to de facto support the status quo. New laws, rules, and regulations contradict social mores in practice, which may represent both overt racism and/or implicit bias, yielding institutional racism. As Ray's theory of racialized organizations suggests, social norms are enacted through organizational processes and can be expressed in very subtle ways.

### *Levers of Change*

Institutional theory and institutional entrepreneurship suggest several levers of change whose combined and cumulative effect may one day yield the self-enforcing norms necessary to sustainable institutional reform. The past provides examples of success that can be continued, expanded, and sustained. These examples also demonstrate where particular levers are weak or lacking. Leadership, that is, presidents, directors general, and secretaries of state, has made an observable, though incremental and reversible difference. Beyond individual leaders' political will to diversify and desegregate the bureaucracy, institutional entrepreneurship suggests that political pressure, networks of change agents, and ultimately changing norms are required to make more significant and sustainable progress. The reform landscape reveals active involvement of a network of actors who bring a variety of resources. External actors included early civil rights leaders who made the injustice visible nationally and internationally, creating public pressure on elected representatives and their appointees. The Black Caucus and members of the House and Senate foreign affairs committees exerted external pressure for reform. External actors supported efforts of internal networks of change agents and institutional entrepreneurs. Others responded to external pressures, such as General Anthony Quainton who advanced the candidacy of Black Americans as "required by the courts."

Ascension to key positions enabled Black Americans to use their access to resources and discretion over their time to prioritize recruitment and advancement of other Black Americans. DG Ruth A. Davis, Ambassador Aurelia Erskine Brazeal, and then Executive Secretary Harry K. Thomas, Jr. represent an internal network of institutional entrepreneurs. Earlier, DG Edward

Perkins, Ruth A. Davis, and others similarly joined forces, and threatened to enlist members of Congress as needed. All proactively strategized and promoted programming and related funding to improve the pipeline of Black Americans joining the foreign service and eventually ascending in its ranks. Individuals on promotion panels have challenged operating norms, advocated for candidates whose efficiency reports and promotion endorsements may be less glowing or convincing due to implicit biases influencing language and previous occupational distribution. DGs Edward Perkins and Linda Thomas-Greenfield, as institutional entrepreneurs, strategically sought partnership and support from the Black Caucus and members of the House and Senate foreign affairs committees. They, in turn, applied other levers to pressure the State Department, including commissioning GAO and Inspector General reports.

Missing is the sustained tenure of institutional entrepreneurs or similarly committed successors—those who have legitimacy to convince people to adopt new norms and organizational capability to disseminate new rules, making them "common knowledge" (Greif 2006). People must fundamentally believe in the rules and/or the need to follow them because they believe all others will do so (suggesting consequences if they do not). Credible leadership that champions the reform is the first step. Presidents and secretaries of state have not sufficiently and consistently prioritized this agenda. Even when they have, noncompliance is insufficiently enforced. Most progress seems to have emerged in the wake of lawsuits. John F. Kennedy may be an exception given his embrace of reforms which yielded fruit in subsequent administrations. Some political actors, arguably, expressed their priority through the appointment of Black American institutional entrepreneurs to positions of authority where they could influence this reform agenda.

Sustainable progress will require a change of norms and fundamental beliefs that extends beyond laws, formal rules, and the specifications of organizational processes. Despite the most recent and dramatic setbacks—with only three Black American ambassadors serving during the Trump administration—more pressure for reform may be forthcoming given the public awakening emerging from the Black Lives Matter protests in the spring and summer of 2020. McLellan (2015) observed that since the Truman administration (1945–1952) every presidential administration named

more Black American ambassadors than its predecessor. At the time of his writing, he noted an increasing diversification of geographical posts. He concluded these were “positive signs that the depth of Black American foreign affairs interests and knowledge extend across the foreign affairs topics and regions of the world” (McLellan 2015, 72). My analysis shows his optimistic outlook did not hold. Political will and related trends can be reversed. But noting such trends and outlier exceptions can challenge future presidential administrations to do better.

### Conclusion

The history of Black Americans in the U.S. State Department confirms we have not achieved a foreign policy bureaucracy reflective of American society. The theory of racialized organizations helps to explain why. The analytic frame of institutional theory and entrepreneurship suggest elements that can contribute to achieving a more representative State Department bureaucracy: 1) multiple networks of institutional entrepreneurs and change agents, including leaders in positions of authority; 2) accessing a variety of power and influence sources and other resources; as they work toward 3) establishing new self-enforcing norms; and 4) data for justice. Ray’s (2019) racialized organization theory confirms why a focus on leadership is so important to a diversity agenda. Appointments at higher levels of the organization hierarchy afford individuals access to resources, including control of time, potentially creating a virtuous cycle. Leadership access affords individuals opportunities not just to inspire others but also to substantially support them in their pathways through the organization.

The cognitive dimension of institutional reform can undermine new formal structures and rules (Greif 2006). Prior beliefs and norms may be pushed underground and persist, emerging in subtle and sometimes unconscious ways through seemingly benign organizational processes, resulting in the perpetuation of racialized organizations. Institutional reform, while fundamentally concerned with power, is not achieved through power alone. But norms can be addressed through sustained

leadership, with legitimacy and organizational capacity, over time, building shared confidence that change is inevitable as more and more actors come to adopt the new model.

Data has played an essential role in moving, however incrementally, toward bureaucracy more reflective of American society. Numbers are important and necessary to identifying and promoting a just distribution of opportunities. And the story they tell can be dramatically enhanced through strategic visualizations, such as those inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois, that illustrate patterns and highlight injustices. However, such data for justice is not universally available. This research was significantly enabled by the Office of the Historian at the State Department. A comparable office does not exist for the U.S. Agency for International Development; thus this analysis could not extend to this important component of American foreign policy.

Even with this support, data is not easy to acquire. Demographic data upon hiring has only been collected since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Fortunately, interested parties have worked independently to gather data and to identify Black Americans from among the many ambassadors who have served. This included independent researchers, such as Michael Krenn, as well as interest groups such as Blackpast.org, members of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and the American Foreign Service Association. New norms related to collecting data on race and ethnicity may hamper its use as data for justice. Categories have changed over time. And individuals may not always understand the import of such data when they opt not to reply to survey questions. These issues inhibit similar studies on the representation of other groups within the State Department and in other public bureaucracies. Only when we consider other groups can we assess the full measure—or lack thereof—of the State Department’s reflection of American society.<sup>3</sup>

The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and a change of presidential administrations inspired new political will to rectify injustices of the past, as well as recognition of the moral duty and practical benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the private and public sector alike. In 2021, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken

3. Latinx, Asians, and Native Americans are underrepresented relative to their percentage of the U.S. population. Goodman (1997) describes “Hispanics” stuck in the “cucaracha circuit.”

appointed the first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer. Wary of the potential for the position to effect only window dressing, Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley insisted on reporting directly to the Secretary of State, signaling the importance of the office and its work.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in a 2022 internal survey, with almost one-third of staff reporting, 44% of respondents reported they had experienced discrimination (Donati 2022). Most of these individuals did not report their experience, disbelieving that the Department would hold perpetrators to account (*ibid.*). In short, the promise of reform is ever confronting a long legacy of mistrust, which, itself, is exacerbated by changing administrations with varying political will.

In 1955, John Roxborough, a Black American lawyer, prepared a memo for the State Department outlining the “Rationale for the Full and Fair Utilization of Non-Whites in the Foreign Service of the United States.” It described four rationales: moral, legal, manpower, and for the effectiveness of foreign relations (Krenn 1999, 95). As Michael Krenn reports, it concluded by quoting Alan Paton: “But it is he [the African-American] more than any other American in this century who has helped America to know what her Constitution is, and that it is fit for all mankind. Perhaps now he [*sic*] can help America to tell the world.” Perhaps indeed.

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### Appendix: Key Moments in the History of Black Americans in the U.S. State Department<sup>5</sup>

- 1883. Pendleton Act, establishes the Federal Bureaucracy as a meritocracy
- 1924. Rogers Act, makes foreign service (FS) appointment and promotion merit-based, with open competitive examination for entry
- 1950. Group of FSOs study the “race problem.” Establishes opportunity for Black Americans to enter laterally into FS by examination
- 1950. Black civil rights leaders petition Secretary of State Dean Acheson for greater representation within the foreign affairs bureaucracy
- 1950–1953. Ambassador Edward Dudley conducts “silent revolution” against the “Negro Circuit”
- 1957. Terence Todman insists State Department provide a place he can have lunch during his Foreign Service Institute training based in segregated Virginia
- 1961. Black American summer internship programs introduced
- 1963. Kennedy Administration-initiated programs, including Blacks serving as Foreign Service Board Examiners and on promotion boards, and the Foreign Affairs Scholars Program, to encourage minorities to study foreign affairs (funded by the Ford Foundation)
- 1964. Foreign Service career booklets revised to incorporate photographs of Black Americans and provide “an integrated look”
- 1967. Junior Foreign Service Reserve Officer Program introduced. After examinations and three years of service candidates could become FSOs
- 1973. Thursday Luncheon Group created to increase the participation of Black Americans and other minorities in American foreign policy. Monitors personnel matters and provides members professional development and mentoring
- 1975. Ambassador Terence Todman begins refusing African posts
- 1977. Ambassador Andrew Young politically appointed first Black American Ambassador to the United Nations
- 1979. Ambassador Donald McHenry politically appointed Ambassador to the United Nations
- 1980. Foreign Service Act calls for a career diplomatic service representative of American society
- 1981. Public Policy and International Affairs program begins providing minority fellowship programs to support related graduate education and careers
- 1986. *Thomas v. Christopher* lawsuit launched alleging “discrimination regarding posts and duty assignments, performance appraisals, promotions, censuring, and selection out.”
- 1989. Terence Todman named first (of four) Black American Career Ambassadors
- 1989. *Alison Palmer v. Warren Christopher*. Class action lawsuit filed against the State Department for discrimination against women in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act
- 1989. Court order finding discrimination against women in written portion of FSO Test
- 1989–1992. Ambassador Edward Joseph Perkins serves as first Black American Director General. Appoints first female Black American ambassadors—two, and five male Black American Ambassadors. Two of the posts are outside of Africa; one is a small island state
- 1992. Ambassador Edward Joseph Perkins named first career foreign service Black American Ambassador to the United Nations
- 1990. Foreign Affairs Fellows program introduced to prepare minorities for graduate school and the Foreign Service entrance examination
- 1992. Pickering Fellows Program introduced (originally the Foreign Affairs Fellows program, renamed in 2001) to fund graduate students’ foreign service professional and academic preparation
- 1996. *Thomas v. Christopher* settled. Consent decree requires significant internal reforms
- 2001–2005. General Colin Powell serves as first Black American Secretary of State
- 2001–2003. Ambassador Ruth A. Davis serves as first Black American female Director General. Appoints five female and 10 male Black American career FSOs to ambassadorial posts. Seven of the posts are outside of Africa; none of them are small island states. Doubles the size of the Pickering Fellowship Program
- 2002. Charles B. Rangel Fellowship announced. Provides funding for graduate programs and two paid summer internship opportunities. Guarantees a five-year contract in the Foreign Service to successful Fellows
- 2005–2009. Condoleezza Rice serves as first Black American female Secretary of State

5. Sources include ADST (2020); Cohn (1999); Davis (1969); GAO (2020); Goodman (1997); Krenn (1999, 1995); and Moddero (1996).

- 2006–2007. Ambassador George McDade Staples serves as Director General. Appoints two females and one male Black American career FSOs to ambassadorial posts. Two posts are in Africa; one is a small island state
- 2007–2009. Ambassador Harry Keels Thomas, Jr., serves as the Director General. Appoints five females and five male Black American career FSOs to ambassadorial posts. Three posts are outside of Africa; one of them is a small island state
- 2010. *Palmer v. Christopher* class action suit ends. Parties agree court order compliance met
- 2012–2013. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield serves as the Director General of the Foreign Service. Appoints three female and two male Black American career FSOs to ambassadorial posts. Three posts are outside of Africa and two are all small island states
- 2020. GAO Report *STATE DEPARTMENT: Additional Steps Are Needed to Identify Potential Barriers to Diversity*, examining the period 2003–2018

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