

Ambassador Charles Ray

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I'll stand because if I sit, I might put myself to sleep. Following on what Ron said, I will try to be very brief so that you can hear from people that really know what they are talking about. I would sort of like to address something he said about the short-term view of the world that we sometimes have. A saying my grandmother taught me when I was a kid is "when you can't see beyond the end of your nose, you are always going to be banging your nose into something." I throw that out because that sort of fits into what I have to say about the outlook for American diplomacy in 2020 and beyond.

You know, first of all, the loss of such an unusually large number of senior career American diplomats from government because of their disagreements with the policies of the current administration, the failure to fill many of our senior positions or to appoint ambassadors in a timely manner. All of these have received a certain amount of media coverage, albeit brief. But like so many things related to diplomacy, they've largely faded from the public view. And missing from this conversation, when the media was paying attention, were issues that were of equal, if not greater, importance. What are the long-term aspects and impacts of the current diplomatic and foreign policy disarray? What are the consequences, long and medium term, of such a loss of experience and expertise? In short, what is the outlook for the future conduct of American diplomacy? What is the landscape likely to look like to our diplomats in 2020 and beyond?

Now, may I venture to make a prediction? I learned when I was Ambassador to Cambodia never to make a prediction. A couple of my predecessors had predicted King Sihanouk's demise and been wrong. I made a mistake early in my tour when he had a little flu to say, "He's probably on his last legs." He recovered and, when I left Cambodia three years later, hosted an all-night dinner for me and my wife which started at 7 o'clock and didn't end until 5 o'clock the next morning, so I learned not to make predictions. He danced, and he sang about 20 songs, and he danced about five times with my wife.

What I learned from all this is that making predictions is a risky endeavor, especially when you are dealing with the actions of people who are nature's most unreliable creatures. So I guess instead of making a prediction, what I would like to do is offer you some possible scenarios about what the conduct of diplomacy might be like in 2020 and beyond.

First, the big picture. As a nation, we are going to be facing a tremendous challenge; mending fences, rebuilding alliances, and restoring the trust our allies, such as NATO and the democracies of Europe, have in us. We will have to work hard to reassure these nations that we have slighted in so many ways, such as neglecting to appoint ambassadors, that they actually do matter to us. We are going to have to reset the dialogue to let other countries know that 'America First' does not mean 'America Only and the rest of the world be damned.' We'll have to restore our concern as a nation for the values of human rights and respect for the rule of law and put them back where they belong as important pillars of our foreign policy. And this, just off the top of my head, is a preliminary list. But achieving this alone, as Ron has mentioned, could take years, and actually, I sound a bit pessimistic when I say it, but I think probably will take decades.

Destroying a reputation is like demolishing a building: it can be achieved in a moment, but rebuilding it takes a lot of time and effort. That's the big picture. As incomplete as that picture is, it is nonetheless daunting.

But along with the big picture, there are smaller issues that have not generated much, if any, media coverage or public discussion. Nevertheless, I think they are in fact quite consequential. Sort of like a burr under your saddle, it's small and you don't notice it, but your horse does, and after he's noticed it for a while, so will you. These issues, small as they are, can cause problems because they are obstacles to achieving the big picture that I mentioned if left unaddressed. And, they can continue to negatively impact our ability to conduct effective diplomacy for many years to come.

Let's take a look at just one of these: the loss of so much expertise and senior talent from our foreign service. As we are working to rebuild alliances, to restore trust, to reclaim American preeminence in the world' education, dedication, and competence, which all our diplomats have in abundance, will not be enough. These alone cannot replace the in-depth knowledge of systems, institutions, people, and places that senior diplomats have built up over decades of service, and which is now lost to us. Relationships built up over decades cannot be re-established overnight. The best educated and most energetic young diplomats will be navigating in unfamiliar waters without seasoned veterans to guide them. They will find themselves in an unmentored learning mode as they try to reinvent the wheel, lacking the contacts and relationships that were lost due to the untimely departure of so many senior officials. They'll be starting at square one, and folks, square one is not where it used to be. It's been pushed back. We are going to be building our diplomatic relationships in some cases from scratch. This takes time,

and for some of these issues, such as dealing with the impact of climate change, I fear that we don't have a lot of time to do something effective about it.

Fractured relationships, some of which took decades to build, will have to be reconstructed brick by brick. Trust will have to be restored slowly and patiently, and these are important. These relationships and this trust are the cornerstones of effective diplomacy. If you cannot be trusted, you cannot be an effective diplomat. You do not have to be liked, and in fact, you can be soundly disliked. But if your adversary trusts you, you have the basis of an effective relationship. Now I admit I have just painted a gloomy picture, but I remain a cautious optimist. I don't believe that any of these obstacles are insurmountable, and that we as a nation will not be up to the task. Some of the threats we face in the future, such as climate change, are existential, so frankly we have no choice but to be up to the task. I think we can succeed because we cannot afford not to succeed. Thank you.