

The Complexities of American Foreign Policy: The Case for Diplomatic Experience and Education

by Justin Kidd

When it comes to selecting their ambassadors, historically, U.S. Presidents have chosen non-career political appointees as their representatives 35 percent of the time.¹ This practice has met with criticism, mainly the argument that the President's desire to have their own people in place runs counter to the need for ambassadors with the experience necessary to conduct foreign policy abroad. However, the real problem of preparing and educating the next generation of diplomats may reside in the Department of State itself.

As the personal envoy and representative of the President to a foreign government, the ambassador enjoys a high level of responsibility and trust. Not only are ambassadors the personal representative of the President, they also act as the eyes and ears on the ground, capable of influencing policy due to their intimate knowledge of their assigned country. Ambassador Robert R. Bowie believes ambassadors play the primary role as the main source of intimate understanding of the local issues, politics, economics, and social issues of their assigned country.² Bowie goes on to say the ambassador is the most likely person to have not only the latest information, but also the context. The ambassador should be able to provide an assessment of what is going on, and recommend a course of action to meet the objectives of U.S. strategy.³ The complexities of the foreign policy environment require that American diplomats be as well trained and educated as possible.

The Ambassador Has Many Responsibilities

The statutory duties of an ambassador are described in 22 U.S. Code 3927, as well as in the letter each president gives to Ambassadors before they depart for their assigned country. Ambassadors have full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all government executive branch employees in that country, with the exception of personnel under United States military

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command. Second, ambassadors shall be kept fully and currently informed with respect to all activities and operations of the executive branch agencies within that country, and shall ensure that all government employees in that country comply fully with all the applicable directives of the chief of mission.⁴ Ambassadors also receive a letter of instruction from the President detailing their additional special duties or tasks. A letter of instruction is also sent to the heads of all executive branch agencies informing them of their requirement to support the new ambassador.⁵

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The tradition of providing a presidential letter of instruction to new ambassadors dates to President Eisenhower.⁶ Historians have noted these letters have changed little over time, as they are general in nature and reinforce the roles and responsibilities of ambassadors. The letters also detail the authorities ambassadors have for the successful execution of the foreign policy mission as the president's personal representative. A 2008 example letter from President Obama is indicative of the nature of the responsibilities. The letter states "you have full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all U.S. Executive Branch employees in (assigned country), regardless of their employment categories or location." The letter goes on to state, "you have full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all Department of Defense personnel on official duty in (assigned country) except those under the command of a U.S. area military commander."⁷

Ambassadors today face a range of challenges including weapons of mass

destruction, trade and commerce expansion, piracy of intellectual property rights, terrorism, trafficking in drugs and persons, environmental pollution, regional ethnic and religious conflicts, refugee displacements, human rights violations, and an increasingly global economy that cannot be managed unilaterally by even a global power.⁸

The Patronage System

Because of the challenges of global diplomacy, one would expect a high level of Foreign Service expertise and experience in those persons selected to be Ambassadors.⁹ However, that is not always the case.¹⁰ As previously stated, 35 percent of selected ambassadors are political appointees with little or no diplomatic or regional experience.¹¹ Although this patronage system has been the norm since the earliest of presidential administrations, it has come under increasing scrutiny and discussion by foreign policy and diplomacy experts.

There has been continuing discussion on the practice of Presidents appointing non-career diplomats as part of a spoils system that dated back to the 1950s. Although historically the numbers of political ambassadors remain in the 30 to 35 percent range, that number had been creeping steadily upwards. Organizations such as the American Foreign Service Association have long advocated for strict limits on non-career diplomats, and much like Ambassadors Ronald Neumann and Thomas Pickering, have developed a list of recommended skills and qualifications that seek to curtail the practice of selecting unqualified candidates.

According to Paul Bedard of *U.S. News and World Report*, the American Foreign Service Association called attention to the appointments of non-career ambassadors to positions of important diplomatic posts abroad.¹² Bedard noted that although they believe non-career ambassadors are accomplished in their professional non-diplomatic fields, their appointments should be the exception, and not

the excepted as they have become. Over a three-decade period, over 85 percent of ambassadorial appointments to major European countries and Japan, and nearly 60 percent of appointments to a wider group of emerging global powers (such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China) have been political appointees.¹³

In June 2008, Ambassadors Neumann and Pickering from the American Academy of Diplomacy sent a letter to presidential candidates Senators Barack Obama and John McCain requesting their support for reform of the selection process for ambassadors. While acknowledging that historically more than one-third of all ambassadors are political appointees, Neumann and Pickering recommended the number of politically appointed ambassadors be limited to no more than 10 percent.¹⁴ Others have argued the role of an ambassador has increased in complexity, as ambassadors now have the responsibility to coordinate activities with all the agencies assigned to their country's embassy. The average medium-size embassy can easily include more than 30 different agencies, each owing their allegiance to a headquarters back in Washington.¹⁵

Neumann and Pickering also recommended a list of qualities an ambassador should possess whether they are a career foreign service officer or political appointee.¹⁶ Among these qualities were integrity, experience in their assigned country, ability to speak the local language, an understanding of American history and the democratic process, and demonstrated skills as a leader and team builder.¹⁷

Other Considerations

Compounding the complexities of the international arena are the challenges of the Washington, D.C. bureaucratic arena. Good to great ambassadors must understand the bureaucratic policy making apparatus within the U.S. government in order to explain the decision-making peculiarities to foreign officials.

Ambassador Raymond Seitz is not alone in his belief that this education is not easy to get due to the fragmented way Washington is structured for decision making.¹⁸ This seems to support the choice of a career foreign service officer who has dealt with this fragmented decision making apparatus, or an appointee who has dealt on the national or strategic level with Washington decision making.

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Ambassadors are supported by embassy staffs of various skills and experiences. As long as inexperienced ambassadors are assigned to a country with a fully manned and experienced embassy staff, there should not be any problems.¹⁹ This proposal postulates that problems arise when the country to which the inexperienced ambassador is assigned is not fully manned with experienced personnel. In this situation, the experience level of the ambassador becomes critical.²⁰

There are detractors that do not believe that even with appropriate resources the State Department can adequately perform their role in diplomacy. Kori Schake is one such detractor who believes that it takes more than an embassy and a staff to conduct U.S. foreign policy. She notes that even outside think tanks, like the Stimson Center, do not believe the State Department is capable of equipping their diplomats with the skills necessary to conduct twenty-first century diplomacy.²¹

Part of the problem may be the limited education offered to both Foreign Service Officers and political appointees. Schake notes the State Department does not invest in the education necessary to help diplomats be more successful.²² This may be partly due to the

lack of empirical research to allow for greater understanding of what helps ambassadors to succeed. Part of this is an absence of measurable standards to assess against. The second problem is the almost total lack of diplomatic training offered and available for political appointees.

Much like how the U.S. military grows their officers and non-commissioned officers through education and experiences, the Department of State provides similar opportunities. However, there are significant differences in the type and length of training that prepares an ambassador for their responsibilities. The course that all new ambassadors attend at the State Departments' Foreign Service Institute is two weeks long. In this short period, new ambassadors are taught a handful of the essential skills they need to be successful at their new post. For non-career ambassadors, this training cannot take place with the Department until their confirmation hearing with the U.S. Senate has been completed. This minimal period to prepare an ambassador would make performance assessment and measurable standards seemingly more important.

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However, this lack of experience or education does not relieve the Department of State, or ambassadors, from providing foreign policy recommendations to the president. Most presidents do not come into office with much foreign policy experience.²³ If anything, the president's lack of foreign policy experience makes it even more important for ambassadors to provide relevant and timely information. Morton Halperin, et al., notes that the president faces so many issues each day that they tend to practice a form of "uncommitted thinking."²⁴ In the face of contradicting or intractable problems, the

president may yield to emotion or a gut feeling when making decisions, thus a logical emotional decision based on the last conversation may be the result. Halperin, et al., observes that presidents are pressured from all sides by special interest actors, and at times respond to those that are the strongest.²⁵ These pressures often come from inside the administration. Knowledgeable, qualified, expert opinion is thus critical to a president trying to make foreign policy decisions. Yet the president may be served by a Department of State that does not value education or change.

A Preference for the Status Quo

As even internal studies admit, the Department of State has not responded well to the various challenges it faces in providing timely and informed advice to the president and senior decision makers. In fact, the Department of State has proven highly resistant to change.²⁶ Sam Sarkesian, et al., observed that the State Department can be stifled in their ability to change, tethered to the status quo, and more interested in self-protection than introspection.²⁷ According to some, this has produced bureaucratic inertia and burdensome procedures that allow little room for initiative and innovation. The danger of such stasis should be apparent given the important role that ambassadors play for U.S. foreign policy.

For years criticism has been directed toward the Department of State for not growing and changing with the times. This is not to say there have not been changes over the years. When former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, became the Secretary of State, he instituted several changes designed to invigorate and educate senior leaders.²⁸ Powell involved senior executives from not only the Department of State, but also other key federal agencies involved in the national security process and called it the Senior Seminar. This type of initiative is what Albert Vicere writes about in *The Strategic Leadership Imperative*.²⁹ In order

to develop high performing organizations, leaders have to be willing to adapt the organization to the marketplace. Leaders should consistently seek ways to meet the needs of their customers. Vicere notes that all organizations go through periods of change, and for institutional resistance to change this fact must be recognized. What slows and shapes this change is the strength of the dominant subculture. In his article “The Issue of Competence in the Department of State,” John Harr calls the Department of State “the Ottoman Empire of Federal Government,” and concludes that Andrew Scott is correct in his assessment about Foreign Service Officers being the dominant subculture that is highly resistant to change.³⁰

This lack of emphasis on training and education has had an undesirable effect on the experience level of assigned Foreign Service Officers, which has been noticed by other researchers. Some have observed that the lack of experience in Foreign Service Officers has created a cadre of diplomats that are new to the business of diplomacy, who are required to learn on the job, with a lack of senior mentors to guide them. Part of this is due to the overall lack of formal diplomatic training. However, it has also been noted that there is a serious lack of true expertness in the department, and that the Foreign Service Officers’ experiences in various posts around the world are too short for them to become area specialists in any true definition of the word.

Career officers may know the practices of diplomatic and consular work, but, with few exceptions, they can hardly claim to be experts in either the regions they support or in the larger politics of international relations. James McCamy and Alessandro Corradini found that in order to become an area specialists, a term of five years in one region is assumed to be reasonable, although only 15 percent of Foreign Service Officers had spent more than five years in any region.³¹ This led them to state that most

Foreign Service Officers have acquired the basic skills of routine embassy administrative work such as report writing, but not the knowledge that comes with prolonged study of an area or topic.

The Danger of Clientitis

This lack of expertness is not coincidental to Hannah Gurman, who believes the success or failure of a country’s foreign policy is based on the dependability and reliability of its diplomatic reports.³² Although some State Department supporters say the structure of each region is supported by a strong regional bureau with experienced personnel, Ambassador Marc Grossman notes that “While regional bureaus can most quickly bring the art of what is possible to the table and galvanize embassy action, they also suffer the most ‘clientitis,’ the tendency to be overly concerned with another country’s sensitivities.”³³ This tendency to overlook a country’s liabilities is exacerbated when combined with inexperienced Foreign Service Officers.

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The lack of true expertness can allow the phenomenon of clientitis to affect the regional bureau’s supporting multiple embassies in a region. The Near East bureau is an example of an elitist culture that sought to ensure the state of Israel would not be allowed to form. The climate of the bureau was one of comparable social attitudes regarding the Arab countries in their region.³⁴ This over-reliance on the experience of the Near East bureau allowed this group to plot extensively against the formation of the State of Israel, while seeming to support the executive branch’s desires. Elihu Bergman noted that the culture of the bureau was something

of a brotherhood, and combined with their Arabism outlook, sought to protect their clients. In the prevailing corporate culture of the Near East Asia bureau, this uniformity of outlook was not surprising.³⁵

Clientitis has led to other more detrimental outcomes. In Nicaragua in 1978, events were spinning out of control for the government of Anastasio Somoza. Although the United States had supported Somoza for many years with both economic and military aid, diplomatic personnel failed to understand the strength of the opposition to Somoza's rule. After a popular anti-government activist was assassinated by government forces at a critical point in the relationship, the U.S. seemed hesitant, unable to choose between a commitment to human rights or the desire for political continuity in Central America, and the fear of creating another Cuba.³⁶

This indecision can be traced to a sense of clientitis and lack of expertness on the ground and led to a decision to cut off military aid to the Somoza regime, while at the same time congratulating him on his improved human rights record. The Somoza government would fall to rebel forces within a year. Strategic Survey notes that "During Somoza's final years, U.S. policy had been hesitant and dilatory: first assuming that Somoza could weather the storm...and finally realizing too late, that he would in fact be toppled."³⁷ The same problem would blind the ambassador and the State Department to the fragile state the government of Iran was in.

President Jimmy Carter had spent the New Year holiday with the Shah of Iran in 1979, and during a New Year's Eve toast proclaimed the Peacock Throne would last another hundred years. The government of Iran would be swept away by opposition forces within one year. "Oblivious to the mounting evidence of mismanagement and corruption, successive U.S. governments had failed to impress upon the Shah the need for reform and the decentralization of authority."³⁸ The State Department and the President were taken utterly by surprise, both at the fall of the Iranian government, and the speed at which it happened. Gurman's comment on the success or failure of a country's foreign policy depending on the accuracy of the diplomats reporting brings a new level of importance when governments friendly to the United States begin to fall.³⁹

The discussion about the selection and use of political appointees over career Foreign Service Officers has dominated much of the conversation concerning the selection of ambassadors. While diplomacy is seen as primarily a human endeavor, it is apparent there are other issues that may directly impact the education and training of effective diplomats. While the use of political appointees will probably never be resolved to anyone's satisfaction, it does seem that the Department of State could take some steps to improve the education and training of all their diplomats. **IAJ**

Notes

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2 Robert V. Keeley, *First Line of Defense: Ambassadors, Embassies, and American Interests Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: American Academy of Diplomacy, 2000).

3 Ibid.

- 4 Martin F. Herz, ed., *The Modern Ambassador: The Challenge and the Search* (Georgetown University: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1983) p. 180.
- 5 Herz; Keeley; Hannah Gurman, *The Dissent Papers: The Voices Of Diplomats In The Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
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- 7 “Sample Letter of Instruction,” Department of State, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://careers.state.gov/survey/DOS%20Authorities/Content/HTMs/Documents/Sample%20Letter%20of%20Instruction.pdf>.
- 8 Keeley; Marc Grossman, “The State Department: Culture as Interagency Destiny.” *The National Security Enterprise: Navigating the Labyrinth*, eds. Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof. (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2011) p. 79-96; Gurman.
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- 12 Paul Bedard. 2010. “Obama Rewards Campaign Donors with Ambassador Jobs.” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 30, 2010.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ronald E. Neumann and Thomas R. Pickering. 2008. “American Academy of Diplomacy Urges Presidential Candidates to Support High Qualifications for Ambassadors”. June 26, 2008. http://www.academyofdiplomacy.org/media/AAD_Announces_Amb_Qualifications_6_2008.pdf (May 14, 2015).
- 15 Jeffrey Cohen, “On The Tenure Of Appointed Political Executives: The American Cabinet, 1952-1984.” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, no 3 (1986), p. 507-516; Hecló, p. 37-56; Neumann and Pickering; Gurman; Ralph Nader. 2013. “Militarizing the State Department.” *Counterpunch* (February 2013), p. 8-10. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/02/08/militarizing-the-state-department> (May 14, 2015).
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- 37 Ibid., p. 108.
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- 39 Gurman, p. 199.