

Send the envoy: Obama's diplomatic posse

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On his second full day in office, President Barack Obama made a symbolic commute from the White House to the State Department to emphasize the centrality of diplomacy to his administration's international approach. While there, he watched as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced the new special envoy for Middle East peace, former Senator George Mitchell, and the new special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke. A few days later, Todd Stern, a longtime adviser to President Bill Clinton, was appointed special envoy for climate change. Then, in late February, the academic and former diplomat Stephen Bosworth was appointed special representative for North Korea policy, and it was announced that career official Sung Kim would remain special envoy to the six-party talks. Meanwhile, Dennis Ross -- once mentioned as a possible special envoy for Iran -- has been given quasi-envoy status as special adviser for the Gulf and Southwest Asia, and Daniel Fried has been named special envoy for the closure of the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay.

As I described in an article¹ in *Foreign Affairs* in 2005, personal envoys are a recurring feature of U.S. foreign policy -- but Obama is resorting to them unusually early and often. The contrast is especially striking with the Bush administration, which had a prejudice against envoys that reflected President George W. Bush's general lack of interest in diplomacy and Secretary of State Colin Powell's fondness for administrative tidiness. Shortly after taking office, Powell abolished 23 envoy positions, including that of special Middle East coordinator - - Ross's old spot -- whose functions were moved back into the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. At the time, the State Department spokesman assured observers that the officials who "have toiled away in the vineyards and devoted time and energy to [the peace process] will be working on the issue in the regional bureau, so that the expertise is not being abolished or lost in any way." Few who tasted the new vintage, however, felt that it was an improvement on the old.

For this reason, Obama's envoy enthusiasm is refreshing. In particular, the Mitchell and Holbrooke appointments will build up America's diplomatic muscle and strengthen Obama's hand. They were, as I wrote, two of President Clinton's "most effective surrogates": Mitchell persuaded the hard men of Northern Ireland to sign the Good Friday Agreement; Holbrooke stared down Slobodan Milosevic and, through sheer force of will, struck the Dayton Accords. Their personal stature, when combined with the gravitas lent to them by their appointments, will enable them to speak authoritatively to foreign interlocutors. They may also be able to bring some coherence to Washington's response to transnational problems such as Arab-Israeli relations and the resurgence of the Taliban. And as with all successful special envoys, they are both well suited to the missions they have been given: Mitchell has the patience of Job; Holbrooke has the belligerence of Samson.

Some have speculated that the choice of such heavyweights reveals Obama's desire to leave these issues to others so that he can focus on the economy. I doubt it. History tells us that special envoys attract attention and create drama. Even if Obama wanted to stay away from such thorny foreign policy questions, these envoys would pull him back in.

Used prudently, special envoys create options for a president. They enable the most complicated issues to receive the high-level attention they deserve. As Secretary of State Clinton has noted, they also enable an administration to get off to a fast start. In light of the sclerotic confirmation process, the ability to appoint envoys without Senate approval is a significant advantage. (It can hardly be denied, however, that this is a constitutional work-around. Obama's envoys have more responsibility than most ambassadors, and they would be well advised to keep Congress fully apprised of their work.)

¹ Michael Fullilove, All the Presidents' Men, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2005.

Special envoys have achieved great things over the years, including the Louisiana Purchase, Lend-Lease, and peace in Northern Ireland. But such appointments are not made without cost, such as to the effectiveness and morale of the Foreign Service. The State Department papers in the National Archives are full of memoranda from slighted officials and ambassadors, including political appointees. For example, when Joseph Kennedy, the U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom, heard that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was dispatching personal envoys to London during World War II, he snorted that it was "the height of nonsense and a definite blow to good organization." Obama's posse of envoys may well strike a similar blow to the status of some of his assistant secretaries of state.

More importantly, the use of envoys can corrode the standing of the secretary of state. That possibility certainly exists in the current case, where several of the trickiest issues on Clinton's agenda have been subcontracted so early to such prominent individuals. Holbrooke's lines of authority are as straight as a bowl of spaghetti: his responsibilities extend far beyond State, and he reports to the president through the secretary of state (or, as he carefully calls her, his "immediate boss"). Like most successful diplomats, Holbrooke is drawn to power like an iron filing to a magnet, and he knows that ultimate power resides not on the seventh floor of the State Department but in the Oval Office. Clinton will have to assert her authority over the envoys -- and prevent the outbreak of turf wars among them, a problem that has bedeviled other practitioners of envoy diplomacy, including Roosevelt.

There are also factors working in the opposite direction, however. Clinton is not known to be a retiring character. She has the clout that comes with an independent power base and has long relationships with both Mitchell and Holbrooke. Obama has been notably respectful of Clinton's prerogatives since his election, and it would make no sense for him to allow his envoys to go around her. Furthermore, even if the presence of the envoys were to restrict Clinton's role on a handful of high-profile issues, that would still leave her to cover, well, the rest of the world -- including rising competitors, old alliances requiring tune-ups, and global shifts of power. That's more than enough for a legacy.

For the president, one key to using envoys effectively while preserving the dignity of both the department and the secretary of state is discipline. Special envoys should be used sparingly, on big issues, when the usual machinery is not up to the task and the right candidate is available. Obama should resist the temptation to appoint envoys as a way of elevating second-order issues to public prominence or appeasing domestic constituencies. President Clinton devalued the currency of special envoys by appointing too many of them. By the time he left the White House, there were more than 50 flapping around, including, for example, Jesse Jackson, the special envoy for the promotion of democracy in Africa -- hardly a notable Clinton foreign policy priority.

Interest groups will now start pressing Obama to appoint envoys for all their pet issues. But if Obama is as canny and deliberate as he appears to be, he will not waste special envoys on ordinary problems.

Perhaps we should not fret too much about these kinds of institutional arrangements. As one of Obama's appointees once told me: "An envoy is not an answer; it's an instrument. The important question is: What's the policy?" On Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Middle East peace process, Iran, climate change, and many other issues, that question remains. But when Obama answers it, he will find that special envoys can be very powerful instruments of his policy.

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