



PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

The Ambassador: Linchpin of Field Diplomacy

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In this age of fast, direct and open communications, and phenomenal interaction in every sphere of human activity, are U.S. ambassadors the equivalent of glorified post office boxes for passing messages to and from overseas capitals — convenient but not essential? Or are they unique catalysts for advancing U.S. interests and promoting peace, security and development in the world?



These perennial questions about the ambassador's role are acquiring even greater relevance in the new, dynamic, global environment. And they lie at the heart of the related debate over whether diplomacy remains a critical instrument of national power.

It is simplistic, if not dangerous, to suggest, as some critics do, that complex interstate relationships are mainly governed by power dynamics, like market forces under laissez-faire doctrine. To the contrary, interstate relations need to be nurtured, cultivated, developed and guided by skilled professionals. A knowledgeable chief of mission still represents a hugely valuable, low-cost asset, particularly with a strong team behind him or her.

If we aspire to continue to play a leadership role on the international stage, we cannot just depend on the autonomous workings of our soft and hard power. To give our policies direction, effective diplomacy remains an

essential ingredient.

Whether for the promotion of bilateral relations or for the protection of our interests in regional and international fora, ambassadors play a key role around the world. They are

best-placed to understand and evaluate the environment of their assignment, make sound recommendations and, within their mandates, to take initiatives.

In a bilateral context, an ambassador who understands the circumstances and culture of the host country, and who enjoys trust at home, can leverage our strengths more adroitly to promote relations or manage challenges in a difficult environment. In the wider regional and global dimensions characterized by contemporary trends of competition and cooperation, there is little room for the amateur to compete successfully.

It is true that our tradition draws heavily on political appointees to key ambassadorial posts, especially in missions where relations are fairly stable and there is a broad convergence of U.S. interests with those of the host countries. On average, more than 30 percent of U.S. ambassadorial appointments go to political figures, a figure that rises to nearly 80 percent for countries that are Group of 20 members.

This practice raises two questions. Do we truly believe that relations with these countries have little room for fur-

ther development that would require trained, qualified persons as heads of mission? And what is the impact of taking those positions off the table for Foreign Service professionals who entertain legitimate expectations of reaching the ambassadorial level?

Whatever the answers to those questions, it seems self-evident that the United States should select its best ambassadors, whether political or career. Such individuals should bring knowledge of the history, language, culture, politics and economics of the country to which they are accredited. They should also have the professional communications, negotiation, managerial and leadership skills required in any field.

Moreover, each administration should strive to ensure that the balance of ambassadorial appointments serves to strengthen our diplomatic service, not weaken it. After all, who besides the American public and taxpayer has the greatest stake in effective ambassadors? Is it not the president, who first and foremost should value the diplomatic and development services as a key tool to success in foreign policy?

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell frequently described U.S. ambassadors as his "field commanders." We must select our best people to play that role, recognizing the value of effective diplomacy and development to national security and to promotion of our interests overseas. ■