Choosing a Secretary of State

Since the Sunday talk shows have declared the 2016 presidential season to be on, it is not too early to consider the question of the next secretary of state. Why is this topic important to readers of this blog? Often it is a secretary of state rather than the president who is the lead official in pushing for Middle East peace, as with Secretary William P. Rogers under Nixon in 1969-70, Secretary Henry Kissinger under both Nixon and Ford in 1973-75, Secretary James Baker under George Bush in 1989 and 1991-92, and Secretary John Kerry under Obama in 2013-14. And even when a president is very involved like Carter or Clinton, the secretary serves as the point person in organizing the negotiations that culminate in a summit at Camp David or Shepherdstown.

In the early nineteenth century, the secretary of state rather than the vice president was considered likely to succeed the incumbent president. Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Q. Adams all served as secretary of state. Henry Clay served as John Q. Adams’s secretary of state but then was unable to get himself elected president. The tradition was temporarily revived by James Buchanan who served as secretary of state in the Polk administration before being elected president in 1856. If Hillary can win the election after her anticipated Democratic coronation, she could revive this old tradition.

Whom a president chooses as his secretary of state says a lot about his attitude towards foreign policy. If he (or she) chooses a nobody with little foreign policy experience, it could signal that the president has little interest in the subject and will be content to merely deal with unavoidable crises as they occur rather than shaping foreign policy. But if he chooses a nobody as secretary of state and an expert as his national security advisor, it could signal that he wants to run foreign policy from the White House as Nixon did with Henry Kissinger. If he chooses a rival presidential candidate as Obama did, or as Lincoln did, it could signal that he is insecure and wants to consolidate his power by disarming his rivals. In Lincoln’s case, because he was the first of his party elected president and he was facing a major constitutional crisis, he wanted the best minds representing all major factions of his party in his cabinet. His biggest rival, William Seward, became secretary of state. Obama, having won a very close primary race against Clinton, meant to disarm or co-opt her.

Presidents have three types of secretaries they can choose. First is a genuine foreign policy expert from the party’s stable of experts who rotate between academia and think tanks when their party is out of office and then serve in the Pentagon, the National Security Council or the State Department when their party is in office. Henry Kissinger, Madeleine Albright, and Condi Rice are all examples of this type. They have a deep understanding of international politics – superpower relations, arms control, etc., combined with an understanding of rival political systems such as that in the former Soviet Union and China
during the Cold War. The disadvantage is that they may not understand how
Washington works. Fortunately for Nixon and Ford, Kissinger was a master at
bureaucratic infighting.

The next type is a lawyer with a major law firm in a major city who becomes a
political insider. Examples of this type include: Dwight Eisenhower’s John
Foster Dulles, Jimmy Carter’s Cyrus Vance, and George H.W. Bush’s James A.
Baker. The advantage of this type is that they have knowledge of how domestic
politics works—at least in Western democracies—and they know how to
negotiate. The disadvantage is that sometimes they operate as if non-Western
politicians and systems function in the same way.

The third type is a professional politician, often lawyers by training, whose
knowledge of foreign affairs comes from having served for years on the foreign
affairs or foreign relations committee of the House or Senate or in the cabinet
of previous administrations. The best examples of this type are Secretary of
State John Kerry and former Secretary Hillary Clinton. Their advantage is that
they combine an understanding of foreign affairs with a very good knowledge of
American domestic politics. Their disadvantage is that they can often be seen
by the president as potential political rivals more than as trusted
subordinates. So the best choice from this group is someone who no longer has
presidential ambitions—a defeated nominee such as Kerry.

Whom a president chooses can also signal in which areas they would like to
concentrate in foreign policy. Is their choice an old Russia hand like
Kissinger, Albright, or Rice? Or is their choice knowledgeable about the Far
East like Richard Holbrooke, who was on Bill Clinton’s short list in 1996? Or
is he knowledgeable about the Middle East? Traditionally presidents in the Cold
War and post-Cold War periods have favored Europeanists with some background in
other regions (generally, the Middle East or Far East). Africanists and Latin
American specialists need not apply—Africa has not been considered important
since the South African transition to democracy, and Latin America has not been
considered important since the Central American guerrilla wars of the 1980s.
Most people who make it on to the short list for consideration as secretary of
state have the ability to quickly get up to speed on a new region. In this
vein, Susan Rice, not Kerry, was Obama’s first choice to replace Clinton until
she was derailed by the Benghazi affair.