

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

The U.S. Foreign Offices ^[1]

We often get reminders that a new Administration in Washington means new leadership at U.S. Embassies overseas. Within a year of taking office, an incoming President generally will have nominated (and the Senate approved) new Ambassadors for all major overseas postings. In many foreign government establishments, these appointments are highly anticipated events, more closely watched than any foreign envoy's arrival on Washington's Embassy Row.

What is sometimes overlooked, however, is how consequential these choices are for the work of U.S. image building. In many countries, the U.S. Ambassador is a ready-made spokesman for the U.S. and all things American. Absent a visit by the President himself or a major political figure from Washington, the U.S. Ambassador is the most authoritative voice for the United States on the local scene. Fluency in the local language and knowledge of the local culture are, above all, public diplomacy qualifications. When a freshly-minted U.S. envoy possesses these gifts, the capacity of that envoy's embassy (or mission) to conduct effective public diplomacy increases exponentially.

Yet too often the public diplomacy qualifications of an ambassadorial nomination get lost in the tussle over whether a job should go to a career officer or a political appointee. The reality is that sometimes a political appointee has more experience in the public arena and a greater talent for the public role that an Ambassador should play than otherwise well qualified career State Department officers.

Are the nominees selected so far by the Obama Administration gifted in the arts and practice of public diplomacy? Among the 30-some nominees put forward to date, there are clearly some potential winners. Louis Susman, nominee to the United Kingdom, draws attention as a former member (under Ronald Reagan) of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. Perhaps this will hold him in better stead now than when he was Vice Chairman of Citigroup. Charles Rivkin, Ambassador-designate to France, is another political appointee/businessman with a prominent public policy profile, a background in the entertainment industry, and whose father was political appointee Ambassador (under Kennedy and Johnson) to francophone Luxembourg and Senegal. Indicators, but not proof, of public diplomacy skills.

But the most promising nominee so far — at least in terms of public diplomacy gifts — may be Jon Huntsman, the Republican Governor of Utah nominated to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the PRC. Huntsman has lived in China, learned Mandarin, and he and his wife have an adopted child from China among their seven children. Apart from the political savvy displayed by Obama (and Huntsman) in engineering this move, this selection sends a positive, “human” message to the Chinese people that will be needed as the two countries face some difficult and contentious issues.

The nomination process can be a rocky one and the Obama Administration deserves credit

for avoiding any truly embarrassing gaffes so far. According to some press accounts, the selection for next U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See has been messy, with the Vatican objecting to Caroline Kennedy being named as a result of her pro-choice views. This is of less consequence than the reported miscues over the naming of a new ambassador to Baghdad, the U.S.' largest "foreign" office, in a war zone no less. Ambassador Chris Hill, the veteran career officer and negotiator for the U.S. with North Korea, was one of the first Obama nominees, confirmed by the Senate, and has been on the job for more than a month now. Reports of a conflict between Obama and Hillary Clinton over this choice have largely faded into the background. Hill's skills in the public arena are unquestioned — it is his reputation as negotiator that faces new scrutiny as North Korea abandons any pretense of observing the agreements he helped to work out.

Back to Obama, the nation's public diplomat par excellence. A few foreign non-Ambassadorial diplomats, posted on the U.S. West Coast, were gathered recently at San Francisco's Commonwealth Club to sound off on how their publics back home were reacting to the Obama presidency. You can log into an audio recording of this discussion here. According to the Egyptian diplomat who took part, the number of newborns in Egypt with the name Hussein tripled since Obama was elected. Not a traditional indicator of image-building success, and one that any U.S. envoy would be hard pressed to duplicate!

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