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AN AMBASSADORIAL QUOTA SYSTEM (S. 1886)

INTRODUCTION

Of all presidential appointments, ambassadorships are probably the most carefully scrutinized and widely criticized. The exalted title, the exotic social life of top diplomats, and the aura of elegance that surrounds the ambassadorial role supposedly make these appointments particularly attractive to well-heeled campaign contributors whose only qualifications are wealth and party loyalty. Although few ambassadorial positions are truly glamorous today, and although the percentage of non-career ambassadors has steadily diminished during the past thirty years, the career Foreign Service has maintained a steady drumbeat for a larger, guaranteed share of ambassadorial positions.

Senator Charles McC. Mathias, Jr. (R-MD) has long been an advocate of the Foreign Service view. Since 1974, he has initiated various legislative proposals to put a ceiling on the number of ambassadors the president may appoint from occupations outside the career ranks. His most recent effort in this regard, S. 1886, would amend the Foreign Service Act of 1980 by limiting political ambassadorial appointments to 15 percent of the total of such positions.

THE DEBATE

The case for a statutory limit on non-career ambassadorial appointments rests on two arguments: 1) that it would create additional opportunities for advancement within the Foreign Service, thus enhancing morale and incentive; and 2) that ambassadorial appointments from the career service are likely to be more highly qualified than non-career appointees.

It is argued that young, upcoming Foreign Service Officers become discouraged about their own chances of ever moving up in a Foreign Service that leaves so many senior officers idle at the State Department while the best diplomatic positions are filled by outsiders. The most capable middle and upper middle-grade FSOs, it is alleged, leave the service prematurely because political appointments leave no room at the top for careerists. That the oversupply of senior officers may stem from other causes is not addressed by proponents of S. 1886, nor do they indicate how many senior FSOs are underemployed or how many of them would be absorbed by the additional chief of mission positions S. 1886 would reserve for careerists. Simple arithmetic suggests, however, that the additional thirty or so slots this legislation might create would provide little relief if a surfeit of senior officers is indeed a problem.

The argument of the higher quality of career officers assumes that there is a professional component to the ambassadorial function that can best be acquired through years "spent in cross-cultural communication."¹ This component is never defined with any precision, although it is clear that it reflects the careerists' perception that an understanding of the interests and the modus operandi of other countries is more important to the conduct of foreign relations than an understanding of domestic issues that may pertain to international problems.

Even though they may concede that some of the most illustrious and competent ambassadors have been non-careerists, proponents of S. 1886 argue that a careerist, with years of exposure to foreign ways and foreign languages, is simply more "professional." Opponents of the measure argue that non-career appointees bring new ideas and approaches to the Foreign Service, which tends to be inbred and elitist, and that, in some instances, political appointees enjoy better access to the president, which enhances their influence with accrediting countries.

Underlying these two basic issues is a certain amount of pique over what many in the Foreign Service regard as an excessive number of appointments of "political" ambassadors by the present administration, interrupting, they claim, several years of steady progress toward a greater proportion of career appointments. The actual numbers, however, do not justify this concern. Of the ambassadorial posts now filled, 70 percent are held by career persons; 30 percent by non-career. The ratios have been similar for the last twenty years.

¹ Martin F. Herz, "Who Should Be An Ambassador?," Foreign Service Journal, January 1981.

THE ISSUE OF MORALE AND INCENTIVE

Foreign Service selection standards are probably more rigorous than those in most United States government services. Even their strongest critics concede that Foreign Service personnel are generally superior to the personnel of other departments and agencies. The small percentage of applicants eventually accepted through such a demanding selection procedure, therefore, have high expectations of their foreign service careers. Morale problems occur when these expectations are not fulfilled. It would be a gross exaggeration, however, to attribute such dissatisfaction to the presence of a handful of presidential appointees in top positions. Morale has long been a problem at all levels of the Foreign Service Officer Corps, and, as such, the subject of much study. But the basis of the problem is not easily defined. There can be little doubt, however, that the decline in influence of the Department of State and the Foreign Service over the actual conduct of foreign relations during the last thirty years has been an important factor. This decline has affected the substance of State Department work, diminishing its importance, and lessening its challenge. "Strong" Secretaries of State have managed to dominate major aspects of foreign affairs -- mainly those having strategic implications. But, in exercising their dominance, they typically have relied on a selected few confidants -- some from the career service, others not -- while keeping the main body of the State Department bureaucracy at arms length. And, in dealing with the myriad international problems, too technical or too obscure to warrant the Secretary's attention, State is frequently displaced by other departments and agencies who mistrust the State Department view. This is a harsh judgment, but one amply confirmed in the memoirs of national leaders from the Truman Administration through Nixon and Kissinger.

Efforts to overcome the endemic problem of morale have focused on bandaid strategies rather than on instituting a structure that would enhance State's substantive output and thereby its influence. Inducements to early retirement, upgrading positions, and other gimmicks have been introduced as a way of stepping up promotions. One result has been an unhealthy obsession with job titles that has diverted the energies of too many FSOs from the real purpose of their careers. Over the past thirty years, with no increase in total personnel, the number of office directors has increased from under 40 to over 150; the number holding the title of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State has increased from seven to over sixty; ambassadorships have been created where no ambassadorial function exists.

Ostensibly, this title inflation has been developed to enhance the State Department representative's authority in dealing with other departments and agencies involved in the foreign affairs process, as if title alone could compensate for lack of substantive influence. In practice, however, the quest for titles has come to substitute for the rewards of work to the point where Foreign Service Officers resist any assignment not

adorned with a title that exaggerates its importance. In a sense, this obsession with titles, and the State Department's willingness to pander to it, may be a major factor behind the persistent effort of the Foreign Service to capture a greater share of ambassadorial positions.

But increasing the number of career ambassadors could cause the morale problem to worsen. The turnover of many career ambassadorial appointments -- especially in the smaller, hardship posts -- is rapid. Because the system tries to give all deserving Foreign Service Officers a chance at the coveted title, those leaving one post cannot always be reassigned as ambassador at another. Comparable titles, thus, have to be created to avert the appearance of demotion. This practice has become one source of the surfeit of senior officers.

It has been suggested that following service as an ambassador, the career officer be automatically removed from the ranks. Such a change in the system would have the double effect of making the career appointee more responsive to political leadership and moderating the surplus of senior officers insofar as that problem arises out of a need to find substitute top jobs for reassigned career ambassadors.

THE ISSUE OF QUALITY

No evidence has ever been developed to establish that career ambassadors, as a group, are superior to non-career ambassadors. Criteria for such evaluations are difficult to construct. The careerists' claim to professionalism and their argument that career Foreign Service Officers are likely to outperform non-careerists stem from the FSO view of what constitutes competent conduct of relations. At one level, it must be conceded that those intimately involved in the operation know best. But the process of observing and dealing with other governments is only part of the foreign affairs mandate. Beyond the need to understand the policies of other governments lies the responsibility to the many businesses, unions, and other segments of U.S. society, whose interests are inextricably tied to events in other countries. The Foreign Service, however, devotes little time or attention to this side of the question.

Central to any analysis of this phenomenon is the incestuous nature of the Foreign Service personnel system. This elite corps of talented -- even brilliant -- men and women operates like an exclusive club, impervious to outside influence. Its system of selection, assignment, training, and promotion revolves around the subjective judgment of those who are already club members -- all closely monitored and scrutinized by the most senior members who manage the club. In service abroad, where relationships are understandably very close, even social behavior and personal habits enter into the composite of impressions that influence recommendations regarding an officer's career.

This is not an atmosphere where bold new ideas are readily accepted or where departures from a traditional mode of thinking can flourish. The pressure to conform is particularly significant when it comes down to the kind of knowledge and talent thought to be suitable in a promising Foreign Service Officer. Knowledge of obscure happenings in obscure countries is valued highly; events of greater importance in the United States are hardly considered. Members of this elite club may sneer at outsiders who cannot name the President of Zimbabwe while they, themselves, may be ignorant of the developments at International Harvester or Firestone and their implications for U.S. relations with important trading partners.

New ideas and, above all, reminders that all America has interests that extend beyond U.S. borders can come to this organization, as now structured, only through infusions of new personnel. With few exceptions, entry into the Foreign Service Officer Corps can occur only at the very bottom or at the very top. Those entering at the bottom quickly learn the virtues of conformity. Only those entering at the top can hope to infect the organization with some sense of the opinions and concerns of the entire nation and some willingness to accommodate the management of foreign policy to those opinions and concerns.

Non-career appointments to ambassadorial positions obviously are needed and can serve an important purpose. Anecdotes that focus on the incompetence of the non-careerist make for good copy in the press, but the career service, too, has produced inept and even embarrassing ambassadors. Tales of their ineptitude rarely escape the confines of the club. Criticisms of the non-careerist will almost inevitably be harsher, because he may bring to the institution an approach totally at variance with the traditional foreign service viewpoint. Innovations always run a greater risk of criticism and ridicule than safe, conventional ideas that deviate little from the established path.

THE ISSUE OF NUMBERS VS. STANDARDS

President Reagan has appointed eighty ambassadors since his inauguration; forty-seven (59 percent) from the career service and thirty-three (40 percent) non-career. However, thirty-four ambassadorial posts have been left unchanged, and thirty-three of these are filled by career personnel. Since all ambassadors are obliged to submit their resignations when a new president takes office, there is no reason to consider those ambassadors who have been retained nearly eighteen months after the Reagan inauguration any differently than new appointees. The significant figures, therefore, are those that reflect the breakdown of career and non-career ambassadors now on the rolls: 70 percent career and 30 percent non-career. This is the same ratio that prevailed at the midpoint of the Ford Administration. At the end of the Carter Administration, one that gave heavy publicity to its interest in appointing careerists, the ratio was 71 percent to 29 percent.

The appointment process should not be judged only in terms of numbers, however. In a conceptual sense, it is possible to construct as strong a case for non-career ambassadors as for careerists. But there are no standards for judging the performance of past or present incumbents, and it is generally agreed that such standards are needed, Ambassador Carol Laise, former career officer and Director General of the Foreign Service, argued before the subcommittee hearings on the Mathias bill that there already exists "a very systematic process by which the Department identifies, assesses, and selects career officers for nomination by the President....But, there is no comparably rigorous process today, nor has there ever really been in the past, for a review of appointments of non-professional people." This "systematic process" that applies to career appointees is nowhere defined for the public or even the FSO. The fact is that even career ambassadorial appointments are made on a highly subjective basis by a handful of people. The so-called "old-boy" network plays an important role in this personnel system where personal loyalties run strong and judgments are influenced by friendships and personal relationships that tend to become very close in the club-like atmosphere of foreign service life.

Most observers, including many careerists, would agree that the same objective standards should apply to the appointments of both career and non-career personnel. Former career ambassadors testifying on S. 1886 suggested a review committee similar to that employed by the American Bar Association in recommending appointments to the judiciary. Application of such a technique to ambassadorial appointments, however, would imply that the judgment of the foreign affairs community be paramount. A broader group might serve the purpose better. Its make-up should reflect the changes in the content of foreign relations in recent years -- changes that make it impossible to segregate issues as purely foreign or domestic. The rush of new technology, the ease with which factors of production can be moved from one part of the world to another, the speed with which financial markets can respond to events in other countries, and a new division of labor on an international basis have all combined to integrate activities between nations on functional lines not easily separated by national borders. This situation has brought a new complexity to government-to-government dealings, which demands foreign service talents drawn from a broader -- not narrower -- professional background.

CONCLUSION

There is little evidence to support the contention that securing 85 percent of chief of mission positions for the career Foreign Service (as per S. 1886) would either enhance FSO morale or improve the quality of ambassadorial appointments. Sagging morale is more likely attributable to a decline in the State Department influence relative to other departments involved in foreign affairs. Offering the professional Foreign Service still

more titles is unlikely to satisfy the desire for challenge that characterizes this select group of talented men and women.

As for the issue of quality, criteria by which ambassadorial qualifications can be judged have never been defined. This proposal employs the careerist's standard that an ambassador is judged by his experience with foreign cultures and languages. Another view holds that ambassadors should also have a thorough understanding of domestic issues and their increasing international implications. Moreover, the arbitrary restrictions of S. 1886 on the President's authority to appoint non-career ambassadors would deprive the Foreign Service of a major source of fresh ideas. Far from being beneficial to the interests of the professional Foreign Service, such a measure could cause it to become more inbred and more rigid in outlook with the result that the decline of its influence in the foreign affairs process would be accelerated.

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