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Diplomacy and Patronage
Diplomacy especially attracts presidential cronies, and those that buy their ambassadorships

American Ambassadors:
The Past, Present, and Future of America's Diplomats
Dennis C Jett
(Pages 283 + xiv, price not indicated)

The US is the only major country that routinely sends non-professional diplomats as ambassadors, around 30% of the total; some are distinguished public figures, often from Washington DC's revolving door ecosystem, in which many politicians, lawyers and others are appointed to all federal agencies. Diplomacy especially attracts presidential cronies, and those that buy their ambassadorships. This practice is emulated especially across Latin America, as also Africa, less so in Asia and Europe.

This book begins with a horror story: on assignment to Argentine in 1973, six weeks after joining the US Foreign Service, the author witnesses the gulf between high public reputation of a political appointee, Ambassador John D Lodge, and the reality of his dismal performance. That envoy was interested only in hosting social evenings that ended with his Broadway songs, plus publicity in the local press, at a time when a new regime wanted to reconnect with the US. In the ingrained US political appointments system, scathing adverse reports did not block him from going on as ambassador to Switzerland. 'Although an explicit quid pro quo is illegal, this tradition continues and is a form of corruption', only slightly less thinly veiled than in the Nixon days when his personal lawyer went to jail for selling ambassadorships (p. 9).

The first US envoys sent abroad were revolutionary leaders, carrying the rank of 'minister'; the title of ambassador was then seen as royalist (the first 'ambassador' was sent in 1893, to London). Benjamin Franklin in Paris in 1776 played a decisive role in mobilizing critical French support for the fragile new republic. A professional foreign service gradually emerged at the end of the 19th century; by 1950 emerged the 30:70 ratio that has since endured, between political and professional appointees (that ratio is reversed for West Europe and the Caribbean, where 72% of the appointees are political, while not a single politico has served in Central Asia). And the Foreign Service Act of 1980 specifies that the president should 'normally' appoint Foreign Service officers as ambassadors!

The author meticulously tracks these two routes to ambassador appointments. State Department officials are selected by the special 'D Committee', and typically have at least 20 years of service. The other route is via the White House 'Office of Presidential Personnel', and 'requires a person to have a political, economic or personal relationship to the president' (p. 33). Before taking office in 1981, Reagan agreed at the behest of a close friend to send a businessman to the plum post of London; that ambassador served for two years, and was 'generally judged somewhere between invisible and ineffective', at the critical time of the Falkland War (p. 64-5).

In a situation that has no parallel in any foreign ministry, of the 33 top leadership posts in the State Department (deputy, under, and assistant secretaries), in 2012 professional diplomats held only 24% – the rest were 'transient' political appointees; in 1975 that figure had been 61%. The picture among the next 35 senior appointments (special envoys, representatives, directors and coordinators) was even worse.

The internal clearance process is now rigorous, and now includes a 63-point questionnaire (reproduced in an appendix). Once cleared, the nomination goes to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; its chairman can delay a confirmation hearing at will, and other senators can also place a 'hold'; it is through such delay that rejection takes place. The process is especially hard on political appointees, but career officials can also face flack. A delay of several months is the norm, in this Committee and the Senate where the final vote takes place.

It is the final chapter the author only offers a mild set of ideas, premised on acceptance of the patronage system. After digressing into definitions of globalization, the nature of 'American exceptionalism' and the 34 international treaties signed by the US and were pending ratification in 2014, small improvements are suggested. Endorsing the openness showed by President Obama, the author calls for greater transparency to identify major financial donors. While awaiting confirmation, nominees could learn the language of the assignment country at Washington's Foreign Service Institute, aiming a 3/3 level in speaking and reading, on a scale of 5. The author stresses: long confirmation delays produce damage to national security and waste.

National systems exist in their own frameworks, logical or otherwise. Given that both politics and diplomacy are the art of the possible, what matters is incremental change to improve a long-embedded system. The book helps to communicate that, also showing that better ways are available.

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