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All the presidents' men: special envoys in US foreign policy

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In its first term, the Bush Administration was down on diplomacy. It withdrew from multilateral agreements that the United States had helped advance and undermined institutions that the United States had helped build. It marketed Libya's renunciation of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction as the fruit of the neoconservative vine, rather than as the result of dogged diplomacy. Its temper was unilateralist; the utility of force was rarely questioned.

Since President Bush's impressive re-election, however, diplomacy has become the comeback concept. The president's fairly bellicose inaugural address was followed by a far more conciliatory state of the union. Key foreign policy appointments have reassured foreign governments, with highly regarded Republican internationalists slotted into senior jobs in the State Department. In her confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that 'the time for diplomacy is now'. The recent trips by both Rice and Bush to continental Europe, once the locus of opposition to the Administration, looked like love-ins (with the Iraqi voters playing the role of Cupid).

If diplomacy does indeed make a return this term, one hopes that it includes the judicious use of an old-fashioned American institution: the special diplomatic envoy. Most US presidents have been partial to personal envoys. In the twentieth century, for example, Woodrow Wilson made the Texan politico Colonel Edward House his representative-at-large; John Kennedy used his brother Robert to flash the family smile around the world and communicate privately with Moscow; George H.W. Bush tapped Richard Armitage for various sensitive tasks; Bill Clinton used Richard Holbrooke to muscle up to Slobodan Milosevic and Senator George Mitchell to coax the hard men of Northern Ireland to sign the Good Friday Agreement.

The most enthusiastic practitioner of envoy diplomacy of all, however, was Franklin Roosevelt, whose stable of emissaries included friends, allies, political cronies and even opponents. Roosevelt's favourite envoy was the former social worker Harry Hopkins who, through his wartime missions to the UK and the Soviet Union, helped set the template for Anglo-American collaboration and establish the triangular relationship between the Big Three.

Early on, the Bush Administration set its face against the special envoy, abolishing many of the positions inherited from President Clinton and creating few new ones. To the new team, the deployment of outsiders spoke of weakness and ad hockery: this was no way for grownups to govern. The CEO president preferred clear reporting lines and administrative tidiness. In so doing, however, Washington ignored a powerful diplomatic instrument that has served the United States well in the past.

Personal envoys have advantages over resident diplomats in acting as surrogates for their head of government. They are able to speak more candidly and negotiate with fuller presidential authority, and information may also be more forthcoming to them. Assignments such as the mediation of regional conflicts can be too sensitive politically to be delegated to regular diplomats but too complex and taxing to be conducted by the president or secretary of state in person.

They also have strengths in the area of public diplomacy, where their status as personal representatives of the president lends them special gravitas and visibility. One example of such symbolic diplomacy occurred in 1940 when Roosevelt asked his recent opponent, the Republican Wendell Willkie, to deliver a morale-boosting message to Winston Churchill and the British people, quoting Longfellow's bracing verse: 'Sail on, O Ship of State! Sail on, O Union, strong and great! Humanity with all its fears, With all the hopes of future years, Is hanging breathless on thy fate!'

Resort to personal envoys trespasses, however, on the sacred turf of the State Department. Experts and career diplomats are often critical of the practice, arguing that international relations is a complex business that should not be left to outsiders and dilettantes. Their opposition is not driven entirely by diplomatic freemasonry. The institution of the special emissary has the faults of its qualities: envoys can lack specialist knowledge; the publicity attending their visits can arouse excessive expectations; and operating through personal agents can demoralise the regular elements of the diplomatic service.

That said, while special envoys are no substitute for a professional diplomatic corps, they can be a useful complement. The trick is to minimise the disadvantages of using them without blunting their edge. Were Bush to revive the sleeping envoy, he should keep four guidelines in mind. First, special representatives should be used sparingly. Second, they should be employed on substantive missions, not to appease sectional constituencies. Third, only people with appropriate qualifications should receive assignments. Finally, the aims of the mission should be well defined, the envoy's powers clearly established and, to the extent possible, the rest of the foreign policy kept in the loop.

As it happens, we have already seen an example of a special mission since the election: President Bush's deft move in drafting his brother Jeb to visit the countries hit by the Boxing Day tsunami. Through the appointment, the president was able to telegraph his personal commitment to aiding the recovery of the Indian Ocean region.

Having taken this first step, President Bush should now continue up the path of administrative innovation. The outside assistance could be of great benefit to America as it moves to re-engage with the world.

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