

America's amateur ambassadors

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ALBANY, New York A simple but important lesson the U.S. government should have learned from Hurricane Katrina is that competence and qualifications matter. Directing relief efforts after a natural disaster, running a central bank, commanding an aircraft carrier - these are not endeavors for amateurs. The same ought to apply to the challenge of leading a diplomatic mission.

Despite the complexity and demands of the job, however, political appointees have run a third of America's embassies since the days of the Kennedy administration.

For sure, over the years, many of these appointees have been eminently qualified to serve by their status as foreign policy experts, elder statesmen or military leaders. But most political appointees lack the experience to be effective ambassadors.

Currently, 49 of the 171 ambassadors, or 28 percent, are political appointees, with a variety of backgrounds. Only 18 of President George W. Bush's 49 political appointees, or 36 percent, appear to have the expertise, background, or "political juice" that would make them exceptionally qualified to serve.

In NATO capitals, pressing bilateral and multilateral issues come to a head on a regular basis; EU-Iran nuclear negotiations, tensions between Russia and other Group of 8 members, and issues related to terrorism - coalition building, intelligence sharing and proliferation. There is no half-stepping in these missions; no time for the boss to "get up to speed."

America's NATO allies usually send the cream of their diplomatic service to Washington. But only six of America's 26 ambassadors in NATO capitals are career Foreign Service officers. Among the 20 political appointees, only five appear to be reasonably well-qualified.

This glaring disparity might suggest some problems with regard to America's selection criteria. This is not the case. The law is clear, but presidents frequently ignore it and the Senate rarely enforces it.

The Foreign Service Act of 1980 stipulates the following regarding ambassadorial appointments: (1) The individual should possess clearly demonstrated competence to perform the duties of a chief of mission, including, to the maximum extent practicable, a useful knowledge of the principal language or dialect of the country ... and knowledge and understanding of the history, the culture, the economic and political institutions, and the interests of that country; (2) positions as chief of mission should normally be accorded to career members of the Service, though circumstance will warrant appointments from time to time of qualified individuals who are not career members of the Service; (3) contributions to political campaigns should not be a factor in the appointment of an individual as a chief of mission.

In fact, however, campaign fund-raising seems very much to be a factor in these appointments. Twenty-seven of Bush's 49 appointed ambassadors are Bush "Pioneers" - campaigners who raised at least \$100,000. (Some ambassadors have the chutzpah to highlight their fund-raising activities in their State Department biographies.) Only three of these 27 fund-raisers appear to be qualified to serve as ambassadors.

The complexities of the post-9/11 global environment, the intrinsic demands of diplomacy, the lessons of Katrina and the government's demonstrated inability to follow the spirit of the laws that it has passed, all argue for an amendment to the Foreign Service Act that would limit the number of noncareer appointments. Al Gore, while he served in the Senate, proposed such a cap; 15 percent, or 26 ambassadorships.

This week, the Pew Research Center released the results of an opinion poll showing that the image of the United States in the rest of the world is continuing to decline. Repairing ruptured alliances, restoring America's international standing, and expanding its circle of friends has to be done one nation at a time.

The practice of appointing unqualified individuals as U.S. ambassadors does more than demoralize dedicated and talented Foreign Service professionals. At a time when the United States find itself diplomatically isolated, the practice hinders efforts to project U.S. power abroad to confront threats that require a cooperative approach to defeat; it sends the wrong signal to friends and allies, and it fails to contribute to value- added diplomatic reporting and insightful policy recommendations from U.S. missions.

In short, the practice does not serve in the interests of U.S. national security, and therefore, it should cease.

Thomas Raleigh is a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who served as an army attaché in Moscow and as a military adviser in Vienna to the U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.