

Nat'l Security Shuffle

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 6, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

President Obama reshuffled his national security team yesterday, announcing Susan Rice would take over from departing National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, and that Samantha Power would replace Rice as ambassador to the United Nations. What do the changes mean?

In Donilon, President Obama had as his closest foreign policy adviser a man who was perfectly suited to one of the most essential, and least headline-grabbing, tasks that faced the president: Conducting in-depth, bottom-up reviews of U.S. policy. Critics charged the policy reviews were ponderous. They certainly angered some entrenched interests who thought the effort was a waste of time. But, the fact is that in contemplating how to proceed in Afghanistan, early in his first term, it became obvious to the president that those same entrenched interests, and the bureaucracies that embodied them, had concluded that there was no need to re-examine their premises, and they had become a little too formulaic in presenting their case for this or that action.

Donilon, who got his start in politics as Jimmy Carter's delegate counter at the 1980 Democratic National Convention ? a convention at which counting delegates was critical ? was perfectly suited by temperament and training for the arduous task of reviewing policy. Among the more important yields was the conclusion that the U.S. was paying insufficient attention to the rise of Asia and the advocacy of steps to redress the imbalance, including the upcoming summit between President Obama and Chinese president Xi Jinping on Friday in California. Donilon also played a pivotal role coordinating the various voices that often held starkly divergent ideas about how the U.S. should move forward in Afghanistan, react to the rebellion in Libya and, more recently, cope with the civil war in Syria. Being National Security Adviser means you probably never turn off your brain, there is always some new crisis at hand, and Donilon can hold his head high as he leaves for a well-earned rest. Still a young man, I suspect he will be brought back in a future administration to serve as Secretary of State or White House Chief of Staff. Full Disclosure: Donilon was a professor of mine at Catholic University in 1981, and we used to see each other with some regularity when he swung by Kramerbooks, where he always left with plenty of reading material.

Samantha Power is one of the authors whose books Donilon purchased. Her magisterial ?Problem from Hell,? won a well deserved Pulitzer Prize for Power. In that work, she detailed the successes and failures, and there were more failures than successes, in the U.S. response to genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda. More Full Disclosure: It was during the Bosnian wars that I first met Power and we have remained friends. I am not revealing any secret in saying that she has the rare combination of a deep commitment to ideals as well as a clear-eyed ability to analyze the moral and strategic difficulties of the kind of complicated situations the world presents to U.S. policymakers. These twin qualities are apparent on every page of her two books.

Foremost among the ideals Power has championed is human rights. The Obama White House has not really been very vocal on this issue in the past four years. We do not hear much about the rights of women in Afghanistan, it just gets buried under the desire to get U.S. troops out, an understandable desire, but one that may lead to some very horrific consequences. Power understands the connection between democracy promotion

and human rights better than most Democrats, one reason Sen. John McCain was quick to praise her nomination. Conversely, unlike some rah-rah conservative jingoists, Power has been unflinching in her demand that America own up to its own misdeeds in the past and learn from them.

Susan Rice is a bit more of an enigma to me. She was treated very shabbily by Senate Republicans last year when she was being considered for the post of Secretary of State. Unlike Donilon, who has always had the mien of an older, more seasoned and more smooth than his age, Rice is known for a combative personality. It remains to be seen how that personality will fit with one of the National Security Adviser's key tasks of coordinating the security agencies. But, Rice joined Power in advocating for robust U.S. action in Libya and, again like Power, she grasps that it is not only the use of force that creates problems but, sometimes, as in Rwanda, the reluctance to use force that makes a problem worse.

It will be especially interesting to see how the new appointees deal with the touchy, and vital, issue of religious liberty. In areas like the Middle East and Southeast Asia and China and Nigeria, the absence of religious liberty only exacerbates ideological and tribal tensions. Religious institutions can play a vital role in establishing cultures that respect human rights, without equating human rights with a policy agenda more commonly found on the Upper West Side than in the Horn of Africa. There is a kind of "values colonialism" that is just as repugnant today as its political predecessor was in previous centuries, and religious institutions can help navigate the divide.

So, all in all, a sad departure to a man who has served the president and the nation well and a thumbs up on the new appointments. Not a bad day for a president who has not had a good day in some time.

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