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President-elect Barack Obama formally unveils his national-security team today: with Defense Secretary Robert Gates remaining at the Pentagon, former rival Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton now nominated for Foggy Bottom and retired-Marine Commandant James Jones as national-security adviser. Meanwhile, his campaign foreign-policy adviser, Susan Rice, will take up the post of U.S. ambassador to the United Nations—and will be given cabinet rank. And we should not forget that the vice president-elect, Joe Biden, is also effectively a member of the foreign-policy team.

Yet, it is hard to imagine this diverse collection of individuals (and their respective staffs) forming an integrated, seamless national-security apparatus. What is going to happen at a meeting, for instance, where Susan Rice's advocacy of armed intervention to stop civilian deaths (e.g. in a place like Darfur) runs up against Bob Gates' pronouncement that not every tragedy around the world merits a U.S. military response?

This, of course, raises two disturbing possibilities. One is that the Obama administration will become paralyzed on foreign affairs, with infighting reminiscent of the famed split during President Carter's tenure between then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. The other is that different parts of the policy establishment will seek to become independent actors in foreign and defense policy—à la Bill Casey as CIA director during the Reagan Administration. And it is not yet apparent whether Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel—or Emmanuel's deputy with foreign-policy experience, Mona Sutphen—are going to be empowered to coordinate all aspects of foreign and security policy on behalf of the White House. Given the strong personalities which the president-elect has chosen, it seems unlikely that they would meekly submit to the direction of the chief of staff.

But perhaps Obama's logic in going with the so-called "team of rivals" approach is based on a different interpretation of the cabinet. Former-Labor Secretary Robert Reich, in his account of

Carter's Heir?

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the Clinton administration, once redefined the entire cabinet not in terms of their nominal functions but in light of which constituencies they represented and which specific tasks they fulfilled on behalf of the president. One can see something similar in these appointments.

Robert Gates is the “cleanup crew,” the one in charge of winding down the Iraq war and putting the Afghan house in order. (In political terms, he also provides cover for the president from his critics—by providing the continuity with the past administration). Joe Biden is the president’s liaison to the foreign-affairs apparatus in Congress and the one who can argue to key Democratic members why they can’t afford to undermine the new president in the eyes of the world. General Jones represents Obama’s outreach to the military, with assurances that he not only won’t be disarming America anytime soon but also that the advice and perspectives of the uniformed services—perhaps overly discounted in the outgoing administration—will receive a fair and respectful hearing. Clinton and Rice, each in their own arenas, are charged with winning support from friends and allies—not token “coalition of the willing support” but serious, James Baker-style assistance.

This approach can work, but two things are required. First, the president himself must be able to provide clear guidance for the type of world he wants to achieve and what he’s willing to pay to get it. He has to effectively communicate his wishes. The second is that the people he’s selected must be willing to carry out what he has requested—and that will also mean staying out of other people’s lanes.

It’s a gamble. If it works, Obama becomes the new FDR (who also successfully pulled off the “team of rivals” gambit in foreign affairs). If it fails, Obama becomes the political heir of Jimmy Carter. Either way, the meetings of the National Security Council should be interesting!

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