

United States

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama

Launching Hillary at the world

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The surprising idea that Hillary Clinton could become Barack Obama's secretary of state



IN THE absence of fact, rumour will dominate: and the latest exciting rumour to emerge from Chicago, where Barack Obama's transition team is headquartered, and Washington, DC, where the political pundits live, is that Hillary Clinton is going to be the new president's secretary of state. "Sources" claim this, though all that is known for sure is that Mrs Clinton visited her former adversary last week; and, of course, that the job has not yet been given to anyone else.

To outsiders, used to administrations in other countries changing top-to-bottom the day after an election, that Mr Obama has made no cabinet appointments a full two weeks after his election might seem sluggish. In fact, he is moving quite fast. He has already named his White House chief of staff, an important position, as well as his press secretary and his chief counsel, and has been filling in some of their deputies and assistants as well. This is quite a bit faster than his recent predecessors managed.

Still, the two most important appointments remain shrouded in mystery. No one yet knows the identity of either the next secretary of state or the next treasury secretary, probably the more significant job of the two at a time when the economy is reeling. But the speculation that the job at State is earmarked for Mrs Clinton is fascinating, the more so since no one from the Obama camp has so far shot it down. It is also rather baffling. Mr Obama

has impressed many foreign-policy experts with his keen interest in and aptitude for their subject: and with America bogged down in two wars and facing rising challenges from a prickly Russia, a volatile Middle East and a rising China, a fresh and creative approach to foreign affairs is sorely needed.

But if he gives the job to Mrs Clinton, he would be ceding a large measure of influence over the reconstruction of America's reputation abroad to a former, and perhaps even future, rival who he could find hard to control. "Never appoint someone you can't sack", commented one old hand this week: and Mrs Clinton would be almost unsackable, thanks to her huge popularity among a large section of the Democratic Party and the status as an ex-president of her husband.

Her appointment would also marginalise Mr Obama's vice-president, Joe Biden, who, as the outgoing head of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, had been expected to play a big role in foreign policy. A secretary of state of somewhat less personal political stature, a Bill Richardson, perhaps, or even a Republican such as Richard Lugar, would have allowed the new president to maintain the primacy of his White House over foreign affairs. It is all too easy to imagine Mr Obama and Mrs Clinton disagreeing messily. Bill Clinton's complex web of business dealings (he has raised large sums of money from foreign companies and governments, both as a speaker and in order to fund his foundation) is also a potential complication.

There are of course positives at play as well. Mrs Clinton is highly intelligent, formidably hard-working and, though not exactly a foreign-policy expert, knows many world leaders. She has also been involved with foreign-related issues thanks to her position, since 2003, on the Senate's Armed Services Committee. If she could subordinate her ambition to the service of her new president and her country, then she could make a fine secretary of state. But the chances are that she would not be an easy one for Mr Obama and whoever he appoints as his National Security Adviser to manage.