OPINION

It’s no scandal for Trump to have agreeable envoys

Elected president makes policy and appoints ambassadors to carry that out; it’s not difficult to grasp

Ambassador Gordon Sondland, who was U.S. ambassador to the European Union in the first Trump administration, says the Constitution makes it the president’s job to determine foreign policy. (2019 File Photo/The Associated Press)

By GORDON SONDLAND

For years now, a familiar outrage cycle has played on repeat: Donald Trump wants ambassadors who agree with him. Cable news panels gasp. Editorial boards clutch pearls. Former officials warn darkly of “politicization.” Anonymous diplomats lament the decline of “norms.”

And once again, the American public is fed the notion that something is fundamentally improper — if not outright dangerous — about a president insisting that his ambassadors carry out his foreign policy.

This fixation is not only misplaced but also reflects a profound misunderstanding — willful or otherwise — of how democratic governance, constitutional authority and diplomacy are actually supposed to work.

Let's start with first principles, because the media often doesn't. Under the U.S. Constitution, foreign policy is not made by the State Department, the Foreign Service or a permanent bureaucratic class. The elected president of the United States makes it. Full stop. Article II vests the executive power in the president, makes him commander in chief and assigns him the authority to conduct diplomacy, appoint ambassadors and receive foreign ministers. The Senate may advise and consent. Career professionals may advise. But they do not decide.

Ambassadors, by design, are not meant to be neutral technocrats or free-floating moral actors. They are the president's personal representatives abroad. Their job is not to express the consensus view of Foggy Bottom, nor to subtly resist an administration they disagree with, nor to preserve continuity for continuity's sake. Their job is to advance the policies of the president who appointed them — whether those policies are popular in Washington salons or not.

And yet much of the media treats Trump's insistence on this fundamental reality as some unprecedented affront to democracy rather than its logical expression.

What's really going on here is less about Trump and more about power — specifically, who wields it.

The system

For decades, a particular worldview has dominated elite foreign policy circles: that America's role in the world is best managed by a professionalized, transnationally minded cadre of diplomats and policy experts who see themselves as custodians of a rules-based order that transcends electoral cycles. In this view, elections matter — but only within limits. Voters can choose the tone, perhaps the rhetoric, maybe the pace. But the fundamentals? Those belong to the system.

Trump shattered that illusion, not by being subtle but by being blunt.

He openly rejected the idea that the State Department "owns" foreign policy. He challenged alliances, trade arrangements, multilateral institutions and assumptions that had long gone unquestioned. And crucially, he expected his ambassadors to do something radical: agree with him.

The horror.

What the media often frames as "loyalty tests" or "litmus tests" is, in reality, the most normal thing in the world. Every president — Democrat or Republican — appoints ambassadors who broadly share the same worldview. Barack Obama did not appoint climate-skeptic ambassadors to negotiate the Paris agreement. George W. Bush did not send anti-NATO representatives to Brussels. John F. Kennedy did not staff embassies with officials who believed detente was naive.

The difference is that Trump was explicit, and his foreign policy priorities ran counter to entrenched bureaucratic preferences.

Many career Foreign Service officers are talented, patriotic and essential to the functioning of American diplomacy. But let's be honest: As an institution, the modern State Department leans heavily toward a particular ideological and policy consensus — internationalist, multilateral, skeptical of nationalism and deeply resistant to disruption. That doesn't make it illegitimate. It makes it human. Bureaucracies, like people, develop beliefs, incentives and self-preserving instincts.

The problem arises when those instincts are treated as sacrosanct and when disagreement from an elected president is portrayed as heresy.

Too often, media coverage implicitly endorses the idea that "real" foreign policy is what the professionals think it should be — and that presidents are merely temporary stewards who ought not deviate too far from the script. When Trump appoints ambassadors who reject that script, the coverage is breathless and accusatory. When previous presidents did the same within the accepted ideological range, it was called leadership.

This double standard matters because it erodes democratic accountability.

'Policy drift by attrition'

If voters elect a president on a promise to renegotiate trade deals, pressure allies to contribute more to defense, confront China more aggressively or recalibrate relations with international institutions, it is not only appropriate, but it is necessary that ambassadors reflect those priorities. Otherwise, elections become performative exercises with little real consequence.

The media's preferred alternative — an ambassador corps insulated from presidential direction — is not a safeguard against authoritarianism. It is a recipe for a soft bureaucratic veto in which unelected officials can slow-roll, dilute or quietly undermine policies they dislike while claiming to defend "norms."

That is not checks and balances. That is policy drift by attrition.

Ironically, many of the same commentators who decry Trump's approach celebrate it when applied elsewhere. European parliamentary systems openly expect diplomats to reflect the governing coalition's agenda. Political appointments are routine. Alignment is assumed. Only in Washington has the idea taken hold that a permanent foreign policy priesthood should stand above politics — and occasionally above voters.

There is also a whiff of cultural disdain in the coverage: a belief that Trump's instincts — and by extension, the instincts of the voters who elected him — are inherently unsophisticated, dangerous or unfit for global stewardship. Better, then, to rely on seasoned professionals who "know how the world works."

But democracy is not a seminar. It is a system built on consent, accountability and the right of citizens to choose leaders who make consequential decisions — even if those decisions make elites uncomfortable.

None of this is to say ambassadors should be unqualified, reckless or blind loyalists. Competence matters. Experience matters. Judgment matters. But alignment matters, too. An ambassador who fundamentally disagrees with the president's objectives is not a check on power but a contradiction in terms.

The media would serve the public far better by asking harder, more honest questions: Are these policies working? Do they advance U.S. interests? Are allies responding? Are adversaries deterred? Instead, we get process outrage masquerading as principle.

In the end, the real story isn't that Trump wants ambassadors who agree with him. The real story is that parts of the media — and the bureaucracy they reflexively defend — are still struggling to accept a fundamental democratic truth: Foreign policy is not made by the State Department. It is made by the president whom the American people elect.

Everything else is commentary.

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