

# Madame Secretary: Old Wine in a New Bottle

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*by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young*

Why did she do it? Why did Hillary Clinton agree to become secretary of state in an Obama administration? Many believe it effectively ends any presidential aspirations she may have, locks her into a thankless bureaucratic role, and ultimately shunts her toward obscurity in an administration likely to focus on domestic issues and the economy.

Equally important, it forces her to give up an independent political voice as a high profile U.S. Senator and tethers her to Obama's fate and fortune. Has she exchanged the role of presidential comer for the role of political goner?

This perhaps harsh view is held by many political watchers shocked at Hillary's decision to join the Obama cabinet. They believe she is preparing to totter off the national political stage at the end of four years or so and enter a well-earned retirement along with her already "well-retired husband." Former secretaries of state often carry illustrious names with them into retirement. In the modern era these have included names like Kissinger, Dulles, and Marshall but almost never do they entertain presidential candidacies.

Even the hard driven William Jennings Bryan, three-time nominee of his party, never tested national politics again after serving as Wilson's secretary of state. More recently the only ex-secretary of state to try presidential politics was Alexander Haig, who ran a short, failed campaign in 1988. Former secretaries of state have accomplished many things, but none of them in modern times has included a successful presidential nomination.

But that has not always been so. In fact, in the nation's first century the secretary of state was regarded as the heir apparent and traditional stepping-stone to the presidency. Could Hillary Clinton, a shrewd student of government and history, be planning her future by looking to the nation's past?

Certainly, it's an interesting past to ponder. Four of the first six presidents served as secretary of state – Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Adams. Later pre-Civil War presidents who had served as secretary of state were Martin Van Buren and James Buchanan.

Not surprisingly, the office came to be seen as the best route to the presidency – sometimes with notorious consequences. Henry Clay, who thrice ran unsuccessfully for president, was accused of the infamous "corrupt bargain" in 1825 when his machinations allowed John Q. Adams to become president in return for appointment as secretary of state. Clay, an indefatigable pursuer of the presidency, was fully aware that this was the best way for him to achieve his goal.

Beyond these examples there have been a number of other secretaries who unsuccessfully ran for the presidency. These include several iconic historical figures such as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and William Jennings Bryan. Other lesser-known secretaries of state like John Sherman, James G. Blaine, Elihu Root, and Charles Evans Hughes were all presidential candidates at one time as well.

So, clearly Hillary Clinton would not be the first secretary of state to connive to be president while serving at State. Indeed, the notion that the secretary of state must be a relatively colorless Foggy Bottom non-politician type is a modern one.

Doris Kearns Goodwin's widely acclaimed *Team of Rivals* has well told the story of Lincoln's cabinet – a cabinet that featured his chief political rival William Seward as secretary of state. But such cabinets and such secretaries existed before Lincoln.

Most of the pre-Civil War presidents – including Polk, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan – had strong secretaries of state who often desired to wield more power than the incumbent president.

Polk deserves special mention here. Few American presidents have had to manage the presidential ambitions of a member of his cabinet more than James K. Polk did. During his single term his overly ambitious and forceful secretary of state, James Buchanan, constantly challenged him. The differences played out not just over Buchanan's presidential ambition, but on policy matters as well. That included the Oregon boundary dispute with England, conduct of the Mexican War, patronage, and even the possible elevation of Buchanan to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Polk tried to reign in Buchanan but to no avail. Buchanan even failed to honor a pledge he made to Polk not to seek the presidency during his tenure at State. Buchanan's performance under Polk, while extreme, was hardly unique. Until the time of Lincoln – and sometimes after – packing cabinets with the best and the brightest served as neither coherent policy nor the incumbent president's interest.

What has this interesting history to tell us about today, about how Obama's cabinet might perform and about Hillary Clinton's possible future? History's lesson here may be that strong cabinets and ambitious secretaries of state are two-sided coins. They can produce brilliant politics and spectacular policy successes as Lincoln's cabinet sometimes did. Or they can produce unending strife, incessant backbiting, habitual posturing, and policy paralysis as did those of presidents Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan.

Obama's selection of Clinton now is being hailed by many as proof of his statesmanship, his self confidence, and his shrewdness. Indeed, he is being compared to Lincoln, a comparison undoubtedly fueled by Goodwin's widely read book.

And the praise may be justified; the expectations raised may be met. Obama in the end – like Lincoln – may come to regard his bold act as his finest hour. But he might also want to bear in mind that even Lincoln often doubted the wisdom of what he had done – and the new president should expect some anxious moments over the next four years. Obama may also want to remember that for every Lincoln that made a team of rivals work there have been many more presidents who could not.

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