



A name to be reckoned with

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WASHINGTON // Barack Obama's choice for secretary of state – the public face of an administration that has pledged a new and more inclusive kind of global diplomacy – is a face already known around the world.

In selecting Hillary Clinton, the New York senator and former first lady, Mr Obama gets a figure with instant credibility, diplomatic heft and a brand name that, in political circles at least, is arguably as recognisable worldwide as Coca-Cola.

Of course, he also gets a former rival who very much wanted his job – and may still – and who once mocked his approach to diplomacy with hostile nations as being “irresponsible” and “naive”.



Barack Obama and his former rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, at an election rally in Florida in October. Emmanuel Dunand / AFP

But regardless of what one thinks of it – and everyone seems to have an opinion – the selection of Mrs Clinton, expected to be announced as early as today, effectively completes a very public and, in many ways, remarkable reconciliation. And it marks the start of a new relationship that analysts say has as many pluses as it does potential pitfalls.

Some have called the president-elect's pick brilliant, saying Mrs Clinton is not only a well-respected figure globally with a built-in Rolodex but someone who knows the nuances of both policy and politicking inside and out.

Others say the choice is fraught with risks, or even an outright mistake. At issue is whether Mrs Clinton can truly subordinate to the very man who dashed her hopes of becoming president and whether she might use the post to further her own ambitions, whatever they may be. Her tenure could bring to Mr Obama's administration an element of the drama that always seems to trail the Clintons wherever they go, something that is anathema to a man who ran a highly disciplined campaign and is known as “No Drama Obama”.

Although the prospect of Mrs Clinton's serving as the top US diplomat has been generally well received by Democrats and Republicans alike, she must first be confirmed by the US Senate. Tough questions may be raised at her confirmation hearings about the post-presidential activities of Bill Clinton and the potential for conflicts of interest. He is a handsomely compensated speaker whose foundation and presidential library have extensive and not entirely transparent lists of donors, including some foreign governments.

“I'm pretty sure the one thing that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have in common is they don't want Bill Clinton to open his mouth very much,” said Daniel Drezner, professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University near Boston.

Mrs Clinton was a harsh critic of Mr Obama's lack of foreign policy experience – as well as elements of his world view – during their drawn-out battle for the party's nomination. And Mr Obama made much of Mrs Clinton's vote for the Senate resolution authorising George W Bush to go to war in Iraq, which he said he would have opposed.

But their foreign policy views are actually more alike than not. Mr Drezner suggested the policy differences between the two have been exaggerated – that is the point of a primary campaign, after all – and are more a matter of style than substance. He said although Mrs Clinton could use the post as a springboard to another political office – New York governor, perhaps, or even president – it still would be in her best interest to serve with distinction, and not be seen as having undermined or outmanoeuvred Mr Obama in any way.

“I don't think she took this job merely to sabotage Barack Obama,” Prof Drezner said. “That seems rather an odd way of going about things. My suspicion is they will work better together than people realise.”

“Obama's style is that he actually likes people who push up against him. He likes strong, sharp, analytical thinkers. The one thing this man has clearly demonstrated is that he's not going to be bullied.”

Mrs Clinton could have remained in the Senate. But there, she is a junior member of a body where seniority is everything. In becoming secretary of state, she will at once become enormously powerful, especially in an administration that has pledged more diplomatic engagement, including with such countries as Iran, and an effort to repair US relations with countries around the world after eight years of the Bush administration.

Ruth B Mandel, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey, suggested Mrs Clinton could be

among the secretaries of state who have a historic effect on the United States and the world. Not all, or even many, do.

The relationship between Mr Obama and Mrs Clinton comes with baggage, a reality of which the president-elect is no doubt well aware. In a recent New York Times column, Thomas Friedman noted that their every exchange, and every leak of information, will be relentlessly scrutinised "for what it means politically and whether there is daylight". He wondered whether the two might, to their detriment, end up operating as a "team of rivals".

That refers to the title of a book by Doris Kearns Goodwin, a US presidential historian, who described Abraham Lincoln's cabinet during the civil war as such, in that he surrounded himself with some former foes, to mixed effect. Her 2005 book is called Team of Rivals: The political genius of Abraham Lincoln.

But Robert Lieber, a professor of government and international relations at Georgetown University in Washington, said although the choice of Mrs Clinton does carry risk, it is also full of potential.

"Hillary knows the foreign policy subject abroad, she knows it in Washington," he said, calling her strong, experienced and pragmatic. "That means the team can hit the ground running.

"They both have a vested interest – a strong political and personal interest – in making this work."

Mrs Clinton is certainly used to blazing trails. There is no precedent for a former first lady going on to become a senator, very nearly a nominee for president and, then, secretary of state.

"She's got a lifetime history of learning how to navigate new waters," Mrs Mandel said.

"She can teach everyone a lesson in that."

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