



Who will be on Obama's new dream team?

By: Jo Biddle – November 14th, 2012

WASHINGTON — A week after winning re-election President Barack Obama has yet to reveal his new White House dream team amid fierce jostling for coveted posts key to shaping America's foreign and defense policy.

Speculation is heating up in Washington corridors about who will be crowned the new secretaries of state and defense, with veteran Senator John Kerry, US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and National Security Adviser Tom Donilon the odds-on favorites to be among the new cabinet faces.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said Tuesday that Obama "has not made a decision on personnel matters," refusing to discuss any of the rumors.

On Wednesday, Obama will give his first press conference since winning a second term. But his closely-guarded calculations may have been thrown askew by Friday's shock resignation of CIA director David Petraeus, which opened up another job to fill.

Kerry, the longtime chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with foreign policy stamped into his DNA, is a well-known, respected figure in international circles and has long dreamed of becoming secretary of state.

But the outspoken, feisty Rice is part of Obama's inner circle and has been a loyal champion of US foreign policy at the UN. US dailies reported her nomination to replace Hillary Clinton may almost be in the bag.

Kerry might instead be tapped for the Pentagon to take over from Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, both The New York Times and The Washington Post said, quoting White House officials.

Among his qualifications for the job is his service in the US Navy during the Vietnam War, for which he was decorated with a Silver Star, a Bronze Star with Combat V and three Purple Hearts.

Both nominations could be problematic though.

Rice has come under fire from Republicans who have alleged there was a bid to cover up the circumstances surrounding September's attack on the US mission in Benghazi.

Too many questions remained unanswered and "Susan Rice would have an incredibly difficult time getting through the Senate," veteran Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said Sunday.

"It depends whether the president wants her bad enough in that position to go... fight" for her, Barry Pavel, director of the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council, told AFP.

Kerry's appointment to a cabinet post would also force an election for his Massachusetts seat in the US Senate, which could see popular Republican Scott Brown -- defeated on November 6 -- make another bid for Congress.

However, analysts said the Democrats had done better than expected in last week's elections by winning a 55-seat majority in the Senate, including two Independents expected to vote with them.

During Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign, some Vietnam veterans launched a controversial smear campaign, alleging false claims about his war record.

But he is widely seen as a safe pair of hands to be entrusted with America's wide-ranging and powerful foreign policy.

"There's a combination of prudence, and knowledge," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

The veteran senator would bring sober reflection on US intervention in world crises to the table born from the "lessons taken away from the war in Iraq in particular, but also Afghanistan," Preble said.

And there were voices of support for his nomination -- to either post -- as US lawmakers returned to work. Kerry would be "an excellent choice for either of those positions," said Republican Senator Dick Lugar.

Kerry was deflecting all speculation.

"Senator Kerry's only focus right now is his job as senior senator from Massachusetts and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee," his spokeswoman Jodi Seth said in a statement.

Donilon, who has been Obama's trusted national security adviser since 2010, is said to want the State Department post, but some say he lacks the political stature of either Rice or Kerry.

"The White House would have a sense of tighter control if it were" either Rice or Donilon, Pavel said in a nod to Obama's efforts to keep a tight rein on foreign policy.

And Pavel did not see Rice's famed outspokenness as mitigating against her hopes for top US diplomat.

Obama, however, may also have a surprise in store as in 2008 when he picked Clinton, his fierce foe in the Democratic primary race, and kept defense secretary Robert Gates in his post as a holdover from former president George W. Bush's administration.

Republican names circulating include former secretary of state Colin Powell, Chinese speaker Jon Huntsman -- who was appointed US envoy to Beijing by Obama -- and former Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel.

"It's the kind of thing a pragmatic President Obama might do," Pavel said. Preble, however, argued that picking a Republican in this partisan climate may not buy Obama much goodwill.

Showing a willingness "to cooperate with the Democrats and particularly the Democratic president" effectively undermines "your credibility among your party," he said.