



Candidate Haley

Colum Lynch

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Over the winter holidays, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations got around to hanging the official portrait of Ambassador Nikki Haley alongside the images of President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence in its lobby in New York.

But there was something, or someone, missing. In the spot where the portraits of America's previous top diplomats, Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, once hung was an unused picture hanger. The U.S. secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, had been essentially airbrushed out of this American diplomatic tableau.

The elimination of America's top diplomat from the mission's lobby gallery highlighted the contentious nature of relations at the top of the president's diplomatic team, as well as the unique nature of Haley's tenure as U.S. ambassador.

The first Republican Cabinet-level U.N. ambassador since the end of the Cold War, Haley has rejected the traditional chain of command that grants the secretary of state the primary policymaking role, and she has made it clear she will accept nothing less than to be Tillerson's equal. Her voracious pursuit of the spotlight, meanwhile, has elevated her national profile and strengthened her prospects for higher political office should she decide, as many suspect she will, to pursue the American presidency.

“Overall, the consensus in Republican national security circles is that she has done herself a huge favor by taking this position and going to New York,” says Daniel Vajdich, a Republican foreign-policy expert who advised the presidential campaigns of Mitt Romney and Ted Cruz. “She can be a very popular candidate in 2020 or 2024.”

In the course of a year, the former South Carolina governor has transformed herself from a diplomatic dilettante into the highest-flying foreign-policy luminary in the Trump administration. Every week brings glowing reviews — CNN called her a “breakout star” — of her blunt performances, and talk of a future as a presidential contender in the post-Trump

era. *Time* magazine put Haley on its cover, honoring the Indian-American diplomat for being among “women who are changing the world.”

She has routinely outmaneuvered and eclipsed Tillerson as the most visible spokesperson for American foreign policy, and she’s secured a place at the table in discussions of the biggest national security issues of the day, from Iran to North Korea. She has even dared to defend the right of women who claim to have been sexually abused by Trump to have a fair hearing — and survived.

Her performance at the United Nations, however, has received more mixed reviews from current and former U.S. officials, as well as diplomatic counterparts who have worked closely with her over the past year.

Haley, they say, has achieved concrete successes, prodding a reluctant China to support a pair of tough sanctions resolutions on North Korea. She has fended off White House threats to bankrupt the United Nations and warmed the hearts of allies from Turtle Bay to Capitol Hill with her withering condemnations of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. But Haley has also presided over highly controversial Middle East policies that have deepened America’s international isolation even as they have bolstered her political standing at home.

Colleagues who once cheered her as the administration’s pragmatist, a vital bridge between the White House and the U.N., see her increasingly as a political opportunist who has placed her pursuit of the presidency above her efforts to maintain America’s alliances and its standing in the world.

“It’s become increasingly obvious she is running for something, which is fine,” says one U.N. Security Council diplomat, who predicts her stance on Jerusalem would win her votes should she decide to run in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

But that, the diplomat, says, “means she is up to more than promoting the U.S. interest at the U.N.”

Haley declined to be interviewed for this story. But a spokesperson from the U.S. Mission to the United Nations challenged any suggestion that she was pursuing the White House job. She devotes much of her time to tackling “critical foreign-policy issues” from North Korea to Iran and Israel “because they consume much of the U.N.’s time,” according to the official, who responded to a list of written questions on the condition of anonymity. She has also promoted human rights, reform of the U.N.’s multi-billion dollar peacekeeping enterprise, and increased aid to Syrian refugees “because its the right thing to do.” Haley, the official adds, “is focused on enacting President Trump’s agenda at the United Nations and representing the American people to the best of her abilities.”

As for the missing Tillerson portrait, the official says: “We should hope we haven’t gotten to the point where pictures in our lobby are an actual thing a publication like FP would report on. That would take the palace intrigue obsession to a new level.”

Nimrata “Nikki” Haley, the 46-year-old daughter of immigrants from Punjab, India, charted a remarkable rise to political prominence in South Carolina politics. In January 2011, she became the first woman and first member of a minority group to reach her state governor’s mansion.

Haley was buoyed by a critical endorsement from former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin at the height of the Tea Party movement. But her particular brand of conservatism in South Carolina stood as an affront to Trumpism. Still, her popularity in the party marked her as a potential candidate for vice president.

Unabashedly pro-trade (South Carolina’s economic resurgence was built with the help of foreign carmakers such as BMW, Volvo, and Mercedes), Haley had promoted a more inclusive strand of Republicanism that seeks inroads into growing minority communities. “Republicans need to remember that the fabric of America came from these legal immigrants,” she [said](#) during the Republican presidential primary.

Her national profile rocketed in the summer of 2015, after she ordered the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse. Delivering the GOP’s response to then-President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address in January 2016, she pleaded with Americans to resist the temptation “to follow the siren call of the angriest voices.”

Even as she accepted Trump’s offer to serve at the U.N., Haley distanced herself from the new president on multiple key foreign-policy fronts, carving out an approach that hewed closer to Republican foreign-policy leaders in the Senate, including Bob Corker, Lindsey Graham, and John McCain. She pilloried Russia, denouncing Putin as an untrustworthy rival and dismissing the prospects of working productively with Assad in the war against the Islamic State.

“I think she picked up the mantle for conservatives not represented in this administration, and she is to be their champion, because they are going to be back in power later,” says one senior foreign-policy advisor to President Trump.

Having staked out a seemingly independent platform, Haley’s arrival in New York in January 2017 came as a relief to the U.N. community, which feared Trump aimed to kneecap multilateral institutions as part of his “America first” drive. In her confirmation hearing, they noted, Haley had exhibited a level of pragmatism that put her colleagues at ease. She opposed the imposition of “slash and burn” budget cuts proposed by the White House that would have devastated U.N. operations, and she highlighted the need to preserve important alliances.

After her confirmation, Haley confided to staff that Trump had provided her with a personal assurance that she would have a free hand to set foreign policy, marking a sharp break with tradition. Haley may have arrived on her first day at U.N. headquarters warning her diplomatic counterparts that she would be “taking names” of foreign delegations that crossed the United States, but that threat was dismissed by colleagues as bluster aimed more at energizing a domestic political base than a real imperative.

Haley’s European colleagues noted that her core positions from Russia to Syria and Ukraine aligned neatly with their own, making her a potential partner who might soften the contours of the president’s controversial policies. “She couldn’t have been better from our point of view,”

says one U.N. Security Council member. “She positioned herself comfortably at our end of the administration’s spectrum.”

That she had little diplomatic experience might actually serve as an advantage. “She doesn’t know enough about foreign policy to know what is her foreign policy,” the diplomat says. “I think essentially, because of ignorance, she was very open to advice.”

Arriving at the U.N.’s headquarters at Turtle Bay in late January 2017, Haley won over the career staff with a commitment to lighten their workload. Her predecessor, Samantha Power, had gained a reputation as a stern taskmaster, pressing her team to work late hours and through the weekends. During her first town hall meeting with staffers, Haley said that she expected staffers to check out every night at a reasonable hour. If they couldn’t finish their work on time, they could simply pick up the next day.

“She cut overtime and told staff to be smarter with their time to get the job done,” her spokesperson says. “Previously staff had no family time, and Ambassador Haley has always felt that if your family life is good, your work will be productive.”

Haley also dispatched her advisors to come up with ideas, signaling a willingness to listen to her staff. One career staffer asked a political aide of the new ambassador: “What is Haley interested in?” The response was: “You tell us.”

The process resulted in the selection of five key priorities that would define Haley’s tenure: North Korea, Iran, Syria, U.N. reform, and humanitarian relief for the world’s neediest. Haley, a staunch pro-Israel politician, also made a personal commitment to counter what she characterized as deeply rooted anti-Israel bias at the United Nations.

At the same time, Haley proved to be a more elusive leader. She ended Power’s practice of convening a meeting each morning with senior staff and experts. Career staff used to have access to Power’s daily schedule, but Haley’s is kept secret.

Most of the mission’s work was channeled through a small coterie of Haley loyalists, many of whom worked for her in South Carolina, including Jon Lerner, a former pollster who heads up Haley’s Washington office, and David Glaccum, her chief of staff.

Haley’s spokesperson says that she communicates daily with career and non-career staff and “considers all of their expertise and opinions.”

Despite her foreign policy limitations, her political skills and her close relationship to the president have earned her admiration from colleagues. A seasoned retail politician, she has a knack for translating complex diplomatic quandaries into simple language that is accessible to Main Street. And she has proved adept at maneuvering through the Trump administration, a skill that has, they feel, kept a hostile White House at bay.

But her way of working has also put her on a collision course with Tillerson, particularly on one of the most critical aspects of U.S. foreign policy: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Since his inauguration, Trump has sought to extricate the United States from the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which placed strict limits on Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for billions of dollars in sanctions relief. Under U.S. law, the president is required by Congress to certify whether Iran is in compliance with its obligations under the nuclear pact every 90 days.

Trump twice grudgingly certified to Congress, in April and July, that Iran had met its commitments under the deal. But he had grown frustrated with Tillerson — who supported certification — for failing to provide him with a plausible case for backing out of the nuclear pact that he had denounced as an “embarrassment to the United States.”

Over the summer of 2017, Trump tasked a White House team of loyalists with devising a strategy that would allow him to decertify the pact when it came up for review in October. In August, Haley wrote an email to White House national security advisor H.R. McMaster asking if she could take a more high-profile role in advancing the president's Iran cause; he gave her the green light.

Over the following weeks, Haley pulled together a small group of close political advisors, including Lerner and Carrie Filipetti, to draft a major foreign-policy speech on Iran, which she delivered on Sept. 5, 2017, at the American Enterprise Institute. But Haley prevented her own experts at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations from briefing her on the nuclear pact or reviewing the speech for errors before it was delivered. Haley also bypassed the rigorous interagency vetting process that usually accompanies the preparation of a major foreign policy speech, according to one official familiar with the matter.

Instead, Haley's team has relied heavily on conservative individuals and think tanks, including former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. John Bolton and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, to provide a steady diet of briefings and policy papers on Iran.

Last summer, Bolton pressed Haley to trigger confrontation with Iran that could be used as a pretext for walking away from the Iran nuclear deal. The plan, according to one official, was to press the intelligence agencies to declassify intelligence suggesting improper activity is occurring in Iranian military bases. She would take that information to the International Atomic Energy Agency and press it to conduct an inspection.

“He went to her, sat her down and said: ‘Here is an idea: you should push this,’” says an official familiar with the meeting. “We thought she got it, but she still hasn't done it.”

Haley's spokesperson says that Haley has spoken many times with Bolton, and that she values his counsel, but said the “depiction of his advice about Iran is entirely inaccurate.”

The spokesperson also denies Haley had sought a larger role on Iran from McMaster: “The president has spoken with Ambassador Haley frequently about Iran policy and has encouraged her to be outspoken about Administration policy toward Iran's dangerous conduct.”

Haley's AEI speech didn't explicitly recommend the president renounce the Iran nuclear pact, but it provided a scathing account of what she saw as its shortcomings. She also provided a defense for pulling out of the deal if that the president decided to do so.

The speech achieved three important goals for Haley: It placed her at the center of one of the administration's most important foreign-policy crises — one that was traditionally managed by the State Department, bolstered her relationship with the president, and distinguished her from Tillerson, who has emerged as her chief competitor for Trump's ear.

But the statement was sloppy, riddled with mistakes and mischaracterizations that could easily have been picked up by experienced staffers, according to current and former U.S. officials.

For instance, Haley claimed, incorrectly, that the Obama administration had asserted the deal would eliminate Iran's nuclear program. The deal envisioned that Iran would develop a peaceful nuclear energy program subject to international monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency. She also confused a heavy water production plant for a reactor, according to Richard Nephew, a former State Department official who helped negotiate the nuclear deal.

Nephew annotated the speech to point out mistakes. The Cato Institute, meanwhile, published its own critique of the speech titled "Nikki Haley's Alternative Facts on Iran."

Haley "suggested that Iran could have hundreds of covert nuclear sites which cannot be inspected under the deal, but offered no evidence for her assertion," according to the report's author.

Haley's spokesperson says the Iran speech was "fully vetted by the NSC, and contained no inaccuracies. For every critic of the speech, we can provide you with experts who praised it."

Her defenders downplayed the importance of any errors in the speech, noting that she is a politician, not a policy wonk, and that she has been effective where it counts: applying pressure to Iran on a range of fronts.

They cite a visit she paid to Vienna last August to press Yukiya Amano, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, to carry out inspections of Iran's military sites. Supporters of the pact see it as a provocation aimed at manufacturing a confrontation between Iran and the international nuclear agency, which has so far found Iran in compliance with its obligations under the nuclear accord.

But critics of the Iran deal, including the White House, have been pushing for such inspections on the grounds that they would provide greater assurances that Iran isn't hiding anything. Haley has also won praise from conservatives for her effort to declassify intelligence allegedly linking Iran to the illicit supply of ballistic missiles that Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen fired at Saudi Arabia last year.

"She has been the most articulate voice in the administration in describing not only the fundamental flaws with the [nuclear pact], but also in reiterating at various forums the overall nature and gravity of the Iranian threat" says Mark Dubowitz, the CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "I think her performance in New York has been consistently good on Iran."

But Haley's personal advocacy of controversial White House positions, such as the threat to ditch the Iran nuclear deal, carries potential diplomatic risks, and nowhere has this been more evident than her approach to Israel.

On Dec. 18, 2017, Haley faced off alone against the world, exercising the U.S. veto at the U.N. Security Council in defense of Trump's provocative decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The U.S. vote, she told the U.N.'s principal security body, had been cast in "defense of American sovereignty."

The image of Haley raising her hand in defiance of the world's powers constituted a compelling piece of political stagecraft that earned her plaudits from American conservatives, evoking the memories of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick, former U.S. envoys known for delivering blistering broadsides against America's foreign critics.

But it was a questionable piece of diplomacy that left the world's superpower isolated in a chamber of its own creation, at odds with some of America's closest friends and allies, including Britain, Italy, France, Japan, and Ukraine. The humbling 14-1 vote against the United States was also unnecessary, according to Security Council diplomats from five countries.

In the days preceding the vote, Haley made little effort to cajole, threaten, or persuade her Security Council diplomats to vote against the Jerusalem resolution. While she dispatched an email to some colleagues underscoring the importance of the issue to the United States, there weren't, as a U.N. Security Council diplomat recalled, the "barrage of phone calls" to ambassadors and their capitals that would typically precede an important vote. The State Department did not even send out formal diplomatic notes — known as demarches — to Security Council capitals seeking support. Only at the final hour did Haley make clear Washington would exact a cost for countries that opposed the United States.

"I am looking at you," she told her council colleagues in a closed-door meeting just minutes before the vote. "The U.S. won't forget, we will remember each and every one of you, we take this personally, we won't forget what you did today when you will come at us asking for money or support."

The threat, which would be echoed in a series of sharp public comments by Haley and Trump over the following days, was issued too late to sway the votes, as delegates had already received their voting instructions. Haley's low-key strategy raised speculation among some of her colleagues that she had either seriously miscalculated the depth of opposition or that this was the outcome she sought. A second U.N. Security Council diplomat put it bluntly: "Haley wanted it that way."

Indeed, one close American ally, Ukraine, that had voted in favor of the Jerusalem resolution in the Security Council reversed course after Haley turned up the heat. On the eve of a vote on a similar measure before the U.N. General Assembly, which adopted the nonbinding resolution by a vote of 128 to 9, Ukraine joined 21 countries who didn't show up for the vote. Thirty-five others abstained from the vote. As a reward, those who didn't vote in favor of the resolution, including Ukraine's U.N. Ambassador Volodymyr Yelchenko, were honored by Haley with an

invitation to a lavish “friendship” reception at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, complete with a live jazz band.

A second council diplomat confided that his government would likely have abstained if Washington had pulled out all stops and mounted a full-fledged pressure campaign in his capital. “For sure, they could have turned us,” the diplomat tells Foreign Policy. “It wasn’t inevitable we wound up voting in favor of it.”

Haley’s spokesperson says Haley and the administration “actively contested the Jerusalem vote, both in the Security Council and the General Assembly,” and that her office “undertook many forms of outreach to make sure member states knew our position during both votes.”

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, left, and Haley listen as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi speaks during a Security Council meeting on North Korea in New York on April 28, 2017. (Eduardo Munoz Alvarez/Getty Images)

While the U.N. has undoubtedly proved an effective launching pad for raising her political profile, Haley’s politicking has also gotten her into trouble on occasion. In October 2017, the U.S. Office of Special Counsel accused her of violating the Hatch Act, which prohibits presidential advisors from using their official positions to influence the outcome of elections, by retweeting a presidential tweet in support of a South Carolina congressional candidate.

At other times, her lack of experience has led to awkward situations. In December of last year, Haley was successfully pranked by a Russian comedian impersonating Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, underscoring the limits of her command of the issues. When the fake Morawiecki asked Haley whether she was concerned about Russian intervention into the island nation of Binomo, a fictional island nation in the South China Sea, Haley said, “Yes, yes.”

And her embrace of increasingly hard-line positions on the Middle East, where she championed administration efforts to cut aid to Palestinian refugees, and Iran, where she has emerged as a sharp critic of the nuclear deal, has heightened concern among colleagues.

National security experts from both parties say that the depth of her knowledge of foreign-policy matters remains relatively shallow — about “one inch deep,” quips one Republican national security specialist.

But they remain grateful that she has rejected the isolationist rhetoric of the Trump presidential campaign, assuring lawmakers in her Senate confirmation hearing that: “I will bring a firm message to the U.N. that U.S. leadership is essential in the world.” Her uncompromising stance on Israel and Iran is also popular in Republican political circles.

“I think she understands that these are positions that will attract money from the Republican donor community, which responds very favorably to these hard-line positions on Israel and Iran,” Vajdich, the Republican foreign-policy expert, says.

“This is a very useful piece of evidence that says she is very much gearing up for the future, and at least leaving her options open. What she does at the United Nations is clearly intended to be a resume-builder and a platform for what she does in the future.”

More troubling is that her small team of political advisors made little effort to forge close working ties with Tillerson's inner circle. In her first months in New York, Haley sought clearance on a range of policy issues from then-presidential counselor Steve Bannon, then-deputy national security advisor Dina Powell, and the president himself. Later, Haley worked through McMaster and forged relationships with the president's daughter Ivanka Trump, on humanitarian issues, and son-in-law Jared Kushner, who has emerged as a close ally on the Middle East.

"Because I am a Cabinet member, I primarily work with Gen. McMaster at the [National Security Council]," she told the House foreign affairs committee last year. "I work more with the NSC than I do with the State Department."

The arrangement, combined with her public speaking skills, has given her greater influence in interagency battles over policy, but it has deprived her of the vast diplomatic reinforcements the State Department's career diplomats can provide and strained relations between the president's two most influential diplomats. Tillerson is frequently absent at events she organizes.

The depth of their estrangement was obvious last fall when they were forced to share the stage at the U.N. General Assembly's general debate, the world's preeminent annual gathering of world leaders. The two attended the Sept. 20, 2017, session on Iran's nuclear deal with separate entourages. The following day, Haley scheduled a press conference to brief reporters on the president's activities at the same time that Tillerson was delivering a speech before the U.N. Security Council on the need to curb nuclear proliferators like North Korea.

But Tillerson's absence at the administration's signature event — a high-level meeting chaired by Trump on U.N. reform — was perhaps the most glaring. McMaster and White House chief of staff John Kelly were the only cabinet members to join her and the president for the session.

The relationship is even worse than it appears from the outside, and Haley and Tillerson have clashed from the beginning, says a Middle East analyst with close ties to the White House. "Her concern is she's a Cabinet member," the analyst says. "His concern is she works for him."

A Trump foreign-policy advisor puts it more bluntly. "Tillerson is stumbling, and the White House has been in a state of chaos for much of the first year," says the Trump source. "So Nikki just decided, absent a direction, 'I'm just going to fill the void.' She is grabbing the bull by the horns. Good for her."

Haley's spokesperson says that Haley had made it clear to President Trump "that she would only take the position if he could confirm it would be a cabinet-level position" and that she could participate in "policy making as an equal member of the national security team, and the president readily agreed."

The official adds that while it is often difficult to align two cabinet members' schedules, the two have worked together, and that she hosted a luncheon for Tillerson at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in April 2017. Tillerson, the official adds, was issued an invitation to the president's U.N. reform meeting, but he did not attend.

While the U.N. reform meeting may have drawn attention to splits in the president's national security team, the fact that Haley had assembled a high-level delegation in support of the United Nations chief was viewed by colleagues there as a godsend, a sign that an often hostile American president was beginning to reconsider his views about the international body.

The reform meeting and the White House luncheons are "examples of Nikki Haley having delivered on bringing the president closer to the United Nations," says João Vale de Almeida, the European Union's ambassador to the U.N. As for Haley, "she is much more of a U.N. person today than when she first arrived. She is much more a part of our family than she was in the beginning."

Still, Haley has faced criticism from colleagues, and some of her own staff, who feel she has placed a priority on organizing high-profile events heavy on symbolism but light on substance.

Before the reform meeting, the U.S. Mission sent out a one-page memo to governments seeking their support for the U.N. chief's reform policies, complete with a list of 10 reform initiatives Washington favored, including the need to strengthen oversight and accountability over U.N. spending.

An effort to lure China into co-sponsoring the event faltered after Beijing asked to amend the text to highlight the importance of sustainable development. Haley refused. Some of her career staffers expressed skepticism over the U.S. initiative, saying it created the impression that the White House was driving the secretary-general's U.N. reform effort.

"It invited scrutiny from those countries who see it as part of Western plot," says one official. The response from Haley's political team was "too bad," the official says.

Even more disappointing was the lack of follow-up on what had been touted as a top American priority. Haley has moved on to other crises, the White House has yet to appoint an ambassador for management and reform, and there have been few, if any, interagency discussions about how to advance the reforms.

"Nothing came out of it," the official says.

Haley's spokesperson disputes that account, saying that Haley and her team "engage actively on a daily basis with the Secretary General, his team and other key U.N. member states." The United States, the official says, did consider requests for amendments by members who participated in the reform event, but those changes had to be presented by a deadline; China apparently didn't make it.

Several of Haley's colleagues confirm that she has faded into the background in U.N. reform talks, but they view her initiative in this area as a diplomatic accomplishment. Trump, who once looked to sideline the world's most prominent multilateral organization, has publicly endorsed the U.N. chief's efforts to improve the U.N.

"She doesn't care what people think of her in the U.N. bubble," the U.N. Security Council diplomat adds, referring to her stance on Jerusalem. "She didn't win any votes in the U.N. Security Council, but when the vote for 2020 comes, this will be a winning issue."

