

Action women

The president defiantly picks two liberal interventionists



JUST over a decade ago Samantha Power, a journalist aghast at American inaction over genocide in Rwanda, confronted dozens of high-ranking officials about why the Clinton administration had stood by and watched the killings unfold. One interviewee, Susan Rice—then an up-and-coming staffer at the National Security Council—confessed that she had sworn a private oath: if ever faced with such a crisis again, she would “come down on the side of dramatic action, going down in flames if that was required.”

On June 5th Barack Obama, a president with a deep wariness of entangling military actions abroad, named Ms Rice (second from right, above) as his national security adviser, promoting her from her current post as America’s ambassador to the UN. The national-security job makes Ms Rice the president’s foreign-policy briefer, gatekeeper, troubleshooter and chief broker in inter-agency wrangles over foreign policy and security. For good measure, he named Ms Power (right, above), until recently a presidential adviser on multilateral affairs and human rights, as America’s new UN ambassador.

Ms Rice will replace Tom Donilon, a courteous master of the Washington bureaucracy known for caution, ferocious loyalty to the president and attention to the domestic political implications of foreign-policy crises. Mr Donilon (left, above) will step down in early July after overseeing the informal summit between Mr Obama and President Xi Jinping of China. Like his mentor, Warren Christopher, another thoughtful sort, he will leave detractors as well as admirers in Washington, after clashes with the Pentagon and other agencies; in 2009 he pushed for a much smaller number of American troops in Afghanistan than the generals wanted.

The appointments of Ms Rice and Ms Power were long-trailed, but were announced with unexpected suddenness. They place two liberal interventionists at the heart of a White House machine which was known, until now, for resisting calls to intervene in such crises as the civil war in Syria. The two women proved to be effective allies in Mr Obama’s first term; they were credited by diplomats with dramatically shifting American policy over Libya in the direction of the NATO-led air strikes that helped topple the Qaddafi regime.

Members of Mr Obama's inner circle have been making more hawkish noises about the dangers of inaction in Syria, fretting that a prolonged fight between the Assad regime and disparate rebels could see chemical weapons and other nasties falling into the hands of extremist factions, some loyal to al-Qaeda. The secretary of state, John Kerry, is said to be among those who would like to see more help, including military kit, sent to more moderate figures in the Syrian opposition.

The departure of Mr Donilon removes a voice of caution from White House debates on Syria. Yet his retirement, on its own, cannot be decisive in shifting Syria policy: the president remains in the room, and his personal caution runs deep.

A forthright sort, Ms Rice has rowed in the past with such prominent Republicans as Senator John McCain of Arizona. Since September 2012 she has been caught up in partisan crossfire, accused by Republicans of misleading the American public by delivering a false account of deadly attacks on American missions in the Libyan city of Benghazi. Although Ms Rice was reading talking points drafted by others, Republican anger was enough to make her withdraw from consideration as secretary of state to succeed Hillary Clinton. Her new post as national security adviser does not require Senate confirmation. A dilemma for Republicans is that Ms Rice could be an ally for a more interventionist world view. Mr McCain said that he disagreed with Ms Rice's appointment, but would make "every effort" to work with her.

Ms Power will require Senate confirmation and has been tagged as "dangerous" by conservatives, who cite her enthusiasm for UN-led interventions and criticisms of some Israeli policies. Though the administration is said to be confident that she will be confirmed, it may be bumpy.

Announcing his new team, Mr Obama gave little away about whether they signalled a shift in policy. He hailed Ms Rice and Ms Power for combining moral passion with pragmatism, and for believing in America's indispensable leadership while being "mindful" that power must be exercised responsibly. Ever the law professor, Mr Obama admires balance, even in foreign policy. The world, a messy place, may have other ideas.

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