

Why Diplomats Are Agog at Trump's Ambassador to Israel

The foreign service resents any outsiders who leapfrog to the top—no matter their skills and qualifications.

By Vivian Bercovici • Updated Dec. 19, 2016 7:18 p.m. ET



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David Friedman, Donald Trump and Ivanka Trump in 2010. *Photo: Bloomberg News*

President-elect Trump's choice for ambassador to Israel, the attorney David Friedman, has been received in some quarters with contempt

and disbelief. Mr. Friedman's presumed failings are said to be many. As a lawyer, he has no diplomatic or foreign policy experience. He is a right-wing "extremist," supposedly because he supports expanding settlements and moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

At its core, criticism of Mr. Friedman reflects the erroneous notion that only professionally trained diplomats can do the job. That is simply false. Modern diplomacy—which I experienced as Canada's ambassador to Israel—is an anachronistic system of entitlement and privilege aligned with the aristocratic sensibilities of the late 19th century. The "foreign service" model that prevails today was the institutional response to a surfeit of well-bred, indolent men needing something to do. So they were sent abroad to underwrite fancy parties and salons, in the name of the King, Queen or Republic.

Two world wars made a hash of the old order, but Western diplomats have held fast to their entitlements. They indulge a posh lifestyle that mostly disappeared from the private sector as governance standards were enhanced. It is difficult to explain layers of servants and personal drivers to shareholders, never mind taxpayers.

Diplomats used to be important emissaries for their governments. Today that role is greatly diminished. Communication is instant and world leaders are overexposed, like rock stars on MTV. Forty years ago presidents and prime ministers might have attended one international meeting each year; today they are on a summit treadmill. They phone one another and cultivate personal relationships. Diplomats are often sidelined and left to churn out reports that circulate in a bureaucratic vortex.

Diplomacy still turns on the exercise of geopolitical power, as it always has, and on trade, which has changed completely in 50 years. Yet

tradition-bound foreign services disdain the sullied world of commerce. In their world view, they—and they alone—are destined to solve the great issues of our time. As a result, there is a notable deficit of business acumen, one of the key elements of modern diplomacy, in many foreign services. Private-sector talent and experience are desperately needed but maligned when recruited.

I know neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Friedman other than through the media. But I do know that Mr. Friedman has been selected to represent America's democratically elected president. He will serve at the pleasure of Mr. Trump and represent the president's policies. Mr. Friedman is not anointed to go rogue and indulge in personal fantasies.

When I was appointed as Canada's ambassador to Israel in 2014 by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper, I was attacked by the press much as Mr. Friedman is today. The star political anchor of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation slammed my appointment.

Why? Because I am Jewish and was therefore supposedly biased toward Israel. This was seen as vitiating any competence or skill I might have brought to the job. As a private-sector lawyer with an extensive business background, I was declared—often by cranky retired diplomats purporting to represent the views of their former colleagues—to have no relevant experience. But this simply made plain their ignorance of what goes on in professions in the real world.

Today, Messrs. Trump and Friedman are excoriated for expressing serious intent to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Some argue this would ignite Muslim fury and global mayhem. But it raises the question: How, exactly, does locating the embassy in West Jerusalem—which is not disputed territory—in any way predetermine the outcome of any negotiations regarding East Jerusalem? It doesn't.

This is a fallacy propagated by rejectionists of Israel and accepted unquestioningly by the international diplomatic community.

The effect of political appointments to diplomatic posts is critical. It signals to foreign governments (as well as domestic interests) that the relationship is a priority for the elected leader. It also allows the officeholder to select an envoy that he or she deeply trusts.

Professional diplomats resent the affront that such appointments represent. They reject “outsiders” for leapfrogging the system, for their access to the top, for their perceived impunity, for their utter unsuitability to the exalted foreign service. Mr. Friedman may be many things. But the notion that only those who have passed the foreign-service examination are worthy of an ambassadorship is laughable.

Mr. Trump was elected by the American people on a platform of change. Those who bring change, by nature, shock the system. The world of diplomacy—in the Middle East and elsewhere—could use more of them. Which is to say, it could use more David Friedmans.

Ms. Bercovici, a former Canadian ambassador to Israel (2014-16), lives in Tel Aviv.