

Peter Friedmann's View from Washington D.C.

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Time for the second team.

We're almost halfway through President Obama's second term in office. Considering the intensity of the job, the constant spotlight on the President's every word and action, and the impossible challenges he faces every day, the toll is immense. It's actually become a sport to track the rate by which the President's head turns gray.

Often overlooked, but often no less strenuous, is the position of Cabinet Secretary. They too can age quickly on the job, but they have an option the President does not -- they can simply quit (or be fired). So by the time the second term rolls around, the second team suits up. This Administration is no different. Of the 15 members of the cabinet who served during the President's first term, only four remain in service halfway through the second term.

Many Cabinet Secretaries toil largely out of the public eye, heading agencies that are less visible such as Housing and Urban Development, or Education. But sometimes even the less visible positions become extremely, and even excruciatingly, well known. Eric Shinseki was not a household name prior to the recent exposure of the cover-up of deaths of veterans awaiting care at the VA. Now, everybody knows about the Veteran's Administration. The negligent treatment of veterans created a national scandal. The limelight was on the President, and as is the case in these situations, Mr. Shinseki was dumped.

He hasn't been the only Cabinet Secretary asked to leave by President Obama. Kathleen Sebelius had the misfortune to serve as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services during the catastrophic introduction of Obamacare. As Congressional and public ire grew, the White House allowed her to be the "face" of the botched rollout, until such time as it was necessary (or convenient) to let her go. She's gone.

But miscues and putting your boss (the President) into unwelcome limelight, are not the only reasons that during the second term of the presidency, there is wholesale turnover in the cabinet.

Some leave because it is difficult to sustain the level of effort for more than four years. For example, Timothy Geithner, the first term Secretary of the Treasury, serving in the years immediately after the George W. Bush presidency, and dealing with the economic meltdown. But don't feel sorry for him, he will be making several millions of dollars a year at Warburg Pincus, a private equity firm, while his successor Jack Lew makes the Cabinet Secretary salary of \$199,700 per year -- for a lot more stress! It can be argued that some leave because they sense further time as Cabinet Secretary may be a liability. In this category one could put Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama's first term Secretary of State. She traveled at a pace that was unprecedented, visiting more countries than any previous Secretary of State. But she exhausted herself, collapsed at one point, and found herself subject to speculation as to her health and age. The fiasco at the US Embassy in Benghazi, Libya unfolded while she was Secretary of State, providing current and future political opponents with cannon fodder for years to come. One can certainly argue that like Eric Shinseki at Veterans Affairs or Kathleen Sebelius at HHS, it is virtually impossible for the Secretary of State to actually manage tens of thousands of employees spread all over the globe. But the cold hard political truth is that what happens under your watch, is yours -- you are either credited or blamed. Actually, if something good happens, the President gets the credit; if something bad happens, the Cabinet Secretary gets the blame and a pink slip. She left the State Department, because it had become more of a liability than an asset in her quest to occupy the White House.

In some cases, it appears that the President simply has some other debts that he wishes to pay off. This might explain why Gary Locke, a perfectly competent Secretary of Commerce left, to be replaced by Penny Pritzker, who was a major financial backer of the Democratic Party generally and of Barack Obama specifically. Another way of looking at this one however is that an opening occurred in the very important job as Ambassador to China, and Gary Locke, who is Chinese -- American fit the bill and was

happy to take it. Of course, the doors of opportunity swing both ways, and when Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus wanted the position, he got it, and Locke was out.

Some cabinet members do an excellent job, are highly regarded, and after four years have simply had enough, and want to move on. In this category one would put Ray LaHood, former Republican Congressman from Illinois who served in exemplary fashion as Secretary of Transportation, during the first term in the White House and on Capitol Hill. He could easily have stayed for President Obama's second term, but he chose not to. His replacement, Anthony Foxx, formerly Mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina seems to be doing a good job, but his inexperience does not allow him to be anywhere near the asset on Capital Hill that Ray LaHood was. The same may be true for Secretary of Homeland Security, and former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano. She also served in exemplary fashion, keeping the President from embarrassments in what is a highly visible, new and untested agency dealing with a still evolving mission. But she has moved on, to be President of the University of California, to make a lot more money and have far less stress. She was replaced by an Obama friend, another major Democratic and Obama fundraiser, Jeh Johnson. And finally Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has left, also extremely well-regarded, and like Ray LaHood a Republican. Obama inherited Gates who was Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush. The President kept Gates on, to assure that in the midst of the Afghan and Iraq wars, that there would be some continuity. But Robert Gates has moved on, replaced by Chuck Hagel, a former Republican Senator who doesn't have the credibility of Gates among Republicans nor the military establishment. He may ultimately pay the price for the Bergdahl – Taliban terrorists swap, depending on how that turns out.

What about the cabinet members remaining in place? Eric Holder remains Attorney General and is expected to stay all 8 years. If there is anybody fiercely loyal to Barack Obama and his agenda, it's Holder. He is not going anywhere. Tom Vilsack, former Governor of Nebraska appears to be doing a reasonably good job at a low profile agency, the Department of Agriculture, and the same can be said for Arnie Duncan, an Obama ally from Chicago who has kept the Department of Education out of the news – the primary objective of any cabinet member.

So at this stage of the second term of a President, the second bench is committed to sticking it out, and in the meantime, will spend every waking minute trying to keep the President and themselves out of the news.