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United Nations Issues: Cabinet Rank of the U.S. Permanent Representative

The U.S. Permanent Representative is the chief representative of the United States to the United Nations. The President appoints the Permanent Representative with the advice and consent of the Senate. Of the 31 individuals who have served since 1946, about two-thirds have been accorded Cabinet rank by Presidents. Some Members of Congress have demonstrated an ongoing interest in the Cabinet rank of the Permanent Representative in the context of the Senate confirmation process and broader U.S. policy toward the United Nations. On November 24, 2020, President-elect Biden announced his intent to nominate Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be Permanent Representative, with Cabinet rank. Biden stated that he will accord Cabinet status to Greenfield “because I want to hear her voice on all the major foreign policy discussions we have.” Thomas-Greenfield was confirmed by the Senate on February 23, 2021.

Role of the Permanent Representative

The position of Permanent Representative is authorized in the U.N. Participation Act of 1945 (UNPA; 22 U.S.C. §287(a)). As this law requires the President to appoint the Representative at the rank of Ambassador, all such appointments are subject to Senate advice and consent. The UNPA provides that the Representative shall represent the United States in the U.N. Security Council and may also serve ex officio as U.S. representative to any U.N. organ, commission, or other body (with the exception of U.N. specialized agencies, which have separate U.S. ambassadors). The Permanent Representative shall also perform other functions as directed by the President. As head of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations (USUN) in New York City, the Representative works with the Secretary of State and relevant State Department bureaus and offices, including the Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO), which is led by an assistant secretary and charged with developing, coordinating, and implementing U.S. multilateral policy.

The President’s Cabinet

The President’s Cabinet is an institution based in custom, rather than statute, and its beginnings date to the presidency of George Washington. Some have traced its origins to Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, which provides that the President may require “the Opinion, in writing, of the principal Officer in each of the executive Departments.” This provision suggests that the framers intended that the President would seek advice from department heads, although it does not require that he or she do so by meeting with them.

Successive Presidents have used the Cabinet for varied purposes and to a greater or lesser extent—in some cases very little. Some Presidents have used it as a deliberative or

decisionmaking body. Others appear to have used it chiefly as a means of maintaining communication and the flow of information among key Administration officials.

By tradition, permanent Cabinet membership comprises the President, the heads of the executive departments and, in more recent decades, the Vice President. Beginning with Dwight D. Eisenhower, each President also has accorded Cabinet rank to select senior executive branch leaders, including the U.S. Permanent Representative. The positions and individuals granted this distinction vary by presidency and, sometimes, within a presidency. Some positions, including the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, the United States Trade Representative, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the White House Chief of Staff, have all consistently been accorded this status over the past three decades.

In general, providing an agency head with Cabinet rank can be a way for a President to publicly convey his or her view that the agency is one of the most important in the executive branch. It also can potentially provide an official with parity in communications with, and access to, Secretaries and other Cabinet members.

Cabinet Status by Administration

President Eisenhower appears to have been the first President to accord Cabinet rank to his Permanent Representative, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., in 1953. It is unclear whether Lodge’s successor, James Wadsworth, held the same status. Nearly all subsequent Permanent Representatives appear to have been granted Cabinet rank until the presidency of George H.W. Bush in 1989. In the following years, Presidents Clinton and Obama provided the position with Cabinet rank, while George W. Bush did not. During the Trump Administration, Ambassador Nikki Haley was accorded Cabinet rank, while Ambassador Kelly Craft was not. Over the years, Presidents appear to have usually communicated their intent to accord Cabinet rank to the Permanent Representative through public remarks or communications with the Senate during the appointment and nomination process. **Table 1** identifies each Permanent Representative since 1946 and their Cabinet rank.

Overall, it appears that many Presidents who have granted Cabinet status did so to prioritize sustained engagement and coordination with the United Nations as an element of U.S. foreign policy. Historians have also suggested that Cabinet rank in some cases was meant to compensate for the fact that the past status and achievements of appointees otherwise exceeded the position (in particular, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. under President Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson II under President Kennedy). In other instances, Cabinet rank might have been negotiated as a condition of accepting

the appointment (as was reported in the case of Ambassador Haley under President Trump). Conversely, Administrations that did not accord Cabinet rank may have sought to limit the size of the Cabinet or determined, based on their perception of the United Nations, or other reasons, that the Permanent Representative did not merit a Cabinet seat (e.g., Presidents George H.W. and George W. Bush).

Policy Issues and Congressional Considerations

Although the decision to accord Cabinet rank to the Permanent Representative lies with the President, over the years some Members of Congress have expressed an interest in the issue. Members may view the Permanent Representative's Cabinet rank (or lack thereof) as reflecting both his or her relationship with the Secretary of State and, more broadly, the relationship between the United States and the United Nations.

Many policymakers and observers have debated the benefits and drawbacks of Cabinet rank. On the one hand, some argue it reflects the President's view on the importance of the United Nations. They also suggest that it provides Permanent Representatives with significant influence and standing in U.N. fora. For example, some maintain the Permanent Representative might have more credibility during U.N. negotiations because other governments may perceive that he or she participates in high-level U.S. policy discussions with the President and other Cabinet members. Many may also view the Permanent Representative as having the flexibility and autonomy to react more quickly to changing circumstances during negotiations because there may be a minimal chain of command to which he or she reports. In U.N. fora, where diplomatic rank and protocol are widely respected, Cabinet status may also provide Permanent Representatives with the ability to negotiate not only with their counterparts but also with foreign affairs ministers who report directly to their heads of government.

On the other hand, some contend that holding Cabinet rank, which often includes attending frequent meetings in Washington, DC, can distract Permanent Representatives from responsibilities in New York that often require his or her physical presence (such as formal and informal Security Council negotiations). On the working level, some observers suggest that having two Cabinet members from the State Department (the Permanent Representative and the Secretary of State) might be inefficient. For example, it might create confusion regarding chain of command within the State Department and potentially lead to limited coordination among USUN and the IO Bureau staff, particularly in areas where the IO Bureau holds expertise. Some have also highlighted the need for consistent budgeting procedures for additional staff or resources often required by a Cabinet-ranked Permanent Representative.

More broadly, some observers have suggested that the overall authority and effectiveness of the Permanent Representative does not depend on Cabinet rank, and that such rank does not necessarily confer the additional authority or access that may be attributed to it, given the fluid role of the Cabinet. They contend that the personality, knowledge, and diplomatic skills of the Permanent Representative, both within U.N. fora and the U.S.

government foreign and national security establishment (particularly the State Department), can play a significantly larger role in his or her success.

Table I. Cabinet Rank of U.S. Permanent Representatives: 1946-Present

| Name | President | Years | Cabinet? |
|-------------------------|------------|---------|----------------------|
| Linda Thomas-Greenfield | Biden | 2021- | Yes |
| Kelly Craft | Trump | 2019-21 | No |
| Nikki Haley | Trump | 2017-19 | Yes |
| Samantha Power | Obama | 2013-17 | Yes |
| Susan Rice | Obama | 2009-13 | Yes |
| Zalmay Khalilzad | W. Bush | 2007-09 | No |
| John Bolton | W. Bush | 2005-06 | No |
| John Danforth | W. Bush | 2004-05 | No |
| John Negroponte | W. Bush | 2001-04 | No |
| Richard Holbrooke | Clinton | 1999-01 | Yes |
| William Richardson | Clinton | 1997-98 | Yes |
| Madeleine Albright | Clinton | 1993-97 | Yes |
| Edward Perkins | H.W. Bush | 1992-93 | No |
| Thomas Pickering | H.W. Bush | 1989-92 | No |
| Vernon Walters | Reagan | 1985-89 | Yes |
| Jeane Kirkpatrick | Reagan | 1981-85 | Yes |
| Donald McHenry | Carter | 1979-81 | Yes |
| Andrew Young | Carter | 1977-79 | Yes |
| William Scranton | Ford | 1976-77 | Yes |
| Daniel Moynihan | Ford | 1975-76 | Yes |
| John Scali | Nixon | 1973-75 | Yes |
| George H.W. Bush | Nixon | 1971-73 | Yes |
| Charles Yost | Nixon | 1969-71 | Yes |
| James Wiggins | Johnson | 1968-69 | Yes |
| George Ball | Johnson | 1968 | Yes |
| Arthur Goldberg | Johnson | 1965-68 | Yes |
| Adlai Stevenson II | Kennedy | 1961-65 | Yes |
| James Wadsworth | Eisenhower | 1960-61 | Unclear ^a |
| Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. | Eisenhower | 1953-60 | Yes |
| Warren Austin | Truman | 1947-53 | No |
| Edward Stettinius Jr. | Truman | 1946 | No |

Source: Adapted by CRS from congressional documents, presidential documents, and other relevant articles and transcripts.

- a. Determination of each Permanent Representative's status is made on the basis of the preponderance of evidence from publicly available sources. Based on examination of these sources, CRS was not able to determine whether Ambassador James Wadsworth, who was confirmed and held the position for less than five months at the end of the Eisenhower Administration, held Cabinet rank.

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