

Tillerson's Task: Mastering Mind-Numbing Expectations at State

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The next secretary of state cannot effectively marshal his staff or respond to nations who challenge the global security system until President-elect Trump clarifies his seemingly unconventional foreign policy priorities.

Exxon Mobil Chief Rex Tillerson, like almost all post World War II Secretary of State nominees, if confirmed, will come to the job with extensive international experience and a global network of high level contacts. International business experience with its focus on underlying political and economic trends, as in Tillerson's case, involving extensive negotiation with foreign governments, is comparable to preparation for the job provided by prior diplomatic or high level military assignments. His responsibility for keeping Exxon Mobil teams safe and effective in dangerous, austere environments is also a plus in the "post-Benghazi" State Department.

But in the end, these are only "entry-level" skills that do not guarantee success. Of our 13 Secretaries with more than a one-year tenure since the Kennedy Administration, all had extensive international experience, but only five -- Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, James Baker, Madeleine Albright, and Condoleezza Rice -- are generally seen as successful, with the jury still out on the current Secretary, John Kerry. What counts in the end is mastering the mind-numbingly varied, ambiguous, and often contradictory expectations of the job. The Secretary of State's most important job is not running a bureaucracy but executing the President's foreign policy while serving as a top advisor to him. But these core functions are not unequivocally the Secretary's alone...

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