Former U.S. diplomats offer perspectives on Obama's foreign policy

ecently retired U.S. Foreign Service Officers Earle St. A. Scarlett and Barbara A.H. Scarlett, who have a combined 50-plus years of global diplomatic experience, shared their personal views on President Barack Obama's foreign policy plans at a Dean Rusk Center lecture during March.

The couple noted that because Obama does not yet have a national security document, he has a listening audience that is "broad and deep" of people trying to get a sense of his plan through his statements and actions.

Barbara said as a result, "when he talked about reaching out to people who will open their clinched fists, a lot of people heard that, not just leaders. He is going to have an audience from the bottom up." She added that she is encouraged by this approach and believes the new president will have success internationally because of it.

"It is a bottom-up diplomacy perhaps very close to what Ronald Reagan did when he said 'I don't need the leaders and the press. Just open the mic. I want to talk to the world."

According to Earle, the world is listening and is waiting to see how Obama answers the major challenge of the financial crisis along with some other questions – "Is China a rival or an ally? Is Afghanistan winnable? Is the Palestine-Israeli problem solvable? What tactic or strategy is best to deal with Iraq? How will he and his team solve these problems?"

Earle believes Obama is "a tenacious person and a good listener with a sense of vision that will serve the United States well" both in national security and foreign affairs.

"To wander through the thicket of international affairs and maintain a sense of good relations with our friends [and] grace with our adversaries and then also build new allies requires great dexterity," Earle added.

Since 1976, the Scarletts have had joint overseas diplomatic assignments in Cameroon, Brazil, the Philippines, the former Yugoslavia and Ireland.

Earle's domestic assignments included serving on the China Desk and Task Force during the Tiananmen Square incident and on the Somalia Desk. He was also a director of political training at the Foreign Service Institute and a Foreign Service examiner.

A specialist in public diplomacy, Barbara was a Foreign Service examiner. She worked on diplomatic strategy for the Kyoto Protocol and on television and teleconference programming on diplomatic issues in Latin America. She also served as a policy adviser on the Middle East and as a desk officer for East Africa and Anglophone West Africa.

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