

8.11.13

## Washington's Protocol Chief Capricia Marshall Steps Down

*Capricia Marshall has spent four years as the link between the White House and visiting foreign dignitaries. Sandra McElwaine talks to her about why she's leaving, and the unique pressures and glories of the job.*

By Sandra McElwaine

When Capricia Marshall [announced several months ago](#) that she was stepping down as chief of protocol a sense of disbelief and a collective groan ricocheted through the White House.

"We all looked at each and said, 'What are we going to do now?'" says Melissa Winter, deputy chief of staff to the First Lady.

Everybody was stunned. The Obamas asked her to stay and there have been multiple meetings on how to replace the seemingly irreplaceable 47-year ambassador. "It's a profound loss," continues Winter. "She knows exactly what we should and shouldn't do. And we all trust her. It's really like losing an entire library."

"No one wanted to work for the spouse of the candidate – everyone wanted to work with the candidate. (Working for Hillary) was the best decision I ever made."

Foreign envoys are equally dismayed by Marshall's departure and have been wining and dining her with a continual round of farewell parties – dinners at the British, Israeli, and Canadian Embassies, lunch at the Embassy of Oman and a joint soiree given by all the African Ambassadors at the Embassy of Nigeria, to name a few.

When I asked for comments on Marshall the tributes poured in. A sample:

"My colleagues and I all agree that Ambassador Marshall is truly one of the best protocol chiefs we've ever known. Her professionalism and elegance have impressed all who have worked with her. Her absence will be felt not only by the U.S. government, but also by many of her friends in China," remarks Cui Tiankai, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China.

"Ambassador Marshall is one of America's finest and we hope to see you soon again, Superwoman," says German Ambassador Peter Ammon, expressing the sentiments of all 189 members of the diplomatic corps.

In a snarky city filled with hypocrites and back-stabbers Marshall's status is unique. There are no jabs or jibes about the immensely popular diplomat who, after four whirlwind years of travel to 42 countries, and hundreds of meets-and-greets with the both the president and the secretary of state, has decided to spend more time with her family.

This is usually Washington-speak for someone who's been disgraced, kicked out or asked to resign. But with Marshall this is not the case – she seems to mean what she says. She is going home to be with her 13-year-old son, Robert Cole, and cardiologist husband, Robert.

A couple of days before her departure last Friday we talked in her ground floor State Department office surrounded by photos, packing boxes and assorted mementoes. (Her desk belonged to Henry Kissinger when he was in office.)

“This has been the job of a lifetime, but one thing trumps all and that is family. When you work in a government it’s never a 9-to-5 job. You have to be on call 24/7.”

She goes on to list the plays, birthdays and family events missed and says, “My son is going into eighth grade. It will be very demanding and I want to be there. It’s important.”

When asked if she would go on to work for Hillary Clinton she replies, “If she decides to run? Well, Secretary Clinton has been, as I (have) said, a great mentor of mine.”

Although she insists that her first act after retiring will be to purchase a global travel card and eventually learn to write and speak French, the significance of the above response indicates that Marshall would be available if her former boss goes for the presidency. She has been integral part of the Clinton entourage since she graduated from Case Western Reserve Law school and joined Bill Clinton’s campaign in 1992.

Fascinated by politics, she showed up in Little Rock and started lugging briefing books and literature around the state with Hillary. “No one wanted to work for the spouse of the candidate – everyone wanted to work with the candidate. (Working for Hillary) was the best decision I ever made,” she says.

In 1993 she tagged along to the White House as special assistant to the First Lady. In 1997, at 32, Marshall was appointed social secretary, the youngest on record..

Comparing jobs, she comments, “The job of social secretary is very domestically focused on issues that are occurring immediately at the White House, whereas Chief of Protocol is a global position. My outreach is more to the international community, the diplomatic corps that is posted here, and then delegations that we go to see and visit, and those that come here to the U.S. We are the bridge between the foreign visiting dignitary and the U.S. government. They are very different in their approaches and what I had to do as my daily duty.”

When Hillary Clinton became secretary of state she insisted on bringing along her loyal aide and protegee as chief of protocol, generating angst within the department and skepticism at the White House.

But according to Tom Nides, former deputy secretary of state, Marshall was a “spectacular success.”

“Just managing the relationship between the White House and the State Department is awesome,” he notes. “It’s a monster job, a game of high-stakes poker. The slightest nuance can cause a huge international incident.”

Marshall says her childhood prepared her for the world of diplomacy. Born in Cleveland to a Mexican mother and a Croatian father, she grew up in a multicultural community with diverse languages and customs. “It almost feels like I was bred for this position,” she says.

Cheryl Mills, former chief of staff and counselor to Hillary Clinton, has known Marshall since her years in Arkansas and says behind the engaging smile and breezy charm lies strong determination. “She is a balance of grace, efficiency, and effectiveness, but she is very tough, fearless, and fierce in her commitment to her job,” observes Mills.

During her tenure there have been surprisingly few faux pas or glitches, except for the time she slipped and fell on the North Portico steps during a state visit by the President of Mexico. The tumble has become a staple on YouTube, and now before each state visit the president jokingly whispers in her ear, “Will she go down? Will she go down?”

At a recent reception he told the crowd that in the future if he stood in the wrong place, or used the wrong fork, it was “because Capricia left me.”

Tina Tchen, chief of staff to Michelle Obama confirms a close personal bond between the Obamas and Marshall and says the First Couple “have absolute confidence” in her abilities. “They know they can count on her for every detail and there’s tremendous ease because she’s in charge.”

Her proudest accomplishments:

Creating the Patrons of Diplomacy Program with Secretary Clinton and raising \$20 million to endow the elegant Diplomatic Reception Rooms.

The Global Chiefs of Protocol Conference, where she brought to Washington more than a hundred chiefs from around the world to schmooze, exchange ideas, discuss problems and plan for the future.

The Diplomatic Partnerships Division, where she takes ambassadors around the country to

cities and remote locations – Wyoming, Alaska, Montana – in order to meet local officials and develop business relationships. She also shepherds them through the capital’s complicated corridors of power. Beside the perfect seating, correctly draped flags, and elaborate ceremonies this may be her lasting legacy.

What she has truly accomplished is to make Congress, administration types and American businesspeople more available to foreign diplomats, and to level the playing field for small nations who rarely get to compete with superpowers like Israel, France and England for access and face time.

“Capricia is fair. She treats everybody equally,” says Michael Moussa, Ambassador from Gabon. “She allows you to discover America and to market and sell your country. If I call and try to get through to the head of NSA I don’t know when I’ll hear back. But when Capricia calls, I get a call back the next day. She is

my anchor at the State Department, the guardian angel of ambassadors, and believe me, she can make things happen.”