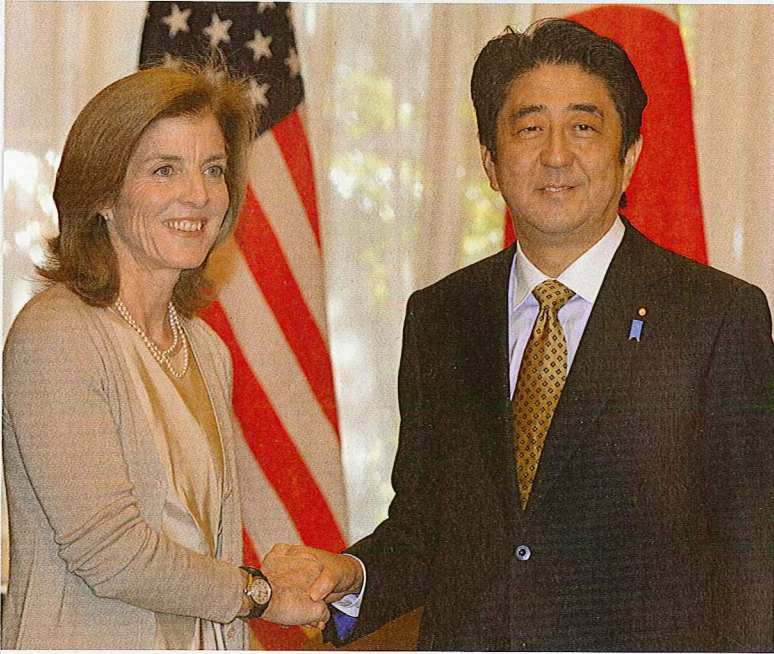


The American way: paying for privilege

As many as a third of the country's Ambassadors purchase their post



by Claudia Flisi

Ambassadorships are explicitly for sale in the United States, where up to one-third of America's highest-ranking diplomats are men or women who pay to be sent abroad for their country. 'Political appointees' become ambassadors without prior diplomatic experience or professional training in foreign affairs, and often without the ability to communicate in the language of the country to which they are posted.

The issue has been underlined by the recent appointment of Caroline Kennedy as the U.S.

Ambassador to Japan despite her lack of diplomatic experience and limited knowledge of the country. Her major qualification instead would seem to be the endorsement of the Kennedy political dynasty favouring the candidacy of Barack Obama for the Presidency over that of Hillary Clinton, who then went on to become the U.S. Secretary of State herself.

It is most often though a question of cash: "Candidates for the Presidency and other powerful offices have to raise huge amounts of private money and one way to reward big donors and fund-raisers is with ambassadorships," explains Tom Fina, a former career diplomat in the American Foreign Service who served as U.S. Consul General in Milan.

One advantage of wealthy donor diplomats is that they are able to personally cover their entertainment expenses, since postings to capitals like London, Paris and Rome cost ambassadors huge sums of money that is not reimbursed.

Some political appointees are selected on the basis of non-financial criteria that simply make them particularly qualified to serve in a specific location. Edwin O. Reischauer was a Harvard professor and Asian scholar - with a Japanese wife - when he was appointed ambassador to Japan in 1961. Richard Gardner was a Columbia professor with experience in Washington - and an Italian wife - when he became ambassador to Italy in 1977. Jon Huntsman, Jr., was a former governor of Utah, fluent in Mandarin Chinese, when he was appointed ambassador to China in 2009.

The practice of appointing non-career ambassadors is not new and is not exclusive to the United States. Nor is interest in enlisting the services of the rich. Some other western democracies, including Japan, do the same, though in more limited numbers.

From an historical perspective, the concept of a 'career foreign service' is a fairly recent one for the U.S. Until 1856, America's Ambassadors