

To Catch the Conscience of a President

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

Sally Jewell is President Obama's nominee for secretary of the interior, to replace Ken Salazar. In her late 50s, she's presently serving as the president and chief executive officer of REI, a Seattle-based retailer of outdoor gear.

She studied engineering at the University of Washington and worked in the oil and banking industries, and sat on boards of the National Parks Conservation Association, the University of Washington Board of Regents, and Premera Blue Cross. A notable career, but the president's move to put her in charge of our public lands surprised some. It brought "unsolicited advice" from Robert B. Semple Jr., the associate editor of the New York Times editorial page.

Semple won a Pulitzer Prize in 1996 for his editorials on environmental issues, including his editorials about a proposed mine that would have been built on the edge of Yellowstone National Park, according to Wikipedia. In a piece on Sunday he counseled Jewell to read Obama's State of the Union Address with great care.

"What she will find there," he said, "is the strong suggestion that the public lands she will be asked to manage wisely and for all Americans serve one purpose only: to produce energy, whether oil or gas or solar or wind. The idea that these lands are also valuable as national parkland, as habitat for thousands of animal and plant species, or as sources of clean water, is nowhere mentioned in that speech."

What the president said and left out in the speech, Semple believes, gives an inkling of the reality people in that cabinet job have confronted over the years: conservation is not a priority, especially in a lackluster economy.

Semple cites the experience of Bruce Babbitt, Bill Clinton's interior secretary. He rarely got Clinton's attention until a pollster showed up with numbers revealing that Republicans were doing themselves harm playing anti-environment politics. "At which point," Semple said, "Mr. Clinton became something of a born-again environmentalist."

Without the solid support of the president, Jewell may find it very difficult, if not impossible, to deal with the obstacles facing the next interior secretary, Semple says. The last Congress did not set aside “a single new acre of wilderness,” and the president “made almost no use” of his authority to preserve new sites of historical significance or great natural beauty.

Jewell springs from the world of business, not politics, which is something new for occupants of the interior post. All the more reason, Semple argues, she will need “the help of a president who so far has not shown much passion for the issues she will confront.”

Early in the Obama presidency, Ken Salazar stirred to cancel “drill now, drill everywhere oil and gas policies” of the Bush administration. But by the time Obama’s re-election campaign was rolling last fall, the president and Salazar “had begun to sound for all the world like Mr. Bush and Dick Cheney in their eagerness to please the fossil-fuel crowd.”

I’m glad Semple spoke out as he did and hope the president was listening.

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