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Utah Governor to Become Ambassador to China

By *Jeff Zeleny*

Updated President Obama on Saturday selected one of the nation's leading Republican governors to serve as the ambassador to China, nominating Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman for the diplomatic post that Mr. Obama called "as important as any in the world."

"We will launch a new era of partnership between our two nations that will advance our shared dreams of opportunity and security in America, in Asia and around the world," Mr. Obama said. "I can think of no more important assignment than creating the kinds of bridges between our two countries that will determine the well being not just of Americans and Chinese, but also the future of the world."

In a morning announcement at the White House, Mr. Huntsman stood at the president's side in the Diplomatic Room and accepted the position that he said came as a surprise. As a co-chairman of Senator John McCain's presidential campaign last year, Mr. Huntsman said he did not expect to be "called into action by the person who beat us."

Mr. Huntsman, 49, learned to speak Mandarin Chinese from his days as a Mormon missionary in Taiwan. He has worked in two Bush administrations, serving as the ambassador to Singapore in the final year of George H.W. Bush's term and as a deputy United States trade ambassador for George W. Bush.

For Mr. Obama, whose advisers already have their eyes set on his re-election in 2012, the selection of Mr. Huntsman is something of a political coup. He has emerged as one of the nation's most visible Republican governors and was expected to at least consider seeking his party's presidential nomination to run against Mr. Obama.

"In the breadth of issues at stake, this ambassadorship is as important as any in the world," Mr. Obama said. "I believe there is much to be gained from a closer working relationship with China, but improved relationships will require candor on issues in which we don't always agree."

As the Republican Party forges through a period of reinvention, Mr. Huntsman has been a leading voice for the direction of the party. He has been a political moderate on issues like immigration, gay rights and the environment, even though he represented one of the most conservative states in the country.

It was far from certain whether Mr. Huntsman would have actually sought the Republican presidential nomination – his centrist views could have created a challenge in early-voting states – but if he is confirmed by the Senate for the ambassadorship to China, he is part of the Obama team at a time when China is of critical importance. And he is out of the mix in the 2012 presidential race.

“When the president of the United States asks you to step up and serve in a capacity like this, that to me is the end of the conversation and the beginning of the obligation to rise to the challenge,” said Mr. Huntsman, who was joined by his wife Mary Kaye, and the couple’s seven children, one of whom was adopted from China.

The courtship of Mr. Huntsman was overseen by the White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, who met with him last Saturday when the governor was in town for the White House Correspondent’s dinner. Mr. Obama also spoke to Mr. Huntsman, aides said, and was impressed by his experience and views on China.

“Governor Huntsman has respect for China’s proud traditions,” Mr. Obama said Saturday. “He understands what it will take to make America more competitive in the 21st century and will be an unstinting advocate for America’s interests and ideals.”

The nomination of Mr. Huntsman is the latest in a series of high-level Republican appointments in the Obama administration. The president selected two Republicans to serve in his Cabinet, but aides said he was frustrated when a third choice, Senator Judd Gregg, Republican of New Hampshire, withdrew his nomination as Commerce Secretary.

Mr. Huntsman, who was elected to his second term of governor last year, intends to step down if he is confirmed by the Senate.

“I hope the good people of Utah will forgive me and understand how proud they should be of their governor for his willingness to serve,” Mr. Obama said. “He always puts country ahead of himself. That’s what Jon has always done.”

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