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July 15, 2010

Winners and Losers

By ROGER COHEN

NEW YORK — The Clintons threw a big Washington bash on June 30 for Hillary Clinton's longtime aide, Huma Abedin, and what struck one of the many guests was the absence of anyone from President Obama's tight White House inner circle.

Congressional heavyweights thronged the garden of the Clinton spread on Embassy Row, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The city's big powerbrokers and various State Department honchos were there for a party marking Abedin's marriage to Congressman Anthony Weiner of New York. But White House insiders stayed away.

Well, as Bill Clinton told CNN recently, "I did everything I could to defeat President Obama and I wanted Hillary to win" — old wounds do not heal overnight. Indeed, they may not heal at all. When my informant said something about the old grievances not going away, the response from the hosts went something like this:

No, they don't and they never will. But, we're public servants and suckers for punishment, so we soldier on.

Speaking of soldiering on, Mrs. Clinton left for Europe the next day and while Americans celebrated July 4, she was in Armenia trying to sort out the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and — equally thankless task — mediate between Armenia and Turkey on their disagreement over what happened in 1915.

You've got to salute Hillary. She's got guts to go with that razor-sharp mind. It's a heck of a job being secretary of state when the White House puts a tight collar around the big issues — Afghanistan, Iran, Israel-Palestine and Iraq — and you're left with Nagorno-Karabakh, disputed Ottoman crimes of World War I and, if you're lucky, U.S. bases on Okinawa. The situation might be slightly less troubling if the boys in the White House — and they are overwhelmingly boys — were foreign-policy heavyweights. They're not. Indeed, I'm told Henry Kissinger refers to them as "the kids."

Chief among them, according to my colleague Helene Cooper, is Denis McDonough, the National Security Council's chief of staff. Earlier this month, Cooper wrote: "Forget Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton or Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates. When it comes to national security, Mr. Obama's inner circle is so tight it largely consists of Mr. McDonough, a 40-year-old from Minnesota who is unknown to most Americans."

I do know McDonough and I've spent a fair amount of time in Minnesota. He has many of the state's qualities: positive, brisk, can-do, affable and efficient.

But am I reassured when I read that Obama's national-security inner circle is comprised of him? Nope. He was a great guy to control the foreign-policy side of a campaign — as he did to perfection for Obama — but he's not a great guy to think big about the world.

Thinking big and bold is required right now. The clock is ticking on momentous presidential decisions. Among them are an Afghan extrication that will salvage a minimum of core U.S. security interests — which will require a bruising negotiation with the Taliban — and what to do about Iran when it becomes apparent by the end of this year that the latest sanctions have changed nothing. Obama's apparent carte blanche to Israel this month on Iran was disturbing.

Then there's Israel-Palestine, where Obama can't decide whether the cost of being an honest broker — pressure on both sides — is worth the domestic heat he takes for being critical of Israel, with the result that he's zigzagging to little effect. After firing Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, Obama said he would tolerate debate but not division. My sense is his foreign-policy house is divided — and the weaker for it. Gen. James Jones, his national security adviser, speaks fine French —

the French love that — but he's left most people unconvinced. Tom Donilon, Jones' deputy, dances around the vacuum as best he can. Like McDonough, David Axelrod and Rahm Emanuel were brilliant campaign strategists, but should they be foreign-policy strategists?

In Clinton, Obama has a Baker-class secretary of state. For how much longer is he going to delegate her to Nagorno-Karabakh? The State Department, a repository of other underused talent, cannot be the White House annex for non-critical affairs.

Back in the 1860s, James Gordon Bennett, then the editor of the New York Herald, a forebear of the International Herald Tribune, gave these instructions to an intrepid foreign correspondent named Henry Morton Stanley:

"Draw a thousand pounds now; and when you have gone through that, draw another thousand, and when that is spent, draw another thousand, and when you have finished that, draw another thousand, and so on; but, FIND LIVINGSTONE." He was referring to the lost African explorer, David Livingstone, whom Stanley eventually tracked down on Lake Tanganyika, uttering the immortal words: "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?"

That sort of journalism's gone out of fashion. So we can all thank Rolling Stone for opening its pocketbook and telling Michael Hastings to do whatever it took to find General McChrystal. In his brilliant piece, Hastings did that. He also found something else: an Afghan policy as fragmented as the team Obama running it.

McChrystal's gone, but not the dysfunction. A blow-up, I presume? Watch this space.