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IN FULL

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**From:** sbwhoeop@aol.com  
**Sent:** Wednesday, November 25, 2009 10:03 AM  
**To:** H; MillsCD@state.gov  
**Subject:** FYI: McDonough feeds this reporter like a zookeeper throwing fish to a seal. He's striking back for Gelb column. Sid

[http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1109/Envoy\\_to\\_Telluride.html](http://www.politico.com/blogs/bensmith/1109/Envoy_to_Telluride.html)

November 24, 2009

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## Envoy to Telluride

As President Obama and a small circle of aides and advisers work out the scale, details and optics of the American strategy in Afghanistan this week, one key figure will be out of town.

Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke — who met Afghan President Hamid Karzai last week and attended the final Afghan session at the White House yesterday — has left will be leaving shortly for a ski vacation in the Colorado resort town of Telluride, I'm told. (UPDATE: Holbrooke spokeswoman Ashley Bommer said Holbrooke is in Washington this morning. "He is planning to spend Thanksgiving with his family in Telluride, Colorado. He will be back this weekend," she e-mails.) Holbrooke's absence seems to confirm what has been whispered for months: that he has not occupied the central role on Afghanistan strategy that he had once been expected to take and that although — or perhaps because — he's maintained his strong relationship with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, his relationship with the White House leaves something to be desired.

Holbrooke's absence means that he won't be the last person the president listens to on the region he's overseeing and, further, that he isn't even fighting for that role. And it's the latest in a series of tea leaves indicating his distance from the White House. Laura Rozen reported on friction earlier this year over the White House insistence that National Security Council chief of staff Denis McDonough clear Holbrooke's meetings. And this week, Holbrooke friend Les Gelb — in a column taken by some in the administration as channeling the envoy's grievances — eviscerated the White House national security staff, taking special aim at "Lord High Executioner" McDonough.

Holbrooke's visit to Afghanistan last week means he's still very much a player in the region. But it's an increasingly crowded field, with military and civilian officials jockeying for influence, John Kerry taking a high-profile role and the White House appearing to stress Hillary Clinton's personal relationship with the Afghan president. The politics of the national security team remain in flux, and Holbrooke has been doing this longer than any of them, so it would be foolish to count him out. However he does, at the moment, seem to be down.

Posted by Ben Smith 11:30 AM