

Bush cabinet choices set the stage for mass social, political struggles

Patrick Martin
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In the selection of its cabinet, the new Republican administration is proceeding as though George W. Bush and Richard Cheney had won an overwhelming electoral mandate for extreme right-wing policies, instead of having lost the popular vote and come to power as the result of a reactionary and anti-democratic intervention by the US Supreme Court.

During the election campaign, Bush and Cheney claimed to represent an “inclusive” and more moderate face for the Republican Party. They distanced themselves from the deeply unpopular Republican congressional leadership. Bush did not even visit Washington DC for eight months, from the time of a fundraising dinner last April until after Gore's concession speech.

Now the pretense of broadening the base of the Republican Party and reaching out to the disaffected is being scrapped. The incoming administration is packed with right-wing ideologues and direct representatives of corporate America. Several of the cabinet nominations, notably John Ashcroft for attorney general, Gail Norton for interior secretary and Linda Chavez for secretary of labor, amount to provocations against the working class, minorities and those concerned with the defense of civil rights, civil liberties and the environment.

These selections demonstrate, not merely the reactionary character of the Bush-Cheney administration, but its insensitivity to the deepening social and political crisis in the United States. The election revealed a country deeply split, and even before the new administration assumes power it is regarded as illegitimate by millions of people. Rather than extend an olive branch to its opponents, however, it is throwing down the gauntlet.

The presidential vote and the election contest in Florida provided a glimpse of the enormous social divisions in America. Bush was able to gain the presidency not only because of the intervention of the five-member right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court, but because the Democratic Party, the trade union bureaucracy, the civil rights establishment and the other props of American liberalism confined all opposition to the political coup in Florida within the framework of the court system.

The Bush administration won power through a flagrant violation of popular sovereignty, ratified by a Supreme Court majority that based itself on the assertion that the people do not have a constitutional right to vote for president or to have their votes fairly counted. Bush's cabinet choices demonstrate that he is preparing to follow this up with intensified attacks on democratic rights.

The result can be foreseen: the policies of the Bush administration will inevitably provoke resistance from the masses, while discrediting those who counseled submission to the Supreme Court and acceptance of the Republican coup in the name of respect for “the rule of law.”

The cabinet members and top White House aides whose appointments have been announced over the past three weeks comprise two main groups: representatives of the extreme right, chosen for their hostility to the government programs they will administer, and former officials of the

Ford, Reagan and Bush administrations who have spent the Clinton years in well-paying positions in corporate America.

Bush takes office thanks to the suppression of tens of thousands of votes in Florida, many of those cast by black and other minority voters. It is therefore difficult to conceive of a more inflammatory action than his nomination of outgoing Senator John Ashcroft as attorney general, the official who will have principal responsibility for enforcement of voting rights laws and the selection of new federal judges, including justices of the Supreme Court.

Ashcroft, the son and grandson of fundamentalist ministers, was one of the most right-wing members of the US Senate. He received 100 percent approval ratings from the Christian Coalition and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. The National Organization for Women and the environmentalist League of Conservation Voters gave him a rating of zero. Ralph Neas, president of People for the American Way, a civil liberties group, said: “With the possible exception of Senator Jesse Helms, I do not believe anyone in the United States Senate has a more abysmal record on civil rights and civil liberties.”

In his six years in the Senate, Ashcroft was identified with the most anti-democratic and punitive social policies. He supported an outright ban on abortion, even in the case of rape or incest, and jail sentences of up to life in prison for doctors who perform so-called partial birth abortions. In the 1996 welfare reform legislation he tried unsuccessfully to ban all aid to unwed teenage mothers, while introducing a successful amendment allowing states to compel welfare recipients to get assistance from religious groups.

The nominee to head the Justice Department has longstanding ties with racist groups. In 1998 and 1999 he contemplated a campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, in which he would have opposed Bush from the right. He gave a friendly interview to *Southern Partisan*, a publication dedicated to defense of the historical reputation of the Confederate slave owners. Ashcroft hailed Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis as “patriots,” adding that it was wrong to portray the Confederate South as fighting for “some perverted agenda.”

Ashcroft swept a presidential straw poll of South Carolina Republicans, beating Bush by 2 to 1, but eventually decided not to run because of Bush's huge financial edge. Later in 1999 he gave the commencement address at Bob Jones University, the South Carolina fundamentalist college that only lifted its ban on interracial dating last year, after public attention was focused on it during the presidential campaign.

During the election campaign candidate George Bush repeatedly deplored what he called “the partisan warfare” in Washington. Ashcroft is the personification of this warfare. He was an early and vocal supporter of the impeachment of Bill Clinton. During the Senate trial, in which Ashcroft sat as a juror, his political-action committee shared its fundraising lists with the legal defense funds of Linda Tripp and Paula Jones. If Ashcroft takes office as attorney general he will have significant influence on whether Clinton is ultimately prosecuted for the Monica

Lewinsky affair.

The Republican senator used his position on the Judiciary Committee to delay or block Clinton judicial appointments. The most notorious case involved Ronnie White, the first black member of the Missouri Supreme Court, whom Clinton named to a federal district court vacancy. Ashcroft launched a vicious attack on White, grossly distorting his judicial record, that resulted in a party-line 55-45 vote to reject the nomination, the first time in nearly 50 years that a district court nominee was defeated in the Senate.

It is worth recalling that in 1993 the Clinton White House had to withdraw two nominees for attorney general, Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood, over minor infractions involving immigrant nannies. These incidents, grossly inflated by the media on the grounds that the “chief law enforcement officer” of the United States had to be legally spotless, were the first in a long series of provocations engineered by the extreme right against the Clinton administration, culminating in impeachment.

The contrast to the present situation is staggering. Bush has nominated an attorney general who opposes the entire framework of civil liberties and civil rights protections established over the past 50 years, who has close ties to racist and religious fundamentalist groups, and there is only token resistance from the Democrats. Not one Senate Democrat has yet declared opposition to Ashcroft's nomination, and several—including Robert Torricelli of New Jersey and Russ Feingold of Wisconsin—have said that Ashcroft would be confirmed and they would vote for him.

Several other Bush nominations have the same character as the selection of Ashcroft—the appointment of individuals with long records of attacking the constituencies their agencies nominally serve. These include:

* *Gail Norton for secretary of interior* —a former attorney for the anti-environmentalist Mountain States Legal Foundation, an aide and protege of James Watt, Reagan's notorious interior secretary, Norton is a right-wing ideologue of the “property rights” movement, funded by the oil and strip-mining companies.

* *Spencer Abraham for secretary of energy* —the outgoing Michigan senator, defeated for reelection, introduced legislation to abolish the Department of Energy in 1999, in favor of sweeping deregulation. The former aide to Vice President Dan Quayle also supported a bill to open the wilderness areas of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling.

* *Tommy Thompson for secretary of health and human services* —the governor of Wisconsin is best known for his frequent conflicts with the department he will now administer over requests by his state government to establish welfare policies more restrictive than the federal norm. Wisconsin ultimately served as the model for Clinton's 1996 welfare reform, which has destroyed an important element in the social safety net and reduced tens of thousands of former aid recipients to destitution.

* *Linda Chavez for secretary of labor* —a former Democrat and union bureaucrat (politically educated in that incubator of right-wing anticommunists, the national headquarters of the American Federation of Teachers), Chavez became notorious as a Reagan administration official for her attacks on civil rights and affirmative action laws. She opposes minimum wage laws as “Marxist” and regularly bashes unions in her syndicated column.

Several other appointments also signal the support of the incoming Bush-Cheney administration for the policies of the extreme right.

Rod Paige, the nominee for secretary of education, introduced a school voucher program as school superintendent in Houston, Texas, but only a handful of parents chose to enter it. He contracted with private companies to handle garbage collection, food preparation and schools for difficult students, and tied principals' pay to student performance on standardized tests. His appointment is a pledge of Bush's support for school vouchers and other measures to encourage privatization in education.

Mel Martinez, the nominee for secretary of housing and urban development, had little involvement in this field in his previous position,

as elected chief executive of Orange County, Florida. His selection is less an indication of Bush's housing policy—he has none—than a payoff to the Cuban-American ultra-right groups who played a key role in stealing the Florida election. Martinez was a co-chairman of Bush's Florida campaign and played a prominent role in the effort to block the return of Elian Gonzalez to his Cuban father.

Donald Rumsfeld, the nominee for secretary of defense, is closely identified with plans for a US anti-missile defense system. Pentagon chief for the last 14 months of the administration of Gerald Ford, 25 years ago, Rumsfeld has since been a corporate CEO. In 1998 he headed a commission set up by congressional Republicans to promote the missile defense plan, which is expected to be the top military priority of the Bush administration.

Rumsfeld, prospective Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and several other nominees are representative of the other component of the Bush cabinet—corporate America. Rumsfeld was CEO of the pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle for a dozen years, before moving on to the electronics firm General Signal Corp.

O'Neill will move to the Treasury from the boardroom of Alcoa, the world's biggest aluminum maker, where he is retiring after 13 years as CEO. O'Neill was a top-level budget official in the Ford administration, then headed International Paper before joining Alcoa. A longtime crony of Cheney, O'Neill was recruited for the Alcoa post by Alan Greenspan, then on the board of the giant corporation, now chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. O'Neill returns to government enormously enriched by his tenure at Alcoa—he is reportedly worth at least \$100 million, and holds options on Alcoa stock which dwarf those of Cheney at Halliburton, the oil services company Cheney headed for five years.

Bush's commerce secretary will be Donald Evans, a Texas oil millionaire who is his campaign chairman and closest personal friend. His secretary of veterans' affairs, Anthony Principi, was number two in that department under Bush's father, before becoming a corporate executive at Lockheed Martin, the big military contractor. The token Democrat in the cabinet, former congressman Norman Mineta, named as secretary of transportation, also worked for Lockheed Martin after leaving Congress in 1995.

Ann Veneman, the nominee for secretary of agriculture, is the first product of California agribusiness to hold that position (her father was a Modesto peach and grape grower turned Republican politician). She was deputy secretary of agriculture in the administration of Bush's father, then returned to California to head the Department of Food and Agriculture under Governor Pete Wilson. In 1996, after several instances of school children being sickened by tainted strawberries, Veneman called a news conference and publicly consumed the fruit in order to debunk the “scare.”

Corporate connections are even more pervasive among the incoming White House staff. Chief of Staff Andrew Card was head of the American Automobile Manufacturers Association, then vice president of General Motors. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, a former Reagan White House aide and Stanford provost, is on the board of directors of Chevron and Charles Schwab, and advises J.P. Morgan. Budget Director Mitch Daniels was a vice president of drug maker Eli Lilly. Deputy chief of staff for policy Josh Bolten comes from Goldman Sachs International. Joseph Hagin, deputy chief of staff for operations, was an executive at Chiquita Brands and Federated Department Stores. David Addington, counsel to Richard Cheney, was general counsel of the American Trucking Association.

The Bush cabinet has been hailed by the media for its diversity—only six of fifteen cabinet-level officials are white males, the remainder include blacks, Hispanics, women, an Arab-American, an Asian-American, etc. But it is a measure of the insulated character of the political and media establishment that it entertains the notion that deeply reactionary social

policies can be made palatable to broad masses of the American people by such cosmetic gestures.

Judged from the only serious standpoint, by its social and class character, rather than the details of color and gender, the Bush cabinet is of a piece: politically reactionary, hostile to the interests of working people, subservient to the dictates of corporate America. It embodies the chasm that separates the political elite from the population it claims to represent. This administration is certain to set in motion a broad and deep-going process of political radicalization in the US.



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