

Obama names more cabinet secretaries—a continued march to the right

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President-elect Barack Obama used a press conference in Chicago Wednesday to name two more members of his cabinet—Colorado Democratic Senator Ken Salazar for secretary of interior and former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack to be agriculture secretary. Following the naming the day before of Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan as secretary of education, the latest appointments have only underscored the right-wing character of the incoming administration.

In the case of Salazar, Obama has selected a figure who stands on the right wing of the Senate Democratic caucus, excelled only by Connecticut's "independent-Democrat" Joseph Lieberman in his identification with the policies of the Bush administration.

A supporter of the Iraq war, Salazar distinguished himself as a freshman senator in 2003 by personally leading Alberto Gonzales onto the floor of the Senate and then testifying on his behalf in his attorney general confirmation hearings.

He likewise enthusiastically backed Bush's selection of Gale Norton, a right-wing Republican from Colorado, for secretary of the interior.

Previously Salazar supported the appointment of William Myers III, a former Interior Department solicitor and ranching industry lobbyist, as a federal judge. While the American Bar Association rated Myers as "not qualified," Salazar praised his "outstanding legal reasoning" on federal land use issues. By contrast, Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, called Myers "the most anti-environmental candidate for the bench I have seen in 37 years in the Senate."

While in the Senate, Salazar voted: against increased fuel efficiency standards for the US cars, in support of offshore oil drilling on Florida's coast, against the repeal of tax breaks for Exxon-Mobil, and in support of subsidies to ranchers using public lands. He also fought against attempts to beef up protection for endangered species and the environment in the US Farm Bill.

Salazar's appointment was greeted with dismay by environmental groups, which had lobbied against his being named. He is widely seen in the West as a loyal servant of the big ranching, mining and other major corporate interests, which backed his selection.

Jon Marvel of the Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project called the appointment a "travesty." Salazar, he said, "will completely undermine Obama's message of change. He will not bring change to the public lands of the western United States."

"Ken Salazar is very closely tied to ranching and mining and very traditional, old-time, Western, extraction industries," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. "We were promised that an Obama presidency would bring change."

"The only ones pleased" with the appointment, noted National Public Radio's Jeff Brady, "were those in the agriculture and mining industries. During the campaign these folks, generally, were counted as supporters of Republican John McCain."

Dan Keppen, head of the Family Farm Alliance, told NPR, "Of all the names mentioned, Salazar is the one we're happiest with."

"Salazar is the first name mentioned that we could support," declared Laura Skaer, executive director of the Northwest Mining Association. She referred to the nominee as "fair and balanced."

Indeed, Salazar's appointment was celebrated on the stock market Wednesday. Shares of Consol Energy and of Massey Energy Co. both climbed by more than 10 percent in the course of afternoon trading on expectations that his taking charge at the Interior Department would spell continued opening up of federal lands for mineral exploitation.

The choice was also hailed by the current occupant of the office, Bush appointee and right-wing Idaho Republican, Dirk Kempthorne, who made expansion of drilling his number one priority at the scandal-plagued department.

"Ken Salazar is an excellent selection for secretary of the interior. ... He recognizes the importance that America's federal lands must play in reducing our dependence on foreign energy," said Kempthorne.

In selecting Tom Vilsack for agriculture, for the fourth time Obama has chosen a Democrat who challenged him in the 2008 election to serve in his administration. He joins former candidates Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton and Bill Richardson.

Vilsack announced his candidacy, but then withdrew from the race before the first Democratic primaries because of

difficulties raising money. He was a prominent supporter of Clinton and frequently attacked Obama as too inexperienced to be president.

In announcing his selection of Vilsack, Obama stressed that the Department of Agriculture is "designed to serve not big agribusiness or Washington influence-peddlers, but family farmers and the American people."

Once again, however, political reality belies the rhetoric. In Vilsack, Obama has selected a prominent advocate of agribusiness and particularly subsidies to big farm interests for the development of corn-based ethanol, whose production has already played such a destructive role in the driving up of worldwide food prices.

Wednesday's nominations were hailed by the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the right-wing caucus that has campaigned for the Democratic Party to ditch any residual ties to liberal reformism and which enthusiastically supported the war against Iraq. Vilsack is a former chair of the DLC, while Salazar was its national conversation chair.

These nominations followed Obama's announcement the day before that he had selected Arne Duncan, the "chief executive officer" of the Chicago public school system, as his education secretary.

Duncan, 44, a Harvard-trained lawyer like Obama rather than a professional educator, was tapped by Mayor Richard Daley to head the Chicago schools in 2001. He has built a reputation as an education "reformer," a misnomer that is identified with the drive to privatize public education and subordinate it ever more closely to the needs of big business.

In Chicago, Duncan's tenure has been identified with his "Renaissance 2010" initiative, which has involved the punitive shutting down of low-performing schools in the city's poorer neighborhoods and then reopening them after replacing the staff or forcing teachers to reapply for their old positions.

Other practices carried out under his direction include performance pay for teachers, the promotion of charter schools and forcing failing students to repeat years.

He is seen as a strong supporter of the "No Child Left Behind" initiative of the Bush administration, in particular the imposition of standardized testing and the rote learning that goes with it.

Bush's former Secretary of Education Rod Paige called Duncan a "budding hero in the education business."

In Chicago and many other urban districts, the policy has led to a kind of educational triage, in which poorer performing schools are shuttered and less able students are forced out. Just 51 percent of Chicago's public school students manage to complete a high school education in 12 years.

Duncan's nomination was strongly supported by the pro-Republican *Chicago Tribune*, which portrayed the debate over a new education secretary as one between "two warring camps—reformers who demand more accountable schools and defenders of the complacent status quo." In

general, the latter camp is meant to refer to teachers and their unions.

Obama, the paper argued, had to appoint someone willing to "smash skulls" or risk "telegraphing that the education industry has succeeded in outlasting the Bush push for increasingly tough performance standards in schools."

Also backing Duncan was David Brooks, the Republican columnist for the *New York Times*, who argued that he possessed "the political skills necessary to build a coalition on behalf of No Child Left Behind reauthorization."

The selection was praised by the Republican-aligned Thomas B. Fordham Institute, whose director Chester Finn, a former education department official in the Reagan administration, commented that Duncan "is a proven and committed and innovative education reformer" who is "not tethered to the public school establishment and its infinite interest groups."

And Bush's Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings praised Duncan as a "great choice," calling him "a visionary leader and fellow reformer."

Some of these same Republican and right-wing elements had also backed New York City's schools Chancellor Joel Klein, but, as Brooks wrote in the *Times*, saw his appointment unlikely because he had been "blackballed by the unions." Duncan was seen as a worthy substitute because he was "less controversial," a "stealth candidate," prepared to implement the same policies but with less friction.

Indeed, following the announcement, American Federation of Teachers chief Randi Weingarten commented positively, "Arne Duncan actually reaches out and tries to do things in a collaborative way." The message was clear: the main teachers' union is prepared to collaborate with the Obama administration in implementing much the same reactionary education policies as those promoted by the Bush administration before it.



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