

Obama's Team of Reactionaries

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In recent weeks, numerous media accounts have referred to President-elect Barack Obama's cabinet selections as a "team of rivals." The reference is to a book of the same name by the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin on Abraham Lincoln's choices for key cabinet posts after his victory in the 1860 election, when he confronted the secession crisis and then the Civil War.

The media comparisons between Lincoln's and Obama's cabinets are specious, betraying a combination of historical ignorance and political shallowness. The false analogy serves two political functions. First, it implicitly imparts to Obama a progressive and democratic aura which is, in fact, belied by his cabinet selections, all of whom are advocates of militarism abroad and austerity at home. Second, the analogy distorts and demeans the historically progressive character of Lincoln and his government, which embodied a profoundly democratic and ultimately revolutionary agenda, centered on the struggle against slavery and the preservation of the union.

The use of the term "team of rivals" in relation to the Obama cabinet rests on the president-elect's selection for secretary of state of his chief opponent for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, and his retention from the Bush administration of Robert Gates for defense secretary. Obama won the nomination over Clinton, who was the early favorite, by appealing to broad opposition to the war in Iraq among Democratic voters and the population at large, incessantly reminding voters that "she got it wrong" in her support for the invasion and presenting himself as the candidate who would bring a rapid end to the war. He then won the general election based on a powerful voter repudiation of the Bush administration's militaristic foreign policy and its pro-corporate and anti-democratic domestic agenda.

Gates oversaw the conduct of the "surge" in Iraq that drowned the Sunni resistance in blood and ethnically

cleansed vast areas of the country. He has publicly opposed any timetable for the withdrawal of US forces.

Obama's top cabinet appointments thus represent a brazen repudiation of his campaign rhetoric, a slap in the face to the millions of workers and youth who voted for him because they believed or hoped that the victory of the candidate of "change" would really signal a change for the better, and a clear signal to the ruling elite that his administration will, in all essentials, continue the imperialist and militarist policies of the Bush administration.

This is not only not analogous to Lincoln's approach, it is the opposite. Lincoln's key cabinet picks, while they had been rivals for the Republican Party nomination of 1860, in no way represented a retreat from the central principles of his campaign and the aspirations of his voters: preserving the union and preventing the expansion of slavery. These appointments included William Seward as secretary of state, Salmon Chase as treasury secretary, and Edward Bates as attorney general.

Lincoln rose to prominence in the young Republican Party by giving political voice to mass popular sentiment against the expansion of slavery to the new states and territories of the West. Largely because of his genius for clearly presenting the critical political issues related to slavery, he bested more prominent politicians such as Seward (senator from New York) and Chase (governor of Ohio) in the contest for the 1860 Republican presidential nomination. But despite numerous political and personal differences, Seward, Chase and all of Lincoln's other cabinet selections shared the central aim of the Republican Party—preserving the union and defeating the rebellion of the Southern slave owners.

Lincoln did not invite rivals into his cabinet who disagreed with him on basic questions of principle, such as Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, who represented the northern wing of the Democratic Party

in the 1860 election and who advocated further concessions to the southern elite on the slavery issue, or John C. Breckinridge, the candidate of the Democratic Party's southern wing, who favored the expansion of slavery. To have matched Obama's cynicism, Lincoln would have needed to appoint Douglas as secretary of state and Breckinridge as secretary of war.

The "rivals" he did appoint to his cabinet all shared his hatred of slavery and his determination to defeat the pro-slavery forces, by force of arms if necessary. As a senator in the 1850s, Seward earned a reputation as one of the most articulate opponents of slavery. He denounced the Compromise of 1850, which allowed for the expansion of slavery and sanctioned the passage of the reactionary Fugitive Slave law. In so doing, Seward memorably appealed to a "higher law" than the Constitution. In the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted slavery in the new states under the guise of popular sovereignty, he called the question of slavery the "irrepressible conflict" that could not be avoided by the sorts of compromises favored by Douglas and other northern Democrats.

Edward Bates, from Missouri, was a former Whig who, after a long period of semi-retirement, regained political prominence based on his opposition to the expansion of slavery to neighboring Kansas. His selection as attorney general was designed to win support among the border states for the Lincoln administration and its struggle against the Southern slaveocracy.

Kearns Goodwin makes much of Chase's jealousy toward Lincoln. But Chase's opposition to slavery was never in doubt. He made his political name as a young Ohio attorney defending fugitive slaves against their masters, and was a founder of the Free-Soil Party, a precursor to the Republican Party. After Lincoln accepted his resignation as treasury secretary in 1864, he quickly appointed Chase as chief justice of the Supreme Court, where his decisions upheld Reconstruction in the South.

In securing the 1860 Republican nomination, Lincoln beat out his main rivals, Seward, Chase and Bates. Then, after winning the general election, he invited them to assume key cabinet posts. He did so not simply because he was a shrewd politician, but because he wished to unite the various sections of the Republican Party behind the aspirations of genuinely democratic

forces in the country and create the best possible conditions for crushing the Southern planters' rebellion.

In contrast to Lincoln's Team of Rivals, Obama has chosen a Team of Reactionaries, which embodies the president-elect's cynical and contemptuous repudiation of his campaign rhetoric and the aspirations of the vast majority of those who voted for him.

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