

# Who's who in the Obama cabinet

## Part four: Domestic policy

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*This is the fourth and final in a series of profiles of the major appointees to the cabinet and top White House staff of Barack Obama. Part one, "Who's who in the Obama cabinet—Economic and budget policy" was posted January 19. Part two, "Who's who in the Obama cabinet—Internal security" was posted January 20. Part three, "Who's who in the Obama cabinet—National security and foreign policy", was posted January 21.*

The bulk of Obama's appointments for cabinet positions covering domestic policy are secondary figures who will be expected to administer the agencies rather than make major policy decisions. Many of these were rubber-stamped Tuesday in a 99-0 vote of the US Senate, without a single Republican voting no, including Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu as secretary of energy, Chicago School Superintendent Arne Duncan as secretary of education, former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack as secretary of agriculture, and retired General Eric Shinseki as secretary of veterans affairs.

Sean Donovan, the New York City housing director named to be secretary of housing and urban development, Lisa Jackson, the New Jersey environment secretary named head of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Trade Representative Ron Kirk, the former mayor of Dallas, are similar figures, as are the two sitting members of the House of Representatives named to the cabinet, Democrat Hilda Solis, nominated as secretary of labor, and Republican Ray LaHood, nominated as secretary of transportation.

Three of the top appointments, however, give a glimpse of the Obama administration's political direction in domestic policy.

### **Tom Daschle, secretary of health and human services**

The long-time leader of the Democratic Senate Caucus, Daschle played a critical role in cultivating Barack Obama for the presidency after the latter graduated to the US Senate in 2004. Obama's presidential campaign was largely staffed by former Daschle aides, and Daschle himself served as Obama's national campaign co-chair. He has been rewarded with his

position at Health and Human Services (HHS), and a second appointment as the top White House coordinator of health care policy, giving him the leading role in both formulating and winning congressional approval for the promised overhaul of the health care system.

Given Daschle's political views and his role (along with his wife) as a top lobbyist for corporate America, any Obama health care plan will be firmly based on the capitalist market, and therefore hostile to the interests of the vast majority of working people whose needs have been failed by the profit-based health care system.

After losing his South Dakota Senate seat in the 2006 elections, Daschle took a position as a "special consultant" with a powerful Washington law/lobbying firm, Alston and Bird, reputedly earning more than \$1 million per year. Alston and Bird represent major health care industry corporations, such as HealthSouth, CVS Caremark, the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, and Abbott Laboratories. Because Daschle was never officially registered as a lobbyist, his influence-peddling on behalf of health corporations does not create a legal obstacle to his installment at HHS—where he will have significantly more influence over decisions affecting the corporations he formerly represented.

Daschle and his wife, Linda Hall, are one of Washington's "power couples." An administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration in the Clinton administration, Hall parlayed that political experience and the clout of her well-placed husband into one of the top lobbying positions in Washington. Her representatives include the major aerospace and defense firms Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

If confirmed, one of Daschle's primary tasks will be to "reform" Medicare. At a January 8 hearing before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Daschle indicated that whatever overhaul of Medicare emerges will be based upon bipartisan consensus—i.e., it must have the support of the right wing of the Republican Party. Daschle said that Medicare "just isn't working right," but rather than demanding billions more in funding, he envisions a drastic restructuring of the program, which will require super-majorities of over 70 votes in the Senate. "I really want to work in a collaborative way. It's the only way we're going to get this done," he said.

Daschle played a critical role in October 2002, mobilizing Democratic Congressional support behind the resolution authorizing President Bush to invade Iraq. Throughout his decade as leader of the Democrats in the Senate, and particularly during his two years as Senate majority leader (2001-2002), he was most noted for his “soft-spoken” leadership style, which amounted in practice to a mealy-mouthed and hypocritical subservience to the Republican right.

### **Ken Salazar, secretary of the interior**

Ken Salazar was confirmed unanimously on Tuesday by his fellow senators for the post of secretary of the interior. Barack Obama’s nomination of the Democratic senator from Colorado won broad support from the Republican Party and powerful mining and ranching interests.

The Department of the Interior is one of the most important federal agencies, overseeing approximately 500 million acres, about 20 percent of all land in the US, most of it located in the West. The position is traditionally given to a representative of Western mining, mineral and ranching interests, and Salazar fits that bill.

During his four-plus years as a senator, Salazar was among the most right-wing in the Democratic caucus. He was an ardent supporter of the war in Iraq. He enthusiastically backed a number of President Bush’s nominations for cabinet and judicial appointments, including Alberto Gonzales for attorney general and the virulently anti-environmentalist ranching lobbyist William Myers III for federal judge.

In an earlier perspective statement, the *World Socialist Web Site* summed up Salazar’s reactionary voting record: “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.”

Environmental groups, who worked assiduously for Barack Obama’s victory in the general election, lamented Obama’s choice, which one called a “travesty.” The ranching and mining industries, which worked just as hard for the victory of John McCain, Obama’s Republican rival, celebrated Salazar’s selection. When possible nominations were still being considered, Dan Keppen, head of ranching group Family Farm Alliance, said that “of all the names mentioned, Salazar is the one we’re happiest with.” Laura Skaer, executive director of the Northwest Mining Association, said, “Salazar is the first name mentioned that we could support.”

### **Rahm Emanuel, White House chief of staff**

Rahm Emanuel is notorious as one of the most fervently pro-Israeli figures in the Obama administration, illustrated by his service as a civilian volunteer with the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1991 Gulf War. This is in part due to family ties. Emanuel’s father, who was born in Jerusalem, was a member of the fascist organization Irgun that carried out brutal crimes against Palestinians between 1931 and 1948. Interviewed by the Israeli daily *Maariv* about whether or not his son would push Obama toward continuing support of Israel, the elder Emanuel replied in racist terms. “Obviously, he will influence the president to be pro-Israel,” he said, “Why wouldn’t he? What is he, an Arab? He’s not going to clean the floors of the White House.”

But Emanuel will play a more central role in domestic policy, particularly because of his close ties to the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives, where he served for six years, rising to the number four position as head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

A top domestic policy adviser to President Bill Clinton, Emanuel championed “welfare reform” that aimed to balance the federal budget on the backs of the working class. Upon leaving the Clinton administration, Emanuel converted his political connections into a lucrative position with the global investment banking firm of Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, taking home \$18 million from 1999 to 2002. This fortune was parlayed into easy victory in a safely Democratic House seat in northwest Chicago. He became a top recipient of campaign funds from Wall Street. In return, he played a key role in securing the votes necessary for passage of the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout in October.

In 2006, Emanuel, together with Bruce Reed of the Democratic Leadership Council, coauthored a book entitled *The Plan*, which outlined the Democratic Party’s militarist agenda. Emanuel proposed a new mass conscription program called “universal citizen service,” in which “all Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 should be asked to serve their country by going through three months of basic civil defense training and community service.” Emanuel is a prominent member of the New Democrat Coalition, a grouping of reactionary congressional Democrats that lists its four critical issues as “national security, economic growth, personal responsibility, and technology.”

*Concluded*



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