

Obama's team: A right-wing cabinet for a government of big business

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In advance of his inauguration, President-elect Barack Obama has assembled a cabinet drawn from the upper echelons of American society and the right-wing of the Democratic Party. Despite his invocations of “change,” his appeals to antiwar sentiment and to young people in the course of nearly two years of campaigning, there is not a single figure in the leading personnel of the Obama administration drawn from the more liberal elements of the Democratic Party, let alone anyone representative of the broad masses of working people and youth.

The right-wing character of Obama's nominees is described by the media under the approving labels of “centrist,” “moderate,” and—most of all—“pragmatic.” This terminology signifies that the incoming Obama team consists entirely of individuals who pass muster with the corporate-financial elite. There is not a whiff of genuine oppositional sentiment, let alone political radicalism, among the lot of them.

It is a remarkable fact that if Hillary Clinton had won the Democratic nomination and the presidency instead of Obama, there would be virtually no change in the cabinet selections. The *Washington Post* noted Sunday, in its overview of the transition process, that Obama staffers have a running joke: “If you wanted Obama to win for president, you should have worked on his campaign, but if you wanted to work for him, you should have worked for Hillary.”

If the most virulently pro-war Democrat in the Senate, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, were entering the White House, he would be quite comfortable presiding over a meeting of the cabinet

selected by Barack Obama—even though the former professed such sharp opposition to Obama that he campaigned publicly for Republican John McCain last fall.

In its basic policies, the incoming Democratic administration will change the policies of the Bush administration only at the margins. One could posit a law of political physics: the more peripheral the policy area, the more “change” Obama will bring. Conversely, on the most critical issues—war, the economy, democratic rights—the shifts in policy and personnel will be cosmetic at best.

The continuity from Bush to Obama is symbolized by two of the main appointees: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of the Treasury-designate Timothy Geithner. Both played key roles in the Bush administration, and both will play even more important roles in the Obama administration.

Obama postured as the most antiwar of the major candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, and owed his narrow victory over Hillary Clinton in large measure to the support among youth and students mobilized on the basis of opposition to the war in Iraq. He has now decided, however, to retain the chief administrator of Bush's war policies. Gates was installed at the Pentagon in December 2006 and oversaw the Bush “surge” of 30,000 troops into Iraq, as well as a continuation of the war in Afghanistan.

Geithner is moving up from the number three position in the Bush administration's financial bailout squad, where he served as president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and worked with outgoing Secretary

of the Treasury Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. Geithner's reward for the collapse on Wall Street, where he was the chief day-to-day government monitor of the financial markets, is to be promoted to the topmost policy-making position.

The confirmation hearings held so far this month have demonstrated the essential unity of the Democrats and Republicans under conditions of financial and military-political crisis. Transgressions of the kind that would have invariably derailed a presidential appointment in the last several transitions—failure to pay taxes, employing undocumented immigrants, even involvement in policy debacles and corrupt deal-making—have been swept aside in the interests of swiftly assembling the team to carry out the new president's program.

Geithner, for example, will head the department that includes the Internal Revenue Service having failed to pay his payroll taxes over a four-year period, only providing restitution with interest and penalties after he was nominated as treasury secretary. Attorney General-designate Eric Holder was responsible for implementing the pardon of fugitive billionaire speculator Marc Rich in the last days of the Clinton administration in 2000.

But after their respective confirmation hearings this week, Republican senators lined up to support both nominees. Orrin Hatch of Utah, speaking of Geithner, told Fox News, "He's a very, very competent guy." Even more effusive was Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, who called Geithner's tax problems "a lot to do about nothing." He added, "I just find it to be really unfortunate because here is an extraordinarily qualified guy who we really do want to have in leadership here in Washington."

As for Holder, even after a hearing where he flatly declared water boarding to be torture—which could make Bush administration officials legally liable for criminal prosecution at the International Court of Justice in the Hague—Republican senators lined up to support him.

When Holder agreed that the United States is "at

war" with terrorists, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina responded, "I'm almost ready to vote for you right now." Senator Mel Martinez of Florida issued a written statement declaring, "Eric Holder understands the unique role of the attorney general and further, I think he's qualified to serve in that role... Therefore, I intend to support Mr. Holder's confirmation and urge my colleagues to do the same."

As for Hillary Clinton, once the highest-profile target for demonization by the Republican right, her confirmation hearing was described in all media accounts as a love fest. Senators spent 45 minutes praising her before allowing the nominee to read her prepared statement. Senators who voted to remove her husband from office ten years ago ratified her nomination for secretary of state and sent it to the floor of the Senate where she will be confirmed within minutes of Obama's official inauguration.

The only Republican to vote against her nomination, Senator David Vitter of Louisiana, cited potentially corrupt relationships involving fundraising by former president Clinton from foreign governments and individuals, who might use their contributions to provide political leverage with Secretary of State Clinton.

The bipartisan consensus driving the approval of the Obama cabinet was summed up aptly enough in a satirical column by Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post*, who described Geithner's appearance before the Senate Finance Committee under the headline, "The Nomination That's Too Big to Fail."

Under conditions of a mounting financial crisis which has shocked and frightened the corporate elite, nothing must stand in the way of putting in place the personnel and policies needed to provide an ever-expanding government bailout to Wall Street.



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