

Obama names third Republican to cabinet

A further bow to the right

Barry Grey
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Barack Obama deepened his extraordinary efforts at bipartisan collaboration with the Republican Party on Tuesday with the announcement of New Hampshire Republican Senator Judd Gregg as his pick for commerce secretary.

Gregg's confirmation by the Senate, which is virtually assured, will bring to three the number of Republicans in Obama's cabinet, including the unprecedented retention of Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates. The other Republican cabinet member is former congressman Ray LaHood, picked to head the Department of Transportation.

Besides naming Republicans to cabinet posts, Obama has elevated three recently retired four-star military officers to top government positions, an unparalleled representation of the military brass in a Democratic administration. He has appointed Gen. James Jones, retired Marine commandant, as his national security adviser; Gen. Eric Shinseki, retired Army chief of staff, as secretary for veterans affairs; and retired Admiral Dennis Blair as director of national intelligence.

The extent of Obama's bowing before the Republican right is highlighted by his agreement, as demanded by Gregg, to have New Hampshire's Democratic governor appoint a Republican to assume the vacated Senate seat. By so doing, Obama—with the support of the Democratic leadership in Congress—is foregoing the chance to obtain the 60 Democratic seats in the Senate required to defeat Republican efforts to block legislation by means of filibusters. The Democrats already control 58 seats and Democrat Al Franken is expected to survive legal challenges to his election victory in Minnesota, bringing the Democratic majority to 59.

As the *New York Times* reported Tuesday: "Even when the possibility of putting a Democrat in Mr. Gregg's Senate seat dimmed, Mr. Obama pressed ahead, telling his advisers that it was more important to build a bipartisan cabinet than increase his Senate majority."

In fact, Obama and the Democratic congressional leadership are more than happy to replace Gregg with another Republican. In the run-up to the November election, there were numerous press reports citing Democratic fears that a 60-seat majority in the upper chamber would unduly arouse popular expectations—i.e., that it would remove a convenient excuse for continuing in all essentials the reactionary foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration.

At his press conference to announce Gregg's nomination, Obama made a point of stressing the right-wing credentials of his choice to head the Commerce Department. He said Gregg is "famous or infamous, depending on your perspective, on Capitol Hill for his strict fiscal discipline." Obama indicated that Gregg's reputation was well suited to his own plans to slash social programs and impose austerity measures on the American people, saying that Gregg "shares my deep-seated commitment to guaranteeing that our children inherit a future they can afford."

Notwithstanding his fiscal conservative credentials, when it comes to protecting the interests of Wall Street, Gregg is an enthusiastic supporter of massive government bailouts. As the ranking Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, he helped draw up the Wall Street rescue plan last year and was one of a handful of Republicans who voted last month to release the second half of the \$700 billion package.

In announcing the selection of Gregg, Obama added to his incessant appeals for bipartisan collaboration, saying it was necessary to "put aside stale ideology and petty partisanship and embrace what works."

This kowtowing before the Republican right goes hand in hand with an extraordinary and unseemly deference to the military. Reporting on Obama's first meeting with the joint chiefs of staff, held last Thursday, the *New York Times* noted that the military chiefs "left 'comforted' about Obama's willingness to work with them."

The article continued: "Pentagon officials say they are relieved that Obama is proceeding slowly on two campaign promises: to pull all combat troops out of Iraq within 16 months and to allow gay men and women to serve openly in the military."

The *Times* noted the pains Obama has taken to pass muster with the brass, including carefully practicing his first public salute, executed on inauguration day, laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns and visiting wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the run-up to the inauguration, and speaking by video feed to US troops in Afghanistan at the Commander-in-Chief Ball on the evening of the inauguration.

None of this prevented Gen. Raymond Odierno, the US commander in Iraq, from holding a press conference last week in which he dismissed Obama's campaign pledge to withdraw one brigade a month and all US combat troops within 16 months—leaving behind tens of thousands of "non-combat" forces—and announced that the

speed and level of troop withdrawals would be determined by the military according to its assessment of the security situation on the ground in Iraq.

What accounts for Obama's extraordinary deference to the Republican right and the military?

Ever since his election, and even more so since his inauguration, Obama's efforts have focused on assuaging the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite and the military and assuring them that they have nothing to fear from his administration. Despite his decisive election victory and his high opinion poll numbers—attribution to popular hatred for the Republicans, opposition to war and Bush's right-wing social policies, and a general swing to the left among broad layers of the population—Obama has acted as one who believes his administration cannot survive without substantial Republican support and solid backing from the financial elite and the military brass.

The new Democratic president has managed to refurbish the image of the Republican Party following its electoral rout in November, presenting it as a powerful and legitimate force, not the despised bastion of political reaction that was repudiated by the American electorate. Indeed, Obama has given the Republicans virtual veto power over his administration's policies.

One reason is that Obama knows that no matter how discredited and unpopular among the broad masses of the people, the Republican Party represents powerful sections of the ruling elite, including the bulk of the military officer corps.

Nevertheless, the contrast between the behavior of the Democrats and Republicans is striking. In power, the Republicans function ruthlessly as the ruling party. Out of power, they function no less ruthlessly as the opposition.

With the Democrats, it is the exact opposite. When they do not manage to throw an election and instead find themselves in power, they temporize and conciliate, cowering before the Republicans and at every point looking anxiously over their shoulders lest they offend the military brass. Out of power, they serve as little more than a rubber stamp for the Republicans.

This has been the pattern at least since the Clinton administration, when the Democrats collapsed in the face of the Kenneth Starr witch hunt of Clinton and followed that up with an abject acceptance of Bush's theft of the 2000 election. That, in turn, set the stage for Democratic collaboration in all of the crimes carried out in the name of the "war on terror," which the Democrats embraced and continue to promote.

It is worth noting that Gregg, who will now sit in the same cabinet as Hillary Clinton, voted in the 1999 Senate impeachment trial of her husband to convict and remove him from office.

The different behavior of the two parties, both of which are instruments of the same corporate ruling elite, is bound up with their somewhat different functions in defending American capitalism. The Republicans openly and directly champion the interests of the most reactionary sections of the corporate establishment. The Democrats,

by virtue of their specific historical and political role as a lightning rod for popular discontent, tasked with preempting any independent political movement of the working class, are obliged to posture as a party of the "common man" and the "middle class." The need to maintain this fiction while upholding the interests of the ruling class imparts to their actions their distinctively half-hearted and two-faced character.

As the Democratic Party has abandoned any program of social reform and lurched to the right, in parallel with the decline in the global economic position of American capitalism, the disparity between its populist pretence and its policy and practice has grown increasingly naked. Moreover, its leading personnel have participated in the self-enrichment of the top layers of American society over the past three decades, and their political outlook has accordingly shifted further to the right.

In social and class terms, the Democratic Party and the Obama administration do not represent the millions of working people who voted them into office, but rather sections of the financial elite and the most privileged upper-middle-class layers. Whatever their differences with Bush and the Republicans, these layers want no part of wealth redistribution from the top to the bottom, and they fear an upsurge from below far more than the predations of the Republican right.

Obama himself—the product of the Chicago Democratic Party machine, promoted by multi-millionaire sponsors and the recipient of nearly a billion dollars in campaign cash, the bulk of it from corporate interests—embodies these privileged and politically reactionary social layers.

As the class essence of the Obama administration and its policies emerge ever more clearly in the coming weeks and months, working people and youth, driven by the economic crisis, will enter into struggle against the phony prophet of "change we can believe in." It is critical that these struggles be consciously prepared through the building of the Socialist Equality Party and the advancement of a socialist program based on the political independence of the working class from both parties of American capitalism.



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