

## **Team of Champions**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

Under immense pressure to bring some certainty into the markets, Barack Obama has moved quickly to announce his choice for main cabinet posts. His planned appointments, as well as his policy announcements, are a study in how to turn crisis into opportunity. A reader of history, with particular attention to the biographies of certain presidents, he has taken a page from Abraham Lincoln in naming a “team of rivals” or at least of big personalities with strong opinions, as his foreign policy lineup: Hillary Clinton will be Secretary of State and General James Jones, a retired Marine commander, his National Security Advisor, while Robert Gates, current Secretary of Defense under Bush, would stay on at least for the first year of the Obama administration.

On the economic side, his choice for Treasury Secretary, arguably the most important post in this crisis is Timothy Geithner, New York Federal Reserve chairman, who has been working closely with both Federal Reserve President Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, and has been part of the decision-making on bank bailouts from the very beginning. This would give continuity to the policy choices already made and bring a stronger measure of certainty and coherence to the process.

With the cooperation of George W. Bush, Obama has been shaping the policy-making process behind the scenes, but after calls for him to give some certainty to the markets and to fill the power vacuum of the interregnum period, he has come forward several times this week to reassure consumers and markets that he is ready to continue the federal government’s unprecedented spending in order to stimulate the economy.

His activist government agenda will be in many ways enabled by the crisis, for example in job creation and energy transformation: he can tie those two goals together by embarking on a New Deal-style of public works while at the same time renewing the energy base of the economy, thereby meeting environmental goals and severing the country’s economically costly and politically unsustainable dependency on oil. He is also helped by the fact that bipartisanship is for now a necessity until the first critical

period of this dire economic period is crossed. Just like FDR took advantage of the Great Depression to drive through his agenda of redistribution, so can Obama. Energy renewal, job creation, adequate health care, education, regulation and tax reform all are goals that had been neglected for too long but now there is an opportunity to turn them into part of the solution to economic recovery. At times when calls for government action are coming from all sides of the political spectrum, the opportunity to turn those calls into reform is enormous, and Obama is using his bully pulpit early to lead the country in that direction. He is now proposing the rapid approval of an economic stimulus deemed around the sum of 500 billion dollars in federal spending and tax cuts for the middle class.

As the pieces of the Obama's cabinet puzzle start falling into place, most observers are surprised at the pragmatism that seems to be guiding his choices. Timothy Geithner is a centrist, a problem solver, a Wall Street outsider, who has worked in different position at the Department of Treasury since 1988, under three different presidents. During the Clinton administration he dealt with the Asian crisis and the Mexican bailout. A dedicated public servant, pro-regulation, young and non-ideological, he has a student-mentor relationship with Larry Summers, Treasure Secretary under Clinton and also a pragmatist, who will now become Obama's economic adviser.

This choice as well as others points to a fact-based administration, which coincides with the vision laid out by Obama during the campaign, one that solves problems and is not ruled by ideology. Bob Rubin, a deficit "hawk" with a strong penchant for balanced budgets who was also Treasure Secretary under Clinton, is helping Obama put together the economic team, which so far has no progressive heavy weight economists like Joseph Stiglitz or James Galbraith, both of whom were Obama advisers during the campaign.

Similarly, on the foreign policy front, Obama chose Hillary Clinton, in spite of their disagreements in foreign policy during the primary election campaign. And all signs point to his picking of General James Jones, a retired Marine general and former NATO commander, as his National Security Advisor. Jones is a Vietnam decorated veteran with strong cross-party appeal, who was asked twice by Condoleezza Rice to be her adviser at State (but he declined). Defense Secretary Bob Gates, another dedicated public servant, would be asked to stay on at Defense and negotiate the next stage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He is close to Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Adviser for Bush 41 and Gerald Ford, who has criticized George W. Bush for both the decision to invade Iraq, which he called “a war of choice not of necessity”, and the way he allowed it to be mishandled by Rumsfeld. To this eclectic team one must add Vice President Joe Biden, whose foreign policy experience was a main consideration when he was picked by Obama as his running mate. He will certainly be another strong voice at the foreign policy table. The main intention behind these choices seems to be that, once Obama succeeds in forming an effective team out of such strong and experienced personalities on the foreign policy front, he can more comfortably focus on the economy without distractions.

These early decisions, whether confirmed, leaked out or strongly rumored, have Washington buzzing. Does the choice of experienced people detract from Obama’s message of change? Not necessarily, since it is the President that will set the agenda and who will lay out the vision. Obama invites strong opinions from his aides, and likes to debate options. That is how he envisions the decision-making process, with his advisers as partners in governance, not as passive surrogates. But there are risks to this approach, the main one being how to mesh these big egos with different backgrounds and perspectives into a real team that can work together without undermining each of its individual members’ missions. That is exactly what happened to Secretary of State Colin Powell under the Bush-Cheney White House: he did not have the full backing of the rest of the team, especially of the vice-president, so he became ineffective and he never recovered.

Another rumor often heard around the capital this week, especially in the anti-Obama camp, is that, given his cabinet choices, Obama seems to be positioning himself to govern from the center of the political spectrum, thus “betraying his progressive agenda” and his left-wing supporters. This claim is incorrect for two main reasons. First, because it is blind to the fact that his so-called “progressive agenda” coincides with the center today. The ideological center has shifted, and “Progressive” is now mainstream. What was considered radical ten or twenty years ago is now what most of Americans want, namely: demands for corporate responsibility and universal health care, concerns about global warming and energy renewal, a foreign policy based on multilateral decision making, respect for human rights and international law. It is still a divided

country, but the wide majority wants reform.

Second, Obama's blueprint of massive public investment to rebuild infrastructure and schools, and to create "green" jobs, his new "New Deal", will be made possible by the crisis itself. Most experts agree that this is not a time to worry about budget deficits. There are new opportunities created by the crisis itself: the call for government action comes from all sides, so it is time to use the momentous circumstances to bring about the change that has been postponed for so long, and to do it in the service of job creation and sustainable growth. Just like President Roosevelt used the Great Depression to drive through his economic agenda of education and distribution, so Obama should make use of the moment and embark on major investments in a XXI century infrastructure, with a new electric grid, water and sewer system, a world class internet service and health care reform.

The new stimulus package announced this week seems to be a first step in that direction. In the next few days the President-elect will announce his choices to head the Department of Commerce and Homeland Security. Bill Richardson, the Hispanic governor of New Mexico, and Jane Napolitano, governor of Arizona are the most likely candidates. Bill Richardson's nomination will be very important since it will not only appease Hispanics (over 67% of who voted for Obama) but also signify a pro-free trade stance by Obama that will assuage fears of Protectionism both in American and abroad. On her part, Jane Napolitano is someone with hands-on experience in Immigration, and her choice to head Homeland Security seems to signal that serious Immigration reform is also on the Executive's agenda.

At only three weeks after his election, and at eight weeks before his inauguration, Barack Obama has been forced to use his bully pulpit to restore confidence and pledge continuity to commitments already made by the outgoing administration. He has shown his pragmatism by inviting the best-qualified and most experienced people into his cabinet to face the difficulties ahead, regardless of their ideology or ties to past administrations. His greatest challenge is to continue turning crisis into opportunity, using the unprecedented consensus on government spending to promote his transformational agenda. He must stick to his narrative of change and use his cabinet's experience to

make that change happen.

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science and Geography  
Director, ODU Model United Nations Program Old Dominion  
University, Norfolk, Virginia*