

Obama's 2nd-Term Team Diversifies

Written by Keli Goff

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Despite a slow start, he recently ramped up his appointments of women and minorities.

While he has spent much of his second term battling Republicans on a host of issues, from the sequester debate to his Cabinet nominees, President Obama has also endured critiques from fellow Democrats. One of the most common complaints from his base of supporters has been that his administration is sorely lacking in diversity in key leadership roles. Shortly before his second inauguration, a headline blared, "Obama's Cabinet Shaping Up to Be a Boys Club." African-American Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) called the White House's diversity struggles "embarrassing as hell."

The president's high-profile nominations of white men to major Cabinet posts -- including Sen. Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense and Sen. John Kerry as secretary of state -- combined with the high-profile derailment of United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice's rumored Cabinet nomination, led some to presume that diversity was not a priority of the administration. But recently the president had begun to debunk that perception.

Last week President Obama named Julia Pierson the first woman ever to head the U.S. Secret Service. This weekend, it was revealed that Lisa Monaco, one of the president's top counterterrorism advisers, is in the running to become the first woman to serve as FBI director. Weeks ago, the president nominated Sylvia Mathews Burwell to be director of the Office of Management and Budget, a Cabinet-level post that would make her one of the most influential voices in defining the country's budget over the coming year.

But Pierson, Monaco and Burwell, all of whom are white, are not alone. In recent months, the White House has begun to hire, promote and nominate more white women and people of color for key roles. Sally Jewell has been nominated to serve in the Cabinet as interior secretary, while Gina McCarthy has been nominated to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

Although Valerie Jarrett is the most visible female White House adviser, there are others. Danielle Gray, who is African American, formerly served as deputy National Economic Council director but has been promoted to assistant to the president and Cabinet secretary, making her the highest-ranking White House liaison to the various Cabinet members. Meanwhile, Jennifer Palmieri, a veteran of a number of Democratic campaigns, was named White House communications director.

Additionally, the following prominent appointments of African-American women have been made: Danielle Crutchfield, the current director of scheduling and advance; Racquel Russell, a

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deputy assistant to the president for urban policy and economic mobility; Tonya Robinson, a special assistant to the president for justice and regulatory policy; Nicole Isaac, a special assistant to the president for legislative affairs; Heather Foster, director of African-American outreach and associate director in the Office of Public Engagement; and Samantha Tubman, deputy social secretary. Micaela Fernandez, appointed special assistant to the president and director of protocol, is African American.

The administration also has a number of senior advisers and staff who are black men, including Awenate Cobbina, who serves as special assistant to the president and chief of staff for legislative affairs; Jay Williams, deputy director of intergovernmental affairs; Jason Green, special assistant to the president and associate counsel to the president; Jonathan McBride, deputy director of presidential personnel; and Rob Nabors, a longtime aide who was recently promoted to White House deputy chief of staff. Miguel Rodriguez, assistant to the president and director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, is Latino.

There are also a number of black candidates thought to be in contention for other high-profile roles, including Charlotte, N.C., Mayor Anthony Foxx, who has been mentioned as potentially the next transportation secretary; while Rep. Mel Watt's (D-N.C.) name has been floated for head of the Federal Housing Finance Agency.

But the name generating the most excitement is a familiar one. As I have written, Susan Rice has been mentioned as a front-runner to become the next national security adviser. Rice has become a symbol of the president's struggle to win support for his nominees from a partisan Congress, as well as a symbol of his own struggle to ensure that his administration reflects the diversity of the nation it represents. It remains to be seen if, ultimately, he will be able to achieve the level of diversity he has said he aspires to, in the White House and beyond.

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