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Obama's Brain Trust

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By E. J. Dionne Jr.
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President-elect Barack Obama has now made three things clear about his plans to bring the economy back: He wants his actions to be big and bold. He sees economic recovery as intimately linked with economic and social reform. And he is bringing in a gifted brain trust to get the job done.

Just three weeks after Election Day, Obama has already expanded his authority by seizing on "an economic crisis of historic proportions," as he described it yesterday, to call for a stimulus package that will dwarf anything ever attempted by the federal government.

But Obama is also using the crisis to make the case for larger structural reforms in health care, energy and education -- "to lay the groundwork for long-term, sustained economic growth," as he put it. Obama clearly views the economic downturn not as an impediment to the broadly progressive program he outlined during the campaign but as an opportunity for a round of unprecedented social legislation.

"He feels very strongly that this is not just a short-term fix but a long-term retooling of the American economy," said one of Obama's closest advisers. "Obama has a holistic view of the economy. Health care is going to be part of it," the lieutenant told me, and so will green energy investments, education reform and a new approach to regulating financial markets.

Obama further underscored his decision to tether social and economic policy by linking his announcement of Melody Barnes as the director of the White House Domestic Policy Council to the unveiling of his economic team.

Getting Timothy Geithner and former Treasury secretary Larry Summers working in harness is Obama's single biggest post-election victory.

Some who know Summers, a man with a large personality, were surprised that he would take the job as inside-the-White-House economic adviser and accept the appointment of Geithner, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, as Treasury secretary.

But Obama's aides are making clear that Summers is being assigned a large role in shaping the administration's overall economic policy, and his White House post will free him from the day-to-day responsibilities of running the Treasury Department -- duties well suited for Geithner, widely seen as a good manager and also as an economic diplomat likely to broker international cooperation in stemming the downturn. The fact that Summers and Geithner have a long history of working together should ease potential conflicts.

The senior Obama adviser said the president-elect benefited from Summers's desire to be at the center of the action during the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. "If ever there was a time

to want to be involved, it's now," said the adviser, who added that Obama, in turn, sees Summers as "brilliant."

Obama got to know Geithner "during the final weeks of the campaign," said the senior Obama aide, and the two hit it off immediately. Like Obama, Geithner had partly grown up abroad, and this gave the two an immediate connection. It led to "an ease in conversation," and the two discovered they "also share a common temperament," including a calm demeanor and a curiosity about the thinking of others.

"When Obama emerged from the first meeting, he was very effusive," said the senior aide. "He said, 'I feel good about him as a person; he inspires confidence.'" Geithner did not campaign for the job, which only sent his stock higher in the Obama circle. "He suggested that others might be better, that he might be more useful where he is," said the Obama lieutenant. "That was impressive as well."

Obama's selection of a team of highly skilled pragmatists has already been described as a move to the political center, but Obama advisers and longtime acquaintances say that this is a misreading of the incoming president and his approach. They describe it as combining a practicality about means with an overriding concern about the corrosive effects of growing economic inequalities.

Aides say that Obama was drawn to Summers in part because the former Harvard president shares the president-elect's passion for a more equitable distribution of economic benefits. Obama was impressed during campaign policy discussions that Summers would often pull the conversation away from general talk about economic growth to a concern with the living standards of families with average incomes.

Washington often divides the Democratic policy world between progressives and pragmatists. With Obama, as yesterday's news conference showed, it will have to become accustomed to a president who is both.

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