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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Insider's Crusade

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

Jan. 20, 2009, will be a historic day. Barack Obama (Columbia, Harvard Law) will take the oath of office as his wife, Michelle (Princeton, Harvard Law), looks on proudly. Nearby, his foreign policy advisers will stand beaming, including perhaps Hillary Clinton (Wellesley, Yale Law), Jim Steinberg (Harvard, Yale Law) and Susan Rice (Stanford, Oxford D. Phil.).

The domestic policy team will be there, too, including Jason Furman (Harvard, Harvard Ph.D.), Austan Goolsbee (Yale, M.I.T. Ph.D.), Blair Levin (Yale, Yale Law), Peter Orszag (Princeton, London School of Economics Ph.D.) and, of course, the White House Counsel Greg Craig (Harvard, Yale Law).

This truly will be an administration that looks like America, or at least that slice of America that got double 800s on their SATs. Even more than past administrations, this will be a valedictocracy — rule by those who graduate first in their high school classes. If a foreign enemy attacks the United States during the Harvard-Yale game any time over the next four years, we're screwed.

Already the culture of the Obama administration is coming into focus. Its members are twice as smart as the poor reporters who have to cover them, three times if you include the columnists. They typically served in the Clinton administration and then, like Cincinnatus, retreated to the comforts of private life — that is, if Cincinnatus had worked at Goldman Sachs, Williams & Connolly or the Brookings Institution. So many of them send their kids to Georgetown Day School, the posh leftish private school in D.C., that they'll be able to hold White House staff meetings in the carpool line.

And yet as much as I want to resent these overeducated Achievatrons (not to mention the incursion of a French-style government dominated by highly trained Enarchs), I find myself tremendously impressed by the Obama transition.

The fact that they can already leak one big appointee per day is testimony to an awful lot of expert staff work. Unlike past Democratic administrations, they are not just handing out jobs to the hacks approved by the favored interest groups. They're thinking holistically — there's a nice balance of policy wonks, governors and legislators. They're also thinking strategically. As Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute notes, it was smart to name Tom Daschle both the head of Health and Human Services and the health czar. Splitting those duties up, as Bill Clinton did, leads to all sorts of conflicts.

Most of all, they are picking Washington insiders. Or to be more precise, they are picking the best of the Washington insiders.

Obama seems to have dispensed with the romantic and failed notion that you need inexperienced “fresh

faces” to change things. After all, it was L.B.J. who passed the Civil Rights Act. Moreover, because he is so young, Obama is not bringing along an insular coterie of lifelong aides who depend upon him for their well-being.

As a result, the team he has announced so far is more impressive than any other in recent memory. One may not agree with them on everything or even most things, but a few things are indisputably true.

First, these are open-minded individuals who are persuadable by evidence. Orszag, who will probably be budget director, is trusted by Republicans and Democrats for his honest presentation of the facts.

Second, they are admired professionals. Conservative legal experts have a high regard for the probable attorney general, Eric Holder, despite the business over the Marc Rich pardon.

Third, they are not excessively partisan. Obama signaled that he means to live up to his postpartisan rhetoric by letting Joe Lieberman keep his committee chairmanship.

Fourth, they are not ideological. The economic advisers, Furman and Goolsbee, are moderate and thoughtful Democrats. Hillary Clinton at State is problematic, mostly because nobody has a role for her husband. But, as she has demonstrated in the Senate, her foreign-policy views are hardheaded and pragmatic. (It would be great to see her set of interests complemented by Samantha Power's set of interests at the U.N.)

Finally, there are many people on this team with practical creativity. Any think tanker can come up with broad doctrines, but it is rare to find people who can give the president a list of concrete steps he can do day by day to advance American interests. Dennis Ross, who advised Obama during the campaign, is the best I've ever seen at this, but Rahm Emanuel also has this capacity, as does Craig and legislative liaison Phil Schiliro.

Believe me, I'm trying not to join in the vast, heaving O-phoria now sweeping the coastal haute bourgeoisie. But the personnel decisions have been superb. The events of the past two weeks should be reassuring to anybody who feared that Obama would veer to the left or would suffer self-inflicted wounds because of his inexperience. He's off to a start that nearly justifies the hype.

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