Obama's Picks Don't Change the Culture in Washington

by Phyllis Schlafly February 13, 2009

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President Barack Obama has indeed made history. His selections for his Cabinet and other top government offices make a mockery of his much publicized campaign promises to give us "the most sweeping ethics reform in history" and to "close the revolving door" to lobbyists.

Some historians confer the ignominious appellation of most corrupt on President U.S. Grant of the 1870s, some on President Warren G. Harding's Teapot Dome scandal of the 1920s, some even on President Bill Clinton. We'll leave it to historians to judge where Obama ranks after evaluating his appointments.

Five of Obama's major nominees are mired in political embarrassment. Three withdrew their names from consideration, one sneaked through confirmation because Senators were still intoxicated with the Obama honeymoon, and Obama plans to use a waiver so the Senate will approve the fifth.

Funny thing, Americans don't seem to like it when government officials evade the taxes that the rest of us pay, especially when they evade more taxes that most Americans' entire tax bill. Apparently, that doesn't seem to bother Obama.

After South Dakota's voters defeated Tom Daschle for reelection in 2004, he pocketed some $5 million advising clients how to seek influence with the government while, at the same time, technically avoiding the label of lobbyist. Then, he failed to pay $146,000 in taxes on that handsome income.

Meanwhile, Daschle became what the Washington Post said was one of Obama's "closest and earliest political allies." So Obama selected Daschle to run the huge Department of Health and Human Services, where he would oversee the health-care companies that had been paying him so generously. Obama planned for HHS Secretary Daschle to play a dual role with an additional perch called the White House Office of Health Reform, where he would coordinate the federal takeover of the entire U.S. medical system.

Even after it became publicly known that Daschle had failed to pay all his income taxes, Obama defiantly declared that he was "absolutely" standing by Daschle. Obama urged Daschle to continue his campaign for confirmation by an obedient Democratic Senate majority.

It was not until Obama's biggest cheerleaders, the big-city newspapers (which Bernard Goldberg says have a "slobbering love affair" with Obama) criticized this notorious lapse in ethics that Daschle withdrew.

Obama nevertheless did not promise to cut off dealings with Daschle, who can now go back to his lucrative job of representing the health-care industry. In exiting his attempt for Cabinet confirmation, Daschle said, "I remain one of its [health-system reform] most fervent supporters."

Obama has tried to dig himself out of this hole by conceding that he "made a mistake" and "screwed up." But that doesn't address the ethical problem because Obama was insisting on the Daschle appointment even after Obama knew Daschle had failed to pay all his taxes.

Obama didn't admit any mistake about Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner, who underpaid his taxes by $35,000 and also employed a housekeeper who stayed in our country as an illegal alien. Geithner only ponied up his unpaid taxes after being nominated for the Cabinet position (which, incidentally, has supervision over the Internal Revenue Service).

Another embarrassment was Nancy Killefer, whom Obama chose to become the first Chief Performance Officer for the United States, a new Cabinet-level position probably as silly as it sounds. Her name had to be pulled because she failed to pay required employment taxes on her household employee.

For the number-two official in the Pentagon, Obama chose William J. Lynn III, an ex-lobbyist for military contractor Raytheon. Obama gave himself the right to grant a waiver.

Obama's first pick for Secretary of Commerce was New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who had made news by endorsing Obama for President during the primary campaign (after being expected to endorse Hillary Clinton). Richardson suddenly withdrew his name because of involvement in an ongoing pay-to-play investigation.

We are still waiting for the other shoe to drop in the scandal of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, who was impeached for trying to sell Obama's vacant Senate seat. We know that Obama was interested in naming his replacement, but we don't know what sort of bargain might have been discussed.

Obama has refused to let Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel testify and also refused to release the tapes of Emanuel's conversations with Blagojevich. That reminds us of Richard Nixon's refusal to release his Watergate tapes.

Americans are justifiably shocked at how Obama has arrogantly selected Cabinet and other high government nominees who failed to abide by the same laws that burden U.S. workers. And Obama's much-touted "transparency" seems to have run into a fog.