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Why does Obama keep raiding the Senate for his cabinet?

Not since FDR has a president transformed this many senators into secretaries

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

President Obama faces a large second-term turnover of cabinet members, and prominent names are being floated for all of the major positions — most notably Sen. John Kerry for secretary of state. Some Democrats have warned against the Kerry selection, as it could potentially result in the party losing his seat to a Republican like departing Sen. Scott Brown in a subsequent election. Indeed, such scenarios are among the reasons why sitting senators are so rarely chosen for cabinet positions.

The only recent president who appointed any sitting senators to his cabinet was Bill Clinton, who chose Texas Sen. Lloyd Bentsen to head Treasury. The Democrats then proceeded to lose that seat, and have never come close to contesting a Senate race in Texas since.

George W. Bush took another direction — he took two recent ex-senators, John Ashcroft and Spencer Abraham. Reagan and George H.W. Bush also avoided tapping the Senate for candidates. In fact, the only president since FDR, besides Clinton and Obama, to take a senator for his cabinet was Jimmy Carter, who took Ed Muskie as his second secretary of state in 1979.

In 2008, Obama became the only president since the start of the twentieth century not named Franklin Delano Roosevelt to pluck two sitting senators out of the chamber for cabinet roles. (New York's Hillary Clinton and Colorado's Kenneth Salazar.) He even wanted a third senator, New Hampshire Republican Judd Gregg, but Gregg backed out, apparently due to pressure from his party.

Obama's picks, most prominently the Colorado one, were electorally dangerous for the party. Democrats were already defending two seats that opened up because of Obama's 2008 victory, due to the fact that Obama and Vice President Joe Biden were both serving in the Senate when they ran. The party also had to defend two other seats, due to the deaths of Ted Kennedy and Robert Byrd. While Democrats managed to retain four of the six seats, in some ways, they were lucky that they didn't lose five.

The criticism of a Kerry pick is based on a similar electoral fear. Recently defeated Sen. Scott Brown is clearly willing to run again, and he has already shown that he is up to the task — he won his seat in a special election in 2010. While Massachusetts is usually a very reliably Democratic state, historically, midterm elections are very bad for the president's party. None of this means that a Kerry pick will result in a lost seat, but it is certainly cause for concern for the Democrats.

Why are today's senators so eager to leave the legislative branch for a job with the president? Some of this is obviously personal — for Kerry, it looks like a career-capping move — but there does appear to be disenchantment with serving in the Senate. And from a political point of view, any politician who may be interested in becoming president one day ought to be careful about taking a cabinet position. Believing that having served in the cabinet is an advantage in a future White House run relies on a misreading of American history.

Sure, many of the early memorable presidents were former cabinet members. Starting with Thomas Jefferson, five of six presidents in a row had first served as secretary of state. But that quickly changed. Since Martin Van Buren, only three presidents have served in any cabinet-level job. Many former cabinet members have tried to run, but the last time a current or former cabinet member managed to even gain the nomination was Herbert Hoover. The other two men who made the cabinet-to-president leap — former Secretary of State James Buchanan and former Secretary of War William Howard Taft — were one-termers, just like Hoover. And Buchanan and Hoover each presided over some of the worst catastrophes in U.S. history.

Cabinet members are not even popular running mates. There have been two in recent years — former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Bob Dole's running mate, former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp. Before them, the last cabinet member to be picked for a run was Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace in 1940. And Wallace was promptly dumped by FDR in favor of Harry Truman in 1944.

Kerry does not appear to be looking toward a future presidential run. But, as Hillary Clinton or Andrew Cuomo may show in 2016, former cabinet members may be back on the radar for presidential runs. If that happens, perhaps future senators would be willing to make the leap from one branch of government to the other. But if the party loses Kerry's seat, future presidents will once again be hesitant to tap the Senate for cabinet members.

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