

Obama's Cabinet of Austerity and War

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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The major cabinet selections announced by President Barack Obama point to the reactionary character of the policies he will pursue in his second term. His administration will be committed to slashing public spending on programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid while it escalates imperialist violence in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and other parts of the world.

The two most significant nominations of the past ten days have been John Brennan for director of the Central Intelligence Agency and Jacob Lew for secretary of the treasury. Both are top Obama aides—Brennan is deputy national security adviser for counterterrorism, Lew is the president's chief of staff—and will leave the White House to take up two of the most powerful positions in government.

The concentration of power within an ever-narrower circle of loyalists is the hallmark of a regime that increasingly operates as a law unto itself. In both foreign policy and domestic policy, the Obama administration seeks to expand the sphere of executive action at the expense of the legislature, a process that continues from administration to administration, Democrat and Republican alike, as American democracy continues to erode.

Brennan is the personification of the foreign policy of the Obama administration, which relies more and more on assassination by drone missiles and Special Forces operations. Obama had to shelve plans to name Brennan to head the CIA when he first took office in 2009 because the former deputy executive director of the CIA was too closely identified with the policies of rendition, torture and murder carried out under the Bush administration.

Brennan, who today claims to have opposed the use of torture, during the Bush administration publicly defended “harsh interrogation methods” by US operatives and the “rendition” of alleged terrorists—neither charged nor convicted of any crime—to foreign countries to be tortured by US allies. He has more recently defended the supposed right of the president to order extra-judicial drone missile assassinations, including of American citizens—a program that he has personally supervised. Since the beginning of 2013, these attacks have been sharply escalated in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Today, with the Obama administration having embraced and accelerated the use of murder as a central instrument of American foreign policy, the elevation of a figure like Brennan evokes no significant opposition from either party or any section of the political or media establishment. The principal difference between the foreign policy of Bush and that of Obama is that Bush preferred open military invasion to destroy regimes targeted by Washington, while Obama places greater emphasis on covert operations and extra-judicial targeted killings to carry out the same dirty job. This, however, by no means precludes

direct military attacks against any number of countries, most immediately Syria and Iran.

In choosing Lew to head the Treasury, Obama abandons any pretense that federal regulators should have some independence from Wall Street, selecting a former top official of Citibank to head the agency that controls the finances of the US government. Lew worked for Charles Prince, sacked as CEO of the largest US bank in October 2007, and then for his successor Vikram Pandit, who headed the bank during the 2008 Wall Street crash, when it escaped liquidation only thanks to the bailout by the Bush and Obama administrations.

Lew entered the Obama administration as a top State Department official before moving to the White House in 2010 for a second term as budget director. (He held the same position in the Clinton administration). A year later, he succeeded fellow banker William Daley as White House chief of staff.

Lew's assumption of the top role at Treasury cements the return to *status quo ante* for Wall Street, in the fifth year since the financial crash. Profits, stock prices and CEO pay have all returned to the stratospheric levels that prevailed before the crash—while the jobs and living standards of working people remain at near-Depression levels.

Not a single prominent Wall Street figure has been jailed or even tried for the colossal destruction caused by the crash. Now a former banker has been placed in charge of the US government agency with the principal responsibility for managing federal finances.

Lew is not, however, primarily a Wall Street executive. The bulk of his career has been spent in government, particularly in overseeing the federal budget and spending on social programs. He is identified with cuts in entitlement programs going back to 1983, when he was a junior figure in the office of House Speaker Tip O'Neill, devising cuts in Social Security in talks with the Reagan administration.

Lew was a fiscal warrior in the Clinton administration, particularly in the years when Clinton worked with Newt Gingrich and congressional Republicans to destroy welfare programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children. He has played the same role in the Obama administration, working on the abortive "grand bargain" with Republican leaders of July 2011, in which Obama agreed to raise the Medicare eligibility age from 65 to 67 and reduce future cost-of-living increases for Social Security recipients.

There has been a smattering of liberal criticism of the nominations of Brennan and Lew, as well as John Kerry to replace Hillary Clinton as secretary of state and Chuck Hagel for secretary of defense, not from a policy standpoint, but because all four appointees are white men. Evidently these commentators believe that the victims of austerity and US military aggression will feel better if those who perpetrate such policies are black, Hispanic, female or gay.

Obama's cabinet appointments once again give the lie to those liberal and pseudo-left commentators who promoted illusions that Obama, if reelected, would in his second term respond to the popular will and pursue a more "progressive" agenda. The politically criminal role of such forces is underscored by the right-wing cabinet being assembled by Obama, whose leading figures embody the ruling class' assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class at home and its policy of aggression and unending war abroad.

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Articles by: **[Patrick Martin](#)**

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