

Obama Slammed for Lack of Cabinet Diversity

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President Obama has been accused of everything from not being born in America to secretly being a Muslim. But the most surprising – and accurate accusation – is that the nation’s first Black president has a cabinet less diverse than that of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

And unlike his first term, Blacks are not biting their tongue about their disappointment in President Obama.

“He’s not being held accountable for his policies or his appointments,” said Mary Frances Berry, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania and former chairwoman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. “In politics, the squeaky wheel gets the most oil.”

And there are plenty of squeaky wheels in President Obama’s second term.

Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.) said on MSNBC that the criticism of President Obama’s lack of diversity in his cabinet is “embarrassing as hell.”

He explained, “If it’s the first term, you could see people got to know who is around that’s qualified in order to get this job, No. 1. I had thought, and maybe it’s so, that it could be the Harvard problem where people just know each other, trust each other and women and minorities don’t get a chance to rub elbows and their reputations and experience is not known.”

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Every if that were the case, Berry states, that still wouldn't be an acceptable excuse.

“Black people go to Harvard, too,” she said. For example, Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick graduated from Harvard Law School in 1982 cum laude.

Blacks graduating from the nation's most prestigious university is not a recent phenomenon. Historian and civil rights activist W.E. B. DuBois received his doctoral degree from Harvard in 1895. William Monroe Trotter, the crusading editor of the Boston Guardian, graduated from Harvard that same year magna cum laude and earned a Phi Beta Kappa key. DuBois and Trotter were among the founders of the Niagra Movement in 1905, the forerunner of the NAACP.

More important, an Ivy League degree is not the ultimate measure of one's ability to serve in top positions, said Berry, who graduated from historically Black Fisk University in Nashville and Yale University Law School.

While Rangle speculates that Obama might have had few Black contacts beyond his Harvard and Chicago inner circle during his first term, Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.) said the Congressional Black Caucus vetted in sent the names of 61 potential appointees to the White House that were qualified to serve in his second term.

Speaking at the National Newspaper Publishers Association mid-winter convention in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Hastings said, “Not one of that 61 was selected – not one.”

One seems to be the magic number with the Obama administration. Of the permanent cabinet positions –not including positions that can be elevated to or demoted from cabinet level at the direction of the president – Obama has had only one Black in his permanent cabinet – Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. In fact, he has had more Republicans in his permanent cabinet than African-Americans.

By contrast, President Bill Clinton, a southern Democrat who grew up during segregation, appointed a record four Blacks to his cabinet during his first term and three during his second

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term.

During his first term, Bill Clinton appointed Ron Brown to serve as Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Energy Hazel D. O'Leary, Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown.

Serving during Clinton's second term were Secretary of Labor Alexis Herman, Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo D. West, Jr.

Two Blacks served in the cabinet of Republican President George W. Bush during each of his terms. Bush made history in his first term by selecting retired General Colin Powell to serve as Secretary of State. Powell was the first African American to hold that position.

During Bush's second term, he appointed Condoleezza Rice to succeed Powell, making her the first African American woman State Secretary. The Secretary of State is third in line in succession to the President of the United States.

Alphonso Jackson served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during Bush's first and second terms.

Under his administration, Obama has conferred Cabinet status to UN Ambassador Susan Rice, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson and U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk.

Although Obama was considering picking Susan Rice as his next Secretary of State, former Senator John Kerry disclosed last week that he was offered the job before Rice asked that her name be withdrawn from consideration.

Professor Berry said diversity is not an issue President Obama or anyone else should get a pass on.

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“Inclusion is not only important to the individual, it’s important for the pipeline,” said Berry. “Diversity strengthens the institution, as well. You have to have different perspectives in the mix.”

Dianne Pinderhughes, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, said Blacks must insist on a larger share of appointments.

“People can complain about his response or how he’s not doing things for the Black community. I think that’s a lousy strategy,” she said. “I think people ought to be proactive and aggressive.”

At press time, five cabinet-level positions were still open: Interior, Commerce, Labor, Transportation and Energy. In addition, Jackson has resigned as EPA Administrator and Ronald Kirk has quit as U.S. Trade Representative, two positions Obama had elevated to cabinet status.

“I would love to see more Black women in the cabinet,” said Avis Jones-DeWeever, executive director of the National Council of Negro Women. “I would also love to see a Black woman on the Supreme Court.”

Obama is asking the public to withhold judgment on his diversity record.

“We haven’t completed the formation of my Cabinet,” he said . “So I’ll let people judge it after all my appointments have been made whether or not we’ve made progress.”{jcomments on}