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Cabinet Members from the opposing Party

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Cabinet Members from the opposing Party

How often does a president reach out to the other party to fill vacancies.

As a nation we will probably never again achieve the balance that George Washington did when there were just three cabinet members. He hired the nation's brilliant Federalist, Alexander Hamilton, to serve as secretary of the Treasury at the same time that he had the nation's stellar Democratic-Republican, Thomas Jefferson, come on board as secretary of state. That was an era -- brief in duration -- when a lid was kept on openly partisan politics because Washington willed it so.



Washington's precedent of trying to bridge factional differences has held up symbolically. It is not unusual for a president to nominate a cabinet secretary from the opposing party, even in the harsh climate of modern politics. For example, Republican Dwight Eisenhower had Democrat James P. Mitchell serve as secretary of labor. Because of his efforts on behalf of migrant laborers and other working people, Mitchell was called "the social conscience of the Republican party."

Democrat John F. Kennedy had Republican C. Douglas Dillon serve as secretary of the Treasury. Dillon had previously been in the Eisenhower administration and was known as a strong advocate of tax cuts. Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, kept Dillon on.

Democrat Bill Clinton had Republican William Cohen serve as secretary of defense during his second term.

Republican George W. Bush has had Democrat Norm Mineta serving in the top spot at the U.S. Department of Transportation. Prior to that post, Mineta served as secretary of Commerce in the Clinton administration.

As you suggest, the question at the beginning of the second term is whether President Bush is inclined to expand the Democratic roster among his cabinet. David Frum puts the matter in historical perspective: "The only president to have derived political benefit from naming members of the opposing party to his cabinet was Franklin Roosevelt in 1940, when he named Henry Stimson secretary of war and Frank Knox secretary of the Navy. But Roosevelt was accepting a tough bargain: Bidding for an unprecedented and shocking third presidential term, he tried to allay Republican fears by handing operational control over the pending war in Europe to the leading GOP foreign-policy figure of the day and over the pending war in the Pacific to the most recent Republican nominee for vice president. It would be as if George W. Bush made Richard Holbrooke secretary of state and John Edwards secretary of defense."^[1]

Much of the post-election discussion over the composition of the cabinet is symbolic, in any case. As Thomas Patterson points out, "Although the cabinet once served as the president's main advisory group, it has not played this role since Herbert Hoover's administration. As national issues have become increasingly complex, the cabinet has become outmoded as a policymaking forum: department heads are likely to understand issues only in their respective policy areas. Cabinet meetings have been rarely reduced to gatherings at which only the most general matters are discussed."^[2]

Looking further back in American history, we see that there was an attempt to elevate the status of the cabinet in the nineteenth century. Bret Stephens briskly observes in the *Wall Street Journal*: "Although the administration of William Henry Harrison isn't the most acclaimed in American history, it did contribute one intriguing idea to the theory of executive government. According to historian John Baker of Louisiana State University, 'Harrison had agreed that executive decisions would be based on a majority vote among members of the cabinet, with the president having one vote.'

As fate would have it, Old Tippecanoe died within a month of taking office and his successor, John Tyler, promptly did away with the cabinet government concept. Good thing, too: Had Abraham Lincoln allowed his cabinet to govern with him (or for him) the Union would probably have gone to war against Great Britain, per the suggestion of his

Secretary of State William Seward, instead of the Confederacy."^[3]

In the end, having cabinet members from the opposing political party or contrary viewpoints must not mask a chief requirement of the presidency -- that "the executive office must be single -- that is, occupied by only one person -- to guarantee the necessary executive power and responsibility." This follows from Alexander Hamilton's defense of the presidency in *Federalist 70*, where he called for "energy in the executive."^[4]

CABINET TURNOVER

According to presidential historian Richard Shenkman, 60 percent of George W. Bush's cabinet had changed over by Inauguration Day -- the highest over the past century. The average is about 50 percent.

(Question from Rachel R. of Salt Lake City, UT)

^[1] David Frum, "A New Style for a New Mandate," *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2004, p. A18.

^[2] Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People: A Concise Introduction to American Politics*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), p. 386.

^[3] Bret Stephens, "What Is a Cabinet For?" *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2004, p. A15. It should be noted that William Seward had not been thinking of threatening war just with Great Britain. Between the Inauguration and the Sumter crisis, the secretary of state wrote a letter to the new president headed, "Some Thoughts for the President's Consideration." Geoffrey Perret records that Seward "wanted Lincoln to unite the country by waging war -- or at least threatening war -- against France and Spain. The Spanish had recently seized Santo Domingo and, with French connivance, were poised to grab Haiti. This violation of the Monroe Doctrine could not be allowed to stand. Tell them to get out of our hemisphere, or else, he urged." [Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's Greatest President and Commander in Chief* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 23.

^[4] Peter Woll, ed., *American Government: Readings and Cases*, 15th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), p. xv.