

The Ledger editorial page

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



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Latest Obama Scandal: Hiring People He Likes

President Barack Obama hasn't even begun his second term, yet already he has been ensnared by scandal. Republicans have uncovered a shocking level of wrongdoing in the Oval Office, and I'm afraid what they say is true: The president is brazenly trying to fill his Cabinet with ... people he likes. Alas, the perfidy doesn't end there. Not only is Obama naming agreeable people to his Cabinet, he is also — audaciously, flagrantly — nominating people who ... agree with his policies. Hello, operator? In Waco, Texas, I'd like the number for a Starr, Kenneth W. Among the first to blow the whistle on the scandal was Sen. Jeff Sessions. The Alabamian, ranking Republican on the Budget Committee, went on CNN on Thursday, immediately after Obama tapped Jacob Lew to be Treasury secretary, to tell Wolf Blitzer why he would oppose confirmation. "This is another person just very personally close to the president," Sessions protested. Lew should not be confirmed, the senator said, because "the budget that he wrote was condemned by The Washington Post, virtually every major newspaper in the country." This was unorthodox — Sessions rarely admits to agreeing with anything he reads in The Post — but the truth of the statement was undeniable: Lew did write the budget. He was Obama's budget director before becoming his chief of staff — writing the budget was his job.

There was a time when nominating trusted advisers to key positions would not have been a scandal.

Sessions had Obama dead right. He is nominating like-minded people to serve in top jobs in his administration. And this scandal will continue until Obama finally accepts his constitutional obligation to name disagreeable detractors to his Cabinet. There was a time when nominating trusted advisers to key positions would not have been a scandal. Just three times in the 20th century (and six times before that) did the Senate reject proposed Cabinet officers, reports the Senate Historical Office. The last rejected Cabinet nominee, John Tower, was denied confirmation as defense secretary after accusations of alcohol abuse and womanizing. Ideology is sometimes a factor (just eight of 50 Democrats voted to confirm John Ashcroft as attorney general in 2001), but it is novel to oppose a Cabinet nominee because the president shares his views. Perhaps this should be called the Lew Rule. It's not just Lew who is up against the Lew Rule. Conservatives are grumbling that Eric Holder, a friend of the president, is planning to remain as attorney general, and that White House official John Brennan has been tapped to run the CIA. Also, many Republicans are furious about the nomination of Chuck Hagel, a former Republican senator, to be defense secretary, because they don't like his foreign policy views. But Hagel's views are quite similar to those of the man who nominated him — and that man just won a second presidential term. To the victor no longer go the spoils, or even, under the Lew Rule, the right to be advised by people who are ideologically simpatico. The Wall Street Journal editorial page protests that Obama is "assembling a team of personal and ideological loyalists whose jobs will be less to offer independent advice than to advance and implement his agenda for a larger, more redistributionist government." (Never mind that eight years earlier The Journal's editorialists blasted George W. Bush's first treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, for being "an unguided missile who didn't agree with the president's agenda.") My Post colleague Jennifer Rubin, similarly, notes that Obama is nominating "confidants who are like-minded, disinclined to question the president or rebut his (often erroneous) thinking." As a matter of management, I agree with Rubin. I've argued before that Obama has too many yes men in the White House, and stocking his Cabinet with them will make his presidency more insular. Installing loyalists, such as Bush did with his personal lawyer, Alberto Gonzales, at the Justice Department, has been problematic. But that's Obama's prerogative. He won the election. The only scandal is denying him the right to choose his own advisers.

THE PEOPLE'S AGENDA

2013 AGENDA FOR PROGRESS: The Ledger's Agenda for Progress editorial on New Year's Day set out recommended goals for public policy. With this coupon, we are asking readers to outline their own state and local public-policy priorities, and send them to The Ledger.

HOW TO RESPOND: List as many as three public-policy goals for local- or state-government officials to accomplish. Explain the need for the goals. Because of space limitations, brevity is important. Responses are scheduled for publication Sunday, Jan. 20, in The People's Agenda. Send by email to voice@theledger.com or fax to 863-802-7849. Note subject as "Agenda 2013." Or use this coupon and mail to the address below.

DEADLINE: Agenda 2013 submissions must be received by The Ledger by Wednesday, Jan. 16, at 5 p.m.

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VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Crimes Are Committed By Those With the Illegal Guns

Every day, we read that more and more people are buying guns. Guns are expensive. More and more, politicians, the media and those that make a lot of money off of creating organizations to ban guns wail that the latest incident of gun violence points to the idea that if we ban guns, then all will be well.

The same politicians just extended unemployment benefits for those that will not work for a year. We now have more than five states that have more than half of their citizens on welfare.

The fear that is being created is not that gun violence is out of hand, the fear is that when this nation implodes from the debt that is unsustainable, those who have never done anything but collect a welfare check will go about taking what they are no longer given. And they will do that at illegal gunpoint.

Look at Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and Houston where there are neighborhoods the police will not go to because of the threat of death by illegal guns. The deterioration of those cities looks much like Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs went off, and this was done by the citizens who live there. Cities are marked off by criminal gang territory by the police in most of the larger cities, and now, in many of the middle cities, too.

As the media starts to print the names and addresses of gun owners, to the delight of those criminals who can read, Mapquest should now read, "All other houses do not have guns, so plan accordingly."

In fact, legal guns are expensive, and the training on how to properly use them costs, too. On the other hand, not as much as medical costs or replacement costs caused by the criminal acts of those who have all of those illegal guns.

DON MILLIGAN
Auburndale

What Fiscal Cliff?

Would someone please explain to me what the Congress and that person just did to me? For weeks we heard that if a deal isn't worked out our taxes were going to increase. The nation's "something" will fall over the cliff and everyone's taxes will go sky high. There have already been reports that the middle class lost an average of \$3,800 per household in 2012. Now the fiscal cliff deal is passed, and the media is reporting that taxes will increase on 80 percent of the nation.

Just what did happen? How was this deal going to help if our taxes are going up? Wasn't the purpose of this deal to stop taxes from going up? Just who is going to benefit from the great deal?

The president and most of the members of Congress are millionaires. Does anyone believe they would do something to take away from their riches? Once again we see the futility of supporting this government. It doesn't really matter which side you're on, members of both political parties will always put themselves first and give the people bull.

JOHN R. EDWARDS
Lakeland

Romney Security Cost

The city of Lakeland is trying to collect \$8,200 from Mitt Romney for security services ["City Wants Pay for Security at GOP Rally," Dec. 4]. Good luck with that.

Here's a thought: Why not ask the Lakeland Republican Party to pay for it? We all know the answer to that one.

As a fallback measure, the city can do what it does best: Set up red light cameras at the airport. Maybe it will get lucky and nick some Democrats.

ROBERT JORDAN
Lakeland

Regulate Commercials

You have published a couple of articles on this subject, but the Federal Communications Commission should become involved to regulate the number of commercials that should be allowed on regular TV programming. Consumers already are paying a high price for cable programming, only to be inundated with a bunch of silly, stupid commercials that have little or no relevance.

There should be a cable service that allows you commercial-free programming, such as premium channels. I think consumers in America should have the option of a service without these commercials dominating the airways.

ANTHONY L. SUMMERS
Lakeland

WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

Voice of the People
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EDITORIALS

[LAKELAND PUBLIC RECORDS]

Police Must Follow Law

Florida is known as the Sunshine State. The reference, of course, is to the state's

bright, warm climate. However, Florida is known nationally for sunshine in another sense: open government — public access to governmental meetings and public records.

Florida's government in the sunshine goes back more than a century to the passage of the Public Records Law in 1909.

Attorney General Pam Bondi summarizes open government this way: "In Florida, transparency is not up to the whim or grace of public officials. Instead, it is an enforceable right."

Lakeland Police Chief Lisa Womack has a different view on the release of public records: At times, the Police Department will play a "cat-and-mouse" game with news organizations when it does not want to release records it considers sensitive, she told The Ledger's Jeremy Maready for an article Jan. 6.

Contrast Womack's contrarian view with that spelled out on the public records page of the city's website: "Florida's public records laws are very broad, and most documents and records are available to the public. Florida practices government in the sunshine with the policy that state, county and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person. Providing access to public records is the duty of each agency, and the city of Lakeland takes pride in delivering municipal services that are transparent and open."

In short, the city goes to great length in explaining the Public Records Law and providing assurance that it will follow the law. Womack's "cat-and-mouse" approach is one in which she will comply with the law only when she feels like it.

CHIEF DIMINISHES LAW

In the city of Lakeland, if only a sole person could be expected to abide by the law, one would hope it would be the chief of police. Unacceptably, Lisa Womack has not held herself to that basic standard. Nonetheless, she and her Police Department expect compliance with the state's laws by every other person in Lakeland.

Judging the effectiveness of a public agency such as the Police Department, either broadly or in a particular instance, is a purpose for which members of the public would use city records. Often, news organizations take on that task on the public's behalf.

However, a public analysis of the department's efficacy can be accomplished only if the department provides records as required by the state law.

"There should be no cat and mouse, and the fact that she said that is incredible," said noted open-government lawyer Gregg Thomas of Tampa.

Thomas represents The Ledger in an effort to obtain public records from the Lakeland Police Department, related to the Nov. 24 shooting of Ralph Harper at the Lakeland Farmer's Market. Harper, 79, of Brandon was shot while working at his gun-and-coin booth at the market.

CLOSED-MOUTHED ON CRIME

Bernardo Copeland Jr., 18, of Lakeland is accused of shooting Harper in the stomach. He, and six other teenagers accused of being present at the shooting and involved, are charged with attempted murder and armed robbery.

The Lakeland Police Department is withholding records such as the teens' criminal histories before the Harper shooting — their ages are not a factor because of the extent of their previous criminal involvement — as well as records for the Harper shooting. Not even the descriptions of some crimes — the "nature of a reported crime," which the Public Records Law requires to be disclosed — have been provided.

That information is important because police believed Copeland had shot Devin Reed in the left calf Sept. 30 while Reed was in a car in North Lakeland. On Oct. 3, Reed and a witness identified Copeland as the shooter. Police said, however, that further witnesses were hard to find.

If Copeland shot Reed, and if he had been charged and arrested even on Nov. 23, rather than Nov. 30, as he was, could Ralph Harper have made it through the day of Nov. 24 without having been shot? Could he have avoided hospitalization and the slow, difficult recovery he is undergoing at home now?

The residents of Lakeland — for whom Womack and her Police Department work — would have a much better chance of determining how well police handled these cases, and how well they are protecting the public, if Womack and her officers would release the related public records, as required by the Florida Public Records Law.