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Cabinet: Pragmatic, Efficient, Conventional

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If Ronald Reagan's Cabinet provides a clue to the way his administration will perform, it is likely to be pragmatic, hard-working and largely lacking in unconventional ideas.

The Cabinet, finally completed last week with the selection of Terrel H. Bell as secretary of education, is overwhelmingly white, male, middle-aged, professional and balanced among conflicting claims within the Reagan constituencies. For the most part, the same description could have been made of the California state cabinet during Reagan's eight years as governor.

Like President Carter before him, Reagan turned for his key Cabinet appointments to his loyal cadre in state government and to survivors of his party's last national administration.

Carter pledged to be a different kind of Democrat and then relied on the second-string of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations for several major appointments. Reagan, after promising that he would unleash the genius of the free enterprise system and bring to Washington the best brains it could provide, chose major figures of the Nixon administration for two of his top four Cabinet positions: Alexander M. Haig Jr. as secretary of state and Caspar W. Weinberger as secretary of defense. The number would have been three of four if Reagan's first choice as secretary of the treasury, John B. Connally, had been willing to take the job a second time.

Reagan's other top Cabinet selection — William French Smith as attorney general — is the latest entry in the old-crony sweepstakes at the Department of Justice. This, too, followed the predictable pattern of Reagan's governorship; he named his executive secretary to the state supreme court.

"Traditional" is the way one veteran Republican describes most of Reagan's choices. For the most part, this assistant to the transition thinks that the Reagan choices will perform professionally and efficiently but are not likely to make waves.

"Ron Reagan doesn't like surprises," says one of the incoming president's financial supporters. "He likes people around him whom he knows and trusts."

Of the 16 Cabinet-level selections, Smith is a personal friend and Weinberger a loyal former aide whom Reagan used to refer to as "my Disraeli." Central Intelligence Agency Director-designate William J. Casey was Reagan's 1980 campaign director. Energy Secretary-designate James B. Edwards, in addition to representing a traditional political payoff to southern supporters, backed Reagan in 1976 when his challenge to President Ford found help scarce among GOP officeholders.

Two others on the list are also loyal Reaganites — Transportation Secretary-designate Drew Lewis, who was an effective Reagan operative at the Republican National Committee, and Health and Human Services Secretary-designate Richard S. Schweiker, who has rarely differed with Reagan since the former California governor picked him for vice president in 1976.

But Lewis and Schweiker also demonstrate the ability of Reagan to reach out beyond his natural conservative base in the Republican Party, as does the selection of James Baker III as White House chief of staff. Baker was Ford's chairman in 1976 and Lewis was the Ford campaign director in the key state of Pennsylvania. Schweiker used to be considered a GOP liberal, and he is still likely to differ with conservatives on such potentially touchy issues as health maintenance organizations.

Reagan's Cabinet selection process, and to some degree the Cabinet itself, demonstrates three Reagan characteristics that are likely to be important in the presidency: his seeming detachment from the daily business of governing, his proclivity for balancing conflicting constituencies, and a somewhat contradictory tendency to cling stubbornly to a pet notion or appointment.

Reagan's detachment, so extreme in comparison to his immediate predecessors that it seems almost like indifference, was evident throughout the selection process. He considered this style a virtue as governor, when he frequently decided an issue from a narrowed list of options brought to him by aides.

But Reagan can be a hard man to dissuade when he has made up his mind about something. He hardly knew Haig personally but was convinced that the former NATO commander had the quality of professional toughness Reagan much admires coupled with a "realistic" view of Soviet military capacity and intentions. Suggestions that Haig could face a difficult Senate confirmation fight never made headway with Reagan, who was willing to fight for his first choice.

Three other Reagan selections demonstrate an executive capacity for overriding the suggestions of his staff. One is Smith, whom Reagan wanted at his side in Washington regardless of qualifications or stories about "cronyism." Another is Casey, whose energy and intellectual capacity were questioned by some of his former colleagues on the campaign staff.

The third and in a way most interesting Reagan personal choice is his only woman Cabinet nominee, Georgetown Prof. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick as ambassador to the United Nations. Reagan became interested after reading a Kirkpatrick article in "Commentary" given him by foreign policy adviser Richard V. Allen. Candidate Reagan asked to have a meeting, interviewed her on his campaign plane and became personally convinced she should have a role in his administration.

What may have fascinated Reagan with self-styled "old liberal" Kirkpatrick — the only Democrat in his Cabinet — is that she seems to be embarked on the same long voyage from liberalism to conservatism which Reagan traveled long ago. As such, she ratifies for the incoming president one of his favorite notions, that the Democratic Party deserted him rather than the other way around.

Reagan's pragmatic tendency to be a balancer allows him to be all things

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to all people when the balancing works. When it doesn't, as sometimes happened in the early stages of his California administration, he winds up pleasing no one.

It is too early to say whether the balancing act has failed in the crucial Cabinet posts of state and defense, but certainly there is unhappiness about Haig and Weinberger. The Haig appointment has disappointed those moderates who distrusted Nixon, supported Reagan and hoped that "Watergate" was a word they would henceforth encounter only in history books. And the selection of Weinberger, a strong defense advocate who is not likely to view waste in weapons systems more tolerantly than he views waste in anything else, justifies the always-near-the-surface suspicions of a New Right that has been given little more than rhetoric in the Cabinet selection.

Weinberger, unassailable as a Cabinet choice because of Reagan's personal trust in him, has given the New Right something to shout at by insisting on professional government troubleshooter Frank Carlucci as his deputy. This clamor on the wings could become a crescendo the first time Weinberger proposes cutting spending on any highly visible military proposal.

EXCERPTED

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