

## **NOT FULL OF BEANS**

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At this time eight years ago, the administration of President-elect Bill Clinton was trying to put together an administration "that looks like America." How many blacks would there be in the major posts? How many Latinos? How many women? How should "two-fers" count? Were white males getting shafted? Was merit a bygone credential?

The racial, ethnic and gender competition got so intense, and so overwrought, that President-elect Clinton denounced "bean-counters" who were demanding such a spoils system based on demographics.

Of course, in a portent of the Clinton style, the bean-counters kept right on counting beans, and Clinton kept making appointments to make the bean-counters happy. Everyone knew that Bill Daley (eek! A white male!) would become Secretary of Transportation -- except that at the last minute Clinton beaned him, choosing Federico Pena for the job, a Hispanic.

The feminists got a promise from Hilary Clinton that one of the top four cabinet posts (State, Defense, Treasury and Attorney-General) would go to a woman. The search was on! Dutifully, President-elect Clinton chose high-grade attorney Zoe Baird. But it turned out she had what is now called "a Zoe Baird problem," she hadn't paid nanny payroll taxes. How terrible!

Could the nomination be saved? No. Not even close. The feminists chose not to try to use their political clout to help her with the Congress. Why not, she was a woman,

wasn't she? Yes, she was, but it turned out she was not a sufficiently liberal woman. Might it be that in this case there was something more to "looking like America" than merely gender, race and ethnicity? (Answer: Yes, and don't forget it.)

And so, after another Nanny-problem nominee (Judge Kimba Wood) tanked, America ended up with Attorney General Janet Reno, whose chief credential at the time was her gender. It will be for history to judge whether she was an effective A.G. But history will have no doubt that Hilary got jobs for gal pals.

And so it came to pass, after ugly arguments, that America ended up with a cabinet that resembled a demographically balanced portrait of successful center-left Democrats, mostly lawyers. Many of them did fine jobs.

Fast-forward, December 2000.

President-elect Bush, too, is well on his way to picking a cabinet that looks like America, with blacks, Latinos, women, as well as white males. Some things have remained the same, but some things have changed -- for the better, and for the weirder.

Judging from Bush's cabinet choices so far, we will end up with a cabinet that looks like a demographically balanced portrait of center-right Republicans, many of them lawyers. Many of them will do fine jobs.

But this time we do not have the degrading spectacle of choosing a government-by-bean. We do not have high profile and divisive fights about race, ethnicity and gender. This time around you don't hear people saying, "I lost out because that job had to go to a tan skirt."

The weird part approaches transmogrification. Some Democratic black activists tell us that Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell and National Security Director Condoleeza Rice don't really count as blacks because they will deal with foreign policy, not with the principal domestic goals of the Congressional black caucus. Mel Martinez of Florida, Secretary-designate of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, should not really be counted as a Latino because he doesn't sign on to the goals of some self-styled liberal Latino activists.

It's the ideology, stupid. Thus, Clarence Thomas is not really black; he's a conservative. In the Reagan administration, certain feminist advocates refused to regard U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick as a bona fide female, because, by their lights, she held conservative views on many issues.

As long as there is free politics, smart presidents will pick their appointees on merit, but never forgetting that a "balanced ticket" has a role, too. Many Westerners would like to see a Westerner in the cabinet; many women want to see females in high-visibility roles -- ditto with blacks, Latinos, Asian Americans, and many other groups, growing in number all the time.

It's not new. Many Catholic Republicans voted for John F. Kennedy in 1960. I myself, of all people, briefly considered voting for liberal Al Gore in 2000 because there was a Jew on the Democratic ticket.

So be it. This is a continental polyglot nation, where some group loyalties remain strong, long. There is a craven way to accommodate this, and a smooth way to do it. Bush's way is smooth.

**BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."**

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