

Friedman's Foolish Fantasy

His bipartisan 'national unity cabinet' idea makes no sense in American terms.

by Conrad Black



Tom Friedman, the amiable but compulsively mistaken columnist of the *New York Times*, has produced a proposal for Joe Biden to nominate in advance a unity cabinet, composed of an ideological range of people from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Mitt Romney. This argument, and the reasoning given for it, are so preposterous that a cordial reply seems called for: This is the same columnist who told his readers that the purported Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election was an invasion of American sovereignty as profound, outrageous, and threatening as the attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. It is the same person who informed President Obama that Obama had created a foreign-policy "doctrine" like those of his

predecessors James Monroe, Harry Truman, and Richard Nixon (all very successful foreign-policy presidents), in Obama's case by making preemptive and unrequited concessions to Cuba and Iran. I could go on if there were a need for it.

Friedman wrote in the *Times* on April 7 that Joe Biden must announce at his party's convention the composition of an entire cabinet, including a number of Republicans. To set the stage for this dramatic proposal, he laid down the customary *Times* artillery barrage of aggressive disparagements on the incumbent: President Trump seeks to "exacerbate the worst" in America and it is a matter of "life and death" to get rid of him, as he only seeks to dominate the country with his "48 per cent (or less)" of voters, to "suppress the vote," and to "squeak by" in gaming the electoral system. Reelecting Trump would be "the moment America ceded its global leadership to China." Having thus established the necessity of his proposal, Friedman counseled Biden to recruit those who would "believe in science," so they could deal with climate change, along with people who in the present crisis "took the science of this epidemic seriously" and would be open to extraordinary measures to help the disadvantaged, support the public sector, and ensure universal health care (though not, to be fair, with the Sanders–Warren–Ocasio-Cortez single-payer Leviathan straitjacket). This great act of unification is necessary to prevent "four more years of lying, dividing, and impugning experts." How Friedman expects to build unity by smearing and defaming the "basket of deplorables" half of the country that has steadily supported Trump isn't clear.

Tom Friedman has taken the idea of a national unity government from the parliamentary system. In countries where the government requires a parliamentary majority and the principal legislative house is determined at least partially by a slate system depending on the numbers of votes each party receives overall, such as Germany and Israel, coalitions are, in practice, always necessary, but that certainly doesn't ensure

a high level of policy consensus. In states where the principal legislative house is chosen by a constituency system in which the leading candidate in each district wins, regardless of how fragmented the vote is (“first past the post”), such as Great Britain and Canada, coalitions are resorted to only in extreme emergencies – four times in the combined history of those two countries in the 20th century, of which three were during the World Wars and one in the Great Depression. On such occasions, the incumbent prime minister, or the most prestigious alternative, is called to lead.

The most famous and successful example was Winston Churchill, from 1940 to 1945. On May 10, 1940, as the Nazi offensive in the west broke into the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, King George VI called upon Mr. Churchill – the leading opponent of the discredited appeasement policy, and a veteran of 39 years in Parliament and nine different cabinet positions, including the Exchequer (Treasury), Home Office, War, Trade, Colonies (an immense empire), munitions (in World War I), the Air Force, and what was then the greatest navy in the world in both World Wars. The small all-party war cabinet that Mr. Churchill chaired, as prime minister and minister of national defense, was delegated practically unlimited powers, except the right to tax, in what swiftly became the greatest crisis of national survival in British history. The country, as Mr. Churchill said in his inaugural statement promising “nothing but blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” had “not seen the campfires of an invader for nearly a thousand years.”

Tom Friedman didn't refer to Churchill, but he did use the terminology of the time (a “national unity cabinet,” which is not an American political expression, as cabinet members are not in the legislature). Claiming any sort of grandeur of emergency now, and on behalf of Joe Biden, is a formidable stretch, even for someone with the elasticity of imagination of Tom Friedman. The precedents he does cite are Lincoln, FDR, and Obama, but these are flimsy; he is inspired by Doris

Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals*, about Lincoln, but Lincoln only had 39.5 percent of the total vote in the 1860 election (which was contested by four serious candidates), and it remains less than half if the votes from the southern states that shortly seceded are omitted. It was only the Republican Party's second presidential election, and Lincoln unified his party by bringing in his rivals for the nomination, especially William H. Seward, who had led on the first two ballots at the nominating convention. Lincoln moved closer to the idea of coalition in his reelection, when he renamed his party the National Union and selected the only southern Democratic senator who had remained faithful to the Union, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, as vice president.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is cited because he nominated Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet member, to be secretary of labor. She was a lifelong Democrat who had worked closely with Roosevelt when he was governor of New York. During World War II Roosevelt did come closer than anyone in U.S. history to coalition government, by bringing in prominent Republicans Henry Stimson (who had held high offices under four Republican presidents) as secretary of war, former Republican vice presidential candidate Frank Knox (Navy secretary), John G. Winant (ambassador to Great Britain), William J. Donovan (chief of intelligence), Edward Stettinius (secretary of State), and Patrick Hurley (ambassador to China), and in sending equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats to the founding meeting of the United Nations (having learned from Woodrow Wilson's mistakes of 1919). The reference to President Obama for having made Republican senator Chuck Hagel defense secretary is spurious, as Hagel was only his third defense secretary and was acrimoniously forced out after two years, hardly an advertisement for national unity.

Friedman's candidate for State is Mitt Romney, which is nonsense. When he was the presumptive Republican nominee for president in 2012 and made his foreign-policy tour, the

highlight was telling the British, a month before opening, that they weren't capable of putting on the Olympic Games successfully (they did). Friedman doubtless likes him for his vote to convict Trump in the impeachment farce, but representing the nomination of Romney to any office as a gesture of national unity is absurd. And there is no reason to believe that Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Republican Ohio governor Mike DeWine would accept the posts Friedman has allocated to them. Joe Biden could not remotely convene such a group and lead it anywhere; an attempt to announce any such concept at the nominating convention would be seen as an effort to prop up an implausible candidate, and would just be yet another attempt to claim that Donald Trump is illegitimate and whoever can be mobilized to oppose him is the official agent of national salvation. If Friedman had any practical interest in national unity, he would lead a movement in the Trump-hating media to acknowledge the president's achievements and oppose him in civil terms and for rational reasons, not by attempting to continue the fraud that he is a cloven-footed, horned monster of corruption and incompetence.