

Enough For A Minyan: A Jewish Who's Who of Biden's Cabinet-To-Be

By Jacob Kornbluh | January 18th | The Forward

As President-elect Joe Biden announced his picks for the Cabinet, the joke went around on Jewish Twitter that the West Wing would have a minyan.

Indeed, at least 10 prominent Jews have been nominated to key positions. There's Ronald Klain (chief of staff); Anthony Blinken (Secretary of State); Janet Yellen (Treasury); Merrick Garland (Attorney General); Alejandro Mayorkas (Homeland Security); and Avril Haines (Director of National Intelligence). One level down are Wendy Sherman (deputy Secretary of State); Eric Lander (science and technology adviser); Ann Neuberger (deputy National Security Adviser); and David Cohen (deputy CIA director). Plus there's Doug Emhoff, the Jewish husband of Vice President-elect Kamala Harris.



It's a "remarkable statement about the place of Jews in this society," said Jason Isaacson, the American Jewish

Committee's chief policy and political affairs officer in Washington. Amid the rise in antisemitism and its role underpinning the Capitol siege on Jan. 6, Isaacson added, the fact that so many well-known and engaged Jews will serve in the highest levels of the administration "and no one talks about that and it's not an issue, that says a lot about how far American society has progressed."

After Biden's inauguration on Wednesday, most of these individuals will have to be confirmed by the United States Senate. Here's a who's who guide to the West Wing minyan-to-be:

Ronald Klain: White House Chief of Staff



Ron Klain on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on March 10, 2020

Born and raised in Indianapolis, Klain, 59, said in an [interview](#) with The New York Times in 2007, that when he married his non-Jewish wife, Monica Medina, they agreed that their three children — Daniel, Hannah and Michael — would be raised Jewish, but that the family would also celebrate Christmas.

A Harvard Law School graduate, Klain first served as chief of staff to former Vice President Al Gore and later as chief of staff to Biden during his first term as vice president. In 2014 he was appointed as President Barack Obama's Ebola response coordinator.

Klain — an active Twitter user — played a key role in drafting Biden's plan to address COVID-19 during the presidential campaign.

Tevi Troy, a historian and author of "Fight House," a book about rivalries at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, pointed out that a number of Jews have preceded Klain in the role. Josh Bolten was President George W. Bush's chief of staff from 2006 to 2009, followed by Rahm Emanuel and Jack Lew, who both served President Barack Obama.

While neither carried the title, Jared Kushner and Stephen Miller were perhaps President Trump's closest and most influential aides throughout his term.

Antony Blinken: Secretary of State



Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken speaks on November 24, 2020.

Born in New York City, Blinken, 58, moved to Paris at age 9 with his mother and stepfather, Samuel Pisar, a Holocaust survivor from Poland. During the Biden campaign and in his speech accepting the nomination in December, Blinken recounted how Pisar, a lawyer, came to the U.S. after escaping a death march out of a concentration camp towards the end of WWII.

Blinken's father, Donald Blinken, served as U.S. Ambassador to Hungary under former President Bill Clinton. His uncle Alan was ambassador to Belgium during

the same time. Blinken's great-grandfather, Meir Blinken, was a [Yiddish writer](#) in the early 1900s.

Also a Harvard graduate, Blinken's first government job was at the National Security Council under Clinton. He was promoted to senior director for strategic planning, then became a speechwriter for the president. During the Bush years, Blinken was staff director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Blinken worked on Biden's unsuccessful 2008 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, and eventually joined the Obama-Biden transition team. During Obama's first term, Blinken was Vice President Biden's national security adviser.

In 2014, he was tapped to serve as deputy to then-Secretary of State John Kerry. In recent years, Blinken was part of the WestExec Advisors strategy advising firm and served as a senior foreign policy adviser, as well as a channel for Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, during Biden's 2020 campaign.

Blinken has also [played](#) on a Jewish Community Center indoor-soccer team in Washington, and — [along with](#) now-Congressman Tom Malinowski of New Jersey — wrote parody songs and self-parody movies on American foreign policy. The pair revived their band in Obama's state department.

Blinken's plate is pretty full for the first 100 days. He must restore morale among career diplomats who have struggled under Trump, and reestablish fraying ties with traditional allies. He will also lead diplomatic talks about rejoining the Paris climate accord, reentering the Iran nuclear deal and advancing Middle East peace. In a pre-election interview

with [Jewish Insider](#), Blinken applauded the recently signed Abraham Accords between Israel and several Arab countries as a “positive step,” but indicated that the Biden administration will also focus on reviving the Israeli - Palestinian peace process and taking the diplomatic route to tackle the Iranian threat.

Dan Shapiro, Obama’s ambassador to Israel, said that Blinken “draws on his Jewish and American family story” and “marries that with a core conviction about the essential nature of U.S. leadership in the world — to defend our people and our security, to support our allies, to confront our adversaries, to uphold our values, and to tackle the most pressing global challenges.”

As Biden’s closest foreign policy aide for two decades, Shapiro noted, Blinken will operate “with the full and complete confidence of the president.”

Janet Yellen: Secretary of the Treasury



Born and raised by a Polish-Jewish family in Brooklyn, Yellen, 74, will make history as the first woman to head the department. The daughter of Anna Blumenthal and Julius

Yellen, she was also the only woman to graduate with a Ph.D. in economics from Yale University in 1971.

Yellen went on to teach economics at Harvard before she was hired by the Federal Reserve Board of Governors to do research on international monetary reform. In 1994, Clinton appointed Yellen to the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors. Yellen left the Federal Reserve in 1997 to become chair of Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers, but returned in 2010, Obama elevated her to be chair of the Federal Reserve board in his second term.

Yellen was one of the people depicted in a last-minute campaign ad by Trump in 2016 that was criticized for — peddling anti-Jewish stereotypes. The ad decried the influence of “those who control the levers of power in Washington” and singled out Yellen, billionaire George Soros and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein. Despite this, Yellen was initially favored for another term on the Fed, but Trump changed course and picked Jerome Powell, a Republican, a move that Yellen called disappointing.

At Treasury, Yellen's challenges include reviving a pandemic-plagued economy, restoring some of the Trump administration's regulatory rollbacks and leading the sanctions regime against Russia, China and Iran, among other countries.

Sheila Katz, CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, said that in addition to being uniquely qualified for the job, Yellen “will be breaking another glass ceiling on behalf of women everywhere,” if confirmed.

Merrick Garland: Attorney General



Garland, 68, grew up in the heavily Jewish Chicago suburb of Skokie with a Protestant father and a mother whose immigrant parents fled Russia to escape antisemitism and persecution in the early 1900s.

After graduating from Harvard, Garland worked as a clerk to legendary Second Circuit Judge Henry Friendly, and later to Supreme Court Justice William Brennan. During the Carter administration, Garland was special assistant to Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti.

In 1989, shortly after becoming a partner in a private law firm, Garland became a federal prosecutor. He had senior positions in the Clinton justice department, and since 1997, has served on the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

President Obama's 2016 nomination of Garland to the Supreme Court was thwarted by the Republican-controlled Senate, which refused to hold confirmation hearings because it was an election year.

“As a longtime public servant, who is also the grandson of immigrants who fled antisemitism in Russia, Merrick Garland will bring a critical perspective to the office of U.S. Attorney General,” Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-

Defamation League, said in an interview. Greenblatt added that he's looking forward to seeing Garland tackle the numerous challenges the country is facing, "including rising hate crimes and violent domestic extremism, and the imperative of racial justice."

Alejandro Mayorkas: Secretary, Dept. of Homeland Security



Secretary of Homeland Security nominee Alejandro Mayorkas on November 24, 2020 in Wilmington, Delaware

Born in Havana, Cuba, Mayorkas, 60, would be the first foreign-born person to run the nation's top public security agency since its creation in 2002. His father was a Cuban native with a Sephardic background, and his mother fled Romania to Cuba amid Nazi persecution in the early 1940s. The Mayorkas family immigrated to the U.S. in 1960 following the Cuban revolution and the ascendance of Fidel Castro.

For most of the 1990s, Mayorkas served as a federal prosecutor in California focused on white-collar crime; President Clinton appointed him U.S. Attorney for Los Angeles in 1998.

In the U.S. Attorney's office, Mayorkas created the Civil Rights Section to prosecute hate crimes and other acts of intolerance and discrimination. During the Obama administration, Mayorkas served as director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and then deputy Homeland Security secretary.



Why my friend Ali Mayorkas will be an ideal Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security

Last year, Mayorkas joined the board of the Jewish refugee aid group HIAS. Mark Hetfield, the group's CEO, said that Mayorkas personal and family immigration history "means he has no illusions about where threats to our country come from."

"DHS has been so focused on foreign threats, and they've woken up to the fact that actually most of the threats to this country are right here at home," Hetfield added. "And I think that's something that the Mayorkas family is familiar with — that the threats don't always come from outside the country. So I think he's in a good position in terms of his psyche to deal with that."

ADL's Greenblatt, who worked with Mayorkas in the Obama administration, described him as a "person of the highest integrity" and as someone who worked closely with Jewish

groups for many years “to improve Jewish communal security.” Mayorkas, who was a volunteer lay leader at ADL, often said that his beliefs about national and communal security “were informed by the lack of security he felt as a Jew in his native Cuba,” Greenblatt added.

Avril Haines: Director of National Intelligence



Nominated Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines on November 24, 2020.

Haines, 51, grew up in Manhattan, and lost her mother at age 15. Her father, Thomas, wrote in a recent memoir that when he took her on a trip to Israel, some Israeli men encouraged her to move there.

After graduating from the University of Chicago and Georgetown University Law Center. Haines worked at the Hague Conference on Private International Law and later as a clerk for Judge Danny Julian Boggs of the U.S. Court of Appeals. She joined the State Department in 2003, and also worked on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Biden was its chairman.

In 2010, Haines joined the Obama White House as deputy assistant to the president and deputy counsel for national security affairs. She later served as deputy CIA director and then replaced Blinken as deputy national security adviser. Haines was among the signatories on a letter circulated last year urging the Democratic National Committee to adopt harsher language on Israel and settlements in the party's 2020 platform.

Like Yellen, Haines would become the first woman to hold this position.

Wendy Sherman: Deputy Secretary of State



Sherman, 71, would also become the first woman in the role; she previously made history as the first woman undersecretary of state for political affairs in 2009.

In a 2018