

Return of the Propeller Heads

By [MATTHEW CONTINETTI](#) | November 14, 2020 6:30 AM



President-elect Joe Biden takes notes as he meets with members of the coronavirus transition advisory board in Wilmington, Del., November 9, 2020. (Jonathan Ernst/Reuters)

Heavy-handed bureaucracy is set for a comeback under Biden.

BARACK OBAMA had a nickname for the highly credentialed economists who surrounded him during his first term. He called them “[propeller heads](#).” It was his way of joshing—and asserting superiority over—figures such as Larry Summers, Peter Orszag, Austan Goolsbee, Jason Furman, and other wonks with impeccable CVs and intimidating confidence in their own opinions. The label reduced these résumé gods to [propeller-beanie geeks](#). Like most Obama statements, it was also a self-flattering way for the president to demonstrate the value he places on intellection, data, and expert knowledge. He and his fellow progressives love the idea that reason, logic, and science legitimize the power they wield through law and bureaucratic diktat.

The public wasn’t so enamored. The weaknesses of the propeller heads became evident over time. No doubt because of their glorious self-image, the propeller heads assumed that government could easily implement their ambitious theories and complicated schemes. They assumed that human beings could be “nudged” into desired behaviors. They placed one set of values—efficiency, equality, safety, carbon or gender neutrality—ahead of others, especially individual freedom and religious liberty. They neglected or waved away unanticipated consequences. They treated disagreement or disobedience as irrational or pathological—a manifestation of racism or sexism or greed. They often went ahead with their plans regardless of disapproval or rejection.

The propeller-head mentality is “we know best.” It dominated the administration. It produced a stimulus that did not stimulate, an unpopular health care plan, a contraceptive mandate that inspired lawsuits against nuns, a cap-and-trade bill that never became law, a financial reform that squeezed community banks, a GM bailout that stiffed non-union pensioners, a series of coal and water regulations that put miners and farmers out of business, an immigration amnesty by fiat that set off a rush for the border, and a nuclear deal that rewarded Iran for its malign behavior. Perhaps the most significant consequence of the imperious and heavy-handed manner in which experts ruled during the Obama years was the political reaction it inspired. The propeller heads like to believe they are the stewards of a healthier, cleaner, safer, saner world. But they are really the midwives of national populism, the doulas of Donald Trump.

And now they are set for a comeback. When you read the Biden-Sanders [unity task force recommendations](#), go over [Biden's potential cabinet picks](#), or examine the membership of [Biden's COVID-19 advisory board](#), you see the outlines of an administration committed to the same technocratic principles and top-down, uniform, centralized style of governance as its Democratic precursor. In some cases—if Susan Rice becomes secretary of state, for example—the very same people will be in charge. In other cases, the personalities will be new, but the methods will be similar.

The center-left views of academic, media, and cultural and foreign-policy elites will be ratified as sacrosanct. Officials will attempt, not always successfully and with unpredictable effects, to turn these opinions into policy, through legislation if possible but through regulation mostly. Dissenting forces will be problematized as disingenuous, malevolent, or not entirely sane. The one place where the public will be able to register its opposition is the voting booth.

Many opinion leaders in Washington dispute the above scenario. They point to Biden's reputation as a moderate, to his decades-long relationship with Mitch McConnell, to the constraints he will face with a narrow House majority and a potential Republican Senate. They hope that the establishment, restored to its former fading glory, will reassert its control and "turn down the temperature." Biden, they add, will have a "caretaker presidency." He and McConnell will work out some small-bore tax changes. Maybe an infrastructure plan will pass. Otherwise things will drift merrily along, with Trump tweeting furiously from the sidelines.

My pundit friends forget the nature of the propeller heads. The propeller heads know they are right—their degrees and titles and offices and accolades prove it. They know that government exists to perform the functions of social uplift and rational control. They are not about to sit back and let the Delaware gang and [the apex predator of American politics](#) run the show. There's a virus to crush, a climate to save, a liberal international order to rebuild.

Two of Biden's appointees to the COVID-19 transition advisory board, for instance, [support](#) another national lockdown. Will Biden overrule them as cases mount and the media call for something to be done?

Biden's deputy campaign manager [told](#) Chuck Todd the other day that her boss "campaigned on an incredibly progressive and aggressive agenda" and that "he's going to make good on those commitments," including his "big, aggressive" climate plan. Will Biden stand aside as this agenda runs into the maw of Joe Manchin and the Senate Republicans? Or will he say that he, too, has "[a pen and a phone](#)" and instruct his EPA and Energy Departments to act accordingly?

It was recently disclosed that Iran has [12 times the nuclear material allowed](#) under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and [installed advanced centrifuges in its underground research facility](#). The theocratic government of Ayatollah Khamenei is isolated internationally. Its economy is under tremendous strain from American sanctions. And Biden and his team are [ready to reenter the nuclear deal if Iran will have them](#), rewarding an authoritarian state sponsor of terrorism in order to demonstrate to Europe that "America is back."

"There's nothing more dangerous than a propeller head who doesn't know his limitations," David Brooks [wrote](#) in 2009. Today's propeller heads are more ambitious than they were a decade ago. And far more moralistic. Come January, they will return to their old offices and resume their old games. Sure, a few of the names will be different. But the results will be the same.

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