

# Holder sworn in as Obama's attorney general

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WASHINGTON — Attorney General Eric Holder, on his first day on the job, signaled a clean break with past policies of the Bush administration and promised to hold Wall Street accountable if any major financial institutions engaged in fraud that contributed to the global financial crisis.

Vice President Joe Biden swore in President Barack Obama's choice — the first African-American to hold the post — in a Tuesday morning ceremony before dignitaries and employees at the department.

The lanky, 58-year-old former prosecutor, federal judge and No. 2 official during the Clinton administration promised the start of a new era at the Justice Department, which was wracked by Bush administration scandals over politically motivated hirings and firings.

Holder has pledged to restore its reputation.

"This is a place that has, I



Vice President Joe Biden, right, administers the oath of office to Attorney General Eric Holder during a ceremony at the Justice Department in Washington on Tuesday. Holder's wife, Sharon, stands by. Holder served as deputy attorney general under Bill Clinton.

think, been hurting, but I think it's ready to heal," he told reporters.

"I am determined to ensure that this shall be a new day for the dedicated career professionals that I am so honored to call my colleagues," Holder said after

taking the oath. He said he was committed to remaking the department "into what it once was and what is always should be."

Biden said the department, under Holder, would return to a past standard of "no politics, no ideology.

Only a clear assessment of facts and law."

Shortly after the ceremony, Holder was questioned about Wall Street, reviled by some Americans for extravagant company bonuses while seeking taxpayer dollars to remain solvent.

"We're not going to go out on any witchhunts, and yet we'll drill down and see" to what extent the economic troubles are the result of fraud or misconduct, Holder said. "We'll find it and hold people accountable."

Holder was confirmed Monday evening by a 75-21 Senate vote, with all the opposition coming from Republicans.

His first official act as attorney general will be to attend a national security meeting, then head to the White House for a meeting on homeland security, aides said.

Holder's inbox is overflowing with pressing legal issues from the prior administration.

For starters, the new attorney general will learn the secrets of the Office of Legal Counsel, whose lawyers justified the use of controversial interrogation tactics and even declined to provide Bush administration documents to internal Justice Department investigators.

Holder also will play a major role in the future of terrorism detainees.

Obama, in a major policy shift, signed an executive order to close the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, within a year. He also created a special task force to review detainee policy; Holder and Defense Secretary Robert Gates will serve as co-chairs.

That panel will look at options for apprehension, de-

tention, trial, transfer or release of detainees and report to the president within 180 days.

Holder promised senators he would review why career prosecutors in Washington decided not to prosecute the former head of the department's Civil Rights Division. An inspector general's report last month found that Bradley Schlozman, the former head of the division, misled lawmakers about whether he politicized hiring decisions.

Another key question facing Holder is how to advise Obama on the order by President George W. Bush that three of his former top aides — Karl Rove, Harriet Miers and Josh Bolten — should not testify before Congress about firings of U.S. attorneys. Rove and Miers were former aides when Bush gave his order.

If Obama reverses Bush's policy, it would create a new legal issue: whether a former president's order against testifying would still be valid.

The Bush administration's warrantless surveillance program is certain to come under Holder's scrutiny.

After a lengthy and heated debate that pitted privacy and civil liberties concerns against the desire to prevent terrorist attacks, Congress last year eased the rules under which the government could wiretap American phone and computer lines to listen for terrorists and spies.

## Expectation

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is a good thing," said Hillary Shelton, director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP, who monitors and lobbies for Capitol Hill legislation on behalf of Black people.

"The expectations should be high. A lot of promises were also made by the candidate and now the president. And holding him to that is important, but being realistic about that and understanding that you've not just hired a commander-in-chief, but we've elected a leader, which means we must all get engaged in helping to fix these problems," Shelton said.

Thomas Todd studied the question from a different direction.

"Nowhere in the campaign did he really promise to handle the Black agenda — nowhere," said Todd, a Chicago-based retired U.S. attorney, known for his impassioned speeches. "I think Blacks have allowed themselves to get caught up in the euphoria and the celebration and that probably is not realistic... So, my attitude has been that Black people — once they get past the historic nature of what has happened, must hold this president as accountable as any other president."

The expectations are clearly very high for the new president, who, in his first

two weeks in office has:

— Visited Capitol Hill in an attempt to win bipartisan support for his economic stimulus package.

— Signed his first bill, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, enabling more employees to challenge unlawful pay discrimination based on gender, race, age and disability.

— Reversed a string of anti-union executive orders issued by the Bush Administration.

— Established a Middle Class Working Families Task Force.

— Ordered the closing of the highly controversial Guantanamo Bay lockup for alleged terrorists.

Across the board, there is the clear understanding that Obama has simply inherited "a mess" from the previous administration, as described by Shelton.

But, Blacks in leadership positions around the country, many who interfaced with Obama's transition team to get their policy wish lists heard, say some of their proposals are race-specific and long-standing.

"We have seen a complete degradation of our schools and a lack of investment in the public school system and a real focus on quality education beyond all of the platitudes and praises and causes and catch phrases and 'Leave No Child Behind.' That does

not do it," said Albert E. Dotson Jr., chairman of the board of the 100 Black Men of America, which primarily mentors Black youth. "We've got to see a real investment in our public school system."

Leslie Baskerville, president and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, said that in an appeal to Obama's then transition team, she made a plea for the restoration of Title 3 funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

"Title 3 funding is the lifeblood of HBCUs... It keeps their doors open," Baskerville said, noting how the Bush Administration recommended "a whopping cut of Title 3 dollars that would be tantamount to a million dollar loss per institution that's eligible. Ninety-seven HBCUs are participating in the Title 3 Program," she said. "So we have to reverse that."

H. Alexander Robinson, president and CEO of the National Black Justice Coalition points to HIV/AIDS disparities in the Black community.

"The office of National AIDS Policy has to be reinvigorated. There hasn't been a director in that office for almost two years," said Robinson. "During that entire administration, it has been left to languish. With

urgency with healthcare reform on the table, with the economic downturn that's facing all of the AIDS service providers, there needs to be leadership from the White House that in fact addresses HIV and AIDS."

Coming back to what the nation has said is Obama's number one issue, Julie Cunningham, president and CEO of the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials, said "Putting America back to work," is crucial, but it must be done such that African-American contractors get a piece of the pie and that "there is accountability and compliance tied to those dollars."

Public policy issues notwithstanding, Freida Thompson, the artist, said her friends are discussing a historic concern that they doubt will be changed by the Obama presidency, but they hope he will at least try. That is racism.

"People are saying it's going to be the Whites against the Blacks. They're saying it's not going to get any better just because he's in the office. I really want him to say something about that. I really want us all to get along," Thompson said.

Illustrating the depth of the problem, Thompson recalls something that her 7-year-old grandson, Angelo, said: "Grandma, now you're going to need security for Sir Barackster."

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