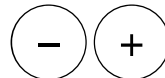


# Who Is Jack Lew, Obama's Nominee for Treasury Secretary?

DAVID A. GRAHAM | JAN 9, 2013 | POLITICS

TEXT SIZE



*The current White House chief of staff is a bookish, private man, but he's also an outspoken liberal with a mind for the intricacies of numbers and budgets.*



Jim Young/Reuters

President Obama [will nominate Jacob Lew to be the next Treasury secretary](#), replacing Tim Geithner, who's retiring. The nomination has long been expected: Lew is a budget whiz and a close confidant of the president who has served for

the past year as White House chief of staff. Here's your cheat sheet on the man who's likely to take over the Treasury. (For a deeper dive, [read Nancy Cook's definitive profile.](#))

**1. He's a numbers guy.** Before he became chief of staff, Lew directed the Office of Management and Budget, running the numbers for the administration. It was his second tour of duty in that job. He also held it from 1998 to 2001 during the Clinton administration. Prior to returning to his OMB chair, Lew worked for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as deputy secretary for management and resources, a chief operating office-like position he inaugurated. And Obama, who is known for pushing back on aides and asking detailed questions, seems to have an unusual degree of faith in him. *The New York Times* [reported](#):

When President Obama was locked in painful spending negotiations with House Republicans last spring, his exceedingly meticulous budget director, Jacob J. Lew, went to the Oval Office to propose some complex budget changes. As Mr. Lew delved deeper and deeper into the numbers, Mr. Obama put up his hand, signaling him to stop.

"Jack, it's fine," the president said, according to Gene Sperling, Mr. Obama's economics adviser, who witnessed the exchange. "I trust your values. I trust your judgment on this."

**2. He has the worst signature in Washington.** Lew earned some [unexpected notoriety](#) in 2011 when a White House memo with what claims to be his signature -- but appears to just be random squiggles, or perhaps a Rorschach test -- emerged.

As [Kevin Roose points out](#), this creates the hilarious possibility that the "signature" will be on every American greenback issued while he's at Treasury. Or maybe not: [Geithner had to change his John Hancock](#) for dollar-printing purposes, so maybe Lew will too.

**3. He's no moderate.** Unlike Geithner, a disciple of Robert Rubin and product of Clinton-era economics, Lew is more closely aligned with class-warrior image that Obama adopted during the election campaign. A staunch liberal, he started his political career [canvassing](#) for anti-war hero Eugene McCarthy in 1968 (he was 12); his adviser at Carleton College was Paul Wellstone, later an iconic liberal senator; and one of his first jobs in Washington was working for Democratic lion and former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill.

**4. But he's earned the trust of Republicans.** Despite his acute partisan sensibility, he has long had a [reputation](#) for earning the trust of and working well with Republicans. People who have had to sit across the negotiating table describe him as a fierce, hard-nosed opponent, but one who listens and works hard to come to a mutually agreeable position. There were perpetual rumors throughout Obama's first term that Geithner's exit was imminent, but the question was always whether the president could get a successor confirmed.

Having been confirmed by the Senate multiple times already, Lew is one of the few candidates who should have a relatively easy run. But he may have depleted at least some of that good will in the last few weeks, when he has served as one of Obama's top lieutenants in negotiations over the fiscal cliff. The confirmation hearings could be tense, in part because of the divisive issues sure to face the next treasury secretary: A fight over the debt ceiling is already in motion; the sequester is due to occur on March 1, barring Congressional action; and spending and budgetary issues will remain a major focus for the rest of Obama's presidency. Perhaps some senator will even ask Lew about his position on [the \\$1 trillion coin](#).

**5. He's part of the 1 percent.** Don't take his liberalism to mean that Lew is a

wild-eyed socialist though. In fact, he's a former banker. In 2008, he [served](#) as chief operating officer of Citigroup Alternative Investments, a division of the Wall Street behemoth. That group was involved in controversial practices like proprietary trading, and was involved in shorting the housing market as the economy lurched toward collapse. Perhaps in keeping with his resume, Lew has rejected the view of many fellow liberals who argue that deregulation of the financial sector contributed to the crash, [saying](#), "[I don't] personally know the extent to which deregulation drove it, but I don't believe that deregulation was the proximate cause." Expect to hear muffled howls of unhappiness from the left, which will be glad to see Geithner go but upset at Lew's positions.

**6. He is a devout believer.** The president better hope catastrophe doesn't strike between sundown Friday and Saturday night. That's because Lew is a devout Jew who [observes](#) the sabbath weekly. During the fierce budget fights of the late 1990s, it was the reportedly one of his few respites from wrangling. But don't take our word for it. Lew has been invited to help light the National Menorah in Washington not once but twice, in [1998](#) and then [again](#) in December 2011.

**7. He doesn't really want to you know anything else.** Unlike the colorful Peter Orszag, who he replaced at OMB, or the two colorful chiefs of staff he succeeded -- Bill Daley (who notoriously used a four-letter word in an [interview](#) with *Politico* in October 2011) and Rahm Emanuel (who notoriously uses four-letter words as frequently as possible) -- Lew is a quiet guy. Rather than live permanently in Washington, he commutes to the capital from the Bronx. He's guarded about his private life, [refusing](#) to divulge much about his children, for example, except how many there are -- two, if you're keeping score at home. He has long expressed a desire to return to New York, and reports prior to the nomination suggested that taking the helm of Treasury was the only assignment that would entice him to stay in Washington a little bit longer.

*A version of this story was [first published a year ago](#), when Lew was nominated to be Obama's chief of staff.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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