



AG Pick Puts Spotlight on Sharpton as White House “Insider”

White House confirmation Friday of President Obama’s choice to be the next U.S. attorney general had barely cleared the air waves when reports of the controversial civil rights attorney Al Sharpton’s (shown on right) status as a White House “insider” sprang up on the Internet.

“Did Al Sharpton Just Pick the Next Attorney General?” asked the headline of the Daily Caller article that reported Obama had announced as his candidate U.S. Attorney Loretta Lynch of New York “just two days after Obama’s post-election meeting with Al Sharpton and weeks after Lynch’s own meeting with Sharpton.” Lynch is also, the report noted, known to be close to Attorney General Eric Holder, who recently announced his resignation, effective with the confirmation of a new AG. The choice of Lynch follows one groundbreaking appointment with another. Holder, who has been attorney general since 2009, is the first black American to hold that Cabinet-level position, and Lynch, if confirmed, will be the first black woman in the post. In her current role as U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, Lynch oversees federal prosecutions in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and Long Island.



Sharpton’s White House meeting with Obama took place on Wednesday, the day after voters apparently rejected Obama’s programs and policies by turning both houses of Congress over to Republican control. But Sharpton had made known the keen interest he and his civil rights organization, National Action Network, were taking in the appointment of Holder’s successor even before the attorney general announced his resignation on September 25.

“We are engaged in immediate conversations with the White House on deliberations over a successor whom we hope will continue in the general direction of Attorney General Holder,” Sharpton said in a statement he released shortly before Holder’s announcement. “The resignation of Attorney General Eric Holder is met with both pride and disappointment by the Civil Rights community,” he added. “We are proud that he has been the best Attorney General on Civil Rights in U.S. history and disappointed because he leaves at a critical time when we need his continued diligence most.” Sharpton later sent a



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 11, 2014

clarification to *Business Insider*, saying:

We did not say we are in the decision making. We are in conversation to reach out to them to have meetings about what we want to see in a successor. I have personally spoken to Attorney General Eric Holder today to express my views that he was the best civil rights Attorney General in history.

Freedom of the press is, of course, a civil and constitutional right, yet the Justice Department under Holder has collected records of Associated Press phone calls and the e-mails of James Rosen, the Fox News reporter indicted as a “co-conspirator” under the 1917 Espionage Act in the department’s investigation of leaks of classified information. Sharpton’s history, however, suggests an interest in civil rights limited exclusively to race issues, especially the type that leads to acts of violence and even riots. After last summer’s riots in Ferguson, Missouri over the fatal shooting of black teenager Michael Brown by a white policeman, *Politico* described Sharpton as [Obama’s “go to man”](#) on race issues.

“There’s a trust factor with The Rev from the Oval Office on down,” a White House official said of Sharpton, an ordained minister. “He *gets it*, and he’s got credibility in the community that nobody else has got. There’s really no one else out there who does what he does.”

What Sharpton “does” these days reflects his “evolution from agitator to insider with all that implies,” wrote Glenn Thrush in the *Politico* profile. Sharpton, 59, had toned down his rhetoric by the time he ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 2004, and since 2011 he has been the host of MSNBC’s one-hour political talk show, *PoliticsNation*. He has, however, a long history of aggravating racial conflicts with incendiary and sometimes anti-Jewish remarks.

One example among many is Sharpton’s contribution to the 1995 feud over the planned eviction of The Record Shack, a black-owned enterprise, from a building in Harlem owned by the predominantly black United House of Prayer for All. According to then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, it was the church that made that request of one of its tenants, the Jewish owner of Freddie’s Fashion Mart, who had subleased space to the record shop. Nonetheless, news of the planned eviction sparked protests by black residents, during which Sharpton was quoted as saying, “We will not stand by and allow them to move this brother so that some white interloper can expand his business.”

The phrase “white interloper” implied that Sharpton thought only black entrepreneurs should have businesses in Harlem. He would have undoubtedly — and rightly — denounced the remark as racist if it had been suggested about a black businessman in a white neighborhood. Years later he recalled, “I called him an interloper. I shouldn’t have referred to his race.” At the same time he dismissed as “ridiculous” the notion that his comment in any way inspired or motivated one of the protesters who months later entered the Fashion Mart with a gun and flammable liquid, shot several customers and set the store on fire before turning the gun on himself. Along with the gunman-arsonist, seven other people died from the attack.

Sharpton had previously fanned the flames of racial hatred in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn after a black child was killed in an accident involving a Hassidic motorist. “If the Jews want to get it on, tell them to pin their yarmulkes back and come over to my house,” Sharpton said. Three days of anti-Jewish violence ensued, and an Australian rabbinical student was stabbed.

A civil jury found Sharpton and two other attorneys guilty of defamation in the infamous Tawana Brawley case that began in 1987 when Brawley, a black teenager, claimed she had been assaulted and raped in the town of Wappinger, New York, by six white men, some of whom were police officers. A grand jury, after several months of studying medical and police records, concluded Brawley made up



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the story. The defamation judgment, calling for the payment \$345,000 in damages, was based on comments Sharpton and the two other attorneys made about Steven Pagones, accusing the Dutchess County prosecutor of racism and of being one of the perpetrators of the alleged abduction and rape. Sharpton refused to pay his share of the damages, and it was later paid by a number of black business leaders.

The incendiary preacher of that era was “a social pariah” to the Clinton administration, *Politico* recalled, but Sharpton is now a welcome guest at the White House, having been hailed by Obama as “the voice of the voiceless and a champion for the downtrodden.” The Daily Beast reported on his post-election visit to the nation’s executive mansion [with a description](#) of Sharpton taking calls on his cellphone from New York politicians eager to keep the controversial black leader informed of developments back home. “Governor who?” he asked when Andrew Cuomo called and identified himself simply as “Governor.” There are, after all, 50 governors, Sharpton reminded him. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio called to confirm that Police Commissioner Bill Bratton had appointed Benjamin Tucker as first deputy commissioner.

“Good,” said Sharpton, registering his approval. “People think I’m running the NYPD,” he told the Daily Beast. “It’s like a demotion to me.”

Perhaps he is too busy at the White House, setting the agenda for the attorney general, to manage the New York police. In the statement he released that day, Sharpton called on the federal Justice Department to “take over the criminal investigations” into the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the death of Eric Garner during a police arrest in Staten Island. “We hope Attorney General Holder will authorize this before his departure,” Sharpton said, “or that it becomes the first order of business for his successor.”



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