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Appointments will determine Trump's legacy

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One of the fruits of Donald Trump's unexpected victory is the opportunity to fill thousands of U.S. government political positions. But he lacks a deep personnel bench. Personnel are policy. That became the mantra of the incoming Reagan administration, of which I was a part back in 1980. Unfortunately, Team Reagan often failed to act accordingly.

President-elect Trump should avoid making a similar mistake. Politico reported that "Trump and his aides ... are leaning heavily on the sort of D.C. insiders that the billionaire railed against on the campaign trail." This could prove especially disastrous in foreign policy.

The president-elect obviously has strong though ill-formed opinions. He collected a wide variety of advisers with little unity of views. Implementing his vision will require the right personnel. He needs staffers who reject the promiscuous intervention that characterized both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Unfortunately, news reports suggest that the transition team is considering as top appointees people who hold views far different than those of Trump in important areas. For instance, suggested for secretary of state are John Bolton, Kelly Ayotte, Newt Gingrich, and Rudy Giuliani, none of whom shares the doubts and qualifications regularly expressed by the president-elect about today's highly interventionist, even militaristic approach.

At least they supported Trump — though Ayotte rescinded her backing once the going got rough. Frankly shameless is the attempt by some of Trump's sharpest critics to clamber aboard the unexpected bandwagon.

For instance, during the campaign 122 GOP-leaning national security analysts signed a letter attacking Trump. Among them was Max Boot of the Council of Foreign Relations. He appeared in a Hillary Clinton campaign ad warning against allowing the business mogul near the nuclear button.

Yet the day after the election Boot suggested that Trump could end up as a relatively conventional Republican if the latter staffed "his administration with competent professionals with prior government experience." The week after the vote Boot wrote that he hoped #NeverTrumpers would overcome the temptation not to serve and "the two sides can come together." Trump's opponents need to "save him from himself."

Boot is not the only former Trump recalcitrant to change positions as the possibility of high office looms. The New York Times recently ran a story headlined, " 'Never Trump' Becomes 'Maybe Trump' in Foreign Policy Sphere." The Times found what it called a "softening" of opposition to working for Trump, and noted resumes from #NeverTrumpers arriving at the transition.

Politico ran a similar article entitled "GOP National Security Elites Agonize: Should I Work for Trump?" Those who criticized him, explained Politico, now face "a gut-check moment that was never supposed to happen because Trump was never supposed to win." However, the prospect of high office unexpectedly beckons and "is enticing."

Characteristic was William Imboden, who worked for George W. Bush, author of the disastrous Iraq Invasion. Imboden told the Times: "Any patriotic American who is asked to serve our country should be willing to do so and should give serious consideration to whatever position is offered."

The motivation could be "a stated sense of patriotic duty," noted reporters Mark Mazzetti, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, or perhaps "a somewhat less noble motive to avoid years of being excluded from Washington power circles." After all, for those committed to an active, warlike foreign policy, it's not fun to remain outside of government.

The last eight years already have been a long exile. To wait another four or eight years during a GOP administration — which easily might be followed by another Democratic president — could result in many wannabe grand strategists retiring without having an opportunity to initiate even a small war.

Apparently the president-elect recognizes the danger of including those who oppose his agenda. During the campaign, he said "I look for talented experts with approaches and practical ideas, rather than surrounding myself with those who have perfect resumes but very little to brag about except responsibility for a long history of failed policies and continued losses at war." He needs to remember that pledge.

There is much in what the president-elect said during the campaign to criticize. But he dramatically broke with the militaristic nationalists and neoconservatives who dominate the Republican Party. Perhaps most notably, he promised that "war and aggression" would not be his "first instinct."

Given Trump's eclectic view, diversity of appointments is inevitable. But it is vital that the men or women at the top also not share reckless foreign policy views rejected by the American people. Then maybe the new administration will change U.S. foreign policy and make history.

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