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Is Donald Trump A Closet Neoconservative? Elliott Abrams Doesn't Belong At The State Department

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Donald Trump said he wanted a strong America, while criticizing Democrat Hillary Clinton for being “trigger-happy and very unstable.” He claimed to be “unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct.”

That created hope among many Americans that he would be a different kind of president. Perhaps his administration would not see the military as the first resort in any foreign crisis. That possibility scared war-happy Neoconservatives who dominated the Bush administration and hoped to shape policy in a new Clinton presidency. Many, like Elliott Abrams, warned Republicans against supporting Trump.

Now Abrams is rumored to be the administration's choice for Deputy Secretary of State. With Defense Secretary Jim Mattis busy reassuring America's Asian and European allies that Washington will always coddle and pamper them, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson breathing fire and brimstone against China, it looks like President Trump has come out of the Neocon closet.

The only reasons it isn't a Neoconservative Full Monty are the president's welcome opposition to confrontation with Russia and his less desirable enthusiasm for foreign thugs and brutes, ranging from Vladimir Putin to Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Saudi royals. Otherwise there isn't much for a Neocon not to like when imagining the many wars in which Trump might involve America.

The choice of Abrams, an unashamed proponent of promiscuous military intervention abroad, would be a particularly a stunning reversal of candidate Trump's claim to reject his predecessors' failed policies of perpetual war. He attacked his Democratic opponent's belligerent record, observing: “Sometimes it seemed like there wasn't a country in the Middle East that Hillary Clinton didn't want to invade, intervene in, or topple.” As a result, “We've made the Middle East more unstable and chaotic than ever before. We left Christians subject to intense persecution and even genocide.” Moreover, “Our actions in Iraq, Libya and Syria have helped unleash ISIS.” Indeed, Trump added, “After losing thousands of lives and spending trillions of dollars, we are in far worse shape in the Middle East than ever, ever before.”

It is unlikely that Abrams would agree with any of these statements. Like Hillary Clinton, it's hard to find a war which he didn't want others to fight.

As my Cato Institute colleague Chris Preble observed:

“Elliott Abrams was one of the leading supporters of the Iraq War. He signed the original statement of principles for the Project for a New American Century, the organization founded by leading @NeverTrumpers William Kristol and Robert Kagan that was instrumental in making the case for regime change in Iraq. Abrams has since signed a number of other letters organized by PNAC and its successor organization, the Foreign Policy Initiative, concerning war with Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya and Syria.”

What happened to the president's declared opposition to the Iraq War? To his warnings against Clinton for promoting perpetual war in the Middle East. And his recognition that U.S. policy has had catastrophic results? Why would he turn State Department policy-making over to someone whose views have caused so much harm to Americans and others around the globe?

Abrams also was a participant in the Reagan era Iran-Contra scandal, convicted for withholding evidence from Congress. He was subsequently pardoned by President George H.W. Bush, but that didn't redeem Abrams' assault on our democratic system. One doesn't have to like or even respect today's congressional leaders to acknowledge the legislative branch's critical role in holding the executive accountable when exercising the extraordinary power it has accumulated in recent years.

Abrams violated the public trust. Is he really the right person to ease the concerns of not just legislators but citizens worried about President Trump's less than stellar character and temperament? The president's insistence that the military would follow his orders even if unlawful, persistent attacks on the independence of judges who rule against him, and support for illegal practices such as torture highlight the importance of Congress to preserve and protect the U.S. Constitution and the rule of law. Elliott Abrams is the wrong person at the wrong time for such an important post.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the expected Abrams pick is that he worked to torpedo Trump's candidacy. Abrams offered advice on how to damage Trump's campaign and doubted the candidate's “character and fitness to be commander-in-chief.” After what Abrams presumed would be Trump's devastating defeat he urged GOP regulars to reassert control and purge any Trumpkins. Abrams declared that he would not vote for Trump. Why is the president apparently planning to reward such a person?

Set aside the personal aspect. Why would the president bring in someone who virtually invented today's failed foreign policy conventional wisdom? During the campaign Abrams even criticized Trump's opposition to nation-building, perhaps the most disastrous U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, candidate Trump promised not to appoint people like Abrams: “My goal is to establish a foreign policy that will endure for several generations. That's why I also look and have to 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. We have to look for new people.” What better example is there of someone with a perfect resume but failed policies than Abrams?

Finally, Trump should realize that there is a good chance the Senate will reject Abrams. Democrats seeking blood will see the latter as a prime target: someone with extreme foreign policy views that had disastrous practical results and who essentially lied to a Democratic Congress on an important issue during his time in government.

Even some Republicans might be queasy with such a record. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) has forthrightly declared his opposition: “Neoconservatives have had us at perpetual war for 25 years. ... These are the same people who think we must blow up half the Middle East, then rebuild it and police it for decades.” They shouldn’t get another chance to cause unnecessary death and destruction, argued Paul. He’s right.

It long has been recognized that personnel is policy. President Trump promised a different kind of administration. That should apply to foreign policy as well. Elliott Abrams would be a voice for failures of the past, not successes of the future.

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