

# The American Conservative

## Secretary of Defense Jim Webb?

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Jim Webb—the former Virginia senator, Ronald Reagan Navy secretary, and brief but memorable 2016 Democratic presidential candidate—addressed *The American Conservative*'s foreign policy conference in November 2016, immediately following Donald Trump's shock White House victory.

He recalled what a friend and fellow Marine told him about Trump: “He said: ‘This guy Donald Trump. The Republicans hate him. The Democrats hate him. The media hates him. I think I found my guy.’”

Webb, a Vietnam veteran, then graciously added: “I would like to salute Donald Trump for his tenacity, for the uniqueness of his campaign.”

Webb is not totally dissimilar to Trump, at least when it comes to party affiliation. Webb, who served as Navy secretary under Reagan's Republican administration, is still officially a Democrat, but has always been coy about whether he personally voted for Trump or whether he would serve in his administration. He was clear on NBC's *Morning Joe* in 2016 that he could *not* vote for Hillary Clinton, however, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions.

In the days following Trump's victory, some called for Webb to take the reins at the Pentagon.

“The key for Trump will be to figure out a way to keep his coalition of supporters content,” wrote popular conservative columnist Mollie Hemingway at The Federalist, advocating for Webb. “One sector of that coalition is the one that includes those who were attracted to what they believed his foreign policy to be—restraint about when and where the United States fights wars coupled with a clear path to victory when we do.” In introducing Webb before his 2016 address, *TAC*'s own Bill Kauffman made the same suggestion.

Now, with James Mattis having left the Pentagon, that call is sounding again. “Former Navy Secretary and former Asst Sec Def @JimWebbUSA would be someone to consider seriously for SecDef. His foreign policy views line up better with @realdonaldtrump and are not Bush 3.0,” Fox News's Laura Ingraham tweeted. Ingraham, two sources familiar with the matter tell me, is close to *Gods & Generals* director Ron Maxwell, who is said to be quietly pushing behind the scenes on Webb's behalf. And Ingraham, along with Tucker Carlson, also a friend of foreign policy restraint, form the tip of the spear of the new regime at Fox News, which, of course, has the ear of the president.

Primetime Fox—Ingraham, Carlson, and Sean Hannity—has been far more likely to defend the president's foreign policy courses than Fox's more establishment-oriented daytime programming. So while *Fox & Friends* was castigating Trump over the Syria withdrawal,

Carlson and Ingraham were just as bellicosely defending him. The war for the president's mind is very real, and the fact that Ingraham and possibly Carlson are advocating for Webb makes him a major player.

Of course in 2016, President-elect Trump went in a different direction from what restraint advocates wanted, tapping retired General James Mattis as Pentagon chief, General John Kelly as immigration point man and then chief of staff, and General H.R. McMaster as national security advisor. Along with the overwhelmed former Exxon CEO Rex W. Tillerson, this contingent formed the always overrated "axis of adults."

But now, with Mattis's New Years' Day departure, all four picks have flamed out.

Early indicators point to acting defense secretary Patrick Shanahan, the former contractor and Mattis deputy, as favored to hold onto the job in a permanent capacity. But President Trump, like Bill Clinton in 1994 after his political enemies seized the House, has the opportunity for a do-over by overseeing a revived administration that conducts itself in an improved manner.

The early signs are quite promising.

Trump tapped Mick Mulvaney, a friend of foreign policy restraint, as acting chief of staff earlier this month. Soon after, he announced the shock withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria and a partial drawdown in Afghanistan.

*The Washington Post's Josh Rogin* claimed over that weekend that no one in the administration went on the traditional Sunday show circuit to defend Trump's Syria move. But that's not true: Mulvaney did. The former Trump budget man told Fox News's Chris Wallace that Mattis had a stark "misalignment with the president's priorities" and that change was needed.

"The president listens to a bunch of different people, including the people who live here [in the United States]—ordinary Americans, the people he promised when he ran for office that he was going to leave," Mulvaney said.

Personnel has always been the Achilles' heel of this presidency. Trump has struggled to staff his administration with the kind of populist-nationalists and foreign policy restrainers needed to execute his campaign vision. Part of that is infrastructure—he has no real Trumpist think tank or slate of ideologically loyal congressmen waiting in the wings. In many ways, Trump's revolution happened well ahead of its time. But part of that is Trump's propensity to hire on personality and loyalty, including the fraught appointments of Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, the doomed hiring of Omarosa Manigault, and the ideologically strained selection of John Bolton.

But many say that Trump can address these mistakes now. Hemingway's article has circulated with enthusiasm on social media, as have Ingraham's remarks. The return of campaign Trump on foreign policy will leave him few friends in official Washington, and he is clearly in need of covering fire. He's reading around. On Thursday, Trump quoted Brad Blakeman of "Freedom Watch" on Twitter: "The American people understand that we have been played by foreign actors who would rather have us fight their battles for them. The President says look, this is your neighborhood, you've got to stand up to protect yourselves." Rogin laments in the *Post* that we have a "President Rand Paul." Jim Webb's son, Jim Webb, actually works for Senator Paul.

If Trump wants to push U.S. foreign policy in a fresh direction—and many, including his administration's until-recently go-to think tank on Iran, the Foundation for the Defense of

Democracies, are clearly worried he means business—he'll need ideological compatriots at the highest levels, heading Defense and perhaps the National Security Council. Doug Bandow in *TAC* urges Webb and retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor, who's been considered by the administration before, to NSC.

Webb, like Trump, has been deeply critical of the past two presidents on foreign policy. He asked in 2016: “How could one Republican presidential administration have made such an incredible strategic blunder as the invasion and occupation of Iraq, only to see the next Democratic administration make an equally strategic blunder—at least as bad, and possibly worse—by initiating what was called ‘the Arab Spring?’”

Importantly, Webb builds bridges and is Senate confirmable. It won't please everyone, but some hawks—who are, likewise, critical of both Bush and Obama—also quite like Webb.

Trump would be hard pressed to find other prominent politicians and thinkers who share his view on the clear pitfalls of U.S. primacy while also disfavoring the Obama-brokered Iran nuclear deal. It's highly unlikely he would select anyone in favor of the deal, nor would Senate Republicans go for it. Webb is practical on this. Stopping far short of calling for war, he said in 2015: “We should, with respect to the situation with Iran right now, we do not want to be signaling in the region right now that we have accepted that Iran would have a larger role in this balance than would be good for the region.”

Webb has his detractors—critics who behind the scenes complain of a temper or think he would clash with the president. That could tempt Trump to keep Shanahan. But he would do so potentially at his own peril. The selection of a defense contractor as defense secretary would draw major heat and bring to the table little of the fresh approach Trump seems intent on pursuing into 2019.

“Jim Webb would be a smart choice for secretary of Defense,” Jim Hanson, president of the Security Studies Group, which advises the administration, told me on Thursday. “He is also a Democrat—maybe the last actual conservative Democrat in public life—and believes in a strong military, used only when the need is unmistakable and the mission is crystal clear. Our enemies would know he is not a man to be trifled with; as we have seen, that force of personality and reputation is a factor in creating deterrence.”

All that should, at the very least, merit some consideration.