



The national security brains behind the GOP candidates

November 18th, 2011

Editor's note: On November 22, CNN, along with conservative think tanks AEI and The Heritage Foundation, will host a Republican candidate debate focused on national security topics.

By Senior State Department Producer Elise Labott

There are a few models for presidential candidates seeking to bone up on national security issues.

First, there's the George W. Bush model. You hire a lean, high-powered team of foreign policy heavyweights to help hammer out foreign policy, defense and intelligence proposals. The Vulcans, as the Bush team was called, included former Secretary of State George Shultz and Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and Paul Wolfowitz. They traded e-mail messages and held conference calls and meetings at the then-Texas governor's mansion, where they hammered out his national security positions. Once in office, the majority of the Vulcans became Bush's national security team.

Then there's the Barack Obama model, which sucks up all the foreign policy talent in Washington to present an impressive front about the candidate's expertise, thereby denying the privilege to his competitors. Obama was in a brain arms race with Hillary Clinton, who had a similar approach, in the '08 primary. It's like the annual Filene's Basement wedding dress sale. When the doors open, brides rush to scoop up all of the dresses they can find, regardless of the style or fit, depriving fellow brides a dress in case they may want it later.

The problem with this approach is that you have no idea what the bride will look like on her wedding day.

Take Mitt Romney, whose impressive foreign policy brain trust reads like one of a presumptive nominee, and is by far the most extensive of all the Republican candidates this election cycle.

His team of 22 special advisers is heavy on Bush administration veterans, including such marquee names as former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and ex-CIA

Director Michael Hayden. He's also tapped former Republican senators such as Minnesota's Norm Coleman and Jim Talent of Missouri, as well as several prominent former State Department officials like Elliot Cohen, who was an adviser to Rice, former Under Secretary Paula Obriansky, and Pierre Prosper, once ambassador-at-large for war crimes. Romney also announced 13 working groups on key issues and regions with prominent professors and think-tank scholars.

A common criticism is that such committees are for show, and the members have little to do with actual policy platforms. Yet Romney advisers say they were pleasantly surprised that their ideas found their way into Romney's "white paper," the most detailed foreign policy platform issued so far by any candidate.

The strength of Romney's team, however, could also be a weakness. While extremely experienced, it runs the spectrum from the far right to the center. Some Republican foreign policy gurus worry the group is so ideologically diverse, it lacks clarity of vision.

"Romney's team is almost too broad, it's soulless," worried one GOP foreign policy expert who has informally advised the Romney campaign. "You don't know what direction he would go and some conservatives are worried it could be analysis paralysis."

Richard Williamson - a former envoy to Sudan and deputy ambassador to the United Nations under Bush who is now a top foreign policy adviser to Romney - disagrees. As a young staffer for President Ronald Reagan, Williamson found a president with a firm world view but open to a robust debate on issues.

"Gov. Romney is the same way," Williamson said. "His framework is 'America is exceptional and is better off leading.' So he is willing to debate clarity of interest and then decides what the best steps to take are. I think that is comforting and is a good aspect of leadership."

Several of the biggest gets in the Washington foreign policy establishment have not endorsed or signed up to formally advise any candidate. They include former Vice President Dick Cheney and his daughter Liz Cheney, as well as former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton. Bolton, sources say, has been sought out by nearly every campaign and could play a major role in a Republican administration.

But the fact that so many people have lined up behind Romney puts the other candidates at a disadvantage, particularly Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a relative newcomer to foreign policy.

Perry's chief foreign policy adviser, Victoria Coates, a book researcher for Donald Rumsfeld, has set up briefings with several Bush administration heavyweights, such as former ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker, ex-Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith, a former National Security Council senior director, William Luti, and several people who were Pentagon officials under Rumsfeld. He's also spoken with several generals in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet a roster of Perry's foreign policy team has yet to come out of the woodwork. One Perry campaign adviser said that while Perry has avoided publicizing his wide pool of advice, he expects in the next month to issue a targeted list of a dozen former diplomats and military officials, "reformers who, like Governor Perry, are unabashed in their support for American exceptionalism and have no sympathy for the neo-isolationist tendencies of some of the other candidates."

Some of the candidates with the most clearly articulated foreign policies aren't relying on advisers. As House speaker, Gingrich tackled U.S. interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo and Haiti, and was a key supporter of North American Free Trade Agreement and other major Clinton-era trade deals. And he has a doctorate in European history. So it's not surprising Newt's chief foreign policy adviser is himself.

The same goes for Jon Huntsman, the former governor from Utah and three-time ambassador, most recently to China, who is campaigning on his unique credibility on global affairs. Randy Schriver, a former chief of staff to Richard Armitage who runs Huntsman's foreign policy shop, says his boss prefers to keep his own counsel.

"He's a very savvy policy analyst and is comfortable coming up with his own position," Schriver said. "That isn't the case with other candidates. He doesn't need a campaign structure that has an expert for every region because Governor Huntsman is an expert himself."

Rick Santorum, a former senator from Pennsylvania who spent eight years on the Senate Armed Service Committee, also seems to draw from his own experience for his policy positions.

Given Herman Cain's slip ups on foreign affairs, many have wondered aloud about his foreign policy team, led by J.D. Gordon, a former military spokesman and Fox News commentator.

"He may have thought foreign policy is just not going to move this election," said Chris Preble, vice president for foreign policy and defense studies at the conservative Cato Institute, of Cain's initial blunders on foreign policy. "He probably decided initially that it wasn't that important, but has learned that other people think it is important, so he will have to make up some ground."

Gordon said he is arranging conference calls for his candidate around the clock and culling one-page briefing papers from experts far and wide to educate Cain on everything from the Arab Spring to relations with Russia. He says the candidate's many gaffes on national security are less about the quality of advice and more due to the lack of time to cram on issues about which he isn't familiar with the finer points.

"He believes he will be a good president," said Gordon, who described Cain as a Reagan conservative believing in "peace through strength and clarity." In a recent conversation

with Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State told the candidate the most important things he needs are the right philosophy and the right advisers

"The campaign took off in popularity so quickly before we had a chance to heavily focus on the foreign policy briefs. He is getting up to speed, day by day. We are working hard to get him there fast enough due to our whirlwind schedule. Considering where he is today from where he started, it is impressive," Gordon said. "He is doing his homework."

The campaigns of Rep. Ron Paul of Texas and Rep. Michele Bachmann of Minnesota have released little information about who is advising the candidates on foreign policy. Bachmann sits on the House intelligence committee which gives a good grounding in many national security issues. This summer Paul, who has staked out the strongest isolationist position, announced constitutional and international law scholar Bruce Fein was advising his campaign on the "dangers to national security of an increasingly interventionist foreign policy."

Richard Grenell, a former spokesman for four U.S. ambassadors to the United Nations and a GOP commentator, said that, on the whole, Republican primary voters have fewer presidential choices this year if the party wants to maintain its traditional advantage on national security issues.

"The foreign policy blunders by some of the GOP candidates would overshadow Obama's weaknesses and mistakes," Grenell said. "I don't believe that a candidate has to know the name of every head of state to be effective in representing the U.S. abroad and keeping Americans safe. There are advantages to having a fresh perspective on old conflicts. But you have to take the time to understand the critical facts."