

Dr. Carson, first do HUD no harm: A quick tutorial for the former surgeon preparing to lead Trump's housing and urban strategy

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The big question facing Dr. Ben Carson, President-elect Donald Trump's choice to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development, is whether he and Trump believe in the core mission of the \$50 billion agency — and if so, whether Carson is prepared to battle the agency's long, sad history of corruption and abuse.

Carson's attitudes toward HUD have wavered between indifference and outright hostility. "Having me as a federal bureaucrat would be like a fish out of water, quite frankly," he told The Washington Post in mid-November when his name was first floated for HUD secretary.

"Dr. Carson feels he has no government experience, he's never run a federal agency," said Carson's friend and business manager, Armstrong Williams, that month. "The last thing he would want to do was take a position that could cripple the presidency."

And back when he was running for President, Carson authored an attack on federal fair housing laws, the anti-discrimination statutes enforced by HUD.

"These government-engineered attempts to legislate racial equality create consequences that often make matters worse," Carson wrote. "There are reasonable ways to use housing policy to enhance the opportunities available to lower-income citizens, but based on the history of failed

socialist experiments in this country, entrusting the government to get it right can prove downright dangerous.”

The same man now apparently feels prepared to manage an agency with 8,000 employees and far-flung operations.

If approved for the job, Carson could have a relatively free hand to shape policy, given Trump’s silence on urban affairs.

Trump’s campaign website had no section on urban policy. Mick Cornett, the Republican mayor of Oklahoma City and the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, publicly acknowledged in July — and repeated in October — that he hadn’t met with Trump or gotten word from the campaign about what the candidate might do if elected.

Consider what happened as late as Oct. 13 — less than four weeks before Election Day. The U.S. Conference of Mayors held a forum in Manhattan at which the Trump and Clinton campaigns were invited to discuss the urban policies they would champion if elected.

An impressive bipartisan panel assembled, including Mayor de Blasio and the mayors of New Orleans; Albuquerque; Columbia, S.C., and Oklahoma City. The Clinton campaign sent former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, an ex-mayor of Philadelphia who was deeply conversant with the ins and outs of steering federal aid to critical urban needs like transportation, water systems and housing.

The Trump campaign sent nobody. That indifference reflects the political reality that cities weren’t important to Trump’s victory. On Election Day, Hillary Clinton swept the nation’s urban areas, carrying 88 of the 100 most populous counties in the country.

We now confront the great irony of a billionaire President, born and raised in New York, who has publicly promised little to the urban centers that made his wealth possible. That gives Carson an opportunity to chart his own course at HUD — provided he can run the agency with the firm hand needed to ward off the ever-present danger of corruption.

In the 1980s, President Reagan’s HUD secretary, Samuel Pierce, allowed corruption to flourish at the agency, complete with consulting fees and sweetheart mortgages for friends and the politically connected. “Estimated losses from this abuse ranged from \$2 billion to \$6 billion,” says a report from the right-of-center Cato Institute.

Scandal returned in the 1990s when President Bill Clinton’s first HUD secretary, Henry Cisneros, pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during his confirmation process about the money

he'd paid to a mistress. After leaving the agency, Cisneros became a director of the now-defunct Countrywide Financial, one of the worst subprime lenders at the center of the mortgage crash.

The pattern continued when one of Cisneros' successors, Alphonso Jackson, got a \$308,000 loan from Countrywide for a vacation home while serving as acting HUD secretary, and allegedly squandered agency funds on a security detail, full-time chef and oil paintings of himself and other HUD secretaries.

Not all HUD chiefs have tolerated or participated in misconduct, of course. George Romney, Jack Kemp, Andrew Cuomo, Shaun Donovan — and the first HUD secretary, Robert Weaver, whom I once had the honor of interviewing — all broke important new ground in building middle-class homeownership and fighting housing discrimination.

Here's hoping Carson hires the experienced aides he'll need to keep the agency honest, active and oriented toward following in the footsteps of the visionary HUD secretaries rather than the crooks.