

THE DAILY CALLER

Facing unease from conservatives, Herman Cain to get specific on foreign policy

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Almost every day, Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain is handed a one-page briefing from his chief foreign policy adviser on news from around the world.

It's one of several things his campaign says the former Godfather's Pizza CEO, who has never held elective office before, is now doing to bone up on foreign policy — especially as he faces a big test in November at a GOP debate on national security issues.

“He's really getting up to speed a lot more so than people give him credit for,” J.D. Gordon, Cain's foreign policy and national security adviser who prepares the briefings, said in an interview with The Daily Caller on Monday.

Throughout his campaign for the White House, Cain has been intentionally vague on how he would handle certain foreign policy challenges as president. That makes some conservatives uneasy.

“I have no idea what Mr. Cain's views are other than being generally pro-Israel,” said Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, who served as a deputy national security adviser for President George W. Bush.

“He needs to say a lot more to be a serious candidate for Commander in Chief,” Abrams said. “He has been far too casual about this subject and does not seem to be taking seriously his need to explain his views.”

Cain has said his foreign policy would be guided by an extension of Reagan's peace through strength doctrine. The Cain philosophy, as he has called it, is peace through strength and clarity. As commander in chief, Cain says he would clearly identify who America's friends are and who America's enemies are while making a particular point of noting that a Cain administration would stand unwaveringly behind Israel.

“If you mess with Israel, you're messing with the United States of America,” he said recently while explaining his philosophy.

Yet, on some of America's major foreign policy engagements, like Afghanistan, Cain has insisted that that he lacks crucial information that President Obama has as commander in chief and would only lay out a plan after being privy to such information and consulting with experts as president.

Several foreign policy analysts contacted by TheDC say such vague positions on crucial foreign policy questions won't cut it for a serious presidential contender.

American Enterprise Institute Scholar Michael Rubin told TheDC that while "foreign policy ignorance and inexperience should not disqualify a candidate," citing the examples of former Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, he did say it's time for Cain "to study up."

"Foreign policy is an important responsibility for the president, and it's time Cain shows that," he said.

Cain's lack of experience was most recently on display last week while discussing a hypothetical situation with CNN's Wolf Blitzer in the aftermath of Israel's deal with Hamas to trade over 1,000 Palestinian terrorists and criminals for the return of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Cain said he could see himself making a similar deal with a terrorist group to exchange detainees at Guantanamo Bay in return for a U.S soldier. In a debate later that night, he backtracked from the statement and said it would be his policy not to negotiate with terrorists.

One source close to Cain told TheDC that Cain's answer to Blitzer was the result of lack of sleep and doing too many media appearances. To others, it signaled a lack of deep thinking on these types of issues.

Stephen Yates, president of the DC Advisory and former national security advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney, said that while he doesn't believe "presidential candidates need to pass pop quizzes on international developments," "it is very important for a serious potential commander in chief to provide a clear sense for how he would influence developments abroad and keep America safe."

"What principles would be his guide in deciding whether and how to use force? How would he employ other elements of American power so that use of force is effective or, even better, not necessary?" Yates asked.

He added: "These are the kind of questions a leading candidate cannot simply pass to advisors. To date, Cain has not projected command of these presidential imperatives."

Cain's campaign says that's about to happen. Plans are in the works, Gordon said, for Cain to deliver a major address on foreign policy that will layout specific plans for Afghanistan and other foreign policy challenges.

Gordon says Cain has been receiving counsel from people well known in the foreign policy community. While Gordon won't say who Cain talks with, Cain has admitted he admires people like former United Nations Ambassador John Bolton.

Other steps Cain has taken to educate himself about foreign policy, Gordon said, include his visit to Israel in August "to learn the facts on the ground."

“He met with the deputy prime minister and the mayor of Jerusalem,” Gordon said.

Gordon, who joined the campaign in September and serves as chief campaign spokesman, was a spokesman at the Defense Department for both Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary Robert Gates. His work included drafting talking points for them.

Gordon said he and Cain share the same philosophy on foreign relations. The three tenets of that philosophy, he said, are, “restoring U.S. leadership, maintaining a strong military and getting tough on terrorism.”

Behind the scenes, Cain also gets a daily briefing from assistant Clark Barrow on domestic, economic and other world news, Gordon said.

But not everyone agrees that Cain needs to get more specific on these issues than he has to date.

While defending Cain’s vagueness on certain foreign policy issues, Justin Logan, the director of foreign policy for the Cato Institute, cited Cain’s recent response on NBC’s “Meet the Press” when questioned about whether Iran’s alleged plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. on American soil was an act of war. Cain said he couldn’t answer the question since he was not privy to all the information available. Cain said, as president, he would consult with military advisors and the intelligence community to determine whether it was an act of war and, if so, what options he would have to respond.

“I actually don’t see what’s wrong with that, but apparently it’s enough to get him in trouble with the media,” Logan said.

With the American people focused on economic issues, Logan doesn’t think Cain’s non-stances on certain foreign policy issues will hurt him politically.

“I figure it’s probably politically acceptable for him to say he wants access to information as [commander in chief] before coming down one way or the other on Afghanistan,” he said. “It’s just not a terribly salient issue for the GOP base.”