



Trump's military: Here's what troops can expect from their next commander in chief

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A Washington outsider who pledged to rebuild what he's called a weak and ineffective military soon will serve as the new commander in chief.

Donald Trump won Tuesday's presidential election in a surprising political upset after he swept key swing states in the South and Midwest. Trump, a Washington outsider who's never held public office, edged out his Democratic opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, ending a long and combative election season.

In his acceptance speech given early Wednesday morning, Trump called on Americans to come together after the divisive campaign season. The New York businessman also pledged to put more Americans to work by rebuilding infrastructure and promised to "finally take care of our great veterans."

Throughout his campaign, Trump said he'd boost the size of the military, including people, ships, and aircraft – though details about how he'd carry out those plans were never specified.

He recently released a 10-point plan for VA reform, and he'll face tough decisions about the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who will serve as his defense secretary, and how he'll lead the armed forces through ongoing personnel and budget cuts.

Trump will be joined in office by Republican Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, who is the father of a Marine Corps officer currently training to become a pilot. Here's what troops can expect from their new commander in chief.

People and pay

After repeatedly arguing that President Barack Obama's administration had undercut the military, Trump laid out plans in September to:

- Increase the number of active-duty soldiers to 540,000, up nearly 100,000 troops from the Army's current drawdown plans.
- Boost the number of Marine Corps battalions to 36 in order to deal with major contingencies. That would add about a dozen battalions to the force
- Build a Navy that has 350 surface ships and submarines, about a 28-percent bump from today's fleet.

- Build an Air Force of at least 1,200 fighter aircraft.

With another round of across-the-board spending cuts, known as sequestration, threatening to wreak havoc on the 2018 defense budget, the military currently doesn't have the funds to carry out those plans. Trump said in his plan that he would "ask Congress to fully eliminate the defense sequester and will submit a new budget to rebuild our military."

Thomas Donnelly, a defense and security policy analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, said defense spending could increase in the years to come since the White House and both chambers of Congress will soon be controlled by Republicans. Whether it actually happens will largely depend on how congressional Democrats respond, he said, since they could try to block any effort by Trump to boost spending.

Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the CATO Institute, said if spending doesn't increase that overseas contingency funds will be something to watch because the services have used those dollars to offset some cuts they've faced.

When it comes to service members' pay and benefits, Friedman said it's difficult to know what might change since Trump hasn't made his plans for the military clear. All politicians tend to say they're great advocates for military pay and benefits, he said, but it's not yet clear where Trump will come down on expenses like TRICARE fees, pay raises, housing, and commissary benefits.

Donnelly said Trump might be more likely than Clinton to override the Pentagon's recent plans to overhaul military pay and benefits.

"I think Hillary might've had the political instincts ... to push that noodle forward," he said. "I think it's more likely that Trump will say, 'We can't cut back on the benefits that our brave guys in uniform deserve.'"

Overseas operations

The fight against ISIS could get even more complicated after the Iraqis retake Mosul, and Trump said that on his first day in office he'd give general officers 30 days to present a plan to defeat the terror group. That followed comments he'd made about knowing "more about ISIS than the generals do, believe me."

Trump has blasted the Obama administration's handling of the fight on the terror group. Trump argued that the Iraqis were giving ISIS fighters too much notice about their offensive plans, but Trump offered few details on what else he'd do differently, Friedman said.

"Trump continued throughout the campaign to say that he can't make his plan public on what he was going to do about it," he said. "Other than generally saying he's going to be aggressive, it's hard to know what Trump was planning."

The president-elect might even be anxious to get troops out of the region, Donnelly said, and take a more standoffish approach toward Middle East conflicts. That could allow him to focus on domestic issues like the economy.

That approach could apply to other parts of the world, too. Trump made waves when he suggested in recent months that he wouldn't defend certain alliances if he felt partner nations

weren't holding up their end of the bargain. Friedman said it's likely "more bluster than reality," but added that Trump doesn't seem as emotionally committed to the NATO alliance or other allies as most Washington politicians.

Reforming the VA

During his campaign, Trump released a 10-part plan to reform the VA in which he said he'd support veterans' physical and mental health care through modernization and better accountability.

"No more long drives, no more waiting backlogs, no more excessive red tape," the plan states. "Just the care and support they earned with their service to our country."

Trump wants to appoint a new VA secretary whose "sole purpose will be to serve veterans." He said he will remove and discipline federal employees who've violated the public's trust and will ask Congress to pass legislation that will allow the VA secretary to "terminate any employee who has jeopardized the health, safety, or well-being of a veteran."

Trump's White House will also have a 24-hour hotline, according to the plan, that will be "answered by a real person" that veterans can call if they have complaints about their VA care. He plans to increase the number of mental health care professionals and will allow veterans to seek care outside the VA system.

"Under a Trump administration, no veteran will die waiting for service," the plan states.

Leadership style

When it comes to getting buy-in from the military community, Trump could face an easier time of that than Clinton might have.

Polls conducted by Military Times and Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families routinely showed that Trump maintained the edge when it came to the military vote. Clinton proved less popular with troops, the polls showed, although servicemembers weren't overly confident about either candidate's ability to serve as commander in chief.

Trump's comments about Sen. John McCain's capture during Vietnam, Gold Star families, and knowing more about ISIS than military leaders didn't sit well with everyone, but Donnelly said the president-elect has proven he's skilled at redefining "what he meant on pretty much anything."

"He's perfectly capable now of saying, 'These guys are my generals. I like these guys and working for me, they're going to be great,' " he said, even if he previously spoke ill of them.

Regardless, Friedman said it's not necessary for Trump – or any commander in chief – to have the military's complete support since troops carry out the president's will regardless of political beliefs. As long as Trump tones down some of his campaign rhetoric, Friedman said it's likely Trump will have the support of his military.

"If he behaves like a president and seems considered and reasoned, and maybe even reduces the amount of wars that we're fighting, it might go a long way to win military support," he said.

