



Trump's Pentagon nominees head to Senate, but they bring baggage

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President Trump's picks for top Defense Department posts may finally start moving through the Senate when lawmakers return this month from a spring recess. And each one will be bringing along political baggage.

His pick for Army secretary, Tennessee state Sen. Mark Green, is being called "Islamophobic" by critics and has angered activists with his past comments about transgender rights, while Democrats have seized on contractor payments to Trump's Air Force secretary nominee.

Meanwhile, the Boeing executive nominated to be deputy defense secretary has no experience working inside the Pentagon.

Committee confirmation hearings could uncover more, but so far that baggage is light, and not the kind that is likely to derail their nominations in the Senate where each needs a simple Republican majority to be approved.

Green could draw more fire and resistance in the chamber from Democrats, who control 48 of the 100 seats, said Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

"I don't think there is much of a chance of a party-line vote with anybody except Green," Friedman said.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, which bills itself as the country's largest Muslim civil rights group, is calling Green "Islamophobic" for comments he made last year in Tennessee to a Tea Party group in September. Green spoke about whether Muslims belong in the country, the history of when "Constantinople fell to the Muslim horde," and the resistance to teaching students about the tenets of Islam.

Two groups, the American Military Partner Association and the Human Rights Campaign, have also pressed the Senate in recent days to reject Green due to legislation he supported as a state senator and other comments he made to the Tea Party group about the Obama administration's push for transgender bathroom rights.

Friedman said the groups could rack up Democratic "no" votes depending on how much they lobby.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., who sits on the Armed Services Committee, which would hold any initial confirmation hearing for Green, has already said she is "deeply concerned" by his comments. The former Army flight surgeon has suggested psychiatrists believe transgenderism is a disease and the governor of Tennessee should have denied same-sex marriage licenses in protest.

But Green will most likely be confirmed.

Green was unavailable for an interview, according to a spokesman, but in a released statement he said he would keep politics out of his service as secretary.

Friedman said Air Force Secretary nominee Heather Wilson, who is a former congresswoman, and Deputy Defense Secretary nominee Pat Shanahan are likely to pass a Senate floor vote with a significant amount of Democrat support.

Wilson was criticized for taking \$450,000 in poorly documented consulting fees from the Department of Energy's contractor-run nuclear labs, but her nomination passed an initial committee vote with overwhelming support, including most Democrats.

Shanahan, who holds two advanced degrees from MIT, was named a Boeing senior vice president last year and previously ran the defense giant's missile and Army helicopter accounts. But unlike other White House nominees who could serve under him, he has never worked in the complex Pentagon bureaucracy.

Thomas Spoehr, director of the Center for National Defense at the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, also said he expects the nominees to sail through to confirmation despite the criticism.

"Everything I've heard so far seems fairly trivial," Spoehr said.

Shanahan could fill a key management position at the Defense Department with influence over budgets, personnel and acquisition systems. Spoehr said a grounded and capable manager is needed and Shanahan's lack of direct experience working in the Pentagon culture might not hamper him.

"Some would consider that a strength," he said.

The Trump administration has been slow to send nominees for key Defense Department positions to the Senate and the three top nominees, along with a handful of others including the department comptroller, could help it finally put its stamp on defense business.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who was confirmed in January, is the lone confirmed appointee at the Pentagon out of 57 positions that must be approved by the Senate, according to Lt. Col. Eric Badger, a department spokesman.

Green, Wilson and Shanahan are among eight more nominees who have been announced by the White House and could soon get a vote in the Senate.