



Finding the Right National Security Adviser Won't Be Easy

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The scandal that resulted in General Michael Flynn's resignation as national security advisor this week continues apace. Congressional Republicans increasingly support an investigation into Flynn's potentially illegal discussions with a Russian ambassador in January, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that the Senate intelligence committee would likely scrutinize Flynn's conduct. It's quite a saga, and yet, it's far from the only drama in town. Flynn may be gone, but there's still the issue of finding someone to replace him.

On Thursday, President Trump's first choice to replace Flynn, Vice Admiral Robert Harward, declined the position after taking a few days to consider. Both the public negotiation period and Harward's rebuff are unusual, and they set a problematic precedent for the Trump administration, which still has several deputy appointments across the government left to fill. If Harward can decline, who else might?

A Tough Job to Fill

"It is a very tricky moment, and there's a great deal of domestic volatility around the national security architecture in the United States," says Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "That said, I think a strong leader who has credibility and credentials in this arena can right the ship."

Trump tweeted on Friday morning that he has four candidates under consideration, including acting advisor General Keith Kellogg. Another may be former general and director of the Central Intelligence Agency David Petraeus, who resigned in 2012 over an affair and the mishandling of classified information. All four will meet with the president this weekend at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

Whomever the White House ultimately chooses, they'll have a hard time matching Harward's credentials. Both ends of the political spectrum lauded the candidate as a strong and experienced leader. He spent almost 40 years in the Navy, was deputy commander of US Central Command under current Secretary of Defense General James Mattis, and served on the National Security Council and in the National Counterterrorism Center during the George W. Bush administration. In short, he had strong experience, and would have worked well with Mattis.

Loyalty First

What Harward was not, though, was a Trump loyalist. Unlike many administration appointees, he wasn't involved in the presidential campaign or transition. That also may have been what torpedoed his interest. Walking into a chaotic cabinet full of ideologues looking to fundamentally reshape government could be unappealing for career civil servants like Harward, who gained their credentials by investing decades in preserving government institutions.

Additionally, the national security advisor will serve on the Principals Committee of the National Security Council alongside Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, a controversial hardline figure. This interaction with Bannon is thanks to an executive order that rearranges who attends the meetings to give him a larger role, and threatens to inject politics into a traditionally nonpartisan group.

"Apparently this went forward because Harward was considering taking it, but instead had to decline because he [asked] to pick his own team members and to maintain some autonomy from Trump's political advisors," says John Glaser, the associate director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "They said no to that."

Those who are cautious about the Trump administration, or actively oppose it, championed Harward precisely because of his independence from the White House, along with his credentials. A candidate with closer ties to Trump would be less popular among these groups, but would have the President's trust more quickly, for better or worse. At this point, the important thing may be to find anyone at all.

"We're in a moment where America is looking to ramp up its wars even as its national security infrastructure is facing remarkable upheaval," Lemmon says.

Meanwhile, the debacle further complicates the relationship between Trump and the intelligence community "The situation is distracting from conducting foreign policy in a responsible way," Glaser says. "It engulfs not only the entire White House probably, but the media and think tanks and people on the hill. It's just total chaos and distraction from policy-making."

That's not ideal in any policy area. In national security, it's potentially devastating.