

Assessing the President-Elect's Foreign Policy Advisors

Some may argue for restraint, but is Trump willing to listen?

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The hubbub surrounding President-Elect Donald Trump's foreign and defense policy appointments has been pretty intense. Some of this is ghoulish fascination, perhaps akin to Americans' collective hunger for so-bad-it's-good reality TV. But mostly it reflects genuine concern about what the people named to serve in the new administration, or speculated about, might advise the foreign policy novice to do.

Michael Flynn's selection as National Security Advisor shouldn't have come as a great surprise to anyone, and yet the implications for the future of U.S. foreign policy are grim. Gen. Flynn harbors deep animus toward Muslims, generally, and profoundly illogical ideas about the supposed array of enemies conspiring to do us ill. My Cato colleague Emma Ashford discerns a disturbing connection to Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, and his even-more-controversial tract *Who Are We?* The presence of Steve Bannon in the Trump White House, though not a foreign-policy advisor, per se, merely adds to my disquiet.

But other of the president-elect's appointees may tug President Trump away from a war against 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, nearly a quarter of the world's population.

Take, for example, his appointment of retired Marine Gen. James Mattis as Secretary of Defense. While I agree with some that having many former generals in senior positions could be a problem, it depends on what these individuals actually advise the president to do during crises.

On substance, Mattis appears to share Flynn's obsession with Iran, a worrisome prospect in an administration that is full of Iran hawks. During an appearance at CSIS in April, Mattis called Iran "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East," and not really a nation-state at all but "a revolutionary cause devoted to mayhem." Yet Mattis has apparently advised against tearing up the Iran nuclear deal (aka the JCPOA) and might be in a stronger position to restrain the president's bellicose instincts if, at the first sign of trouble, others are advising him to shoot first, and ask questions later.

Along these lines, I sense in Mattis a healthy appreciation for the limits of military power. He's obviously no pacifist (check out [some famous #Mattisisms](#)), but [he asks tough questions](#) about what military action is intended to achieve, and whether the mission has the support of the American people. This is not a man who is inclined to treat every problem as a nail, just because Uncle Sam wields a massive hammer.

[Mattis has also raised](#) some serious concerns about the deficit and the debt, and challenged some sacred cows, including the need for maintaining a nuclear triad.

For now, I'm reserving judgment on the "Warrior Monk." He is sure to be a very important player in the Trump administration, and has the potential to steer the new president away from his hawkish impulses, if he, Mattis, is actually so inclined—and if the president is willing to listen.

Is Trump willing to listen? It is fashionable to read into some of the president-elect's remarks a deep distaste for America's wars, and a determination to avoid future ones. Some self-described libertarian non-interventionists even see a kindred spirit, notwithstanding Trump's many other decidedly un-libertarian views (see [flag burning](#), [trade](#), [immigration](#), [crony capitalism](#), [infrastructure spending](#), [criminal justice](#), [entitlements](#), [the drug war](#), and [an independent judiciary](#)). For some, it appears, his belated skepticism of the Iraq war is sufficient to win their trust.

For my part, I think it is too easy to ascribe to Donald J. Trump many coherent policy ideas. With the possible exception of his views on trade (he took out a [full-page advertisement](#) in the *New York Times* in 1987 bemoaning the trade deficit with Japan), he doesn't appear to have many core beliefs. He could be a skeptic of foreign wars, nation building, and confrontations with major powers; or he could end up being a champion of all these things, just so long as he's the one running them.

This presents both an opportunity and a risk for advocates of limited constitutional government, market economics, and peace. Because the president-elect has little familiarity with the details of public policy, the people that Donald Trump chooses as his senior-most advisors will have a particularly important role in its formulation. And with Trump's foreign policy inner circle shaping up as a potential competition between Flynn and Mattis, the Secretary of State-designee takes on new importance.

Will that person be a hawk, along the lines of John Bolton or Rudy Giuliani? Or might we see a more pragmatic man or woman serving as the nation's top diplomat? The names are many and varied, from Mitt Romney and Sen. Bob Corker, to John Huntsman and [ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson](#). The most objectionable candidates are likely to run into fierce opposition. Some senators might even try to block the nomination. For example, Sen. Rand Paul has signaled his strong disapproval of the ["big cheerleaders for the Iraq War,"](#) who are now [pushing "for regime change in Iran."](#) Paul's stance has prompted an equally vociferous defense of Bolton by some of his fellow Iraq war boosters, such as [Sens. Lindsey Graham](#) and [John McCain](#).

Conservatives and libertarians should want as many like-minded people as possible to be serving in the incoming Trump administration—and that is why we are paying such close attention to all the speculation about who he will name next.

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