

Knoxville NEWS SENTINEL

Generals in Cabinet raise red flags

Trevor Thrall

December 17, 2016

For a man who dodged the draft during the Vietnam War, President-elect Donald Trump seems awfully gung-ho to appoint generals to top positions. His latest choice, retired Marine general John Kelly for secretary of Homeland Security, follows retired Marine general James Mattis as Defense secretary and retired Army lieutenant general Michael Flynn as national security adviser.

Trump's nominations might reflect a desire to surround himself with expertise and inoculate himself against criticism. His fondness for Russian President Vladimir Putin and unorthodox handling of foreign affairs during the transition have already raised serious concerns among both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Once flanked by his generals, however, Trump's actions will carry the imprimatur of their expertise and credibility. If this is the case, then there is not much to worry about. America's generals are, indeed, an impressive bunch.

I suspect, however, that Trump's infatuation with the generals stems from something deeper and more dangerous: America's broader crisis of confidence — in itself, in its institutions, in its role in the world.

Warning signs abound. The first red flag is the steady decline of American trust and confidence in government. According to the **American National Election Studies**, American trust in the federal government sits at its lowest point since the ANES started tracking it in 1958. In 2012, just 22% of Americans thought the government could be trusted most of the time or just about always, compared with a high point of 76% in 1964.

Gallup polling reveals that confidence in the specific institutions of democratic government has also tanked over the past several decades. The percentage of those who say they have either a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the presidency has slumped to 36%. The Supreme Court also gets 36%, while the criminal justice system manages only 23%. Congress now enjoys the confidence of just 9% of Americans.

Perhaps even more disturbing, however, are signs that Americans' fundamental faith in the democratic form of government is weakening. A *Washington Post* survey in October found that 40% of Americans say they have "lost faith" in democracy. And as *The New York Times* reported recently, whereas just one in 15 Americans in 1995 approved of "having the army rule," today the figure has risen to one in six — a significant jump given that military rule is inconsistent with the principles of democracy.

Rising fears of economic stagnation, the increasing polarization of politics and the ongoing threat of terrorism have all worked to strain Americans' beliefs in their country's ability to meet the challenges of the future. A **2015 NBC News/Wall Street Journal** survey, for example, found that 49% of Americans think the nation is in "a state of decline," compared with 48% who do not. And in 2013, the **Pew Research Center** found for the first time ever that a majority of the public (52%) agreed that the United States should "mind its own business internationally," compared with 38% who disagreed.

Given this uncertainty and fear, it is understandable that Americans have started to look elsewhere for a solution. They seem to have found it in the military. The military is the only major institution of government whose stock has risen since the 1960s and 1970s. In Gallup's 2016 survey, **73% of Americans** said they had either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military, up from 58% in 1975 at the tail end of the Vietnam War.

It's not hard to understand why the public would place its trust in the military. Unlike politicians, who pursue partisan interests, the U.S. military pursues the national interest. Unlike politicians, who seek political power for their own gain, U.S. military servicemembers sacrifice safety, and often their lives, on behalf of others. Unlike the increasingly polarized Washington environment that finds it nearly impossible to deliver effective solutions, the military's displays of competence on the battlefield offer the prospect of technical and non-political solutions to difficult problems.

But like other quick fixes, looking to the military to solve all the problems confronting the United States is to choose fantasy over reality. The military has no answers for technological disruption of the economy or how to fix Obamacare. The generals don't have a secret plan to improve race relations. As competent as the military is on the battlefield, there are simply no military solutions to most of the important problems facing the nation.

I have no doubt Trump's generals will do their best for the country. My real concern is that this reliance on them suggests Americans have lost faith in their ability to deliberate, negotiate and hustle their way to a better future.

Trevor Thrall is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and an associate professor at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. Follow him on Twitter @trevor_thrall.