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## Trump's generals can't fix us

Trevor Thrall

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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. According to the American National Election Studies, trust in the federal government sits at its lowest point since the ANES started tracking it in 1958. In 2012, just 22 percent of Americans thought the government could be trusted most of the time or just about always, compared with a high point of 76 percent 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 percent. The Supreme Court also gets 36 percent, while the criminal justice system manages only 23 percent and Congress scrapes the bottom at 9 percent.

### **Faith in democracy**

Perhaps even more disturbing are signs that Americans' fundamental faith in the democratic form of government is weakening. A Washington Post survey in October found that 40 percent say they have “lost faith” in democracy.

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 challenges. A 2015

NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey, for example, found that 49 percent of Americans think the nation is in “a state of decline,” compared with 48 percent who do not.

Americans looking for a solution seem to have found it in the military, the only major institution of government whose stock has risen since the 1960s and 1970s. In Gallup’s 2016 survey, 73 percent said they had either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military, up from 58 percent in 1975.

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, service members sacrifice safety, and often their lives, on behalf of others. Unlike an increasingly polarized Washington that finds it nearly impossible to deliver, the military offers 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 us 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. There are simply no military solutions to most of the important problems facing the nation.

### **After the honeymoon**

I have no doubt Trump’s generals will do their best for us. 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.

Trump’s shocking victory hints that more people than ever are ready to hand over the reins to a tough-talking strongman who promises simplistic and muscular answers to every problem. But after the honeymoon is over, the United States will be left with a president who does not respect democratic institutions or the appropriate role of a military in a democracy. A democracy with a competent military is a fortunate nation. A democracy run by competent generals, on the other hand, is not a democracy.

*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.*