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Romney team starts to look like Bush's

By Seth McLaughlin

Ed Gillespie served as President George W. Bush's right-hand man and now is a top political adviser to presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney.

R. Glenn Hubbard and Greg Mankiw led Mr. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers. Now they are Mr. Romney's economic brain trusts.

The same can be said for his foreign policy team, where Mr. Romney boasts a number of faces from the Bush old guard, including former CIA Director Michael V. Hayden and former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. Today, they are the former Massachusetts governor's go-to guys on counterterrorism.

Mr. Romney's corps of advisers, in fact, is heavily salted with figures who surrounded the 43rd president as he watched over massive increases in federal spending, the creation of more government programs and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the nation-building efforts that followed.

These moves helped give life to the tea party movement's battle cry of limited government that has reshaped the political landscape.

The choices threaten to complicate Mr. Romney's vow on the campaign trail to lead the nation on "a different course, a new course unlike any of our past," and appear to play into the message that President Obama is touting on the stump: that Mr. Romney wants to drag the nation back to the era of deregulation and trickle-down economic thinking that sparked the financial crises in the first place.

"There are a couple of new faces, but not nearly as many as there should be," Republican strategist Michael McKenna said. "The terrible thing is that [Mr. Romney] is helping Obama make his case: 'Hey, we are going back to the Bush administration.' "

The danger for Mr. Romney is that he risks reminding voters too much of the days of the former president, who oversaw major defeats for his party in the 2006 and 2008 elections and who left office with an approval rating of 22 percent in the final CBS/New York Times poll of his presidency.

The bitterness has not abated. In a CNN/ORC poll, 57 percent said Mr. Bush and other Republicans are more responsible for the nation's economic woes, while 29 percent said Mr. Obama and other Democrats bear the blame.

Analysts and others said the problem isn't so much with the specific people Mr. Romney has tapped. Indeed, Mr. McKenna singled out and applauded Mr. Romney's decision to appoint Oklahoma oil billionaire Harold Hamm as energy adviser to his

campaign.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the **Cato Institute**, a libertarian-leaning think tank, offered glowing reviews of Mr. Romney's troika of advisers - Mr. Hubbard, Mr. Mankiw and Kevin Hassett, another former member of the Bush team - on issues of taxation and economic policy.

"These are brilliant economists," Mr. Edwards said before cautioning that Mr. Romney shouldn't look to Mr. Bush's team on the spending side.

"A key failing of Bush was that he spent far too much money. Bush's Office of Management and Budget chiefs, like Joshua Bolten, were not spending cutters. Indeed, they were believers in big government like Bush was," he said.

"So," he said, "Romney needs spending-cutting experts to complement these tax experts. Our giant \$1 trillion deficits and huge Obama spending increases will be the key thing Romney needs to tackle if he is elected. So he needs experts on how to cut, privatize and downsize federal departments like Housing and Urban Development, Energy and Education. If elected, he needs a hard-line spending-cutting OMB chief. He needs Cabinet secretaries who believe in cutting their own departments."

Andrea Saul, a Romney spokeswoman, shrugged off the notion that her boss is trying to turn back the clock by surrounding himself with ex-Bushies.

"Mitt Romney has assembled a diverse group of highly respected policy thinkers," Ms. Saul said. "He fields their opinions, evaluates them and ultimately makes his own decisions on policy."

Democrats, meanwhile, seem giddy with the idea of tying Mr. Romney to Mr. Bush, who has kept a low public profile since leaving office and whose name has been rarely uttered by the GOP candidates in the primary race.

"I think people absolutely blame the previous agenda for the economic free fall and they have no interest of going back to that," said Mo Eliehee, a Democratic strategist. "The fact that he has surrounded himself with a lot of people who got us into this mess is telling, but he can still take things in a different direction - and he doesn't want to do that."

Mr. Obama, who rode into office aboard a message of hope and change, used a similar message to formally launch his campaign over the weekend, painting Mr. Romney's way of thinking as a relic of the not-too-distant past.

"Somehow, he and his friends in Congress think that the same bad ideas will lead to a different result," he told a crowd in Ohio. "Or they're just hoping you won't remember what happened the last time we tried it their way. Well, Ohio, I'm here to say that we were there, we remember, and we are not going back. We are moving this country forward."