Washington wonders: What would a Trump Pentagon look like?

Rebecca Kheel

September 11, 2016

With much of the Republican national security establishment shunning their party's presidential nominee, it's unclear who would serve in **Donald Trump**'s Pentagon if he won the White House.

Observers say Sen. **Jeff Sessions** (R-Ala.), a close Trump adviser, could be a prime candidate for Defense secretary, though he might be a better fit for a job elsewhere in the administration.

Ultimately, Trump's potential Pentagon team would likely be like much of the rest of his campaign — unexpected and unconventional.

"Anyone who says they know who's going to be in Trump's Cabinet is lying," said Alex Ward, a national security expert at the Atlantic Council. "Trump will be able to find people who agree with him, but to what end will be difficult. Finding top-tier talent will be difficult."

In early August, 50 Republican national security officials signed an open latter pledging never to support Trump. Nearly half of them had signed a similar letter during the primary that garnered 121 Republican signatures.

More than a dozen Republican national security and foreign policy officials have endorsed Democratic nominee **Hillary Clinton**.

The resistance of the GOP's foreign policy establishment to Trump could make it harder for him to fill top positions in his administration.

"One of the potential issues could be that fact that so many of what we call the bench have basically come out for Clinton," said Arnold Punaro, a retired Marine major general and former staff director of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Trump aligned himself closely with the thinking of defense hawks on Wednesday when he proposed to bulk up the size and funding of the military.

But it's unclear if that will be enough to bring the defectors back into the fold, especially since later that night he rankled feathers anew by praising Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Much of Trump's national security speech drew from proposals previously issued by the conservative Heritage Foundation. Jim Carafano, vice president for the think tank's foreign and defense policy studies who is advising the Trump campaign in a personal capacity, did not return a request for comment.

Trump has dropped hints about the people he might want on his foreign policy and national security teams.

In an August interview, radio host Hugh Hewitt asked Trump about the possibility of former Sen. Jim Talent (R-Mo.) serving as Defense secretary and John Bolton, a US ambassador to the United Nations under President George W. Bush, serving as secretary of State.

Trump called Bolton a "good man" and said, "We are seriously thinking about it." But he didn't say anything specific about Talent.

In July, Trump hinted about the possibility of retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, as Defense secretary when he retweeted a supporter who wrote "General Michael Flynn will make a great Secretary of Defense when you become POTUS!"

But Flynn would be ineligible, as the law requires a seven-year "cooling off" period between active duty and Defense secretary to ensure the Pentagon remains under civilian control. Flynn retired in 2014 amid clashes with Obama administration officials.

"He would be prohibited by statute," Punaro said. "No one is going to change that law."

Ward, of the Atlantic Council, pegged Flynn as an obvious choice to head Trump's CIA, rather than the Pentagon.

The Pentagon, perhaps more than any other Cabinet department, needs a leader with experience, Punaro said.

"The Pentagon is the world's largest and most complex organization," he said. "It's probably the hardest job in government, other than commander in chief."

Asked about the qualifications of Sessions to be Defense secretary, Punaro said he did not want to speculate on hypothetical appointments. But, he added, in general, lawmakers are not necessarily the best Cabinet secretaries, while the most successful Defense secretaries have been those who came from within the Pentagon.

"Previous commanders in chief have noted that people who have gone from the Hill to the executive branch don't always make superb executives," he said.

Sessions serves on the Armed Services Committee but is better known for his hard-line stance on immigration issues.

Still, Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, noted that Sessions is the most senior person advising Trump on national security matters, so could be the pick for Defense secretary.

Trump's lack of support from the establishment could hinder his ability to fill positions below the secretary.

"I have yet to meet a single person in Washington who I know who is advising him," Preble said. "There are hundreds or maybe even thousands of politically appointed positions in the Pentagon. I honestly have no idea who would staff those positions."

Some of the Republicans who have come out against Trump could change their mind out of a sense of duty to the country, Preble added, but "barring that, it seems to me those positions will go unfilled or be filled by people who are genuinely new to this enterprise."

"Civil servants would have a lot more influence on the shape and direction of policy," Preble predicted of a Pentagon with inexperienced leadership.

Ward said he foresees running mate **Mike Pence** playing a role in choosing the leader of the Pentagon, and noted that Pence has been "guarded" about that topic.

"Trump has a coherent worldview, but he has no coherent policies to make that world view come true," Ward said. "If he's really serious about substantive changes, he needs a steady, experienced hand."