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# Inability to fulfill key positions threatens our national security

BY NORTON A. SCHWARTZ AND THOMAS STEPHENSON, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 11/21/18 10:30 AM EST  
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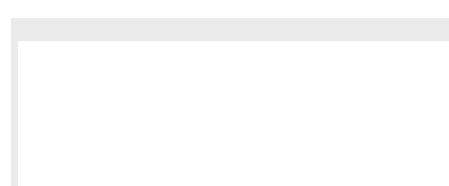
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The U.S. government faces a number of threats to its national security: think of a rising China, Russia, a nuclear armed North Korea, and cybersecurity.

What hinders our ability to address these challenges? Vacancies in key top leadership positions. The government agencies responsible for U.S. policy towards South and East Asia and the Middle East, for example, are currently missing key appointees.



In our ever-more complex security environment, there is no United States post-election responsibility more important than ensuring a seamless transition between the most senior

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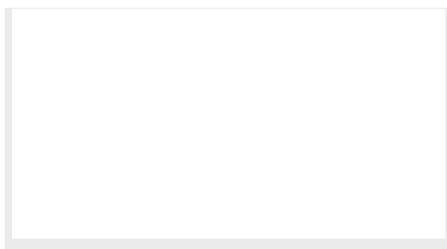
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officials handling the country's national security duties. The last nine presidential administrations each faced a national security crisis in the first 270 days in office.

Nearly half-way through President Trump's term, key national security positions remain vacant across the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, and at the CIA and FBI. This is not a situation exclusive to the current administration. Unfortunately, as with too many recent administrations, the president is now simultaneously presenting candidates for those who have departed, while also trying to fill first round positions.

Yet getting the job done has become harder and harder. Why? And what can we do about it?

Addressing these questions motivated Business Executives for National Security (BENS) to improve approaches to fill these crucial positions.

Our assessment, based on input from 14 current and former Republican and Democratic presidential nominees who have weathered confirmation processes, illustrated shortfalls across administrations in preparation provided to prospective candidates, particularly those who were unfamiliar with the operations of government or the agency for which they were being considered. We also found glaring inconsistencies across and within administrations in how financial disclosure matters were handled.

Nominees over the years also have become increasingly challenged in knowing how long it will take to navigate the confirmation process; this compounds the always uncertain outcome since every nominee requiring Senate review must await the Senate's decision before they can be sworn into position. Frequently, nominations for senior national security positions are pending confirmation for many months.

Congress and the White House have previously come together to make some changes through bipartisan legislation to reduce the number of presidential appointee positions requiring Senate confirmation to allow new administrations to be set up with more efficiency and speed. But more needs to happen, if we want to keep our country safe and secure, even – especially – in times of electoral transition, and if we want to continue to encourage our best and brightest from all walks of life to aspire to public service.

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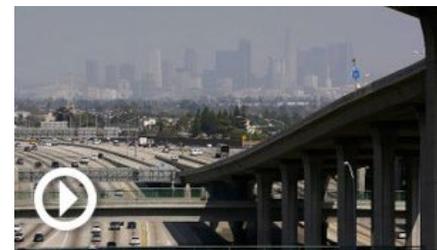
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BENS [Building the National Security Bench 2018: Ensuring a Strong Senior Government Service](#) recommends practical concrete steps to mitigate the burden shouldered by prospective nominees, and increase an administration's opportunity to assemble an experienced national security team, including:

- Create a resource manual that gives nominees immediately needed information and tools to navigate the road ahead. This replicates a private sector best practice when onboarding leadership like a new CEO;
- Pair nominees with individuals who have served in similar positions. A presidential nominee facing confirmation, with little government experience, would benefit from consulting with a skilled predecessor who has walked the same path;
- Establish a mechanism -- a Trusted Advisor Portal -- that provides help in completing financial disclosure forms. The portal would allow prospective nominees to make informed decisions on additional yet necessary resources like financial advisors, lawyers, or auditors to navigate the financial disclosure process;
- Provide front-end "accelerated" reviews that could give initial indications of what a prospective nominee might have to financially disclose or divest. Such review results could encourage better informed decisions at the front end of the nomination process; and
- Capture in one database that the nominee can share, duplicative information that nominees currently must provide separately, often repeatedly, to the executive and legislative branches. This would be more efficient, increase opportunities for accurate delivery of data, yet preserve the independence and responsibilities of each branch.

These recommendations can be implemented immediately, by the administration and Senate, with respect to current and prospective nominees. The 2020 presidential transition teams that will soon be created by both parties can implement such actions too.

Getting the right people into the right senior level positions – effectively and quickly – is a shared goal across administrations. Administrations should shape the search, selection, and confirmation process for presidential appointees so that it maximizes opportunities to attract the most qualified individuals that our country has to offer to fill national security positions of trust. Our people, and the challenges we are facing, deserve no less.



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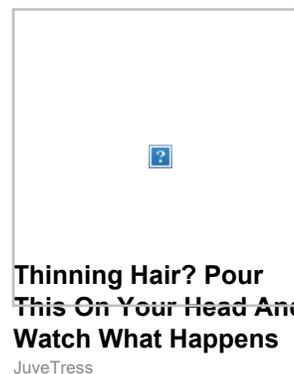
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