

## CNN REPORT

# Trump team doomed to repeat Bush's mistakes

By Michael F. Oppenheimer

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### Story highlights

- Michael Oppenheimer: Trump's national security picks echo qualities of George W. Bush picks that blundered US into Iraq
- He says Trump's shrug at Russia's election hack portends dangerous foreign policy

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*(CNN)*The Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq spotlighted four ingredients sufficient to produce a historic strategic blunder: an ill-informed and inexperienced President; advisors with single-minded agendas; a broken policy process; and a major external shock. The Trump Administration is well on its way towards supplying three of these, and the fourth -- a shock -- is inevitable, although its precise character has yet to reveal itself.



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Observers should stop looking for a Trump grand strategy, or speculating about the President-elect's policies towards particular countries or issues. Whatever attitudes he expresses about policy are skin deep, an incoherent, impulse-driven miscellany of ethno-nationalism, isolationism, and an infatuation with authoritarian rulers who he views as partners in deal making.

Absent any workable strategic concept, the style will be transactional, similar to Obama's but without the current President's informed pragmatism and instinctive caution. Relations with our major adversaries will be governed by Trump's inflated estimates of his prowess as deal-maker, then by humiliation and a dangerous sense of betrayal when partners fail to deliver.

Indeed, the potential leverage we have gained over Russian behavior via Ukraine-related economic sanctions is already dissipating as Trump's vocal opposition to

sanctions and his eagerness to do a deal was reinforced this week by the arrival of Trump's advance team of surrogates in Moscow.

While Trump has endorsed some realist ideas, by questioning the cost/benefit of our alliance system, and the advisability of nation-building, Bush as candidate endorsed similar views but with little conviction, then reversed course in reaction to 9/11. We can expect the same from Trump, whose impulsive temperament, on full display during the campaign and in his ongoing Twitter war with critics, and now with his own intelligence agencies, will shape actions more powerfully than his "ideas."

Although wise advisors and effective process can compensate for the President-elect's weaknesses, those selected or nominated thus far will mostly reinforce them.

Michael Flynn, the choice for national security advisor, shares Trump's thin skin and inventiveness with facts, as well as a single-minded focus on Islamic extremism that will quickly produce policy errors as the administration confronts complex challenges and policy tradeoffs.

The job of national security advisor requires an even-handed commitment to conveying the highest quality policy analysis to the President, an honest assessment of policy options and trade-offs, wire-brushing of intelligence to provide the President with the best information available, and effective management of policy debates to encourage argument even on behalf of unpopular positions. Flynn's preoccupation with Islamic extremism, his intolerance of dissent, and his managerial ineptitude, demonstrated while running the Defense Intelligence Agency, make him uniquely unsuited to head the National Security Council.

Kansas congressman Mike Pompeo for the CIA director post is a further blow to informed strategic decisions. Pompeo is a highly partisan member of the Tea Party with an inflated view of the threat of Islamic extremism, and no record of accomplishment in the field of intelligence, or in management.

He takes over a job already deeply compromised by his new boss's public dismissal of the CIA's performance on Russian interference in the Presidential election, and by the President-elect's disinterest in receiving intelligence briefings.

The CIA job requires an understanding of policy-relevant intelligence needs, combined with sufficient detachment to provide the best information and analysis possible, whatever the implications for the president's agenda. It requires a full acknowledgement of uncertainty surrounding key decisions. It also requires that the President be informed of developments off stage that pose new challenges outside the frame of current priorities.

The combination of Flynn as information gatekeeper and advisor to the President, Pompeo as principle originator of intelligence, and Trump as disinterested intelligence consumer, is a guarantee of major intelligence and policy failure in a Trump Administration.

James Mattis as Secretary of Defense may mitigate the damage, but Flynn will leverage his proximity to the President for the last word, which, given Trump's lack of discipline and knowledge, will usually be decisive.

The same can be said of Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson, an accomplished CEO but a diplomatic and foreign policy novice with close business ties to a major U.S. adversary. The prospect of an entire foreign policy team with political and commercial driven sympathies to Russia, even as Russian hacking into the election escalates in

importance, guarantees a rough confirmation for all nominees and a foreign policy already delegitimized.

Jeffrey Sessions as Attorney General, and Stephen Bannon — former head of Breitbart News, the hard-right website — as chief White House political strategist, further erode confidence in the administration's future foreign policy.

The AG nominee's hard line on treatment of undocumented immigrants and border enforcement will inevitably embroil the country in disputes with Mexico, and with European allies expecting to share the burden of refugees from conflict zones. Bannon's proximity to the President will make him a major influence on foreign policy, despite his absence from the formal policy process, and his right wing extremism coupled with a volatile temperament will make him a disruptive influence in an administration desperately in need of orderly process.

Relations with European governments will be at great risk, as their increasingly powerful neo-fascist political opponents derive added confidence from the knowledge that a champion of global right-wing populism sits just down the hall from the Oval Office, while the President does deals with Putin, their principle external adversary.

It is impossible to imagine this particular group forming an effective policy process.

The chaos of the President-elect's transition and the marginal quality of most of his appointments reveal Trump himself as the problem. His impulsivity, lack of knowledge, many prejudices and conflicts of interest augur badly for the future of America's global leadership and ultimately, for our safety.

The consequences of these pathologies may not fully reveal themselves immediately, but will burst into full view when something goes wrong, and something will surely go wrong. Some of these future crises will be self-inflicted, as the global uncertainty generated by the shaky hand in the White House will force both allies and adversaries into worst-case assumptions or risky behavior, and CIA early warnings go unheeded.

But beyond the self-inflicted, no President can expect to avoid unpleasant surprises: for example, Soviet missiles in Cuba; Berlin blockades; Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; 9/11; the 2008 financial meltdown; the Arab Spring and the sudden rise of ISIS.

Administrations are often defined by their reaction to unanticipated challenges, and a combination of presidential calmness, the wisdom of advisors, good policy process and at least a working sense of strategy are essential requirements of effective crisis management.

These qualities are in short supply in the emerging Trump Administration. When called upon to deal with the inevitable shocks that await, their failure could be truly catastrophic.

It's clear that that mitigating the damage to U.S. interests will not come from within the administration. It may learn from its inevitable mistakes (as JFK did from the Bay of Pigs fiasco), but this does not have the look of an administration intent on learning. The beginning of wisdom for the rest of us -- in Congress, journalism, academia, civil society -- is to acknowledge the new and manifold risks we now face from a chaotic, unpredictable and highly personalized Presidency, operating in a dangerous, complex and fast-moving world.

We'll need to be systematic about identifying and anticipating the sources of heightened risk: major strategic surprises resulting from an excessive focus on Islamic terrorism and an already broken intelligence-policy process; unanticipated, unintended

blowback from errant policies (for example, China's reaction to abandonment of the One China policy); American allies reacting to new uncertainty surrounding our commitment to their security, by renationalizing their defense (Japan? Germany?) and setting off regional arms races; adversaries taking excessive risk, encouraged by uncertainty about our red lines; Trump himself reacting out of pique to the discovery he's been had by an erstwhile partner; and of course defending the country from violent extremism -- from whatever source -- without making the problem worse.

We need to be honest about the greatly heightened risk to the country already created by the President-elect in dismissing (indeed, during the campaign, inviting) Russian interference in the 2016 election. The Russians would, at this point, be entirely justified in concluding that an attack on our core Democratic institutions is risk-free, so long as the political result favors the President. The Russians will need to be disabused of that idea.

The challenge to the intelligence community cannot be exaggerated. Maintaining its professionalism, its detachment from the administration's policy preferences, its candor in delivering bad news, while building and maintaining its credibility with the President, may turn out to be impossible.

If that's the case, Trump, to quote President Obama, will be "flying blind." And we'll all be along for the ride.