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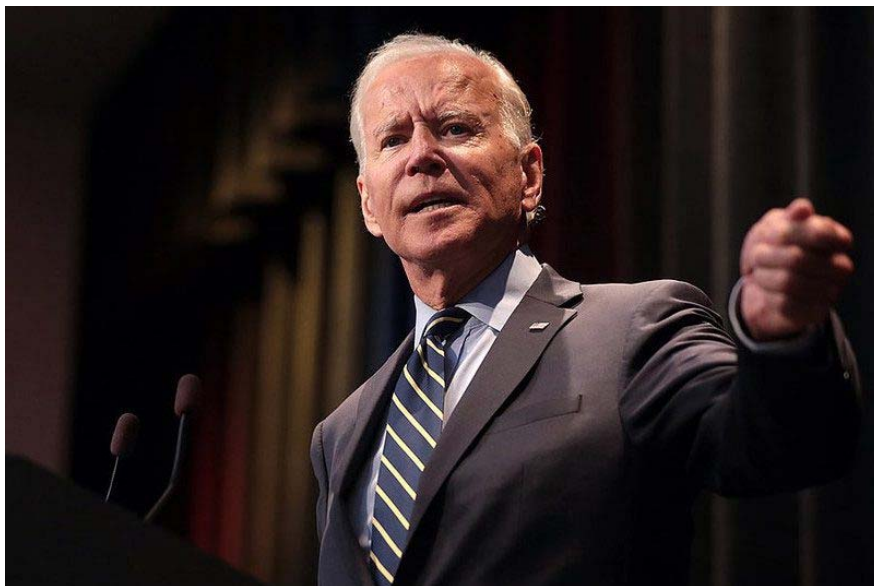
European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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19.11.2020

Biden and the CIA



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One of the most consequential appointments that a new president must make is director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Unfortunately, this appointment is usually made late in the transition process, getting insufficient attention and typically ending up with a mediocre selection. Presidents have named liberals (Ted Sorenson and Tony Lake) who couldn't survive the confirmation process; former CIA analysts and operatives (Richard Helms, William Colby, Robert Gates, John Brennan, and—the current director—Gina Haspel) who failed for various reasons; veterans from Capitol Hill (Rep. Porter Goss and George Tenet) who politicized intelligence; and an eclectic group (John Deutch, General David Petraeus, General Michael Hayden, Leon Panetta, and Jim Woolsey) who failed to provide leadership in the post-Cold War era.

President Bill Clinton's selection of Woolsey, the poster child for failure, was typical. It was late in the transition period; Clinton had no likely candidate; and Woolsey was virtually unknown to the key advisors around the president-elect. But he did have one singular attribute. He was a hard-liner and nominally a Democrat, and Clinton's advisers favored the idea of picking someone from the right-wing in order to appease the military-intelligence communities.

The meeting between Clinton and Woolsey in Little Rock, Arkansas, was classic. Woolsey wasn't quite sure why he was being called to the meeting, and college football was the main subject of discussion. There was virtually no substantive discussion. Clinton and Woolsey never established a working relationship; Woolsey, an introvert, worked behind closed doors and alienated the agency's leadership, and he thoroughly antagonized both Democrats and Republicans on the congressional intelligence committees.

The directors who were agency professionals were a particularly motley group. Haspel is best known for her leading role in the CIA's sadistic torture and abuse program; she never should have been considered. Brennan held an executive position during the planning and imposition of the program and never demurred. CIA director William Casey (former OSS) found Bob Gates to be the perfect sycophant, and the two of them enforced a program of politicized intelligence for President Ronald Reagan. James Schlesinger, Porter Goss, and George Tenet also excelled at the politicization of intelligence.

Meanwhile, there is the sterling example of Helms, who testified to Congress that it had to trust that "honorable men" were working inside America's intelligence services. Several years later, he was fined \$2,000 and given a two-year suspended sentence for perjuring himself before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. General Hayden stands out for his leadership role at the National Security Agency, where he broke the Fourth Amendment against illegal searches and seizures, and at the CIA, where he actively lobbied on the Hill to permit CIA interrogators to torture and abuse suspected terrorists in violation of the Eighth Amendment.

The CIA has floundered at key moments because of the lack of a stable and senior leader at the top, and a "culture of secrecy" that has blurred the judgment of many CIA leaders who have allowed the tailoring of intelligence at key junctures. There probably is no perfect resume to suggest suitability for the role of CIA director, but the professional military, Capitol Hill, and perhaps the Agency itself may not be the best place to train a tough-minded leader who recognizes the central role of intelligence analysis and is suited to "tell truth to power."

But I would suggest that President-elect Joe Biden look at the one department of government that has never produced a CIA director—the Department of State. In the early 1950s, President Harry Truman wanted the director of the Department of State's Policy Planning Division, George Kennan, to consider taking over the leadership of the CIA. Unfortunately,

Kennan refused, denying the agency a leader who recognized the importance of intelligence gathering and analysis and would have been a rigorous enforcer of trenchant estimates and assessments. President Clinton was very close to naming Ambassador Thomas Pickering as CIA director, but Clinton decided that Pickering was a perfect choice as ambassador to Russia in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. I've been beating the drums for Pickering over the years, but at the age of 89 he is no longer an obvious choice even in an age of aged leaders.

Fortunately, there is a Department of State veteran, William Burns, who would be a perfect choice, although he is reportedly being considered as a possible secretary of state to fill the tiny shoes of Mike Pompeo. Burns is currently the President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; he had a brilliant 33-year career as a Foreign Service Officer and retired as Deputy Secretary of State. Burns would understand the limits of the "culture of secrecy" and the pitfalls of covert action. More importantly, he would have the strategic sense few CIA directors have had for ensuring the central role of intelligence in identifying challenges and opportunities for decision makers.

My major concern is that the Biden team is looking at a tired list of possible choices as CIA director, which includes former acting director Michael Morell. Morell, like many CIA "luminaries," such as John Brennan and John McLaughlin, has never accepted the CIA's role in brutalizing terror suspects and has criticized the Senate intelligence committee's authoritative study of torture and abuse as "deeply flawed." All of them have whitewashed the CIA's role. There will always be great tension between secrecy and democracy, and Biden will do great harm if he appoints a director who is more interested in keeping secrets from Americans than in keeping secrets to protect Americans.

NOVEMBER 18, 2020

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