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Burns at the CIA

For the past 40 years, incoming presidents have typically made the choice of director of the Central Intelligence Agency their last selection. These choices have been mediocre for the most part, which helps to explain the current crisis of credibility and integrity that confronts the CIA. President-elect Joe Biden has made his last major selection in naming former deputy secretary of state William Burns to be CIA director. This is a sterling choice that should receive unanimous support from the U.S. Senate.

Burns has every skill that is required for managing the key civilian intelligence agency in an overgrown intelligence community that has had too many intelligence failures at home and abroad in recent years. Burns was only the second career diplomat to be named deputy secretary of state. He also earned the rare title of “career ambassador,” and he is cut from the same cloth as such outstanding foreign service officers as George Kennan and Chip Bohlen. Burns is currently president of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, our oldest international affairs think tank, with a global network of 140 scholars across six countries. Burns has received awards from the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the intelligence community.

More importantly, Burns’ leadership qualities and his experience point to the kind of strategic vision that has been missing within the militarized intelligence community, particularly within the CIA. A career ambassador, Burns has experience that points to a deep understanding of key CIA functions: strategic intelligence analysis for the policy community and clandestine operations in support of presidential national security policy. Senior foreign service officers understand the importance of long-term and strategic intelligence that is prepared at home. As a former ambassador, Burns is familiar with the role of CIA operations abroad. CIA clandestine operatives are typically hostile to directors from the “civilian” world, but Burns would be that refreshing change that should be welcome. As a former CIA intelligence officer, I am confident that CIA analysts will be ecstatic over this appointment.

The selection of Burns will reverse the decades of lackluster and mediocre CIA directors, who often have been after-thoughts on the part of recent presidents who have hoped that nothing controversial would reach them from the CIA. The politicization of intelligence under former CIA leaders such as Robert M. Gates in the 1980s and George Tenet in the run up to the Iraq War will not happen under Burns. Hopefully, presidential misuse of CIA's mandate for covert action, which received overly enthusiastic support from former leaders such as Richard Helms, William Colby, and William Casey will be challenged by Burns. The current CIA director, Gina Haspel, is best known for her support of the sadistic policy of torture and abuse, which would not have been given approval by Burns. Even Barack Obama's appointments to the CIA included Leon Panetta, who was instrumental in denigrating the Office of the Inspector General, which is essential to oversight, and John Brennan, who violated the separation of powers in compromising the Senate intelligence committee's study of CIA's torture and abuse program.

While U.S. foreign policy has been in a state of paralysis during the Trump administration, the global community has ignored our dysfunction and moved on. European leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel have revived the European Community and reached an important economic agreement with China. China has conducted diplomacy adroitly in the Third World, and stepped into the vacuum of influence created by U.S. stasis. Our retreat from arms control and diplomacy has hurt the entire international community, particularly the United States, which is throwing scarce resources at a bloated defense budget. The decisions that need to be made to reverse the U.S. decline require trenchant and relevant strategic intelligence.

With this appointment, President-elect Biden has demonstrated that he is capable of out-of-the-box selections for there has never been a CIA director from the Department of State. He recognizes that morale at the CIA has plummeted in recent years for obvious reasons, and that CIA performance has been challenged both inside and outside the intelligence community. Finally, Biden has demonstrated that serious public servants are needed to rehabilitate a key agency in national security decision making. The past four years have sadly demonstrated the failure of our guardrails to protect U.S. governance. It will take senior leaders, such as Burns, to begin its rehabilitation.

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