

Opinions

# Rex Tillerson's firing was necessary to national security

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By **Hugh Hewitt** March 13 at 7:52 PM

On my first show for MSNBC last June, I sat down at Langley with CIA Director Mike Pompeo, now President Trump's nominee for secretary of state. A quick read of the transcript will not only explain the sudden change at Foggy Bottom but also should reassure any fair-minded person that a much-needed infusion of talent and presidential trust is on the way.

It's been hard to find anyone in the White House to say a bad word about the character or personality of Rex Tillerson or a good word about his leadership at State. The friction between the White House personnel shop and Tillerson's chief of staff, Margaret Peterlin, is the worst-kept secret inside the Beltway, and the glacial pace of staffing up the political ranks has angered national security conservatives. Those foreign policy wonks tend to admire the director of policy planning, Brian Hook, but look in vain around the department for anyone else with anything resembling a theory of the world on which to operate the world's link to the United States.

Other key jobs remain unfilled, including the undersecretary for arms control and international security affairs and the U.S. representative to the U.N. mission in Geneva; both jobs have much to do with holding Iran to account to the deal struck under the Obama administration. The undersecretary for management is another empty office, even though veterans of the bureaucracy from past Republican presidents remain available.

Tillerson has also failed to push nominees for crucial ambassador posts, such as Richard Grenell as ambassador to Germany, the most important non-nuclear power in the world. Other important embassies, such as those in South Korea, Turkey and South Africa, lack even a nominee, though numerous and very qualified candidates abound. The paperwork gridlock of an isolated and uninfluential secretary of state brought the conservative pro-Trumpers and career State Department staff together in agreement that the department was a massive shipwreck.

It is no accident that Trump used the word "energy" when he spoke approvingly of his new nominee. Pompeo will work quickly and decisively with key allies such as Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) in the Senate to reinvigorate the department. First in his class at West Point and an editor of the Harvard Law Review, Pompeo got key experience in the ways of the Washington swamp at the law firm Williams & Connolly before he went as far as possible from it to Wichita to launch a successful career in business and then Congress.

Most importantly, Pompeo agrees with Trump's priorities and understands that his job is to serve Trump's agenda, not create one of his own. When he says to a counterpart, "The president believes . . .," Pompeo will himself be believed. Like George Shultz with President Ronald Reagan and Henry Kissinger with President Richard Nixon, the boss needs a trusted right arm, not a distant figure of uncertain commitment to core presidential goals.

More changes may be in the wind as a president fresh off a year of policy successes but personal shortfalls looks to reorient for the midterm elections. Secretary of State Pompeo will be part of a largely successful national security team of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, national security adviser H.R. McMaster and other Cabinet members as well as the superb commanders at the Pentagon. Trump's nominee for CIA director, Gina Haspel, obviously enjoys the confidence of her predecessor and the president. With quick work staffing up at State, the country will have made a complete break with the disastrous policies of the Obama years. It was a sudden and somewhat rough change, but necessary to national security. Now if the Senate Democrats who have stalled so many appointees charged with protecting the nation's defenses and interests will cooperate with Senate Republicans, the hard work of opposing an increasingly ascendant China and an increasingly reckless Russia can accelerate.

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