Beyond Trump's High-Profile White House Picks: A Long, Slow Process to Staff the Administration

By MAX STIER
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Recent headlines have focused on President-elect Donald Trump naming Reince Priebus his White House chief of staff and Stephen Bannon his chief strategist and adviser. These are just two of the roughly 4,000 political appointments Mr. Trump will make. Some 1,100 positions of key administration leadership jobs also require Senate confirmation.

In administrations past, the road to identifying and nominating leaders for critical positions and then getting them confirmed has had its share of potholes, requiring a heavy lift from the president-elect's transition team–in this instance now headed by Vice President-elect Mike Pence–and continued work once in office as well as cooperation from the Senate.

There is no guarantee that even critical positions will be filled urgently. In March 2009, during the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was effectively home alone, overseeing the financial rescue plan, the stimulus package, and the auto industry bailout without key members of his leadership team because many had not yet been nominated by the president or, in turn, confirmed by the Senate.

The White House view from Pennsylvania Avenue PHOTO: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

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The same was true across much of the federal government. President Barack Obama was sworn in in January 2009, but it was the end of April before all 15 of his Cabinet secretaries were confirmed and early August–more than six months after his inauguration–before all departments had a deputy. By the end of Mr. Obama's first year in office, a third of Senate-confirmed leadership jobs in the executive branch remained unfilled.

Some of the delays during that first year, including at Treasury, were caused by issues related to taxes, ethics, or other problems specific to the nominees, or were the result of partisan politics. But about 70% of the time was taken by the onerous vetting, selection, and security-clearance process.

Running the U.S. government–arguably the world's most powerful, most complex and largest organization–

without having top leaders on the job could exacerbate U.S. national security and economic vulnerabilities, domestic challenges, and Mr. Trump's lack of experience in elected government. The president will need his leadership team up and running to effectively address the threat of terrorism, issues such as immigration and health care, and foreign challenges such as those from Islamic State and Russia's increasingly aggressive president.

It is incumbent on the president-elect to choose and the Senate to consider all Cabinet secretaries and their core teams—about 100 political appointees of the 1,100 requiring confirmation—by or shortly after Inauguration Day. The time frame between Election Day and the inauguration make this a reasonable and attainable goal. These nominations can be grouped in batches, with the Senate reviewing each Cabinet secretary while also simultaneously considering his or her deputies, general counsel, and chief financial officers. Other key agency leaders and nominees for critical positions overseeing homeland security, defense, disaster, and pandemic response would also be an important part of the early confirmation process.

Another helpful goal: for Mr. Trump to have his White House fully staffed by Inauguration Day; and to seek to have an additional 300 more key departmental and agency political appointees confirmed by the August congressional recess.

Mr. Trump's transition team and, later, his White House would benefit from prioritizing the appointment process, as well as by selecting people who not only share Mr. Trump's views but also have experience managing large organizations and understand the levers of government.

How well Mr. Trump does on this front will be an indicator of his success in fulfilling his policy agenda. It's also likely tell us a great deal about how he will govern.