



Rex Tillerson Represents All That is Wrong with Trump's Incoming Administration

By Danielle Root January 10, 2017

In the weeks leading up to the U.S. presidential election, President-elect Donald Trump's campaign touted a common theme: the need to “drain the swamp” and rid Washington of wealthy elites and pay-to-play politics.¹ Trump's campaign lambasted Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton and her husband President Bill Clinton for their wealth and supposed status as Washington insiders. In contrast, Trump presented himself as a man of the people, the “blue-collar billionaire,” who shared ordinary American's frustration with the country's ever-increasing wealth inequality.² Furthermore, Trump sought to establish himself as the candidate who would pursue strong-armed tactics against foreign threats.³

So imagine the surprise when, less than one month after being elected to the highest office in the land, Trump began to assemble a cabinet filled with individuals who, together, are worth more than one-third of all U.S. households combined.⁴ Trump's cabinet, if confirmed, will make up the richest administration in modern U.S. history.⁵ Furthermore, several members of Trump's inner circle, including Trump's pick for National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, and his transition team advisor, Paul Manafort, have close ties with Russia, whose government waged a covert attack on our electoral system in order to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election.⁶ The Russian hacking has been called “an act of war” and the “political equivalent of 9/11.”⁷

No cabinet nominee better embodies all that is wrong with the incoming administration than Trump's choice for U.S. secretary of state, former Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson.⁸ To protect America's interests in the world, Congress should deny Tillerson's confirmation as secretary of state.

His excessive wealth represents the hypocrisy of Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp”

Tillerson’s net worth is estimated to be upwards of \$150 million dollars.⁹ Last year alone, he pocketed \$24.3 million—that is more than 400 times the median U.S. household income.¹⁰ At the same time, he has amassed more than 2.6 million shares in ExxonMobil stock worth just less than \$245 million.¹¹

As a result, Tillerson was able to donate more than \$76,000 to candidates, outside groups and super political action committees, or super PACs, in the 2016 elections, and more than \$480,000 in total to politicians and advocacy groups since 1992.¹² Under Tillerson’s leadership, Exxon Mobil donated more than \$2 million to political campaigns and groups in the 2016 election cycle, and spent more than \$8.8 million lobbying the federal government last year.¹³ Exxon and Exxon Mobil have given more than \$19 million to candidates, super PACs, and outside groups since 1990.¹⁴ Among those who have benefitted from Tillerson and Exxon Mobil’s giving are Sens. Marco Rubio (R-FL), John Barrasso (R-WY), and Cory Gardner (R-CO), all of whom sit on the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee responsible for confirming his appointment.¹⁵ Exxon Mobil has donated nearly \$29,000 to Rubio, more than \$20,000 to Barrasso, and an excess of \$25,000 to Gardner over the course of these politicians’ respective careers.¹⁶

It is no secret that the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Citizens United v. FEC* decision has changed the rules of political campaigns and ushered in political contributions in amounts never before seen.¹⁷ In politics today, money often wins elections; those who pay the piper call the tune.¹⁸ Given this new reality, how can committee members who received campaign donations from Exxon Mobil objectively evaluate the company’s former CEO on his fitness for the office of secretary of state? In order to ensure that America’s interests are protected, it is of utmost importance that Tillerson’s nomination receive the highest form of scrutiny.

His unusually close ties to Russia raise serious questions over how U.S. interests will be represented abroad

Like Trump himself, Tillerson has demonstrated an unusually close relationship with Russia and its leader, President Vladimir Putin. Their relationship spans almost 20 years and has proven extremely lucrative for both men.¹⁹ During his many trips to Russia, Tillerson has orchestrated billion-dollar deals between Exxon Mobil and Rosneft, the Russian government-owned oil giant.²⁰ In 2013, Putin presented Tillerson with Russia’s “order of friendship award,” one of the highest honors the Russian government can bestow upon a foreigner.²¹ In December, Putin praised Trump’s decision to nominate

Tillerson as secretary of state, citing Tillerson's longtime dealings with the country.²² Putin is more than just Tillerson's business ally: Tillerson and Putin have been described as "personal friends."²³ Indeed, Tillerson "has had more interactive time with Vladimir Putin than probably any other American with the exception of Henry Kissinger."²⁴

It is perhaps not surprising then that Tillerson has been a vocal critic of the Russian sanctions that President Barack Obama imposed in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. To date, Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine is estimated to have claimed the lives of more than 9,000 people.²⁵ Tillerson claims, for example, that the sanctions cause "broad collateral damage," which for him, means lost profits.²⁶ Exxon Mobil is estimated to have lost close to \$1 billion on account of the sanctions. If they were lifted under the Trump administration, the value of Exxon Mobil stock would increase dramatically.²⁷

In January 2017, Tillerson promised to divest his personal funds from Exxon Mobil. He announced that, if confirmed, he would receive an advanced payout of his more than 2 million company shares, paid to an independent trust barred from investing in the company.²⁸ Tillerson has also promised to sell an additional 611,000 shares he already owns, worth more than \$54 million.²⁹ Still, Tillerson's receipt of a \$180 million retirement package from Exxon Mobil—just weeks before his confirmation hearing—raises serious questions over whether, as secretary of state, Tillerson would put the country first over the interests of the company to which he not only owes his immense personal wealth, but also his entire career.³⁰

Tillerson's lack of civil service or foreign policy experience make him unfit to serve as America's top diplomat

In the past, Trump has cited Tillerson's years of business dealings with foreign governments in making the case that he is uniquely qualified to fill the position of U.S. secretary of state.³¹ But experience in foreign business dealings does not a diplomat make. Being secretary of state is more than just negotiating with foreign governments. The nation's top diplomat also "delivers and defines the aid, the resources that the United States provides in that country, whether it's support for local human rights groups or democracy organizers or whether it's through USAID, new technologies to help free speech and free organizing in authoritarian countries."³² Tillerson has no experience in this area; rather, he has never pursued anything other than the bottom line. A civil servant must be focused on pursuing the best policies for the American public, not profit yielding. Of course, there are instances where the policy that is the most profitable or economical, also proves to be the most beneficial to the public interest. At other times, however, they are in direct opposition.

The New York and Massachusetts attorney generals, for example, are currently investigating Tillerson's company, Exxon Mobil, over allegations that it intentionally downplayed the risks of climate change to the public and lied to its investors about how the company could be affected by these risks.³³ Exxon Mobil is alleged to have advanced climate-denying research to benefit the oil industry for many years—thereby putting the company's bottom line ahead of the public good. The backlash against Exxon Mobil's alleged efforts has been compared to past campaigns against tobacco companies that, for decades, downplayed the risks of smoking.³⁴ Tillerson has called the charges “pretty unfounded, without any substance at all.”³⁵

Those knowledgeable in foreign relations matters remain doubtful that Tillerson can break away from his business-centered mentality to pursue diplomatic solutions that are in the best interest of the American people. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) for example, has voiced “concerns” over Tillerson's nomination, due to Tillerson's business interests and ties to Russia.³⁶

The only way to ensure that Tillerson's background receives the proper level of scrutiny is for members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—including those who have received political funds from either Tillerson or his company—to step up, do their jobs, and ask the tough questions. They must require Tillerson to describe in great detail his ties to Russia, and provide clear assurances that his past business dealings with foreign nations will not cloud his judgement in making the difficult choices as secretary of state.

Moreover, they must demand that he lay out the particulars that qualify him to serve as America's top diplomat. To these ends, members of Congress should push back against claims that Tillerson's experience in closing deals with foreign companies and governments prepares him to act as secretary of state. To be sure, his years of private business dealings do not qualify him to act as a public servant on the world stage. Rather, as journalist Steve Coll said in an interview, Tillerson's career as an Exxon Mobil executive has primed him to make “decisions on the basis of what's best for ... shareholders not what's best for the United States.”³⁷

Conclusion

There is too much at stake for this country to have a secretary of state who is unfit to serve. The recent terrorist attack in Berlin, continued humanitarian crisis in Syria, and revived tensions related to the West Bank settlements, emphasize that foreign diplomacy and strategy will remain a sizable challenge in the years to come. The U.S. secretary of state should be someone with extensive foreign policy experience, not a multimillionaire former oil executive who is likely to place the interests of his business allies, including Russia, over those of the American people.

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Endnotes

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