

Obama team confirms Nunn's role as defense advisor on transition

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A spokeswoman for Barack Obama this morning confirmed that former Georgia senator Sam Nunn will have a key role in the shift to a new administration, but said that a report that he would oversee a Pentagon transition team was overstated.



"Senator Sam Nunn will play an informal senior advisor role throughout the defense transition process. His expertise and the respect he has earned will be invaluable to ensure a smooth transition," said transition spokeswoman Stephanie Cutter. But he won't be paid, and won't have a formal position on a Pentagon transition team, as the AP reported.

The Associated Press article also said Warren Christopher, the former secretary of state under President Clinton, would also be a leader in the switch of administrations.

"However, he is not playing a role in the transition process," Cutter said. "There's a lot of disinformation out there. We're working hard to put the agency review teams together and expect they'll be announced this week and inside the agencies by the end of the week."

Whether formal or informal, paid or unpaid, it's clear that Nunn will be a significant part of the transition process on defense and national security matters. Not a surprise, given that Nunn appeared at Obama's side during a Virginia press conference, a week or so before the election.

Here's a quick review of what Nunn's involvement might mean:

— First, what it doesn't say that Obama has named a secretary of defense. On the eve of the presidential election, from the King & Spalding office in Atlanta, Nunn declared himself uninterested in any cabinet position or permanent post in government. There's no reason to disbelieve him, and his background role in the transition reinforces this. But Nunn is a reassuring figure to those in the Pentagon who don't know what a Barack Obama administration might bring.

— In Nunn, you get a defense expert — the former head of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee — who's expressed skepticism about the ramping up of hostilities toward Russia, and NATO's extension of mutual defense membership to countries like Poland and Ukraine on the Russian border. NATO, Nunn has said, should be wary about making promises it can't keep — not when its own defense forces are busy in Afghanistan.

"We need to understand that when you make military commitments, you've got to back it up with military capability," Nunn said three months ago. "And right now, NATO is in danger of turning itself into a political organization rather

than an effective military organization, and making political commitments which cannot be backed up with current forces.”

— Included in Nunn’s concerns about Russia is that country’s reaction to Eastern Europe as a platform for a U.S. missile defense system. “For us to deploy a missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland - the system itself is not yet mature, and the Iranian threat is not yet mature. So we’ve got some time. Russia offered their territory, and it seems to me we ought to be working with Russia on missile defense,” Nunn said in the same interview.

— Though he did not often speak of it publicly, Nunn was highly critical of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. (As a senator, he voted against the first Gulf War.) The former senator has blamed President Bush’s go-it-alone policy in Iraq for the souring of diplomatic relations on a number of other, perhaps more important fronts.

Like Obama, he has said that the U.S. needs to renew its emphasis on diplomacy. “Although it’s really not accurate, we’ve given the impression in the world that the military is our primary and only tool. And the military are the first ones to say that we can’t be the only tool. There has to be a whole array of tools in the arsenal, ” Nunn said last year.

At the same time, Nunn has not advocated an immediate skedaddling — to use a technical phrase — out of Iraq, if only for logistical reasons. “We have something like 44,000 track vehicles over there. It would take, probably, 12 months — nothing but flying C-17s and other cargo aircraft back and forth to get them out, ” he said.

— During the debate over running mates this summer, gay groups targeted Nunn for his support of the U.S. military’s don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy that permits gays to serve — as long as they keep their sexual orientation a secret.

Barack Obama’s involvement of Nunn in the transition of the nation’s military command would seem to be, if not a dismissal of this objection, then a recognition that — in the face of two wars on the other side of the globe — that open service by gays and lesbians may not be an immediate priority.

Remember that the topic of gays in the military was the first fight picked by Bill Clinton when he assumed the presidency in 1992. Earlier this year, Nunn said “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” deserves another look, but said any change in policy should bubble up from within the Pentagon.