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Is Leon Panetta the Right Choice for CIA Director?

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President and C.E.O.

President Obama's nomination of one of Northern California's leading citizens, former Congressman Leon Panetta, to be CIA director stirred controversy when it was announced

in January. The debate has revolved around whether Mr. Panetta has sufficient intelligence credentials to run the agency effectively.

I believe he is an inspired choice. Why? What the intelligence community needs most at this time is a firm management hand and strong ethical guidance, and Mr. Panetta has both. Not only has he managed the Office of the President as chief of staff for President Clinton, but he managed the budget process for all federal agencies, including the CIA, as director of the Office of Management and Budget in the 1990s. His contacts in Congress are excellent from his years representing the Monterey Peninsula in the House, including as chairman of the House Budget Committee – which reviewed and approved the CIA's budget. All of these roles, and his membership in the recent Iraq Study Group, give him the capability to succeed with the management and budgetary issues facing the intelligence community.

More important, the intelligence community has suffered through some poor choices in recent years. These have included yielding to what was probably political pressure, leading the agency to mistakenly conclude in 2002-2003 that WMD were present in Iraq, and the decisions to use interrogation techniques that have not gone down well in our democratic society, no matter how justified our cause in combating terrorism.

These problems require a leader with a strong ethical compass, who will use good judgment in making key choices for the intelligence community. In addition to his prior government service that met high standards for good judgment and ethics, Mr. Panetta has spent the past decade thinking about leadership and ethics, teaching and lecturing about these topics, and training young people to engage in ethical government service through the Panetta Institute at Cal State Monterey Bay and Santa Clara University. He has

the qualities of high moral standards and good judgment that are essential for the intelligence community at this time.

Concerns have been expressed that Panetta would be viewed as an outsider by the personnel in the intelligence agencies. But most CIA directors for the past several decades have come from outside the intelligence community. They have included professors, businessmen and diplomats. Panetta is more familiar with the intelligence business than most of these folks.

It is also perhaps not widely known that a major change has taken place in the intelligence agencies' personnel since 9/11. Some 50 percent of intelligence community staffers have joined since that time. This is not the hardened group of veteran analysts and opera-

tives that it might have been in previous years, who perhaps would have protested or undercut the effectiveness of a director who was not "one of them." Many of the current staff are young and relatively new to the intelligence profession.

In addition, the intelligence community is involved in a makeover in how information is gathered, bringing into its practices the major developments from the civilian economy that have increased capabilities for finding and organizing information. For example, the intelligence community now has an "Intellipedia," like Wikipedia, where analysts from different fields and agencies can post and access information that previously would have only been accessible to a narrow range of people in a limited field.

Given this change in makeup and in its work process, I believe the intelligence community will be well served by, and will welcome, a man of Mr. Panetta's stature and capabilities as the fine leader who will secure their budgets and continue to improve their capabilities, while providing the

moral compass to keep them out of trouble. An informal poll of a few of my intelligence community friends suggests that they agree with this perspective.

Besides all of this, Mr. Panetta's son, James, is a Naval Reserve intelligence officer just awarded the Bronze Star for his work locating al-Qaida targets in Afghanistan.

I commend the choice of Mr. Panetta for this role, and wish him great success. Ω

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Photo courtesy of Leon Panetta

Panetta is more familiar with the intelligence business than most [previous CIA directors].