



OPINION

‘Home Alone’

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If the world financial crisis is a war, then our Dwight Eisenhower – Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner is operating without an Omar Bradley, a Lawton Collins, a Matthew Ridgeway or a George Patton. Generals without effective subordinate commanders usually lose.

It's uncertain why, two months into the administration - and with economic policy its foremost priority - Geithner is the only Senate-confirmed policy official at Treasury. No fewer than four prospective appointees, two for the department's No. 2 job, have dropped their names from consideration. But it's widely assumed that those considered - and willing to take such vital jobs as deputy secretary and undersecretaries for domestic finance and for international affairs - somehow fell afoul of the Obama administration's unprecedentedly rigorous ethics clearance process, which includes a full audit of several years' past tax returns.

And the "home alone" syndrome is not confined to Treasury. Of 400-odd posts requiring Senate confirmation, nominations have been made for 68 and the Senate has processed 33. No top sub-cabinet jobs have been filled at the departments of Energy, Commerce, Interior or Health and Human Services. Administration officials argue, correctly, that its pace of nomination and confirmation is ahead of that of the past three new administrations, but it's still unacceptable, particularly in view of the expansive agenda President Barack Obama is advancing. Policy can get made by White House czars, but it can't be implemented without top agency officials.

Proposals to streamline the nomination and confirmation process have been made numerous times over the years.

There's agreement among experts on the issue - including Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, a Roll Call contributing writer, and Max Stier of the [Partnership for Public Service](#) - that reform should include paring down the number of officials needing Senate confirmation and consolidating the blizzard of forms that nominees need to fill out as part of the vetting and confirmation process.

Reform proposals usually come to naught because the Senate likes to have a ring around the necks of executive appointees - and because no one wants to seem to be easing back on ethical scrutiny.

Last week, Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander (Tenn.) proposed that a bipartisan "gang" be formed to help (or nudge) the committee of jurisdiction, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, toward reform this year.

Ornstein says that when he last proposed a reform push in 2007, the top Republican on the panel, Sen. Susan Collins (Maine), was enthusiastic, but Chairman Joe Lieberman (ID-Conn.) let the matter drop.

Alexander, who served as President George H.W. Bush's Education secretary and has been on both sides of the confirmation process, says that "Washington, D.C., has become the only place where you hire a lawyer, an accountant and an ethics officer before you find a house and put your kid in school."

To the extent that Obama wants to ensure that his nominees are untainted by unsavory associations with special interests - or by tax errors - Congressional action may not be effective. But Congress should make confirmation as smooth as it can be and stop discouraging worthy citizens from serving their country.