

Comments on the Vermont Adjutant General Selection Process
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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you my observations on the Adjutant General (AG) selection process, and to offer some suggestions for improvement.

I decided to run for AG because there were many serious problems at the Guard that needed to be addressed. While I obviously didn't get elected and won't have the opportunity to handle these issues, I did learn a lot about the Vermont's AG selection process. In fact, I had just started putting together some notes to share with you when Ron emailed and invited me to speak today. I've organized my talk into three processes, which I call the application process, the campaigning process, and the selection process.

First, the application process. I was shocked to find out that all that was needed to get on the ballot was to send an email saying I wanted to run for AG. I didn't have to provide any qualifications or even reasons why I wanted to be AG. This is out of whack for any regular job application. But for THIS job, the person selected would be responsible for the lives and well-being of thousands of Guard members, for helping the state in times of disasters, and for perhaps engaging in international conflicts and wars. And yet, there were no required qualifications to be considered for the position!

I would suggest two essential qualifications without which someone would not be allowed on the ballot, and one important qualification: 1. that the individual is, or has served, in an Army Guard or in the U.S. Army, or in an Air Guard or in the Air Force; and 2. that the individual has to be, or have been, a senior officer (Colonel or General). Satisfying these two essential criteria will limit your candidates and will better ensure you are getting experienced applicants.

First, having a senior officer from the Army or Air Force or Army or Air Guard will mean they know the military and have years of experience in military or Guard organizations. Second, a person holding the rank of Colonel or General will have demonstrated success and leadership because only the highest performers get selected to these ranks. But rank alone is not enough, because there are the occasional ineffective (or worse) senior officers. And this is where other credentials come into the process. Evaluating their civilian and military education and degrees, their volunteer work, civic involvement, awards and citations earned, publications, even their physical fitness, etc. In the Air Force, we called this the "whole person concept."

One other desirable qualification is whether the candidate had served in "joint" assignments. That means that they had been assigned to organizations that were composed of service members from multiple branches of the military. Having a candidate who has served alongside Army and Air service-members will give them an advantage in leading the Army and Air components of the VT Guard.

What I do not think important is whether a candidate has served in the Vermont Guard or even be a Vermonter. Just the opposite, I think it would be an advantage to have someone from another State Guard or from the active duty Army or Air Force. In the active duty military, people are transferred to other jobs and locations every few years. This brings fresh insights and experience, and reduces the chances of getting stuck in routines which may no longer work. The rank and file of the VT Guard provide the historical background and continuity.

Senior military leaders coming from other locations bring with them tools and techniques and insights from other places, along with knowledge of what's worked and what has not. Too often we get stuck thinking that our problems are unique, or we re-invent the wheel, or we think that the way we do things is the only way to do them. So, I urge you not to limit yourselves only to Vermonters or only to folks who have served in the VT Guard.

So, how do you find quality AG candidates? Establish a search committee like many civilian organizations who need to fill a CEO-type position. This committee, which could be a newly formed joint military committee of the VT House and Senate, perhaps with a few senior Guard members, could find, vet, evaluate, and recommend potential candidates. And, given the toxic culture of the Vermont Guard, I strongly urge you to actively look for senior female applicants for Vermont's next AG.

Next, the campaign process. The only public forum given to the candidates was a session before the members of the House and Senate military committees. While other legislators could have attended the joint committee meeting, most did not. Unlike some municipal elections, there was no public forum for the voters to learn about the candidates or to question them directly. When I ran for the South Burlington city council, we had debates and public forums for the voters to observe and to question us. Additionally, we were provided a list of pertinent questions to respond to in writing (these were published in the local paper), and we were given the opportunity to speak and debate the issues with the other candidates on public TV and field questions from callers. I would suggest a similar process be put in place for the selection of the AG.

The current informal, haphazard way that AG candidate "campaign" is uneven and disruptive at best, and discriminatory at worst. Right now candidates have to get to each of the 180 legislators individually in-between the legislator's other official duties. This process puts some candidates at a disadvantage. Some candidates may have personal or outside money financing their campaign efforts; others may not. Having the most money or big financial backers should definitely not be the deciding factor in selecting an AG. Some candidates may have job commitments that prevent them from campaigning. For example, in the past election, one of the candidates, Col Knight, was in this situation. He was still serving and was prohibited from campaigning the way the others were. Perhaps this is why some candidates started campaigning in 2018.

Providing written questions on pertinent matters and holding a few public forums in the State House, would give the legislators the opportunity to hear directly from the candidates and to question them in public. Guard members could suggest relevant and timely questions.

And, lastly, the selection process. Some claim that Vermont's process is problematic because it has legislators elect the AG. I don't think that is the problem. Actually, I think having all legislators involved in selecting a person who will be responsible for the lives of thousands of Guard members, the lives and well-being of Vermonters, and being part of our national defense is a wise idea. The lack of awareness of the issues, not having established criteria, and not having a established way of evaluating potential candidates are the problems. I think having the legislators elect Vermont's Adjutant General is a wise method. It allows many elected officials the opportunity to evaluate and decide, rather than having one individual, such as the Governor make a selection. In other states which select the AG this way, it sometimes becomes a personality contest or a reward for past personal or political favors.

I heard that some legislators were reluctant to vote on the AG because they didn't know enough about the military to make an informed decision. A Governor could be in the same situation, except that now there is only one potentially uninformed person. At least with multiple votes there is the chance that some of the voters will have educated themselves on the requirements, and on the credentials of the candidates. Frankly, I don't think inexperience with the military is a legitimate excuse to change the process. I think a Guard or other military member could give a "Military 101" class in an hour or less, which would be sufficient to provide the legislators with a basic understand of the organization. Just as with other issues which come up for a vote, legislators are expected to become informed before they vote. Why would selecting the right leader for the AG be an exception? The military is not a mysterious or overly-complicated organization. Personally, and I digress a bit here, I think some of the problems our country has with the military and the military budget comes from lack of awareness on the part of lawmakers. The size of our ever-increasing defense budget, and the life-and-death issues surrounding the use of military force demands that our lawmakers be as informed, if not more informed, on military matters as they are on civil issues. This includes Vermont's decision-makers.

And lastly, it seemed inappropriate and out of character for the AG to be elected by secret ballot. Since most other votes are public, this very important vote ought also be public.

Gen Knight has much on his plate as he takes over as Adjutant General. It's a big job with lots of serious issues: the treatment of women, retaliation against whistleblowers, alcohol abuse, the boys club atmosphere among the pilots, and more. But these problems are not isolated. How the Guard leadership addresses these problems will affect retention, recruitment, and its reputation. As good a guy as Gen Knight seems to be, he needs not only your support but also your oversight and scrutiny. Don't assume all is well. Make sure it is. A good commander and leader will welcome this. In the old arms control mantra: "trust but verify."

Thank you for this opportunity to present my thoughts and views.