

WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT

The Moody Series on Bipartisan Leadership

In Conjunction with
The Texas Presidential Libraries
and
In Collaboration With
Rice University's
Baker Institute for Public Policy

Funded by the Moody Foundation

September 23, 2016
National Security Forum
At the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum
Austin, Texas

SESSION 6: THE TRANSFER OF SECURITY WHILE IN THE MIDDLE OF POLITICS: THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Moderator: Paul D. Miller, Associate Director The Clements Center on Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin

Meghan O'Sullivan, Jeane Kirkpatrick Professor of the Practice of International Affairs and Director of the Geopolitics of Energy Project at Harvard University's Kennedy School, Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan

Peter Feaver, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Duke University, Special Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Reform on the National Security Council

Julianne Smith, Deputy National Security Advisor for Vice President Joseph Biden

Joshua Bolten, Chief of Staff, President George W. Bush

For conference video: <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/experts-news/events/national-security-transition/>

AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. PAUL MILLER: -- happy to be your moderator. I'm joined on the stage for this last panel with a group of illustrious, respected experts (inaudible).

I would like to introduce the panel.

Meghan O'Sullivan served in the Bush administration as the deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan. And, as befitting her title, she had a very spacious, stately office in the Eisenhower Building next door. And when I in-processed, it was actually Meghan's last day, she was out-processing. And somebody told me that I was going to get her office. And I was very excited. I thought, this is great, I must be very important. And I went up there and found they had carved it up into cubicles. So I got one-sixth of Meghan's office.

(Laughter.)

MR. MILLER: Peter Feaver of Duke University served on the NSC in the second Bush and first Clinton administrations.

And Julie Smith serves as -- served as the deputy National Security Advisor for Vice President Biden. I have no (inaudible).

And Josh Bolten, among his many accomplishments is not being John Bolton.

(Laughter.)

MR. MILLER: He has been bedeviled by stories for decades, but Josh Bolten has never served as the permanent representative to the United Nations (inaudible). Josh Bolten, of course, served as chief of staff to President Bush.

So we're here to talk about the transition for the National Security Council. And Meghan, I'll give the floor to you first.

MS. O'SULLIVAN: Great. Thanks very much, Paul.

And -- not sure if my mic is on. Okay.

And it's a pleasure to be here and it's a pleasure to be on this last panel and with some very excellent colleagues of mine.

Before I went into government, if someone had said to me that I was a great bureaucrat or a process maven, I would have thought it was some kind of veiled insult. But after quite a few years in government, I have come to appreciate that it's quite the opposite and I would welcome those superlatives. Because I certainly learned that a good process doesn't guarantee a good outcome in foreign policy. But a bad process certainly invites failure.

And so a lot of what I imagine we will be talking about during this panel is the process by which the new president will come in and set up his or her National Security Council and the relationships among people and the relationships between that entity and agencies.

I would like to just briefly talk about three separate things, just a few things about NSC process, a little bit about a transition of NSC at a time of conflict -- as Paul mentioned, I work on Iraq and Afghanistan, so I thought a lot about the NSC transitioning during this time where you do have Americans in combat situations, both in Iraq and Syria. And then I will just say a few words about what I think the outgoing administration or the outgoing NSC can do for the incoming NSC, and I'll be very brief.

On the NSC process, I think we've heard a lot of great things today and there are many things I could say which are not controversial. But instead, I am going to reach for a couple of things that I think might be subject to debate. And to put it in a greater context, or

a sharper context, I just want to mention a few things that I felt were very critical in the Bush White House that helped produce a positive -- what I viewed and I think a number of people view as a positive outcome around the Iraq policy strategy that led to the surge.

So the first two things I would say is that under the Bush NSC, one thing that I found incredibly important and valuable was that there was a separation between debate over policy and domestic politics. I don't think in the many years that I was there, I don't think I ever saw Karl Rove in any meeting that I was in, or anyone from his shop. I think that's fair to say. And it's certainly not that conversations about politics, domestic politics surrounding Iraq, I'm sure, I know they happened. But they were just separate from the debate about the strategy.

And our guidance, the people on the policy side of the house, our guidance was very clearly to try to identify a strategy that would change the dynamics in Iraq, which were very bad at the time. And it didn't have anything to do about what's politically feasible; give us a strategy that's politically feasible.

The second thing I would say is quite related to that. And that has to do with the fact that under that NSC and those kind of strategy discussions, they were not constrained, at least from the outset, with resource constraints. So what I mean by that, when we think about the surge, obviously the surge had a lot to do about resources, it had a lot to do about troops. And, of course, this was part of the conversation.

But again, the guidance that the policy people were given wasn't, look for a better strategy that doesn't require more troops or that can be accomplished in two years. There were no caveats having to do with resources. That came, I think, at a separate point in the process.

And I found those two things incredibly valuable to get the outcome that we got. That if either there had been constraints around resources identified at the start, which I had seen in some instances, or there had been domestic politics in the room, that we would have never gotten to the place where we got to.

And then thirdly, I would say, just Steve Hadley as the National Security Advisor, I think most of you saw him earlier today, and he did just a really fabulous job. Not only is he a great human being, but in fact he was fantastic in doing exactly what needed to be done at that point. He was interested in not just getting the right strategy, but he was interested in coming to that strategy in a way that those who would have to implement it were on board. And that took a certain kind of character, a relentless character, but one that was very quiet and unassuming in its relentlessness.

Secondly, NSC at a time of transition and conflict. And again, drawing on my experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, very quickly I would just say that here I would say the NSC is absolutely pivotal. Sometimes we hear talk about the importance of maybe delegating to lead agencies, State, DOD, maybe even Treasury to be the lead on certain policies. And there are occasions where that makes a lot of sense.

But as I think Josh mentioned earlier today, that certainly in times of conflict or war, when you have a lot of coordination to be done, and we all know that today's conflicts cannot be solved with just diplomacy or just military force or just economic assistance, when all that coordination needs to be done, I do think there is a special role for the NSC.

And that leads to my second point about transition of the NSC at such

moments of conflict. And I would say that holdovers, there's even a better case to have holdovers in the NSC during these kinds of transitions. And I don't know if this concept has come up yet so far, but just as the idea of keeping people who worked in the previous administration to work at least for a while in the next administration.

And actually under the Bush to Obama administration, I can't speak for all the directorates, but the Iraq and Afghan directorates, they had -- almost everyone in that office was held over to my knowledge. Which really, I think, played an important role in helping President Obama make some wise choices at the very beginning about his Iraq policy. It wasn't even just the more junior people, it was also some of the more senior people who were held over.

Just wrapping up, what can an outgoing administration do for the incoming administration? There was a good exchange between Josh and Kristen [Silverberg] earlier about when it's appropriate to ask the outgoing administration not to do something. I think there is a flip side of that coin, and that is sometimes it's a good idea for the outgoing administration to take hard -- to tackle hard issues, to take difficult things off the table when possible for the incoming administration.

The most dramatic example I have again comes from the Iraq era. And during the transition from Bush to President Obama, what happened then was the negotiation of a Status of Forces Agreement [SOFA] with Iraq. And this actually took a very big headache off of President Obama's plate at the very beginning. The Iraqis wanted a different legal arrangement for the U.S. forces that were based in Iraq, they didn't want to rely on a U.N. mandate. This was going to be something that was going to be on President Obama's desk the first day he stepped into office. The negotiation of a SOFA before he came into office but actually it culminated after his election at least gave him some breathing room.

Secondly, I would say a good thing that an outgoing administration can do at a time of conflict is to present the new administration with a strategic review. And Steve Hadley might have mentioned that he did this with Afghanistan. That there was an internal review done on Afghanistan presented to the incoming Obama administration, not executed by the Bush administration but offered as, here is what we would do if we were going to be in office longer. You know, we encourage you to take what of it is meaningful to you.

I think the most important part of any such strategic review would be to identify like what are the assumptions that we had built our strategy on, and how had those assumptions evolved over time? When did assumptions prove correct, when did they prove wrong? Because I think that is something that is a really useful mind set to get from the beginning.

And then lastly, and this sounds very trite, but I would say an outgoing administration, if they can explicitly share lessons learned, there's got to be some real value in that. I can completely appreciate that there might be some political nervousness about an outgoing administration saying, hey, here are 10 things we got wrong or 10 things we wish we had done otherwise. But if it could be done, if it became a common practice, I think it could be valuable.

And the thing that really makes me say this is it is pretty stunning, I think, to people who worked on Iraq under President Bush to hear so many senior members of the Obama administration, including the President himself, say that the biggest lesson learned in

foreign policy was around Qaddafi's removal and Libya. And that the big lesson was that if you remove a regime and you don't put anything in its place, it leads to a major situation of destabilization. That was the number one lesson of Iraq.

And if somehow we could have helped the following administration not have to relearn that, or not have to learn that in another context, that would have been a huge advantage for our country and for others.

I'll stop there.

MR. FEATHER: Well, it's still a privilege to be speaking to you. I think the privilege may be wearing on you all.

(Laughter.)

MR. FEATHER: I point out, I started the morning conversing with one of my bosses and I am now ending the day on a stage with an even higher level boss, and I have the strong urge to go collect coffee. The only thing that's stopping me is (inaudible).

(Laughter.)

MR. FEATHER: I would make four points about the NSC and the interagency process. The first one is that the conventional wisdom that is out there and you've heard I think today and yesterday is that the NSC is too large and that the Scowcroft model is the ideal for the future. I think the conventional wisdom is half right and half wrong.

They're right that the current NSC is too large. I happen to know that Susan Rice agrees with me, because she cut back on the size of the NSC. So, I mean, there was a general sense that it had gotten too large. But I do not think the Scowcroft size is a realistic template for 2017. The current NSC has to cover a range of issues, including homeland security. That's a big chunk of the personnel at the White House, that would just mean that the Scowcroft size is too large. Some of the principles and modus operandi of the Scowcroft model still works, but the size is a mistake to focus on that. Don't try to get down to 50 if you are the incoming president. Maybe less than the 400-plus it is now, but not down to 50. That's the first point.

The second point is just a friendly footnote to Philip's [Zelikow] excellent point today about teams. You are picking teams. It is a team of individuals. And it's crucial not just the individuals and their personalities and how they work together, which was the point that Philip made, and it's a good one. But it's also where they are in the organization chart and thus what their responsibilities and lanes are. And then how that intersects with their personalities.

I have this little counterfactual riff I do with my students that says, the first term of the Bush administration would have gone very differently if Dan Coats had performed better in his interview for Department of Defense. Why? Because he was supposed to be Secretary of Defense. If he had been secretary, then his deputy would have been Armitage [Richard], which would have created the natural spot in State for Paul Wolfowitz, where he naturally fit, and also the right position for Rumsfeld of DCI, the Director of Central Intelligence, which is where Don Rumsfeld was most focused at the time.

Same team, same players, different roles. And I think the first term would have gone differently. That's my -- that's the argument I sustain for two hours in a student seminar. And I'm looking for Josh's pushback on that.

Third point. Be wary about critiques about interagency dysfunction. I have

what I call Feaver's Iron Law of Interagency Dysfunction. Any interagency process that persists over time that you deem dysfunctional is functional for someone more powerful than you in the interagency. This is especially true for dysfunctions that can be traced back to the National Security Council, the National Security Council staff. Because the National Security Council staff is the institution that most closely reflects the imprint of the President, the President's personality, style of operation, the President's vision. And so if the NSC staff is doing something over time, consistently, then the bet is that's probably what the President wants them to do.

That's not to say that there aren't mistakes. But on average, the further away you go from the President, the more likely you can have bureaucratic activity that is not what the President would do. And the closer you get to the President, the harder it is to sustain over time behavior that the President really, truly does not want. It may not be working, it may not be producing results that the President wants, but the behavior itself probably is what the President wants.

Which means if you want to change the functioning of the NSC staff, then you have to change the way the President operates. Very hard to do. Or you have to change the President.

Which leads me to my fourth and final point. Playing my little hypothetical about the two next presidents, one of two choices. What do we know about the two people who are coming in to the -- one of them is going to be President of the United States. What do you know about their style of governing and their personality? What is likely to be the kind of White House role that they will want to have?

So take Secretary Clinton. In a Clinton administration, do you think that the White House will delegate more authority down than in the Obama administration? I would bet that Secretary Clinton will have -- a President Clinton will have a very White House centric national security apparatus. And we may be talking about the glory days of the Obama administration when so much was delegated down in comparison. Maybe it's not going to be that extreme, but I think that there's a chance, or it's likely, I should say, that President Clinton's administration would be at least as White House centric as President Obama's has been.

What about a President Trump? This is harder to predict. My best guess is that it will be a two-zone kind of process. There will be zone one, which is the operations on issues that President Trump is most invested in, which will be a fairly smaller set than maybe previous presidents have chosen. But in zone one, this will be extremely White House centric. Based on how he has run the campaign, it appears that he relies on a very small group of inner circle, a kitchen cabinet. He approaches things by kitchen cabinet. And so even the White House may not matter as much in a Trump administration on these zone one issues, it will be the West Wing.

But on zone two, the -- I think this -- President Trump would likely have a larger number of issues that he is not as invested in, not as hands on with. And for that, those, it will be much more delegated, pushed down into the departments and agencies, the permanent civil service, on many, many more of those issues. And so you will have this bifurcation of process, I predict.

In zone two, just flag one challenge. Those issues work fine until they become

a matter of presidential concern, at which point, regardless of the president, but even in a Trump presidency, they will be pulled up into zone one. So the effectiveness of zone two processes depends in part on their ability to predict what would happen if the President really was interested in this issue and was in the room working it.

And in a healthy administration, you can do that well. You can spread the President's vision down into the far reaches of the bureaucracy. This is one of the functions of those national security strategy documents and QDRs [Quadrennial Defense Review carried out by the Department of Defense]. They are a vision casting that are read and explain what the thinking of the administration is down to the lower levels.

In a Trump administration, it might be more unpredictable. He prizes unpredictability and talks about ways that it might help in international negotiations. I think that unpredictability will make it harder for his administration to operate on issues they don't - where he hasn't spoken, because they won't know what he would do if he does choose to speak on it. And so that, I predict, will be one of the process challenges if there's a Trump administration.

And I'll stop there.

MS. JULIE SMITH: Great. Well, thanks to the organizers for including a session on how, how to govern and looking at process and structure. And I know this has been a part of the two days, and feel like a lot of events looking at 2017 are focused on the what, what to do about ISIL and China and Russia and all of the rest. So it's fun to do this, and I am grateful that everyone who is here has decided to stick around to listen to us talk a little bit about this aspect of governance, because it's important.

And I think as I noted in the last session, the world has changed in really dramatic ways since the National Security Council was created in the late 1940s. And we've covered all of that, it sounds like, in other sessions. And on top of the way in which the world has changed, I think America's place in that world has changed as well. And it's more challenging in some ways to shape outcomes, so there's a lot of complexity there.

And I think despite all of that complexity, either about the external world or how social media impacts the pressure for policy makers to respond, we're still largely using a national security system and structure that is more or less the same as it was many, many decades ago. We are dealing with a series of directorates based primarily on regions and functional areas. Now, the directorates have changed, they've evolved. We've added directorates as Peter noted, because we have new challenges like cyber and all of these new areas where we feel like we need a designated office focused on issue X. And obviously, we've had growth, and that's been well documented.

But I think despite that, despite that we now have a larger National Security Council, and some change -- every president comes in with a different command climate and a different set of policy priorities, we are still relying on a pretty static set of processes and structures.

And so I think it is worth stepping back. Because the only shot you have at changing it comes at the beginning of an administration.

To her credit, Susan Rice has tried to counter this trend and fact about the difficulties of altering structure, and she came in late in Obama's tenure and still tried to instigate some reforms inside the National Security Council, but it's very, very difficult. And

we can go through some of the things she's done, which I think she's on the right track.

But I think really the next president has to step back and think about some of the broader questions. And for me, it really fundamentally comes down to three questions. What is the mission of the National Security Council? The mission of the National Security Council has evolved and changed and grown in a number of unexpected ways. It was initially designed to drive decisions and ensure that those decisions were implemented. Now you find cases where you do need, as Meghan noted, for different reasons, a White House lead on a particular issue where the decision-making process merits someone at the White House really pulling the levers on something that is of the utmost importance to the President. And particularly if it involves the use of force.

And then you also have cases where the White House, this one in particular, feels the need to get more engaged in policy formulation and also ensuring the decisions are implemented. But really reaching down to ensure that happens in ways that has created tremendous friction with the other agencies, which of course has been all very well documented in a number of books by some of the members of Obama's Cabinet.

And so I think what's happened over time is we've seen this evolving mission set. But even though the staff has grown and we've added a few directorates, it cannot cope with that evolving mission set. And you have a situation where the staff feels overwhelmed, they're trying to do it all, they're trying to staff up, staff the Vice President, the National Security Advisor, the President himself. And simultaneously managing a bunch outward in their interagency.

Now, some of that just comes with the territory. But I think we've seen many cases where the White House is frustrated with an agency -- either it's going too far off mission from what the President wants, or it's just under delivering and not moving fast enough. And the White House feels that it needs to reach in and take over, instead of really dealing with the heart of the problem.

And so for me, I think you have to have the next president come in and really think about how does he or she see the fundamental mission set for the National Security Council? What is it that you want that team to be doing? Obviously, in many cases, they have to wear many hats. But where is it and what cases can that staff push decisions down and out to the interagency and hand off some of those mission sets where appropriate? And again, there will be cases where you are going to want a White House lead, depending on what the issue in question is.

From there, the second question is what kind of structure do you need built around that mission set? So that's a whole array of questions about process and structure. How many deputy National Security Advisors do you think you need? How many special assistants? I heard earlier about the counting, the tabulation and how we've grown some of those titles, and there has been a proliferation of people at the top level.

So thinking through, do you want, for example, to have a directorate on all of those functional areas in every single region? Could you instead think about some cross-cutting directorates? Can you bring together directorates to work on a common mission set? Why are we continuing to stovepipe so many of these issues that then just creates enormous friction about who's in charge? Because so much of our work today is cross-cutting.

So thinking about how many DCs [Deputies Committee] do you want to have?

Susan, to her credit, Susan Rice has done a lot to try and push down decisions and say we don't need a DC on that; we're bringing up these very small tactical decisions to principals and frankly wasting their time and detracting from their ability to do their day job back at their home agency.

But there are broader questions about personnel, the number of detailees that you bring in from State and DoD. They are largely the staff that supports the few people that are commissioned by the President. So there's a lot of process and structure that you have to look at, but you've got to start with the mission.

And then the last question for me, as I noted earlier, is how do you build in strategic pauses? You're running, all of us know, those in the audience, those of us up here on the panel, how hard it is to lift your head up from the crisis of that hour. You don't get too many opportunities to "red team" U.S. assumptions, to look back and figure out where you got it wrong, to do an assessment of that strategy document you helped craft two years ago and figure out how the world has changed. Those opportunities do not come around that often. And the poor souls that are tasked with doing that simply can't get the attention of the principals to focus on those longer term questions and trend questions.

So I think, thinking in advance about what you're going to do, what kind of command climate will you have as a president and as, say, a National Security Advisor to ensure that the staff knows that you value that, you support it, you'll make time for it. Yes, there will be weeks where you just can't do it and you're going to have to push some stuff aside. But you've got to ensure that there is a designated team always pushing back, saying we do need to step back and look at our Syria policy four years later. What did we get wrong? What assumptions did we have earlier on? What's changed about the situation? And trying to build in either staff or processes that will help you do that is absolutely critical.

So again, I don't want to be too naive about the difficulties of working in the National Security Council. It is a messy place to work. The stress is high, the hours are long. That's not going to change. You're going to continue to feel like a chicken with its head cut off, running from one DC [Deputies Committee] to the next or PC [Principals Committee]. And struggling each and every day to maintain strategic attention.

But if you make some small structural changes in advance, and come in with the right command climate, with personalities that can deliver on it for you, I think you can make changes on the margins that will make your policy priorities much more easier to realize than if you just come in and say we're going to use the exact same structure, we'll put a little emphasis here and there and make no changes whatsoever.

So I do think while we in Washington love to debate the actual policy, we have to ensure that we're also spending some time looking at process as well.

MR. JOSHUA BOLTEN: Thanks for having me back. Although I suspect a fair amount of the audience was hoping that John Bolton would be here.

(Laughter.)

MR. BOLTEN: Just a few reflections on lessons learned and things to emulate and not emulate from my experience with the Bush administration, where we did pay a fair amount of attention to structure and process. And the first one was that we established as a principle early on that every issue that requires White House attention should have a home, but only one home, so that there's not the effort to get to the President through

various different channels and so on.

It's less of a problem in the national security area, because the NSC is a well-established and congenial home for decision making. But President Bush was able to spread the culture that Andy Card tried to establish, which was the Chief of Staff's office gets to decide which entity in the White House has responsibility for an issue, and that is the entity if anybody's got a problem in that issue through which you go even to the President if you want to have input on that issue.

President Bush put the burden on the homeowner of that issue to make sure that everybody else in the process was fairly treated. But I think we avoided a lot of turf consciousness. Certainly outside the national security area. And I think, to a large degree inside the national security area, by just having that ethos from the beginning.

The second and related lesson learned was that President Bush was ruthless in outing people who tried to go around the process or slip in (inaudible). And more than a few times, I'd be sitting in a meeting with him in the Oval Office and he'd have a couple of Cabinet officers there. And before the subject of the meeting got under way, he'd say, Condi, did you know that Don Rumsfeld was trying to go around you --

(Laughter.)

MR. BOLTEN: -- on this issue? And he did it in a light way, you know. Clearly, daggers then exchanged between Condi and Rumsfeld. But he did it in a light way, but in a way to suggest to everybody that he didn't care much about the process. In other words, he thought it was beneath him, and everybody else should do the process decision making that the President shouldn't have to worry about. But that he expected people to follow the process. And he persistently outed people in front of the people whose prerogatives they had violated with those misbehaviors in that regard.

Second, something to emulate for the Cabinet of a new president is, and also related to this point, is something that Condi Rice did. Which is when she became Secretary of State, having spent the first four years of the administration visiting with the President first thing in the morning and having sort of that quality time which was reserved for the Chief of Staff and the National Security Advisor, started at roughly 6:45 every morning when George W. Bush would get to his desk. He had already been up for 90 minutes, but he would wait until the reasonable hour of 6:45 to wander down to the Oval Office. And our tradition was the Chief of Staff would wander in and chat with him for a few minutes and then the National Security Advisor would wander in. The Chief of Staff would stay until it was time to go run the senior staff meeting.

That was great time with the President. He would be signing documents and things and catching up on the overnight news. And it was never scheduled with anything.

And Condi Rice most days, at least two or three times a week and sometimes five days, six days a week, the President would just get a phone call from Condi Rice at five minutes after 7:00, 10 minutes after 7:00 after she had known that the Chief of Staff had had the time that he needed and that the National Security Advisor was in the room. And she would (inaudible). And she always had a couple of things on her mind. And the President would keep signing documents and listen to her. But they had that channel of communication.

And I would say Cabinet officers who could get away with that, emulate that.

And Bush took really good advantage of that relationship, because it kept him up to date, it kept him in sync with his Secretary of State. But Condi also knew that anything she told him, he would repeat to Cheney or Rumsfeld or whoever else she might be trying to slip past. So it wasn't an occasion to undermine the system, it was just an occasion for her to get her licks in properly.

I like Peter's (inaudible) about the importance of personnel. I think every president learns this at some point early on in their tenure. But the decisions they make in those 73 days between election and inauguration -- and in our case, it was like 38 days or something like that -- but the decisions that the President-elect makes on who is going to fill the key roles are among the most consequential decisions that they will make during their entire presidencies.

A lot of people think that the dialectic of history and just the burden of events and so on makes it only marginally important who the players are. But I think, Peter, your thought exercise suggests that actual outcomes could have been quite substantially different, were different personnel in different seats. I don't want to take a view on better or worse, but certainly highly consequential.

And the President-elect should think about not just about who is best in any particular position, but especially in the national security area should think about how does that work as a team. Do they balance each other off ideologically? Are they going to be able to communicate with each other and get along? Are they going to be, as a group, be able to collectively give me the kind of advice I need? And so that's a complicated matrix for a president to think about. But I think in the 73 days, there's relatively little more important for the President to think about.

And finally, I like Meghan's point about keep politics out of national security. I thought -- I think that's a great and relatively little-noticed virtue of the Bush administration, that every subsequent president should emulate.

Meghan, I'm assuming you didn't know this, but the reason you never saw Karl Rove in a national security meeting was that the President told Karl Rove, you may never come to a National Security Council meeting.

So you did know that?

MS. O'SULLIVAN: Well, I learned that later.

MR. BOLTEN: We didn't advertise that, but the President made that clear right at the beginning. If it's an NSC meeting, you may not appear. And it wasn't because he didn't respect Karl's advice or didn't value his input. He valued it enormously, and Karl is one of the -- one of the brightest and most eclectically informed and bright individuals I've ever known, who could have substantially useful input on almost any issue.

But the President also knew that the signal he wanted to send to the rest of his administration, the signal he wanted to send to the public, and the signal he especially wanted to send to the military is that the decisions I'm making that involve life and death for the people in uniform will not be tainted by any political decisions. And I think we ended with the approval ratings to prove it.

(Laughter.)

MR. PAUL MILLER: Thank you all for your comments. I would like to piggyback on just one thing that Meghan said, and I have one question in mind and then I will

hand it over to those of you who are here.

Meghan talked about a continuity of the staff of the NSC staff, that President Obama carried over select NSC staffers on Iraq and Afghanistan. He did indeed do that, I'm one of them. I worked for President Bush and then I was asked to stay on in the Obama administration. And I believe that happened largely because of the personal relationship between the incoming National Security Advisor, General James Jones, and General Doug Lute.

And I think it's regrettable that such a good decision depended upon a personal relationship. I would love for this idea, the continuity of staff in wartime, to be normal. This should actually be an expected thing for when a president, a new Commander-in-Chief is inheriting a shooting war, to have continuity of staff for those areas of the world where our troops are in combat.

So yes, it did happen. I give a lot of credit to President Obama for doing that. It took some, I think, some political courage for him to keep on not only Secretary Gates and General Lute, but also the staff. And I would love to see the next president do the same thing, since we still have troops in combat overseas.

I would like to ask a question about the structuring process of the NSC. Julie, you brought this up. You talked about what is the mission of the NSC.

We've heard complaints over the last two days really about the interagency process. It could be improved. It used to be, prior to the H. W. Bush administration, that each new incoming administration would rewrite the first -- Presidential Decision Directive Number One. It would change the NSC process, it would change the boxes on the NSC staff chart. And that largely stopped once Scowcroft kind of put it down on paper once and for all. And each new administration for the past 25 years has simply copied and pasted and reissued the same PD One [Presidential Directive One]. But if we all have agreed or if we have heard so many people say that the interagency process doesn't work very well and the structure is now quite old, it may need some refreshing and a new -- a transition is an ideal time to do that, to think about how the NSC structure, process and mission might change.

So my question to all of you is this, if you were to rewrite the PD One, what would you say? How would you redesign the interagency process, the NSC staff and the interagency committee structure?

(Inaudible.)

MS. SMITH: So I like that idea. And I think there are folks around Washington playing with that and trying to think of what it could look like. But, you know, there's only so much you can do with that.

I think one of the themes that's come out of this discussion is personalities really matter. And kind of the tone and the style that they set and the people they select for those high -- the very highest leadership positions, all of that will have in many ways a greater impact than another PDB. I mean, I think -- I'd like to go through the exercise and I've played with ideas myself, like what I would actually write down on paper. And a couple of us have been brainstorming on this, just trying to think what it would look like.

But again, it really fundamentally comes down to what is conveyed by the President him or herself. And what kind of -- I mean, just like you were talking about, indicating to Karl Rove, you are simply not welcome in the Sit Room. There's one example,

right? And the next person could come in and say, I'm not going to have so many czars or special envoys or super coordinators or special coordinators. Or maybe they're going to have more of them, I don't know.

But trying to determine up front what the pace of the work, the structure of the work, the hierarchy, thinking through all that in advance and then relaying it to the people that are going to be working for you is almost more important in my mind. But I do think the pace of the meetings really gets at part of -- the main part of the problem.

I mean, I know the size has become a big subject of discussion for many. And I do think it's gotten a little too big. I also think it can be overstated, given everything that's counted in that 400 number and the merger that's taken place, and the Sit Room is in there. And so I think the debate of 50 versus 400, it's not as useful as I think some believe it is.

I think what's more important is, what are you going to tell your staff about how you are going to preserve that space. It really comes back to your talk earlier. What's presidential and what's not, and how can you ensure that everyone from a Cabinet level position all the way down through the interagency [process] understands that they can, in certain spaces, make decisions, say, at the NPC level, which is so important and really hasn't been happening enough in my mind. And instead, we're lifting everything up and then forcing people to spend six to eight hours of their day in the Situation Room, when they've got plenty to do back at their home agency.

MR. FEATHER: So one of my other sayings of interagency reform is, whom the gods would destroy, they first seek to do a Goldwater-Nichols [Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1968] interagency --

(Laughter.)

MR. FEATHER: And so I'm leery of massive change at the interagency level of a Goldwater-Nichols style. But I do think you can improve things dramatically. And on my checklist would be this. I would seek to create a personnel float in all of the departments that are not DOD.

One of DOD's great assets, particularly in the military, is that you have a 3 percent, somewhere around there, float. Which means that at any given time, a fraction of the force is free to go for education, continuing education, or assignments outside of the building. And the other departments and agencies in the national security space don't have that and would benefit from it.

I'd also give more money to State Department to upgrade their computers, so that they can talk to the computers at the White House and that the intel community uses. It will be shocking --

VOICE: Or they could just set up their own.

(Laughter.)

MR. FEATHER: I'll let Julie respond to that.

But a lot of this business could be conducted over computer, but can't be because their computers do not talk to each other.

I would, if I were on the NSC giving instructions, I would create training programs, training modules. The (inaudible) module I mentioned before that every NSC director would have to take. I would also set a rule that says if you're on the NSC staff, you have to spend two days a month out of the building in one of the departments and agencies

on not just socializing but familiarizing yourself with the rest of -- there's this very scary feeling, if you're the NSC staff, your nightmare is that something will happen while you're gone and then you won't be able to get back in and you'll miss the --

VOICE: Fear of missing out.

MR. FEATHER: The fear of -- FOMO [fear of missing out] is the biggest -- it's real. One of our dear friends who had a trip to France planned during one of the Lebanon Hezbollah war missed out and he would call me from a pay phone and say, what's happening, what's happening? And I couldn't tell him, of course. But he was missing out.

VOICE: You said, Will, get off the phone.

MR. FEATHER: But there's a great advantage when you go out, because you then understand the insight that having a very large staff, which if you're in the NSC you laugh when you're criticized for being on a large staff, because you're nothing compared to the people you're interacting with.

But you go to their office and you realize, wow, a large staff actually slows them down. That's why they're late for their deliverable on the paper, because they have a large staff and that's slowing them down. You learn things when you leave the building.

And so I think there's things that could make the current system work better. And these things is where I would invest my capital, as opposed to a fundamental reorganization of the interagency.

MS. O'SULLIVAN: Lots of good recommendations, so I won't repeat them, except to maybe emphasize one thing that Julie said. If I were taking a pen to the interagency process, the structure of the NSC's PCs, DCs and whatever we call them next year is not the thing that I would change, either. I think that it's actually survived because that isn't really what I saw as the thing that did not work most effectively.

I would, and this is building on what Julie said. I would think really seriously about how often those meetings take place. So my directorate was for Iraq and Afghanistan and there were -- maybe there were two years, maybe it seemed like two years, maybe it was -- who knows. It was a long period of time where my office was in charge of two NSCs, two PCs, two DCs and two steering groups a week. And I think we were maybe me, six directors. And we're -- just the paperwork for that, the sheer paperwork for that was enormous. And then you think about the time that people spend in their room on those issues.

And so I think -- you know, these were critical issues at a critical time, so obviously we were going to meet more than perhaps other issues. But I do think like having some kind of rhythm that is only violated with intention rather than kind of the cascade of well there's always something to discuss would be useful.

One other thing that didn't come up, which I am surprised hasn't come up yet -- at least I haven't heard it today -- is this idea of getting more involved around the strategic planning into the NSC. I know this is something that Peter and Wil worked very hard at. And one thing again from afar that I've seen that the Obama administration has done well is using outside commissions to do some long-run thinking. And I'm thinking in particular about something called PCAST, which is the Presidential Commission on Science and Technology. Some of my colleagues from Harvard sit on that.

And that's a very small group that actually meets with the President, that actually takes on really serious issues of some long-run consequence. And so, in some ways,

maybe if we can't get NSC staffers to sit down and think about, five years hence, that you can use some of these commissions less to, you know, put people in place that you'd like to be able to pick up the phone and call every once in a while and more to give them real work to do. And I'm sure many people would be happy to do it.

MR. MILLER: Thank you. All right, I'd like to open it up to the audience. And especially to reward any students who have made it this long, any who would like to ask some questions.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Quick observation. I'm wounded, because as the drafter of NSPD One in January 2001 --

(Laughter.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: -- I promise you it was not a cut-and-paste job. And actually, that particular document involved two really quite serious disagreements involving the Vice President. No need to get into the details about them, but they were really important and not (inaudible). And then there was another matter that significantly changed the role of the Department of the Treasury. So there were many, many little matters. But they're just not a cut and paste job.

My main question though really is directed mainly to Josh, but I am really keying a little bit off something Meghan said.

The thing that you have Josh, is now I want you to think about national security but also the domestic side. I'm actually struck because I've done a little work on the domestic side, we did a little work on election reform in '01 and '02. On the -- that the way decisions are made and staffed on the domestic side is not a facsimile of the way decisions are made and staffed on the foreign policy side. And I'm not sure it's because of some dramatic qualitative difference in the nature of policy staff. There's something going on and it relates to Meghan's point.

The hypothesis actually, in my experience, is the quality of policy staff work has been steadily declining over a number of years on the national security side, written policy staff work, and that meetings are frequently used as a surrogate for increasingly poor written staff work. And I was asking myself, is there a correlation between the quantity of meetings and the quality of output? In fact, I believe it is a negative correlation.

I believe in the two years you mentioned, that's a negative correlation. Actually in the period in which the policy has turned around, the turnaround is not marked strikingly by way more meetings. There was however some fairly significant written staff work and then some fairly focused meetings. The first sets of meetings were pretty inconclusive.

And then some of biggest initiatives, for instance on India and Iran, which we made during the second term of the administration, actually were not notably accompanied by many meetings at all. But because oftentimes meetings are enemies of thought. I mean, the time you're spending going to meetings, returning from the meetings, attending the meetings is time you're not spending sitting down and either reading or rewriting paperwork that actually tees up and focuses the issues.

And so partly I'm asking, reflect a little bit on the contrast between the way policy staff work was being done on the foreign policy side that you witnessed and the way it was done on really (inaudible) domestic issues, including crossover subjects like PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] or even subjects like health care and so on.

Because it seems strikingly different to me. And on the other side there was often some very high quality work being done.

MR. BOLTEN: Can you repeat the question?

(Laughter.)

MR. BOLTEN: Philip asks a really good and interesting question. And I -- I don't know the answer, but I suspect -- and my guess is that there are several layers of response but that the most accurate responses are in the neighborhood you talked about. Which was only when I sat as Chief of Staff did I really have visibility over what all the operations were doing and how the policy work came forward.

And I think the NSC was frustrated by having too elaborate a structure that did exactly what Meghan was talking about, which is I was stunned at the number of meetings they held and the lack of decisiveness that that created because it was always possible for stuff to go through the first level, second level, third level, and then the senior people can't really agree, so they decide to send it back for more work, and then it goes back down and it bounces back up.

And there were very tough issues on which any -- even the finest senior public servants would have trouble agreeing. But still the structure, I think, creates an unnecessary obstruction and an unnecessary crutch as to decision makers.

The domestic policy staff, the National Economic Council staff, which were the two other major policy entities in the White House, in the time I served there were blessed with having staffs about a tenth as large as the National Security Council staff. So they couldn't do all that stuff. They had to rely on the agencies for their work. And then it would rise up to a pretty senior level. And the senior -- the senior -- the senior folks would have to sit in a room and largely trust the work that was done by the Treasury Department or the Energy Department or the EPA and reach some decision or accommodation or recommendation to the President without having had the -- their own staffs really fully prepare them in the way that you would like to be. But which ultimately, I think, could be an enemy of good decision making.

Now, that said, the issues that rise up through the NSC are typically much more consequential, usually more difficult and in volume much larger than the other policy councils have to deal with. But I think that goes back to the point we were talking earlier about the sort. I think the White House can be effective, the President's national security apparatus, to be effective, has to push as many issues as they possibly can back out to the agencies, to Defense and State and intelligence agencies and so on to resolve on their own, to deal with on their own, and focus on the big presidential decision making that's so consequential to the country.

Have a satisfied you with that answer?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's a good start to the conversation.

(Laughter.)

MR. BOLTEN: Yeah, I had a feeling.

Philip is now wishing that John Bolton had been here.

(Laughter.)

MR. MILLER: Any other questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My name is Seth. I am from the University of

Texas at El Paso.

There's been some conversation about the strengths and limitations of different backgrounds, professionally, within the intelligence community, military and diplomatic community. I was wondering what ratio you would like to see for the next administration, or if there needs to be a change in ratio with the National Security Council?

MR. FEATHER: So I will take a first crack at that. That the vast majority of the NSC staff are detailees; that is, they are permanent employees of the State Department, intelligence community, DOD and military and Treasury. And they spend one, two years at the NSC.

One of the problems that could be fixed, and next on my list, would be protecting their careers when they go back to the departments and agencies, so that service at the White House is career enhancing rather than career negating. The absolute top, top people -- and you have heard some of them here today, Philip Zelikow, Ambassador Negroonte, Nick Burns, who has been mentioned a number of times, along the way, spent time at the NSC and they went back and their careers did not suffer. But [for] many more, their careers suffered. And that's a problem. Of course, you want the best quality coming in.

You need, though, some to be political appointees. That is, people who are there because their vision matches the President's more fully. They're there serving at the pleasure of the President and they're there to help push the President's vision through the rest of the interagency. Steve Hadley mentioned this before. If you don't have NSC staffers pushing that, then it's not going to get pushed.

And so I'm one of those who views the system of political appointees as a positive, not a negative. How far down it needs to go into the departments and agencies is another matter. And I'm prepared to learn that it's gone down too low. Although I suspect the folks at the lowest levels are political appointees but they're not in positions of great responsibility. They're maybe staffing and learning and you're building the team.

Frankly, and this is my last point on this, the U.S. system is the envy in this area of many of our allies. Because it takes advantage of a much larger talent pool, the U.S. is able to, and it's not just limited to those who are trained and inculcated in the values of a single stovepipe or a column of excellence, as it's called, that is stuffed just with the vision of a certain department or agency. America can draw on outsiders and it refreshes and creates much more innovative thinking. So I would not disrupt that part of the system. I think it's useful to have some political appointee turnover.

MS. O'SULLIVAN: I could just add to that very briefly and say, just as Peter says, most of these people are not political appointees. And I think that's good and actually you want a balance from the different agencies. So for most of the time, I had four RAC directors. I always made sure I had one from State, one from an intelligence agency, one from the military and one from Treasury.

And there was a person I wanted to hire from outside the system, someone named Brett McGurk. It took me, I think, more than a year to get him into the system because he didn't fit. You know, he wasn't coming to me from an agency. He currently is our ambassador against ISIS, so he stayed in this whole time. He's done pretty amazing things. But it was really hard. There was every disincentive in the world to try to bring someone in from the outside. And that, I think, to a large extent makes sense, given the talent that you

have in all of these different agencies.

And it's important that those people are represented in the -- well, in my case, at my directorate because if I had an issue that I needed to understand better or our team needed to understand better or the President needed to understand better, you know, you have that person who knows how that agency works, so they have relationships, they have history and they can, you know, go back into that system and help you figure out something.

The last thing I would say, again with my theme about the NSC in areas where there's conflict or American personnel in harm's way, I put a real premium on having people who have been in the field come back and serve at the NSC. And I think that's really important, because those people who have been in the field, when they get back in the NSC, they understand some of the realities being experienced out in the field. So you understand how, you know, how far Washington can feel. You understand when Washington calls a SVTC at 3:00 in the morning and you only get four hours of sleep anyway, that's kind of inconvenient, you know. And there are all these small things, you know, relationships.

So I think that that's another part or place that I would put some premium on, you know, if I was working similar portfolios today.

MR. MILLER: Thank you. We have time for one more question. Yes.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, I'm Julia Dreer (phonetic), former enlisted military, Air Force, and I am here in the officer training corps at UT, just by way of introduction.

My question, I believe it was Mr. Feaver -- am I saying that right -- you had mentioned the partisanship and how important it is for the public to be able to trust the NSC. And so speaking to that, from my experience in the military, you said the public has a great trust in the military. And it's partly because they keep away that partisanship from their image, their public image. And, of course, in doing that, we have certain regulations and rules that we have to follow as members of the military, as far as no campaigning, especially in uniform, things like that.

So my question for the panel is how do we, without infringing on the civil liberties given by the Constitution, how do we create that sense of trust with the NSC in that sense of partisanship and removing it from that partisanship without infringing on those civil liberties, and also as an American exercising your right to free speech?

MR. FEAVER: Right, so two answers. One is, while I don't give up my basic freedoms, I give up a lot of freedoms when you go into the government. And so restrictions on what you can say and do in your workplace is not a constitutional infringement, necessarily. I better defer to Bobby Chesney here, but --

MR. BOBBY CHESNEY: You're right.

MR. FEAVER: That's the first point.

The second point though is that there is actually a provision called the Hatch Act, which is designed to do exactly what you're talking about. To make sure that while an administration is governing, that even if they're political appointees, they are doing their governing work and they are not doing the partisan campaign work of reelecting the President. So even though they may fervently hope that the President is reelected and they may -- they may certainly vote for him, they may even give money to him or her -- exactly, him or her -- and then on their vast amounts of free time, they can also, you know, stuff

envelopes or do outreach or something on weekends. But while they are in their government position, they cannot.

And this is something that I think the average American doesn't believe. The average voter thinks they're all political all the way through. But actually all administrations, and President Obama's administration made very clear instructions to their current departments to stay -- it's especially worrisome for them because, you know, Secretary Clinton came from their administration so they have to be even more careful. They go to great lengths to separate the political -- the partisan political, which is different from the political -- the partisan political from their governing. And I think that's a good thing.

Our system has a lot of problems with it. I'm not sure the truck is on the blocks quite as far as Philip does. It's got a lot of problems. But the dysfunctional -- the partisan dysfunctions that you're seeing are not, I don't think, the major problems in the way the interagency process works. That dysfunction shows up in the way Congress performs its job, less so in the way the executive branch does.

MR. MILLER: Thank you so much. And we could continue talking about these things for a long time, but we've been talking about them for two days already, so our time is at an end.

But before I ask you to thank our panelists, I want to thank you for your attendance at the Third Annual Texas National Security Forum. I want to thank again our sponsors, the Moody Foundation, the White House Transitions Project, the Herzstein Foundation, the LBJ Library, the LBJ School.

And I also want to ask you to join me in thanking the staff of the Clements and Strauss and especially Kathy Edelman.

(Applause.)

* * * * *