THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2025

Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 23

THE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR AND STAFF

John P. Burke, *University of Vermont*
White House Transition Project

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The White House Transition Project. Begun in 1998, the White House Transition Project provides information about individual offices for staff coming into the White House to help streamline the process of transition from one administration to the next. A nonpartisan, nonprofit group, the WHTP brings together political science scholars who study the presidency and White House operations to write analytical pieces on relevant topics about presidential transitions, presidential appointments, and crisis management. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2021, and now the 2025. WHTP coordinates with government agencies and other non-profit groups, e.g., the US National Archives or the Partnership for Public Service. It also consults with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions, worldwide. See the project at http://whitehousetransitionproject.org

The White House Transition Project produces a number of materials, including:

- **WHITE HOUSE OFFICE ESSAYS:** Based on interviews with key personnel who have borne these unique responsibilities, including former White House Chiefs of Staff; Staff Secretaries; Counsels; Press Secretaries, etc. , WHTP produces briefing books for each of the critical White House offices. These briefs compile the best practices suggested by those who have carried out the duties of these office. With the permission of the interviewees, interviews are available on the National Archives website page dedicated to this project:
- ***WHITE HOUSE ORGANIZATION CHARTS.** The charts cover administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama and help new White House staff understand what to expect when they arrive and how their offices changed over time or stayed the same.
- ***TRANSITION ESSAYS.** These reports cover a number of topics suggested by White House staff, including analyses of the patterns of presidential appointments and the Senate confirmation process, White House and presidential working routine, and the patterns of presidential travel and crisis management. It also maintains ongoing reports on the patterns of interactions with reporters and the press in general as well as White House staffing.
- ***INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT**. The WHTP consults with international governments and groups interested in transitions in their governments. In 2017 in conjunction with the Baker Institute, the WHTP hosted a conference with emerging Latin American leaders and in 2018 cosponsored a government transitions conference with the National Democratic Institute held in November 2018 in Montreal, Canada .

Earlier White House Transition Project funding has included grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and The Moody Foundation of Galveston, Texas.

The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history. https://democracy.missouri.edu .

For the White House Transition Project
http://whitehousetransitionproject.org
Martha Joynt Kumar, *Director* (202) 285-3537
Terry Sullivan, *Exec. Director* (919) 593-2124

For the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
https://democracy.missouri.edu/
Justin Dyer, *Director* (416) 832-2121

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2025

Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 23

THE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR AND STAFF

John P. Burke, *University of Vermont*
White House Transition Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (informally termed the "NSC advisor") and the staff that serves under that person is one of the most important White House offices in its impact on policy. In some administrations, that impact is so strong that foreign and national security policy making is essentially centralized in the hands of the NSC advisor with minimal input from cabinet-level departments.

As with many of the units and offices within the White House staff, there is little statutory or legal constraint (beyond budgetary limits) in how the role of NSC advisor is defined or how the NSC staff is organized and operates. Much is the result of tradition, presidential inclination, and the personalities, prior experiences, and interpersonal dynamics among the "principals"—the president's key advisors, the NSC advisor included. For presidential transitions, the role of NSC advisor and the organization of the NSC staff must clearly be of special attention and concern. Not only have they become the president's most important source of policy advice on foreign and national security policy; the NSC advisor-designate almost always plays a major role in determining how national security policy making will be organized and in filling NSC staff positions.

The job of NSC advisor has evolved considerably since 1947, when the National Security Council was statutorily established as an advisory body to the president. Responsibilities of modern NSC advisors that relate directly to the president have included the following:

- Source of personal advice and counsel to the president
- Focal channel for information during situations of crisis
- Conduit for written information to and from the other principals

- Organizer of the president's daily national security briefing
- Provider of day-to-day staff support to the president
- Watchdog of the president's political interests as they relate to national security matters

Additional key responsibilities relate to the NSC staff:

- Selecting skilled and experienced personnel, especially an effective deputy NSC advisor, which has evolved into greater importance
- Effectively organizing the different layers and subunits of the NSC staff system
- Effectively providing an interagency process that brings agencies and departments—and the NSC staff—into the early stages of policy formulation
- Fostering good morale and commitment to presidential policy goals in an organizational atmosphere that also tolerates reasonable dissent

Other broad responsibilities may include serving as a spokesperson, cultivating political support for presidential decisions and actions, and assisting in implementing national security policy. The particular combination of these tasks varies from one NSC advisor to another, as does the emphases given to each and the particular ways they have been carried out. One of the major tasks during a transition is to figure out which "package" of these various duties is most appropriate.

Among the most desired qualifications for service as NSC advisor is the ability and willingness to act as "honest broker": (1) a concern for the fair and balanced representation of different views at various points in the deliberative process; and (2) attention to the quality of the organization and processes in which deliberation occurs at various stages. Personalities matter, and it is part of the job of NSC advisor to think about the collective contribution all the principals make to presidential decision making.

There is tremendous pressure during the transition to select persons who have been loyal to the candidate, but decision making after Inauguration Day may require more: attention to how that decision making can operate effectively through honest brokerage. Early selection of an NSC advisor is just as important as early selection of a chief of staff.

Politicization of the NSC advisor's role is an area that should be considered during the transition. If advocacy is problematic, perceptions of pursuing a political agenda or becoming a partisan figure are even more so. Involvement in policy implementation and ongoing operations appears to be the riskiest expansion of the NSC advisor's role.

THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2025

Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 23

THE NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR AND STAFF

John P. Burke, *University of Vermont*
White House Transition Project

INTRODUCTION

The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (as the job has been officially titled since the early 1970s, but informally termed "NSC advisor") and the staff that serves under that person is one of the most important White House offices in its impact on policy. In some administrations, that impact is so strong that foreign and national security policy making is essentially centralized in the hands of the NSC advisor with minimal input from cabinet-level departments such as State or Defense.

Few today—or even back then—could identify President Richard M. Nixon's first secretary of state, even though he had been Dwight D. Eisenhower's second attorney general (William Rogers, by the way). Yet Nixon's NSC advisor, Henry Kissinger, was a household name and a recognizable media figure. Indeed, such was the power of the position that when Nixon eventually appointed Kissinger as secretary of state in 1973, he retained his job as NSC advisor.[1] In other administrations, NSC advisor and departmental input in the policy process

---

* This article draws on my book, *Honest Broker? The National Security Advisor and Presidential Decision Making* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009). For more general discussion of recent presidential transitions, see John P. Burke, *Presidential Transitions: From Politics to Practice* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Burke, *Becoming President: The Bush Transition, 2000-2003* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); and Martha Joynt Kumar, *Beyond the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). On the organization, development, and management of the White House staff, see John P. Burke, *The Institutional Presidency: Organizing and Managing the White House from FDR to Clinton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

[1] Kissinger eventually relinquished the NSC advisor post on November 3, 1975, during the Ford presidency, and was replaced by his deputy, Gen. Brent Scowcroft.

were more balanced. Such was the case, for example, during Gen. Brent Scowcroft's tenure in the job under President George H.W. Bush. In still other administrations the policy roles of the NSC advisor and staff have been more attenuated. The latter has been rarer since the 1960s. But there have been cases, such as during Alexander Haig's tenure as secretary of state, where departmental dominance was asserted, although in Haig's case not successfully or for very long.

As with many of the units and offices within the White House staff, there is little statutory or legal constraint (beyond budgetary limits) in how the role of NSC advisor is defined or how the NSC staff is organized and operates. Much is the result of tradition, presidential inclination, and the personalities, prior experiences, and interpersonal dynamics among the "principals"—the president's key advisors, the NSC advisor included. Indeed matters are so fluid that there is no common agreement whether the informal title is NSC "adviser" or "advisor" (I will follow the preference of recent administrations and use the latter).[2]

For presidential transitions, the role of NSC advisor and the organization of the NSC staff must clearly be of special attention and concern. Not only have they become the president's most important source of policy advice on foreign and national security policy; the NSC advisor-designate almost always plays a major role in determining how national security policy making will be organized and in filling NSC staff positions. Plus, in the short run of a new presidency's early—and critical—days and months, they are readily available sources of information and counsel: they are non-confirmable positions that can be more quickly filled than is the case for the subcabinet.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The evolution of the role of the NSC advisor and staff has been significant. Their precise time of origin as key players in the process, particularly the NSC advisor, is subject to some debate. But the history is instructive.

FOUNDATION: THE TRUMAN YEARS

At least organizationally, a plausible case can be made tracing at least some impact back to the National Security Act of 1947, which first statutorily established the National Security Council as an advisory body to the president.[3] As part of the act, the position of NSC

---

[2] In their memoirs Presidents Nixon, Kissinger, and Carter and NSC advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert McFarlane use "adviser," while Reagan, Bush and Scowcroft, and Clinton prefer "advisor." The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* also use "adviser." The White House uses "advisor," although a history of the National Security Council (Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "History of the National Security Council, 1947–1997," 1999, https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/NSChistory.htm) uses "adviser," as has, since its creation in 1946, the White House's Council of Economic Advisers.

[3] In the original 1947 act, the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the three service-branch secretaries (Navy, Army, and Air Force), and the chair of the National Security Resources Board were designated statutory members of the NSC. Late in the drafting of the 1947 act, the president was also given the power to designate additional members of the NSC when he felt necessary (although the act stated that they were only eligible for inclusion if they held an office confirmed by the Senate); by 1949 the treasury secretary was regularly attending NSC meetings. In the 1949 reorganization of the NSC (which had as its impetus recommendations by the first Hoover Commission), the three service secretaries were removed as statutory members—thus strengthening the position of the defense secretary—and the vice president was added. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of the CIA were also designated as statutory *advisers* to

"executive secretary" and an NSC staff were created to facilitate the council in its work. The White House successfully maneuvered to place both under direct presidential control rather than lodging them in the Pentagon, as then Navy Secretary and later first Defense Secretary James Forrestal had strenuously lobbied in favor of.[4]

Yet the Truman national security system was a weak one. Truman distrusted the collective deliberative apparatus thrust upon him by the Republican-controlled 80th Congress. Until the Korean War broke out in June 1950, he attended only twelve of fifty-seven NSC meetings.[5] During the war, the NSC met every Thursday, and Truman attended sixty-four of its remaining seventy-one meetings.[6] As for the NSC staff, it was a presidential instrument from the start, although not a very strong one. Truman's choice as its first executive secretary—Rear Admiral Sidney Souers—was a pale imitation, if that, of even the weaker NSC advisors in subsequent administrations. Most accounts of the history of the NSC and its staff mention Souers and his successor under Truman, James S. Lay Jr., but they are rarely included in lists of "NSC advisors." At most they served as somewhat limited policy coordinators and staff facilitators, not sources of substantive policy advice, much less embodying other aspects of the modern NSC advisor's role. Yet they were steadfast in maintaining presidential control over the NSC; it would serve at most in an advisory but not constraining capacity for the president.

There were organizational weaknesses. The NSC staff was small and largely drawn from departmental detailees.[7] Initial position papers for council discussion were prepared by State or Defense, not by an independent NSC staff. As well, the working groups established to

---

the NSC; at least in theory that change gave the JCS chair a bit of freedom to disagree with the defense secretary. The NSC executive secretary and staff were also formally incorporated as part of the Executive Office of the President, thus further securing presidential control of the national security process. In 1951 the Mutual Security Act made the director of mutual security a statutory member of the NSC. Truman's initial appointee was Averill Harriman. In 1953 the National Security Resources Board was abolished and replaced by the Office of Defense Mobilization, whose chair was made a statutory member of the council. In addition, the director of the Foreign Operations Administration was made a member of the council; however, later the Foreign Operations Administration was reorganized as the International Cooperation Administration, the director of which was not made a statutory member. Currently, according the NSC's White House website, "The NSC is chaired by the President. Its regular attendees (both statutory and non-statutory) are the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Defense, and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the statutory military advisor to the Council, and the Director of National Intelligence is the intelligence advisor. The Chief of Staff to the President, Counsel to the President, and the Assistant to the President for Economic Policy are invited to attend any NSC meeting. The Attorney General and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget are invited to attend meetings pertaining to their responsibilities. The heads of other executive departments and agencies, as well as other senior officials, are invited to attend meetings of the NSC when appropriate" (The White House, "National Security Council," https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc).

[4] Truman further curbed Forrestal's efforts at control by having the secretary of state rather than defense preside over NSC meetings in his absence.

[5] Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, "Early Years," in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27. In Falk's count, Truman attended eleven of fifty-six meetings; Stanley L. Falk, "The National Security Council under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy," *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1964): 406.

[6] Office of the Historian, "History of the National Security Council."

[7] On the early organization of the staff, see Sidney W. Souers, "Policy Formulation for National Security," *American Political Science Review* 43, no. 3 (1949): 537-38; and James S. Lay Jr., "National Security Council's Role in the U.S. Security and Peace Program," *World Affa*irs 115, no. 2 (1952): 37-39. In 1949, the NSC staff budget was $200,000 with a full staff of 31 (including clerical), half of whom, according to Souers (538) were on detail from other departments.

consider these papers—before they rose to the full NSC—were drawn from the affected departments.[8]

In the view of James Lay, the staff members detailed from departments to work for the NSC "tended to become or be looked upon as foreigners to their respective departments." But at the same time, the "consultants" from the departments who directly reviewed policy papers with the NSC's executive secretary "looked upon their passive role as secondary to their heavy departmental responsibilities, [and] gave less and less attention to NSC affairs." Interagency coordinating and vetting, at a higher level but below the full meetings of the NSC, were nonexistent. The final product—staff reports to the NSC—"were too frequently unacceptable when they reached the Council table. It was difficult for the staff to exercise initiative in developing forward-looking policies." As a result, Lay notes, "more and more, individual departments preferred to send their draft recommendations directly to the Council without any staff coordination, with inevitable clashes and delays at the Council table."[9] According to the history of the NSC on the White House website, the planning process prior to NSC meetings "suffered from haphazard staffing and irregular meetings and was sometimes bypassed entirely. The executive secretaries of the Council had no real authority or influence beyond managing the process."[10]

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE EISENHOWER YEARS

Not surprisingly, change came quickly in the organizationally attentive Eisenhower presidency. Eisenhower's agent for reform was Boston banker Robert Cutler.[11] During the 1952 transition, Eisenhower and Cutler met to discuss needed improvements. By late March, following extensive consultation with former Truman-era officials and others inside and outside of government, Cutler presented to Eisenhower the architecture of a new national security process, which, with some tinkering, the president approved.

One major change was the appointment of a new White House official—Cutler himself—as the major domo of the process, above the executive secretary level. Eisenhower informed Cutler that he had decided on a new title for his position—several had been discussed—"Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs." Cutler's first presidential charge was to put his report into action.

The other organizational changes closely tracked with correcting the deficiencies of the Truman years. The most noticeable feature of the new system was the creation of what came to be dubbed "policy hill." Its organizational topography included a more regular, better organized, and higher-level planning operation before matters were considered at full council meetings: the NSC Planning Board. As the "upside" of policy hill, the main task of this interagency group was not only to find areas of consensus and policy agreement but also to ensure that policy alternatives, where agreement could not be obtained beforehand, were

---

[8] Souers, "Policy Formulation for National Security," 538-539. Also see Anna Kasten Nelson, "President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council," *Journal of American History* 7, no. 2 (1985): 368-371; Falk, "National Security Council," 408.

[9] James S. Lay Jr., "Administration of the National Security Council," January 19, 1953, White House Office, Office of Special Assistant for National Security, Special Assistant Series, Administration Subseries, Eisenhower Library.

[10] Office of the Historian, "History of the National Security Council."

[11] Cutler, the president of Boston's Old Colony Trust Company, was a reserve brigadier general who had served on Secretary of War Henry Stimson's staff and had briefly been on the Truman NSC Psychological Strategy Board.

placed before the full NSC. Meeting weekly, it especially took care to make sure that departmental points of disagreement—so-called "policy splits"—were clearly brought to the attention of the NSC's members With Cutler as chair, the Planning Board began to set the foundation of the modern NSC advisor's role.

With respect to the NSC staff, Cutler retained Lay as executive secretary and S. Everett Gleason as Lay's deputy. In Cutler's view their institutional memory from the Truman years would be helpful. They are "devoted, capable, and well-informed," he told Eisenhower; "They will provide continuity, effectively operate the staff mechanism, and greatly help in the policy planning."[12] It is an important lesson in the importance of the continuity of expertise and substantive knowledge in the transition from one administration to the next.

At the "top" of policy hill were regular meetings of the NSC (generally weekly, on Thursday mornings—usually two hours in length but sometimes reaching four—with Eisenhower in attendance) and the creation of written "records of action" reflecting NSC deliberations and presidential decisions.[13] Cutler and his successors would play a role: not in tendering personal advice but in fairly presenting the view of others and in keeping the discussion on track.

What would come to be the "down slope" of policy hill—the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB)—was not the product of Cutler's direct handiwork but of another board, the Jackson Committee (of which Cutler was a member). Chaired by William H. Jackson (a businessman and former CIA official who would also serve as acting NSC special assistant in the latter months of 1956), its purpose (much like Cutler's) was to examine and improve on the policy mechanisms of the Truman years, in this case the Psychological Strategy Board.[14]

---

[12] Memorandum from Robert Cutler to the President, "Recommendations Regarding the National Security Council," March 16, 1953, White House Office, Office of Special Assistant for National Security, Special Assistant Series, Administration Subseries, Eisenhower Library.

[13] Cutler's recommendations also included Eisenhower's desire that the secretary of the treasury and the director of the Bureau of the Budget be made nonstatutory members of the NSC so that the fiscal and economic impact of national security decisions would be properly factored in. Fiscal concerns also figured in another recommendation adopted: the requirement of financial appendixes to Planning Board policy options that were up for discussion by the full NSC; see Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, *1953-1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 131-32. The director of the U.S. Information Agency was also added as a nonstatutory member of the NSC. Additional ad hoc members of the NSC were added as needed, such as the attorney general when matters of constitutional or legal import arose (Robert Cutler, *No Time for Rest* [Boston: Little, Brown 1965], 299; also see Herbert Brownell with John P. Burke, *Advising Ike: The Memoirs of Attorney General Herbert Brownell* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993, 291-93]). With respect to the "records of action," these were prepared generally by the Friday after the Thursday NSC meeting, or by Monday or Tuesday of the next week at the latest. According to Gordon Gray (Eisenhower's last NSC advisor), they also offered the opportunity for "reclammas," which were put forward from time to time by departments that might object to something in the record (Gordon Gray Oral History, June 25, 1975, Eisenhower Library, 18). More generally, as Bowie and Immerman note, records of actions provided "insurance against an official charged with implementation misinterpreting a decision or directive" (Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 89]).

[14] On the Wm. Jackson Committee and its work, see Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 93-95. As Bowie and Immerman note, the OCB was the weaker part of the Eisenhower national security system: "Over the subsequent months and years the administration continually tinkered with the OCB's organization and functions; still, its performance never met the president's expectations. But the OCB's important contribution to America's national security was never questioned, and Eisenhower and his advisers viewed his successor's decision to dismantle it as a grave mistake" (95). On problems with the Truman-era PSB and the subsequent development of the OCB, also see Elmer Staats, Oral History, July 13, 1964, Kennedy Library, 8-10.

In September 1953 the committee recommended that a new OCB would have *as part* of its duties the development of psychological strategy aimed at Cold War propaganda. But it was given a broader mandate: it would monitor and coordinate policy implementation by agencies and departments.[15] The new OCB was chaired (until January 1960) by the undersecretary of state (initially Eisenhower's wartime chief of staff, Gen. Walter Bedell Smith), and its members consisted of representatives from other agencies and departments (here much like the Planning Board) as well as Cutler from the NSC.[16]

Creation of the Planning Board, while important, was not the only alteration in process. Effective day-to-day operations, as much as good organization and structure for policy planning, were objects of Cutler's scrutiny and remedy. Much would lay the foundation for the NSC advisor as an "honest broker" of the deliberative process—and it was the leitmotif of Cutler's understanding of the job. Cutler's early recommendations for reform included a strong charge—indeed "an unbreakable engagement" in his words—that NSC principals be briefed by their Planning Board representatives before council meetings. Cutler also stressed that every Planning Board participant "must express and stand by his honest views; those views, if substantial conflicts cannot be fairly resolved, may never be suppressed or compromised, but should be reported to the Council."[17] Indeed, the report clearly states that each Planning Board member "has the *right* to have included in any report sent up to the Council, in his own words, any disagreement on the part of his department or agency with any part of such report."[18] Here we see the importance of the NSC advisor as a fair and honest broker of the policy process.

Other changes made included better circulation of policy papers before NSC meetings, clear agendas (set by Cutler and his staff), and regular briefings of Eisenhower by Cutler of agenda matters on the afternoon before NSC meetings. Cutler also included in his recommendations a clear list of his own duties as NSC special assistant/advisor. Some reflected elements of brokerage: oversight of the deliberative process and power to remedy any deficiencies. Cutler had "responsibility for the rate of flow of work through the Planning Board, and the manner of presentation and quality of such work." Cutler presided at Planning Board meetings, but he saw as his special duty—and here we explicitly see direct brokerage—to "lead the discussion in such manner as to bring out the most active participation by all present." It also was Cutler's duty to bring "to the attention of the president with recommendations for appropriate action, [and any] lack of progress of an agency in carrying out a particular policy which has been assigned to it."[19] Cutler's role as honest broker was not

---

[15] In his earlier consultations with Cutler, Gen. George C. Marshall was especially instructive about the importance of later stages of the policy process when he "spoke at length about the need for policy coordination. Policy is 10% planning and 90% carrying into effect. Someone must keep constant watch to see that policies are being carried out (a follow-up)" (NSC Study, "General George C. Marshall," February 19, 1953, White House Office, Office of Special Assistant for National Security, Special Assistant Series, Administration Subseries, Eisenhower Library).

[16] In January 1960, NSC advisor Gordon Gray took over the chairmanship of the OCB. In 1957, during Cutler's second stint as NSC advisor, the OCB was formally brought within the EOP and Cutler was made its vice-chair. Cutler was not comfortable in that capacity and persuaded Eisenhower to appoint a second special assistant on the NSC staff (Frederick Dearborn) to take on that task.

[17] Memorandum from Robert Cutler to the President, Recommendations Regarding the National Security Council, March 16, 1953, White House Office, Office of Special Assistant for National Security, Special Assistant Series, Administration Subseries, Eisenhower Library.

[18] Ibid. (emphasis added).

[19] Ibid. On the internal operations of the Planning Board, see Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 91-92.

restricted to organizational matters: brokerage also occurred in NSC meetings. As Fred I. Greenstein and Richard Immerman summarize, "The assistant for national security affairs played an active, but largely procedural part in the deliberations. He kept the debate on track, directed the council's attention to disagreements and ambiguities, and watched for signs of policy slippage."[20]

The formal organization of the Eisenhower NSC process was not without its critics, particularly the Senate subcommittee investigation led by Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA) toward the close of the administration.[21] The charge was that it was bureaucratically cumbersome, slow in its deliberative operations, and prone to compromise and "lowest common denominator" policy recommendations.

Even today, when there is greater appreciation of the inner workings of the Eisenhower presidency and of Eisenhower's leadership style, the debate continues. As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. asked as late as 2000, "Is the layered Eisenhower machinery really 'a precedent for effective national security advising'? On the record, surely not. It is wrong too in theory. Organization charts are less important than people." Moreover, according to Schlesinger, the Eisenhower model "is all the more wrong" with the onset of the digital age: "the vertical arrangements of the past are being replaced by increasingly horizontal arrangements—which is the way that presidents like FDR and JFK operated instinctively."[22] By contrast, in the view of Laurin Henry, the author of an extensive early study of presidential transitions, "The Planning Board, the NSC, and the OCB constituted an architectonic system for policy formulation, decision, and execution of which the administration was extremely proud."[23] Subsequent empirical studies of decision making during the Eisenhower years bear out the merits its national security deliberative arrangements, as noted below.

The McGeorge Bundy Years: Change, but for the Better?

In the post-Eisenhower years, the job of NSC advisor evolved considerably. Eisenhower saw the NSC system and its staff as a device for effectively harnessing the relevant agencies and departments so that they would have productive input on policy options. For his

---

[20] Fred I. Greenstein and Richard Immerman, "Effective National Security Advising: Recovering the Eisenhower Legacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2000): 342. According to Bowie and Immerman, Cutler and his Eisenhower-era successors "effectively if imperfectly promoted multiple advocacy by playing role that closely approximated Alexander George's model 'custodian manager'" (257).

[21] The most widely available report of the Jackson subcommittee (its formal title was the U.S. Senate Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery) is Henry M. Jackson, ed., *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level* (New York: Praeger, 1965). For other criticisms of the Eisenhower NSC machinery (including analysis of the Jackson subcommittee), see Falk, "National Security Council," 423-29; Anna Kasten Nelson, "National Security I: Inventing a Process (1945-1961)," in Hugh Heclo and Lester M. Salamon, eds., *The Illusion of Presidential Government* (Boulder CO: Wesview, 1981), 252-55; Paul Y. Hammond, "The National Security Council as a Device for Interdepartmental Coordination," *American Political Science Review* 54, no. 4 (1960): 903-10; Paul Y. Hammond, *Organizing for Defense: The American Military Establishment in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 357-70; Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 94-95; H. W. Brands, "The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 4 (1989): 966-74.

[22] Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Effective National Security Advising: A Most Dubious Precedent," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2000): 351.

[23] Laurin L. Henry, *Presidential Transitions* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1960), 617-18.

immediate successor, however, that system was too ossified and bureaucratic. For John F. Kennedy, the NSC advisor and staff needed to be more forcefully a presidential instrument, one serving as a direct source for *presidential* initiatives. Subsequent presidencies have grappled with these two organizationally different models and the different implications they bear for the role of the NSC advisor and staff.

McGeorge Bundy's tenure as NSC advisor is illustrative of some of the dilemmas. Both Kennedy and Bundy found the organizational structure of the Eisenhower policy process cumbersome and overly bureaucratic. Both the Planning Board and the OCB were quickly abolished. Kennedy, an instinctively informal and highly collegial decision maker, also preferred venues other than the organized and somewhat large NSC meetings of the Eisenhower years. According to Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's chief White House advisor, NSC meetings were used—when they were used—for "minor decisions" or "major ones actually settled earlier." Kennedy "strongly preferred to make all major decisions with far fewer people present." During and after crises, the NSC would often be convened, but for the purpose of getting everyone on record and to "silence outside critics."[24] As Kennedy himself observed in a NBC television interview in April 1961, meetings of the NSC are "not as effective" as smaller decisions groups; "it is more difficult to decide matters involving national security if there is a wider group present."[25]

There also may have been some initial hope that a strong policy-making linkage would develop between the president and the secretary of state, perhaps along the lines of the Truman–Dean Acheson relationship. The choice of Dean Rusk, a cautious and reticent man, precluded that possibility. (Alternatively, it may have just been a rhetorical ploy to satisfy critics, with JFK intending to serve as his own secretary of state all along.)[26]

But what developed was haphazard. The early policy process was highly problematic, culminating in the Bay of Pigs fiasco of April 1961. Bundy recognized that organizational changes were needed, but he had difficulty gaining Kennedy's attention and support. In a May 16, 1961, memo to the president, Bundy told Kennedy that although the White House was once again the "center of energy. . . .We do have a problem of management; centrally it is a problem of your use of time and your use of staff. . . . but in the process you have overstrained your own calendar, limited your chances for thought, and used your staff incompletely. You are altogether too valuable to go on this way." Bundy then proposed three correctives. One suggestion was that the president try to stick to his schedule. The second was more regular and focused meetings with Bundy: Kennedy needed a "real and regular time each day for national security discussion and action." The third was better staff work.[27]

Bundy began to fill the vacuum, especially in meeting more frequently with JFK. Organizational changes that he did make increased his power and that of his NSC staff. Abolishment of the Planning Board and the OCB eliminated staff positions involved in *interdepartmental* coordination of the policy-making and implementation processes. In their place, Bundy and his staff became more directly involved as the authors of national security policy—even though jerry-rigged "task forces" were often constituted to provide some

---

[24] Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 281.

[25] Bromley K. Smith, *Organizational History of the National Security Council during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations* (Washington, DC: National Security Council, 1988), 17.

[26] McGeorge Bundy, "Letter to the Jackson Subcommittee," in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 82-84.

[27] Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the President, May 16, 1961, President's Office Files, Staff Memoranda—Bundy, Kennedy Library.

semblance of wider coordination and input. In place of the OCB, Bundy and his staff took on the job of issuing National Security Action Memoranda (NSAMs) informing recipients of policy directives.[28] Yet Bundy's NSAMs lacked the rigor of the Eisenhower deliberative process: they were directed at "action" rather than "planning," on "what was happening at the moment."[29] With all these changes and despite any organizational weaknesses, the NSC staff—and the NSC advisor—were potentially placed in a greater policy advocacy role, eclipsing any initial hope for a return to State Department dominance.

Bundy would press Kennedy for further attention to organizational matters throughout the remaining years of his presidency, but efforts were fitful. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy had worked out a better venue for his collegial decision making with the creation of ExCom (the Executive Committee of the National Security Council). But as Bundy would tell him in April 1963, ExCom was a good first step and "a good instrument for major interdepartmental decision." But it was "not so good for lesser matters of coordination." In his view, ExCom "has not proved effective at all, except during the extraordinary week of October 16-22, in the process of forward planning." [30]

Nor were some of Bundy's organizational changes all that beneficial. It was he who now regularly briefed the president on intelligence matters, not the CIA director (at Eisenhower's NSC meetings) or through the staff secretary position that Gen. Andrew Goodpaster had effectively operated. As Goodpaster would later recollect, "raw intelligence . . . should not come to the president. You can give the president too much. . . . not even McGeorge Bundy, as brilliant as he is, can do a job of analysis for the staff over in CIA and DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency]."[31]

Bundy's tenure as NSC advisor also began to reveal some of the tensions in the various parts of the role as it came to be expanded. While Bundy was sometimes concerned for effective organization, he was often an advocate rather than an honest broker during meetings. The secret tape recordings of ExCom's meetings during the missile crisis, for example, reveal Bundy largely voicing his own policy views, not serving as the central agent testing for weaknesses in options, questioning assumptions, or other activities such as encouraging the airing of underrepresented views.[32] During Lyndon Johnson's presidency, although Bundy

---

[28] Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 41.

[29] Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth, McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 186; I. M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 101.

[30] Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the President, April 2 1963, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, Kennedy Library. It is also worth noting that Robert Kennedy had expressed his own concerns to his brother about the need for a better decision process. At the end of a memo calling for more meetings to discuss Cuba and South American policy, the attorney general noted: "PS: I think this kind of effort should be applied to other problems as well. The best minds (*me) in Government should be utilized in finding solutions to these major problems. They should be available in times other than deep crisis and emergencies as is now the case. You talk to McNamara but mostly on Defense matters, you talk to Dillon but primarily on financial questions, Dave Bell on AID matters, etc. These men should be sitting down and thinking of some of the problems facing us in a broader context. I think you could get a good deal more out of what is available in Government than you are at the present time." Memorandum from Robert Kennedy to the President, March 14, 1963, Latin America Folder, Subject Files 1961-1964, Sorensen Papers, Kennedy Library.

[31] Andrew Goodpaster, Oral History, June 11, 1980. Eisenhower Library, 66.

[32] On the recordings made during the missile crisis, see Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997);

often cautioned him about the need to explore more deeply the various policy options on Vietnam before him in 1964 and 1965, Bundy's memos sometimes tilted the deck in favor of courses he preferred. It was not a successful mix.

Not only was Bundy a policy advocate, in very marked contrast to his Eisenhower predecessors; he and his staff also became increasingly involved in operations. With the creation of the White House Situation Room after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Bundy and his staff directly received cable traffic and other information. This was positive in some sense: they no longer had to rely on what was forwarded (or might not be forwarded) from State, Defense, and the CIA. But with it came greater control. As Karl Inderfurth and Loch Johnson note, the other side of this involvement in operations was "a procedure known as 'cross-hatching' . . . requiring White House clearance for important outgoing State Department cables."[33] On many occasions, the NSC staff not only cleared those cables but initiated them.[34]

Involvement in operations increased in the Johnson presidency. Bundy was sent on fact-finding missions to South Vietnam. Most notably he became heavily involved as a key intermediary among the contending parties in the Dominican Republic crisis of May 1965. According to Rusk, "I was skeptical about McGeorge Bundy's selection to this team, as I would have been about any member of the White House, because his presence involved the White House directly in the outcome."[35] But it was the State Department's representative, not Bundy, who would eventually guide policy toward a resolution.[36]

Under Johnson, Bundy's public visibility increased. He became one of the chief defenders of the administration's Vietnam war policy. We clearly see here another marked departure from the Eisenhower years. Bundy was a more effective spokesperson in the Johnson years than the more placid Rusk. Yet his efforts were sometimes overbearing and aroused controversy. They also began to grate on an attentive media distrustful of Johnson. According to historian Andrew Preston, at one "debate" between Bundy and Hans J. Morgenthau, a prominent University of Chicago professor of international relations, Bundy's "aggressive debating tactics came across as mean spirited" and marked "a particularly sour moment" in his tenure as NSC advisor; they "struck blows to the administration's credibility."[37] The debate didn't help his relations with the president either: LBJ had not given Bundy permission to appear, was livid at his defiance, and even temporarily told aide Bill Moyers that he was going to fire Bundy.[38] Bundy's picture on the cover of *Time* magazine and a lengthy, favorable article that week did not help matters.

Bundy developed extensive contact with the Washington press corps, especially key figures such as Walter Lippman, Joseph Alsop, Ben Bradlee, and reporters from the *New York Times* and the Washington papers, especially the *Post*. These contacts were in marked departure

---

and (with somewhat different transcriptions) Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting the 'Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

33 Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, "Transformation," in Inderfurth and Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions*, 66.

34 Preston, *The War Council*, 42.

35 Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Norton, 1990), 375.

36 Preston, *The War Council*, 200-201. On the lack of deliberation on sending troops and the questionable assumption that a Castro-ite coup was in the offing, see Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 324-25. On the administration's position, see Dean Rusk, Oral History, January 2, 1970, Part II, Johnson Library, 15-26.

37 Preston, *The War Council*, 197-98; on Bundy and the college teach-ins, also see Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 318-23.

38 Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 321-22.

from his press-shy Eisenhower predecessors, but they laid a foundation that would be followed by his successors. Johnson, however, kept a wary eye on Bundy's dealing with reporters and had him report on press contacts. On one occasion, Johnson refused permission for Bundy to appear on *Meet the Press*; Bundy was disappointed, telling Johnson, "I admit I enjoy this kind of thing."[39]

THE MODERN NSC ADVISOR

For Bundy and his successors, the responsibilities of the NSC advisor have grown. The particular combination of these tasks varies from one NSC advisor to another, as does the emphases given to each and the particular ways they have been carried out.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE NSC ADVISOR

Some responsibilities that more recent NSC advisors have taken on relate directly to the president:

- Source of personal advice and counsel to the president
- Focal channel for information during situations of crisis
- Conduit for written information to and from the other principals
- Organizer of the president's daily national security briefing
- Provider of day-to-day staff support to the president
- Watchdog of the president's political interests as they relate to national security matters

In addition to responsibilities relating to a president's cognitive decision-making needs, Alexander George has noted several other presidential needs that, by implication, the NSC advisor might have a place in fulfilling:

- Providing emotional support
- Assisting a president in gaining understanding and support for actions taken within the circle of presidential advisors
- Assisting in obtaining political support and a sense of legitimacy for those decisions and actions from the even wider audience of Congress and the public[40]

Some responsibilities relate more broadly to the foreign policy environment:

- Service as a visible spokesperson and media figure
- Involvement in the implementation of national security policy, including diplomatic contacts and sometimes diplomatic missions

---

[39] Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 300.

[40] Alexander George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), 81.

Some relate to the operations of the National Security Council or the meetings of its subset—the "principals"—which is the more frequent forum for deliberation among the presidents and his or her top advisors:

- Coordination of lower-level agency and department input before it reaches higher-level policy makers
- Setting of meeting agendas
- Tasks related to making sure meetings operate effectively
- Efforts after meetings to communicate presidential decisions and relay information about other policy matters
- Some relate to the NSC staff:
- Selection of skilled and experienced personnel
- Selection, especially, of an effective deputy NSC advisor
- Effective organization of the different layers and subunits of the NSC staff system so that they contribute to effective decision making
- Effective provision, as part of that organizational task, of an interagency process that brings agencies and departments—and the NSC staff—into the early stages of policy formulation in a cooperative and workable manner
- Other managerial tasks, such as fostering good morale and commitment to presidential policy goals, but also fostering an organizational atmosphere that tolerates reasonable dissent

Transition Challenges: One of the major tasks during a transition is to figure out which "package" of these various duties is most appropriate. Part will depend on what the NSC advisor brings to the table in terms of experience and expertise. Part will depend on the strengths and weaknesses of other actors. For example, are the secretaries of state or defense likely to be effective spokespersons? If so, the need for the NSC advisor to do so may be lessened a bit, and vice versa. Likewise, what substantive expertise do they bring to policy matters? That will likely have some impact on the NSC advisor's exercise of policy advocacy. A major part also depends on the president-elect. What foreign policy experience does the president-elect possess? What broader foreign and national security policies and goals have been articulated in the campaign? Finally, part will depend on other aspects of the NSC advisor's role and the context in which it is situated, to which we will now turn.

A CHIEF RESPONSIBILITY: THE NEED FOR HONEST BROKERAGE

One of the most important responsibilities, perhaps "foundational" in its relation to effective policy making, is the presence of what has come to be termed honest brokerage. A recent study by the Atlantic Council concluded that in addition to government management experience, the "ability (and desire) to act as honest broker" was "chief among the desired qualifications" for service as NSC advisor. Moreover, it is central to mission of the NSC system: "the NSC must be a coordinating 'honest broker,' not a miniature and operational

foreign policy establishment housed within the White House." All told, "This honest broker role builds trust and confidence—straightforward, perceptive, and wise recommendations build success."[41]

The role of the NSC advisor as an honest broker in the national security decision process has its practical origins in the Eisenhower presidency. As a matter of academic scrutiny, it is best embodied in Alexander George's discussion of the NSC advisor as "managerial custodian." According to George, six tasks are required of the managerial custodian:

1. Balancing actor resources within the policy-making system
2. Strengthening weaker advocates
3. Bringing in new advisers to argue for unpopular options
4. Setting up new channels of information so that the president and other advisers are not dependent upon a single channel
5. Arranging for independent evaluation of decisional premises and options, when necessary
6. Monitoring the workings of the policy-making process to identify possibly dangerous malfunctions and instituting appropriate corrective action[42]

George's list represents an ideal; no NSC advisor, even in the Eisenhower years, embraced all of them. However, a more limited and practicable definition of the broker role might include two general elements distilled from them: (1) a concern for the fair and balanced representation of views among the principals and others at various points in the deliberative process; and (2) attention to the quality of the organization and processes in which deliberation occurs at various stages.

There is a strong case to be made that honest brokerage is an important and vital contributor—although not necessarily the only contributor—to effective decision making. Many NSC advisors have identified honest brokerage as an important part of the job of being an effective advisor. As Brent Scowcroft—who served as NSC advisor under Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush (and deputy under Nixon)—points out, brokerage remains central, if not foundational, to being effective in that role:

> If you are not an honest broker the system doesn't work well. The first thing you have to do is to establish in the minds of all of the members of the NSC that their views will be presented honestly and straightforwardly to the president. . . . Once they are comfortable with that, they certainly expect that you will present your own views but that you will do it in a way that doesn't disadvantage theirs.[43]

According to Anthony Lake, President Bill Clinton's NSC advisor during his first term, while he increasingly expressed his own policy views, "I tried at the same time to absolutely be an honest broker, because if that doesn't happen the whole system collapses. I am positive I never blocked any information or access by anybody else."[44]

---

[41] Chester A. Croker, Daniel Levin, David C. Miller Jr., and Thomas R. Pickering, "The National Security Council Reform Project: A Foundational Proposal for the Next Administration," Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, June 2016, ii-iii.

[42] George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy*, 195-96.

[43] Gen. Brent Scowcroft, telephone interview with author, November 15, 2007.

[44] Anthony Lake, telephone interview with author, November 1, 2007.

Some empirical studies of what makes for decision-making success identify the presence of some components of the honest broker role. Greenstein and I found the presence of honest brokerage to be a positive contributing factor to Eisenhower's 1954 Indochina decision making, while its absence was notable in Johnson's problematic escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965.[45] Meena Bose reached similar conclusions about Eisenhower in her study, noting now a contrast with Bundy's tenure as NSC advisor under JFK.[46] Early empirical confirmation of the benefits of the broker role was also established by Roger Porter in his extensive examination of the Economic Policy Board during the Ford administration.[47] Other studies have suggested higher-quality policy decisions when brokerage was present.[48]

Likewise studies of decision failures, such as the Tower Commission's report on the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan years, have identified problems that might have been remedied through more effective brokerage activity. As its report notes,

> The Iran initiative ran directly counter to the Administration's own policies on terrorism, the Iran/Iraq war, and military support to Iran. . . . Established procedures for making national security decisions were ignored. Reviews of the initiative by all the NSC principals were too infrequent. The initiatives were not adequately vetted below the cabinet level. Intelligence resources were underutilized. Applicable legal constraints were not adequately addressed. . . . This pattern persisted in the implementation of the Iran initiative. The NSC staff assumed direct operational control. . . . How the initiative was to be carried out never received adequate attention from the NSC principals or a tough working-level review. No periodic evaluation of the progress of the initiative was ever conducted. The result was an unprofessional and, in substantial part, unsatisfactory operation.[49]

The Tower Commission's recommendations for reform are also notable in the way they echo many of the components of the broker role. "It is the National Security Adviser who is primarily responsible for managing this process on a daily basis. . . . It is *his responsibility* to ensure" that

- matters submitted for consideration by the Council cover the full range of issues on which review is required;
- those issues are fully analyzed;
- a full range of options is considered;
- the prospects and risks of each are examined;
- all relevant intelligence and other information is available to the principals;

---

[45] John P. Burke and Fred I Greenstein, with Larry Berman and Richard Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage, 1989).

[46] Meena Bose, *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy: The National Security Decision Making of Eisenhower and Kennedy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998).

[47] Roger Porter, *Presidential Decision Making: The Economic Policy Board* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 214-15.

[48] See the nineteen case studies from the Truman through Nixon presidencies in Gregory M. Herek, Irving L. Janis, and Paul Huth, "Decision Making during International Crises: Is Quality of Process Related to Outcome?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31, no. 2 (1987): 203-26. Also see the ten case studies from the Truman through the George H.W. Bush presidencies in Patrick J. Haney, *Organizing for Foreign Policy Crises: Presidents, Advisers, and the Management of Decision Making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). In both studies, the decisions that showed the fewest symptoms of defective decision making occurred in the Eisenhower presidency.

[49] John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York: Random House, 1987), 62-63.

- legal considerations are addressed; and
- difficulties in implementation are confronted.

The national security advisor, moreover, has these responsibilities "not only with respect to the president but with respect to all the NSC principals." They should be "informed of the president's thinking and decisions." They should have "adequate notice and an agenda for all meetings." Decision papers should be "provided in advance." Adequate records should be kept of "NSC consultations and presidential decisions." Finally, it is the responsibility of the NSC advisor "to monitor policy implementation and to ensure that policies are executed in conformity with the intent of the president's decisions."[50]

Transition Challenges: Is the place of honest brokerage recognized in selecting a candidate for national security advisor? Is the president-elect cognizant of its importance? There is tremendous pressure during the transition to select persons who have been loyal to the candidate, allegiant to his or her agenda, and hopefully knowledgeable about the substance of policy. But decision making after Inauguration Day may require more: attention to how that decision making can operate effectively and, especially, the role of the NSC advisor in fulfilling that task.

TENSIONS WITH OTHER COMPONENTS OF THE ADVISOR ROLE

The Tower Commission's findings and recommendations offer powerful warnings about NSC advisors who abandon brokerage and become too deeply enmeshed in policy formulation and implementation. Yet more recent NSC advisors may have had legitimate reasons for expanding their responsibilities beyond those of their Eisenhower-era forebears. Policy advocacy, political involvement, and diplomatic and other implementation efforts have become attached to the duties of some—perhaps if not all—recent NSC advisors. These additional responsibilities signal the presence of powerful forces at work that need to be understood in making a realistic assessment of the role of the NSC advisor in the contemporary era. During transitions, they are components of the NSC advisor's job that need to be carefully factored in, both in defining the job and in selecting an appropriate person for the position.

ADVOCATING POLICY

Policy advocacy, whether among the deliberations of the principals or in the form of counsel tendered privately to the president, is common to all post-Eisenhower NSC advisors in one form or another. Yet it also can be problematic. For example, the introduction to the oral history project of the Brookings Institution on the role of the NSC advisor (which included a roundtable and interviews with nine former national security advisors) observes: "Since the Kennedy administration, the assistant to the president for national security affairs (a.k.a. 'the national security adviser') has played two roles: manager ('honest broker') of the day-to-day policy process and substantive policy adviser." The introduction goes on to note that "presidents clearly want both, but the roles are in tension. . . . Some national security

[50] Ibid., 90 (emphasis added).

advisers have balanced these roles adroitly. Others have not, generating discord within the president's senior advisory team."[51]

A more robustly defined role for the NSC advisor—especially in the area of policy advocacy—portends difficulty. According to I. M. Destler, "It changes the staff from *mediating* between the president and senior officialdom to that of *substituting* for officialdom, reducing the president's perceived need to work with and through established channels."[52] Where brokerage is largely absent and where the national security advisor acts as the dominant policy voice to the president, the risks for error are great, especially as exclusion of other views may come about.

Yet, as Anthony Lake recognizes, some balance may be possible. Modern NSC advisors often present their own policy views, "but you also have to make sure that the others know what the views are so there are no surprises." At the same time, in Lake's view, the NSC advisor must be concerned that the national security system is serving the president's decision-making needs: "You have to drive the process, and you have to understand that only the NSC can do that." [53] Issues are more cross-cutting than they were in the 1950s, and "practically every issue now has an economic, military, political, diplomatic dimension, [making] it hard for any cabinet officer to have the absolute lead on that issue. . . . So it has to be coordinated and it has to be led from the White House."[54] Lake's own attempts over the summer of 1995 to craft an "Endgame Strategy" for resolving the impasse between the Muslims and the Serbs in Bosnia represent an important and successful effort by an NSC advisor to take a more active role in the policy process. But, in Lake's view, his advocacy did not stand alone; brokerage was also present: "It was a case of honest broker in the sense that everybody's views were there but I certainly was pushing as hard as I could and in every way I could."[55]

For academic observers, such as Destler, striking the right balance may provide a solution: "discreet advice or advocacy" is permissible in moderation, but "strong, visible internal advocacy (except of already established presidential priorities)" is not.[56] Destler's position is echoed in the conclusions of the Tower Commission's report: "To the extent that the national security adviser becomes a *strong* advocate . . . his role as 'honest broker' may be compromised and the president's access to the unedited views of the NSC principals may be impaired."[57] For Carnes Lord, counterbalancing bureaucratic interests may call for advocacy, "for there can be no guarantee that agency heads will in all cases subordinate their own interests and perspectives to the strategic perspective represented by the [NSC] adviser." In fact, for Lord, that "strategic perspective" offers a special entrée for advocacy: "The [NSC] adviser should be considered to have the right to provide advice *in his capacity as strategic planner*." Presidents may choose to embrace the "tactical, political, or personal factors" of others, but only the NSC advisor "can be relied on to keep the strategic perspective within presidential view."[58]

---

[51] Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, eds., "The Role of the National Security Adviser," *The National Security Council Project: Oral History Roundtables* (Washington, DC: Center for International and Security Studies and the Brookings Institution, 1999), 1.

[52] I. M. Destler, "National Security Management: What Presidents Have Wrought," *Political Science Quarterly* 95, no. 4 (1980-81): 583.

[53] Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 5.

[54] Lake, telephone interview.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Destler, "National Security Management," 577.

[57] Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Commission Report*, 11.

[58] Carnes Lord, *The Presidency and the Management of National Security* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 94.

Transition Challenges: In considering the responsibilities of NSC advisor, advocacy must be factored in, but within limits. Some advocacy might be called for if

- bureaucratic positions fail to cover the full range of options or opinion;
- effective brokerage has generated trust and confidence in the process;
- competing views are fairly and fully represented;
- participants have a right of appeal;
- the NSC advisor is not perceived as pursuing a wholesale policy agenda;
- advocacy is discreet and not overbearing—yet others are aware of what the NSC advisor has advocated;
- advocacy is seen as generally representing the president's unique, broader strategic interests.

PUBLIC VISIBILITY

Like advocacy, the public visibility of the NSC advisor has also become part of the job. Some NSC advisors, such as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, were highly visible, if not their administration's chief foreign policy spokespersons. Others, such as Scowcroft and Lake, had public presences more akin to their predecessors under Eisenhower.

As with advocacy, there is a price to be paid when the NSC advisor becomes a highly visible figure. A number of effects seem possible: competition and bruised relationships with the other principals; the possibility of public pronouncements "locking in" the NSC advisor (and by implication the White House) to set positions and commitments; perceptions of a personal agenda and questions about fairness that might detract from the broker role; and perhaps even the time taken away from other duties.

In the view of the Tower Commission, the NSC advisor should operate offstage, out of the eye of the media and the public: "Ideally, the national security adviser should not have a high public profile. He should not try to compete with the secretary of state or the secretary of defense as the articulator of public policy. . . . While a 'passion for anonymity' is perhaps too strong a term, the national security adviser should generally operate offstage."[59] For Robert Cutler, Eisenhower's first NSC assistant, anonymity was not too strong a term: "an 'anonymous' Assistant to the President has no charter to speak for his Chief in public." And anonymity, in turn, strengthened his relation to the president. In their private meetings, Cutler recounts in his memoirs, Eisenhower often "seemed to be thinking out loud to test his ideas on someone whom he trusted to keep his mouth shut."[60]

Yet given the media realities of the twenty-first century compared with those of the 1950s and 1960s—or even the pre-cable world of the 1970s and the pre-Internet world of the early 1990s—the NSC advisor is likely to become a public explainer and defender of the administration's policies. As Lake acknowledges, "I think the president and I probably paid a price for how little I did."[61]

---

[59] Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report*, 91.

[60] Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 295.

[61] Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 6.

Transition Challenges: As with advocacy, early consideration should be given to the degree and character of the NSC advisor's public role. Again, balance is important. A more public role may be appropriate if

- the secretaries of state and defense are the administration's principal spokespersons;
- the other principals are comfortable with the NSC advisor's public role;
- the NSC advisor is an effective public presence;
- public activities are carefully orchestrated within a broader communications strategy and the NSC advisor is not free-lancing or flying solo.

At a minimum, the public role of the NSC advisor is a matter that should be threshed out among the principals and the president-elect during the transition period.

POLITICAL ADVICE, PARTISAN INVOLVEMENT

Another facet, although usually present in lesser degree, of the job of more contemporary NSC advisors is either tendering advice of a more political nature or, on occasion, engaging in what might be regarded as partisan political activity. Again, there are costs. Too much political advice or partisan involvement can weaken the NSC advisor's stance as an objective source of policy advice. In Lake's view, a perception of partisanship can "diminish his or her credibility, and only adds to the distrust and divisions between the Executive and Congress."[62] Moreover, "if the national security advisor is perceived as being political or, worse, offering advice to the president on political grounds, it shakes confidence in the administration, which in itself is bad politics."[63]

Yet interjection of political calculation may be important in a decision process. As William Newmann notes, "The president's policy choices are deeply dependent on his overall political beliefs, goals, and fortunes at any given point."[64] Furthermore, political calculation might play an important role given that policy and politics cannot be neatly separated and are in fact deeply intertwined: Which policy positions will gain greater congressional support? Which will enlist the cooperation of allies, especially in light of their respective domestic political situations? How will political forces cause adversaries to react? Many of these seem to be questions that the NSC advisor might be in a position to answer or at least contribute to during deliberations. They have bearing both on the substance of national security policy as well as the feasibility of one option over another. Policy making cannot operate in a political vacuum if it is to be effective.

At the same time, other senses of political calculation, more akin to that of being a political watchdog, seem more problematic: Which policy option will prove popular with the public or aid the president's broader political standing? Here a "too political" NSC advisor might endanger the broker role. Good policy sometimes does not make for good politics and vice versa.

Political or partisan *involvement* rather than political advice raises a separate set of role-related concerns. In the minds of some NSC advisors, some forms of involvement are reasonable, others are not. According to Frank Carlucci, Ronald Reagan's NSC advisor after

---

62 Anthony Lake, *6 Nightmares* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 262.

63 Lake, telephone interview.

64 William W. Newmann, *Managing National Security Policy: The President and the Process* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 7.

Iran-Contra, "I think defending the president's position is perfectly legitimate, but actively engaging in and organizing political activity is inappropriate."[65] Condoleezza Rice's strong public involvement in the 2004 election was the subject of criticism at the time and would come back to haunt her during her confirmation hearings for secretary of state.

Transition Challenges: Politicization of the NSC advisor's role is an area that should be considered during the transition. If advocacy is problematic, perceptions of pursuing a political agenda or becoming a partisan figure are even more so. Yet the interjection of political considerations into the policy process by the NSC advisor might occasionally be in order if

- the NSC advisor is uniquely positioned to offer certain forms of political counsel (e.g., the domestic politics of foreign governments);
- issues dealing with political impact are not adequately presented in the counsel coming from other principals (potentially part of the broker role);
- more public activities are directed at explaining or defending the administration's positions, while perceptions of a partisan political agenda and direct political involvement are generally avoided.

Diplomacy, Operations, and Policy Implementation

The involvement of the NSC advisor in implementing policy, whether partaking in diplomatic contacts, undertaking missions abroad, or engaging in other activities that carry out rather than formulate policy, is another potential part of the job. Again, such activities began in the post-Eisenhower era. At best, the OCB provided an institutional mechanism for interagency *oversight*; implementing policy was the province of State, Defense, or the CIA. Direct involvement in policy implementation can be problematic, whether Kissinger's secret diplomatic missions or Adm. John Poindexter's *sub rosa* efforts in Iran-Contra. The latter is especially notable, given the difficulties it caused the Reagan presidency. According to the Tower Commission, the NSC advisor "should focus on advice and management, not implementation and execution. Implementation is the responsibility and the strength of the departments and agencies." The NSC advisor and staff "generally do not have the depth of resources for the conduct of operations." As well, involvement in operations risks "compromising their objectivity."[66] So too for Carlucci's practices after Iran-Contra: "I came in with the firm idea that we shouldn't be involved in operational matters, least of all running covert action programs, that our fundamental mission was policy coordination, policy oversight, and seeing that the president's policies were implemented, not necessarily implementing them ourselves."[67]

Yet NSC advisors are sometimes involved in diplomatic efforts that involve policy implementation. Back-channel negotiations and a range of secret and sometimes not so secret diplomatic missions are not uncommon. Moreover, foreign governments—especially the Soviet Union in the Cold War years—have sometimes asked to have more private diplomatic contact with the White House through the NSC advisor or to have the NSC advisor serve as an emissary on sensitive missions. Such needs must be accommodated.

---

[65] Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 16.

[66] Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Commission Report*, 92.

[67] Frank Carlucci, Interview, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, August 28, 2001, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2001_0828_carlucci.pdf, 37.

Unique circumstances may dictate the involvement of the NSC advisor in operational matters, as was the case with Kissinger's negotiations on normalizing relations with China. As Robert McFarlane observes, had normal channels been used, "it would not have otherwise succeeded. . . . you had to be able to find out if the Chinese were even interested—secretly. Once we confirmed that they were, if you had brought in Democrats and bureaucrats throughout the government, it would have leaked and quickly been aborted."[68] But even in this case, errors were made that required later correction. More generally, as Walter Isaacson points out, no matter how great Kissinger was "as a gunslinger, the lone cowboy cannot build a policy based on tending to various complex alliances unless he is willing to share information and authority with the bureaucracy." Kissinger launched an "age of bombshell diplomacy." However, "In the long run this trend will probably prove more exciting than wise."[69] In the short run of the Nixon presidency, Kissinger's efforts to keep his diplomatic activities secret enraged Secretary of State Rogers and were a central source of tensions between State and the NSC advisor and his staff that festered for years. It was a problem that would vex Nixon personally, test his patience, and take up much time, as H. R. Haldeman's diaries frequently attest.[70]

Another impetus for diplomatic activity is an effort to emphasize a president's personal interest and concern in a foreign policy issue. According to Lake, "The secretary of state should be the chief diplomatic officer of the United States government. But sometimes it can be more effective for the White House to do it." In those cases, according to Lake, efforts were undertaken "without burning the bridge, turning it into a Vance and Brzezinski, Kissinger and Rogers."[71]

For the Obama administration, the reopening of diplomatic ties to Cuba during his second term presents a more recent example. Here, as with Kissinger's efforts with China, direct White House effort may have been called for given the politically charged nature of the policy effort. According to one account, deputy NSC advisor Ben Rhodes and the director of the NSC's Latin American staff handled the "secret talks." Moreover, "the White House did not inform Secretary of State John F. Kerry until the discussions were well underway, and State Department officials in charge of the region found out only as they neared completion."[72] In this instance NSC efforts proved productive, and diplomatic relations were finally normalized again after almost fifty-five years.

That said, concerns still may remain, particularly as an operational role may commit the NSC advisor to policies and positions that then later render him or her unable to objectively advise the president. Too much diplomatic effort and travel activity may hurt the standing of the NSC advisor in another way: loss of personal contact with the president, with others filling the void. This may have been a contributing factor to the departure of Obama's first NSC advisor, Gen. James Jones. As the *New York Times* noted at the time of Jones's resignation, he "spent a lot of time wrangling with allies and adversaries alike on Mr. Obama's behalf . . . but wielded less influence in the White House." As a result, his deputy, Tom Donilon, and his chief of staff, Denis McDonough, "spoke more regularly with Mr. Obama and served as the

---

[68] Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 46.

[69] Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 509.

[70] The published version of select diary entries can be found in H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: Putnam, 1984). The originals, which are both in written and (later) recorded form, are located at the Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives, College Park, MD.

[71] Lake, telephone interview.

[72] Karen De Young, "How the Obama White House Runs Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.

go-to aides for staff members trying to gauge where the president stood."[73] Jones's trips abroad often removed him from the center of action, and day-to-day operations often fell to Donilon; Jones "never seemed to click" with the president.[74]

Transition Challenges: Involvement in policy implementation and ongoing operations appears to be the riskiest expansion of the NSC advisor's role. Indeed the difficulties are quite apparent in the semantics of the job title: NSC *advisor* rather than bureaucratic operative. Yet some limited activities may be feasible if they

- are directed at monitoring and oversight;
- result from special circumstances, such as the expectations of foreign governments or as signals of a particular presidential concern or direction, rather than serve as routine practices;
- avoid "free-lancing" and the other principals are informed about and in agreement with them;
- are carefully weighed against any negative consequences.

THE NSC ADVISOR IN CONTEXT

Another set of factors to consider in the appropriate definition of the NSC advisor's role is the place of that person within a web of other actors and broader advisory arrangements. Two particularly stand out: the relation of the NSC advisor to the president and then to the other principals.

NSC ADVISOR AND THE PRESIDENT

One very important contextual factor is the fit of the NSC advisor's role with the president's own desires and expectations as a decision maker. The paramount position that the president's needs serve in considering how decision-making processes, structures, and organizations are crafted and how the particular roles of those involved in them are defined is well recognized. In general, it would be poor practice to set out an advisory system that did not fit well with a president's decision-making and managerial style.

The NSC advisor is in a particularly important position. His or her proximity to the Oval Office makes the NSC advisor a daily barometer of presidential inclination, intention, and policy will. The need for "fit" appears especially strong. According to Colin Powell, who served as Reagan's last NSC advisor, "At the end of the day, the duty of the National Security Council staff and the assistant is to mold themselves to the personality of the president."[75] More generally, according to the Tower Commission, "Because the system is the vehicle through which the president formulates and implements his national security policy, it must adapt to each individual president's style and management philosophy."[76] Scowcroft, one of the three principal members of the Tower Commission, particularly emphasizes that "advisers

---

[73] David E. Sanger and Helene Cooper, "Civilian Replaces General in Key Foreign Policy Job," *New York Times*, October 9, 2010.

[74] David E. Sanger, "National Security Adviser to Resign, Officials Say," *New York Times*, October 8, 2010.

[75] Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 52.

[76] Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Commission Report*, 88.

must learn to respond to the way in which a president wants information; otherwise they will either frustrate the president or the president will go around the system to get his own information."[77]

Yet there are downsides to a perfect fit: some personal predilections may be sources of decision-making weaknesses. As Carnes Lord observes, "Presidents should expect to pay severe penalties for indulging quirks of their personalities . . . at the expense of institutional arrangements that reflect the basic logic of the presidential office."[78] As Bowie and Immerman point out, for example, Nixon "perverted the entire system to serve his own and Henry Kissinger's penchant for secrecy and deviousness."[79] Catering to Nixon's quirks and idiosyncrasies ultimately proved costly—not so much to Kissinger but to Nixon and his presidency. Bundy meshed well with JFK, yet his adjustment to the Johnson persona may have been too close a fit for a president with strong emotions and weak decision-making instincts. Reagan's emotional commitment to freeing the hostages in Lebanon encouraged NSC advisor Robert McFarlane to devise the arms-for-hostages scheme, and it was an operation whose implications Reagan apparently did not fully grasp at the time. Reagan's loose management and reliance on delegation provided an opportunity for Admiral Poindexter, McFarlane's successor, to take it upon himself to add the diversion of funds to the Nicaragua contras piece of it, which would ultimately prove so damaging.

The close proximity of the NSC advisor to the president raises another set of concerns: the temptation to bypass the broader system and make decisions on the fly. Powell, for example, always exercised care when he met privately with Reagan; he would invite someone else along and make sure that person was taking notes.[80] Perhaps it was his innate caution, perhaps he sought to avoid misunderstandings with the other principals, or perhaps it was a lesson he drew from Iran-Contra. Scowcroft also was careful that his morning meeting with the president did not become an occasion for presidential decision making without the knowledge and participation of the other principals. "The president can make a decision anytime he wants," Scowcroft notes. But, mindful of what had transpired at points between Reagan and his NSC advisors during Iran-Contra, "when that happened and the president said 'I think we ought to do this,' I said, 'Fine, we'll do that; but let me check with my colleagues and see if there are any problems we haven't thought about.' So I would call around to them and say, 'The president wants to do this, do you have a problem with it?'"[81] In addition, Scowcroft had his deputy, Robert Gates, attend in order to make sure that what transpired was interpreted properly; the same went for meetings of the NSC.[82] In Scowcroft's view, they were all part of the honest broker role.[83] Lake also made it a practice not to use his private meetings with Clinton to press for a decision in the direction that he favored, as Kissinger had done:

> When you are with the president, it could be very tempting on the every morning when you are meeting with the president to use that to make decisions. At least in my mind I was trying to make those

---

[77] Brent Scowcroft, "Ford as President and His Foreign Policy," in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *The Ford Presidency: Twenty-Two Intimate Perspectives of Gerald R. Ford* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 312.

[78] Lord, *The Presidency and the Management of National Security*, 86.

[79] Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 259.

[80] Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 164.

[81] Scowcroft, telephone interview.

[82] George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 31.

[83] Scowcroft, telephone interview.

> implementation meetings on decisions that had already been made: "You want me to be doing this, you want me to be doing that" . . . and then teeing up policy discussions, saying "you are going to have to have a meeting on this or a meeting on that." And certainly giving my advice but never letting that come to a final policy decision.[84]

Presidents also face their own responsibilities in dealing with the NSC advisor. They must be prepared to listen, prioritize when necessary, set goals, and ultimately make decisions. One example: at their daily briefings, as Powell relates, Reagan "listened carefully and asked a few questions, but gave no guidance." "We would lay out the contrasting views . . . and wait for the president to peel them back to get at underlying motives." Carlucci would present his recommendations but was often unclear of Reagan's decision. "Was that a yes?" he would later ask Powell. [85]

As well, presidents are the ultimate managers of the process and must recognize that task as a presidential one. According to Powell, "The president's management style placed a tremendous burden on us."[86] When Powell took over as NSC advisor, Reagan "never spoke to me about the job, never laid out his expectations, never provided any guidance."[87] Reagan also let the interpersonal tensions and disputes between Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger fester too long. Similarly, George W. Bush failed to rein in Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld's practice of not taking seriously the NSC deliberative process.

Transition Challenges: Meeting presidential needs and predilections matter and should be part of the calculus during the transition about how the job of the NSC advisor is defined and how broader advisory arrangements are structured. Yet simple fit may fail to adjust for presidential weaknesses. NSC advisors, once in office, also need to be attentive to their personal time with the president and avoid hasty decisions that may short-circuit the wider deliberative process. Presidents must recognize that they are the ultimate managers in defining expectations, holding participants accountable, and making the system work effectively. The latter seems especially a set of tasks that might be profitably undertaken during the transition or early on in the new administration.

NSC Advisor and the Other Principals

One thing that does appear clear is that administrations will have to have live with an enhanced role for the NSC advisor. We cannot return to the days when the State Department and the secretary of state were dominant. As Bert Rockman explains, presidents "find their political and policy needs better served from within the White House. From this vantage point, the departments sooner or later are perceived as representing interests that are not those of the president." Nor, according to Rockman, can the secretary of state serve as both foreign minister and chief policy advocate: "To be both, foreign minister (representing departmental perspectives) and leading foreign policy maker has within it increasingly the seeds of an insoluble role conflict."[88]

---

[84] Lake, telephone interview.

[85] Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 334.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 349.

[88] Bert A. Rockman, "America's Departments of State: Irregular and Regular Syndromes of Policy Making," *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 4 (1981): 925. Also see Brzezinski's discussion of the superiority of a

Another dynamic is that foreign and national security policy problems have grown more complex and require cross-cutting input from a variety of agency and departments. No one department can usually claim exclusive or near-exclusive domain. As Anthony Lake explains,

> There are systemic reasons why it is almost inevitable that there will be increasing emphasis on the national security advisor . . . getting more involved. . . . the fact is that in a world in which practically every issue now has an economic, military, political, diplomatic, etc., dimension, it is very hard for any cabinet officer to have the absolute lead on that issue. This is so because the other cabinet officers increasingly have equity on those issues and they are simply not going to follow that lead. So it has to be coordinated and it has to be led from the White House, and while presidents can do that in making general decisions, it can only be done on a day-to-day basis out of the NSC staff.[89]

As part of that centrality, the NSC advisor has a crucial task in setting the tone of the interpersonal relationships among the principals. Some NSC advisors have used their pivotal position as gatekeepers to block the information and advice coming from others and to pursue their own policy agendas. Others are more facilitators—rendering advice but making sure that others are heard. Striking the right balance in relation to the other principals is important in operating effectively and achieving success.

As Lake notes, "A lot of it depends upon personalities. Always."[90] According to Scowcroft, "It's all personality. . . . I think you need to always be conscious of the interplay of personalities."[91] Making the various personalities work effectively together clearly contributes to a better advisory process. As Joseph Sisco—a key deputy secretary of state on Middle East affairs during the Nixon and Ford years—observes, "I think it would have been a much easier relationship if Henry [Kissinger] had cooperated more fully with [Secretary of State] Bill Rogers and if there had been much greater sensitivity about the personal relationship. Henry admits this in his book."[92] By contrast, as Secretary of State James Baker observes of the Bush Sr. team, they were a group of "experienced, collegial peers who had worked together in one capacity or another and who liked and respected one another . . . we trusted one another." Policy differences were sometimes present. Cheney and Scowcroft were more cautious than he was about changing policy, according to Baker. But these differences never led to the "backbiting of the Kissinger-Rogers, Vance-Brzezinski eras or the slugfests of our national security teams during the Reagan years."[93]

Part of the equation is also presidential and what he or she brings to the table. The Bush Sr. foreign policy team had much less bureaucratic infighting compared with its Reagan predecessor, even though the principals were skilled, experienced, and with well-developed policy views. Part had to do with Scowcroft's conception of his role, and part with the experience of Baker and others who had gone through the Reagan years. But part was also George H.W. Bush's: he understood the institutional and interpersonal forces at work. As he notes in *A World Transformed*, "Brent and Jim did get moderately crosswise, but very rarely." On the one hand, Baker "worried he might be excluded from a decision that affected his

---

"presidential" system to a "secretarial" one (Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1983], 533-38).

89 Lake, telephone interview.

90 Ibid.

91 Scowcroft, telephone interview.

92 Joseph Sisco, "Ford, Kissinger and the Nixon-Ford Foreign Policy," in Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *The Ford Presidency: Twenty-Two Intimate Perspectives of Gerald R. Ford* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 331.

93 James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 21-22.

department. As a former chief of staff, he knew how a strong-willed presidential adviser, if backed by the president, can easily isolate a cabinet member." On the other hand, Scowcroft and the NSC staff "were also concerned about what State might be up to." The management challenge was recognized and dealt with, not just by the principals but by President Bush himself: "We tried very hard, and I think successfully, to keep all the participants informed and eliminate personality clashes which could undermine policy-making as well as effective diplomacy."[94]

The Obama presidency offers a different, more cautionary story. Here the lesson from the experience of James Jones, the first NSC advisor, is one of making sure the NSC advisor is a proactive lead player among the principals. According to one early account, Jones seemed to "attend meetings rather than lead them" and that he needed "to drive the agenda." Moreover, with a high-powered team—Hillary Clinton at State, Robert Gates continuing at Defense, and special envoys George Mitchell and Richard Holbrooke—Jones failed to establish himself as "first among equals."[95] Similarly, in the view of David Rothkopf, "The national security adviser needs to be behind the president"; however, Jones was not "seen as a guy in the room."[96] The latter role for an NSC advisor might have worked well in the Eisenhower years but not for contemporary NSC advisors.

Transition Challenges: Personalities matter, and it is part of the job of NSC advisor to think about the collective contribution all the principals make to presidential decision making. How the NSC advisor defines the job and works on a daily basis can foster good relations or can inhibit them. And, again, the president has a management task in setting the tone and eliminating sources of tension. The issue especially has a temporal dimension. These personnel choices are first made during the transition to office. Presidents-elect and their transition advisers make a variety of calculations in selecting key appointees. In the area of national security, how those individuals are likely to work together—not just their merits qua individuals—especially needs to be factored in.

INTERAGENCY PLANNING AND COORDINATION

NSC advisors, particularly at the start of a new administration, play a crucial role in how the decision-making process is organized, most especially with regard to interagency input and coordination. Cutler's efforts in almost single-handedly creating the Eisenhower-era system were notable, as were Bundy's efforts to disband them and then struggle to find an effective substitute. Subsequent NSC advisors have been equally important in putting their imprint on the broader interagency process.

Some administrations have favored a system in which the State Department is placed in the leading role, others one in which the NSC advisor dominates. Both have proven problematic. In March 1966 the interagency coordination process below the level of the NSC was finally more formalized—during the Kennedy-Johnson years—with overall direction and authority given the secretary of state.[97] A Senior Interdepartmental Group

---

[94] Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 36.

[95] Joel Klein, "The Rock Builder," *Time*, May 4, 2009, 32.

[96.] Helene Cooper, "National Security Adviser Tries Quieter Approach," *New York Times*, May 7, 2009.

[97] Inderfurth and Johnson, "Transformation," 67. The organizational changes were based on a report by Gen. Maxwell Taylor.

(SIG) was created, chaired by the undersecretary of state. Various Interdepartmental Regional Groups (IRGs) were also established, usually chaired by a regional representative from State. A special group on Vietnam was created (chaired by the undersecretary of state) as well as a principals-level group on arms control (chaired by Rusk).[98] The State Department–led process, however, harkened back to the weak system under Truman and proved less than effective.[99]

During the 1968 transition, Nixon partially embraced but also departed from the NSC process in which he himself had participated as vice president: he wanted more and better organization but without, as Kissinger notes, "lowest common denominator" recommendations or single choices.[100] Based on recommendations by Kissinger, former Harvard colleague Morton Halperin, and Gen. Andrew Goodpaster,[101] a new system was devised that, while more formally structured, centralized control of policy in Nixon's—and Kissinger's—hands. The Johnson-era SIG was abolished. Nor were there to be the more informal Tuesday lunches to work out differences among the principals. Instead, an NSC Review Group was created, below meetings of the full NSC, as well as an NSC Ad Hoc Under Secretary's Committee, below the NSC Review Group, and a variety of interagency regional groups.[102] Key committees were chaired by Kissinger himself, not by departmental representatives. Most important among these latter groups was the interagency Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), set up in April of 1969, to deal with crisis situations. Another was the Review Group, where Kissinger approved papers going to Nixon and NSC members and was able to control the latter's agenda.

The written record of policy options and deliberations was also strengthened with the creation of National Security Decision Memoranda (NSDMs)—which reflected Nixon's policy choices—and background analyses, done on an interagency basis, titled National

---

98 W. W. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power: An Essay on Recent History* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 362.

99 According to Inderfurth and Johnson, "The SIG framework never became a very effective method for interagency coordination" ("Transformation," 67). Also see Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy*, 104-5. According to Roger Morris, the SIGs and the IRGs "became merely rubber stamps for the process of passing on consensus memoranda, brokered by inter-agency vetos" (Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 75). According to Bromley Smith, then the executive secretary of the NSC, representatives from State "began sending papers from the [SIG] directly to the president, shorting out the secretary of state . . . it was not a satisfactory procedure." Rostow "had to pick up the ball and put questions in shape so the president could deal with them" (Bromley Smith, Oral History, July 29, 1969, Johnson Library, 19-20).

100 Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 41. Also see Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 136; Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 80.

101 Goodpaster, Eisenhower's former staff secretary, was on temporary leave from his position as deputy commander in Saigon in order to work on the Nixon transition. In the third volume of his memoirs, Kissinger especially singles out Goodpaster as the "architect" of the new system, as well as an important source in recommending that the NSC advisor rather than departmental representatives (especially State) chair key committees (Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999], 75). Roger Morris, however, regards Halperin—who was then at the Defense Department's Office of International Security Affairs—as the key force in drafting the new plan and with Goodpaster in more of an after-the-fact approval role (Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 78-84).

102 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 43; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 75-76. Also see Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 80-81; John Prados, *Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 263, 266-67; David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 115-18.

Security Study Memoranda (NSSMs). Some 165 NSSMs were produced during the first term alone.[103] Views vary on whether the NSSMs were just bureaucratic busywork or a useful contribution to policy deliberations.[104]

On December 28, 1968, at Key Biscayne, Nixon told William Rogers, his designate for secretary of state, and Mel Laird, his designate for secretary of state, of the organizational changes. According to Kissinger, "Like so many meetings in the Nixon administration the Key Biscayne session had its script determined in advance."[105] Rogers and Laird later raised objections, but Nixon resisted any alterations.[106] It was a harbinger of White House determination to dominate the process and a signal of little tolerance of departmental concerns or perspectives. Once again, we see transition errors leading to future costs.

At the start of the Carter presidency, the interagency process was simplified. Two committees were created: a Policy Review Committee (PRC), usually chaired by the secretary of state or another cabinet member as appropriate, and a Special Coordinating Committee (SCC), chaired by NSC advisor Brzezinski himself.[107] The latter dealt with "cross-cutting issues," arms-control policy, intelligence activities, and crisis management. Brzezinski also proposed and Carter approved a procedure for organizing NSC paperwork. Brzezinski and his staff prepared and organized most of the staff work, including the preparation of Presidential Review Memoranda (PRMs), as well as the gathering of information for PRC or SCC meetings, preparation of agendas, and coordination of the paper flow. If the principals agreed on policy recommendations, Brzezinski submitted a Presidential Directive (PD) to Carter for approval. If no recommendations were forthcoming, Brzezinski, drawing on his own notes or those of his staff, prepared a summary report for Carter, and the matter would be taken up at the presidential level.[108] It was an orderly process, but one that would create difficulties and reveal the increasingly powerful role of Brzezinski as an advocate and not just a coordinator. The new system was approved by Carter shortly before his inauguration without

---

[103] Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 120. For a list of NSSMs through early October 1971, see John Leacacos, "Kissinger's Apparat," in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93; fifty-five NSSMs were ordered by Kissinger in the administration's first 100 days. Morris points out that the NSSMs trailed off to only eight in the first four months of 1970. In part this reflected that basic national security policies were now set, but also that "increasingly the most important decisions were to be taken outside the NSC" (Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 92).

[104] According to Kissinger, "It enabled me to use the bureaucracy without revealing our purposes" (Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 155).

[105] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 44; also see Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 86-91.

[106] Kissinger, *White House Years*, 44. Kissinger also provides an interesting account of Nixon's indecisiveness in personally pressing the issue against Rogers's and Laird's opposition by his delay in signing NSDM 2, which put the organizational changes into effect. Nixon finally signed it on January 19. According to Kissinger, NSDM 2 encompassed all the changes Kissinger had proposed, except that Nixon wanted the CIA director to be removed from NSC meetings—an exclusion that Laird and Kissinger eventually got Nixon to rescind (see Kissinger, *White House Years*, 44-47). Morris notes that a reduced CIA role was in Halperin's original plan (Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 81, 88).

[107] In addition to the two principal committees, there were also lower-level, interdepartmental groups, chaired by senior agency officials, to deal with matters not requiring the attention of the SCC or PRC. Also, Vance usually chaired most PRC meetings, although a few were chaired by the secretary of defense and a couple by the secretary of the treasury (Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 59; Zbigniew Brzezinski, interview, Carter Presidency Project, Miller Center Oral History, February 18, 1982, 62-64, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_1982_0218_brzezinski.pdf).

[108] On the development of the Carter NSC system, see Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 10, 58-63.

consultation with Secretary of State–designate Cyrus Vance or Harold Brown, who had been tapped for Defense.[109] According to Vance, "[I] opposed this arrangement from the beginning, and I said so to the president."[110]

Under Reagan, the major organizational change was the creation of three senior interagency groups (SIGs) that were closely tied to the departments. State took the lead in the SIG on foreign policy, the Pentagon on defense matters, and the CIA on intelligence. A fourth SIG was created a year later on international economic policy, and Treasury was the lead agency. Under the SIGs, interdepartmental working groups—chaired by a representative from the lead department—were charged with developing options to be presented to the SIGs.[111]

At least at the start of the Reagan presidency, the cabinet secretaries (and the director of the CIA) played a major role in their respective SIGs. Also at the start the NSC advisor was in a comparatively weaker position. Yet the SIGs proved less important over time, and they were replaced by a stronger NSC advisor and a staff-directed process.[112]

THE "SCOWCROFT MODEL"

As part of its recommendations for reform, the Tower Commission especially emphasized the need for better organized and more thorough interagency coordination, which NSC advisor Frank Carlucci and his deputy, Colin Powell, put into practice. Many of the commission's recommendations were Scowcroft's handiwork. Plus, he undertook a personal effort: "I actually drew up a model for reform of the NSC system, and I guess I gave it to Carlucci but really Colin Powell."[113] As a result, early in his tenure, Carlucci submitted NSDD 276 on organizational reform to the president. At the top of the new system was a Senior Review Group, to be chaired by the NSC advisor. Below that were several Policy Review Groups, which Powell, as deputy NSC advisor, chaired. NSC staff control of these committees avoided the department-led groups that had often bogged down the development of policy options earlier in the administration. The new system also prevented "many issues leap-frog[ing] from lower level working groups to full scale NSC meetings, where intense disagreement by the principals often precluded presidential decisions."[114] The new system did not sit well with Secretary of State Shultz, who opposed the NSC advisor chairing meetings of

---

[109] Brzezinski, interview, Miller Center Oral History, 63, 67.

[110] Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 37; also see Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 62-63.

[111] The nomenclature of the paper trail also changed—a seemingly endemic occurrence in each new administration. The Carter-era PRMs became National Security Study Documents (NSSDs), while the PDs were labeled National Security Decision Documents (NSDDs). On the SIGs, NSSDs, and NSDDs, see Robert McFarlane, with Richard Saunders and Thomas C. Shull, "The National Security Council: Organization for Policy Making," in R. Gordon Hoxie, ed., *The Presidency and National Security Policy* (New York: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 1984), 266-69.

[112] Writing in 1986, Colin Campbell observes that "only the SIG on intelligence remains active. The Crisis Preplanning Group chaired by the NSC staff director for policy development coordinates the administration's management of major foreign policy emergencies. The Strategic Arms Control group headed by the assistant to the president for national security affairs [the NSC advisor] has supplanted the SIG on defense. And the Economics Policy Council has absorbed the entire case load of the SIG on International Economic Policy" (Colin Campbell, *Managing the Presidency: Carter, Reagan, and the Search for Executive Harmony* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986, 43).

[113] Scowcroft, telephone interview.

[114] Dick Kirschten, "Competent Manager," *National Journal*, February 28, 1987, 474.

the principals in the president's absence. But it laid the foundation for what has come to known as the "Scowcroft model."

Put in place during Scowcroft's second stint as NSC advisor under Bush Sr., the "model" had three levels.[115] The first, below meetings with the president present, was the principals' committee. Chaired by Scowcroft, it was a place to bring all the principals productively and cooperatively together. According to Scowcroft, it had special merit because the principals "were able to agree frequently. . . . What it did was save a lot of the president's time." [116]

The second level, the deputies' committee, was even more important in some ways. Its members were drawn from the major departments and agencies, but the group was chaired by Scowcroft's own deputy (initially Robert Gates). According to one account, the deputies' group

> would meet as often as everyday, and its principal task would be to debate and reach agreement on narrowed policy options that could be brought to Bush and his top national security aides for final decision. A chief goal of the set-up was to reduce the gap that too often existed between the middle level of government where detailed policy was developed, and the top level, where decisions are made. A committee of deputies bridged this gap because its members would be trusted by the top level yet be in a position to communicate easily with the lower level.[117]

In some ways, Scowcroft was able to revive a process that harkened back to the Eisenhower Planning Board, but without its more cumbersome formality.

At the third level of the process were eight (an initial number to which more would be added) Policy Coordinating Committees (PCCs). These groups examined and developed policy proposals. Yet the effectiveness of the work undertaken at this level—dubbed National Security Review (NSR) papers—seems mixed, especially those undertaken early in the new administration. According to Richard Haass, who served on the NSC staff during this period, "One of the real weaknesses of the PCC level is that it was periphery-chaired. It's very hard to have any player be both a player and the referee. The assistant secretary of state comes to the meeting to chair it and to represent the State Department. This puts him in an extremely difficult position." [118]

---

[115] Scowcroft had developed the proposal during the 1988 transition. And unlike the fait accompli for cabinet members that Kissinger's organizational changes entailed in the 1968 Nixon transition or Brzezinski's for Carter, Scowcroft circulated his proposal to Baker and Senator John Tower (R-TX), who was then Bush's nominee for secretary of defense. According to Scowcroft, "I had to convince [Baker] in the beginning because it was new. It hadn't been done before, and he was wondering whether that cut into his prerogatives. But I convinced him. It was a collegial operation." Baker had no problems with Scowcroft chairing the principals in the president's absence. Even though "I was junior to them all," Scowcroft later recalled, "there wasn't that kind of problem. It worked beautifully." (Scowcroft, telephone interview).

[116] Ibid.

[117] David Callahan, "Honest Broker: Brent Scowcroft in the Bush White House," *Foreign Service Journal* 69, no. 2 (1992): 31. As Gates would later note, sometimes it was the number three person in the department who was on the committee, since the number two person was usually tasked with managing departmental affairs. Thus Robert Kimmitt, the undersecretary of state for political affairs, usually attended instead of Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, while Paul Wolfowitz, undersecretary of defense for policy, attended for Defense rather than Donald J. Atwood, undersecretary of defense (see Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 266-67).

[118] Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, eds., "The Bush Administration National Security Council," *The National Security Council Project: Oral History Roundtables* (Washington, DC: Center for International and Security Studies

During the Clinton presidency (and later under George W. Bush), the policy-making structure of the Scowcroft model was kept intact: the serious policy work would continue in the principals' committee, and the deputies' committee would continue to provide interagency coordination below the principals level and serve as the conduit upward for policy working groups. The latter were now called Interagency Working Groups (IWGs) and were chaired by representatives from either departments, the NSC or the National Economic Council (NEC).[119]

But there was one important organizational change. In an effort to better deal with international economic issues, a small staff was created in that area and placed under the control of both the NSC advisor and the director of the NEC. In addition, the director of the NEC was made a member of the NSC, and he and his NEC staff were included in meetings involving international economic issues.

One overall trend also deserves mention, and it is that the NSC staff may come to dominate the policy process. This is why effective interagency coordination is needed. Centralization of policy making in the White House is a feature of the modern presidency. Its development may be good for a reason: it gives the president rather than cabinet members and their departments greater imprint on policy. However, taken too far, it can choke off important sources of policy counsel. Sometimes, of course, this is simply a matter of bureaucratically grounded perceptions—cabinet secretaries thinking they should be the lead actors, contemporary Dean Achesons weighing in privately with contemporary Harry Trumans or a John Foster Dulles with an Eisenhower. Yet, even in the Obama presidency, which had political heavyweights such as Hillary Clinton and John Kerry at State and Robert Gates and Leon Panetta at Defense on board, concerns were raised about too much White House heavy-handedness. According to one account, there was "an overbearing and paranoid White House that insists on controlling even the smallest policy details, often at the expense of timely and effective decisions." Within the Defense Department, in particular, "mistrust of the White House has persisted since the administration began." "Micromanagement" by the NSC staff "drove me crazy," according to Gates. Panetta later noted its "penchant for control," including review and approval of media interview requests.[120]

Transition Challenges: Interagency coordination has been a perennial problem since the NSC's creation in 1947. Bringing together the president's team—both within the White House and in the departments and agencies—and getting them to collectively function effectively is a challenge, and one that should be addressed at the outset of a new administration. The development of the Scowcroft model offers good news to presidential transitions: it has now survived through three presidencies, and at least organizationally it seems to offer a reasonable template for effective coordination. But much, again, depends on the efforts of the NSC advisor (and the deputy NSC advisor); some have made the model work effectively, others less so. Attention to the third level of the model, the working groups, is one area that requires further analysis. Here the track record is very mixed. Finally, one of the most important activities during the transition is the preparation of a national security

---

and the Brookings Institution, 1999), 12, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/19990429.pdf. Haass was the NSC's chief Middle East expert at the time.

[119] Office of the Historian, "History of the National Security Council"; also see Vincent A. Auger, "The National Security Council System after the Cold War," in Randall B. Ripley and James M. Lindsay, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy after the Cold War* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 52-54.

[120] De Young, "How the Obama White House Runs Foreign Policy."

directive, signed by the president and usually issued shortly after the inauguration, in which the organization of the national security system is set out and responsibilities assigned.

NSC Advisor and the NSC Staff

The size and internal organization of the NSC staff is another matter for the NSC advisor's attention. There is, again, no statutory guidance here, save for budgetary constraints. Historically, the organization of NSC staff has varied. The problem is compounded by the fact that organizational and personnel issues are critical tasks that must be confronted during the transition.

Deputy NSC Advisor

With the development of the Scowcroft model and the emergence of the deputies' group as a critical layer of interagency coordination, selection of a deputy NSC advisor has taken on greater importance. That person must possess many of the same skills as an effective NSC advisor, especially in serving as an honest broker in his or her own right. Robert Gates's tenure under Scowcroft is especially notable in this regard. Gates had the prior background and the personal skills and inclination to make his part of the system work. According to Scowcroft,

> [Gates] was very central. The deputies' committee worked so well because of Bob Gates. Before every meeting, he would come in and say, "Here's the subject." And then he would say, "Where do you think we want to end up?" I would say what I thought. He gave everybody their head at the meeting. But in the end, we would have either a decision or a split down clearly defined lines. He was extremely effective. He was terrific.[121]

According to Philip Zelikow, NSC staff director for European and Soviet affairs at the time, Gates also kept a watchful eye and firm hand on other parts of the process:

> What Gates did was to push down the process of initial policy papers and the breaking out of issues so that that occurred as much as possible and in as rigorous as possible [a] way at the assistant secretaries' level below the deputies' committee. So by the time you got to the deputies' meeting with Gates, very often the particular issues were already identified with some crispness. And then the quality of the analysis on those issues was correspondingly higher and more focused. By the time something would come to the principals, it was defined even better still.[122]

Gates also managed the NSC staff, freeing up Scowcroft to serve as counselor to the president. According to Zelikow,

> [There was] a division of labor between Scowcroft and Gates. Scowcroft is the partner of the president, and he is in effect the White House chief of staff for all foreign matters. . . . The real operation of the machine [was] Gates's job. . . . Gates was the person who had to make the machine really run and stay sharp. It was Gates's job to get things to Brent's attention and frame issues so that Brent could operate in the most effective way. One needed the other to reach their full potential, which is often the case. In a good managerial system, you want to hire people to offset your weaknesses, and vice versa. The Scowcroft-Gates combination was an exceptional team in that way.[123]

---

[121] Scowcroft, telephone interview.

[122] Philip Zelikow, telephone interview with author, December 21, 2007.

[123] Ibid.

The division of labor between the two, of course, was a matter of personal chemistry and how Scowcroft defined *his* role as NSC advisor; others may work out the particulars differently. But that they *were* "worked out" is important and instructive.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

As with the Scowcroft model, the core internal organization of the NSC staff has remained fairly consistent over recent administrations, although with some alterations to reflect differing priorities both across presidencies and within them at different points of time. Geographical subdivisions predominate. To take just one comparison, the fall 1996 staff under Clinton and Lake and the spring 2004 staff under George W. Bush and Rice had the following common units:

- African Affairs
- Asian Affairs
- Inter-American Affairs (Clinton)/Western Hemisphere Affairs (Bush)
- Defense Policy and Arms Control
- Intelligence Programs (Clinton)/Intelligence (Bush)
- Legislative Affairs
- Legal Adviser
- Strategic Planning and Speechwriting (Clinton)/Press and Speechwriting (Bush)

Some geographic units were grouped differently.

Under Clinton:

- Central and Eastern Europe
- European Affairs
- Near East and South Asian Affairs
- Russian, Ukrainian, and Eurasian Affairs

Under Bush:

- European and Eurasian Affairs
- Near East and North African Affairs

Some units were similar but with slightly different emphases:

- Democracy, Human Rights, and Humanitarian Affairs (Clinton)
- Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations (Bush)

Some units reflected the administration's priorities. In 1996 the Clinton NSC staff had units dealing with

- Global Issues and Multilateral Affairs
- Nonproliferation and Export Controls

- Public Affairs

By the fall of 2000, it had additional new staff units:

- South East Europe
- Transnational Threats

In contrast, by 2004 the Bush NSC staff had units dealing with

- Combating Terrorism
- International Economic Affairs
- Proliferation Strategy, Counterproliferation, and Homeland Defense
- Strategic Planning and Southwest Asia[124]

Early in the Obama presidency, one of the most important changes within the national security staff structure was the incorporation of the once-separate White House Office of Homeland Security and the Homeland Security Council within the NSC structure and under the ultimate direction of the NSC advisor. Both had been established shortly after September 11, 2001. However, following a review (Presidential Study Directive 1) of the organization of counterterrorism and homeland security efforts within the White House, President Obama ordered the change on May 26, 2009.

Another significant change was the reorganization of media and communications responsibilities into a Strategic Communications unit. Its director, Ben Rhodes, was designated yet another deputy national security advisor, a sign of his status as a major player on the national security team. He emerged as a key public figure on national security matters during the Obama presidency.

A new unit, Resilience Policy, was also created. Its mandate concerned emergency hazards and medical preparedness. Other changes were the creation of the separate entities Transborder Security and Multilateral and Human Rights. Later in the Obama presidency, a unit designated Energy and Climate Change was brought within the national security policy structure.

The geographic units were organized as follows:

- Africa
- Asia
- Central Region [Afghanistan, Near East, North Africa, South Asia]
- Europe, Russia, and Central Asia
- Western Hemisphere Affairs

The policy-specific units (in addition to those noted above) covered the following:

- Counterterrorism Policy
- Cybersecurity
- Defense

---

[124] *Capital Source* (Washington, DC: National Journal, Fall 1996), 11-12; *Capital Source* (Washington, DC: National Journal, Fall 2000), 13; and *Capital Source* (Washington, DC: National Journal, Spring 2004), 12-13.

- Intelligence
- International Economics
- Weapons of Mass Destruction

The national security structure remained relatively stable through the Obama presidency, save for changes noted above. However, by 2016, some reorganization led to the consolidated Defense Policy, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Arms Control unit, as well as a retitled Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region entity, and a separate staff on South Asia.[125]

NSC STAFF SIZE

One question that a new administration will face is: Has the staff of the NSC become too large and unwieldy? Precisely determining its personnel composition is no easy task given that many staff members are "detailed" to serve from a variety of departments, agencies, and the military. Plus, White House "bean counting" of employees is often unreliable, with an incentive to underestimate. Human resources "sleight of hand" is a prevalent practice.

Under the Obama presidency, the proper size of the NSC was subject to analysis and discussion (not the first time, by the way). Susan Rice, the NSC advisor during Obama's second term, was reportedly astounded to discover its growth since her service in it during the Clinton years. In her view, it had quadrupled in size to some 400 staff members. One of her initial efforts was to trim it back, some 6 percent by one estimate. While it is difficult to get a good estimate of NSC staff size, there has clearly been a significant increase. One count lists George H.W. Bush's NSC staff at 50, Clinton's at 100, George W. Bush's at 200, and Obama's at some 400.[126] One might quibble with the numbers, but the upward trajectory is clear.

Some of this growth is the result of the incorporation of new entities within the NSC staff structure, the White House staff on homeland security most notably. Still, an incoming administration should carefully examine the number of NSC personnel. What are the sources of growth? How much reflects "bureaucratic creep" that can be pared back? On the other hand, what are necessary additions? According to a recent study by the Atlantic Council, too large a staff damages its ability to coordinate, with the result that the NSC has itself "become part of the problem." Its recommendation is that the appropriate size of the NSC should range between 100 and 150 professionals.[127]

Appendix One contains a special analysis of one important aspect of NSC growth: the use of agencies detailees.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Another area for attention is the organizational culture of the NSC staff. The overall aim here is to ensure cooperative relations between the staff and departments—not just at the level of the principals and the NSC advisor, as we saw, but something that should permeate down through their respective organizations.

During the Carter years, according to Madeleine Albright (then on the NSC staff), despite some "we" and "they" tensions between the NSC staff and their counterparts at State,

---

125 *Federal Yellow Book*, Spring 2010, Winter 2016.

126 De Young, "How the Obama White House Runs Foreign Policy."

127 Croker et al., "National Security Council Reform Project," 11, 13.

Brzezinski tried hard to foster a unified effort: "I think on the whole there were many staff meetings in which Zbig would make it very clear that he didn't like the 'we' and 'they' kind of thing, and I think all of us were aware that certain people were 'they.'"[128]

During Clinton's first term, Lake also was aware of and sought to tamp down the traditional rivalry between the NSC staff and the State Department. As the NSC's own history notes, "During the Carter years, Lake had witnessed the negative effects of bureaucratic infighting and squabbling between Secretary of State Vance and National Security Adviser Brzezinski. As Clinton's National Security Adviser, Lake was effective in maintaining cordial relations with Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher and in developing an atmosphere of cooperation and collegiality." [129] The us-versus-them tensions within previous administrations were on both their minds and agendas. According to Lake,

> I remember more than once telling them [the NSC staff] to avoid the trap . . . both Christopher and I remember this very much from the Carter administration of course. . . . I do remember telling folks at staff meetings, "We must not let this happen." Christopher and I tried to head it off. [130]

Brzezinski also had another useful practice. Unlike Kissinger, who often kept his staff in the dark and limited their contact with Nixon, Brzezinski held weekly meetings in order to, in his words, "report to the staff in full on my dealings with the president and on presidential business, so that vicariously, if not directly, they have a sense of engagement with a man for whom they are working so hard."[131] "I made a point of sharing with staff a great deal about my relationship with the President."[132] According to one NSC staff member, "Zbig wants people to be personally responsible and deeply involved." Moreover, "He gets the staff people to meet with the president—that was unheard of before."[133] Brzezinski especially understood the long hours they put in on the job: "I wanted them to feel involved with the President."[134]

Transition Challenges: Particular attention must be paid early to the selection of a deputy NSC advisor who can fit the particulars of that job, as it has now evolved into greater importance. The division of labor between the NSC advisor and the deputy must also be clearly factored in. A second major task is attention to the organization of the NSC staff, especially organizational alterations that have bearing on the administration's policy priorities. A third task is attention to the internal culture and dynamics of the NSC staff. Development of a positive esprit de corps is important, but so too is fostering a sense of cooperation across the administration and a recognition of the role that all play in effective policy development.

---

128 Madeleine Albright, in Brzezinski, interview, Miller Center Oral History, 18.

129 Office of the Historian, "History of the National Security Council."

130 As Lake further notes, "Because if it looks like there is a House of York and a House of Lancaster, then reporters will immediately start playing the traditional game of going to folks at the State Department and saying 'Here's what the NSC says is happening' and at the State Department, the testosterone will flow and the State Department officials will on background say 'No, here's what is happening' and then they will take it back to the NSC staffer and the NSC staffer will fight back, and it gets out of control" (Lake, telephone interview).

131 Dom Bonafede, "Zbigniew Brzezinski," in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 199.

132 Brzezinski, interview, Miller Center Oral History, 82.

133 Bonafede, "Zbigniew Brzezinski," 200.

134 Brzezinski, interview, Miller Center Oral History, 82.

THE EARLY POLICY AGENDA

Early efforts to put a new administration's own mark on policy are common; indeed they are expected. But whether in domestic, economic, or foreign and national security policy, that effort is complicated not just by the difficulty of that task in its own right but by the increasing length of time it now takes to fill subcabinet appointments. According to a Brookings Institution study of appointments requiring Senate confirmation, by the end of the first 100 days of the George W. Bush presidency, in nine of fourteen departments, only the cabinet secretary had been confirmed. Out of 500 key subcabinet positions, only 29 nominees had been confirmed, compared with 42 at that point for Clinton and 72 under Reagan. By the end of August—with September 11 looming—227 had been confirmed, 41 were announced but the paperwork hadn't yet reached the Senate, 55 were in the process of Senate confirmation, and 144 positions remained unfilled.[135] When the Brookings study was complete, it concluded that it took, *on average*, 8.7 months for the Bush administration to move its nominees through Senate confirmation, compared with 8.3 months in the Clinton presidency and 5.2 under Reagan.[136] Tracking by the *Washington Post* in the early Obama presidency indicated similar delays.

It is not likely the timetable will change in the 2016–2017 transition. In fact, the trend indicates that even more time will be needed. Clearly, efforts to make subcabinet appointments in key agenda areas should be a prime area of concern. Special attention must also be given to devising a balanced personnel process. Too little control by the transition team, as occurred with Carter in 1976, can lead to the cabinet secretaries' domination of the selection process, with later repercussions to the White House's agenda. Too much transition control can lead to organizational weakness within a department as a cabinet member operates in an alien and perhaps hostile environment. Perhaps the right balance can begin to be found in the operational code of George W. Bush's 2000 transition. Their aim, according to personnel director Clay Johnson, was "Do it with them, not to them."[137]

Likewise, and maybe even more importantly, early selection of an NSC advisor is critical. He or she will have a major impact in selecting NSC staff personnel, but without facing the impediment of Senate confirmation. The sooner people are in place, the sooner they can function effectively in their jobs, and the sooner they can turn attention to the new administration's substantive agenda.

Still, the task at hand is daunting. Past efforts to undertake an early review of policy and to engage in a major effort at policy planning have been mixed at best. A largely NSC staff-directed process seems the best course in any case, although departmental "buy in" to the effort and its results is also needed. If the organizational structure mandates department-led efforts, the team of political appointees charged with that undertaking at State, Defense, or elsewhere may still be thin given appointment delays. Even if confirmed, they will likely be encumbered with the tasks of learning their basic departmental responsibilities.

The 1988–1989 George H.W. Bush transition experience is especially instructive. Here was a president with deep foreign policy interests and experience, working with a foreign policy

---

135 White House Transition Project, Presidential Appointments Tracker, 2009.

136 Christopher Lee, "Confirmations Fail to Reach Light's Speed," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2003.

137 Eric Schmitt, "Cabinet Selection Over, Transition Now Focuses on Those Important No. 2's," *New York Times*, January 5, 2001.

team that had them as well. In Scowcroft's view, these efforts at long-range planning were important but difficult to achieve in practice: "I always thought that the NSC, as the agent of the president, ought to have a long-range planning function. I tried it both times and it never worked satisfactorily. Either nobody had time to pay attention to it or you had to grab them when a fire broke out. That was one of the most frustrating things to me. Nobody else is in a position to do the broad, long-range thinking that the NSC is, but I don't know how you do it."[138]

In Secretary of State Baker's view, these early policy reviews in 1989 were handicapped by the fact that many Bush subcabinet appointees were still not in place and, as a result, Reagan holdovers—more averse to examining their own policies—played a major role. According to Baker, the existing bureaucracy produced the papers rather than fresh sources who did not have a vested interest in existing policy. The result was "least-common-denominator thinking, with every potentially controversial—that is, interesting—idea left out in the name of bureaucratic consensus. In the end, what we received was mush."[139]

Yet Scowcroft was organizationally astute and adaptive. NSR-3, on policy toward the Soviet Union, came before Bush in mid-March 1989, but it yielded no major changes from the Reagan years and was characterized as "status-quo plus."[140] According to Scowcroft, "it was disappointing . . . short on detail and substance" and lacked "imaginative initiatives." In its place, Scowcroft asked Condoleezza Rice to draft an alternative think piece, which was much better in Scowcroft's view and evolved into a new approach for dealing with Gorbachev.[141] NSR-12, on basic national security policy, suffered delay, and by May 1989 only sections of an early draft had been produced; Scowcroft even felt they were inadequate.[142] Slow work ran against the deadline for a NATO summit meeting, and Scowcroft himself took the lead in fashioning a conventional arms reduction proposal for the meeting, an initiative that was warmly greeted by the NATO allies and would lead to a conventional forces treaty with the Soviet Union that was much to the advantage of the United States.

Long-range planning also bears on crisis decision making. It is obviously not crisis decision making per se. However, as President Eisenhower recognized from his own military experience, continued attention to planning facilitates an adept and effective response to an immediate crisis. In a paper produced by Cutler in March 1968 and circulated to Eisenhower, the former president noted in the margins that "through this practice [of continuous planning], the members of the NSC became familiar not only with each other but with the basic factors of problems that might, on some future date, face the president." Furthermore, as Cutler notes in the paper, "Thus in time of sudden, explosive crisis, these men would gather to work with and for the president, not as strangers, but as men intimately made familiar, through continuing association with the character, abilities, and understandings of each colleague at the Council table. Such training and familiarity enabled them to act in an emergency, not as ciphers and not as yes-men for the president, but as men accustomed to express their own views."[143]

---

138 Daalder and Destler, "Role of the National Security Adviser," 20; also see Rothkopf, *Running the World,* 273-74.

139 Baker, *Politics of Diplomacy*, 68.

140 Prados, *Keeper of the Keys*, 549.

141 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 40, 53.

142 Prados, *Keeper of the Keys*, 549-50.

143 R. C. Cutler, "The Use of the NSC Mechanism: Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon," March 1968, Gordon Gray Papers, Eisenhower Library. In the margins of the document, Eisenhower also noted that "there were many

That many new administrations have faced early crises should also be factored in and prepared for. Some are of the new administration's own making, such as the Bay of Pigs invasion for JFK. Others come from external threats, such as September 11. Some are carried over from the previous administration that, through neglect or policy drift, emerge as major challenges, such as the humanitarian mission to Somalia in the late days of the Bush Sr. presidency that morphed, under Clinton, into a military effort against its warlords, with eventual consequences in the loss of U.S. lives on the streets of Mogadishu.

The aftermath of crises is also noteworthy. For Kennedy, they generated a degree of learning behavior that made him a better decision maker. For other presidents, the opportunity for change goes unrecognized. The Gulf of Tonkin attacks, for example, failed to serve as a warning sign to Lyndon Johnson about the intelligence he was receiving, and they prompted no reconsideration of a troubled decision-making process that in less than a year would lead to a major military commitment in Vietnam.

The transition from the Bush to the Obama presidencies is especially notable on the importance of crisis management. Just hours prior to Inauguration Day itself, credible reports emerged of an impending terrorist attack on the Washington Mall during the official swearing-in ceremony. As Martha Joynt Kumar relates, once intelligence data emerged indicating a likely attack, both the outgoing Bush and incoming Obama teams swiftly and cooperatively swung into action. The FBI and representatives of the intelligence community quickly briefed Obama's senior leadership about the impending threat. On the morning of Inauguration Day, Bush's chief of staff, Joshua Bolten, NSC advisor Stephen Hadley, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (who would continue in that position under Obama), Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, CIA Director Michael Hayden, and JCS Chairman Michael Mullen gathered for what became a three-hour meeting in the Situation Room in the West Wing of the White House. Attorney General Michael Mukasey and FBI Director Robert Mueller also attended part of the meeting. But the highest echelons of the Bush team were not alone. They were joined by Rahm Emanuel, Obama's designee as chief of staff, and a number of their counterparts from the incoming Obama national security team.

Not only was the meeting an unprecedented gathering of the respective teams of old and new administrations to deal with a potential crisis; it was the culmination of a transition effort that in many ways had prepared them for just such an event. As Kumar stresses, "Thus, by the time they came to the White House on January 20 on the cusp of the inauguration, officials [from both the Bush and Obama camps] knew one another well and were consumers of

---

split views brought forth at the NSC." Furthermore, as Cutler notes, in his memoirs, even more important than "*what* is planned is that the planners *become accustomed* to working and thinking together on hard problems; enabling them—when put to the ultimate test—to arrive more surely at a reasonable plan or policy" (Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 296-97, emphasis in original). Similar points are also made in his final report to the president at the end of his first stint as NSC adviser in April 1955: "Every so often history takes charge. Then there is no time for papers to be properly staffed through the Planning Board and decisions must flow from oral discussion. That Council members have been trained in the customary Council procedure serves to condition them for crash problems which must be decided without the usual background material," (Robert Cutler, "Report to the President: Operations of the National Security Council, January 1953-April 1955," April 1, 1955, White House Office, Office of Special Assistant for National Security, Special Assistant Series, Chronological Subseries, Eisenhower Library). Brownell also makes the same point about the impact on crisis management. Members of the team "became accustomed to working with each other." Prior planning "enabled those persons involved in the policy process to draw on knowledge and information acquired earlier that would be useful in responding to any immediate and pressing crises at hand" (Brownell, *Advising Ike*, 293).

reports, memoranda, and regularly held conversations. . . . The level of comfort they had was important for the dilemma that confronted them."[144] Transition planning by the Bush White House and unprecedented efforts to pave the way for a successful Obama transition had prepared both teams to handle just such a crisis.

Transition Challenges: Transitions need to move quickly in selecting key appointees in order to get their agenda off of the ground. Early selection of an NSC advisor is just as important as early selection of a chief of staff. Both play central if not determining roles in the structure and operation of their respective staff organizations as well as the selection of key personnel within them. NSC staff members are in a better position to undertake the lead on any broad policy-planning reviews; top layers of departments and agencies are likely to be skeletal for a considerable time. But new presidencies also must be aware of the difficulties of such an undertaking; departments must eventually "buy in." Finally, the possibility of early crises must be prepared for. In their aftermath, stock must be taken and lessons learned. The ability of the Bush and Obama teams to deal with a possible terrorist attack on Inauguration Day provides a powerful lesson concerning the advantages of effective transition planning and cooperation.

NATIONAL SECURITY TRANSITIONS IN THE POST-9/11 ERA: LESSONS FROM THE BUSH TO OBAMA TRANSITION

The ability to respond quickly to the threat of a terrorist attack, such as the one that faced the Bush and Obama teams on January 20, 2009, is but a part of the transition efforts that must occur in a post-9/11 world. As a report by the Congressional Research Service, issued nine months before in April 2008, warned,

> These organizations have not undergone a presidential transition and may see many political appointees depart federal government service prior to the inauguration of the next President. Also, the organizations that existed during the last presidential transition and the new agencies may have employed many new personnel who are not well-versed in addressing matters of national security during times of presidential transition. Additionally, organizations that pre-date the attacks of September 11, 2001, and that previously had national security responsibilities, may be asked to devote additional attention and resources to presidential transition-related issues Based on the length of time between the previous presidential transition, the departure of senior political and career officials, and the influx of new personnel addressing national security issues, it is possible that some federal agencies may not be properly anticipating the attention required or resources needed to support the incoming Administration's preparation and policy familiarization efforts. Some security observers contend that if proper planning has not occurred, efforts to support the incoming Administration may require personnel and resources to be transferred. This reallocation could detract from ongoing national security related activities and possibly place the nation at risk.[145]

Jamie Gorelick and Slade Gorton—two members of the 9/11 Commission—particularly point to early transition efforts in these areas, even predating the November election. In their view, attention must be given to the following:

---

[144] Martha Kumar, *Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 3.

[145] John Rollins, "2008-2009 Presidential Transition: National Security Considerations and Options," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 21, 2008), 7-8, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=485462.

- Provision to the candidates before Election Day of full information regarding national intelligence programs and practices, beyond the intelligence briefings that presidential candidates are currently provided
- Early selection and vetting of key national security officials, even before Election Day, so that time is not wasted in the postelection period
- A change in media and public culture that would allow candidates to vet nominees before Election Day
- Early meetings of prospective appointees with their counterparts in the outgoing administration[146]

Although their recommendations apply broadly to national security, homeland security, and intelligence officials, they are relevant to the transition to office of a new NSC advisor and staff.

As it happened, both the outgoing Bush and incoming Obama transition teams were able to put in practice a number of these recommendations in 2008 and early 2009. Most notable was the recognition by the outgoing Bush administration of the importance of successfully paving the way for their successors in office. Here, George W. Bush's insistence upon preparing an effective transition was central to the effort. On November 6, 2008, shortly after Election Day and before a gathering of cabinet and White House staff, Bush spoke about the importance of a successful transition and his commitment to seeing it come about. However, it did not mark the start of his efforts; in fact, he had instructed his chief of staff, Josh Bolten, to begin planning almost a year before. According to John Podesta, a former Clinton chief of staff and one of the co-chairs of the Obama transition organization, "we had a very good professional interaction. I think that was empowered by the President [Bush]." It was Bush who said, according to Podesta, "Make this thing work right."[147]

Assisting Bolten was longtime Bush aide and friend Clay Johnson, who was tasked with preparing agencies and departments for the upcoming transition. Bolten, Johnson, and several other White House officials met with representatives of both Obama and McCain over the summer of 2008. To date, this is the earliest substantive contact between a sitting administration and the transition leaders of the presidential candidates.

One area of special concern was obtaining security clearances for transition officials and prospective appointees well before Election Day. Bolten took advantage of new legislation embodied in the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and passed by Congress in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. For the first time, provisions were made to enable the candidates' transition teams to submit names for security clearances before Election Day. An early effort here was especially important to Bolten, who understood how long the clearance process might take. Work on security clearances began over the summer of 2008 and included outreach efforts by the Bush White House, the Justice Department, and the FBI to both the Obama and John McCain transition advisers.[148] Efforts in 2008 in this area marked an important departure from the past. Further attention is merited here for transitions in 2016 and beyond. Getting early clearances is important in ensuring that key officials are in place, fully informed, and ready to take office as soon as possible. Delay hampers a new administration, especially in national security affairs.

---

[146] Jamie Gorelick and Slade Gorton, "Between Presidents, a Dangerous Gap," *New York Times*, July 16, 2008.

[147] Quoted in Kumar, *Before the Oath*, 71.

[148] For further discussion, see ibid., 48-51.

After Election Day, transition efforts stepped up, and there was more contact and cooperation than had occurred in prior transitions, save perhaps for the interparty one between Reagan and George H.W. Bush in 1988. Once an appointment was designated by the Obama transition, meetings were quickly set up by Bolten and his team for that person with his or her counterpart in the Bush administration. Especially in the area of national security, cooperation and preparation were strong. Kumar notes the following efforts, largely orchestrated by NSC advisor Stephen Hadley:

- Face-to-face meetings between Bush officials and their likely successors, not just at the highest levels but in mid-level positions where feasible
- Extensive issue memoranda prepared by administration officials and provided to their Obama counterparts
- Preparation of contingency plans for possible events requiring swift action
- Frequent briefings for the Obama transition on both policy issues and matters relating to the organization and structure of the NSC staff
- Preparation of records, documents, and policy memoranda by Hadley and key associates specifically designed to remain with the Obama NSC staff and not be turned over to the National Archives and Records Administration. These materials included copies of Bush's National Security Presidential Directives, executive orders, and summaries of conclusions (SOCs) from meetings of the NSC as well as the principals committee.[149]

In the view of incoming NSC advisor James Jones, the efforts of Secretary of State Rice and outgoing NSC advisor Hadley were especially important in creating a "glide path" to a successful transition. As for the transition, according to Jones, "it was pretty darn close to being ideal."[150] For those lower down, according to Kumar, "Incoming staff learned much more about why the Bush administration officials made the decisions they did."[151]

One of the most notable efforts was the preparation of contingency plans *and* meetings between key members of the two transition groups to analyze and discuss them. These culminated, in turn, in one of the most interesting and unprecedented events in transitions to date. In early January, a "table top" exercise was held at the White House involving about fifty participants. Members of the Obama group literally sat next to the person whom they were set to replace as they worked through resolving one of the contingencies—how to deal with improvised explosive devices placed by terrorists in several U.S. cities.[152] It was an eerily prescient exercise in the very real crisis management that both groups would be forced to deal with on Inauguration Day.

Jones had also used the contingency plans to organize his own simulated exercise within the Obama team. It took place in Chicago in early December and involved a number of cabinet and staff officials who had been selected by that date as well as the president-elect. In Jones's view it was an important event not just in familiarizing the team with crisis planning and

---

[149] Martha Kumar, "The 2008 National Security Council Transition: Providing Continuity in a Bipartisan Environment," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* 43, no. 3 (September 2013): 503-5.

[150] Quoted in ibid., 497.

[151] Ibid.

[152] On the exercise, see Kumar, *Before the Oath*, 94-96, 193-96; Kumar, "2008 National Security Council Transition," 509-11.

response, but also in beginning to build a decision-making process that suited the president's needs.[153]

One area where improvement might be made over what occurred in 2008 was the delay in naming a new NSC advisor. It was not until around Thanksgiving that Obama settled on Jones, and his appointment was not publicly announced until December 1 as part of a general roll-out of the Obama foreign policy team. Like the chief of staff does with the domestic and economic staffs, the NSC advisor plays a crucial role in setting up the national security structure and selecting its key personnel. The NSC advisor's appointment, as soon as possible after Election Day, provides a crucial time advantage in getting things up to speed, which is ever needed, but a sure necessity in a post-9/11 world.

Transition Challenges: For presidential transitions, prior to 2008 there was no historical precedent, to draw upon for insight, for the changed organizational context and national security challenges in the aftermath of 9/11. The war against terror must figure as central in the calculus of all of those involved, during the transition, in the areas of homeland and national security policy and the organizational and personnel needs they require. Indeed, effective integration of *homeland* security and *national* security policy is now a new—and vitally consequential—factor in the effectiveness of presidential transitions. The efforts by the Bush and Obama teams during the 2008–2009 transition provide a useful foundation that should be carefully examined by future transition leaders.

FINAL POINTS

I offer no grand finale. Just two quotations—perhaps a closing pas de deux, if you will—to ponder from our foundational NSC staff-system president, Dwight D. Eisenhower. The first is from his memoirs:

> Organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent; even less can it, of itself, make the decisions which are required to trigger necessary action. On the other hand, disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can lead to disaster. Organization makes more efficient the gathering and analysis of facts, and the arranging of the findings of experts in logical fashion. Therefore organization helps the responsible individual make the necessary decision, and helps assure that it is satisfactorily carried out.[154]

The second comes from a Columbia University oral history in 1967:

> I have been forced to make decisions, some of them of a critical character, for a good many years. And I know of only one way in which you can be sure you've done your best to make a wise decision. That is to get all of the people who have partial and definable responsibility in this particular field, whatever it be. Get them with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. I do not believe in bringing them in one at a time, and therefore being more impressed by the most recent one you hear rather than the earlier ones. You must get courageous men, men of strong views, and let them debate and argue with each other. You listen, and you see if there's anything brought up, an idea that changes your own view or enriches or adds to it. Sometimes the case becomes so simple that you can make a decision right then. Or you may go back and wait two or three weeks, if time isn't of the essence. But you make it.[155]

---

[153] See Kumar, "2008 National Security Council Transition," 517-18.

[154] Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 114.

[155] Quoted in Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 246.

On both accounts, however, it is important to remember that the president does not stand alone: an effective NSC advisor and staff can make a wealth of positive difference.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. REORGANIZING THE INTERNAL NSC STRUCTURE*

Budget and personnel changes within a White House unit are an area where many senior staff experience restructuring difficulties. In the case of the National Security Council, there are anomalies that prove difficult to work through at the beginning of an administration. Its budget is a small one, and the bulk of personnel comes from outside the White House. "One of the things that I didn't get done, that I tried to do in the transition, was to fix the . . . essentially broken nature of the NSC as an institution."†

As a statutory office, General Jones thought it should have its own budget. He explained some of the quirks of the NSC budget with a personal illustration. "Any time any national security advisor or foreign minister or defense minister, sometimes even head of state came to my office and I offered them a cup of coffee or anything, I got a bill for it at the end of the month. You know, it was out of personal funds to the tune of about $400 a month out of pocket." That was something that did not change. Part of the reason for the need to have the NSC advisor pay out of a personal account was the budget troubles of the agency. "When we took over on January 20, 2009, the budget for the NSC was $6 million annually."

In order to figure out what their needs were, General Jones did a study of the unit's requirements in terms of personnel and budget. "I did a study immediately, as quickly as possible, to figure out, what does it take to run this organization, to do everything that we want to do, to fund travel, to attend conferences and to be relevant, to be able to be the machine that drives the interagency process that brings people to the table and runs this thing? And I came up with a figure of about 325 people total." Many of those people are ones on detail from the Department of Defense and the Department of State, which means the home department picks up their salaries. Changing the ratio of detailed personnel to salaried NSC employees—a 70% detailees to 30% permanent NSC personnel—proved difficult to change as well.

At the same time, Jones did make gains in the effort to increase the NSC budget. "So I came up with $12 million, and when I left, we got it up. That caused shockwaves around the White House because they didn't want any one particular organization around the White House to be bumped up when everybody else was going to stay pretty flat." Though the budget was increased, the added funds were not sufficient to deal with the issue of the detailed personnel. The detail issue is an important one because it means there is a constant flow of new people coming into the NSC.

General Jones explained that the detailing system is an organizational weak point they weren't able to resolve. "It's really one of the weak links. It's not that the detailees are bad, but it's just that it creates this revolving door of people who are just always coming and going to do their year or two at the NSC and then go back to their agencies." While the detailees are

---

* This appendix is reprinted from Martha Kumar, *Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 203-5.

† James L. Jones, interview with the author, Vienna, VA, November 29, 2011. All subsequent statements by General Jones are from this interview.

important for the operation, having around two-thirds of the staff on detail "is not good for the organization. And we felt that within a year because after a year people started leaving, some very key people started leaving. . . . They walk out one day and their replacement shows up maybe sometimes two weeks later, and it takes them a long time to come up to speed. So that's definitely a weakness."

Interestingly, in the Bush administration, Hadley viewed detailed personnel as a benefit to the NSC because he worried about the presence of a entrenched staff if the office did not have regular turnover. From his viewpoint, there were ways to hold over detailees when you wanted to and by doing so, avoiding building a staff structure that became its own entrenched bureaucracy. "We sought to avoid creating a 'permanent' NSC policy staff of career NSC policy people," Hadley said. "Such a permanent staff would soon develop its own bureaucratic prejudices and interests and reduce the NSC to just one more government agency."* The NSC is charged with synthesizing information that staff gathers from departments and executive branch agencies. Hadley explained his thinking: "The NSC is supposed to integrate across the stovepipes of the federal bureaucracy, coordinate issues across many agencies, and have reach-back into those agencies based on the NSC staff members' ties with people in those agencies and their experience serving there. All of these functions become harder and are in some sense compromised if you develop a permanent NSC policy staff." Even in a bipartisan environment there are differences in interpretation of what kind of staff is needed. Both men had strong and contrasting arguments for their viewpoints on detailing staff from other agencies. Their disagreement gets to the reality of White House organization that the structure one adopts reflects the interests of the current president. There is no one way to organize any unit of the White House staff, including the National Security Council.

* Stephen J. Hadley, interview with the author and follow-up e-mail message, Washington, DC, January 16 and 20, 2013.

APPENDIX 2. ASSISTANTS TO THE PRESIDENT FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS, 1953–2016

Susan Rice: July 1, 2013–

Tom Donilon: October 8, 2010–July 1, 2013

James Jones: January 20, 2009–October 8, 2010

Stephen Hadley: January 26, 2005–January 20, 2009

Condoleezza Rice: January 22, 2001–January 25, 2005

Samuel R. Berger: March 14, 1997–January 20, 2001

Anthony Lake: January 20, 1993–March 14, 1997

Brent Scowcroft: January 20, 1989–January 20, 1993

Colin L. Powell: November 23, 1987–January 20, 1989

Frank C. Carlucci: December 2, 1986–November. 23, 1987

John M. Poindexter: December 4, 1985–November 25, 1986

Robert C. McFarlane: October 17, 1983–December 4, 1985

William P. Clark: January 4, 1982–October 17, 1983

Richard V. Allen: January 21, 1981–January 4, 1982

Zbigniew Brzezinski: January 20, 1977–January 20, 1981

Brent Scowcroft: November 3, 1975–January 20, 1977

Henry A. Kissinger: December 2, 1968–November 3, 1975 (served concurrently as Secretary of State from September 21, 1973)

Walt W. Rostow: April 1, 1966–December 2, 1968

McGeorge Bundy: January 20, 1961–February 28, 1966

Gordon Gray: June 24, 1958–January 13, 1961

Robert Cutler: January 7, 1957–June 24, 1958

Dillon Anderson: April 2, 1955–September 1, 1956

Robert Cutler: March 23, 1953–April 2, 1955

Source: Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "History of the National Security Council, 1947–1997," https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/NSChistory.htm.