

**THE NATIONAL SECURITY  
COUNCIL:**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRESIDENT ELECT

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# PART I: MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT ELECT

The National Security Council is your principal mechanism for orchestrating the instruments of national power. The NSC was established in 1947 to advise presidents on the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies into a unifying national security policy. It is an advisory body and not a decision-making body, and it has no directive authority over the departments and agencies of government. The president decides after receiving advice from inside and outside the NSC system and directs the departments and agencies that have the statutory authorities and capacities to implement policy.

The Council has a small number of statutory members and advisors, but it relies on a hierarchy of committees and is supported by a full-time staff. The NSC system implements a collaborative interagency process to inform and engage the departments and agencies that wield the instruments of power. When the process works well it produces clear policy statements that guide the actions of the executive branch. More importantly, it builds throughout the bureaucracy a deep understanding of objectives and the methods for achieving them.

National security rests on a strong economy and a unified public. As president, national security, foreign, economic, environmental, and health care policies will all make demands on your time, and your time is the critically scarce resource. By properly employing the NSC you extend your reach, magnify your vision, and amplify your energy in furtherance of national security.

The report is organized in three parts.

- *Part I: Memorandum to the President Elect* presents recommendations for your administration. Some are dependent on the form of your administration and your choice of national security strategy.
- *Part II: An Assessment of the NSC System* presents the findings and conclusions of the study—what works and what doesn't—derived from NSC organization and process since its inception but emphasizing the post-Cold War era.
- *Part III: The National Security Council (1947-2008)* presents a more detailed history of the NSC including the specific organizations and processes employed by past administrations.

## Recommendations

Recommendations for your administration are organized below into those that should be taken immediately upon inauguration day, those that should be undertaken during your first year in office, and those that will require sustained effort throughout the full term of your administration.

### *On Inauguration Day*

Initiative in the first year of your administration is critical. There are several actions you can take prior to entering office to reduce the risk of delays and missteps.

#### **1. Determine your approach to national security management as you are considering cabinet nominees.**

There are three broad options for managing national security. You may adopt cabinet government and delegate to department secretaries. You may designate State or Defense as lead agency and delegate to its secretary. You may instead manage national security through your assistant for national security affairs. In all cases, you will provide high-level guidance, reserve the most critical and cross-cutting decisions for yourself, and delegate. Ensure that political nominees are aware of the role they are expected to play to avoid the destructive competitions that have plagued some administrations. The design of your National Security Council—its role, size, and staffing—supports and must wait on your choice of approach to managing national security.

#### **2. Center policy formulation in the NSC initially.**

Regardless of the approach you choose to manage national security, it is recommended that you initially center the interagency process for policy formulation in the NSC.

- If you chose to manage through the NSC, then you will need a robust NSC staff to lead in policy formulation and to manage the interagency process.
- If you chose to manage through your cabinet, then the department staffs will formulate their respective policies and you will need a robust NSC staff to assist in their integration and to manage the interagency process.
- If you choose a lead agency approach, it may be that no department staff has the capacity to manage the interagency process for policy formulation. It will take time to remedy the shortfall, but you need an interagency process that works on inauguration day. Instead, assign NSC committee and working group chairs to the lead agency. Responsibilities can be transferred from the NSC staff to the lead agency staff if and when capacity is assured.

Initially centering the interagency policy formulation process in the NSC staff reduces the risk of losing critical time early in your administration and allows you to smoothly move toward your preferred management approach for national security.

#### **3. Direct the State Department to establish explicit bodies for oversight of policy implementation and for coordination of day-to-day operations.**

Managing national security is more than formulating a unifying policy. There are separate interagency processes for policy formulation, oversight of implementation, and

coordination of day-to-day operations. Achieving unity of effort requires orchestration of *all* instruments of national power at *all* levels of government.

**4. Continue with the organization established by George H.W. Bush and adopted by successive post-Cold War presidents.**

Regardless of your management approach to national security, there is little reason to think that a new NSC organization is necessary. Critically important time at the beginning of your administration will be lost experimenting with new organizational arrangements between the NSC and the departments and agencies. You will have time to fine tune organization as your administration gains experience.

**5. Issue a presidential directive on inauguration day announcing your NSC.**

Be prepared to issue a presidential directive on inauguration day announcing the organization and process of your national security system. It is an assignment of roles and missions to the departments and agencies and to your cabinet nominees. Be prepared to resolve competitions immediately. You personally must establish and enforce collegiality initially and throughout your administration.

**6. Defer reduction of the NSC staff until your administration's second year.**

It is common to criticize the outgoing administration for having a large, bloated staff. But the demands of office invariably create upward pressure on staff size. Policies are formulated early in an administration for the departments and agencies to implement. A large staff is needed immediately to provide adequate processing capacity. The staff later shifts from formulation to overseeing implementation and to crisis response. Reduce staff then if justified.

**7. Resist the temptation to affect a clean sweep of NSC staff and to overload the NSC staff with partisans.**

Seeing staff held over from the previous administration as potentially disloyal is understandable. It may be tempting to affect a clean sweep of the NSC staff, and it may be equally tempting to replace civil servants with political loyalists. Civilians and military detailed to the NSC staff are on staggered rotations providing continuity in the interagency teams. The experience of detailees is invaluable. Loyalty to person or party comes at the expense of experience and competence. If you value multiple options and diversity of view, appoint outside subject matter experts as well.

*First Year*

The first year of your administration provides the greatest, and perhaps only, opportunity to set your administration's national security agenda.

**8. Initiate a series of policy reviews to set the agenda and to begin building the interagency teams that will support you during crisis management.**

The first year of your administration is the time to initiate changes in policy direction. Set the agenda by initiating a range of policy reviews. Maintain continuous policy review; it not only allows you to adapt to the evolving landscape and to adjust course, it prepares your staff to respond to the crises that certainly will emerge.

**9. Use the NSC interagency process to thoroughly engage the expertise resident in the executive branch and to direct its energies.**

Secretaries, deputy secretaries, and assistant secretaries chair NSC committees, as may your assistant for national security affairs. All are presidential appointees and bring your energy to bear and extend your vision and influence deeper into the bureaucracy. The experience and expertise lies not with your appointees, however, but with the professional civil servants and uniformed military detailed to the NSC staff and those otherwise engaged in the interagency process from their parent agencies. But the departments and agencies are conservative, favoring policy continuity over dramatic change. The energy to change direction must come from the chief executive. Through engagement you provide the energy to overcome friction.

To engage is to benefit from the experience and to gain buy-in from those who must implement your policies. To not engage is to virtually guarantee policy failure in implementation. The NSC system is your most direct mechanism for control and change.

**10. Seek advice beyond the NSC, and use the NSC's process to extend your reach, magnify your vision, and amplify your energy.**

You will likely choose to receive advice in private from a range of sources and to not limit yourself to the formal NSC. And you will likely make the most important decisions alone or in the presence of a small number of confidants. Regardless, your regular attendance at formal NSC meetings, with departmental staff in attendance, provides you with your best opportunity to communicate your strategic vision and to enable government to pursue your objectives. Receiving advice and making decisions elsewhere, formal NSC meetings may largely be theater—critically important theater. You have the authority to command through presidential directives, but you must lead in person.

*Throughout Your Administration and Beyond*

A major challenge of your administration is organizing for the twenty-first century. Post-Cold War strategies have relied heavily on state-building operations that have exposed the weakness of some instruments of power and have exacerbated the problems of orchestrating the many instruments. It isn't at all clear that these missions have widespread public support. And the wisdom of the mission as a way to achieve national security ends is not yet apparent. Not all national security strategies rely on state building.

**11. Foster a public debate on national security strategy.**

Formulating national security strategy—the linkage of ends, ways, and means—is a statutory responsibility of the president. Throughout the Cold War, a bipartisan strategic consensus held under the rubric of containment. But post-Cold War strategies have fluctuated wildly with no consensus or stability in sight. Your policies are formulated in the context of strategy, and without sustainable political consensus to commitment, your policies will suffer from lack of support and will expire with your administration. Consensus is built only through engagement with the people and the people's branch.

## **12. Balance the instruments of national power.**

The instruments of national power are many, including military, informational, diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence, financial, and economic instruments. With the military as an exception, the NSC has largely focused its attention on the *use* of the instruments of power, leaving the *production* of power to the departments and agencies and to the associated congressional committees. The military instrument was the focus of reform following WWII and continuing through the Cold War. Similar attention has not been paid to the other instruments of power, which have been in decline. The result is an imbalance in instruments and a heavy reliance on a relatively isolated military instrument designed to defeat the forces of an opposing major power. Your options for action are limited by the instruments available. The instruments wielded by the departments and agencies of government can be balanced only in the context of a national security strategy.

## **13. Align the instruments of national power within the departments and agencies to facilitate their orchestration and to produce unity of effort.**

The division of labor represented by the current organization of the executive branch is the product of a decades-long era of major power conflict. Largely through accidents of history, the instruments are spread across the departments and agencies that wield them. Their number, diversity, and distribution, compounded by the demands of state-building operations, make their orchestration increasingly problematic. Resolution of interagency conflicts can only be decided by presidential intervention.

There are ongoing efforts considering fundamental reorganization of the national security apparatus driven by evidence that state-building operations are problematic and not supported by the current division of labor. A massive reorganization of government without a sustainable political consensus on strategy is ill advised. From legislative authorization and appropriation to fielded capabilities may take a decade or more. Government cannot be reorganized for each incoming administration's strategy.

## **14. Preserve congressional confidence in the NSC.**

The NSC is a privileged organization. It is an advisory body to the president. There is a tension between providing candid advice that is dependent on privacy versus the transparency necessary for democracy. When the NSC is in high repute, Congress yields to the president's privacy. The president must maintain congressional confidence.

Much can be done with executive orders and presidential directives. Use them for the less contentious or for immediate need. For policies to survive your administration, Congress must take ownership. Ownership requires congressional engagement, authorization, and appropriation. The chief executive initiates change; Congress institutionalizes change.

## PART II:

# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE NSC SYSTEM

The National Security Act of 1947, as amended, does not specify in detail the organization and process of the National Security Council system leaving instead each president's decisionmaking style to dictate design. Some NSC staffs were policy activist while others were policy neutral process managers. Some presidents used the NSC for long-range, strategic purposes while others used it in a reactionary mode. The former relied more on standing NSC committees while the latter relied more on ad hoc committees. Continual policy review characterized the administrations with a strategic perspective.

The common structure of the Bush-Quayle, Clinton-Gore, and Bush-Cheney administrations shows that organizational stability is possible. It also shows that organization does not determine outcomes. Personalities, not surprisingly, are stronger determinants of NSC performance than is organization. Particularly important is the complex personal interaction between the president, secretary of state, secretary of defense, and the president's assistant for national security affairs. In one administration, the vice president weighed heavily in the calculation. But regardless of personalities, the purpose of NSC organization and staff work remains the same. Eisenhower is specific about the purpose of detailed, multi-level, interagency staff work in the NSC system.<sup>1</sup>

Its purpose is to simplify, clarify, expedite and coordinate; it is a bulwark against chaos, confusion, delay and failure. Organization cannot of course make a successful leader out of a dunce, any more than it should make a decision for its chief. But it is effective in minimizing the chances of failure and in insuring that the right hand does, indeed, know what the left hand is doing.

Eisenhower's NSC system included separate boards for policy formulation and oversight of policy implementation. Kennedy and Johnson dropped the oversight function incorrectly assuming that the departments and agencies would understand and faithfully implement well crafted policy approved by the president. Reagan's NSC staff ventured into policy implementation with disastrous consequences. Given the historical evidence, formulation of policy and oversight of policy implementation are necessary and sufficient functions of the NSC. Implementation of policy should be left to the executive branch

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 630.

departments and agencies that are subject to congressional oversight and that have the expertise and requisite statutory authorities.

The title “National Security Council” refers to different things in context. The legislative meaning of NSC denotes a small number of statutory members and statutory advisors, possibly extended by presidential invitation. Sometimes, a reference to the NSC includes the NSC staff and embraces the entire interagency committee hierarchy from the formal NSC down to the working groups that do the NSC’s detailed business. When necessary to avoid ambiguity here, “NSC proper” refers to the highest-level committee, “NSC” refers to the entire committee hierarchy and support staff, and “NSC system” includes the NSC organization and its process.

## NSC Organization

National Security Council organization includes the structure of the committee hierarchy and the structure of the staff secretariat into divisions. The size and composition of the staff is included here as an issue of organizational design.

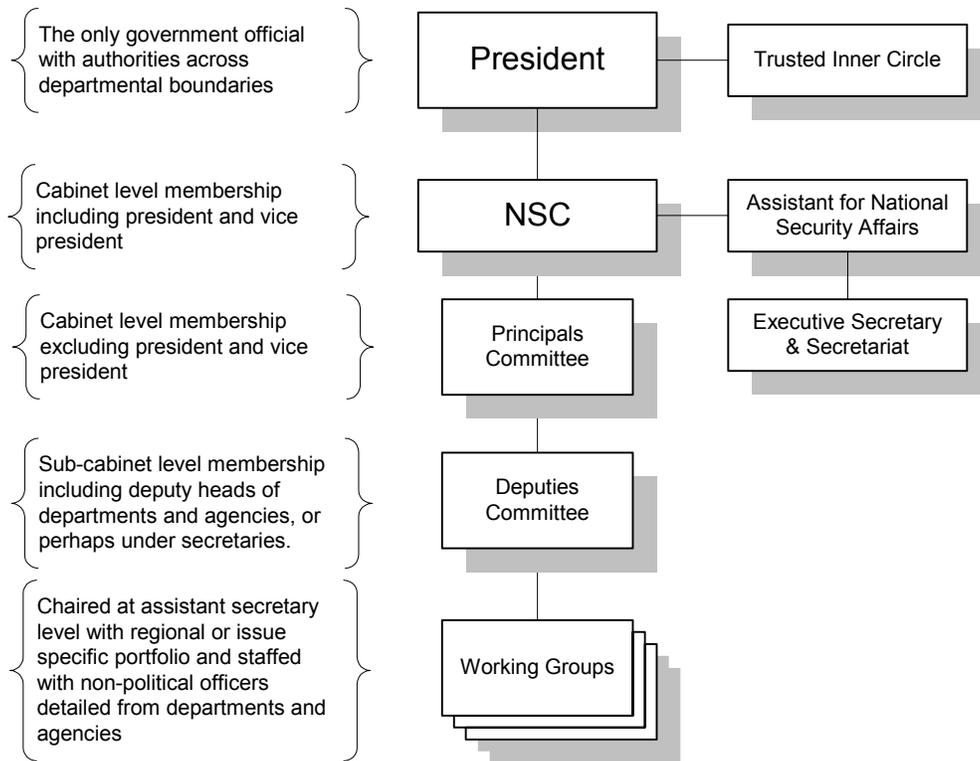
### *NSC Committee Structure*

#### **1. Cold War administrations experimented with new NSC organizations with little positive effect. Post-Cold War administrations achieved organizational stability.**

Legislation leaves the issue of NSC organization to the individual chief executive. Typically, each new administration designed an NSC system to overcome the perceived shortcomings of its predecessor. The result was a pendulum swing with some modest forward progress. But the elder Bush’s administration established organizational stability at the end of the Cold War. There appears to be no reason to deviate from that stability.

Organizationally, the NSC is a hierarchy of interagency committees—the NSC proper, a cabinet-level committee, a sub-cabinet-level committee, and a layer of working-level committees (see Figure 1). The post-Cold War organization, established by the elder Bush and used since, is described below.

The formal *National Security Council* is at the top of the interagency committee hierarchy. NSC meetings are attended by statutory members and statutory advisors. Others may be invited depending on the agenda. In recent history, the *statutory members* of the NSC have been the president, vice president, secretary of defense, and secretary of state. President Ford vetoed legislation in December 1975 to add the treasury secretary, who has attended regularly under some administrations. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of central intelligence (more recently the director of national intelligence) are *statutory advisors*. With the creation of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and U.S. Information Agency in the early 1960s, their directors have been *special statutory advisors*, although USIA was disestablished in the early 1990s. It is common in the literature to see *NSC principals* used to include the statutory members and statutory advisors.



**Figure 1. Notional National Security Council System Organization**

Some administrations limited attendance at NSC meetings to the principals, and some allowed the principals to be accompanied by staff support. With staff in attendance, principals were more likely to represent their agencies than to act as presidential advisors. After the Iran-Contra scandal in the Reagan administration, the Tower Commission clarified the respective roles of NSC members.<sup>2</sup>

When they sit as members of the Council they sit not as cabinet secretaries or department heads but as advisors to the President. They are there not simply to advance or defend the particular positions of the departments or agencies they head but to give their best advice to the President.

The NSC is only advisory. It is the President alone who decides. When the NSC principals receive those decisions, they do so as heads of the appropriate departments or agencies. They are then responsible to see that the President's decisions are carried out by those organizations accurately and effectively.

The *Principals Committee* sits directly below the formal NSC and is chaired by the president's assistant for national security affairs. The president's time is scarce and the other principals often meet without the president when an issue can be resolved without presidential intervention. Without being convened formally, Principals Committee

<sup>2</sup> Tower Commission, *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, Washington, D.C.: 16 February 1987, V-2.

meetings often take place informally just prior to a meeting with the president so as to make best use of the president's time. The Principals Committee also serves a quality control function over the outputs of the interagency process prior to presidential consideration.

The *Deputies Committee* sits below the Principals Committee in the hierarchy. It is chaired by the president's deputy national security assistant. Membership on the Deputies Committee is drawn from the same departments and agencies represented on the NSC and the Principals Committee. The deputy secretaries or deputy directors—who often serve as chief operating officer of their agencies—attend committee meetings. State and Defense each has an influential under secretary with responsibility for policy and planning. That under secretary may attend instead of the department's deputy secretary.

The Deputies Committee meets more frequently than the Principals Committee and NSC. The deputies attempt resolution of interagency issues at their level elevating only the most difficult up the hierarchy. A great deal of NSC work gets done at the deputies' level, but the detailed interagency work is conducted at the next lower level. The Deputies Committee decides which working groups to establish, gives them specific tasking, assures the quality of upward-moving products, and assures that the mix of tasking downward is responsive to the president's agenda.

Attendees at the highest level committees in the NSC hierarchy—NSC, Principals Committee, and Deputies Committee—are the president's political appointees. They have broad, department-wide portfolio. Their purpose is to steer the ship of state according to the president's will. But eventually someone must row.

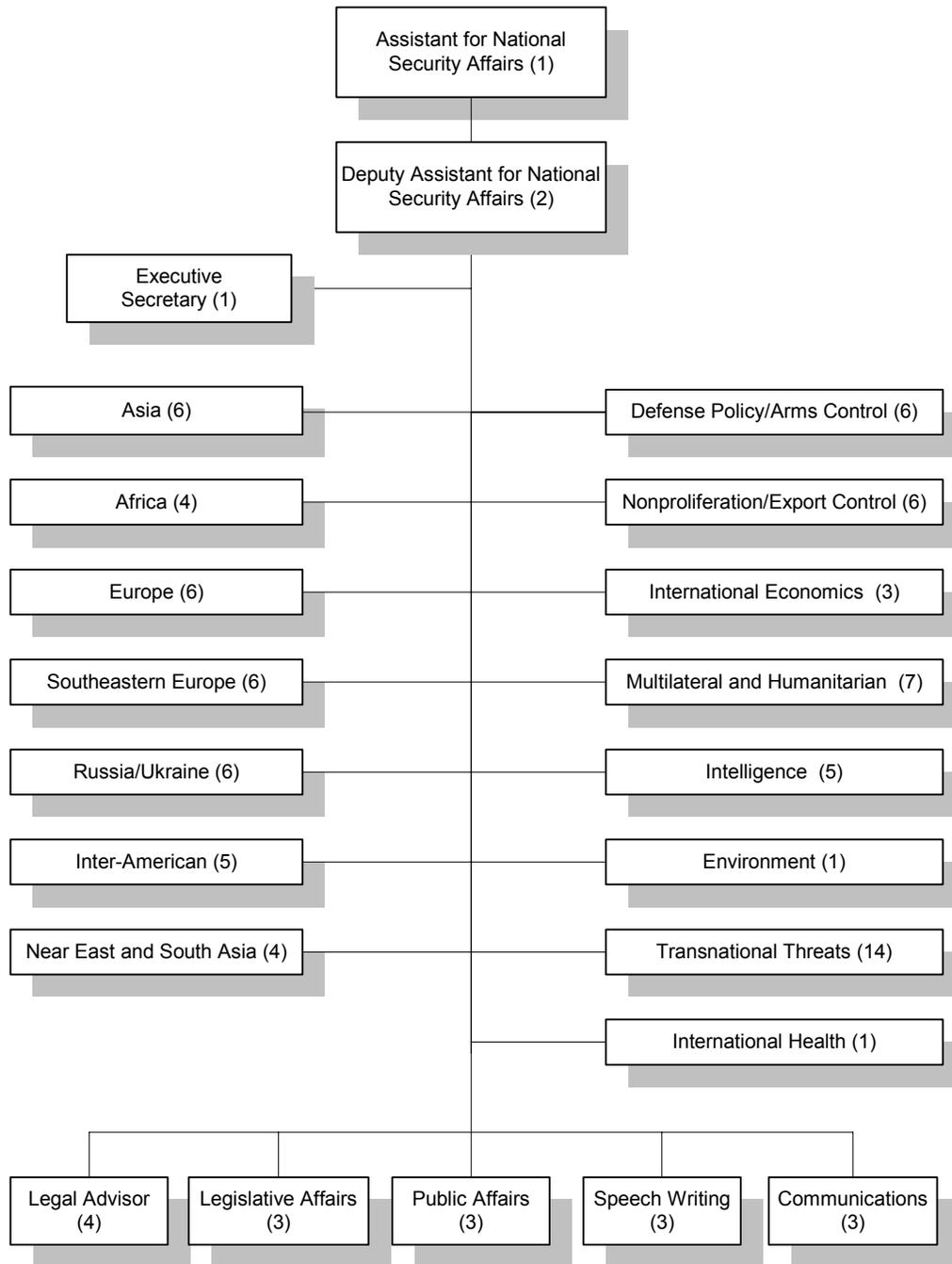
The detailed interagency work is done in *working groups* by non-political career civil servants and uniformed military detailed from across the departments and agencies and by political appointees. Working groups are chaired at the assistant secretary level by a political appointee with a narrow regional or functional portfolio. A regional focus might be on Europe, Latin America, or the Middle East. A functional, or issue-specific, focus might be arms control or terrorism. While chaired meetings are held periodically, the members of the working groups are continuously engaged.

With reasonable foresight, and a measure of luck, an NSC working group will have been continuously engaged in a policy area when a crisis emerges. Such a working group is best capable of shifting into a support role for presidential crisis management. Crisis management is often conducted in the White House by the president and closest advisors, not by or in the NSC.

### *NSC Secretariat*

Each administration organizes its NSC secretariat differently, but there is some level of regularity. Staff is organized into small *divisions* each with a regional or functional focus. Figure 2 shows how Clinton's staff was organized into regional divisions on the left and functional divisions on the right. The number in parentheses indicates how many

substantive staffers were devoted to the division, a total of 100.<sup>3</sup> Another 125 were in administrative support.



**Figure 2. NSC Staff Organization 2000**

<sup>3</sup> Ivo H. Daalder and I.M. Destler, “A New NSC for a New Administration.” Policy Brief No. 68, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, November 2000.

The list of regional and functional divisions reflects the contemporary geostrategic environment and the president's emphases. An administration may easily adapt this structure. Boundaries of regional divisions may be realigned, the focus of functional divisions shifted, and the number of staff adjusted.

Originally, under Truman, the NSC staff was populated by experienced career bureaucrats on permanent assignment. They were without political agenda but commonly brought the perspectives of their department of origin. JFK brought intellectuals from outside for diversity and at the same time brought partisans to actively pursue his political agenda. Staff drawn from outside of government were chosen for their subject matter expertise. Chosen and employed wisely, they protect against groupthink and can provide the president with multiple options. Political appointees generally have been chosen for party loyalty, personal loyalty to the president, or on ideological grounds rather than for their subject matter expertise.

The NSC staff also includes career professionals detailed temporarily from elsewhere in the executive branch. They bring subject matter expertise, contacts, and fresh experience from their departments and agencies. Ideally, professional detailees are on two- to four-year assignments from their parent agencies. Longer assignments weaken the link between the detailees and their home department. Their temporary rotations are staggered to retain continuity within and between administrations.

Politicization of the NSC staff extended the president's power. Politicization has other consequences. Many witnesses to the Tower Commission identified lack of continuity in the NSC staff as problematic.

One problem affecting the NSC staff is lack of institutional memory. This results from the understandable desire of a President to replace the staff in order to be sure it is responsive to him. Departments provide continuity that can help the Council, but the council as an institution also needs some means to assure adequate records and memory.

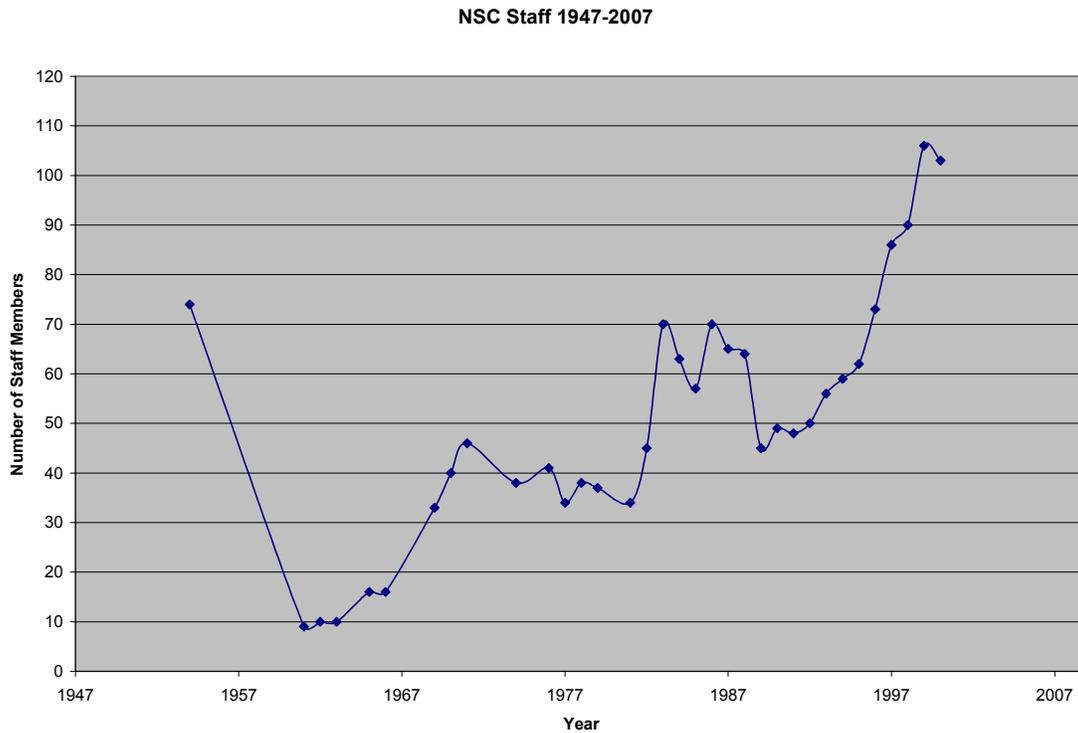
## **2. The long-term trend in NSC staff size is toward growth as policy work shifts out of the departments and in to the NSC.**

It is common for an administration to come into power thinking the past administration's NSC staff was too large and unwieldy. It is also common to see staff size reduced initially only to see it grow back later under the pressures of geo-strategic events. Still, there is an apparent consensus that the NSC staff should be lean and focused. Figure 3 shows the size of professional staff across administrations. Administrative support is not counted.<sup>4</sup> While there are differences across and within administrations, there has been a continual growth over time; experts argue against the trend preferring policy formulation in the departments and limiting the NSC to interagency coordination.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from Kennedy to Clinton was reported in Daalder and Destler, "A New NSC for a New Administration," 2000. Ivo Daalder generously provided updated information from Kennedy to Bush. Data from Truman and Eisenhower administrations are from alternate sources. Administrative staff is not counted.

The growth in NSC staff size is correlated with the shift away from the State Department's dominance and is exacerbated by the increased need to orchestrate the instruments spread across the departments and agencies. Presidents' desires to directly control national security matters necessitated the growth of NSC staff as well.



**Figure 3. NSC Staff Size 1947-2007**

## NSC Functions

### **3. Formulating policy and overseeing its implementation are necessary and sufficient functions for the NSC system.**

Since the inception of the postwar national security system in 1947, the NSC has engaged in three different functions: *policy formulation*, *oversight of policy implementation*, and *policy implementation*. Administrations that did not engage the departments and agencies in policy formulation saw failures in implementation. Administrations that did not continuously monitor the departments and agencies for compliance with policy often saw their well-crafted policies fail in implementation as well. Policy formulation and its oversight in implementation are necessary and sufficient; implementation is to be left to the departments and agencies with the statutory authorities and the expertise.

Administrations differed in their emphasis on these functions and the venue where the functions were carried out.

- In the Truman administration, the secretary of state had a strong staff, the new secretary of defense had a meager staff reflecting his weak authorities over the three

military departments, and the NSC staff was small, policy neutral, and formative. State took the lead in policy formulation, the concerned departments and agencies reviewed the resulting policy documents, and the NSC staff managed the paper process.

- In Eisenhower's system, intellectual lead came from State, policy formulation was conducted in the NSC, and the expertise in the departments and agencies was deeply engaged. Oversight of policy implementation was strong and continuous and conducted in the State Department consistent with its role as lead in day-to-day operations.
- The Kennedy NSC engaged in policy formulation but not oversight, assuming incorrectly that the conservative departments and agencies would faithfully follow the president's stated policies.
- The Reagan NSC entered into implementation resulting in criminal prosecution.

Other functions are commonly associated with the NSC but are actually carried out elsewhere. Although the NSC has statutory authority to *advise* the president, presidents generally seek counsel outside the formal NSC. And presidential *decisionmaking* and *crisis response* generally take place separately in the Oval Office or the West Wing's Situation Room rather than in the NSC.

#### **4. Presidents have used the NSC less for advice and more for engaging the expertise of the departments and agencies in a collaborative interagency process.**

Some presidents preferred that their formal NSC meetings be attended only by the principals—the statutory members and advisors—while other presidents included principals and significant numbers of staff assistants in the formal setting. Some rarely convened the NSC preferring to receive advice in more intimate settings.

#### *Advice versus Engagement*

Presidents often looked beyond the NSC for advice. Many, perhaps all, sought candid advice in private Oval Office meetings. Some relied heavily on regularly scheduled meetings with trusted advisors—Johnson over Thursday lunches and Carter over Friday breakfasts. The attendance list was largely the same as the NSC membership. They were, in essence, informal NSC meetings. But the distinction between formal and informal NSC meetings is of little consequence. The distinction that matters is whether the principals meet privately or accompanied by support staff.

Presidents understandably preferred the candid discussions that take place in private. Cabinet members tended to speak more freely in the informal, collegial environment. They were more likely to act as advisors and less as heads of departments and agencies. Leaks were less likely to occur than from meetings with staff in attendance. In all likelihood, presidents' decision making was better facilitated by private, informal meetings than by large, formal NSC meetings. There were negative consequences, too, of small, informal meetings. To prevent leaks, the agenda often went unannounced. Staff could not prepare their principals for the kind of fluid discussions presidents desired. Meetings without staff in attendance were weak in getting decisionmaking rationale back

down to the agencies for implementation, and they were weak in engaging the expertise resident deep in the agencies.

Large, formal meetings offer advantages over small, informal meetings. Eisenhower's NSC meetings included staff support—back benchers. Observers claimed that principals were better prepared when accompanied by staff, and the presence of staff meant that discussions were documented and carried back to the departments and agencies. But with staff in attendance, principals were more inclined to represent agency views and less inclined to give candid advice to the president. The larger the meeting, the more prone they were to leaks and the harder it was to identify the source of the leak.

If presidential decisionmaking is best supported in private meetings of NSC principals, then what is the purpose of formal NSC meetings with support staff in attendance? In the formal setting, discussion between the NSC principals takes place in front of staff. Staff members must engage their agencies to prepare their principals. Staff members hear the questions, the answers, and the positions of the other departments and agencies. The principal is free to engage in the discussion, and the staff is able to assist their principal upon return to their department or agency. With decisions made elsewhere, formal NSC meetings in front of a large audience may be mostly theater, but it is theater that successful executives have long used to share their vision. Audience members are better able to return to their home office and act in the president's stead. This theater is a tool of effective leadership.

It is tempting for presidents so inclined to use the NSC only as an advisory body and to not engage the agencies more deeply in the process. The effect is to lose the considerable expertise resident in the agencies, to lose legislative oversight of the executive branch, to lose objectivity, and to deny energy to the implementing departments and agencies.

Both the large, formal meeting and the small, informal meeting have strengths and weaknesses. One should not be chosen over the other. They can be complementary. The small, informal meeting may be best for advising the president for decisionmaking. But the larger, formal meeting engages and energizes the interagency process in ways not possible in private settings.

### *Process: Preparation for action or paper?*

In the idealized process, the president injects guidance from the top down, and the NSC supports a collaborative, interagency effort that produces integrated national security policies from the bottom up. The NSC's interagency process has produced documents for three purposes.<sup>5</sup> Many documents are used to task the NSC system to conduct single- or multiple-agency studies. Others promulgate official policy; the policy is often the output of a previously commissioned study. A third type directs specific actions. Most administrations make the distinction between study directives and decision directives. Decision directives are used either to promulgate policy or to direct action. Administrations have typically chosen to rename their documents to distinguish them from the documents of the previous administration.

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<sup>5</sup> GAO/NSIAD-89-31, *National Security: The Use of Presidential Directives to Make and Implement U.S. Policy*, December 1988.

Although the process clearly produces paper, something intangible and no less important is also produced. By engaging the president's appointees in the process, the president's agenda drives the process. By engaging the expertise resident in the departments and agencies, the policies produced are more likely to be feasible in implementation. Bad ideas are more likely to be exposed, as are good ideas that may entail excessive risk, work cross purpose with other policies, or lack the necessary resources. The departments and agencies that participate in policy formulation are more likely to see it as their own and implement it more faithfully. The process that produces the documents prepares the executive branch to be proactive rather than merely reactive when crises erupt. Process is critically important.

**5. Policies formulated in the administration's first year have the greatest chance of success in implementation.**

The NSC system workload changes over time, and the opportunity for change is short. New policies take years to implement. Policies formulated late in an administration have little chance of success. More studies are initiated early in an administration. Later in an administration, preparation and planning is often overtaken by events—crises emerge and demand attention. The policy formulation process builds the interagency team that will oversee policy implementation and support crisis response. Administrations that do not prepare early can only be reactive.

Driven by the president's agenda, the NSC system formulates interagency policies for presidential consideration. Early in an administration, issue-focused studies may indicate the need for new or updated policy statements. Studying issues and reviewing policies prepares the administration for action. It builds familiarity within elements of the NSC organization and it frequently produces written policy statements to be promulgated to the departments and agencies for implementation.

The need to review existing policy or to initiate new policy can be recognized anywhere in the committee hierarchy. But a policy study is initiated only from the top by an NSC directive. Guidance comes from the top, the work is done at the bottom of the hierarchy, and all intermediate levels perform a quality control function. Several iterations may be required before the study produces an output for presidential consideration. The output of a study is often a new policy statement, developed through the interagency process, approved by the president, and promulgated to the affected departments and agencies of government. More immediate decisions are promulgated without lengthy studies.

For policies to continue beyond an administration, they must be institutionalized. Only Congress can translate policy into funded programs executed by the departments and agencies of the executive branch that then become their champions. Members of Congress who take ownership of programs add considerable sustaining weight to policy. Congress institutionalizes policy.

## Form and Personalities

In the history of the NSC, personalities provide the best explanations for success and failure, but organizational arrangements put personalities into roles that can exacerbate or mitigate competitions between strong personalities.

## *Form of administration*

### **6. Presidents manage national security either centrally from the White House or distributed through cabinet government.**

Some presidents have managed national security matters from the White House while others managed through cabinet government—either a presidential or secretarial approach.<sup>6</sup> The departments and agencies are conservative in nature and prefer policy continuity over dramatic change. Several presidents have distrusted the departments and agencies they were elected to lead. The NSC is the mechanism through which some presidents have chosen to impose change.

With the idealized cabinet approach, the president provides vision, policy objectives, and broad guidance and then delegates authority to strong secretaries. In some cases, the president may designate one department—traditionally State—as lead agency. The presidents' policies are formulated in the staffs of the departments that have statutory authority to implement those policies. The NSC staff's role is more policy neutral and more involved in managing the interagency process to integrate foreign, military, and domestic policies. Of course, the president may intercede as he or she sees fit.

With the presidential approach, policy formulation is centered in the NSC. The NSC staff takes on a more dominant role, either as co-equal or superior to the departments and agencies. The president's assistant for national security affairs—an official neither elected nor confirmed by the Senate—takes on a prominent public posture and presides over the national security system between the president and the president's cabinet secretaries. Rather than policy neutral, the NSC staff is activist in formulating the president's policies and guiding the actions of the departments and agencies. A strong and visible national security assistant coupled with a strong NSC staff shifts power to the president and the White House. The shift in power and influence comes at the expense of the State Department and its secretary. The result is a demoralized State Department and weakened diplomatic instrument.

By the 1960s, several new agencies had been created to wield the informational and economic instruments. The era of the Marshall Plan had ended, and legislation made the distinction between military assistance and foreign aid. The Defense Security Assistance Agency was established to administer the former and the U.S. Agency for International Development to administer the latter. The U.S. Information Agency was established to wield the information instrument. State retained a dominant role in policy formulation providing policy guidance to USIA, USAID, and DSAA, while those agencies exercised relative autonomy in implementation.

There are large policy and planning staffs at the NSC, at State, and at Defense; dominance has shifted between these staffs over time. Some earlier administrations designated the State Department to play the dominant role (lead agency) in policy formulation, oversight of policy implementation, and day-to-day operations. More recently, the Defense Department exercises the largest staff, but it has no recently demonstrated capacity for formulating policy to be followed by the other departments and

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<sup>6</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The NSC's Midlife Crisis," *Foreign Policy* 69 (Winter 1987-1988): 80-99, 81.

agencies. Knowledgeable critics argue against a dominant NSC staff, recommending policy formulation by the staffs of the departments with the NSC staff playing a coordinating role.

Both Eisenhower and Nixon centralized process in the NSC and deeply engaged the departments and agencies in the interagency process. Unlike Eisenhower, who had a policy-neutral executive secretary, Nixon had a powerful assistant for national security affairs in Kissinger, who acted almost as a deputy president for national security affairs.

Some presidents invited the budget director or the secretary of the treasury, but other department and agency heads preferred to discuss policy options without fiscal constraint, thus leaving it to Congress to fund. It may be possible to discuss policy without fiscal constraint, but not strategy. Strategy is the linkage of ends, ways, and means. Means cannot be excluded from the equation. Congress must be a part of strategy formulation.

### *Competitions*

#### **7. Destructive competitions have developed for the lead role foreign policy formulation and presentation.**

Both presidential and secretarial approaches invite competitions. One well documented competition is for the role of chief enunciator of foreign policy. Secretaries of state, presidents, and presidents' assistants for national security affairs have all vied for the position. Senior appointees bring powerful personalities and will step up to fill leadership vacuums real or perceived. But the competition goes deeper than announcing foreign policy. Policy must be formulated, its implementation must be coordinated at all levels, planning and budgeting must be coordinated, and day-to-day operations are conducted continuously. Without clear assignment of roles and missions, destructive competitions develop. The president's needs are not well served by a competition. The American public, Congress, and the international community see disarray and lose confidence.

Carter, Reagan, and Bush attempted cabinet government. Carter and Reagan were beset by the classic competitions, Carter with a strong secretary of state and a strong national security assistant and Reagan with a strong secretary of state and a very weak national security assistant. The elder Bush successfully managed a collegial cabinet with strong secretaries and a strong but low-profile national security assistant.

Competitions are common, public, and destructive. The competition between Reagan and Haig is a classic example between president and secretary of state. Brzezinski and Vance offer the classic example of competition between the national security assistant and the secretary of state. In times of military conflict, the secretary of defense often adopts a high public profile enunciating foreign policy instead of the secretary of state or president. McNamara and Rumsfeld are clear examples. General Douglas MacArthur famously entered into a competition with Truman. Truman resolved his competition; Reagan and Carter allowed theirs to fester.

In an apparently unique case, a competition developed for the role of principal national security advisor to the president. During the Bush administration, Vice President Cheney, along with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, appears to have had greater influence with the president than the president's national security assistant, Condoleezza Rice.

It is not an accident that the pivotal point in the discussion above is who shall enunciate *foreign* policy. Nor is it inconsequential. National security policy is not equivalent to foreign policy. Nor is it the sum of foreign, military, and domestic policies. National security policy is the integration of relevant subsets of foreign, military, and domestic policies. The need to integrate across these policy domains reflects a flawed division of labor born of the lessons of World War II and evolved through decades of the Cold War, a long period of major power conflict.

### *Assistant for National Security Affairs*

The position of *national security assistant* deserves special attention. The position has no specific basis in law. The original 1947 legislation allows for an executive secretary to manage the permanent staff and the staff process. The Eisenhower administration established a new position of *special assistant to the president for national security affairs* (the position of executive secretary remained and retained the authorities that the title implies). The holder of the new position was a process manager without policy agenda. Kennedy's national security assistant, McGeorge Bundy, was the first to have a substantive policy making role rather than acting as a policy-neutral process manager. The Nixon administration shortened the title to *assistant to the president for national security affairs*, but the president informally used the title of *national security advisor* reflecting his relationship with Henry Kissinger, and the informal title continues in common use today. Carter's national security assistant, Zbigniew Brzezinski, is the only national security assistant to hold cabinet rank, a presidential designation.

One commentator concluded that with a strong national security assistant, the relationship between the White House, State, and Defense won't work well; but without a strong national security assistant, the relationship won't work at all.<sup>7</sup> But "strong" is an imprecise term. Kissinger was a strong national security assistant achieving dominance over the entire apparatus. Brzezinski was a strong assistant and entered into a competition with a strong secretary of state. Brent Scowcroft was strong, maintained a low profile, and created the conditions for collegiality rather than competition.

Kissinger and Richard Nixon shared a strategic vision, and Kissinger enjoyed the president's trust and confidence. A highly visible national security assistant and a weak secretary of state lacking foreign policy experience concentrated power in the White House. Kissinger designed the NSC committee structure and chaired the committees he chose to dominate. Kissinger set the NSC study agenda. The president wanted to be presented with multiple options. Kissinger's position as committee chair allowed him to control the study agenda and the committee debate, and his direct access to the president allowed him to skew the discussion in private advisory sessions with Nixon.

Scowcroft also enjoyed the trust and confidence of the president, George H.W. Bush. Scowcroft focused his efforts on his role as advisor and assistant to the president and substantially delegated management of the interagency process to his deputy, Robert Gates. Scowcroft's direct access to the president could have raised the suspicions of

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, "2 Laws Concerning the National Security Advisor," *New York Times*, 7 January 1982, A20.

department and agency heads, but the NSC principals trusted Scowcroft to fairly and accurately represent their positions to the president. When the president asked, Scowcroft expressed his independent views. Scowcroft maintained a low public profile, allowing the NSC principals to enunciate the administration's position to domestic and foreign audiences. Scowcroft's low public profile and honest broker approach was a critical enabler of collegiality in the Bush administration. His quiet competence allowed trust and avoided destructive competitions.

While there is general agreement that Kissinger is the exemplar of the most powerful national security assistant—the deputy president for national security affairs—many are quick to nominate Scowcroft as the example to emulate—the honest broker and trusted personal advisor.

## National Security Strategy

### **8. Cold War administrations held to relative stability in national security strategy under the label of containment. Post-Cold War strategies have fluctuated dramatically with no consensus or stability in sight.**

Throughout the Cold War there was a political consensus on the nature of the threat and the response. At the level of national security strategy, although there were eight variants, there was stability under the label of containment. That political consensus collapsed along with the Soviet Union, and post-Cold War strategies have fluctuated wildly. No consensus on national security strategy is apparent and none appears in the offing.<sup>8</sup> National security policy formulated outside of a sustainable strategy will expire with each administration.<sup>9</sup>

### **9. Post-Cold War state-building operations have exposed flaws in the national security system designed for an era of great power conflict. The applicable instruments of national power are more diverse, out of balance, and their orchestration increasingly problematic.**

World War II exposed problems achieving unity of effort across the State, War, and Navy Departments. Reorganization during the war was necessarily deferred, and a plethora of coordinating boards and committees was established instead. Following the war—informed by a series of studies and congressional unification hearings—the National Security Act of 1947 established the national security organization that provides the foundation of today's system. Unification was incomplete and largely limited to the armed forces. The NSC is necessitated by the division of labor across the existing departments and agencies of the executive branch.

Throughout the Cold War, new agencies were created with specialized focus, including foreign aid, military assistance, arms control, and influencing foreign populations through

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<sup>8</sup> Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21 3 (Winter 1996-1997): 5-53.

<sup>9</sup> There are ongoing bipartisan efforts to foster debate on national security issues, for example, the Partnership for a Secure America, <http://www.psaonline.org>, and the American Security Project, <http://americansecurityproject.org>.

dissemination of information. In general, the State Department set policy objectives for these agencies that in turn had relative independence in matters of policy implementation.

Unification of the armed forces continued during the Cold War under the name of “jointness.” The most *dangerous* military threat of the era was major war between the forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Diplomats would be called home and the military would be sent forward with the objective of defeating the enemy military. Military forces were structured accordingly. The most *likely* threat, however, was communist exploitation of civil unrest in the third world. Military forces structured for major war were assumed to be capable of conducting these “operations other than war” as lesser included cases. It was less assumption and more recognition of resources inadequate to maintain separate mission-oriented forces and an understandable preference to devote available resources to the most dangerous threat.

The operations other than war once considered lesser included cases are now the main effort. These complex operations—sometimes called state building, nation building, or capacity building—require application of *all* instruments of power at *all* levels of government over sustained periods of time. They are often conducted amidst armed hostilities with the military in an ambiguous supporting role.

The results of decades-long orientation on major war include:

- Instruments of power scattered across government, some through accidents of history.
- A diplomatic instrument weakened from comparative neglect with atrophied capacity for orchestrating the other instruments of power.
- An isolated military instrument structured to defeat the military forces of a major power painfully restructuring and carrying the burden of other departments and agencies.

There is considerable evidence that the instruments of national power are inadequately balanced to support the disparate post-Cold War strategies. There is also evidence that the instruments are spread across the departments and agencies in such a way as to exacerbate the flawed division of labor. Most noticeable is a heavy reliance on a relatively isolated military instrument. Major reorganizations are being proposed to support state-building operations absent a sustainable strategy that requires it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, the ongoing bi-partisan Project on National Security Reform, <http://www.pnsr.org>.

## PART III:

# HISTORY OF THE NSC (1947-2008)

The design of today's national security system is driven by the requirements of war between major power alliances. The National Security Act of 1947 established the system in an attempt to address the most pressing shortcomings identified during World War II. The Act was amended throughout the Cold War. The result is a powerful military instrument relatively isolated from the other instruments of power. The current geostrategic environment requires a much greater emphasis on orchestrating all the instruments of power. Only the president sits atop the departments and agencies of government, and the NSC system is the president's principal mechanism for achieving a unifying national security policy and overseeing its implementation.

Mobilizing for and fighting World War II exposed a variety of shortcomings in America's national security apparatus. Some were too difficult to address during the war and were deferred. Of necessity, the United States developed ad hoc solutions demanded by the war. After the war, organizational unification was the solution pursued to achieve greater unity of effort. Some wanted unification of the State, War, and Navy Departments and a new centralized intelligence function, but that was a bridge too far. Unification of the armed forces under a single department would have to do. The incomplete unification required a body to coordinate the actions of the separate departments and agencies. The National Security Act of 1947 established the National Security Council for that purpose.

There were additional reasons for proposing the NSC. Sensing too much power in the presidency of FDR, Congress hoped that working with the military through the NSC would inhibit unilateral presidential action. Congress specifically doubted Truman's experience in foreign affairs, and some in Congress doubted Truman's general abilities. Perhaps an advisory body like the National Security Council would militate against his perceived shortfalls. For Congress, the NSC would both rein in too powerful a president and bolster a weak president.

The National Security Act places the National Security Council under the immediate direction of the president. The Act specifies the function of the Council as follows.

The function of the Council shall be to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.

Each administration has organized its NSC as a hierarchy of committees. At the top, the NSC proper is composed of statutory members and advisors who are simultaneously heads of their departments and agencies. The Council is an advisory body without executive authority. A Council meeting is chaired by the president who retains sole directive authority over all the departments and agencies of the executive branch. The chairs of the lower level committees in the hierarchy have no directive authority.

The Act allowed for a permanent staff to assist the president in integrating national security policy. The NSC staff was to be small to review, not duplicate, the work of executive branch departments and agencies. The substantive policy work was initially conducted in the departments, but as the permanent NSC staff developed, substantive work shifted from the departments and secretaries to the White House and the president.

The NSC system is best characterized as a decision support system for presidential decisionmaking. The NSC system is not a decisionmaking body. Decisionmaking and crisis management are generally handled in the Oval Office, with elements of the NSC system providing support. As currently configured, the NSC system is not suited to day-to-day operational decision making. That authority is delegated to the departments and agencies.

From Truman to Ford, the NSC system has been tailored to each president's individual style. The elder Bush created a system that achieved some stability and was adopted by subsequent administrations. The earlier NSC systems differ in meaningful ways. Some presidents used the NSC to foster collegiality while others used it to control competing agencies.<sup>11</sup> In some administrations the NSC was weak relative to the Departments of State and Defense, and in others it appeared as a peer or even as a super agency. Some presidents turned to the NSC as their principal source of advice while others sought advice in private, informal settings. Rather than simply as a source of advice, some presidents used the NSC system to deeply engage the expertise resident in the departments and agencies of government in the policy formulation process. The NSC systems from Truman to Bush are individually summarized below.

### Truman 1947-1953

The NSC system was formative during the Truman administration. Truman initially thought that the NSC would be constraining, thinking it an attempt to impose cabinet government over his presidential prerogative. The NSC was underused and Truman rarely attended meetings until the outbreak of the Korean War. During the war, however, meetings were frequent and Truman attended regularly, finding the Council essential. The NSC was staffed by professionals rather than partisans. Throughout, the State Department dominated both the NSC and the fledgling Defense Department. Toward the end of Truman's administration, the president and all that attached, including the NSC, were rendered ineffective. Eisenhower campaigned to end the unpopular war in Korea.

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<sup>11</sup> History of the National Security Council, 1947-1997. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/history.html> accessed 3 August 2007.

President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947 into law and was the first president to serve under it. Truman thought the NSC was needed, but he was suspicious that it could grow to represent cabinet government with secretaries holding their own political power base who might dilute his presidential authority. In the British system of cabinet government, the cabinet as a whole has responsibility for decisions made, but in the U.S. system, the president alone has that responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

Truman rarely attended NSC meetings prior to the onset of the Korean War. As attendance grew in the president's absence, two things happened. As more agency representatives attended, principals increasingly represented departmental views rather than playing the role of independent advisor. The president didn't hear the full discussion; he heard only the conclusions presented by his executive secretary. To compensate, agency heads increasingly sought private audience with the president, further weakening the NSC as an advisory body. Real advice was informal. Truman sought advice from his secretary of state, secretary of defense, and budget director in private session.

The National Security Council prepared and presented policy positions to the president. The Council did not make policy; the president did. The president, chairing an NSC meeting, may have signified his agreement with other Council members, but a decision was made only when a formal document was presented by the NSC and signed by the president. The NSC's executive secretary coordinated the views of Council members. The NSC was not responsible for implementing policies approved by the president; the agencies had sole responsibility for policy implementation.<sup>13</sup>

Truman preferred the private counsel of trusted advisors—including individual cabinet members—over exclusive or even heavy reliance on the formal NSC. A fiscal conservative, Truman also included the budget director to the displeasure of cabinet members who preferred to discuss policy options without fiscal constraint. The NSC system was for staffing and coordination rather than as the primary source for recommendations. Once a policy decision was made, the purpose of the NSC was to advise the president on issues requiring interagency coordination.<sup>14</sup> The NSC was not to be a place to centrally coordinate implementation; that was typically State's responsibility.

The State Department led in matters of foreign policy. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, army chief of staff during the war, established State's Policy Planning Staff reporting directly to him. Marshall's brain trust dominated the new NSC staff in the early Truman administration. The new National Military Establishment (soon to be renamed Department of Defense) was opposed to State's dominance. Secretary of Defense Forrestal lobbied for a stronger military role and offered to house the NSC in the Pentagon.

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen A. Cambone, *A New Structure for National Security Policy Planning* (Washington: CSIS Press, 1998), 148. Richard A. Best, *National Security Council: An Organizational Assessment* (Huntington, N.Y.: Novinka Books, 2001), 10-11, 51-55. Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35-45.

<sup>13</sup> Inderfurth and Johnson, *Fateful Decisions*, 35-36.

<sup>14</sup> Best, *National Security Council*, 11.

The Truman years provided a rich experimental environment to evolve a new organization and process. For the first time in American history, an attempt was made to produce formal policy statements—including objectives and the methods to achieve them—to guide the actions of all agencies of government.

Truman's early NSC organization included a number of standing and ad hoc committees supported by a staff of individuals on loan from the various agencies and an executive secretariat. Committees included a standing committee on internal security and an ad hoc interagency committee for strategy review under State auspices. Truman selected an individual to head the NSC secretariat to act as his administrative assistant. The executive secretary managed a permanent staff and the paper process. Neither the secretary nor the staff had political or substantive policy roles. Still, State played a strong role in staff coordination.

According to observers, the NSC was not prominent in making policy. Real policy decisions were made on the fly by State, Defense, the White House, and the Budget Bureau in other than a methodical and deliberate process. In general, policy papers expressed principles too abstract to guide government action, and the Defense establishment was largely unaffected by other than budget constraints.

Arguably the most important policy of the Cold War was a product of State. George Kennan is credited with formulating the containment strategy from his posting in Moscow. Kennan later served as director of the policy planning staff and was followed by Paul Nitze. The seminal document that formalized the strategy was a product of the State Department given a National Security Council designation—NSC-68.

At the end of his administration, checked by the Supreme Court for overstepping his constitutional authorities, both Truman and his NSC were reduced in activity as a lame duck president was dragged down by a stalemated and unpopular war in Korea. Eisenhower made the weakness of the NSC, real or perceived, a campaign issue. He argued that planning was needed to be ahead of issues before they became crises. Eisenhower would commission Robert Cutler, a New York banker, to study the problem.

## Eisenhower 1953-1961

The NSC system was perhaps strongest under Eisenhower, reminiscent of a general staff. Ike's NSC conducted both policy formulation and oversight of policy implementation. One board developed policy and passed it vertically down to the departments and agencies for implementation and horizontally to a parallel board to oversee policy implementation in the departments and agencies. The president's national security assistant was a policy-neutral process manager. The process was criticized as not much more than a paper mill by the opposition party and the Kennedy presidential campaign.

Eisenhower established a large staff in the NSC and shifted policy formulation from State's Policy Planning Staff to the president's NSC. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles provided direction to policy, but the interagency process was conducted in the NSC system supported by a large, policy-neutral NSC staff. The defense secretary's authorities and staff grew but remained a weak contender. Eisenhower's process was one of continual policy review with the concerned agencies working toward consensus. Not

just high level statements, Eisenhower's policy papers included multiple levels of implementation detail.

Eisenhower's process assured that all the agencies with implementation responsibilities had participated in the process, had their concerns heard, and heard the concerns of others. The president had buy-in by the time he signed the policy statement. Resistance in implementation from the agencies was thereby reduced; still, the Operations Coordination Board continually monitored implementation for compliance. Consistent with State's lead role in day-to-day operations, the OCB met at State rather than in the NSC's offices. State remained dominant over Defense and the NSC staff.

The formal written product gave guidance at all levels. Ike's process ensured that agency heads were informed and that agency heads gave him informed options. The departments and agencies were thoroughly engaged in policy formulation, and they were able to continue the pursuit of the president's policies even when Eisenhower was seriously ill late in his administration. Unlike other modern presidents, Eisenhower considered Congress to be a full partner in national security matters.

Where Truman was reactionary, Eisenhower was strategic. Eisenhower had a big picture and responded to crises within the context of that image. Eisenhower handled crises outside the NSC, including the Suez in 1956, Quemoy Islands in 1955 and 1958, and Lebanon in 1958. The process ensured that all acted in step and were prepared for crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than criticize a popular president, the Kennedy campaign attacked his NSC system. The Senate Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery chaired by Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson had a partisan flavor to it. It operated from 1960 to 1961 while Kennedy campaigned for the presidency. Principals in the Eisenhower administration, Robert Cutler and James Lay, testified to the committee in the affirmative about the Eisenhower NSC process. Truman's men from State, Kennan and Nitze, testified in the negative.

According to the Jackson Report, Eisenhower's process was inflexible, overstaffed, slow to react to crises, and involved at too low a level. Policy review did not produce innovation. Instead, the consensus process produced the lowest common denominator solution. The Policy Hill process was criticized for its formality and by the volume of plans that it produced. It was called a paper mill. These critics focused on the paper product, the plan, rather than the cohesion and shared vision that planning produced. The Jackson subcommittee report strongly influenced the incoming Kennedy administration.<sup>16</sup> The report favored informality and a smaller staff to generate multiple options and to deal only with major issues.

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<sup>15</sup> Best, *National Security Council*, 58-59.

<sup>16</sup> Senator Henry M. Jackson, ed., *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1965).

## Kennedy–Johnson 1961-1969

Informality and ad hocery weakened the NSC under Kennedy and even more so under Johnson.<sup>17</sup> Both preferred to receive advice in more intimate and informal settings. Their NSC systems continued the policy formulation function but dropped the oversight function under the assumption that the departments and agencies would follow presidential policies. Policies often failed in implementation. As secretary, Robert McNamara strengthened the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Kennedy's NSC was reactive. Johnson's NSC was almost completely consumed by the Vietnam War.

Strongly influenced by the Jackson Report, Kennedy initially abandoned Eisenhower's NSC system without a working replacement. He immediately lost Ike's long-term, strategic orientation and, intentionally or unintentionally, shifted into crisis response mode. Where Eisenhower's system, from top to bottom, could respond to crises out of a common strategic conception, Kennedy's system was ill prepared and reactive.

Kennedy sought diversity of thought and insisted on being presented with multiple options. In addition to career staff, Kennedy added a diverse group of intellectuals including academics and practitioners to the NSC staff. Rather than rely on what he saw as calcified departments and agencies, the president established an activist staff that, more than just managing the paper process, vigorously advanced his agenda. McGeorge Bundy was the first true national security assistant and the first to communicate directly with the press. Bundy was anything but policy neutral. He set the agenda with National Security Action Memoranda.

Kennedy abandoned oversight of implementation, delegating it to State until the Bay of Pigs fiasco caused him to doubt both State and the CIA. The result was the creation of the White House's Situation Room and a shift of implementation oversight responsibilities from State to the White House and the NSC. The NSC became a little State Department.<sup>18</sup>

Under Eisenhower, the NSC was the president's staff; under Kennedy, it was the national security assistant's staff. Where Eisenhower was accused of receiving a single, lowest common denominator solution, Kennedy received multiple options. Policy papers presented for Eisenhower's signature were generally long-term and strategic policies, while options presented to JFK tended to be in response to crises. Ike's process thoroughly engaged the implementing agencies and produced common understanding; Kennedy's did not.

Ike's NSC committees were largely chaired by a representative from State, preserving a dominating role for that department; Kennedy's committees were chaired by a representative from the most affected agency, contributing somewhat to the erosion of State's dominance.

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley L. Falk, "The National Security Council under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 79 (September 1964): 403-434. Falk's article provides a superb summary of the Council's formative years. See also, Anna Kasten Nelson, "President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council," *Journal of American History*, September 1985, 377.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Preston, "The Little State Department: McGeorge Bundy and the National Security Council Staff, 1961-1965," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, 4 (December 2001): 635-659.

Johnson's style was even less formal than Kennedy's. Johnson wanted candid advice in private, and his national security assistant emphasized his personal advisory role with the president over detailed policy formulation. Johnson's fear of leaks bordered on paranoia. His preferred forum for receiving advice and discussing issues was his Tuesday Lunch Group. Principals were not prepared by staff, no notes were taken, and the results were not disseminated. Johnson's NSC, and his presidency, was consumed by Vietnam.

## Nixon-Ford 1969-1977

Nixon was determined to run foreign policy from the White House rather than from Foggy Bottom. A powerful NSC and national security assistant were key. So, too, was the deliberate choice of a weak secretary of state, William Rogers, who lacked foreign policy experience. The Defense Department now clearly could hold its own against State, but Nixon's NSC dominated both. Nixon referred to Henry Kissinger, his *assistant for national security affairs*, as his *national security advisor*, and the informal title continues in use today.

Nixon shared Kennedy and Johnson's distrust of State and the CIA, and he centralized control in the White House. A strong assistant to the president, Kissinger, took on many responsibilities formerly carried out by the secretary of state.

Kissinger proposed an NSC system to overcome the perceived deficiencies of Johnson's system. According to Kissinger, Johnson relied on oral communication with cabinet members to guide the actions of the departments. His administration lacked written policy statements and the rationale that underlie decisions. The result was policy failure in implementation. Instead, Kissinger would deeply engage the departments and agencies through the NSC's interagency process, which Kissinger himself would control.

Kissinger's process was a top down version of Eisenhower's Policy Hill. Kissinger set the agenda by establishing the committees and chairing those he chose to dominate. A large, activist staff would extend Kissinger's power. Nixon wanted and received multiple options through Kissinger, but Kissinger was not a policy neutral intermediary.

In Nixon's second term, Kissinger became secretary of state and for a time simultaneously retained his position of national security assistant. Impeachment charges brought against Nixon preoccupied the president and in consequence further strengthened Kissinger's hand in matters of national security. Ford continued Nixon's NSC system.

Nixon's Under Secretaries Committee took on some of the responsibilities of Eisenhower's Oversight Coordinating Board. But where Ike's Board was in perpetual motion, Nixon's Committee was energized only when implementation became problematic, and it eventually withered away.

By the time of the Vietnam War, two powerful staffs had developed in the Pentagon—the civilian office of the secretary of defense and the uniformed joint staff. Defense had surpassed the policy planning capacity resident in State. With a powerful NSC staff and powerful Defense staffs, State's influence receded to a weak third place.

Concentration in the White House allowed secrecy, at least in the administration's first term. Throughout the Nixon-Ford administrations, Henry Kissinger served almost as deputy president for national security.

## Carter 1977-1981

In the aftermath of Nixon's Watergate and the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, there was a strong and common sense that too much power had become concentrated in the White House generally and in Kissinger, an unelected official, specifically. Decisionmaking was secretive and policy was made out of sight of Congress and the departments and agencies. Carter's response was to attempt cabinet government, pushing authorities from the White House back out to the department secretaries. Carter continued with a strong national security assistant in Zbigniew Brzezinski. He also selected a strong secretary of state in Cyrus Vance. A visible competition developed between Vance and Brzezinski. Carter sat above the competition between his national security assistant and secretary of state without resolving it.

Carter, like Kennedy, wanted multiple options presented to him for decision. He did not want a single, thoroughly staffed policy option characteristic of the Eisenhower administration or options filtered and controlled by someone like Kissinger. The NSC and its staff would be co-equal to the departments and agencies rather than dominate them as in the Nixon era.

Instead of centralized and secretive decisionmaking, Carter wanted collegiality. But he did not often call NSC meetings, thus missing his most important opportunity to establish and enforce collegiality among the NSC principals. He disestablished the committee that predecessor and successor presidents relied on to oversee covert operations.

The initial design of the NSC system called for two types of committees. For those issues that fell clearly within the domain of a single department, typically State, that department was declared lead agency and one of its representatives designated to chair committee meetings. For those issues that cut across the responsibilities of the departments and agencies, no lead agency was designated. Instead, the national security assistant, Brzezinski, would chair.

But as the administration settled in and personalities asserted themselves, the NSC committee system deviated from its originally stated intention. The structure remained but the division of labor changed. Where State was lead agency, it conducted long-range policy reviews, while Brzezinski's committees dealt with emerging and persistent affairs. Brzezinski was thus able to assert considerable control where he chose. Although Brzezinski had less power than Kissinger, he remained strong and had a prominent public presence.

Carter was not heavily engaged with his NSC. Like Kennedy and Johnson, he sought advice in small, informal settings. Carter's Friday breakfasts replaced Johnson's Tuesday lunches. They were regularly scheduled meetings for candid discussion. There was no specific agenda, and staff could not prepare their principals. No notes were taken, and there was nothing for principals to disseminate to their departments and agencies afterwards.

## Reagan 1981-1989

Like Carter, Reagan wanted a form of cabinet government but without a strong national security assistant like Kissinger or Brzezinski. Retired Army general Alexander Haig was Reagan's first secretary of state, and Caspar Weinberger served as secretary of defense. A competition quickly developed between Haig and Weinberger, and Reagan's handlers feared that Haig would upstage the president in enunciating foreign policy. Like Carter, Reagan let the competition fester unresolved. Haig eventually resigned. The role of the president's national security assistant sank to a new low as did the reputation of the NSC.

Reagan weakened the role of the national security assistant and reigned over an NSC system run amok. For the first and only time, the president's national security assistant was denied direct access to the president. Reagan had six national security assistants, a record that still stands. Still, NSC staff grew and committees proliferated. The president remained detached, and NSC staffers acted with sketchy guidance and a minimum of oversight. The Iran-Contra scandal—an arms for hostages deal—was the result. NSC staff engaged directly in policy implementation—operations—without the expertise resident in the departments and agencies and beyond congressional oversight. It brought the NSC to its lowest repute since its inception.

The illegal activities of Iran-Contra brought critical examination of Reagan's out of control NSC system both by Congress and the executive. The President's Special Review Board, commonly referred to as the Tower Commission, comprised John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft.<sup>19</sup> Although the Tower Commission Report specifically diagnosed the failures of Reagan's NSC system, its recommendations remain the most authoritative on the modern NSC and remain salient today.

The Report's findings were harsh and clear. In senior committees, department heads would not accept subordination to the head of the department designated lead agency, and the president did not enforce subordination. Furthermore, the president would not delegate foreign policy to the secretary of state and he would not manage foreign policy himself through the NSC. Reagan's NSC had politicized and distorted intelligence products. The Commission put forward a clear model for the NSC system, including the role of the national security assistant and staff, and for the interagency process.

The Commission concluded that the national security assistant's effectiveness is dependent on power derived from proximity to the president. The Report recommended that the national security assistant have direct access to the president. Furthermore, the national security assistant should chair the senior committees but to coordinate rather than dominate, to promote cooperation between department and agency heads rather than compete with them. The national security assistant should have primary responsibility for managing the process assuring that the full range of issues are raised to the president; that prospects, risks, and legalities are fully analyzed; and decisions are informed by all relevant sources. The assistant was also to be an advisor presenting personal views as

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<sup>19</sup> Tower Commission (President's Special Review Board), *Tower Commission Report* (New York: Bantam/Time, 1987).

well as fairly representing the views of other advisors. The assistant should adopt a low public profile leaving articulation of national policy to the president and the cabinet.

There were also recommendations for the NSC staff. The NSC was an advisory body, not an alternative to circumvent the agencies. The job is to review but not to compete with or replicate the functions of the departments and agencies. The staff should be small, experienced, and highly competent. Staff should be balanced, including detailees from the executive departments and agencies and experts from outside of government. Assignments should be long enough to develop expertise but generally less than four years, and their arrival and departure should be staggered to provide continuity within and between administrations. The NSC staff should have its own legal advisor.

The State Department should lead in formulation of foreign policy and in advising the president on foreign policy. Committees should be supported by full time staffs in the lead agencies rather than by NSC staffs.

The NSC staff was “actively involved” in preparing the national intelligence estimate on Iran published on May 20, 1985. There was the impression that White House policy preferences had perturbed the estimate. The Commission asserted that the intelligence process must produce unbiased estimates and remain out of the policy advocacy role.

Covert operations, or operations in general, conducted by the NSC staff undercut the responsible agencies. The Tower Commission report consistently referred to them as unprofessional in implementation. They failed to take advantage of agency contacts and expertise and the reservations that come from experience. The responsible agencies are subject to congressional oversight, the NSC, an advisory body, is not. The NSC staff must stay out of implementation.

The NSC system differed before and after the Tower Commission in many ways. Both changes in organization and process occurred. For political appointments, priority given to personal loyalty to Reagan slowly gave way to national security experience. From the weakest national security assistant, the position slowly regained some of its past strength, eventually recovering in the end. Even beyond the later emphasis on experience, the change in personalities offers the best explanation for the improved performance at the end of the administration. The president’s detachment was a constant throughout.<sup>20</sup>

A highly qualified national security executive, Ambassador Frank Carlucci, was chosen as national security assistant to implement the Commission’s recommendations. Access to the president was no longer constrained by the White House chief of staff. Carlucci chaired senior committee meetings over the initial objectives of Secretary Schultz. Within three months, Carlucci replaced more than half of the staff he inherited from his predecessor, John Poindexter, with more experienced foreign policy professionals. Colin Powell followed Carlucci as national security assistant. Together, they restored competence and collegiality. Reagan’s detachment remained.

The Reagan administration’s national security system is unique; it represents the low point for the NSC. White House handlers wanted to capitalize on Reagan’s strong communications skills and clearly reserve for the president the role of chief enunciator of

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<sup>20</sup> Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 335.

foreign policy. Simultaneously, they would protect him from the details that he showed no affinity for. The result was a national security assistant without direct access to the president and a national security system running without presidential guidance and supervision. President Reagan's style, variously described as disinterested in "detail" and big picture and hands off, is more accurately described as maladministration. In the end, the impression was widespread that the administration was incompetent.

## Bush 1989-1993

George H.W. Bush brought national security competence and departmental collegiality, and he initiated the NSC organization that exists today. Colin Powell served as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. Dick Cheney and James Baker served as secretaries of defense and state, respectively. Brent Scowcroft served as the president's sole national security assistant throughout the administration with a minimal public presence. Mutual respect, competency, and collegiality characterized the process. Bush, a president highly qualified in national security matters, capably steered the process and managed the personalities.

The NSC system would conduct policy review and elevate critical issues to the president. A National Security Review memorandum would initiate a policy review. The NSC would coordinate policy development and the actions of the implementing agencies. The NSC was not a decision making body. Decisions were made by the president in the context of his most trusted advisors. Crises were managed through standing rather than ad hoc committees.

Bush met regularly in the Oval Office with his "core group" throughout the Gulf War. The group included Bush, Scowcroft, Baker, Cheney, Powell, Vice President Dan Quayle, Deputy National Security Assistant and later DCI Robert Gates, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. The unofficial group was more the decision making venue than was the formal NSC. Its limited membership was leak proof and lent itself to candid discussion.

The NSC system comprised a hierarchy of committees. The top two committees in the hierarchy—the NSC proper and the Principals Committee—rarely met. The Deputies Committee was the president's engine of change and management. The Deputies Committee met frequently to deal with broad issues, long-range strategy, and crisis management.

Below the Deputies Committee were Policy Coordinating Committees, each with a specific regional or functional focus. State typically chaired regional committees at the assistant secretary level, and an NSC staff member chaired functional committees. The PCCs raised issues to the deputies. They brought focus and the expertise of the agencies. Political appointees chaired PCC meetings thus extending the president's influence.

Bush chose collegiality over competition. Although loyalty to the president was important, Bush appointed officials who brought considerable experience and competence to the NSC. The administration restored some formality to the system, but the president relied heavily on informal settings for advice and decision making. Scowcroft's performance is considered by many to be the model to emulate. Bush's NSC system was not a campaign issue.

## Clinton 1993-2001

William J. Clinton retained collegiality, kept his predecessor's NSC organization intact, and eventually expanded the staff to record size. Clinton created the National Economic Council parallel to and modeled on the NSC. He also included strong economic representation to the NSC system. Clinton's NSC was reactive, having more to do with the administration's approach to national security strategy than with the NSC's organizational structure. Anthony Lake, Clinton's first national security assistant, chose a low profile more like Scowcroft. Sandy Berger, national security assistant in Clinton's second term, established a more prominent public presence.

The Clinton administration's NSC system employed the same hierarchy of committees established by the Bush administration. The Principals Committee and the Deputies Committee remained in name and purpose. Bush's regional and functional Policy Coordinating Committees persisted under the name Interagency Working Groups.

Although the Clinton administration adopted an NSC system virtually identical to the Bush administration, there were meaningful differences worth examining. One was the division of labor between the national security assistant and the deputy. Under Bush, national security assistant Scowcroft emphasized his advisory role with the president. His deputy, Gates, managed the interagency process. Under Clinton, Lake and Berger divided regional and functional issues between them, but neither undertook management of the interagency process. The predictable result was a weakly managed process at all levels.

The Clinton administration, in response to the end of the Cold War, reduced the size of the staff. But at the same time, it stood up more specialized offices than Bush's NSC staff. In an attempt to maintain its dominance over the departments and agencies, NSC staffers chaired as many committees as possible. The overall result was a poor interagency process at the deputies and working group levels. In Clinton's second term, the NSC staff reversed course and ballooned to over 100 professional staffers, the largest staff ever. A powerful and visible NSC existed at the expense of a State Department that was weakened and demoralized.

Clinton's NSC system was collegial. W. Anthony Lake was Clinton's first national security assistant. Lake was an experienced foreign service officer who had worked on Nixon's NSC staff under Henry Kissinger and who had been director of State's Policy Planning Staff in the Carter administration. Warren M. Christopher, a Los Angeles international lawyer in private life, was appointed secretary of state after serving as deputy secretary of state under Carter. Robert Rubin headed the new NEC. Lake maintained collegial relations with Christopher and Rubin. Initially, Lake maintained a low public profile but eventually felt compelled to be a more public enunciator of foreign policy as Clinton declined and Christopher failed.

In the second term, Samuel "Sandy" R. Berger, former deputy national security assistant, rose to take Lake's position. Madeleine Albright, who served as ambassador to the United Nations in the administration's first term, was appointed secretary of state in the second. Although she had served on the NSC staff under Carter and Brzezinski, her career had largely been in academe. As secretary, she emphasized her foreign policy advisory role over the executive role at State.

Because of campaign promises and a genuine desire to focus “like a laser” on the economy, Clinton was not heavily engaged in the national security process. Clinton inherited Somalia and initiated actions in Haiti, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia. He also initiated peace talks in the Middle East. Clearly, Clinton did not ignore national security and foreign policy issues, but his attention was divided. An NSC system not well managed compounded by a president not heavily engaged produced mixed results. Neither of Clinton’s secretaries of state brought significant executive experience to the office and the Department continued its decline in morale and capacity. Still, campaign criticisms were focused on Clinton’s strategy, specifically the role of “nation building,” but not on NSC organization.

## Bush 2001-2009

George W. Bush created a weak NSC system, preferring a small group of likeminded advisors over rigorous analysis and vigorous debate. Interagency process in the NSC was overtaken by military process in the Pentagon. A highly qualified secretary of state, Colin Powell, did not share the dominant hardliner world view and was marginalized. Vice President Cheney built a personal national security staff of unprecedented size and influence. He insinuated himself and his office into the NSC system in ways never before seen. Cheney attempted to serve as deputy president for national security, but fell short of Kissinger’s performance. National Security Assistant Rice chose a low profile as did the articulate vice president, leaving an inarticulate president to communicate U.S. policy to domestic and foreign audiences.

The Bush administration continued the NSC organization from the previous Bush and Clinton administrations with some minor but consequential differences. Bush entered office with the intention of abandoning Clinton’s interventionist tendencies and nation building, and a suspicion of all things Clinton, including the counterterrorism office in the NSC. That would change in September 2001. The State Department chaired regional committees while the national security assistant chaired functional committees. The vice president attended Principal Committee meetings chaired by Rice. Neither Rice nor her deputy and successor Stephen J. Hadley could manage the interagency process.

The NSC system was designed to be passive, reduced to dealing with interagency conflicts brought to its attention. The agencies were not systematically engaged in the policy formulation process. Multiple options were not analyzed and advanced. Instead, solutions were decided in a closeted environment at the top and sent down for implementation. Expertise in the agencies was not engaged to inform presidential decision making, but to implement presidential decisions. The predictable consequence is what is becoming legendary failure in policy implementation. The NSC organization and process did not fail, the administration failed to use the NSC system effectively.

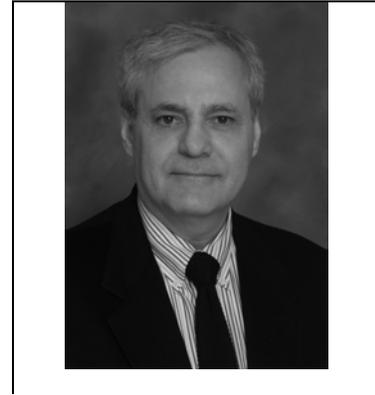
The Bush administration favored the military instrument over other instruments. Pentagon processes dominated interagency processes. Decisions were made without deep engagement of professionals across the executive branch. The results include a weakening of the NSC and State Department staffs’ role in the process relative to the Defense staff’s role, a militarized foreign policy, and a demoralized State Department and CIA.

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