

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

U.S. Army War College
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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 03 MAY 2004	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED -			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Origin and Development Process of the National Security Strategy		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S) John Bartolotto		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See attached file.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 30	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: LTC John K. Bartolotto

TITLE: THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF THE NATIONAL
SECURITY STRATEGY

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 10 February 2004 PAGES: 30 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This paper explores the origins of the National Security Strategy (NSS), the process of how it is developed, staffed and written by the Executive Branch, and recommendations for improving the overall developmental process of the NSS.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have successfully accomplished this research project without the assistance and efforts of several people.

COL Dick Buzby, my Faculty Advisor, who did an outstanding job of guiding, and advising me throughout the entire year.

COL Thomas "Doc" Brown, my Strategy Research Project Advisor, who gave me great mentoring, coaching, gentle prodding, editorial commenting, and overall helped me to stay on track and not lose my focus, sanity, or morale.

COL Alan Stolburg and Dr. Larry Goodson, who both from the start, got me focused and oriented on what I needed to quickly understand about the National Security Strategy, areas I needed to research, literature I needed to read, concepts I needed to explore, and experts I should contact.

COL (Ret) Don Snider whose patient guidance, instruction and first hand experience in the process of the National Security Strategy was invaluable.

Lastly, and most importantly, I need to thank my wife, Susan, and my children Sarah, Emily, Hannah and John for their patience, love, support, understanding, and hours and days of not seeing me, while I toiled away on completing my project, and the entire Army War College program. I am always thinking of you.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation – or coalition of nations – including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential or merely presumed.

— Edward Meade Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy* (1943)

The problem with national security strategy documents is that they often create the false impression that strategy formulation is a rational and systemic process. In fact, strategy formulation both within the executive branch and between the executive branch and Congress is an intensely political process from which national strategy emerges after protracted bargaining and compromise. Key personalities do what they can agree to do.

— Earl H. Tilford, US Strategic Studies Institute (1995)

The National Security Strategy (NSS) is really bundles of security, economic and political strategies based on assumptions about how best to advance national security and build international order.¹ It encompasses both planning for the use of the various implements of state power and attention to the domestic policies needed to produce and maintain them over the long-run.² What inevitably happens within the government is that administrations pursue a mix of policies and strategies to attain a consensual NSS.³

In the past our Nation's Grand Strategy revolved around how the Administration, specifically the President, viewed the world and at its essence was his vision for the place that the United States (US) had in it. But as Secretary of State Colin L. Powell stated in his remarks at The Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., on September 5, 2003 "Vision isn't enough...The President needs a strategy to design and execute foreign policy. I do mean the translation of the President's vision into policies, policies that are coherent...the translation requires the establishment of priorities...policies are unified by a strategy...in a document called the National Security Strategy of the United States."

However, over the past seventeen years since the creation of the Congressional law (the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, United States Code 50, Section 104a) that established the requirement for the NSS, the NSS has met with varied success in dealing with our adversaries, our allies, and our nation's future.⁴ Additionally, the NSS has a profound impact on defense acquisition policies and the emphasis the nation places upon cooperation with its allies and friends.⁵ It is extremely important for military leaders to understanding the origin and the

process of developing the NSS, especially in light of September 11, 2001 and our on-going War on Terrorism, because the NSS affects the direction that the nation takes, and indirectly the course of the world.

What is the origin of the NSS? How is it developed by each Administration? Is developing it, as stated by Earl H. Tilford, an intensely political process?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins and the developmental process of the NSS, and then make several recommendations for improving the NSS developmental process.

THE ORIGIN OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Throughout history nations did not make a habit of publishing their grand strategy prior to pursuing it. The very thought of practicing a policy that would make a nation's grand strategy public would have surprised Metternich, Bismarck and Lord Salisbury.⁶ But seventeen years ago, the US decided to do just that. So what is this thing called the NSS, which even for the US is a unique and recent phenomenon, and what is its origin?

It was not until 1943, during World War II (WWII), that the term "national security" came into full usage in US political discourse.⁷ But since the end of WW II, each administration has sought to develop and perfect a reliable set of executive procedures and institutions to manage national security policy.⁸ Congress stepped into the debate by passing the National Security Act of July 26, 1947, which in among other things created the National Security Council (NSC) under the chairmanship of the President to coordinate foreign policy and defense policy, and to reconcile diplomatic and military commitments and requirements.⁹ Proponents of the reform realized that no institutional means for coordination of foreign and defense policy existed, and that the informal management techniques employed by President Roosevelt during WW II and President Truman after the war were not suitable for the long haul.¹⁰ The Congressional logic was simple. The US was one of two super powers left after WWII and without a process and institution in place to coordinate national security, the nation faced the real threat of heading down the wrong path.

During this same time period, at the dawn of the Cold War, it was the Executive Branch which initiated the practice of publicly articulating its national security strategy. The most well known of these early articulations was George Keenan's 1947 "X" article in Foreign Affairs, which provided the rationale for the containment strategy that became the cornerstone of US foreign policy throughout the Cold War. This strategy was codified the following year by the Truman administration's National Security Council Document 68 (NSC-68). During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the best rationale for US national security policy was actually

contained in the Secretary of Defense's "Annual Report to Congress."¹¹ The next precedent came when the Nixon administration did official statements of national security strategy in a State of the World Report.¹² Until 1986, the United States had no written official NSS.¹³ In 1986 the Nixon administration's precedent became law with the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, which required the President to report regularly to Congress and the American people on the NSS.¹⁴ Congress's mandate tasked the Executive Branch to publish a NSS, and in 1987 the first document called "The National Security Strategy of the United States" was published by the Reagan administration.¹⁵

The fundamental, strategic nature of the NSS is threefold: one, it furnishes a historical perspective to past strategic structure; two, it delineates the interest of the United States; three, it analyzes the threat and objectives of the United States, and the means to achieve these objectives.¹⁶

The prerequisites for the NSS transmittal to Congress are contained in Section 104a of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, United States Code 50.

(1) The President shall transmit to Congress each year a comprehensive report on the national security strategy of the United States (hereinafter in this section referred to as a "national security strategy report").

(2) The national security strategy report for any year shall be transmitted on the date on which the President submits to Congress the budget for the next fiscal year under section 1105 of title 31.

(3) Not later than 150 days after the date, on which a new President takes office, the President shall transmit to Congress a national security strategy report under this section. That report shall be in addition to the report for that year transmitted at the time specified in paragraph (2).

(b) Contents

Each national security strategy report shall set forth the national security strategy of the United States and shall include a comprehensive description and discussion of the following:

(1) The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the national security of the United States.

(2) The foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression and to implement the national security strategy of the United States.

(3) The proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives referred to in paragraph (1).

(4) The adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy of the United States, including an evaluation of the balance among the capabilities of all elements of the national power of the United States to support the implementation of the national security strategy.

(5) Such other information as may be necessary to help inform Congress on matters relating to the national security strategy of the United States.¹⁷

The bottom line of 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act is that Congress amended the National Security Act of 1947 to require an annually written articulation of the nation's grand strategy from each succeeding President. Congress's rationale behind the edict was that the Executive Branch had more often than not failed to formulate, in an integrated and coherent manner, the judicious use of resources drawn from all the elements of national power, a mid- and long-term strategy necessary to defend and further vital national interests.¹⁸

The 1947 National Security Act only went so far in assisting Presidents in formulating foreign and domestic policy. Even though President Truman established the National Security Agency (NSA) in 1952¹⁹ the Congress still sensed a real need for a single vision for the nation, and Congress even disbelieved that a national strategic vision even existed. The nation had been following "containment" in one form or another for over forty years. What Congress doubted, and disagreed with, was the containment strategy's focus in terms of our national values; its interests and objectives; its coherence in terms of relating means to ends; its integration in terms of the elements of power; and its time horizon.²⁰ With the birth of the NSS the Congress also ensured greater civilian control of the military and its planning – which really was the political theme of the Goldwater-Nichols Act.²¹ Furthermore Congress wanted some sort of means to link the national strategic vision to the annual Presidential budget,²² which is why the Executive Branch is tasked to report the NSS early each year, so that it can then be followed on by the resources requested in the administration's annual budget submission.²³

In theory, a coherent and effective NSS would efficiently align and balance the strategic ends, ways, and means in pursuit of our national interests in consonance with our social values. The NSS, like Grand Strategy, has been defined as the art and science of developing, applying, and coordinating the instruments of national power (diplomatic, economic, military, and informational) to achieve objectives that contribute to national security. It encompasses national defense, foreign relations, and economic relations and assistance; and aims, among other

objectives, at providing a favorable foreign relations position, and a defense posture capable of defeating hostile action.²⁴ But would the Executive Branch cooperate with Congress? And how would such an important document be developed without being politicized by each administration?

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Each NSS starts with the administration's mental image of the world.²⁵ As a process the NSS involves determining what interests the nation has, what priorities to place on those various interests, and what national instruments of power are available and appropriate for achieving individual interests and the aggregate of those interests.²⁶

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies states:

National security strategy, or "grand strategy," is the art and science of developing, integrating, and deploying the political, economic, diplomatic, military, informational, and other instruments of national power and influence to secure political objectives in peace and war. A national security strategy seeks to counter real or potential threats to a state's interests, values, or survival. This focus on perceived threats differentiates a security strategy from a state's general foreign and domestic policy initiatives. National security strategy should also be distinguished from military strategy or doctrine. As Clausewitz recognized, military strategy should flow from, and be subordinate to, overall national security policy goals, even if the resultant potential for political interference in military planning and operations can often be frustrating for those in uniform.²⁷

As it turns out, Earl H. Tilford was correct in his assessment that the NSS development is an "intensely political process". The main reason for this is that the NSS is a product of an interagency system, in which the NSC plays the central role and has numerous interactions with other government procedures that introduce painful iterations.²⁸

The congressionally mandated NSS document, which bears the President's signature and is supposed to be produced annually as an indicator of an administration's direction in national security and foreign policy. The NSS is also eagerly awaited because it is the best example of "purposeful adaptation" by the American government to changing global realities and responsibilities. It expresses the US strategic vision, what the US stands for in the world, its priorities, and a sensing of how the instruments of national power, (diplomatic, economic, military and informational) will be arrayed. Since it is truly an interagency product, the NSS also serves to discipline the interagency system to understand the President's agenda and priorities, and develops a common language that gives coherence to policy within an administration. It is also more than a strategic document. It is political, designed to enhance the presidential authority in order to mobilize the nation. Finally, the NSS tends to document rather than drive

the policy initiatives, which is especially true in election years.²⁹ Through my research and after reviewing each NSS, I found this to be exactly the case – that each administration’s final NSS is merely a reiteration of the administration’s accomplishments.

There are several issues that complicate the process of developing the NSS. First, there is a high turnover of and injection of new personnel, at times inexperienced and equipped with new predispositions about national security, at the top echelons of the American government with each new administration. Second, because the NSS expresses strategic vision, what the United States stands for in the world and what its diplomatic, economic, and military priorities are,³⁰ all the agencies involved in those arenas are placed at political odds with one another for their piece of the national pie. Third, each new administration will try to put its own stamp and spin on the NSS.³¹ Lastly, in the case of every NSS that Don M. Snider and John A. Nagl reviewed in their book The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision, they found that the operating atmosphere in which the NSS was prepared was one of intense, adversarial politics. This adversarial environment exists because the Executive Branch must communicate its strategic vision to Congress and numerous constituencies (thus legitimizing its budget rationale), transition from campaign promises to governance (foreign policy in particular), and try to establish the overall agenda of the President while at the same time getting ready to prepare the more politically overshadowing State of the Union address.³²

Again the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies succinctly defines the NSS process:

The term national security strategy implies a planned, systematic, and rational process, where a consideration of national interests, values, and priorities decides policy objectives, and an analysis of available resources, and the external security environment determines the strategy to achieve these objectives. However, in practice, strategy making is rarely so straightforward. The security implications of trends in the international environment can be difficult to interpret and analyze; leading to the kind of strategic drift that characterized Western security policies following the end of the Cold War. Strategies often develop incrementally as a result of compromises between the conflicting interest groups involved in decision making. They are also shaped by strong leaders, organizational cultures, and governmental structures. In some states, economic policy alone can drive the whole security strategy process. Unforeseen events will also tend to upset the most rigorous planning, causing the distinct stages in a sequential process of strategic analysis, choice, and implementation to overlap.

³³

The first and most obvious effort of each administration is to formulate and codify its preferred approach to national security.³⁴ The US Army War College’s Strategy Formulation Model (below) sums up this formulation and codifying process. The Strategy Formulation Model

shows the various forces and trends that effect an administration as it establishes its approach to and creation of its national security strategy.

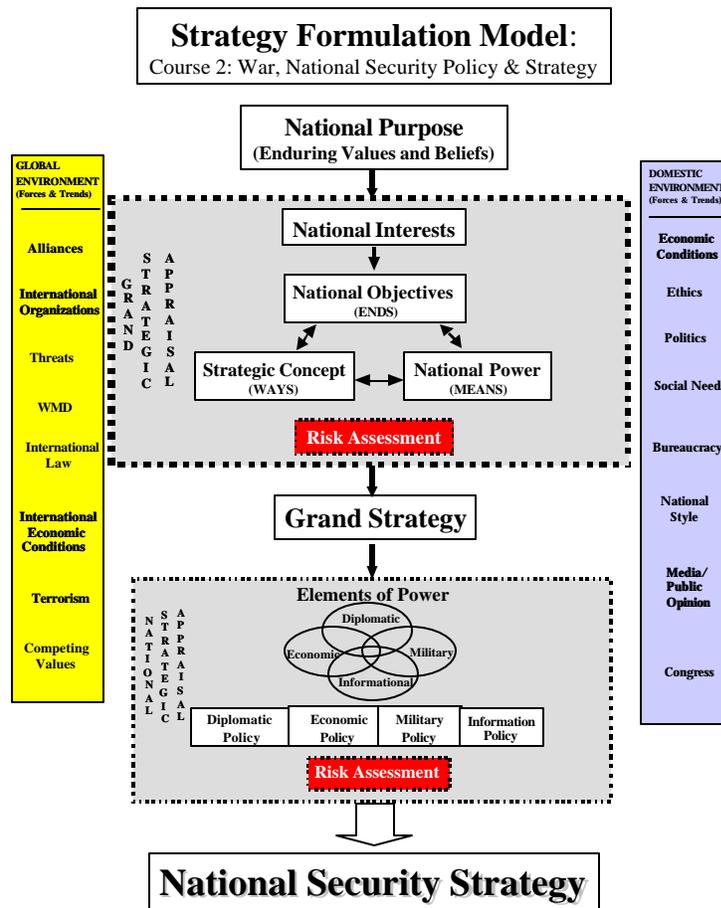


FIGURE 1. ³⁵

The overall process of initiating, controlling, developing, writing, and publishing the NSS is owned and resides with the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, who also heads/leads the NSC staff. ³⁶ The main part of the NSC staff that deals with the NSS is known as the Executive Secretariat and varies in size and function from administration to administration. ³⁷ The NSS is used to create intellectual consensus vetted through the election

campaign and party platform. It is carved from a consensus view of the nation and the world within the Executive Branch, but its main flaw is that it must speak to so many audiences. The NSS process is started by a National Security Decision memo from the President and designates which cabinet departments will participate in the formulation of the NSS. Usually the first National Security Directive (NSD) or National Security Memorandum (NSM) from the President lays out how the NSC will work. The functions and operations of the NSC change from administration to administration and sometimes within administrations. The NSS is processed under the organizational structure of the NSC and above all it is a political document and Presidential agenda.³⁸ In addition to the governmental actors with formal responsibility in the policy process, interest groups and public opinion directly affect the substance of the NSS.³⁹

However, regardless of the variety of political actors involved in national security policy, the focal point is fixed on the presidency. It is the quality and capability of the person in the Oval Office that determines the success or failure of U.S. national security policy and strategy.⁴⁰ There are four important factors to a systematic study of the development of the NSS and all of them center on the President. First, the President's leadership style, his personality and character as critical determinants of how the Oval Office functions with respect to national security policy and process. Second, how the President views the powers and limitations of the office and how he sees his role in furthering its prestige and power. Third, the President's mindset (view of the world) regarding U.S. national interests and the international security environment and how these affect the national security policies and strategic posture his administration attempts to put into place. Lastly, the President's ability to bring the first three components to bear upon the National Security Establishment so as to synthesize and integrate its efforts toward coherent policy and relevant options.⁴¹

Each Administration designs the decision-making system of the NSC to fit the needs and desires of the new President and his style of leadership/management.⁴² The basic NSS formulation process starts with someone on the NSC staff setting out, in the name of the President, to task the Cabinet officials and their strategy-minded deputies, to articulate the preferred NSS for the United States. What follows is an iterative, interagency process of some months (or years depending on the administration) culminating in multiple drafts and several high level meetings, including the NSC, to resolve differences and ultimately approve the final version of the NSS.⁴³ One of the most useful ways for a new administration to start the NSS formulation process is to begin with an analysis of the ideas contained in the last administration's NSS to the new administration's campaign statements and to the new policies it

desires to pursue.⁴⁴ The most important thing to remember about each NSS is that they are macro level documents that take much interagency planning to develop and result from intensive interaction among agencies.⁴⁵

Because there are no formalized decision criteria or standard formats for issuing strategic guidance, the thoroughness and quality of that guidance varies substantially from NSS to NSS, and from administration to administration (and sometimes within administrations). One of the main problems with the NSS is that the resultant product reflects a process that lacks both standardized structure and a set of relevant factors to be considered and communicated before committing US elements of power.⁴⁶ Additionally the quality of the NSS depends on how willing Presidential administrations decide to be frank and forthcoming with Congress and the American people. Over the years most administrations have interpreted Congress's mandate loosely. Former President Bill Clinton's first NSS reportedly went through 21 drafts before it was finally submitted a year and a half late.⁴⁷ The most crucial element of the entire NSS development process is that even if people at the Executive pinnacle try to formulate a national strategy, fragmentation may still result and where they fail to do so, fragmentation will be inevitable.⁴⁸ So then the question is what should the nation do to improve the developmental process of the NSS?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY PROCESS

The United States Commission on National Security / 21st Century was correct in 2000 with their assessment that "The time for reexamination (of the NSS) is now..."⁴⁹ This call for a change in how the nation develops its national strategy is based on the fact that although Congress requires the Executive Branch to submit a NSS, few administrations have used the document to seriously re-examine America's role in the world.⁵⁰ One issue feeding the winds of change is that of consistency of our national strategy brought about by the fact that unless a President succeeds himself or is followed by a like-minded leader, an end-of-term NSS will usually find its way quickly onto the garbage heap of history because it has little useful value other than to document accomplishments of the outgoing administration.⁵¹ Most importantly is the realization that what President, in a fast-paced, media-oriented world wants to articulate once a year, in a static, written report a detailed statement of his forward-looking strategic vision?⁵²

The United States is in the world to stay. Whether they like it or not, US citizens cannot withdraw from external responsibilities, nor can they retreat to the isolation of the early twentieth century. Regardless of the policies of any administration, the US has links to most parts of the

world – politically, economically, culturally, and psychologically. What the US does or does not do has an impact on international politics. Additionally, many national security issues cannot be isolated from domestic policy either.⁵³ The most evolved democracy in the world has the most cumbersome national security decision-making process. Inefficiency is the price the founding fathers imposed for democratic accountability. But some of the inefficiency is the result of American strategic culture, with its multiplicity of players, plentiful but diffused resources, and the propensity to segment peace and diplomacy from war and military power. Frederick the Great cautioned: “Diplomacy without arms is music without instruments.” So did John F. Kennedy: “Diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail.” Major structural changes must be made in the interagency system in order to harness human talent and resources intelligently. It is time to revise the 1947 NSC system and the 1986 NSS process and move to one for the 21st Century.⁵⁴

Structural and procedural changes are not enough for successful national security policy. Also needed is a focus that provides coherent visions of national interests, clarity of national security policy, and clear directions to the design of strategy. By exercising effective leadership and by providing a sense of purpose and vision in articulating national interests, the President can shape the boundaries, determine the directions, and establish the critical points to map out US national security strategy.⁵⁵

I fully agree with the Phase III Report of the U.S. Commission on National Security / 21st Century “Road Map for National Security: Imperative for Change” which recommends that the Executive Branch should establish a National Security Service Corps (NSSC) to enhance civilian career paths, and to provide a corps of policy experts with broad-based experience throughout the Executive Branch.⁵⁶ The NSSC is needed to create a historical knowledge core within the Executive Branch to assist in standardizing the NSS process because the current ad hoc system of formulating strategic guidance is clearly not conducive to producing strategies appropriate to our foreign policy initiatives or responses to crises. Furthermore the entire Executive Branch’s policymaking apparatus must continue to refine its strategic planning system if the NSS is to become a streamlined process.⁵⁷ The NSS is so essential to achieving national objectives, especially in our current environment, that it portends an even greater need for complete and comprehensive strategic guidance and supports the adoption of a standard format. Strategic guidance should provide elements of information that the appropriate government departments and agencies need if they are to take coordinated action and achieve the desired strategic objectives. These elements become apparent from an analysis of the

theoretical requirements for directing strategic action, from the considerations and rationale for engagement outlined in the NSS.⁵⁸

The National Security Act of 1947 needs to be amended to give the NSC increased powers to force other government agencies to quickly focus their efforts on the development of a timely and relevant NSS. By not having these powers the NSC will continued to be hampered by a politicized and bureaucratic system that does not produce the NSS in a timely manner, which jeopardizes our National Military Strategy (NMS), contingency planning guidance, our Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, and Combatant Commander's operations plans.

Terry L. Deibel, of the National Defense University, proposed a need for a NSS that stressed the importance of pragmatism and continuity. His argument is based on the fact that barring significant events like September 11, 2001, our national interests change little over time, he stated, new administrations should be assembling their NSS from policies that succeeded in previous administrations.⁵⁹ After reviewing all thirteen NSS, (Reagan 1987 & 1988; Bush 1990, 1991 & 1993; Clinton 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 & 2000; and Bush 2002), I agree with Terry Deibel, that although each NSS is worded and organized slightly different by each administration, each NSS has the same relative objectives.

What is required most in every NSS is that it must ensure that our national ends be consciously related to means and that the national interest overseas is carefully defined. The task would be far easier if the President uses the language of national strategy and explicitly builds his prospective policy on the successes of all of his recent predecessors.⁶⁰ This may well be the case in each and every one of past NSS, but each is certainly tainted with political party rhetoric and spins. Gabriel Marcella, in her work National Security and the Interagency Process summed it up best when she stated that the complex challenges to national security in the 21st Century will require intelligent integration of resources and unity of effort within the government. It is also imperative that changes be made to make the system and the process more effective.⁶¹

My recommendations for improving the NSS process are the following.

- The Goldwater-Nichols Act should be amended to instruct the Executive Branch that the NSS should not be changed from a previous administration's version unless that previous version is not achieving the national interests or a radical change in the national direction (the War on Terrorism) is required. This is for the sake of the entire nation and its steady direction along a single global and domestic path. NSS policies that are effective and productive for the nation should not be changed and should continue for the overall benefit of the nation.

- The Goldwater-Nichols Act should be amended to instruct the Executive Branch that the NSS should be thought of as the overarching national plan and be tied in with the State of the Union. Ideally the State of the Union should be the President's verbal expression of what is contained in the NSS.
- The Goldwater-Nichols Act should be amended to change the requirement for a yearly NSS to only one at the beginning of each administration, due no later than October of the inauguration year. The rationale for this is that the NSS should be a plan to give overall vision, direction and guidance to the nation. The main NSS document should not change within administrations. If minor changes are required then they should be issued as Presidential policy/directives/memorandum as issues arise.
- The Goldwater-Nichols Act should be amended to fully implement the U.S. Commission on National Security / 21st Century recommendation for the establishment of a National Security Service Corps.
- The Goldwater-Nichols Act should be amended to instruct the Executive Branch that the NSS should include domestic programs and policies. This requirement is essential because a nation cannot achieve its goals if its foreign and domestic strategies are not synchronized. The NSS should not be a solely "foreign policy statement" but a total focus on all issues, both foreign and domestic that effect our national interests.

CONCLUSION

After seventeen years and many different versions, the NSS has become a critical part of American politics and policy. Its origin is well known and understood by both Congress and the Executive Branch. Additionally, both seem to understand and appreciate the importance of an established NSS for each administration and for the nation. The process of how to develop the NSS is another story altogether. Many believe that the NSS has fallen short of the expectations held by the Goldwater-Nichols Act, and it should not come as a surprise because every Presidential administration views Congress as a competitor, rather than a partner, even when the same party controls both. Additionally, an administration's early NSS efforts may also serve the political purpose of differentiating a new government from its predecessor.⁶² As a result, information about a critical subject like national security is power; pure raw power – and the stakes are high.⁶³ This being said, the nation still needs this critical document because a great power such as the United States cannot afford to send mixed messages about its intentions, whether to its allies, to its competitors, or to its adversaries.⁶⁴

WORD COUNT=4978

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