



THE WALKER PAPERS

Honest Brokers in the Gray Zone

Adapting the NSC for the
Twenty-First Century

Christopher P. Mulder, Col, USAF
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USMC (RET.) Advisor



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Air Force Fellows

Since 1958, the Air Force has assigned a small number of carefully chosen, experienced officers to serve one-year tours at distinguished civilian institutions studying national security policy and strategy. Beginning with the 1994 academic year, these programs were accorded senior service school professional military education in-residence credit. In 2003 these fellowships assumed senior developmental education (SDE), force development credit for eligible officers.

The SDE-level Air Force Fellows serve as visiting military ambassadors to their centers, devoting effort to expanding their colleagues' understanding of defense matters. As such, candidates for SDE-level fellowships have a broad knowledge of key Department of Defense (DOD) and Air Force issues. SDE level fellows perform outreach by their presence and voice in sponsoring institutions. SDE-level fellows are expected to provide advice, promote, and explain Air Force and DOD policies, programs, and military doctrine strategy to nationally recognized scholars, foreign dignitaries, and leading policy analysts. The Air Force Fellows also gain valuable perspectives from the exchange of ideas with these civilian leaders. SDE-level fellows are expected to apprise appropriate Air Force agencies of significant developments and emerging views on defense and economic and foreign policy issues within their centers. Each fellow is expected to use the unique access she or he has as grounds for research and writing on important national security issues. The SDE Air Force Fellows include the National Defense Fellows, the RAND Fellows, the National Security Fellows, and the Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows. The Air Force Fellows program also supports a post-SDE military fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

On the intermediate developmental education level, the chief of staff approved several Air Force fellowships focused on career broadening for Air Force majors. The Air Force Legislative Fellows was established in April 1995 with the Foreign Policy Fellowship and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Fellowship coming under the Air Force Fellows program in 2003. In 2004, the Air Force Fellows also assumed responsibility of the National Laboratories Technologies Fellows.

Foreword

The National Security Council, as we know it today, is a fairly new concept and the result of development across fourteen presidential administrations. The 1947 National Security Act created the NSC and, in the aggregate, has accomplished with it was charged to do: maintain the security of the United States.

The world today is much more dynamic than when I was the 21st National Security Advisor (NSA), serving under President Obama. To confront the adversaries on our horizon and best them in competition or conflict will require realignment of priorities, reform of agencies, and reconsideration of processes. This paper comes at an ideal time.

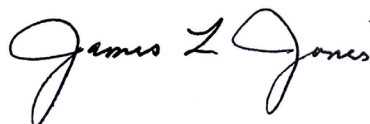
The NSC sits at the confluence of our government, charged with providing the president the information and tools to make sound decisions and then to coordinate the action of agencies that those decisions demand—a monumental task. Yet it remains a relatively ad hoc organization without funding commensurate to its role. Drawing approximately two-thirds of its personnel from across the government on a temporary basis, it is neither conducive to continuity nor truly staffed for twenty-four hour operations, all features that I hope as the NSC continues to mature will be remedied. For this system to successfully equip national leadership today and in the future, it must evolve to meet the challenges of the “Gray Zone.”

The authors have painstakingly researched, read, discussed, and interviewed multiple individuals with first-hand knowledge of the NSC over the years. Their innovative approach to creating this document tackles the intangible elements of the decision-making process, such as “groupthink” and personal relationships between staff, principals, and the president. To help develop their recommendations, they crafted and ran a tabletop exercise that examined the impacts of “groupthink,” one of their focus areas. They also rightly identify the importance of “Scowcroftian” fairness and honesty as a leading trait in the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs.

Another innovative aspect of this document includes recommending that all Americans should be educated and informed more fully on national security matters including both successes and failures. One actionable way to accomplish this is to produce an engaging docuseries that can highlight the demands of our national security apparatus through the lens of the president, national security advisor, and the national security council. The concept is included in the appendix for those that are interested in making that a reality.

The future will be much more dynamic than when I was the NSA, but I am confident that our young people will find solutions to the most difficult tests

yet to come. Understanding how the executive branch creates and executes national security policy is a crucial step in developing those solutions, to include novel, creative, new ways of doing the nation's national security business. Consequently, the paper captures well the challenges of managing national strategy and makes an important contribution to determining how the NSC will function in tomorrow's increasingly contested security environment.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James L. Jones". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J'.

GEN. JAMES L. JONES, JR., USMC
(RETIRED)

National Security Advisor for
President Barack Obama

About the Authors

Christopher P. Mulder is a Colonel in the Air Force, worked at the Atlantic Council, and was the Senior Air Force Fellow from 2020–2021.

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Matthew R. Crouch (Advisor) is a retired USMC Lieutenant Colonel. He worked at the Atlantic Council and was the Senior Marine Corps Fellow from 2020–2021.

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of more than a year-long effort that started within the Atlantic Council's Forward Defense practice. Unfortunately, Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, the man whose name adorns the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, passed away shortly after the 2020-2021 military fellowship year started. Yet his influence lives on, with Scowcroft's name remaining as the name of the center, a new Scowcroft legacy program, and Dr. Matthew Kroenig, the Scowcroft Center's deputy director, sending *The Strategist* to every staff member when they start in the Scowcroft Center. This was the impetus for Colonel Mulder to become highly interested in the National Security Council. After he read multiple National Security Advisor autobiographies, including *The Strategist*, this effort was off to a running start.

The manuscript in front of you is an attempt to holistically analyze the NSC through its inception to the present day. Our intent is not to relitigate past events through the history or case study sections. In general, we try to stick to the commonly accepted outcomes, perceptions, and facts. We also realize that there is context prior to, during, and after each administration's decision making that plays a role in how a president and their NSC make decisions. We are certain that length and time constraints have prevented perfect presentation of the nuances and facets of the complicated business of making national security decisions. We fully acknowledge that historical context is important to consider and can help inform current and future organizational change and decision making, but we are also focused on the future. We hope this paper inspires others to think, write, engage, and act on national security and defense matters to ensure that the United States continues to lead and be a guiding light around the globe. Any mistakes, flawed analysis, or inaccuracies are the authors alone. Even though we learned a great deal about our nation's history, national security apparatus, and those characters that were in the arena during challenging times throughout the development of this project, we fully realize that we have much more to learn about our exceptional nation. We will continue to do our part.

The authors would like to thank the entire Forward Defense team (Clementine Starling, Mark Massa, Christian Trotti, and Julia Siegel) for strategic guidance and input during the project's initial development. The authors would also like to thank former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley for pointing us to his NSA paper titled, "The Role and Importance of the National Security Advisor;" former National Security Advisor Robert "Bud" McFarlane, author Max Brooks, and the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy

and Security Director Barry Pavel for agreeing to be interviewed during the creation of this report. The authors would also like to thank Kalohi Clark, Joseph DiNoto, Aleksas Juskys, Dan Mulder, Frank Goertner, Guermantes “G-Man” Lailari, and Brian Morra for their consultation, and their invaluable comments, edits, and insights on the paper. The authors would also like to thank Brigadier General (retired) Chad Manske for his manuscript review and his own academic work that highlights the British NSC-like model that informed the US NSC model. Special recognition goes to Julia Siegel and Olivia Popp for helping develop the NSC docuseries concept. Finally, the authors would like to thank members of the Atlantic Council who participated in the wargame (attached in the Appendix); their participation informed the research and findings. Additional thanks for former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel for his endorsement of the docuseries concept.

Finally, Robert “Bud” McFarlane passed away on May 12, 2022 due to health complications prior to the publication of this paper. Both Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Crouch and Colonel Christopher Mulder were fortunate enough to be mentored by Bud. He gave generously of his time as a commitment to continued service. Over multiple in-person meetings, we learned how patriotic, thoughtful, and insightful he was, always granting us a new perspective, additional questions to ponder, or renewed energy to learn and do more for our families, community, and nation. During every meeting, Bud conveyed through stories that men and women of principle, with core values, and a depth of knowledge are required to serve in government to secure the nation’s security. We will carry this same sentiment forward as we mentor those aspiring to serve. We are forever grateful for Bud’s leadership, friendship, and mentorship.

Abstract

It has been over 60 years since the National Security Council was brought into existence under the Truman administration. In that time, the Council has undergone many challenges brought on by technological advancements, changes in warfare environments, and political conflicts within administrations. The authors provide analysis of the successes and failures of NSC administrations, along with discussion of modern warfare and the changes over the past few decades to show what changes might be implemented in order to tailor a successful NSC for the future.

Executive Summary

This paper was written to benefit those unfamiliar with the National Security Council (NSC), those at various academic institutions who are eager to learn more, new detailees to the NSC staff, current NSC staffers contemplating new processes, the general public, and policymakers who are interested in improving the nation's national security. The paper is not intended to relitigate every historical event to modify or change the generally accepted outcome, result, or perception of these historical events. The goal of this project was to reflect on the past to inform a future that is postured to respond to any national security threats.

Twenty-first century foreign policy thus far has been defined by rogue states, terrorist activity, the return of great power competition, unconventional conflict in new domains, and other vexing challenges. These challenges have only accelerated over the past 20 years through the evolution of the Global War on Terror into the maturation of a hybrid warfare environment with near-peer and non-state adversaries, and unfortunately now a large-scale invasion by Russia into Ukraine. In the face of these obstacles, two questions emerge: how can the United States respond to ambiguous situations adequately, in a timely manner, all while preventing unnecessary escalation? In doing so, what will the role be of a harmonized interagency strategy?

As one of the key decision recommending bodies in the foreign policy apparatus, the NSC will surely play a vital role. Currently containing an advisory board of cabinet-level officials, deputies, and numerous staff, the NSC has taken different forms over the past several decades.¹ As a board composed of some of the most influential foreign policy figures in the executive branch, the NSC has historically had the ability to operate as a veritable power broker, taking on an advisory and, occasionally, operational role in foreign policy, synchronizing the elements of the US Intelligence Community with the Departments of Defense, State, and other departments to shape foreign policy and national security. Yet the NSC's history here has not been unblemished. Prior foreign policy failures—like during the Vietnam War, the Iran-Contra Affair, and Iraq War, among others—have led to the NSC being lambasted as ineffective and sometimes even disastrous. At the same time, however, the NSC has been lauded for its success in managing challenges such as the Gulf and Cold Wars. Why is there such a disparity in these conclusions?

This paper aims to answer two fundamental questions. First, what makes the NSC succeed—or fail? Second, how can this vision of a successful NSC be tailored to twenty-first century conflict, also referred to as gray zone conflict or hybrid warfare, when US adversaries are using a new and unconventional

playbook? Yet even in this changing unconventional world, the NSC will still need to plan for and respond to large-scale invasions, like Russia's attack on Ukraine.

The report begins with a history of the NSC, moving from the creation of the NSC under the Truman administration to the current Biden administration. Throughout the NSC's history, a clear pattern emerges: an oscillation between two extremes, often back-to-back. When one administration would have an overly weak and uninfluential NSC, this would often be followed by a subsequent, powerful NSC, followed again by an NSC that was more constrained. This pattern can be seen time and time again, from Truman's out-of-the-picture NSC followed by Eisenhower's rigidly formalistic NSC, to Nixon's omnipotent NSC stewarded by Henry Kissinger resulting in a far more informal and hands-off NSC under Carter. This is unsurprising. Both an overly weak and overly powerful NSC have obvious defects, and neither is preferable to the other. Instead, the inexorable conclusion of the history section is that an effective NSC is a balancing act, necessitating an NSC that is neither too weak nor too powerful.

Beyond the observation of patterns, each NSC is also evaluated, not only on foreign policy success, but also by an analysis of collective decision-making which is informed by social sciences on dynamics such as collective action problems and groupthink. We have found that the NSC has been susceptible to harmful group decision-making dynamics and that responsible NSC prescriptions must take this into account.

We have provided charts to illustrate the NSC process flow for each administration, along with an explanation of the fundamental aspects of each. The process flow charts were designed to help the reader visualize how information would flow between key national security figures and departments. The size of each box is also important and connotes the influence of actors in the information ecosystem.

Finally, we have created an NSC spectra chart that covers four key areas: NSC Influence, NSA Power, NSC Informality, and Presidential Influence. These four spectra help categorize NSC behavior and outcomes, with prior NSCs tending to fall in the middle on each of the four spectra. Straying too far toward either extreme often portends sub-optimal outcomes.

In testing this theory, the paper examines seven case studies: the Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, the Iran hostage crisis, the Iran-Contra Affair, the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and the Cold War. Each case study features an evaluation of what went right—or wrong—for the NSC, situating NSC efficacy along the four spectra. By explicating the paper's theory in the context of seven

case studies, we draw conclusions about NSC effectiveness in both theory and practice.

Following the examination of these case studies, the paper extracts a concrete example of the theoretical model, dubbed the “Scowcroft model.” It represents the NSC under the leadership of its namesake, Lt Gen Brent Scowcroft.² The Scowcroft Model struck the ideal balance across all four spectra and can be broken down into several informal and formal elements (the former being leadership and cultural styles, and the latter being institutional design elements): honest brokerage, trust, the ability for the NSA to operate behind the scenes, a limited number of staff members, a clear hierarchy, and a mandate for NSA leadership.

While, at this point, the paper has argued in favor of the potency of the Scowcroft Model, what’s past is not prologue and the foreign policy challenges of yesterday will not be the same as those of today. The paper thus concludes with an analysis of how the Scowcroft Model—and NSC writ large—can be tailored to the challenge of hybrid, gray zone conflict. Defined by its operation below traditional thresholds of conflict, hybrid war is a vexing challenge for policymakers, deployed by adversaries who seek asymmetric advantages against the conventionally superior US military. By operating short of traditional thresholds for war, hybrid conflict tends to focus on often-overlooked domains—political, cyberspace, space, economic, social, legal, and others. The paper argues in favor of taking the hybrid threat seriously, while also detailing what the NSC can do to confront both hybrid and traditional challenges: codification of the members of the NSC Principals Committee, the continuation of a three-tier hierarchy (principals, deputies, and policy coordination), an organizational mandate for an interagency committee housed within the NSC to coordinate whole-of-society responses to hybrid challenges, and a push for the next NSA to hold court consistent with the ethos of the Scowcroft Model.

The paper concludes with a series of eight recommendations:

1. Codification of Principals: Promote stability among the principals to create a sense of belonging that can be conducive to candid exchange of ideas.
2. Right-Size Staff Levels: Establish principles that should govern the staffing of the NSC system.
3. Tailor the NSC to Hybrid Warfare and Gray Zone Conflict: Create an interagency group with the express organizing principle of hybrid warfare.

4. Engage the Public with Novel Education Techniques: Increase public knowledge about NSC processes, suggesting steps that can facilitate greater involvement.

5. Calibrate Presidential Involvement: Establish a process for allowing the president to be involved when necessary and to be excluded when doing so would facilitate frank discussion.

6. Overhaul the National Security Act of 1947: Combine the recommendations within the framework of the National Security Act of 1947 by updating key components of the broad framework that has served the nation well for approximately 75 years.

7. Hire the Best and Brightest: Create incentives to bring and keep talent within the NSC staff.

8. Evolve the Scowcroft Model to Meet Twenty-First Century Challenges: Operate according to the ideas and concepts of former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, who laid out a remarkably comprehensive framework for responsible NSC stewardship, yet the model should continue to evolve to meet twenty-first century threats.

The paper's findings are buttressed by a wargame (located in Appendix A) that simulated a hybrid conflict with Russia in the Baltics prior to the current invasion. Led by the paper's authors—with the participation of think tank experts and military professionals—the wargame lends credence to many of the paper's findings: if one wants good policies from the NSC, one first needs an effective process. An atmosphere that encourages a group mentality and band-wagoning or one that boxes out particular viewpoints will not be conducive to good policy, a finding that mirrors many of the paper's findings on actual, real-life foreign policy crises.

Another unique element of this paper is engaging with the American public on a proposed docuseries (located in Appendix B) that traces successes and failures of administrations as showcased through the relationship between the president, national security advisor, and the rest of the NSC. The American public should be motivated to not only participate in civics, civil or military service (or both), but also in the security of the nation at the highest level, the executive branch.

While a rigid, cookie-cutter model for NSC effectiveness is neither desirable nor possible, our hope is that this paper provides a primer on what made prior NSCs work—or not work—over the past 75 years, as well as a blueprint for how the NSC can contribute to providing peace and prosperity in the

next 75 years. The national security policy during the twentieth century had unquestionably high stakes since the United States was squaring off against one closely watched and predictable true adversary, the Soviet Union.³ The twenty-first century cannot guarantee this (relative) simplicity, with added threats including nuclear proliferation, rogue states, the return of great power competition, and instability overseas. Since we initially wrote this manuscript, events have unfolded that only further serve to underscore the significance of these findings and the stakes of a well-run and balanced NSC: the chaotic withdrawal of US security forces from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁴ At the time of publication, these events lack sufficient maturation for the paper to adequately opine on the successes or failures of President Biden's NSC, interagency coordination, and other key issues.⁵ Nonetheless, early reports have framed the Afghanistan withdrawal as a case of partial groupthink and insufficient coordination, where key information either did not reach pivotal decision-makers or was marginalized in debates within the administration.⁶ Similarly, the war in Ukraine rages on with fevered debate on the nature of current US policy.⁷ While these issues lack sufficient maturity for an in-depth analysis, our hope is that they—as microcosms of the crises faced by any NSC—serve to raise the salience of the challenges of NSC stewardship.

The History of the NSC

Overview

How has the NSC developed and evolved over time? Ascertaining what makes the NSC tick is vital in order to form prescriptions about how the NSC can succeed going forward. As a result, the report begins by first looking backward, identifying the factors that highlight NSC success and failure under prior administrations. This detailed history of the NSC will begin with its formation in 1947, touch on British influence that led to the current NSC and conclude with the current Biden administration.

In doing so, this section observes changes and continuities across administrations, focusing on both the formal and informal elements of the NSC during each respective administration. The National Security Act of 1947 reshaped the US government's intelligence, military, and strategic foreign policy apparatus after World War II. This dynamic realignment and reinvention of American instruments of strategy and power was transformative in enabling the nation to more precisely synthesize information to define objectives, formulate

strategy, establish policy, and implement an execution plan that could be harmonized across the federal enterprise. Its passage established the Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, Department of the Air Force, National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council.⁸ Ultimately, this reorganization was a reinvention of key aspects of the American government and afforded the president organized access to the architects of national power.

For the purpose of this paper, formal elements refer to legally codified aspects of the NSC, such as how committees are structured—these elements have tended to be shaped by executive order. In contrast, informal elements are not based in law, but instead are based in the personality and approach of the participants—how the NSA develops national security options and interacts with the president, the tendency of members to register disagreement, and more. While formal elements are easier to objectively measure, what happens behind the scenes matters too: some have claimed that the approach taken by the NSA is the most determinative element of NSC success.⁹ Neither Congress nor the courts have added rigid constraints on the structure of the NSC, as noted by John Burke, who claims that, “as with many of the units and offices within the White House staff, there is little statutory or legal constraint . . . Much is the result of tradition, presidential inclination, and the personalities, prior experiences, and interpersonal dynamics.”¹⁰

At the same time, however, the formal elements do matter. The structure of the NSC’s decision-making—and who is present to make those decisions—determines the personalities and interpersonal dynamics present for key decisions. As a result, the history section analyzes the formal and informal elements in tandem.

One introductory task remains: defining success and failure. To assess any NSC—and, indeed, to even define the spectra—first requires a general assessment of success and failure. One could argue, however, that measuring success and failure is an inexact science. What one viewer considers a failure could be considered success by another, depending on each viewer’s political or philosophical views. This manuscript has intentionally avoided advocacy on broader policy or partisan matters, focusing instead on organizational design and procedural coherence. As a result, the paper evaluates each administration’s NSC—and various case studies—from the vantage point of several lenses. First, did the NSC (or activity in question) achieve the intended results, irrespective of whether those results were commendable as a matter of policy desirability? Second, did the decision(s) made operate as a result of an NSC that advanced an array of opinions and allowed lively debate? Third, did the decision arise through a replicable and organized process, as opposed to a pol-

icy judgment that might have been sound but was nonetheless ad hoc and disorganized; in the context of the NSC, this requires that a process be capable of being used across administrations, with a process that does not depend on particular individuals or their particularized relationships.

Additionally, while this paper examines several case studies and examples, not all situations are created equal. An administration may well confront short-term crises that are handled in the span of a week; conversely, there are wars that extend across administrations, operating as an exercise in long-range planning. What constitutes success or failure in those cases will vary; short-term crises reward quick, decisive thinking, while long-range challenges necessitate deep planning and an ability to coordinate activities over an extended horizon. Our section on case studies examines both and attempts to taxonomize them accordingly.

Finally, NSC spectra will be further analyzed and explained after the history section. Assessed spectra include NSC and NSA influence, NSC formality, and presidential influence. The history section begins with the creation of the NSC under President Harry Truman in 1947.

The Truman Years: A Neglected NSC

The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of rapid activity in the national security bureaucracy, with the formation of the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and NSC occurring in rapid succession as part of the National Security Act of 1947. What explains these developments? One key factor was the desire to develop authoritative bureaucratic institutions to guide President Harry Truman through key national security and foreign policy decisions. Thrust into power after the sudden death of his predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman was regarded as an untested and inexperienced politician.

At the same time, there was widespread concern about bureaucratic chaos in the upper echelons of government. During the Roosevelt administration, there had been a major expansion in the number of both executive agencies and White House advisors, ballooning the size of the governmental bureaucracy.¹¹ However, much of this had been managed informally; key figures in the Truman administration feared that an inexperienced manager would be unable to handle the “administrative chaos” of the Roosevelt years.¹² In no area was this concern more acute than foreign policy, where Truman was seen as a relative novice who would need strong counsel for decisions in the international arena.¹³ Two key figures—Gen George C. Marshall and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal—aimed to create a model for synthesizing national se-

curity decisions. In doing so, they sought to model the command structure used during World War II, where the Combined Chiefs of Staff concentrated key military authority within a more limited group of leaders—indeed, this was the same model used for the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, created in 1947 as part of the National Security Act.¹⁴

Truman agreed, and ideas were proposed to effectively merge national security authorities. At the outset, Truman was a proponent of consolidating the military branches themselves, proposing a unified armed service. This was, however, fiercely opposed by many key military authorities, so Forrestal sought to find an alternative that could accomplish the same objectives: from this emerged the foundations for the NSC.¹⁵ Created as “a new institutional arrangement to advise the new president and provide coordination between the various military services, the State Department, and other agencies concerned with foreign affairs,” the NSC would allow coordination across disparate branches and agencies without formally consolidating authority.¹⁶ The result was the National Security Act of 1947, which created the Secretary of Defense, Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and enshrined “coordination of the activities of the National Military Establishment with other departments and agencies of the Government concerned with national security.”¹⁷

Much of what eventually became the NSC was modeled after a British predecessor, the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID).¹⁸ After the Crimean and First Boer Wars, the British empire was confronted with the challenges associated with governing a large overseas empire. As a result, several committees were formed in 1885 to examine possible approaches to the empire’s imperial defense problems. Yet despite recognizing the problem, these various bodies remained disparate and not unified, contributing to a protracted set of military failures during the Second Boer War. By 1902, following the conclusion of the war, the British government moved to unify these committees and centralize decision-making. By 1904, the CID had been born.¹⁹ Similar to the eventual NSC, the CID was originally conceptualized as both advisory and coordinating; the CID would convene government officials to decide large political issues, with orders then being coordinated among the various government departments. In particular, it served a key coordinating purpose during World War II, observed closely by US allies.

The initial NSC was not an overtly powerful institution. Throughout the time of the Truman administration, the NSC was primarily an advisory body, with members serving as “somewhat limited policy coordinators and staff facilitators, not sources of substantive policy advice.”²⁰ This was by design. Prior to 1947, the key national security decisions were made at the cabinet level, with

Senate-confirmed figures or military authorities calling the shots. Truman felt that he had influence over these figures by nature of the appointment process but feared that creating a strong NSC could empower staff level advisors to undermine his constitutional prerogatives as Commander-in-Chief.²¹ As a result, Truman avoided using the NSC, preferring to coordinate directly with his favored advisors. From the first meeting on 26 September 1947 until the Korean war, Truman participated sporadically, attending only 12 of 57 meetings.²² Instead, he viewed the NSC “only as a place for recommendations to be worked out . . . The policy itself has to come from the President, as all final decisions have to be made by him.”²³

The NSC during the Truman administration was not only neglected but also uncoordinated and disorganized. As a result of Truman’s mistrust, the NSC’s advisory role was limited, with an accordingly small staff and support structure. There was no separate hiring process for the creation of an NSC staff, with staff members merely rotating from other agencies (from the Department of Defense in particular). The small number of staff members—and their limited ties to the NSC—resulted in an NSC system that was weak at the mid- and lower-levels. Consequently, coordination suffered. Departments aimed to bypass the staff level of the NSC and coordinate directly with higher-level organizational figures; this compounded the confusion and disorganization.²⁴ These challenges were particularly acute during the Korean War. Instead of serving a coordination function, the NSC system contributed to stove-piping across agencies, with one State Department spokesman quipping that a recommendation could be carried all the way to the top “but be followed by a new JCS paper stating its own independent position.”²⁵

Where did the NSA fit into this picture? The answer is that one did not yet exist. While the modern NSC includes an NSA as arguably the most important figure, there was not one originally. Instead, there was an Executive Secretary whose role was much more administrative in function than the modern NSA. Indeed, the Executive Secretary did not even preside over NSC meetings; that function was reserved for the president or, in his absence, the Secretary of State. Nonetheless, some of the modern-day features of the NSA were carried out by the Executive Secretary, Adm Sidney W. Souers.²⁶ Meeting Truman through a close mutual friend, Souers emerged in the administration as Truman’s key advisor on intelligence-related matters, becoming a trusted confidant of the president. Recognizing that the president feared the usurpation of authority by the NSC, he intentionally worked to limit the power of the NSC, proscribing its role to an advisory function. Since Souers shared Truman’s view that the NSC’s responsibility was to advise the president, whenever a policy issue came up, Souers would ensure the president legitimately wanted

the NSC to consider the question at hand.²⁷ While nurturing a close relationship with the president, Souers attempted to manage the NSC with a light touch; he eschewed media publicity and was known for a reticence to register a strong opinion in NSC debates, preferring to keep lines of communication open for others instead.²⁸ While Truman grew to trust the NSC more over time—evenually claiming that the NSC had “proved to be one of the best means available to the president for obtaining coordinated advice as a basis of reaching decisions”—this was because of the NSC’s relative insignificance.²⁹ During the Korean War, the key diplomatic and strategic decisions were made outside of the NSC forum, with the NSC being relegated to a marginal function of implementing and coordinating already-decided recommendations.³⁰

Despite the weaknesses of the Truman administration’s NSC, there were several lasting implications that shaped the modern-day NSC. Although he governed an NSC that had little influence, many of the managerial tactics of Souers bear resemblance to today’s model of an ideal NSA: being a confidant of the president while simultaneously ensuring that views of key advisors can reach the president by neither stifling debate nor dissent among key advisors. The Truman NSC was primarily shaped by informal elements and personalities. Despite frequent NSC meetings prior to the Korean War, Truman was rarely present, choosing to work with his most trusted advisors outside of the confines of the NSC. Similarly, even following the end of Souers’ tenure as Executive Secretary (and his replacement by James S. Lay Jr.), Souers continued to play an outsized advisory role, with his opinions superseding those of Lay.³¹ Relationships, and not structures, were what counted.

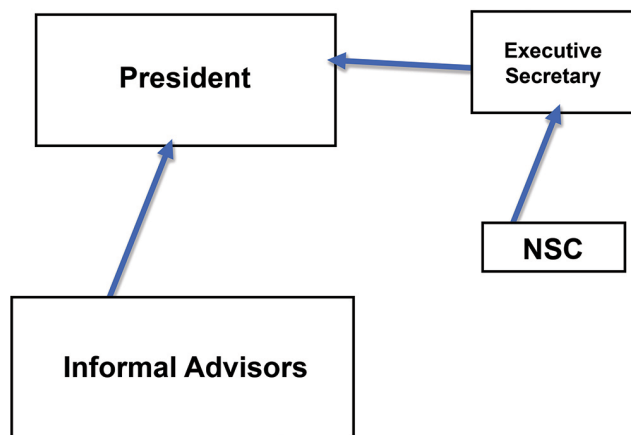


Figure 1: Truman: NSC Process Flow Chart. NSC Staff Size: Fewer than 10 staff members.³²

The Eisenhower Years: Emerging Institutionalization

While the Truman years were defined by a weaker NSC, his successor, Dwight Eisenhower, took a different approach. An operationally oriented military leader, Eisenhower appreciated the virtues of strong organization and hierarchy, disavowing looser and more collegial structures.³³ As a result, he sought to create a large and organized structure to oversee the national security process, working with Boston banker Robert Cutler during the 1952 presidential transition. As part of this reorganization, Eisenhower and Cutler concluded that a supervisory role was required, above the level of the Executive Secretary, electing to create a “Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs,” alternately known as the “National Security Advisor.”³⁴

Beyond the creation of the NSA position, there were also major organizational changes that began during the Eisenhower years, which brought structure and formality to a domain where collegiality and informality had dominated. Arguably the most influential change was the creation of a series of substructures within the NSC to organize and coordinate policy in specific areas of focus. Cutler conceptualized NSC operations as a “policy hill” or organizational topography for how information would flow up and down the chain of command.³⁵ At the top of the hill were the president and his cabinet secre-

taries; an NSC Planning Board was created to ensure that information was organized and pre-screened for relevance before reaching the top of the hill. In contrast, at the bottom of the hill were the staff, tasked with carrying out directives from the top; an Operations Coordinating Board was created to bring information down the hill, allowing directives from the top to be carried out.

These substructures were, in many respects, derivative of the British CID's organizational structure, where an advisory board was complemented by various subcommittees that coordinated the interagency recommendations of the CID. Notably, the Coordination Committee served a remarkably similar function to Truman's Operations Coordinating Board, with the former being tasked with synthesizing all plans and operations across agencies. The similarities did not end with the substructures, however. The CID relied on a secretary to "function as a conduit of information to the prime minister and cabinet."³⁶ One secretary in particular, Lord Hankey, epitomized in the British context what the US NSA would eventually come to resemble. While not having an official appointment or having constitutional authority, Hankey served a key consultative, administrative, and operational role, coordinating discussions for cabinet members while also ensuring that the CID staff process ran smoothly.

What did this screening and coordinating function look like under Eisenhower? Cutler, appointed by Eisenhower, assumed the role of the NSA and embraced his role as a key coordinator. Believing that his task was "to facilitate smooth progress up and down policy hill," Cutler was eager to ensure that the NSC was an indispensable part of the national security bureaucracy while also retaining the trust of the president.³⁷ To achieve these objectives, Cutler fashioned himself as more than just a bureaucrat. He attempted to nurture a close relationship with Eisenhower while also playing an active role holding court over the meetings of cabinet level figures within the NSC. Early on, he issued a memorandum emphasizing that each cabinet level participant "must express and stand by his honest views; those views, if substantial conflicts cannot be fairly resolved, may never be suppressed or compromised, but should be reported to the Council."³⁸ When it came to attaining the trust of the president while concurrently managing strategic relationships and building a powerful institution, Cutler succeeded. Eisenhower placed far more trust in the NSC and "convened the NSC more often than Truman, attended it more regularly, and placed greater faith in its capacity to deliberate matters, formulate strategy, and provide advice."³⁹

The result of these processes was an administration that successfully navigated foreign policy challenges, both short- and long-term. A carefully calibrated approach to nuclear deterrence brought the Korean War to peaceful resolution, while numerous covert activities taken by the CIA occurred without

exposure or widespread embarrassment.⁴⁰ Long-range strategic planning was also successful, with the Eisenhower administration creating a cogent approach to containment of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ Indeed, future NSA Brent Scowcroft noted the extent to which Eisenhower's approach to overall strategy inspired him, praising Eisenhower's fixation on alliances as the bulwark for peace.⁴²

Nonetheless, the Eisenhower NSC was not without criticism, with some arguing that it was unduly cumbersome. Henry Jackson, a senator from Washington created a commission to examine the utility of the Planning and Operations Boards. The commission culminated in the release of a series of reports in 1961 that recommended the significant reform of the former and the abolition of the latter because of the potential for an ossified structure that would delay key decisions.⁴³ Others have claimed that the Eisenhower NSC was too focused on structures over personalities, with Arthur Schlesinger Jr. rhetorically asking whether the "layered Eisenhower machinery [is] really 'a precedent for effective national security advising'? On the record, surely not . . . Organizational charts are less important than people."

While there may not have been consensus about the effectiveness of the Eisenhower NSC, its influence on the modern NSC is undeniable. First, Cutler's attempt to institutionalize and reorganize the NSC has many parallels to the present day structure, with a clear hierarchy dictating how information flows up and down an organizational topography. Second, similar to Souers, Cutler attempted to position himself as a figure that was trusted simultaneously by the president and NSC figures, creating an early form of honest brokerage.

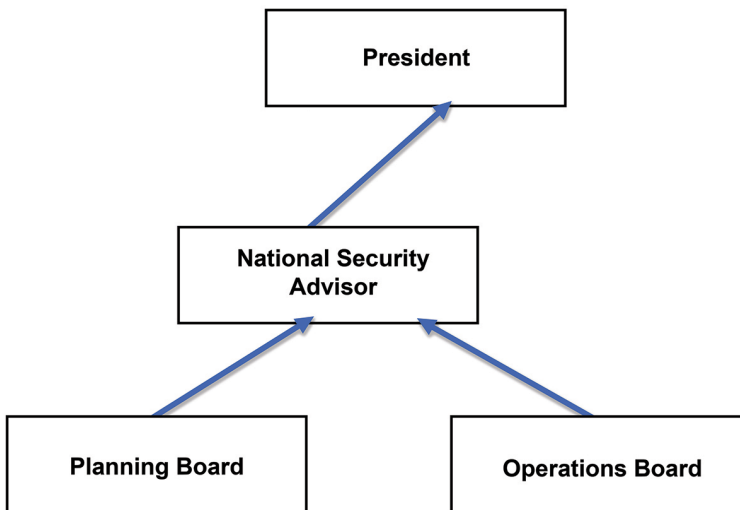


Figure 2: Eisenhower: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Between 10 and 20.⁴⁴

The Kennedy and Johnson Years: Informality Strikes Back

The transition from the Truman administration to the Eisenhower administration marked a major shift, moving from an informal NSC to a stricter, more regimented process. This see-saw continued in the shift from the Eisenhower administration to the Kennedy (and later Johnson) administration, but in the opposite direction—a looser, more collegial structure re-emerged. Just as Eisenhower's disposition and military background predisposed him to hierarchy, President John F. Kennedy's personality moved him in a separate direction despite his military experience. Coming from a prominent political family, Kennedy was young, distrustful of authority and well-educated, known to be a prodigious reader and quick thinker. Kennedy believed that he—and his close group of personal advisors—could adequately craft foreign policy without reliance on entrenched experts.

As a result, Kennedy quickly moved to create an inner circle of close confidants and friends that he had cultivated prior to taking office, prioritizing personal relationships and institutional expertise over a rigid chain of command.⁴⁵ Naturally, this reduced the importance of the NSC—he viewed it as large, unwieldy, and too rigid. Most of his key decisions were made outside of the NSC, with the NSC cosmetically existing for “minor decisions” or “major ones actually settled earlier.”⁴⁶ This was no secret, with President Kennedy confirming in a 1961 interview that “it is more difficult to decide matters involving national security if there is a wider group present.”⁴⁷ In his NSA, Kennedy found a figure sympathetic to his personal view about the (un)importance of the NSC: McGeorge Bundy. A connection from Harvard, Bundy had been the youngest-ever dean of the school, with a shared ideological orientation toward nation-building, combining political idealism with hawkish anti-Communism.⁴⁸ Similar to Kennedy, Bundy was an undeniable intellectual, trusting himself over the established authorities and institutions within the government.

While Bundy and Kennedy disliked the rigid formalism of the NSC, they both soon realized that the NSC could be reformulated to their liking. As a result, they envisioned the NSC as an informal structure for the president's key advisors to hold court, working to dictate foreign policy freed from bureaucratic constraints or Congressional oversight. This marked a watershed moment for the NSC; while the NSC had previously only served a coordinating and advisory function, NSA Bundy used it as a vehicle for unilaterally crafting foreign policy. The result was that the NSC became a “Little State Department,” where Bundy, Kennedy, and close confidants would make the key foreign policy decisions without input from cabinet level officials.⁴⁹ This

tactic of end-running around other agencies became well-known, with Kennedy famously exclaiming that “Bundy and I get more done in one day . . . than they do in six months in the State Department.”⁵⁰ To implement this, Kennedy announced that he would use the NSC “and its machinery more flexibly than in the past, in line with recommendations made by the Jackson Subcommittee,” consolidating functions of the Operations Coordinating Board into a number of special projects, at the direction of Bundy.⁵¹ In lieu of the Planning Board, Bundy created geographic specialties to various staffers, allowing him to serve a coordinating role and as a filter for the president. National Security Action Memorandums were inaugurated to assist with the NSC delegating tasks to relevant agencies. Another element to this unique period was Kennedy’s creation of the White House’s “Executive Committee,” or ExComm, a more informal process that aimed to facilitate inclusion of views from Kennedy’s trusted voices. Composed of the NSC with several additional informal advisors, the ExComm offered a more flexible forum where members could be slotted in to offer viewpoints depending on the issue at hand (while permitting their absence from other meetings where their views weren’t needed). At times the ExComm was larger than the NSC.⁵² Yet at other times, the ExComm was smaller, consisting only of Kennedy’s most trusted inner circle; the divergence in size was a product of its inherent flexibility.⁵³ The ExComm first met on 16 October 1962, in the White House Cabinet Room and was the true NSC in Kennedy’s eyes.⁵⁴

Bundy’s style differed markedly from that of Cutler or Souers. Instead of attempting to act as a disinterested party who would filter information to the president, Bundy was an opinionated and dogmatic figure, espousing strong views in favor of interventionism and a prominent role for the United States on the world stage; he was not reticent in openly voicing his views and advocating to the president. Secret tape recordings of the Cuban Missile Crisis support this, where Bundy was “largely voicing his own policy views, not serving as the central agent testing for weaknesses in options, questioning assumptions, or other activities such as encouraging the airing of underrepresented views.”⁵⁵ Bundy was also notable for seeking the spotlight, craving media attention and interviews instead of operating under the radar.⁵⁶ Many of these tendencies were only exacerbated by the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961. A botched invasion of Cuba three months into the Kennedy administration “revealed to the President that he could not give his complete trust to the experts.”⁵⁷ Quickly, Kennedy moved to shift key foreign policy decisions away from institutions like the CIA, instead concentrating them within a tight-knit group of trusted confidants. The NSC forum itself was marginalized, with Kennedy preferring a “Situation Room” established near the NSC office, where Bundy

would filter information prior to it reaching the president.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the Kennedy administration was prematurely cut short by Kennedy's assassination in 1963, curtailing the NSC evolution during this period.

These trends, NSC marginalization and the president primarily trusting a core group, only grew under the subsequent Johnson administration. Inexperienced in foreign policy, President Lyndon B. Johnson insisted that Bundy stay on across administrations. Like Kennedy, Johnson distrusted large groups of experts. Instead, he wanted a core group of close personal confidants he could trust, designing the NSC accordingly. *Time* magazine referred to his administration's foreign policy core group as the "Big Three" of Bundy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.⁵⁹ More than ever, the formal structure of the NSC was marginalized, with informal "Tuesday Lunch" meetings between confidants replacing NSC meetings as the key venue for strategy development and decision-making. Over the course of the Johnson administration, there were 160 of these meetings. While these featured candor and collegiality between advisors who respected each other, they were not well-suited for formulating coherent strategy or dictating policy: they were often spur-of-the-moment and so informal that staffers lacked awareness of what had transpired, making delegation of tasks impossible.⁶⁰

This allowed Bundy and several key advisors to play an increasingly pivotal role in the defining foreign policy challenge of the generation: Vietnam. Bundy's fingerprints can be seen throughout Vietnam; he authored much of what today is referred to as the Pentagon Papers, pioneered the air and naval campaign of sustained reprisal and was a leading proponent of the "Domino Theory."⁶¹

During this time, NSC meetings were increasingly marginalized. Despite regular briefings—every two weeks on average—during Johnson's first 11 months, the meetings were short and insignificant.⁶² At the peak of the Vietnam War in 1965, the conflict was discussed extensively by Johnson in NSC meetings, but the forum was used primarily as a rubber stamp for decisions that had already been reached. Indeed, Bundy himself observed that "the NSC as a formal council has had even less to do under President Johnson than it did under Kennedy."⁶³ Bundy's ideologies even continued after his departure under NSA Walt Rostow, who allowed the Tuesday Lunches to continue to be the primary decision-making body. The result was an NSC confined to "reflective and educational discussions, rather than decision-making meetings." The one attempt at formal interagency coordination, a Senior Interdepartmental Group (SIG) in 1966, was undermined by inconsistent meetings, relegated to an afterthought.⁶⁴

The result of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations was an NSC that was simultaneously weak and powerful—the cabinet level officials in the NSC were effectively disempowered, with Bundy and Kennedy diminishing their influence. At the same time, however, the head of the NSC became more powerful than ever, with Bundy becoming the single most influential foreign policy figure in both administrations, using the NSC to advance his aims.

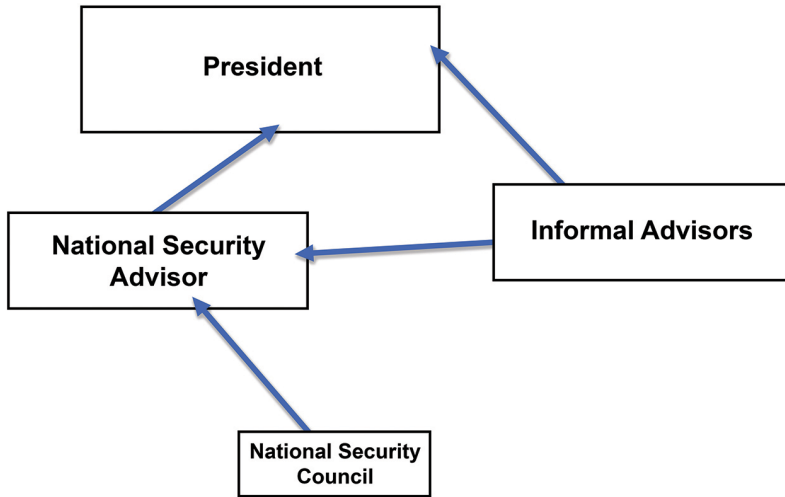


Figure 3: Kennedy: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Around 10.⁶⁵

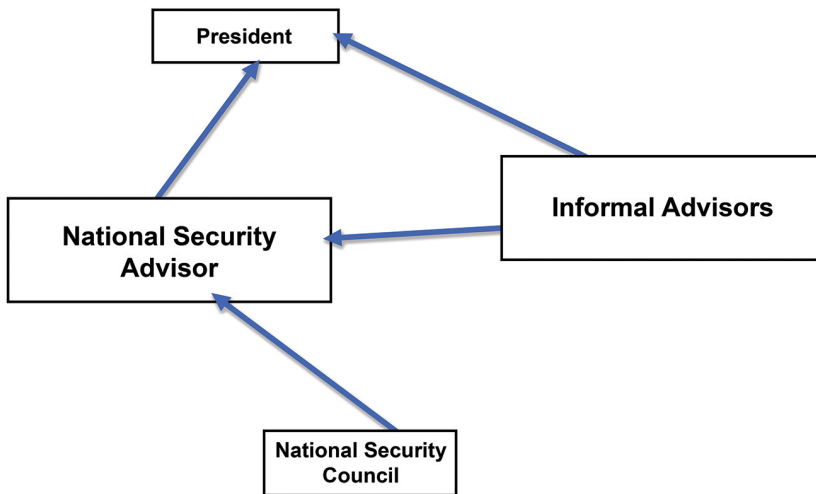


Figure 4: Johnson: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Between 15 and 20 at beginning; increased to nearly 40 by 1969.⁶⁶

The Nixon and Ford Years: The Peak of NSC Power

President Richard Nixon took office in the throes of the Vietnam War in 1969 and was determined to leave his mark on foreign policy. Believing that Congress was too slow and unwieldy to effectively manage foreign policy, Nixon wanted to concentrate increasing amounts of foreign policy authority within the presidency.⁶⁷ To do this, he realized that the NSC could be harnessed to achieve this goal, noting in his memoirs that “From the outset of my administration . . . I planned to direct foreign policy from the White House. Therefore, I regarded my choice of a National Security Advisor as crucial.”⁶⁸

Nixon set out to create an NSC structure that combined disparate elements from his predecessors: the powerful NSA who held the president’s ear was merged with the formalistic structure of the Eisenhower NSC. The result would be an NSA who coordinated closely with the president, sitting at the helm of an organized and rigid NSC with expansive foreign policy power and inter-agency influence. That NSA was Henry Kissinger, who noted that “the present task is to combine the best features of the two systems.”⁶⁹

An academic and well-respected foreign policy mind prior to his time in government, Kissinger lamented the ways that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had used the NSC, believing that the informal meetings and

side-stepping had marginalized the institution to an educational forum, as opposed to a decision-making body. As a result, his first mission was to sweep power away from informal advisors and away from competitors in the Department of Defense or the Department of State, consolidating leadership within the NSC.⁷⁰ In 1969, National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 2 abolished the 1966 SIG, limiting the oversight powers of the Department of State. This was replaced by the National Security Council Review Group, centralizing interagency coordination within the NSC.⁷¹ Six new committees were created within the NSC, all chaired by Kissinger, while NSC staff nearly tripled in size.⁷²

Beyond his efforts to use executive orders and committee creation to increase NSC size, Kissinger also used his strong relationship with Nixon to cement his dominance. William P. Rogers—an attorney with little foreign policy experience—was picked as Secretary of State, with the implicit understanding between Nixon and Kissinger that this selection would assist in minimizing the Department of State's influence. This was borne out, with Kissinger famously taking key meetings with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin alone, without Rogers.⁷³ Kissinger himself felt that his influence was primarily derived from his relationship with Nixon, noting in his memoirs that “the influence of a Presidential Assistant derives almost exclusively from the confidence of the President, not from administrative arrangements.”⁷⁴ Kissinger's influence was so profound that he himself was empowered to be the author of the US Government's first official instrument for classified intelligence sharing with foreign governments and international organizations. On 20 July 1971, Kissinger issued NSDM 119: Disclosure of Classified United States Military Information to Foreign Governments and International Organizations. This was the inception of the US government's formalization of what is known today as Foreign Disclosure. At the time of its signing, Kissinger issued this guidance, on behalf of the president, to the vice president, secretaries of defense, state, the US attorney general, and the director of central intelligence.⁷⁵ This confidence was evinced further following the departure of Secretary Rogers when NSA Kissinger became Secretary Kissinger, becoming the first figure to hold the NSA and Secretary of State titles concurrently.

Kissinger's style aligned closely with his approach to consolidation—he created a NSC that ensured he was at the epicenter of strategy development and decision-making. As an example, he set the conditions during a secret trip to China for President Nixon's visit, a first for an American president, the following year in 1972. This visit led to normalizing relations with China.⁷⁶ In contrast with the approach of Cutler or Souers, Kissinger did not attempt to operate as a disinterested party or honest broker. Instead, everything that

reached Nixon first passed through him, and he would “slap on his own views as it went to the President.”⁷⁷ To some extent, this was inevitable: Kissinger chaired every major NSC committee, which resulted in him having the power to set the agenda, empower specific stakeholders, and control the flow of information to and from the president.⁷⁸ During his tenure, he was frequently criticized for this unilateral approach; his biographer noted that even if successful “as a gunslinger, the lone cowboy cannot build a policy based on tending to various complex alliances unless he is willing to share information and authority with the bureaucracy.”⁷⁹ Moreover, Kissinger embraced and encouraged a very public-facing NSA role. During the Nixon administration, he was the most visible national security strategy figure, operating as a de-facto spokesperson for the foreign policy of the administration.⁸⁰ While some might claim that these changes did not strengthen the NSC the result of an all-powerful NSA nonetheless did grow aggregate power of the NSC, moving influence away from traditional loci of foreign policy influence, such as the Department of State. One possible reason for Kissinger’s outsized role in national security was Nixon’s reluctance to participate in direct confrontation during meetings with his NSC principals.⁸¹ The effect of Kissinger’s enhancement of the NSC can be seen in the ways that NSC power dwindled in the subsequent administration, when the Ford administration’s NSC—under Scowcroft—exercised a far less outsized role in foreign policy.⁸²

The resignation of Nixon brought only minor change to the NSC during the administration of Gerald Ford. The 1975 Murphy Commission criticized the expansive NSC of the Nixon years, recommending a reduction in staff and that the NSA have no official responsibilities.⁸³ Most of these changes were ignored. Instead, the 1976 Executive Order 11905 reaffirmed the dominance of the NSC over the intelligence community and interagency coordination process, merely making cosmetic changes. Kissinger did not remain NSA but retained his title as Secretary of State in the Ford administration. His protégé and deputy, Lt Gen Brent Scowcroft, took over as NSA when Kissinger gave up this role. Given their professional closeness, Scowcroft was reluctant to undercut Kissinger, resulting in alignment between the NSC and Department of State for the Ford administration.⁸⁴

The Nixon years represented an experiment with a new type of NSC: one that had the powerful NSA of the Kennedy and Johnson years with robust influence over intelligence activities, while preserving the formal structure of the Eisenhower years. The result was one of the most impactful NSCs in American history, with Kissinger becoming the administration’s preeminent figure for foreign policy and the coalescing of strategy across the Departments of Defense and State.

Meanwhile, the Ford years represented development and implementation of the Scowcroft Model, the informal concept of interagency coordination and presentation of foreign policy and national security options to the president for his decision without undue influence by the NSA.

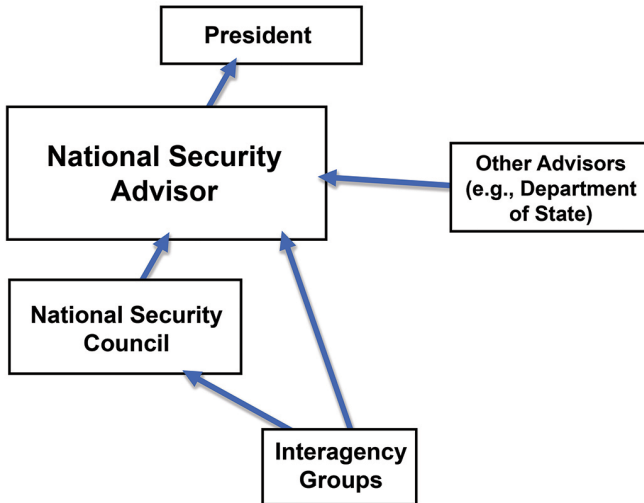


Figure 5: Nixon: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Between 40 and 50.⁸⁵

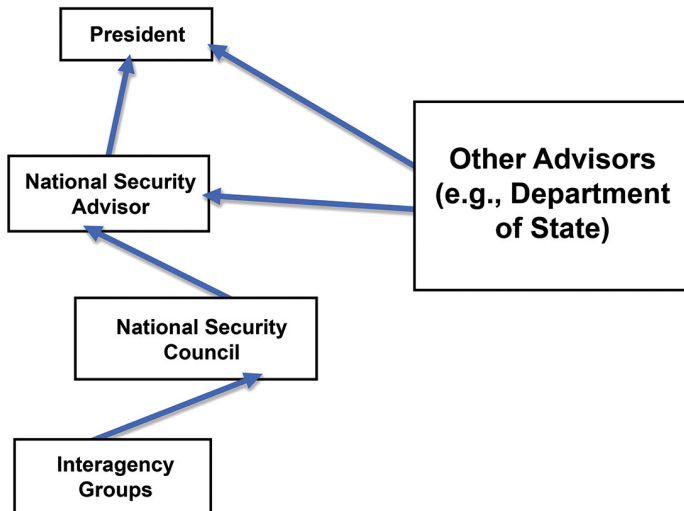


Figure 6: Ford: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Around 40.⁸⁶

The Carter Years: Clawing Back Influence

Following the Nixon and Ford administrations, a similar pattern repeated itself: a subsequent administration reacted to the excesses of its predecessor, swinging the pendulum of NSC power in the opposite direction. The Carter NSC was defined by informality and decentralization, attempting to reverse the NSC growth in influence permitted by Nixon. Immediately following Ford, Jimmy Carter came to power, promising to clean up the corruption and abuses of power that took place during the Nixon administration. Unlike Nixon, who believed in a sweeping and expansive foreign policy executed by the president, Carter believed in a restrained and more patient American mission, which meant a reduction in hard power, distaste for covert action, and a disavowal of US interventionism.⁸⁷ As a result, Carter had a negative view of the ways that Kissinger had created a powerful NSC, and desired to deconstruct it as a part of his political agenda to reign in instruments of strategic power that he perceived as having gone rogue.⁸⁸

Believing that the NSC should be molded from a strategy and policymaking body into a forum for dialog and coordination, Carter selected Zbigniew Brzezinski as NSA, regarding him as someone who would facilitate vibrant debate. His selection was accompanied by Cyrus Vance's nomination as the Secretary of State; the juxtaposition of Brzezinski's hardline anti-communism with Vance's circumspect moderation was intended to allow a range of different perspectives.⁸⁹ At the outset of the Carter administration, there were also several changes to the NSC structure. Staff numbers were cut from over 30 to fewer than 20, standing committees reduced from eight to two, and two new committees, the Policy Review Committee and the Special Coordinating Committee, were created for oversight. Notably, the NSA was only permitted to chair one committee.⁹⁰ The NSC also took a step back from the standpoint of policy coordination, with a diminished role in organizing interagency activities; instead, the primary purpose became the provision of advisory input.

Distrustful of the NSC, Carter returned to a time-honored tact: using informal arrangements and advisors in lieu of NSC processes. The "Tuesday Lunches" of the Johnson administration were reborn as "Friday Breakfasts," where Carter would consult with the vice president, NSA, secretary of defense, secretary of state, and his chief domestic advisor. In contrast, the NSC only held ten formal meetings during the Carter administration.⁹¹ This severely complicated the role of the NSA as an information filter, screening information reaching the president. The ineffectiveness of these informal meetings would result in unrefined information directly reaching Carter, with no clear organizational strategy for separating noise from signal. This often occurred

in environments with limited strategic context provided, few notes kept, and even fewer agendas prepared, which resulted in disorganization and embarrassing gaffes. One such slip-up involved an error in transmitting instructions to the UN Ambassador, which resulted in the ambassador accidentally voting in favor of a resolution calling for Israel to dismantle its settlements.⁹²

Brzezinski developed a new organizational construct for the NSC consisting of two committees, the Policy Review Committee and Special Coordination Committee. Implementing this new simplified, reduced construct was not without challenges for the NSA and White House staff.⁹³ An additional challenge for the NSC during this period emerged from clashing personalities and Brzezinski's style. While divergence between Brzezinski and Vance was by design, respectful disagreement often turned into intractable conflict. Disputes between the NSA and Secretary of State are not unprecedented, however, an essential element is a means of resolving the dispute and adjudicating the matter into a strategy, with the president weighing in. Carter was unwilling to play this role; instead, according to CIA Director Stansfield Turner, he "vacillated between Brzezinski and Vance, and they often canceled each other out."⁹⁴ The result was very often a bureaucratic stalemate. Vance and Brzezinski both thought that they were the liaison for negotiations of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, developing the US strategy around the Russian conflict in Afghanistan, and more, resulting in confusion and mixed messaging. This was exacerbated by Brzezinski's desire to operate and be perceived as an influential public-facing figure in a fashion very similar to Bundy and Kissinger. Brzezinski held frequent press conferences, was a fixture on television, and maintained a close personal relationship with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, seemingly competing with Vance for the public eye as the chief foreign policy architect.⁹⁵

Arguably the most defining foreign policy event of the Carter administration was the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979–1981). While the Camp David Accords and Taiwan Relations Act were also significant events for the Carter administration that had foreign policy ripple effects for years to come, neither pressed the administration to the same extent as the Iran Hostage Crisis.⁹⁶ The crisis was precipitated following the successful revolution against the pro-American Shah of Iran, with the US embassy in Tehran becoming a target for fundamentalists. On 4 November 1979, Iranian students seized the embassy and took over 50 Americans as hostages. The crisis dominated the headlines for the 444 days the hostages were held, with the Carter administration widely being perceived as helpless and ineffectual. Other foreign policy challenges were undoubtedly exacerbated by this period of perceived weakness, with the Soviet Union in 1979 supporting Marxist insurgents who made strong gains in Ethi-

opia, Angola, and Mozambique, while Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in late 1979.⁹⁷

How did such a fiasco transpire? One explanation was a miscalculated diplomatic overture. Following the successful overthrow of the pro-American Shah—a revolution rooted in anti-Americanism—Brzezinski met with Mehdi Bazargan, Iran’s new prime minister. Telling Bazargan that the United States would explore relations with Iran, a photograph of the two men shaking hands rapidly circulated. The next day, student protests exploded due to the perception that the handshake represented a betrayal of anti-American revolutionary sentiments. This was followed by a delayed and indecisive response by the Carter administration, with leaked intelligence from NSA staffer Gary Sick revealing that a military response was entirely off the table. The result was perceived impunity on the part of the hostage-takers and an escalation in demands.⁹⁸ This was only made worse by Carter’s attempt to suspend reelection campaigning and dedicate much of his energy to the crisis. Known as the “Rose Garden Strategy,” it had the effect of signaling to the terrorists that they could throw the entire presidency into disarray, expanding their leverage.⁹⁹ Efforts at rescue and negotiation were singularly unsuccessful, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini opposing settlement and Operation Eagle Claw—an attempted rescue—resulting in American military deaths but no rescue.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the failure of Operation Eagle Claw was so pronounced that many labeled it a deciding factor in Carter’s landslide loss to Reagan. Years later, it also motivated the creation of a unified Special Operations Command to more properly coordinate special operations warfare.¹⁰¹

To conclude, just as the Nixon years acutely demonstrated the risks of a consolidated, powerful NSC, the Carter administration showed the other end of the spectrum—an NSC that was sufficiently restrained to the point of enfeeblement, with a return to disorganized and informal coordination. To see whether the subsequent administration could correct these defects, we will now turn to the Reagan years.

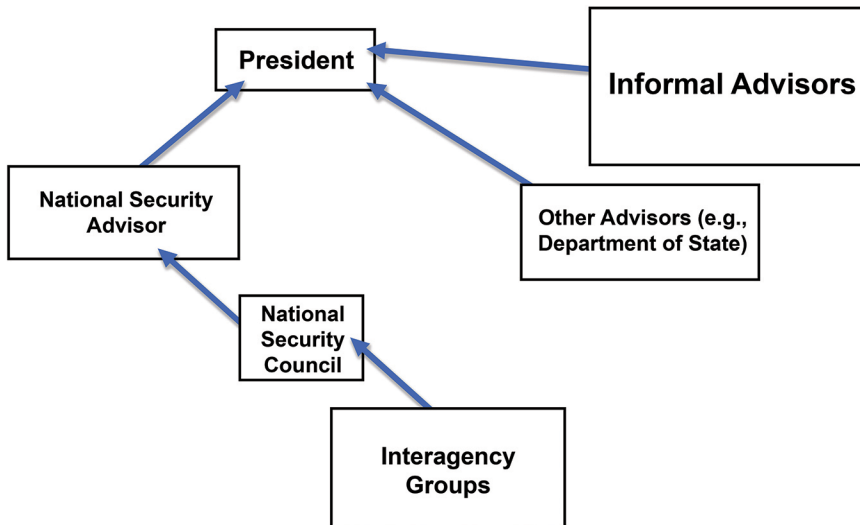


Figure 7: Carter: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Around 40.¹⁰²

The Reagan Years: The NSC and the Limits of Trust

Among many Americans, there was a perception of disorganization in Carter’s foreign policy, and Ronald Reagan easily won the election, becoming the 40th US President in 1981. While Reagan was critical of Carter’s foreign policy, he was nonetheless worried about recreating the NSC—and omnipotent NSA—of the Nixon years, desiring instead to replace a strong NSC with a strong cabinet.¹⁰³ While efforts to formally codify a shift of power to the Department of State away from the NSC failed, there were nonetheless other steps taken to diminish the influence of the NSA.¹⁰⁴ Emphasizing that the Secretary of State would be the “primary adviser on foreign affairs, and in that capacity, he is the chief formulator and spokesman for foreign policy for this administration,” Reagan moved to prevent the NSA from having direct access to him.¹⁰⁵ Instead, the role of his first NSA, Richard Allen, would be to coordinate and implement objectives crafted by the Department of State, rather than articulating a broader strategic vision.

National Security Decision Directive-2 (NSDD-2) reflected this shift in emphasis, moving NSC power away from the NSA and instead creating a larger coordinating function. NSDD-2 removed the NSA from the chairmanship of the NSC subcommittee, instead providing that officials from the Department

of State, Department of Defense, or CIA would chair key subcommittees. Three SIGs were concurrently created to facilitate interagency coordination; the NSA would also play a marginal role in managing the SIGs.¹⁰⁶

Within a year, Allen had left and was replaced by William Clark. Although Clark had slightly more influence than his predecessor—he was granted access to Reagan—the tone for the Reagan NSC had been set: a rapid rotation of NSAs who struggled to gain influence with the president, coupled with a rapid ballooning of the NSC bureaucracy related to interagency coordination.¹⁰⁷ Over the next five years, there were 22 SIGs and 55 Interagency Groups (IGs) established, creating what former NSA Brzezinski quipped was the “Mid Life Crisis” of the NSC. The vast number of coordinating groups created bureaucratic hassle and confusion, perversely undermining coordination. The problem reached a fever pitch in 1982, when disputes among various factions over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, compounded with protracted disagreement between the State Department, Department of Defense, and senior White House staff, culminated in Secretary of State Alexander Haig resigning in protest.

By 1982, Clark was out and replaced by Robert “Bud” McFarlane, who pledged to bring greater stability and coordination to the interagency process.¹⁰⁸ However, despite maintaining access to the president, McFarlane was not a close confidant of his, which resulted in both individuals losing the ability to closely coordinate with the NSC. This disconnect between senior leadership and actions at the staff level of the NSC contributed to the eventual Iran-Contra affair, the biggest scandal of the Reagan administration. McFarlane resigned his post in 1985 and was replaced by John Poindexter. One year later, in 1986, the scandal emerged in the form of illegal arms transfers. Known as the Iran-Contra affair, the incident featured the illicit sale of arms to the Nicaraguan Contras in exchange for the release of American hostages, an “arms for hostages” scheme funneled through the Iranian government in direct contravention of the Boland Amendment. Little evidence emerged that Reagan was aware of the affair; instead, the most recognizable figure at the heart of the scandal was Oliver North, an NSC staffer, who worked with other staffers to orchestrate the plan.¹⁰⁹ Although McFarlane was aware of the plan to some extent, the perception of the Iran-Contra affair was an NSC gone rogue, with one figure observing that they were “reckless cowboys, off on their own on a wild ride.”¹¹⁰ This was evident by the absence of any visible coordination process across the NSC staff elements, including the management and leadership levels. In his memoir, *Special Trust*, McFarlane makes note of one instance where North casually passed him by as he was “hurrying into a car for a rendezvous with someone in Cyprus regarding the status of a separate effort he had set in motion on his own to gain the release of the hostages.”¹¹¹ The current NSA,

Poindexter, was also implicated in the affair, having coordinated with North to plan the transfers to the Contras. Poindexter was forced out shortly after the scandal was revealed.

In many respects, the problems of the Iran-Contra affair came from the top. Reagan's management style was far from detail-oriented, and he fashioned himself a "Chairman of the Board" who delegated extensively and observed his staff only from afar.¹¹² Coupled with the expansive NSC bureaucracy that emerged during the administration (and weakened NSA authority), staff level authorities were empowered to make sweeping—and illegal—decisions.¹¹³

Soon after the scandal, a study was commissioned to examine what went wrong and how the NSC could be reformed to prevent its repetition. Led by Senator John Tower, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, and former NSA Scowcroft, the "Tower Commission" produced a sweeping report in 1987 on the failings of the Reagan NSC. The Tower Commission noted that the primary issue was leeway given to junior-level figures within the NSC, as opposed to centralizing decision-making and approval authority within the NSA. Because "the system generally operates better when the committees are chaired by the individual with the greatest stake in making the NSC system work," the report recommended the NSA return to chairing the key senior-level committees.¹¹⁴ However, a weakened NSA did not imply a weakened NSC, and the report excoriated the NSC's efforts to overstep their authority and avoid genuine interagency coordination, accusing staffers of intentionally "failing to take full advantage of the professional expertise available from the Intelligence Community, and potentially involving the country in misguided ventures."¹¹⁵ To prevent this from repeating, it was recommended that the NSC primarily return to serving the president in an advisory role, moving away from a strategy implementation or interagency execution role that primarily belonged to departments. Other concrete recommendations included staff size reductions, oversight controls, the appointment of legal counsel, and consolidation of various IGs. The subsequent Reagan NSA advisors—Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell—began to implement these recommendations, and most of the staff were replaced.¹¹⁶

When juxtaposing the Nixon and Reagan NSCs in particular, one sees a stark contrast—the tight control and NSA power consolidation of the former, versus the loosening of the reins and rogue adventurism of the latter. Evidently, neither extreme was desirable; could a balance be found? One man thought he could strike a balance: the author of the Tower Commission report himself, Brent Scowcroft. In the subsequent administration, Scowcroft had the opportunity to test his theories: the H. W. Bush years.

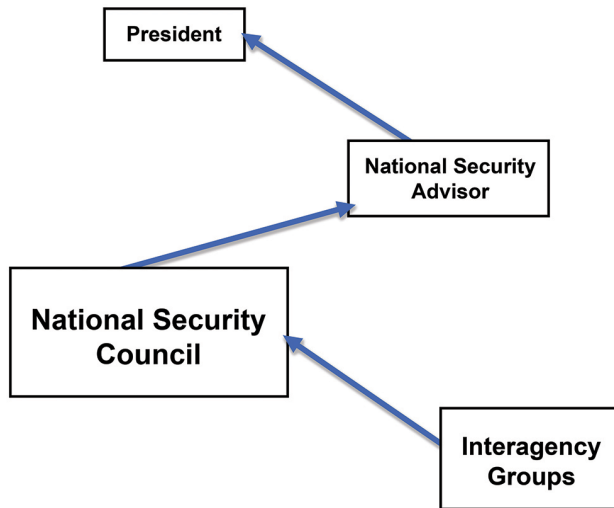


Figure 8: Reagan: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: There was an increase from around 40 to 75 in 1985 before declining again to around 40 by 1989.¹¹⁷

The H. W. Bush Years: **Re-Enter Brent Scowcroft**

Unlike with several of the previous elections, George H. W. Bush did not sweep into office based on public sentiment turning against his predecessors. Rather, Bush had been the director of Central Intelligence under Ford and vice president under Reagan. He, in some respects, signaled continuity. Seen widely as a Reagan loyalist, onlookers expected that Bush would govern in a manner like Reagan.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, Bush's eight years in the Reagan administration had also given him a firsthand experience of what the chaos of the Reagan NSC had involved. As a result, Bush realized that several changes would need to be made.¹¹⁹

Reforms had begun in the last few years of the Reagan administration under Carlucci and Powell, and Bush was determined to finish what they started. Immediately upon taking office, Bush signed NSD-1, which involved several changes: the Policy Review Group was enlarged to a committee, the deputy NSA was tasked with managing the deputies committee, a principals committee was created, and eight policy coordinating committees were created. As a result, there would be a clear hierarchy for monitoring activity throughout the NSC, with the NSA and their deputy coordinating and conducting oversight

through the principals committee and deputies committee, respectively. This created the framework for the modern NSC.¹²⁰

While the restructuring was significant, an arguably more significant development was not a formal element. Rather, Bush's pick of Scowcroft to be his NSA permanently altered the position. The first individual to serve as NSA two separate times, Scowcroft was prepared to serve Bush differently than he had served Nixon and Ford. Scowcroft had seen the two extremes of the NSC firsthand—having served under Kissinger, he saw the downsides of a powerful NSC—and NSA—that usurps power from other parts of the government. On the other hand, Scowcroft had authored the Tower Commission report, and saw the other end of the spectrum, where the bureaucracy of the NSC goes unchecked by the NSA.¹²¹

This manuscript has an entire section dedicated to the “Scowcroft Model” of NSA stewardship, so it will not be sketched in detail here. However, there were several elements that defined Scowcroft's tenure as NSA.

First, Scowcroft worked to nurture an informal and close relationship with the president, to the point where Bush could trust him as an advisor. However, critically, this was not a relationship of an advocate or assistant—rather, the close role that Scowcroft adopted was one of a trustworthy distiller of intelligence into strategy and presenter of information that could help formulate policy. In other words, Scowcroft would not merely agree with recommendations from Bush or carry out his demands; instead, the relationship that was cultivated was based on the assumption that Scowcroft would present information faithfully to Bush, while screening out unnecessary information that could only distract from the issue at hand.¹²² Much of this coordination took place at the strategic level and not just the tactical. *A World Transformed*, a book jointly written by Bush and Scowcroft, shows the closeness between the two leaders and the extent to which they coordinated on strategic questions.¹²³

Second, there were efforts on the part of Scowcroft to build in effective interagency coordination; this was facilitated not through a panoply of SIGs and IGs, but strong personal relationships. Working closely with then-Secretary of State James Baker, he created an unusually collaborative relationship between the NSC and Department of State, with cohesion and collaboration replacing competition. This collaboration was mirrored by Scowcroft's other relationships with those in government: although they might not always agree, there was mutual respect and a desire to hear alternate perspectives.¹²⁴

Third, Scowcroft created a small, well-oiled machine that always bore his fingerprints. The system was organized with multiple layers, so that the parties in question always knew who they reported to and who would be receiving decisions. The design, deliberately consistent with a military-style intelli-

gence operation, was built to create a controlled flow of information that included the distillation of pertinent data. The goal was ensuring that signal could be separated from noise, with essential information reaching the top. Each policy coordinating committee knew the scope of their duties and got their marching orders from the Deputies and Principals committees; at the same time, information could effectively rise to the deputies and principals level, with a screening function taking place every step along the way.¹²⁵ Scowcroft was involved intimately, chairing several committees and ensuring that those he did not chair nonetheless still reported their key findings to him. Fearing a gargantuan bureaucracy that could dictate and implement policy on its own, Scowcroft kept the NSC small, lean, and effective.¹²⁶ From a strictly organizational standpoint, the NSC was structured similarly to that of the Nixon NSC, “providing for a National Security Advisor chairing most of the key committees. The key differences lay in the personalities involved.”¹²⁷

Fourth and arguably most importantly, however, was an informal element: honest brokerage. While the Bush NSC contained many of the formal elements of the Nixon NSC, the informal approach taken by Scowcroft bore little resemblance to that of Kissinger. For Kissinger, the objective was not only oversight of the decision-making process, but intimate involvement in the decisions that were eventually reached; his opinion would be heard. For Scowcroft, however, it was different—he was involved in the decision-making process, but he typically allowed it to proceed as a neutral party. His view was not as an involved stakeholder, but as an honest broker, someone who would facilitate conversation and try to pull relevant contributions out of participants. This would encourage information to be shared and heard without bias.¹²⁸

The Bush administration is regarded as having had numerous successes in the foreign policy domain, and much of this can be attributed to the strong and positive role for the NSC internationally. The period of the late 1980s and early 1990s was pivotal, featuring the Tiananmen Square incident, collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Gulf War. The Bush administration skillfully navigated the period, leaving the US’s global standing enhanced. In no instance was the positive role of the NSC more evident than the Gulf War, held up as the model for a tactical intervention and “modern war,” rapidly forcing Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Scowcroft positioned himself as the key coordinator behind the scenes, with the NSC skillfully coordinating action across agencies.¹²⁹ Such cases exemplify the success of Bush’s NSC, led by Scowcroft.

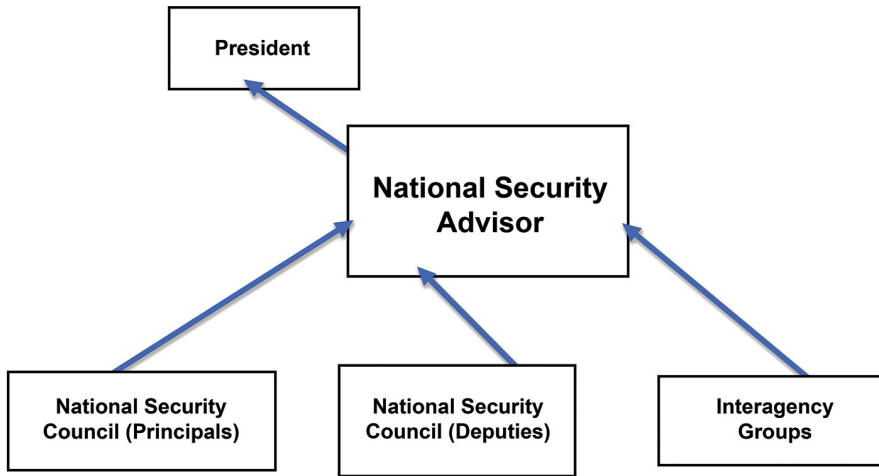


Figure 9: Bush: NSC Process Flow Chart. NSC Staff Size: Between 40 and 45.¹³⁰

The Clinton Years: Clinton’s Continuities

Upon Bush’s defeat in the 1992 election, Bill Clinton kept much of the NSC structure intact, maintaining the tripartite framework of the principals, deputies, and policy coordinating committees. The only notable reorganization effort was linking economic issues more strongly to the NSC, creating a joint staff that reported to both the NSC and the National Economic Council. The principals committee was slightly expanded, with Presidential Decision Directive-2 (PDD-2) adding additional members such as the Secretary of Treasury, Ambassador to the United Nations, Assistant to the President for Economic Policy, and the Chief of Staff. Scowcroft’s successor, Anthony Lake, was intent on continuing many of the informal elements as well, subscribing to the wisdom of the NSA serving as an honest broker.¹³¹ As a result, Lake—and his successor, Samuel “Sandy” Berger—had several foreign policy successes. Most notably, the US intervention in Kosovo with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces was held up as a successful tactical intervention, where the US and allied forces quickly achieved their objectives.¹³² Another generally agreed upon foreign policy success was the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty; over the years it has come under stress, but remains intact today.¹³³

The Clinton NSC was not only defined by success. Some have criticized the Clinton NSC for failing to engage in long-range strategic planning and, in particular, being too slow to recognize the shift in warfare from traditional state

actors to non-state actors (in particular, the burgeoning growth of terrorist groups like al Qaeda).¹³⁴ Others have criticized the Clinton NSC for failing to intervene successfully in Somalia—after numerous US troops were killed, Clinton withdrew and aborted the mission—with this potentially having ramifications for broader US willingness to intervene abroad. The failed intervention in Somalia spurred PDD-25, which laid out onerous conditions to be met prior to US intervention. The strategy resulted in US hesitation in Rwanda shortly after.¹³⁵ This overreaction based on the failure of Somalia's intervention against intervening in Rwanda reflects a similar failure of long-range planning, culminating in a tragedy in Rwanda following the nation's genocide.¹³⁶

An additional criticism leveled against the Clinton administration concerned the response to a series of terrorist provocations led by Osama bin Laden in Kenya and Tanzania. In August 1998, American cruise missiles struck targets in Afghanistan and Sudan, aimed at retaliation for a series of attacks by bin Laden and the Taliban.¹³⁷ Justified by an appeal to the right of self-defense, the strikes were limited in scope, calculated to be a calibrated and proportional response. Yet while the strikes were certainly not an overreaction, the Clinton administration may well have miscalculated by *underreacting*. Known as Operation Infinite Reach, the operation reportedly was seen as a demonstration of weakness by the United States on the part of bin Laden, who is reported to have said that the attack only killed camels and sheep.¹³⁸ Aggression subsequently increased: an al Qaeda suicide attack on the USS Cole killed 17 sailors in 2000, while the 9/11 attacks a year later killed nearly 3,000 people.¹³⁹

While Scowcroft's years were widely viewed as having been a success, the Clinton NSC's were unequivocally less successful. Nonetheless, they found some success in emulating the Scowcroft Model, and future NSAs would attempt to do the same. Could future NSAs succeed, especially in the face of deep foreign policy crises? We now turn to the administration of George W. Bush to explore this question.

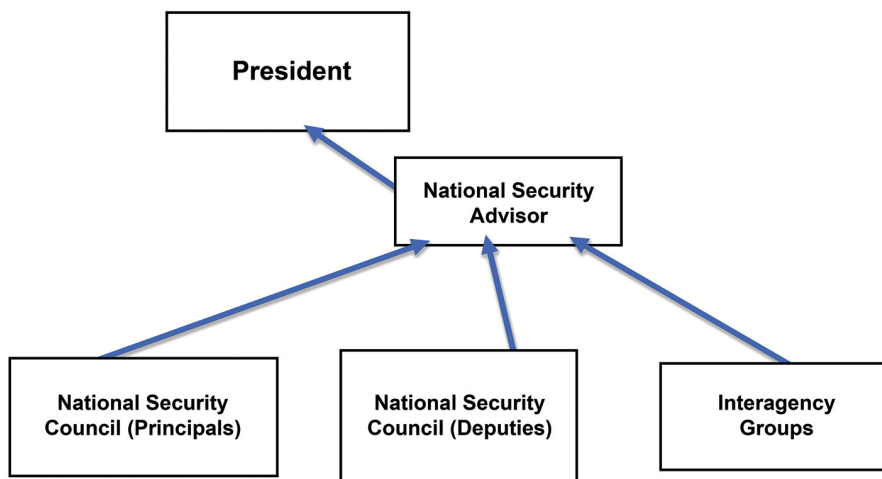


Figure 10: Clinton: NSC Process Flow Chart. NSC Staff Size: Around 45 at the beginning; the staff rose to around 70 by the end of Clinton’s first term, culminating in an NSC of around 100 by the end of the second term.¹⁴⁰

The George W. Bush Years: The Challenges of Brokerage

The first year of the Bush administration featured more continuity than change, with the most notable directive being National Security Presidential Directive-1 (NSPD-1), or the “Organization of the National Security Council System.” NSPD-1 explicitly laid out the interagency functions of the NSC, defining as a function the coordination of “executive departments and agencies in the effective development and implementation of” national security policies.¹⁴¹

However, the continuity across administrations ended abruptly on 11 September 2001, arguably the first significant “gray zone” activity in the twenty-first century. The terror attacks and the subsequent War on Terror had a profound effect on the national security bureaucracy. As a result of the 9/11 Commission Report, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence was established in 2004, while the Department of Homeland Security was established in 2002. Both organizations resulted in an increasingly expansive national security bureaucracy. This extended into the NSC as well, with the size of the NSC ballooning well beyond those of the Scowcroft years. Notably, work was increasingly concentrated at the Deputies level, with multiple Deputy NSAs appointed, divided up by functional areas of expertise.¹⁴²

Critically, however, the War on Terror meant that Bush was thrust into the role of serving as a wartime president, a role that he lacked experience in. Having only been a governor previously, Bush, unlike his father, lacked extensive intelligence and foreign policy experience.¹⁴³ Aware of his limitations, Bush tried to construct a foreign policy team with such bona fides, which resulted in deference to figures such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Richard “Dick” Cheney. Rumsfeld and Cheney became key decision-makers, making decisions outside of the ambit of the president.¹⁴⁴

The influence of Rumsfeld and Cheney led to notable issues for Bush’s first NSA, Condoleezza Rice. Although she fashioned herself as an honest broker in a similar tradition to Scowcroft, she was missing a key element that Scowcroft emulated: control over the process and the personalities involved. It was apparent that the real decision-making authorities were Rumsfeld and Cheney, which left Rice outside of the core chain of command and sphere of dominant strategic influence. As Cheney and Rumsfeld became increasingly aligned on the objectives of the War on Terror, presenting a unified front, the role for Rice was increasingly marginalized. The result was that “the national security advisor gradually retreated to a role of staff officer to the president rather than driving this process.”¹⁴⁵

This dynamic was exacerbated by Rice’s desire to take a hands-off approach in the process. She was seen as not steering the foreign policy ship or inter-agency process, remarking, “I frankly prefer being coordinated than coordinating,” and left her role to be primarily as a legitimizer for the more hawkish members of the administration.¹⁴⁶

While honest brokerage does require taking a hands-off role in hearing the perspectives of other participants, the NSA must nonetheless play a key coordinating function, managing disparate personalities. Rice had been mentored by Scowcroft and fashioned herself as his protégé but failed to strike the appropriate balance between being hands-off and nonetheless intimately managing the NSC process.¹⁴⁷ Skillful management of the foreign policy establishment was especially necessary, since “principal players in that process, moreover, were skilled bureaucrats and political operatives, often holding strong views, and thus perhaps especially in need of a heavy dose of brokerage.”¹⁴⁸ Yet Rice did not provide this brokerage. Although she was effective at not allowing her own personal views to come to the forefront of discussions, she did not adequately probe and challenge the views of others.¹⁴⁹

One criticism leveled against her tenure as NSA was encouraging group-think, allowing the alignment of Rumsfeld and Cheney to create a cohesive group environment that others rallied behind.¹⁵⁰ At the same time, Rice was a close ally of Bush and did not overtly contradict him. Instead of the NSA serv-

ing as a counselor to the president, Bush's NSA was more of an implementer, with Rice being reticent to offer conflicting views to those of Bush, instead working to operationalize his views.¹⁵¹

The most notable place where these weaknesses came to light was the war in Iraq, beginning with the start of the conflict in 2003. Rice did not probe the arguments presented in favor of the war effort with enough rigor; core assumptions about the *raison d'être* for the conflict ultimately went unquestioned, with the desire for consensus taking the place of rigorous inquiry.¹⁵²

The second half of the Bush administration featured Stephen Hadley as NSA, who emphasized efficient organizational management over the prior years, where strong personalities had steered the ship. Having been Rice's deputy, Hadley was used to operating outside of the public view, and he thrived in this role.¹⁵³ Prioritizing interagency coordination, Hadley ordered a joint interagency review of the failing effort in Iraq, with the review assessing the current state of the wartime operations. Hadley also inherited a less challenging dynamic than Rice, however, as Cheney had suffered a loss in influence following the public outcry over the war effort. This allowed Hadley to shepherd an NSC that was not as closely tied to the views of Rumsfeld and Cheney.¹⁵⁴ While the tenure of Hadley is traditionally seen as successful—reinvigorating the interagency process, bringing organizational clarity to the Iraq War effort, and regaining some of the traditional authority of the NSA—there were some limitations.¹⁵⁵ Hadley lacked Rice's close relationship to the president and while closeness does have costs, there are also benefits. Hadley lost out on the opportunities of trusting rapport with the president, a relationship that helps in ensuring the president is fully looped into the process.

The NSCs of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton successfully fostered foreign policy success in coordination, and the NSC of George W. Bush recognized that, attempting to replicate that success through a similar model. That did not happen, with experts panning the management of the Iraq War effort. What changed? While the Bush NSC kept many of the formal structures intact, the stewardship of the process by the NSA was lacking. While Scowcroft adeptly navigated divergent personalities, Rice struggled with confronting the dominant—and cohesive—personalities in the administration, allowing honest brokerage to turn into deference.

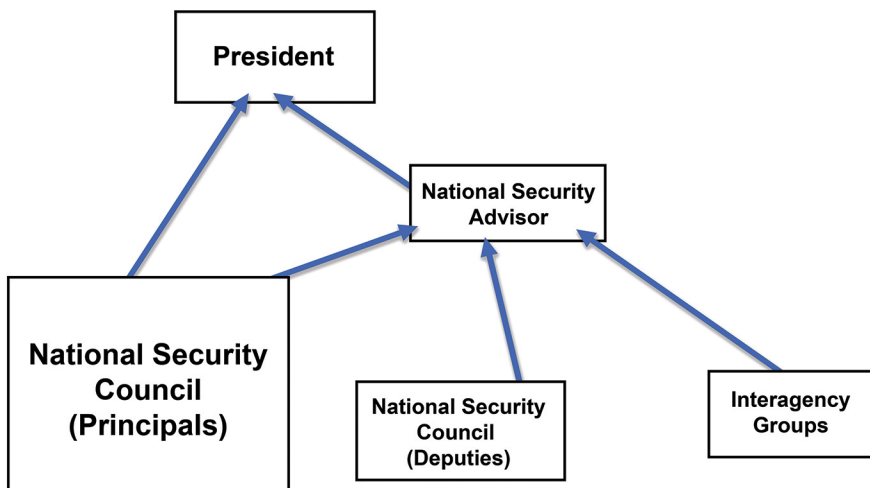


Figure 11: Bush: NSC Process Flow Chart NSC Staff Size: Around 260 personnel, including around 60 administrative and support staff.¹⁵⁶

The Obama Years: An Over-Engineered Machine

Our analysis of the history of the NSC will conclude with two modern NSCs: those of President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump, and briefly comment on the current NSC under President Joe Biden. This section begins with the Obama NSC.

Like his predecessors, the early days of the Obama administration began with tweaks to the structure of the NSC. Most notably, Presidential Policy Directive (PPD)-1 enshrined a list of permanent or invited participants to be present at the principals meetings, including the Attorney General, Secretary of Homeland Security, Ambassador to the United Nations, White House Counsel, and even the Deputy Secretary of State.¹⁵⁷ In 2009, a major reform was the merger between the NSC and the Homeland Security Council, creating a joint National Security Council Staff.

The result was a far larger NSC, with a correspondingly large scope of responsibilities. To appreciate the growth of the NSC, compare its size under Scowcroft to its size under Obama’s NSA, Gen James L. Jones, Jr. In 1992, the NSC had roughly 200 staff and personnel; under Jones, the NSC had ballooned to over 400 people.¹⁵⁸ While larger size conferred the benefits of more manpower, some of the traditional defects of bureaucracy set in. There were com-

plaints about an excessive number of both principals and deputies involved in the process, an excessively confusing chain of command, and what one Assistant Secretary of State dubbed a “gigantic stalemate machine.”¹⁵⁹ Decisions were not typically made with speed or with a sense of urgency. The process was often described as resulting in micromanagement, with NSC officials weighing in on operational decisions typically left to departments; some military commanders have reported feeling as though the NSC overstepped into the operational domain on core strategic and tactical military decisions.¹⁶⁰

Beyond some of the formal elements, however, were concerns about the relationship between Jones and Obama. Jones was highly regarded as a military leader and manager and had a reputation as someone who would effectively coordinate the interagency process and broker personality conflicts.¹⁶¹ But the absence of intimate familiarity between the NSA and president prevented the formation of a strong rapport. As a result, upon becoming NSA, Jones did not enjoy a particularly close relationship with Obama. Instead, Obama mostly worked with those he was more familiar with, choosing to consult others in the cabinet for key foreign policy decisions.¹⁶² In a sense, this resembled the informal approach of Kennedy and Johnson, with the president forming his own inner circle to circumvent some of the key decision points in the NSC.¹⁶³ This made it difficult for Jones to be positioned as an advisor, instead primarily serving in a coordinator position for the purposes of task execution.¹⁶⁴ While being undercut as a core advisor, however, Jones was able to effectively coordinate among principals and the interagency process; one example was a regular weekly lunch with key principals such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to coordinate efforts.¹⁶⁵ Some of this behind the scenes coordination may have been by design, with Jones in a 2009 interview emphasizing his desire to build a collegial environment and “not . . . have to be so much in the forefront.”¹⁶⁶ Notwithstanding, the inherent schism between the NSC coordination processes and the administration seeking advice outside of the NSC resulted in discrepancies across approaches, discrepancies between the approaches of the NSC and those of Obama’s inner circle. Examples of this notable divergence include how to handle issues like the fall of the Morsi regime in Egypt or the National Security Agency scandal created by the revelations of Edward Snowden.¹⁶⁷ Jones’ tenure was successful with respect to the formal NSC processes, managing and coordinating a large bureaucracy. However, the limitation was in building a strong and cohesive advisory role with the president.

Jones was succeeded by his deputy, Thomas Donilon, who took a different approach to NSC stewardship. While Jones operated more behind the scenes and with a bureaucratic touch, Donilon was keener on remaining in the picture

on key foreign policy decisions. Similar to his predecessor, Condoleezza Rice, Donilon was viewed as more political, leaning more toward advocacy than being purely advisory. As a result, he was accused of being insufficiently neutral to be an honest broker—his opinions were often clear, and they were known to represent those of the president. While there were some principal-level feuds (notably, a spat between Donilon and Deputy Secretary of Defense Michele Flournoy about insufficient alignment between the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff), the primary issues took place at the deputy and staff levels, where subordinates bristled at attempts to exert influence on the entire process.¹⁶⁸ In sum, Donilon's tenure was marked by an attempt to be intimately involved in the process (as opposed to disengaged or distant), but this was undercut by the appearance of being too political. In many ways, Donilon's tenure reversed the strengths and weaknesses of Jones's. While Donilon was more successful in serving as a trusted confidant of the president, this undercut his ability to manage and broker the process in a neutral way.

Donilon's successor, Susan Rice, suffered from a similar challenge—seen as too political, and not fitting the traditional “honest broker” role. While cabinet level officials tend to share the president's political party—and are seen as political actors—this dynamic was exacerbated for Rice, given her association with the controversial events in Benghazi, Libya. Having been connected to the Benghazi attack—resulting in a series of high-profile Congressional hearings—Rice was seen as a partisan player. This hampered her ability to work in a bipartisan and nonpartisan role that benefits the “honest broker” philosophy at the outset.¹⁶⁹ She also was viewed as too much of an Obama loyalist, with her role resembling that of Donilon's—implementer for Obama's views. In conversations with deputies and staff, she was sometimes criticized for being too vocal about her views—and, by extension, Obama's—even in areas where she was seen as less experienced (such as the pivot to Asia).¹⁷⁰ This undermined her ability to serve as an honest broker.

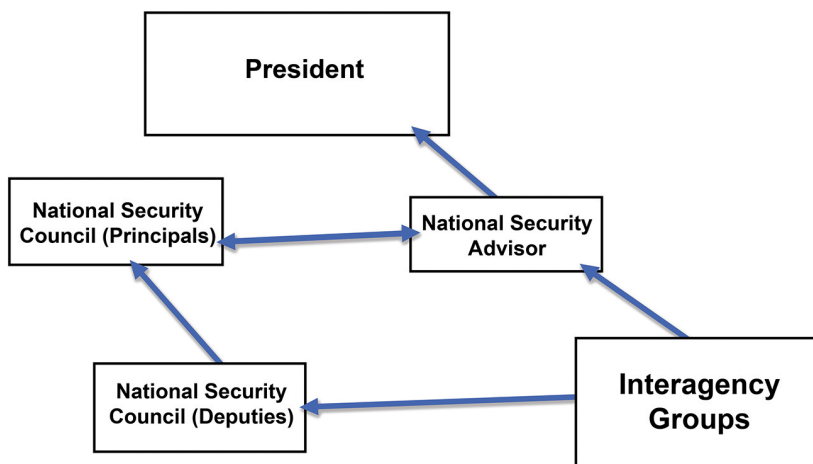


Figure 12: Obama: NSC Process Flow Chart. NSC Staff Size: Over 400.¹⁷¹

The Trump Years: Neglected Processes

Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, took pride in positioning himself as the opposite of everything Obama did or stood for. A veritable norm-busting president, Trump pledged to undo most of the Obama presidency, and the NSC was not shielded from this promise. A businessman who lacked prior political experience, Trump was immediately skeptical of foreign policy experts and reluctant to trust authorities—he wanted to design a foreign policy apparatus that would place him at the center. The result was a hollowed out NSC, geared toward rubber stamping his decisions.¹⁷² In just one term, Trump rotated through a series of NSAs: Michael Flynn, H. R. McMaster, John Bolton, and Robert O’Brien, with the first three resigning. O’Brien, his final NSA, was one of the least experienced foreign policy figures to ever fill the role, which many took as a sign that Trump was trying to marginalize the NSC.¹⁷³ Although O’Brien held regular NSC meetings, Trump did little to engage with them.¹⁷⁴ This was a pattern for the Trump NSC, where no NSA had particular influence—decisions were primarily made by Trump and his inner circle of close advisors, which empowered White House staff at the expense of the national security apparatus.¹⁷⁵ At the staff level, the dynamic was similar: while many of the staffers were Obama-era holdovers, they were increasingly marginalized given the Trump administration’s tendency toward unilateralism.¹⁷⁶

Trump's management style was not the only major change to the NSC. To effectuate his views, there were major cuts to the NSC. At no point was this more pronounced than the tenure of O'Brien, who was instructed to dramatically cut staff members. This resulted in over 40 staff members leaving, which create personnel shortages and understaffing.¹⁷⁷ While there certainly was a strong argument to be had that the Obama NSC was oversized, some felt that the Trump NSC cuts were indiscriminate, with one official noting that "There's only so much fat you can cut, and pretty soon you start to get into muscle. This team has clearly gotten to the muscle."¹⁷⁸ Many of the cuts directly affected the interagency process, hampering the labor-intensive coordination across agencies. This was likely intentional, however, because of Trump's distrust of many agencies as being a bureaucratic morass he dubbed the "Deep State" or "Swamp."¹⁷⁹ Turnover also soared, with seven of the eight senior NSC positions turning over at least once.¹⁸⁰ This was not limited to the NSC, with an 80 percent rate of turnover for senior White House staff by September 2019, making it difficult to coordinate policies across that time.

Beyond staff level challenges and the rapid succession of NSAs, there were also criticisms of the management strategies of many of Trump's selections. Flynn's short tenure was marked by scandal and received criticism for neglecting the NSC process in favor of an informal group of advisors.¹⁸¹ McMaster claimed Scowcroft as his model NSA, had written a book on the need for military advisors to advise the president with candor, and expressed determination to operate as an "honest broker."¹⁸² He also spoke of restructuring the NSC away from the micromanagement of the Obama administration, aiming to restore power to agencies. He was unsuccessful in these objectives—given Trump's propensity for unilateralism, the agencies to whom power was delegated similarly lacked influence or were understaffed. Trump famously claimed in reference to the State Department's being understaffed that "I'm the only one that matters." The result was power increasingly being consolidated around the president and his core set of advisors, with an NSC advisor commenting that "there are two parallel tracks—there's the interagency process, and then Trump makes a decision . . . It's two ships in the night."¹⁸³ In many respects, McMaster tried to run the NSC in textbook fashion, designing processes and bringing discipline into the mix, but when confronted with a president who was less conventional, McMaster failed to adapt accordingly.¹⁸⁴ Some noted that McMaster may also have been limited due to retaining his status as an active Army Lieutenant General, undercutting his willingness to directly challenge the input of the president.¹⁸⁵ Finally, McMaster was also hindered by the lack of a strong rapport with the president—speaking infrequently and never having a strong relationship, this hampered their communication.

McMaster's successor, Bolton, encountered similar challenges. From the outset, Bolton was criticized as lacking many of the quintessential traits of a strong NSA. Entering with a reputation for combativeness and a strong temper, some predicted that Bolton would not be a willing participant in interagency processes or someone able to broker meetings effectively. Having strong views of his own, it was suspected that he might use the NSA position to advance his views as opposed to mediating impartially.¹⁸⁶ However, even if Bolton were perfectly suited to the job, the broader problem was the president's attitude toward the NSC process; Bolton was unable to move Trump away from the allure of unilateralism or the counsel of informal advisors.

Bolton was succeeded by Trump's final NSA, O'Brien. O'Brien, having spent less time in government, was expected to bring a less opinionated perspective than Bolton, allowing for smoother brokerage. One opinion piece upon his nomination dubbed him the "anti-Bolton."¹⁸⁷ At the same time, however, O'Brien's relative inexperience resulted in someone who was less adept at navigating the interagency process. Coupled with the recent turnover in other agencies, the effect of a less supple NSC was the solidification of existing power centers: the president's informal advisors and the State Department, where Secretary of State Michael Pompeo had cemented himself in the good graces of Trump.¹⁸⁸ As mentioned earlier in the section, O'Brien also began a significant reorganization and downsizing of the NSC, citing as precedent the small size of Scowcroft's NSC, but he may have gone too far, leaving the NSC ill-equipped for the challenges facing the administration.¹⁸⁹

As a result of these major shifts at the NSC, it was challenging for the Trump administration to adequately coordinate and present a unified front on the international stage. These coordination challenges could be seen in the lack of a coherent message in the ongoing Ukraine crisis, and in the aftermath of the assassination of Iranian military leader Qassim Soleimani.¹⁹⁰ Fundamentally, the reliance on a single individual made it challenging to articulate a clear set of policy objectives, beyond broad principles. The Trump administration struggled to create a coherent strategic vision for foreign policy, and struggled more to implement it.¹⁹¹ However, the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy clearly and rightly identified China as a significant threat to national security, which is largely viewed as a bipartisan issue.¹⁹² The Trump administration also negotiated the Abraham Accords that are generally accepted as a success, and the Biden administration is attempting to capitalize on them.¹⁹³ However, the accords will have to be reevaluated in the future to assess whether long-term objectives have been achieved and remain sustainable.

As of the writing of the manuscript, Biden is still in the first half of his four-year term, but there are signs that he will attempt to reverse many of the decisions of the Trump administration. Having served as Obama's vice president, Biden may well try to return to the more muscular NSC staffing of the Obama years.¹⁹⁴ Biden's selection of Jake Sullivan as NSA is also telling—Sullivan, a lawyer and academic, has expressed a strong interest to be involved in the NSC's mechanics without micromanaging or directly interfering with the interagency process, which indicates a desire to strike a balance.¹⁹⁵ There will also likely be strong relationships across the foreign policy and White House apparatus, with much of the Biden team having been selected because of their familiarity with Biden and one another. In particular, some have noted the closeness of Sullivan and White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain may portend collegiality between the NSC and White House, a far cry from the adversarial relations during the Trump administration.¹⁹⁶ Nonetheless, some have raised early concerns that this tightness of the Biden team may lead to groupthink, with shared assumptions and collegiality resulting in a reluctance to probe deeper and more carefully into key decisions, such as the method in which the withdrawal in Afghanistan took place. Only time will tell whether the Biden administration's NSC will succeed in effectuating a strong vision for national security policy.

Taken together, the modern NSCs of Obama and Trump are telling. Given the prior success of the Scowcroft NSC—and the challenges of successive NSCs—there would ostensibly be consensus about the model to strive for. Yet the Obama and Trump NSCs returned to the see-sawing of the twentieth century, when successive administrations swung between powerful NSCs and weak NSCs, seeing firsthand the downsides of both extremes.

This section has sketched an overview of the history of the NSC, from its founding to the present day. Through the design choices of prior administrations, we can begin to understand some of the conditions that predispose an NSC to success, as well as numerous pitfalls that can engender failure. Building upon this section's historical analysis, the subsequent section will extract a theory for what makes a given NSC go wrong.

To close this section, it is important to note that over time the NSC process has been defined more by change than continuity. There have been strong NSAs and weak NSAs, large NSC staff level systems and small NSC staff level systems, and NSAs with close ties to the president and those kept at arm's length. This was mirrored by the British experience with the CID, where drastic changes took place over time. Beginning as a council of close advisors, the CID gradually took on a greater operational role, with an ever-larger network of cabinet level advisors and staffers for policy coordination.¹⁹⁷ While the NSC system has not grown inexorably larger, the British experience with the CID

demonstrates that national security systems are malleable and impermanent. These changes lend themselves well to NSC study; the subsequent section attempts to disaggregate these changes and assess their benefits and drawbacks.

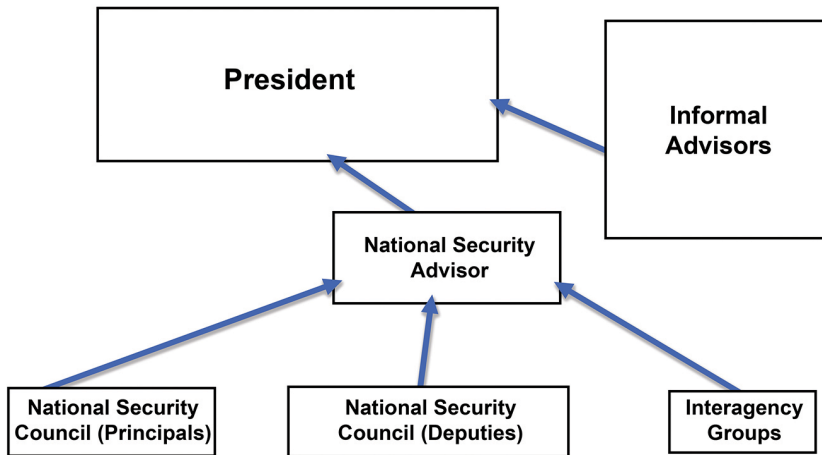


Figure 13: Trump: NSC Process Flow Chart. NSC Staff Size: Around 300.¹⁹⁸

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: **NSC Extremes**

To understand criticisms of the NSC, it is important to recognize that an effective NSC is not necessarily strong or weak, while a desirable NSC is not necessarily above the fray or intimately involved. Rather, a successful NSC is about striking the proper balance, and defects in the NSC emerge when an extreme is reached on either end of the spectrum.

We argue that there are four spectra that shape NSC success—the influence of the NSC, the power concentrated in the NSA, the collegiality of the NSC participants, and the role played by the President. These will be dubbed NSC Influence, NSA Power, NSC Informality, and Presidential Influence, respectively. Whether an administration’s NSC succeeds is determined by striking an appropriate balance on each of the four spectra.

There may be other factors that shape the success of an NSC. It is indisputable that the policies prioritized by an administration will affect how successful that administration is (and, by extension, how successful the NSC is). Processes may be inadequate, and the administration could succeed despite that

by pursuing sound, well-reasoned policies. However, we exclude those from this paper for two reasons. First, it's challenging, if not impossible, to discuss the desirability of certain policies without moving into a political debate about the merits of conservative versus liberal foreign policy, and other questions that lack consensus. These are challenging questions that demand nuanced answers and are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the more relevant question is whether the answers reached by a given NSC were well-reasoned and procedurally sound, irrespective of the political valence of the answer in question. Second, policy is typically shaped by process. While reaching a sound decision is possible with a poor process, it becomes far less likely. Therefore, some have remarked that "process makes perfect."¹⁹⁹ Good policies often stem from good processes; if the end goal is sound policies, perfecting processes will be the necessary first step. As a result, the four spectra—and the manuscript as a whole—will focus on processes, while nonetheless acknowledging that specific policy choices by an administration may well function as an exogenous factor that shapes administration success.

Spectrum: NSC Influence

The first spectrum to examine is NSC Influence. At one end of this spectrum is the weak, hollowed out NSC. As the prior chapter discussed, the NSC can serve as either an advisory role, a coordinating role, or both. When the NSC fails to serve an advisory role, a gap is created that tends to be replaced by informal advisors, many of whom may lack extensive foreign policy experience. The dangers of this were seen in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, when casual meetings and weekly lunches became the primary determinants for US foreign policy. Few presidents attempt to go it alone, and a dearth of advice from the NSC will result in input coming from elsewhere. When a president does attempt to act more unilaterally, as Trump did, the risks are obvious: policy swings on a dime, with challenges in articulating a cohesive vision for foreign policy.²⁰⁰ However, even Trump did not entirely attempt to navigate foreign policy alone, and the advisory situation was like that of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' emphasis on informality. White House aides were empowered to make key decisions, and inexperienced foreign policy and advisors like Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, were leading diplomatic efforts.²⁰¹ For example, Kushner conducted negotiations of the Abraham Accords, a significant series of negotiations between Middle East powers; such direct family influence for a non-diplomat, appointed to a foreign policy position, was virtually unheard of prior to Kushner.²⁰²

Casual meetings and informal decision-making are hardly novel. The NSC is, after all, a relatively recent invention when the long history of foreign policy decisions prior to 1947 is considered. Presidents for centuries made pivotal decisions by convening advisors informally. Nonetheless, as foreign policy challenges grow in complexity, systems and processes must match them. Informal systems, engendered by a weak NSC, may inadequately prepare the president to respond to a litany of foreign challenges that emerge at a faster tempo than ever before.

The dangers of a weak NSC do not just pertain to a dereliction of the advisory duty, however. An NSC insufficiently involved in the interagency coordination process can grind the wheels of bureaucracy to a halt, resulting in siloed, stove-piped decisions between agencies. The challenges of interagency coordination are as old as the NSC itself, where Truman's neglect for the NSC resulted in inadequate coordination across departments.²⁰³ However, as foreign policy crises have evolved over time and grown increasingly complex, the need for interagency coordination has only risen. As traditional military threats are replaced by unconventional conflicts across political, economic, and military domains, there is an increasing need for a whole-of-government approach. The NSC is uniquely suited to serve this coordinating function, given its role as a forum for multiple agencies to present their positions, with the NSC holding court over the views of various factions of government. Some have argued that the threat posed by China—a legitimate competitor and peer across domains—is unparalleled by competitors of the twentieth century. As a result, there will be a premium placed on whole-of-government coordination, with the NSC being a prime candidate to assist in that mission. The absence of the NSC serving this role was notable during the Trump administration, when agencies made decisions in a much more siloed capacity.²⁰⁴

Beyond a failure to serve an advisory or coordinating function, the NSC can also be weak merely because of the number of supporting staff. This is particularly the case when cuts are made midstream through an administration, with workloads increasing on staffers and advisors taking on portfolios that they were not previously tasked with. The Trump NSC demonstrated the perils of this approach when a small group was inadequate to carry out a coordinating function. This was why the Trump NSC was accused of inadvertently cutting muscle while attempting to trim fat—as staffers went down by one-third, there was confusion and disorganization throughout the organization.²⁰⁵

However, the defects of a weak NSC do not counsel in favor of an overly expansive one, either. A related criticism is that of an NSC that is too large, too unwieldy, or simply too powerful in the scope of responsibilities it possesses. The most notable example of an NSC that was too unconstrained was the Rea-

gan NSC, which led to the Iran-Contra affair, where the sweeping array of IGs and lack of oversight culminated in staffers becoming “reckless cowboys, off on their own on a wild ride.”²⁰⁶ Here, the risk was empowering junior-level staffers who lacked full access to the classified information gleaned by intelligence professionals, with the Tower Commission lambasting Reagan’s NSC for substituting the experience of NSC staffers for that of those in the intelligence community. Even when the president is in the loop, an overly muscular NSC can be a danger. Consider the Kennedy administration, when the Kennedy and Bundy “Little State Department” allowed them to circumvent intelligence officials, culminating in the Bay of Pigs crisis.²⁰⁷

Even if the NSC staff could be large and perfectly accountable, there are legitimate concerns about an oversized body complicating decision-making. The Obama NSC is an apt illustration of this concern, labeled a “stalemate machine” that was incapable of producing consensus or decisions within an operationally-relevant timeline.²⁰⁸ While future crises will require a whole-of-government approach and coordination across agencies—necessitating a strong NSC—this coordination must happen within a reasonable time frame as a crisis unfolds. While a larger group ostensibly can facilitate greater coordination—by devoting more manpower to interagency coordination—it can perversely *increase* stove-piping. As more subgroups emerge, there may be greater specialization, with fewer people getting a complete view of the picture.²⁰⁹ These dangers can also be seen in the context of the British CID as well; at the height of World War II, there were 733 subcommittees, with key figures inside the CID apparatus noting that it often smothered important policy insights from ever reaching the top and being screened adequately.²¹⁰

Spectrum: NSA Power

The second spectrum to examine is NSA Power—what role does the NSA play in the NSC process? Should they be an influential player, or ought the NSA operate more at the margins?

A weak NSA can exist alongside either a weak NSC or, paradoxically, even a strong NSC. A weak NSA coupled with a weak NSC is a recipe for decisions to be made outside of the NSC’s ambit. As the previous portion on NSC influence discussed, this can be dangerous, resulting in informal advisors without national security competences or classified intelligence making key decisions.

However, there are numerous examples of a weak NSA holding court over a strong NSC, resulting in questionable decisions that sustained brokerage and strong stewardship could have avoided. The most notable example of this phenomenon is the Iran-Contra affair, where the combination of a removed NSA

and an expansive NSC resulted in staff level individuals being empowered to take unilateral action. This spurred the Tower Commission to recommend the chairmanship of key committees by the NSA, forcing the NSA to be apprised of recent developments at the staff level.²¹¹ Throughout the Reagan administration, there were leadership challenges. Allen, his first NSA, lacked access to Reagan. McFarlane, Reagan's later NSA, noted that he was unsuccessfully "trying to move all these elephants around" when coordinating staff.²¹²

This dynamic played out similarly yet again in a different context during the Bush administration and the Iraq War, when Condoleezza Rice found herself unable to effectively broker decisions between Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and Donald Rumsfeld.²¹³ Instead of facilitating robust debate and probing the dominant assumptions of those in the cabinet, Rice took a side early on, marginalizing Powell and rubber stamping the dominant view of the administration.²¹⁴ Rice's desire to align with the president resulted in a hands-off role for brokerage, which culminated in poor decision-making prior to, and during, the Iraq War.²¹⁵

An overly powerful NSA—such as Bundy or Kissinger, for example—carries a different set of risks, however. Concentrating power in the hands of one individual can create a mentality that favors unilateralism, power grabs, and the dismissal of information contrary to their preconceptions. One notable example of this existed during the Bundy years of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, following the abolition of the Planning Board and subsequent filtering of all information through Bundy.²¹⁶ Bundy was criticized for attempting to supplant the intelligence community, taking on the role of briefing the president and serving an informational function that he was ill-equipped to serve.²¹⁷ The omnipotent NSA can rarely operate as an honest broker either, since they will be predisposed to act to ensure their fingerprints are on all recommendations. Bundy here was no different and would openly advocate for his own views, with recordings from numerous meetings demonstrating his tendency for shutting down debates, rather than facilitating them.²¹⁸

Another salient example of this risk came from the Nixon years under Kissinger. Desiring to cut through the bureaucracy in pursuit of a fast-paced, executive-driven foreign policy, Kissinger worked to marginalize the Secretary of State and other potential barriers.²¹⁹ Kissinger succeeded, and he became synonymous with Nixonian foreign policy, but there was a cost. By chairing virtually every NSC committee, and ensuring that all information passed through him, there was ample opportunity for Kissinger to influence everything that came up through the NSC. As a result, Kissinger's reign featured "lone cowboy" diplomacy that overstated his own competencies in areas where he lacked expertise while marginalizing experts elsewhere, eschewing the in-

teragency and consultative process.²²⁰ In particular, some have been harshly critical of Kissinger's approach to Southeast Asia, where the United States struggled to coordinate responses to crises in Cambodia and Laos or adequately wind down the war in Vietnam.²²¹

Spectrum: NSC Informality

The third spectrum to examine is “NSC Informal Elements,” with the emphasis not on the structure of the NSC or the power entrusted to the NSA but rather the atmosphere and culture of the NSC. Should the NSC be rigidly hierarchical, or should there be an emphasis on informality and collegiality? As with the prior two spectra, the answer is both and neither.

Excessive informality can take root within the NSC organizationally, when rigid structures give way to cliques, replacing structured meetings with “breakfasts” and “lunches” among friends. In these quasi-social settings, one's place is never ensured; an advisor who steps out of line may cease to be invited, remaining a part of the NSC in name only while being left out of informal gatherings where the true decisions are made. This creates a strong pressure for conformity, since insecure advisors will want to align with the other members of the group; scaled across the group, this creates an illusion of unanimity, through a phenomenon known as groupthink.

Groupthink, a practice that discourages individual thinking, decision-making or responsibility, is not unique to the NSC or even foreign policy. Rather, it stems from the fundamental nature of people, social animals who thrive on feelings of inclusion and attaining recognition from others. Three key contributing factors are the presence of a strong group leader that others want to appease, a high-level of group cohesion, and intense pressure from the outside to make a good decision. It is no mystery that these factors can all be present at the NSC. The president—or the NSA as their proxy—can function as a strong group leader that creates reticence among other participants. In an informal, clique-driven setting, there may be a perceived high-level of cohesion. Given the stakes of foreign policy, the pressure is always high, and is only magnified by the perceived need for consensus at the NSC, where participants may fear that discord could leak and signal a lack of resolve on the part of the United States government. This fear of protracted disagreement can lead to advisors picking their battles and striving for unanimity, which can devolve into bandwagoning and following the crowd.²²²

This dynamic can be seen repeatedly over the history of the NSC. During the Tuesday Lunches of the Johnson administration, none of the participants had an assured place in an informal setting. Reports indicate that those pres-

ent were keen on being treated as family and wanted to continue to be included.²²³ It hardly seems coincidental that dissent did not take place at these meetings, with Johnson and Bundy controlling much of the discussion. Considering that sizable parts of the Vietnam War effort were dictated at these meetings, one cannot help but wonder what might have been different had leaders fostered a culture of dissent, probing some of the (ultimately disproved) assumptions about the war.

While there may be an impulse to solidify NSC processes and add a rigid hierarchy, this too brings its own risks. An NSC that is too formal can bring its own challenges if it prioritizes organizational charts over people.²²⁴ An overly rigid system can ossify the process, slowing down the system to a halt as key decisions pass through multiple gates. This was the criticism leveled against the Eisenhower NSC—members of the national security apparatus felt that it took an unreasonable amount of time to move decisions up and down Policy Hill.²²⁵ A similar criticism was leveled against the Obama NSC, where the large number of staff members and formal processes spurred bureaucratic discontent. Paradoxically, the more rigid the structures, the more likely they are to be disregarded. As the section on the Obama NSC noted, there were often informal meetings that circumvented the NSC process, borne of the desire to avoid running into the “stalemate machine.” This pressure could become especially acute in the twenty-first century, as international crises grow increasingly fast-paced and complex; actors may prefer not to wait for solutions to wind through the system. Some level of informality, therefore, appears to be inevitable, which is unsurprising since structures by themselves are not enough for effective decision-making. Instead, the people involved in the process are relevant. While formal structures have a place, at a fundamental level the key players need to trust each other and have a sufficiently strong rapport to work alongside each other in consultative roles.

Spectrum: Presidential Influence

The fourth and final spectrum to examine is the extent to which the president has influence on the NSC process. This can be approximated through their relationship with the NSA, as well as the extent to which they generally attempt to insert themselves into the process.

While a strong relationship between the NSA and president is important, this can become harmful if it distorts the role of the NSA. While an effective NSA is aligned with the president, they do not necessarily move in lockstep. Rather, the NSA should be bringing information to the president, synthesizing ideas created further down the chain of command while striking a balance

that avoids unduly influencing the ideas synthesized. When the president makes informal recommendations to the NSA, the NSA should probe them and challenge them knowing these informal conversations would be protected under executive privilege. The test of a strong relationship is the security of the NSA to push back, knowing that they will maintain the confidence of the president. An NSA that is too close to the president performs less as an information-bringer and instead primarily operates to execute the wishes of the president, delegating the orders of the president down the chain of command. The case of Rice and Bush shows this. In aligning closely with Bush, Rice fashioned herself as an advocate and problem-solver for the president, neglecting to challenge his assumptions and instead focusing on how to execute his wishes.²²⁶ A secondary problem is when the NSA and president are so enmeshed that they close themselves off from other decision makers, which undermines the ability to challenge shared assumptions. This dynamic can be seen with Bundy and Kennedy in particular. As two close friends with a shared background, they found more similarities than differences and instantly trusted each other over other advisors. The result was short-circuiting much of the rest of the NSC process.²²⁷

More generally, this is a microcosm of a broader factor: the extent to which the president has influence as a decision-maker. Kissinger expands on how leaders provide guidance in his recently released book, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*:

Leaders think and act at the intersection of two axes: the first, between the past and the future; the second, between the abiding values and aspirations of those they lead. Their first challenge is analysis, which begins with a realistic assessment of their society based on its history, mores, and capacities. Then they must balance what they know, which is necessarily drawn from the past, with what they intuit about the future, which is inherently conjectural and uncertain. It is this intuitive grasp of direction that enables leaders to set objectives and lay down a strategy.²²⁸

Some key questions to ponder based on the preceding description on how leaders operate are: Is the president actively present in the room where decisions are made, pressing his thumb on the scale, or are decisions made with the implicit approval of the president, with the core debates happening among the subordinates? What experience does the president have in foreign policy and national security prior to election? There is also a middle ground, where the president is involved in some decisions and not others, or where the president has key individuals who report back to him and keep him apprised of key developments. Like the other spectra, the best answer is often the middle ground or even that it may be situation dependent. The president's active in-

volvement can be a recipe for an overwhelming amount of information, as Bundy worried about Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs. It can also create a group-think dynamic, where participants worry about alienating the president. On the other hand, however, an absent president can empower mid-level individuals to make decisions on issues vital to the national security of the country, as was seen with the Iran-Contra Affair.

To conclude, this section has argued that to understand NSC effectiveness requires conceptualizing it through a series of spectra. A good NSC is neither strong nor weak, empowered by an NSA that is neither omnipotent nor hapless, and is both formal and informal. An effective NSC, therefore, is a balancing act, operating along a continuum between two extremes. Using this taxonomy, how successful has the NSC been in the past? To assess this, we turn now to a series of seven case studies, examining NSC effectiveness in handling crises.

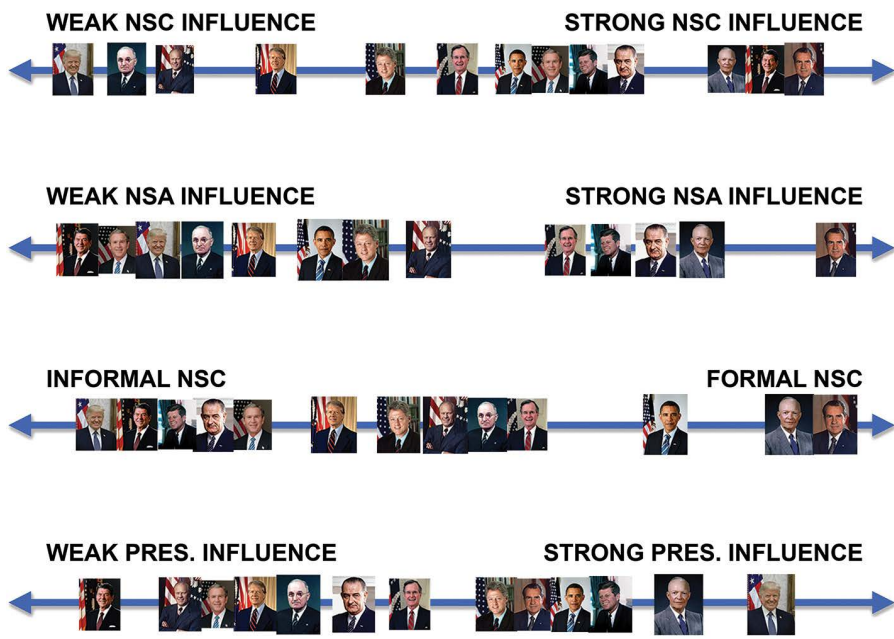


Figure 14: Stacking Up the Administrations

(All notes appear in shortened form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

Notes

1. In fact, the colloquial use of the initialism NSC is sometimes meant to refer to the entire body, containing both cabinet level officials and staffers. Others use it to primarily refer to the cabinet level deliberative body. For the purpose of clarity, this manuscript will use NSC to refer to the principal-level individuals who are codified members of the NSC; deputy- and staff-level members will be described as “staff” or as part of the “NSC system.” For a longer explanation of this distinction, see: Chad T. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” *Air University Press*, March 2009, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Nov/22/2001847939/-1/-1/0/WP_0015_MANSKE_MACHINERY_OF_GOVERNMENT.PDF.

2. The Scowcroft Model, which will be defined at length later in this paper, refers to the model of NSC stewardship inaugurated by Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor under Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. However, a person does not make a model, and the strategies he deployed have been studied extensively in subsequent years, with a focus on ideas such as honest brokerage, a collegial but organized structure, a small group, and more.

3. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” 6.

4. Donati, Rasmussen, and Phillips, “Chaotic Afghanistan Pullout Caps Two Decades of Missteps.”

5. Manske, 6.

6. Troy, “All the President’s Yes Men.”

7. Tenzer, “Debate: In Ukraine, the West Cannot Allow Itself to Sleepwalk.”

8. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “National Security Act of 1947.”

9. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff,” 1.

10. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff,” 2.

11. Leuchtenberg, “Franklin D. Roosevelt: Domestic Affairs.”

12. Nelson, “President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council,” 361.

13. Sander, “Truman and the National Security Council: 1945–1947,” 369.

14. Nelson, “President Truman,” 361.

15. Sander, “Truman and the National Security Council,” 372.

16. “National Security Council Origins.”

17. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “National Security Act of 1947.”

18. Manske, “The Machinery of Government,” 9.

19. Manske, 11.

20. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff,” 3.

21. Sander, “Truman and the National Security Council,” 388.

22. Rothkopf, “Running the World,” 57; Sander, “Truman and the National Security Council,” 387.

23. Truman, *1946–1952: Years of Trial and Hope*, 59.
24. Lay, “Administration of the National Security Council.”
25. Nelson, “President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council,” 374.
26. Nelson, 366.
27. Nelson, 368.
28. Nelson, 369.
29. National Security Council, Minutes of NSC meeting, April 2, 1949.
30. Nelson, “President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council,” 377.
31. Nelson, “President Truman and the Evolution of the National Security Council,” 372.
32. “Papers of Harry S. Truman Staff Member and Office Files.”
33. Henderson, “Organizing the Presidency for Effective Leadership: Lessons from the Eisenhower Years,” 43.
34. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff,” 5.
35. Burke, 5.
36. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” 15.
37. Preston, “The Little State Department,” 638.
38. Cutler, “Recommendations Regarding the National Security Council.”
39. Preston, “The Little State Department,” 638.
40. Pach, “Dwight D. Eisenhower: Foreign Affairs.”
41. Department of State, “Foreign Policy Under President Eisenhower.”
42. Scowcroft, “Eisenhower and a Foreign Policy Agenda,” 451.
43. Jackson, *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level*.
44. Hooker, “The NSC Staff: New Choices for a New Administration.”
45. Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Policy Making*, 97.
46. Burke, “The National Security Advisor and Staff,” 9.
47. Smith, *Organizational History of the National Security Council during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations*, 17.
48. Preston, “The Little State Department,” 642.
49. Preston, 636.
50. Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth*.
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52. Stoughton, *National Security Council Executive Committee (ExComm) Meeting, 10:10AM*.
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Put to the Test: NSC Case Studies

Any examination of the successes and failures of American foreign policy in the last century would be hard-pressed to find an incident in which the NSC played little to no role. To illustrate some of the principles of effective NSC stewardship, we will examine seven foreign policy case studies consisting of five failures and two successes. These case studies are:

- The Bay of Pigs Invasion
- The Vietnam War
- The Iran Hostage Crisis
- The Iran-Contra Affair
- The Iraq War
- The Gulf War
- The Cold War

As discussed in an earlier section, the terms success and failure are imprecise, but there are potential proxies for assessing success. One is whether the NSC achieved the intended results, irrespective of whether the intended results were commendable as a matter of policy desirability. Another is whether the NSC operated as a result of an NSC that advanced an array of opinions and functioned to allow lively debate. The final is whether the decision arose through a replicable and organized process, as opposed to a policy judgment that might have been sound but was nonetheless ad hoc and disorganized.

Not all case studies are similar, instead, they often cleave along the lines of short-term crises and long-term challenges. What constitutes success or failure in those cases will vary; short-term crises reward quick, decisive thinking, while long-range challenges necessitate deep planning and an ability to coordinate activities over an extended horizon. This section will examine cases in both cases and clearly taxonomize them accordingly. The following cases can be considered short-term: the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Iran Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Contra Affair, and the Gulf War. In contrast, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Cold War can more accurately be described as long-term challenges.

The Bay of Pigs Invasion

The Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961) is indisputably the most significant foreign policy failure of the Kennedy administration. In 1959, Cuban president Fulgencio Batista was ousted suddenly by revolutionary Fidel Castro. During the Cold War, there were fears by US intelligence sources that Castro could have

Communist sympathies, resulting in a Communist state being set up near the continental United States. This was only magnified by relations that began to be developed between the Soviet Union and Cuba.¹ As a result, Eisenhower authorized planning to overthrow Castro's regime, and he directed the CIA to develop an invasion plan, in coordination with guerrilla armies in Cuba.² Kennedy learned of the plan in 1960 shortly after taking office, moving quickly to sign off on the invasion. By April 1961, Brigade 2506 had landed at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, beginning the campaign.³

The campaign was a dismal failure, with unsuccessful coordination and planning at all levels. The Cuban government forces were not caught by surprise when American and Cuban revolutionaries landed, and they fought back with unexpected fervor. Not having expected this response, Kennedy needed to provide air cover to assist with the invasion but wanted to keep the invasion secret. In a bind, he chose not to provide air cover, dooming the invasion to be overwhelmed.⁴ The invading forces quickly surrendered. Not foreseeing the need for air cover—or effectively planning the diplomatic questions about invasion secrecy—was an interagency failure, with a lack of coordination between intelligence, military, and diplomatic factions. Other mistakes were simply embarrassing oversights—at one point, the Pentagon authorized US support to move in from Nicaragua but neglected to account for local time zones and subsequent time differences, resulting in the forces being hours later than expected, closing the window of opportunity.⁵ The implications of this failed invasion cannot be overstated. Castro, already moving closer to the Soviet Union, realized now that the United States would seriously contemplate toppling his regime. The Bay of Pigs sealed the deal, creating a Communist power on the United States' doorstep.

The Bay of Pigs is a sore spot in the tenure of the Kennedy administration, and the NSC played a critical role in the failure—through its absence. Although the decision was authorized by the NSC, the plan was not extensively discussed in official NSC meetings.⁶ Even though all NSC members were aware of the plan, the Kennedy administration had moved quickly to concentrate key decisions within a group of trusted advisors, in an informal setting. The Kennedy administration distrusted formal processes, and neglected those formal processes in planning the Bay of Pigs invasion.

In no aspect is this clearer than the interagency issues that emerged as a result of the lack of formal coordination. The key entities for the invasion were the CIA and JCS, tasked with the intelligence and military roles, respectively. At the last minute, Kennedy created changes to the timeline and strategy of the invasion. It is reported that these changes were never analyzed by either the CIA Director or the Chair of the JCS, and certainly not analyzed in con-

junction with one another.⁷ Kennedy conducted an end-run around the NSC and neglected the interagency process, creating a stovepiped approach.

The limitations were not entirely because of the NSC process breaking down, however. The brokerage provided by Bundy also left much to be desired. Bundy allowed Kennedy to be deeply involved in the planning of the invasion, dictating both strategic and tactical questions. Kennedy immersed himself in information about the invasion and, in this overwhelming setting, overextended himself. The result was an inability for the president, the most critical decision-maker, to distinguish noise from signal. In a post-mortem memorandum following the failed invasion, Bundy admitted as much, noting that there would be a need to insulate Kennedy from overwhelming amounts of information, with the NSA serving more of a filtering function.⁸

Bundy's limitations were not just in filtering, however. He failed to broker meetings in a way that would avoid the creation of groupthink. From the outset, Bundy and Kennedy made their respective opinions clear. The vocal views of leaders of a group early on in dialog can have a salient effect on setting the agenda, which is precisely what happened.⁹ Soon, the die was cast, and advisors did not want to push back on the decision to invade. This was only magnified when dissenting views raised were shut down—a CIA memo claiming that a similar coup in Guatemala had failed was quickly suppressed, while advisor Arthur Schlesinger's objections were glossed over.¹⁰ Schlesinger later noted that "our meetings were taking place in a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus, [and] not one spoke against it."¹¹ Instead, advisors committed to the invasion made a series of heroic and flawed assumptions about the possibility of a surgical invasion, presenting questionable evidence on the basis of best-case assumptions that the United States could enter, topple Castro, and leave. These assumptions were never probed. Instead, they were taken for granted and became the standard assumptions for every scenario examined.

What does the Bay of Pigs incident teach us about the NSC? First, attention must be paid to the interagency process. While there are certainly benefits to a small, tight-knit group of decision-makers, someone ultimately must dictate to the diplomatic, intelligence, and military communities what their marching orders are. Second, the NSA must be both a broker and filter. The NSA should not position themselves as the advocate of the president, nor a fervent debater. Instead, they should allow probative questions and discussions from other principals. This information should reach the president, but everything else should not. The president is one person, with their own human biases and limitations. It is incumbent upon the NSA to ensure the president gets only the most relevant information; the subjective nature of relevance forces the

NSA to walk a fine line, ensuring that spurious information is excluded while not imprinting their ideas too firmly on any one course of action.

The Vietnam War

The second case study to examine is the Vietnam War (1955–1975). Entire books have been written about US decision-making over this 20-year period, requiring this case study to be modest in scope: the escalation of the war under the Johnson administration, from 1963 to 1969. Specifically, the study will focus on the events engendering escalation following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident of 1964 and the subsequent escalation over the next two years. This is intended to enable the comparison of this case study to other, shorter case studies (such as the Bay of Pigs, which was far shorter in duration).

Conflict in Vietnam did not begin when the United States began sending advisors to the nation in the 1950s. Vietnam, a French colony (then known as French Indochina), had been waging a war for independence with the French in the 1940s and early 1950s. Despite US pretensions of anti-imperialism and an end to colonies, the United States never supported the liberation of French Indochina, which built resentment among Vietnamese leader and revolutionary Ho Chi Minh.¹² During the Kennedy presidency, there were increased concerns about the radicalization of Vietnam—and South Asia more broadly. The Domino Theory of geopolitics had gained currency in the upper echelons of government, and senior leaders feared that the Soviet Union, which was gaining a foothold in the region, would convert much of the unaligned world to communism.¹³ While Vietnam was far from a priority in the early days of the Kennedy administration, Kennedy nonetheless feared appeasing the Soviet Union. Early in his administration, he authorized the arrival of several advisors to South Vietnam, but there was not an extended military presence.¹⁴

That began to change under the Johnson administration. The number of advisors continued to spike under Johnson until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. Two US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin claimed to have come under fire from the Vietnamese adversary. This was questionable and may have been a technical malfunction, but Johnson seized upon it to secure the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and Congress authorized virtually unlimited military measures against Vietnam.¹⁵ This was followed by a rapid increase in presence in Vietnam.¹⁶ The conflict quickly grew in nature, and by 1965 the president had authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, a major air campaign that ultimately culminated in America dropping over one million tons of bombs on Vietnam. As the campaign failed to eliminate Vietnamese support, Johnson eventually

began to send in ground forces, initiating ground war with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces.¹⁷

As ground fighting began, it was difficult to garner large-scale American support for the war effort. The presence of a draft had alienated many Americans and caused widespread protests. The 1968 Tet Offensive—what was functionally a kamikaze campaign by the Viet Cong—demonstrated the lengths that the Vietnamese would go for the war effort, which only further diminished American support for the war. Shortly after, Johnson announced that he would not be seeking reelection.¹⁸

Johnson's successor, Nixon, had campaigned on winding down the war effort. Nixon had made an end to the war one of his central campaign promises.¹⁹ Yet, in the early days of his presidency, Nixon escalated the war effort, claiming the ostensible support of a "silent majority" of Americans who were in favor of the war.²⁰ Although the war effort eventually ended, it was far harder to wind down than many had anticipated, and the conflict was a dismal failure. Vietnam was united under a communist government, millions died as both sides committed horrible atrocities, and the conflict remains a stain on US history in the twentieth century.²¹

What role did the NSC play in the escalation of the war effort? Much of the escalation took place during the Johnson years. A legendary arm-twister and senator, Johnson was well-regarded for his domestic politics chops, but was comparatively less focused on foreign policy. As a result, he was deferential to his foreign policy advisors, even taking the unprecedented step of asking Kennedy's NSA, Bundy, to stay on in their roles across administrations.²² Assuming a similarly high-profile role to the one he had in the Kennedy administration, Bundy became the public face of the Vietnam War for the Johnson administration. Behind the scenes, his role was similarly significant, attempting to shape the decisions of the foreign policy apparatus. Others were skeptical. Following his infamous trip to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission, Secretary of State Dean Rusk said he was "skeptical about McGeorge Bundy's selection to this team, as I would have been about any member of the White House, because his presence involved the White House directly in the outcome."²³

The major challenge created by Bundy's involvement in Vietnam was like what he engendered in the Bay of Pigs incident: groupthink. Bundy had set opinions about the Vietnam effort, and he was determined to ensure those views were represented. In doing so, he failed to serve as an honest broker, ensuring that views he agreed with were the primary ones that reached Johnson.²⁴ Similar to the Johnson years, a major contributing factor was the informal setting in which meetings occurred, as well as the clique-oriented atmosphere that formed. Johnson was known for isolating advisors who were not toeing

the party line, and made an example out of Vice President Hubert Humphrey for voicing opposition to the Vietnam effort.²⁵ Johnson did not desire open contradictions or disagreement, and designed his group accordingly.

As the history section of the manuscript discussed, meetings were informal “Tuesday Lunches” among a tight-knit group of advisors, where Johnson intentionally hoped his own intuitions and early conclusions would be supported. The only notable dissenter in the inner circle of foreign policy advisors was Under Secretary of State George Ball, but he too was cut out.²⁶ Soon, the key decisions were made at the lunches, with the NSC operating more as a briefing forum and rubber stamp for preordained decisions.²⁷ Key enablers of this environment were Bundy, as well as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who worked to gain power relative to the JCS. McNamara in effect created an echo chamber, blinding even himself to information contrary to his agenda. He reportedly was unaware even of a wargame conducted by his own team, the SIGMA I-64 wargame, which demonstrated the ineffectiveness of an air campaign on Vietnam.²⁸

This environment quickly gave way to groupthink and confirmation bias. Few members present wanted to contradict the prevailing wisdom, since those that did were often cut out. Principals would make end-runs around deputy policymakers that they feared could contradict them, as was the case with Bundy trying to skirt Chester Bowles, the Under Secretary of State prior to George Ball, resulting in Bundy dictating policy directly to mid-level civil servants in the Department of State.²⁹ Even those who were initially insiders found themselves on the outs when they contradicted Johnson and other insiders, as was the case with McNamara. After he proposed a bombing halt in Vietnam, he was marginalized and eventually dismissed.³⁰ Eventually, the environment was such that Bundy decided that intervention was necessary and merely sought *ex-post facto* rationalization of this decision. This was seen visibly with an attack on a base in Pleiku, which Bundy seized on as proving the need for the United States to markedly scale up the war effort. Intervention was the result, and Bundy sought a means to achieve it as a result of his preordained conclusion.³¹

The Johnson administration also inadvertently tied its own hands repeatedly during the war effort. As a result of Bundy’s visibility—positioning himself as the most well-known public defender of the war—policy was often announced to the American public, with Bundy proclaiming the wisdom of the war and intervention to journalists, in televised debates, and more. This made it hard for the administration to reverse course without losing face, locking in policies.³²

The result was expected, and policymakers got the outcome they set out to create: more intervention in Vietnam. Determinative assumptions about the

war—which ultimately were proven mistaken—were made without being debated with rigor or challenged. The most notable was the embrace of the Domino Theory, defined as a political action having significant second and third order effects, which was challenged by the falling of Vietnam without a subsequent loss of South Asia. An additional common refrain in the administration was the notion that the United States would “lose credibility” for not intervening, collapsing the American alliance network. This had precious little theoretical or empirical support but was quickly accepted as dogma among Johnson’s inner circle.³³ The military events leading to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution were handled similarly, and claims of a Vietnamese provocation were spurious but were quickly accepted and pushed throughout the government.³⁴

What does the Vietnam War demonstrate about the NSC? First, it is an additional black mark against an overly collegial, informal decision-making apparatus, given concerns about groupthink. Social constraints and fears of being removed from the in-group are deeply rooted and can negatively influence decisions. There needed to be more contrary voices present, with a NSA that was receptive to their views. Second, the dangers of a publicly visible NSA are also apparent. Policy decisions become far more calcified when announced to the public, with reversal being challenging considering the audience costs engendered.

The Iran Hostage Crisis

The third case study to examine is the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979–1981). Illustrating the pitfalls of an uncoordinated, weak, and undisciplined NSC process, the crisis was a legacy-setting event for Carter and grew to define the foreign policy of his administration. Yet the crisis was not inevitable since numerous missteps by the administration at both the strategic and operational coordinating levels resulted in a preventable failure.

Although the hostage crisis itself only began in November 1979, the stage had been set in February 1979 when the US-backed Iranian Shah Pahlavi was driven from power during the Iranian Revolution. Motivated by a complex mix of poor economic conditions and nationalism, the revolution aimed to drive out a leader who was widely seen as a puppet for the West.³⁵ Prior to the eventual collapse of the Shah’s government in February 1979, there had been a series of protests and demonstrations, growing increasingly violent. While Carter toasted the Shah’s government as an “an island of stability” in late 1977, storm clouds were gathering, and were missed by the administration.³⁶ In January 1978, symbols of the monarchy were attacked by thousands of protesters, while protests and subsequent crackdowns by security forces had spread

to three dozen cities by March of the same year. In August, following the arrest of a prominent cleric, martial law was declared, and the revolution began in earnest, with the Iranian prime minister soon resigning.³⁷ Engulfed in protests and fighting, the Shah's government collapsed over the next year.

How were these warning signs missed? The inability to predict the Iranian government's collapse was seen as a major failure by the US intelligence community. A notable intelligence report as late as August 1978 claimed that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a 'pre-revolutionary' situation."³⁸ The issue may not have been insufficient information, but rather it being inadequately utilized. An internal report by the CIA found that "the US compiled a substantial amount of accurate information and analysis about major events, particularly the demonstrations and riots."³⁹ The challenge may have been groupthink among the NSC. Quickly, a consensus formed that the Shah's regime was stable and that he could stay in power merely by liberalizing his regime to ease demonstrations.⁴⁰ Few, with the notable exception of Brzezinski, pushed back against this consensus. The result was a NSC that screened out contradictory information about the precarity of the Shah's regime, leaving it ill-equipped to plan for the fall of the Shah.

Blame for the slow response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Iran can be placed at the foot of the NSC. By the summer of 1978, Brzezinski had received a report indicating an unstable situation. Yet the NSC was slow to respond, with the only notable result being a phone call from Carter to the Shah reiterating support. This was made worse in November that same year, when Ambassador William H. Sullivan issued an urgent call for information stating the Shah needed guidance on what to do and on what the US policy would be. Following an emergency NSC meeting, it was communicated to the Shah that the United States would "back him to the hilt," indicating military support. The next day, Sullivan walked back the message. Left confused and disoriented by this uncoordinated US message, the Shah continued to struggle. The problem was only made worse by continued infighting between the two warring factions of Carter's government: Vance and Brzezinski, with the former urging Carter to pull back support and the latter wanting stronger support. Distracted by Camp David peace talks, Carter's focus was elsewhere and he failed to adequately weigh between the conflicting camps. Subsequent waffling and uncommitted US support for the Shah eventually culminated in the fall of the government in February 1979. There were early signs that relations between the United States and the new Iranian government would be troubled. As early as February 1979, there was an attack on the US embassy in Tehran, prompting an American diplomat to grumble that "we used to run this country . . . Now we don't even run our own embassy."⁴¹

As a result of the revolution, US policymakers had a challenging political dynamic to navigate, starting with the question of should there be attempts at making overtures toward the new Iranian government, the fundamentalist government of the Ayatollah? The Carter administration opted to make limited overtures, with Brzezinski meeting in November with Iran's prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan. A photograph was taken of the two shaking hands and was soon published in newspapers. Almost immediately, protests erupted, with conspiratorial Iranian students believing the handshake indicated the government was softening on anti-American revolutionary attitude.⁴²

From there, the situation deteriorated rapidly. On November 4, Iranian militants stormed the US embassy in Tehran and took dozens of Americans hostage. As it became clear that the militants were going to continue holding the embassy, Iran's prime minister and his cabinet resigned while the Carter administration pursued a diplomatic solution.⁴³ Over the coming weeks, a few hostages were gradually released, but most hostages were held. By December, Iranians had overwhelmingly authorized a new constitution bestowing upon the Ayatollah supreme power. Diplomatic resolution would come to a standstill as the Ayatollah continued to push anti-American intransigence.⁴⁴ Months went by, but the possibility of progress remained remote. In April 1980, US threats of a naval blockade were met with an immediate promise to kill the hostages if US military action commenced. The effect was the perception of the Carter administration as weak, kowtowing to the Iranian threat.⁴⁵

However, a major operation was covertly planned and attempted that same month on 25 April. Known as Operation Eagle Claw, this was a planned rescue of the hostages with US military forces and CIA operatives. The plan arose because of the perceived lack of other options at the NSC, with members dismissing the seizure of Iranian oilfields, retaliatory bombings, and a total blockade. As a result, the NSC settled on a rescue operation. Three MC-130s would carry an assault force of 118 troops into a desert, where they would link up with other aircraft and helicopters. With the assault force assembled, they would covertly work their way to Tehran, and fight to liberate the embassy.⁴⁶

The plan was fatally flawed from the start. Planning of the rescue had been hampered at the outset by open disagreement between Vance and Brzezinski, with Vance opposing the rescue mission and eventually resigning in protest in April 1980.⁴⁷ Operationally, the landing spot for the MC-130s was near a major Iranian highway, resulting in a bus approaching the landing zone. After the bus was seized, a tanker truck was fired upon and exploded, lighting up the landing strip and complicating covert action. The situation only deteriorated from there, when hydraulic difficulties took a helicopter out of commission. With only five rescue helicopters remaining, the ground commander aborted

the rescue mission. Tragedy soon struck near the site of the tanker explosion as a rotor blade on a helicopter struck another aircraft, causing an explosion that killed eight service members. The operation was a tragic failure on all counts—a failure of maintenance, a failure of planning, and a failure of joint operational coordination. In fact, its failure was critical in spurring the creation of a unified Special Operations Command years later.⁴⁸

Months became years and the United States was no closer to resolution. While the July death of the Shah was expected to precipitate some resolution, policymakers refused to meet the Ayatollah's demands of cash assets and an apology.⁴⁹ The crisis dragged on for 444 days and the hostages were released in January 1981, upon Reagan's inauguration. The entire situation was widely seen as a catastrophic failure of US foreign policy.

Where did the NSC go wrong during the hostage situation? In addition to the miscalculations preceding and during the revolution itself, the NSC made several serious errors once the hostage crisis had commenced. One major problem occurred at the strategic level, with the way that Carter chose to signal and prioritize the crisis. Known as the Rose Garden Strategy, Carter paused much of the rest of his foreign policy and focused on election campaigning, narrowly focusing on the hostage crisis. A strategic failure, it signaled to the terrorists that they could throw the entire presidency into disarray with their actions.⁵⁰ The NSC's inability to stop this choice was an abdication, signaling a propensity to focus on the operational at the expense of the strategic. A similar strategic failure arose as a result of Carter's contradictory declarations. In December 1979, Carter proclaimed that the safe rescue of the hostages, a narrow and focused objective, was the top priority of the administration, yet later that month, he claimed the top priority instead was advancing the national interest of the United States as a whole in the region.⁵¹ Operationally, the NSC also orchestrated a disorganized and fractured negotiation process, with diplomats going to Tehran without first securing meetings with the Ayatollah; the effect was an image of unpreparedness projected by the administration.

Moreover, the NSC failed to effectively allocate time across the administration's foreign policy portfolio. The Rose Garden Strategy did not merely exist at the top but percolated through the NSC system. Cabinet members were spending the lion's share of their time on the Iran situation, while staffers were diverted from other portfolios to Iran. Vance estimated that over one-quarter of his time was spent on Iran, with hours spent discussing the situation with Congress daily.⁵² The effects of this diversion were palpable—the Soviet Union in 1979 supported Marxist insurgents who made strong gains in Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique, while Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in late 1979.⁵³

Like other case studies, there were also strong groupthink dynamics at play, particularly relating to Operation Eagle Claw. Members of the NSC were prone to suffer from a Fallacy of False Dilemma, believing the choices were truly rescue or inaction. This predisposed them to severely underestimate the risks of the rescue operation. Evidence indicated a catastrophically high failure rate for such operations in the past, and a CIA report claimed the likeliest outcome would be the death of 60 percent or more of the hostages.⁵⁴ Yet these downsides were infrequently debated. The operation itself was flawed for many of the previous reasons: a poor choice of landing location, insufficient reinforcements, inadequate knowledge of where the hostages were located, and poor coordination between the various branches of the military in the operation.

Finally, effective debate throughout the crisis was compromised by Brzezinski's inability to serve as an honest broker due to his ongoing feud with Vance. The animosity between the two men was well-known and hampered the administration's ability to project a unified front on the crisis. However, the problem was even worse behind the scenes, with Brzezinski taking steps to undermine Vance's ability to participate in deliberations. Vance, in his autobiography, claimed that Brzezinski was tasked with summarizing meetings, complete with disagreement to present to the president, yet according to Vance, Brzezinski would frequently truncate the notes to avoid a full telling of the conversation.⁵⁵ Brzezinski also positioned himself closer to the national security apparatus than Vance, taking over the daily intelligence briefing and ensuring that his ideas on what to do were featured front and center. The result of this turf war was a compromised deliberative process, which prevented the best ideas from winning out in the NSC's marketplace of ideas.

Of relevance to the paper is the fact that the Iran Hostage Crisis was not merely a short-term crisis. Rather, some have argued that it was symptomatic of a broader shift in US-Iran relations that took place following the fall of the Shah's regime in 1979. David Crist, in *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran*, counsels against understanding US-Iran relations as punctuated by specific crises (the Iran Hostage Crisis, proxy operations with terrorist groups, numerous crises relating to Iran's nuclear program, and so forth).⁵⁶ Rather, he considers the relationship to be an ongoing, 30-year "gray zone" conflict, operating in an intermediate area between peace and all-out conflict, defined by low-level military provocations. As a result, he notes that "for three decades, the two nations have been suspended between war and peace. At various times, relations have moved from the light of peace to the darkness of war. But in the end, the 2010s and onward still look remarkably like 1979, with the two nations still at loggerheads."⁵⁷

What can the Iran Hostage Crisis teach us about NSC effectiveness? First, it illustrates the importance of speed and decisiveness in fast-paced situations. Public-facing disagreement and inconsistent policy stances can have tangible impacts. Even if there is disagreement behind closed doors—as is often desirable—such disagreement must not compromise the NSC’s ability to move quickly or project a unified front. Second, there must be processes that ensure intelligence can reach the key decision-makers. Intelligence about the precarity of the Shah’s regime and the impending threat to US interests was missed, with catastrophic effects. When intelligence exists but does not find its way to the right people, this reflects a failure of process. This counsels in favor of a stricter and more disciplined NSC process. Finally, the dangers of groupthink revealed themselves once again. While there was disagreement—epitomized by the Vance and Brzezinski turf wars—this alone was insufficient to rupture the illusion of consensus otherwise present, where key players made dubious assumptions regarding the stability of the Shah’s regime and, later, the likelihood of success in Operation Eagle Claw despite strong countervailing evidence.

The Iran-Contra Affair

The fourth case study to examine is the Iran-Contra affair (1985–1987). The Iran-Contra affair, in many respects, represents the flip side of several of the preceding case studies: while the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam War involved an overly-involved NSA, the Iran-Contra affair did not. Rather, the NSA was overly trusting and empowered junior-level staffers without properly verifying their involvement in certain aspects.

How did this situation arise? In 1981, the Reagan administration had approved an operation to aid Nicaraguan insurgents, the Contras, who were fighting against the Sandinista government. Desiring the provision of arms, the Reagan administration had moved forward with aid. However, this was blocked in Congress, with the Boland Amendment prohibiting the sale of arms to the Nicaraguan Contras. Frustrated in the initial pursuit of their objective, the Reagan NSC sought to create workarounds to route arms to the Contras. But why was this objective essential enough to justify an end-run around the law? The Reagan administration thought they could pursue two objectives concurrently: anti-communism and a salve to the effects of terrorism. In the context of the Cold War, anti-communism was always the primary objective, particularly in proxy conflicts between anti-communist forces against communist governments. Correspondingly, throughout the 1980s, terrorism and hostage-taking had increased in salience while high-profile incidents like the 1979 Iran hostage crisis and the terror attacks on the Vienna and Rome airports in 1985 (killing

18 civilians) upended the West.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, nearly 40 American hostages had been taken in Lebanon. A NSC staffer, Lt Col Oliver North, proposed a work-around: using Israel to sell arms to Iran illicitly, with the arms subsequently being sold from Iran to the Contras. In exchange, there would also be the release of the hostages being held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hence, an “arms for hostages” scheme was birthed: arms would be funneled to the anti-communist Contras, which would also be used as a chip for freeing American hostages. The deal went through, with the 1986 release of the hostages.⁵⁹

Key NSC figures, such as North and John Poindexter, knew the scheme was questionable and needed to remain discreet since it could be seen as “negotiating with terrorists.” This was a position opposed to the principle laid down by Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz, not to mention the dubious legal nature of any end-run around Congress.⁶⁰ Yet Poindexter in particular felt that he had little choice—Reagan, while not signing off on the plan, had told his NSC staff to “keep the Contras alive, body and soul” while also saying that he couldn’t “live with [himself]” if he couldn’t get the hostages back from Lebanon.⁶¹ Poindexter was particularly interested in the suggestion from North, given his own affinity in an expanded governmental role in efforts against terrorism (Poindexter was committed to a vision for predictive analysis and data collection geared toward counterterrorism).⁶² These factors converged, and an elegant solution seemingly existed, if only it could stay private.

However, the deal did not remain unknown for long. Instead, it was exposed as an illicit arms-for-hostage exchange, contrary to both the Boland Amendment and limitations on diplomacy with Iran. Both North and then-NSA McFarlane were eventually criminally charged—with Poindexter, the subsequent NSA, being convicted in 1990 and North convicted in 1989 (though both had their convictions vacated or reversed on appeal). The ensuing result was the largest scandal of the Reagan administration.

The Iran-Contra affair was carried out illicitly by NSC staff members, so it serves as an important case study with respect to NSC management. The scandal was a case of individual, mid-level staffers going rogue, as opposed to serving either an advisory function or a coordinating function in service of the president. For those who feared an unelected, unaccountable government bureaucracy, this was their worst nightmare, where the foreign policy apparatus charted their own adventurous path. Described as “Reagan staffers [who] had cooked up their own plans and then carried them out,” the scandal was a failure of management and leadership, with a NSA who was insufficiently involved.⁶³ The Tower Commission’s report on the Iran-Contra affair lambasted the NSC for insufficiently involving both the president and the NSA in the process. While prior NSCs—such as the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon NSCs—

featured an NSA intimately involved in all stages of the process, McFarlane was more removed. As a reaction to the Kissinger days of the NSA chairing nearly all key committees, figures other than the NSA had taken key leadership roles. This made it challenging for the NSA to get a clear perspective on the planning of the key committees, magnified by the tremendous number of IGs and policy committees created during the Reagan years.⁶⁴

The NSA was not entirely at fault, and much of this culture emanated from the top. Reagan fashioned himself the “chairman of the board” and preferred to oversee from a distance.⁶⁵ In a sense, then, it can be said that “the NSC process did not fail, it simply was largely ignored. The national security advisor and the NSC principals all had a duty to raise this issue and insist that an orderly process be imposed. None of them did so.”⁶⁶ Even when key decision-makers could access the President, the institutional culture was such that they chose not to, making decisions without presidential input. The first failure of the NSC, then, was a lack of senior leadership, creating decision gaps for their subordinate staffers to make on their own. Despite the size of the NSC during this time, much of the Iran-Contra affair was orchestrated through backchanneling and informal dealings, which further compounded the oversight challenges.

Another defect was a misapprehension of the core role that the NSC should serve. While the NSC *does* have an important interagency coordinating function, this should not be its primary purpose. The NSC is not meant to be a team of the president’s “fixers,” carrying out policy dictates. Rather, it serves principally as an advisory forum, advising the president on strategies to deal with the foreign policy challenges of the day. In this case, coordinating the sale of arms was a clear Department of State prerogative, and the NSC overstepped into a principally policy coordination role. A clear division of roles needed to be enforced.⁶⁷ A secondary component of this defect was the disavowal of interagency coordination. By nature of the arms deal being secretive, there was little to no interagency coordination, or coordination with Congress. In effect, the United States had two foreign policy strategies—one public, and one private, anathema for projecting a unified front on the international stage.⁶⁸

This telling of the story is not uniformly accepted, however. Oliver North, at the epicenter of the scandal, asserted in his autobiography *Under Fire* that “I am convinced: President Reagan knew everything.”⁶⁹ North argues that blaming mid-level staffers was a tactic to forestall impeachment and find a convenient scapegoat. While North does not argue Reagan willingly lied, he does express the belief that Reagan was at some point informed about the diversion and failed to realize its significance. This claim is hard to evaluate, contradicting other versions of the story in a way that is challenging to recon-

cile. Nonetheless, even under North's telling there are significant challenges to the NSC process that can be evaluated, even if the manuscript cannot weigh in on how much Reagan knew (or did not know). North acknowledges that Reagan tended to "concentrate on broad policies . . . and he generally left the details to subordinates."⁷⁰ Even under North's telling, there was an inability for key information to be understood and acted upon at the top.

What can the Iran-Contra affair teach us about NSC effectiveness and efficiency? First, while the NSA should govern with a light touch and not prejudice dialog with their beliefs, they also cannot be hands off. Chairmanship of key committees by the NSA or trusted deputies is important to ensure the NSA—and, by extension, the president—is in the loop. Here, key decisions never even made it to the committee, with *ex parte*, staff level decision-making outside the ambit of the cabinet level officials. Second, the purpose of the NSC needs to be clearly defined. While the NSC can serve an important interagency function, the primary purpose is not to execute foreign policy tasks. Rather, the NSC was created to serve an advisory function, and it was inappropriate for the NSC to be handling arms sales even if the "stakes justified the risk" when it is illegal. These blurred lines between coordination and advisory functions become apparent when looking at then-contemporaneous pieces from figures such as Poindexter who argued in *The Wall Street Journal* for an expanded administration role in Iran.⁷¹ Finally, large bureaucracies cannot run themselves. Many committees and formal structures do not guarantee smooth operations, nor does it guarantee the *use* of those processes. Backchannel dealings against the backdrop of a large and expansive NSC is a valuable warning: overly complex and over-engineered processes can be too unwieldy to govern, paradoxically incentivizing agents to operate outside of the structure.

The Iraq War

The fifth case study to examine is the Iraq War (2003–2011). Like the Vietnam War, this conflict was a sustained engagement over several years, which makes its entire examination too unwieldy for a small section of just one manuscript. Instead, we will focus on the initial decision to invade Iraq, based on the pretext of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had long antagonized the United States, particularly following his unsuccessful attempt to invade and hold territory in Kuwait (which resulted in the Gulf War). In the closing days of the Clinton administration in 1998, there were calls to invade Iraq and topple the dictatorship of Saddam. Indeed, the Project for a New American Century, which featured key decision-makers in the future Bush administration, was open

about calling for an invasion.⁷² Clinton's signature of the Iraq Liberation Act (1998) was a major turning point, enshrining regime change as the official policy of the United States.

By 1999, US officials had acquired information that Iraq was potentially in possession of WMD. This information was highly suspect, coming from a source who was believed to be untrustworthy even at the time. Nonetheless, the information was passed on to US officials and taken seriously. Upon Bush's election in 2000, the path toward invasion accelerated as removal of Saddam became an increasingly high priority. Between 2000–2003, more information was being acquired by US intelligence officials suggesting that Saddam had a legitimate stockpile of WMD and a potential nuclear program under development. US signaling toward the regime grew more hostile, and Bush gave a key speech decrying Iraq as being part of an "Axis of Evil."⁷³ Not all in the foreign policy establishment were unified, however. Scowcroft, no longer in government, wrote a well-known opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Don't Attack Saddam." In it, Scowcroft acknowledged that Saddam was a menace and threat, but argued that the evidence tying Saddam to terrorist organizations and, critically, WMD was far more spurious. Instead, Saddam was likely to focus on just clinging to his own power and not challenging the United States.⁷⁴ Scowcroft also argued that it would be more challenging than widely recognized to successfully engage in nation-building, with a concomitant risk of destabilizing the region. Brzezinski was opposed as well, having argued in 2002 that the foreign policy establishment ran a risk of allowing "its nonpolitically defined war on terrorism . . . [to be] hijacked and diverted to other ends."⁷⁵

By March of 2003, a military operation had been initiated, as Bush announced to the public the beginning of a US engagement in Iraq. Within a month, Iraq's army was overwhelmed, and the regime crumbled. Yet, the *raison d'être* for the intervention—Iraqi WMD—was quickly debunked. By January of 2004, US and international officials had aborted the search for WMD and concluded that initial intelligence assessments had been incorrect. Far from being a surgical intervention with an easy exit, however, the Iraq War was not amenable to a quick ending. Instead, it was incumbent upon the United States to promote democracy, rebuild the government, and ensure stability, necessitating a continued military presence. This culminated in the 2007 surge, and a conflict that did not finally begin to wind down until 2011, eight years after the initial invasion.⁷⁶

While there is debate about whether the Iraq War had any upside, it is undeniable that the initial purpose—rooting out WMD—was a failure. This failure was rooted in the NSC process, where key decisions relied on dubious information and intelligence that should have been discounted. The initial

intervention in Iraq was a perplexing mix of both worst- and best-case scenario planning: worst-case assumptions about the actions of the Saddam regime, bolstered by best-case assumptions about the surgical precision and effectiveness of a US intervention.

Many of these problems emerged as a result of the NSA, Rice, and her lack of effective brokerage. When sorting through conflicting information and assessing the reliability of suspect intelligence, brokerage is needed more than ever.⁷⁷ This need for brokerage was further magnified by the presence of a new president and a collective of opinionated, experienced foreign policy experts who were inclined to stick to their guns. Disputes quickly emerged between Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell, with Cheney and Rumsfeld in favor of intervention and Powell expressing deep-seated hesitations. This was an opportunity for Rice to serve as a broker, arbitrating the disputes between both factions. Instead, she took the side of Cheney and Rumsfeld early on, chilling dissent from Powell and others. Once this prioritization had been made, the tone had been set, with Cheney and Rumsfeld quickly moving to consolidate authority over the key decisions. As Joseph Collins noted:

One expert talked about the dominance of the Cheney-Rumsfeld viewpoint as a “thumb on the scales” of the national security decision making process. Secretary Rumsfeld’s penchant for dealing one-on-one with the combatant commanders and diving into the details of war plans and unit deployments was also unprecedented in the postwar era.⁷⁸

Much of this arose as a result of Rice positioning herself less as a broker and more as a counselor to the president, dedicated less to facilitating debate and more to arriving at a conclusion the president could concur with. In one notable case, when there were disputes between the CIA and Department of Defense about the appropriate recourse, Bush told Rice that she needed to “get this mess straightened out,” which positioned her as a fixer for the president.⁷⁹

A significant contributing factor was also the presence of groupthink in the NSC. In the years preceding the 2003 invasion, core assumptions were made about the presence of WMD, the precision of an invasion, the likelihood of avoiding subsequent state-building, and more. Instead of testing these assumptions and probing them for weaknesses, they were sustained without challenge. Notably, in December 2002, Bush reportedly asked in a principals committee meeting how sure the NSC was about the presence of WMD. This was a reasonable inquiry since the initial WMD intelligence had been acquired from a dubious source, and numerous figures in the intelligence community—even Powell, then Secretary of State—were skeptical. Instead, Bush was reassured that the WMD case was a “slam dunk.”⁸⁰

Similarly, the question of whether the intervention could be executed in a short time frame was also not subject to rigorous debate. Assuming that war was hard, and peace was easy, the primary focus when planning was on defeating Saddam and winning the initial conflict; governing in a postwar Iraq was an afterthought. Like the WMD question, this was the product of an initial rash assumption gaining currency and never being challenged. Gen Tommy Franks, then commander of US Central Command (USCENTCOM), took charge of much of the planning effort and insisted on focusing the bulk of energy on the warfighting question, while glossing over local population dynamics and the challenge of creating a new government.⁸¹ Few challenged this initial prioritization, instead operating within it.

Magnifying all this was the willingness of key figures to actively work to cut others out of the process. For example, Franks' influence was magnified because of direct coordination that took place between him and Rumsfeld, short-circuiting several mid-level military and diplomatic figures who could have had influential roles in the planning stage.⁸² At the principals' level of the NSC, Powell also had his influence limited as a result of his role as a dissenter.

The debate surrounding the history of the conflict is not settled, however. Like the contradicting depictions of the Iran-Contra affair, some have argued that the battlelines surrounding the Iraq invasion were different. In his book, Robert Draper pushes back against the conventional narrative that Cheney and Rumsfeld were the loci of power in the administration.⁸³ Arguing that Cheney and Rumsfeld had little interest in intervention or democracy promotion, Draper claims that the driving force was Bush, who was personally motivated to strike against Hussein and demonstrate his strength as a successor to his father, particularly in light of claims that Hussein had plotted an assassination against the senior Bush.⁸⁴ Even if this contradiction of historical perspective is true, Draper asks the same question: why was Bush not able to be convinced of the folly of the intervention? Even if Bush was more the driver of the invasion, there was still a lack of countervailing voices that reached the president.

What implications does the Iraq intervention have for the NSC? First, the lead up to the intervention—and groupthink dynamics—demonstrates the vital role that the NSA plays, and the need for honest brokerage. While the groupthink dynamic qualitatively differed from the dynamic under Bundy (with an in-group clique), groupthink was nonetheless engendered because of an unwillingness to probe key assumptions. Notably, the presence of opposition by itself was not enough and key figures such as Powell and Scowcroft opposed the war, but their views did not take hold. In fact, Powell, under duress, was the one who sold the war at the United Nations, convincing many that concerns

about WMD were well-founded.⁸⁵ While hindsight is 20:20 and it would be easy to criticize decision-makers for choosing undesirable options, the issue is not the decision chosen but the decision-making environment fostered. Not all countervailing views were registered, and those views that were given were not always listened to fairly; an environment conducive to disagreement and extensive debate was not engendered. Instead, “the lack of a culture of multiple advocacy and the failure to utilize and institutionalize a devil’s advocate meant advocates did not get a fair hearing in the interagency forum.”⁸⁶ By itself, opposition is not enough; it needs to be nurtured and heard. Second, the NSC should work to protect dissenting voices from marginalization. Perceived favored factions can create a risk of alienating those who would otherwise dissent but instead toe the line, fearful of losing their spot at the table. Not well publicized for obvious reasons, it was determined that Hussein was bluffing about his WMD, after terminating these programs, to deter Iran.⁸⁷

The Gulf War

The sixth case study differs from the preceding five in that it is considered a success. The Gulf War (1991) is often held up as the high-water mark for what modern warfare should look like. The United States, in response to an aggressor, established a formidable international coalition to defend against territorial incursion. Pursuant to United Nations authorization, the coalition fought back, using modern technology and sound military tactics to reclaim the territory in a matter of weeks, carrying out an operation with surgical precision.

In the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussein decided to invade the nation of Kuwait, seeking access to Kuwaiti oil fields.⁸⁸ The Bush administration acted quickly, working to assemble a coalition of NATO members and Middle Eastern countries to push Saddam out of Kuwait, protecting against the territorial incursion. Action to mobilize the international community at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) proceeded similarly quickly, with a resolution passed authorizing necessary action if Iraq had not ceased its behavior by 15 January 1991. The next day, in the face of Iraqi intransigence, Operation Desert Storm commenced.⁸⁹ Waging war using satellite-enabled technologies for the first time, US and allied forces brutally attacked the Iraqi center of gravity, rapidly dismantling one of the largest armies at the time. Within weeks, Kuwait was liberated, and the United States had achieved its objective, expelling Iraqi forces without being drawn into a longer, protracted conflict.⁹⁰ Even today, the Gulf War is venerated as the textbook example of how contemporary wars should be fought: in clear international legal territory (with UNSC authorization), using modern technology to limit casualties and

enhance efficiency, while taking care to conduct a surgical operation that allows the quick attainment of objectives.⁹¹

None of these successes were accidents. The quick response, gathering of support in the international community, and coordination between the branches of the US armed services were the product of sound NSC stewardship, led by Scowcroft. Scowcroft's NSC struck a good balance between formality and collegiality, achieving both structure and casual rapport. While the 1989 National Security Directive 1 (NSD 1) had established the principals and deputies committees—creating a clear structure and flow of information—organizational charts did not replace people. The NSC, military community, and Department of State all trusted one another and could work seamlessly, having frequent and candid conversations about the state of international affairs.

The incursion on Kuwaiti territory, as a *fait accompli*, necessarily caught the world by surprise.⁹² Despite initial uncertainty about how to respond, within a matter of hours and days there were preliminary plans being debated at the NSC, followed by the rapid assembly of an international coalition.⁹³ One of the key contributing factors to the success of the operation was strong interagency coordination. Scowcroft kept in close contact with Secretary of State James Baker throughout, enabling the NSC and Department of State to present a truly unified front when interfacing with allies.⁹⁴ Similarly, a diplomatic masterstroke was keeping the conflict limited by ensuring Israel was uninvolved, despite Israel desiring a more forceful response against Hussein to more decisively limit Iraq's power. This was facilitated through interagency coordination between the Department of State and the CIA, led by Scowcroft.⁹⁵ With respect to the armed services, there were initial concerns that the “warring tribes” of the military would vie for greater influence in the conflict, but Scowcroft skillfully ensured coordination between them, allowing a seamless initial intervention without decisions on the foundation of parochialism.⁹⁶

Much of the success can also be attributed to Scowcroft's skills as a manager and broker. The structure of the NSC through the principals, deputies, and policy levels meant that not every decision was within Scowcroft's direct ambit, making micromanagement challenging.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, he still managed effective oversight, keeping tabs on the broad objectives of his subordinates, who could worry about the details.⁹⁸ At the principals level, he wrote the playbook on honest brokerage, ensuring that all views could be presented on possible steps in the intervention. This is not to say that Scowcroft lacked opinions. He had them, but he was strategic in withholding them until later in the deliberations, to avoid engendering a groupthink-oriented environment.⁹⁹

The Cold War

The seventh and final case study examines the efforts undertaken to succeed in the Cold War, a success on two fronts: winning and achieving American foreign policy objectives, while also avoiding a war between nuclear powers. Our examination of the Cold War focuses not on response to crises rather on the long-range strategic planning that took place across administrations. Indeed, the efforts of every administration from Truman through Bush showed remarkable strategic clarity and political discipline in pursuing a long-term strategy, managing and leading whole-of-government efforts.

A distinct strategy of containment was adopted and maintained across eight successive administrations. Described as a “coherent, bipartisan grand strategy . . . sustained for four decades,” containment joined together three core strategic insights: the challenge of the Soviet Union as an expansionist power existentially threatening American vital interests, the purpose of preserving freedom for the United States and like-minded nations, and the solution of creating alliances and presence abroad.¹⁰⁰ A far cry from the “Fortress America” that had defined the United States for much of the 1800s and prior to the world wars, this required a concerted shift in political, economic, and military policies as well as the creation of international institutions, sweeping alliances, and expansive economic interconnectedness.

Arguably the focus for this strategy emerged from George Kennan, a State Department official posted within Moscow in the 1940s. Later dubbed the “Long Telegram,” Kennan created both the diagnosis and solution that later would be encapsulated by containment.¹⁰¹ Kennan argued that the Soviet model had long-term, structural weaknesses and believed that it held the seeds of its own demise. This vulnerability, however, made the Soviet Union even more dangerous, creating paranoid fears of encirclement that, coupled with an almost messianic desire to spread its ideology, rendered the Soviet Union a threat to the free world. Kennan’s solution was a whole-of-society approach to competition and containment, creating a unified front that aimed to keep up—and ultimately, to best—the Soviet Union militarily, economically, and politically. This was an unpredictable long-range competition that might end abruptly, with the Soviet Union liable to change “overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies.”¹⁰²

Kennan’s writing was published in *Foreign Affairs* as the famous “X” essay (Kennan’s pseudonym) and gained currency within government.¹⁰³ Seen as a reasonable middle ground between the more extreme approaches of isolationism or military confrontation, each of the Cold War administrations carried out a variant of containment with remarkable strategic discipline.

The Truman administration inaugurated the strategy with a bang, with Truman proclaiming the “Truman Doctrine” in 1947 and announcing support for those worldwide in struggles against communism.¹⁰⁴ Notably, this manifested itself in the provision of aid that same year to Greece and Turkey, culminating most famously in the defeat of the communist-aligned *Kommunistikon Komma Ellados*, or KKE, guerrilla party in Greece.¹⁰⁵ Concerned that hardship and economic discontent in Europe could breed support for communism, this political effort was soon followed economically by the Marshall Plan and billions in economic aid for Western Europe. Communist party support declined in Western Europe by one-third between 1946 and 1951.¹⁰⁶ Finally, the most significant military alliance to date was created in this period, with the NATO emerging from the 1948 Vandenberg resolution establishing a series of European security pacts and, in 1949, led to the NATO pledge: an attack on one as an attack on all.¹⁰⁷ Truman’s efforts stemmed from his fidelity to the fundamental mantra of containment, which was to project a unified front, and avoid the appearance of cracks that could be exploited by the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁸

In many respects, the Eisenhower presidency was different. It was a Republican administration, a far more systematized and powerful NSC, and an arguably less assertive military posture overseas. Yet the fundamental precepts of containment remained in making the effort to subvert Communist expansion without outright military confrontation. This balancing act was illustrated most clearly in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, when efforts to protest the communist government imposed in Hungary resulted in a full-scale Soviet invasion. Faced with the specter of Soviet expansion, the Eisenhower administration considered forceful military responses but ultimately decided against them. Instead, the approach taken was to contain Soviet expansion and solidify the surrounding countries, using the incident as an information campaign to galvanize support for the West.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, the Kennedy administration featured several changes from its predecessor. Perhaps most notable was the inauguration of “flexible response” as a doctrine that emphasized graduated and tailored deterrence, instead of the all-out retaliation that defined the early thinking of the nuclear age.¹¹⁰ But even these ostensible changes contained a fundamental continuity—an emphasis on containing and countering Soviet expansion. The impetus for the shift toward flexible response, after all, was the need for credible options to counter the Soviet Union without resorting to all-out war. Competition in other domains, such as the space race, demonstrated the extent to which the United States would embrace the notion of outcompeting the Soviet Union across the whole of American society, leveraging the private sector and ordinary citizenry in the competition.¹¹¹

The Johnson administration's foreign policy was largely defined by the Vietnam War which, though unsuccessful, shows continuity in strategic thinking, even if misapplied. The root of the much-maligned Domino Theory that dictated intervention in Southeast Asia was containment, which aimed to prevent the seeding of communism in any potentially fertile soil, even if the result was sending Americans to fight in seemingly inessential civil wars.¹¹² Here, a more pernicious side of a bipartisan consensus is illustrated—the dangers of taking the strategy to an extreme when there's seemingly uniform agreement over it, creating an environment where the strategy goes unchallenged. Outside of Vietnam, containment continued to have influence, perhaps most notably demonstrated by the “Johnson Doctrine” declaration that communism would not be permitted to thrive in the Western hemisphere.¹¹³

The Nixon and Ford administrations took a slightly different tack by moving toward détente with both the Soviet Union and communist China, seeking more stable relations with the former and inaugurating official relations with the latter.¹¹⁴ This was coupled by the Nixon Doctrine, widely interpreted as limiting the extent to which the United States would militarily defend the world against communism.¹¹⁵ While seemingly a noncompetitive strategy—attempting to defrost relations with two ideological opponents—a closer examination shows notable continuity in the strategy. Due at least in part to pressure from Congressional conservatives, the Nixon and Ford administrations depicted détente not as a complete opening but solidly within the broader frame of competition: cooperating and reducing risk when possible but competing when necessary, creating a more stable foundation for competition.¹¹⁶ Nixon still hewed to the original strategy, aiming to “keep Soviet power from running over us and our allies and friends, hoping that in time the Kremlin's revolutionary fervor would wind down and the Soviet Union would turn into a normal great power in its relationship with the United States.”¹¹⁷ This version of détente was, therefore, still irreducibly rooted in stopping the spread of communism by merely tailoring the original Kennan strategy to modern realities.¹¹⁸ In fact, closer relations with China actually amplified anxieties in the Soviet Union about Sino-Soviet relations, which had an encircling effect, while arms control efforts made the world safer without loosening the vise of containment.¹¹⁹

The Carter administration took a similar approach to détente, praising the notion of non-antagonistic relations while still pursuing competition.¹²⁰ Brzezinski advocated using military force in neutral areas to protect vital American interests against Soviet incursions.¹²¹ In fact, this “Carter Doctrine” seems nearly entirely rooted in the Truman Doctrine, prioritizing efforts to prevent neutral areas from being absorbed into the Soviet sphere.¹²²

The Reagan administration was more explicit than perhaps any other administration about containment, even campaigning on the promise to isolate the Soviet Union more than its predecessors.¹²³ Claiming a “singular purpose . . . to restore and revitalize a strategy of global containment of the Soviet Union,” the Reagan administration built a foreign policy doctrine that emphasized rolling back communist gains while defending forward through affirmative US support for anti-communist insurgency groups across the world.¹²⁴ Yet, like other administrations, containment could be paired with cooperation when interests converged, with cooperation sometimes following from competition. The most notable example was the deployment of intermediate-range missiles to Europe to threaten the Soviet Union, pressuring Soviet leadership to sign away intermediate-range weapons in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987.¹²⁵

The first Bush presidency was the final Cold War administration and appropriately brought this chapter to a close. A weakened Soviet Union offered far more opportunities for cooperation, allowing the administration to pursue a strategy it dubbed “Beyond Containment” that sought mutual benefit while not compromising on core US interests. Bush was clear that containment had gotten the United States this far and made sure it continued, proclaiming that “containment has worked and it worked because democratic principles, institutions and values are right and always have been.”¹²⁶ Instead of moving beyond containment, the Bush strategy was instead to adapt it to the times, pursuing a dynamic form of containment that added pressure but offered clear opportunities for Soviet reform and off-ramps to tamp down competition on terms favorable to the United States. This eventually culminated in the fall of the Soviet Union without great power war, leaving the United States alone victorious in the competition.

The production of NSC-68, a strategy document produced in the Truman administration, was a critical step by the NSC. Given to Truman in 1950, NSC-68 came from the panic that followed the first nuclear weapon test by the Soviet Union.¹²⁷ This situation prompted then Secretary of State Dean Acheson to direct the State Department to conduct a review of national security strategy within the State Department, and also to review policies across government to build a coherent overall strategy.¹²⁸ Led by Paul Nitze, the eventual strategy advocated an enlargement of the military budget, nuclear expansion, and containment of the Soviet Union through diplomatic, economic, and military means. The strategy did arguably go further than Kennan’s intention with containment—Kennan himself criticized the strategy for being too expansive in its assessment of Soviet means.¹²⁹ Yet the strategy nonetheless accepted the primary insight of the containment strategy, toeing the middle ground between

isolationism and military rollback or “no-negotiation,” laying out a foundation for both competition and coexistence, backstopped by a robust military build-up.¹³⁰ And the central purpose, “to preserve the United States as a free nation with our fundamental institutions and values intact,” was a clear lodestone that offered a mission to orient strategies around.¹³¹

The NSC was critical at every step in formulating the strategy and, in some cases, operationalizing it. In many respects, this was the first real test for the NSC, having been formed just three years prior.¹³² The NSC hit the ground running on strategic planning, with NSC-68 having been preceded by a 1948 strategy to reduce Soviet influence.¹³³ Laid out in NSC 20/4 or “US Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to US Security,” the strategy was an important precursor to the eventual NSC-68.¹³⁴ The fingerprints of the NSC on NSC-68 show the entity operating at its finest with long-range strategic planning, and a whole-of-government vantage point. Truman, in initiating the strategy, was clear—he didn’t just want a parochial State Department document, but wanted to know his options to match the Soviet challenge across each spectrum of national power.¹³⁵ While defense was a central part of the strategy—and Truman did triple defense spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 1950 to 1953—it was decidedly not just a military strategy.¹³⁶ Diplomatic efforts to unify allies against the Soviet Union called for diplomacy to proceed by creating “political and economic conditions” for negotiation and competition.¹³⁷ At the same time, economic statecraft like the Marshall Plan solidified US financial influence, using existing economic strength as a means of leveraging a key comparative advantage. The strategy also was implemented at home, with public opinion and messaging efforts to galvanize support for the strategy (and the resulting tax increases).¹³⁸ Even an information warfare strategy was arguably included, with discussion of the need to counter propaganda, expose false narratives, and build a resilient society.¹³⁹

While containment was a wildly successful strategy for the Cold War, allowing both US victory and the avoidance of great power war, it was neither flawless nor perfectly applied. In some instances, there was a mistaken alignment of Soviet means and motives, which exaggerated either Soviet intentions or Soviet capabilities to carry out malign intentions. The most notable example of this was Vietnam, where strategists adopted the much-lambasted Domino Theory. Assuming that the Soviet Union could or would infinitely expand—and use Ho Chi Minh as a pawn—was theoretically unsound. Yet under the banner of containment, a costly war commenced to prevent the loss of Southeast Asia. The lesson is not that containment shouldn’t have been the foundation for US strategy, but that even good strategies can be misused. The fact remains that

Kennan, the arguable father of containment, himself cabined containment to vital regions of significance, not all areas (and he himself criticized the Vietnam efforts).¹⁴⁰ Any good strategy cannot run on “autopilot” but rather must be tailored to the particulars of the region and interests at stake.

However, it bears emphasizing that the Cold War was not exclusively a long-run challenge. Rather, the marathon of a five-decade-long competition was punctuated with its fair share of sprints. Arguably the most significant of these was the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, and the events leading up to it. The fact that the Soviet Union collapsed peacefully—without war, a possibility considered unthinkable in many international relations circles—reflects successful planning and crisis stewardship by the first Bush administration. In *A World Transformed: The Collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Unification of Germany, Tiananmen Square, and the Gulf War*, Bush and Scowcroft offered a rare firsthand account of the planning preceding—and during—the events, offering a unique window into the role the NSC played in the incident.

Upon taking office, Bush had sought productive relations with his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev, ranging from reassuring Gorbachev privately to discount hardline campaigning against the Soviet Union to their eventual first-name basis and friendly rapport. Importantly, Bush noted a strategic opportunity: the rapport that Reagan had maintained with Gorbachev, as well as his ability to signal continuity as Reagan’s vice president. The result was that Bush “pledged general continuity with Reagan’s policies towards the Soviet Union” in private assurances toward Gorbachev. Coupled with smaller, intangible gestures, such as having his family work on earthquake relief efforts in Armenia, the result was a strong working and personal relationship between the leaders. These friendly relations would be vital given the period of turmoil that the Soviet Union was about to enter. While containment was the proper overriding strategy, the Bush NSC properly recognized the need to combine strategic vision with tactical flexibility, mixing containment with cooperation or, as Bush put it, having “the raw confrontational character of containment . . . infused with the idea of détente.”¹⁴¹

But strong ties and a desire for warmer relations do not by themselves create a strategy, nor provide the tools to operationalize one. Here, the NSC played an important role in adjusting long-range plans to the Soviet Union’s then-present political situation. Scowcroft initially attempted to temper Bush’s optimism about cooperation, worrying that Gorbachev was attempting to disarm the United States with kindness. To assess whether Soviet reforms were genuine, he commissioned several strategic reviews, with one review by the NSC and intelligence community finding that Soviet economic reforms were likely to spur political disruption. Most notably, however, was NSR-3, an all-

encompassing strategic review on the Soviet Union that concluded in favor of a four-prong strategy, which was to project strength at home domestically, maintain allied cohesion in Europe in the event of Soviet efforts to assert strength, provide economic assistance to Eastern Europe as a means of weakening the Soviet hold over the bloc, and take efforts to guard against regional instability in areas destabilized by Soviet presence, such as Central Asia.¹⁴² The review also noted a unique window of opportunity to transform the Soviet Union, given the period of internal turmoil.

Armed with this knowledge, the Bush administration proceeded apace with warmer relations, offering the struggling Soviet Union the chance to choose cooperation and de-escalation over continued competition. But the Soviet Union's days were numbered. A series of nationality crises had begun to emerge in the constituent national republics of the union, beginning with the secession movements in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. Here, the Bush administration had a choice to either align itself with the secessionists, or remain non-committal. Support for secession was being pushed domestically, with conservative political factions claiming the Baltics had long been the most unjust of the Soviet Union's territorial claims. Yet Scowcroft and Bush also recognized the extent to which the Soviet Union felt existentially threatened by the disintegration of its control in the Baltic, with Gorbachev warning that they must not even "think about secession."¹⁴³ Fearing that full alignment with the secession would jeopardize US ties with Gorbachev during a window that critically required open lines of communication, the Bush administration declined to take a hardline approach.

These ties were important, and they permitted the administration to project to the Soviet Union that its interest was in preserving order and stability, not opportunistically capitalizing on a geopolitical advantage, most notably sending this message to Gorbachev following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Continued strong relations and open communication permitted the administration to gain a window into the internal political struggles of the Soviets, allowing more advance warning of potential incidents. Scowcroft and Bush note a particular meeting with Eduard Shevardnadze, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, where they got a uniquely candid insight into the magnitude of the Soviet Union's internal struggles. Strong bilateral communication characterized every stage of the crisis from the various secession efforts, the falling of the Berlin Wall and mass exodus from East Germany, all the way through the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 following the rapid secession of the Baltic states, coup against Gorbachev, and eventual vote for dissolution by the Soviet Union's parliament.¹⁴⁴

While the Cold War had its share of crises and sprints, it was still fundamentally a marathon. The success of this long-range strategic effort depended on three core features, which have relevance for building our generation's version of an NSC-68—a clear strategic mission that identified an existential threat, a government wide effort to counter it, and bipartisan consensus to facilitate this effort. For generations, administrations have recognized the risks of the Soviet Union but also the fundamental comparative advantages that the United States has economically, militarily, and politically. The government, through the NSC, was able to create a unified effort across agencies (and elements of national power) to build an entrenched strategy that the American public could be galvanized behind, remaining locked in across time. The NSC was and is best suited to this, with its vantage point for seeing entire problems and its ability to harness the interagency process in executing solutions.

Today, this ability is sorely missing. Since the end of the Cold War, the past 30 years can only be described as a strategic hiatus, with confusion replacing clarity as an obvious great power competitor vanished. Proclaiming the 1990s as the “end of history” and the reign of Western ideals, US foreign policy aimed to universalize liberal democracy and free market economies.¹⁴⁵ As part of the end of the “Third Wave” of democratization, significant efforts were undertaken to transform the former Soviet states and the new Russian nation into a Western democracy. This trend, coupled with the shocking blow of terror in 2001, soon brought the promotion of democracy to the forefront of US foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.

The resulting “War on Terror” aimed to root out extremism, building new nation-states along the way. Throughout the next decade, Middle Eastern wars and democracy promotion consumed enormous American blood and treasure, absorbing resources while antagonizing and empowering potential adversaries.¹⁴⁶ In Europe, NATO enlargement and the humiliation of Russia throughout the 1990s created a nationalist upswing that brought Vladimir Putin to power and in Asia, China's economic surge and the frustrations of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996 and the Belgrade Incident of 1999 cemented a view of the United States as an obstacle to Chinese interests.¹⁴⁷

By the early 2010s, great power competition again characterized the international environment, yet policymakers were slow to adjust. This was a bipartisan failure; while the Bush administration policy expended resources in the Middle East, Obama proclaimed that he didn't “need a George Kennan” and that the world of great power competition was over.¹⁴⁸ The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review continued to view China and Russia primarily as those who could be reliable partners, while the 2010 Russia “reset” in retrospect looks naïve in its hopes for win-win cooperation with Russia.¹⁴⁹

Within ten years, recognition of a changed strategic picture formed, marked best by the contrast between 2018 Nuclear Posture Review to the preceding strategy. This belated realization is unsurprising—the 2014 seizure of Crimea by Russia, Chinese military build-ups and regional provocations in the South China Sea, and increasingly aggressive proclamations by both made clear that relations were becoming contentious, entering a lower point than had been seen in decades.

The 30-year period following the end of the Cold War featured missed opportunity after missed opportunity, with the United States both squandering its unipolar advantage and fueling the rise of two great power competitors. To see the extent to which the United States lost a hard-won edge, compare the accomplishments over the past 30 years between the United States and China. China used historically unprecedented growth to lift millions out of poverty, build the world's largest economy (measured by purchasing power parity), make themselves the world's most indispensable trading partner, and build a suite of in-theater military advantages to blunt US force posture in the region. In that same period, the United States' largest foreign policy accomplishment was to spend trillions on wars in the Middle East without much to show for it.

Today a bipartisan consensus has emerged—both Democrats and Republicans essentially agree on the need to counter China as a revisionist power and Russia as a revanchist spoiler. Public opinion polls also show Americans agree.¹⁵⁰ Yet shared anger and fears don't make a strategy. A bipartisan consensus is an important first step, but what's missing is an overall strategy. Two central issues can be identified as the root of the problem.

First, tectonic shifts have defined policy from administration to administration. While both Democrats and Republicans generally agree on the threat that China poses, competing across all domains of national power requires consistency and a coherent strategic vision that doesn't change after every election. Major shifts between administrations on everything from trade policy, climate agreements, arms control, and burden-sharing with allies hamper the ability for the United States to project a unified front.

Second, strategic discipline requires priorities to drive choices. Trying to compete everywhere means excelling nowhere. While at first glance, the US military budget dwarfs China's—around five times larger in 2021—the necessary context makes this far less impressive. Currently, the United States has over 700 bases in more than 80 countries worldwide, with a force geared toward presence everywhere, with global command partitioned into unified commands.¹⁵¹ In contrast, China's equivalent “theater commands” (Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central) are hardly equivalent: “Western” doesn't mean the Americas, but western within the Pacific. Put simply, China's budget

is earmarked toward a subset of one region, while the United States is spending for the entire world. This is only magnified by the fact that China gains cost advantages by paying military costs in the cheaper renminbi currency and having lower personnel costs due to lower salaries. Choices will have to be made and staying in the most mission-critical fights—especially marathons over multiple generations—will require deprioritizing certain regions or offloading duties to reliable US allies.

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The Scowcroft Model: Theory and Practice

We have attempted to identify key patterns and trends across administrations in order to understand why the NSC was unsuccessful in our first five case studies but successful in our sixth and seventh. This section attempts to synthesize those patterns into a theory, rooted in the NSC stewardship of Scowcroft in our final case study that we call the Scowcroft Model.

However, one example is not enough to make a model. Our description of the Scowcroft Model is not intended to serve as a replication of the exact system designed during the Scowcroft NSA years. Instead, it is an attempt to describe an NSC that strikes an appropriate balance between two extremes, bringing in design elements from NSCs both preceding and succeeding Scowcroft's NSC. Nonetheless, the name is a nod to arguably the most well-respected NSA yet to serve, someone who designed a superior model in theory and deployed it admirably in practice.

Scowcroft is the only figure to ever serve as NSA across two administrations nonconsecutively, serving in the Ford administration and George H. W. Bush administration. However, prior to his service as NSA under Ford, he served under Kissinger as Deputy NSA. During this time, Scowcroft saw firsthand what an activist and powerful NSA could do, concentrating NSC powers within himself and marginalizing other key foreign policy players.¹ Although Kissinger was a mentor to Scowcroft, the Scowcroft Model was a reaction to the extremity of an activist NSA, where unilateralism substituted for collaborative policymaking.

However, Scowcroft had a second key formative experience decades later, leading the report of the Tower Commission. In the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal, the Tower Commission report highlighted numerous defects in the NSC model of the Reagan administration, spearheaded by Scowcroft and future NSA Hadley. Scowcroft was not focused on scoring points against the Reagan administration or litigating ethically ambiguous actions. Instead, "Scowcroft was 'keenly focused' on ensuring the White House's national security advisor and NSC staff continued to hold the reins in the national-security process and the policy it produced."² While the Kissinger years showed Scowcroft the risks of an activist NSA, Iran-Contra taught Scowcroft the countervailing risk of absent leadership. The NSA needed to be attentive, leading with a light touch.³

The Scowcroft Model emerges out of these two extremes, an exemplary balancing act that fits neatly along the spectra we discussed earlier in the manuscript. To taxonomize the core elements of the Scowcroft Model, we divide them into the categories of "formal elements" and "informal elements." While formal elements pertain to the structure of the NSC itself, informal

elements relate to the approach the NSA takes toward their peers and the culture inculcated. This description is loosely based on former NSA Hadley's primer on the Scowcroft Model and the ideal NSA, where he finds six elements of the "job description" and then five elements of how it should be enabled. Our report finds four essential formal elements to proper NSC organization, and three essential informal elements for how the NSA should conceptualize their role.⁴

However, another contributing text is *The Strategist* by Bartholomew Sparrow, widely regarded as the authoritative description of the life and work of Scowcroft. *The Strategist* provides a perspective from Scowcroft's colleagues, counterparts, and indeed even Scowcroft himself on his legacy and conclusions that can be drawn about the NSC process.⁵ While the primer by Hadley gets down to brass tacks on the core ways that the Scowcroft Model would build and navigate the NSC, *The Strategist* views the Scowcroft Model from the perspective of the larger picture. Here, Sparrow argues the defining feature of Scowcroft's approach was the ability to create and execute a national strategy. As the book notes, Scowcroft was skilled "as a strategic thinker . . . he instinctively does not look at any issue in a vacuum, as self-contained; every issue has tentacles . . . he's very good at . . . tracing out their connections to other issues."⁶ Yet Sparrow also acknowledges that "Strategy . . . inevitably has an operational component," with Scowcroft himself having noted that "a brilliant strategy can flounder for lack of resources or agencies' commitment to implementing the president's decisions."⁷ As a result, complementing the formal and informal elements below should be an attempt by the NSA to never lose sight of the big picture. In attempting to answer the core questions of "What do we want?" and "How will we do it?" it is critical to not miss the forest for the trees.

Formal Elements

First, the Scowcroft Model requires a lean and effective NSC, neither large and unwieldy nor too small to coordinate policies. One of the defects of the Iran-Contra affair was an unwieldy NSC, unable to be tamed. Twenty-two SIGs and 55 IGs created what Brzezinski called the NSC's "Mid Life Crisis."⁸ This made it too tempting for the NSC to move from an advisory or coordinating role into an operational role, crafting and executing policies unilaterally. By the next administration, the picture was markedly different. Scowcroft's NSC was lean, with only a few dozen people involved in the process; even if this group wanted to take on an operational role, it would have been impossible. Instead, the administration of decisions happened at the agency level, relegating the NSC to an advisory and coordinating role.⁹ This is also important for

effective interagency coordination. Too many people can create an incentive for over-specialization, resulting in stove-piping. Instead, the Scowcroft Model adopts a strategy that places “more information in fewer heads,” facilitating superior coordination.¹⁰

Here, the Scowcroft Model strikes an appropriate balance. An unwieldy NSC (seen in the Reagan administration and Obama administration) is avoided, preventing the creation of either a “Mid Life Crisis” or “Stalemate Machine” NSC. On the other hand, the NSC still retains a sufficiently large cadre of experts to do its job.

Second, the Scowcroft Model requires a clear hierarchy and order of operations for decisions. One effective design element for achieving this is the split between principals, deputies, and policy coordination committees. Drafted in the early days of the Bush administration, NSD-1 created the modern NSC hierarchy, with the principals committee including the heads of agencies and the most senior officials, the deputies committee including deputy secretaries, and the policy coordination committees doing the interagency work.¹¹ In effect, the principals and deputies committees do the NSC’s advisory work, while the policy coordination committees do interagency policy coordination.

This divide allows policy options to be developed and refined as they flow up the chain of command, while decisions by senior leaders can be communicated and implemented back down the chain.¹² The model harkens back to the “Policy Hill” notion of the Eisenhower administration, where the NSC Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board would facilitate the flow of information up and down the bureaucracy.¹³ Importantly, the Scowcroft Model’s use of hierarchy balances loose informality and ossified formalism. While a clear structure avoids the disorganization and loose collegiality of past NSCs, the design is intentionally not stove piped or rigid. Rather, the close managerial involvement of the NSA—and the selection of a tight-knit team—allows cross-talk and coordination, while nonetheless maintaining a structure where the flow of information is clearly defined. While criticisms of the Eisenhower model’s rigid formalism are partially accurate (that organizational charts are less important than people), the Scowcroft Model allows the NSC to have it both ways, with sound organizational models and collaborative people in its ranks.

Third, the Scowcroft Model creates a strong role for the NSA as a steward of the NSC, while avoiding a situation where the NSA becomes the entire NSC. Recall that Scowcroft came into the NSC immediately following the Iran-Contra affair, where the view of the NSC was that of a shadowy subgovernment calling the shots on its own. The media was harshly critical of the NSC and was immediately skeptical that Scowcroft would continue this trend. Early in the Bush administration, a *New York Times* article titled “Bush Backs Plan to Enhance

Role of Security Staff” adequately captured the sentiment of the day.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Scowcroft proved his critics wrong. By playing a stronger role in the NSC process, any bureaucratic overreach was reined in, since “the national security advisor kept the NSC staff under close watch, but not on a short leash. He encouraged staffers to develop new ideas, come to his office, and then ‘defend them and argue them.’”¹⁵ Consistent with the recommendations of the Tower Commission report, Scowcroft assumed chairmanship of the various policy committees, instead of allowing them to operate as quasi-autonomous entities outside of the ambit of the NSA.

Scowcroft did not become a new Kissinger. While both Scowcroft and Kissinger extensively chaired the NSC committees, Kissinger used his chairmanship to push an agenda, while the Scowcroft Model emphasizes approaching the role as a neutral broker. This will be discussed in the following pages when examining the informal elements of the Scowcroft Model. As a result, the Scowcroft Model avoided both a weak NSA with little influence and a powerful NSA that shut down dissent.

Fourth and finally, the Scowcroft Model places a premium on effective interagency coordination. While the NSC does not play an operational role in implementing policies, it can nonetheless play an important role in bringing together disparate efforts across agencies. Unique to the White House is an unparalleled power to convene, capable of bringing figures across the executive branch, legislative branch, state and local governments, and the private sector. This emphasis arose out of two historical interagency challenges facing the NSC—overstepping its bounds, and ineffectively coordinating. With respect to the NSC overstepping its bounds, this problem was acutely present during the Kennedy and Nixon administrations, when the NSC became a “Little State Department” and cut other diplomatic and military actors out of the process entirely. Similarly, the NSC’s ineffective coordination was seen with the Bay of Pigs, when NSC actors seemingly disavowed the coordination process entirely.

The Scowcroft Model aims to remedy this with the Policy Coordination Committees, tasked with a clear mandate of interagency coordination of already-decided policies, which will allow interagency coordination with little risk of it degenerating into operational dictation. At a fundamental level, the Scowcroft Model is about creating a well-run and accountable bureaucracy.¹⁶ This approach to the interagency process thus adequately avoids an absent NSC and an overzealous NSC that infringes upon the prerogatives of other agencies.

Informal Elements

While the formal elements of the Scowcroft Model are vitally important, it would be a mistake to view those as sufficient for an effective NSC. The NSC is not only a product of policies and structures but is a product of people and relationships. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. claimed that “organizational charts are less important than people,” while Anthony Lake emphasized that “bad process beats good policy.”¹⁷ The Scowcroft Model recognizes this and conceptualizes the role of informal elements as vital to success.

First and most critically, the NSA must assume the role of an “honest broker.” While the Oxford dictionary defines an honest broker as “an impartial mediator in . . . disputes,” in the NSC process it requires something more, with Hadley noting that honest brokerage is “running a fair and transparent process for bringing issues to the president for decision. It means maintaining a ‘level playing field’ in which ideas and views can compete with one another on an equal foundation, without ‘stacking the deck’ in favor of one or another approach.”¹⁸ To be an honest broker is to not try to unduly influence the conversation—or the conclusion reached—with one’s own opinion. The NSA is permitted to have opinions, but they must be carefully modulated to avoid pre-ordaining the conclusions reached. This often requires the NSA waiting to weigh in until the end of the discussion, usually to synthesize the information presented into a conclusion. Groupthink dynamics are also a concern within the NSC staff and even between the NSC principals themselves. It is critical that leadership at all levels challenge assumptions and pose questions to discover new information that may provide a richer picture prior to a decision being made by the president.

Importantly, this is one of the most essential ways to combat groupthink among the NSC. Groupthink dynamics primarily arise when people feel unable to genuinely air their views, fearing exclusion or retaliation. This was seen saliently in the Johnson administration, when some advisors were empowered, while others who disagreed felt they would need to toe the line or risk marginalization.¹⁹ However, voicing opposition is not by itself sufficient if there is not a culture of dissent. Powell, Scowcroft, and Baker all opposed the Iraq War, but their views were never taken seriously. The NSA must bring to life views that exist along a spectrum, ensuring that dissenters have a genuine chance to make their case.²⁰

To do this requires an NSA willing to forge genuine, strong relations with their team. Otherwise, NSC members will be skeptical that they can legitimately voice opinions without retaliation. This is where the Scowcroft Model shines in building collegiality and strong relationships, even within formal structures

and hierarchies.²¹ This also requires the NSA to stay above the parochial fray, avoiding attempts to view relations with others in zero-sum terms. Trying to “please the teacher” and be the president’s favored advisor at the expense of other advisors can undermine the ability to serve as an impartial arbitrator.²²

Second, the NSA needs to be a confidant of the president, having sufficiently close ties to keep the president apprised of events at the NSC. The president is an often neglected but vitally important part of the NSC, since culture emanates from the top. As Hadley put it, “Presidents get the national security process they deserve.”²³ A president out of the loop can result in situations such as Iran-Contra, where Reagan’s distance meant that he played little to no role in decision-making carried out by his subordinates.²⁴ Instead, information must flow up to the president, with the NSC’s advisory function ensuring the president is given all the information required to make a thoughtful and well-informed decision.²⁵ Like everything else, however, this is a balance. A NSA that is inseparable from the president cannot adequately serve as an honest broker, as seen in Rice’s close allegiance to Bush. A NSA must remain an advisor and not a counselor, maintaining an ability to contradict the president without marching in lockstep.

Third and finally, the NSA must operate offstage, existing behind the scenes. A public-facing NSA runs the risk of seeking attention and fame, creating public pronouncements that tie the president’s hands and foster audience costs. This was most famously seen with Bundy during the Johnson administration, when he became the administration’s voice for the Vietnam War. Once Bundy announced ideas to the public, it was nearly impossible to reverse course and change the administration’s policy while saving face because the administration could not easily contradict Bundy given his public salience. A recent example of too much media attention includes Susan Rice being asked to give the American people an update on Benghazi during the Sunday morning talk shows. Soon after going on the talk shows, the story changed, and Susan Rice was blamed for deceiving the American people.

Publicity can also run the risk of bringing interagency feuds out into the open, resulting in a perceived division between various factions of the government. If it becomes well-known that the NSA and Secretary of State are not aligned on a particular policy (because the NSA “went public”), allies and adversaries alike may not know who speaks with the approval of the United States.²⁶ Instead, interagency feuds should remain behind closed doors, with the NSA and senior administration officials resolving problems before they see the light of day.

Hybrid Warfare

Background and Theories

The manuscript thus far has painted a picture of what an effective NSC looks like, tested against historical conflicts and crises. Yet, the past is not prologue, and prior successes of the NSC do not guarantee its suitability to the present day, when conflicts are of a different nature than at any point in history. This section will therefore focus on adapting the NSC to the present day, when conflicts are decidedly unconventional. For the NSC to work as intended, many of the conclusions about the Scowcroft Model will need to be explicated in a new context: hybrid conflicts, or gray zone warfare that resides below the threshold of armed conflict. This paper will reference hybrid conflict in place of gray zone warfare below the threshold of armed conflict.

What constitutes a hybrid conflict? While “hybrid war” too often is used as a vague and all-encompassing term, the central tenet is a shift away from the traditional dichotomy of war and peace. Traditional strategic thinking on warfare is premised on a clear dividing line between war and peace, between conflict and cooperation.²⁷ Rooted in the classic Clausewitzian formulation that war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” war is seen as an extreme effort geared toward the attainment of objectives by force.²⁸ Yet what happens when coercive activity takes place short of that threshold? This is often dubbed activity in the “gray zone,” with activities that are neither black (war) or white (peace); instead, the activity includes elements of both war and peace. What makes these activities difficult to taxonomize—let alone to respond to—is that different actors will have different perceptions of the activity and may disagree on suitable responses. While a land invasion or nuclear strike is decidedly wartime aggression, the question is murkier in the case of a non-attributable cyber attack, disinformation campaign, economic coercion, or the employment of irregular forces not belonging to the military of any singular nation-state. This includes scenarios that envision the utility of private military contractors in armed engagement versus security and stability operations. These forces may or may not have a uniform or fight under a flag as we would know it, further complicating the future hybrid warfare environment.²⁹

As “the strategy of the weak,” actors are incentivized to pursue hybrid or gray zone strategies upon recognizing that they will not succeed in traditional military conflicts. At this present historical juncture, many US adversaries have realized that the United States will not be defeated in a head-on military conflict.³⁰ This realization likely happened in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With its major rival crumbling, the United States was left

standing alone as the international hegemon, ushering in the unipolar era with no near-peer competitor. Shortly after, the world watched in awe as the United States prosecuted Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War, seeing the United States treat the formidable Iraqi army as a set of amateurs in a traditional military campaign. As Max Brooks, author of *World War Z*, put it, the world saw firsthand the result of meeting the United States directly on the battlefield: it was a trip down the highway of death.³¹

Adversaries soon realized that they could not defeat the United States in a traditional campaign that permitted conventional forces to be brought to bear on an enemy's center of gravity. Instead, adversaries adapted, with US "conventional superiority creat[ing] a compelling logic for states and non-state actors to move out of the traditional mode of war and seek some niche capability or some unexpected combination of technologies and tactics to gain an advantage."³² As a result, it can be said that the Gulf War marked a genuine turning point in great power competition. Previously, unconventional warfare was a tactic used by insurgents, non-state actors and state actors supporting insurgents. For the first time, however, core US adversaries began to think unconventionally, recognizing that a direct competition in military force would be unwinnable.

Defined by one theorist as "the effort to achieve strategic objectives without using significant force," US adversaries have gone to school on this modern strategy of warfare.³³ Although the strategy has gained increased salience given contemporary US military dominance, hybrid warfare is not a new tactic. While Western strategists know Clausewitz and focus on decimating the enemy's center of gravity, Eastern strategists are reading Sun Tzu, who preaches instead to "subdue the enemy without fighting."³⁴ When fighting is prohibitively costly, provocations below the traditional threshold for war appear far more attractive. As a result, traditional adversaries have adapted and learned to embrace the employment of non-military means of warfare as described in David Crist's book, *The Twilight War*. To a large extent, many can argue that a fundamental function of the NSC is to lead the whole-of-government strategy and inter-agency process for hybrid warfare which the Chinese have embraced in their "Unrestricted Warfare" doctrine.³⁵

Instead of taking a bite out of the US-led international order directly, adversaries are content to nibble at the edges, testing the resolve and willingness of the United States. The intention of gray zone provocations is to force the United States to face a lose-lose situation: respond disproportionately to a provocation and start a war, or back down and swallow a loss.³⁶ This has become increasingly easy for adversaries given the interconnectedness of the digital age, where the technological and political cohesion of a society are reliant on

vulnerable nodes. Hybrid strategies are numerous. One example is China's campaign of island-building in the South China Sea, or creation of Air Defense Identification Zones to undermine flight passage. While a US declaration of war or military campaign would be grossly disproportionate, China gains an increasing foothold in the Pacific, infringing on the territorial claims of neighbors in disputed waters.³⁷ Indeed, this challenge has been dubbed by some the "Senkaku Paradox," referring to disputed islands between Japan and China.³⁸ As China encroaches on disputed territory, the United States can do little but watch and military threats to defend uninhabited islands with little strategic significance would be non-credible. On the other hand, the scenario demonstrates to China that they can take pieces of territory from the United States and its allies, which emboldens them.

Other examples take place in the cyberspace and informational domain. Given global reliance on the enabled technology for everything from electricity to the Internet and communication, a debilitating cyber-attack on military or civilian infrastructure can cripple a nation. However, cyber-attacks are hard to attribute and it's doubtful the United States would start a war against an adversary without certainty that the adversary in question even carried out the cyber-attack.³⁹

Informational conflict and the weaponization of narratives against an adversary are central aspects of hybrid war. Adversaries view civilian society as a series of soft targets and utilize disruption as a means of hampering cohesion. A military can have superior equipment, but what use is that if the nation's people are divided and unwilling to fight? As a result, a large component of hybrid warfare is softening targets, to break their willingness to fight.⁴⁰ Many of these tactics can be seen in the Russian approach to potential conflict with NATO allies but are also utilized by terrorist extremist groups for recruitment and advocacy purposes. This specialized type of strategic communication is designed to target weaknesses and vulnerabilities of an adversary to affect a desired perception or understanding about a specific topic of importance. The means and medium used to deliver it are irrelevant, as long as the intended psychological impact of the narrative is achieved.⁴¹ Using disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and cultural ties, Russian agents have attempted to infiltrate the societies of Baltic states, preying on alienated Russian-speaking populations in an attempt to depict the West as the enemy and Russia as a supporter. Similar tactics include interference in electoral processes, "fake news," financial influence, and more.⁴²

This strategy is unsurprising, given the sophistication of Russian thinking on hybrid warfare. The purported "Gerasimov Doctrine" (named after Russian military leader General Valery Gerasimov) reflects extensive theorizing about

modern warfare and the conditions for success in the information age, with Gerasimov concluding that conflict is in a ratio of 4:1 between non-military and military.⁴³

Traditional military planning may well involve waiting for the conflict to erupt into a full-blown military engagement, preparing to fight and win a war. Unfortunately, under conditions of hybrid war, by that point the conflict will have already concluded—and will likely have been lost. This presents an opportunity for a NSC that understands hybrid warfare to serve that strategy and leadership vacuum that precedes full-blown military conflict. Future forms of statecraft are likely to include hybrid warfare when examined from a broader geopolitical context. Adversaries are likely to include the hybrid model as a component of their national security strategy, specifically when considering the costs, benefits, and risks from conventional armed conflict. The components of this cost/benefit and risk analysis very often include political, economic, loss of life, land, and credibility in the global community of nations.⁴⁴

A prime example of this failure was the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. Although there were elements of traditional warfare, the bulk of the conflict occurred in the gray zone, when Russian propaganda, cultural persuasion, and disinformation won the war before it started. Instead, it is imperative for strategists to develop responses to hybrid warfare across the continuum of peace and war.

One essential component is not between nations, but within nations—the fostering of intracountry resiliency. Fragile democracies, susceptible to disinformation and coercion, represent increasingly soft targets for would-be adversaries. Testing the waters and initiating low-level aggression can be a tempting strategy for adversaries in such situations. Steps that combat disinformation in traditional media and social media, improve trust in government, and deconstruct partisan tribalism will all be necessary to stem the tide against low-level hybrid aggression. When citizens trust their government and political systems, it becomes far harder for outside parties to turn them against their government.⁴⁵

Another vital arrow in the hybrid warfare response quiver is detection. Given the low-level nature of many hybrid threats, it is understandable that some can operate beneath the surface, evading detection. Nonetheless, those threats can spread and grow in nature. One notable example is the array of Russian cyberattacks on US infrastructure, which flew under the radar for an extended period and were challenging to attribute to Russian agents. The intelligence community must be vigilant to ensure it can detect low-level threats. This is essential because “the gradualist nature of hybrid threats requires early, decisive responses

to punish selected revisionist acts and ‘stop the rot.’ Defense must therefore offer [the] government a range of options short of war to punish an adversary.”⁴⁶

Finally, the government must be prepared to make credible responses—militarily or otherwise—for when hybrid warfare begins to escalate into something resembling traditional war. Given the continuum that hybrid warfare operates along, traditional military threats may ring hollow or appear non-credible. As a result, flexible deterrence will be required, blending military and non-military responses with both deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Effectively tailoring deterrence will require mixing responses across domains, not limiting a response to symmetric retaliation.⁴⁷ Put differently, there is no reason to respond in a tit-for-tat manner in a symmetric domain; this could allow an adversary to believe that they will control the pace of escalation. The full spectrum of electronic, cyber, economic, industry, political, and military responses will need to be available, requiring a whole-of-society approach.

An NSC for Twenty-First Century Conflicts

While the preceding pages outlined the nature of the hybrid threat, an open question remains about the potential role played by the NSC in addressing these challenges. Unfortunately, little research has been done into the steps needed to adapt the NSC to deal with modern conflicts. Many NSCs have suffered from short-term bias, focusing on present threats without studying deeper, more foundational questions of how to conceptualize war and prepare for long-term challenges. As a result, the NSC is not well-equipped to deal with hybrid conflicts that necessitate a whole-of-society approach.

Nonetheless, this manuscript proposes an adaptation of the Scowcroft Model’s sound theoretical basis, applying it to hybrid conflicts. Interagency coordination, honest brokerage, and other core tenets of the Scowcroft Model will play a vital role in turning the tide with respect to hybrid conflict preparedness.

The first step will involve a recognition that the NSC must move beyond a model based in the “Situation Room,” where the NSC attempts to handle short-term, pressing crises. While this is of course necessary in many cases, hybrid conflicts will be longer and more drawn-out. As a result, there will be more of a need for long-term, strategic planning, as well as the ability to coordinate responses over a drawn-out horizon. The NSC will need to adapt accordingly, with teams tasked with keeping tabs on long-term strategic threats. As a result, “rather than narrowly focus on near-term risk and solutions for today’s strategic environment, we must recognize the need to take a longer view, a generational view, for the sustainability of our nation’s security and prosperity.”⁴⁸

Long-term planning at the NSC is not without precedent. The Eisenhower administration inaugurated Project Solarium, which set out a long-term plan for the Cold War over an extended horizon.⁴⁹ Similarly, the Carter administration produced NSC-10, the “Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review,” which conducted foresight on key military trends. And as our Cold War case study demonstrated, no document was more indispensable in crafting the Cold War’s containment strategy than NSC-68. Yet, these forms of reviews are far too rare, and strategic planning must return to being the norm. To foster this, there also may need to be a broader change in hiring and staffing patterns, with NSC and White House figures not merely serving in brief rotations of several years. Key policymakers and professionals will need to have more medium- and long-term progressions working on key strategic challenges, to not lose valuable insights once someone rotates out. However, negative outcomes can manifest themselves when staff remain in the same position for an extended period. A balance must be struck between “temporary” NSC staff and “tenured” NSC staff.

The second step will be to revamp interagency coordination, moving beyond the typical bureaucratic players. While the NSC has demonstrated effectiveness in coordinating with diplomatic and military heads, the defining feature of hybrid conflict is that it is whole-of-society. Across military, political, economic, industry, information, and cultural dimensions, conflict will be waged, and the US homeland will not be exempted. As a result, there will need to be increased input from figures in the domestic community, as well as those who have competencies pertaining to traditionally excluded domains.

The NSC has, at times, demonstrated a tendency for overstepping and parochialism. However, we believe the Scowcroft Model offers a way to achieve interagency coordination with a soft touch, which would allow the NSC to coordinate across agencies instead of prosecuting policy turf wars. This will be more vital than ever, given the challenges posed by hybrid conflicts. To achieve this goal, the NSC will need to be equipped with structures and processes to coordinate across government and even across society. It is critical to note that each agency cannot just handle their piece of the hybrid challenge, siloing out responses. Instead, the NSC must work to ensure that several officials have the larger strategic perspective in mind.⁵⁰

Some have objected that the NSC is the wrong forum for such responses, given its largesse and inability to react quickly to crises.⁵¹ Again, the Scowcroft Model can hold the keys. The rapid response of the NSC to the Gulf War is living proof that a small, nimble, coordinated team can effectively respond to fait accompli attacks and unexpected events. One additional possibility is to create a directorate at the policy coordination level, tasked with coordinating

information pertaining to potential hybrid threats. This would facilitate fast action, while enabling actors at the principals or deputies level to be apprised of potential concerns.

The third and final step is to be more vigilant than ever about honest brokerage, ensuring that the NSA recognizes the high stakes involved in hybrid conflict. Traditional military challenges can involve confusion, mixed signals, and miscalculations. However, hybrid conflicts compound these difficulties, since the *modus operandi* of an adversary is confusion and ambiguity. Arguably the largest challenge of disinformation is that mistaken assumptions and misunderstandings pervade not just the body politic, but seep into the upper echelons of government, with leaders making poor decisions based on falsehoods, cognitive biases, and groupthink. Studies have demonstrated that the combination of disinformation with groupthink is especially pernicious: people cling to demonstrably false information because it appears popular or supported, with their beliefs soon calcifying due to confirmation bias.⁵² The challenge, then, will be for the NSA to hold court over the NSC, ensuring that disinformation and biases can be called out when presented.

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34. Garamone, "Military Must Be Ready."
35. Liang and Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*.
36. Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight*.

37. Brady, "Between Peace and War."
38. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes*.
39. Brady, "Between Peace and War."
40. Marovic, "Wars of Ideas: Hybrid Warfare, Political Interference, and Disinformation."
41. Maan and Cobaugh, *Introduction to Narrative Warfare: A Primer and Study Guide*.
42. Marovic, "Wars of Ideas."
43. Kofman, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts."
44. Neville, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare: Identifying Critical Elements in Successful Applications of Hybrid Tactics."
45. Marovic, "Wars of Ideas."
46. Monaghan, "Countering Hybrid Warfare," 90–91.
47. Monaghan, "Countering Hybrid Warfare," 91.
48. Kay, "Managing the Gray Zone is a Gray Matter Challenge."
49. Lettow, "U.S. National Security Strategy: Lessons Learned."
50. Kay, "Managing the Gray Zone is a Gray Matter Challenge."
51. Singleton, "Reforming the National Security Council to Confront the China Challenge."
52. Ryan, "Groupthink, Fatigue, and Divilment: Why Do People Share Fake News?"

Recommendations

Thus far, we have focused extensively on what factors predispose the NSC to success or failure. The previous chapter explicated those criticisms in the context of hybrid conflict, moving beyond broad NSC theory to a particular setting for twenty-first century conflict. We will conclude with a series of recommendations, designed to avoid past problems that the NSC has faced, as well as to adapt the NSC to the future.

Recommendation #1: Codification of Principals

The members of the Principals Committee of the NSC ought to be codified in some form. Too often in the past, the NSC has fallen prey to groupthink dynamics due to members fearing their subsequent exclusion if they refuse to toe the party line. Instead, influence ought to be institutionalized, allowing members to speak with a level of candor that can only be supplied if they are assured that they will not lose their place.¹

While many members of the Principals Committee are de-facto permanent members, the president does also get discretion about who to include, with some officials being present at some meetings (and in some administrations) but not others. This is desirable—there are well-founded concerns about congressional micromanagement if members are statutorily codified. Indeed, there is precedent for a flexible system of decision-making—the British CID allowed the prime minister to be surrounded by an array of advisors, permitting him to listen to specific individuals as the situation demanded. Yet there may be such a thing as too much discretion and flexibility. While the desirability of statutory codification may deserve further study, the executive can codify members presently through executive order.² While traditionally executive orders outline who will serve on the Principals Committee, executive orders can go further in committing that certain positions will be permanently represented—this has the function of creating “audience costs” should the president attempt to marginalize their perspective. Additional steps may include solidifying participation at meetings and speaking positions, ensuring that all voices are heard.

Recommendation #2: Right-Size Staff Levels

The NSC should continue to be structured around a Principals Committee, a Deputies Committee, and Policy Coordination Committees. There is a need to right-size the staff number at the policy coordination level. While the Trump administration went overboard with cuts, the Obama administration’s level of

400 staff members is equally unsustainable.³ Instead, one number floated is around 200 professional staff members, although the precise number will need to be studied further.⁴ The precise number may be less relevant than the responsibilities—and, perhaps, the people—in those positions, with some scholars suggesting as few as 30 to 50 professional staffers being sufficient for adequate NSC staffing, if they have broad enough portfolios.⁵ This will give the NSC adequate muscle for interagency coordination, while avoiding creating the temptation to segue into extensive implementation or operational work, usurping the prerogatives of other agencies.⁶ Bud McFarlane stated that a NSC staff of approximately 60 would better serve the president by driving policy and interagency coordination instead of the bloated NSC staff that has existed in recent years.⁷ He also thought that a smaller NSC staff allows for an environment where the president can make decisions in case there is paralysis between the secretary of defense and secretary of state as an example. There is also danger that a bloated staff may drive NSC staff into extraneous details that may detract from focused attention on the big picture.

This downsizing has the added benefit of concentrating more power at the level of the principals and deputies, which provides a superior vantage point for strategic decisions and coordination. This will allow a more natural separation between the NSC's strategic advisory function and the interagency coordination function, with the former being concentrated at the principals and deputies level.⁸

Recommendation #3: Tailor the NSC to Hybrid Warfare

A study group should be commissioned to examine ways of adapting the NSC to hybrid warfare and, more generally, the act of strategic planning. While this manuscript will not purport to have a comprehensive list of recommendations that the study group should examine, there are several that would be valuable starting points. One idea is for either the deputies or principals' level to have a strategic mandate enshrined (through executive order) to engage in long-term strategic planning. This should be a standing agenda item, unable to be pushed aside due to short-term policy needs. With regular meetings convened for long-term planning—and strategy documents produced—there can be major progress in dealing with long-range, structural challenges such as hybrid conflict.⁹ Another idea is a policy coordination committee with an explicit organizing principle surrounding interagency cooperation between various agencies on matters pertinent to the hybrid threat. This will facilitate a whole-of-society response to the hybrid threat. As part of this, a directorate could be established with one central individual tasked with overseeing the

coordination process. A mandate to ensure oversight of conflicts below traditionally defined thresholds process could avoid stove-piping and ensure key coordinates aren't missed. Some may object that this could be excessively bureaucratic and would add yet another process. This criticism is well-taken and steps will need to be taken to harmonize the process with existing processes to avoid an over-engineered process. One alternative may be to forgo a separate committee but instead attempt to install a hybrid lens or procedural focus within existing committees, ensuring that this perspective is heard. Relatedly, some have proposed an automatic trigger for a convening of the deputies committee "whenever any Federal agency deems a gray zone approach to an international issue is appropriate, ensuring a whole-of-government solution is developed."¹⁰ This may be an effective mechanism at ensuring hybrid challenges are at the forefront of the NSC.

Strategic, long-range planning must also become a more central organizing principle for the NSC. This has been a criticism leveled against the NSC for some time, with former NSA Brzezinski noting a gap in other agencies for long-range planning that could be filled by the NSC using an organization such as the Eisenhower-era NSC Planning Board as a forum for long-term thinking.¹¹ The explicit focus of the British CID on long-range planning provides ample precedent for such a focus, and it is long past time that the NSC reorient itself accordingly. The study group should thus examine proper mechanisms to facilitate said discussions.

This is a major missed opportunity given the unique role the NSC occupies, serving as both a forum that convenes agency heads for high-level advisory functions and an interagency coordinating body. Few, if any, other areas of government offer such a cross-cutting vantage point to see the entire strategic picture and operationalize recommendations across government.

This study group should cast a wide net for NSC reform, exploring domains in the social sciences (anthropology, economics, geography, political science, psychology, and sociology) and business to understand the conditions for effective decision-making. Fundamentally, many of the challenges of the NSC are psychological in nature, and other domains may have answers considering the extensive research present on groupthink dynamics. The way that large corporate entities structure decision-making may offer insights. For example, there are studies that have examined the organizational culture at Google, with research that focuses on the benefits and drawbacks of their non-hierarchical collegial organizational culture.¹² This bears more than a passing resemblance to the questions of NSC organization, and the extent to which the NSC should be (in)formally structured.

A component of this may also involve rethinking domain-specific deterrence. Thinking in terms of domains (nuclear, conventional, cyber, and so forth) is understandable but may be overly reductive when modern deterrence challenges cross domains. Imagine a cyber-attack against nuclear assets, or a counterspace attack against assets that enable a carrier strike group to function; are these cyber- and space-domain, respectively, or are they nuclear and conventional? Deterrence should be rethought as a unified goal, with domain-specific actions being the subcomponents of a holistic strategy.¹³ Such an approach is also consistent with how adversaries consider deterrence.¹⁴

Recommendation #4: Engage the Public with Novel Education Techniques

A greater awareness should be fostered among the American public about hybrid conflict and the role that the NSC will play in fighting it. One of the unfortunate realities of contemporary international politics is the disequilibrium between the importance of the issues and the awareness that Americans have of them. Hybrid conflict—and the threat it poses—is not well-understood, nor is it part of everyday political conversations. Worse yet, the American public is prone to believe disinformation and conspiracy theories, which need to be affirmatively combated.¹⁵ The result is a significant risk of disinformation being used as a cudgel by adversaries to influence popular opinion and create—or dismantle—popular support for a particular action.¹⁶ Concurrently, the inner workings of the NSC are also poorly understood. The path to a dangerous NSC is through a poorly understood NSC, where citizens lack the ability to hold public leaders accountable.¹⁷ Ultimately, the president and those in the administration are held to account for their actions primarily by the people at the ballot box, with either positive or negative outcomes for the administration and party in power. To craft sound, thoughtful approaches to hybrid conflict, both the nature of the conflict itself and the NSC will need to be better understood.

There are numerous ways to increase understanding, and this list is far from being comprehensive.

Wargaming

One approach may be an increased curricular emphasis in high schools and universities on simulating hybrid conflict and resolving them through wargaming, creating an interactive and engaging way for the public to understand the stakes of modern conflicts.¹⁸

Satellite National Security Offices

Another may be to try and foster a more diversified way into the NSC-adjacent space. While the NSC is currently centralized in Washington, there may be cause to establish satellite offices in cities around the country. University students tend to work within the city they were educated in, resulting in a strong geographical asymmetry where national security talent comes from.¹⁹ Satellite offices could facilitate entry-level work and internships from those across the country, involving a greater range of people.

Popular Culture

Finally, helping to bring the NSC into popular culture could also prove impactful. Appendix B includes an outline for a future documentary series that highlights the importance of the NSC, but does so in an engaging and culturally appealing way. This creative docuseries will help raise the salience of the NSC's mission.

Recommendation #5: Calibrate Presidential Involvement

There should be a study of ways to toggle the President's involvement in decision-making, with flexibility surrounding presidential input. As noted, a prior defect has been undue influence by the president on decisions, with other principals afraid to contradict what they perceive to be the party line. At the same time, however, the president should be apprised of what is happening in their national security apparatus. There need not be a forced choice. Mechanisms can be put in place to facilitate meetings that take place without presidential involvement, intended for situations where candor ought to be prioritized. A similar mechanism was inaugurated during the Kennedy administration following the Bay of Pigs debacle, with the Executive Committee (ExComm) of the NSC regularly meeting without the president to foster open dialog.²⁰ The ExComm even occasionally convened meetings with those outside of the NSC, which provided external opinions and countered group-think. Such a mechanism could be particularly useful in an environment where presidential involvement can bias the other participants.

Recommendation #6: Overhaul the National Security Act of 1947

The foundation of the NSC—the National Security Act of 1947—ought to be closely studied, evaluated, and reformed. While the manuscript does suggest a series of improvements to the NSC, proposals to dismiss or remake the NSC are unnecessary, dismantling a process that has served as the foundation of the

national security apparatus for decades. Some have suggested that inefficiencies and delays in the system are grounds for broad alterations, with undesirable delays and outcomes resulting in blame being laid at the feet of systems and processes. As Richard K. Betts describes it, “the urge to replace is natural for those who focus on blunders in the substance of national security policy and assume results would have been better if the process of policymaking had been different.” Instead of trying to alter the process to better foster speed, policymakers should recognize that delays are often a feature and not a bug, a sign that the system is fostering thoughtful deliberation. While there can—and should—be alterations to the NSC process, wholesale removal of processes in the interest of speed or particular outcomes should be rejected, since “office holders come and go, but serviceable institutions must endure for generations.”²¹ Other components of the National Security Act should be reviewed for possible reform, including intelligence organizations or processes, incorporating hybrid warfare decision-making into the national security apparatus, and streamlining defense acquisition.

Specifically, the National Security Act could be given a face-lift with an eye toward reducing parochialism. Establishing interagency cross functional teams may facilitate better communication and address concerns about information flow, where information goes “up” but not “across” to other agencies who may need it. Cyber and information spaces have already done this with some success, as has the counter-drug and counter-terrorism realms, demonstrating the potency of thinking synergistically across domains and agencies.²²

Recommendation #7: Hire the Best and Brightest

The need for strong informal elements and the right people in the right places should be prioritized. Bud McFarlane emphasized that hiring the best will ensure all viewpoints are considered and will also enable the national security process to move forward without stalling.²³ This requires motivated and exceptional talent: people with the vision, historical understanding, breadth of experience, and innovative ideas to break through the bureaucracy. Compared to the preceding recommendations, this is less concrete and tangible. Nonetheless, it is important as a frame through which NSC reforms ought to be situated. Processes and systems can be perfect but fail if the people tasked with managing them don’t fully invest in them. Moreover, a certain degree of NSC success depends on the inherent squishiness of strong relationships, rapport, and trust, all aspects that cannot be institutionalized or mandated. There should be a premium placed on bringing principals, deputies, and other staff

into the fold who are collegial and trust one another, although trust and unflinching loyalty should not be conflated.

To facilitate this, it is imperative that serving at the NSC is seen as a leap forward in one's career, not a step back. Aligning incentives could include increasing requirements for interagency duty tours as a promotion requirement within existing agencies, more stringent educational and professional requirements for prior experience, or simply raising the pay of NSC staffers.

Hiring the best and brightest across the nation will accomplish several things for the republic. It will strengthen democracy and allow the nation to compete in the gray zone more effectively by including and representing the full diversity of America's talent, leading to stronger national cohesion and security.²⁴ The applicable human resource hiring practices should be reevaluated and modified to ensure this recommendation is fully integrated into the fabric of national security hiring practices.

Recommendation #8: Evolve the Scowcroft Model to Meet Twenty-First Century Challenges

The final recommendation has been heavily implied—if not explicitly stated—throughout the manuscript: the NSC should embrace the ethos of the Scowcroft Model. However, this does not imply that the Scowcroft Model should remain static. Based on our interviews, it is clear that legacy information technology systems, meeting coordination, data assessment, and other processes have room to improve while still maintaining the Scowcroft Model.

While no model is perfect, the Scowcroft Model is supported both by theoretical accounts of NSC success and the empirical results it bore in the first Bush administration. This period of foreign success, while not entirely attributable to the Scowcroft Model, was nonetheless enhanced by the NSC's organizational models and people. While previous NSCs have encountered problems across the spectrum, the Scowcroft Model overcame those, striking an appropriate balance in several key areas. After all, the Scowcroft Model is fundamentally about balance, a "Goldilocks" system that is neither too formal nor excessively collegial, featuring a NSA neither too distant from the president nor sycophantic, a NSA who serves as an honest broker that listens to others but nonetheless filters information out before it reaches the president.

As twenty-first century conflicts grow increasingly complex and dangerous, policymakers will need a potent toolkit to prevent the sparks of competition from igniting into flames. The Scowcroft Model is neither perfect in theory nor practice. Yet it is time-tested and generally emulated by subsequent

NSAs, offering an essential vehicle for adapting the NSC, for present conflicts and beyond.

Conclusion

It has been 75 years since the 1947 National Security Act created the NSC. Presidents, NSC statutory and non-statutory members, Congress, and NSAs from Robert Cutler to Jake Sullivan have all influenced, evolved, and matured the national security decision-making process that resulted in both successes and failures. The United States is at an inflection point when it comes to its role in world affairs as Russia continues its Ukrainian invasion, China makes significant advancements in space, and gray zone warfare is playing an outsized role in national security and geopolitics. After reading this paper, it should be clear that no single congressional legislation, NSC organizational change, or new NSA will have the singular effect on United States national security that is required for the future, but rather multiple inputs that at times can be complex and messy.

The future will be shaped by people of character, at every leadership position up to the president, who are willing to step up and boldly, selflessly lead by protecting the homeland from land, water, air, space, cyber, electronic, and information attack for the next 75 years and beyond. This mandate is both a great challenge and opportunity for the twenty-first century that we believe is vital for continued prosperity at home and abroad. With solid leadership and adaptation, the NSC can and will continue its role in advising the President of the United States, who must lead with vision, decisive decision-making, resolve, resourcefulness, creativity, and empathy to benefit the American people's security.

Notes

1. Olszowka, “Strengthening Multiple Advocacy in the National Security Council.”
2. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” 14, 83. Manske has argued that “This study suggests that certain checks, balances, and other legislative restrictions could be put into place regulating the staff size without impeding the president’s ability or prerogative to make policy decisions.” However, such ideas need to be subject to further study and scrutiny.
3. Toosi, “Biden Plans a Beefed-Up National Security Council.”
4. The topics of further study may include—but need not be limited to—the core mission of the NSC, where it will focus in the future, possible ways to leverage emerging technology for enhanced communication flow and administrative task effectiveness, and staff requirements for these and other missions.
5. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” 83–84.
6. Bobroske, “Reforming the National Security Council.”
7. Author interview with Robert McFarlane, 16 June 2021.
8. Crocker, Levin, Miller, and Pickering, “A Foundational Proposal For The Next Administration.”
9. Crocker, Levin, Miller, and Pickering, “A Foundational Proposal.”
10. Troeder, “A Whole-Of-Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare.”
11. Manske, “The Machinery of Government Needs a Tune-Up,” 84.
12. Author Removed, “Decision-Making Culture: The Case of Google.”
13. Crouch, Mulder, and Piliero, “National Security Challenges of Yesterday and Tomorrow: Reflecting on the Last 75 Years to Prepare for the Next 75.”
14. Starling, Wetzel, and Trotti, “Seizing the Advantage: A Vision for the Next U.S. National Defense Strategy,” 38.
15. Mulder, “#28: Court Every-Day National Security Influencers.”
16. Crouch, Mulder, and Piliero, “National Security Challenges of Yesterday and Tomorrow.”
17. Gans, “How the National Security Council Got So Powerful.”
18. Work and Selva, “Revitalizing Wargaming is Necessary to be Prepared for Future Wars,”; Bartels, “Wargames as an Educational Tool.”
19. “Where are College Students Going After They Graduate?”
20. Troy, “All the President’s Yes Men.”
21. Betts, “Don’t Retire the National Security Act.”
22. Crouch, Mulder, and Piliero, “National Security Challenges of Yesterday and Tomorrow.”
23. Author interview with Robert McFarlane, 16 June 2021.
24. Goertner and Benson, “How the Next U.S. National Security Strategy Should Include Diversity.”

Appendices

Appendix A: Wargame

Design Elements

To test the hypotheses of this manuscript, the authors created and conducted a wargame, or tabletop exercise, simulating a hybrid conflict in the Baltics. The exercise took place on 15 June 2021 over Zoom and was attended by seven staff members of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

The scenario simulated Russian aggression against the Baltic state of Estonia. Loosely adapted from a RAND primer on hybrid warfare, the scenario was divided into three stages.¹ The first stage involved Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns, with Russian entities fomenting unrest by claiming that Estonia has disenfranchised Russian-speaking Estonians. The subsequent rioting in the street was accompanied by a crippling cyber-attack on Estonian infrastructure and a speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin encouraging a secession referendum for the city of Narva, bordering Russia. At the same time, domestic disruption in the United States occurred during a contested election, with Russian electoral interference. This stage is the "Nonviolent Subversion" stage of a hybrid conflict, as taxonomized by the RAND primer.

The second stage featured an escalation in violence in Estonia, with insurgent forces seizing the capital city. There was fighting on the ground between insurgent forces claiming allegiance to the Russian cause and Estonian security forces, with unconfirmed intelligence that troops with allegiance to the Russian Federation had entered the fighting. However, it was confirmed that Russian forces were massing near the border to enforce the referendum vote on Narvan independence, and Estonia issued a request for assistance, claiming that NATO should act pursuant to Article V. According to the RAND taxonomy, this stage constituted "Covert Violent Action."

The third and final stage involved a Russian invasion of Narva to enforce the referendum. NATO tripwire forces in the area were involved in the fighting, drawing the United States and NATO into the conflict. Fighting occurred conventionally, but Putin issued an ultimatum—if the United States did not back down, he would asymmetrically escalate with tactical nuclear use or counter space attacks against critical assets. This stage is taxonomized by RAND as "Conventional Aggression Supported by Political Subversion."

Each participant was assigned a role on the NSC, with a president, NSA, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of National Intelligence (DNI),

Secretary of the Treasury, and Secretary of Homeland Security. Prior to the exercise, each participant was given several articles providing a brief primer on hybrid warfare, as well as a series of player objectives. Each player's objectives were intentionally designed to include both collective and parochial goals. The collective goals were universal (preventing a war with Russia from beginning, preventing the escalation of a war if it does begin, and maintaining the cohesion of the alliance system). However, the parochial goals varied by player, sometimes coming into conflict. For example, the president was told to maintain popularity at home by coming down hard on Russia, while the NSA was told to maintain the confidence of the president to ensure he would have a future in the president's party. Some players were given objectives that predisposed them to be vocal leaders (such as the Secretary of State being told to lead, given his ambitions for higher office), while others were given objectives that made them followers (such as the DNI being told to avoid alienating party leaders such as the president, NSA, and Secretary of State). This was intentional—we wanted to examine whether this environment would engender groupthink, and whether participants would put parochial objectives over collective objectives when the two conflicted.

Another intentional design element we added to test our findings was the addition of unconfirmed intelligence, liable to being interpreted in the vein of a worst-case assumption. During the second stage, we added a piece of intelligence that indicated Russian forces had crossed into Estonia and had joined the fighting. If true, this would be a major escalatory step, certainly being sufficient to activate Article V. However, we hedged and claimed that the intelligence was unconfirmed. We wanted to replicate the pattern seen in the lead-up to the Iraq War, where unreliable information indicating a worst-case scenario was introduced; we wanted to assess whether participants would jump to the worst-case interpretation.

Prior to the exercise, we entered with four hypotheses:

1. If the president takes an active role in the crisis, other participants will bandwagon behind their views.
2. If the NSA expresses their opinions and is less of an “honest broker,” other participants will bandwagon behind their views.
3. If the Secretary of State takes a leadership role and endorses a hawkish response, the two bandwagoning players (DNI and Secretary of Treasury) will follow closely behind, especially if the Secretary of Defense concurs.

4. Participants will assume the worst about Russian soldiers fighting in Estonia and, instead of working to confirm the intelligence, plan to act on the incomplete information.

Wargame Summary

The first stage began with participants being informed that Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns had accelerated in Estonia, pushing for a secession movement in Narva; concurrently, a contested election in the United States and interference by Russia was fueling discontent. The discussion was kickstarted by the president, who urged a focus on the domestic challenge first, suggesting the NSC find a way to make it through the election unscathed. Participants then discussed the likelihood of being able to successfully attribute the election interference and cyber-attacks in the United States to Russia. However, about halfway through the first meeting, the Secretary of State began to encourage a focus on the link between the US election and the situation in Estonia, claiming that a hybrid situation needed to be discussed in tandem. Other principals soon agreed, with the Secretary of State proposing a coordinated solution of sanctions, offensive cyberspace operations, and diplomacy with allies to provide energy alternatives to the Estonians. It was decided that a combination of sanctions and cyberspace responses would be proportional, as opposed to sending in troops, striking an appropriate balance without undue escalation. The NSA concluded the meeting by suggesting attribution of the interference in the domestic context, with immediate financial and cyberspace responses in the international context against Russia to prevent further aggression in Estonia.

The second stage began with Russia escalating cyberspace aggression and propaganda against Estonia, with Russian-aligned groups violently fighting within the country, culminating in the seizure of Tallinn by insurgent forces. Some unconfirmed intelligence suggests that Russian troops joined the fighting, but this is difficult to know with certainty. Principals quickly concluded that this was likely sufficient for Article V of the NATO treaty to be activated, providing for a collective military response. Participants also suggested moving in place a tripwire force to provide a clear redline for Russia. However, some participants voiced concerns about controlling escalation, particularly considering Putin's own precarious domestic situation. There was debate over whether the United States should focus on moving in troops along with allies, or whether the focus should remain on sanctions and offensive cyberspace operations. The president concurred with the tripwire suggestion, which resulted in agreement that a limited troop movement was necessary. The NSA sum-

marized the recommendations as including troop movement on a sixty-day timeline, expanded sanctions (with a focus on targeting Putin's inner circle), and information operations targeting the Russian domestic front.

The third and final stage began with Russian forces crossing into Estonia, aiming to enforce the results of the secession referendum by force. Principals debated about the best way to ensure escalation management, to prevent the conflict from spiraling into the nuclear realm. The secretary of the treasury argued that continued strong sanctions pressure could supplant escalation in the conventional realm, while the secretary of defense encouraged continued cyberspace operations and an emphasis on diplomacy. The president emphasized that the strength of the alliance network might be at stake, which would necessitate not blinking in the face of Russian aggression. The conclusion delivered by the NSA was that there should be escalation, but it must be limited and localized to the Estonian theater. This would be accompanied by the most escalatory cyber-attacks and economic pressure applied yet in the game.

Findings

The exercise revealed several important and relevant findings. These will be broken down by the respective hypotheses.

Hypothesis #1: An active role played by the president would influence the views espoused by other participants.

In our exercise, the president took an active role in setting the agenda and weighing in. The president was the first to speak in each of the three stages and made his opinion clear. For example, in the first stage the president noted that the domestic crisis was of greater importance than the international crisis; debate proceeded to focus on the domestic crisis, with other participants adopting the presupposition that the domestic and international were separate.

While there was vibrant debate throughout the exercise, the president did serve an important agenda-setting function, and key assumptions made by the president early on were not challenged. This confirms our hypothesis and offers an important lesson. The president, by nature of their authority, is liable to influence the debate; few participants want to be on record openly contradicting the leader of the United States. This may counsel against the president speaking early or often, since it might bias participants against speaking openly or candidly. This also falls to the NSA, who should be willing to remove the president from the day-in, day-out debates at the NSC to allow conferral among the principals separately.

Hypothesis #2: An opinionated NSA can materially shape the conversation and influence the views presented.

In our exercise, the NSA attempted to play the role of an honest broker, soliciting input from all participants. He held court by going “round robin-style” around the room for each question, asking each participant to give their perspective. This forced conversation to be democratic, and all participants had a pseudo institutionalized role as a result of being forced to weigh in.

The result was vibrant debate throughout the exercise. Participants felt comfortable that their views were genuinely included, which facilitated a candid conversation. In this sense, the brokerage was successful in bringing in all viewpoints. Nonetheless, it was not a panacea. Some participants spoke with greater frequency than others, and the more reticent participants often delivered shorter, truncated remarks. While the NSA did an admirable job trying to pull more from the taciturn participants (following up and asking for clarification), some people were simply less willing to speak than others. This may be due to insufficient experience with the issue at hand or being less senior than a colleague, but the result was that participation was still not equal.

Given that the NSA was generally not opinionated in this exercise, we did not have as much of a chance to test theories about groupthink stemming from an overly active NSA. He generally served the role of an “honest broker” and brokered the conversation in a way that facilitated perspectives from others. However, one area where group cohesion did manifest itself was the NSA’s desire to bring the president into most major decisions. The president was treated as an equal participant in the meeting, but it was inevitable that his views would carry more sway by nature of his position. The result was that certain decisions (in particular, a focus on domestic responses over international responses in Stage 1 and a tripwire force in Stage 2) were driven by the president’s views.

Hypothesis #3: A leadership role taken by a participant other than the president or NSA could result in others rallying behind this individual.

Specifically, we instructed the secretary of state to try to position himself as a leader (giving him an individual objective of advancing his own political prospects by playing a leading role in the crisis) and instructed the DNI and secretary of the treasury to try to avoid alienating the secretary of state. The objective was to create a set of contradictory pressures on the participants, forcing them to choose between searching for the best possible policy response versus aligning closely with the individuals they wanted to avoid alienating.

We found that in many cases, participants chose to bandwagon. The secretary of state took on a leadership role throughout the meetings, and others often fell in line behind him. In the first stage of the conflict, the secretary of state was the first to explicitly begin framing aggression through the framework of Article V, which resulted in the others adopting a similar framework. As the

conflict evolved, numerous participants seemed to be taking their cue from the secretary of state, asking him to weigh in before presenting their own views. He also occasionally made claims based on information that went beyond his authority, such as noting in the third stage that troops had crossed into Estonia (information that would likely have been gathered by authorities other than the Department of State).

This demonstrated the challenge for participants in balancing parochial objectives with collective ones. While everyone shares a goal of avoiding conflict, participants have a natural desire to be included. As a result, participants that feared exclusion were more likely to avoid alienating a perceived power broker, even if it came at the expense of rigorously testing assumptions.

Hypothesis #4: Participants would quickly jump to a worst-case assumption, particularly in the second stage when information was supplied indicating that Russian troops had crossed into Estonia.

We intentionally made this information unconfirmed, hoping to assess whether participants would nonetheless accept it unquestioningly. We hypothesized that, in the face of uncertainty, participants might assume the worst-case scenario and proceed based on that assumption.

For the most part, this is not what happened. Participants did not fixate on whether Russia had actually sent in troops of its own into the conflict. Instead, participants prepared for possible future evolutions of the conflict, such as whether allies would be willing to work together on a declaration of Article V based on the massing of Russian troops on the border. There was no collective assumption based on questionable information.

Altogether, the experiment demonstrated many of our theories about the NSC. Collaboration occurs between numerous people, who have their own agendas and objectives. The parochial interest in inclusion and influence can sometimes conflict with the interest in creating the most rigorously tested ideas. Ensuring that the NSC does not fall prey to problems of collective decision-making will be an ongoing challenge for any NSC.

Nonetheless, there were several limitations to our wargame. The first was the short time frame for the activity. Conducted over a two-hour period, the game was significantly shorter than a real crisis would be, resulting in some debates and conversations being cut short. The second was that each player was not an expert in the specific role they were given (i.e., we did not curate a financial expert to play secretary of treasury, an intelligence expert for DNI, and so forth). The result was that some periods of silence in the game may not have indicated concurrence, but rather a lack of subject-matter expertise on a given question. Third and finally, the nature of the matter at hand—how people act and what drives their actions—is intrinsically challenging to study

and draw clear conclusions about. When one figure concurs with another, is that the product of groupthink, or perhaps just genuine agreement because the idea is a sound one? The fact that the game was a short time frame and did not involve playing out the recommendations of players (to test their rigor and soundness) adds to this challenge.

Appendix B: Proposal for an NSC Docuseries

Logline

The fascinating untold stories of the United States NSC, a group of oft-hidden leaders and top advisors behind every US president since 1947.

Concept

The NSC is one of the most powerful entities in any presidential administration, but it is also the least understood. On the heels of Lt Gen Scowcroft's passing, now is the time to captivate and educate the American public on the NSC. There is a deep misunderstanding across the United States on how national security is formulated, developed, and executed. This series would shed light on the hard work that many national security advisors, their staffs, and the council at large have accomplished for the United States since 1947.

The NSC has been composed of many fascinating characters, and a Netflix or equivalent docuseries platform would tell the story of national security and foreign policy formulation through the lens of important figures mainly hidden from the American public due to the nature of the NSC's work. It will be a highly creative and intimate account of NSC characters and their decisions, wrapped around the intricacies of geopolitics and individualized to the presidents they served.

Why a Docuseries?

The short documentary series format has quickly become the consumable-media-of-choice during the COVID-19 pandemic; viewers tend not to distinguish between narrative and documentary as long as it's gripping. The docuseries format is unique in that it is flexible, able to be played with episode by episode and tied together with a through-line that encourages viewers to keep watching. Because of the rich history of the NSC and its members, a documentary would simply not be long enough. A docuseries provides enough screen time to flesh out different characters, different events, and different eras—enough to give the story of the NSC the telling it deserves.

Netflix has a history of producing successful historical, military, and political-centric documentaries including *Five Came Back*, *Medal of Honor*, *The Last Czar*, and *The Royal House of Windsor*. *Five Came Back* featured a production process that involved working through hundreds of hours of archival footage, newsreels, and raw footage from war films, which became a large pull for the strength of the story and series writ large: that the viewer knows they are getting an extraordinarily curated and incredibly unique experience from watching this series that they could get nowhere else. Additionally, the three-part *Five Came Back* was based on the best-selling book of the same name (*Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War*) by Mark Harris. The ability to buy intellectual property for a potential series is a huge pull for media platforms like Netflix, even if the resulting work is only loosely based on the original.

Netflix has a strong anecdotal history of working well with external collaborators. Producing such a series not merely through Netflix, but also being able to distribute it through its platform automatically increases a potential series' audience base. The value placed on the Netflix brand is quite high not merely nationally, but also internationally, and its large distribution worldwide ensures that it will be seen and enjoyed by viewers worldwide.

The other media platforms would also meet the requirement to produce or host this NSC docuseries. Due to space constraints, Netflix was the primary platform that was analyzed.

What's the Intent?

To differentiate itself from a History Channel docuseries, for instance, this series would craft, in tandem, both the portraits and the stories of NSC members to build a full picture of the NSC through its ever-changing nature through history. Shifting with every president, the NSC itself is not a homogenous entity. This docuseries will highlight the individuality of certain members, the lives they led, and the many important decisions they helped their president make. This hidden tale of both the compelling nature of complex behind the scenes politics – both domestically and internationally – that members of the NSC worked through can come to life in a docuseries. There are interesting, complicated people behind every single NSC – strategy nerds and the general public alike will be able to enjoy these stories.

Target Audience

This docuseries would automatically attract fans of history, politics, and war, which arguably consists of a large portion of the American populace. An

American captivation with the drama of politics and an untold history plays well with the subject of this docuseries. Aside from attracting those with a vested interest in national security, Netflix will also be interested in how this idea attracts a broader audience. By focusing on various people within this narrative, including specific national security advisors and time periods that are widely understood by the American public (Cold War, “War on Terror,” and so forth), this series can draw in emotions shared across the nation. At this moment in time, this docuseries could play a unique cinematic role of instilling confidence in viewers across the political spectrum in the American system.

Thematic Elements

- Strategy: How is US national security strategy developed? Why is strategy important to the world?
- Politics: How does national security, tied into international affairs, relate to domestic politics?
 - Power and Influence: What is the NSC and how does it influence US policy?
 - Empathy: How does strategy affect people, both those making the decisions and the world around them?
 - War: How is war changing, and how is US strategy changing in response?
 - Mystery: Why is national security strategy classified in nature?

Creative Approach

The story of the NSC will be told in a four or five episode docuseries with each episode focusing on either a different time period (pre-Cold War, post-Cold War, and so forth) or following a specific person’s narrative (various national security advisors). The narrative would retell historical events, to include interviews from high-level officials involved in previous national security strategy decisions, talks with people close to NSC members in question, and archival footage or newsreels when possible. Through these elements, the docuseries will be both informative of the strategy process while drawing in the American public. It will be essential to bring in the human element, to make it relatable to the average person and to develop a compelling narrative that explains why international issues matter here at home. Being able to pull the thread on crucial and landmark moments in American history that stemmed from the NSC unravels the intriguing element of the story.

Outcomes

Through a captivating docuseries, the docuseries would educate the American public on national security strategy process and formulation. Additionally, this project honors Scowcroft's legacy that can be referenced for years to come.

Notes

1. Radin, "Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses."

Table of Abbreviations

ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zones
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GWOT	Global War on Terror
IG	Interagency Groups
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
IP	Intellectual property
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEC	National Economic Council
NSA	National Security Advisor
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandums
NSC	National Security Council
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
PMC	Private Military Contractors
PNAC	Project for a New American Century
PRC	Policy Review Committee
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty
SCC	Special Coordination Committee
SIG	Senior Interdepartmental Group
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

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