

The NSC Staff: Rebuilding the Policy Crucible

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The Iran-Contra affair, if it accomplished nothing else, put an institutional spotlight on the National Security Council Staff, subjecting it to scrutiny unparalleled in its 40-year history. If we are to glean anything meaningful from this tawdry episode, other than entertainment value, it is critical that the right institutional lessons be learned and that appropriate systemic remedies be applied. The most basic lesson is that the affair manifested the much deeper problem that has plagued every administration since Truman—the absence of clearly defined and functionally adequate responsibilities for the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and the National Security Council Staff he heads.

Even a cursory review of postwar national security decisionmaking reveals that different presidents have created different national security structures with differing degrees of success. Most analysts agree with the Tower Commission's view that the national security system "is properly the president's creature. It must be left flexible to be molded by the president into the form most useful to him."¹

At the same time, it appears that inexorable forces in the contemporary international system are driving modern presidents into more intimate involvement in national security affairs and the executive branch itself into what Zbigniew Brzezinski has described as a White House-centric presidential system of decisionmaking.² It is no accident, for example, that every president since JFK has found the State Department wholly inadequate in the formulation of national security policy. Indeed, the existence of foreign policy as a discipline independent of the broader sweep of national security is itself a non sequitur. Diplomacy, it would now seem, is too important to be left to the diplomats.

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Within this context, several functional requisites must be performed if the national security system is to work: administration, coordination, supervision, adjudication, crisis management, policy formulation, and position advocacy.³ The extent to which the national security structure facilitates the execution of these functional requisites dictates the success or failure of the entire system.

Given the factors of centralized decisionmaking and the functional requisites, and with the caveat that no two presidents will structure the system identically, there should nonetheless be basic similarities across administrations in answering three fundamental questions:

- What should the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs do?
- How should the NSC Staff be configured?
- How should Staff responsibilities be articulated?

In the following discussion, we will attempt to provide answers to these questions, in the process outlining an NSC Staff model for the future.

The Role of the Assistant to the President

As distasteful as it may be to many in the national security business, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs—let's call him the APNSA—must be one of the three primary actors in national security. Former State Department official Leslie Gelb has argued that no administration can “turn the prince back into a frog” and return the APNSA to what some see as his ideal role—the low-key facilitator of national security policy along the McGeorge Bundy or Robert Cutler model.⁴ Indeed, the chaos of the early Reagan NSC was due in large measure to the efforts of Edwin Meese and Alexander Haig to turn the clock back to a system now rendered irrelevant by the evolving demands of national security. Instead, the basic document that organizes the national security system in the future should recognize and facilitate the modern role of the APNSA. As Philip Odeen, author of a major study on the NSC, has said, “There has been a fundamental change in the nature of the problems over the past fifteen or twenty years that has tended to give the national security adviser a much heavier role, a much more public role, and a much more important role.”⁵

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The APNSA must effectively function in two sometimes conflicting capacities. First, he must function as the manager of the national security system, wearing the hat of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Second, he must act as the personal counselor to the president on national security matters in his capacity as the National Security Adviser. If the APNSA/NSA is deficient in either capacity or if the structure creates insurmountable obstacles along either path, then the national security system as a whole will not work.

In his first role, the APNSA must oversee with objective eyes the operation of the National Security Council and its supporting staff. He must insure that the non-advocacy functions are executed by the Staff in an effective and judicious manner. As the Tower Commission asserts,

It is his responsibility to ensure that matters submitted for consideration by the Council cover the full range of issues on which review is required; that those issues are fully analyzed; that a full range of options is considered; that the prospects and risks of each are examined; that all relevant intelligence and other information is available to the principals; that difficulties in implementation are confronted.⁶

In this capacity as manager of the national security system, he serves primarily the institution of the National Security Council, and he should be an honest, non-controversial broker of ideas and options. His neutrality on issues, however, should not be confused with passivity; he may indeed be very assertive in what Odeen calls "decision forcing" and in policy supervision.⁷ The APNSA will have to crack the whip to make the national security system work, to forge consensus at the lowest level possible, to insure that the bureaucracy is presenting issues fairly and imaginatively, and to demand adherence to the president's decisions.

At the same time, as we have seen, the APNSA must serve in the role of personal adviser to the President. The Tower Commission reached the conclusion that "he is perhaps the one most able to see things from the President's perspective [and] is unburdened by departmental responsibilities."⁸ Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the beneficiary and the victim of a strong APNSA, contends that "the NSC advisor must do more than coordinate—he must represent the President's views."⁹ It is both unrealistic and dangerous to argue, as Haig does, that the "National Security Adviser should be a staff man—not a maker of policy."¹⁰ I. M. Destler's view that the position should be abolished altogether is even less feasible.¹¹

Many critics oppose an assertive role for the APNSA primarily because of the high public profile some advisers have assumed in the past.¹² This line of criticism is far more emotional than substantive, and it misses the more compelling issues. Suffice it to say that, in the execution of the functional requisites, it is not essential that the APNSA be a public spokesman,

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but if he is, then the administration needs to insure that he and the other public figures in the government are espousing a coherent and consistent national security policy line.

The issue of whether or not the APNSA is a public spokesman, however, should not be confused with the question of what substantive policy role he should play. The national security system must recognize that the elevation of the APNSA has been brought about, not solely as a by-product of powerful egos and dominating personalities, but by the demands of an increasingly complex international environment. For all its weaknesses, the Carter Administration eventually recognized this reality and produced some notable successes in national security by enhancing the position of Zbigniew Brzezinski. For all its strengths, the Reagan Administration did not, and the result was an unnecessarily chaotic and directionless national security system, particularly in the early years. Ever the journalist, Leslie Gelb summarizes the issue neatly in his two "iron laws." The first point, Gelb argues, is that "things won't work well with a strong national security adviser to the President. The second is that, without a strong adviser, things won't work at all."¹³

How, then, does an administration design the national security system to facilitate the dual roles of the APNSA/NSA? Brzezinski, R. D. McLaurin, and others have proposed that the status of the APNSA be upgraded to formal cabinet level, either as the Director or the Secretary of National Security, possibly even subject to Senate confirmation.¹⁴ These dramatic proposals might well resolve the internecine squabbling that seems endemic in each administration and would position the incumbent to fulfill both his primary roles. But these proposals, however attractive from a functional perspective, are not politically feasible; they would surely elicit howls of protests from the media, the wrath of a Congress ever suspicious of White House centralization, and stormy resignations from irate cabinet members facing the relegation of their positions to subordinate status.

Short of that, the President needs to spell out in detail the specific roles and responsibilities assigned to the APNSA and give him the bureaucratic leverage he needs to follow through. At a minimum, the APNSA should chair the important sub-NSC committees in which most of the business of national security is conducted. Moreover, the NSC Staff should chair the

interagency groups (IGs) subordinate to those committees chaired by the APNSA; Alexander Haig was at least right when he argued that "he who controls the key IGs . . . controls policy."¹⁵

In addition, the APNSA should be explicitly assigned the crisis management portfolio and be given the authority to task throughout the government in the execution of this critical role. The APNSA must also be directly responsible to the president with no intervening superior on the White House staff. Finally, he must be afforded cabinet-equivalent status (without the formal designation) and be recognized as effectively coequal to the Secretaries of State and Defense. These recommendations run against the grain of many NSC critics, but they are essential if the United States is to return to an effective national security system.

From this outline, it is evident that the APNSA must be a person of singular ability; this is no position for an inexperienced political crony, a sycophant, or a stodgy bureaucrat. Qualities necessary for success as the APNSA/NSA include the following:

- *Competence.* The APNSA must be conversant in the entire range of national security issues or, at least, must know where his weaknesses are and act to redress them.

- *Experience.* The APNSA cannot come into the government as a novice. He must understand not only the formal structure of the bureaucracy but also where the entrenched issues and individuals are found. He must also understand how and when to pull the right levers to make policy happen.

- *Intellect.* He must be at once conceptual and pragmatic, able to generate ideas and then translate them into meaningful policy. Moreover, he must have an established intellectual reputation in order to command instant respect in the government, in the academic world, in the Congress, and in the media. He must be an intellectual magnet to attract the brightest and most innovative people to the NSC Staff.

- *Integrity.* The APNSA must have sufficiently strong character to be able to act as the honest broker in coordinating and integrating the national security system. As former national security adviser Walt Rostow said, "He must be able to present another man's case as well as the man himself could."¹⁶ The entire national security system must have confidence that the APNSA will present alternative views fairly and will not take advantage of propinquity in order to push his own positions at the expense of the integrity of the system. He must be able to present bad news to the president and to sniff out and squelch misbehavior before it becomes a problem. He must be scrupulously honest in presenting presidential decisions and in monitoring the implementation process. Perhaps most important, he must impart the same sense of ethical behavior to the Staff he leads. Much of the Staff's work automatically implies the presidential imprimatur; the APNSA cannot tolerate abuse of such a precious mandate.

- *Loyalty.* If he is to function as a personal adviser to the president, the NSA must believe in the man he serves. He must consider that his first duty is to support the president while insuring that he never overshadows or upstages his boss. He must elicit the trust and confidence of the president in order to act effectively in his stead within the national security system.

- *Diplomacy.* The APNSA will, by the very nature of his position, elicit envy and animosity from the departments. He must make a concerted and continuous effort to salve wounded egos, to maintain cordial relations with abrasive personalities all over the government, and to present triumphs and tragedies in a manner that helps smooth the way for cooperation on the next issue.

- *Confidence.* He must be confident in his own abilities and in those of his staff in order to hold his own in the cacophony of conflicting opinions that marks any national security system.

A final quality is that the APNSA/NSA should normally be a civilian. A military officer, despite possession of all of the traits listed above, operates from two perceptual disadvantages. First, military officers are unfairly seen to possess only modest intellectual capabilities. This makes it especially difficult for an officer to be taken seriously in the formulation and advocacy of policy. Second, there remains within the government a psycho-historical suspicion of a strong role for a person in uniform in the development of policy. Many Americans are simply uncomfortable with an officer crossing the line between policy execution and policy formulation. For these reasons, the position of APNSA/NSA is better filled with a civilian.

Although this is a daunting list of qualities, there are certainly those in government, in academia, and in the private sector who meet them all. These should form the population from which the APNSA/NSA is drawn.

The National Security Council Staff

The NSC Staff must of course be supported by an external national security structure that allows for the smooth execution of the functional requisites. But internal to the Staff itself are key variables that will impact on the effectiveness of the entire system. These are size, organization, and composition.

Size. The NSC Staff has varied greatly in size, ranging over the years from three to nearly 100 professionals. In determining the appropriate size, one must strike a balance between efficiency and flexibility; the Staff must be large enough to comprehend the entire spectrum of national security issues with some degree of expertise, yet small enough to be responsive. Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser under Presidents Ford and Bush, points out that long-range planning is often inadequately done because “the NSC Staff is constrained as to the number of people available [and] our limited

personnel assets were used to put out fires.”¹⁷ At the same time, the Staff must be small enough to avoid the rigidity that marks most large organizations. Moreover, a large Staff creates yet additional evidence that a rival State (or Defense) Department has been created in the White House, a perception that leads to unnecessary private friction and public squabbling. Although persuasive justification for an exact size probably cannot be offered, it appears that 40-45 professionals is about the right number. A Staff much smaller than that cannot contend with the range of issues that must be considered by the NSC; a Staff much larger will become a bureaucracy unto itself in which individual Staff members will lose their personal relationships with the APNSA and with the president they support.¹⁸

Staff Organization. The Tower Commission, reacting to the aberration that was the Iran-Contra affair, recommended an organization designed to maximize supervision. “Clear vertical lines of control and authority, responsibility, and accountability are essential to good management.”¹⁹ This impulse provides a useful point of departure, but caution must be exercised; such an organization can become excessively structured and rigid. The designers of the next Staff organization must not try to remedy the Oliver North phenomenon by structural solutions. The Iran-Contra affair occurred primarily because of personality flaws in North and Poindexter rather than faults within the system itself. Supervision and accountability are necessary but should not come at the expense of flexibility and intellectual freedom. Staff members must be able to interact with each other across nominal staff lines, to form ad hoc working groups to deal with specific issues, and to draw upon each other’s expertise to resolve policy problems.

The organization that best supports these needs is a three-tiered system. The top tier is made up of the APNSA, his Deputy, and his Executive Secretary. The middle layer is composed of the directors of the regional and functional groups. These groups mirror those found in the Departments of State and Defense, thereby allowing far smoother interdepartmental coordination. Finally, at the bottom, there is the layer of Staff members who serve under the supervision of the directors.

The Staff organization must be at once flexible and structured. It must be flexible by fostering horizontal coordination between Staff members and

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between directors; it must be sufficiently structured to discourage direct, private, and unchecked relationships from developing between the top tier and the Staff members at the bottom such as occurred between Poindexter and North.

The position of Executive Secretary bears special mention. This is the only Staff position specifically authorized in the 1947 legislation, and it can be used to great advantage by the APNSA and the Staff in executing the process functions. In this, the Executive Secretary can help relieve the APNSA from much of the more mundane yet critical process functions, freeing him up to focus more attention on policy substance. The Executive Secretary position fell into disuse during the Nixon and Ford years but can be a post of great utility. In the same vein, there is value in establishing a small, relatively stable policy group within the office of the APNSA in addition to the current non-policy secretariat. This would allow for substantive and administrative continuity between presidencies and would help save each administration from having to grapple with the same lessons that its predecessor struggled to learn.

Staff Composition. In 1961, McGeorge Bundy said in a letter to Senator Henry Jackson that the NSC Staff “should be composed of men equally well versed in the process of planning and in that of operational follow-up.”²⁰ Sound guidance. The members of the NSC staff should be drawn from the widest range of sources possible: the State and Defense Departments, the intelligence community, Treasury, the academic world, and the private sector. They should share the qualities of the APNSA, with emphasis on selflessness and confidence. They must be experienced within the government and be well-connected with all relevant departments and agencies.

But they should not stay on the Staff indefinitely. One of the conclusions of the Tower Commission is that members of the Staff should not remain for longer than four years.²¹ Rotation of the Staff members is the safest way to insure that new ideas and fresh approaches are continuously being introduced into the system. Moreover, and perhaps less idealistically, rotation of the members of the Staff is the best way to hedge against the greatest danger inherent in White House service—losing touch with the ethical foundations and constitutional idealism so essential to individual Staff members. Many members of the Staff have commented on the erosion of ethical values that occurs after the third year on the White House staff and how morally numbing the entire process becomes.

NSC Staff Charter

Many administrations, regardless of their individual national security systems, have developed implicit understandings about the roles and missions of the Staff. But no president has outlined his desires for the NSC Staff clearly and with formal presidential blessing. For example, PD-2, the basic organizational document in the Carter Administration, says only that

“the Assistant to the President shall be assisted by a National Security Council staff, as provided by law.”²² NSDD-2, the Reagan Administration’s counterpart, is silent on the role of the Staff altogether.²³

In order to clarify lines of authority and eliminate the pointless groping for bureaucratic relevance that plagues every NSC Staff, the responsibilities of the Staff should be explicitly articulated in a presidential directive document. This document should be separate from that which lays out the basic national security system and should be clear in what the Staff should and should not do. In the figure on the following page is a proposed directive document which can serve as a point of departure for any administration in its efforts to insure that the national security system is functionally effective.

The proposed directive is built to address the requisite functions and to clarify other aspects of the NSC Staff that have been long neglected. In paragraph one, the directive outlines the Staff’s responsibilities for the execution of the requisite functions and provides bureaucratic mechanisms by which these functions can be accomplished. Paragraph two provides a vertical NSC Staff structure that allows for flexibility and accountability. Next, the directive caps the size of the Staff and requires that a cross-section of national security talent be employed. Paragraph four resolves a long-standing if silent element of friction within the government by identifying the equivalent rank for each position within the NSC Staff. Finally, the directive allows the APNSA some flexibility in the regional and functional groups but does not allow him to expand the size of the Staff or the scope of its responsibilities.

Such a document could be useful, not as a final product to be signed immediately by the President, but as a vehicle to engender discussion long overdue and as a base upon which to construct a definitive charter for the structure and function of the NSC Staff.

It is important to make a final comment about the people who will fill this organization. The debate on the national security structure generally focuses on systems, wiring diagrams, and organizations, but it is the people who make it all work. The most skillfully designed national security system will fail utterly when it is not staffed by men and women of great character, intellect, and commitment. More than any other organization in Washington, the NSC Staff depends upon its people. There are no intervening layers to protect the system from the egocentric, the foolish, and the venal. The president must therefore select his APNSA with the full knowledge that it should be his most important, and careful, appointment. The APNSA must then select his Staff with equal care, demanding the highest standards of demonstrated competence, intellectual daring, and selfless dedication.

For the first 170 years of our existence, the management of our international affairs was quite effectively handled by the Department of State, with occasional help from the War and Navy Departments. Since the end of the Second World War, however, the international environment has changed

National Security Directive (Proposed) The National Security Council Staff

In support of the National Security Council System mandated in NSDD-2 and in accordance with the National Security Act of 1947, the National Security Council Staff is established.

I. *Functions of the National Security Council Staff.* The NSC Staff shall act in three capacities.

First, it shall serve as the staff of the National Security Council under the direction of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. In that capacity, the Staff shall be responsible for the administration of the NSC system.

It shall also be responsible for the coordination and integration of policy in preparation for submission to the NSC for consideration. It shall also be responsible for supervising the implementation of my decisions and for interpreting specific policies.

Second, the Staff shall provide support to the Assistant to the President in his capacity as coordinator of crisis management. The NSC Staff shall effect coordination throughout the relevant agencies to insure the presentation of options and the implementation of decisions in a timely manner. It shall convene crisis management working groups subordinate to the NSC and composed of representatives of the involved departments and agencies. It shall also be responsible for crisis contingency planning, drawing upon the departments and agencies for support.

Third, the Staff shall support the Assistant to the President in his capacity as the National Security Adviser. In this regard, the Staff shall be one of my personal staffs and will provide me, through the National Security Adviser, with recommendations on national security matters.

II. *Organization of the NSC Staff.* The Staff shall be organized into three echelons. At the top shall be the Assistant to the President, his deputy, and the Executive Secretary of the NSC. Next, there shall be nine directors chairing groups in the following regional and functional areas: Europe and the Soviet Union, the Middle East and Southwest Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Far East, Intelligence, International Economics, Transnational Issues, and Defense Policy. Third, there shall be Staff Officers in each regional and functional group whose work will be supervised by the Directors. In addition, there shall be established a Staff Secretariat responsible for administrative support to the NSC and composed of permanent civil servants. It is my intention that the Staff Secretariat provide the administrative continuity between administrations.

III. *Size and Composition of the NSC Staff.* The size of the Staff shall not exceed 45 professionals, excluding the Assistant to the President, his deputy, the Executive Secretary, and the Staff Secretariat. The Staff shall be composed of representatives of the Foreign Service, the armed forces, the intelligence community, the academic community, and the private sector.

IV. *Equivalent Rank of the NSC Staff.* For the purposes of seniority and protocol, the NSC Staff shall have equivalent rank as follows. The Assistant to the President shall rank as a member of my cabinet. The Deputy Assistant to the President shall rank as a deputy secretary. The Executive Secretary and the Group Directors shall rank as assistant secretaries. The Staff Officers shall rank as deputy assistant secretaries.

V. *Modifications to this Directive.* The Assistant to the President may change the composition and structure of the functional and regional groups as required.

so dramatically that this time-honored managerial system simply does not work any longer. Every administration since that of FDR has either implicitly recognized this phenomenon and moved to a White House-centered management structure, or has ignored it and created a chaotic national security process. It is now time to formalize what has been the de facto system and to create the sort of structure that will help guarantee the proper and efficient management of national security affairs into the next century. This can be accomplished only if we acknowledge the inability of an 18th-century system to deal with 21st-century challenges: we require a formal presidential mandate for the APNSA/NSA and the National Security Staff. The APNSA and his Staff are critical realities in the management of contemporary national security. We must now harness their energies and abilities by institutionalizing their role as integral players in an efficient and finely honed national security system.

NOTES

1. John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, Report of the President's Special Review Board (Washington: GPO, 1987), p. I-3.
2. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The NSC's Midlife Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, No. 69 (Winter 1987-88), 81.
3. The functional requisites are themselves a matter for considerable study and discussion. The first five, which might be called the process functions, are generally accepted throughout the bureaucracy. It is the last two, the advisory functions, that cause the greatest consternation and outcry for they imply a special and direct relationship between the President and the NSC Staff.
4. Leslie Gelb, in *National Security Policy Organization in Perspective*, ed. Lawrence J. Korb and Keith D. Hahn (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), p.19.
5. Philip Odeen, in Korb and Hahn, p. 24.
6. Tower, p. V-2.
7. Odeen, p. 9.
8. Tower, p. V-3.
9. Harold Brown, *Thinking About National Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983), p. 202.
10. Alexander M. Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), p. 58.
11. I. M. Destler, "The Job that Doesn't Work," in *Decisions of the Highest Order*, ed. Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 320-24.
12. This was the primary criticism directed against Brzezinski; it led to accusations that the Carter Administration could not speak with one voice on national security issues.
13. Inderfurth and Johnson, p. 296.
14. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Deciding who Makes Foreign Policy," in Inderfurth and Johnson, pp. 328-29. R. D. McLaurin, "National Security Policy: New Problems and Proposals," in *The Presidency and National Security Policy*, ed. R. Gordon Hoxie (New York: Center for the Study of the Presidency, 1984), p. 350.
15. Haig, p. 60.
16. Harrison Donnelly, "The National Security Council," in *Congressional Quarterly's Editorial Research Reports*, 16 January 1987, p. 22.
17. Brent Scowcroft, in Korb and Hahn, p. 8.
18. The Scowcroft NSC Staff in the Bush Administration began at numbers significantly lower than those of the Reagan Administration.
19. Tower, p. V-4.
20. McGeorge Bundy, "Letter to Jackson Subcommittee," in Inderfurth and Johnson, p. 107.
21. Tower, p. V-4.
22. Jimmy Carter, *Presidential Directive/NSC-2: The National Security Council System* (Washington: The White House, 1977), p. 2.
23. Ronald Reagan, *National Security Decision Directive Number 2: National Security Council Structure* (Washington: The White House, 1982).