

BACKGROUND

No. 3098 | APRIL 14, 2016

Memo to a New President: How Best to Organize the National Security Council

Kim R. Holmes, PhD

Abstract

The National Security Council is the President's chief source of national security advice. Historical precedent reinforces how crucial a strong NSC is to the good of the country. A dysfunctional NSC can lead to disasters such as the Bay of Pigs and the Iran–Contra affair, while an effective NSC can lead to successes such as strategic arms control under President Ronald Reagan or the “surge” under President George W. Bush. Because the President's leadership style has such a significant influence on the NSC's shape and effectiveness, the next President must avoid the allures of groupthink and cult of personality and instead adopt the successful “advisor/honest-broker” model, monitor the implementation of policy, emphasize strategic planning, and focus on the essentials of presidential leadership. Failure in national security is not an option, and one of the best ways for the next President to avoid it is by properly organizing the National Security Council and then following its advice.

Ever since its creation in 1947, the National Security Council has been the chief vehicle for coordinating national security advice for the President of the United States.¹ Over the years, Presidents have experimented with different NSC structures and organizations with varying degrees of success. They have tried strong advisors and weak ones. They have had small staffs and large ones. Some Presidents have relied on NSC staffs heavily, while others have used them only seldom. Through it all, enough historical evidence has been accumulated to pass judgment on which organizations work best and which ones don't.

We know, for example, that involving the NSC staff in the independent operations of government is a bad idea. We also know that

KEY POINTS

- The National Security Council is the President's principal source of national security advice.
- The National Security Advisor decides which issues warrant the President's attention and which ones do not.
- The President should staff the NSC with people who are philosophically compatible and understand clearly that they will be judged based on how well they function inside the team.
- One problem with the system, however, is that the imperatives of running large departments and agencies will always color the kind of advice a Cabinet member gives to the President.
- An obsession with consensus can lead to groupthink. A President naturally would prefer that all advisors agree, but creating an expectation—and a system—that forces consensus as the final product of advice is unwise.
- A lesson from President Kennedy is worth keeping in mind: A miscalculation in national security is not only dangerous to the country, but also can ruin presidencies.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3098>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

the best National Security Councils are those that work together as a team. There are countless other lessons we could apply. All of these lessons, however, by themselves are not really enough. Countless studies have been done recommending the “ideal” NSC structure, only to have Presidents ignore them the moment they step inside the White House. We must understand why this is so before we delve into the problem of NSC reform.

The basic problem is that contradictions are built into the very nature of the NSC. On the one hand, it is supposed to be at the service of the President—that is, the President’s principal source of advice. On the other hand, the President’s advisors are also Cabinet officials who are in charge of huge operations with their own distinct cultures and interests. In the middle is the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA), colloquially known as the National Security Advisor, who is tasked with faithfully coordinating the advice from this disparate group of people while simultaneously offering independent advice on his or her own. The same people who are in charge of advising the President, the Cabinet heads, are also tasked with implementing decisions. It can be structured no other way, but the imperatives of running large departments and agencies, complete with their parochial interests, will always color the kind of advice a Cabinet member gives to the President.

In addition, there are the pressures of the modern presidency. The 24-hour news cycle has thrust many issues, no matter how trivial, into the limelight, making them the President’s responsibility. The news media expect every tactical detail, from the timing of a raid on a terrorist bunker to the targets of drone attacks, to be known and controlled by the President. As a result, the NSC staff gets overly involved not only in the minutiae of operations, but also in politics. It begins to operate more as a personal White House staff than as an advisory and policy coordination staff, sometimes even to the point of acting like a Praetorian Guard for the President’s

political fortunes, which is particularly inappropriate given that many people on the staff are career civil servants from national security agencies rather than political appointees. The results are quite often disastrous.

Any NSC reform plan must come to grips with these dilemmas. The President must squarely face the fact that the NSC system he or she chooses must recall its original purpose, which is to provide advice to the President and coordinate the implementation of decisions across the government. Treating the NSC as an extended, personal operations staff, which is always the temptation of Presidents with weak organizational skills, is bound to fail. So, too, is any NSC system that ignores—or pretends to ignore—the nature of parochialism, both of agencies and of the NSC staff itself, which should not be functioning as an agency. On the one hand, it is necessary and even beneficial to have the departments and agencies push their agendas, because they are the best repositories of operational expertise. On the other hand, taken too far, independent-minded departments can cause the NSC system to break down. Only a President who is acutely aware of the dilemma can consciously build an NSC system that can resolve it.

With these cautionary words in mind, it is possible to build a National Security Council structure that balances these competing forces. There are numerous studies of historical lessons and best practices upon which to draw. From these studies can be distilled at least 10 principles for how the next President can best organize the NSC:

- 1. Adopt the advisor/model for the National Security Advisor.** This model not only best serves the interests of the presidency, but also has the best chance of creating a smoothly operating national security team.
- 2. Design an NSC organization that is streamlined and focuses on the essentials of presi-**

1. The National Security Council is chaired by the President and consists of the Vice President (statutory); Secretary of State (statutory); Secretary of Defense (statutory); Secretary of the Treasury (non-statutory); and Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (non-statutory). The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the statutory military advisor to the council, and the Director of National Intelligence is the intelligence advisor. Other Cabinet members and senior officials can be designated by the President to attend NSC meetings. The National Security Council staff is headed by the NSC’s Executive Secretary, who reports to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Various structures exist to coordinate advice for the President, including interagency meetings of Principals (the President, Vice President, and other relevant Cabinet Secretaries); Deputy Secretaries and their representatives; and other subordinate interagency structures. See “The National Security Council,” The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/nsc> (accessed February 5, 2016).

dential leadership. It is the job of the National Security Advisor to decide which issues warrant the President's attention and which ones do not. Only the most important issues should be decided personally by the President, with the relevant heads of agencies making other decisions consistent with presidential guidance and after the appropriate NSC discussions.

3. **Choose Cabinet secretaries who will work as a team to support the President.** People should be chosen who are philosophically compatible and understand clearly that their success will be judged based on how well they function inside the team.
4. **Empower NSC Cabinet members but hold them strictly accountable if they fail.** This is the only way to avoid the pressures of creating a highly centralized NSC bureaucracy, which almost always leads to failures.
5. **Keep the NSC staff as small as possible.** NSC staffs today are far too large and overly tempted to involve themselves in departmental operations.
6. **Integrate into the NSC system a greater emphasis on strategic planning.** The NSC is the only governmental national security body that can stay ahead of events, but it cannot do so if all it does is manage crises and ignore long-range issues and concerns.
7. **Don't allow process to crowd out substance.** Because NSC staffs are bloated and involved in far too many details of operations, NSC principals are overwhelmed by far too many meetings.
8. **Too much insistence on consensus can lead to groupthink.** This can dilute the quality of information and advice the President receives and dull the sharpness of the options presented to the President for decision.

9. **Create a formal system that monitors the implementation of policy, making this one of the key functions of the NSC staff.** The President should ask the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs for periodic updates on the progress being made in various areas of policy. This should serve as a bureaucratic prompt for setting up separate processes to review implementation.

10. **Continue to have the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism report directly to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.** While it is true that many of the operational details of homeland security are unique, it is also true that the President would benefit from a policy and strategy that integrates national security and homeland security.

Background

The first meeting of the National Security Council took place on September 26, 1947, two months after President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act into law.² At the beginning of the Cold War, it was clear that America's national defense apparatus had to be reformed. The War and Navy Departments were fused together with the new Department of Defense and a newly created Department of the Air Force, which had been the Army Air Corps. Also established was a new National Security Council consisting of the President, the Vice President, and the Secretaries of State and Defense or their representatives.

The NSC was formed to "to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign and military policies relating to the national security...."³ It was originally a small organization, focused mainly on facilitating agency advice to the President. In addition to the new executive secretary, Sidney W. Souers, there were only three employees in 1947.

Scholars have struggled to describe the various models of the NSC as they have evolved over the years. They tend to do this based on how active or dominant National Security Advisors have been.⁴ On one end

2. Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.), p. 27.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

4. *Ibid.*, Figure VI.B, p. 181; also see Figure V.B, p. 139.

of the spectrum is the activist advisor model represented by Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. These men carved out strong roles for the advisor and built a powerful NSC staff to dominate the making of foreign policy. An even stronger variant was the NSC system under Admiral John Poindexter and Robert MacFarlane, where in some cases the NSC staff operated independently. On the other end of the spectrum were the less intrusive and independent advisors under Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman. They were much less powerful than Kissinger and Brzezinski and tended to be more like administrators than advisors. In between these two extremes was the “honest-broker” model developed by Brent Scowcroft and Colin Powell.

Each President has developed an NSC process to suit his own special style and interests, and his choice of National Security Advisor is the result of the type of advice he wants to receive. The more personal control, the more powerful the advisor. The more powerful the advisor, the more controlling and insular is the NSC staff.

The NSC system is also the product of the President’s style of leadership. Truman, for example, was distrustful of the NSC and thus guarded his prerogatives jealously. His advisor had very limited authority; he was a mere executive secretary existing only to facilitate the bureaucratic process of receiving advice from the principal members of the NSC. There was no formal advisory role for the executive secretary, and the main purpose of the NSC process was to coordinate advice, not implement it. Eisenhower, being a former military man, was much more rigorous about decision-making processes than Truman was. He institutionalized a highly ordered NSC system that upgraded the advisor (in the person of Robert Cutler) beyond being an administrator to a coordinator of policy. In addition, Eisenhower was the first President to use the NSC for policy implementation, creating a formal Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) to monitor implementation.

Still, by today’s standards, the NSC process in these years was rather passive, not to mention that the staff was much smaller; Eisenhower’s NSC staff,

for example, numbered only around 20 employees.⁵ The National Security Advisor still functioned largely as bureaucratic coordinator rather than as an independent advisor in his own right.

This all changed in the 1960s. John F. Kennedy bridled at Eisenhower’s formality and wanted a more informal and personal system. He wanted to draw on the advice of a few trusted individuals, such as National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. The overall effect was to centralize advice in the hands of a small group operating outside the confines of the formal NSC process. Kennedy’s desire to control—indeed, micromanage—foreign policy drove him to bypass the State Department and other agencies that he saw as too slow and timid. His centralization of presidential authority reduced the size and relevance of the NSC staff,⁶ but he strengthened the National Security Advisor as an independent operator.

Kennedy paid a high price for this innovation. Bereft of the checks and balances of the formal NSC system, which deprived him of valuable intelligence and sound advice, he launched the failed Bay of Pigs operation. He reintroduced more formal systems afterwards, but America had gotten its first modern taste of the pitfalls of presidential micromanagement. Kennedy’s two experiments (and lasting legacies)—centralization and the National Security Advisor as an independent counselor—had been introduced painfully, but they would endure in one form or another for the rest of the NSC’s history.

Over the next decades, the NSC process continued to become more centralized, and the power of the advisor grew under both Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter. The Secretary of Energy joined the NSC, and its staff grew in size. By 1970, it had grown to over 40 employees.⁷ Kissinger became an independent agent of foreign policy decision-making, even at one point holding the titles of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor at the same time. Brzezinski followed in his footsteps as an activist National Security Advisor, actually becoming a full-fledged member of the Cabinet.

5. Brookings Institution, National Security Council Project, “NSC Staff Size,” http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Projects/nsc/Graph_of_the_NSC_Staff_Size_per_Year.PDF (accessed November 11, 2015).

6. *Ibid.*

7. Inderfurth and Johnson, *Fateful Decisions*, p. 132.

When Ronald Reagan took office, it looked as if a counter-reaction against centralization had arrived. Reagan's National Security Advisor, Richard Allen, was given a largely administrative role, not even reporting directly to the President. However, by his second term, Reagan had swung in the opposite direction, allowing Admiral Poindexter and Robert McFarlane as National Security Advisors to engage in direct operations, some of them unknown to the rest of the government (and even, in some cases, unknown to the President himself).

In yet another swing back in the opposite direction, National Security Advisors Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell settled on what came to be known as the honest-broker approach late in Reagan's second term. There would be more of a focus on administering the advisory process to ensure not only that the President got the best advice possible, but also that the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs would not be an activist or independent player.

Enter Brent Scowcroft. For a short period, he had been National Security Advisor to President Gerald Ford, but during that time, he had remained in the shadow of Secretary of State Kissinger. As APNSA to George H. W. Bush, however, Scowcroft came into his own, picking up where Powell had left off and developing the honest-broker role of the National Security Advisor into a fully developed form. Scowcroft not only introduced the basic NSC structure that is still used in modified fashion today—the principals and deputies committees and subordinate interagency groups (known variously as interagency working groups, policy coordinating committees, or interagency policy committees)—but also created the new hybrid wherein the APNSA could be both an honest-broker coordinator of advice and an independent source of advice for the President at the same time, making clear to the President when he was presenting the views of the President's other advisors and when he was presenting his own views.

Every subsequent President has used this basic structure even as he tweaked it and enlarged the NSC staff. There are variations, to be sure—Clinton's Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger was more of an activist

than George W. Bush's Condoleezza Rice, and Clinton's NSC was more freewheeling than Bush's—but the modern balance to avoid the extremes had been established. Not too weak, but not too powerful either, the modern National Security Advisor was now seen as the President's independent source of advice, the lead coordinator for receiving advice from the agencies, and the President's main aide in ensuring that his decisions were implemented.

As in many Administrations before his, the character of President Barack Obama's NSC has varied widely. It started out as an organization of limited influence under National Security Advisor James Jones. Jones tried to create an honest-broker, bottom-up organization, but like Kennedy, Obama wanted to rely on trusted advisors independent of the formal NSC process. Jones never gained Obama's trust, and like Truman and Kennedy, Obama initially downgraded the formal role of the NSC, relying heavily on insider advisors like Valerie Jarrett and Vice President Joseph Biden.

After Jones left, that changed. When Thomas Donilon became National Security Advisor on October 8, 2010, the NSC process was upgraded and became more formalized. Obama found that, as with Kennedy, an insufficiently strong APNSA and too much informality did not necessarily serve his interests. Once Obama had in place a National Security Advisor he trusted, he was willing to give him more authority.

At first, the new system appeared to work better. The successful raid that killed Osama bin Laden, for example, happened on Donilon's watch. But other problems surfaced. For one thing, the size of the NSC staff ballooned to nearly 400 employees.⁸ With the growing staff came more micromanagement of operations.

Moreover, despite Donilon's stronger advisory hand, disastrous decisions still slipped through. The Libyan intervention in March 2011, for example, was made mainly at the behest of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and United Nations Permanent Representative Susan Rice, largely for ideological and political reasons. They overrode the reluctance not only of Donilon and Secretary of Defense Rob-

8. Karen DeYoung, "White House Tries for a Leaner National Security Council," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/white-house-tries-for-a-leaner-national-security-council/2015/06/22/22ef7e52-1909-11e5-93b7-5eddc056ad8a_story.html (accessed September 16, 2015). See also David Rothkopf, "National Insecurity: Can Obama's Foreign Policy Be Saved?" *Foreign Policy*, September 9, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/09/national-insecurity/> (accessed November 23, 2015).

ert Gates, but also of the President himself. It was a chaotic affair, clearly not thought through, and a decision that went against the best advice of the President's most seasoned advisors. The inept and crudely politicized handling of the Benghazi attack also happened when Donilon was advisor.

After Donilon left office in June 2013, the NSC deteriorated further. The new National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, held Obama's trust, but she was confrontational and highly political and lacked Donilon's finesse and judgment. Some of the most embarrassing foreign policy decisions of the Obama Administration were made while Susan Rice was advisor. These included the flip-flop on Syria and the assertion that Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl had served with honor and distinction.

Perhaps because Rice was so political, the NSC became even more of a micromanager after Rice took over. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the NSC became this way solely because of Rice. The President had always been distrustful of the departments and agencies, especially the Department of Defense. Witness his refusal to take military advice from his commanders on Afghanistan and his keeping Jones at bay precisely because he was, as a former four-star Marine general, seen as being too close to the military. With Rice, Obama got exactly what he had wanted all along: a fiercely loyal servant willing to bend the NSC process to his will.

One central feature of Obama's National Security Council, regardless of who was advisor, is that it is highly political. It is not only the perception of political motivation behind the decision to spin the video in the Benghazi affair to deflect criticism during the presidential campaign; it is also the way the President pushed aside military advice on troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq to satisfy promises made during his 2008 campaign.

There were many other instances of politicization in national security decision-making. The NSC staff, for example, was left out of the loop in the President's decision to grant partial amnesty to the children of illegal immigrants—a decision driven staff-wise largely by political advisor Valerie Jarrett. Even though immigration clearly touch-

es on homeland security, the NSC staff in charge of implementing the new immigration policy was bypassed: Some NSC staffers learned of the decision only when they were asked to clear on a press release. The NSC staff was routinely sidestepped as well on budget and economic decisions even when they directly affected national and homeland security.

Another key feature of the Obama NSC is its micromanagement of department and agency operations. Going back to the Iran–Contra affair, scholars have warned repeatedly of the dangers of allowing NSC staff to get involved directly in agency operations. Yet, as former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has pointed out, micromanaging operations was rampant in the Obama NSC:

I had served in the White House on the National Security Staff under four presidents and had strong views as to its proper role. I had come to learn that White House/NSS involvement in operations or operational details is usually counterproductive (LBJ picking bombing targets in Vietnam) and sometimes dangerous (Iran–Contra). The root of my unhappiness in the Obama administration was therefore not NSS policy initiatives but rather its micromanagement—on Haitian relief, on the Libyan no-fly zone, above all on Afghanistan—and I routinely resisted it. For an NSC staff member to call a four-star combatant commander or field commander would have been unthinkable when I worked at the White House and probably cause for dismissal. It became routine under Obama. I directed the commanders to refer such calls to my office. The controlling nature of the Obama White House, and its determination to take credit for every good thing that happened while giving none to the people in the cabinet departments—in the trenches—who had actually done the work, offended Hillary Clinton as much as it did me.⁹

Nor was NSC micromanagement limited to defense affairs. When he was Homeland Security Advisor, John Brennan practically ran the CIA-driven drone

9. Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), pp. 586–587. See also Bret Baier, Interview with Robert Gates, Fox News *Special Report*, Video file, Grabien, October 15, 2015, <https://grabien.com/file.php?id=61320> (accessed November 23, 2015).

operations campaign out of his office.¹⁰ In addition, NSC staffers involved in homeland security were overly involved in the minutiae of daily operations of the Transportation Security Administration and other agencies. With a bloated and growing staff and a presidential penchant for meddling in the day-to-day affairs of the agencies, largely for political reasons, the process became fraught with redundancies and inefficiencies. The results were frustrated implementing agencies and poor presidential decisions that sometimes were made against the advice of the President's principal advisors.

The irony is that Barack Obama had come into office committed to NSC reform. The Administration implemented NSC reforms of its own, merging, for example, the Homeland Security Council staff with the National Security Council staff in 2009. APNSA James Jones explicitly called for better integration of the NSC staff in the National Security Strategy of 2010. A major study of the national security system called the Project on National Security Reform (PNSR), undertaken in 2008–2009 at the behest of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Peter Pace, inspired some of Obama's reforms.¹¹

In the fiscal year (FY) 2012 Defense Authorization Act, there was a formal requirement that the President provide Congress with a detailed organizational plan for implementing the National Security Strategy.¹² However, as Jack A. LeCuyer, a former Army War College professor and the lead researcher for the PNSR study, concludes: "Unfortunately, while the White House took initial steps in this direction [of integrated reform], it has done little since PSD-1 [the initial presidential directive setting up the NSC structure] to recognize this imperative for transformation of the national security system."¹³ Despite an initial flurry of interest, the Obama Administration fell back on business as usual and pretty much abandoned Jones's hope for reform.¹⁴

Lessons Learned

The NSC has known both successes and failures. A dysfunctional NSC can lead to disasters like the Bay of Pigs and the Iran–Contra affair. A highly effective NSC can lead to successes like reorienting strategic arms control under President Reagan, organizing the "surge" under President George W. Bush, and managing the raid against Osama bin Laden under President Obama.

A new President seeking to organize the NSC should heed the lessons of history:

- **Ultimately, the President's leadership style decides the shape and effectiveness of the NSC.** Among the various models for the National Security Advisor (assertive, limited-influence, or honest-broker), the chosen model must consciously fit the President's leadership style. Otherwise, the temptation will exist for the President to misuse or even bypass the NSC process. In addition, while normally it is the person closest to the President, whether the APNSA or the Secretary of State, who possesses the most power, the best NSC model should try to avoid lodging too much power in one person.

The best model is one that maximizes the effectiveness of the NSC as a team. Historical experience shows that a "team of rivals" model managed either personally by the President or by a strong APNSA does not work well. It wastes the President's time and energy; causes friction, backbiting, and turf battles among the departments and agencies; and is usually weak in both implementation and accountability. The NSC and NSC staff exist solely to advise and assist the President; if they instead cause the President problems, the President should change the structure or personnel of both.

10. Philip Elliott, "Lawmakers Urge Oversight of Drone Program," *The Washington Times*, February 10, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/feb/10/lawmakers-urge-oversight-drone-program/?page=al> (accessed November 24, 2015). See also David A. Graham, "Meet John Brennan, Obama's Drone Czar and Nominee for CIA Director," *The Atlantic*, January 7, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/meet-john-brennan-obamas-drone-czar-and-nominee-for-cia-director/266884/> (accessed November 24, 2015).

11. Project on National Security Reform, *Turning Ideas into Action*, September 2009, http://www.voltairenet.org/IMG/pdf/Turning_Ideas_into_Action.pdf (accessed November 24, 2015).

12. Jack A. LeCuyer, *A National Security Staff for the 21st Century*, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, December 2012, p. vi, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1142.pdf> (accessed November 24, 2015).

13. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

14. *Ibid.*

- **Beware of overly aggressive or independent National Security Advisors.** A highly independent APNSA involved directly in operations, as Admiral Poindexter was, is extremely risky not only because of potential legal problems, but also because the NSC lacks the expertise, capabilities, and accountability to run operations properly. Strong National Security Advisors like Kissinger and Brzezinski can be effective in some cases, but the price is usually a high degree of discontent and dysfunction in the policymaking process. It is fine to have a visionary APNSA so long as he or she reflects the views of the President and is not imposed on NSC principals outside of the consultative process. The APNSA's job is to get what the President (not the APNSA) wants done and to get it done through responsible departments and agencies (not the NSC staff).
- **It is highly risky for a President to bypass the NSC either directly or with overly informal processes.** Presidents will inevitably rely on friends and informal advisors, but doing so can be very risky. Valuable intelligence can be lost. Opposing views can be excluded. Politics can play too big a role. Groupthink and steamrolling the decision-making process by influential personalities can result in bad decisions. Agencies like the State Department will lack buy-in and may slow-roll or even sabotage Administration policy. The risks of making political and even legal mistakes go up astronomically. If the President does not trust or like the NSC, the APNSA, or the NSC process, he or she should change the structure and processes, not bypass or ignore them.
- **Centralization is the curse of the modern NSC.** The desire by the President and his advisors to control everything, usually as a defense against political criticism, is the bane of the NSC's existence. It not only causes the President to become overly involved in tactical details, but also leads to bloated staffs and heavy-handed staff involvement in operations and tactics, which are best left to the relevant agencies, and tends to paralyze the decision-making process. Because the NSC staff is overwhelmed with the details of operational decisions, strategic priorities are neglected, and monitoring the implementation of policies suffers. Decisions get bogged down in interminable inter-agency reviews, and the overall quality of advice to the President suffers.
- **Often, the bigger the staff, the poorer the quality of advice and the more uneven the implementation of policy decisions.** As the size of the NSC staff has grown, not only has the quality of advice suffered, but the staff also has been drawn more directly into operations. This tendency has created confusion and even chaos in implementing policies, including military policies. It also leads to waste, duplication, and redundancies as inexperienced NSC staffers question or overrule more experienced operational hands in the field. A huge NSC staff can also mean that the President gets personally blamed for operational failures, since everyone assumes that he is in charge. Peter Feaver and William Inboden, who worked on President George W. Bush's NSC, explain why a larger NSC staff does not necessarily reflect greater presidential control:

It seems logical that the more employees you have reporting to you, the more power accrues to you. Yet often the opposite happens as this sprawling bureaucracy leeches away presidential power. Each office and each employee frequently has a mind and political will of their own and just enough distance or autonomy from the President to pursue an independent course.¹⁵
- **Overwhelming the NSC staff with meetings, reporting requirements, and bureaucratic processes impairs the ability of advisors to provide clear-cut and timely advice to the President.** The current NSC staff is overburdened with meetings, paperwork, and the minutiae of tactical and operational issues. In addition to the "tyranny of the inbox," there is the ever-present demand that NSC staffers are expected to be up to speed on the latest operational

15. Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "Implementing an Effective Foreign Policy," Chapter 27 in *Choosing to Lead: American Foreign Policy for a Disordered World*, The John Hay Initiative, 2015, p. 268, <http://www.choosingtolead.net/implementing-an-effective-foreign-policy> (accessed February 6, 2016).

details.¹⁶ Experience shows this to be a mistake. Not only does it involve NSC staff in matters and tactical decisions for which they are ill suited. It also distracts them from the more important business of preparing the best advice possible for the President. The original source of the error is the assumption that the NSC staff must serve as a personal operational staff for the President and that the White House Situation Room must function as an operational center rather than as an information center.

- **Many of the NSC’s chronic problems—for example, a bloated staff and the micromanagement of operations—are caused by the President’s failure to delegate to Cabinet members and hold them accountable.** Instead of confronting a recalcitrant Cabinet member, it is thought to be easier for a President to let the National Security Advisor use the NSC staff to rein in the offending official. This is nearly always a mistake. It seldom solves the problem, and it inadvertently puts the onus for all failures back on the President. That a President would not want the embarrassment of firing an underperforming Cabinet official is understandable, but experience shows that it is temporary and, in any event, pales in comparison to the damage caused by a rogue or inept secretary. The head of an executive department works for the President, not the President’s staff.
- **The NSC has largely failed to achieve one of the most important functions envisioned by its originators: long-range strategic planning.** Eisenhower’s NSC was probably the best organized for strategic planning. It had an actual NSC Planning Board with its own assistant, and its work was rigorously analytical with an eye on long-range questions.¹⁷ Other NSCs have had strategic planning offices, but they have struggled to integrate them into policymaking, large-

ly because the NSC is so consumed by crises and day-to-day operations.

- **Any Cabinet secretary who strives to represent his or her agency rather than the President will be marginalized.**¹⁸ It makes no difference how brilliant or talented a Secretary of State or Secretary of Defense may be; if not seen by the President as part of the President’s team, he or she will be marginalized. This was true particularly with Secretary of State William Rogers, who was sidelined by Kissinger during the Nixon Administration. A principal who is trusted both by the President and by his or her “building” is in the best position to be successful.

Operational Principles for the NSC

With these historical lessons in mind, it is possible to list the key operational principles for a successful National Security Council process.

- **Start with remembering the roles of the APNSA.** They are:
 1. Setting agendas and defining priorities.
 2. Working as an arbiter and adjudicator of conflicting interagency recommendations.
 3. Providing independent advice when requested by the President.
 4. Being a national security professional and creating a firewall against the influence of domestic politics.
 5. Creating an efficient staff management system that clearly reflects the President’s priorities and needs.

In addition, Brent Scowcroft has offered some “axioms” on how the APNSA should operate.¹⁹ As

16. Shawn Brimely, Dafna H. Rand, Julianne Smith, and Jacob Stokes, *Enabling Decision: Shaping the National Security Council for the Next President*, Center for a New American Security, June 2015, p. 7, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS%20Report_NSC%20Reform_Final.pdf (accessed November 24, 2015).

17. Inderfurth and Johnson, *Fateful Decisions*, p. 32.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

19. *Ibid.*

summarized by Karl Inderfurth and Loch Johnson in their book *Fateful Decisions*:

The NSC advisor had to be a policy integrator and an honest broker. He or she also had to be willing to concentrate mainly on advising the president, not making public pronouncements and to be prepared to defer to the secretary of state as the chief “explicator” of foreign and security policy. The advisor had to be prepared to eschew the temptation of running foreign policy from the White House, to carefully husband the president’s time, and sharply limit the operational role of the NSC staff. The advisor had to engage only sparingly in diplomacy with foreign nations—and only in tandem with the secretary of state, and be able to organize the NSC staff to suit the president’s “habits, needs and proclivities.” Finally, the national security advisor had to work in a close partnership with the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), “instead of allowing OMB to make policy by default by dint of its control over money.”²⁰

In sum, and based on these points, it is best to limit the NSC’s main functions to:²¹

1. Identifying the national security issues requiring the President’s attention.
2. Making sure the President has all of the relevant intelligence and advice needed to make a decision.
3. Ensuring that the President is provided with a wide range of options explored by advisors, complete with their recommendations provided in a fair and open way.
4. Presenting to the President the means necessary to implement the President’s decisions.
5. Evaluating the effectiveness of policy implementation and assisting the President in assessing the performance of the agencies in that regard.

■ **Remember the “iron” laws of a successful NSC.** Leslie Gelb believes that there are two “iron laws” governing the NSC process: (1) Things don’t work well with a strong National Security Advisor to the President, and (2) they also don’t work well without a strong advisor.²² Essentially, Gelb is calling for balance, for a National Security Advisor to be strong enough to forge a functioning team but not so overpowering as to create resentment and chaos inside the system. I would add some “iron” laws of my own: (1) No APNSA or NSC structure, no matter how brilliant, can overcome the failures and shortcomings of a President, and (2) a well-run NSC organization and process will not guarantee success, but a poor one will surely produce failure.

■ **Adopt the advisor/honest-broker model for the APNSA.** After countless reviews and studies, and after much painful historical experience, most experts have settled on the honest-broker model as best for the NSC. It best serves the interests of the presidency and has the greatest chance of creating a smoothly operating national security team. Above all, the main job of the National Security Advisor is to coordinate the advice to the President, *not* to be a completely independent player. The APNSA must be strong enough to shape the process but not so overbearing and out front as to overshadow either the President or any of the other principals on the NSC.

The APNSA should be a trusted steward of the advisory process, ensuring that all views are conveyed to the President fairly and clearly. This does not mean, however, that the advisor should be a mere administrator or someone who is not expected to provide independent advice to the President. The APNSA should give independent advice to the President, provided it is done privately and only after all views of other principals have been made known to the President.

■ **Design an NSC structure that focuses on the essentials of presidential leadership.** The

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., p. 336.

22. Ibid., p. 337.

NSC's main job is to give the President the best advice possible, but another crucial task is for the advisor to decide which decisions rise to a level that merits the President's attention. Not every foreign policy decision does so. Not every tactical move has to be approved by the President. It is up to the advisor to determine what these issues are and how to distinguish between a presidential decision and one that is best left to Cabinet members. Once the advisor makes that determination and the President makes a decision, it is up to the NSC staff to:

1. Develop and communicate to the agencies the President's vision, goals, and objectives.
2. Engage the agencies in developing clear sets of options for implementing these goals and objectives.
3. Evaluate the implementation of the policies decided by the President.
4. Establish a crisis-management system that involves the principals of the NSC and their staff but avoids making everything a "crisis." It is up to the advisor to enforce discipline in this matter. The proper places for the management of crises are the Principals Committee, the Deputies Committee, and other subgroups, but from time to time, special crisis-management interagency task forces will be created. However, these should be employed sparingly and only when they truly involve a crisis, such as after a terrorist attack or to help manage military operations.
5. Integrate into the NSC system a greater emphasis not only on long-range perspectives and strategic planning, but also on new cross-cutting influences of science, technology, communications, and international economics. The NSC is the only governmental national security body that can stay ahead of events, but it cannot do so if all it does is manage crises.
6. Develop a consultation and communications strategy that engages and informs key national security constituencies, especially Congress and the media, but also outside influential groups such as think tanks and non-governmental organizations. This should be done only with the President's full knowledge and approval and with very strict coordination of information with all members of the NSC team.

- **Refine the existing NSC and homeland security structures.** There should be no formal APNSA deputy other than the Principal Deputy National Security Advisor, who should be responsible for managing the activities of the NSC. This means abolishing the current position of a principal Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications. A separate Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism currently reports to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. This practice should continue. It is necessary in order to integrate the strategies and policies of national security and homeland security. In addition, a newly created Deputy Advisor for Counterterrorism should report to the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism but also coordinate day-to-day activities with the Principal Deputy National Security Advisor. It is necessary to have the two formal deputies under the Homeland Security Advisor—one for homeland security and another for counterterrorism—because of the highly technical nature of the subject matter.

There is no need to restore Bush's separate Homeland Security Council, which was abolished by Obama, but a second deputy homeland security advisor for combatting terrorism should be added to the existing one for homeland security. Under these two deputies, separate directorates should be added to the homeland security staff for nuclear threats, chemical-biological threats, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, continuity-resilience, response, and transportation-border security. These steps are necessary to give the President the advice he or she needs to manage this crucial portfolio of security affairs.

The National Security Advisor should continue to chair meetings of the NSC principals in the President's absence, and the NSC staff should continue to chair the various interagency meetings. Both the President and the APNSA should hold informal weekly meetings with the principals of the NSC team to air views outside the formal NSC process. The President should always want

the APNSA to be present if the President is in attendance; in addition, the APNSA should have informal meetings and perhaps even daily phone calls to discuss decisions with the President. Formal NSC meetings chaired by the President are at the President's discretion, but they should be reserved only for extremely important issues or during crises. The NSC processes should help the President use his or her time efficiently.

The current structure of Principals Committees, Deputies Committees, Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs), and Sub-Interagency Policy Committees is adequate for these tasks.

The APNSA should explore new and creative ways to engage the agencies in the interagency management of policy implementation and crises. NSC staff should chair interagency meetings, but at the sub-IPC level involved in detailed operations, competent agencies should take the lead. NSC staff should monitor progress but should never be put in actual charge of operational task forces; placing them in charge of operations can cause the NSC staff to become treated as an "agency" for various purposes, resulting in legal difficulties. Agencies should be challenged to come up with new answers to problems rather than always falling back on the default of established practices.

Finally, political considerations are inevitable in the White House, but pressing for partisan advantage, as happened in the Obama NSC, should never be a decisive factor in the making of national security policy. For this reason, no members of the President's political advisory team should attend NSC meetings. The advisor may interact with anyone he or she pleases, but it should be remembered that preventing partisan politics from dominating decisions is a top APNSA responsibility.

Taking all of these principles into consideration, the National Security Council staff would be organized as depicted in Figure 1:

- **Choose NSC principals who will work as a team to support the President.** This rule is

nearly always proclaimed but seldom followed. Politics, friendships, and the reputations of candidates tend to dominate the process of choosing a National Security Advisor, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and other principals in the NSC. This is a huge mistake. A dysfunctional NSC team can ruin a President's foreign policy no matter how smart individual members may be.

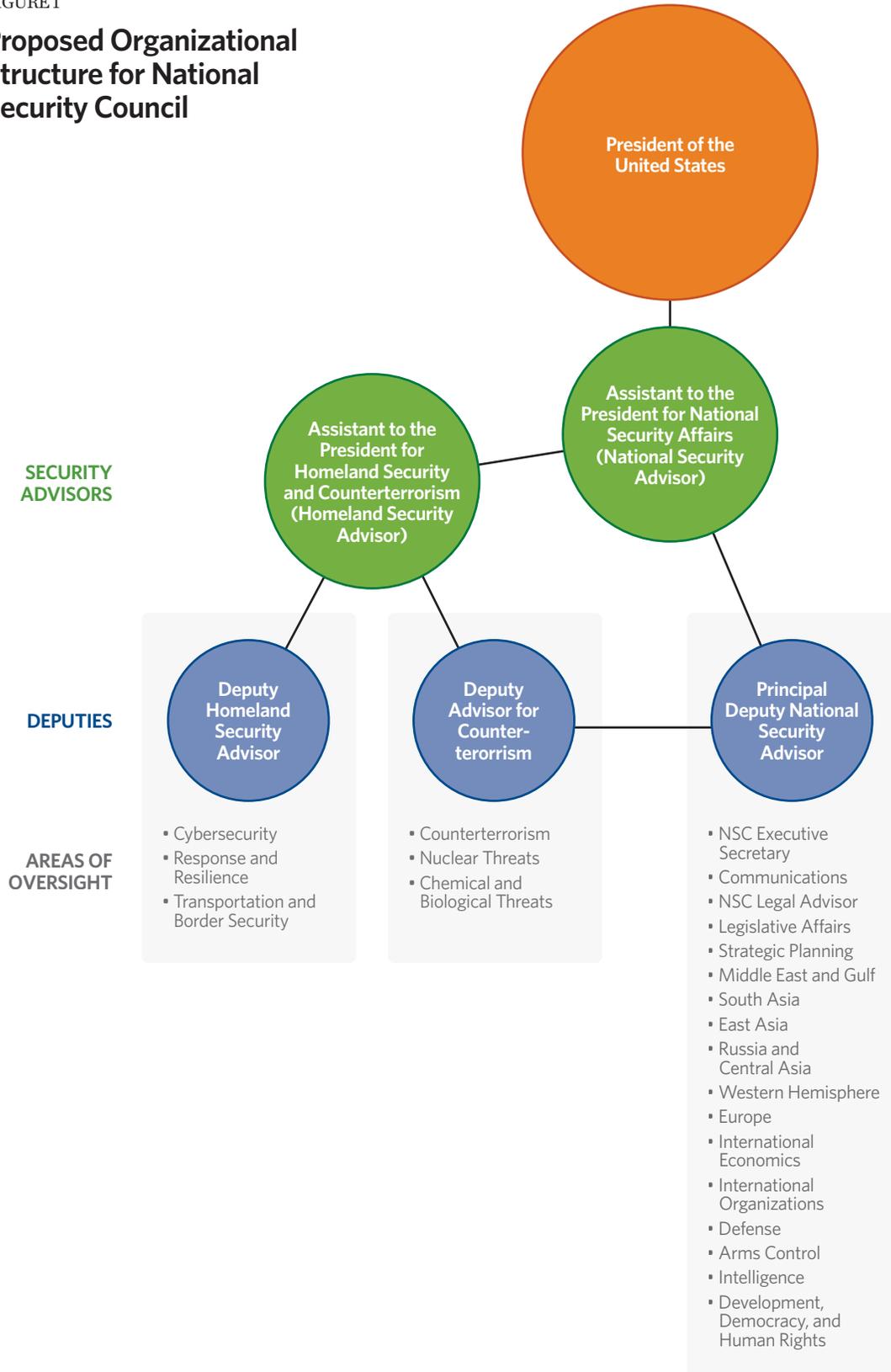
The President must be adamant in refusing to hire candidates who are incapable of working on a team. People should be chosen who are philosophically compatible and understand clearly that their success will be judged on how well they function inside the team. The President should never tolerate unauthorized leaks; open warfare between principal agencies (turf battles are inevitable, but open political warfare between State and Defense, for example, is a sure sign that the President has lost control of policymaking); or a Cabinet member's elevation of an agency's interests above the common good of the country and the President's success. Refusal to adhere to these rules should be a firing offense.

- **Look upon the Secretary of State as "first among equals" among foreign policy advisors.** The Secretary of State should be the President's principal foreign policy advisor but not the only one. The National Security Advisor also plays an important advisory role. In reality, the President needs the unified advice of all of his principals, and this is something that only the APNSA can ensure. There should be no "vicars" or "czars" at State or anywhere else in the government.
- **Be wary of the pitfalls associated with so-called whole-of-government solutions.** Jack A. LeCuyer, former Minerva Chair at the U.S. Army War College and lead researcher for the Project on National Security Reform, defines the whole-of-government approach as one "that fosters government-wide collaboration on purpose, actions, and results in a coherent, combined application of available resources to achieve the desired national security objectives or end state."²³ Elsewhere, this approach is said to be based on "strategic system management functions, processes, and best

23. LeCuyer, *A National Security Staff for the 21st Century*, p. xiv.

FIGURE 1

Proposed Organizational Structure for National Security Council



practices” that will improve the balance between departmental and whole-of-government practices.”²⁴ This is a noble-sounding idea, but it also comes with a number of pitfalls:

1. The creation of highly cumbersome, overly complex, and centralized bureaucratic procedures that greatly complicate the decision-making process, undermine accountability, and bloat staffs, all of which drains power away from the President.
2. The establishment of roles and duties that vastly exceed the skills, capacities, and capabilities of the NSC staff. For example, the PNSR study recommends creating an NSC office to build “human capital” for a newly created interagency workforce that, among other things, would “prescribe personnel policies and programs” for employees in the departments and agencies.²⁵ This is totally unrealistic. The NSC staff should not be expected to create and be involved in the management of an agency workforce separate from what the departments and agencies would establish and manage themselves. It lacks the expertise, skills, capacities, and operational control to manage such a workforce properly or set standards and procedures for it.

In addition, the PNSR report recommends creating an office for “national security integration and analysis” that would be involved in “data rights management, user authentication procedures, classification release authorities, business rules,” and other highly technical matters.²⁶ Again, this is far too much micromanagement and NSC involvement in the operational details of the departments and agencies. It would be far more effective to provide the departments and agencies with an overall requirement for devising the plans themselves and then to create a review system that holds them strictly accountable for the results.

- **Keep the NSC staff as small, simple, and streamlined as possible.** NSC staffs today are far too large. While it is unrealistic to expect the NSC staff to be as small as it was in the halcyon days of Eisenhower or even George H. W. Bush, it should not be nearly as large as it is today. The only way to resist the temptation to expand staffs is for the President consciously to insist on limiting their size. There is no ideal number, but anything above 150 should be heavily scrutinized.

In addition, the President will have to find a balance between political appointees and agency professionals on the NSC staff. Too heavy a presence of agency employees who are seconded to the NSC staff, sometimes for budgetary reasons, should be avoided. Agency professionals are often more beholden to their parent departments than they are to the President’s agenda. The President deserves the best technical advice, which sometimes only agency professionals can provide, but political appointees, particularly at the most senior levels of the NSC, are also essential. If the staff is smaller, the temptation to add seconded agency officials to save money could be reduced.

- **Don’t allow process to crowd out substance.** Because NSC staffs are bloated and involved in far too many details of operations, NSC principals are overwhelmed with far too many meetings and other process requirements. If the NSC were smaller and did less, it would at least be easier to restrict the number of wasteful meetings, but this would also require discipline on the part of the advisor. There should be a clear hierarchy of meeting structures, based on priorities that preserve the President’s and principals’ time.

Also, the number of NSC-generated studies, reviews, and other paperwork needs to be limited: If everything is important, nothing is important. The tools by which the President makes decisions should be few and straightforward, limited mainly (but not exclusively) to presidential decision memoranda that become the basis for

24. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

25. Project on National Security Reform, *Turning Ideas into Action*, pp. 168-172.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

policy and presidential statements and speeches. Beware of introducing major policy innovations through presidential speeches that have not been properly vetted. Speeches should follow, not lead, presidential policy decisions.

- **An obsession with consensus can lead to groupthink.** A President naturally would prefer that all of his or her advisors agree, but creating an expectation—and a system—that forces consensus as the final product of advice is unwise. It can dilute the quality of information and advice the President receives, and it inevitably dulls the sharpness of options. Hard decisions are skirted by endless analysis, and there often is little more than the appearance of consensus when in reality unresolved differences linger below the surface.

Ironically, groupthink is often the byproduct of an efficient NSC process. Almost everyone wants to be seen as a team player, but too much emphasis on comity can stifle independent thinking. To avoid this trap, the President should insist on giving all sides a fair hearing. One way to do this is to hold informal meetings and luncheons (outside of the formal NSC process) that include the President, the National Security Advisor, the Homeland Security Advisor, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and other principals so that all have an opportunity to present their views. Another is to create a culture and system in which the President is presented with options. The President should know and understand the options presented to the Principals Committee and why the members decided as they did. In particularly important cases, the President should chair NSC meetings to explore the options personally.

However, presidential decisions should be made in private and not in meetings. This must be clearly understood; otherwise, a President's probing questions can lead to misunderstandings (playing devil's advocate, for example, can be misconstrued as favoring or opposing a certain position). In addition, lower-level groups such as the Depu-

ties Committee and the various IPCs should be required to report their deliberations in memos that consciously outline and evaluate options and fully explain the reasons for their recommendations.²⁷ It is up to the APNSA to ensure the high quality of these memoranda.

- **Formally establish that greater interagency cooperation is critical to the security of the United States.** The National Security Advisor should be fully empowered to report any deficiencies or contraventions of the President's policies and expectations to the President; Cabinet officials should be held accountable and disciplined if they fall short. Cabinet officials, of course, should likewise feel free to let the President know if they think the APNSA falls short.
- **Integrate the process of strategic planning into decision-making and policymaking.** Presidents and National Security Advisors always talk about the importance of strategic planning, but the press of day-to-day business and the ever-present tug of crises overwhelm it. The only way strategic planning will be taken seriously is for the President to insist on it and if a structure is created to integrate planning into policy and budget decisions. A separate strategic planning directorate inside the NSC structure is necessary in order to assess strategic challenges and capabilities, oversee national security review studies, create a National Security Strategy, and provide national security planning and resource guidance to the agencies. However, for this office to work properly, some basic rules must be observed:

1. **The work of the planning directorate must be inserted into the advice and decision-making process of the NSC's regular order of business.** It cannot be filed off into a separate stovepipe where studies and guidance are ignored because of the press of daily business. The only way to avoid this weakness is to empower the planning directorate to be involved both the formulation and implementation of policy. The directorate should

27. Brimely et al., *Enabling Decision*, p. 13.

conduct ongoing reviews of policy to ensure compliance with strategic objectives. Strategic goals and objectives drawn up by the directorate staff should guide every policy decision, and summary sections to that effect should be included in presidential directives and other decision-making documents.

2. The strategic planning directorate should work with the Office of Management and Budget to develop long-range budget plans.

It would be useful for the directorate and OMB to develop conceptual budgets for planning purposes, but actual unified “mission” or integrated budgets are unworkable. Not only do they conflict with agency budget procedures; they also do not coincide with congressional budget processes.

Planners may dream of building an elaborate new national security system or of utilizing “whole of government” approaches to budgets that would reorganize the national security agency system and Congress’s committee structure, but such a radical transformation is not likely to happen.²⁸ Nor is it even necessary. Rather than trying to elevate strategic planning by adding more systemic procedures at the staff level, which will only result in bloated staffs and cumbersome (and probably ignored) bureaucratic procedures and reporting requirements, it would be better for the President to insist that budget and resource guidelines developed by the planning directorate and OMB are mandated for the departments and agencies by OMB itself.

3. Focus strategic planning on issues that cut across the stovepipe issues of the departments and agencies.

It is widely known that many national security issues involve issues besides military preparedness. This is undoubtedly true, especially as far as the impact of technology, cyber-warfare, demographics, ideologies, and economics on national security is concerned. All too

often, however, this notion is used to justify expanding definitions of national security to include issues (for example, climate change) that actually have only a marginal or at the very least a disputable impact on security. Strategic planning should focus on the complex interaction of all issues on the evolution of national security threats, including those outside the perimeters of so-called hard security, but planners must focus on matters that truly endanger the safety and security of the American people.

4. Involve outside think tanks and academic communities in strategic planning.²⁹

It is too much to expect busy NSC staff employees to have the time to read the latest research and academic literature on national security. Federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) like the RAND Corporation and numerous military research institutions like the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College can assist the government in long-range research, but they are often focused on individual departmental and agency concerns and sometimes may be overly sensitive to the political priorities of an existing Administration. A better idea would be to reach out to a wide spectrum of private think tanks to conduct long-range strategic planning research. Most think tanks would be eager to help, and if task forces consisted of researchers representing different points of view, they might result in new ways of thinking that are lacking not only in our government, but also in our currently polarized political environment.

5. Make better use of commissions and advisory institutions.

Numerous existing advisory boards such as the Defense Policy Board and the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board could be enlisted to help in strategic planning. For many years, they have often been used more to reward prominent people with political favors than to do the hard work of analy-

28. Project on National Security Reform, *Turning Ideas into Action*. See also LeCuyer, *A National Security Staff for the 21st Century*, pp. 72-73.

29. The author would like to thank former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley for suggesting this idea.

sis, with the result that their performance has been spotty. These boards should be staffed with professionals willing to conduct long-range studies related to strategic planning. Congressionally mandated reports could be enlisted for the same purpose. For example, one of the most successful research panels in recent years was the National Defense Panel's assessment of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, co-chaired by former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former General John Abizaid.

- **Create a formal system that monitors the implementation of policy and make this one of the key functions of the NSC staff.** This has been tried in various ways, from Eisenhower's Operations Coordinating Board to formal inter-agency reviews of policy implementation, all with varying degrees of success. Since the NSC staff is essentially dual-hatted with the task not only of coordinating advice for the President, but also ensuring that his advice is heeded, the distinctions between decisions and implementation often get blurred. It is inevitable that the same people are involved in both the crafting and implementation of policy, but a special process should be established to review whether goals and objectives are being achieved.

The President should ask the APNSA for periodic updates on the progress being made in various areas of policy, and these updates should serve as a bureaucratic prompt for reviews of implementation. Specific metrics of progress should be developed and monitored by the NSC staff. The advisor also should receive periodic progress reports from interagency task forces and groups. If an agency needs prompting to do a better job, the APNSA should be empowered as enforcer, although principals should always be allowed to make their case in person to the President.

Even as the NSC staff undertakes this monitoring role, however, it should remain mindful that its main job is still to advise and assist the President (for example, by monitoring compliance with the

President's decisions). The NSC staff's functions do not include issuing direction to the President's agency heads.

- **Ask Congress to reduce the number of mandated strategy reports.**³⁰ Numerous reports, including the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the Quadrennial Defense Review, and others, currently mandated by Congress are often useful in shaping the public debate, but they have little or no bearing on what the federal government actually does. They use up an inordinate amount of NSC staff time—time that would be better used in preparing internal planning documents. The purpose of producing public information would be better served if Congress insisted on higher quality statements and testimonies in congressional hearings.

Checklist of NSC Items for the President

The President-elect needs to begin preparing to take office well ahead of inauguration day. The government will provide funding and office space under the Presidential Transition Act for "readiness" teams for the nominees even before the election takes place, but once a President is elected, official transition planning can begin in earnest.

The details of guidelines for transitions are not covered in this paper, but suffice it to say two things: There is but one President at a time, so the President-elect should be very careful about making public statements about policy, and the transition teams should vet personnel to make sure they are in place as soon as possible after inauguration and should enable the most important decisions on NSC organization and structures to be made as soon as possible. Thus, very soon after taking the office, the President should:

- **Prepare and issue a number of presidential directives.** At the top of the list should be the first presidential directive describing the NSC organization (PD-1). It should spell out the roles and responsibilities of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism. A draft can be prepared ahead of time during the transition process, but the final result

30. Feaver and Inboden, "Implementing an Effective Foreign Policy," p. 270.

should be the result of extensive briefings and consultations with existing NSC members and staff, as well as department and agency personnel and outside experts, during the transition. The goal should be to outline the NSC structure in a presidential directive on “day one” of the new presidency.

In addition, other documents should be prepared for issuance as soon as possible. They should include:

1. A presidential letter to heads of departments and agencies articulating the President’s expectations for the national security interagency system;
 2. A letter to the Secretary of State outlining the President’s expectations regarding chiefs of diplomatic missions;
 3. An executive order establishing the formalities of the interagency system, including key personnel and structures;
 4. A presidential directive describing the role and authorities of any special interagency teams created;
 5. A budget request to fund the NSC staff and system,³¹ and
 6. Letters to the Department of Homeland Security and other departments and agencies involved in homeland security explaining the new system.
- **Be prepared to hire NSC and homeland security teams as a top priority and as soon as possible.** National security is the Commander in Chief’s top priority. The National Security Advisor in particular should be among the earliest hires, perhaps even the first. Candidates for advisor, national security Cabinet principals, and key NSC staff should have top priority in the personnel process and should be interviewed and vetted during the transition period.
 - **Hold a formal meeting of NSC principals chaired by the President as soon as they are in place.** Informal meetings can be held as Cabinet members come on board, but it is important that the President hold a formal meeting of all NSC principals to explain what is expected of them. At the top of the list of presidential injunctions should be that individual NSC members will be judged by how well they function inside the team. In addition, the principals should be told that they will be involved in various strategic and policy reviews and that they need to add staff quickly to help them perform this task. Finally, to avoid any confusion, the specific role of the advisor should be explained personally and carefully by the President.
 - **Issue a presidential study directive outlining a series of strategic reviews of policy and interagency processes, including a review of previous directives and executive orders.** This should be done formally only when the full team of Cabinet members is in place, but the advisor can begin the preparatory planning and staff work earlier. The new President should not hesitate to overturn existing directives or executive orders deemed to be incompatible with the direction of policy under the new President. The Homeland Security Advisor should conduct a similar review of homeland security in coordination with the National Security Advisor.
 - **Develop an internal six-month plan to signal a new direction in foreign policy.** This should include the following:
 1. Strategic and policy review plans with short deadlines;
 2. A review of top crises to be addressed immediately;
 3. Decisions on budget planning, including adjustments to be made in existing budgets;
 4. The first foreign trips to be made by the President; and

31. Project on National Security Reform, *Turning Ideas into Action*, p. ix.

5. Major presidential speeches and statements explaining the new direction in foreign and security policies.

- **Hold consultations early with key congressional leaders.** U.S. foreign policy works best when it enjoys bipartisan congressional support. This is not always possible in today's hyperpartisan environment, but the next President at the very least should make an effort to reverse the corrosive aloofness and disregard for congressional prerogatives practiced by President Barack Obama. The NSC staff should have a congressional liaison office, but it should keep the agencies informed and never operate independently of approved NSC policies or without the knowledge of the President's legislative assistants. Politics is inevitable in working with Congress, but the NSC staff should try to keep both parties informed.
- **Reach out to key U.S. allies to show robust support.** Many U.S. allies felt neglected by President Obama. To reverse this impression, the new President should make a serious effort to reach out to key allies in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia (starting with the United Kingdom and Israel is often a good idea). Plans should begin immediately for presidential trips, hosting U.S. allies in state visits at the White House, and looking for ways to boost the visibility of allied cooperation in multilateral meetings and fora.

Conclusion

Incoming Presidents often ignore recommendations about how to structure the National Security Council because they are not easy to implement in

the time allowed. There is always some convenient shortcut, and the press of busy schedules often forces decisions before they are thought through. Then there is the headiness of having just won a presidential election, which inevitably induces a short-lived feeling of invincibility in the President. The result is often overconfidence in one's abilities, and the President becomes impatient with the hard work of organization.

Everyone should remember what John F. Kennedy once said: "Domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us."³² Kennedy understood something all Presidents should remember: A miscalculation in national security is not only dangerous to the country; it can also bring down Presidents.

Some final words of advice, then, for the next President: Don't think that anything you have ever done before prepares you for the rigor and demands of the presidency. You may think the pressure of the campaign was difficult, but it is nothing compared to the unrelenting stress of having the world's eyes on your every move and the relentless pressure to make important decisions with imperfect (and sometimes conflicting) information. With this in mind, it would be wise to check your hubris at the front door of the White House.

As John Kennedy might have reminded us if he were alive today, failure in national security is not an option, and one of the best ways to avoid it is to think very hard about how to organize advice from the National Security Council.

—*Kim R. Holmes, PhD, is a Distinguished Fellow in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

32. "John F. Kennedy—Foreign affairs," Profiles of U.S. Presidents, <http://www.presidentprofiles.com/Kennedy-Bush/John-F-Kennedy-Foreign-affairs.html> (accessed November 24, 2015).