

In the Shadow of the Oval Office

The Next National Security Adviser

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NOWHERE IN U.S. law is there a provision establishing the position of the assistant to the president for national security affairs. The job is the creation of presidents, and its occupants are responsible to them alone. The position gained prominence after John F. Kennedy's election nearly half a century ago and since then has become central to presidential conduct of foreign policy. Fifteen people have held the job during this time. Some proved successful, others less so. But the post of national security adviser is now an institutional fact. By all odds, it will remain so.

National security advisers have a tough job. They must serve the president yet balance this primary allegiance with a commitment to managing an effective and efficient policy process. They must be forceful in driving that process forward to decisions yet represent other agencies' views fully and faithfully. They must be simultaneously strong and collegial, able to enforce discipline across the government while engaging senior officials and their agencies rather than excluding them. They must provide confidential advice to the president yet estab-

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lish a reputation as an honest broker between the conflicting officials and interests across the government. They must be indispensable to the process and the president yet operate in the shadows as much as possible. They must do the heavy lifting yet allow others to receive the glory. Above all, they must ensure that the president and his senior advisers give thorough and careful consideration to the handful of critical issues that will make or break the administration. And they must handle all issues, large and small, in a manner that establishes and retains the trust of their senior administration colleagues.

The failures of many previous national security advisers show the importance of getting the job right. Their successes show that it can be done. If the next national security adviser can learn from these failures and these successes, the nation will benefit greatly.

PRESENT AT THE CREATION

IT ALL STARTED with Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy in 1961. Previous presidents had aides who managed the National Security Council (NSC), established under President Harry Truman in 1947 and given greater prominence by President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s. Eisenhower, in fact, created the position of special assistant for national security affairs, as it was then called. But he did so for the sake of policy planning, not day-to-day action. Kennedy was skeptical of long-term planning and wanted to handle foreign policy directly, hands-on. So he and Bundy converted the job into one of managing the president's current policy business and connecting the broader national security bureaucracy to presidential purposes.

Bundy came from outside government—he had been a professor and then a dean at Harvard—as would most of his successors. Within a few months, he emerged as Kennedy's most important aide on national security affairs. He moved his office to the West Wing. He recruited a small staff, soon dubbed Bundy's "little State Department," which provided independent advice and analysis to the president and watched over the broader government. And for the first time, the president, the national security adviser, and his staff gained direct access to information, including cable traffic and intelligence assessments, that would enable them to reach independent judgments on what needed to be done. Together,

these innovations created within the White House an independent staff and analytic capability to help the president manage and execute the nation's business abroad. No previous president had had such a capability, but it was one that no subsequent president would do without.

Kennedy and Bundy were compatible individuals, and they worked well together during the 1,000 days that Kennedy was president. Kennedy wanted lots of information. He thrived on debate and disagreement. A speed-reader, he devoured books and documents and sought out information from all and sundry. The unusually bright Bundy was very much in his element within this intellectual environment. He was happy to feed Kennedy more and more information, drawn from a wide range of government and outside sources. Especially after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Bundy knew that he needed to look at problems from all angles, even switching positions if necessary, in order to assure the diversity of views and perspectives Kennedy so clearly needed and wanted. He did exactly that during the Cuban missile crisis, which turned out to be Kennedy's finest hour. And as the deliberations during the crisis exemplified, Bundy ran an internally open process. He came to be trusted as an honest broker and communicator by the principal cabinet secretaries and their subordinates.

But what works with one president does not necessarily work with another. Bundy's uncomfortable relations with Kennedy's successor underscore that there is no single formula for being an effective national security adviser. It depends very much on what the president wants and needs. Lyndon Johnson was a domestic policy man, an extraordinary wheeler-dealer focused on pushing new legislation through Congress. He was responsible for many of the great initiatives—on civil rights, social justice, health care, poverty—that helped make the United States what it is today. But he was not much of a foreign policy man. He was uncertain about the direction the United States needed to take in the world, especially when it came to the Vietnam War. He feared being seen as weak or responsible for a prominent geostrategic loss, but he was unclear about how to win. Perhaps because of this basic insecurity, he relied on his most senior advisers—particularly the secretaries of state and defense—to help him chart his course. Unlike Kennedy, Johnson did not seek out the more junior staffers who might have real expertise. He did not want or need a mass of background

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information to make his decisions. Instead, he trusted Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara—and later his senior military commanders—to advise him well.

Bundy was uncertain about how to operate within this environment. He did not have the same personal relationship with Johnson that he had had with Kennedy, nor, frankly, did he regard Johnson in the same light. He realized that he had to change in order to do his job well. Johnson did not want mountains of information, nor did he like to debate options or analyze the alternatives. He was a man of action, uncomfortable with dissent—which he feared could leak out and undercut him. Bundy responded by becoming less of a channel for alternative views and more of an advocate—particularly on Vietnam, the issue that dominated the times. Johnson may not have needed another advocate for escalation in Vietnam, but that is what he got. Bundy also came to differ sharply with Johnson on the manner of his wartime leadership. He believed that the chief executive should tell the nation the full magnitude of the commitment, whereas the president sought to downplay the war in order not to undermine his domestic programs. The breach grew, and Johnson was happy to see Bundy go in early 1966.

Walt Rostow, Bundy's successor, was far more compatible with Johnson. But Rostow, an unquestioning booster of the Vietnam War, was not nearly so effective with the rest of the administration. He was not trusted to reflect the views of other officials in his conversations with the president, and Johnson never really put him in charge of managing the overall policymaking process. This highlights a fundamental dilemma: Bundy was a superb process manager but ultimately failed with Johnson because of their shaky and deteriorating personal relationship. Rostow, on the other hand, had a good relationship with the president but failed as a process manager. The trick, as Kennedy had demonstrated, was to find someone who could both manage the process in the way the president needed and relate to the president in ways he wanted.

WHITE HOUSE DOMINANCE

RICHARD NIXON and Henry Kissinger built on what Kennedy and Bundy had begun. Both were foreign policy aficionados, eager to put their stamp on the world. They had a similar realist view of how the

world operated—one in which power and its balance among states were of primary importance. They used the institutions established by Kennedy to establish a strong, White House-centered system of foreign-policy making. And at the beginning, they seemed to have the balance right, creating a policy process that engaged officials across the government yet protected the president's power to choose. Under Kissinger's direction, interagency groups drafted study memorandums on a wide range of issues, lengthy documents that tried to consider all possible angles of the matter in question and present the president with all the realistic options. The issues would then be discussed at the NSC, with all the senior advisers weighing in. Nixon would examine the analyses, listen to the arguments, and then make his decisions.

Yet Nixon found the system not to his liking. He was determined to impose his will, but he had a deep aversion to overruling his advisers face-to-face. And he hated the press leaks that came from an internally open process. So, within six months, the well-calibrated analytic system crafted by Kissinger to Nixon's specifications was abandoned. Increasingly, the president and his national security adviser decided what they wanted to do and set about doing it, with little regard for the perspectives or prerogatives of other key players, including Nixon's own secretary of state. Kissinger became the implementer of Nixon's most important foreign policies—on Vietnam, the Soviet Union and arms control, and China. They would make policy in secret and then execute it in secret. Kissinger negotiated with Hanoi, keeping the talks secret for well over two years. Kissinger employed a secret back channel with the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, and negotiated through it many of the key arms control agreements. Kissinger went on the first trip by a U.S. official to China since 1949—secretly, of course—and opened the way to establishing relations with the communist government. All of this was done with Nixon's authority, and in important instances it led to extraordinary results.

Nixon and Kissinger demonstrated the great potential for power that inheres in the position of national security adviser. But their tenure also demonstrated the great potential for the abuse of that power. Secrecy feeds on itself, and under Nixon and Kissinger, it became a dangerous obsession. It was made worse, in this case, by each man's insecurities and the resulting fragility of their trust in each other. To

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protect himself from blame for leaks, Kissinger authorized the wire-tapping of even his own staff. And the inability of both to share power marginalized people who had the knowledge and expertise that often is necessary to make the right decisions (as became clear, for example, in technical discussions on arms control or the conflict in South Asia). This undermined the cohesion of the government as a whole, since the distrust secrecy engendered among other top officials led them, in turn, to work around Kissinger and sometimes even the president.

After Kissinger, no national security adviser would ever again dominate all major foreign negotiations. Nor would any of his successors systematically keep other key government players in the dark about what he and his president were doing in the areas of those officials' responsibility. There would be occasional abuses, but most national security advisers came to realize that information is a key to power, that sharing it is a key to building trust, and that trust among the top officials is a key to effective policymaking. This was well understood by Brent Scowcroft, Kissinger's immediate successor under Gerald Ford. Another clear lesson from the Kissinger experience is that the national security adviser should not be the primary negotiator on a complex set of issues. The adviser can help open doors or try to clinch the deal. But to be the negotiator is to replace the secretary of state. On that road lies certain conflict, growing distrust, and an increasing likelihood of flawed outcomes.

CONFLICT AND DISARRAY

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI realized the pitfalls of Kissinger's approach when Jimmy Carter tapped him to be national security adviser. But he also realized the glory awaiting those who succeeded in the policy field. So even as he worked to craft an open policy process, one in which information would flow freely and the positions of top players would be accurately conveyed to the president, his real interest was in moving policy in a certain direction. Unfortunately, Brzezinski's views on key issues—notably on how to deal with a Soviet Union that appeared to be becoming more powerful and menacing—clashed with those of other top people in the administration, especially Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and often with the president himself. The ongoing battles that followed led those who opposed Brzezinski on policy to

perceive him, more and more, as an unfair manager of the policy process, someone who was trying to tilt it in his preferred direction. Trust broke down and, with it, an effective process.

Carter aggravated the situation. On the one hand, Carter wanted foreign policy to be run out of the White House—a desire that naturally gave his top aide tremendous power and influence. On the other hand, Carter's policy instincts were, at least initially, closer to those of Vance and the other doves in the administration than to his hawkish national security adviser. As a result, Brzezinski was empowered from a process perspective even when the president was more comfortable with the other side in debates over policy. The only way Brzezinski could have reconciled these conflicting pressures was by focusing on managing the process and downplaying his own views—or else by convincing the president that his views were indeed the right ones.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Carter came around to supporting his national security adviser's view of the Soviet threat. But by then it was too late. Vance would soon resign (over a policy difference with Carter relating to the hostages in Tehran). U.S. standing in the world and the president's standing at home had been tarnished by the uncertain leadership Carter had shown in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. And Brzezinski was widely seen as someone who had distorted the process and failed to protect the president from his own mistakes. Brzezinski's tenure in the job delegitimized it in the eyes of many. There were calls to make it necessary for the national security adviser to be confirmed by—and thus accountable to—the Senate (a call Brzezinski initially supported). Some even proposed abolishing the position altogether, arguing that its very existence generated policy conflict within an administration.

FOUR WHO FELL SHORT

RONALD REAGAN came to Washington sharing the view that the national security adviser had become too powerful a player in the previous decade and that the power of the secretary of state and other cabinet officials had to be restored. But he overreacted to the Kissinger and Brzezinski experiences, thereby creating new problems. Richard Allen, his first national security adviser, was essentially relegated to

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the bureaucratic standing of NSC executive secretaries in the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. His office was moved back down to the West Wing basement, away from the action on the first floor, where the Oval Office is located. And his direct access to the president was blocked.

Allen's successors were able to restore some of the perks and procedures that had put national security advisers closer to the power of the presidency. But each of the next three of Reagan's national security advisers—William Clark, Robert McFarlane, and John Poindexter—proved inadequate to the task. Clark, although personally close to Reagan, lacked the knowledge and experience necessary to lead an effective process. McFarlane, affable and hard working, lacked the stature to go up against his gigantic cabinet counterparts, especially Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. And Poindexter was living proof of the Peter Principle: eventually, everyone gets promoted to the level of their incompetence. The nation, unfortunately, cannot afford incompetence in its national security advisers. The consequences can be catastrophic—as the Iran-contra scandal demonstrated, nearly destroying the Reagan presidency in the process.

Reagan himself did not help. Uninterested in the details of policy, he too often proved unwilling to decide between the positions staked out by his headstrong secretaries of state and defense. He tried to split the difference between them when he could, even though Shultz and Weinberger frequently disagreed on fundamentals, not merely tactics. Decisions were often postponed, to be debated another day. Nor did Reagan ever agree to get rid of one or the other of his advisers in order to overcome the differences that way. "They are my friends," he would explain. "You work it out," he would tell his hapless national security adviser, who, without the president's backing, really was in no position to do so. The only way he could work it out and get things done was to subvert the process, which hardly served the president's or the nation's interests.

The shock of Iran-contra induced a much-needed shakeup. Strong advisers were brought in to help the president run his White House. Former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker became chief of staff, and former NATO Ambassador David Abshire came in to ensure an honest administration response to the Iran-contra investigations.

Frank Carlucci, a former deputy secretary of defense, became Reagan's fifth national security adviser. He revamped the foreign policy process and helped restore trust across the government.

Reagan's successes in his last two years in office owe much to these personnel changes, but they would not have been possible without two other major developments. One was the emergence of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who offered Reagan the opportunity to jointly find a way out of the Cold War confrontation. The other, partly a result of this first development, was the decision by Weinberger to leave his post at the Pentagon, thus ending the debilitating feud with Shultz that had paralyzed the administration. In the final year of Reagan's term, Carlucci took over at the Defense Department, and Colin Powell took over at the NSC. Cooperation replaced confrontation—both in Washington's relations with Moscow and within Reagan's own administration.

THE SCOWCROFT FORMULA

THE SUCCESSFUL end of the Reagan presidency provided a perfect situation for George H. W. Bush. The NSC had been relegitimized through the changes that had been instituted in the wake of the Iran-contra scandal. Those responsible for the excesses had been punished, through forced resignation and, in some cases, prosecution. The world itself stood at the brink of major positive change. Even before Bush ascended to the presidency, Gorbachev had announced the unilateral withdrawal of hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops and thousands of tanks from Eastern Europe, long the focal point of the Cold War confrontation.

Bush was in many ways the perfect president for this situation. He was intensely interested in foreign policy. More than any president before or since, he understood both the importance of a well-run policy process and the role of the national security adviser in managing it. And he appointed the perfect national security adviser to help him succeed. Although Bush's best friend, James Baker, would be in charge of the new diplomacy as secretary of state, the president would rely on Scowcroft (who had served in the same position under Ford) to keep his policy team moving in the same direction. Scowcroft had a winning formula. He built a relationship of great trust with the other key players in the administration. He then ran an open and fair but

determined interagency process—both at the level of the principals and below, especially among the deputies. And he became the president's most trusted adviser by providing a sounding board and pushing his own ideas when he thought they best served the president's—and the nation's—interests.

The processes and practices Bush and Scowcroft instituted proved their worth during the administration's tumultuous first years in office. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union—all of it happened on their watch. With Baker, they managed the change brilliantly. The Cold War ended without a shot being fired. Then came the challenge of Saddam Hussein, who in August 1990 invaded Kuwait. Again, Bush and Scowcroft met the test, pulling together a large international coalition to force Iraq out of its neighbor's territory and restore the status quo. Not everything went well: the aftermath of the Gulf War, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the disintegration of Somalia all posed great challenges at high human cost, which Bush and Scowcroft tended to downplay. But those cases represented failures to adapt old worldviews to new realities, not failures of process. The process Scowcroft put in place, the way he balanced his responsibilities as presidential adviser and honest broker, the manner in which he structured interagency deliberations by emphasizing trust and transparency—these made Scowcroft the national security adviser that each of his successors sought to emulate.

For Scowcroft, the 1980s provided an object lesson in how not to manage the national security process. For Anthony Lake, Bill Clinton's first national security adviser, that lesson was provided by the 1970s. Lake did not want to be like the domineering Kissinger (whom he had served as an executive aide), nor did he want to repeat the feuding of Brzezinski and Vance (which he had witnessed from the seventh floor of the State Department, where he had run the policy planning staff). He wanted to be like Scowcroft under Ford: a quiet, unassuming, behind-the-scenes honest broker who managed the policy process efficiently and without conflict. Lake also sought to keep his distance

Deference to the Oval Office is essential, but so is challenging the judgment of its occupant.

from Clinton; he wanted to keep the national security process insulated from politics. That, too, was a lesson Lake had learned from the 1970s. There were clear risks in being too close to the president.

Lake's model of what a national security adviser should be might have worked with another president and another secretary of state: a Ford and a Kissinger or a Bush and a Baker. But this administration was different. Unlike Ford and Bush, Clinton was a Washington novice, much more passionate about domestic policy than foreign affairs. He needed someone not just to manage the policy process but also to push it forward. A Kissinger or a Baker could have done that, but, for all his strengths, Secretary of State Warren Christopher was no Kissinger or Baker. He was content to have foreign policy take a back seat at the White House, to not push difficult choices on the president, and to defer actions when not doing so might have diverted attention and political capital from domestic concerns.

After the debacles of the first year—over Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti—Lake realized that the way he had approached his job from the outset did not serve the administration. So he changed. He would not only manage the process but drive it along, by trying to resolve old problems and better anticipate new ones. If that meant pushing actions (such as threatening the use of force in Bosnia, Haiti, or North Korea), then he would push them. If that meant differing significantly with others within the administration, then differ he would. The president, too, came to understand that he needed to be more actively engaged in foreign policy. The new approach paid off. The democratically elected leader of Haiti was restored to power. The Bosnian war, Europe's most bloody since 1945, was ended. A new relationship was forged with China. Relations with Moscow were solidified. By the end of Clinton's first term, many of the issues that had piled up in the foreign policy in box at the outset had been successfully transferred to the out box.

A more confident Clinton could try to use his second term to mold a more stable and peaceful world. Sandy Berger was the perfect partner for that effort. Close to the president in both personal and political terms, Berger would help Clinton steer foreign policy during the next four years. Although the execution of policy would remain the purview of the cabinet officers, the initiative would come from an energized White House. Clinton and his second national security adviser were

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kindred souls—tactically astute and politically brilliant, although lacking a clear strategic vision of the world and the United States' role in it. They were problem solvers—and good ones. They tried to solve some big problems, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, they were keenly aware of the political limitations that a hostile Republican Congress would try to impose. These political considerations played a large role—sometimes too large a role—in their deliberations, particularly when it came to whether and how to use force.

CHANNELING THE PRESIDENT

GEORGE W. BUSH came to the presidency very much determined to do things differently from his predecessor, although in one important respect he was very similar. Like Clinton's, his presidency would be focused on problems at home rather than those abroad. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, came as a huge surprise to the new president and his young national security adviser, and they reordered his priorities. His national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, was to be a key part in this reordering. Yet none of the titanic figures in Bush's cabinet was inclined to defer to her on matters of policy or process. Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and even Secretary of State Colin Powell did not make things easy for Rice. Cheney tried to take away her major responsibilities (such as chairing the Principals Committee) and went around her (on detainee matters). Rumsfeld refused to share information (on war planning).

Rice's power lay with the president, who trusted her and liked her more than he did any of his other advisers. To maintain that power in the face of the giants surrounding her, Rice decided that she needed to channel Bush—to focus on his instincts and translate them into policy. After 9/11, Bush was increasingly certain about what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it. Rice's job was to get it done. In the process, she decided not to put Bush's instincts and desires to the analytic test—not to probe his assumptions, look for alternative courses of action, or even examine the likely consequences. She asked, What does the president want, and how can it be done? She did not ask, What if the president is wrong? How else can we achieve his objectives? Who among those who disagree with him should he hear out?

This was a serious failing. It is fair to wonder, however, whether the kinds of questions Rice should have posed were ones Bush was at all interested in considering. There is reason to believe that, particularly after 9/11, Bush would not have reacted positively to such an analytic effort and that he would have objected to Rice's trying to engage him in it. Early in his administration, people meeting with the president felt that, especially on foreign policy matters, Bush was very much in receiving mode. He did not know all that much and realized he needed to know more. But later, those meeting with him saw someone much more in broadcasting mode—telling them what he thought and what he was going to do and far less interested in hearing what they thought. Bush had no self-doubt; he was “the Decider.” Given this, it is doubtful that he would have been interested in reexamining his assumptions, taking another look at alternatives, and working out what to do if the policy he was advocating did not succeed. And so Rice never suggested that he do any of these things. Ultimately, the successes and failures of this presidency, Rice realized, would be the successes and failures of the president. Once again, what the national security adviser could do was constrained by the predilections of the president.

Of course, on those (rare) occasions when Bush did realize that his policy was failing, having an adviser in the White House willing and able to push consideration of alternatives could have helped. Stephen Hadley, the successor to Rice when she became secretary of state in 2005, has been such an adviser, and he did push such an analytic effort when Bush finally recognized in 2006 that his Iraq policy was failing. Hadley urged a reexamination of the assumptions underlying the Iraq strategy. He had the president meet with analysts who favored different strategies. And he pushed a policy review that would give the president clear choices. By the end of that year, these efforts produced a new Iraq policy—the “surge”—which provided the president and his administration with a new basis for hope that the disaster in Iraq might turn out better than many people, including most Americans, had come to believe it would.

Hadley, of course, has worked in a very different environment from the one Rice worked in. Most important, on the issue of Iraq, the president himself had come to believe that his policy was not working and therefore was open to considering alternatives. Hadley has also

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operated within a different team. The new secretary of state, Rice, was, unlike Powell, a close and trusted confidante of the president, someone Bush felt comfortable handing the reins of policy to. The failure of the original Iraq strategy had undermined Rumsfeld's power; his replacement, Robert Gates, was much more of a team player. And although the vice president remained extremely influential, he no longer had many allies within the rest of the government. All of this has enabled Hadley to play the more traditional role of a national security adviser, in a way that Rice could not, which goes to show: national security advisers can only be as effective and successful as presidents enable them to be.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCES

DURING THE course of an administration, the typical national security adviser spends more time with the president than does anyone else responsible for the nation's business overseas. He or she sits a few paces away from the Oval Office, briefs the president first thing in the morning, and is often the last person to see him before he retires in the evening. Now more than ever, making effective policy to cope with an increasingly complex and interconnected world requires integrating varied dimensions—defense and diplomacy, finance and trade, the environment and homeland security, science and social policy—into a coherent foreign policy. It is at the White House and, within it, at the NSC that such integration occurs—which is why, aside from the president himself, the national security adviser is potentially the most important person in government today.

The person who sits in the large corner office of the West Wing must strike a number of difficult balances. One is to realize that although the president is boss, he is not always right. Maybe after the September 11 attacks it made sense to consider the risks posed by Saddam and his apparent determination to obtain weapons of mass destruction to be unacceptably grave. But that was the kind of judgment call that should not have been accepted uncritically by anyone—least of all the national security adviser. Such a conclusion demanded probing analysis and detailed discussion of the assumptions and alternative conclusions, as well as of the possible consequences. No president is

omniscient; all of them need advisers who can protect them from themselves. Deference to the office is vital, but so is challenging the judgment of its occupant, particularly when the stakes are high—which, when it comes to war, they always are.

Another balance the national security adviser needs to strike is between being assertive and not intruding on the roles of others. There are some tasks that the national security adviser and his or her staff are uniquely placed to undertake, and it is their responsibility to make sure that they do so. They must staff the president's daily foreign policy activities, manage the process of making decisions on major foreign and national security issues, drive the policymaking process to make real choices, and oversee implementation of the decisions the president has made. At the same time, there is a natural temptation for national security advisers to think that they can be as good a secretary of state or secretary of defense or CIA director as the actual people who occupy those positions. At times, Kissinger, Brzezinski, Poindexter, and Lake all gave in to this temptation. Sometimes, it worked out well—for example, in Kissinger's opening to China and in Lake's marshaling of European support to end the Bosnian war. But often it did not, with Iran-contra being only the most obvious example. People are generally better positioned to do their own jobs.

The key ingredient to getting these balances right is trust. The president must trust the national security adviser to present him with his or her best and unvarnished advice. The other senior players in the national security field must trust the national security adviser to convey their views fairly and openly to the president when they are not there—as will often be the case on fast-moving issues. They must also be confident that they know what the adviser is telling the president about his or her own views and advice. And they must be sure that they will be involved in any issue or decision that falls within their purview. In helping Reagan survive Iran-contra, Abshire, then special counselor to the president, insisted that (quoting the former presidential adviser Bryce Harlow) “trust is the coin of the realm.” Not every national security adviser has taken this maxim to heart. Iran-contra, of course, resulted from secrecy at the core of the NSC, when even the president was kept in the dark about the diversion of funds. But there have been less egregious instances in which national security advisers

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have forgotten the importance of trust. Kissinger, for example, regularly ignored other senior officials by conducting back-channel negotiations in their areas of responsibility without their knowledge. Brzezinski carried his policy advocacy to the point where other policy players did not believe he was playing straight with them.

What is most important, in the end, is to make sure that the president makes the right decisions, that he does so in a timely manner, and that they are implemented effectively. There is a model of how to manage this decision-making process well, and it dates back to the beginning of the Nixon administration. The new president was steeped in foreign affairs like few others; it was the abiding interest of his presidency. As a result, he did not want to be confronted with consensus recommendations emanating from the bureaucracy; he wanted clear options backed up by good analyses of the underlying assumptions, possible actions, and likely consequences. Kissinger accordingly instituted comprehensive reviews of all the major policy issues—ranging from Vietnam to strategic weapons policy to arms control to China. He put together a deliberative process that presented the president with a clear set of alternative policies, each based on a careful review and analysis. The process eschewed consensus recommendations and produced options that were not limited to the preferences of the different agencies and that included other choices that might plausibly work. Unfortunately, Kissinger and his president essentially abandoned this process a few months into their administration.

It is the national security adviser's overriding responsibility to manage policymaking in such a way as to give the president the best chance of getting it right. The adviser needs to make sure that all those with strong stakes in the issues are involved in the process of deciding them, that all realistic options (including those not favored by any agency) are considered and fully analyzed, that the underlying assumptions are fully tested, and that the possible consequences of every action are clearly understood by everyone before the president is asked to make a decision. The importance of an effective policy process cannot be underestimated. Its absence, history shows, can be truly disastrous. 🌐