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The President's Man

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MCGEORGE BUNDY invented the position of presidential national security advisor. In the service of John F. Kennedy, he converted a job established by Dwight D. Eisenhower to coordinate formal interagency planning into one providing day-to-day staff service to the chief executive on the most urgent current international issues. He continued in this role for over two years under JFK's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. Supported by a small staff of action intellectuals recruited specifically to serve the current president, and aided by a system they established to monitor the foreign affairs agencies' cable communications to and from overseas posts, Bundy provided intimate, informed staff support no prior president had ever received and no subsequent president would want to do without. In *The War Council*, historian Andrew Preston summarizes its historic importance: "Perhaps no other bureaucratic change of the past forty years has had such momentous consequences for the conduct of America's foreign relations."[1]

For the most part, Bundy played his advisory role in cooperation with the principal cabinet officials. He was their colleague and frequent communications channel to the president. He conveyed their views honestly, he brought them together to argue before the president and he handled countless first- and second-order issues with a brilliance and fluid efficiency that has yet to be matched. A Cold War pragmatist, he did not push any overall policy line with the president but addressed matters as they arose and kept the confidence and respect of his peers. Successors would exclude the secretary of state from key decisions (Henry A. Kissinger under Richard M. Nixon) or press a policy line at variance with that which the president was currently pursuing (Zbigniew Brzezinski under Jimmy Carter). Bundy kept to the role of honest (albeit activist) broker.

Most of the time. The big exception was Vietnam. Bundy joined with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in late 1964 and early 1965 to press a policy of escalation on a reluctant President Johnson. His role in America's largest foreign policy tragedy, pre-Iraq, is set forth in impressive detail in this book. Committed to active U.S. global engagement in the tradition of his mentor, Henry Stimson, and believing in the necessity of avoiding

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[1]Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, The NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 334 pp., $49.95.

defeat and the United States's capacity to use military force for good ends, Bundy moved, to quote Preston's chapter titles, from "adviser" acquiescing in Johnson's cautious decisions to "advocate" pressing for stronger presidential action. "Without his efforts", the author concludes, "the war would not have unfolded as it did: indeed, it may not have unfolded at all."

The former conclusion is true; the latter is subject to grave doubt. As one who lived though that period as a young Washington policy aide, I recall all too well the overriding force of the "Munich analogy": If we didn't hold the line on communism in Vietnam, we would have to confront the enemy later, with its strength enhanced and our credibility diminished. It was only after escalation failed to turn the tide that this conventional wisdom was broadly challenged. Moreover, since this book is overwhelmingly about what Bundy and his aides said and wrote, with much less about what Johnson heard from others, it offers us no basis for comparison of Bundy's impact with, say, the strong, pro-escalation work coming from both the civilian and military sides of the Pentagon and conveyed by McNamara's forceful advocacy. Still, Bundy's role was undeniably important. In many other policy debates Bundy leaned against what other advisors were supporting to protect the president's power to decide. On Vietnam, Preston shows, Bundy went with—and reinforced—the predominant view.

One particularly appealing feature of the book is its treatment of the roles of Bundy's senior NSC staff associates. To an unusual degree, Kennedy granted them access to him; even more unusual was the fact that Bundy encouraged this. Reflecting this reality, Preston devotes separate chapters to Walt Rostow—Bundy's NSC deputy through November 1961—and Michael Forrestal, who joined the staff in 1962. He properly labels Rostow "the hawk", though he overstates the advisor's influence on Kennedy and early 1960s Vietnam policy, and the author's statement that Rostow's departure from the NSC staff in December 1961 was not "acrimonious" misses a central point: that Rostow's ideological approach to Vietnam (and other issues) was incompatible with the pragmatic, skeptical, terse *modus operandi* that dominated under Kennedy and Bundy.

By contrast, the flexible Forrestal was admirably suited, and his longstanding relationship with Averell Harriman (who directed East Asian affairs at State), plus his social friendship with Kennedy, made him a natural choice. His pragmatism (enhanced by his initial ignorance of Vietnam) was precisely what Kennedy wanted. He became, in Preston's words, a "soft hawk", devoted to U.S. engagement in Vietnam but favoring "non-military escalation." Yet he was not chosen for his policy views, but for his perceived personal smarts and stylistic "fit" with the Kennedy White House.

Preston's bottom line on Bundy is rough but fair: He was an exceptionally "able, respected and successful National Security Adviser" whose "overall record [was] irrevocably tarnished by his role in causing and continuing the Vietnam War." Yet it is joined to a conclusion about the person that is, frankly, baffling. After stressing how Bundy's Stimsonian convictions drove him to press deep involvement in Vietnam, which failed abroad and brought great costs at home, the author then criticizes Bundy for recanting after the war's full costs became manifest. This reflected, Preston writes, "the underlying superficiality of his conviction." He compares this unfavorably with Rostow's "genuine" ideological views which were "impervious to these same pressures." But don't we want leaders who learn from such a devastating experience, even if too slowly? Surely it is the insensitive ideologues who pose the greater danger.

One final, contemporary point. Vietnam was clearly a policy disaster for the United States. But after reading this book—and looking back at the leaked Pentagon Papers released 35 years ago—one cannot help but be impressed with the seriousness, depth and sophistication of the ongoing intragovernmental debate surrounding each major decision in the early and mid-1960s. The national security advisor spurred and brokered this debate, bringing options and their advocates before the president—time after time.

The contrast with 21st century policymaking on Iraq is stark. By credible contemporary accounts, President George W. Bush decided early to launch an invasion, without a single top-level meeting where pros and cons were explicitly set forth. Once decided, he never looked back. Nor did he look forward. There was no serious interagency NSC review of postwar stabilization strategy with clear options debated before the president. Instead, the problem was delegated to the agencies, with the Pentagon shutting out most experts from State and other agencies, and briefing Bush from time to time on what it was doing. Neither the president nor his national security advisor demanded more. And their country is stuck with the outcome. □