

White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War

John A. Gans (Liveright Publishing, 2019), 301 pp., 8 plates, illustrations

Reviewed by Matthew J.

In 1947 the United States Congress passed the National Security Act, which created the CIA, Department of Defense, and National Security Council (NSC). Facing an escalating Cold War with the Soviet Union, lawmakers envisioned they were creating an architecture to manage US national security policy and anticipated that the NSC would serve as a coordinating body to manage the increasing commitments that a strategy of global containment would require. Within a relatively short time, the NSC not only coordinated policy among the “interagency,” but also became a key driver of US foreign policy, and as John Gans demonstrates in *White House Warriors*, the mission of the organization often depended on who was staffing it at any given time.

Gans focuses on individuals and particular stories as he recounts how NSC staffers navigated conflicts from the 1960s to the present around the world, including in Vietnam, Lebanon, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He describes these individuals as “middle-aged professionals with penchants for dark business suits . . . who have spent their lives serving their country in windowless offices, or on far-off battlefields, or at embassies abroad.” (3) He argues that the NSC has taken on increasing importance in policymaking, even, at times, commanding more influence than the Defense and State Departments in foreign policy debates.

Gans also posits that many presidents have preferred an agile NSC, one able to respond quickly to developing events around the globe. This book holds value for analysts, whose products help inform policies implemented by NSC staffers, and operators, who are often reliant on the NSC for covert action authorities, as well as general readers interested in the intersection of intelligence and policy. Better understanding of how the organization functions can help highlight how to approach the NSC, a body that is one of the most important consumers of intelligence.

Following a few pages dedicated to Franklin Roosevelt’s approach to foreign policy and how Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower conceptualized what an NSC staff should look like, Gans introduces readers to some of the earliest *White House Warriors*, including Michael Forrestal, who served on John Kennedy’s lean NSC staff and had access to the Oval Office and ability to influence the young president. Forrestal pushed for escalation in Vietnam and even counseled Kennedy to rethink US support for South Vietnamese President Diem, which Kennedy did without any input from his most senior foreign policy advisers. Diem’s overthrow in 1963 was an early example of the immense impact NSC staffers could have and how they had the ability to circumvent more formalized processes.

The 1970s witnessed the rise of influential national security advisors, such as Henry Kissinger, who in concert with his staff implemented a restructuring of the NSC, one in which the national security advisor chaired meetings and held more sway than the secretaries of state and defense. Kissinger’s NSC focused less on coordinating interagency players and more on making policy and gained “the power to review and either approve or reject the bureaucracy’s ideas.” (37) When judging the Nixon administration, Gans makes a well-reasoned argument that its legacy on the NSC was found in how successive administrations did very little to reverse the status of the organization as a foreign policy making body, not just a coordinating agency.

Jimmy Carter continued the tradition of a strong NSC staff, bringing on Zbigniew Brzezinski, who kept several holdovers from the Ford administration, including CIA officer Bob Gates and US Navy Commander Gary Sick. It was Sick who argued in favor of a military operation to free US hostages then being held in Iran, and when he wrote a memorandum for Brzezinski arguing that operation “Desert One” could provide the administration with a solution to the crisis, Brzezinski barely edited it before submitting to the president. (60) During the Reagan

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era, NSC staffers pushed for the United States to play a larger role in stabilizing the Lebanese Civil War, a policy choice that ended in tragedy following terrorist attacks against the US embassy and a Marine barracks in 1983. The chapter on Reagan also highlights how the Iran-Contra scandal led to significant reforms at the NSC, an organization that had previously been able to avoid much oversight. In 1986 the Goldwater-Nichols Act stipulated that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs would attend NSC meetings, and one year later, the Tower Commission report recommended the creation of a legal counsel for the body.

One of the commission report's authors, Brent Scowcroft, continued his reform efforts of the NSC into the 1990s, as he became George H. W. Bush's national security advisor. Scowcroft established new types of council meetings that remain today, the Deputies Committee (DC), which included the second in charge at the major agencies and the Principals Committee (PC) for the secretary/director level leadership. Gans writes, "If imitation is the highest form of flattery, the greatest compliment to and legacy of the Bush NSC...is that it would serve as the standard for every NSC that followed." (114) The chapter on the Clinton years focuses almost exclusively on the war in Bosnia, as the breakup of Yugoslavia and he credits the NSC staff with helping achieve the Dayton Peace Accords, which in Gans's view, illustrated the "need for a strong and engaged staff." (139)

The final two chapters primarily cover the Bush 43 and Obama administrations, with a few pages on the earliest days of the Trump presidency. Gans primary argument here is that the post-9/11 period and US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq ushered in a "wartime NSC," in which staffers took on roles that included traveling frequently to conflict zones and, at times, providing the president with daily intelligence updates. (149) In order to meet these demands, the staff ballooned to several hundred. Under President Obama, the staff continued to play a hands-on role, reviewing plans for counterterrorism operations and pushing forward with a normalization of relations with Cuba. All of these activities caught the attention of Congress, which sought reforms at the organization and in late 2016 imposed a restriction on the number of NSC staffers in policy roles to 200.

Gans concludes by noting that in the NSC's more than 70-year history, NSC staffers have accumulated power and influence, often at the expense of department heads and cabinet members. In many instances, as Gans argues, the staff has not only acted as a coordinating body but has pushed US foreign policy in particular directions and "in conflict after conflict, a more powerful NSC staff has fundamentally altered the American way of war." (209) Debates on the proper role of the NSC will surely continue, but there is no doubt, that the organization, and its staff, will continue to play a key role in managing, executing, and at times driving, key US foreign policy decisions, making it all the more important that intelligence professionals understand the institution's history.



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