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A Mouse That Wanted to Roar

Congressional investigators conducting the autopsy of President Reagan's Iranian/Nicaraguan misadventure began with the assumption that the National Security Council was a rogue elephant crashing out of control through the foreign policy jungle. Their preliminary conclusion, however, is that the NSC was nothing but a rogue mouse.

According to this view, the NSC has become a nest of second-raters who deluded themselves into thinking they still had the clout their predecessors enjoyed under Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. So they embarked on a hare-brained, foredoomed escapade that even such a master of intrigue and manipulation as Henry Kissinger couldn't have brought off—and would not have attempted in the first place.

Unlike the classical Greek tragedies, this was not a case of great and powerful men betrayed by hubris, but of ambitious little men betrayed by their own mediocrity. The plot and the cast of characters suggested farce, but the resulting production was a tragicomedy with grave consequences for the Reagan administration and the United States.

As explained to our associate Lucette Lagnado by experts inside and outside the government, the stage was set for the NSC's pratfall not this year or last, but in 1981 when Reagan first took office.

The new president was determined to avoid the bad press that previous administrations had suffered because of the constant feuding between the NSC and the State Department. The way to do this, Reagan decided, was to appoint Richard Allen as his national security adviser and Gen. Alexander Haig as secretary of state. Allen was not the man to challenge the formidable Haig, Reagan's self-proclaimed foreign policy "vicar."

Those who were at the NSC in those days still recall the resentment over their subordinate position. They were made to understand that they were not to steal the show from the State Department. It was made clear to them that their agency was to be merely a clearinghouse for policy ideas, a coordinating agency to expedite communications among the policy-making and operational departments.

The NSC's humiliating role as water boy for the real foreign-policy players was formalized in National Security Decision Directive No. 2, prepared during Allen's tenure though actually issued by his successor, William Clark.

The NSC's morale revived under Clark, whose arrival was greeted with misgivings by the professionals. Though a foreign policy novice, he

proved to be a strong leader; he also had a close relationship with the president. Clark stood up to the State Department and demanded—and got—the removal of Thomas Enders, the assistant secretary for Latin American policy.

But any dreams of revived power were shattered when Clark was replaced by Robert (Bud) McFarlane. "He was over his head in the job," recalled one source. "He was dry and military," said another.

According to these and other sources, McFarlane felt threatened by strategic deep-thinkers and conservative ideologues, whom he conscientiously weeded out of the agency. Though this made McFarlane popular with Foggy Bottom and the media, critics say it deprived the NSC of its intellectual heavyweights and put bureaucrats and military types in control.

"Bud's inclination was to rely on the Foreign Service, the CIA and the career military," one source said.

The process of freezing out intellectuals and ideologues expanded under Adm. John Poindexter, who, predictably, favored military people in key positions.

Congressional foreign policy specialists are openly contemptuous of the present NSC staff. "There are no thinkers there," complained one, "only people capable of shuffling papers." Another Senate source—a Democrat—said "Kissinger's outfit looks really good" compared with the NSC today, and added: "Even Brzezinski looks good."

One congressional critic summed it up this way: "The Kissinger NSC was high-powered. It had credibility. The Poindexter NSC is staffed by nerds and gnomes from top to bottom."

The recent fiasco suggests that the NSC staff returned the uncomplimentary aspersions heaped on it, and a bunker mentality set in. Everyone looked down on them, so they'd go it alone and show their critics. They would tackle the Arabists in Foggy Bottom, who counseled a tilt toward Iraq, and the wimps at the CIA, who were reluctantly bowing to Congress' orders against aid to the Nicaraguan contras.

Thus did the scorned, downtrodden Walter Mittys at the National Security Council seek to restore their agency to its once-lofty pinnacle of power with a foreign policy coup that was equaled in its audacity only by its lunacy. They thought they were Rambo; if they'd only looked in the mirror, they'd have seen . . . Mickey Mouse.

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