

The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security

Bartholomew Sparrow (Public Affairs, 2015), 752 pp., index

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

What Brent Scowcroft said and did has influenced US foreign policy for the past forty years. He served under the Nixon administration, first as a military assistant, and later as a deputy assistant for national security affairs for Henry Kissinger. He became the national security advisor for presidents Ford and George H. W. Bush. He chaired an eponymous commission which was charged with looking into US strategic forces, served on the Tower Commission under President Reagan, and was head of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board during the President George W. Bush administration. He wrote editorials on foreign policy and continued to advise policy officials after he retired. He grappled with issues ranging from the US opening to China in 1972, the evacuation of South Vietnam before its fall in April 1975, debate over the MX nuclear missile in 1983, the breakdown of the national security process under President Reagan in the Iran-Contra affair, the dismemberment of the Soviet empire starting in 1989, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and—indirectly—debate over whether to invade Iraq in the summer of 2002.

The Strategist is the first attempt to capture the full and consequential life of Scowcroft. The book relies on extensive interviews with Scowcroft himself, interviews with those who knew him, histories of his time, and some documentary evidence. This should have all the makings for a solid historical account of the subject's life; unfortunately, however, *The Strategist* suffers from two major problems: instead of using Scowcroft's own words to support a historical account, the book reads more like an oral history backed by some of the documented record; the book also raises the old question about whether it is a good idea for a biographer to like his subject. Sparrow comes across as a huge fan of Scowcroft's policies and politics, with the result being a biased account in which the author and subject seem to reinforce one another's views.

The book works off the sensible premise that bad foreign policy outcomes are the result of bad process. So we learn of the way Kissinger ran the National Security Council (NSC)—and the ways in which Admiral John Poindexter and Condoleezza Rice ran it—and are then given a comparison between their ways and those of Scowcroft. Kissinger by all accounts ran a dysfunctional NSC, full of backbiting, poor information sharing, and inconsistent input from the departments on major issues. Sparrow relates how Kissinger had a habit of skewing his options papers for Nixon towards the policy Kissinger supported—usually the second option in the paper. Though Sparrow does not explicitly mention it, this faulty NSC process, in which many officials were cut out, arguably contributed to the disastrous decision to expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia.

Poindexter's NSC broke down completely under Reagan, leaving the president with only a general idea (though how general is a matter of dispute) of the arms-for-hostages deals, and the funneling of the sale proceeds illegally to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The Tower Commission, with considerable input from Scowcroft, resulted in forced resignations, an independent counsel investigation, and a new national security advisor to tighten up the NSC. Rice's NSC, in both Sparrow's and Scowcroft's view, was unable to get the NSC process to accommodate the clash of egos among Vice President Richard Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin Powell. Sparrow contends this is said to have led to the "ill advised" invasion of Iraq.

For his part, Scowcroft receives praise, no doubt much deserved, for restoring perspective to the NSC's role and raising the morale of those who staffed it after Kissinger's departure. He cut the staff in half upon becoming director to address the Council's disproportionate influence on foreign policy. Changes he implemented resulted in a

more open flow of paper. Greater input into decisions was encouraged, both from the departments and NSC staff. He gave NSC officers back their passes to the White House cafeteria, overturning a practice Kissinger had enforced to prevent his staff from mingling with other staffers in the White House. Scowcroft's policy memos to Ford were not skewed towards a particular option. Later, under President George H. W. Bush, Scowcroft breathed new life into the National Security Council forum as designed in 1947 by creating the Core Group, consisting of foreign policy principals and the president, with the addition of the National Security Advisor. He did the same one level below by convening the Principals Committee to discuss issues without taking up the president's time. The Deputies Committee became the "workhorse" for the administration, reducing the need for the other two decisionmaking bodies to convene.

This streamlined, structured, and more open process got results. On Scowcroft's watch, the Ford administration signed the Helsinki Accords that contributed to the opening and eventual disintegration of the communist bloc in Europe and oversaw the massive—some say not massive enough—evacuation of US officials, civilians, and members of the South Vietnamese government from Saigon in April 1975. Scowcroft as President Bush's chief foreign policy advisor successfully secured widespread foreign support for German reunification. Bush enhanced cooperation with the Soviets on a variety of bilateral issues. Scowcroft also helped engineer the victory of US and UN forces over Saddam Hussein's military in Kuwait.

However, the author overstates his case when contrasting the Scowcroft-run NSC under President George H. W. Bush with the same entity under Rice. Sparrow repeatedly asserts the George W. Bush administration held no NSC meetings to discuss the rationale for going to war against Iraq. Yet his own narrative suggests the decision to move in the fall of 1990 from defending Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield) to evicting Iraq from Kuwait (Operation Desert Storm) did not go through a formal vetting process, either (see Powell's comments below). The author also takes aim at the Bush administration's failure to plan for the aftermath of the Iraq war, but he himself acknowledges that the Scowcroft-run NSC failed to deal effectively with the aftermath of victory in Kuwait, which left two-thirds of Saddam's military capabilities intact—capabilities that were later used to crush rebellions in the Shia south and Kurdish north that Operations Desert

Storm and Shield helped to incite. He then adds a second dubious comparison, that Kissinger and Scowcroft would have done a better job of leading, noting "it is impossible to imagine Kissinger [as National Security Advisor] letting a secretary of state, secretary of defense, or vice president marginalize his input on policy decisions." That may be so, but Kissinger himself was guilty of marginalizing others, as Sparrow chronicles earlier in the book.

Another theme of the book is that a well-functioning NSC leads to cautious policies that default to "staying the course." Scowcroft acknowledges as much, noting that he always tried to evaluate how a major policy initiative could go wrong and precipitate lots of unanticipated consequences. Most historians give the Bush administration high marks for managing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberalization of Eastern Europe in a careful and deliberate manner. In one of his relatively few critiques of Scowcroft, however, Sparrow contends neither the president nor Scowcroft had a vision for how a post-Cold War world should function. The "New World Order" Bush cited in September 1990 lacked definition and received little policy process follow-through. Scowcroft had the phrase dropped, its "grandiose meaning beyond anything he or Bush originally conceived."

The book covers only a few issues regarding Scowcroft's interaction with the Intelligence Community. His dispute with CIA director William Colby over the Church Committee hearings is discussed. Scowcroft objected to Colby's giving full cooperation to the Committee by answering its requests and even volunteering some information. Scowcroft saw these requests as a challenge to executive privilege, while Colby was trying to save the CIA and thought that stonewalling would have made matters much worse. Sparrow raises a point often lost in discussions of this topic that Ford let Colby have his way, in part because Ford's experience as a congressman on the House Intelligence Committee made him more open to legislative oversight. Scowcroft also backed the Team B exercise, whereby a group of outside experts—many of them opposed to détente and the SALT nuclear arms agreement—looked at information similar to the classified materials to which CIA analysts had access in order to come up with alternative conclusions about Soviet capabilities and intent. As head of the PFIAB, Scowcroft launched a study into intelligence reform for the George W. Bush administration; however, its recommendations were not adopted because Defense Secretary Rumsfeld,

as was the case with many of his predecessors, refused to give up control over much of the intelligence budget. And, as the report was finished at the time of the September 11th attacks, DCI Tenet did not want to subject the workforce to a dramatic overhaul when officers were having to grapple with terrorism targeting operations and analysis. Scowcroft contends the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq was a failure of intelligence, when a strong case can be made that it was both an intelligence and a policy failure.

The reader gets a healthy dose of accolades for Scowcroft, many of them earned but gratuitous. One journalist is quoted as describing him as “an honorable public servant, whose instinctive loyalty is to the Commander-in-Chief. He faithfully and competently gets the job done.” (239) Sparrow commends Scowcroft's comments in his book *America and the World* as “striking for the comprehensiveness of his thinking, his command of the issues, his knowledge of the histories of the individual countries and regions of the world.” (557) One would expect to see such over-the-top praise on the dust jacket of the book and not in the body of the text. The quotes often descend into cliché: “Bush and Scowcroft believed too, in the importance of national service, honor, courtesy, and self-discipline. Both were also well mannered, unassuming, gracious, and cordial—behavior today many would label ‘old fashioned.’” (278) “Scowcroft—and Gates—shared a fundamental commitment to the current and future security of the United States.” (550) A little of this goes a long way, yet the reader encounters such grand and vague tributes throughout the book.

So it comes as frankly something of a relief to read the few critical comments. Former National Security Advisor and then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell thought Scowcroft, during the run-up to the Gulf war, “had become the First Companion and all-purpose playmate to the president [and that he] was regularly failing in his larger duty to ensure that policy was carefully debated and formulated.” (398) This quote, borrowed from Bob Woodward's *The Commanders*, is the

most serious charge levied against Scowcroft in the book. Yet Powell's remark goes largely unexplored. And since Sparrow quotes journalists who praise Scowcroft, it only seems fair to note he should have quoted one of his most vocal critics, the late Christopher Hitchens, who had some rather choice if excessive things to say about Scowcroft's time with Kissinger and about his policies in the aftermath of the Gulf War.

As another reviewer of this book has noted, Scowcroft also demonstrated a bad habit of putting down those who disagreed with him. Some were too emotional or passionate. Colby was “troubled,” “tortured,” and “overwhelmed” for differing with Scowcroft regarding how to handle the Church Committee hearings. Secretary of State James Baker was “frantic” about Russia's nuclear weapons' falling into the wrong hands (Scowcroft thought it simply meant “that many fewer aimed at us.”). Some in the Bush administration had a “religious fervor” for fighting terrorism; for others, it was naiveté. Reagan administration officials who proposed steep cuts in nuclear weapons were said to have a “child-like faith” in strategic warning. His disagreeing with Vice President Cheney—after agreeing on much during their time together in the Ford administration—is ascribed in part to the aftereffects of Cheney's many heart surgeries. Indeed, some of Scowcroft's comments about the Bush administration are downright nasty: he suggests President Bush decided to invade Iraq for political gain—to win the second term his father never had. Such dubious and unsubstantiated speculation is beneath Scowcroft, and the author does him no favors by including them in the book. Sparrow conserves them almost certainly to paint Scowcroft as a counter to the “unreasonableness” of others.

But this is not a critical biography, made very clear in the last passage of the book that notes Scowcroft's (many positive) qualities are “vanishingly rare among those occupying the highest positions of power.” A more objective and reasonable biography of Scowcroft's distinguished life has yet to be written.

