

TOWARD A SMALLER WHITE HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY STAFF

A look at the present in historical perspective

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In November 2000, Ivo Daalder and I published a twelve-page “Brookings Policy Brief” on the National Security Council. In it we tracked the growth of the NSC policy staff over a 40-year period, from an activist ten or so under John F. Kennedy to around a hundred at the end of the Clinton administration. We found this staff growth excessive. We particularly decried the Council’s expansion in the 1990s, which “made the NSC more like a government agency—preoccupied with the many details of foreign policy—and less like a presidential staff focused on managing a competitive policy process.”¹

That essay was released one day after the November 7th election. We had planned to address it to the president-elect by name, but his identity had not yet been determined, so we labeled our product “A New NSC for a New Administration.” We pointed to various “pitfalls” in prior regimes, noted that growth in staff size was the “default position” in past Council experience as successive leaders yielded to “the natural temptation to take on new tasks” and “to broaden the focus of their work,” and urged “professional restraint” to resist these pressures. The staff, we said, “should be *no more than 40–45 substantive professionals* (emphasis added).” This would make it “akin to the late Reagan, Bush and early Clinton administrations.”²

Daalder had served on Tony Lake’s NSC staff under President Bill Clinton. A bit over eight years later, President Obama would name him the United States Representative to the NATO Alliance. I had been writing about the NSC for roughly thirty years. Yet it would be hard to find a recommendation that was less vindicated by subsequent practice.

Fast-forward to 2015. The Obama administration was moving to “fine-tune” or “right-size” the National Security Council staff.³ So said its head, presidential national security adviser Susan Rice and her chief of staff, Suzy George. As part of this effort, they were “reversing the trend of growth across successive

Administrations of both parties ... gradually right-sizing the NSC staff.”⁴ But the base from which they began working was now, by common estimates, a staff of four hundred, which would be double that of the George W. Bush administration, quadruple the peak under Clinton, and nine to ten times the Reagan-Bush-early Clinton level that we recommended. By mid-summer 2015, Rice told *Washington Post* correspondent Karen DeYoung, “the staff had been cut by 6 percent,”⁵ which would make it around 375.

These numbers are likely on the high side. The staff counts that Daalder and I reported in 2000 included solely policy professionals, not cable-sorters and other operational staff in the White House Situation Room. The Obama White House was not at all eager to provide precise numbers. But DeYoung, who has tracked the NSC as much as any contemporary analyst, reported that “slightly more than half of today’s NSC personnel are what Rice calls ‘policy people.’”⁶ This would put the core staff’s size at around 225–250. And one significant contributor to staff growth was Obama’s decision back in 2009, defensible in substance, to incorporate the formerly separate Homeland Security Council staff of about 35 professionals.

Putting all this together, NSC staff growth under Obama does not seem quite so egregious. Still, the enhanced size clearly generated serious problems. The administration acknowledged the need for “fewer, more focused meetings, less paper to produce and consume, and more communication ...”⁷ Others were harsher, arguing that the size and scope of the NSC has led to micro-management, pulling far too many issues into the White House orbit, and simultaneously clogging the process of decision as meeting after meeting ends in irresolution. One prescient analysis summarized a key problem as “Too Many Meetings, Too Little Seniority and Decisions.”⁸ According to one staff listing, there were recently no fewer than 22 NSC people with the title, “Special Assistant to the President.”⁹ (“Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs” was, of course, the title inaugurated by Eisenhower and held by Kennedy’s McGeorge Bundy, who was the first in this job to manage day-to-day presidential business, essentially inventing the modern national security adviser position. Chief Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman removed the word “special” from the title because, he recounted, no one could tell him what it meant. It is not clear that anybody can explain it today!)¹⁰

This chapter will argue that in recent years NSC staff growth has truly gotten out of hand, that late Obama “right-sizing” efforts only scratched the surface, and that the time has come for truly radical down-sizing. It is not, the author must admit, the product of the sort of detailed empirical research that supported many of his previous writings on the topic.¹⁰ It is appropriate here, however, to put forward in general terms some of the reasons why the staff has grown. Then we will set forth some reasons why that growth needs to be reversed. Finally, we will suggest what principles might guide a genuine “right-sizing” of the NSC staff, and suggest, tentatively, how we might get there from here.

Explanations for staff growth

The most frequently cited reason for NSC staff growth is enhanced responsibilities. The world has become more complex, it is said. The issue agenda has broadened, engaging more agencies. This broadening has made it ever more unlikely that cabinet agencies will be able to apply the comprehensive perspective to these issues that presidents require.

There is clearly some truth in this assessment. The number of independent nations continues to grow. The rise of Asia renders insufficient the longstanding U.S. priority to Europe and the Middle East. Economic challenges have risen to rival security threats. Most dramatic of all, perhaps, is the post-9/11 rise of terrorism to top-tier policy status, exemplified in recent years by the emergence of the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL), aka *Daesh*. As noted above, Obama's decision to bring the formerly separate homeland security staff into the NSC has been a significant contributor to staff growth.

Moreover, over the decades policy staffs linked to top officials have been growing across the government. Upon assuming the position of secretary of state in 1949, Dean Acheson recalled that "a vitally important step within the Department was the selection from among the young officers of a personal assistant for me"—someone who was "a bachelor, bright, pleasant, knowledgeable about the Department, energetic, and responsible."¹¹ Young Luke Bartle, pulled from the Canada desk, was apparently all this historic Secretary needed for personal policy and operational support. Contrast that with the plethora of aides today on the personal staffs of the Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretary, the Under Secretaries, etc. And there are parallels in the other lead national security agencies—in the international security affairs offices of the Pentagon, for example.

So staffs generally have grown. So, as noted, has the policy agenda. But the challenges of today do not seem orders of magnitude different from those of the forties—or the sixties. Truman, Acheson, and Acheson's predecessor, George Marshall, faced a desperate Europe threatened with economic and political collapse, an incipient Cold War with Russia, Russia going nuclear, a surging independence movement in India and other longtime colonies, and a communist revolution in China, not to mention the creation of new policy institutions both domestic and international—DoD, CIA, NATO, IMF, World Bank, GATT. Like the Obama administration, the leaders of the first postwar decade also faced sustained political attack, particularly on China policy.

The Kennedy-Johnson sixties brought recurrent crises over Berlin, China going nuclear, an emerging common market in Europe, the Cuban missile crisis, war between China and India, war between Pakistan and India, and—of course—what became our all-consuming war in Vietnam.

Are today's challenges really greater? Doubtful. More numerous? Maybe. More politically contested? To some degree: the depth and bitterness of partisan polarization on foreign policy today is probably unique in the postwar period,

though the Joseph McCarthy period of the late forties/early fifties must be rated a close second. But surely the present challenges are not ten or fifteen times as great as those faced by predecessors.

So important causes of staff growth must lie elsewhere.

A key driver is the fact that NSC aides are always overloaded with work—managing voluminous information flows, keeping on top of multiple issues, cultivating relationships across the government—and find it relatively easy to acquire help in handling this work. As one good recent study puts it,

the NSC relies quite heavily on detailed civil servants, foreign service officers, and uniformed military who are placed at the White House for one-to-two-year rotations, even as their home agencies pay their salaries during this time. These "detailees" make up more than two-thirds of the NSC staff. The availability of this "free" labor pool—often highly talented, motivated mid-career staff who see service at the NSC as critical to career enhancement—has been attractive for the NSC leadership.¹²

This labor pool is also attractive, it should be added, to second- or third-tier NSC aides who seek help with their heavy workloads.

Problems with staff growth

Around the summer of 1978, I was working as a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, running a project on Executive-Congressional Relations in Foreign Policy. As I was wandering somewhere on the top floor of the Eleven Dupont Circle Building, an excited secretary came running, saying something like: "Mac, Mac, the White House is calling!" Inured to Washington ways, I had the presence of mind to respond, "Who in the White House?" It turned out to be a summer intern. Perhaps seeking paycheck for the multiple interviews he had granted me on selling the Panama Canal treaties to Congress, a senior congressional liaison aide had tasked his short-term helper with writing a quasi-official history of the successful ratification campaign, and told him that I would be a good source!

I did, of course, talk to that intern. And I would be the last to criticize either him, his boss, or the work that he did. But as a longtime fan of Richard Neustadt, I recalled what that Presidential studies guru had said years before: "This is the White House calling" means less every decade." For as White House staff expands, the proportion of those with White House titles who can actually speak for the president must shrink. We will never have more than one president, and that person will have trusting relationships with only a limited number of senior aides.¹³

The same principle holds, of course, for the aides of those aides. Henry Kissinger, whose NSC policy staff in 1970 numbered "only" in the thirties,

found it necessary to create a *de facto* inner staff of assistants privy to his real thoughts and priorities (and not to all of those either). Kissinger was, of course, notorious for his secret mode of operation, but the principle still holds more generally—beyond a certain relatively low point, the accumulation of staff to a senior official means that most are no longer “staff” to her or him in any real sense. They cannot act for their leader in any direct sense, for they lack reliable connection to what s/he thinks and what s/he wants.

But these aides are typically talented, knowledgeable, and motivated individuals. They are where they are because of this talent and because of their ambition: they want to help shape the world. In the absence of direct relationships with top leaders, they inevitably search for ways to have impact. This will involve invoking the White House or NSC name. It will involve convening meetings to “get on top of” issues large and not-so-large. They can occasionally, of course, do great damage to a president—witness one Colonel Oliver North in the second Reagan administration.

But more often, in their genuine efforts to do good, they just clog the process. The more staff aides there are, the larger the number of talented people who have to pull or push issues upward, to compete for the time and attention of top leadership, and to tax the time of those in the agencies. The more they will, intentionally or not, tie the hands of those agency officials. And since the number of top officials cannot, by its nature, increase, their demands will generate a bottleneck at the top. The result will be more NSC deputies’ committee meetings, more meetings feeding into those meetings, etc. And because too many issues are being driven upward, an unintended result will be greater frustration at all levels of government.

What staff should be doing

So there is a problem. One “solution” would be to eliminate the NSC policy staff entirely, returning the Council to the role intended in the 1940s by its primary initial conceptualizer, James Forrestal. Policy would be the province of the great Cabinet departments, State above all. The Council would embody the Cabinet heads working collectively. Not a few foreign service officers have dreamed of such a change; so have some defense military and civilian officials across the river. This author once put forward a moderate version of this reform, calling for abolition not of the staff but of its head.¹⁴ Concerned about the process-distorting impact of several assistants to the president for national security affairs, I urged in 1980 that this post be eliminated and that the staff be headed by the sole NSC official actually named in the statute, the Executive Secretary.

Ronald Reagan actually launched his administration with a variant of this reform, keeping the title but subordinating its first holder, Richard Allen, to his primary policy adviser, Edwin Meese. Secretary of State Alexander Haig moved aggressively to fill the leadership vacuum, but his demanding style provoked a backlash among his Cabinet and White House colleagues. Within a year, the

President had brought on a new, truly senior national security adviser. Longtime Reagan associate William Clark. Within eighteen months, Haig was out of a job.

This was just one of many demonstrations over the period since World War II that presidents want and feel they need, a senior, personal foreign policy adviser with a supporting staff. That, in practice, certainly decides the matter. But beyond the important question of presidential preference, there are matters of management principle that argue for effective policy staff aides at the White House level. So it is useful to step back at this point and reflect on what roles staff aides ought to play.

If a president depends solely on his “line” officers (Cabinet secretaries, agency heads) he’s will limit the information flow to himself and become victim to least-common-denominator compromises among his senior subordinates, often reached without his knowledge or input. He needs staff to inform him, to help him shape real options for decision, to communicate decisions he makes, and to oversee implementation. He needs them to manage his substantial personal, day-to-day role in making foreign policy, including dealings with foreign counterparts. He needs them to protect him—from actions in “his” government that entail serious substantive or political risk.

But the president also needs supportive strong officials elsewhere in the foreign policy government—the secretaries of state and defense, but also their subordinates, down at least to the assistant secretary level. Without them empowered to do *his* work, the policy capacity of his administration will be severely limited. As I wrote decades ago, there need therefore to be “lines of confidence” stretching from the president to these officials.¹⁶ Staff needs to nurture these lines. McGeorge Bundy commented in 1980 that the national security adviser should see himself (more recently, herself) as working for the secretary of state as well as the president, facilitating communication between these two busy, heavily scheduled individuals.¹⁷ Steve Hadley, George W. Bush’s second-term national security adviser, has made a similar argument on more than one occasion. And this point can be generalized to the relations of NSC senior directors (with those misleading “Special Assistant” titles) to, say, assistant secretaries of state and defense.

Presidential staff needs, of course, to assure that responsible officials are acting in accord with presidential and administration policy. But assuming agency officials are doing so, that staff needs not to dominate or overpower them but to *empower* them, to work with them, to link them to presidential authority so they can be effective in doing the president’s work. Staff aides need to be strong and purposive, but also subtle, enticing cooperation. Their aim should not be to command a top-down process through their roles as chairs of interagency committees, but to build policy allies across the government and connect them to what senior officials want and need. They should enforce fidelity to policy *ends* but allow some leeway on implementation *means*.

It is useful to cite two examples of this being accomplished. Carter administration policy making is best remembered for the substantive, stylistic, and

personal conflict between National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance, particularly concerning relations with the Soviet Union. But from the time that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, NSC aide William Quandt worked hand-in-glove with Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders to build the policy and political foundation for what became the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. And they worked in particular in support of Secretary Vance, whose role was critical to the talks' success.¹⁸ (It helped that Saunders had served on the NSC staffs of several prior administrations, and Quandt had had previous NSC experience under Henry Kissinger.)

What was the exception under Carter was very much the rule under President George H. W. Bush and his exemplary national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft. Their administration, of course, saw the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the unification of Germany, and the reversal of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's conquest of Kuwait. U.S. policy making across this range of historic events featured continuous collaboration among, for example, senior staff aides Robert Gates, Richard Haass and Condoleezza Rice at the NSC; Robert Kimmitt, Philip Zelikow, and Robert Zoellick at State; and Arnold Kanter, who played important roles in both locations. They provided the operational and substantive underpinning for the uniquely productive and collegial policy process at Cabinet level under Bush, Scowcroft, and Secretary of State James Baker. As NSC aide Peter Rodman noted, "[T]he Bush administration ... consisted of grown-ups working together in a civilized way, and a president who made sure of it."¹⁹

In both of these administration cases, the cooperation involved a small group of people who grew to trust one another. This reinforces, in this author's mind, the central argument of this essay—that policy management staffs work best when they are relatively small. When, say, two or three NSC people are working an issue area (Europe, the Middle East), they cannot hope to handle issues themselves and so must engage departmental officials. If that number grows to six or more under a senior director, however, with a score or more of such subdivisions, this type of constructive, informal cooperation is less likely to emerge. For the NSC staff is then transformed into a bureaucracy with its inevitable rigidities, jurisdictional lines and likely turf conflicts.

So lacking persuasive counter-argument, this analyst must return to the Daldler-Destler recommendation of sixteen years ago: an NSC staff of 40–45, augmented perhaps by ten at most to cover homeland security.

This would mean, in turn, cutting back sharply on the number of organizational subdivisions. A useful rule of thumb might be to have no more NSC senior directors than the National Security Adviser and his principal deputy could work with continuously and productively on a daily basis, building strong relationships of mutual trust.

How do we get there from here? By far the best person to accomplish this is the president, of course, and by far the best time is the beginning of an administration. When Jimmy Carter came to office in 1977, he decided immediately to

cut back sharply on the size of presidential staff, including the NSC. Seeing this handwriting on the wall, newly designated national security assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski recruited a staff numbering in the thirties, about 20 percent smaller than that of his predecessor. This did not prevent him from emerging, over time, as Carter's primary foreign policy adviser.

Whatever the size of the staff, it will be composed of very busy people. And their subordinates will be hyper-busy as well. The temptation will be to bring in more men and women to help. As one modest counter, however, we could do worse than reach back once again into that frenetic period in the aftermath of World War II.

About eighteen months after taking office, President Harry S Truman turned to George C. Marshall, architect of victory in that war, to serve as his secretary of state. In late April 1947, Marshall called in foreign service officer George Kennan and asked him to head a new staff to engage in policy planning. The immediate need? How to respond to a Europe on the verge of collapse. The younger man asked for instructions. The response? "Avoid trivia."

As Kennan recounted in his memoirs, he had, "on no notice at all, to scorch together something in the nature of a staff." It was clear, he continued, "that we would have to draw on people whose greatest qualifications, as in my own case, were simply that they were favorably known, and available." The staff was formally established within a week, and Kennan quickly recruited five men of varied backgrounds and specialties. Within a month of Marshall's mandate, the staff delivered him a paper with their findings and recommendations. The main elements of the paper found their way into Marshall's historic commencement address at Harvard, one month to the day from the staff's creation. There followed the Marshall Plan which saved Europe.²⁰

Kennan plus five people. And they were very busy that month!

Epilogue: Beginnings with Trump

When the least-prepared President-elect in American history speaks (without much knowledge) of abandoning the pillars of post-World War II U.S. foreign policy (NATO, free trade, etc.), questions like the size of the NSC staff pale in significance. The question becomes, rather, will he assemble an at least minimally competent foreign policy team possessing the background and prudence that he lacks, and will he listen to their advice and proceed with due caution as he learns on the job?

The initial signs were not promising. From his deeply protectionist Inaugural Address to his designation of Michael Flynn as national security adviser and alt-right advocate Steve Bannon as chief White House planner, Trump entered office seeming ready to practice what he preached.

But reality intruded early. Less than a month into his tenure, Flynn was out, having discussed economic sanctions with the Russian ambassador during the transition and then lied about the conversation with the Vice President. He won

the distinction of serving a shorter period of time in that position than any of his 22 predecessors, and he seemed destined to spend the next portion of his life as a target of multiple investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

His successor, General H. R. McMaster, was greeted with relief by the Washington policy community. He was a respected defense intellectual who immediately began sending reassuring messages at home and abroad. Together with Defense Secretary James Mattis, he acted to counter some of the President's impulsive Twitter messages. So, with perhaps less effectiveness, did Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who failed to build a strong supporting team in his department.

McMaster did not, however, quickly establish the sort of close relationship with the President which has, in the past, been a prerequisite for long and effective service in the national security adviser job.²¹ Nor was he always able to prevail on staffing decisions. He could only have gained, however, when Bannon was first removed from the NSC Principals Committee, and then left the White House staff in August to pursue his far-right agenda from the outside.

Thus, as this is written in fall 2017, the President has implemented some of his promised changes: withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement and the Paris climate accords—but not most. There have been ongoing, fractious efforts to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But Trump's reported determination to withdraw from the Korea-U.S. FTA (in the midst of growing tensions with North Korea over nuclear weapons, no less) was reportedly overcome by the united opposition of his foreign policy advisers. Whether this point-counterpoint pattern would continue was anybody's guess.

Notes

- 1 Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, "A New NSC for a New Administration," Brookings Institution Policy Brief no. 68, November 2000, pp. 3–4.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 3 Suzy George, "Fine-Tuning NSC Staff Processes and Procedures," White House website, June 22, 2015.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Karen DeYoung, "How the Obama White House Runs Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 George, "Fine-Tuning NSC Staff."
- 8 Shawn Brimley, Dr. Dafna H. Rand, Julianne Smith, and Jacob Stokes, "Enabling Decision: Shaping the National Security Council for the Next President," Center for a New American Security, June 2015, p. 5.
- 9 Wikipedia, "The US National Security Council," un sourced.
- 10 See, for example, *President, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform* (Princeton University Press, 1972 and 1974); "National Security Advice to U.S. Presidents: Some Lessons from Thirty Years" (*World Politics*, January 1977); "National Security Management: What Presidents Have Wrought" (*Political Science Quarterly*, Winter 1980–1981); *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American*

Foreign Policy (Simon and Schuster, 1984 and 1985, with Leslie Gelb and Anthony Lake); Oral History Roundtables on the National Security Council (seven in number), Brookings Institution and University of Maryland, 1998–2000, co-edited with Ivo H. Daalder, and most recently, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office* (Simon and Schuster, 2009, with Daalder).

- 11 Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 256.
- 12 Brimley et al., "Enabling Decision," p. 3.
- 13 Of course some, like Kennedy, will have a respectable number of such relationships; others, like Nixon, will have very, very few.
- 14 "A Job That Doesn't Work," *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1980.
- 15 I use the male pronoun for convenience, recognizing the distinct possibility that the next president may be a "she."
- 16 *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy*, esp. chap. 9.
- 17 See, for example, McGeorge Bundy, "Mr. Reagan's Security Aide," *New York Times*, November 16, 1980.
- 18 William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Brookings and University of California Press, 1993), p. 329.
- 19 Quoted in Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, Moderators, "The Bush Administration National Security Council," National Security Council Oral History Roundtable, Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland and The Brookings Institution, April 29, 1999, p. 4. This 60-page transcript includes many other comparable characterizations of the Bush-Scowcroft-Baker process. On the Iraq conflict of 1990–1991, see also Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity: War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (Simon and Schuster, 2009). On the revolution in Europe, see Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed* (Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 20 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), chap. 14.
- 21 Eli Lake, "Washington Loves General McMaster, But Trump Doesn't," *Bloomberg News*, May 8, 2017, www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-05-08/washington-loves-general-mcmaster-but-trump-doesn-t.