

Space for Notes



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Review Essay on:

David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*, PublicAffairs, 2005, 554 pp.

The birth of the National Security Council did not exactly make the headlines. When the National Security Act established the NSC in 1947, The New York Times gave top billing to the creation of a new post of secretary of defense. Only on page 2 did the story get around to mentioning that "the legislation also provides for a National Security Council," composed of the most senior national security officials, whose "meetings will be presided over by the President."

In the half century since, the NSC has become a central institution--in important ways, the central institution--of U.S. foreign policymaking. And over this period, its basic character has changed: from a council of senior cabinet members deliberating with the president to a group of White House staff members headed by the assistant to the president for national security affairs, known as the national security adviser. Over the years, the NSC has increased the power of the NSA and the president but weakened those cabinet members without strong ties to the man in the Oval Office. All told, the advent of the NSC represents one of the most important organizational innovations of the U.S. government since 1945.

In its early years, the NSC was the subject of dozens of scholarly and journalistic analyses. More recently, however, it has received little serious treatment, even as it has become entrenched as the presumptive center of presidential foreign policymaking. A comprehensive book on the NSC's origins and evolution is thus very much needed.

David Rothkopf presents *Running the World* as just such a book--*The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*. And in part, he delivers on this promise. Rothkopf has interviewed, on the record, all the most important NSAs since the late 1960s: Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Frank Carlucci, Colin Powell, Anthony Lake, Sandy Berger, and Condoleezza Rice. (He also had an informative conversation with the late Andrew Goodpaster, President Eisenhower's staff secretary for national security.) Extensive quotations from these and many other important players are the strongest element of the book, illuminating how policymaking really happens. Rothkopf quotes no fewer than 50 former officials, all of whom he interviewed between May and September 2004. For these conversations alone, anyone with an interest in the process of foreign policymaking will want this book on his or her shelf.

As a comprehensive analysis of its topic, however, the book falls short. Rothkopf provides lots of raw material--page upon page of relevant stories and insights--but no clear set of conclusions or even a general idea of how everything adds up.

Mistakes and Omissions

Rothkopf declares in his introduction that "the primary focus of this story is the post-Cold War period in the life of the National Security Council." Perhaps, but it takes him over half the book to get there. This is unfortunate because the post-1989 chapters (plus the chapter on the Reagan era) are the best in the book. The earlier experience is less accessible through interviews, and it shows.

There are also needless errors. Rothkopf twice includes the International Labor Organization among the multilateral institutions created after World War II: one click on "About Us" at the organization's Web site would have told him that it was founded in 1919 under the Treaty of Versailles. He writes that McGeorge Bundy (NSA to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson) was succeeded in 1966 by "his deputy Walt Rostow"; in fact, Rostow had left the NSC for the State Department in November 1961, to be replaced as deputy by Carl Kaysen, a key player who goes unmentioned. Rothkopf is similarly careless about NSC staff numbers: he states on page 84 that "Bundy cut his staff from 71 to 48," then on page 85 that "Bundy reduced it in size from several scores of staff aides to about eleven." He is also inconsistent about the number of aides who served Henry Kissinger.

More important, Rothkopf misses the fundamental change that was initiated under Kennedy and confirmed under Richard Nixon. For its first 13 years, the NSC was staffed by career civil servants who managed interagency policy planning. Under Kennedy, these men (and few if any women) were replaced by aides appointed to serve a specific president, whose job was not planning but day-to-day issue management. Every administration since has followed the Kennedy model. (When Scowcroft resumed the post of NSA during the George H.W. Bush administration, Rothkopf tells us, he instructed his predecessor, Colin Powell, "to tell his staff that they were all fired unless [he] particularly asked them to stay.")

When the NSC was founded, President Harry Truman was quite happy with his secretary of state, George Marshall. He was even happier with Marshall's successor, Dean Acheson. He found the NSC helpful mostly as a forum for deliberation among his cabinet secretaries and for coordination across departments (particularly the State Department and the Pentagon). But the NSC's role was expanded under Kennedy. Although Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman were important ad hoc policy players as senior White House staff members under several presidents, their roles were nothing like those of the NSAS from Kennedy's presidency onward.

Eisenhower was more committed to the NSC and met with it virtually every week that he was in Washington. He created the position of special assistant for national security affairs (H. R. Haldeman would remove "special" from the title in 1969) and tasked its initial occupant, Robert Cutler, with developing a comprehensive policy-planning process in which papers were drafted by senior departmental officials with NSC staff support, then debated at council meetings, and finally promulgated as policy to guide (but not dictate) day-to-day decisions. For the here and now, Ike had Goodpaster, a no-profile aide who brought people and intelligence together as the president required. Because Rothkopf interviewed Goodpaster, and because he draws on a good (though unabashedly pro-Eisenhower) book by Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman (*Waging Peace*), he gets the Eisenhower story basically right. But because he seems to have read little else in the policy literature covering the period, he

succumbs to Eisenhower hagiography--as inadequate a view of the complex 34th president as was his earlier denigration.

Rothkopf's failure here is particularly costly to his treatment of Kennedy, whose key role in shaping the modern NSC he misses almost entirely. Kennedy, as Rothkopf correctly notes, picked Bundy as his NSA without any specific idea of what Bundy would do, and together they dismantled the Eisenhower NSC structure without fully understanding it (contributing to, among other things, the Bay of Pigs disaster). But Kennedy's changes, as refined later in his administration, established a new NSC-based presidential advisory structure that has endured to the present. This structure has three elements: a senior-ranking NSA who manages current issues for the president, a staff recruited for the specific administration, and a White House situation room that provides the technical capacity to monitor departmental communications, particularly those of the State Department. In his 1968 campaign, Nixon talked about restoring Ike's NSC and denounced the "catch-as-catch-can talkfests" of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, but it was Kennedy's structure that Nixon built on and formalized once in office.

As the story moves on, Rothkopf runs through the basics. He depicts the extreme centralization of the NSC under Nixon and Kissinger, the conflict between Cyrus Vance and Brzezinski under Jimmy Carter, and the six years of disarray under Reagan. Rothkopf's obvious sympathy for Brzezinski causes him to ignore the connection between Brzezinski's controversial performance as NSA and Reagan's initial decision to downgrade the position. But he is right about the abysmal performance of the system under the Great Communicator. Reagan's hands-off style made it impossible for his NSAs to manage the bitter conflict between Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger--paving the way to the Iran-contra affair and the near collapse of the administration. The NSC was then reorganized according to the biting critique of the Tower Commission, whose three members former Senate Armed Services Committee Chair John Tower, former and future NSA Brent Scowcroft, and former Senator and Secretary of State Edmund Muskie--took specific senior officials to task for their failings.

The administration of George H.W. Bush was notable for its collegial and productive policy process, with Secretary of State James Baker and NSA Scowcroft playing complementary roles. Clinton NSAs Lake and Berger retained the basic interagency coordinating structure--a cabinet-level "principals committee" chaired by the NSA and a "deputies committee" below it for ongoing issue management--put in place by their predecessor. In the current Bush administration's first term, NSA Rice succeeded in staving off a reported effort by Vice President Dick Cheney to chair the principals committee himself. But, as Rothkopf notes, the administration's policymaking process remains highly Unbalanced: Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have managed to keep a heavy "thumb on the scales" of high-level deliberations, particularly on critical issues such as Iraq.

Policymaking versus policy

Running the World is only partly about the process of policymaking and the NSC. At many points, there is a book about policy struggling to break free. The chapter about the NSC'S origins, for example, is preceded by one contrasting the multilateralist approach chosen by U.S. leaders in the wake of World War II with Bush-Cheney unilateralism in the wake of the attacks of September 11,

2001. The final chapter, aptly titled "U.S. Foreign Policy in the Age of Ambiguity," devotes barely 3 of its 29 pages to conclusions about policymaking, and many more to Rothkopf's views about how policy has gone wrong under Bush's leadership. As a result, the book provides no synthesis, no serious effort to generalize from 58 years of NSC experience.

If Rothkopf had provided a thoroughgoing analysis of policymaking, he would have focused not mainly on substantive issues (multilateralism versus unilateralism, for example), but rather on how decisions are made and implemented (was Bush provided with a full analysis of the pros and cons of abandoning the Kyoto Protocol or of invading Iraq with thin international support?). Since the NSC'S performance is central to these process questions, one would like a book on the council to focus persistently, not intermittently, on the way each administration's NSA and supporting staff affected how issues were managed. And one would like it to draw from the broad variety of NSC experience some lessons about what works best. But Rothkopf fails to do either.

This leaves unanswered several fundamental questions. What, for example, should be the role of the NSA within the overall policy process? A substantial literature, unplumbed by Rothkopf, explores this topic. According to the consensus that had developed by 1980, the NSA should be the president's principal aide on foreign policy--an honest broker among other officials, a driver of the policy process, and an overseer of policy implementation-but should have a low profile and a limited operational role, avoiding too many public appearances and advocacy on controversial issues. But Scowcroft--in many ways the exemplar of this tradition--departed sharply from this style when he pressed for a forceful response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. And Lake, Scowcroft's successor, said at a 1999 Brookings Institution-University of Maryland roundtable on the role of the NSA that he had "made a mistake the first six months in office when I tried too much to be just an honest broker. I remember Colin Powell coming to me and saying that I needed to give my own views more push."

What about public appearances? Rothkopf acknowledges that Berger "adopted a more visible public presence" during Clinton's second term but does not address the pros and cons of this change. He might have noted that Brzezinski's public advocacy did much to undercut his credibility as an honest broker, whereas Rice's more frequent public appearances as NSA did not cause the same problem since she was generally presenting established presidential policy.

Should the NSA act as a negotiator? Pointing to Kissinger's diplomacy Rothkopf argues that it "would [have been] a ridiculous waste of a vital asset" to prevent him from conducting important negotiations himself. But Rothkopf neglects the cost of letting him do so: with Kissinger handling all the main issues, other U.S. diplomats were undercut and the management of the policy process was neglected.

What about the size of the NSC staff? The conventional view is that it should be kept small. At points, Rothkopf seems to disagree: "The impulse to overstreamline staffs needs to be resisted." The staff has grown, he argues, "because the role of the NSC has grown as the scope of issues it must keep track of for the president has grown. It's a genie that won't go back into the bottle." Yet later Rothkopf claims that Rice's "eighty-person NSC" was at a

disadvantage competing with Cheney's smaller, more "ideologically cohesive" staff. And in his passionate closing critique of the Bush administration's unilateralism, Rothkopf argues that terrorism "poses a threat quantum levels of scale beneath that of the Cold War."

So what, then, is the increase in the "scope of issues" that requires close to 100 professionals on today's NSC staff? The Department of Homeland Security and the White House Homeland Security Council have taken primary responsibility for domestic terrorist threats, and the newly created National Economic Council coordinates economic policy. Might it be that bureaucratic and political forces have led to the bloating of staffs, as well as the inflation of titles, in the White House and across the federal government?

Rothkopf's most fundamental limitation is his failure to address the relationship between process and policy. He writes about both but does not do enough to connect the two---and thus he fails to show the reader why the NSC really matters. One finishes *Running the World* applauding the author's ambition and grateful for how much of the NSC story he tells. But we still need a book that pulls it all together.

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