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by Eugene Lang
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Two hundred and forty days.

That is the average length of tenure – eight months – of the national security advisor to the U.S. president during the past two-and-a-half years. With the resignation or firing (depending on who you listen to) of John Bolton, Donald Trump is now on to his fifth assistant to the president for national security affairs, the official title of the job.

It is an historic anomaly of epic proportions. Since the position was created during the Eisenhower administration in the early 1950s, on average national security advisors have served 32 months, exactly four times the average shelf life of Trump’s advisors (and Trump is only just over halfway through his first term of office).¹

Revolving doors are of course a hallmark of the Trump administration, but does this one really matter?

Running the World

The national security advisor to the president is a unique job that has no analogue in Canada² or in any country for that matter. It is a position designed by and for a superpower, conceived at the height of the Cold War when an existential threat to the United States and the American way of life was real and present. Today, that superpower has the largest and most powerful military in history, with national security interests in almost every corner of the world.

The assistant to the president for national security affairs sits at the crossroads of arguably the most complex, opaque and consequential bureaucratic interface known to any government anywhere at any time in history. He or she – this being one of the few top positions in the U.S. government that both men and women have held – is at the centre of the National Security Council (NSC), an interagency committee established at the end of the Second World War, chaired by the president. Its membership includes the vice-president and about 20 of the top cabinet secretaries and their equivalents. They include the secretaries of State, Defence, Treasury, Homeland Security, Energy, the attorney general, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, White House chief of staff, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and national security advisor, among others. David Rothkopf, in his masterful history of the NSC, with only slight exaggeration calls it “The Committee in Charge of Running the World”.³ The council was in fact established chiefly to help ensure American global dominance following the Second World War, when the

¹ The longest serving national security advisor is Henry Kissinger, who held the position for over six-and-a-half years during the Nixon and Ford administrations. The shortest tenure, by far, is that of Michael Flynn, Donald Trump’s first advisor, who served for 24 days.

² Beginning in 2004, there has been a national security and intelligence advisor to the prime minister in Ottawa. This position is not in any way analogous in mandate, authority, influence, access and power to its U.S. counterpart. Canada also has no equivalent of the National Security Council.

³ David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power*, (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 2004).



United States graduated from a pre-war isolationist posture to a postwar internationalist orientation.

The so-called Principals Committee of the NSC – where most of the heavy lifting gets done – includes these same people, except for the president and vice-president. It is both convened and chaired by the national security advisor. Consequently, the assistant to the president for national security affairs has de facto cabinet rank and might even be considered *primus inter pares* among this group, though is not subject to congressional confirmation like the other senior members of the NSC.

This helps explain why any list of previous assistants to the president for national security affairs reads like a Who's Who of American foreign policy, if not postwar international history. Former president John F. Kennedy had the brilliant McGeorge Bundy in the role; Lyndon Johnson the erudite Walt Rostow; Richard Nixon the master strategist Henry Kissinger; and Gen. Brent Scowcroft served both presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush as national security advisor. Jimmy Carter had Zbigniew Brzezinski; Colin Powell served George H.W. Bush; and the two Rices – Condoleezza and Susan, unrelated and vastly different in world views – worked for George W. Bush and Barack Obama respectively.

We tend to remember national security advisors more than we do secretaries of state, likely because the former has had more impact on the world than the latter in the last half-century or so. Who remembers, for example, Nixon's first secretary of state? Kissinger so dominated U.S. foreign policy during Nixon's first term that the name William (Bill) Rogers is little more than a footnote in American diplomatic history. Cyrus Vance was similarly overshadowed by Kissinger's erstwhile rival, Brzezinski, who became an almost impossible-to-pronounce household name in the 1970s.

A few assistants to the president for national security affairs – Kissinger, Powell and Condoleezza Rice – went on to become secretary of state, but probably had less power in that role than they had working in the White House. It is more than a quirk of history that Kissinger remains the only national security advisor to have retained that post while serving as secretary of state.⁴ Few people understood where power rested and how to use it in the U.S. government more than Kissinger.

Herding Vipers

National security policy is, or should be, the integration of foreign policy (including foreign economic policy) and defence policy, supported and informed by domestic and foreign intelligence, including intelligence related to international and domestic economic affairs. In the United States, Canada and in most advanced countries, these varied mandates are of course functionally divided among and within numerous departments and agencies of government and the military.

⁴ Kissinger served as both national security advisor and secretary of state from September 1973 to November 1975.



Effective national security policy, therefore, is a monumental exercise in synthesis, collation and integration of numerous and often divergent perspectives, analyses, intelligence and data. It is therefore among the most complex and consequential of government undertakings in any country, but especially in the U.S. Anyone who has ever worked in national security policy knows that perhaps the biggest challenge of all is in managing and negotiating the inevitable turf, ego, ambition and power struggles among senior officials (civilian and military), political decision-makers and bureaucracies more generally that attends a universe with that many players working on such critical files. Nowhere are these struggles fiercer, and the outcomes more critical, than in Washington.

Dealing with the egos and ambitions alone requires a special type of person. In America, unlike Canada, those who reach the top of the national security ladder are frequently regarded as the best and brightest of their generation. David Halberstam in fact coined that term 50 years ago, chiefly in reference to people like Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Clark Clifford and Bundy, all of whom were at the apex of the postwar American national security system.⁵ And those who aren't at the top of their class, yet hold these positions, are invariably the most ambitious of Americans. Donald Rumsfeld, Alexander Haig, Dick Cheney and Mike Pompeo are good examples. These are the kinds of people who almost always think they are the smartest in the room and are typically forces of nature in their own right.

The national security advisor, therefore, must have the credentials, ego and confidence to interact on an equal footing with type-A personalities on steroids on a daily basis. They must lead the NSC staff to provide the critical integrative and management function considered so essential to U.S. foreign policy success. In other words, they must bring coherence to complexity, if not to chaos, to tame egos and temper ambitions. And out of this analytical and social process they must generate cogent, wise, well-rounded advice for presidential decisions on the most pressing of national security concerns.

Rear Adm. Sidney Souers, the first executive director of the NSC (the forerunner position to the national security advisor), described the essential attributes of the job as follows:

He should be a non-political confidant of the President—a trusted member of the President's immediate official family ... He must be objective and willing to subordinate his personal views on policy to his task of coordinating the views of all responsible officials. His job is not to sell the President on an idea with which he is in sympathy but rather to ensure that all the views of all the interested departments and agencies are reflected.⁶

It sounds like an almost impossible job. Often an exercise in herding and managing vipers in the effort to forge some kind of consensus, the national security advisor's role cannot be overstated in

⁵ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (New York: Random House, 1969, 2001). Halberstam's title was of course intended to be ironic, as the thesis of his book is that a collection of America's best minds around presidents Kennedy and Johnson were singularly obtuse in analyzing and advising the president on American involvement in Vietnam.

⁶ David Rothkopf, *Running the World ...* 58.



terms of the effective functioning and outcomes of American foreign policy. It is also obviously a position of immense influence and power.

The Geography of Power

In government, as in real estate, location matters a lot. All governments have a geography of power. In the American national security architecture, power is located squarely in the White House. That is where policy is made on the big national security issues. The national security advisor is the only member of the national security team, apart from the vice-president, who sits in the White House. Typically, the national security advisor also has more direct access to the president than any other member of that team – and the only thing that matters more than location in this power equation is access.

The assistant to the president for national security affairs, therefore, has both the best location and the most access to the chief decision-maker. That is essentially the definition of power in Washington. It is also the reason Kissinger had so much authority over foreign policy during his first two years as secretary of state. Unlike any other secretary of state before or since, Kissinger still had the location and the access of the national security advisor. He understood the geography of power like no other.

Chaos Trumps Coherence

Today, it is commonplace to see Trump's foreign policy, like much else of the Trump presidency, as an exercise in itinerant, knee-jerk incoherence, if not chaos. Often, it is argued, that is how Trump has always managed the enterprises he has run.

Yet, the revolving door of national security advisors has added another dimension of dysfunction to this presidency. The essential interagency co-ordination, synthesis and management function that is supposed to be the primary role of the NSC and the assistant to the president for national security affairs has been totally absent under Trump. It is one of the chief reasons for Trump's chaotic foreign policy. None of the national security advisors in this administration has been in the job long enough to fulfil the intended role. The most qualified of Trump's assistants for national security affairs in terms of skill, experience, knowledge and temperament was H.R. McMaster, who served for just over a year, not nearly enough time to bring coherence to the Trump foreign policy and world view.

Bolton more or less dispensed with the interagency co-ordination role altogether⁷, and instead used his location and access singularly to advance his own, extreme views – views that would

⁷ A White House official has said, "Principals' meetings...have become rare. I don't remember the last time there was a fucking principals' meeting," as quoted in Heather Hurlburt, "Bolton Leaves the National Security Council in Ruins", *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2019. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/13/bolton-walks-away-from-the-national-security-councils-corpse-trump/>



probably never survive a normal NSC process of consensus building. But Trump knew what he was getting in Bolton, or at least he should have, and thus enabled his style, which tells us a lot about how this president thinks about the NSC and the national security advisor's core role.

The president evidently sees no value in a multiplicity of views and analysis of complex issues that are sorted through the NSC and the assistant to the president for national security affairs to provide him wise counsel. For Trump, the advisor is just another employee or underling, a cog in a big corporate machine that Trump controls, a person who can easily be replaced by a long list of equally ambitious people lined up at the door. Trump is apparently considering at least 15 people to replace Bolton and has publicly stated: "A lot of people want the job. It's a great job. It's a lot of fun to work with Donald Trump. It's easy because I make all the decisions."⁸

In taking that attitude, the president totally undercuts the main source of legitimacy if not authority that the national security advisor has; namely, his or her role as "a confidant of the President ... a trusted member of the President's official family". Without being a true confidant to the president – with the two-way loyalty that such a relationship implies – and being seen as such by the other national security principals, the advisor is virtually neutered in performing his/her traditional role. Trump himself has said publicly it doesn't matter what the advisor thinks or does, because Trump is the decision-maker. This of course fundamentally misunderstands the role and further undermines any future holder of the position in this administration.

Simply put, there hasn't been a national security advisor during the Trump presidency in the way the architects of the position conceived of it, and the way those who held it pre-Trump carried out the job. It's perhaps not surprising that a president who apparently thrives on chaos and allegedly fosters it deliberately sees little value in the NSC and has little time for the assistant to the president for national security affairs. In fact, he might consider both a nuisance because their jobs are to bring order where there is complexity, confusion and sometimes chaos.

Bolton will be replaced soon enough, perhaps with one of the best and the brightest of his or her generation, definitely with one of the most ambitious of Americans. But it won't matter. The national security advisor, one of the key people in charge of running the world, is AWOL in Washington and won't be returning as long as Trump is President.

⁸ Grace Segers, "Trump Says He Has 15 Candidates to Replace John Bolton as National Security Adviser," CBS News, Sept. 12, 2019. Available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-says-he-has-15-candidates-to-replace-john-bolton-as-national-security-adviser/>

► **About the Author**

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