

Cultivating Strategic Thinking: The Eisenhower Model

RAYMOND MILLEN

Recent commentary on the apparent inability of the United States to formulate a clear, consistent grand strategy evokes the question whether such an undertaking is possible for a democracy like the United States. This article examines the National Security Council (NSC) mechanism of the Eisenhower administration. In contrast to the general belief that the Eisenhower NSC was a bureaucratic paper mill, presided over by an affable but phlegmatic president, the reality is that the organization was dynamic and industrious. Astoundingly, the Eisenhower Presidency was unique in its approach to formulating national security policy and the only administration to publish a comprehensive basic national security policy.

In the September 2011 issue of *ARMY Magazine*, James M. Dubik, Lieutenant General (USA Retired) in his article, “A National Strategic Learning Disability?” expressed deep concern regarding a rather incoherent US national security strategy.¹ In a similar vein, Professor Rosa Brooks in the 23 January 2012 edition of *Foreign Policy*, “Obama Needs a Grand Strategy,” declared the “. . . 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) is many things—press release, public relations statement, laundry list of laudable aspirations—grand strategy it ain’t.”² Though their criticisms are valid, they miss the more important issue. Prior to assuming office, very few presidents are educated or experienced in the art and science of formulating grand strategy, and more soberly, the National Security Council mechanism is not optimized towards helping them think strategically. In short, a fundamental inability to cultivate strategic thinking has plagued the National Security Council for decades, so this is not a new phenomenon.

Strategic theorist Harry R. Yarger laments in his book *Strategy and the National Security Professional* that the United States “owns the twenty-first century but is strategically clueless as to what to do with it. Paradoxically, at the time it is most needed, our leaders appear increasingly inept at thinking

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strategically, and the ‘sound bite’ has replaced the national debate on policy and strategy.”³

In *Modern Strategy*, Colin Gray devotes an entire chapter to the topic, “The Poverty of Modern Strategic Thought,” observing “In modern times it has become ever easier for policymakers and military commanders to be so diverted by the proliferation of different forms of war that they have neglected ‘the basics’ of strategy.”⁴

To be clear, simply publishing a strategic document does not mean the policy was fully staffed, studied, and debated, with differences reconciled, and with opportunities and risks prudently weighed. Similarly, poignant presidential speeches, while stirring and inspiring, are no substitute for a national security policy formulation process. Americans may admire great communicators, but confusing lofty rhetoric for substance heightens the risk of becoming embroiled in actions that neither promote nor protect US interests.

These sobering assessments raise the question: How is it possible, sixty-five years after the establishment of the NSC, for US presidencies to continue stumbling about in the realm of foreign policy and national security strategy? It is particularly vexing when one recalls the motivation behind the establishment of the NSC was to inject greater consideration and rationality into formulating foreign policy and national security strategy, coordinate policy initiatives, and develop consistency in policy and strategy formulation—idealistic goals following the years of chaotic and often wasteful management practices during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Congress regarded the council as a coordinating body for the president, with the National Security Act of 1947 stating,

The function of the Council shall be to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and the other departments and agencies of the Government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security.⁵

In deference to Constitutional separation of powers, the National Security Act of 1947 provided the NSC as an advisory body for the President, but Congress did not mandate how it was to function. Indeed, presidents are free to use the NSC in ways which befit their leadership and management styles. Under the leadership of a skilled Chief Executive, the NSC can be a powerful advisory body.

One such president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, exhibited exceptional acumen with his organization of the NSC mechanism, using it to cultivate strategic thinking. An increasing number of scholars are discovering Eisenhower’s organizational and strategic genius, which went unrecognized for decades due to the president’s “Hidden Hand” executive management approach and “above politics” image.⁶

As addressed later in this article, Eisenhower was the only president to foster continual and extensive study, debate, and development of a US national security strategy—an astounding revelation. Eisenhower’s success causes one to wonder why so many successive presidencies have been marked by foreign

policy confusion and inconsistency. Since the United States has elected to remain engaged in global security (rather than escape into isolationism), it makes strategic sense to devote as much attention to crafting grand strategy as Eisenhower. The process is not simple however; the president, no matter how experienced and wise, needs a properly honed NSC system.

Accordingly, this article explores the Eisenhower NSC mechanism, seeking to understand how its structure, processes, and procedures promoted three essential aspects:

- Exploiting the expertise of government and nongovernmental subject matter experts.
- Permitting the president to exercise strategic thinking in the council.
- Coordinating the implementation of policy and strategy.

In the course of this examination, we will emphasize the role of the national security advisor as the key player in the NSC mechanism, a role that makes more sense than placing him or her as an advisor to the president.

The Eisenhower NSC

Making the National Security Council the principal forum for the development of foreign policy and national security strategy, Eisenhower established two structures—the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board—to prepare policy issues for council discussion and to assist in the implementation of policy decisions. It would be an oversimplification to characterize Eisenhower's NSC mechanism as a military staff process. By design, the mechanism was “to integrate the manifold aspects of national security policy (such as foreign, military, economic, fiscal, internal security, [and] psychological [aspects]) to the end that security policies finally recommended to the President shall be both representative and fused, rather than compartmentalized and several.”⁷ Eisenhower did not regard the NSC as a “planning or operational mechanism” but as “a ‘corporate body,’ consisting of officials . . . advising the President in their own right and not simply as the heads of their respective departments.”⁸ Of all the qualities the president sought from his advisors, the ability to render a balanced view for national security decisions was the most highly prized.⁹

Planning Board

The function of the Planning Board was to study policy issues in the form of draft policy papers for council consideration. That it was able to perform this function exceptionally well resulted from pure organizational genius. The Board provided a way for departments and agencies to participate in and contribute to foreign policy and national security strategy development to a degree yet to be replicated.

From their list of senior policy officials, department secretaries and agency chiefs deliberated with the special assistant to the president for national security affairs regarding candidates for board membership. Once the special assistant accepted the candidate, the department secretaries and agency chiefs

submitted a formal letter to the president, who in consultation with the special assistant gave the final approval. Each member derived formal authority from the rank of assistant or under-departmental secretary and a prestigious presidential letter of appointment. Informal authority was drawn through daily consultations with their respective secretaries or agency chiefs as well as frequent contact with the special assistant.¹⁰

As coordinator of the NSC mechanism, the special assistant chaired the Planning Board, which met thrice weekly with sessions lasting three to four hours.¹¹ While the majority of ideas for policy papers emanated from the departments and agencies, quite a few ideas resulted from the NSC (including the president), the Operations Coordinating Board, the Planning Board itself, and individuals in the government.¹² In preparation of draft policy papers for NSC consideration, the Planning Board devoted two or more sessions to a unique staff process:

- Collating supporting studies and documents from the government bureaucracy.
- Integrating various viewpoints and information into one paper.
- Studying, debating, and clarifying the substance of each paper.

A critical step in the process involved normalizing the vocabulary among the various agencies to create a common lexicon for reference.¹³ As Robert Cutler, Eisenhower's first special assistant, explained, the goal for draft policy papers was to reach greater clarity in language and highlight disagreements for the council's edification: "Out of the grinding of these minds comes a refinement of the raw material into valuable metal; out of the frank assertion of differing views, backed up by preparation that searches every nook and cranny, emerges a resolution that reasonable men can support. Differences of views which have developed at lower levels are not swept under the rug but exposed."¹⁴ Accordingly, irreconcilable views, called "policy splits," were embedded in parallel columns in the draft policy papers for ease of reading and debate among council members.¹⁵

Draft policy papers were designed to meet the needs of the NSC. They represented the integrated views of departments, agencies, and occasionally outside consultants. The president insisted on written products as a basis of discussion because "without an integrated, advance-prepared text as a discussion base, loose debate among busy men preoccupied with departmental duties seldom produces helpful results."¹⁶ The preparation of the papers was not nearly as important as the process which energized everyone involved in policymaking. Board members apprised their secretaries and agency chiefs daily of the issues under debate within the Planning Board. The special assistant also ensured the president was fully aware of the issues and the differing viewpoints. In this manner, the government bureaucracy and the administration were thoroughly educated on the issues prior to any NSC meeting.

Of important note was the role the military played in the process. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) circulated its formal military views on draft policy papers outlined in a separate paper to council members prior to each meeting. Although the Joint Chiefs had a representative on the Planning Board, he did

not provide formal input for the policy papers. Instead, the representative would informally give cues regarding likely JCS reactions to the recommended policy, which the JCS would later put in writing.¹⁷ This approach served several functions distinctive to current American strategic culture:

- It exemplified the military establishment's subordination to civilian authority.
- It divorced the JCS from policy formulation, protecting the NSC and the military from accusations of militarization.
- It allowed the military to provide specialized assessments and military implications for proposed policies.

On occasion, the Planning Board and the NSC commissioned consultants or special committees outside the government to provide fresh perspectives, new ideas, and expertise on the more complex issues. The NSC utilized these consultants to supplement information and provide differing views, not as part of the decisionmaking body. Although the majority of the consultants were useful framing problems and providing advice, these ad hoc committees were used sparingly (fifteen, in total, according to Cutler) since outsiders were generally not familiar with the day-to-day policy challenges confronting government agencies nor were they sufficiently attuned to the impractical aspects of differing ideas.¹⁸ Most of these committees, however, provided a valuable service to the NSC. For example, the Killian and Neumann Committees, commissioned to study countermeasures to the growing Soviet nuclear threat, resulted in the creation of the nuclear triad as well as the establishment of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).¹⁹ One committee, the Gaither, proved counterproductive. Overstepping its original mandate of studying the potential for a national nuclear shelter program, the committee demanded a rapid and excessive military expansion based on unsubstantiated fears of a Soviet first-strike capability. In an attempt to force Eisenhower to adopt all of its recommendations, committee members began to leak classified information to the press, which soon politicized the issue. In the end, Gaither Committee members promulgated falsehoods (e.g., the missile gap) and fantastical scenarios of a nuclear surprise attack, creating a sense of doom in American society.²⁰

A standardized policy paper format also assisted the council members in digesting the contents rapidly under standardized sections: general considerations, objectives, courses of action, financial appendices, and a supporting staff study.²¹ General considerations were drawn from the national intelligence estimate and departmental analytical work. The general objectives were US policy objectives. The courses of action were detailed policy guidance proposals. Because Eisenhower wanted the council to "recognize the relationship between military and economic strength," every draft policy paper included an estimated program expenditure appendix, detailing financial costs of the policy proposal, aggregate military and economic expenditures, and supporting data. Depending on the issue, a draft policy paper could range from 10 to 50 pages.²²

A week prior to the NSC meeting, the Planning Board distributed the draft policy papers for consideration to the NSC members. The special assistant

briefed the president on the draft policy papers one to two days prior to the council meeting, permitting the president to absorb the core issues. In similar fashion, Planning Board members briefed their respective department or agency heads. Because a typical NSC meeting would consider only three to four draft policy papers, the president and his principal advisors were able to devote sufficient time to focus on policy issues without becoming overwhelmed.

National Security Council

Eisenhower sought to bring routine and harmonization to policymaking and strategy formulation. Consequently, each Thursday at 10:00 a.m., the president chaired NSC meetings. The president's stated mandate to his NSC advisors was for them to rise above department parochial interests and focus on how their department or agency could contribute to national security policymaking. There was also the expectation that NSC members would be fully knowledgeable of the policy issues on the meeting agenda so the discussions could begin with minimum delay.

Although the president was in charge of NSC meetings, the special assistant managed the agenda. The Director of the CIA opened the meeting with a twenty-minute intelligence briefing to highlight the latest events or trends likely to impact US policies.

Immediately following the intelligence update, the special assistant would move the meeting to the policy issues for discussion. To set the stage for discussion, he provided a five- to twelve-minute summary of each issue: a concise background statement, the issues requiring a decision, and the general considerations, objectives, policy guidance, and pertinent appendices. With the draft policy papers in hand, council members would begin the discussion.

Points of dispute were debated with participants providing point-counterpoint stances. Because time was of the essence, council members observed strict rules for concise exchanges of views, but no one was denied the right to speak. If a point of dispute was important to a member, then the special assistant could extend the time of debate if the president agreed in order to ensure no issue or perspective was ignored or anyone marginalized. Cutler found intellectual added-value to people intensely debating an issue. Not only did the forum foster an environment for meaningful solutions, it also ensured good ideas did not get lost in the vast bureaucracy. The president listened to and encouraged debate without offering his comments. He judiciously resisted the temptation to intervene too early in discussions, cognizant of the fact that presidential comments could unduly influence council members and compromise candid debate.²³

Regulating the number of participants in council meetings was one of the special assistant's critical management tasks, seeking to balance efficacy with candid discussion. As Cutler recalls, "You have to have as many people at a meeting as the president, who is in charge, feels are necessary for the expression of the various points of view that he thinks should be expressed.

You should not leave out a small voice with a real interest just because it is small.”²⁴ Yet Cutler maintained an “invisible line” existed regarding the size of the council, which when exceeded “stymied candid, intimate, and productive discussion . . . and sometimes even the voicing of opinions.”²⁵ Accordingly, eleven participants were the norm, and maintaining this small circle was critical so differences of opinion and classified issues could be debated candidly and vigorously.²⁶

The president preferred to make his final policy decision a few days following the NSC meeting. Only rarely did he make a decision at the council, and it was not unusual for some issues to require several sessions before the president was satisfied they had been sufficiently vetted for final decision. At times, the president would have the statutory members and selected officials join him in his office immediately after the meeting to discuss classified or confidential matters. If a policy issue was particularly complex, Eisenhower would set aside time for reflective thinking as he assayed the strengths and weaknesses of policy options as well as the potential risks and opportunities.

In essence, President Eisenhower designed his NSC mechanism to help him think strategically. It was not enough to use information and advice solely to make a policy decision; the president focused on strategic effect and the likelihood of multiordered consequences of those decisions. As Yarger instructs,

The art of strategy allows the strategist to see the nature of the strategic environment and a path or multiple paths to his desired end-states; and the scientific aspect of strategy provides a disciplined methodology to describe the path in a rational expression of ends, ways, and means that shape the strategic environment in favorable terms.²⁷

Presidential policy decisions were transmitted on a record of action, which was more strategic guidance than directive. From Eisenhower’s perspective, national security policy should represent “general direction, principle, and guidance, but should not be spelled out in detail.”²⁸ Accordingly, the special assistant and his deputy or the executive secretary would distribute to council members for review and comment a draft record of action, summarizing the contents of the meeting and the resolution of each disputed issue. A few days following the NSC meeting, the president would review the record of action with attached departmental comment, make edits, and initial the document, making it official national security policy. From the record of action, the special assistant produced the policy statement, a one to two-page document of three or four paragraphs in concise, clear language. The executive secretary would submit a letter of the president’s policy statement to the departments and agencies responsible for implementation, advising them that the President’s Operations Coordination Board would assist in coordination.²⁹

NSC Staff

Under the supervision of the executive secretary, the NSC staff acted as the secretariat, performing administrative tasks for the Planning Board,

NSC, and the Operations Coordinating Board.³⁰ The NSC staff was comprised of high-caliber individuals and provided continuity for successive administrations. Altogether, the NSC staff consisted of seventeen administrative and secretarial personnel as well as eleven “think people.” Its primary task was to help the special assistant “to cope with the inundating flood of papers that must be read, analyzed, dissected, digested, kept abreast of, and channeled.”³¹

The Operations Coordinating Board (OCB)

The OCB’s mission was to monitor and assist tasked agencies with the implementation of NSC policy decisions. While the OCB provided guidance and coordination on policy implementation, it left the detailed planning to the relevant federal department.³² Cutler explains that the function of the OCB was “to coordinate, ‘ride herd on,’ and report to the Council on the performance by the departments and agencies charged with responsibility to carry out national security policies approved by the president, and to be constantly mindful of such policies’ and performances’ psychological implications.”³³ The OCB was not authorized to direct how policy was to be implemented or relieve the federal bureaucracy of its responsibilities for policy implementation. Furthermore, departments and agencies reserved the right to refuse advice or assistance. If an irreconcilable problem developed, the matter was brought to the president for resolution. Aside from these restrictions, the OCB was “authorized to initiate new proposals for action within the framework of national security policies.”³⁴

In accordance with the president’s orders, the OCB provided:

- Advice on the implementation plan, interdepartmental coordination to ensure that all involved actors contributed to the implementation plan.
- Supervision of all phases and aspects of the plan to ensure timely and coordinated execution.
- Oversight of subordinate tasks of the plan to ensure they were aligned with higher policy goals and with the international opinion that the United States sought to foster.
- Initiation of new national security ideas for policy consideration as a result of the policy implementation process.
- Advisory functions the president deemed necessary.
- Submission of periodic reports to the council concerning implementation progress.³⁵

Eisenhower’s second special assistant, Dillon Anderson, added that the OCB ensured implementation programs did not conflict with existing policies.³⁶ Because the president issued broad but concise policy statements, the OCB devoted some time to clarifying questions from the tasked department or agency.³⁷

Throughout his two terms, Eisenhower conducted a number of organizational revisions of OCB membership as he sought ways to optimize the implementation of policy. By the end of Eisenhower’s Presidency, the special assistant served as chairman of the following members: undersecretary of state, the deputy secretary of defense, the director of central intelligence, the director

of the U.S. Information Agency, and the director of the International Cooperation Administration. Additionally, the agency tasked with the implementation of policy was directed to assign an undersecretary-level representative “when the Board is dealing with subjects bearing directly upon the responsibilities of such head,” enjoying the same status as the other board members. The Chairman of the Atomic Energy commission, the Undersecretary of the Treasury, and the Deputy Director of the Budget of the Bureau were “Standing Request” members.³⁸

A staff of 40 personnel, many of whom were detailed from government departments, supported the OCB. Internally, federal agencies dedicated around 92 personnel to work on OCB issues. In an attempt to integrate the efforts of the NSC and OCB further, Eisenhower assimilated the OCB staff into the NSC staff in 1958. On 13 January 1960, the president appointed special assistant Gordon Gray, as chairman of the OCB.³⁹

The NSC mechanism as practiced under President Eisenhower was not a panacea to the complex international challenges facing a president. Neither did it guarantee flawless decisions and policies. Nevertheless, the mechanism did place a higher premium on the process of formulating grand strategy rather than on operational planning. The practice of strategic thinking requires the honing of relevant information and ideas for council consideration. Just as important, the development of a policy requires patience and disciplined thinking. The following examines how Eisenhower managed national security development and cultivated strategic thinking.

The Eisenhower NSC in Practice

The Eisenhower Presidency holds the distinction of being the only administration to conduct a formal, extensive, interagency formulation of basic national security policy (BNSP), known generally as Massive Retaliation or the New Look.⁴⁰ The reasoning behind the BNSP was to infuse rationality into the policy formulation process.

Robert Bowie, who chaired the State Department’s strategy planning board, described Eisenhower’s national security policy process in his book *Waging Peace*.⁴¹ During his presidential transition period, President-elect Eisenhower met with his key advisors in December 1952 on the USS Helena after his tour of the Korean War zone. In typical fashion, Eisenhower prompted his advisors to begin thinking about a new Cold War strategy and provided his strategic guidance.

The president instructed Secretary of State Dulles to initiate the formal strategic review process in April 1953, arranging to have the principal NSC advisors meet with the president in the White House Solarium, hence the title Project Solarium. Eisenhower instructed the formation of three teams of renowned experts with each team developing its own Cold War strategic approach.⁴² From June through July, the three teams debated their approaches in NSC meetings, where Eisenhower participated in the debates, sometimes passionately. Through iterative meetings, Eisenhower participated in the discussions of each approach and synthesized those aspects that best promoted

and protected American interests. Solarium, however, was not the end state of the strategy formulation process. The real work occurred in council meetings.

From August through September, the Planning Board worked on drafts of the Basic National Security Policy (BNSP), which was debated in numerous NSC meetings, requiring the reconciliation of policy splits and clarifications.⁴³ Ratifying the New Look as NSC 162/2 on 30 October 1953, the NSC reviewed the BNSP annually and revised it once in May 1958 as NSC 5810/1. The process of development, implementation, and revision of the BNSP is unique in that no other Presidency has devoted such focused teamwork, discipline, energy, and thought to a US national security strategy. The reader is encouraged to peruse each document to gain an appreciation of what a comprehensive national security strategy should look like.⁴⁴

Eisenhower used the BNSP to establish the rationale for the optimal distribution of military resources and forces, the reliance on deterrence (both conventional and nuclear), and the value of cultivating alliances and coalitions. Economic strength and the morale of the citizenry were identified as strategic imperatives. The character of the Cold War, which was neither war nor peace, strongly suggested that the United States would prevail by deterring a general war with the Soviet Union, by nurturing a vibrant economy based on the private sector, and by protecting the American spirit from unwarranted fears and exaggerated threats.

It is important to understand the BNSP was not an operational plan, and Eisenhower intentionally separated policy development from execution. Detailed planning is the purview of departments, agencies, and their subordinate echelons. The international environment is too diverse and dynamic to accommodate a grand plan that addresses all challenges. More to the point, the Massive Retaliation aspect of the New Look was not a blueprint of American responses to all threats (though the administration did inject ambiguity into messages meant for communist regimes regarding the use of nuclear weapons). Presidential prerogative—not a defined strategic plan—determined the specific actions the United States employed to achieve strategic effect (ends), which promoted or protected those national interests as articulated in the BNSP.⁴⁵

Eisenhower used his presidential prerogative to flexibly respond to inchoate threats and crises with a balanced combination and varying dosages of the instruments of power.⁴⁶ For example, the president employed covert operations against Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Indonesia in 1958 to prevent them from falling into the Soviet camp. Balancing diplomacy with show of force, he contained the multiple crises in the Straits of Taiwan (1954-1955 and 1958), forestalling a general war between the national and communist Chinese regimes. The president used diplomacy to end the Korean War in 1953 and to counteract the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956, preempting Soviet influence in the Middle East. He prevented Berlin from becoming a crisis by reminding Premier Khrushchev of Russia's obligations regarding the Yalta agreement. The president did not hesitate to intervene with troops in Lebanon in 1958 to stabilize the region during its elections. During these crises,

Eisenhower used the council to discuss options and weigh the varying viewpoints. He practiced patient diplomacy, invariably informing allied leaders and almost always engaging the leaders directly involved in the crisis. Eisenhower's critics may find fault with his policies, but there is no credence in the assertion the BNSP hamstrung the president. Notably, he always radiated calm and optimism to the public, understanding that pessimism and panic are infectious and debilitating to the morale of the people.

The larger issue of whether the Eisenhower administration pursued national security policies that were oblivious of the Soviet threat warrants attention. As reflected in each BNSP, the president assessed early in his first term that nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles would become the greatest threat once the United States lost its monopoly in nuclear weapons. Through the recommendations of the Killian and von Neumann Committees, Eisenhower directed that the Navy, Army, and Air Force pursue ballistic missile programs to create healthy competition, promote innovation, and take advantage of service specialization.⁴⁷ Though the Soviet launching of the Sputnik satellite in October 1957 created irrational panic, the United States launched its first of many satellites in January 1958 and initiated the space program. More important, the successful missile programs of the three services coalesced into the US nuclear triad. Hence, Eisenhower's strategy precluded any alleged bomber, missile, or technological gap, nor was the United States ever vulnerable to a Soviet nuclear first strike.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The Eisenhower administration's national security policy was the embodiment of an NSC mechanism that fully integrated the viewpoints of the departments, agencies, and outside experts as well as educated the government on policy issues and coordinated the implementation of policy. Through this mechanism, Eisenhower practiced strategic thinking, a product of education, study, and experience as a strategist. There was no guarantee that succeeding presidents would have practiced strategic thinking with the same sagacity as Eisenhower had they retained his mechanism, but they would have had a well-honed NSC system to educate them and their administrations on the formulation of national security strategy. Unfortunately, President John F. Kennedy dismantled the NSC mechanism in favor of an inner circle of intimate advisors, leaving policy chaos in its wake.

Aside from having an average approval rating of 64 percent and an average unemployment rate of 4.9 percent, Eisenhower presided over the longest period of peace and prosperity in the modern era.⁴⁹ Not only did he balance the federal budget, his attention to fiscal responsibility resulted in federal surpluses. The nation had a rational, prudent grand strategy, avoiding extreme measures and creating assurance in American minds.

The NSC mechanism helped the president manage assertive personalities trying to dominate the NSC and monopolize the president's attention, and it impelled the government bureaucracy to account for the costs of proposed

policies and programs. In his book *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt contended the Truman and Eisenhower NSC systems undermined the president's power to persuade, but Eisenhower exercised his NSC mechanism in ways that would have baffled later presidents. NSC procedures and processes ensured the president heard all sides of an issue and shielded him from committing to a policy (or *ex parte* views) before he had a chance to reflect on it first.⁵⁰

This article does not argue that the NSC apparatus resulted in flawless decisions and policy; clearly, those aspirations are beyond human capabilities. But what it did accomplish was to foster an environment for cooperation, camaraderie, and learning within the federal bureaucracy. The president, his principal advisors, and their subordinates were thoroughly educated on the issues and relied on a repository for accessing former and existing policies, studies, and reports. In this manner, the administration had a basis for learning from its mistakes. This was the fertile ground for the formulation of grand strategy.

The distinctive qualities of the Eisenhower NSC are largely forgotten by the public but are still relevant for national security professionals and strategists. In the Eisenhower administration, national security issues received thorough, dedicated, and integrated scrutiny before becoming policy. The entire government bureaucracy was educated on the issues, to include the viewpoint of other departments and agencies. The coordination and assistance rendered for policy implementation reached its peak under Eisenhower. Ironically, the Eisenhower NSC mechanism embodied the aspirations of today's "whole of government" approach. That is to say, many in government recognize the necessity of the interagency process, but they are not quite sure how to exercise it. As a model for a consistent, rational grand strategy, the Eisenhower NSC stands without peer.

NOTES

1. Dubik, James M., "A National Strategic Learning Disability?" *ARMY Magazine*, September 2011, 19-20.
2. Brooks, Rosa, "Obama Needs a Grand Strategy," *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2012.
3. Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), 2.
4. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127.
5. *The National Security Act of 1947*, Public Law 80-253, 80th Cong., 1st sess. (July 26, 1947).
6. For an in-depth examination of how Eisenhower operated behind the scenes, see Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore: Basic Books, Inc., 1982; Johns Hopkins Paperbacks, 1992).
7. Robert Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," *Foreign Affairs* 34, no. 3 (April 1956): 441-458, at 441.
8. Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 442; Cutler testified before Congress that by statute and intent, the Council provided advice to the President only. It was never a planning or operational organ. Robert Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," testimony to the Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery, in *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy-Making at the Presidential Level*, ed. Henry M. Jackson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 112.
9. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 124.

10. Under Eisenhower, the National Security Advisor was called the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Robert Cutler, *No Time for Rest* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1965), 298, 312; Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, 126-127.

11. As coordinator, the National Security Advisor facilitated the development of policy but did not initiate it. He outlined the policy options for NSC consideration, and managed the flow of information. Cecil V. Crabb, Jr., and Kevin V. Mulcahy, "The Lessons of the Iran-Contra Affair for National Security Policy Making," in *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, ed. Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2004), 165. During Eisenhower's second term, Planning Board meetings were reduced to twice a week; Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 312.

12. Dillon Anderson, "The President and National Security," *The Atlantic Monthly*, CXCVII (January 1956): 42-46, at 44; Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 450-451.

13. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 312; Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 456-457; Systems Analyst Donella Meadows writes that the process of normalizing the vocabularies of diverse organizations is necessary because organizations develop their own language to describe their perceptions of reality. Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), 174-175.

14. Cutler was describing the end state of the NSC process, but left little doubt that the preparation of draft Policy Papers was integral to the whole. Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 442.

15. Cutler pointed out that "policy splits" were included in over two-thirds of the draft Policy Papers, which required resolution by the Council or the President. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 117.

16. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 351.

17. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 115.

18. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 128-132; Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 453-454.

19. Despite the hysteria surrounding the launching of Sputnik on October 4, 1957, the United States had established a much more robust and diverse space and missile program than the Soviets, launching the first of several satellites on January 31, 1958. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), 206-211; Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 348-351; *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*, "A Brief History of NASA," <http://history.nasa.gov/factsheet.htm> (accessed March 6, 2012); *Redstone Army History*, <http://www.redstone.army.mil/history/systems/redstone/welcome.html> (accessed January 13, 2011).

20. Harvard professor Morton Halperin provides an excellent account of the whole sordid affair. Morton H. Halperin, "The Gaither Committee and the Policy Process," *World Politics* 13, no. 3 (April 1961): 360-384.

21. Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 446.

22. The practice of including estimated costs in papers began on July 20, 1953. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: 1953-1956* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1963), 131-132; Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 114; Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 298-299.

23. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 117, 133; Greenstein, 129.

24. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 124.

25. Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 453; Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 298-299.

26. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 122.

27. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, 33.

28. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 300.

29. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 299, 306; Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 117-118, 125, 137.

30. Anderson was Special Assistant from 1955 to 1956. Anderson, "The President and National Security," 44.

31. Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 455-456; ideally, Cutler believed a core staff of 12 to 14 competent, well-paid "think people" was ideal. Along with adequate salaries, the work was interesting enough to attract intelligent people. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 127-128.

32. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, 133.

33. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 311.

34. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 129; Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," 449.

35. Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Executive Order 10483 - Establishing the Operations Coordinating Board," September 2, 1953, 18 FR 5379, 1953 WL 6009. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=60573> (accessed March 5, 2012).

36. Anderson, "The President and National Security," 45.

37. Cutler, "The National Security Council under President Eisenhower," 125.

38. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Executive Order 10700 – Further Providing For the Operations Coordinating Board," February 25, 1957, 22 FR 1111, 1957 WL 8006. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=60615> (accessed March 2, 2012). On February 25, 1957, Executive Order 10700 superseded Executive Order 10483, in an attempt to make the OCB more effective. The Undersecretary of State was no longer the chairman; the President designated the chairman and added a vice chairman to assist him. The Director of the Foreign Operations Administration was dropped after the agency was abolished. The Director of the US Information Agency was raised from observer to member by Executive Order 10598 on 28 February 1955. And the Director of the International Cooperation Administration was also added. Eisenhower's representatives were the Special Assistant for Cold War Planning and until appointed chairman of the OCB, the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. The presence of both representatives reflected the President's desire for greater follow-up of policy implementation; Executive Order no. 10483; James S. Lay, Jr., and Robert H. Johnson, *Organizational History of the National Security Council During the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations*. 86th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, DC: National Security Council and House Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery, 1960), 38, 38 n72, 39-40.

39. Citing a December 1958 survey, NSC historian, John Prados wrote that 54 professionals and 38 secretarial staff were dedicated to OCB issues. Additionally, 42 OCB working groups required even more officials. John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 74-75; Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Letter to Gordon Gray Designating Him Chairman of the Operations Coordinating Board," January 13, 1960. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12142> (accessed March 2, 2012).

40. At the time, a fair number of distortions and wild speculations appeared in the press and academic writings regarding the significance of the policy. The fact that it was a classified document and the Administration wanted to inject a bit of ambiguity regarding its reactions to aggression, some misunderstanding was likely unavoidable.

41. The definitive book on the BNSP development process is Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Meena Bose provides an excellent synopsis of the New Look strategy development in *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy: The National Security Decision Making of Eisenhower and Kennedy* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 19-41.

42. Team A, led by George Kennan, focused on a revision of the Truman Administration's initial policy of containment. Vice Admiral Richard Conolly's Team B assessed a containment strategy, underscoring nuclear deterrence, drawing a line around key regions in the world like Europe and the Western Pacific. Finally, Team C under Major General James McCormack and Colonel Andrew

Goodpaster looked at a more offensive strategy with limited roll-backs of Communism. Bose, *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy*, 30-33; Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 123-138; Jim Newton, *Eisenhower: The White House Years* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 128-129.

43. Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 139-146.

44. *A Report to the National Security Council by The Executive Secretary on Basic National Security Policy*, "NSC 162/1," October 20, 1953 and *A Report to the National Security Council by The Executive Secretary on Basic National Security Policy*, "NSC 162/2" (Washington, DC: US Department of State, October 30, 1953), <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-162-2.pdf> (accessed September 23, 2011); *Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on Basic National Security Policy*, "NSC 5810/1" (Washington DC: US Department of State, May 5, 1958), <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v03/d24> (accessed September 23, 2011).

45. Colin Gray, evoking Clausewitz, defines strategy as "the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy," metaphorically, "the bridge that relates military power to political purpose." By strategic effect, Gray explains that it is "the currency that produces political change, . . ." and measures "the impact of strategic performance upon the course of events." Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 8, 17, 19.

46. Presidential prerogative determines which instrument of power or combination to use during a crisis to promote or protect US national interests. Generally, the instruments of national power are diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. For an in-depth explanation of each see Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, 68-73.

47. Eisenhower directed the NSC Science Advisory Committee to establish a Technological Capabilities Panel (TCP) under MIT President James R. Killian to assess American military technology and develop countermeasures. The President selected Dr. Killian as the Special Advisor, who would become a regular participant in the Council. In due course, this concept grew into a national scientific agency, The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the spring of 1958. Missile research from the Department of Defense's von Neumann Committee on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), together with TCP recommendations, resulted in an accelerated development of ICBM nuclear warheads, which prevented a missile gap from developing. Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 348-351, 352-353.

48. *The Gaither Report*, written by Paul Nitze, did identify some issues which Eisenhower acted on, but the later conduct of some of its members can only be regarded as politically motivated and unprofessional. *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age*, *Security Resources Panel of the Science Advisory Committee*, "NSC 5724" (Washington DC: November 7, 1957), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB139/nitze02.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2012).

49. Gallup, WSJ Research, "How the Presidents Stack Up," linked from *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-presapp0605-31.html> (accessed February 23, 2012); U.S. Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Civilian Unemployment Rate," <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/data/UNRATE.txt> (accessed February 23, 2012).

50. In his book, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, Greenstein provides a compelling argument regarding Eisenhower's practice of Presidential power.