



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF GETTING IT RIGHT

ACTION MEMORANDUM

TO: The Next National Security Advisor
 FROM: Ivo Daalder and Mac Destler
 SUBJECT: **What You Need to Know about Your Job**

Congratulations! You have just been appointed to the second most demanding job in Washington. (Your new boss takes the honors.)

As the President's closest national security aide, you will face incessant demands. On any given morning, as you dig into the latest intelligence threat assessment from Islamabad, your boss may buzz you asking just what it was he promised the Japanese Prime Minister the previous evening. Then, as your Deputy for Global Issues delivers the draft agenda for the upcoming Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change, the Secretary of Defense phones with news of a resurgence of sectarian violence in Baghdad that has left ten Americans dead. The Russian Ambassador has already been waiting twenty minutes for his long-scheduled meeting to help plan his President's first visit to Washington. Meanwhile, China is resisting the latest draft UN Security Council resolution tightening sanctions on Iran in response to its nuclear activity, and the Free Trade Agreement with South Korea is 15 or so votes short of passage, with the House vote set for tomorrow afternoon. And it's only mid-morning.

You will need to handle all these matters—and more. But in the midst of the cacophony that is daily policymaking in Washington, you will need to give priority to those tasks that only you, as the National Security Advisor, are in a position to perform. This means you must:

- **Staff the President's daily foreign policy activity**—the information he gets, the people he sees, especially his communications with foreign leaders and his trips overseas.
- **Manage the process of making decisions** on major foreign and national security issues, setting aside those that do not require the President's attention or involvement while giving the most careful consideration to those critical matters that will make or break your President and his Administration.

Ivo Daalder is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. **Mac Destler** is Saul I. Stern Professor at the School of Public Policy, University of Maryland. They are co-authors of *In The Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served—from JFK to George W. Bush* (Simon & Schuster, 2009).

- **Drive the policymaking process** to ensure that the President and his top advisers have real choices to consider, with advantages and drawbacks clearly spelled out and understood.
- **Make sure that decisions are implemented** by the departments and agencies of the U.S. government in the manner the President intends.

No one but you and your relatively small NSC staff can do any of these tasks well. Failing to do any one of them is likely to have serious, even incalculable consequences for the President, the country and the world at large.

As you may know, the Project on National Security Reform has recommended a bold reform of the whole National Security Council system. But nothing like that will happen before your responsibilities commence. To prepare for your job, you would do well to study the successes and failures of the 15 people who have held this position since John F. Kennedy elevated it to its current importance with his appointment of McGeorge Bundy in 1961. There have been some outstanding examples of effective performance, starting with Bundy's critical, probing role during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And there have been some astounding failures, particularly the shenanigans that led to the Iran-Contra Affair under President Reagan and the failure to assess the pros and cons of invading Iraq in the outgoing Administration. But even those who did the job well experienced failures (such as the Bay of Pigs), while those who were less successful proved at times to be effective managers of the process (like the decision on the troop surge in Iraq).

None, though, did the job better than Brent Scowcroft, the only person to hold the position twice, first under President Gerald Ford, then under President George H.W. Bush. As the latter's National Security Advisor, Scowcroft crafted what proved to be a winning formula made up of three key components: Gain the trust and confidence of the other key players, establish a cooperative policy process at all levels, and cement an unbreakable bond with the President.

Every president is unique. As National Security Advisor, you must adapt your operation and style to what the President wants and needs. He is your primary constituent. If he does not value your service, you won't be any good to him—or anybody else. Even so, your success will depend in large part on whether you can make the Scowcroft Formula your own. Here are some suggestions drawn from past examples on how best to do that.

BUILD TRUST AND CONFIDENCE WITH COLLEAGUES

Nothing undermines effective policymaking more than distrust among a president's senior advisers. The key for the President is to have people at the top who can work together and who are committed to resolving differences rather than insisting that they are right. Presidents haven't always been attentive to this requirement. Alexander Haig, Reagan's first Secretary of State, was unwilling or unable to work well with key White House aides. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was so disdainful of National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice that he refused to share military planning information or even, at times, to return her phone calls. With these appointments, Reagan and Bush destroyed the prospects for effective policymaking.

The most urgent requirement, therefore, is to assemble a congenial senior team, not just to appoint capable individuals. The first President Bush did so successfully with Scowcroft, Secretary

of State James Baker and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney. His son achieved this, finally, when he elevated Rice and replaced Rumsfeld with Robert Gates. Even with a congenial group, however, it is largely up to you, the National Security Advisor, to meld them into an effective team. Here's how:

- **Meet regularly, and frequently, with your colleagues.** The Cabinet-level Principals Committee, chaired by the National Security Advisor, has been the main NSC coordinating body for the past twenty years. You should convene it regularly—at least twice a week. Involve in its deliberations all of the key players who have a stake in the issue at hand, expanding the group when necessary to include not only the Secretaries of State and Defense and the military and intelligence chiefs, but also such advisers as the Treasury Secretary, Attorney General and White House Chief of Staff. Having the right people at the table ensures both broader consideration of policy issues and better buy-in on any decisions that are made.

Be sure to supplement these formal meetings with more relaxed, informal sessions. Under Reagan, NSA Colin Powell met with George Shultz and Frank Carlucci every morning to thrash out the day's issues. Under Clinton, there were not only Monday ABC breakfasts (so called because they included Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, National Security Advisor Samuel Berger and Secretary of Defense William Cohen), but also weekly lunches that added the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of Central Intelligence, the UN Ambassador and the Vice President's National Security Advisor to the mix. These informal venues will give your senior colleagues a chance to speak frankly, to vent openly, to get a better sense for one another, and thus to deepen their relationships. That is how real trust is built.

- **Convey their views faithfully to the President.** You will be seeing the chief executive daily, often hourly. Nothing will build your colleagues' trust more than their learning, through experience, that you will tell the President exactly where they stand on an issue. Nothing will undermine that trust more than any suspicion, justified or not, that you are blocking out or distorting their views.
- **Ensure that others have access to the President.** The President also needs to hear their views directly, and they need regular exposure to him to get a true sense of his priorities. You need to advocate and organize such meetings. Avoid the model of Henry Kissinger, who developed near-exclusive access by exploiting Richard Nixon's desire not to meet with his own Secretary of State, William Rogers. By contrast, Sandy Berger would tell Clinton "to talk to the person you are going against and hear it directly from them." Sometimes this would lead the President to change his mind, earning Berger the trust necessary to make the process work. As Bundy put it, "A good national security assistant works for Cabinet officers as well as for the President. One of his main functions is to help senior officials outside the White House understand and be understood by the President."
- **Do your job, not theirs.** You can be an activist member of the President's team, but your job is managing the process, not implementing policy or being its principal advocate. You are not the Secretary of State. Kissinger (with Nixon's conniving) broke this rule egregiously, negotiating through backchannels (often without Rogers's knowledge) on arms control with the Soviet Union, opening relations with China and ending the war with North Vietnam. When you engage in active negotiations, meet often with foreign leaders and travel frequently overseas, you are stepping on someone else's turf and undermining

their trust in your ability to coordinate. The Kissinger-Rogers case was extreme, but it wasn't unique. Secretaries of State Cyrus Vance, George Shultz and Warren Christopher also concluded at times that their White House counterparts were overstepping their bounds.

The same applies to speaking publicly. In the era of 24/7 news coverage, it is inevitable that the President's advisor will defend and make the case for his policy. But some go too far. Zbigniew Brzezinski's outspoken public advocacy reinforced the impression of policy conflict and disarray within the Carter Administration, as he later acknowledged. Condoleezza Rice appeared on more Sunday talk shows than any National Security Advisor before or since. But the more you become a public advocate, the harder it becomes to play the policy skeptic. Rice became the most effective Bush Administration salesperson for the Iraq war, warning of smoking guns coming in the form of mushroom clouds. But she didn't raise probing questions on the inside—about the evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, about what would happen after Saddam Hussein was toppled, about the consequences of another invasion of a Muslim country for America's standing in the world, about how a war against Iraq should be weighed against other strategic priorities. These questions needed to be asked before, not after, key decisions were made.

BUILD COOPERATION IN DEPTH

Even if the principal advisers to the President come to enjoy each other's trust and work well together, they can only handle a limited number of issues. The Secretary of State will often be abroad; the Secretary of Defense must run the largest and most costly organization in the U.S. government. And you may find yourself at the President's side for many hours on end. Much of the work of effective governance will therefore fall to your subordinates. Your success will depend crucially on their doing their jobs right.

- **The deputies are key.** A strong Deputies Committee, led by a deputy national security advisor who has your complete confidence, will be essential. The deputies should cover as many issues as possible on behalf of the principals, settling those that they can, framing the most urgent and contentious for their superiors. They should meet three or more times a week—daily, if not more frequently, in times of crisis. Their effectiveness will depend on their capacity to work together and their ability to speak for their principals. If neither condition holds, the process breaks down, as it did during Bush's first term. But when the deputies do work together well—as was the case when Colin Powell ran the Deputies Committee under Reagan, Robert Gates under Bush Sr., and Sandy Berger and Jim Steinberg under Clinton—the capacity of the government to support the president is multiplied.
- **Bring analysis to bear on big issues.** The major matters, those that by their nature require presidential decision, cannot be decided on the fly or on a whim. Sound policy rests on sound analysis. Nixon and Kissinger devised a system, employed at the onset of their Administration, that sought to bring such analysis to bear. The President issued National Security Study Memoranda that asked agencies working with the NSC to frame policy options for particular issues. The options importantly were to include not only the preferred positions of different agencies but also policy choices that were logically plausible even if they lacked an agency advocate. This allowed the President to make clear, analytically grounded policy decisions. You should launch a similar process in the first days of your tenure.

- **Recruit a small NSC staff with broad responsibilities.** Since the end of the Cold War, the NSC staff has more than doubled in size. Some of this reflects the increased complexity of the world, more issues under your purview and a larger number of agencies to be coordinated. But some of it is simply following the path of least resistance, resulting in a staff too cumbersome to be truly presidential. You should recruit senior people who can work with their agency counterparts. Keep the staff lean by focusing on the issues that matter to the President. And hand operations and implementation to the departments, or to presidential envoys within them. Make sure you and your staff don't cross that line, as the NSC did in the Iran-Contra Affair, which nearly destroyed the Reagan Presidency.

GET CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT—AND STAY CLOSE

Last but assuredly not least, you will need a close relationship with the President. Not only is this necessary for you to serve him personally; it is also what makes you influential with and useful to your senior colleagues. Without it, you will not be able to manage the policy process or do anybody much good.

Your White House proximity makes this possible—indeed, Bundy, Walt Rostow under Lyndon Johnson, Kissinger, Brzezinski, Scowcroft and Berger all built on this advantage to play major policy roles, and Rice had a unique relationship of confidence with George W. Bush. Such close ties bring enormous advantages. For example, while you should not normally be the Administration's emissary to foreign leaders, there will be times when a visit or a message from you will be needed to convey the President's personal views. Anthony Lake traveled to Europe in the summer of 1995 to convey just such a message: that President Clinton was determined to end the war in Bosnia. He did so with the full support of the President and Secretary of State, and the trip launched a new and effective strategy to end the war. Its success depended on Lake's clear ability to speak for the President. You need to be able to do this as well. Here is how:

- **Be the President's principal go-to person on matters international.** Respond to his demands for information, in his preferred form as well as substance. Make it clear to him that you are pressing his priorities. Over time, you may find it productive, as Bundy did, to encourage the President to deal directly with other senior NSC aides on specific issues. But you must remain central to this process.
- **Give him your best advice, but don't keep it secret from your colleagues.** As your relationship deepens, the President will increasingly seek your personal views. Failure to convey them will make you less useful to him and ultimately weaken you in his eyes. But avoid creating thereby a secret, Nixon-Kissinger-type policy process. Your colleagues must continue to trust you if you are to serve the President and the nation most effectively.
- **Remember that although the President is boss, he is not always right.** You will serve him poorly if you do not challenge him on impulses he has not thought through or policy inclinations that require further vetting. In the end, of course, he will decide. But unless you establish and maintain a process where the pros and cons are carefully examined, his presidency may suffer irreparable damage. And so may the nation. This truth can be summarized in one word: Iraq.

In accepting the President's call, you have taken on one tough job. Your background and his confidence in you give you a good start. But history shows that your success will require a lot more than that. Good luck; you'll need it. 🍀