

It's Time to Overhaul National Security Council

THE FIRST presidential transition of the post-Cold War era provides a perfect opportunity to overhaul the National Security Council — and high time! Its founders never intended it to become the institution that it has become. Its staff should be reduced and its director demoted.

The council consists of six top government officials given authority by Congress in 1947, during the dangerous early Cold War years, to formulate overall security policy. They include four members, the president, vice president, secretaries of state and defense, plus two advisers, the director of central intelligence and the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Congress established the council to assure military and intelligence inputs into foreign policy. The famous figures usually associated with it were never on it. They served as directors of its secretariat, a position which began as "executive secretary," an important, but relatively humble job. All that was before a series of ambitious incumbents induced friendly presidents to push the post all the way to cabinet rank.

Eisenhower began the upgrading, and Kennedy moved it a step further, naming the ambitious McGeorge Bundy to cabinet rank. Meanwhile, he appointed the retiring Dean Rusk to head the State Department. In a frantically energetic White House, Bundy and his aides soon assumed State Department chores, making up for delays in Foggy Bottom and lending the NSC secretariat a characteristic it retains to this day, that of a mini foreign affairs department.

This set the stage for the enormously ambitious advisers waiting in the wings, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, who dominated U.S. foreign policy for over a decade, each, in fact, deposing a secretary of state. The adviser and secretari-

at came to rival, then threaten and finally eclipse the State Department. By the time Ronald Reagan became president, the chaos in the management of foreign affairs caused by a bloated NSC secretariat with bigger than life advisers had become intolerable.

Determined to avoid recurrences, Reagan gave Richard Allen, his first adviser of six sub-cabinet status. Allen, charged with impropriety, soon left, and a Reagan crony, William P. Clark, replaced him. Hopeless at foreign affairs, Clark was followed by replacements whose ineptitude combined with an overgrown and underemployed NSC secretariat and, resulting in a true scandal by any measure, the Iran-Contra caper.

The drama of the NSC secretariat as an independent foreign policy agency, begun by Bundy and made Wagnerian by Kissinger and Brzezinski, finally lapsed into farce — John Poindexter director, Oliver North starring.

Lashed by a scornful press and an enraged Congress, the White House named three government career officials in succession to head the secretariat. When Bush was elected, I named Brent Scowcroft. They all helped restore dignity and usefulness to both the job and the staff, but the potential for trouble remains untouched.

The NSC secretariat employs 60 people. It includes nine bureaus for issues and regions, which federal departments cover in much greater depth. Given what the new administration hopes to accomplish, why shouldn't it be deflated?

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