

Struggling with Standard Order: Challenges and Performance of the Trump National Security Council System

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This article examines issues that have emerged in the Trump national security system and its process of information analysis and deliberation during its first year and one half in office. It was troubled from the start, and it especially experienced a problematic transition period. It then faced the resignation of its initial National Security Council (NSC) advisor, Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, less than a month after Trump was inaugurated. This article explores how Flynn's eventual replacement, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, confronted a challenging task in restoring order and in appointing new personnel. He also increasingly faced White House criticism of his performance as NSC advisor as well as numerous reports that his days in the post were numbered (which indeed proved to be the case). On March 22, 2018, President Trump announced that John Bolton would replace McMaster. Bolton quickly moved in changing key personnel and in putting his own imprint on the post. Throughout, the national security process was overshadowed by a president who lacked foreign policy experience and whose decision-making patterns and practices were often problematic.

Keywords: Trump, McMaster, Bolton, Flynn, Scowcroft model, presidential decision making, national security, National Security Council (NSC), NSC advisor

The national security system of the Trump administration, the deliberative patterns of this president, and at times the policy outcomes that have resulted have been problematic compared to his recent predecessors. We have witnessed the resignation of a national security advisor (Flynn) after less than a month on the job (unprecedented), difficulties in finding his replacement, questions raised about the membership on key National Security Council (NSC) committees, and a high level of turnover at top levels in national security personnel. Flynn's replacement, H. R. McMaster, sought to restore order. However, by the end of March 2018, McMaster was the next casualty, just shortly after Secretary of

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State Rex Tillerson was fired. No other president, since the position was created under Dwight Eisenhower, has run through two NSC advisors in such a short space of time. Compounding this is a president whose decision-making style and use of channels of information and advice have been in marked contrast to his recent predecessors.

At the same time, this administration faced serious national security challenges: North Korean tests of long-range missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons in the Pacific and perhaps even the continental United States (and, in June 2018, direct negotiations with its leader), continued instability in the Middle East, a variety of difficult issues dealing with Iran (including eventual U.S. withdrawal from the international nuclear weapons accord in 2018), heightened Russian foreign-policy activism, Chinese attempts to exert greater control over its nearby seas and economic influence if not dominion abroad, cybersecurity threats from a number of foreign sources, continued terrorist attacks upon civilian populations, the national security implications of global warming and climate change, and the foreign policy implications of changes in trade and tariff policies, to name but a few. Indeed, it is fair to suggest that few modern presidents have faced such a wide, complex, and serious set of pressing foreign-policy issues in their early administrations.

This article does not allow sufficient space to address the Trump administration's response to all of these events and challenges. However, it does invite examination of the advisory system and personnel it put in place to potentially address and respond to them as well as how all of this relates with Trump's own personal calculus as a decision maker.

Standard Order, More or Less

How a president organizes to meet these challenges, in effect to craft channels that feed into and inform presidential decision process and choice, matters. Presidents have clearly struggled with how to do this, some better and some for worse (see Burke 2009). Since the creation of a more formal national security system in 1947 during the Truman presidency—a huge advance over Franklin D. Roosevelt's ad hoc arrangements—there have been numerous attempts. Dwight Eisenhower put in place his “policy hill”: a “planning board” of departmental and agency officials chaired by the NSC advisor (a newly created post) to vet policy options, regular weekly meetings of the NSC, and implementation oversight by an “Operations Coordinating Board.” John Kennedy regarded them as too bureaucratic and formalistic and largely abandoned them (even meetings of the NSC were held less frequently). His NSC advisor, McGeorge Bundy, struggled to find a replacement. While JFK's much-lauded Ex-Com was a workable solution in the Cuban missile crisis, it was no substitute for more enduring planning and decision making. Lyndon Johnson, too, faced difficulties. His “Tuesday lunches” with key decision associates and infrequent NSC meetings were a recipe for error and slipshod decision making. Under Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger created a more formal NSC committee system, but only the ones he chaired as NSC advisor really mattered. In fact, it was his constant personal interaction with Nixon that counted in the end.

Change began to come in the aftermath of the Tower Commission's examination of the Iran–Contra scandal during the Reagan years. Process and system were singled out as prime culprits. Brent Scowcroft, one of the commission's principal members and at that point a former NSC advisor to President Gerald Ford, was the chief architect in suggesting reforms. During their tenures in the remaining years of the Reagan presidency, NSC advisors Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell began to put these recommendations into practice. More came into fruition when Scowcroft himself returned to the White House as George H. W. Bush's NSC advisor.

In short, what came to be called the “Scowcroft model” was put in place and it endured through subsequent presidencies, both Republican and Democratic. It embraced a deliberative process that included:

- The NSC advisor as a fair and balanced broker of the national security process in presenting information and analysis to the president and to the full NSC.
- The NSC advisor as the chair of the Principals Committee (essentially the NSC plus additional designated members meeting in the absence of the president).
- A deputy NSC advisor who presides (in the Deputies Committee, immediately below the full NSC) over departmental and agency representatives. The goal here has been to exam, vet, and coordinate information and analysis in the presentation of policy options that eventually flow to the Principals and the full council. This effort at interagency input, analysis, and coordination was the weak link in the post-Eisenhower NSC system.
- A variety of interagency working groups, drawn from agencies and departments, but usually chaired by NSC staff, who work on and set out policy analysis and options for consideration by those above.
- And, above all, a president who values and utilizes the advantages to be gained for his/her ultimate decisions by a well-vetted and informed deliberative process.

This emphasis on “standard order” should not be taken to suggest that the Scowcroft model is the only pattern that might be followed. Nor is it one that *guarantees* order. Much still remains required concerning the extent to which other factors make it work. Most notable here is the extent to which its participants buy into the system, adhere to its process, and respect its rules of the game. The latter proved to be problematic, for example, during Donald Rumsfeld's tenure as secretary of defense under G. W. Bush.

Scowcroft's work is merely a foundation, but it has been the basic structural model followed by all presidents since the end of the Reagan administration. It offers us a broad guide. Perhaps the Trump presidency will develop another model. However, what emerged suggests otherwise: disorder at times rather than a new order to replace the standard model.

So what challenges and problems did Trump face and how did he and his associates respond to them?

McMaster Takes Charge: Order Restored?

Flynn did not last long as NSC advisor—less than a month—once it became clear that he was ensnared in allegations concerning his contacts, during the transition, with the Russian ambassador to the United States. Flynn initially denied them, but they were

ultimately substantiated (Burke 2017, 585–88). They became part of the investigation concerning Russian interference in the 2016 election. Questions were also raised concerning key NSC staff appointments and preparations undertaken during the transition period as well as how well the system put in place was functioning.

Trump did not have an easy time finding a replacement for Flynn. One candidate, retired Vice Admiral Robert Harward turned down the job. Harward apparently did not receive the reassurances he wanted that he would be free to select his own NSC team, especially the crucial post of deputy NSC advisor. He was also concerned about interference from Trump's political staff (Bender 2017a). As well, Harward reportedly "harbored strong reservations from the beginning about taking the post because of Mr. Trump's unpredictable style and the level of chaos that has engulfed his White House" (Davis and Schmitt 2017).

On February 20, 2017, Trump announced that Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster had agreed to serve as NSC advisor. McMaster was highly regarded for his battlefield leadership during the Persian Gulf War and later in the Iraq War. He had earned a doctorate at the University of North Carolina; his doctoral thesis concerned military advice to Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War. It was later published as a book, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joints Chief of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (McMaster 1997). Widely circulated among the military and in the national security community, its central argument was that military leaders had failed in their responsibility to challenge the flawed strategy and plans of Defense Secretary McNamara and President Johnson in ramping up U.S. military commitment in Vietnam.

McMaster made clear from the start that he was in charge of the NSC staff, yet he proceeded methodically and incrementally in making changes. Within 10 days on the job, he undid a new bureaucratic layer that Flynn had put in place: two deputy assistant positions, one overseeing the regional staffs and the other dealing with transnational issues were eliminated. Neither of the jobs existed in the Obama NSC staff. According to one White House aide, "McMaster took a look at them and thought he didn't need the extra layer. He wanted to go back to the way it had been prior" (Johnson and Toosi 2017). He also returned to the past practice of permitting some of his senior directors to be present in the Oval Office when Trump was on the phone with foreign leaders. Flynn just permitted them to "listen in" from the Situation Room downstairs. According to one former senior NSC official, these phone calls are the "highest-stakes form of diplomacy" but also potential "mine fields." "If the president can't immediately turn to a regional expert for clarifications or questions. . . we may find ourselves in a very difficult or dangerous place" (Palmeri 2017).

One of McMaster's most important achievements was issued on April 4, 2017, a revised memorandum on the structure of the national security system. This is an otherwise routine document issued early on in a presidency clarifying the statutory and nonstatutory membership of the NSC itself and various NSC committees and subcommittees. The initial Trump memorandum provoked extensive criticism from both the media as well as former national security officials (Burke 2017, 575–82). McMaster understood the issues causing controversy. While changes were not drastic, they removed the causes for concern. Among its chief changes were:

- White House political strategist Steve Bannon's removal as a member of the NSC Principals Committee or as an invitee to meetings of the full council. His name was not even listed on the "Memorandum For" distribution list at the top of the document. Not a small matter.
- More prominent listing of the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence in their statutory capacity as "statutory advisers"; they were now more directly recognized among the NSC "regular attendees" (which they implicitly were, but the statutory designation of them as "advisers" rather than "members" was not understood by the media).
- The NSC advisor's enhanced authority for oversight, agenda setting, and paperwork flow for *both the NSC and the Homeland Security Council (HSC)*. In the original memo the HSC advisor had a direct reporting line to the president. In the revised memo, the HSC advisor reported to the NSC advisor; with the proviso that the NSC advisor had "sole discretion" to delegate any matters to the HSC advisor.
- Sole control of the NSC advisor over convening and chairing meetings of the Principals Committee, again with "sole discretion" to delegate homeland security matters to the HSC advisor.

McMaster had clearly asserted his authority as NSC advisor along traditional lines. He also corrected issues that had been poorly crafted in the initial document prepared by Flynn's team.

Interestingly, McMaster met with former NSC advisor Brent Scowcroft shortly before these changes were made. According to one report, McMaster's efforts represented

[a] major victory in reviving the so-called "Scowcroft model," in which the national security adviser avoids pushing his own policy agenda in favor of serving as a referee for proposals put forth by NSC staff and the career professionals from national security and foreign policy agencies that also participate in high-level meetings. Scowcroft also established a process in which the national security adviser is heard but rarely seen, *his or her influence measured by how much they have the president's ear in private*. (Bender 2017b, emphasis added)

Bottom line: had the revised April memorandum been the one initially issued, the Trump administration would have avoided an extended streak of negative coverage by the media. As it was, McMaster understood the problems and took the needed steps. But there were, of course, personalities and other dynamics, including presidential, that remained to be filled in. Note the final sentence in the above quote: "his or influence [is] measured by how much they have the president's ear in private." As we shall see, this sometimes proved problematic for McMaster and likely contributed to his resignation.

Equally important, McMaster also began making personnel changes, such as the appointment of Fiona Hill, a skeptic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, as senior director of the NSC's Europe and Asia desk. He proceeded cautiously in easing out K. T. McFarland, a Flynn confidante, as his deputy. In mid-March, Dina Habib Powell, who had served in the G. W. Bush administration in a number of capacities and was then a senior economic aide to Trump, was transferred to McMaster's staff with the new title of "deputy national security advisor for strategy." She was given responsibility for interagency coordination—a major responsibility of the regular deputy—as well as overseeing the development of the NSC's national security strategy report. Within weeks, McFarland was out and nominated to serve as U.S. ambassador to Singapore (from which she withdrew in February 2018 due to questions raised about her involvement with Flynn in his contacts with the Russian ambassador). Major General Ricky Waddell formally

replaced McFarland in her position, while Powell continued on in her position as deputy for strategy.

Still, McMaster was directly rebuffed by Trump in his efforts to replace Ezra Cohen-Watnick, NSC senior director of intelligence and a Flynn appointee. Cohen-Watnick apparently appealed the decision to both Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner, with whom he had developed ties during the transition. Bannon and Kushner reportedly “brought the matter to Trump on Sunday [March 12, 2017], and the president agreed that Cohen-Watnick should remain as the NSC’s intelligence director” (Vogel and Johnson 2017). I suspect that this was not welcome news for NSC advisor McMaster. However, McMaster did eventually succeed in removing him in early August.

McMaster also had removed several Flynn loyalists in the preceding weeks such as Rich Higgins, a director of strategic planning, and Derek Harvey, a senior Middle East advisor (Gray 2017). Not surprisingly, McMaster became the subject of negative leaks and commentary by foreign policy nationalists complaining that he was blocking the Trump agenda. According to one report titled “The Guerilla Campaign Against McMaster is Alive and Well,” he has “been in the crosshairs of the nationalist wing close to Trump since the start of his tenure.” Critics view him as “too representative of establishment, ‘globalist’ foreign policy, particularly when it comes to Israel and Iran” (McLaughlin 2017). In response to the criticism of McMaster at the time of the firings, Trump issued an unusual statement of support: “General McMaster and I are working very well together.” In late February 2018, rumors surfaced once again that McMaster was headed for the door (see, e.g., Starr et al. 2018; Parke et al. 2018; Johnson and Nussbaum 2018).

In late January 2018, another important change was announced when Dina Powell left the deputy NSC slot and was replaced by Nadia Schadlow. Schadlow, who holds a doctorate from Johns Hopkins’ Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, was a long-time associate of McMaster. She was a key player in the administration’s National Security Strategy document issued in December 2017. Unlike Powell, however, Schadlow’s prior background was largely academic. A key question at the time was whether she would measure up to the crucial deputy’s responsibilities. There was no opportunity for an answer: she was quickly replaced when Bolton took charge.

McMaster had greatly benefited from Powell’s service. She had close ties to the Trump inner circle: she was “a close ally known for her unparalleled network of relationships both inside and outside the West Wing, according to White House aides and outside advisers.” “A former official in the George W. Bush administration who also worked in the State Department under Condoleezza Rice, Powell served as a guide and support for McMaster. . . in the chaotic Trump White House.” Schadlow brought expertise to “an administration that at times has struggled to recruit experience and talent” (Karni 2018).

Although McMaster ended up with a freer hand in controlling NSC staff than had been offered to Admiral Harward, he still needed to proceed cautiously and strategically in making personnel changes. He succeeded in removing some of the more questionable Flynn appointees. But it was not without cost as the nationalist, “America first” camp among Trump supporters began to question his allegiance and loyalty. He encountered success in revamping the national security process memo and eliminating its more

questionable members such as Bannon. But would McMaster's changes have effect on Trump's deliberations?

McMaster and Trump: An Uneasy Relationship

One of the biggest challenges that McMaster faced was his relationship with the president. Personal affinity, presidential comfort, and prior association are often characteristic of the more successful president–NSC advisor relationships: Jimmy Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski, G. H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, and G. W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, for example. McMaster, by contrast, was a newcomer to the tight, loyalty-driven Trump inner circle. Moreover, he did not see his role as simply a pliant instrument of Trump's changing will. Rather, it was the more traditional one of providing straightforward and unvarnished information and analysis to his president. As General David Petraeus put it at the time, "He has a record of being quite forthright." Moreover, according to one report, "In his first week on the job, General McMaster has already shown an independence familiar to past colleagues" (Baker 2017).

Forthright? Independence? Would McMaster's style and his understanding of the NSC advisor's role clash with Trump's expectations? It was a question raised right from the start. As a headline in the *New York Times* bluntly phrased it shortly after McMaster's appointment, "Will Trump Take 'Brutally Forthright' Advice from McMaster?" (Baker 2017). As it turned out, McMaster's relationship with Trump proved problematic at times. McMaster "has never quite clicked with the president, according to six senior White House officials. He is disciplined and focused, and has frequently clashed with Trump, who loves small talk and meanders from one subject to another" (Johnson 2018a).

Nor was it clear that the NSC process McMaster diligently cultivated mattered in the end. "We built this process that was incredibly effective," and McMaster "would constantly pull people back into process." However, according to one former staff member, it "had the veneer of something that Stephen Hadley or Condi Rice or Susan Rice would recognize, [but] it's not getting the work done." According to another, "There are two parallel tracks—there's the interagency process, and then Trump makes a decision. But there's often no suggestion that he is making decisions with *reference* to that process. It's two ships [passing] in the night" (Keefe 2018, 43, emphasis in original).

By late November 2017, Trump, chief of staff John Kelly, and a "small circle" of others discussed concerns about McMaster's fitness for the job but "ultimately decided to keep McMaster in place. Among their reasons for doing so: Removing him would have launched them on a search for the president's third national security adviser in a year, and Trump and Kelly could not agree on a replacement, according to a senior administration official." "The discussions about replacing McMaster. . . are a reflection of just how tumultuous his relationship with the president has been since he took the job just a year ago" (Johnson 2018a). Trump apparently wanted to bring former UN ambassador John Bolton on board, while Kelly opposed Bolton's appointment.

If there was dissatisfaction on Trump's part with McMaster, it did not make it into Trump's tweets until February 16, 2018, following special prosecutor Robert Mueller's indictment of 13 Russian nationals and three Russian organizations allegedly involved in interfering with the 2016 election. McMaster publicly commented that the evidence was now "incontrovertible" that there had been Russian meddling. Trump took immediate and public issue with him and tweeted that McMaster had forgotten to add that the 2016 election outcome had not been changed by the Russians and that any "collusion was between Russia and Crooked H, the DNC and the Dems." The incident is a good case study about how an NSC advisor needs to be careful about public comments.

McMaster was correct but probably should have known better than to say so publicly. Trump's tweeted rebuke (and it was taken by the press as a rebuke) was quite predictable. Sad but true: few presidents have been in the habit of ridiculing their chief lieutenants; McMaster was not the first nor likely the last. The fracas once again raised questions about how long McMaster would remain as NSC advisor, and there were reports that the White House was actively exploring military assignments that would be suitable to his rank (see, e.g., Starr et al. 2018; Johnson 2018a). On March 22, 2018, Trump tweeted that McMaster was out; he also had resigned his military position.

McMaster's relationship with President Trump is a useful reminder that orderly organization can carry an NSC process only so far. The interpersonal dynamics between the NSC advisor and the president are important in their own right. Unfortunately, what might seem reasonable behavior on the NSC advisor's part in insuring good order can mesh poorly with presidential expectations. Good systems can increase the odds of good policy choices, but they cannot guarantee them. Presidential fit is important, but what if that fit means dysfunction? And what if in the end a good NSC advisor does not "have the president's ear"? Has Bolton fared any better than McMaster in his relationship with President Trump?

Outcome: The National Security Strategic Survey

One major outcome of the national security process, whatever its quality, was the administration's National Security Strategy paper issued on December 18, 2017, toward the end of Trump's first year in office. The survey—a comprehensive statement of the administration's assessment of national security issues and strategies for achieving foreign policy objectives—is mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols National Defense Department Reorganization Act of 1986. The first report pursuant to the act was issued by the Reagan administration on January 1, 1987.

Although Goldwater-Nichols called for yearly reports, White House compliance has been mixed. As Table 1 indicates, reports were generally issued (with some exceptions) in compliance with the act by the Reagan, G. H. W. Bush, and Clinton administrations. The reports from the G. W. Bush and Obama administrations were much more sporadic. Bush issued two reports, in 2002 and 2006, while Obama also only issued two, in 2010 and 2015. This is in marked contrast to the seven reports issued over the eight

TABLE 1
National Security Strategy Reports

<i>Year</i>	<i>President</i>	<i>Issue Date</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>President</i>	<i>Issue Date</i>
2017	TRUMP	12/18/2017	2000	CLINTON	12/1/2000
			1999	CLINTON	12/1/1999
2016	OBAMA	none	1998	CLINTON	10/1/1998
2015	OBAMA	2/6/2015	1997	CLINTON	5/1/1997
2014	OBAMA	none	1996	CLINTON	2/1/1996
2013	OBAMA	none	1995	CLINTON	2/1/1995
2012	OBAMA	none	1994	CLINTON	7/1/1994
2011	OBAMA	none	1993	CLINTON	none
2010	OBAMA	5/28/2010			
2009	OBAMA	none	1992[1993]	G.H.W. BUSH	1/1/1993
			1991	G.H.W. BUSH	8/1/1991
2008	G. W. BUSH	none	1990	G.H.W. BUSH	3/1/1990
2007	G. W. BUSH	none	1989	G.H.W. BUSH	none
2006	G. W. BUSH	5/16/2006			
2005	G. W. BUSH	none	1988	REAGAN	1/1/1988
2004	G. W. BUSH	none	1987	REAGAN	1/1/1987
2003	G. W. BUSH	none			
2002	G. W. BUSH	9/17/2002			
2001	G. W. BUSH	none			

Source: National Security Strategy Archive [nssarchive.us].

years of the Clinton presidency and the three reports issued over the four years of the G. H. W. Bush presidency. The Trump document is also notable in that it was released during his first year in office, the only time this has been done.

The Trump report was largely drafted by then-NSC staffer Nadia Schadlow working in close concert with then-NSC deputy advisor Dina Powell as well as McMaster. Schadlow and Powell not only conducted an internal NSC staff canvass but they met extensively with department and agency officials as well as with members of Congress, the military, and other foreign-policy experts, according to reports. Schadlow, of course, succeeded Powell in the deputy slot just weeks after the report was issued.

Publication of the survey in prior administrations has usually been a passing affair, with little notice. However, the Trump document was the subject of much anticipation, speculation, and White House leaks in the days before it was issued. Reporters were duly briefed by administration officials on the eve of its publication. Their initial takes were widely reported in a variety of media and Internet outlets. Moreover, its unveiling merited a major presidential speech; apparently Trump was the first president to do so (Gearan and Mufson 2017). Trump appeared at a gathering of cabinet members, other department and agency officials, and military personnel at the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center in Washington, DC.

Not surprisingly, given Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 campaign (the latter mentioned if not touted during his address) and the administration's actions during its first year, the survey highlighted some significant departures from the themes of Obama and Bush. It clearly embraced Trump's notion of a foreign policy based on "America First" (a term specifically mentioned). Perhaps, on the positive side, it proved a useful exercise by administration experts in making sense of what had been a hodge-podge of nationalist, nativist, and a times jingoistic themes and expressions.

Its central theme was what it termed Trump's doctrine of "principled realism." "Realist," it noted, because it acknowledged "the central role of power in international politics" and affirmed that "strong and sovereign states" are the "best hope for a peaceful world." "Principled," it claimed, because it was grounded "in advancing American principles."

The survey was organized around "four pillars": (1) protect the homeland, (2) promote American prosperity, (3) preserve peace through strength, and (4) advance American influence. The themes here were more inward looking than those of his predecessors; "national interest" was its heart and connective tissue. Gone was the Bush-era emphasis on promoting democracy abroad. The Trump survey explicitly noted that "America will no longer tolerate chronic trade abuses and will pursue free, fair, and reciprocal economic relationships." Indeed, the broader connection between national security and the health of the domestic economy were leitmotifs both of the document and Trump's speech unveiling it. However, as Nicholas Burns, a career diplomat who held a variety of senior posts in the Bush Sr., Clinton, and G. W. Bush administrations (including ambassador to North Atlantic Treaty Organization and undersecretary of state) observed at the time, "what's missing from this document is any emphasis that the U.S. has to promote democracy and human freedom, which most American presidents—John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan—have felt was important. He's weakening us on these essential foundations of American power" (Gearan and Mufson 2017).

While much broad strategy was shared with the reports of his immediate predecessors, especially the threat of terrorism and the need for vigilance in homeland security, there were clear differences. In contrast to the Obama 2015 report, which had far fewer references to Islam (Islam once; ISIS once), the Trump report explicitly noted the common "jihadist terrorism" ("jihad"/"jihadist" appears 32 times) present in both ISIS and Al Qaeda, and their embrace of Sharia law and submission to it.

Another significant and predictable difference: the Obama 2015 report emphasized climate change and the effects of global warming as new national security threats. Trump took a 180-degree turn and noted that, "[g]iven future global energy demand, much of the developing world *will require fossil fuels*, as well as other forms of energy, to power their economies and lift their people out of poverty" (emphasis added). The Obama document also embraced the Paris Climate Accords, which the Trump administration rejected. For Trump: "the United States will not cede sovereignty to those who claim authority over American citizens and are in conflict with our constitutional framework."

Immigration policy also posed clear differences. The Obama document emphasized the need for a "pathway to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants. For Trump, the

emphasis was on the “sovereign right to determine who should enter our country” and that strengthened “control over our borders and immigration system is central to national security, economic prosperity, and the rule of law.”

The Trump survey clearly emphasized that both China and Russia were not merely economic competitors but military threats bent on global dominance in the future. Needless to say, this is sometimes at odds with Trump’s own favorable comments on Russia’s Putin and China’s Xi. There is also the odd juxtaposition of the aim that the United States “must upgrade our diplomatic capabilities,” with the reality that Secretary of State Tillerson was pursuing, at the time, dramatic cuts to the State Department’s budget (a proposed 30 percent by some estimates) and a leaner organization. Not surprisingly, Iran was singled out for failing to live up to the 2015 nuclear accord. In addition, Iran was highlighted as a source of problems in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The Trump memo was attuned to external threats, especially cybersecurity, and protection of “critical infrastructure and digital networks,” in light of “new adversaries [who] create new vulnerabilities.” The document does not say whether this included Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

In the end, of course, what matters are not the words and rhetoric of the strategic survey but what bearing it has had for the actions of this president. Anti-Muslim rhetoric, sharp words about traditional allies, less-than-measured comments about adversaries such as North Korea (“fire and fury”), and a variety of other thoughtless, often late-night tweets have been regular features of Trump’s own direct issue. As one Trump administration staffer was quoted: the strategic survey “is divorced from the reality” of his presidency. “What’s most striking is how disconnected the Trump NSS is from the words and actions of the president himself, the man whose endorsement will ultimately be needed to provide the NSS any credibility” (Brannen 2017).

The Trump memorandum, agree with its substance or not, set out the administration’s foreign-policy perspective. That it attracted such attention is testimony to changing media coverage wrought by this presidency. Whether it mattered has depended on the changing vicissitudes in the mind of this president. The system produced one thing. But this president often unpredictably has shifted course, yielding quite another and sometimes without taking advantage of analysis and counsel.

Unfinished Business: In a Family Way

Presidents have often relied on a variety of informal channels of information and advice separate from formal advisory channels such as the NSC system. Prominent examples here include Eisenhower’s close association with his brother, Milton Eisenhower, a distinguished university president at a number of institutions (including Pennsylvania State University and Johns Hopkins University during his brother’s presidency) and service as a government official during the New Deal (see Ambrose and Immerman 2009). Historically, the most notable have been meetings of top-level former political notables brought in for periodic consultation on foreign policy: the so-called “wise men,” especially

during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Nixon favored extensive telephone calls to a wide array of political figures and often was a source of counsel to his successors in office. George H. W. Bush also cast his informal advisory net widely: his well-publicized “rolodex” of “outsider” contacts, both domestic and foreign.

As well, presidents have relied on a variety of “special envoys” tasked with substantive foreign missions. Richard Holbrooke under Clinton is perhaps the most prominent in recent administrations; he served as a high-ranking envoy during the Bosnia and then Kosovo crises, then as Obama’s representative to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Others have provided prominent service such as former Senator George Mitchell (D-ME) on Ireland, during the Clinton years, and the Israeli–Arab peace process under Obama. Under George W. Bush, former Secretary of State James Baker was sent to Iraq to negotiate its war debts and former Senator John Danforth (R-MO) was dispatched to Sudan during that country’s civil war. Even such a well-respected cast, however, has generated problems and tensions, especially with the State Department (on issues with special envoys, see Lyman and Beecroft 2014). Outside channels and ad hoc envoys can offer much, but they require diligent attention and effective management.

For Trump, a major issue has been extensive telephone conversations, often after hours and in response to cable news programs he has watched, with a variety of external confidants. These have included the late Roger Ailes of Fox News; Rupert Murdoch; Carl Icahn; Rudy Giuliani; and his former campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, among others. Here Trump often has vented, apparently seeking support and reinforcing counsel (Diamond 2017).

Most notable has been the role of Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Kushner is no external “wise man” because he has held a White House position. However, he has served with a very broad portfolio as a presidential advisor and sometime envoy outside of the NSC system and the State Department. Kushner lacked, however, substantive foreign policy experience prior to Trump’s presidency, save for some of his business dealings. Yet, during the campaign, and continuing through the transition and into Trump’s presidency, he was assigned increasingly significant responsibilities.

Problems arose from the start. Most problematic: Kushner and Donald Trump Jr. (and, to be fair, it was the latter who was the chief organizer) attended the infamous June 2016 meeting with a group of Russians with questionable credentials and promises of damaging information about Hillary Clinton. The meeting proved central to subsequent Senate and Justice Department investigations of possible links between the Trump campaign and the Russian government (Becker, Apuzzo, and Goldman 2017).

Kushner’s contacts with a variety of foreign representatives also caused difficulty in his appointment paperwork, security clearance, and testimony to congressional committees. Early documentation for his security clearance failed to include reports of some foreign contacts; several revisions in the official record were required. Indeed, by the end of February 2018 (over a full year into the Trump presidency), Kushner still had not received a permanent security clearance (Riotta 2017). Kushner did hold an interim clearance, which allowed him access to the highest levels of classified documents. In late February 2018, however, the issue of interim clearances loomed

large as a result of several dismissals of White House staff members who also held them but whose prior behavior indicated serious personal issues. Chief of staff Kelly announced those whose full clearances had been pending since June 2017 would be cut off from the top level of secret documents as of February 23, 2018. Kushner was not granted an exception to this policy. However, his background checks and paperwork were eventually completed and his full security clearance was finally granted on May 23, 2018.

Interestingly, even though not holding a permanent clearance, the interim one enabled Kushner to receive the President's Daily Briefing (PDB) on intelligence, a highly sensitive and classified document. Under Obama, only seven White House officials were granted access to the PDB. Under Trump, the list grew to 14, including Kushner (Entous and Osnos 2018, 21). According to David Priess, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official and author of *The President's Book of Secrets* on the PDB, "I have not come across another case of a White House official being a designated recipient of the PDB, for that length of time, without having a full security clearance" (Entous and Osnos 2018, 21). Kushner's access to the PDB presumably ended on February 23, 2018 (until he received his permanent clearance in May). However, it must be borne in mind that presidents are free to share whatever information they deem appropriate with whomever they wish.

In April 2017, Kushner traveled to Iraq and met not only with top American generals but Iraqi officials as well. His portfolio also included China, Mexico, Canada, and Israeli–Palestinian relations (for a positive account of the latter, see Charal 2018). His relationship with China's ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, especially came under scrutiny. In an article subtitled "China's Suspect Courtship with Jared Kushner," Entous and Osnos noted that the U.S. intelligence community regarded "China's influence operations [as] a source of equal concern" to those of Russia. In Kushner, "Cui found a confident, attentive," but "inexperienced counterpart" amenable to a number of informal meetings during the Trump administration's first year. These "frequent encounters" made some U.S. officials "uncomfortable." Their informality was notable, especially given Kushner's preference for small groups, which often excluded specialists from the State Department and NSC who normally have been present for such meetings in past administrations. According to one former NSC member, "He went in utterly unflanked by anyone who could find Beijing on a map." They even met alone on one occasion, which, in the view of one former U.S. official, was a sign of "naiveté" (Entous and Osnos 2018, 20). Kushner also reportedly passed along Chinese proposals to Secretary of State Tillerson prior to his March 2017 visit to Beijing (Entous and Osnos 2018, 20–24). More generally, Whipple noted in his 2018 book *Gatekeepers* that Tillerson's "duties were commandeered by Kushner. Negotiating trade agreements was impossible when the president's son-in-law was freelancing deals of his own" (303). As well, Kushner was a source of counsel on such domestic issues as opioid drug abuse, veterans' medical care, information technology, and other issues. Here he operated as the czar-like head of the White House Office of American Innovation, created by Trump in March 2017.

Questions have also emerged concerning Kushner's spouse and Trump's daughter, Ivanka. During the transition, she held meetings with Queen Rania of Jordan on women's issues and Al Gore on climate change and sat in on a session (along with Kushner) with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Entous and Osnos 2018, 22). Both Ivanka and Jared accompanied Trump during his July 2017 G-20 summit meeting in Germany. Having family members along on these trips is not unusual by any means, in this case especially given their roles in the Trump White House. Still, their actions on the trip proved newsworthy. Trump's request that his daughter take his seat during one of the sessions was widely and not favorably noted (she briefly sat between British Prime Minister Theresa May and China's president Xi Jinping). Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul tweeted: "This is strange. Very strange" (Merica 2017). White House officials denied that it was out of the ordinary. Ivanka also used the trip to further one of her assigned projects, funding for women's initiatives in developing nations. Jared, for his part, sat in on a private meeting between Prime Minister May and Trump. As James Pfiffner (2017) observed, Kushner and Ivanka Trump "are major White House players. The breadth of Kushner's policy responsibilities and his access to the president undermined [then chief of staff] Priebus's authority."

It is not clear how successful Priebus' successor, John Kelly, has been in his efforts to have Jared and Ivanka clear with him their informal visits with the president when policy matters are the main purpose. In Bannon's view, Kelly "totally iced out Jared and Ivanka . . . shut down Jared—except to work on Israel and Palestine" (Whipple 2018, 311–12). According to another report, Kelly "has curbed [their] role. . . and has at times questioned Ivanka Trump's work on Capitol Hill." Still, the same article notes that Kelly was "supportive" of her (Dawsey, Costa, and Rucker 2018). Kushner's mounting legal difficulties in the wake of the Mueller investigation may have limited some of his expansive activities as the administration entered its second year. More generally, as one account has noted, continuing revelations, especially with the Chinese, "expose him to additional questions about the wisdom of his diplomatic efforts and the recurring risks that his work in government cannot be disentangled from his family's business interests" (Entous and Osnos 2018, 24). A report in the *Washington Post* titled "Kushner's Overseas Contacts as Foreign Officials Seek Leverage" specifically raised issues concerning the latter: "Officials in at least four countries [China, Israel, Mexico, and the UAE] have privately discussed ways they can manipulate Jared Kushner. . . by taking advantage of his complex business arrangements, financial difficulties and lack of foreign policy experience, according to current and former U.S. officials familiar with intelligence reports on the matter." According to the report, it was an issue that McMaster raised in his daily intelligence briefings with the president (Harris et al. 2018).

In addition, while Kushner was supposed to make McMaster and the NSC staff aware of his foreign contacts, McMaster "learned that Kushner had contacts with foreign officials that he did not coordinate through the National Security Council or officially report" (Harris et al. 2018). In fact, when he became NSC advisor, McMaster was surprised to find out about Kushner's ranging foreign-policy portfolio: "You mean I've got somebody running a significant part of foreign policy who doesn't report into my structure?" (Keefe 2018, 41).

At the very least, as Michael Nelson has noted, “Abilities aside, Ivanka and Kushner’s status made it awkward for staff members who lacked their strong personal connection with the president to disagree with them” (Nelson 2018, 36). This does not bode well for the internal “organizational culture” of the Trump White House staff.

Presidents are obviously free to seek counsel outside of formal administration channels. Indeed, in most presidencies this has usually been seen as of great benefit. For Trump the terrain beyond the regular channels of the NSC system has seemed problematic. Reliance on his family inner circle, even when they were granted insider status as was the case for Kushner, has raised concerns. This has particularly been the case in the area of foreign policy where prior experience is often lacking and present judgment might at times be questionable.

A Presidential Problem: Deliberative Style and Decision Making

While well-structured and functioning advisory systems are needed, they are not sufficient in themselves to yield effective outcomes. Their workings also depend on the one actor to which they are solely directed in the end: the president.

Some flexibility is obviously needed at the very top in adjusting to how individual presidents process information and take advice. Yet there are cautions here. LBJ thought his Tuesday lunches were great forums for taking advice on Vietnam, but they proved to be poor venues for really discussing the options before him. Nixon hated meetings and was uncomfortable when aides clashed. He became increasingly reliant on paper, which he would peruse alone in his private study; he also became increasingly dependent on his private conversations with Henry Kissinger. This practice led to the exclusion of other sources of information and advice (most notably his own secretary of state, until Kissinger took on that job as well). Jimmy Carter valued his weekly Friday breakfasts with his vice president, secretaries of state and defense, and his NSC advisor. They were his “favorite meeting” of the week and without a prior agenda, he writes in his memoirs. Yet, apparently unbeknownst to Carter, his breakfast mates had met the day before to hash out differences and determine the agenda they would pursue with him the next day (Burke 2009, 329). The deck was more stacked than Carter ever realized.

Trump seems especially problematic in his use of the resources at his disposal to assist his acquisition of information, enhance his deliberations, or even as a reality check where his inclinations are strong. As noted above, McMaster (and his ordered process) and Trump’s personal deliberations were like the passing of “two ships in the night.”

One potentially disturbing practice that apparently has emerged in the Trump presidency is that administrative officials who appear on television news shows and other venues often do so not just to mold public opinion but also to influence Trump himself. A frequent cable TV watcher, his views have often been influenced by, if not on some occasions reactive to, what he sees and hears in the media. According to one report, there is “evidence that Trump’s advisers, formal and informal, *talk to him* through the television, believing his decisions are influenced by what he sees on cable news.” Whether

this has occurred on national security matters is difficult to determine. But some of the “pro-Trump arguments you hear on TV might not be delivered with the principal goal of winning or retaining [public] support. They might be aimed at the president himself” (Borchers 2018).

What Trump says in public about his policy choices has also been problematic. He sometimes goes off the cuff in public statements to an unusual degree. As Howard Kurtz noted, “He is loose with language. He makes little attempt to vet his presidential pronouncements. He watches cable news endlessly and sometimes regurgitates half-baked comments” (Kurtz 2018, 5). Often these occur in tweets as we all well know. This practice may mark a new era in presidential communication, not unlike FDR’s fireside chats. However, will history treat it differently than it has for FDR?

Indeed, Trump’s tweeting has often been a source of both confusion and concern. At a summit of European foreign-policy leaders in February 2018 (this was the one where McMaster incurred Trump’s ire by saying the Russians had sought to tamper with the 2016 election), some top U.S. officials reportedly “had a message” for the group: “Pay no attention to the man tweeting behind the curtain.” The report was titled: “Top U.S. Officials Tell the World to Ignore Trump’s Tweets” (Birnbbaum and Witte 2018).

While Michael Wolff’s recent book on the early Trump presidency, *Fire and Fury*, has been questioned as to its accuracy, it contains some startling material. Wolff directly quotes an April 2017 e-mail, apparently widely copied and forwarded within the administration and “purporting to represent the views of Gary Cohn,” Trump’s director of the National Economic Council (NEC) at the time. The relevant sections of Trump’s deliberative style are in italics, but the whole thing is worth a read:

It’s worse than you can imagine. An idiot surrounded by clowns. Trump won’t read anything—not one-page memos, not the brief policy papers; nothing. He gets up halfway through meetings with world leaders because he is bored. And his staff is no better. Kushner is an entitled baby who knows nothing. Bannon is an arrogant prick who thinks he’s smarter than he is. Trump is less a person than a collection of terrible traits. . . . The reason so few jobs have been filled is that they only accept people who pass ridiculous purity tests, even for midlevel policy-making jobs where the people will never see the light of day. I am in a constant state of shock and horror. (Wolff 2018, 186, emphasis added)

Problems in Trump’s style as an information gatherer and decision maker can be gleaned from other sources, and they confirm what is conveyed in the e-mail. According to an *Atlantic* review (titled “The President Who Doesn’t Read”) of Wolff’s book, “Trump’s allergy to reading is *among the most fully corroborated assertions*” Wolff makes. Moreover, “Trump’s indifference to the printed word has been apparent for some time,” and “his reliance on oral communication have proven liabilities in office” (Graham 2018, emphasis added). Something, by the way, the editors of the magazine noted before Election Day in 2016: “he appears not to read” (*Atlantic Editorial Board* 2016).

More generally, Trump’s personal decision calculus reveals problems. According to a March 2, 2018 news piece (at a particularly tense moment when chief of staff Kelly, NSC advisor McMaster, and NEC advisor Cohn were all rumored to be leaving):

Administration officials and outsiders with windows into decision-making describe a growing sense of despair within Trump's ranks, driven by the mounting realization that the president's *brand of politics guided by intuition and improvisation* is incompatible with a competently functioning executive branch. Most alarming, by these lights, is mounting evidence that Trump lacks an attribute possessed by most previous presidents and certainly by all the most successful ones: *a capacity for self-critique and self-correction* (Harris and Restuccia 2018, emphasis added).

Cohn announced his resignation days later, on March 6. The Dow Jones industrials tumbled by some 350 points on the news.

In fact, Trump is not beyond dissembling facts when it suits his purposes. His misleading claims are regularly tracked by a number of media outlets (see, e.g., Kessler and Kelly 2018). Sometimes he apparently does not simply know, but comments nonetheless. Most startling was his own self-confession at a fundraising event on March 14, 2018 when he told Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that Canada ran a trade surplus with the United States. It was factually wrong. Trudeau correctly protested, but Trump replied: "Wrong Justin, you do." As Trump later admitted, "I had no idea. I just said, 'You're wrong'" (Blake 2018). Trump's lack of basic knowledge here—it does not seem to be just a political ploy given his statement that he did not know—is especially notable because free trade was a central theme of his campaign, and Canada is one of our most important trading partners. It is number two, in fact, slightly behind China and ahead of Mexico.

Trump's style has particularly affected how national security information reaches him. According to one early report, staff were explicitly told "they need to make their points in council meetings quickly." Moreover, they have been informed "to keep papers to a single page, with lots of graphics and maps. 'The president likes maps,' one official said." "Paper flow, the lifeblood of the bureaucracy, has been erratic" (Sanger, Schmitt, and Baker 2017). NSC staff were asked to "[t]hin it out," one member reported. They did, "But then word comes back 'This is still too much.'" They were also told that the president is "a visual person," and it helps to make points "pictorially" (Keefe 2018, 36). Another report indicated that NSC staff members prominently placed Trump's name in written reports that he does read so as to more likely attract his attention and keep him reading (Holland and Mason 2017).

The *Washington Post* especially noted Trump's reluctance, boredom perhaps, with reading the PDB, the most up-to-date daily source on national intelligence information and analysis, preferring just an oral briefing instead. Most presidents receive both an oral briefing and the document itself, but Trump "has declined to participate in a practice followed by the past seven of his predecessors" and "rarely if ever" reads the PDB. Reading is not Trump's preferred "style of learning" one insider familiar with the PDB process has indicated. Plus, he prefers any information to be "condensed as much as possible," according to the *Post*. Shortly after becoming president, moreover, intelligence analysts began to add "photos, videos, and graphics" to the oral briefings because they seemed to capture the president's attention (Leonnig, Harris, and Jaffe 2018).

Wolff noted a major event where these "visuals" apparently made a difference in Trump decision making. In early April 2017, the Syrian government used chemical

weapons in attacking rebel forces in the town of Khan Sheikhoun. Innocent civilians, including children, were casualties. It was an opportunity for a U.S. response based on a sound moral outrage, yet Trump was reluctant to act. Words, details, and briefings by the national security team did not seem to matter to him. Ivanka Trump and Dina Powell realized a visual presentation to Trump on the atrocities was more likely to get him to think and act. It worked: “he went through it several times. He was mesmerized.” Shortly thereafter a retaliatory attack on a Syrian airfield was launched; the mission occurred while Trump was dining with China’s Xi at Mar-a-Lago. “That was a big one,” Trump told a friend (Wolff 2018, 192–94).

Presidents clearly vary in how they gather and assess information effectively. To return to the PDB, for example, some presidents, like Obama, preferred the written document. And, to provide a fair contrast to Trump, this was especially the case as oral briefings were less frequently scheduled later in Obama’s presidency (Thiessen 2012). Even Reagan read the PDB daily. G. W. Bush was apparently assiduous in maintaining a regular schedule of both formats. Some presidents prefer the oral briefing be done by the NSC advisor, while others are content to hear it from a CIA officer. Yet, since the PDB first came on the scene under JFK, the information has been more richly conveyed in most past administrations compared to this one.

The costs? Here there are some differences in assessment, and Trump defenders claim he is well informed. Still, his practices seem problematic: “By not reading the daily briefing, the president could hamper his ability to respond to crises in the most effective manner, intelligence experts warned” (Leonig, Harris, and Jaffe 2018). At least the small audience for Trump’s oral briefings had been a distinguished one: NSC advisor McMaster and, usually, national intelligence director and former senator Dan Coats, plus then-CIA director Mike Pompeo.

When Trump does read, he likes it short and sweet. As Trump himself told Jim VandeHei and Mike Allen of *Axios* shortly before his inauguration, “I like bullets or I like as little as possible. I don’t need, you know, 200-page reports on something that can be handled on a page” (VandeHei and Allen 2017). McMaster was apparently advised of this presidential proclivity when he became NSC advisor and told to keep things short. Whether he did so is uncertain. It may have been a source of tension with Trump from the start as well as a possible source of his demise.

Whatever the NSC system looked like in the early Trump presidency, even given McMaster’s efforts at improvement, outcomes depended on how this president processed its work. Here problems ensued: Trump was not your standard presidential decision maker (with “standard” running a wide gamut of presidents). It is not clear what system or structure might have worked to positive advantage.

A Second NSC Advisor Is Fired: Bolton Becomes the Third

On March 22, 2018, President Trump telephoned McMaster and later tweeted that former UN ambassador John Bolton would replace him. McMaster’s dismissal, at least, was

handled more adeptly than Tillerson's firing just days before. The initial public announcement by a tweet notwithstanding, both parties exchanged positive comments concerning McMaster's departure.

Bolton's name had been floated as a possible replacement for several months, although apparently chief of staff Kelly was not keen on the choice. Trump clearly was. Despite Bolton's moustache (an odd impediment but one that apparently raised the president's concern), Trump believed he had a level of comfort with him that McMaster did not measure up to.

Bolton moved quickly, unlike McMaster, to make important personnel changes in the NSC staff. McMaster officially left the NSC post on Friday, April 6, 2018. On Sunday, April 8, Michael Anton, press spokesperson for the NSC, confirmed that he too would be leaving. On Tuesday, April 10, the White House announced the departure of Tom Bossert, the homeland security advisor. Reports indicated that his resignation was at Bolton's request, apparently conveyed to Bossert that very day, and that McMaster had a frustrating and sometimes stormy relationship with him (Dawsey, Jaffe, and Nakashima 2018). Bossert was replaced by Rear Admiral Doug Fears of the Coast Guard.

More changes quickly followed. On Wednesday, April 11, the resignation of McMaster's recently appointed deputy NSC advisor for strategy, Nadia Schadlow, was announced (effective at the end of April). She submitted her resignation, after speaking with Bolton the previous day, in order to "allow him to build his own NSC leadership team," according to one White House official (Diamond and McLaughlin 2018). This was followed, the next day, by an announcement that Major General Ricky Waddell, the other deputy NSC advisor, was stepping down. Mira Ricardel, undersecretary of commerce for export administration and a former Boeing executive as well as a former assistant secretary of defense, was quickly tapped as Bolton's new deputy. She was clearly a Trump loyalist and a foreign-policy hard liner. Moreover, as one account noted, "Bolton's new deputy is a hawk with sharp elbows, just like him" (Rogin 2018). During the transition, she worked on the personnel team assigned to defense and then, after Trump's inauguration, was the lead White House official on Department of Defense appointments. Reports indicated that she frequently clashed with Defense Secretary Mattis and derailed a number of his picks for key Pentagon assignments. For his part, Mattis reportedly blocked her nomination for a defense post, which led to her assignment as an undersecretary in the Department of Commerce (Gramer and De Luce 2018; Rogin 2018). Finally, Lieutenant General (retired) Keith Kellogg, who had served as NSC chief of staff and had briefly been acting NSC advisor immediately following Flynn's resignation, was shifted over to Vice President Mike Pence's staff as his principal national security advisor. Fred Fleitz, who had been Bolton's chief of staff when he was undersecretary of state for arms control, replaced him.

In just one week, Bolton had managed to reshape personnel at the top of the NSC system, a process that took McMaster months to achieve and delicately negotiate with the Trump loyalists, a number of whom were gone by the time Bolton took over. As one account noted, Bolton "is moving fast to consolidate control over the national-security policymaking process, and is preparing for internal battles that may emerge" (Rogin 2018).

Bolton's appointment, coupled with CIA director Pompeo's replacement of Tillerson at the State Department, also altered the internal dynamics at the top of Trump's foreign-policy team. Before the shifts, interpersonal relationships were sometimes rocky, with McMaster a bit more inclined to defer to Trump once he made his presentation of options (Glasser 2018; Keefe 2018, 41). However, depending on the issue, McMaster, Tillerson, and Mattis sometimes combined together (two of them, sometimes all three, plus chief of staff Kelly on occasion) to forestall actions they viewed as ill advised. This was especially the case regarding the Iran nuclear agreement, about which Trump had voiced grave reservations dating as far back as the start of his campaign in 2015. On two occasions when all three were still in their posts, Trump was eventually persuaded to continue the deal pending further alterations in its terms. However, on May 9, 2018, Trump announced that the United States was abandoning the agreement. "He didn't get out of the deal until now because he gave repeated opportunities to try to fix the deal," Bolton told reporters. "The president wanted to let all the efforts go forward, and he did, right up until just a few days before the May 12 deadline" (Hudson and Rucker 2018).

Once McMaster and Tillerson were gone, the internal debate within the Trump administration was quite different given the new cast of players. According to one account, Trump's advisors "put up little resistance to a decision many viewed as a *fait accompli*, given the president's March firing of two key Iran deal defenders: Tillerson and national security adviser McMaster. In their place, Trump installed two hawks and staunch critics of the Iran deal: Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo." "Mattis, perhaps realizing he was outnumbered after the ouster of Tillerson, refrained from aggressively rehashing his earlier opposition," said the White House official. "Everyone's on the same page now" (Hudson and Rucker 2018). According to another account, deliberations over the issue were somewhat attenuated per Bolton's direction:

Even if Mr. Mattis had wanted to fight for the deal, it is not clear how much he would have been heard. Mr. Bolton, officials said, *never convened a high-level meeting of the National Security Council to air the debate. He advised Mr. Trump in smaller sessions, otherwise keeping the door to his West Wing office closed.* Mr. Bolton has forged a comfortable relationship with the president, several people said, channeling his "America First" vocabulary. (Landler 2018, emphasis added)

In this account, "Bolton is emerging as an influential figure, with a clear channel to the president and an ability to control the voices he hears." Mattis is "isolated." Secretary of State Pompeo is seen as playing "a swing role, a hard-line former congressman and C.I.A. director who, in his new job, seems determined to give diplomacy a fair shot." There is a clearer "split" within the Trump foreign-policy circle "between those, like Mr. Mattis, who want to change the behavior of hostile governments and those, like Mr. Bolton, who want to change the governments themselves" (Landler 2018).

Procedurally, a similar process was reportedly used prior to Trump's June 2018 meeting in Singapore with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. As one report noted, "Bolton has yet to convene a Cabinet-level meeting to discuss [Trump's] upcoming summit with North Korea next week, a striking break from past practice that suggests the

Trump White House is improvising its approach to the unprecedented nuclear talks.” “The White House’s summit planning has been unstructured, according to a half-dozen administration officials” (Johnson 2018b). Still, on other issues, meetings of the Principals Committee, over which Bolton presides, “are more focused than before,” according to one senior official (Johnson 2018b). Trump looms over all, with his own predilections and style driving deliberations. On June 7, just days before the summit, Trump told reporters: “I don’t think I have to prepare very much. It’s about attitude. It’s about willingness to get things done” (Hutzler 2018).

Bolton also began to make changes in the NSC staff structure. On May 15, 2018, Bolton aide Christine Samuelian e-mailed the NSC staff that the cyber coordinator role, a position that had been held by Rob Joyce, was being eliminated. According to Samuelian, the NSC had two senior directors in this area and thus “cyber coordination is already a core capability.” Others, however, viewed the coordinator post as essential. Joyce, according to one account, “led a team of directors and senior directors who worked with agencies to develop a unified strategy for issues like election security and digital deterrence. The coordinator also represented the administration in meetings with foreign partners and at conferences and other public events” (Geller 2018). According to another report, experts in the field and members of Congress “were mystified by the move,” with some suggesting that Bolton “did not want any competitive power centers emerging inside the national security apparatus” (Perlroth and Sanger 2018). The change was also notable given that an Obama-era commission had recommended that the coordinator position be elevated to the “assistant to the president” level, the highest White House staff ranking. More generally, Samuelian’s e-mail indicated that the elimination of the coordinator position was part of a more general effort to “streamline authority” among the NSC’s senior directors, which may indicate further structural changes (Geller 2018).

Bolton moved quickly in making personnel changes at the top of the NSC system. Elimination of the post of cyber security coordinator indicated the possibility of further structural changes. While these changes might have been beneficial, they leave open the question of whether the NSC process will function more effectively. Challenges remain, as they did for McMaster, especially the fit with Trump’s own deliberative style and predilections.

Bolton’s Likely Further Challenges

While Bolton moved quickly to put his imprint on the NSC system, potential challenges remain. The first is the problem of policy advocacy. Bolton clearly brings knowledge to the job, although its substance has been a subject of controversy. Most notably, G. W. Bush was not able to secure his Senate confirmation as UN ambassador; he served under a recess appointment. Bolton is clearly a policy advocate with strongly held views and no reluctance to express them. His more hawkish approach may put him at odds with this president: Trump’s “America First” versus Bolton’s “America Dominant.” They may ally at times, but they also may come to diverge at times. Bolton’s strong support of the Iraq War

in the Bush years, for example, clearly differs from Trump's public statements. So, too, perhaps for Bolton's greater willingness to use military force as a policy tool.

A second issue concerns Bolton's operating style and Trump's presidential response. Bolton's *modus operandi* is more akin to that of a cabinet member than the traditional role of the NSC advisor. While Trump may have been impatient with McMaster's analytic and perhaps didactic style, it is not clear that Bolton's strong advocacy fares any better with this president. At the same time, perhaps Bolton's more confrontational and hard-line approach has sat well with Trump: a triumph of style over substance? Whether it has yielded sound foreign policy is another matter.

Both with respect to Bolton's expertise and operating style, the possible parallel here is Nixon–Kissinger. Yet Nixon was a president deeply steeped in foreign policy, plus he and Kissinger largely agreed on substance. The corresponding match for Trump–Bolton is less clear. In general, strong, unalloyed policy advocacy is problematic for an NSC advisor, especially if other views remain left out. Advocacy has a place, but it must be carefully aligned with providing fair and balanced counsel to the president that comes from a variety of sources, especially the NSC system.

A third potential challenge is Bolton's understanding of the value of the NSC process. Bolton's strong sense of policy direction may perhaps be of positive benefit but it could damper, if not squash, the policy deliberations that percolate up through the NSC system. At a minimum, the policy process can operate as a reality check on presidential and/or NSC advisor policy preferences. It must be nurtured accordingly. There may be that odd person in the room or in a policy paper who looks at the map of the Bay of Pigs and points out that the revised landing location is in the swamps and now far from the intended mountain sanctuary.

More broadly, the NSC system has served as a prime source for not only fleshing out details but also for developing policy options in a wider range of areas beyond the immediate big agenda of the president or the NSC advisor. What will U.S. policy be in dealing with Catalanian independence? Hungarian immigration policy? South African treatment of white landowners? Instability in Venezuela? Myanmar's treatment of its Rohingya's minority? The Philippines' war on drugs? Is a strong-willed NSC advisor able to sustain a process that remains needed in policy areas where perhaps his views or those of the president are less pronounced or even reasonably developed? Here a viable NSC system is needed, at the very least, to fill in.

A highly visible NSC advisor might also be problematic. What works generally has depended on the dynamics of the foreign-policy team. Scowcroft, for example, was willing to permit Secretary of State James Baker take the public lead; Kissinger, by contrast, was more publicly adept and media savvy than Secretary of State William Rogers during Nixon's first term. In general, an NSC advisor should step back a bit. Some public presence may be needed depending on the media skills of the other principals, but too much may compromise the integrity of the deliberative process that he superintends. A more visible NSC advisor also likely sets in motion difficulties with other members of the president's policy team, most notably the secretaries of state and defense, if his public presence is resented.

That Bolton has not been Brent Scowcroft is clear. Perhaps he does not need to be. Policy advocacy and media visibility may be part of the NSC advisor's job, but if not carefully managed they can conflict with responsibilities to nurture an effective national security system. Trump's interpersonal dynamics with his top aides have loomed over all. That Bolton has not been H. R. McMaster is also clear. But has his relationship with the president been more positive and productive?

Conclusion

McMaster's efforts to restore some semblance of standard order were clearly needed. The transition had failed to put in place an effective national security system. Even the initial national security memorandum, while adhering to the basics of the Scowcroft model, generated controversy. McMaster quickly remedied this and embraced standard order. Yet, sound structures and systems do not stand alone; they are necessary but not sufficient. Who occupies key positions and what skills and expertise they bring to the job also count. Internal dynamics changed when McMaster replaced Flynn and a new team was eventually brought on board; they will continue to evolve under Bolton. To put it a bit differently, the "Scowcroft model" might matter, but so too do the people who populate it.

Still that is not enough in accounting for what transpired, especially in this presidency, and a key question remains definitive: Does the president take seriously the counsel received? Apparently, what McMaster (and the NSC process) offered were not enough. For Bolton, one issue is difference from Trump on some key national security issues. Another issue is interpersonal style. If Trump was uncomfortable with McMaster's detailed briefings, has he been at ease with Bolton's more assertive nature and advocacy? The Trump experience also offers an interesting caution in the conventional wisdom that decision-making structures, such as the NSC system, should fit presidential predilections. One hazards to guess what things would have looked like if they wholly matched Trump's decision-making preferences and inclinations. But it does raise the question of what strategies and structures might have been put in place to channel this president's proclivities in a more positive direction.

What has transpired so far is especially revealing about how the media now cover a presidency, especially in the national security area. In the Internet era, a myriad of online news sources are eagle-eyed in their constant, 24/7 attention to new developments. This has been with us for a while, starting in Clinton's second term when the worldwide web became commonly available. Under Trump it seems to have accelerated. Trump has particularly raised media scrutiny, both in conventional news sources and in new media outlets. That NSC committee membership or national security strategy memos were hardly noticed in the past until this presidency is new. Will it continue for Trump's successors? That there was a constant drumbeat on who is up and down in inner circles is not new, but it has accelerated in intensity. At the very least, all of these continuing changes in the media set new challenges for a presidency. In particular, they suggest the need for an

effective White House communications operation, which was especially problem ridden in the early Trump presidency, to complement deliberative processes.

Further: continued speculation about McMaster's fate in office surely cannot have been productive, not just for him personally but for others on the NSC staff. To the extent that these stories were not just media speculation but were fed by sources within the administration likely has had some negative effect on organizational culture and morale. Frequent reports of the "boss's departure" can hardly be positive and productive news. This issue, of course, ended with McMaster's resignation. It will be interesting to see if Bolton eventually encounters the same demeaning dynamic, one fed by the way not just by the media but also by Trump's own tweets and leaks by sources within the administration.

Years from now, will we see NSC advisor McMaster's efforts (or those of chief of staff Kelly) as examples of successfully prodding a president toward better order and more informed judgment? Or were they ill-fated efforts to bring order to a presidency and a president who defied order? Has Bolton delivered better?

Finally, one must ask whether system, process, and a struggle for order even mattered for much in this presidency. Or, in the end, has it simply been Donald Trump all along? As he told Fox News in November 2017, "I'm the only one that matters, because when it comes to it, that's what the policy is going to be."

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