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# “The More Essential Ones”: Ethics and National Security

*John Gans*

*For those interested in changing US foreign policy, ethical arguments are often considered the strongest. Yet a new book on how presidents and their closest advisors make decisions in war reveals how, historically, the US national security policy process was designed to drain decisions of their morality. That is an important lesson for those interested in humanitarian interventions abroad. They need to appreciate that telling policymakers to “do something” is not enough, and instead help them find the “something,” and the political and national reasons to do it.*

## Introduction

In July 1995, President Bill Clinton was upset. The war in Bosnia, which by then had killed hundreds of thousands of people and created over a million refugees, had also led to criticism of the president—by the public, his counterparts abroad, Congress, parts of his own government, and even himself. An aggravated Clinton vented to aides and looked everywhere for ideas. At one point, he turned to a young navy sailor who was in the Oval Office to set up a telephone line, and asked, “What do you think we should do on Bosnia?” The aide replied, “I don’t know, Mr. President.”<sup>1</sup>

The tragicomic conversation between a frustrated commander in chief and a lowly phone technician reflects two important trends in the summer of 1995. The first was that everyone in Washington, the president included, thought something

should be done to stop the violence in Bosnia, especially as the city of Sarajevo was under siege and the tragedy played out on televisions around the world. The second was that no matter the ethical and moral outrage in the Oval Office or

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elsewhere in Washington, no one could find an American policy response that made sufficient diplomatic, economic, military, and political sense.

The Clinton team was not the first or the last US administration to struggle with that dilemma. For a recently published book on the people

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and the power of the National Security Council staff, or NSC, who support the president and the policy-making process, I reviewed decisions in America's wars from President Harry Truman to President Donald Trump. What I learned was that even when everyone agrees on the ethical dimension of an issue, such passion is rarely enough to drive a change in policy. Anyone interested in changing

American policy must appreciate that the US national security process is designed to drain decisions of their morality.

#### “More Essential Ones”

The modern national security policy-making process was created after World War II. Despite the establishment of the White House's professional staff, known as the Executive Office of the President, in 1939, and some informal military and diplomatic coordinating committees like a Standing Liaison Committee of second-ranking officials from the State, Navy, and War departments, Franklin Delano Roosevelt preferred hands-on, ad-hoc war management. He issued orders directly to a loose collection of senior military leaders, used his personal advisors as envoys to the world and Washington, and personally communicated with allies like British prime minister Winston Churchill.

Roosevelt's was, according to biographer Robert Dallek, a “deliberately organized—or disorganized” approach.<sup>2</sup> The president, who described himself as “a juggler...perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths if it will help win the war,” kept his cards close, his options open, and just about everyone else, including his last vice president Harry Truman, in the dark.<sup>3</sup> Although it worked and World War II was won, Roosevelt's juggling drove Washington mad and worried the senior officials, uniformed and civilian, who were charged with protecting the nation.

Concerned about Roosevelt's *ad-hocracy* and the American public's potential retreat into isolationism, many policymakers believed it was time, in Truman's words, to establish a “closely knit, cooperating and effective machinery” for national security.<sup>4</sup> The government had grown during the war; technology, like nuclear weapons, had advanced; and the United States had increasingly global interests and cooling relations with the Soviet Union to manage. In a changing Washington and world, many tried to find a better way to make policy.

Few worked harder or longer than Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, a former Wall Street financier. He was all in favor of better war management, but Forrestal also wanted to protect his own and his service's interests. To do



so, Forrestal sought to control the plan that would produce it, and he enlisted Ferdinand Eberstadt, a friend and former government official who was working in business in New York at the time, to help.

Eberstadt admitted up front the impossibility of the job. He wrote, since it was “unlikely that any one form of military organization would equally meet” all the nation’s needs, traditions, and—though left unstated—ethical considerations, it would be best to come up with a plan that would advance “the more essential ones.”<sup>5</sup> To do so, Eberstadt recommended the creation of a national security council and the establishment of a “permanent secretariat, headed by a full-time executive” to prepare agendas, provide data, and distribute the council’s conclusions.<sup>6</sup>

After much legislative wrangling, the final National Security Act of 1947 created, among other entities, the National Security Council (NSC), made up of the president, the secretaries of state and defense, and more. It also created what came to be called the NSC staff, a collection of aides who were charged with keeping the council itself effective but eventually came to serve the commander in chief instead. President after president empowered the staff to run the interagency system of meetings and memo writing that prepares options for decision.

### Nightmares

Because the system has always been focused on national interests first and foremost, few of these options are designed to meet ethical ends, and that has been a problem for some in government. Well before the siege in Srebrenica, many at the State Department and elsewhere were at wits’ end over US policy in the Balkans and began resigning in protest in 1993. One departing official, whose resignation letter leaked to the press, wrote that Clinton’s policies were “misguided, vacillating and dangerous.”<sup>7</sup>

Though several at State tried to convince those considering departure to give Clinton, then a relatively new president, a chance, it was a hard sell. Many of those considering resignation had been monitoring the reports of mounting horrors in the Balkans—rape, torture, and ethnic cleansing—but they were not empowered to do anything to stop them. One resigning State staffer said, “It’s a very tragic commentary that at the end of the 20th century, we are not able to respond to genocide.”<sup>8</sup> Another explained that the atrocities and US inaction gave him nightmares.

Yet at that point, Clinton did not have many good options. His predecessor President George H.W. Bush had already tried disowning the Balkans, only to see the situation worsen, for which he was criticized by then-candidate Clinton. The Central Intelligence Agency had also told the new Clinton White House that lifting the arms embargo on the region to give Bosniaks a better chance to defend themselves would make only a modest military difference. And that spring, Clinton himself publicly ruled out sending American ground troops to bring peace to the restive region.



Although a NATO implemented a no-fly zone in April 1993, little other progress was made on Bosnia in the administration's early months. Clinton was learning on the job: at one point he reportedly said, "On this foreign policy thing, I know I can get it. I just need some time to think about this."<sup>9</sup> His NSC Senior Director for European Affairs Jenonne Walker recalled, the team spent "all these hours on Bosnia with enormous difficulty making any decisions."<sup>10</sup> The result was continued fighting in the Balkans, growing frustration at the White House, concerns on Capitol Hill, and disappointment and resignations around government.

The internal impasse reflected several factors. Despite the success of the Gulf War in 1991, many including Clinton believed the American people were still afflicted by the "Vietnam Syndrome" that included a hesitation about the use of force abroad. In particular, the US military was concerned about the prospects of involvement in another far-off internal war and Clinton, for myriad reasons, was reluctant to push too hard on the Pentagon. Besides, after his election, Clinton had said, "I just went through the whole campaign and no one talked about foreign policy at all, except for a few members of the press."<sup>11</sup>

### "Seize control"

As the crisis worsened in the years ahead, those who wanted, in some cases desperately, to end the bloodshed struggled to overcome these limits. Eventually, even Clinton grew furious at how much events were drifting out of control. As the president struggled, he tended to ask for opinions and ideas. That was Clinton's style: one aide recalled, "The president wanted to know my views, but he wanted to know everybody's views."<sup>12</sup>

One night in mid-July 1995, as the president took a momentary break to practice his golf swing on the Eisenhower putting green near the Oval Office, two aides arrived with additional details of the horror in Srebrenica. After a dispiriting review of the latest bad news, the president screamed: "This can't continue. We have to seize control of this." Again, he wanted to know where the new ideas were. Clinton's aides explained they were working on a fresh proposal. But Clinton responded, "That's not fast enough."<sup>13</sup>

For several weeks, some at the White House, well before the worsening of the situation in Srebrenica, had begun developing a comprehensive new strategy

known as the "endgame" plan. The plan that resulted was not exactly novel—it was a combination of many of the options considered and even tried in the past—but it was a unique approach that included a complex schematic that tied changes in policy to changes on the ground.

What was new was the urgency,

which though bolstered by Srebrenica, was driven as much by complaints in Congress and concerns at the White House over the impact of Clinton's reputation, especially with his reelection the next year.

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Eventually, Clinton agreed to give it a try. This plan was launched the diplomacy by Richard Holbrooke, then Assistant Secretary of State, and eventually led to peace talks at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. For good reason, the effort is often cited as a monumental achievement in humanitarian response, but the ethical arguments for it were not the strongest. Clinton’s personal reputation and political fortunes, geopolitical concerns about a spillover of violence, and America’s international credibility, all were far greater factors in getting to Dayton and the historic accords that brought momentary relief to violence in the Balkans.

### Do Something

The entire episode, from America’s frustrations over the bloodshed to its diplomatic and military intervention in Bosnia, is a reminder of the limit of the ethical argument in Washington. Even when everyone agrees that something should be done, very often they disagree over what the new policy should be. Even when a president, driven to screaming in moral outrage, wants new ideas, moral clarity does not make writing a new memorandum any easier for the NSC staff or anyone else.

In many ways, that is by design. Avoiding the personal impulses of the president or anyone else, whether for moral or material reasons, is why the National Security Council system was created in the first place and why it has served presidents for more than seven decades. That is an important lesson

for those interested in humanitarian interventions abroad. They need to appreciate that telling policymakers to ‘do something’ is not enough, and instead help them find the ‘something,’ and the political and national reasons to do it.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bob Woodward, *The Choice: How Clinton Won* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 261.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler: Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred D. Sander, “Truman and the National Security Council: 1945–1947,” *Journal of American History* 59, no. 2 (September 1972): 371.

<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand Eberstadt, “Postwar Organization for National Security,” in *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council*, eds. Karl F. Inderfurth and Lock K. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>7</sup> Mark Matthews, “State Dept. resignations reflect dissent on Bosnia US policy called weak, ‘dangerous’” *Baltimore Sun*, August 24, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Williams, “A Third States Dept. Official Resigns over Balkan Policy,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Woodward, *The Choice: How Clinton Won* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 257.

<sup>10</sup> Jenonne Walker, interview with author, April 22, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Piece* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 168.

<sup>12</sup> I.M. Destler and Ivo Daalder (moderators), “The Role of the National Security Advisor,” October 25, 1990, The National Security Council Project, The Brookings Institution and the University of Maryland Center for International and Security Studies (CISSM), 80, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/19991025.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Woodward, *The Choice*, 258.



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