

President Eisenhower Establishes His National Security Process

By Robert R. Bowie

Dwight D. Eisenhower came to the Presidency in 1953 profoundly convinced that an orderly system for strategic planning and policy making was essential for the Cold War, and that a suitable organization was necessary for that purpose. Indeed, the National Security Council (NSC) had been created in 1947 to meet that need. But Eisenhower's service with the Truman Administration had convinced him that it had not developed such an organized system or coherent strategy. In the 1952 election campaign he had vigorously criticized this deficiency and had promised that rectifying it would be a top priority.

Accordingly, even before taking office, Eisenhower named Robert Cutler to be his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. Cutler was a Boston banker who had served on General George C. Marshall's staff in World War II, as an assistant to Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal, on President Harry S. Truman's NSC staff, and in Eisenhower's campaign. Cutler was not to be an advisor on substantive policy. His job was to reorganize the NSC system and then manage its operation for it to become the central instrument in the making of foreign and national security policy. The aim was to ensure that in reaching important decisions, the President would have the benefit of full information, thorough analysis, and candid advice—enhanced by vigorous debate among his top advisors in his presence and with his active participation.

In preparing his reorganization report, Cutler consulted extensively with Truman Administration veterans—who were surprisingly forthright in their criticisms of the Truman process and suggestions for reform, which in many respects paralleled the views of Eisenhower. By mid-March, Cutler's plan for a reformed NSC had been completed, approved by the President, and was being put into effect.

In the new NSC system, two elements were central to its effective operation: the role of the President and that of a Planning Board. The President was to chair the NSC meetings and to lead the discussion to assure full participation by the Council members. To facilitate discussion, their number would be limited—beside the President and Vice President, members included the Secretaries of State, Defense, and Treasury, the Directors of the Mutual Security Agency and the Office of Defense Mobilization, with the Director of the CIA and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (and later the Director of the Budget Bureau) as advisors. Other officials might be invited when appropriate.

Throughout his tenure, President Eisenhower assiduously fulfilled his role: he regularly presided at the weekly two-hour Council sessions (missing only six of the first 179), and stimulated discussion by comments and questions. Eisenhower alone made the decisions—the

Council was only advisory. To remove any ambiguity, after each meeting he distributed a written record of what he had decided.

A New NSC

The NSC Planning Board was the engine of the system. Its policy reports provided the agenda for the Council. Eisenhower considered the work of the Planning Board to be indispensable for the proper functioning of the policy process. He told the Council that they did not have time to do the essential in-depth analysis, and that the Board must do it for them to provide the basis for their deliberations. The Board was made up of the senior planning official from each of the NSC agencies, nominated by its head, and appointed by the President.

The Board's reports for the Council were not intended to be detailed blueprints for operations. Decisions regarding day-to-day implementation, handling crises, or negotiating tactics were made by the President more informally in the Oval Office. The NSC reports were to provide strategic analysis and guidelines as the framework for such decisions. They sought to clarify and anticipate premises, trends, and threats; and to define U.S. interests, objectives, and priorities in light of risks, benefits, and feasibility. In addition, the reports were to balance ends and means in respect to the overall basic national strategy, and in particular states, regions, and issues.

In preparing its reports, the Board met in extended and lively sessions two or three times each week. It marshaled and analyzed data and drew on expertise from the members, agencies, and other sources, and sought to integrate and reconcile the various perspectives on interests, threats, objectives, and means. But Eisenhower explicitly directed the Board not to water down or paper-over serious divergences (or "splits"). These were to be highlighted by clearly stating the conflicting positions in parallel columns in the draft report so that the Council could understand and debate the issue.

To ensure that Council members came to the meetings adequately prepared for fruitful discussion, Eisenhower directed that each NSC member be briefed on the reports beforehand by his designated Planning Board member. The briefing also enabled other relevant agency officials to present their comments or criticisms on the draft reports.

As indicated above, the President made important operational decisions in the Oval Office at meetings attended by the officials concerned. Eisenhower was convinced that such decisions benefited greatly from the NSC process. In general, the strategic framework and guidelines developed in the NSC gave coherence and consistency to operational decisions, which made them more effective. And in crises or emergencies, as he told President Kennedy, the earlier NSC deliberations assured a "depth of understanding and perspective—that is a clear comprehension of the issues involved, the risks, the advantages to be gained, and the effects" of possible actions. Moreover, the existence of

a well-understood strategy enabled Eisenhower to delegate decision making and execution on less critical issues to subordinates with the confidence that they would know his intentions.

In Practice

The first major task of the reformed NSC system was to develop Eisenhower's basic national security strategy. The death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin shortly after he took office in 1953 led Eisenhower to initiate a unique exercise (known as "solarium") as input to the work of the Planning Board in developing the post-Stalin strategy to confront what was to become the Cold War. To analyze alternatives to meet the Soviet threat, he set up three small teams of well-qualified foreign policy, military, and intelligence experts to develop the best case for each of these strategies: containment, "drawing a line" on Soviet expansion, and coercive "roll-back" of Soviet power. In July, the teams presented their results to the President and top national security officials. After the initial discussion, the NSC referred these reports to the Planning Board for its consideration, along with other materials, in preparing a draft Basic National Security Policy. This process required three months of intensive work by the Planning Board and review of the NSC before approval by the President in late October. In its appraisal of the Soviet threat, U.S. objectives, and the military means required, the Eisenhower strategy differed radically from NSC68 (which Truman had approved in 1950 after the Soviet nuclear test and the Korean attack). Instead of seeking to coerce the early "roll-back" of the Soviet threat by a predominant power, the strategy sought to prevent nuclear war by deterrence and arms control. This would contain Soviet expansion until the eventual decline or decay of the threat, by means that would be economically and politically sustainable by the United States and its essential allies for the "long haul" of the Cold War.

Despite subsequent variations (often mainly verbal), the core elements of this strategy guided the Western pursuit of the Cold War until the Soviet collapse.

