The Truman White House

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The National Security Council was established thirty years ago by the National Security Act of 1947. The deficiencies exposed by the pre-Pearl Harbor period of diplomatic and military maneuvers, the handling of wartime problems involving relations between foreign, military, and domestic policies, and the development of policies for the postwar period demonstrated to many individuals, both in and out of government, the need for better machinery for coordinating our foreign and our military policies.

The National Security Act of 1947, passed by a Republican Congress and approved by President Truman, was best known as the legislation that provided for "unification" of the armed services. However, it also established the National Security Council to "advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign and military policies relating to the national security so as to enable the military services and other departments and agencies of the government to cooperate more effectively in matters involving the national security." The Central Intelligence Agency, created by the same act, was placed under the council. The act also provided for the establishment of a career staff headed by a civilian executive secretary appointed by the president.

Those who participated in the initial organization and work of the council were motivated by certain key principles. The central one was a recognition of and emphasis on the council's role as a policy advisory body to the president.

At the time the council was organized, there were some people within the executive branch who favored a somewhat different emphasis. They did not deny that the council was fundamentally an advisory body to the president. But they believed that when, in the absence of the president, there was consensus within the council on a particular matter, when the departments or agencies represented on the council were able to carry out the decision reached, and when that decision was within the
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scope of previously approved presidential policies, it would not be necessary to seek the president's approval.

It was decided, however, that the council’s role should be limited strictly to advising the president. The advisory character of the council was the principal theme of the “Concept” of the council approved by the president in July 1948. The only qualification placed upon this proposition was the recognition that under the statute, the council members had certain corporate responsibilities for issuing general directives concerning the organization and coordination of the various departmental and agency foreign intelligence activities that related to the national security. Even this was not truly an exception, for the president retained the ultimate power of decision within the executive branch.

The advisory character of the council was reinforced by a general acceptance of the principle that divergent views on national security matters should not be suppressed but should be clearly reflected at each stage in the development of a policy.

Within this broad and basic concept the NSC officials responsible for organizing the council’s work faced certain immediate practical decisions as to what kinds of problems should be tackled first. The council’s functions, as stated in the statute, were very broad indeed. It was believed, however, that the council could most quickly establish itself as an organization of recognized usefulness to the president and to the departments and agencies if initially, instead of tackling some of the broader, long-range national security problems, it were to concentrate on developing policies to deal with problems that were of immediate, current concern to the agencies and that required a presidential decision. Finally, everyone recognized that under existing circumstances the NSC was likely to be concerned in a very considerable measure with problems involving foreign affairs and, accordingly, that the State Department would play a major role within the organization.

The act was approved by the president on July 26, 1947. Mr. Sidney W. Souers, the executive secretary-designate, began assembling a small, permanent council staff in August. The council held its first meeting on the effective date of the act—Friday, September 26, 1947. Mr. Souers was sworn in as executive secretary just prior to the meeting, together with the heads of two other new agencies established by the act, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the chairman of the National Security Resources Board.

Although President Truman presided at the first council meeting and at occasional meetings thereafter, he did not attend regularly until the beginning of the Korean War. The president’s decision not to attend the NSC meetings was based, first, upon his concern that discussions might
be terminated prematurely by any expression of his own views and, second, upon his conviction that by not attending he could best preserve his full freedom of action with respect to NSC policy recommendations.

Following its meetings, the council's recommendations were ordinarily brought to the president for his consideration by the executive secretary who served, in effect, as an administrative assistant to the president for national security matters. The president was kept regularly informed of the status of council business through regular briefings by the executive secretary. The executive secretary saw the president daily to brief him on the latest foreign intelligence as well as on council matters. From the beginning, even though the president did not regularly attend, council meetings were held in the Cabinet Room of the White House.

The council established standing committees or subcommittees from time to time. Such standing committees occasionally included members from noncouncil agencies.

The initial organization of the staff of the NSC, drawn from the agencies that participated in its work, performed two basic functions. Individual staff members were responsible for bringing the resources of their respective departments and agencies to bear on the council's work; and these individuals, as a group, prepared the papers considered by the council. The permanent career staff of the council provided certain central services as well as independent analyses of the subjects before the NSC and its interdepartmental staff.

As initially organized, the council staff had three principal components: first, the Office of the Executive Secretary; second, a secretariat which performed such usual duties as circulating papers, preparing agenda, and recording council actions; and third, a unit called "the staff" which developed studies and policy recommendations for council consideration. The Office of the Executive Secretary and the secretariat were composed entirely of permanent council employees; the staff initially consisted wholly of officials detailed on a full-time basis by the departments and agencies represented on the council. Because it was anticipated that the majority of problems falling to the council would relate primarily to foreign affairs, the State Department was asked to provide an official to head this interdepartmental group.

First and most important of the four principal categories of policy papers considered by the NSC were the basic overall policy papers that covered a wide range of national security problems and contained related political, economic, and military strategies. Second were the papers covering individual foreign countries or larger geographical regions. A third category might have been called "functional" policies. These covered
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such matters as mobilization, atomic energy, free world–Sino-Soviet bloc trade, and the regulation and control of armaments. Organizational policies constituted the final category. These included policies relating to the council’s own organization, policies on internal security organization, and general policy directives relating to the organization and coordination of foreign intelligence activities, issued pursuant to the National Security Act.

At its first meeting, on the recommendation of the executive secretary, the council made the assessment of U.S. objectives, commitments, and risks in relation to actual and potential U.S. power a continuing, long-range study assignment of the NSC staff. It was decided very early that this assignment should initially be tackled through studies of certain critical areas of the world. And it was agreed that these studies should subsequently be incorporated in an overall appraisal of U.S. objectives, commitments, and risks.

The great majority of the policies considered by the council dealt with particular foreign countries or large geographical regions that presented critical problems at the time. Papers of this kind were focused on single (though major) problems and in some cases provided quite detailed policy guidance. Papers dealing with a single foreign country did not attempt to cover all aspects of U.S. relations, focusing only on certain key aspects. As the months and years passed, the council and its staff progressively tackled broader, longer-range problems and widened the scope and coverage of country and regional policy papers.

During this initial phase, relatively few policies of the “functional” variety were acted upon by the council. However, because the NSC was establishing many of its own basic organizational arrangements during this period and was also making recommendations for organizational changes in areas of governmental activity related to the council’s work, organizational policies constituted an important part of the council’s business. The council began in December 1947 to discharge its responsibilities under the National Security Act for issuing general policy directives concerning the organization and coordination of departmental and agency foreign intelligence activities that related to national security. In January 1948 the council initiated a general survey of foreign intelligence activities.

On May 4, 1949, the executive secretary met with State Department officials to discuss the work of the interdepartmental staff and the type of reports they had been preparing. On May 26 the executive secretary issued instructions to the coordinator of the staff requesting the staff (a) to conduct a periodic review of all current national security policies to determine what revisions were necessary; and (b) to undertake a pro-
gram of studies on major policy problems, appraising their national security aspects and analyzing alternative courses of action open to the United States without making policy recommendations.

Members of the staff, although assigned to the council on a full-time basis and physically located together in the NSC offices, also maintained offices in and regular contact with their respective agencies. The first step in the preparation of any paper was a staff meeting to discuss the problem and to define the scope of the particular report. Then each staff member obtained staff-level views from his respective department or agency.

The usual policy paper prepared by the staff during this period consisted of three basic elements: first, a very brief and quite general statement of the problem being addressed; second, an analysis of the problem; and third, the conclusions. The conclusions were the only section of the paper normally acted upon by the council.

After several meetings, the staff draft was sent to the departmental representatives for their views on whether the paper was suitable for council consideration. Following such clearance, the paper, including any continuing divergent views, was submitted to the council for consideration. The views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were obtained by the secretary of defense on any papers having military implications and were circulated to the council prior to its consideration of the paper.

The policy proposals acted upon by the council were prepared by the staff. Where a council member submitted a policy proposal directly to the council, it was usually referred (sometimes after preliminary discussion) to the staff for preparation of a report and recommendations. The council also acted directly upon a report submitted by one of its members (generally, the secretary of state).

During the latter part of the period under review, there was increasing use by the NSC of ad hoc committees to prepare reports. Such committees were generally composed of higher-level agency representatives than was the staff.

From the start the council agenda included a variety of different types of report. Some were submitted for consideration as the basis for policy recommendations to the president; others were submitted for council information.

In a typical council meeting, the executive secretary introduced each subject on the agenda, but generally did not attempt to summarize the contents of the reports on the assumption that each participant had done his homework in advance. A general discussion of the policy paper followed.

At the beginning of the council's existence a decision was made not
to prepare written minutes reflecting the council's discussion; the reason-
ing was that to do so would have inhibited the discussion. The only
permanent, official record made during this period was a record of the
council's actions on the various subjects it considered. This record was
prepared by the executive secretary, but it was not routinely circulated
to council members for clearance before being submitted to the presi-
dent. Council members could, of course, raise questions about the
executive secretary's interpretation of what had occurred in the meeting,
following circulation of the approved record.

Occasionally, when it did not appear necessary to have a formal
discussion of a report, the council acted by a memorandum of approval.

After each council meeting, the executive secretary submitted to the
president the record of the council's actions and the policy papers as
amended and adopted by the council, including any remaining differ-
ences of views. He also submitted any Joint Chiefs of Staff views on the
paper. The president then acted on the council's recommendations,
approving or rejecting only the conclusions of the policy paper. If
approved, they became the national security policy on the subject.

Following the president's decision, the record of the council's actions
and the approved policy papers were circulated to all council partic-
ipants. When the president approved policy recommendations submitted
to him by the NSC, he directed that they be implemented "by all appro-
priate executive departments and agencies of the U.S. government under

National Security Council meeting, January 25, 1951. Left to right: James S. Lay,
Jr. (NSC executive secretary), W. Stuart Symington (chairman, National Security
Resources Board), W. Averell Harriman (presidential adviser on foreign affairs),
Gen. Walter Bedell Smith (director, CIA), Gen. Omar N. Bradley (chairman, Joint
Chiefs of Staff), George C. Marshall (Defense), Dean G. Acheson (State), President
Truman, John W. Snyder (Treasury). Vice-president Alben W. Barkley was not
present at this session.
the coordination" of the department or agency head who had primary responsibility for implementing the policy involved. The head of a department or agency that had been assigned responsibility by the president for implementing a council action or for coordinating the implementation of a policy paper was informed of his responsibility by an individual memorandum from the NSC executive secretary. It was the responsibility of the coordinating agency to notify all other departments and agencies of the actions for which each was responsible in implementing the paper and to ensure that such actions were taken in a coordinated manner. The coordinating agency was also responsible for ensuring appropriate dissemination of the policy, or extracts from it, to government agencies which were not members of the NSC.