



U.S. NATIONAL

SECURITY STRATEGY:

LESSONS LEARNED

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The Biden administration, as well as future administrations, should look to the national security strategy planning efforts of previous administrations for lessons on how to craft a strategy that establishes a competitive approach to America's rivals that is both toughminded and sustainable in order to guide U.S. foreign, defense, and budget policies and decision-making. In this article, Paul Lettow gives a history of the processes and strategies of past administrations, beginning with the Eisenhower administration, and draws out the lessons to be learned from them.

In keeping with the practice of U.S. administrations for the past several decades, the Biden administration is likely to produce a national security strategy within its first year or two. Indeed, it has already signaled that it will begin work on one.¹ It will do so while confronting an international environment characterized by increasingly intense geopolitical challenges to the United States — most prominently and comprehensively from China, but also from a Russia determined to play spoiler and destabilizer when and where it can, and from Iran, North Korea, and other powers and threats at a more regional level.

President Joe Biden has stated that the United States and China, in particular, are engaged in “extreme competition,”² while CIA Director William Burns has said that China is the “most significant threat [and] challenge” to the United States throughout the foreseeable future and that “[o]ut-competing China will be key to our national security.”³ To increase the likelihood of long-term outcomes that favor the United States, the administration should focus its national security strategy on establishing a competitive approach to America’s rivals — especially China — that is both toughminded and sustainable in order to guide U.S. foreign, defense, and budget policies and decision-making. The president and his team should look to the national security strategy planning

efforts of previous administrations for lessons on how to do just that. A number of those lessons are positive but are underappreciated today — and some are cautionary, pointing to flaws in outlook or process that the Biden administration and future administrations ought to avoid.

Most presidents since Harry Truman have produced a written national security strategy, or something akin to it. During the Cold War, national security strategies often took the form of a classified written directive to executive branch departments and agencies as part of a systematic planning process involving senior White House national security officials and cabinet secretaries. These strategies focused, for the most part, on competing with the Soviet Union and its allies. Sometimes, those overarching strategy documents sparked an ongoing planning process that generated classified strategies addressing specific regional or functional subjects. Since the end of the Cold War, presidential administrations have issued national security strategies only in unclassified form for public consumption. Those public documents were often products of a far less rigorous and analytical process than those which had been pursued by Cold War presidents and more closely resembled an extended speechwriting exercise, disconnected from any prior or ongoing systematic planning.

The Trump administration broke with that post-

1 Biden issued interim national security strategic guidance “even as we begin work on a National Security Strategy.” *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the interim guidance “gives initial direction to our national security agencies so that they can get to work right away while we keep developing a more in-depth national security strategy over the next few months.” See Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

2 Regarding China, Biden said: “[W]e need to not have a conflict. But there’s going to be extreme competition.” Joe Biden, interview by Norah O’Donnell, *Face the Nation*, Feb. 7, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-interview-iran-sanctions-nuclear-agreement/>.

3 Burns, during his confirmation hearing, added that China is “the biggest geopolitical test that we face.” Martin Matishak, “Biden’s CIA pick vows to focus on a rising China,” *Politico*, Feb. 24, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/24/cia-william-burns-china-471354>.

Cold War trend by taking a hybrid approach. It issued a public national security strategy document followed by classified internal directives on specific regions and functional topics. The administration's national security strategy emphasized the geopolitical threats posed by great-power rivals, especially China, and the need for a competitive U.S. strategy in response.⁴ Those basic substantive premises have earned widespread acceptance, even as they marked a departure from post-Cold War national security strategies that had downplayed — or misapprehended — the threats posed by China, Russia, and other state actors that have challenged the United States over the last several decades.

The United States is at a transitional and consequential moment. It is newly alert to an era of great-power competition. The Biden administration seems to grasp that it should accept and build on the basic premises and many of the elements of its predecessor's national security strategy, while pursuing more predictable policies and turning away from the vagaries, moral relativism, and transactional nature of Trump, which, in ways big and small, often proved counterproductive to his own administration's national security strategy.⁵

More broadly, the United States is out of practice at developing and pursuing a strategy of high-stakes, long-term geopolitical competition. Such a strategy, adjusted and corrected over time, ought to garner enough bipartisan congressional and public support to endure, be firm in pressing America's formidable advantages in acute but peaceful competition, and be sufficiently far-sighted and disciplined to make investments in resources, attention, and time to best position the United States to succeed over the long run.

There is thus much to be gained by reassessing the advantages that accrue from a sound national security strategy, and the prerequisites and elements of a successful strategy, as well as the pitfalls that should be avoided. There are important differences between America's rivals today — their nature and the challenges they pose and the type of competition they require — and the rivals of the Cold War era. This article looks to post-World War II history not to encourage replicating it, but to understand the principles and practices that can help the country navigate through the storms that surely lie ahead.

This article draws on a review of available historical records of a number of previous national security strategies, as well as interviews with eight former national security advisers and many other senior officials involved in shaping previous national security planning efforts. It gleans from those sources lessons and principles that apply both to the process of developing a national security strategy and to the substantive elements of the most successful examples. It attempts to shed light on how to increase the chances that a national security strategy will be effective — that is, to guide an administration's national security policies, to achieve the objectives that strategy outlines by the means it proposes, and to set a foundation upon which future administrations can build.

This article first sets out *why* a president should develop a national security strategy. It then addresses the *what* and *how* of national security strategic planning by giving a brief history of how administrations from the Cold War onward have, or have not, conducted strategic planning and by identifying some of the consequences of those decisions. The article concludes by distilling the lessons from those past efforts that may be of help as the Biden administration and future administrations undertake national security strategic planning in a difficult, competitive international environment.

In summary, the president ought to adapt to the present circumstances the best elements of the rigorous, analytical planning processes that generated successful national security strategies during the Cold War. These include: a classified process that focuses on understanding the nature of America's adversaries, what they are up to, and why; a net assessment to analyze America's advantages and vulnerabilities relative to its rivals; incorporation of that comparative analysis in the ensuing strategy directive, such that the strategy aims to assert America's relative advantages, shore up its vulnerabilities, and exploit adversaries' weaknesses; an approach designed to meet challenges from China and other rivals on a sustainable basis, obviating the need for wild swings from periods of repose to frenetic reaction, building on the useful aspects of the Trump national security strategy, and increasing the likelihood for public and congressional support over the long term; and a planning process that is driven by the White House but nevertheless

4 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>.

5 See Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>. Campbell is now coordinator for the Indo-Pacific on the White House National Security Council staff. Ratner is now special assistant to the secretary of defense and leads the Department of Defense's China Task Force. In his confirmation hearing, Burns stated that "out-competing China" requires "a long-term clear-eyed bipartisan strategy." Matishak, "Biden's CIA Pick."

allows for input from the president’s cabinet, thus ensuring, as much as possible, a unified sense of direction to guide the administration’s efforts.

Why Develop a National Security Strategy?

Before examining the most useful aspects of national security strategies — the *what* and *how* — it is helpful to understand *why* presidential administrations pursue them. The Biden administration is likely to produce a written national security strategy in part because of custom and law. The pattern stretching back for decades of presidential administrations issuing a national security strategy document generates expectations that the Biden administration will follow suit. And a federal statute, in place since the Goldwater-Nichols national security reforms of the mid-1980s, states that the president “shall transmit to Congress each year” a national security strategy.⁶ Over the last two decades, that provision has been honored mainly in the breach: Beginning with the George W. Bush administration, presidents have, sensibly, produced one national security strategy for each four-year term, rather than annually, which would be unnecessary and perhaps unhelpful. While the statutory provision has served the purpose of encouraging presidents to develop a national security strategy, it has also coincided with the post-Cold War era of national security strategies that were unclassified, designed primarily for public consumption, and mostly disconnected from rigorous planning processes — a cross between a speech and a check-the-box exercise. The congressional requirement has been, at best, a mixed blessing and ought to be reexamined.

In addition, the Biden administration, like every presidential administration, has its own reasons for producing a national security strategy. At their best, written national security strategies can serve multiple purposes.

First, a national security strategy can identify and prioritize the most important U.S. interests, the threats to those interests, and the objectives that America must pursue to secure those interests. A national security strategy should start with lay-

ing out the most critical national interests: the physical security of the nation and its people, the maintenance of the country’s constitutional system and values, and an international environment conducive to American prosperity. It should set out clear objectives as well as the means necessary to preserve U.S. interests over the long term, especially in light of other international actors, including great-power rivals, that are pursuing interests and objectives often directly at odds with those of the United States. It should also account for and emphasize what a president and his team believe they must achieve as well as what they will not accept and thus must prevent or counteract. A national security strategy affords an administration the opportunity to consider those interests, threats, and objectives dispassionately, comprehensively, and systematically, rather than having to try to come up with various plans in reaction to disparate crises once they have been forced on the United States, when the willingness to consider overall enduring interests and priorities is at a minimum.

Second, a national security strategy can set a direction for an administration, shaping day-to-day policy and decision-making. It can provide coherence, allowing officials to place discrete issues and actions within the framework, terms, and priorities set out in the strategy. President Dwight Eisenhower, leading a meeting of his National Security Council to consider a draft of a basic national security policy, emphasized that principle. According to the meeting minutes, “he pointed out that even as you dealt with day-to-day problems you needed some kind of a philosophy as a general guide to action.”⁷ In setting out that directional guidance, a national security strategy can prioritize particular objectives and the means to achieve them, while allowing for flexibility and adaptability in execution. This, in turn, allows officials, from the president on down, to prioritize the allocation of resources — including of their individual and collective time and policy goals — rationally and intentionally, in line with the overall strategy. A national security strategy thereby helps avoid the “tyranny of the inbox” that can otherwise plague senior officials and cause them to spend their time and effort on distracting, secondary issues without making meaningful progress on established U.S. priorities.

6 *War and National Defense*, U.S. Code 50 (2015), § 3043. On the legislative mandate, see Catherine Dale, *National Security Strategy: Mandates, Execution to Date, and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, Aug. 6, 2013, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43174.pdf>; Nathan J. Lucas and Kathleen J. McInnis, *The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, April 5, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44023.pdf>; and Kathleen J. McInnis, “The 2017 National Security Strategy: Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, Dec. 19, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IN10842.pdf>

7 “Memorandum of Discussion at the 165th Meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday, October 7, 1953,” Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS], 1952–1954, National Security Affairs, Volume II, Part 1 [hereafter FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1], Document 94, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d94>.

Third, a national security strategy also helps ensure that the different departments and agencies under the president operate in alignment with one another in terms of understanding and direction. As will be seen, a process that allows senior cabinet-level officials to give their input and requires them to sign off on the strategy, or at least requires them to understand and acquiesce to a clear presidential decision regarding strategy, tends to ensure that differences among senior officials are comprehended, addressed, and resolved upfront. This helps avoid an administration being consumed by disagreements over basic premises and directions for years.

Fourth, in setting out national security priorities and the means necessary to achieve them, a national security strategy allows a president and his team to take the initiative in order to create positive outcomes and head off unacceptable ones, rather than being forced to take a reactive or defensive position in response to situations or crises brought about by other actors. A proactive approach, as Henry Kissinger noted while serving as national security adviser, helps ensure that policies “are not simply tactical responses to immediate situations.”⁸ It encourages and guides officials in shaping the decision-making environment in which competitor nations operate.

Fifth, when crises do arise, officials do not have to assess and deal with them starting from a blank slate. Instead, they can place the crisis within the overall strategic context, including the most important and enduring U.S. interests and objectives that they have identified and prioritized in advance. A strategy can help avoid over-reacting or under-reacting to crises, or becoming befuddled or overwhelmed by them. In short, it can help prevent stumbling into disasters by inaction or unwise action for want of a pre-existing framework in which issues and events can be properly prioritized and considered. Eisenhower was well aware of the benefit of advance planning during crisis management, and it furthered his determination to lead a systematic national security planning process with his senior officials.⁹

Sixth, a properly designed, ongoing strategic planning process can also help the president and his National Security Council to make appropriate

course corrections over time if they periodically revisit and revise as necessary the premises and objectives of the strategy. As an administration progresses, however, a national security strategy can also allow them to assess and reject ill-considered arguments or ideas that may be vocally advocated for but would ultimately diverge from, or even work at cross-purposes with, the overall strategy.

Finally, a national security strategy can help keep a president and his team focused on how best to position the country over the long term, by clarifying and prioritizing the investments that have to be made now to increase the chances of positive outcomes in the future. This includes everything from research and development efforts to overseas bases and deployments to maintaining access to global commons and influence over international standards-setting institutions. A national security strategy does not just match ends to means in the near-term. It can and should also underscore the need to husband and generate the resources that will be essential over the long run. Indeed, a properly conceived national security strategy requires that an administration conceptualize, marshal, and invest in resources in the near term to enable success years later, as the best of those strategies have emphasized. That is especially so during an era of intensifying great-power competition, with China growing in power and employing that power to shape the international environment in its own favor for the future.

The “What” and “How” of National Security Strategic Planning: A Brief History

Kennan and the Birth of Cold War Strategy

Looming large over the problem of *how* to develop a sound national security strategy, and what elements it should include, is the legacy of George F. Kennan. But it is essential to understand what it was about Kennan’s contribution that was so consequential to the formation of U.S. strategy and what its relevance is today.

Kennan’s signal statement — the “Long Telegram” — came in the form of a cable he sent to

8 “White House Background Press Briefing by the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger),” Feb. 16, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972 [hereafter FRUS, 1969–1976, I], Document 58, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d58>.

9 Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89, 258–59.

Washington in February 1946 while he was serving as U.S. chargé d'affaires in Moscow.¹⁰ It was a response to earnest queries from a Washington mystified as to why the Soviet Union, America's recent ally in the war, was not being more constructive in cooperating with U.S. plans for the post-war international system. Kennan, a specialist in Russia's language, history, and culture, was serving his second tour in the Soviet Union and had observed in person Joseph Stalin's show trials and the opacity and duplicity of the Soviet leadership. Brooding, sensitive, and possessed of a keen, cynical mind, Kennan had despaired that the U.S. government up to that point had understood neither the nature of Stalin's Soviet Union nor its implications for the United States. In fielding the inquiries from Washington, he took the opportunity to help his government, as the telegram stated, "apprehend"

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that problem and "recognize [it] for what it is."¹¹

The Long Telegram was clear-eyed and stark in its description of the Soviet leadership, its motives, and its modus operandi. Combining a traditional insecurity and a desire to bring together unchallengeable authority and Marxist dogma, Soviet leaders "found justification for their instinctive fear of [the] outside world, for the dictatorship without which they did not know how to rule, for cruelties they did not dare not to inflict, for sacrifices they felt bound to demand." Kennan warned that the Soviet regime continually sought to increase its strength and prestige internally and externally, and that it would aim to destabilize Western powers and divide them from each other while expanding its own geopolitical influence. He

argued that the Soviets thus posed an enormous challenge to American interests, but that the United States could best meet it not by belligerence or inaction, but through adopting a thoughtful, long-term strategy. Kennan also noted that the nature of the threat meant that the United States had important advantages. The Soviet Union did not take unnecessary risks when faced with strong opposition or likely defeat. It was, relatively, the less powerful force, and because it was overextended and purely dictatorial, it was deeply flawed.¹²

A year after sending the cable, Kennan anonymously authored a *Foreign Affairs* article titled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," in which he developed his thesis that the Soviet Union bore within it the seeds of its own decay, and that U.S. policies could "increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate" with the aim, ultimately, of "promot[ing] tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power." He wrote, fatefully, that U.S. policy "must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansionist tendencies."¹³

Kennan did *not* set out a grand unified theory for U.S. foreign relations based on blue-sky thinking about America's preferences for what the world ought to look like. He was not given to wishcasting as a premise for American policy. His contribution lay in understanding and explaining, compellingly and resonantly, what *Soviet* leaders were up to — their motives, interests, and aims, and how they pursued them — and what that meant for the United States. In illuminating the latter, Kennan was able to observe that through embracing a competitive but peaceful long-term strategy, the United States could help to foster the conditions that would produce a solution to the challenge posed by the Soviets.

In a kind of "Big Bang" at the start of the Cold War in 1946 and 1947, Kennan thus identified the

10 "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State," Feb. 22, 1946, FRUS, 1946, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, Volume VI, Document 475, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v06> (also known as "The Long Telegram"). This section also draws from Paul Lettow, "Parallel Lives," *National Review* 61, no. 19 (Oct. 19, 2009): 43–45; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown & Co. 1967); Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969); and Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War*, reissue ed. (London: Picador, 2010; New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2009).

11 Kennan, "The Long Telegram."

12 Kennan, "The Long Telegram."

13 George F. Kennan (X), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4, (July 1947), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>.

threat posed by the Soviet Union and, in light of that threat, the basic premises that would ultimately guide American strategy for decades. It fell to others to craft the strategies for each administration, however, including for Truman. Paul Nitze, building on the premises and insights that Kennan had established, led the drafting of the classified NSC-68 in 1950, which wove together military, political, and ideological policies into an assertive and coherent whole. It focused in particular on the hard power — especially military forces — perceived as necessary to operationalize containment of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Strategic Planning Under Eisenhower

Before taking office as president, Eisenhower had led the Allied invasions of North Africa and of Western Europe, commanded the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe to victory over the Axis powers, and served as Army chief of staff and as supreme allied commander of NATO. He knew the value of planning. And he was determined to impose a rigorous strategic planning process in the White House. Eisenhower shared Kennan's basic assessment of the threat that the Soviets posed to America's interests and of Soviet methods. He also agreed that, on balance, the United States was the stronger power. He believed that the nature of the Soviet system and of Soviet geopolitical overreach itself made the Soviet Union vulnerable.¹⁵

Eisenhower was also exasperated by what he saw as the erratic nature of the Truman administration, especially its swing from making drastic cuts to the national security budget in the immediate post-war years — which Eisenhower knew was dangerous and foolhardy in the dawning Cold War — to a surge in spending, in part to meet the demands of the Korean War.¹⁶ The war had originated in an invasion of South Korea by communist North Korea that had shocked the Truman administration.¹⁷ The

war bedeviled the administration over the ensuing three years and had ground to a stalemate by the time Eisenhower took office.

Eisenhower was a habitual planner who sought to take the initiative rather than respond defensively to events. He was emphatic that America needed to pursue a Cold War strategy that was comprehensive, consistent, and built for the long haul. He was attentive to the strengths and vulnerabilities of America and its allies relative to their adversaries and to the need to marshal and deploy resources in the short term to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes in the future. He sought to wage a vigorous, sustained competition with the Soviet Union, communist China, and communist satellites in the Cold War, and to do it on terms that favored the United States.¹⁸

Understanding the purposes and advantages of sound strategy better than perhaps any president before or since, Eisenhower prioritized the establishment of a rigorous planning process to develop a national security strategy. His National Security Council — the president, vice president, secretaries of state, defense, and the treasury, and the senior-most military, budget, intelligence, and other relevant officials — generally met once a week throughout Eisenhower's presidency, devoting much of their time during the first year to strategic planning through a rigorous process overseen by Eisenhower and his national security adviser, Robert Cutler.

At the beginning of that process, Cutler had noted to Eisenhower that the president, as chairman of the National Security Council, “should exercise that leadership by asking for views around the table so as to bring out conflicts and so as to create a sense of team participation among those present in making the policy which they must later carry out.” That suggestion corresponded with Eisenhower's own views and inclinations.¹⁹ As will be seen, he would accomplish the twin purposes that Cutler had set out with extraordinary patience and skill.

14 “A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary (Lay),” FRUS, 1950, National Security Affairs, Foreign Economic Policy, Volume I, Document 85, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v01/d85>. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81–116; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 347, 371–81, 420–21, 467, 735; and Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove*, 111–14, 118, 133. Truman formally approved NSC-68 after the outbreak of the Korean War. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 105, 107.

15 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 43–54. This section draws on Paul Lettow, “Ike's Triumphs,” *National Review* LXX, no. 10 (May 28, 2018): 37–38.

16 Lettow, “Ike's Triumphs,” 37–38.

17 See Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 355–58, 402–13.

18 Lettow, “Ike's Triumphs,” 37–38; and Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 4, 75–80, 88–90. For concise and deeply informed analyses of Eisenhower's pre-presidential background as a strategist and its impact on his presidency, see Andrew P.N. Erdmann, “War No Longer Has Any Logic Whatever: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Thermonuclear Revolution,” in *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945*, edited by John Lewis Gaddis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87–119; and William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 3–83.

19 “Memorandum for the President by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler),” March 16, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 50, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d50>; and “The President to the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler),” March 17, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 51, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d51>. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 45, 83–93.

In their first few months in office, Eisenhower and Cutler set up a new committee chaired by Cutler — the Policy Planning Board — that consisted of senior planning officials selected from throughout the departments and agencies. The board's mission was to provide discussion papers and drafts for consideration at the National Security Council meetings. Throughout his pre-presidential career, Eisenhower had been frustrated and dismayed by bureaucratic wrangling and rivalries — not least the parochial fights among the military services when it came to the budget process, fights that Eisenhower saw as inimical to pursuing sensible strategy. The strategic planning process that he and Cutler devised reflected his experience and personality.²⁰ Eisenhower underscored that while members of the Policy Planning Board would represent their respective departments and agencies, they would also serve the president and the National Security Council overall and must pursue their work accordingly. Eisenhower himself approved and appointed each of the board members, and he sent presidential letters to them charging them with their duties.²¹ The written summary of a National Security Council meeting from Eisenhower's first year includes the following statement by Eisenhower, captured in the third person used by the notetaker:

Noted a statement by the President of his conception of the NSC as being a corporate body composed of individuals advising the President in their own right, rather than as representatives of their respective departments and agencies. Their function should be to seek, with their background of experience, the most statesmanlike solution to the problems of national security, rather than to reach solutions which represent merely a compromise of departmental positions. The same concept is equally applicable to advisory and subordinate groups, such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the NSC Planning Board.²²

To drive the point home, the White House distrib-

uted that paragraph from the meeting summary as a separate action memorandum to the National Security Council members — who had already heard the president's message in person — “for the information and guidance of the Council and its advisory and subordinate groups.”²³

With the aid of the Policy Planning Board, Eisenhower's National Security Council systematically reviewed and assessed the Truman administration's Cold War strategy, including its principles, means, planning documents, and budgets, identifying elements that would be preserved and strengthened, and those that would be jettisoned.²⁴

Eisenhower and his National Security Council then set out and considered different strategic alternatives for a long-term approach to the Cold War, in an exercise known as Project Solarium. The president assembled three teams, each drawn from experts inside and outside of government, to study and present on a different basic approach. Alternative A, which drew on and refined elements of the Truman strategy, would “maintain over a sustained period armed forces to provide for the security of the United States and to assist in the defense of vital areas of the free world,” “continue to assist in building up the economic and military strength of the free world,” and “exploit the vulnerabilities of the Soviets and their satellites by political, economic and psychological measures.” It would be “interpreted and administered” on the basis that “if we can build up and maintain the strength of the free world during a period of years, Soviet power will deteriorate or relatively decline to a point which no longer constitutes a threat to the security of the United States and to world peace.” Kennan, who had been closely associated with the Truman administration, was brought in to lead Team A.

Alternative B would establish an explicit cordon around the areas then under Soviet and satellite control, beyond which the United States would permit them no advance without provoking war. Alternative C proposed to “increase efforts to disturb and weaken the Soviet bloc and to accelerate the consolidation and strengthening of the free world

20 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 45, 83–93; “Memorandum for the President,” March 16, 1953, FRUS, II, 1; and “The President to the Special Assistant (Cutler),” March 17, 1953, FRUS, II, 1.

21 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, pp. 45, 83–93; “Memorandum for the President,” March 16, 1953, FRUS, II, 1; and “The President to the Special Assistant (Cutler),” March 17, 1953, FRUS, II, 1. At the start of the strategic planning process, in his March 17, 1953, memorandum to Cutler, Eisenhower instructed Cutler to “call the special attention” of National Security Council members to the Policy Planning Board and said that he “place[d] great emphasis on the selection of men of high caliber for these positions, able to devote plenty of time to their Planning Board functions.”

22 “Memorandum of Discussion at the 166th Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, October 13, 1953,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 95, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d95>.

23 Note 2, NSC Action No. 928, in “Memorandum of Discussion,” Oct. 13, 1953, FRUS, II, 1.

24 See memorandums of discussions of weekly National Security Council meetings from Feb. 11 to April 29, 1953 and on June 9, 1953, associated preparatory papers, and documents summarizing conclusions and adopting policy restatements in in “United States National Security Policy: U.S. Objectives and Programs for National Security; Estimates of Threats to the National Security; Military Posture and Foreign Policy; Organization for National Security,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, documents at 234–323, 370–86, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1>.

to enable it to assume the greater risks involved.”²⁵

Eisenhower and his top aides listened to the presentations in a special session and then considered and debated them during later meetings. They directed the Policy Planning Board to draw together the best elements of their review of the Truman administration’s policy and Project Solarium, revise them in light of those National Security Council debates and conclusions, and draft a unified strategy.²⁶

Another essential aspect of Eisenhower’s approach is that while he and his team adhered to Kennan’s basic analysis of the Soviet Union and the threat that it posed, they also paid close attention to an analysis of American capabilities and means.

The attention and time that Eisenhower and his National Security Council devoted to strategic planning was extraordinary. One National Security Council meeting, convened to consider a draft of what ultimately became NSC 162/2, “Basic National Security Policy,” resulted in an extended discussion within the group regarding the nature of the Soviet threat and how to pursue a sustainable U.S. response that balanced national security and economic concerns. Cutler himself, Eisenhower’s right-hand man and fellow architect of the process, commented that the meeting resembled a “debating society.”²⁷ But Eisenhower knew what he was doing. Through the process of examining the prior administration’s approach, stepping back to consider a wide range of alternatives, and hashing out their own differences in considering drafts of a national security strategy, he and his National Security Council continually worked to identify and prioritize the soundest premises, objectives, and means of accomplishing those objectives as they built their strategy.

The president, aided by Cutler, deftly guided the

meetings, letting debates play out, nudging them in certain directions with questions and comments, and moving with ease and apparent purpose from examining the fundamental premises and principles of containment and deterrence to drilling down into concrete facts. Along the way, his National Security Council together weighed and discarded ideas that some of them had previously held firmly. For example, Treasury Secretary George Humphrey’s initial hardline views on restraining national security spending were worn down and eventually overcome by what the council collectively came to perceive as a need to keep that spending at a relatively high, but sustainable, level to invest in the military, science, technology, and other resources that they felt would be essential to playing the long game in the Cold War. The National Security Council also extensively considered and largely rejected, as being both risky and ultimately unnecessary, the use of direct military force or overt sub-

version to roll back communist control from satellite countries where it was already established. The council also sought to avoid missteps or misadventures that would dissipate America’s strength and work to America’s long-term disadvantage.²⁸

The national security strategy document that they ultimately developed, the top secret NSC 162/2, amounted to the original peace through strength approach. NSC 162/2 emphasized both geopolitics and hard power as foundations for maintaining U.S. values and America’s way of life and for nurturing freedom abroad. It was wary and sophisticated in its analysis of the Soviet Union and of potential future outcomes. It noted, for example, that although the Sino-Soviet alliance was then “firmly established” and must be dealt with as such, “in the long run, basic differences may strain or break” it. The document was attuned to Soviet vulnerabilities and flaws and to the strengths of the United States and its allies. The strategy document focused on pursuing a steady, sustainable build-up in hard power; strengthening alliances and the forward deployment

25 “Paper Prepared by the Directing Panel of Project Solarium,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 69, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d69>.

26 The documentary record of the origins in May 1953 and ensuing work of the Project Solarium teams, their presentations to the National Security Council in July 1953, and the resultant council debates and follow-on taskings are set out in “National Security Policy,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, documents at 323–28, 349–54, 360–66, 387–93, 393–464, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1>. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 123–38; and Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove*, 150–51.

27 Cutler’s quote is from “Memorandum of Discussion at the 165th Meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday October 7, 1953,” Oct. 7, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 94, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d94>.

28 “Memorandum of Discussion at the 131st Meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday, February 11, 1953,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 46, 236–37, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d46>; and “Memorandum of Discussion at a Special Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, March 31, 1953,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 53, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d53>. See also National Security Council meetings from September to November 1953 that considered what ultimately became NSC 162/2, “Basic National Security Policy,” prepared by the Policy Planning Board, and associated drafts, reports, and memorandums, all available in “National Security Policy,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, various documents at 464–75, 489–609.

of U.S. forces; taking the ideological offensive; and proactively pressing American advantages, especially technological, economic, and values-based advantages, to undermine Soviet power and influence peacefully. Eisenhower formally approved NSC 162/2 in October 1953 and “direct[ed] its implementation by all appropriate executive departments and agencies of the U.S. Government.”²⁹

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the planning process that Eisenhower launched in his first year in office arrived at the strategy he had had in mind from the start. But the planning process he led allowed him, together with his senior-most officials who would be responsible for executing the strategy, to test their assumptions and preconceptions. It let them consider a range of potential strategic alternatives, and as a group find their way toward an approach that could guide day-to-day action and decision-making with the overall aim of building enduring strength and succeeding in long-term, peaceful competition. It thereby enabled them to act in line with the strategic premises and objectives that they had established and to do so with a relatively uniform understanding of those premises and objectives and the role of each in pursuing them. They applied those premises and objectives for example, in their budget planning.

Moreover, NSC 162/2 served as springboard, not an endpoint, for the Eisenhower administration’s strategic planning process. Over the course of his two terms, Eisenhower and his National Security Council systematically reevaluated their strategic objectives and the means to achieve them, seeking to make adjustments accordingly while sticking to the basic approach that they had established. They were especially attentive to areas that ultimately required more rigorous analysis and definition

than the administration had given them in its first year. They pursued their strategic planning as an ongoing process.³⁰

Eisenhower is often quoted as saying “It’s not the plans, it’s the planning,” or variations on that theme. That statement is a little misleading, however: He did, in fact, place considerable emphasis on the specific strategy documents that he and his National Security Council developed and that he approved, and rightly so. Yet, the statement does reflect an essential component of his approach to national security planning. Even if it had not resulted in any written strategy documents, the process that he led his security council through would still have been valuable, by winnowing out unwise or unworkable ideas, prioritizing issues and objectives, and establishing baseline approaches that could and did act as a guide to action for those who had to execute them.

Another essential aspect of Eisenhower’s approach is that while he and his team adhered to Kennan’s basic analysis of the Soviet Union and the threat that it posed, they also paid close attention to an analysis of American capabilities and means. The records of the Eisenhower National Security Council meetings show a continual emphasis on ensuring that the administration’s strategy would wage the Cold War in a way that played to U.S. strengths and would prove sustainable over time.³¹ For example, Eisenhower and his National Security Council sought to find a level of national security spending that could endure, and to avoid dissipating America’s strength through unsustainable commitments of resources or by getting lost or diverted in fights, literal or figurative, that were outside of the core interests and objectives that they had identified.

29 Memorandums of discussions at National Security Council meetings to consider what ultimately became NSC 162/2, “Basic National Security Policy,” prepared by the Policy Planning Board, and associated drafts, reports, and memorandums are available at “National Security Policy,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, including meeting of Feb. 11, 1953, 236–37; meeting of March 25, 1953, 258–63; meetings from September 1953 to November 1953, 464–75, 489–609. For the text of NSC 162/2, Oct. 30, 1953, see “National Security Policy,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, 577–97. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 139–46, 257.

30 Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 147–257.

31 “Memorandum of Discussion at the 131st Meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday, February 11, 1953,” Feb. 11, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 46, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d46>; “Memorandum of Discussion at a Special Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, March 31, 1953,” March 31, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 53, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d53>; “National Security Policy,” FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, documents at 323–28, 349–54, 360–66, 387–93, 393–75, 489–609. Eisenhower’s “New Look” policy, with its emphasis on nuclear weapons, was designed in part to keep defense spending at sustainable levels. See Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 125–96. In the end, Eisenhower sought and obtained what were remarkably high peacetime defense budgets as measured by percentage of Gross Domestic Product and of federal spending. As a result of that sustained investment, his administration served as the bridge between the U.S. military of World War II and that of today. It was during the Eisenhower presidency that the United States developed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, high-altitude spy planes, and spy satellites. Both before and after the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, Eisenhower championed government investment in science and technology, and encouraged scientific and technological education. Lettow, “Ike’s Triumphs,” 37. See also Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower*. Eisenhower also focused on laying out for the public and Congress the threats identified and that the United States must set a course for long-term, but ultimately peaceful, competition. As the Eisenhower administration constructed its own national security strategy, Eisenhower wrote to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: “[P]rograms for informing the American public, as well as other populations, are indispensable if we are to do anything except to drift aimlessly, probably to our own eventual destruction.” “[W]e must begin now to educate our people in the fundamentals of these problems,” Eisenhower continued: “We must have the enlightened support of Americans and the informed understanding of our friends in the world (emphasis in the original).” “Memorandum by the President to the Secretary of State,” Sept. 8, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, II, 1, Document 89, 461, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d89>.

The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations

Neither Presidents John F. Kennedy nor Lyndon B. Johnson oversaw a rigorous strategic planning process. They preferred informal and nimble decision-making, unencumbered by formal strategic planning. Partly that was a response to, and a way to differentiate themselves from, what they and their advisors and much of the media and academia characterized as the stale, bureaucratic, old ways of the Eisenhower administration.³² One of the political themes of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations was dynamism and vigor, of a new generation, possessed of analytical prowess and intellectual self-confidence, taking the helm.³³ The Kennedy administration was indeed young: When he took office, Kennedy was 43, his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, was 41, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was 44.

The Kennedy and especially Johnson administrations were also less concerned about balancing an active national security approach with domestic

economic needs and concerns than Eisenhower and his cohort had been. With a more optimistic and expansive view of economics and U.S. capabilities, they focused less on sustainability.³⁴ Kennedy in particular was also prone to relying on powerful, bold oratory — eloquent, moving, and inspiring, in the case of his inaugural address, but also overly broad, almost boundless — as a guide for policy. Each administration also displayed a near-obsession with credibility and image, in terms of both domestic and international politics.³⁵

More broadly, with an emphasis on a “flexible response” approach to crises around the world, the administrations focused less on systematically assessing the comparative strengths and vulnerabilities of the United States and Soviet Union and their respective allies — and the need to press U.S. advantages, peacefully and over the long run, while avoiding reactive positions in crises forced by others — and more on being able to devise and shape a suitable response to developments as they arose.³⁶

For all of those reasons, Kennedy and Bundy put

32 “The intent ... of the steps below [including the abolition of the Policy Planning Board and giving its functions to national security adviser McGeorge Bundy] is to free up the time and attention of the President and his immediate advisors by relieving them of the burden of immediate supervision of the machinery for continuous policy review and adjustment.” “Draft Paper by the Executive Assistant of the Operations Coordinating Board (Johnson),” undated [January or February 1961], FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume VIII, National Security Policy [hereafter FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII], Document 6, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d6>. See also “Record of Actions Taken at the 475th Meeting of the National Security Council,” Feb. 1, 1961, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 8, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d8> (including a report by Bundy that “in response to the President’s desires a different organization and procedures would henceforth be used in the work of the National Security Council, involving fewer and smaller staff groups” and policy recommendations would not be subject to as much formal development or interagency coordination); “Notes of Secretary of State Rusk’s Daily Staff Meeting,” Feb. 14, 1961, 34 (noting the dismantling of Eisenhower’s White House-coordinated policy process and that the State Department should try to do strategic planning so that “foreign policy is not made on a fragmented basis by various agencies”); “Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President’s Press Secretary (Salinger),” March 13, 1961, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 19, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d19> (evidently anticipating press inquiries, stating that Kennedy prefers informal discussions with smaller groups on each national security question rather than a more formal National Security Council process); and “Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President’s Special Counsel [Speechwriter] (Sorensen),” March 13, 1961, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 21, 65, 68, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d21> (noting the importance of policymaking by what Kennedy says publicly); and “Memorandum for President Kennedy,” June 22, 1961, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 31, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d31>. The author of this latter memorandum, entitled “Current Organization of the White House and NSC for Dealing with International Matters,” is not identified, but appears to be inside or otherwise close to the administration. The memorandum notes the Eisenhower planning model and that Kennedy “has changed all that” and that Kennedy “works through many people and talks to still more,” but “retains an acute sense of ‘operational’ communication” and “counts on his people to keep in close touch with each other, and in general they do”; it praises Bundy and his staff as men of a “high level of ability” and “[in]comparable,” but also warns that “there should be a more clearly defined pattern of preparation for new policy papers, and reporting on existing crisis areas,” and that “much could be ordered that is now somewhat haphazard”; and it wryly notes for Kennedy that those suggested changes “would require a Presidential acceptance of routine that might be dull.” See also Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6–9, 25–26, 34–41; Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2009), 35, 70–71; and Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271.

33 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 6–9, 25–26, 34–41; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 35, 70–71; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271.

34 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 27–33; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 16; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271, especially 202–04, 259; David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 6–7, 13, 78–81, 84, 132, 151. See also memorandum for the record of President Johnson and Vice President Hubert Humphrey meeting with the White House National Security Council staff, noting Johnson’s points that “in our own interests we have to worry about the other fellow. More than that we can’t rest while other people are miserable in such numbers. ... So a nation blessed with the riches ours has can not sit back while others like ourselves [i.e., humans] are in misery,” and also noting that Humphrey “spoke generally on the same theme of circulating the ideals of the Great Society into a worldwide effort against poverty, disease, and illiteracy.” “Memorandum for the Record,” May 27, 1966, FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume X, National Security Policy, Document 129, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v10/d129>.

35 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, xi–xii, 6–9; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 157–221; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271, especially 211–12, 232; Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 76–84. See also Bundy’s White House notes from March 21, 1965, as the Johnson administration was steadily deepening U.S. military involvement in Vietnam: “[I]f we visibly *do enough* in the South [Vietnam] (whatever that may be), any failure will be, in that sense, beyond our control”; “Questions: in terms of U.S. politics which is better: to ‘lose’ now or to ‘lose’ after committing 100,000 men? Tentative answer: the latter.” Quoted in Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 167.

36 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 9, 287; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271, especially 213; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 220; and Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 71, 76. On “flexible response” in the nuclear realm, see Elbridge A. Colby, “The United States and Discriminate Nuclear Options in the Cold War,” in *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*, ed. by Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 49–79.

no emphasis on national security strategic planning. Indeed, they appear to have been averse to it, as a matter of personality, principle, and politics.³⁷

But that did not mean that no one else in the administration attempted it. In late 1961, Walt Rostow shifted from the White House, where he had been Bundy's deputy, to the State Department, where he took over as director of policy planning. There he picked up and ran with the task his predecessor had started of preparing a draft "Basic National Security Policy" for consideration by the National Security Council. Rostow seems to have generated the massive document more or less on his own, without direction or oversight from the White House.³⁸ He was an odd fit for the role. Kennedy had moved him out of the White House specifically because he was an unceasing advocate for maximalist economic aid policies and maximalist involvement in meeting communist challenges when and wherever they might arise, including in the Third World and including by use of U.S. military force.³⁹ Those tendencies were also reflected elsewhere in the administration, including in the rhetoric of the president himself — if not always in his actions, as will be seen — but Rostow represented their distilled essence, as did his draft of the Basic National Security Policy in the spring of 1962.⁴⁰ A

draft of the document sent out for written comment elicited a mixed reaction. Bundy expressed approval to Rostow of the military sections of the nearly 200-page draft. But characteristically, Bundy expressed skepticism on his own part and that of the president about the utility of strategy in general. With respect to this effort in particular, Bundy also noted that "[t]he paper seems to me to imply a kind of equal and adequate effort everywhere, and I think both abroad and at home we have to have a clear sense of limits, and of priorities."⁴¹ McNamara wrote that "the thrust of the proposed policy seems highly suitable."⁴² In contrast, Kennan, then serving as ambassador to Yugoslavia, was unsparing in his criticism, not least because, as Kennan wrote to Rostow, "the paper is deeply imbued with a relatively optimistic view of the sources of human nature."⁴³

Kennedy was wary of getting pinned down to any strategy, much less one produced by an official he had effectively banished from the White House. So, while the paper encapsulated many of the basic inclinations of the administration's flexible response approach, it was never formally adopted or approved by Kennedy.⁴⁴ In the end, neither Kennedy nor Johnson evidently developed a national security strategy. They did not want to — Kennedy

37 As the historian Lawrence Freedman has noted, "Kennedy spoke about the need to give a visionary edge to foreign policy and be guided by core principles, yet advisers found him fixated by the short term." Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 6–7. See also Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 40–41; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 35; and Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 148.

38 Notes, excerpts, and documents reflecting the drafting of Rostow's Basic National Security Policy, and the debate and reactions it generated, are available at FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Documents 70–85, 93–95.

39 Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 9–10, 95, 98–104, 110–17, 125; Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 28–33, 38–41; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271; Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 38.

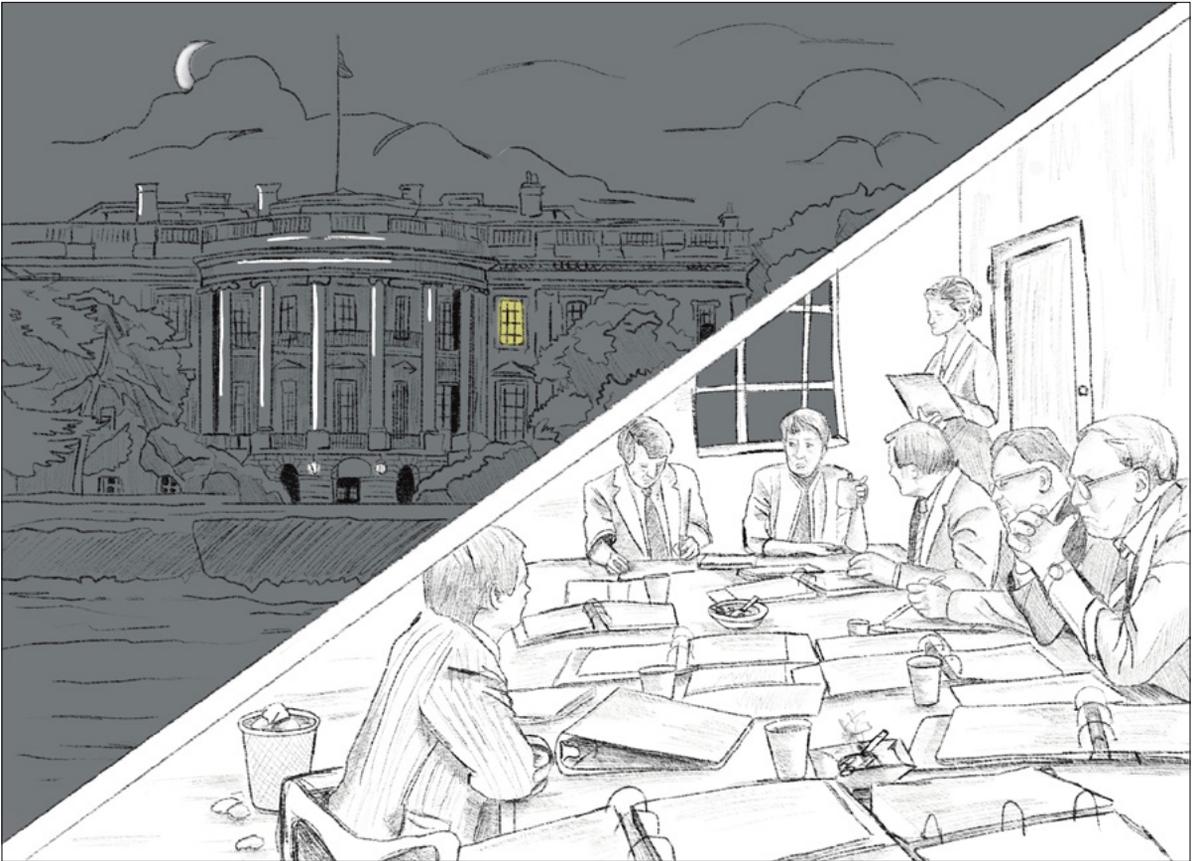
40 The complete text of the draft of the Basic National Security Policy as of June 22, 1962, is in "Draft Paper, June 22," June 22, 1962, FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. VII, VIII, IX Supplement, Document 271, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v07-09mSupp/d271>. See also FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Documents 70–85, 93, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08>.

41 "Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council and Counselor of the Department of State (Rostow)," April 13, 1962, FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. VIII, National Security Policy, Document 77, 263, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d77>.

42 McNamara, letter dated June 13, 1962, quoted in "Editorial Note," FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 94, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d94>.

43 Letter from Kennan to Rostow, May 15, 1962, in "Letter from the Ambassador to Yugoslavia (Kennan) to the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council and Counselor of the Department of State," May 15, 1962, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 85, 285, 289, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d85>.

44 Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 117; Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 6–7, 40–41; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 199; "Editorial Note," FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 94, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d94> (noting numerous instances in 1962 when Kennedy and/or Bundy simply avoided taking any position on the Basic National Security Policy or whether it would be adopted as policy, leaving the rest of the executive branch, which had been responding to and commenting on various iterations of it, to speculate about its status); "Memorandum From the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council and Counselor of the Department of State (Rostow) to Secretary of State Rusk," FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 136, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d136> (noting conversations that Rusk had had with Department of Defense officials about the Basic National Security Policy, that the policy now appeared to be dead as far as the Department of Defense was concerned, and adding, after reminding Rusk that the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had each produced fundamental national security policy documents: "Whatever the limitations inherent in any such document, I doubt that it will redound to the credit of our Administration that we failed to thrash out any successor document. A BNSP obviously cannot substitute for specific policy judgments; and it should not tie the President's hands. But it can provide an occasion for debating and defining the bone structure of policy and communicating it to the troops who never see the four star generals. My first recommendation is, therefore, that you consider with the President whether or not you wish to consider the BNSP exercise as finished."). Rostow, undaunted and still without any guidance or direction from the White House one way or the other, produced yet another attempt at a Basic National Security Policy in November 1963; he told Rusk "that promulgation of a BNSP would contribute in important ways to effective, coordinated execution of U.S. policy." Rostow is quoted in "Editorial Note," FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 146, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d146>.



in particular — and did not try to.⁴⁵ Bundy not only did not lead or guide a national security planning process, but he resisted, in a passive-aggressive manner, attempts by others within the administration to conduct strategic planning throughout his tenure as national security adviser from 1961 to 1966.

In 1963, for example, the State Department, again spurred by Rostow, proposed “strategic studies of various countries as a basis for policy making and programming,” presumably in lieu of any overarching strategy.⁴⁶ Bundy cast doubt on the idea at a White House meeting, expressing skepticism of the value of strategy papers, although “admitt[ing] that analyses of the type suggested would produce information which would be available in time of a crisis and might facilitate action then.” Characteristically, he cast aspersions on the idea of the studies but did not take responsibility for the process, guide it, or turn it off, leading the State Department to gin up a process that again involved the other departments and agencies and again left everyone wondering where the president — first Kennedy, then Johnson — and Bundy would come out on

it.⁴⁷ A memorandum for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by a military staff officer summarized Bundy’s approach during interagency consideration of the papers:

Bundy himself, concerned essentially with operational matters, seems not to believe the papers will be of much value in determining policies because they may be out of date before they are finished. His basic approach, as he admitted today, has been that since he could not stop the Rostow papers from being developed, he could, if necessary, ignore them ... But [these matters] are seldom joined directly. Instead they flit by in shorthand remarks. ... Bundy looked on the White House role as being the right to intervene without any obligation to do so. ... [Bundy] said you could not make programming decisions in a policy document and, when asked where these would be made, did not answer directly, although he believed they would be made in the budget. ... In summary, the discussion reached no recognized conclusions,

45 Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 197–271.

46 “Editorial Note,” FRUS, 1961-1963, VIII, Document 135, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d135>.

47 “Editorial Note,” FRUS, 1961-1963, VIII.

and the role of the strategic policy papers remains unsettled, although it seems they may be more important than Bundy now wishes.⁴⁸

The historian Lawrence Freedman has noted that the refusal on principle of Kennedy and Bundy to engage in strategic planning “fitted in with the temper of the times,” with the “intelligentsia” from which Bundy came — he had been a Harvard dean — preferring and celebrating instead its own “capacity for analytical problem solving.”⁴⁹ More broadly, Freedman has noted, Kennedy “wanted a national security staff to suit his temperament as Eisenhower’s staff had suited his. . . . He wanted a system that extended the range of his options and did not box him in when the moment came to choose... preferring small, intense groups.” Yet “there were costs” to that “informal structure,” Freedman writes. “This less orderly structure produced few clear and properly considered recommendations,” with “nobody quite clear on whether the president knew all he needed to know or exactly what he had decided.”⁵⁰

Many of those who were responsible for guiding U.S. national security policy before and after the Kennedy and Johnson administrations have assessed that, at least in part due to a lack of adequate strategic planning, Kennedy and Johnson too often reacted to international events and crises rather than first developing and then executing a proactive approach. That assessment has been bipartisan and not only retrospective.⁵¹ And indeed, the period witnessed rolling crises in Cuba, Berlin, Laos, Cuba again during the missile crisis, and Vietnam.

After the disastrous Bay of Pigs episode and the embarrassing Vienna summit with Nikita Krushchev, during which Krushchev sought to test Kennedy with overly assertive bombast, Kennedy continued to face a cascade of crises pressed upon him

by adversaries. But he began to handle them with greater wariness and savviness. His crisis management *modus operandi*, as Freedman has noted, was to keep as many options open as possible, and to feel for a resolution while avoiding the introduction of direct or significant U.S. military force. That approach allowed him to find his way through the various crises after his first half-year in office and to avert disaster along the way.⁵² But some of those crises were close-run things.

Some insecurity seemed to creep in amid the White House’s self-confidence in its ability to solve crises. Following the Cuban missile crisis, Eisenhower apparently suggested the need for improvements in White House national security planning and process. In a memorandum to Kennedy in response, Bundy noted that they had dismantled Eisenhower’s planning process and committees but placed responsibility for the cause of that dismantling elsewhere, especially on Rusk and McNamara. He acknowledged that “it is probably also true that we did not promptly develop fully adequate new procedures of our own.” He then blamed the State Department for lack of executive management and inter-departmental coordination. He commented that “we have learned a lot in the last year and a half;” but maintained that “[w]hat we have said, and what I, at least, have deeply believed, is that different Presidents are bound to have different administrative methods. General Eisenhower is a believer in a military concept of staff operations, and you govern by direct personal involvement and decision.”⁵³

Five months later, Bundy wrote another memorandum to Kennedy, this one stating: “As you know, there has been considerable discussion in recent months of the need for strengthening inter-departmental planning and coordination on major national security issues.” Bundy suggested the possibility of establishing an interagency commit-

48 “Memorandum for the Record,” Dec. 4, 1963, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 148, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d148>.

49 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 7.

50 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 40–41.

51 Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson was scathing in his assessment of the Kennedy administration during its first year in letters to his former boss, President Truman. He wrote of “weakness in decisions at the top,” and “a preoccupation here with our ‘image.’” Acheson said that the latter “is a terrible weakness. It makes one look at oneself instead of at the problem. How will I look fielding this hot line drive to short stop? This is a good way to miss the ball altogether.” Letter from Acheson to Truman, July 14, 1961, in Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson, *Affection and Trust: The Personal Correspondence of Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson, 1953–1971* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 264–65. The next month, after having assisted Rusk — who had served Acheson at the State Department during the Truman years — with an issue, he wrote to Truman that “to work for this crowd is strangely depressing. . . . Rusk wants to approach everything piecemeal. But how you lead anyone unless you first know where you yourself want to go, I do not know.” Letter from Acheson to Truman, Aug. 4, 1961, in Truman and Acheson, *Affection and Trust*, 267. See also Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 11, 41; and Winston Lord, interview with the author, July 6, 2012. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had served on the State Department Policy Planning Council during the Johnson administration, later stated that neither the Kennedy nor the Johnson White House had done much strategic planning nor pursued much structure regarding national security policy, that they had acted mainly on an “ad hoc” basis, and that they had been “overwhelmed by basic events and crises.” Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012.

52 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, especially xii, 4, 5, 9, 40–41, 54–57. See also Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 41–47, 63.

53 “Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy,” Nov. 16, 1962, FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII, Document 108, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d108>.

tee that would include Averell Harriman from the State Department. Bundy recommended that Harriman draw on plans from, of all people, Rostow.⁵⁴

Following Kennedy's assassination, the officials and ad hoc process that Kennedy had overseen lost the guardrails he had come to provide in the face of exigencies. For his part, Eisenhower tried to warn Johnson to be more systematic in national security organization and planning. According to Bundy — who continued on as national security adviser, ultimately to be replaced after several years by Rostow — “Ike was trying to get the new President to abandon all the bad habits of his predecessor.” Somewhat flippantly, Bundy added in a memorandum for the record that Eisenhower “has a picture of chaos among the children, I guess.”⁵⁵

Eisenhower had resolutely kept U.S. combat forces out of Vietnam, both because of the conflict's roots as a French colonial war and because of the risk of a quagmire that would dissipate U.S. strength. Kennedy, while steadily deepening U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, had held firm on that main principle.⁵⁶ With his death, the restraints fell away. Johnson and his administration stumbled into what became a disaster in Vietnam, where the connections between interests, priorities, objectives, and means were never properly comprehended, much less tailored in the execution.⁵⁷ Bundy seemed unable or unwilling to tee up those subjects for systematic and rigorous review, a crucial aspect of his job, and for his own part recommended expanded U.S. military action in Vietnam at critical turning points in 1964 and 1965.⁵⁸ His eventual replacement, Rostow, was a vigorous advocate of the war. The scholar Gordon Goldstein worked with Bundy in the 1990s on a project to analyze retrospectively the U.S. presidency and the Vietnam War during the 1960s. (Bundy died before they could complete it.) In his own resultant book on Bundy, Goldstein noted that, 30 years after the events in question:

[T]he man I observed was still struggling to understand how Vietnam happened. ... One of the questions that appeared to preoccupy

Bundy was how the process of managing presidential decisions for Vietnam could have become as disordered as it did for both Kennedy and Johnson. Bundy had come to the White House with a reputation for brilliance as a bureaucratic manager, the young academic dean who had tamed the fierce politics and formidable egos of the Harvard faculty. The conventional wisdom was that Bundy was decisive, commanding, and terse.⁵⁹

In his controversial 1995 memoir, McNamara, too, acknowledged in retrospect that the most basic issues involved — such as whether South Vietnam was worth the effort poured in, and whether that effort could have been successful in the first place — “were not presented clearly to” Johnson and “remained unanswered throughout his presidency.” He wrote:

One reason the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed to take an orderly, rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam was the staggering variety and complexity of other issues we faced. Simply put, we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only twenty-four hours in a day, and we often did not have time to think straight.

“This predicament,” he added, “ought to be recognized and planned for when organizing a government.”⁶⁰

Strategic Planning Under Nixon

On taking office in 1969, President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Kissinger, inherited the Vietnam War, domestic turmoil, and tensions with U.S. allies. Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's vice president, insisted that his administration's strategy would aim to place the United States back on a sustainable course in the Cold War. That was the purpose of what would become his *détente* approach. He wanted both to take advantage of geopolitical opportunities in the Cold War and to avoid

54 “Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Kennedy,” April 2, 1963, FRUS, 1961-1963, VIII, Document 131.

55 Bundy as quoted in Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 101.

56 Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 50–56, 63–67, 95–96, 239–40.

57 Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 98–140, 156–67, 168–249; and Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 235–71.

58 Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 98–140, 156–67, 168–249. Goldstein characterized one Bundy memo to Johnson from April 1965: “Bundy submitted another memorandum to President Johnson elaborating on the merits of an open-ended and unformulated U.S. military strategy in Vietnam. ... Bundy again argued that America's strategic objectives did not have to be precisely defined.” Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 169.

59 Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, 70–71.

60 Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 101, xxi.

U.S. withdrawal from its most important overseas commitments or severe defense cuts, both of which he thought would jeopardize America's long-term competition with the Soviet Union.⁶¹

Nixon and Kissinger led a process that was especially White House-centric by design. They shared an instinct to consolidate policymaking in the White House on the most important issues, including on Vietnam and on relations with the Soviet Union and with China.⁶² Within days of taking office, Kissinger flooded the executive branch departments and agencies with classified formal requests for studies on almost every conceivable foreign, defense, and intelligence issue, in each case sending out multiple pages of specific questions and often asking for the bases of various assumptions and alternative hypotheses or courses of action.⁶³ The reasons for this were partly Machiavellian: to gather information on how each department or agency thought about specific issues and why for his own bureaucratic reasons. It was perhaps even an effort to keep them busy with responding while the White House, more or less fully staffed from the start, could get under way with its policy planning.⁶⁴

Yet that is only part of the story. Kissinger and

his staff genuinely wanted to fill gaps in their own knowledge and understanding of various regions, functional issues, and developments. And they wanted to probe for alternative explanations or approaches outside the consensus views.⁶⁵ In that first year, the White House convened a number of sessions of the National Security Council and subordinate interagency committees to discuss the studies and basic policy options and directions.⁶⁶ But it was largely Kissinger and his staff who undertook the work of shaping and drafting the administration's national security policies, in some cases through memorandums and directives sent to the departments and agencies, and in some cases simply by formulating a policy and then implementing it, with or without the involvement of the departments and agencies. As Winston Lord, who worked closely with Kissinger throughout the administration as a strategic planner, and who subsequently served in senior roles in administrations of both parties, has noted, a strategic sensibility pervaded Nixon's foreign policy. On the issues they prioritized, Nixon and Kissinger insisted on thoughtful analysis, including by identifying, understanding, and navigating the interconnectedness of efforts in

61 In FRUS, 1969–1976, I, see Nixon's comments in private to French President Charles DeGaulle on March 1, 1969, in which he foreshadowed a move to drive a wedge between China and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the basic concept of which he had been contemplating for a few years, 63–64; speech by Nixon to the North Atlantic Council, April 10, 1969, 69–75; speech by Nixon at the U.S. Air Force Academy, June 4, 1969, 86–88 ("There is no advancement for Americans at home in a retreat from the problems of the world. ... America has a vital national interest in world stability, and no other nation can uphold that interest for us."); speech by Nixon to the United Nations General Assembly, Sept. 18, 1969, 107–08 ("our aim is to place America's international commitments on a sustainable, long term basis"); and memorandum from Nixon to Kissinger regarding the draft of the first annual report on foreign policy (discussed below), February 10, 1970 ("get back to my theme that the Nixon doctrine rather than being a device to get rid of America's world role is one which is devised to make it possible for us to play a role—and play it better, more effectively than if we continued the policy of the past in which we assume such a dominant position" and suggesting that Kissinger look at and draw from Nixon's Air Force Academy speech, as "the tone and strength of that speech on this issue is very much needed"), 186–87. A comment made by Nixon in a meeting with French President Georges Pompidou in 1971 characterized Nixon's approach. After Pompidou had given a *tour d'horizon* of trends in the Cold War, Nixon said, "in the broad landscape President Pompidou had painted we should now look at the pieces and see how those pieces could be moved to our advantage rather than [the Soviets]." Kissinger was not present. See "Top Secret Memorandum of Conversation," Dec. 13, 1971, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 35. See also Winston Lord, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, April 28, 1998, 54–55, <https://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004lor02/2004lor02.pdf>.

62 Lord, 2012 interview with the author; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 24–48; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 299–302. See also "Memorandum From President Nixon to His Assistant (Haldeman), His Assistant for Domestic Affairs (Ehrlichman), and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," March 2, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 61, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d61>.

63 Nearly 50 National Security Study Memorandums issued by the White House to the departments and agencies from Jan. 21, 1969, through the spring of 1969 requested formal studies. Among these are "National Security Study Memorandum 1, Situation in Vietnam," The White House, Jan. 21, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_001.pdf; "National Security Study Memorandum 2, Middle East Policy," The White House, Jan. 21, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_002.pdf; "National Security Study Memorandum 3, U.S. Military Posture And the Balance of Power," The White House, Jan. 21, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_003.pdf; "National Security Study Memorandum 9, Review of the International Situation," The White House, Jan. 23, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_009.pdf; "National Security Study Memorandum 10, East-West Relations," The White House, Jan. 27, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_010.pdf; and "National Security Study Memorandum 14, U.S. China Policy," The White House, Feb. 5, 1969, accessed at the Nixon Library, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_014.pdf.

64 Lord, 1998 interview with Kennedy and Bernkopf Tucker, 48–51; Lord, 2012 interview with the author; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, 47.

65 Lord, 1998 interview with Kennedy and Bernkopf Tucker, 48–51; Lord, 2012 interview with the author; and Senior Nixon administration national security official, discussion with the author, March 2012. One of the Department of Defense recipients of the many taskings from the White House was an Air Force officer named Brent Scowcroft, who was impressed that Nixon and Kissinger were reaching down into the departments and agencies for information, and who would later join Kissinger's National Security Council staff and then serve as national security advisor to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush. Brent Scowcroft, interview with the author, August 1, 2012.

66 Lord, 2012 interview with the author; and Senior Nixon administration national security official, discussion with the author, March 2012; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, 24–47.

one area with effort in another, and by pursuing a proactive, not reactive, approach.⁶⁷

And yet, the Nixon administration did not develop a comprehensive national security strategy document. At Nixon's urging, toward the end of his first year in office, Kissinger's staff sent him a summary of trends in the international environment, drawn from the interagency responses and discussions on the subject that had been one of Kissinger's requested study topics early on.⁶⁸ But Kissinger and his staff did not then use it as a basis for an overarching, classified, internal planning document.

Nixon and Kissinger had agreed even before taking office, however, that they would issue unclassified annual reports on U.S. foreign policy from the White House.⁶⁹ Kissinger's staff worked extensively on the first report, which came out just over a year after Nixon took office, and on the ensuing annual iterations. They are thoughtful reviews of international trends and of U.S. policy and were sometimes predictive, dropping hints of policy changes to come. Nixon, Kissinger, and their immediate staff placed great importance and priority on the annual reports, and crafted them carefully.⁷⁰ Characteristically, Nixon's response to a draft

of the first annual message was to emphasize that it should convey more forcefully that his policies were aimed at sustaining a strong, enduring American presence and influence in the world and a lasting ability to compete in the Cold War.⁷¹

The annual reports did involve some input from the departments and agencies.⁷² Yet, they did not have as a primary function, and did not achieve, the creation of an overarching strategy that established fundamental premises regarding the nature of the threat posed by America's adversaries, the strengths and weaknesses of those adversaries relative to the United States, or the priority objectives and methods by which America could exploit those elements to its advantage. Such honest assessments, analysis, and policy direction are essentially impossible in an unclassified document for public consumption. Nor did the annual reports require or involve substantial buy-in and sign-off from the various departments and agencies. That in turn meant that the process of developing the reports did not both empower and constrain the cabinet secretaries and agency heads to follow the directions laid out in the documents with basic unity of effort, as they otherwise might have.

67 Lord, 2012 interview with the author; and Lord, 1998 interview with Kennedy and Bernkopf Tucker, 64–65.

68 "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Analysis of changes in international politics since World War II and their implications for our basic assumptions about U.S. foreign policy" and attached paper, Oct. 20, 1969, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 41, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d41>. The cover memo and the paper itself indicate that Nixon had requested such a document earlier that month. In the cover memo, Kissinger noted that "[o]ne of the first studies [his] Staff undertook was a comprehensive review of major trends in international politics" — see National Security Study Memorandum 9 — and that "[p]art of that rather long review was a summary of those trends in the context of the postwar evolution of American foreign policy and the current mood of reassessment," and added that the attached study paper represented his staff's interpretation and summary thereof.

69 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 158–59; "Report by President Nixon to the Congress," Feb. 18, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 60, 195, fn. 1; "National Security Study Memorandum 80, The President's Annual Review of American Foreign Policy," Oct. 27, 1969, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_080.pdf.

70 "Report by President Nixon to Congress," Feb. 18, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 60, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d60>. The full text of the report is available at The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-report-the-congress-united-states-foreign-policy-for-the-1970s>. Nixon described that first annual report to members of Congress as "the most important statement made by this Administration," and said that "all our foreign and defense policies had been gathered together in one place." "Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant (Buchanan) to President Nixon, Notes from Legislative Leadership Meeting," Feb. 18, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 59, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d59>. See also Lord, 2012 interview with the author; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 158–59; Lord, 1998 interview with Kennedy and Bernkopf Tucker 54–55, 63, 75; and Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 303.

71 See Nixon's memo to Kissinger regarding the draft of the first annual report on foreign policy in "Memorandum from President Nixon to His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Feb. 10, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 57, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d57>. (Nixon wrote, "get back to my theme that the Nixon doctrine rather than being a device to get rid of America's world role is one which is devised to make it possible for us to play a role—and play it better, more effectively than if we continued the policy of the past in which we assume such a dominant position," and suggested that Kissinger look at and draw from Nixon's Air Force Academy speech, as "the tone and strength of that speech on this issue is very much needed.") Nixon emphasized that basic theme repeatedly in comments after he released the first annual report in February 1970, as Buchanan noted in his memorandum on the legislative leadership meeting: "the President said unless the United States does play a role in the world, if, for example, the United States should return home, the rest of the world in his opinion would come under Communist domination. ... The purpose of this foreign policy is to find a way to stay in the world, not a way to get out of the world."). "Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant," Feb. 18, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I. More generally, see comments from Nixon to Kissinger in a meeting on October 12, 1970: "The US—what it will be like for the next 25 years depends on whether we have the guts, the stamina, the wisdom to exert leadership ... All right, we will get out of the world. Who is left? The two activists, Russia and Communist China. ... We go to the sidelines and there are a couple of big boys out there ready to play—China and Russia." "Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Oct. 12, 1970, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 2, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v13/d2>.

72 "Memorandum from Under Secretary of State (Richardson) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Dec. 5, 1969, FRUS 1969–1976, I, Document 46, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d46>; "Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Richardson) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Jan. 22, 1969, FRUS 1969–1976, I, Document 53, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d53>; "Memorandum From Secretary of State Rogers to Nixon," Dec. 24, 1969, FRUS, 1969–1976, I, Document 48, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d48>; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 158–59; and "National Security Study Memorandum 80."

One of the effects of Nixon and Kissinger's White House-centric planning model was to further marginalize the cabinet departments and other agencies and their roles relative to that of the White House. Even Kissinger and his closest aides, in retrospect, realized that Kissinger's personalization, even personification, of policy design and execution caused needless friction within the government, thereby complicating efforts to pursue the strategy successfully.⁷³

It also left the Nixon administration's national security approach uniquely tied to the strengths and weaknesses of its two architects, especially Kissinger. Kissinger was largely of the view that America was in long-term relative decline and had to plan and act accordingly, for example, and that underlying premise colored his approach, including with regard to negotiations with the Soviets.⁷⁴ That premise seems not to have been as clearly or fully shared by Nixon. And, for all of Kissinger's formidable intellect, historical insight, and negotiating prowess, that premise was later disproven, or at least rendered premature, in light of America's unipolar pre-eminence from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s. It is at least possible that a more systematic and comprehensive strategic planning process, including about basic premises and evaluations of relative strengths and vulnerabilities in the Cold War competition along the lines that Eisenhower had led, would have resulted in greater testing and tempering of those premises. That was especially the case following Nixon's resignation, which removed from the calculus his own geopolitical shrewdness

and his attention to hard power and to détente as a tactic. By the mid-1970s, the premises underlying Kissinger's foreign policy had become a political hindrance for President Gerald Ford. Ronald Reagan, who challenged Ford in the Republican primaries in 1976, criticized Ford and Kissinger's policy. So did Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in the general election, with Carter battering Ford and Kissinger's policy as declinist.⁷⁵

Strategic Planning Under Carter

Carter entered office prioritizing human rights and arms control, but he had less-defined views regarding the nature of the Soviet threat and the proper balance between competition and cooperation in the Cold War.⁷⁶ His administration did produce a formal, classified national security strategy directive in its first year, and it provides valuable lessons for today.

Carter's administration followed a two-track approach to strategic planning. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, brought on to his staff as his chief strategic planner the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, with whom Brzezinski had co-written a book comparing the United States and the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ In the first few months of the administration, Brzezinski and his White House staff, including Huntington, prepared for the president a lengthy memorandum outlining specific national security policy objectives, with the proposed timing for each.⁷⁸ Both Carter and Brzezinski considered it to be an im-

73 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 30. That view is implied in some of Lord's insights and prescriptions in his interview with the author. Lord, 2012 interview with the author. See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 273, 332.

74 See Kissinger's essay "Central Issues of American Foreign Policy," in "Essay by Henry A. Kissinger," 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, I, Document 4 (first published in 1968), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d4>; "Background Press Briefing by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Aug. 14, 1970, FRUS, 1969-1976, I, Document 69, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d69>; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 54-70; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 161-62, 169, 180-81, 199, 225, 236.

75 Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, Paperback ed. (New York: Random House Trade 2006), 26-32. In remarks made to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations in 1976, Jimmy Carter said, "Our recent foreign policy ... has been predicated on a belief that our national and international strength is inevitably deteriorating. I do not accept this premise." He continued, saying, "détente is under attack today because of the way it has been exploited by the Soviet Union. ... [Kissinger] is giving up too much and asking for too little. ... To the Soviets, détente is an opportunity to continue the process of world revolution without running the threat of nuclear war." "Remarks by Jimmy Carter," March 15, 1976, FRUS, 1977-1980, Vol. I, Foundations of Foreign Policy [hereafter FRUS, 1977-1980, I], Document 4, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d4>. In the second presidential debate against Ford, on Oct. 6, 1977, Carter stated that "we've become fearful to compete with the Soviet Union on an equal basis. ... The Soviet Union knows what they want in détente, and they've been getting it. We have not known what we've wanted, and we've been out-traded in almost every instance." "Editorial Note," FRUS, 1977-1980 I, Document 11, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d11>. See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 307, 319.

76 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 48-50.

77 See Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Power: USA/USSR* (New York: Viking Books/Compass Press 1965; originally published 1963/1964); and Justin Vaïsse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski: America's Grand Strategist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 72-73.

78 "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter," April 29, 1977, [hereafter "Memo from Brzezinski to Carter"], and excerpts of attached paper prepared by the National Security Council staff, "Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Staff," in FRUS, 1977-1980, I, Document 36, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d36>; Zbigniew Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012; and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 50-57. In his cover memo to Carter conveying the memorandum, Brzezinski noted that "It is not meant to be a public statement—and its publication or revelation would be counterproductive." "Memo from Brzezinski to Carter," FRUS, 1977-1980, I.



portant statement of the administration's aims.⁷⁹ It was, in essence, exclusively the product of Brzezinski and his staff.⁸⁰ Brzezinski later stated that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown had seen that memorandum but had not provided significant input into it or even evinced much interest in that kind of planning.⁸¹ In all events, Brzezinski may not have gone out of his way to include the departments and agencies in the development of the document.⁸²

Brzezinski and his staff also led a more traditional strategic planning process that did involve the departments and agencies. Their first step was to prepare a comprehensive net assessment of the United States and the Soviet Union. In the secret Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-10, "Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review," from February 1977, Carter directed that Brzezinski would chair an interagency process to develop a "dynamic net assessment" that "will consist of review and comparison of the overall trends in the political, diplomatic, economic, technological, and military capabilities of the United States, its allies, and potential adversaries," and "will evaluate the

objectives and national strategies that may be pursued by our principal potential adversaries and examine the alternative national objectives and strategies appropriate to the United States."⁸³

BRZEZINSKI AND HIS STAFF ALSO LED A MORE TRADITIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS THAT DID INVOLVE THE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES. THEIR FIRST STEP WAS TO PREPARE A COMPREHENSIVE NET ASSESSMENT OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION.

Brzezinski and his staff established interagency task forces to oversee what ultimately became 11 preparatory studies on specific functional and regional areas to provide analysis and data for the net assessment. The head of the Defense Department's Office of Net Assessment, Andrew W. Marshall, played an important role supporting the development of the net assessment, as did a number of intelligence officials.⁸⁴ That interagency work ultimately produced a number of written reports covering specific issue areas. Drawing on all of that background and input, Huntington then drafted a

79 Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012; and Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 45 (quoting diary entry from April 29, 1977: "The National Security Council staff has prepared for me what we call our international goals. This is a good framework around which to build our day-to-day decisions. I think a growing consciousness of these tangible goals will be good to bind us all together in a common effort.") See also Brzezinski's memo to Carter from April 1977 ("Memo from Brzezinski to Carter," FRUS, 1977-1980, I, Document 36); a memo of a meeting with Carter, Vance, Brzezinski, and members of Congress, ("Memorandum for the Record," Feb. 1, 1977, FRUS, 1977-1980, I, Document 19, 80 and fn. 4, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d19>); and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 50–57.

80 Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012. In his cover memo to Carter conveying the memorandum, Brzezinski stated, "The document is not an interagency consensus statement. It was prepared, on the basis of the conceptual framework which you and I have often discussed, by Sam Huntington and myself, with NSC staff inputs." The cover memo noted that Huntington was also coordinating the PRM/NSC-10 net assessment project, discussed below. "Memo from Brzezinski to Carter," FRUS, 1977-1980, I, 36. See also Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 50–57.

81 Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012.

82 Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012. "Let Cy [Vance] assess your more comprehensive goals," Carter wrote to Brzezinski in July 1977 in response to a later paper from the State Department which set out four-year goals as the State Department saw it, and which Brzezinski had forwarded to Carter. "Memorandum From the Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Tarnoff) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," June 28, 1977, FRUS, 1977-1980, I, 199, fn. 1, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d47>.

83 "Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-10, Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review," The White House, Feb. 18, 1977, [hereafter "PRM/NSC-10"], <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/memorandums/prm10.pdf>.

84 See "PRM/NSC-10 Comprehensive Net Assessment Organization," undated, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP-83M00171R001200160001-7.pdf>, listing the members of the Net Assessment Group and Net Assessment Working Group, and setting out the 11 interagency task forces and their chairs, available at the CIA Electronic Reading Room; Edward C. Keefer, *Harold Brown: Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge, 1977-1981*, Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, Vol. IX (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), 132–37; Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 130–36; and Andrew W. Marshall, oral history interview with Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, June 29, 1992, 1–2, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_MARSHALL Andrew 06-29-92.pdf?ver=2018-04-10-070002-393. (Marshall stating that "We ... got involved in one part of the PRM-10 activity. There were two parts, one run by Huntington and Odom, out of the NSC staff, and my office was the principal contributor from Defense because they were trying to replicate at another level a broad assessment of the world situation and major trends.")

single, consolidated net assessment report for consideration by the National Security Council.⁸⁵

Huntington's net assessment has not yet been fully declassified and released, but significant parts of it have been, in final or draft form. It appears to be an extraordinary work, in ambition, scope, and execution.⁸⁶ It was occasionally given over to academic, political-science-influenced language and themes — on historical phases of the Cold War, for example — tendencies to which Brzezinski and Kissinger were also prone in their government roles, and that, viewed in retrospect, did not always prove perspicacious or particularly useful. But for the most part the document seems to have been insightful and illuminating, dispassionately analyzing relative U.S. and Soviet strengths and weaknesses across a wide range of categories and issues and across different regions of the world. The excerpts quoted here come from several declassified sections of what appears to be a near-final draft that is undated but seems to be from May or June 1977.

Huntington underscored that recent years had seen deteriorating trends in relative U.S. military strength and posture and increased Soviet influence and adventurism in regions around the world, especially in the Third World. In certain hard power and geopolitical metrics, the Soviets had built up considerable momentum, trends that altered the overall Cold War competition in worrisome ways. "The most significant change that has occurred in the power relationships between the US and the SU during the past decade has been the growth in Soviet military power in relation to that of the United States," Huntington wrote.⁸⁷ He assessed that "[t]he probability that the Soviets will take one or more military initiatives during the next eight years is high," for a number of reasons: The Soviets' capability to take military initiatives in the Third World was "significantly greater" than it had been; they had "redefined the scope of their

interests and commitments in Third World areas"; the U.S. military presence in Third World areas had been reduced; "the Soviets could well feel that" U.S. public opinion and legislative restraints inhibited any U.S. military response; and the "Soviets may feel it necessary for them 'to win' a crisis-confrontation with the U.S. in order to establish their overall equality with the U.S. as a world power."⁸⁸

Huntington looked at the nature of the Soviet system, the motivations and interests of Soviet leaders, and the implications for U.S. strategy with clear eyes. "Soviet leaders do not easily comprehend the idea of a pluralist world or a balance of power. Their domestic experience encourages them to see an international pecking order." "The Soviet response to American dominance," Huntington wrote,

has been a political struggle to overthrow the pecking order and to establish a new subordination, not a new balance. 'Parity' is not, from this viewpoint, a cornerstone concept for capping the arms race. It is a tactical slogan for an assault on the post-1945 world strategic edifice.⁸⁹

Huntington's writing style was more genteel and restrained than that of Kennan, or certainly of Nitze, but his portrayal of what the Soviets were up to and why, and what the implications were for U.S. strategy, were essentially as stark:

If the Soviets choose to view the strategic relationship as a pecking order, American leaders are unwise not to take that into account. ... The Soviet leaders are likely to continue seeking to develop their strength, not only in arms, but across the board in political, economic, and military instrumentalities. The task for American strategy is to

85 Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 75–76, 177; and "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, with Madeleine K. Albright, Leslie G. Denend, and William Odom," Feb. 18, 1982, Carter Presidency Project, University of Virginia Miller Center, 2003, 31–32, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_1982_0218_brzezinski.pdf. (Odom, who assisted Huntington during the process, summarized Brzezinski's instructions to Huntington as "Go out and tell us how we're doing in the world vis-à-vis the Soviet Union," and stated that the objective was to construct a "comprehensive net assessment" that encompassed "all the major categories of power."); and Brian J. Auten, *Carter's Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 156–58.

86 Extensive segments of Huntington's net assessment report, which appear to be from a close-to-final version that is undated but seems to be from May or June 1977 [hereafter "Draft Net Assessment Report"], are available at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, in National Security Council Institutional Files, 1977-1981, Box 29, Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-10, for example. The excerpts quoted here come from that version in that file location. Those segments have been declassified and released and were made available to the author by the Carter Library. The full text of the Huntington net assessment awaits declassification and release. See also Miller Center, "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski," 31–35, 39–40; and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 177, on the contents of the Huntington net assessment. In September 1980, Odom summarized the Huntington net assessment and used it to gauge how the administration had done over the intervening period in light of Huntington's analysis and conclusions and to set out needed adjustments in strategy, in a memorandum to Brzezinski. "Memorandum from William Odom of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," Sept. 3, 1980, FRUS, 1977-1980, I, Document 156, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d156>.

87 "Draft Net Assessment Report," VI-1.

88 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV C-5-6.

89 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV A-9.



cope with this competition in its full scope rather than to view it narrowly as a military and military-technical issue.⁹⁰

Huntington sought to dispel what he saw as illusions in U.S. policy, and to grapple with the implications for U.S. policy of the Soviets' own approach to the Cold War. Regarding arms control, for example, Huntington wrote: "it looks doubtful in retrospect that Western strategists have 'raised the Soviet learning curve' on matters of nuclear warfare in the sense they have sometimes believed. The Soviet side has never lost sight of the essentially political character of both military force posture and arms negotiations."⁹¹ "American negotiation success," he wrote, "will depend on being more adept at exploiting Soviet weaknesses, at putting the Soviets on the defensive diplomatically."⁹²

Huntington delved into an analysis of relative Soviet weaknesses, including economic and technological vulnerabilities relative to the position of the United States:

The slowdown in the Soviet economy and its weakness in competing with the West is due in large part to the political choices made long ago by Soviet leaders and tenaciously upheld today. The Soviet command economy may be inefficient, but it reserves the structural allocation decisions for the top leadership. The leadership's continuing preference for heavy industry and military might has led to an enormous military burden, far greater than has normally been realized in the West.

"Unable or unwilling to cope with economic problems through domestic reform," Huntington continued, "the Soviet leadership has turned to the alternative of importing more advanced technology. In other words, the present Soviet trade policy is aimed at avoiding systemic reform not at achieving reform."⁹³

Huntington expressed skepticism and wariness of advocates for expanded U.S. (and Western) economic ties with the Soviet Union. "[T]he profit made by the firm which executed the sale of a technology" had to be weighed against playing into the Soviets' attempts to solve their manifest economic and technological weaknesses: their inherent inefficiencies and flaws; the constraints on growth imposed by massive military spending; and the increasing drain on Soviet resources posed by Soviet client states, which itself posed significant risks and threats to the Soviets in coming years.⁹⁴

More broadly, Huntington assessed, "[i]n the economic competition, most factors favor the US. The difficult choices face the Soviet Union," such as "How to avoid giving up military programs? How to respond to the economic realities of East Europe?"⁹⁵ Huntington again pointed to the implications for U.S. policy, emphasizing the benefits of a competition-based U.S. approach and the strategic error of an overly cooperative policy: "Astute American appraisals of the level of Soviet discomfort can provide occasional opportunities for nudging the USSR into more cooperative behavior toward the West," whereas "US neglect of its competitive opportunities may allow the Soviet leadership to postpone or escape growing constraints on its capability to compete."⁹⁶

Moving to an analysis of relative political institutions, Huntington underscored that U.S. political institutions "have successfully emerged from a trying decade which involved racial problems, student upheavals, an unwinnable war, and a constitutional crisis." He highlighted the U.S. political system's "adaptability." In contrast:

Soviet political institutions confront serious problems caused by unfavorable demographic trends, economic slowdown, an inefficient agricultural sector, nationality aspirations, and intellectual dissidence. During the coming decade, the Soviet system will also confront a succession struggle

90 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV A-13-14.

91 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV A-13.

92 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV F-6.

93 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV E-11. See also IV E-1, where the report states, "The apparent goal of the Soviet economic strategy ... is to open Western sources of technology and to draw on them in order to catch up with Western levels of ... productivity and to perk up the nodding Soviet growth rate. On the economic front, accordingly, the Soviet Union has emphasized cooperation that facilitates East-West trade."

94 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV E-7, 8. "In the short run, it is in the economic sphere that Soviet alliance calculations will become more complex and subject to risk. ... [G]iven its goals in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union has few real alternatives. ... A longer-range dilemma for the Soviet Union is how to allow national solutions without ultimately encouraging nationalist challenges to Soviet political and ideological control." See pages IV D-15, 17, 19. Huntington described a number of negative trends, including that of "a 'one-way-street' in transfers of technology and capital to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe," and said, "The degree of risk involved in these trends must be estimated in terms of individual and cumulative [sic] impacts and the significance of each area in the implementation of a national strategy." See page VI-7.

95 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV E-13.

96 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV E-13.



.... All-in-all, American political institutions seem to be emerging from a time of troubles, while Soviet political institutions are possibly entering one.⁹⁷

Sorting through the various critical regions of the world, Huntington zeroed in on Iran as a country of long-term importance and short-term vulnerability for American interests and the leading potential geostrategic flash point in the coming years, and on the Middle East more broadly. In doing so, he foreshadowed what would become the Carter Doctrine three years later.⁹⁸

Huntington reached the following conclusion of his net assessment:

In sum, a rough overall equivalence exists in military capabilities. The US remains significantly ahead of the Soviet Union in most non-military aspects of national power, including economic resources and productive capability, technology, stability and responsiveness of political institutions, diplomatic support and access in most regions of the world, and overall political action, information, and ideological warfare capabilities.

“The present US overall competitive advantage, however,” Huntington noted,

must also be assessed against the dynamics of present and foreseeable change. The trends have been favorable to the Soviet Union or against the US in a number of key areas: strategic forces, conventional forces in Europe, mobilization and force projection capabilities, short-run economic interaction payoffs, [redacted] and diplomatic relationships, especially in Africa and Latin America. In others, including intelligence capabilities

and core alliance relationships, the trends have been mixed. Trends favorable to the United States occur principally in political capabilities (political institutions and capacities for PIA) and in economic productivity.⁹⁹

The overall net assessment indicating the following, Huntington reasoned: cooperation will remain limited; misunderstandings will persist on many key issues; and competition will predominate.¹⁰⁰

Huntington’s net assessment served as one of the bases for ensuing discussions within Carter’s National Security Council, from which emerged the administration’s classified written national security strategy.¹⁰¹ Another planned input in that process was a review of possible defense strategy alternatives led by the Defense Department. But mismanagement of the conceptualization and organization of that study by civilian policy officials in the department resulted in a document that was essentially useless for that purpose, as even Brown conceded.¹⁰²

The top-secret written national security strategy that ultimately emerged from the National Security Council discussions was extremely short, at only five pages.¹⁰³ As a strategy, it was vague and subject to a wide variance in interpretation. It mostly glossed over the sensitive and perceptive comparative analysis that Huntington had developed and provided little guidance as to U.S. objectives and the means to achieve them.

The document stated that “US-Soviet relations will continue to be characterized by both competition and cooperation.” It did capture important themes from the net assessment in noting that in the competition, “military aspects aside, the United States continues to enjoy a number of critical advantages: it has a more creative technological and economic system, its political structure can adapt more easily to popular demands and relies

97 "Draft Net Assessment Report," VI-4-5.

98 See also "Memorandum from William Odom of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)," Jan. 18, 1980, FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XI, Part 1, Iran: Hostage Crisis, November 1979 – December 1980, Document 156, 412, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v11p1/d156> (noting the presence of Huntington's paper as the administration faced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the crises in Iran).

99 "Draft Net Assessment Report," VI-6, 7.

100 "Draft Net Assessment Report," IV A-13.

101 See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 177; "Meeting of the Special Coordination Committee, July 7, 1977, Summary of Conclusions," regarding PRM/NSC-10 Comprehensive Net Assessment, 1-3, in folder SCC 020 – US – USSR Strategic Capabilities and PRM-10, 7/7/77; and "Memorandum to the Special Coordinating Committee from Christine Dodson, NSC Staff Secretary, Aug. 2, 1977," in advance of SCC Meeting on Aug. 4, 1977, regarding PRM/NSC-10, in folder SCC 024 – PRM 10, 8/4/77, both from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, National Security Council Institutional Files, 1977-1981, Box 87.

102 "I do not think the study provides the basis for a selection of an overall integrated military strategy at this time." Memorandum from Brown to, inter alia, Brzezinski and Vance, June 6, 1977, "Subject: PRM – 10 Force Posture Study," 1, with attached agenda for discussion, and attached "PRM/NSC-10 Military Strategy and Force Posture Review Final Report," available from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/memorandums/prm10.pdf>. See also Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 120–33, 137; and Auten, *Carter's Conversion*, 160.

103 "Memorandum: Presidential Directive/NSC-18, U.S. National Security Strategy," Aug. 26, 1977, from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/directives/pd18.pdf>.

on freely given popular support, and it is supported internationally by allies and friends who genuinely share similar aspirations.” In contrast, “though successfully acquiring military power matching that of the United States,” the Soviet Union “continues to face major internal economic and national difficulties, and externally it has few genuinely committed allies.” “In this situation,” the strategy continued, “I direct that US national strategy will be to take advantage of our relative advantages in economic strength, technological superiority, and popular political support.”

Yet, it then listed five short objectives that gave only the scantest direction and no prioritization: 1) “[c]ounterbalanc[ing]” Soviet power and influence “in key areas, particularly Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia”; 2) competing politically with the Soviet Union “by pursuing the basic American commitment to human rights and national independence”; 3) seeking Soviet cooperation in resolving regional conflicts and reducing areas of tension; 4) pursuing arms control and disarmament negotiations; and 5) “seek[ing] to involve the Soviet Union constructively in global activities.” The United States would also “maintain an overall balance of military power ... at least as favorable as that that now exists.”¹⁰⁴

The vagueness and lack of prioritization or direction of the national security strategy may have resulted from a wide variance in the views among Carter’s principal advisers and a need to capture an approach that could garner agreement among them easily enough. Brzezinski and Huntington were more attentive to and concerned with the adversarial nature of the Cold War, the need for the United States to pursue a primarily competitive approach, and the importance of hard power than was Secretary of State Vance, who emphasized co-

operation with the Soviet Union, as well as a focus on transnational issues.¹⁰⁵ It also may have been due to the competing instincts of Carter himself, whose worldview encompassed elements of both outlooks and, early on at least, resolved clearly in favor of neither. Perhaps Brzezinski and his White House staff saw some advantage, tactical or otherwise, in keeping the document brief and general, or perhaps they simply preferred it that way. Yet the upshot was that while the document started from a premise of competition, its goals seemed just as weighted toward cooperation, and overall it avoid-

One of the tragedies of the Carter years was that an appropriately balanced, consistent, competition-oriented approach toward the Cold War could have guided the administration from the start.

ed specificity, prioritization, or guidance, giving encouragement and justification to both factions.¹⁰⁶

Over the next two years, the Carter administration struggled to pursue a clear, proactive line of foreign and defense policy, with Vance and Carter himself often favoring a focus on negotiations and restraint and Brzezinski warning, with growing concern and intensity, that they were neglecting the competitive nature of the Cold War and losing public and international support along the way. Brown increasingly sided with Brzezinski.¹⁰⁷ The period also saw the further deterioration in many of the trends that Huntington had already identified in the net assessment — growing Soviet military buildup and geopolitical adventurism, embodied by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — and a crisis and subsequently a series of debacles in Iran.

104 “Presidential Directive/NSC-18, U.S. National Security Strategy,” 1–2. Nearly two pages from the ensuing military strategy part of the document are still redacted — they appear to address U.S. military strategy in Europe, among other issues.

105 Brzezinski noted in his memoirs that “[t]he interagency debate over the PD-18 draft revealed a sharp dispute within the Administration about the implications of PRM-10.” “One side,” Brzezinski stated, “preferred to limit our strategic forces to an assured destruction capability and to consider reducing our forces in Europe and Korea. The Indian Ocean-Persian Gulf region was to be addressed through arms control efforts with the Soviets.” Brzezinski continued that the “other side, on which I found myself, pointed to the momentum and character of Soviet military programs, the vulnerability of the oil-rich region around the Persian Gulf, and the growing Soviet projection of power” in regions around the world. Brzezinski noted that the resultant national security strategy reflected a series of compromises, although it also gave him “additional arguments” on various U.S.-Soviet issues. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 177–78.

106 Keefer, *Harold Brown*, 135–37; and Auten, *Carter’s Conversion*, 162–68.

107 Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 13, 29–31, 42–48, 177–78. Indicative of the ongoing battles were: an extraordinary memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter on Feb. 9, 1978, in which Brzezinski warned of negative Cold War trends in Western Europe and in the Third World and stated that “[t]he cumulative effect of these trends could be very serious internationally and then domestically,” and that “[b]y the fall we could be under attack for having presided over a grave deterioration in the U.S. global position,” (“Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski to President Carter,” Feb. 9, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, I*, Document 68, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d68>); and a letter from Vance to Carter on May 29, 1978, setting out his own views and expressing clear frustration with Brzezinski’s headline public and internal positions and declarations (“Letter from Secretary of State Vance to President Carter,” May 29, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, I*, Document 82, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d82>).

The last two years of Carter's term saw the United States swerve toward a more combative posture in the Cold War, featuring increased defense budgets, aid to the Afghan resistance, and the announcement of the Carter Doctrine aimed at heading off Soviet advances toward the Middle East.¹⁰⁸ In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter famously declared, "My opinion of the Russians has changed most [*more*] drastically in the last week than even the previous two and one-half years before that."¹⁰⁹

One of the tragedies of the Carter years was that an appropriately balanced, consistent, competition-oriented approach toward the Cold War could have guided the administration from the start. That would have only required following through on analytical work — and the competitive implications that flowed from it — that had already been done, and prioritizing it in the written national security strategy document, even if that had meant apprehending, forcing, and resolving some intra-administration disputes at the front end.

Strategic Planning Under Reagan

Perhaps no administration's national security strategic planning has been as underappreciated as that of the Reagan administration, although it got off to a late start. Ronald Reagan, wary of the tensions between the White House and the cabinet departments that had characterized U.S. foreign and defense policy under Nixon and Carter, had initially downgraded the role of national security adviser. That experiment was short-lived and has not been repeated since. Secretary of State Alexander Haig clashed constantly with the White House and other cabinet secretaries and agency heads on both substance and process. Reagan's national security ad-

viser was unable to coordinate the interagency process and establish guidance with any effectiveness. At the end of his first year, Reagan replaced his national security adviser, restored the role to its central coordinating function, and within six months also replaced Haig with George Shultz.¹¹⁰

At Reagan's direction, the new national security adviser, William Clark, and his deputy, Robert "Bud" McFarlane, immediately established a rigorous strategic planning process. Reagan perceived not just that the Soviet Union was overstretched but also that its internal system was vulnerable economically and technologically. He emphasized that the United States could and should exploit those vulnerabilities and pursue a competitive strategy that took the initiative and played to U.S. strengths. Clark and McFarlane intended that the strategic planning process should "reduc[e] to careful writing" the president's views and set out a comprehensive strategic framework to guide the prioritization and execution of the administration's approach.¹¹¹

Reagan signed a directive instructing his administration to develop an overarching strategic framework. The first step was to produce an extended study paper that identified fundamental U.S. national security objectives and set out a strategic rationale and agenda to guide all aspects of U.S. national security policy. The second was to incorporate the findings of the study in a single national security strategy directive.¹¹² The extended study was conducted by an interagency group, but it was chaired and directed by Clark's White House staff. Reagan played an active role in the process, reviewing and commenting on draft segments and sometimes, Clark later noted, sending them "back to the drawing board."¹¹³

The review process resulted in a top secret, 87-

108 Odom, who served on Brzezinski's staff as Carter's military assistant and had worked closely with Huntington on the net assessment, later stated that in 1977 and in 1978 the State Department in particular, and sometimes the Defense Department, "launched vigorously off in other policy directions than PRM 10 seemed to justify," and that were, in Odom's eyes, "self-defeating" in light of the findings and implications of the net assessment. For the ensuing two years, "based on the kind of analyses we had done in PRM 10, we [Brzezinski and his White House staff] had to work slowly to try to bring the realities to the eyes of the President, the eyes of the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and make them realize that we had to tackle some of these policies from very fundamentally different directions." "[T]here was a lot of tension," Odom said. "We wouldn't have had a case without the earlier analysis." Miller Center, "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski," 34–35, 39. Odom said that he had tried "to understand the differences of view that beset us in the Carter Administration," and that it eventually seemed to him that "we split over whether or not the Soviet Union was a status quo power." Brzezinski and he thought not, that "[t]he power balance had shifted; if anything, the competition was going to be tougher; the possibility of maintaining the post-World War II international order essentially unaltered was going to be a much larger, more challenging task," whereas others "seemed to believe that the U.S.S.R. was becoming benign and status quo, and accepting the international order." Miller Center, "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski," 56. Auten, in *Carter's Conversion*, and Keefer, in *Harold Brown*, discuss the administration's policy shifts over the four years in detail, as does Brzezinski in his memoirs, *Power and Principle*.

109 See Carter's interview with Frank Reynolds at ABC News, in "Editorial Note," Dec. 31, 1979, *FRUS, 1977-1980, I*, Document 133, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d133>.

110 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 42–47, 60–64.

111 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 1–80. The Clark quote is from an interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2001.

112 "National Security Study Directive 1-82, U.S. National Security Strategy," The White House, Feb. 5, 1982, from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nssds/nssd1-82.pdf>.

113 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 61–70.

page study paper, titled “U.S. National Security Strategy.”¹¹⁴ The study was divided into three parts. The first section provided an analysis of the nature of the U.S.-Soviet competition and the international environment and a statement of U.S. objectives. The second section directed that those objectives had to be attained through an “interlocking” set of diplomatic, information, politico-economic, and military strategies. And the final section set out in detail a military strategy in pursuit of the administration’s objectives.¹¹⁵

The study paper focused on identifying the threats posed by the Soviet Union and the relative U.S. and Soviet strengths and weaknesses. It was ruthless in specifying and prioritizing U.S. policy approaches that sought to exploit America’s strengths in peaceful competition over the long haul. For example, the military strategy component of the study noted that the Soviets “face severe economic problems” and “a bleak economic outlook” and that “[I]iving standards in the USSR will probably stagnate owing to the growing defense burden and inefficient investment practices. As Soviet citizens perceive a decline in the quality of life, productivity growth will also decline,” forcing Moscow to “make difficult choices among priorities.” “[I]t will become increasingly difficult for the Soviets to sustain their military buildup as their economic growth slows.”¹¹⁶ Noting “continuing [Soviet] difficulties in introducing new technology,” and also the need for a sustainable U.S. military force and budget, the paper emphasized exploiting “our national genius for technological innovation and industrial efficiency, and in our alliances.”¹¹⁷ A principal theme of the study was that perceived advantages in various specific spheres of the Cold War — military, economic, technological, ideological — translated into expanded influence and freedom of action in the overall U.S.-Soviet competition. Thus, it underscored the need for America to seek and exploit opportunities to bolster its standing in those areas that most worked to its strengths, while shoring up relative weaknesses

where it could.

The underlying analysis in the study established a foundation for the stated U.S. national security objectives. Those were forward-leaning and aimed at Soviet vulnerabilities. One of them was:

To foster, if possible in concert with our allies, restraint in Soviet military spending, discourage Soviet adventurism, and weaken the Soviet alliance system by forcing the USSR to bear the brunt of its economic shortcomings, and to encourage long-term liberalizing and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and allied countries.¹¹⁸

The National Security Council took up the study paper for consideration and discussion. Clark later noted that the objective of pressuring the internal Soviet system “didn’t have a lot of support” from State Department officials, including Haig — who was about to be supplanted by Shultz in any event — but the president and other senior officials strongly supported it. It stayed in the document amid the debates within the National Security Council.¹¹⁹

Reagan approved the study in full and formally adopted it as the foundation of foreign and defense policy in a top secret directive.¹²⁰ That national security strategy directive stated in the presidential first person that “I have carefully reviewed the NSSD 1-82 study in its component parts, considered the final recommendations of the National Security Council, and direct that the study serve as guidance for U.S. National Security Strategy.”¹²¹ The document listed the “global objectives” outlined in the study, summarized the rest of the study, and included the study in its entirety as an attachment.¹²² The national security strategy directive itself made clear that it was the beginning, not the end, of the administration’s strategic planning. Additional classified strategies on specific issues and regions were to follow.¹²³

Clark then delivered what was for him a rare

114 “U.S. National Security Strategy,” Study Paper, April 1982, Records Declassified and Released by the National Security Council, Series III., Related Documents, Subseries B, System II, Box 4, 90283 (NSDD 32), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

115 “U.S. National Security Strategy,” Study Paper.

116 “U.S. National Security Strategy,” Study Paper, 2, 9, 13.

117 “U.S. National Security Strategy,” Study Paper, 73.

118 “U.S. National Security Strategy,” Study Paper, 5.

119 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 68. The Clark quote is from an interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2001.

120 “National Security Decision Directive 32, U.S. National Security Strategy,” The White House, May 20, 1982, from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd32.pdf>.

121 “National Security Decision Directive 32,” 1.

122 “National Security Decision Directive 32,” 1–8.

123 “National Security Decision Directive 32.”

speech. He described in broad terms that the administration had undertaken a process to “review the results of [the] first year with decisions often being made at the departmental level, to see where we were, to make sure our various policies were consistent, and to set the course for the future” by a “well-thought through and integrated strategy.” Unsurprisingly, Clark did not spell out all of the specific objectives in the national security strategy. But he did note that the administration would be prepared “to respond vigorously to opportunities as they arise and to create opportunities where they have not existed before.” And, echoing the president’s rhetoric while capturing the direction of the strategy, Clark emphasized “our fondest hope that with an active yet prudent national security policy, we might one day convince the leadership of the Soviet Union to turn their attention inward, to seek the legitimacy that only comes from the consent of the governed, and thus to address the hopes and dreams of their own people.”¹²⁴

The national security strategy codified a single, unifying framework. It established objectives that the United States would work peacefully to reverse the spread of Soviet influence and to pressure the Soviet system so as to leave internal reform as the Soviet leaders’ best, or only, option. It also catalyzed a period of intensive strategic planning within the Reagan administration across a range of issues: Over the ensuing year, the administration issued 75 national security directives, many of them establishing follow-on regional and functional strategies.¹²⁵

One of these strategies was specifically on America’s policy toward the Soviet Union, building upon the premises and guidance set out in the national security strategy study and directive. The White House stated that the development of that strategy directive was to “proceed on the premise that Soviet international behavior is determined not only by the external environment but also by political, economic, and social and ideological features of the Soviet system itself.”¹²⁶ The White House mandated that the review process that would develop the

directive should encompass, among other things, the likelihood of changes in the Soviet system, the sources of tensions and strains within that system, as well as the bases for continuity, and how “the United States, its Allies and other mobilizable forces” could “influence the evolution of Soviet policies and the Soviet regime in directions favorable to our interests.”¹²⁷

While the State Department chaired the interagency group that produced the resultant strategy directive, Clark directed the overall process. The strategy directive itself was largely drafted by Richard Pipes, the Harvard historian of Russian and Soviet history, then serving Reagan and Clark as senior director for Soviet and European affairs.¹²⁸

The strategy directive on U.S. relations with the Soviet Union flowed from the prior national security strategy. The directive stated that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union would consist of three elements. The first was to “contain and over time reverse Soviet expansionism by competing effectively on a sustained basis with the Soviet Union in all international arenas—particularly in the overall military balance and in geographical regions of priority concern to the United States.”¹²⁹ The second was:

To promote, within the narrow limits available to us, the process of change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the privileged ruling elite is gradually reduced. The U.S. recognizes that Soviet aggressiveness has deep roots in the internal system, and that relations with the USSR should therefore take into account whether or not they help to strengthen this system and its capacity to engage in aggression.¹³⁰

The third was to “engage the Soviet Union in negotiations to attempt to reach agreements which protect and enhance U.S. interests and which are consistent with the principle of strict reciprocity and mutual interest.”¹³¹

124 Clark, “National Security Strategy,” address before the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, May 21, 1982, in *American Foreign Policy Current Documents, 1982* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 1985), 89–91, 93.

125 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 70.

126 “National Security Study Directive 11-82, U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union,” The White House, Aug. 21, 1982, 1, from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nssds/nssd11-82.pdf>.

127 “National Security Study Directive 11-82, U.S. Policy Toward the Soviet Union,” 1–3.

128 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 76–80.

129 “National Security Decision Directive 75, U.S. Relations with the USSR,” [hereafter NSDD 75] The White House, Jan. 7, 1983, 1, from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nssds/nssdd75.pdf>.

130 “NSDD 75,” 1.

131 “NSDD 75,” 1.

The strategy directive emphasized that “[i]mplementation of U.S. policy must focus on shaping the environment in which Soviet decisions are made both in a wide variety of functional and geopolitical arenas and in the U.S.-Soviet bilateral relationship.”¹³² It laid out the means by which the United States would seek to influence the factors that could impel Soviet policy toward directions more favorable to U.S. interests. It established objectives across U.S. military strategy, economic policy, political action, geopolitical strategy, and bilateral relations.¹³³ For example, it stipulated that the United States would pursue “a major ideological political offensive, which, together with other efforts, will be designed to bring about evolutionary change of the Soviet system.”¹³⁴ The strategy directive established some specific steps to be taken toward each objective, but did not attempt to catalogue them.

The strategy directive, as assertive as it was, was intended to be sustainable. It stated that the “interrelated tasks of containing and reversing Soviet expansion and promoting evolutionary change within the Soviet Union itself cannot be accomplished quickly,” and that the policy it set forth “is one for the long haul.”¹³⁵

While Pipes was the primary drafter of the strategy toward the Soviet Union, the interagency nature of its development meant that the various departments and agencies weighed in at the front end, and thus bought into and were constrained by the outcome. The State Department, for example, sought to mitigate the objective of putting pressure on the internal Soviet system, succeeding in inserting the phrase “within the narrow limits available to us” in the block quote above. But it did not attempt to turn away from that objective overall, which in any event had been set in the earlier national security strategy and was accepted — even underscored — by Reagan and the rest of the National Security Council. The final draft of the directive met with little objection when the council took up it up for consideration. Reagan approved it as a formal, secret directive to guide U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union.¹³⁶

Through the formal strategic planning process that had produced the national security strategy

and the ensuing follow-on strategies, Reagan and his National Security Council had collectively allowed themselves flexibility in pursuing specific foreign and defense policies, but left little doubt about the premises and objectives that would guide those policies, which were both coherent and particularly assertive.

McFarlane, who had played an important role in coordinating the strategic planning process as Clark’s deputy and then succeeded him as Reagan’s national security adviser, later stated: “We had a policy, written down, that said, ‘I am the president and I want to challenge the Soviet Union politically, economically, and militarily.’ That does tend to have an effect on the Cabinet and on subordinates, as it should.” McFarlane added that “the development of programs from that leitmotif, included programs on arms control and human rights and regional disagreements ... and bilateral issues.” All of those, McFarlane continued, “contained—well, ‘aggressive’ has a legal connotation to it I don’t intend, but an enthusiastic, energetic, competitive content. Not a placid, passive content, but competitive. For example, the economic policies were specifically designed to weaken the Soviet economy and to do so in any way we could think of within legal and moral bounds.” McFarlane concluded: “We established a policy framework that directed us to explore ways to compete more energetically.”¹³⁷

Like the Eisenhower administration, the Reagan administration also reassessed and refined its national security strategy over time. In September 1986, for example, a year and a half after Gorbachev had taken power in the Soviet Union and nearly a year after Reagan and Gorbachev had met at the Geneva summit, the Reagan administration updated its classified national security strategy.¹³⁸ The updated strategy noted that the “Gorbachev leadership is more vigorous and dynamic than its predecessors” and that “the potential now exists for more creative and energized Soviet foreign policies inimical to U.S. interests.”¹³⁹ It retained the same basic objectives as the earlier version.¹⁴⁰ The strategy remained intensely assertive and consistent with the earlier version in its aims: “the greatest

132 "NSDD 75," 2.

133 "NSDD 75," 2–9.

134 "NSDD 75," 8.

135 "NSDD 75," 6, 8.

136 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 78–80.

137 Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 88–89, 126–29. The McFarlane quotes are from an interview with the author, Aug. 22, 2000.

138 "National Security Decision Directive 238, Basic National Security Strategy," [hereafter NSDD 238] Sept. 2, 1986, from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd238.pdf>.

139 NSDD 238, 3.

140 NSDD 238, 5–6.

threat to the Soviet system, in which the State controls the destiny of the individual, is the concept of freedom itself," it stated, and "[w]hile we will seek and experience periods of cooperation with Soviet leadership, there will be no change in the fundamentally competitive nature of our relationship unless and until a change occurs in the nature of the Soviet system."¹⁴¹ Again, the strategy focused on exploiting comparative U.S. advantages in high technology to press U.S. strengths, channel the military and economic competition into areas that favored the United States and could prove sustainable, and to undermine the Soviets at their weakest points and force them toward options — reducing Soviet defense spending and pursuing internal change — in line with U.S. interests. This time, the strategy was aided by the Reagan administration's pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative missile defense research and development program, announced in 1983, which Reagan knew to be a source of enormous military, technological, and economic anxiety and concern for Gorbachev.¹⁴² The United States, the document noted, "must pursue strategies for competition which emphasize our comparative advantages in these areas."¹⁴³

The updated Reagan strategy is also noteworthy for its concise statement of the imperative to avoid direct U.S. military engagements that could result in a quagmire and dissipate U.S. strength:

In a conflict not involving the Soviet Union, the United States will rely primarily on indigenous forces to protect their own interests. Commitment of U.S. combat forces will be made only when other means are not considered viable. Such commitment is appropriate only if political objectives are established, our political will is clear, and appropriate military capabilities are available. If U.S. combat forces are committed, the United States will seek to limit the scope of the conflict, avoid involvement of the Soviet

Union, and ensure that U.S. objectives are met as quickly as possible.¹⁴⁴

Strategic Planning Under George H. W. Bush

Brent Scowcroft, George H. W. Bush's national security adviser, later expressed disappointment with the efforts at strategic planning that he had led in 1989, the administration's first year.¹⁴⁵ In some respects, his assessment was too modest, because despite the results of the strategic planning process being underwhelming, the process itself did produce useful effects.

With Bush's agreement, Scowcroft conducted an interagency review of policy that was intended to generate new strategies to underpin the administration's foreign and defense policies. Scowcroft was motivated, in part, by a desire to ensure that the Bush team considered and shaped its own policies, rather than simply continuing without reappraisal the approaches of the Reagan administration.¹⁴⁶ The White House accordingly requested a series of formal interagency studies, including reviews of U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe, and America's policy toward the Persian Gulf.¹⁴⁷

The classified directives requesting the studies were themselves insightful and probing. The secret four-page document directing the review of U.S.-Soviet relations noted the potential for enormous positive alterations in the relationship, given changes occurring within the Soviet Union and shifts in its control over Soviet satellites. But it also expressed wariness: "the USSR remains an adversary with awesome military power whose interests conflict in important ways with our own. The Soviet Union already presents a new and complicated political challenge to us in Europe and elsewhere."¹⁴⁸ The directive sought a study of Soviet policy objectives, assessments of the Soviet internal situation and foreign and military policies, and a review of the sources of U.S. leverage over the Soviet Union

141 NSDD 238, 4, 5.

142 NSDD 238, 7; and Lettow, *Ronald Reagan*, 122–248.

143 NSDD 238, 7, 9.

144 NSDD 238, 16.

145 Brent Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012; and George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books 1999), 37–41.

146 Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 37–41.

147 See "National Security Review-3, Comprehensive Review of US-Soviet Relations," [hereafter "NSR-3"] The White House, Feb. 15, 1989, from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsr/nsr3.pdf>; "National Security Review-4, Comprehensive Review of US-East European Relations," The White House, Feb. 15, 1989, from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsr/nsr4.pdf>; "National Security Review-5, Comprehensive Review of US-West European Relations," The White House, Feb. 15, 1989, from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsr/nsr5.pdf>; and "National Security Review-10, U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf," The White House, Feb. 22, 1989, from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsr/nsr10.pdf>.

148 NSR-3, 1. In the presidential first person, Bush continued: "My own sense is that the Soviet challenge may be even greater than before because it is more varied."

and potential policy alternatives newly available to the United States.¹⁴⁹

The administration had announced in broad terms that it was pursuing a policy review and analysis, creating public interest in the classified, internal process. That was especially so given the quickening pace of events unfolding in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union, including the loosening grip of communist control over Warsaw Pact countries, the potential perils of possible responses from Moscow and the satellite governments, and the enormous geopolitical ramifications for the United States.¹⁵⁰

The review process was hampered from the start by the fact that it occurred before the administration was sufficiently staffed with its own new appointees. The Defense Department, for example, did not have a confirmed secretary in place for two months, so the initial taskings for the reviews were handled without the attention and leadership from the top that they might otherwise have received. Nor did other departments evidently give the studies the priority that Scowcroft had intended.¹⁵¹ In all events, Scowcroft later characterized the reviews that resulted from the interagency process as unimaginative, effectively reiterating past approaches, and he expressed some regret that he had not delved into and directed how and by whom they were prepared. Especially disappointed with the proposed strategy on U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, Scowcroft called for a re-do, turning the assignment over to his White House staff adviser for Soviet affairs, Condoleezza Rice, who then drafted what became the administration's strategy directive on Soviet policy.¹⁵²

Despite these disappointments, the interagency review process did ultimately contribute to the administration's national security successes. In con-

sidering the studies, Bush and his National Security Council engaged in their own discussions of both strategic direction and specific policy courses, particularly on Eastern Europe and the future of Europe as a whole. That process was itself fruitful, resulting in specific ideas from Scowcroft and others that led to proposals and approaches that Bush launched that year. It demonstrated, for Bush and Scowcroft and their colleagues on the National Security Council, the importance of regularly discussing the development of policy direction among themselves. It also helped establish the "Core Group" of principals whose work together, guided by the president and coordinated by Scowcroft, as they brought the Cold War to a successful and peaceful end has rightly earned them admiration and esteem.¹⁵³

Both Bush and Scowcroft revered and consciously emulated Eisenhower. In announcing his first bid for president, in 1979, Bush stated that he adhered to "the principles of Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower," and even quoted Eisenhower directly: "There is in world affairs a steady course to be followed between an assertion of strength that is truculent and a confession of helplessness that is cowardly."¹⁵⁴ Bush and Scowcroft's national security planning was less rigorous and systematic than Eisenhower's. Yet, like Eisenhower, they possessed strategic vision and steadily implemented it. One of the ironies of Bush's presidency was and remains the criticism that he lacked an overarching vision. To the contrary, he deserves to be remembered as one of the most effective strategists among presidents.

Bush's worldview was based on the harsh lessons of World War II, as he highlighted in his foreign-policy memoirs.¹⁵⁵ Having been shot down over the Pacific at age 20, and having lost his crew-

149 NSR-3, 2–4.

150 Don Oberdorfer, *From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1991*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 332–34, 347, 349.

151 Senior Bush administration Defense Department official, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012; and Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012.

152 Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 40–43, 53; "Transcript, Interview with Brent Scowcroft," Nov. 12–13, 1999, George H. W. Bush Oral History Project, University of Virginia Miller Center, 40, 51, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_1999_1112_scowcroft.pdf; James A. Baker, III, with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 68–70 (Baker noted that "much of the review was run by Reagan administration holdovers" and that "we asked the bureaucracy itself to produce the papers," which "resulted in least-common-denominator thinking"; "what we received was mush."). On what became the administration's formal policy toward the Soviet Union, see "National Security Directive 23, United States Relations with the Soviet Union," The White House, Sept. 22, 1989, from the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd23.pdf>. See also Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, orig. published 1995), 20–31.

153 Miller Center, "Transcript, Interview with Brent Scowcroft," 31–33; Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012; and Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 40–56.

154 Bush quoted (including his quotation of Eisenhower) in Jon Meacham, *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush* (New York: Random House, 2015), 216–17. See also Paul Lettow and Kori Schake, "The Vision Thing: George H. W. Bush Saw How to Preserve American Strength at a Perilous Time," *National Review* 70, no. 24 (December 31, 2018), 32–34.

155 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 60–61.



BUSH AND SCOWCROFT'S

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mates, he knew better than most that things can and do go dangerously wrong when America abandons a leadership role, or when its foreign policy is not guided by clear-eyed purpose — as with the disastrous American policies of the interwar years. Faced with convulsions in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself, and then in the Middle East with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Bush played the long game. Reminiscent of Eisenhower, he constantly, even ruthlessly, worked to preserve America's geopolitical position and strength for the long haul, so that it could serve as a bulwark against the worst possibilities of a brutal and potentially chaotic world.¹⁵⁶

Robert D. Kaplan has astutely summarized Bush's worldview: "Tragedy is avoided by thinking tragically."¹⁵⁷ For Bush, that meant, among other things, insisting on a unified Germany remaining in NATO, and the United States strengthening, not abandoning or curtailing, its position as the preeminent power in European affairs. Bush thereby hoped to reduce the possibility of future intra-European conflict and to deter other powers from attempting to dominate or destabilize the continent.¹⁵⁸ As he put it in a diary entry, the United States had "a disproportionate role for stability;" and he had "to look after the U.S. interest in all of this without reverting to a kind of isolationistic or stupid peace-nik view on where we stand in the world."¹⁵⁹ In the Middle East, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 threatened the cardinal U.S. geopolitical principle of avoiding the destabilization or dominance by a hostile power of that region — as with East Asia and Europe — and so he led a coalition to combat and reverse it. That, in turn, served as precedent for what Bush and Scowcroft saw as a vision for the post-Cold War

world in which the United States played the leading role, in which sovereign states adhered to basic rules, and in which structures of power favorable to America could encourage international cooperation to enforce those rules when necessary.¹⁶⁰

That was their vision for the "new world order." The inartful phrase was used by Bush in a speech in the lead-up to the Gulf War, and was maligned from the start.¹⁶¹ But as Scowcroft later noted, and the historian Jeffrey Engel and Kaplan have rightly emphasized, that slogan has come to mean nearly the opposite of what Bush and Scowcroft had intended. Bush and Scowcroft were not Wilsonian, nor did they believe in multilateralism for its own sake. They knew that the world was a rough and unforgiving place, and that the United States needed to sustain its strength and leadership and geopolitical standing over the long haul.¹⁶² Engel quotes Scowcroft as saying: "The world could be a better place. But don't get carried away."¹⁶³

As noted earlier, the current statutory requirement for an unclassified annual strategy was enacted in 1986, as part of the broader Goldwater-Nichols package of legislative national security reforms. In addition to their classified, internal national security strategy planning described above, the Reagan and Bush administrations also issued unclassified national security strategies almost every year starting in 1987. The Bush administration's three strategy documents were especially notable. They started to lay conceptual foundations for the post-Cold War world that were in line with Bush's and Scowcroft's views: optimistic but wary, and insistent upon maintaining strong alliances underpinned by American hard power over the long haul. Those iterations of the national security strategies were

156 Lettow and Schake, "The Vision Thing," 32–34; Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), 5–10.

157 Robert D. Kaplan, "Obama Is No George H. W. Bush," *The National Interest*, March 5, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/obama-no-george-h-w-bush-15406>.

158 See Engel, *When the World Seemed New*; Lettow and Schake, "The Vision Thing," 32–34; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*; and Kaplan, "Obama Is No George H. W. Bush," *The National Interest*.

159 Bush diary entry, Feb. 24, 1990, in George H. W. Bush, *All the Best: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 460–61.

160 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399–400. See also Engel, *When the World Seemed New*; Lettow and Schake, "The Vision Thing"; Kaplan, "Obama Is No George H. W. Bush."

161 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 399–400. For Bush's speech, see "September 11, 1990: Address Before a Joint Session of Congress," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress>.

162 Miller Center, "Transcript, Interview with Brent Scowcroft," 51–52 ("So as it became clear that there was a new world emerging, I was looking for a cute way to encapsulate and show that we were thinking ahead, that we were out in front. You know, this certainly was not the first time it was used, to be sure, but no, I did not know that it had a Wilsonian connotation, or didn't think of it at the time. ... [I]t wasn't a vision of a whole world. We didn't think it was going to be a peaceful world. We thought it was going to be a messy world."). Scowcroft added that the concept had emerged from discussions he had with Bush "about what the future might look like, and how we ought to act to steer the future in directions that would be appropriate to the United States. It's all fuzzy other than the New World Order, which I wish I had never thought of. ... [B]ecause it's been used for all kinds of pernicious things, mostly turning the United States over to the U.N." "You know, if you come from Utah like I do," Scowcroft noted wryly, "where every helicopter you hear overhead at night is the U.N., you sort of have second thoughts." Miller Center, "Transcript, Interview with Brent Scowcroft," 52. See also Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 415–39, 480; Kaplan, "Obama Is No George H. W. Bush"; and Lettow and Schake, "The Vision Thing," 32–34.

163 Scowcroft quoted in Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 10, 480.

relatively heavy on geopolitics — on ensuring an active, sustained, and global American presence, and on preventing domination or destabilization of regions critical to U.S. interests by current or potential future rivals.¹⁶⁴

But Bush and Scowcroft never did set out their strategic principles in a comprehensive way or fully and effectively explicate them publicly. In some ways, they were like Eisenhower, just without the paper. They were guided by basic principles and led a group of senior officials who hashed out their differences among themselves, sometimes vigorously but as a team, as they pursued those basic principles. Perhaps they would have been well served by getting that basic strategic direction on paper. It certainly would help us more clearly understand and learn from their example today. For his part, Scowcroft — at least as of 2012, when this author interviewed him — enthusiastically supported the mission of examining past strategic planning efforts, how we might learn from them, and the importance of developing sound and sustainable strategy.¹⁶⁵

Strategic Planning in the Post-Cold War Era: Clinton, Bush, and Obama

The Bill Clinton administration continued to issue unclassified national security strategies most years, before the George W. Bush administration commenced the current tradition of issuing them once every four-year presidential term.¹⁶⁶ Those efforts by the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama administrations had their purpose. They were extended public statements meant to emphasize critical themes and priorities of each administration for an audience that included Congress and the public, as well as friend and foe abroad.

In some respects, the Nixon administration's annual foreign policy messages served as early forerunners for those documents, which were often written with care and even eloquence. Take, for example,

the Bush administration's focus on its freedom agenda in 2006 or the Obama administration's underscoring of climate change and other transnational issues and threats.¹⁶⁷ Like Nixon's messages, they sometimes foreshadowed policy developments, as with the Bush administration's 2002 national security strategy, written in the wake of the al-Qaeda attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and in advance of the war in Iraq. It declared that "[w]e must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends. ... To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively."¹⁶⁸

The post-Cold War U.S. national security strategies operated more as speeches than as strategies. But rhetoric is not strategy, and mistaking the former for the latter is dangerous. Rhetoric is given to categorical statement and overreach that sweeps away analysis, prioritization, or context. It is best deployed as a tool in the implementation of a strategy. For the most part, the post-Cold War era national security strategies were disconnected from the kind of rigorous, classified national security strategic planning often conducted by presidential administrations during the Cold War.

A prerequisite for the best of those Cold War planning efforts was a searching analysis to try to understand *other* international actors. U.S. strategists of earlier eras understood well that they were maneuvering on a playing field with other important actors — some friendly, some not — that were operating with motives, interests, and objectives of their own. Attempting to understand those motives, interests, and objectives with dispassion and rigor was foundational for crafting U.S. strategies. Those strategies, in turn, aimed to shape the environment in which those actors made decisions.

For much of the post-Cold War era, America's efforts to bring about the country's best wishes have seemed not to have had the desired effect. Until re-

164 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, March 1990, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1990.pdf?ver=x5cwOOezOoak2BjhXekM-Q==>; *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, August 1991, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1991.pdf?ver=3slpLiQwmknO-RplyPeAHw==>; and *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, January 1993, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1993.pdf?ver=Dulx2wRKDaQ-ZrswRPRX9g==>.

165 Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012.

166 The Clinton administration's annual national security strategies appear to be the only such documents that explicitly acknowledged that they were issued in compliance with the requirements of the statute.

167 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, March 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>; *National Security Strategy*, The White House, May 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf; and *National Security Strategy*, The White House, February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf. Alan G. Stolberg, *How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents*, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, October 2012, xi, 14, 70–98, 112, provides a history of the processes by which the 2002, 2006, and 2010 national security strategies were developed.

168 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, 14–15, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>. See Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), 152–56, 166–72, 291; and Stolberg, "How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents," 73–81.

cently, national security strategies in this era have often been devoid of a clear-eyed analysis of the motives and capabilities of other important international actors.¹⁶⁹

One of the most fundamental lessons from America's Cold War-era national security strategy is one of the simplest, albeit the most underappreciated: America ought to examine — with as much insight and intellectual honesty as it can — what its principal geopolitical rivals are up to, why, what kind of challenges that poses to the United States, and what might be done about it, other than resorting to conflict or inaction.

That kind of clear-eyed foundational analysis of other actors is conspicuous by its absence from many of the national security strategies that have been produced over the last few decades. By way of illustration, the Clinton administration's national security strategy from 2000 emphasized that “[i]ntegrating the [People's Republic of China] more fully into the global trading system is manifestly in our national interest.” It stated that the administration's trade and economic policies “will create jobs and opportunities for Americans through the opening of Chinese markets, promote economic reform in China, and enhance the understanding of the Chinese people of the rule of law in the development of their domestic civil society in compliance with international obligations,” and that the United States was accordingly working “to complete the multilateral negotiation of China's WTO accession,” which “offer[s] the best hope of internal reform” within China.¹⁷⁰

Yet, there is now a considerable debate on several points: whether the United States should have so purposely facilitated the drastic expansion of communist-led China's comprehensive power through the World Trade Organization decision and other choices; the soundness of the premises and assumptions that underlay that policy direction; and what

its likely or plausible implications and outcomes were for the United States and for the international system it had done so much to build and lead.¹⁷¹ These fundamental issues could have been thought through at the time, before the United States pursued such a critical policy direction that persisted over decades. And they should have been — systematically, in secret, with rigor, and with a dose of both hardheadedness and intellectual humility that characterized, say, the Eisenhower administration, which went out of its way to test its own assumptions and consider alternative strategies.

The same applies to the Bush administration's 2002 national security strategy, which sought to rally other major powers around a counterterrorism focus and noted the need to hedge against potential threats if China and Russia turned in hostile directions, but it also noted that “the world's great powers” are “increasingly united by common values,” and that “recent developments have encouraged our hope that a truly global consensus about basic principles is taking shape.”¹⁷² It focused on expanding trade and economic cooperation with China, which “will advance openness and rule of law in China,” and on deepening its global role, and noted that China “has begun to take the road to political openness.”¹⁷³ The document also discerned “a critical change in Russian thinking that promises to lead to productive, long-term relations with the Euro-Atlantic community and the United States.”¹⁷⁴ The view may have looked different from Beijing or Moscow.

To his credit, the national security adviser in George W. Bush's second term, Stephen Hadley, who had been deputy in the first term, recognized the importance of strategic planning. He took steps to rebuild both a culture of planning and a capacity for it, with the support of the president.

The initiation and early years of the war in Iraq had suffered from a lack of adequate strategic

169 As Kissinger told the scholar-practitioners Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier regarding U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War: “Every new administration tries to develop a new strategy. The problem is that they never start with an analysis of what the world is, but what they think it should be.” Kissinger quoted in Chollet and Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 71.

170 *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age*, The White House, December 2000, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2000.pdf>.

171 See Campbell and Ratner, “The China Reckoning.” They wrote that contrary to American policymakers' assumptions and expectations, “China has instead pursued its own course, belying a range of American expectations in the process. That reality warrants a clear-eyed rethinking of the United States' approach to China. ... [B]uilding a stronger and more sustainable approach to, and relationship with, Beijing requires honesty about how many fundamental assumptions have turned out wrong.”

172 *National Security Strategy*, September 2002, Preface, ii, and 26.

173 *National Security Strategy*, September 2002, 27–28. The document stated that “[t]he events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally changed the context for relations between the United States and other main centers of global power, and opened vast, new opportunities.” See page 28.

174 *National Security Strategy*, September 2002, 26.

planning.¹⁷⁵ Hadley helped shepherd a thorough reassessment of strategy for the war in Iraq from the White House in 2006.¹⁷⁶

Bush and Hadley also took some institutional steps to lay a foundation for future national security strategic planning. They reestablished a directorate within the National Security Council staff for strategic planning,¹⁷⁷ of the kind that Brzezinski had created and Huntington had led. (Lord had earlier served essentially a similar role for Kissinger.) The initial leaders of that directorate, the scholar-practitioners Peter Feaver and William Inboden, played a significant role in the White House review that led to the Iraq “surge” and also spearheaded the drafting of the 2006 national security strategy.¹⁷⁸

Administrations since have preserved that strategic planning directorate on the White House staff, although its usage and effectiveness have varied. The Trump administration would elevate and expand it, as will be seen.

In 2008, Bush and Hadley, assisted by this author, also formally established an interagency national security policy planning committee, chaired by that White House strategic planning directorate and comprising all of the senior planning officials from throughout relevant departments and agencies. Those officials were specified in a presidential directive and charged in that directive with assisting the National Security Council and its principals with coordinating the preparation of strategic planning documents, analyzing and recommending policy alternatives, and contingency planning.¹⁷⁹ In essence, the Bush administration was rebuilding, or at least allowing for the future use of, something akin to Eisenhower’s Policy Planning Board.

Shortly after taking office, the Obama administration engaged in a classified process aimed at identifying and prioritizing national security threats, challenges, and opportunities in what was called a national security priorities review. It was

conceived by Barry Pavel, the defense lead on the National Security Council staff who had started in the fall of 2008 under Bush and remained under Obama. An important drafter for the project was Ben Rhodes, then the chief National Security Council speechwriter and later the deputy national security adviser, who captured Obama’s thinking and voice. Drafts of the document were discussed with representatives of departments and agencies and then provided to help guide them as they undertook their own strategic reviews in the administration’s first year, but the administration may not have had Obama formally sign off on it, at least at first, so that he would not be pinned down by it.¹⁸⁰ That document, the various departmental strategic reviews, and the policy speeches by Obama in Prague and Cairo and elsewhere formed the basis for the administration’s unclassified 2010 national security strategy.¹⁸¹

Strategic Planning Under Trump

In 2017, Trump’s then-national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, wanted to make sure that the administration had a written national security strategy that provided coherent policy direction. He brought on Nadia Schadlow as deputy assistant to the president for national security strategy. Schadlow oversaw a handful of directors within an elevated and expanded strategy directorate. Their principal task was to spearhead the development of the written national security strategy. McMaster, Schadlow, and others on the National Security Council staff believed that the United States was overdue for a national security strategy that focused on the challenges that the United States faced from China especially, as well as from Russia and other, more regional rivals such as Iran and North Korea. That approach served as the basis for the development of the national security strategy.¹⁸²

175 For different perspectives on how and why this was so, see Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 161–215; Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 4–7, 168–293; and Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2012, first published 2011), 316–30, 359–60, 413–541.

176 See Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 538–43, 544–46.

177 Stephen Hadley, interview with the author, 2012. Full disclosure: This author worked for Bush and Hadley in that strategic planning directorate from 2007 to 2009.

178 See Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 538–43, 544–46; and Stolberg, “How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents,” 70–73, 81–91.

179 “National Security Presidential Directive 60, Establishing a National Security Policy Planning Committee,” The White House, Aug. 28, 2008, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-60.pdf>.

180 Barry Pavel, interview with the author, April 26, 2021. See also Stolberg, “How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents,” 92–93.

181 Barry Pavel, interview with the author, April 26, 2021. The strategic planning directorate established by Hadley played a significant role in the 2010 national security strategy. Rhodes evidently helped draft it and coordinated directly with the president to ensure that it captured his interests, priorities, and voice. See Stolberg, “How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents,” 92–97. On the Prague and Cairo speeches, and on Obama’s rhetoric generally, see Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: Vintage, 2019, orig. pub. 2018), 41–42, 48–49, 51–61, 66–69.

182 Nadia Schadlow, interview with the author, Dec. 18, 2020.

As a foundation for understanding the nature of the threat posed by China and other great-power rivals to the United States, the White House team drew on work from inside and outside the U.S. government on America's great-power competitors and the nature of their challenge, including that of Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg.¹⁸³ McMaster and Schadow met directly with relevant cabinet secretaries and agency officials at the front end of the process, and established interagency working groups to provide input and analysis on particular issues during the development of the document. Specific departments or agencies within those working groups were tasked with preparing and presenting study papers for discussion or for follow-up input and analysis. The National Security Council staff drafted the actual national security strategy document and then sent it out for interagency review.¹⁸⁴ The effort involved the president, who signed the document and launched it publicly.¹⁸⁵

The document's drafters intentionally sought to set out the challenge to U.S. interests posed by China and other rivals, and the essential elements and objectives of a competitive U.S. strategy that would be compelling and resonant on a bipartisan basis and would lay the foundation for a long-term approach.¹⁸⁶ That sense was shared among strategic planners at the Defense Department, guided by Secretary James Mattis, who supported the development of the national security strategy along these lines, and who ensured that the Defense Department simultaneously prepared a classified national defense strategy, which would complement the national security strategy. Mattis was adamant that the national defense strategy would follow not long after the national security strategy, which it did.¹⁸⁷

The administration's national security strategy and national defense strategy kicked off a series of stra-

tegic planning documents from other departments and agencies and within the White House, which led to the development of a number of classified strategies on specific issues and regions.¹⁸⁸ Among them was the "U.S. Framework for the Indo-Pacific," a classified planning document from February 2018, shortly after the national security strategy and national defense strategy.¹⁸⁹ The administration declassified and released that framework document, with some redactions, days before Trump left office, noting that it "has served, for the last three years, as the Trump Administration's overarching strategic guidance for implementing" the national security strategy within the Indo-Pacific, and that it was being made public "to communicate to the American people and to our allies and partners America's enduring commitment" to the region.¹⁹⁰

Lessons Learned

Several lessons can be drawn from these examples of national security strategic planning to help guide the Biden administration and future administrations as they undertake their own planning processes. Chief among these lessons are:

Develop a comprehensive strategy

The Biden administration ought to develop a comprehensive national security strategy, for the reasons stated at the top of this article. Many of those responsible for national security strategic planning in administrations during the Cold War have agreed that it is just as essential now as it was then and that the government can and should discern and apply lessons from past efforts, even though the nature of the challenges and challenges to U.S. interests are different.¹⁹¹

183 See Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

184 Schadow, interview with the author, Dec. 18, 2020; and Elbridge Colby, interview with the author, Dec. 3, 2020.

185 Schadow, interview with the author, December 18, 2020; Colby, interview with the author, Dec. 3, 2020; and *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

186 Schadow, interview with the author, December 18, 2020.

187 Colby, interview with the author, Dec. 3, 2020; Schadow, interview with the author, December 18, 2020. The Defense Department released an unclassified summary of the national defense strategy. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, The Defense Department, January 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

188 Schadow, interview with the author, December 18, 2020; Colby, interview with the author, Dec. 3, 2020.

189 "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," The White House, February 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

190 "Statement from National Security Adviser Robert C. O'Brien," The White House, Jan. 12, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-national-security-advisor-robert-c-obrien-011221/>. For the full statement, see "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific," The White House, Jan. 5, 2021, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/O'Brien-Expanded-Statement.pdf>.

191 Senior Nixon administration national security official, discussion with the author, March 2012; Lord, interview with the author, 2012; Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012; and Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012. Also Nadia Schadow, interview with author, December 2020.

Make it classified

The strategic planning process that develops the overarching strategy should be rigorous and searching. By its nature, that involves information and analysis that is classified. The administration should aim to produce a classified national security strategy and then decide, with care and intention, what aspects it will make public and in what form, whether through an unclassified summary or through speeches or other statements.¹⁹²

The White House should lead

The process of developing the national security strategy has to be driven by the White House. The president has to give priority to it, and the national security adviser has to provide leadership, responsibility, and oversight. At the same time, the relevant departments and agencies ought to provide meaningful data, analysis, and input. That serves to inform the development of the overall strategy, to prevent or mitigate shortcomings in understanding or assumptions within the White House, and ultimately to increase the likelihood of buy-in to the ultimate strategy from senior leaders from the departments and agencies. The most essential elements of the strategy should be considered and debated by the president and his or her National Security Council. As illustrated multiple times during the Cold War, that process itself can be useful. The most senior officials, who will have to oversee the execution of the strategy, can thereby air out and resolve any fundamental differences among themselves regarding the assumptions, alternative possibilities, and most essential objectives of the strategy. If the National Security Council together cannot find agreement, then the president can consider the differences and make a clear decision on them. Either way, that process increases the likelihood of a common understanding, and unity of effort in execution, of the strategy.

Geopolitics matters, then, now, and always

The national security strategy should identify

and set out America's enduring interests, and the principal threats and challenges to them, including from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other state and nonstate actors. In doing so, the administration should remember the importance of geopolitics. Preventing the destabilization or domination of East Asia, Europe, or the Middle East by a power hostile to the United States is an enduring first principle of U.S. foreign policy. A related principle is that America should maintain access to lines of communication between and among those regions and more broadly to the sea, air, space, and cyber commons. Those principles have roots in the thinking of the best American strategists even before the Cold War, including, among others, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Nicholas Spykman.¹⁹³ They served as a continual thread throughout U.S. Cold War strategy, beginning with Kennan and Truman through the strategies of each of the Cold War presidents, and in George H. W. Bush's conceptualization of the post-Cold War world. We have learned through painful experience in the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st the importance of those geopolitical principles, which go to the heart of Americans' safety and their ability to thrive in the world.

There are, of course, other important interests that must be analyzed, many of them related to those cardinal geopolitical interests and some new and acute in today's technological and globalized context. They include the importance of sustaining U.S. influence over critical intergovernmental organizations and other international regulatory and standard-setting bodies. The current influence of China over the World Health Organization, and the ramifications of that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, is one of many warning signs in that regard. Other essential interests include preventing or withstanding the increasing ability of rivals to weaken America and its allies at home through propaganda or misinformation; manipulation of infrastructure or markets; or theft, manipulation, and disruption of data. The beginning of a strategic planning process is the time to think through the most essential U.S. interests, old and new, and the source and nature of the threats to those interests.

192 Brzezinski recommended, in aid of building congressional support, that an administration convene informal sessions with a small number of bipartisan congressional leaders to generate support for the premises and main objectives of its national security strategy. Brzezinski, interview with the author, July 7, 2012. Brzezinski's idea was endorsed, at the time, by Scowcroft, interview with the author, Aug. 1, 2012, although another, more recent former national security adviser, in an interview that summer, expressed some skepticism that it could significantly improve inter-branch or bipartisan relations. In all events, it may be worthwhile to try.

193 See, for example, Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1897); Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect upon International Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003; originally published 1900); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 29–55 (on Roosevelt); Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 233–67 (on Roosevelt); and Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (London: Routledge, 2007; originally published 1942).

Rigorously analyze competitors

One of the most important inputs into the strategic planning process should be an analysis of the sources and nature of those threats to enduring U.S. interests. For rival great-power state actors in particular, the planning process should include analyzing their motives, interests, objectives, and methods. In essence, the administration should ask anew the questions that Kennan answered: What are America's principal adversaries or competitors up to, why, and what does that mean for the United States? That analysis should, as Kennan did, take into account whether and how the military, economic, or technological challenges from a particular country are linked to the internal nature of its governing system and in what way, and what the consequences of that are for U.S. policy. And the analysis should include a searching assessment of both the strengths and vulnerabilities of America's principal competitors. In the current environment, that kind of analysis will have to be done with respect to several different U.S. rivals. The results will help guide the development and prioritization of U.S. policy objectives and means.

Analyze the United States, too

The Biden administration should undertake some kind of net assessment examining the comparative advantages and weaknesses of the United States and its principal competitors, especially China, which presents the most comprehensive challenge to U.S. interests. Huntington's study shows that such a net assessment can be done with useful results. In this era, it may be especially helpful in illuminating areas where the United States has traditionally held advantages, such as the ability to develop and deploy the most innovative technology for military or dual-use applications, but now require attention and forethought in order to maintain or regain that historical edge.¹⁹⁴ The process should identify the limits and capabilities of the United States, both relative and absolute, and take them into account.¹⁹⁵

Focus on the decision-making environment

The administration should prioritize how to

shape the environment in which other actors make decisions so as to increase the likelihood of those outcomes being more in line with U.S. interests. That was one of the recurring themes of America's Cold War strategy, most explicitly in Eisenhower's and especially in Reagan's strategies. In his magisterial history *Diplomacy*, Kissinger underscored that "the art of policy is to create a calculation of the risks and rewards that affect the adversary's calculations."¹⁹⁶ It is the essence of a competitive strategy.¹⁹⁷

Maintain continuity — and consider alternatives

The administration's planning process should assess which elements and aspects of its predecessor's approach ought to be maintained and built upon. And, as with the Eisenhower administration's Project Solarium, it should also step back to consider what plausible alternatives exist, even if it results in drawing elements together out of different possible approaches to form a cohesive whole.

Play the long game

The administration should focus now on identifying, investing in, and marshaling the resources that are necessary to increase the likelihood of good outcomes in the future, and doing so in a way that the American people and Congress are able and willing to sustain over many years. That means primarily, but not exclusively, the sinews of hard power — military, technological, and economic. The most rigorous and effective of the national security strategies of the Cold War looked and planned ahead and aimed to make investments and take steps that limited an adversary's decisions and freedom of action over the long run. Those strategies aimed at what is now known as peace through strength: proactive, sustained, peaceful competition on terms that favored the United States and, critically, avoided causing the country reactively or precipitously to slide into disadvantageous positions, when the chance for an ill-considered response or even conflict is highest. A peace through strength approach, one that avoids dissipating U.S. strength through ill-advised U.S. military actions, itself helps to ensure that the strategy will endure. During Eisenhow-

194 See Christian Brose, *The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare* (New York: Hachette, 2020).

195 The author is grateful to Andrew May for encouraging inclusion of this lesson.

196 Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 481.

197 "To expect the Soviet leaders to restrain themselves from exploiting circumstances they conceive to be favorable is to misread history. To foreclose Soviet opportunities is thus the essence of the West's responsibility. It is up to us to define the limits of Soviet aims." Kissinger, *White House Years*, 119.

er's presidency, as during Reagan's decades later, major combat actions fought by American forces were conspicuous by their absence.

Hard power underpins soft power, and enables it

A competitive strategy built for the long haul and underpinned by American and allied hard power helps to resolve some of the tensions between hard power and soft power that have bedeviled U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War and even during it. Hard power is essential to the salience and attractiveness of American values. Invoking and championing fundamental values are most potent when America's hard-power trajectory and geopolitical standing are moving upward. The Carter administration had an unquestionable and profound commitment to human rights, but its first years saw an erosion of its geopolitical standing that made its championing of human rights less attractive and less effective than it should and could have been. The Biden administration is looking to prioritize transnational issues such as climate change. It should carefully consider the factors and elements that influence the environment in which other powers make decisions in those areas and think through how best to influence outcomes conducive to U.S. interests. That may involve positive, cooperative approaches. Yet, successfully achieving U.S. objectives in those areas may also involve — or, at the least, require building upon — a tougher-minded competitive approach overall in which American hard power is understood to be on the upswing. A long-term competitive strategy focused on addressing geopolitical threats that is underpinned by hard power and reinforces traditional U.S. values may also be galvanizing for America's allies and partners. Indeed, it may be the only strategy that can ensure the maintenance of those relationships, which are, in turn, essential comparative advantages for the United States in great-power competition.

Lead an ongoing process

The national security strategy should serve as the departure point, not the endpoint, of an ongoing strategic planning process that establishes specific strategies for the most important functional and regional issues.

Remain optimistic

Finally, the Biden administration should undertake its strategic planning effort with a quiet self-confidence in the United States. For any

number of fundamental reasons — among them free and fair elections, a free press, divided government — America has historically proved able to self-correct and to remain resilient and adaptable even in the face of significant and long-term challenges. That capacity was abundant during the Cold War, when successive administrations sought to navigate the circumstances of their times while building on the best and most constructive premises and approaches of their predecessors. We have done this before.

Conclusion

The United States faces considerable challenges ahead. The post-Cold War era — a time of enthusiasm and ultimately of disappointments and struggles — has given way to a revitalization of great-power competition. In particular, the Biden administration confronts a unique and comprehensive challenge from China. And unlike during the Cold War, when Kennan captured the essence of the challenge and the basic premises of the competition more or less from the beginning, this time the United States has gotten off to a late start in grasping the nature of the challenge and in establishing its response.

America is embarked on an era of difficulty and peril, but the Biden administration and future administrations also have before them an opportunity: to set the country on a strategic course that is toughminded, competitive, and proactive, but also peaceful, steady, and sustainable for the long haul. To succeed, they will need to understand and heed lessons — positive and negative — from administrations that grappled with national security strategy throughout the Cold War. Understanding how and why previous presidential administrations succeeded or failed at developing a competitive national security strategy is not merely of academic interest, but is a vital element of any effective effort. 🦋

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