

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
Digital Library Collections

This is a PDF of a folder from our textual
collections.

Collection: Baker, James A.: Files
Folder Title: [White House] National
Security Organization
Box: 3

To see more digitized collections
visit: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/archives/digital-library>

To see all Ronald Reagan Presidential Library inventories
visit: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/document-collection>

Contact a reference archivist at: reagan.library@nara.gov

Citation Guidelines: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/citing>

File
Nat Security
Organization

Advice on National Security Post

BEN
12/1/80

Reduction
NSC.

By McGEORGE BUNDY

NEW YORK — As Ronald Reagan thinks about his Cabinet and staff, he is entitled to the comfort of knowing that there is one place where less would be more — in the job of assistant for national security affairs.

I don't mean to say that it is an unimportant job or an easy one, only that it would serve the president better if there was less of it.

There are three ways to begin.

First, put a flat prohibition on diplomatic communications that bypass the secretary of state and on public statements that can be used by anyone to suggest a difference between the secretary and the White House staff.

The president himself has a positive duty to be the chief expositor of foreign policy, but the only right second voice is that of the secretary of state. The president also has every right to communicate directly with foreign leaders when he wants to, but if he does not trust his secretary of state enough to include him confidentially in any private process of communication, he should change secretaries.

SECOND, CUT back the National Security Council staff.

My guess is that by this step alone, Reagan could find the space he needs for the extra offices he quite imaginatively wants to give to his Cabinet members in the Executive Office Building. It is flatly inconceivable that the real business of the president and the National Security Council requires a professional policy staff of the present size, well over 30. Given the number of eager, strong-minded persons who would like to help Reagan do things their ways, it would be no mean trick to keep the staff properly lean, but all it

really takes is an order. A 60-percent cut would not be excessive.

Third, select the Cabinet before the White House staff, and include the relevant Cabinet choices in the process of choosing the national security assistant.

Such consultation would serve to emphasize a quite basic point: A good national security assistant works for Cabinet officers as well as for the president. One of his main functions is to help senior officials outside the White House understand and be understood by the president. The model, here is the way Harry Hopkins helped Henry Stimson and others work for the "disorderly" Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II.

OF COURSE it is important for Cabinet officers to have direct access to the president, and it is fortunate that Reagan does not seem to share the temperamental inwardness that has made such otherwise different men as Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter keep their distance from their own Cabinets (and so encourage excesses by their assistants). But the president and his secretaries will be just too busy to do all this work of interconnection on their own.

These changes would all help the national security assistant stick to his main business: to help the president himself — again, in three ways.

First, all presidents want timely information, and the assistant has the means of providing it.

A good Cabinet officer also understands the need to keep the president informed, but even the most loyal secretary may occasionally spin the reporting in his own direction, and a good national security assistant can help the president avoid becoming the prisoner of anyone, including the assistant himself. This informational function is totally different from running a separate diplomatic operation. Moreover, as long as there is mutual confidence between the president and his secretaries, such information will be helpful mainly in combating the built-in resistance to change of the various departmental bureaucracies and in permitting the timely identification and resolution of the more serious conflicts either between departments or with the president's own policy.

A SECOND, harder task is to help with the jobs that are inescapably interdepartmental.

The kind of staff work called "crisis management" is the most conspicuous case here, and a certain coolness under pressure is desirable in the assistant. The national security assistant is also well placed to help the president prevent end runs of all sorts by a single department, or even by the White House staff — though in a happy White House this assistant and others will have close, mutually supportive relations. Let us hope. Reagan will ensure that no new strategic doctrine comes as a surprise to his secretary of state.

Third, and perhaps still more significant, is the business of helping the president identify and deal with the problems that simply cannot be handled by delegation to the single most

concerned department.

In 1961, trade negotiations emerged as such a problem, and recently there has been need for special White House staff work to support the president's efforts at economic summit meetings. In both cases, the right answer was found not in the assumption of direct responsibility by the national security assistant but in the appointment of a special officer with the indispensable White House standing. Problems of international energy policy and of North-South financial crisis suggest themselves as possible candidates for parallel treatment over the next few years, and it is a safe bet that the interested cabinet officers will seldom recommend extra-departmental arrangements.

THE IDEAL national security assistant does not exist; everyone who has tackled the job has made his share of mistakes and violated one or more of the rules suggested here.

But it does help to want to do this job, and not the ones that belong to others.

It is only a modest exercise in non-partisanship to express the hope that Reagan, after he has found the people he wants for the State, Treasury and Defense Departments, will find someone to serve him well in this quite different but amply challenging assignment. In the same spirit, one may hope that he will choose a person of unchallenged integrity and discretion; There are a number among his supporters.

McGEORGE BUNDY, who was special assistant for national security affairs to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, is professor of history at New York University.