



John Gans. *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War.* New York: Liveright, 2019. 272 pp. \$28.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-63149-456-7.



Reviewed by Philip Shackelford (South Arkansas Community College)

Published on H-War (July, 2020)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

With *White House Warriors*, John Gans presents a fascinating and timely exploration of both the history and individuals behind the National Security Council (NSC), its purpose, and its functions. Emerging from the widespread institutional upheavals following World War II and the passing of the National Security Act in 1947, the NSC developed from efforts to bring a more structured organizational approach to America's national security apparatus as the nation moved into the early Cold War period. To the chagrin of many in the newly minted Department of Defense, particularly Secretary James Forrestal, the NSC was destined to be a White House agency, given responsibility for informing the president on national security policy and strategy. According to Gans, the NSC quickly grew to fulfill and exceed this mandate, eventually exerting "more influence over presidential decisions than any single institution or individual over the last seventy years, transforming not just America's way of war but also the way Washington works" (p. 3). He describes how the NSC has assumed increasing responsibilities

since its inception, becoming the "intellectual engine" behind modern national security and shaping not only today's world but also America's relationship with it, "both good and bad" (p. 9). Ultimately, Gans offers up a cautionary reminder to his readers that, as unelected government bureaucrats, NSC staffers wield considerable influence on national security and foreign policy yet remain largely anonymous and unaccountable to the American public.

The key theme that Gans emphasizes is his assertion that through their work—by offering their insight, advice, and opinions to US presidents—NSC staffers have changed not only the course of their own lives but history as well, transforming "how America fights its wars and how Washington works" (p. 10). In addressing this not unambitious claim, Gans embarks on a chronological journey through the beginning stages and evolutionary development of the NSC over the years, beginning with its creation and the initial phases of ambiguous organizational standing during the Truman administration. In its earliest incarnations, the

NSC was organized into three different teams: the secretariat, responsible for setting agendas, taking minutes, and circulating drafts of papers; junior detailees on loan from a variety of other government and defense agencies, responsible for drafting policy papers; and “consultants,” top-level representatives of the agencies involved, responsible for providing quality control and cultivating buy-in from senior-level officials at their home agencies. Each presidential administration then left its own organizational and philosophical mark on the NSC in succession, affecting not only the ways the council performed but also the level of success each organization was able to achieve.

As Gans admits, this record is far from exemplary. The NSC has always been and continues to be a very active organization, yet over the years it has been fraught with political intrigue and organizational chaos during times of crisis when such issues frequently complicated and prevented the kind of measured, quality advice presidents needed. Bolstered by the powerful influence of national security advisors in its early years, such as Henry Kissinger, the NSC saw its institutional power grow and become increasingly influential, giving presidents the power to behave with growing independence with regard to foreign policy challenges. Quickly, however, this power seemed to become tempered by frenetic organizational adjustments, mismanagement, and unsupportive cultural environments. Although organizational tweaking continued throughout the rest of Harry S. Truman’s presidency as well as Eisenhower’s administration, a true crisis would not arise until the NSC faced the growing challenge of American involvement in Vietnam.

With Vietnam, the NSC, the US military, government, and indeed the nation as a whole faced a defining moment. Under Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, National Security Advisors McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, and notably Kissinger, respectively, were tasked with helping to navigate the complex world

of American national security policy and specifically US strategy in Vietnam. Success remained perpetually out of each, however. Early efforts on the part of the NSC staff, Michael Forrestal in particular, repeatedly met with frivolous, misguided, and generally unsuccessful efforts to find a workable American strategy on the part of bureaucrats who favored optimism and party lines over solid, data-driven decision-making. Conditions worsened under Kissinger—who treated the NSC as his own personal fiefdom to support his and President Nixon’s ideas—thus limiting the council’s influence. It was during this period, however, that, Gans argues, the NSC began to transform the American way of war—specifically through NSC-led escalation of American involvement in Vietnam—made possible as Kissinger and Nixon ignored input from intelligence and military leaders and routinely left Defense personnel out of discussions, favoring instead to make decisions on their own. Thus, significant policy and strategy change had become possible even when largely circumventing normal channels.

Conditions under President Jimmy Carter seemed to improve, due in large part to the early influence of Carter’s pick for National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had a valuable “eye for talent” and also inherited a number of talented staffers from President Gerald Ford’s NSC (p. 48). Additional influence was overshadowed by acrimonious relations between key individuals in the council and Carter’s administration, however, and ultimately the Iran Hostage Crisis that would come at the end of Carter’s presidency. The chaos and dysfunction would only worsen under Ronald Reagan, as mutual distrust and frustration between the Department of Defense and the NSC deepened and as disastrous episodes, such as US intervention in Lebanon and the infamous Iran-Contra affair, sullied the council’s reputation. Although the reputation and overall performance of the NSC would improve under President George H. W. Bush’s administration, American involvement in the Balkans under President Bill Clinton indicated

that a willingness on the part of the NSC to be “tempted” and occasionally even asked to take on a larger strategic role in foreign policy remained (p. 129).

Although additional signposting throughout the narrative would assist readers in drawing stronger connections back to the original argument, Gans ultimately follows through on his claims regarding the transformative influence of the NSC by illustrating the evolution of influence that the council and its principles were able to wield and by providing the presidents they served with options outside the normal military or diplomatic catalog. Notably, and often disastrously, this included the ability to act more or less independently when deemed necessary. Gans reiterates, however, that the NSC operates largely beyond the view of the American public and in relative anonymity—calling into question whether or not the current structure is in fact optimum. All told, Gans provides a vivid and timely glimpse into one of the most significant organizations in our modern national security apparatus—a perspective that students of both military history and government should find valuable.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Philip Shackelford. Review of Gans, John. *White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54199>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.