

# *The Irony of 'White House Warriors'*

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Review of John Gans, *"White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War"* (Liveright, 2019)

Campaigning in the long shadow of Vietnam and Watergate, Jimmy Carter told a war-weary America that his election would bring with it not only a new foreign policy, but also a new way of making foreign policy. Gone would be the "secretive and hierarchical" approach of the Nixon and Kissinger years, replaced with a more collegial and collaborative process. The Carter transition team even considered "abolishing the National Security Council and reducing the size and influence of the NSC staff." But Carter picked the forceful Zbigniew Brzezinski as his national security adviser, and, by the time all was said and done—after early triumphs like Camp David were replaced by the Iran hostage and other crises—the Carter NSC staff had come to resemble Nixon's in influence and power.

Jimmy Carter's administration exemplifies a recurring pattern in John Gans's new book, "White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War." Gans (a former Pentagon speech writer who today directs the Global Order Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Perry World House) recounts in persuasive detail how nearly every president since World War II has taken office vowing to reform how national security decisions are made, with many

presidents expressing a desire to reduce the White House's involvement in the policy-making process. This, of course, is unsurprising: The NSC staff is an almost impossibly attractive target, whether of incoming presidential administrations or outside political foes. It's a proxy that can be used to attack the president, and it's also, by structural design, small and inward facing and thus disinclined to fight back. Officials in the national security departments and agencies are unlikely to come to the NSC staff's defense and may even join in the criticism. (Higher headquarters, after all, is always all messed up.) Perhaps most importantly, maligning the process doesn't require solving what are almost always nearly intractable challenges; rather, it allows you to hold out hope that solutions will magically emerge from a "better" way of doing things.

But that's not the punchline of the story told by "White House Warriors." Instead, it focuses on describing how nearly every president who took office after promising change ultimately wound up presiding over the maintenance or even tightening of the White House's control of the national security policy-making process. The centripetal forces, it seems, are simply unavoidable.

Gans tells this story creatively. Rather than a comprehensive history, "White House Warriors" consists primarily of a series of vignettes—each recounting a particular NSC staffer's individual role during a national security challenge as a way of telling the larger story. So, for example: Michael Forrestal, in the Kennedy administration, uses his informal access to encourage escalation in Vietnam and a coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. In the Nixon years, Mort Halperin and Tony Lake spar with Henry Kissinger over further escalation in Vietnam. More recently, the Clinton administration's Sandy Vershbow and Nelson Drew help to create the path leading to the Dayton Accords; Meghan O'Sullivan advocates for the Iraq surge in the George W. Bush administration; and Doug Lute puts the Pentagon through its paces during President Obama's Afghanistan review. These stories are rollicking and compellingly told. They offer an instructive glimpse into what NSC staffers actually do and why presidents eventually find reliance on them irresistible, across a long run of administrations.

Gans's endeavor, however, is not solely a descriptive one: In essence, he's written two books. After spending nearly 200 pages working through his NSC stories, the last chapter of "White House Warriors" argues forcefully and at length that the centralization of power in the NSC staff over time has become a serious problem. The NSC staff, Gans says, is "too big to be thoroughly managed or effective." Placing so much responsibility in the hands of "a couple hundred unaccountable staffers," moreover, contributes to the concern that there is a "conspiratorial deep state [that] threatens the nation's representative democracy." In Gans' view, official "Washington" finally needs to accept that the NSC staff must decrease in size and/or responsibility, and that in any case it must become more transparent.

Read against the backdrop of president after president taking office promising to reform the NSC staff, only to adopt it as their own, Gans's final, normative arguments raise some obvious questions: Do his critiques, at least some of which are broadly representative of the slings and arrows launched by nearly every aspiring president and numerous other national security commentators, hold up? Or are they simply attacks against a seemingly easy target that, on reflection, don't really get to the heart of the matter?

## I

The heart of the matter (or at least an important chunk of it for this book) is Gans' view that the informal institutional consensus reached in the wake of the 1980s Iran-Contra affair—whereby the NSC staff would serve as an "honest broker" among institutional stakeholders and stay out of operational matters—is effectively dead. Instead, Gans argues, over time the NSC staff has taken on responsibilities it shouldn't, slowing down national security decision-making, disempowering the departments and agencies with actual expertise in this area, and ultimately leading to less effective policies.

Is "White House Warriors" right about this? The question is important and indeed necessary. Does the NSC staff consistently over-reach—and does its overreaching tend to produce worse national security outcomes? Of course, everyone (including Gans) would agree that in any organization as large and complicated as the executive branch, there will always be instances where particular individuals fail to stay in their lane. When stakes are high, as they invariably are in the national security context, there's always going to be sharp elbows and bureaucratic tensions. Everyone acknowledges this—but does it rise, as "White House Warriors" seems to suggest, to a systemic organizational problem? Based on the evidence that the book lays

out, I'm far from convinced that there is a genuinely systemic problem of NSC staff either overstepping bounds or making things worse.

## II

Start with over-reach. Gans's articulation of the NSC staff's appropriate role—*i.e.*, the NSC staff focuses on coordinating policy discussions and advising the president, while steering clear of operational matters—is the classic one, and there are good reasons for it. Not only does the staff's institutional location make it the best-situated executive branch actor to play the "honest broker" role, but most of the executive branch's relevant technical expertise and capability also resides with other departments and agencies. Not irrelevant, either, is that no one on the NSC staff is either in the statutory chain of command or in a position confirmed by the Senate, with the implication that the Appointments Clause of the Constitution may limit the type of authority the NSC staff can wield.

But if Gans is right about the "death" of the post-Iran-Contra institutional settlement, one would expect the vignettes in "White House Warriors" to show the NSC staff in subsequent administrations acting inconsistently with this classic position. That's simply not the case, however. Instead, in the run-up to the First Gulf War, Richard Haass spends his time "drafting and redrafting" policy papers and managing the "tipfiddle," a document that coordinates logistical, diplomatic, and political requirements. Similarly, during the 1990s Balkans, Sandy Vershbow and Nelson Drew prepare a paper that is used to prompt a strategic discussion with departments and agencies. It's hard to see these as other than paradigmatic examples of NSC staff exercising its coordinating and advisory functions.

More recent vignettes also appear to be broadly consistent with the classic

position, although Gans clearly feels otherwise. Gans asserts that the Iraq surge was a "product of the strategic meddling and 8,000-mile screwdriver" employed by the George W. Bush administration's NSC staff and, moreover, that the Obama Administration's contentious review of Afghanistan troop levels was an example of the NSC staff "losing its way." These processes, in each administration, certainly touched on matters where departments and agencies were expert and in which any policy—including the status quo—inevitably involved serious tradeoffs as well as uncertainties. But they also involved the NSC staff in attempts to find new solutions to difficult strategic problems on key presidential initiatives, when the president was plainly unhappy with his existing options. To be sure, it's possible the NSC staff could have managed these processes better, and there very well may have been specific episodes when they should have pulled back. But both of these episodes are a very long way from the operational free-lancing of Iran-Contra.

As a general matter, it's hard to see how driving an interagency process to develop a strategy for a key presidential initiative—which usually means, to be clear, some form of political commitment made to the American public—falls outside the boundaries of what the NSC staff should be doing. More fundamentally, the appropriate line of demarcation between the NSC staff's responsibilities and those of the departments and agencies is difficult to draw and inherently contextual and dynamic. It bears noting as well that the NSC staff is far from devoid of expertise: Certainly there are capabilities that reside only in the agencies, but the majority of NSC staffers are career officials detailed from other executive branch entities. This expertise enables NSC staffers to broach certain technical or operational details with departments and agencies, something that might be particularly important if the details are relevant to

presidential decision-making. And there's nothing, in and of itself, wrong with NSC staffers doing so, at least so long as they leave the actual doing to their department and agency counter-parts.

Leaving this skill overlap to the side, however, there's still a question of how responsibilities should be allocated between the (non-operational) NSC staff and departments and agencies to address decision-making in an increasingly complex, but also increasingly, time-compressed world. It's one thing to put tactical decisions on a hot battlefield on one side of the line; absent very unusual circumstances, it's difficult to see how or why the NSC staff should involve themselves in such time-critical decisions. But what about when new technologies enable military and intelligence operations in foreign countries with a click of the button and every action we take is a diplomatic incident waiting to happen or may establish a precedent that could be used against us in a different context? When the distrust between the United States and a foreign nation demands secrecy and the foreign counterparty knows that the United States' emissary speaks directly for the president? And, perhaps most importantly, when there's a 24-hour news cycle, when nearly everyone possesses a device that can record what's happening around them and transmit it around the world instantaneously, and when *any* national security occurrence—be it the death of U.S. soldiers delivering aid in the Horn of Africa, the treatment of detainees at a facility in a war zone or an unexpected attack on an embassy—might have enormous strategic and political consequences?

So it's true that the NSC staff has increased in size and responsibility at least since 9/11. But it's also true that there's been a corresponding increase in the national security challenges facing the United States and the necessary footprint of our response to them. When global complexity is increasing and decision-

making time cycle decreasing—when the United States is operating in more countries, and those operations frequently require complex coordination across all of the levers of U.S. power—it's only natural that there be a proportionate increase in the size of the NSC staff. Put simply, undertaking a larger number of national security activities means a larger number of activities under department and agency supervision that require monitoring through interagency processes, and with all of that comes more issues that might require a presidential decision. A proportionate increase in NSC staffers is almost a necessity in such circumstances. Indeed, without one, it's possible the post-Iran-Contra institutional settlement could unravel in the opposite direction—toward the dysfunctional Cabinet government, department by department without effective centralized coordination, that the NSC staff was established to address.

Departments and agencies of the Executive Branch are in any case far from powerless, “White House Warriors” documents. Both NSC staffers and officials at departments and agencies—and particularly senior officials—are well aware of their appropriate roles and well aware that the president is the only official in the White House in the chain of command. Over-reach is therefore, to a large degree, self-correcting. For example, Gans relates a famous story where the Secretary of Defense became livid when he saw a direct line to the White House at an in-theater air base. But the punch line of the story is that the secretary ordered the line removed: “You get a call from the White House, you tell ‘em to go to hell and call me.” Likewise, if the national security advisor thinks the NSC staff is getting to be a little too large and that a recalibration is needed, she can “right-size” the staff. Or if a Cabinet official wants to make sure their views are accurately presented to the President, they meet with him and tell him. “White House Warriors” is not persuasive, it seems to me, in

demonstrating a “structural” problem of NSC staff over-reach.

### III

“White House Warriors” makes claims not just about process, however—but also about substance: The claim that, on balance, the NSC staff taking a direct, interested-stakeholder role (versus the “honest broker” role) leads to worse national security outcomes. Primary support for this assertion consists of the book’s vignettes, which, on Gans’ view, show that the NSC staff has made “more bad recommendations than good.” And a couple of the vignettes certainly do appear to point to serious mistakes: the Vietnam-era Diem coup and the 1980s Beirut mission. On the other hand, others appear to point to resounding successes: the road to the 1995 Dayton Accords, or the 1990 First Gulf War. Still others, such as the Iraq surge or the Afghanistan review, appear to offer ambiguous outcomes.

As evidence goes, however, these examples hardly seem like an overwhelming case for concluding that an institution repeatedly endorsed by presidents of both parties constitute a serious problem. This is particularly so when the real missteps—the Diem coup and the Beirut mission—occurred before the post-Iran-Contra settlement, when NSC staffs were much smaller and with a far narrower remit. In fact, Gans never really discusses the possibility that the real lesson of some of these early errors could very well be that a smaller NSC staff might potentially lead to more haphazard and less informed White House interventions—hardly a recipe for better policymaking.

Regardless, it’s not at all clear that simply looking at outcomes in this fashion is the right barometer for judging the NSC staff’s effectiveness. In many, if not all, of the cases discussed in “White House Warriors,” departments and agencies played a key role alongside the NSC staff, and there was broad agreement on the

course of action across the Government. Would the Diem coup—which was presented in a cable from the U.S. Embassy in-country and worked on by officials throughout the Executive Branch—have unfolded differently, for better or worse, without the NSC staff’s involvement? What about the success of the First Gulf War? Who knows? Surely some, if not most, of what drove the unquestioned successes was not the allocation of specific bureaucratic responsibilities in Washington, but rather the fact that policy and process were in service of achievable goals given the resources the United States was willing to commit.

One could point to other methodological issues. Focusing on big ticket items where the NSC staff took the lead, like those discussed in the book, makes for a better narrative and can paint an anecdotal picture of the NSC staff’s unique role over time. To truly judge relative effectiveness, however, “White House Warriors” would have to compare those situations to others where agencies took the lead with relatively less NSC staff involvement.

But the broader critique of the book’s choices for vignettes is that they provide nothing like a full accounting of what the NSC staff does day-to-day, most days. Leave aside matters that show up on the front page of the Washington Post; the U.S. government has to do many things and make many decisions on a daily basis, and the NSC staff plays a key role in coordinating the government’s position for many of them. If two agencies can’t agree on a position for a treaty negotiation, for example, or if they have trouble working out a policy that takes account of both agencies’ equities, it’s helpful to have an entity that can (at least theoretically) mediate and then, if necessary, easily take the issue to the ultimate arbiter.

Moreover, the NSC staff’s relatively flat, non-hierarchical structure allows it to play a vital function circulating information

throughout the executive branch, thus helping to ensure that departments and agencies are acting off the same sheet of music. Information disperses more readily through an organization with a couple of hundred employees than one with tens or hundreds of thousands, and departments and agencies thus frequently contact the NSC staff, sitting at the center of the network, to stay in touch with deliberations and decisions (often by reaching out to their own detailees).

Perhaps most importantly, however, the NSC staff is uniquely positioned, precisely because of its sensitivity to political demands given its closeness to the president, to identify issues of particular salience outside the normal workings of the departments and agencies and possessed of the ability, precisely on account of its proximity to political power, to place those issues on the agendas of senior leaders. Put simply, there are numerous examples of productive national security initiatives that likely would not have occurred without NSC staff involvement.

#### IV

Whatever one concludes about "White House Warriors" on the topic of effectiveness, it is ultimately second-fiddle to a quite different critique. The second critique is accountability. Judging by "White House Warriors" and a subsequent *Atlantic* article, accountability is Gans' primary concern. Put baldly, Gans argues that the NSC staff's "growing, unaccountable power" contributes to the American public's "pervasive belief" in a "deep state" and to its "collapsing trust" in government. This leads him to assert that the NSC staff needs fundamentally to "rebuild trust" and to demonstrate that it serves the public's interest.

This is, to put it mildly, a highly unusual argument. The leadership of the NSC staff has offices in the West Wing of the White House, steps away from the Oval Office.

The remainder of the staff sits a stone's throw away in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and spends much of its time camped out in the Situation Room. The usual complaint about the role and remit of the NSC staff, after all, is that it is too responsive to political concerns, rather than insufficiently so.

It bears noting, too, that this "too responsive to politics" complaint appears to be an implicit premise of Gans's earlier effectiveness argument—although he never explicitly states what he means by effectiveness, he certainly doesn't appear to define it as carrying out the public's will, as expressed through their elected officials. Rather, effectiveness appears to be closely related to technocratic expertise, such that the extrusion of politics into policy is often, as a rule of thumb, a recipe for problems. This might of course be true in any given instance regarding the interplay of politics and effectiveness and the (at least by implication) partly political role of the NSC staff. But Gans's emphasis on effectiveness, with its (at least) implicit focus on technocratic expertise, stands in an odd tension with his critique based on political accountability and what the NSC staff ought to do about it. It seems especially odd given that his argument about accountability says, in effect, that the conventional wisdom has it all backwards.

Regardless, I don't finally think the claims of "White House Warriors" about accountability are persuasive. Even so, this does not mean that Gans is wrong to raise a red flag concerning accountability—only that he may have chosen the wrong target against which to do so.

#### V

The first puzzle with respect to Gans's accountability argument is what he means by accountability. Gans repeatedly talks about the NSC staff's accountability to the

“American people,” but Article II of the Constitution is clear that the president is both the Chief Executive and the Commander-in-Chief. One doesn’t have to believe in some strictly unitary executive branch to think that the national security and foreign policy bureaucracies are under the president’s direct authority. Thus, the key consideration for accountability purposes—at least according to the Constitution—would appear to be how much agency “slack” exists between the executive branch and the president. The NSC staff figures in this, one would think, as an intermediary to reduce the disconnect between bureaucratic agencies and political leadership.

At the same time, the question of how much “slack” there might be between bureaucratic agent and political principal applies equally to the relationship between the NSC staff and the President. Given that this is a book about the NSC staff, “White House Warriors” is largely addressed to the latter rather than the former. And, unsurprisingly, “White House Warriors” does not suggest that there is a problem of accountability, of agent-principal “slack,” between the NSC staff and the president. Rather, one of the book’s key themes is precisely the opposite: presidents have “explicitly empowered the staff in big ways . . . and small” because they see the NSC staff as an integral tool for carrying out their national security vision. “Accountability,” at least in this constitutional sense of the relationship between the NSC staff and the president, does not seem to present any great problem.

In that case, when Gans talks about accountability, he must mean something different. But what? It’s certainly true that, regardless of how one feels about the current occupant of the presidency, we generally do not want the national security apparatus to be in the business of contravening presidential direction. Nonetheless, the primary means the Constitution establishes for holding the

president accountable, such as elections every four years and impeachment, are imperfect governors and provide only “loose” control. The Constitution thus creates or contemplates oversight mechanisms other than direct presidential control: Congress can (within constitutional limits) pass laws to oversee or remove discretion from the president or conduct oversight itself. Private actors can bring lawsuits against executive branch officials and a free press can also raise concerns about Executive Branch policies. All of these oversight tools may make executive branch decision-making more transparent, lessen some of the potential risk of centralized executive discretion, and, ultimately, lead to a national security policy that better reflects the public interest—or, more exactly, policy that is more closely accountable to the will of the public expressed through their elected representatives, including as further developed through other Constitutionally-available mechanisms of political accountability besides the president. Although “White House Warriors” does not develop the point, it seems to me that something like this must be the sense in which the book discusses accountability.

Even assuming Gans is right to view accountability through this broader lens, however—and, as discussed below, I believe he is—it’s still difficult to see why his concerns center on the NSC staff. “White House Warriors,” after all, does not call for Congress to play a more active role in national security decision-making (by, for example, passing statutes that decrease executive discretion), nor does it call for a reduction in the U.S. national security or foreign policy footprint or bureaucracy. Thus, in arguing for a reduction in the NSC staff’s size and/or responsibilities in the name of accountability without calling for a reduction in the executive branch’s size and/or responsibilities, Gans is calling for a transfer of authority from the NSC staff to other national security departments and agencies—an implicit argument that

our national security policy will be more accountable (as Gans uses the term) if departments and agencies are more empowered *relative to* the NSC staff.

## VI

But this seems implausible. As the only official in the executive branch who is popularly elected, the president alone is uniquely accountable to the people; and he is therefore the official best positioned to tether bureaucratic action to the public's desires—to minimize the "slack." The NSC staff resides inside the White House—that cauldron, so to speak, of national politics. There's likely not a single policy official on the NSC staff who is more than two or three organizational levels from the president's senior-most White House political appointees. This doesn't guarantee that the NSC staff is more responsive to the president than the departments and agencies, but it surely creates a substantial presumption for "White House Warriors" to overcome as to which executive branch actor is more "relatively" accountable. And the book contains essentially no argument as to why the NSC staff's involvement leads (or might lead) to increased agency costs vis-à-vis the public or the president. On the contrary, it argues that the NSC staff has a number of attributes that would likely make it more responsive, such as its willingness to question assumptions and understanding of when political will might exist to undertake certain national security actions.

"White House Warriors" is also chock full of examples of NSC staffers helping presidents wrangle a bureaucracy reluctant to take actions the president felt were politically advantageous or necessary: Richard Haass works to convince "reluctant generals" to support president George H. W. Bush's desired course of action with respect to the Gulf War. Sandy Vershbow and Nelson Drew do exactly the same for the Balkans, and George W. Bush's NSC staff do the same

for the Iraq surge. And lest one think that the NSC staff consistently pressures the military to take action it would prefer to forego, consider what is perhaps the prime example of the critical role the NSC staff plays in ensuring that the rest of the executive branch is responsive: the so-called "Afghanistan surge." Soon after assuming the presidency in no small part due to his opposition to the Iraq War, President Obama found himself on the receiving end of a Department of Defense request for a substantial troop escalation in Afghanistan. Although then-candidate Obama had portrayed Afghanistan as the "right war" (in contrast to Iraq), Gans notes that media leaks of the Pentagon's proposal left the president feeling "boxed in." It fell to the NSC staff to "more forcefully manage the Pentagon," running an extensive review of the proposal before arriving at the solution of a time-limited surge.

As noted above, it's certainly arguable that some of these examples of aggressive NSC staff management of the bureaucracy made for less effective national security policy. But what seems inarguable in light of these examples is that Gans's overheated claims about a "deep state" are bizarre. As I understand it, concerns about the "deep state" rest on the belief that there are career military and security officials (among officials of other, non-national security agencies of government) who feel like they know what is best for the country and that they therefore are unresponsive to the direction of the nation's elected political leadership—*i.e.*, the president and his political appointees. But does anyone really think a relatively small team of overworked staffers that practically live in, or a stone's throw away from, the West Wing, and a material portion of whom are political appointees, are beyond direct political control? It seems far more plausible to direct concerns about the power of unelected bureaucracies—you call it the "deep state" or anything else—toward the large bureaucracies operating under thin layers



of political control at the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom, Langley, Liberty Crossing and elsewhere. As Gans himself notes, the individual today more responsible than any other for stoking fears of a “deep state,” President Donald Trump, has seemingly come around in his view of his NSC staff, even as he continues to criticize other elements of his executive branch. There’s a reason why the many critiques of the NSC staff don’t tend to focus on its accountability relative to other agencies and departments of government.

## VII

This doesn’t necessarily mean that Gans is wrong to focus on issues of the public trust and, more broadly, perception of the legitimacy of national security policy. Although the NSC staff may not be the primary problem, popular dissatisfaction with the way the country is going and declining trust in government are vitally important issues and may provide an indication that the “absolute” accountability” (as Gans uses the term) of the entire national security apparatus is a subject worthy of concern.

Viewed through this lens, some of Gans’s suggestions, such as opening the NSC staff up to an undetermined “level of congressional oversight” and having senior NSC staff “respond to background questionnaires” upon their appointments, perhaps might help address the problem. The devil of proposals like these is, however, in the details. “White House Warriors” never really grapples with the incremental benefits and costs of opening the NSC staff up to greater scrutiny.

For that matter, what precisely is the transparency gap Gans proposes to fill? Why isn’t congressional and public oversight of the departments and agencies sufficient? It certainly seems a stretch to tie the public’s dissatisfactions to an inability to subject the deputy national security advisor or senior director for the Middle East to a public grilling. Isn’t a

more likely source the substance of the decisions—the message, rather than the messenger?

Likewise, to the extent there is distrust about the government’s failure to explain adequately what it has done, why would one think that exposing the NSC staff to oversight will fix that? The same privilege and classification doctrines that apply to the departments and agencies also apply to the NSC staff, and, although the precise boundaries of these doctrines are understandably contested, both executive privilege and secrecy classification serve important purposes. Would additional congressional oversight be able to take into account the fact that the NSC staff’s work is necessarily infused with privileged presidential communications in a way that the communications of departments and agencies simply aren’t? If anything, public confidence and trust seems likely to decrease if NSC staffers were increasingly forced to appear publicly—only to be unable, for perfectly legitimate reasons, to answer key questions.

Placing NSC staff members more in the public eye could also change the nature of their jobs and make them less focused on keeping their heads down and carrying out the president’s national security direction. If this, alongside the other costs, became unduly burdensome to the executive branch, what would stop the president from creating another staff position to be his personal advisor on national security issues?

Perhaps most fundamentally, as Gans himself notes, there’s a real question as to whether Congress “can or even wants to handle” the responsibility of overseeing the NSC staff.

None of this means that particular reforms are not appropriate or that Gans’s recommendations for increasing Congressional oversight of NSC staff decision-making should be dismissed out of hand. Rather, it’s an acknowledgement

that the NSC staff has evolved the way it has for non-frivolous reasons. Any enhanced congressional oversight of the NSC staff would raise and have to navigate a number of thorny issues—issues that “White House Warriors” does not address, much less resolve.

### VIII

Which brings us back to where we started. There’s a deep irony to “White House Warriors.” The book tells the story of how president after president assumed office promising to meet our national security challenges by changing how such decisions are made, but ultimately came to maintain or expand the NSC staff once they were actually responsible for the decisions being made. Rather than taking the obvious lesson from this story—*i.e.*, that the NSC staff is an easy target, but the rhetoric doesn’t quite match the reality—Gans instead levels criticisms that no more withstand scrutiny than the critiques of aspiring presidents withstood contact with the actual responsibilities of the Oval Office.

This is not to say that the NSC staff is a perfect institution, of course. Institutional design is hard, and, although “White House Warriors” doesn’t necessarily make the case, it’s certainly possible that opening up the NSC staff to greater congressional oversight might improve accountability. Likewise, recalibrating the line between NSC staff and department and agency responsibilities might improve effectiveness. But it’s difficult to see how the normative recommendations in “White House Warriors” would address the very problems Gans identifies. Good process is undeniably important, and it’s hard to make good policy without it. But “White House Warriors” itself shows that procedural critiques are often used instrumentally, when you want to express the view that something is wrong, but you aren’t quite sure what it is or how to fix it.

The current moment is a complicated one: Faced with two decades of seemingly endless and indeterminate conflict, rising challenges from emerging or declining great powers, and a seemingly accelerating trend throughout the world toward authoritarianism, it’s only natural to ask what’s gone wrong. And it’s surely more attractive to advance arguments to neuter the President’s staff when you lack confidence in the current occupant of the office.

Rather than take the easy way out by criticizing the NSC staff, however, we as a nation would do better to debate the substantive issues—such as whether our interests in the Middle East and South Asia are overstated or instead risk dangerous neglect. Or whether we agree on the nature of and threats created by China and Russia’s strategic ambitions and how to respond to them. Or whether there is a better way to (at least) recognize and (hopefully) address the distributional consequences of global trade agreements. Or whether additional legal safeguards should be placed on an increasingly unilateral presidency. These are the kinds of questions that should occupy our time, rather than obsessing on the role of a handful of people who, sitting in the White House, exist to help the Commander-in-Chief to manage these challenges.

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