

National security, since the time of President Harry Truman, has been the most essential duty of the President of the United States. It is designed to consider the complexity of formulating rational policies for how the country behaves in a dangerous world. Unlike the process in dictatorships, the President must not "shoot from the hip." We should elect presidents who have judgment, knowledge of history, and the ability to weigh multiple options.

The National Security Council (NSC) is the President's principal forum for considering national security and foreign policy matters with his senior advisors and cabinet officials. Since its inception under President Truman, the Council's function has been to advise and assist the President on national security and foreign policies. The Council also serves as the President's principal arm for coordinating these policies among various government agencies.

The NSC is chaired by the President. Its regular attendees (both statutory and non-statutory) are the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Defense, and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the statutory military advisor to the Council, and the Director of National Intelligence is the intelligence advisor. The Chief of Staff to the President, Counsel to the President, and the Assistant to the President for Economic Policy are invited to attend any NSC meeting.

The heads of other executive departments and agencies, as well as other senior officials, are invited to attend meetings of the NSC when appropriate. We are currently encountering numerous foreign policy crises, the most recent of which nearly plunged the country into war with Iran. The experienced advisors initially imposed on President Trump have been gradually replaced by those willing to support what Trump wants, including affirming his frequent untruths. This is the time to revisit how the national security process should be run, as it was from Truman to Obama.

There were always political differences in the policies of Democrats and Republicans, but the norm prevailed: governing was the job of the best possible coterie of good thinkers available and good decisions depended on the best bipartisan representatives and senators. Throughout the Cold War, checks and balances worked, and presidents did not shoot from the hip, ignoring all advice, and firing advisors who didn't flatter and agree with them. "Wrecking balls" should not replace thought.

In this country, even in Abraham Lincoln's time, Lincoln was wise enough to choose his political rivals to serve in his cabinet. They morphed from political "enemies" to gifted and admiring presidential guides and supporters. The best of today's presidents do the same, choosing cabinet members from the opposite party to help steer the country toward the center.

When we consider the enormous power that a president has as Commander in Chief, we should support a process in which the best thinkers in the administration, men and women representing the different disciplines, are regularly convened to weigh in on issues that the president must address. Decisions on foreign policy (America's place in the world) should be bipartisan and should, whenever possible, have continuity in principle from one presidency to another.

All foreign policy issues are complex, requiring the contributions of specialists from the State Department, the repository of historic knowledge; the Intelligence agencies, the collectors of current and historic knowledge of allies and foes; the Military establishment, collectors of long-range planning for emerging events; and when needed, the consultation of Congressional Foreign Policy Committees and the "gang of eight" (bipartisan membership with security clearances). Presidents must be prudent thinkers, must be able to listen and ask questions, and then must make sometimes life and death decisions.

The most dangerous problem facing us today is a President who rejects the norms observed by every other president, from Harry Truman's time through Obama's. He announces his scorn for all his predecessors, disdains the professionals there to provide him with context (calling them "deep state"), and proclaims himself smarter than his generals, State Department, and Intelligence experts. This is a formula for disaster that could endanger the world.

682 words

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