

Introduction

The President's "Personal Band of Warriors"

The grandfather clock by the door in the Oval Office was ticking.

The president, years into a divisive war, was about to announce the biggest decision of his time in the White House. Facing resistance from senior military officers and hesitation from his secretary of state, the commander in chief had made a controversial and risky choice. In a speech later that day, he would tell the American people of a plan to send tens of thousands of additional US troops to a bloody conflict where thousands of American service members had already been killed and dozens of attacks were occurring each day.

Disagreeing with his advisors and isolated from a public pessimistic about the war, the president was far out on a limb when a member of the National Security Council staff, known in Washington simply as "the NSC," joined him in the Oval Office. After giving the president a quick briefing before the speech and starting to walk out of the room, the young aide turned to say one more thing. Trying to buck up the war-weary president, she said: "I know you feel really alone right now, but I want you to know that you are not alone. I am standing there with you." 1

Of course, this NSC staffer was down the hall and back behind the scenes by the time the president faced the nation all alone and gave his televised speech that evening. Her name was not mentioned, she did not get called before Congress to explain the strategy, nor was the staffer charged with traveling the country explaining the choice to the public. Technically, she did not even work in the White House itself but instead labored far from the eyes of the public she served in the building next door.

The Executive Office Building looks important, a six-story mountain of -Virginia and Maine granite, all columns and mansard rooftops, and protected by an iron fence. Completed in 1888, the State, War, and Navy Building was rechristened when its eponymous and growing tenants departed for new confines in the years before and after World War II. Still the plaque that bears the Executive Office Building's generic name is no help to tourists and other passersby wondering what all the badged and busy men and women, who hustle up the building's imposing staircases early each morning, do all day and often late into the night.

Today, those toiling on the third floor are the staffers of the National Security Council, the forum where the president meets with cabinet secretaries and senior military leaders. The NSC staff has evolved since its creation seven decades ago. What began as a collection of the council's administrative clerks has become the president's "personal band of warriors," as George W. Bush, the commander in chief making the decision to send a surge of troops to Iraq,

called the staffer Meghan O'Sullivan, who briefed him before the announcement speech, and her colleagues.²

Just as housing the NSC was not the original purpose of the Executive Office Building itself, presidential warriors were not the plan when Congress created the staff in a single line of law in 1947. But every president needs help, whether it is with little questions (what is the name of a foreign leader's wife?) or the big ones (should we go to war?). As the NSC staff has helped with the inane tasks and the near-impossible challenges, each commander in chief has, in his own way, trusted and empowered the dedicated staffers sitting right next door.

In return, though the War Department left the Executive Office Building decades ago, the NSC's warriors have kept up the fight. Shielded in secrecy and driven by a responsibility to the president as well as the country's security, the staff works, and sometimes battles, to get answers and ideas, often in the face of opposition from secretaries of defense and state. From the Executive Office Building's third floor and in one-on-one conversations with the commander in chief, the NSC has exerted 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.

The men and women walking the hushed corridors of the Executive Office Building do not look like warriors. Most are middle-aged professionals with penchants for dark business suits and prestigious graduate degrees, who have spent their lives serving their country in windowless offices, on far-off battlefields, or at embassies abroad. Before arriving at the NSC, many joined the military or the nation's diplomatic corps, some dedicated themselves to teaching and writing about national security, and others spent their days working for the types of politicians who become presidents. By the time they joined the staff, each had shown the pluck—and the good fortune—required to end up staffing a president.

O'Sullivan might have started her journey to the Executive Office Building earlier than any NSC staffer in history. As an elementary school student in Massachusetts, the precocious second grader wrote a paper on what she believed to be the state of Palestine.³ After her teacher patiently explained that it was not an independent nation, the seven-year-old O'Sullivan, ashamed her research had missed such a critical fact, was driven to learn more. She went on to college in Washington, then a job on Capitol Hill, a doctorate at the University of Oxford, and later a role at a prominent think tank before she joined the government a month after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

In Washington and books about it, individuals are often referred to by the name of their institution, so a three-star general comes to represent all of the "Pentagon" just as an assistant secretary of state serves as the entire department's voice. The NSC is no different, and in conversations in -Washington, especially on the war, O'Sullivan was considered a representative of the staff and even the White House. Yet the NSC's members have come from

different places—rich and poor; registered Democrats, Republicans, and independents; some were wonks in second grade and others bloomed much later—and they have chosen to serve in the Cold War, the war on terror, and the decade in between.

When the crimson-haired O’Sullivan first joined the NSC in 2004, she was a striking presence for more than just her hair color in the Executive Office Building’s checkered hallways and on the wider Bush national security team. The 34-year-old O’Sullivan was a rare young woman in meetings when the business of national security, especially at the highest levels, was still dominated by middle-aged men. Having worked in her career’s earliest days for a Democratic senator, O’Sullivan was also not a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, let alone a hawk, in the Republican administration. And unlike many in Washington, she had gone to war, as a civilian who arrived in Baghdad in the first few days of the 2003 invasion.

Even if O’Sullivan stood out in discussions, it is relatively hard to see her and other NSC staffers in news coverage or in the history books. Presidents get most of the credit, blame, and attention, often followed by the cabinet secretaries on the National Security Council, military leaders, and the staff’s boss, the national security advisor. Staffers instead are found often just out of the news camera’s frame and just below historians’ radars, usually sitting, listening, watching, and taking notes on the backbench of meetings in the White House Situation Room, the Oval Office, and elsewhere.

There are few paths to those rooms and the NSC itself. Because the staff’s -budget is relatively small, it can only hire so many people directly: O’Sullivan was a rare expert appointee whose tenure was tied to the president’s. Most of the hundreds and hundreds of staffers who have served on the NSC have been loaned temporarily, usually for a year or two, paid, and given security clearances by the military, the diplomatic corps, or the intelligence community. But that is all it takes. Staff members like their boss, the national security advisor, are not required to be confirmed or even questioned by Congress, and the press and public are rarely alerted to their hire.

When each NSC staffer first walks up the steps to the Executive Office Building, he or she joins an institution like no other in government. Compared to the Pentagon and other bureaucracies, the staff is small, hierarchically flat with only a few titles like directors and senior directors reporting to the national security advisor and his or her deputies. Compared to all those at the agencies, even most cabinet secretaries, the staff are also given unparalleled access to the president and the discussions about the biggest decisions in national security.

Yet despite their access, the NSC staff was created as a political, legal, and bureaucratic afterthought. The National Security Council was established both to better coordinate foreign policy after World War II and as part of a deal to create what became known as the Defense Department. Since the army and navy only agreed to be unified under a single department and a civilian cabinet secretary if each still had a seat at the table where decisions about war were

expected to be made, establishing the National Security Council was critical to ensuring passage of the National Security Act of 1947. The law, as well as its amendments two years later, unified the armed forces while also establishing the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, as well as the CIA.

At first the council itself got all the attention due to the novelty and importance of its charge; indeed, one headline billed its members “The Men Who Guard the Nation’s Security.”⁴ Though the council’s makeup evolved over the years, inviting different officials to its meetings and allowing more than a few women like O’Sullivan to do the guarding, its members, called “principals” in Washington, still include the president, the vice president, the secretaries of defense and state, and some others of cabinet rank. The national security advisor, a White House position, runs its meetings, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and leading intelligence officials attend only as advisors to, not as members of, the council.

Everyone in Washington—Congress, the White House, the military, and the State Department—agreed that a forum of such stature, considering decisions of such consequence, needed administrative staff to keep it productive and push its paper. But the agreements stopped there. The State Department did not want a “director” for the new team, the first defense secretary wanted the staff to sit at the newly built Pentagon, and the president’s advisors preferred they become a “further enlargement of the presidential staff.”⁵

The White House won the argument. The NSC executive secretary—so named as a concession to the secretary of state—and his team were treated as a part of the president’s executive office, housed in the Executive Office Building and charged with serving the “presidential position.”⁶ From those first choices, subsequent presidents empowered the NSC to meet their own needs as the government grew, as technology shrank the distances between the commander in chief and the frontlines, and as the nation’s interests and their defense went global during the Cold War.

As a result, O’Sullivan joined an NSC that, though hidden from the public’s view and Congress’s reach in the Executive Office Building, was expected and empowered to serve the commander in chief rather than the council itself, which lost influence as presidents used it less and less for advice and more for photo opportunities. Along the way, the staff transformed from adjunct presidential staffers to aides to all-powerful national security advisors before becoming managers of the policy process and eventually drivers of the policy itself. Through this evolution, president after president came to rely on the staff to pursue the foreign policy responsibilities bestowed by the Constitution and born amid a changing world.

Understanding just how the staff staffs the president requires knowing the way Washington’s national security policymaking is supposed to work on paper—and how it has worked in practice since 1947.

At the beginning of each new presidential administration, the recently sworn-in commander in chief issues a memorandum detailing the way he wants to manage national security. This document establishes the bureaucratic rules of the road for the running discussion about national security that is sometimes called the interagency process: who from the agencies will come to meetings, chair them, and be responsible for assignments. These memoranda are not enacted by Congress or even expected to last long, since the guidelines can be altered as situations and presidents require; but the memo establishes what is supposed to be the regular order and, in some cases, a pecking order, which is why more than a few times the document has led to disagreements.

The staff is only mentioned fleetingly, if at all, in these memoranda. Instead, the NSC's role has been developed over decades of what should be considered Washington "common law," as one former White House official called it.⁷ Rather than legislation, custom and tradition have established the unwritten dos and don'ts of NSC staffing. The staff is trusted to serve the president with briefings, policy papers, and talking points and to support the national security advisor and policy process by organizing, taking notes at, and sharing the outcomes of its meetings.

Although the staff works in secret, the common law that governs its behavior is well known in Washington. The unwritten code came into force in the 1980s and has been passed down from staffer to staffer and administration to administration. It has also been blessed without objection by Congress as well as Washington's foreign policy establishment, who expect NSC colleagues and the national security advisor to make sure the common law is followed.

More important than what is allowed by common law is what is forbidden. The staff is not supposed to go "operational." The NSC's staff members are not expected to join the real battles on the frontlines, develop tactical plans, or issue direct orders to commanders there or anyone else at the Departments of Defense and State, in the intelligence community, and elsewhere. Legally and practically, the NSC is not in the chain of command, so staffers can review operations at the White House Situation Room, sometimes in great frustration and even despair, but actual execution must remain in the hands of the nation's military, diplomats, and spies.

The NSC staff are also not expected to be go-it-alone advocates for their own ideas, working around official channels or subverting their colleagues and counterparts in Washington. They are to serve as so-called "honest brokers" who fairly relay to the president the views of all his advisors but also can give their own advice. That last part of honest brokering is a delicate, if not impossible, practice in Washington, where trust is fragile, passion about policy drives careers, and "honesty" is often in the eye of, and defined by, one's rivals.

There is no formal introduction to these rules for NSC staffers like O'Sullivan. The common law is not posted in the Executive Office Building's hallways, emailed on first days, or formally

policed by the national security advisor. The staffers in one of the most secured buildings in the world—where emails, phone calls, and meetings are guarded—operate on an honor system.

Still, on most days, it is relatively easy to follow the rules, even those left unwritten. Staffers like O’Sullivan simply support their boss. They get the president ready for phone calls, trips, and visits with foreign leaders. They draft talking points and contribute to speeches. They prepare him for deliberations and decisions with his advisors and the National Security Council. And once the president makes a choice, they measure how the policy is working.

Yet the world, and certainly war, rarely work according to plan. Despite the clear organizational charts delineated in the early administration memoranda and the decision directives written to limit ambiguity, national security is hard, and far less precise than many would hope. Enemies have a say, strategy X does not always lead to result Y, Murphy’s Law can trump the art of war, and often Washington is simply proven wrong about what to do and how to do it.

Yet despite access to the latest intelligence, few know for sure if a plan is working or not. Policymakers from the president down sometimes can feel what some in Washington call “drift,” the sense that events are out of the control of people who are used to feeling just the opposite. Even then, commanders in chief, busy and eager to appear confident, are slow to question the chosen course, and most of the senior civilian and military advisors, who developed—and thus remain invested in—the original plan, believe they will make it work in time.

As a result, Washington can take a while to figure out just what is going on and what the United States should do instead. After all, a change of course requires acknowledging that the first plan was wrong, an admission few seasoned politicians and policymakers are eager to make. It requires deciding more time will not help. And in the case of some of the most strenuous, detailed, and expensive of national undertakings, it can require fundamentally rethinking and revising the way America thinks about and wages war.

None of this is easy, which is why change is so hard in Washington and often requires a fight. Every day in the nation’s capital, thousands of men and women work to shape national security policy. Each of them, from the cabinet secretaries on the National Security Council to the desk officers at the agencies, especially the Departments of State and Defense, believe they know what is best and deserve to have a say. Yet at a moment of crisis and drift, the president often looks to those who also have his best interests in mind.

When a member of the NSC staff like O’Sullivan is called to see the president, there is little time to waste. Every minute counts in national security and a president’s day. After racing down the steps to the Executive Office Building and crossing the driveway, the staffers hustle into the West Wing’s basement below a nondescript awning, and race either down the steps to the Situation Room on the right or upstairs to the Oval Office.

Once in the room, the NSC staff rarely has a place on the official agenda and little real power to decide a matter or even issue an order, which is left to the president. But the NSC staff has the choice to speak up. As they decide whether to stay quiet, members of the NSC must weigh their dedication to the president and country, worry about violating Washington common law, and weather the frustration of defense secretaries and others in Washington, who would often prefer the staff keep their ideas to themselves.

Time and again, in the decades since its creation, members of the NSC staff, like O'Sullivan, have chosen to speak up in conversations with the president and in the memos and meetings before and after. As a result, staffer by staffer and president by president, the NSC has taken greater responsibilities from the agencies and become the intellectual engine of national security, fighting for policies that have been triumphs as well as terrible tragedies. Through it all, the NSC has shaped today's world, and America's relationship with it, in good ways and bad.

When O'Sullivan turned to say one more thing to President Bush before the speech announcing the surge, he barely reacted as the minutes ticked away. It was the end of a long fight over a war gone bad, and neither the commander in chief nor his NSC warrior were in particularly good form: Bush's poll numbers were down and his advisors divided, while O'Sullivan was the target of criticism and questions about her competency from some in government and out. As the president said a rushed, "Thanks, thanks," he was likely talking less about the awkward pep talk than about their work together for the decision he was about to announce.⁸

Like O'Sullivan that day, most on the NSC staff choose to say their piece, ask a hard question, or propose a new idea. Their voice is not always heeded or even heard. But by simply speaking up, NSC staffers have changed the course of their own lives and history, even as they transformed how America fights its wars and how Washington works. In return for their fights, most staffers, like O'Sullivan in the Oval Office, have received the thanks of a grateful president.

Yet the names of these staffers, let alone their voices and impact, are hardly ever known outside of the Oval Office or the third floor of the Executive Office Building. You deserve to know who they are and what they fight for. And at a time when many Americans have doubts about government and questions about a so-called deep state of unelected officials controlling policy, you must decide if you want the NSC to keep up the fight, because the staff are not only the president's warriors. They are yours.

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