

## A Brief Overview of the Foreign Policy Decision Making Team in the Reagan Administration

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### Abstract

This article describes the Reagan Administration and its key figures dealing with foreign policy, their personalities, interaction with each other, and impact on the overall foreign policy decision making. The Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency played key roles in formulating and implementing the foreign policy in the Reagan years. President Reagan entered the White House without a clear foreign policy strategy, but determined to move foreign policy advising out of the White House and back to the State Department while at the same time keeping overall control of foreign policy decision making in the NSC.

**Keywords:** Administration, foreign policy decision-making, Reagan, Shultz, Weinberger

### Introduction

#### Initial Years of Reagan's Presidency

In the process of selecting and appointing administration members in the aftermath of his landslide victory in the 1980 presidential elections under the slogan Let's Make America Great Again Ronald Reagan strongly relied on his "kitchen cabinet" members – his loyal allies and trusted friends from California, Ed Meese and Michael Deaver among them, who transformed their group into a formal Transition Advisory Committee joined by James Baker and other new personalities in the Reagan team. Per request of the President-elect, they produced a list of three potential candidates for each administration position. Another source the President-elect sought advice from was President Nixon; but these consultations were held in a clandestine manner as the Water-gate memory was still vivid.

President Nixon provided a rather long memo with his ideas about President Reagan's potential appointees and suggestions for prioritizing in the initial year economy and budget deficit over foreign policy. President Nixon strongly backed Alexander Haig's candidacy for the State Secretary praising his experience and intelligence while discarding George Shultz for this position as inapt in *"understanding world issues generally and the Soviet Union in particular that is needed for this job"* (Cannon, 1991). Although George Shultz was the first choice of the Transition Advisory Committee for the State Secretary's position, the President-elect did not offer Shultz a position in his administration but chose Alexander Haig, partly because of President Nixon's advice but also based on the personal positive impression he formed during their only private meeting a year and a half earlier at Reagan's California ranch when Haig was still considering running for presidency himself.

President Reagan's initial appreciation of Haig's talents changed with frustration over his battles and inability to constructively deal with the White House staff, other administration members and the U.S. envoy to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick. In these quarrels President Reagan often had to act as a mediator, something he hated, but still rec-

ognizing Haig's intellectual abilities President Reagan noted with disappointment *"it's amazing how sound he can be on complex international matters but how utterly paranoid with regard to the people he must work with"* (Reagan, 2007). In June 1982, President Reagan informed Secretary Haig of his readiness to accept Secretary's resignation and commented in his private diary that *"the only disagreement was over whether I made [foreign] policy or Secretary of State did"* (Reagan, 2007).

#### George Shultz vs. Caspar Weinberger

At that time the only person considered by President Reagan for the State Secretary's position was George Shultz, head of the Bechtel Corporation at the time, who gladly accepted this nomination. Secretary Shultz stayed in the same capacity with the administration until the very end of President Reagan's second term in January 1989. Before his appointment as Secretary of State, George Shultz acted in a more informal role supporting the administration's international economic efforts in a number of ways. Early on after Reagan's inauguration George Shultz chaired the volunteer economic advisors group which strongly opposed the establishment of any import limit on Japanese cars. In 1974, then California Governor Reagan invited George Shultz to Sacramento for lunch to discuss the budget and economic issues at a federal level. The meeting left Shultz convinced that Ronald Reagan wanted not only to run for the presidency but was trying to understand how the presidency actually worked and took that very seriously (Cannon, 1991).

Caspar Weinberger served as the Defense Secretary from 1981 to 1987. In its March 1982 article, The Washington Post vividly characterized Weinberger as *"a soft-spoken and courtly Renaissance man who speaks only of hardline anticommunism; an Anglophile whose comments lock him in combat with the allies of Europe; an ambitious man with a zest for diplomatic mission but no taste for diplomatic nuance; an Episcopalian who has a Jewish surname, Arabist*

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*instincts and a special fondness for Saudi Arabia*" (Schram, 1982). The administration members and Pentagon staffers noted Weinberger's unrivaled tenacity which often wore down his adversaries. Secretary Weinberger is often cited for formulating six criteria for the use of military force he laid out in November 1984, which, in Weinberger's words, were major tests to be applied when the use of U.S. combat forces abroad was considered (Jentleson, 2014).

The vision Caspar Weinberger brought to the Pentagon was based on both his personal combat experience in the WWII and the experience of the Vietnam War. The lesson learned in Vietnam was reminded by Secretary Weinberger many a time, *"You can't fight Congress and public opinion and an enemy at the same time. That's why Vietnam was the crime of the century"* (Friedman, 1990). In fact, Secretary Weinberger often got under Secretary Shultz's criticism for his reluctance to commit troops to international missions (even the ones that served the purpose of coercive diplomacy) and the two had often engaged in hot debates in the Oval Office with the President present.

Donald Regan, the Secretary of the Treasury in 1981-1984 and the White House Chief of Staff in 1985-1987, described President Reagan's confusion when he witnessed the battles between the two Secretaries, *"Ronald Reagan did not want to choose between two good friends, two of his staunchest supporters, two of the most brilliant people in the cabinet, two of the people he relied on. Reagan did not often know which of these two trusted advisers was right in any given situation"* (Cannon, 1991). Reagan was often unwilling to side openly with one highly valued cabinet member against another, especially Shultz and Weinberger. In a way, the conflict between the two was complicated by Weinberger's fascination with foreign policy and by Shultz's willingness to use military force for diplomatic purposes and the two Secretaries encroached into each other's territory.

### **President Reagan's National Security Council – the Weakest Link in the Administration**

The Shultz-Weinberger confrontation could have been substantially mitigated by a strong National Security Adviser and National Security Council staff which, by all accounts, remained the weakest link in the structure of the President Reagan's Administration. During his eight years of Presidency, Reagan had six National Security Advisers. The greatest scandal of the Reagan era, which caused the Americans to change their view about Ronald Reagan, originated in the NSC offices.

In fact, until the Iran-Contra scandal, President Reagan did not see in a National Security Adviser and NSC staff the effective tool for coordinating national security and foreign policy. When National Security Adviser Poindexter found himself in the midst of the Iran-Contra scandal in November 1986 and had to testify for obstructing justice, an effort was made to restore efficiency of the NSC with former Ambassador Frank Carlucci's appointment. Later Carlucci was appointed Secretary of Defense and was replaced in November 1987 by General Colin Powell.

In the initial years of his presidency, Reagan formally

downgraded the NSC role by transferring some of its functions to the State Secretary in January 1982. By signing the NSDD-2, the President *"assigned to the Secretary of State authority and responsibility, to the extent permitted by law, for the overall direction, coordination, and supervision of the interdepartmental activities incident to foreign policy formulation, and the activities of Executive Departments and Agencies of the United States overseas"* (White House, 1982). The State Secretary's control did not cover activities conducted exclusively through "military or other channels" and activities executed and administered by a single department or agency not significant for the overall U.S. foreign policy in the particular country or the region (White House, 1982).

As in a relatively recent Congressional Report on NSC's historic organizational structure is observed, Reagan's NSC arrangement had major limitations and was characterized by an absence of orderly decision making and uncertain lines of responsibility. According to the report, until the arrival of Carlucci, the Reagan Administration lacked a strong, politically attuned National Security Adviser that had characterized Administrations since 1961 (Best Jr, 2011). The role of the National Security Adviser changed with the last two of President Reagan's Advisers, Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell, who established a greater level of coordination and avoided clandestine operations. This was formalized by the establishment of some formal mechanisms, including a Senior Review Group headed by the National Security Adviser.

### **The Intelligence Community's Role on the Rise in the Reagan Administration**

The person in charge of the U.S. Intelligence Community in the Reagan Administration was William Casey who held a position of the Director of Central Intelligence and oversaw the entire spectrum of the intelligence from 1981 until his death in 1987 (as Casey's replacement was appointed FBI Director William Webster who remained in this position until 1991 – so far, the only person to have served as both the FBI and CIA Director). Casey joined Reagan's Presidential campaign in 1980 when it was on the verge of financial fiasco. Not only he managed to successfully run the campaign financially but also negotiated nomination of George H.W. Bush as Vice President. Later his candidacy for the position of the CIA Director was supported by Ed Meese, a key figure in the Transition Advisory Committee, and President Nixon, who noted in his memo to President Reagan that the Agency needed "an entirely new guard and a complete house cleaning" and Casey would do an "excellent job" (Cannon, 1991). No doubt, Reagan was also impressed with Casey's service in OSS in World War II.

The years of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the Central Intelligence Agency are viewed as times of revival and increased morale. In the words of CIA historian and ex-Agency member Nicholas Dujmovic "at CIA, there is an enduring internal narrative about the 1980s, specifically the years 1981 through 1986, when the Agency was led by Reagan's first DCI, William Casey. The "Reagan-Casey" years are understood as a time of resurgence for CIA, a second "Golden Age" for the Agency (the first was the Eisenhower-Dulles period, when CIA made a name for itself fighting in the early

Cold War). In the renewed and rejuvenated CIA of this narrative, CIA's relevance is reasserted after a difficult period for the Agency known as the Time of Troubles: the press revelations, scandals, and congressional investigations of the 1970s, combined with Jimmy Carter's perceived disdain for CIA as evidenced by the Carter administration's budget and personnel cuts under one of CIA's most disliked directors, Stansfield Turner. From an insider's perspective, the 1970s were a disaster" (Dujmovic, 2011).

Dujmovic further notes that the Agency staff members had widespread impression *"that William Casey gets the credit for resurrecting CIA with expanded resources and a renewed mission, thanks to his personal relationship, even intimate friendship, with the President"*. However, Dujmovic deems the view about certain personal closeness between William Casey and President Reagan to be misconception which originated either through Casey's deliberate overstating of his relations with the President or failure to correct his subordinates' impression that such a relationship existed. Dujmovic cites Robert Gates, first executive assistant to Casey in 1981-1982 and later number two ranking official in the Intelligence Community, who thought that *"his relationship with the president was in a considerable way a distant one"*. It will be fair to state that the rise and influence the CIA enjoyed in the years of Reagan's Presidency was not a result of personal relations between the President and CIA Director but rather of President's understanding of the importance of intelligence data and his reliance on it in decision making.

### **"Conservatives" vs. "Pragmatists"**

The first term of Reagan's Presidency was characterized with periodic squabbles of *"conservatives"* and *"pragmatists"* within the White House. Their clash poured openly out in October 1983 when National Security Adviser Clark leaving the White House to lead the Interior Department. The events that followed Clark's transfer Cannon colorfully describes as *"failed palace coup"* (Cannon, 1991). The *"pragmatists"* plan implied that James Baker, then the White House Chief of Staff, would become the National Security Adviser and Baker's deputy Mike Deaver would move to the position of the Chief of Staff. This reshuffle was giving *"pragmatists"* control over the key positions in the White House. They were successful getting First Lady Nancy Reagan, Vice President Bush and State Secretary Shultz on board and convincing President Reagan in the desirability of the plan.

However, the *"conservatives"* group, which included Defense Secretary Weinberger, CIA Director Casey and outgoing National Security Adviser Clark strongly opposed the reshuffle and openly confronted Reagan. The President had an alternative choice of a *"conservative"* candidate for the National Security Adviser's position, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, leaving that time her position of the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, who suggested her own candidacy and had others mediate in her behalf.

Being told that her appointment would not be accepted by the *"pragmatists"* group and Secretary Shultz, President Reagan settled on a compromise choice of Bud Macfarlane, Deputy National Security Adviser, whose personality

was more or less acceptable to both competing factions. However, Macfarlane's appointment did not lead to NSC's increased efficiency.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the people responsible for foreign policy decision making in the Reagan's Administration had experience and knowledge to be true leaders in their respective fields. They honestly tried to advance Reagan's vision to the extent they understood it and their particular role in it. Lack of harmony and sometimes obvious clashes, such as between George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger, could be associated with President Reagan's reluctance to engage in, what seemed on the surface, *"bureaucratic squabbles"* of his most valued Administration members -no surprise that some scholars studying psychobiography characterize Ronald Reagan as a passive-positive leader (Hudson, 2014) - but also with strong individual personalities having different views of and approaches to how to promote the Reagan agenda on the world scene.

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