Henry Kissinger, Bureaucratic Politics, and the 1973 War

Richard Ahne & Tyler McBrien

Morton H. Halperin's "Bureaucratic Politics Model" (BPM) offers a compelling analytical prism through which to view the decisions of U.S. policymakers prior to the Egyptian and Syrian surprise attack on Israeli forces in the Sinai peninsula and the Golan Heights in 1973. According to Halperin, the "maker" of policies is not one single actor or entity, but rather a "conglomerate" of various organizations and actors. These disparate political entities often differ about government policies and decisions and compete in affecting both governmental decisions and actions.[i] By deliberately restructuring the U.S. intelligence apparatus in an attempt to prevent bureaucratic politics from interfering with policymaking, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger maneuvered to concentrate decision-making power regarding all important aspects of foreign policy in the White House. Toward the Middle East, they pursued a strategy of delay in negotiating with Egypt and Israel, causing the two of them to oppose the activist policies of the State Department, designed to lessen tensions and avert hostilities, and blinding them to the warning signs of the impending attack.

In addition to recognizing the number of disparate actors who can affect any decision, the bureaucratic politics model also sheds light on the competition and political jockeying that occurs between these actors and organizations. Although the jockeying sometimes stems from careerist motivations, it is important to point out that these participants in foreign policy decision-making believe they are truly pursuing the national interest.[ii] During the Nixon Administration, both Secretary of State William Rogers and then National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger believed that they had the nation's true national security interests at heart, even

though their policies could not have differed more.

Although some actors, such as the president, wield considerably more influence because of their formal roles, a number of intelligence, diplomatic, and military organizations and actors engage in some form of political jockeying. By understanding the realities of bureaucratic politics, Kissinger and Nixon sought what they believed was good for the United States, successfully restructuring U.S. intelligence reporting to the White House and dominating foreign policy decision-making in all regions, including the Middle East. They were able to do so as a result of successfully pushing Kissinger's organizational essence into the forefront and Kissinger engaging in extra-bureaucratic means as Nixon's special agent. As special agent, he maneuvered to affect the flow of information to the president. This concentration of power and decision-making allowed the two to pursue their policy agenda of delayed negotiations, which we believe ultimately led to the failure to foresee the surprise Arab attack.

To understand the interactions between bureaucratic players, one has to first look at their "organizational essence", in Halperin's terms, the dominating perspective within an organization regarding its missions and capabilities.[iii] The existence of various organizational essences logically leads to differing and competing ideas of national interests. An organization's essence often adheres to a common set of principles. In the case of the organizations comprising the U.S. intelligence apparatus under the Nixon Administration, one maxim holds true: an organization heavily relies on policies and strategies that will make the organization seem more influential and important.[iv] Therefore, an organization's essence dictates the policy agenda it chooses to pursue. For example, former Foreign Service officer Charles W. Thayer illuminates the conventional view of the State Department's essence: "Secretary Cordell Hull once said he required four things of his ambassadors: to report what was going on; to represent the United

States before foreign governments and publics; to negotiate United States government business; and to look after American lives and property."[v] During the Nixon Administration, key officials in the State Department, namely Secretary of State Rogers, viewed themselves as the chief interlocutors in negotiations between the Egyptians, Israelis, and Americans leading up to the 1973 attack. However, Kissinger and Nixon thought otherwise. The battle over who would negotiate with Egypt surged to a boiling point in the years leading up to the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, as Kissinger and Nixon sought to enlarge the control of the White House in foreign policy decision-making and marginalize the scope of the other actors involved.

To this end, Kissinger competed intensely and successfully against the State Department, often bypassing its authority and sabotaging its efforts in favor of his agenda and interests. According to Kissinger, he and the State Department shared a fundamental difference in how to approach the tensions of the Middle East. Kissinger believed that the State Department was eager to launch an initiative in the Middle East between Egypt and Israel and to seek a substantive, comprehensive settlement between them.[vi] The State Department also sought compromise in the form of interim proposals for agreement between the involved parties, such as limited disengagement from the Suez Canal.[vii] With these as preferred goals, State also valued a speedy and resolute course of action, seeing it as another way to contain and reduce Soviet influence in the region.[viii] With these goals and beliefs in mind, the State Department sought a comprehensive peace settlement; time was a critical factor to consider because tensions could boil over at any time.

Kissinger's view of the situation and how to approach it could not have been more different. Kissinger generally preferred a strategy of prolonging the stalemate and gridlock between the Arabs and the Israelis.[ix] Believing that such an approach would frustrate the Arabs

into moderation, Kissinger then hoped to draw them away from Soviet influence and into the American sphere of influence.[x] In his memoirs, Kissinger repeatedly expresses doubts about State's approach, goals, and reasoning. He believed that it was unlikely to find any compromise or common ground between the Arabs and Israelis, and therefore expressed serious reservations and dissent about State's underlying assumptions and in initiating serious, substantive negotiations.[xi] In these ways, Kissinger sought to enlarge the essence of his role as the president's agent and advance his views of the correct peace process.

Given these divergent views, it is easy to see bureaucratic political dynamics as a major factor in the struggle to shape American foreign policy in the Middle East.[xii] Throughout his memoirs, Kissinger repeatedly insists that Rogers and the State Department initially seemed to be spearheading foreign policy by insisting that he had a small, constrained part to play with virtually no diplomatic role,[xiii] while State was actively engaged in the diplomatic planning and action.[xiv] All in all, the environment of the American intelligence and diplomatic apparatus, along with differing views on how to approach the negotiations, gave Kissinger the incentive to employ bureaucratic tactics.

Kissinger justified delaying progress and stonewalling the "wrong" actions of the State Department by demonstrating that his position was correct. In an exchange between Kissinger and Nixon on February 21, 1973, Kissinger urges Nixon to exercise steady caution because the Arabs seem to be finally coming around to the Americans, while State is "cranking up one of its wild charges" and can mess up the whole thing.[xv] Here, it is evident that once developments seemed to be going as he hoped, Kissinger became more determined to push what he believed to be the correct strategy. Nixon's subsequent agreement with Kissinger's assertion highlights Kissinger's growing strength in influencing other actors to believe that his delay tactics were

working. [xvi] The victory of Kissinger's preferred policy in entering the forefront of Middle East foreign policy is portrayed in the declassified meeting memorandum of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), amid Egyptian and Israel military movements after the war began. As the policymakers discuss how Israel should be aided, Kissinger commands the meeting. Kissinger fiercely insists that even though they may hate the United States the Arabs will turn to Washington eventually because the United States alone can deliver an agreement with Israel, and therefore, the United States should hold out and continue to press its advantage. [xvii] Although Kissinger is at a moment that spotlights the complete incorrectness of his perspective, with the war he thought would not happen already underway, Kissinger continues to push his policy view and organizational essence. The general agreement of the policymakers with Kissinger's assessment only further reflects growing influence and sway of Kissinger and his proposed delay tactics. [xviii]

In restructuring the decision-making process, Kissinger and Nixon relied heavily on another tenet of the bureaucratic politics model and its application to foreign policy: one's relationship with the president is the single most important determinant of influence. [xix] According to former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who preceded Secretary Rogers, the real dynamic of government power is "how confidence flows down from the President," which "fluctuates" often. [xx] Kissinger's close personal relationship with President Nixon afforded him the means with which to reorganize U.S. intelligence reporting. Confidence may be gained or lost in various ways, but the fact remained that Kissinger had Nixon's confidence and Secretary Rogers did not. Such confidence often leads to deference or policy outsourcing on certain issues. [xxi] Nixon personally had no love for Rogers and allowed him and State to deal with only those foreign policy issues that Nixon viewed were either not important or unlikely to lead to

success, a sign of the contempt with which Nixon viewed Rogers.[xxii] Once Middle Eastern affairs became a larger priority in the administration,[xxiii] Nixon preferred instead to work within the White House, thus increasingly transferring the primary responsibilities for dealing with Israel and the Arab nations to Kissinger.[xxiv]

John Helgerson, a former Deputy Director for Intelligence, maintains that Nixon was suspicious of the intelligence agencies, and even during the campaign, made it clear that he would only accept reports directly from the CIA director, and never from lower-level officers.[xxv] Helgerson argues that this restructuring helped Kissinger, a key player, to obtain an increasingly involved and ultimately central role.[xxvi] This demonstrates the fluctuation of the president's power towards those who have a special relationship with him. Nixon's desire to handle national security affairs from the White House caused him to rely more and more on Kissinger, his close National Security Advisor, instead of the Secretary of State, as a key player within this new foreign policy apparatus.

Armed with increasing presidential confidence, Kissinger began to play the role of *special agent*, to use the terms of the bureaucratic politics model. Presidents often appoint special agents, who are not rigidly committed to a particular realm and able to cut across various departments.[xxvii] Freed from the operational restraints of essences, interests, or capabilities of a single organization, these special agents are inclined to utilize extra-bureaucratic means and channels of action.[xxviii] Kissinger in particular believed in the efficacy of such extra-bureaucratic means. In his *American Foreign Policy*, published before Kissinger joined the Nixon administration, Kissinger argued that one of the most important characteristics of effective executive leadership in diplomacy was the use of means outside normal bureaucratic parameters.[xxix]

The secret back channel that Kissinger shared with Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat's national security advisor, Hafiz Ismail, represents an exemplary case of Kissinger's extra-bureaucratic means.[xxx] In an exchange between Kissinger and Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin, prior to a meeting with Ismail, Kissinger reveals the extent to which he planned to use this secret channel with Ismail as a delaying tactic, to talk in generalities and stall for time, sabotaging State's efforts without their knowledge.[xxxi] Kissinger's strategy with Ismail was "to say next to nothing, or to speak at such a level of generality that it doesn't mean anything."[xxxii] He repeatedly dismissed State's efforts to the Israeli ambassador as "a bore" or "a mistake"[xxxiii] truly reflecting the extent to which Kissinger used his agency as extra-bureaucratic weapon and a contemptuous means to sideline Rogers and the State Department.

The dynamic surrounding the secret channel that Kissinger possessed with Ismail demonstrates not only another means to delay and bypass State efforts, but also displays the intensifying risks of Nixon's and Kissinger's fabricated bureaucratic infrastructure. Diverting from conventional, regularized processes for decision-making, or *action channels*, always represents a potential risk for those playing bureaucratic games because inconsistent policies can yield misunderstandings among nations.[xxxiv] Kissinger himself admitted the secret channel fostered a completely incoherent foreign policy, with State efforts and Kissinger's plans to delay extra-bureaucratically risking chaos and the chance for Ismail and the Egyptians to play the Americans.[xxxv] Nonetheless, Kissinger took full advantage of his special agent role.

As Nixon's special agent, Kissinger naturally played a key role in disseminating the specific information that would reach senior policymakers. Halperin calls this part of bureaucratic politics "maneuvers to affect information".[xxxvi]Most information that reaches the upper echelons of policymakers has been filtered and carefully selected by organizations or

individuals who are trying to substantiate their positions on an issue. Halperin identified possible

tactics in maneuvering to manipulate information, three of which Kissinger, often with the aid of

Nixon, clearly deployed: (1) circumventing formal channels,[xxxvii] (2) keeping away from senior

participants those who might report facts one wishes to have suppressed,[xxxviii] and (3) structuring

reporting of information so that senior participants see what you want them to see.[xxxix]The first

tactic, circumventing formal channels, speaks to the countless back channel communications that

exist in bureaucratic politics. Secret channels exist because of the nature of the information being

discussed or the time sensitivity on certain information. In keeping away from senior participants

those who might report facts one wishes to have suppressed, individuals sometimes maneuver to

exclude other individuals or entire rival organizations from influencing policy decisions. The last

of Kissinger's bureaucratic maneuvers, structuring reporting of information so that senior

participants see what you want them to see, was perhaps the easiest to execute. As Halperin

points out, the sheer volume of intelligence produced in the U.S. intelligence apparatus each day

is daunting, so selecting self-confirming information proves an easier task than other

maneuvers.[xl]

As previously discussed, Kissinger utilized the first tactic in a widespread fashion, with

his notable use of secret back channel relationships and obsession in creating delays. The second

and third tactics can be seen in the environment in which the White House received intelligence

from the CIA. According to Helgerson, Nixon's generally aloof management style[xli] created an

intelligence structure in which Nixon only received intelligence reports directly from the CIA

director, shutting out briefings from lower-level officers.[xlii] Kissinger also developed a central

role as the middle-man, making it clear that Nixon would not receive intelligence deliveries

without prior approval and screening from either Kissinger himself or one of his senior staff.[xliii]

This created an apparatus in which Kissinger could play a central role in filtering out information that Nixon received and keeping away intelligence feed from lower-level staff, both tactics to affect information. A memorandum from CIA Director W. E. Colby to Kissinger displays not only how the CIA viewed Kissinger's role as nearly indispensable, but practically asks him for more policy information under the pretense of fostering greater analysis.[xliv] Colby's sentiments reveal that Kissinger had such a central role. He was even in a position to manipulate the intelligence itself.

The precarious dynamics of bureaucratic politics in foreign policymaking played a decisive role in the American intelligence failure before the 1973 War. Correlating to Halperin's model, Nixon's influence as the President, the chief driver of policymaking, enabled him to steadily anoint his close adviser, Kissinger, as his special agent. Kissinger, whose organizational essence and objective in shaping American foreign policy in the Middle East, ran counter to the essence of that of Rogers and the State Department. Armed with the ability to use extra-bureaucratic means, such as his secret channel with Ismail, Kissinger became the key player in Middle East policymaking. Not only was Kissinger able to manipulate action channels and intelligence flow, but he also successfully jockeyed against State's efforts, intentionally delaying the peace process. Ultimately, their obsession with delay and the intricate national security apparatus constructed by Nixon, with Kissinger as the catalyst, allowed Kissinger's own interpretation and his respective hostility towards other views, to blind American policymakers to the impending attack. The resulting October surprise offers a cautionary tale against the excessive accumulation of power and decision-making in U.S. foreign policy.

[i]   Halperin, Morton H. *Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,* 42.

[ii]   Halperin, Morton H. *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy, Second Edition,* 9.

[iii]   Halperin. *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 27.

[iv]   Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy,* 38.

[v]   Thayer, *Diplomat*, 81.

[vi]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years*, 350, 353.

[vii]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: Years of Upheaval*, 200-201.

[viii] Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years*, 353, 356.

[ix]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: Years of Upheaval*, 196.

[x]   Ibid.

[xi]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years,* 350.

[xii]   United States. "8. Memorandum From Harold H. Saunders of the National Security Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)". *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV.* 12.

[xiii] Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years,* 348.

[xiv]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years,* 350.

[xv]   United States. "22. Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)". *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV.* 55.

[xvi]   Ibid.

[xvii] Central Intelligence Agency, Washington Special Actions Group, Document 1973_10_24H, "Washington Special Actions Group Meeting", 5.

[xviii] Central Intelligence Agency, Washington Special Actions Group, Document 1973_10_24H, "Washington Special Actions Group Meeting", 6.

[xix]   Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 226.

[xx]   Halperin, 226-7.

[xxi]   Halperin, 227.

[xxii] Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years,* 348.

[xxiii] Kissinger, *Memoirs: Years of Upheaval,* 195.

[xxiv] Kissinger, *Memoirs: White House Years,* 348, 353.

[xxv]   Central Intelligence Agency, Helgerson, John, Document 1996_01_01, "Intelligence Support for Richard M. Nixon", 103.

[xxvi] Ibid.

[xxvii] Halperin, 301.

[xxviii]   Halperin, 301.

[xxix] Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 511.

[xxx]   Kissinger, *Memoirs: Years of Upheaval,* 196, 206-207.

[xxxi]   United States. "23. Memorandum of Conversation". *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV.* 63.

[xxxii] Ibid.

[xxxiii]   United States. "23. Memorandum of Conversation". *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV.* 60-60.

[xxxiv]   Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications,* 45.

[xxxv] Kissinger, *Memoirs: Years of Upheaval*, 206, 208.

[xxxvi]   Halperin, 164.

[xxxvii]   Halperin, 173.

[xxxviii]   Halperin, 170.

[xxxix]   Halperin, 166.

[xl]   Halperin, 166.

[xli]   Central Intelligence Agency, Helgerson, John, Document 1996_01_01, "Intelligence Support for Richard M. Nixon", 103.

[xlii]   Central Intelligence Agency, Helgerson, John, Document 1996_01_01, "Intelligence Support for Richard M. Nixon", 109.

[xliii] Central Intelligence Agency, Helgerson, John, Document 1996_01_01, "Intelligence Support for Richard M.

Nixon", 106.

xliv Central Intelligence Agency, Colby, W. E., Director of Intelligence, Document 1973_10_27B, "Critique of Middle East Crisis", 3.