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The Presidency—V

Evaluation of New Institutions That Help President Keep Up With Pace of History

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The American Presidency, like most other national institutions, is in a race with the pace of American history.

So swift is that pace and so vast the growth of the American Republic and its responsibilities, that all national institutions—and the habits of the men who run them—inevitably lag behind.

This is true in a special sense of all political institutions. It is true, regardless of the party in power, not only of the Presidency but of the Congress with its multiplicity of overlapping committees and its cult of seniority.

It is true not only of the machinery for electing Presidents but also of the methods of selecting powerful assistants to the President. And the problem of change in Washington is especially difficult. For change depends most of the time on the men who have benefited by the political habits and machinery of the past.

In this series of articles, of which this is the last, an effort has been made to draw a distinction between the President and the Presidency, and to report on some of the men and institutions that carry on the burdens of the office during the President's illness.

All these men are caught in this race with the fierce transition of the time. They are all conscious of the need of change. And while they do not change as fast as events, it does not follow that progress has not been made.

Cabinet Meeting Day

This, for example, was Cabinet meeting day in Washington (it is usually on Fridays). The only resemblance it bore to Cabinet meetings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's time was that it was held in the White House Cabinet Room.

The Cabinet under F. D. R. was a story-telling bee—in formal, unprepared, and unrecorded. When, after the war, officials and historians wanted to know what happened in these Cabinet meetings, they had to go to the late Henry L. Stimson's personal diaries. For no official record was kept, no agenda was prepared, no catalogue of decisions was preserved. And the only consolation for the historians was that it probably didn't matter, for the Cabinet was not the place where the work was conducted.

Today, the Cabinet (minus John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, who was off in California scolding Nikita S. Khrushchev, his favorite target) arrived at the White House, each with his black Cabinet diary.

The secretary to the Cabinet, Maxwell M. Rabb, prepared an agenda. For each item on the agenda there was a background memorandum, setting out the points at issue, and a financial statement, indicating what the various proposals would cost, if adopted.

When Vice President Richard M. Nixon, pinch-hitting for the President, called the meeting to order, the Cabinet members did not have to be told the background of the problem (this took up most of the time in the Roosevelt meetings). The problems had been defined and the papers circulated to the members by the Cabinet secretariat earlier in the week.

Furthermore, a record of the meeting was kept by Mr. Rabb. And as soon as Mr. Nixon ended the meeting to go to Quantico, Va., for a survey of problems with the lords of the Pentagon, representatives of all the Cabinet members met at the White House. They recorded whatever decisions had been taken so that they could follow up on the action promised.

Different From British

This is not to say that the Cabinet is now an agency of the Presidency comparable, say, to the British Cabinet. It does not have the power of decision, as the British do under the system of Cabinet responsibility. Nor does it deal with national security matters.

Its responsibility is to report and recommend policy on some matters—agriculture, natural resources, justice, etc. National security questions are dealt with in the National Security Council. The council is now the most powerful agency of the Government under the President, and the most important arm of the Presidency.

This came into being under President Harry S. Truman on the basis of the experience of the war. It was the result of many years of struggle over the burden of the White House, and was established by the National Security Act of 1947, as amended in 1949.

This act did four things:

1. Established the Department of Defense (instead of separate departments of Army, Navy and Air Force).
2. Created the Central Intelligence Agency for the collection and appraisal, at a central point, of world intelligence relating to national security.
3. Set up the National Security Resources Board (now the Office of Defense Mobilization).
4. Established the National Security Council.

The purpose of the N. S. C. was to advise the President on the integration of domestic, foreign and military policies relating to national security; to "assess and appraise the objectives, commitments, and risks of the United States in relation to our actual and potential military power;" to consider policies on matters of common interest to the departments and agencies of the Government, "and to make recommendations to the President in connection therewith."

Anti-Free-Wheeling "Device"

This was intended to keep the separate departments dealing with security matters from running off in all directions—sort of an anti-free-wheeling device. And while nobody can ever hope to coordinate as many people as now work in the security field, it has done extremely well.

The statutory members of the N. S. C. are the President, who normally chairs the weekly meeting on Thursday mornings; Vice President Nixon, the Secretary of State (Mr. Dulles) and Defense (Charles E. Wilson), and the director of the Office of Defense Mobilization, Arthur S. Flemming.

Others who attend are the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen W. Dulles, who opens each meeting with a world intelligence report; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arthur W. Radford; the Secretary of the Treasury, George M. Humphrey, the assistants to the President for disarmament (Harold E. Stassen) and foreign affairs (William H. Jackson); the director of the Bureau of the Budget, Percival F. Brundage, and such

The difference between the N. S. C. and the Cabinet, other than that one deals with home affairs and the other with security affairs, is that the N. S. C. is far more formal. It does everything on the basis of carefully prepared staff work, and almost always deals with questions that require a specific recommendation to the President for policy action.

If the President has something he wants studied, he refers it to his special assistant for security affairs, Dillon Anderson. Mr. Anderson is a conservative lawyer from Texas who has a gift for wry verse, which he does not use on N. S. C. papers.

Mr. Anderson may then refer the question to the department concerned, or to several departments for their observations. And when the papers are then taken by the N. S. C. permanent staff (most of whose top members have been there from the start of the agency). The staff prepares them for the consideration of the National Security Council's planning board.

Power of Planning Board

Much has been written, though little is known, about the N. S. C. What is more important is that even less is known about the council's planning board, which does most of the pick-and-shovel work for the N. S. C. and a great deal of its thinking.

It is, therefore, the principal planning and coordinating inter-department committee in the issues of war and peace and one of immense power. This, of course, is flatly denied by all its members, who are not only "anonymous" but practically invisible.

The planning board met this afternoon in Room 352 of the Old State Department Building—some men whose names are almost unknown beyond the top level of official Washington.

Mr. Anderson, the aforementioned writer who normally is chairman of the planning board, was not present this afternoon. He was away on Kwajalein Atoll with Lewis L. Strauss, the atomic energy chief, presumably listening to bangs. His place was taken by the man who has been chief secretary of the N. S. C. from the beginning, James S. Lay Jr.

The other members on hand today were Robert R. Bowie, the Harvard teacher who is Assistant Secretary of State and head of the State Department's policy planning staff; and Robert A. Lovett, Jr., if