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The 'chaos' in the depths of Foggy Bottom

SECRETS OF STATE

The State Department and the
Struggle Over U.S. Foreign Policy
Barry Rubin

Oxford University Press. 335 pp. \$25

Reviewed by
Nils H. Wessell

Barry Rubin, a respected young scholar at Georgetown University before becoming a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that the greatest secret of state is how decisions are made and implemented. He contends that the policymaking process, mysterious to the public but familiar to insiders, conceals a crisis in both the form and substance of American foreign policy.

Rubin sketches a policymaking process dominated by chaos since the Franklin D. Roosevelt era. We have experienced distracted presidents, backbiting within administrations, institutional rivalries among State and Defense Departments, the CIA and the White House staff, and constant interference by congressional interlopers, the latter determined not to be burned by another foreign intervention and committed to making the news out of a deep conviction that the national interest requires their re-election. Mixed into the process is a public that wants a strong America but disapproves of economic ties and military assistance to unsavory but friendly regimes.

It is to calm this whirling vortex of political confusion that most presidents since Dwight D. Eisenhower have increasingly bolstered the authority of their national security advisers. As Rubin sees it, the result has been a series of international traumas that make Little Bighorn look like a triumph for Gen. George Custer.

Aside from ritual (and mutually exclusive) appeals for the president to "end disputes" while conducting "free-wheeling discussions," Rubin himself seems to be of two minds as to a solution. One is to elevate the State Department to the role of *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in the policymaking process. For President Reagan, as for Jimmy Carter, Rubin seems to think that what has been needed is a heavy dose of State Department primacy — for Carter because he was indecisive, and for Reagan because he is uninvolved.

But for decades, as Rubin's account makes clear, the Foreign Service officers at Foggy Bottom have been bogged down in a morass of position papers, committee meetings and bu-

reaucratic cookie-pushing. Worst of all, the State Department's natural "constituency" of foreigners lacks clout. Unlike the potent clientele of farmers who undergird the Department of Agriculture, State's foreigners don't vote.

At other points in his balanced narrative, the author stresses that any organizational framework has its shortcomings and that structure must "correspond to the needs and abilities of different presidents and subordinates." Presidents since FDR have almost always stressed their need for direct White House leadership in foreign affairs. FDR himself humiliated Secretary of State Cordell Hull for 11 years and relied on Hull's deputy and his own aide, Harry Hopkins.

But the decisive question, I think, is whether greater reliance on the career professionals in the State Department is the right antidote to bureaucratic chaos and bad policy. For one thing, State's preoccupation with the daily routine of diplomacy ill equips it for the principal task of American foreign policy: the definition and pursuit of a national strategy to advance this country's interests and values in the world.

Nor can Foreign Service officers, who spend much of their careers abroad, mobilize the domestic support that any overall national strategy requires. It is not accidental that the White House, its national security affairs staff and political appointees throughout the agencies are better positioned to establish the president's political priorities and to implement them in accord with the electoral mandate that any president's incumbency represents. You can rely on the bureaucracy for advice and warning, but priorities must flow downward from elected leaders and their trusted political confidants.

Certainly the familiar debacles of the last 25

years, from the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion to the fall of Saigon in 1975, paint a dismal portrait. But ignoring the success of American foreign policy invites fascination with failure. The same government that brought us the prolonged humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis and the Marines as sitting ducks in Lebanon also led to the successful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis and the restoration of freedom to the grateful citizens of an increasingly Cubanized Grenada. While these failures were not exclusively those of the State Department, the successes were the result of presidential leadership, a juxtaposition that suggests just how tenuous a brief for State Department primacy may be.

In politics, as in love, timing is everything. Perhaps it is the misfortune of this book,

detailing the inside story of how policy is made, that it follows hard on the heels of two blockbusters published in recent months. Strobe Talbott's *Deadly Gambits* is a tendentious indictment of the Reagan administration's arms-control policymaking; Arkady Shevchenko's *Breaking With Moscow* provides an inside look at the byzantine process of Soviet foreign policymaking.

For academic readers familiar with the older works of Morton Halperin, Graham Allison, I. M. Destler and various prominent memoir writers, the present volume, for all its scope in surveying secrets of state from FDR to Reagan, will add little new. Like an oft-told tale that improves in the telling but excites barely suppressed yawns from loyal family listeners, *Secrets of State* earns our respect as an example of the genre but fails to break new ground.

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