

Center for Strategic and International Studies

“The National Security Council at 70: Charting the Future of America’s Security”

Dialogue with:

**Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster,
26th National Security Adviser**

**General James L. Jones Jr. (Ret.),
22nd National Security Adviser**

**Stephen Hadley,
21st National Security Adviser**

**Henry Kissinger,
8th National Security Adviser**

Introduction:

**John J. Hamre,
President and CEO,
CSIS**

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JOHN J. HAMRE: Everybody, welcome. While we are getting ourselves organized up here, let me just say we're delighted to have everyone with us.

We always – when we do public events, we have a little safety announcement. I am responsible for your safety tonight. So if I have to ask you to follow my instructions, please do that. Please sit down, gentlemen. The exits are right behind us. Now, I am going to take care of H.R. first. I want you all to know that. (Laughter.) But he does have other people here to help him. I'll come back for everybody. The stairs that take us down to the street are right over here to the right. We'll go, make two lefts when we get to the street, meet over across at National Geographic, I've ordered ice cream, and we'll sing a song of praise for our salvation. (Laughter.) OK. We're going to have – nothing's going to happen, but I want you to be ready in case I have to ask you to do something.

This is an extraordinary evening. I want to say thank you to General McMaster, who gave us the opportunity to celebrate this, the 70th anniversary of a remarkable institution, you know, the National Security Council, National Security Council system. You have before you four gentlemen that have been national security advisers. I got about three or four more in the audience, but I couldn't get everybody on the table. But we've got remarkable talent. And my goal tonight is to try to help all of you understand how this institution works and some of the big questions that are in the way. So I'm going to just be the moderator and try to stay out of the way with my questions.

The first thing that I would like to ask you is this. You know, the National Security Council really sits at the fault line of American constitutional governance. There's no question that the – that the Congress has a right to oversee the actions of departments like the Defense Department and the State Department, and there's no question that the president has a right of privacy in his decision-making, and we call that executive privilege. And the National Security Council sits squarely on top of that fault line. You know, you are there for the president to help pull the government together, but you are coordinating the activities of agencies that have accountability to the Congress. And I would like to just ask each of you to just reflect on that from your own personal experience. You know, Henry has a trump card, so he can interrupt you anytime he wants. So I'm going to start with you, H.R., on this question.

GENERAL H.R. MCMASTER: OK. Well, thank you.

Well, I think it's very important to the president and for all of us to ensure that Congress can fulfill its constitutional role, which oftentimes, as you know, is vital to our democracy because it's Congress that represents the American people. But it's also Congress's role that's often critical in providing sometimes a corrective to what could be unwise policies, and for us across the administration to be able to access the great work that their staffs do.

So the departments, as you mentioned, John, have the primary responsibility for that interaction with the Hill. But what we've attempted to do on the National Security Council is to have meaningful conversations with senators and congressmen and staffers about our key policy initiatives, and early in the development of what we're calling our integrated strategies. So we have found that's immensely helpful because, first of all, a lot of – a lot of the problems that we're facing require legislative remedies, and, well, all of them require resources. So I think our emphasis has been, in relation to your question, on early consultation from the NSC, but obviously continued coordination between the departments – the relevant departments – and the Hill and the relevant committees.

MR. HAMRE: Jim and Steve, each of you had administrations that had somewhat contentious relations with the Congress. How does this issue – because they would obviously want to know what you’re saying and what you’re thinking, but you have an obligation to the president to be his advisor. Jim, how about you?

GENERAL JAMES L. JONES JR.: Correct. Well, I think the most important thing is that for the – for the national security adviser and the NSC is to, on matters of national and international security, to be – to project an image of bipartisanship. And in my relationship with President Obama, I asked him for that latitude to resist putting a political spin on big issues until such time as those issues had been developed. I mean, obviously, it’s a political decision. During my time, that followed Steve, we decided to combine homeland security and national security into one – into one staff, and that was a big – a big difference in terms of the size of the staff.

But I think the bipartisan approach is extremely important. In my military career, I had the good fortune of spending a few years on Capitol Hill as a Marine liaison officer, and my motto was always do for the majority what you do for the minority, and vice versa. And then I found out when I became national security adviser that all of a sudden I was a Democrat, and I didn’t know I was. (Laughter.) And, you know, you have to get through that, and you can only get through that by working at it and by making sure that you reach out to both sides. And I think that’s extraordinarily important on security issues.

MR. HAMRE: Steve?

STEPHEN HADLEY: Well, of course, the national security adviser is not confirmed by the Senate, does not testify on the record before Congress. But I, like I’m sure all my predecessors, spent a lot of time consulting informally up on the Hill – briefing, explaining policies, and all the rest. It’s an important part of the job.

I learned everything I know about being national security adviser from the man who’s in the front row here, Brent Scowcroft. And one of the things – I worked for him when he was national security adviser the first time, but we served together on the Tower Commission. And one of the most important things about the Tower Commission, which was established by President Reagan in 1986 in the wake of the Iran arms sales, was to stave off an effort by the Congress to basically take over the national security structure – require the national security adviser be confirmed, set the number of people, set the organizational structure. And Brent led the charge to frustrate that effort because it’s not just an issue of privacy, it’s an issue of separation of powers. If the president cannot gather around him or her a staff of people in which he or she can have great confidence, then the president is not going to be able to carry out the constitutionally prescribed roles for the president in foreign policy, where the president has a lot of roles and a lot of leadership.

So it’s a – it’s a fundamental constitutional principle that needs to be observed. And it is always subject to struggle, because in times of war presidents get more power. In times when presidents seem to get in trouble, the Congress takes it back. So it’s a tension we’ll always have. But it’s very important for the institution of the presidency to preserve that group that is able to support the president in their constitutional role.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, nobody had a boss that had more difficult relations with the Congress, ultimately, than Richard Nixon. I mean, what – how did you balance your obligations to be his advisor, but also the accountability to the Congress?

HENRY KISSINGER: The question of accountability arises in two ways. One, how the Congress can control the main lines of policy if some of it is carried out by the NSC. And there are some measures that have to be taken in a(n) essentially secret mode – openings of negotiations, the exploration of new avenues. So that's the basic problem.

And the administration in which I served was during the Vietnam War, and you cannot say that bipartisanship was at its height. (Laughter.) And some of the people who had started us into that road then joined the peace movement. So passions were great. And President Nixon had a combative side. So all of this, all of those issues.

But, in fact, what we did is two things. As a matter of principle, we did not – President Nixon did not permit that his staff members could testify before congressional committees or could be subpoenaed by congressional committees. But we agreed with Senator Fulbright that we would have private meetings that he would invite me and the members of the Foreign Relations Committee to drinks in his house, and that I would come periodically and brief them. So no formal record was kept of these briefings, and it was not a subpoenaed order of it. So that's – and we invariably briefed the leading members of the various senatorial committees.

The problem was there was a philosophical difference, and the country was so deeply divided at that moment that it was very difficult to find a basis for bipartisanship. And how do you end a war that one party has started, the other party has inherited, and the party that first got involved had a shift inside that party so that they objected in principle to the policy they themselves had advocated? I don't say that as a criticism. That was the fact – that was the fact of the situation. But even in the Nixon period, we at least thought we made strenuous efforts to involve the Congress in our – in our decision-making.

But the key issue really comes down in the continuing debate to what degree do the operations of the NSC become so pervasive that they really act like a department? There is a category of decisions which I think most would believe have to be done to some extent secretly, and to permit exploration. But then, when it becomes a day-to-day occurrence, that's when your question arises, whether there is still congressional control. I think most of the time the NSC has stayed on the right side of the – of the line. But one could argue that if the NSC as an institution conducts a continuing negotiation that goes on over several years, that then it is really doing – taking steps that ordinarily are under departmental and congressional control.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, you have anticipated the next question I was going to ask, because there is a critique in Washington these days that the National Security Council has become operational, that it's taking on the activities of the departments rather than being a coordinating and advisory structure. I think each one of you probably dealt with that criticism. Henry's given us his thoughts about it. Steve, let's start with you, then. I mean, how do you – how do you think about that? I mean –

MR. HADLEY: Well, one of the things is that part of the bargain about the national security adviser and the NSC being not subject to Senate confirmation or testimony and the like is that it needs to be respectful to confine its role so it does not preempt the roles of departments and agencies or Cabinet secretaries, who are the ones that are confirmed by the Senate and to whom slots and money is appropriated to carry the foreign policy. So it requires the national security adviser to enforce discipline on the staff and to be self-limiting, and particularly not get too public in terms of what they

are doing. You know, we learned in the Iran arms sales and the Iran-Contra the dangers of having an NSC that runs operations.

One the other hand, I would say just simply this. I think the NSC has spent a lot of time developing ways of delivering policy options for the president. I think there is a role, though, for the NSC not in running operations, not displacing the departments, but to make sure that once the president makes a decision and sets a policy, that the departments and agencies are implementing that policy effectively. It's not to substitute for the departments and agencies, but it is to make sure that they are implementing the president's decision and hold them accountable. I think that's kind of new frontier for the NSC, and something that I think we need, because the greatest policy is no good if it isn't implementing and it isn't causing effects on the ground that advance the interests of the country.

MR. HAMRE: Jim?

GEN. JONES: I think the biggest cancer in any NSC is when it crosses over from being strategic to operational. And we have to guard against that. And it's not – it's not easy. Technology's a double-edged sword in this – in this case, where technology allows someone on the NSC, if he or she wishes to, to pick up a telephone and call an operational commander on the field in Afghanistan. And that's a problem for every administration. That's not just one administration.

As a Marine officer, I was on the receiving end of direction from – direct from the White House as a captain, in the Mayaguez operation off of Cambodia. A well-intentioned staffer decided he wanted to talk to Captain Jones. And he could do that. But that is – that is the big problem. And it's one of the jobs I think the national security advisor and whoever else can convey is that under no circumstances will you do that – under no circumstances. Because once you open that door, then you do get into running – micromanaging and running operations. And that's something that the NSC should guard against, absolutely.

MR. HAMRE: H.R., can I put you on the spot?

GEN. MCMASTER: Sure. And, first, let me just say it's been a great gift to be able to study the NSC from a historical perspective, and then to learn from those that – who are here, and especially General Scowcroft, who's been just a tremendous role model and mentor for me as well. And so much of his work is very relevant to this question on emphasizing the role of the National Security Council in coordinating and integrating across all the departments and agencies to provide options to the president. And then once the president makes decisions, as Stephen has point out, to assist with the sensible implementation, execution of those decisions.

And in recent years, for whatever reasons, more and more authorities have been centralized within – were centralized within the National Security Council. And it did cross, I think, a line between a coordinating and integrating organization into an executing arm of the government. So consistent with President Trump's guidance, we have devolved responsibility and authorities back to the departments where it belongs, and emphasized that coordination and integration role. One of the ways we've done that is with the time we saved by not calling up, you know, Captain Jones or his equivalent.

What we've done is applied that time to reestablishing our strategic competence, to think longer term, and to involve the heads of the departments and agencies – the State Department in particular – to play a foundational role in framing problems, in viewing situations around the world that affect our

national security through the lens of vital interest. And then based on that framing to establish long-term goals and more specific objectives associated with those goals. Then what happens is the principals issue guidance to the departments and agencies which then allow them to get to work and to actually start doing things, if it's already within their authority, to meet whatever the principal's guidance is.

And then we bring those decisions to the president that require his decisions, the approval of that framing, then ultimately we deliver to the president an integrated strategy – much as we did, as many of you sort of watched us do it, on the Cuba policy, which is probably the most public one. But there are signed polices on Iran, for example, which you'll hear more about this week. And I could go on and on. But the – but I think what has helped us, has helped us address this potential of centralizing too much control in the NSC, making the NSC too operational, is to focus more on the development of these integrated strategies.

MR. HAMRE: Henry, I think when you were the national security advisor, you had a staff that was 40 or 50. I'm not exactly sure – but I think it was about 42, 45, something like that. We've seen big staffs in the NSC in recent years. I mean, is this a simpler question? I mean, more people are looking for things to do, they take on command responsibility. Is part of this – I know, H.R., you started with the idea of capping. Could you talk – all of you talk about how big a staff is and how influential it is, given its job?

Please, H.R.

GEN. MCMASTER: OK. Well, if you're – if you're Dr. Kissinger you can probably get away with 40 or 50. If you're me, you might need some more help, right? (Laughter.) So I'm reminded that the – that the German general staff had its roots in trying to institutionalize the genius of Napoleon. And so we should remember that you probably need a few more staffers if you're not Henry Kissinger.

But the – but we have made a conscious effort to reduce the size of the staff, and to make sure that form follows function. And as we devolve responsibilities back to departments and agencies, as we get out of really management of tactical issues, then we're able to reduce. So we have reduced significantly the numbers of policy people and overall staff. So it was over 400 or so at its peak. We're down to about 360-something now. And that sounds like a lot. Of those 360, it's really about 160 to 170 policy people. And the rest is the White House Situation Room, which runs multiple shifts, and information technology, those who manage the president's travel and visits to foreign leaders. So there's a large administrative component. So it's not as big as some of the numbers you hear talked about.

What has contributed to the growth over time as well, from – you know, from 50 or so to 167 is the emphasis on homeland security, especially after the mass murder attacks on our country on September 11th, 2001. And so the National Security Council now has a blended staff that also includes the Homeland Security Council. Now, does that mean we can't get smaller? No, we can, I think. The emphasis is obviously to have the right people with the right expertise. And because of the coordination and integration efforts, the right personality a lot of times, right, to lead by charm and bring people together around these important issues.

So I think we're – I think we're at a good place now in terms of the size and effectiveness, especially of the extremely talented – as all of you know – the dedication and talent of the people on the National Security Council is – it's astounding. And it just makes you proud every day when you

interact with your teams there. But it is – it did grow for a number of reasons. It is getting smaller again. But the numbers can be deceiving in terms of policy people.

MR. KISSINGER: Well, we didn't start with a fixed idea of the number of people that should be on the staff. I think one of the problems is this: What do you define as national security policy. And when we started in the Nixon administration, we concentrated on a number of key issues – like Russia and opening to China – four or five key issues. And we left most of the others to the departments. Then gradually over time, the line between strategy and day-to-day policy got eroded. And so there was found to be a greater need for White House supervision. And there is a – there's a reason for this.

In the ideal world, the people who lose a debate accept it and march along. In the world that I knew, which I know has improved since then – (laughter) – found that that – well, the party that gets overruled tends to think it was misunderstood. (Laughter.) And that there is a need to carry out the implementation as close to the original overruled point as you could find. So there is a tendency for departments to slide over into the preference of their members. And this is, of course, maddening to presidents who think they have settled something, and then it gradually slides away.

I think this accounts for the fact that more and more fields got – but that function of, which Steve Hadley mentioned, to add to policy formulation, the need for supervising implementation, because very often the difference between success and failure is in nuance. And if you screw that up, then even a great policy decision can fail. So it wasn't just the desire to improve. And of course, I must say, from a historical point of view, relations between the operators and the conceivers were never better than when I held both jobs. (Laughter, applause.) Which actually was not a good system. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMRE: Jim, you brought up this question about how technology is changing the nature of the National Security Council. I think when – Henry, I think you remember – I remember you telling me that when you first opened the channel to China, it was in a – it was a typewritten note that went through mail channels, and it took a while for – even to know if it got there. Well, now everybody's sitting with a piece of machinery on their – on their belt that's got more computing power than DOD used to have 40 years ago.

MR. KISSINGER: Our first channel to China, on the Chinese side, were handwritten notes that were delivered and packaged and brought to Washington by a package diplomat, in a sealed envelope. And our reply was typed on paper that had no watermark on it, and came back the same way. So each exchange took a minimum of nearly three weeks. And the real gap in time was two to three months between these – between these exchanges.

MR. HAMRE: And so now Jim is talking – he's had experiences where it's, you know, a battlefield commander couldn't get a phone call from the president, and this was – this was hard to run a National Security Council with that kind of immediacy. What – how did you deal with it, Jim?

GEN. JONES: Well, if I could just make a comment on the size – just to go back for one more second on the previous – because I feel pretty strongly about this.

MR. HAMRE: Yeah, sure.

GEN. JONES: The size of the National Security Council is not what's important. It's what the national security does – National Security Council does. And if you look at the range of issues that the president has to deal with every single day – just in the seven days since I've been gone, I know H.R. deals with about twice as many issues every day than either Steve or I had to do in our watch. So the size of the National Security Council has to be adequate to the task, and that means you organize yourself on functional directorates and geographical directorates that make sense. I mean, you have to have that kind of knowledge.

Now, on my watch we combined the Homeland Security Council and the National Security Council. But I will tell you that on my watch, the National Security Council was severely underfunded. Severely underfunded. Grossly underfunded. And the only way to fight that was to get detailees from the agencies. So – and Steve and I have talked about this. So on my watch, the National Security Council was roughly two-thirds detailees and one-third permanent personnel. And guess what? After the first year, those detailees went back to their agencies, and you had to rebuild them. So the National Security Council has to be organized. And the size, I frankly don't care what the size is, as long as it does what it needs to do.

And secondly, it has to have – in this day and age, where big issues are the province of multiple agencies and departments – it's no longer just the Defense Department and a little bit of the State Department. It's Treasury, it's Energy, it's Commerce, it's everything, and they're at the table. And if you're going to run an organization that seeks to be the ringmaster, if you will, to make this thing work, you have to have adequate size, and I think you have to have them there on a permanent basis. I think the ideal – I think detailees are good, but I think we had it wrong. We should have had two-thirds permanent personnel for policy and one-third detailees that can – that can – that can be rotated. That's my opinion.

On the question, John, that you raised, I – you know, that's the national security adviser has to figure out what it is the president needs to know. And frankly, in this day and age, with the pace of – with technology contributing to the immediate knowledge of what's going on in the far corners of the world, you don't – we don't have the organization to keep up with that on a 24/7 basis. And not jokingly, when I was national security adviser, I used to say, you know, we need – we need a port and starboard National Security Council. We need one when half the world is asleep and one when half the world is awake, and we need to have staff, you know, other than just kind of a watch, but, I mean, actually people who are working issues so that when the – when the ship comes, you're actually transitioning with knowledge and you're not spending the whole waking hours of your next day trying to catch up with what's going on, because if that's – if that's the conundrum you're caught in, you have no time to think strategically unless you build that into the National Security Council and you have a senior director who has the staff that do nothing but think about what's coming over the horizon. So it – technology – it's another example of technology being a double-edged sword, but it does multiply the task of what you tell the president during the PBB dramatically every day.

MR. HAMRE: You know, Dwight Eisenhower had – really did have two NSCs. You know, he had – he had a military background, so he had a J3 and a J5. For people that are not familiar, the J3 is responsible for day-to-day operations, fighting the fight. The J5 is responsible for strategic planning, looking downstream. And Eisenhower actually had two staffs, and he spent as much time with each of them as the other. So he gave priority to it. And I know, H.R., you've got your – Dr. Schadlow as your J5 here. She's putting together the national security strategy. How do you distinguish between strategic long-range planning and the daily fight?

GEN. MCMASTER: We do have a strategy team led by Kevin Harrington as well, and then Dr. Schadlow's working on the national security strategy overall. But we've tried to do that by developing a system that emphasizes strategic planning, and then that same team, though, unlike the Eisenhower administration, which had the planning board and the operational control board – it was OCB – that the same directorates have oversight for implementation. And so what we've found is, just with the initial strategies that we've developed, that we really need principals to become involved about six months into a sustained strategy to assess it and then to recommend adjustments, unless the situation changes fundamentally, such as a Kurdish referendum, or an event that really causes us to review the assumptions on which that strategy's based and to make recommendations to the president on how to – how to adjust based on events.

But what we've found is, it is immensely important to have strategies in place because otherwise the tendency is to respond to events without fully understanding how to try to bend or respond to those events in a way that actually advances toward clearly articulated goals and objectives. So we have not separated execution or implementation, which is done at the departments and agencies but coordinated at the NSC from the – you know, from the planning effort. But what we – what we do have are these two organizations that look long-term all the time.

MR. HAMRE: Could I ask each of you – Steve, yeah, let –

MR. HADLEY: You know, John, yeah, I mean, this is a huge problem, and I don't think any NSC staff has solved it. I think what H.R.'s doing is definitely in the right direction. But, you know, it's the old problem: If all you do is manage crises, all you're going to get is more crises because you're not putting in place the policies and strategy to shape the future and avoid the crises.

On the other hand, as Jim mentioned, the number of issues that HR is dealing is – with is overwhelming. So we tried – and Peter Feaver's here; he can talk a little bit about it – we tried to have a strategy cell that was integrated into our staff. Peter and his people would show up when we were talking about a day-to-day problem to try to get a longer-term strategic perspective. Really, I found that the best time I could do me – with that team was Saturday morning, because that's the only time things got to – sort of quieted down a little bit.

But there's a terrific resource that's available to Nadia and H.R., and that is you are pressed to have time to take the longer view. But of course, we have a robust think tank community, here in Washington, and one of the things that we did was come up with sort of 10 things that might go bump in the night and be a problem for us. And Peter went quietly to a number of think tanks and said, you know, we – if you would do a study on the long-term implications of X, I think I know some people in the White House who would be interested in reading it. So I think there's actually a real opportunity for using this think tank community, as well as the intelligence community and policy planning communities, to make the intellectual investment and looking over the horizon and trying to talk about some alternative strategies. It's a – it's a partnership that I don't think we've taken full advantage of.

MR. HAMRE: Jim.

GEN. JONES: I completely agree with that. Having the privilege of working in a think tank like CSIS, I think there's great value to asking the think tank community to take on some of the strategic issues that are coming at us, but they're not quite mature, but bear watching and thinking about. And it's just that it's a force multiplier and it's something that should be used, I think.

MR. HAMRE: Please.

GEN. MCMASTER: Just to add on, I think it's important, obviously, to have this focus, but as Stephen has mentioned, to organize properly for it as well. And so it's outreach to think tanks to bring in outside perspectives. And really what I'm doing is repeating a lot of the advice I got from many of you as I took the job. But it's also helping the departments and agencies maintain that long-term perspective and to help integrate their long-term planning. So what we did to organize is create a deputy national security adviser for strategy, Dina Powell, who is our main bridge into policy planning at State, into OSD policy, and brings those teams together around what we're calling national security challenges so that we are ready to frame these problems, get guidance from principals, that they've already been talking about within their department. So it's not a meeting that's held and we say Iran or Russia, discuss. This is something that Dina has really led across departments and agencies so we're ready for that framing discussion.

MR. HAMRE: Henry raised a very interesting issue which I didn't focus on in my time. I'd like to come and bring us back to it, and that is when he talked about the necessity of governments doing things in secret. But we're a democracy where ultimately policy is a public debate. And I would like to get – how do you feel about this – the – obviously the government has to have secret channels where it can initiate diplomacy, but it has to be grounded in something we talk to the American public about. Henry opened the door on this. And again, I just – H.R., if you'd give us your reaction, and Jim, and Steve, and I'll come back to Henry.

GEN. JONES: Want to start?

MR. HADLEY: Well, I had a practice that I had no secrets from my NSC principals. There wasn't anything that I was doing that Condi Rice, the secretary of state, and Bob Gates, the secretary of defense, didn't know. And it was fine because that's the way the president wanted it. So I think that is an important piece. And we had the kinds of relationships where I was very comfortable doing that. I also wanted them to know what I was thinking, and to get a sense of the kind of advice I would give to the president so that if they had a different view, they would have an opportunity to present the other side.

I think in terms of the Congress and the public, I think one of the things we have to distinguish between is the thematic and general direction of policy from sort of operational and execution details. And I think, you know, the public and the Congress. And I think, you know, the public and the Congress, once you start with thematic, they have an inexhaustible desire to go all the way down to the details. And it's a mistake.

And I think what we've got to do is make that distinction – thematic, broad policy, what's context, what's our objectives, what's our basic principles of our strategy, and then, you know, let the professionals do the implementation and execution, where some secrecy is required, because, you know, your strategy won't succeed if the enemy knows what you're going to do before you get there and do it. I think that's a distinction we've lost, and we need to try to – a discipline we need to reintroduce into the system.

GEN. JONES: One of the things that technology does allow for is very classified communications with friends and allies. And one of the things that I not only enjoyed the most but I thought was very productive is engaging other national security advisers on a weekly basis with a one-to-two-hour video teleconference on a regular basis.

That had a very unifying effect on the big issues. And you could talk at a pretty high level of confidence. I don't recall anything that was ever discussed on those video teleconferences ever being revealed in public, by them or by us. It was – and then more countries decided to adopt the national security adviser in their government. For instance, the U.K. didn't have a national security adviser officially designated until 2009-2010. And more countries have since come on, I think. I'm sure H.R. has more interlocutors to deal with.

But I think you have to be careful to make sure that when the national security adviser is using those channels that there's immediate feedback to the secretary of state, the secretary of defense and other departments. And that's a metric that absolutely you have to live by, because otherwise you have fragmentation. And the big risk for a national security adviser is that, you know, if he or she doesn't do that well, you become competitive with another department. And that's absolutely something that you can't tolerate.

GEN. MCMASTER: The real dilemma is the more people you can bring in, the better – the more expertise you can bring in and bring to bear on a problem, the better, because it gives you different perspectives. It allows you to understand better the tools that you can bring to bear to help solve problems.

But in recent years in particular, the problem with leaks has become a real challenge to national security. And so I think what's very important is that everyone that's involved in these sort of policy discussions understand the sacred trust that is placed in them, and they realize that speaking to the media about government deliberations is treasonous when it involves national security.

And so then I think, with that confidence established, the more transparency, the better, I think, in terms of common understanding across departments and agencies. And so that's the balance, I think, that we really have to strike.

MR. KISSINGER: Let me make a philosophical point here. In conventional wisdom, it's, of course, desirable to have transparency. And secrecy is supposed to be bad, and sharing knowledge is supposed to be very good. But if you ask yourself how history is actually made, if you turn it into a bureaucratic effort, a lot of people get informed, and you may wind up stagnating and being paralyzed.

The essence of creative policymaking is to go down a road that is in a lonely fashion. There's a Spanish proverb that says, traveler, there is no road; roads are made by walking. And this seems to me to be an aspect of policymaking. And if one becomes too obsessed with clearances, which is on one level a way of feeding everybody's ego, and nobody is willing to walk on unfamiliar roads, then you're in great difficulty.

Of course, a president or a secretary of state, when he pursues secret avenues, will have to justify them in a measurable time and embody them in the thinking. But when President Bush sent Brent Scowcroft to China after Tiananmen, if that had been made as a public discussion, there would have been endless debates. And after he had been there and worked out some principles, those principles could then be discussed and become part of the political process.

So the art of conducting the NSC, in my opinion, involves a combination of making sure that there is the needed level of transparency, but also that there is an element of creativity. And one of the

realities, in my observation, is that the operators always have the floor because they have immediate problems, and the thinkers who want to do something have to establish themselves.

And so almost every president that I've observed has, somewhere along the line, felt it necessary to employ emissaries channel – separate channels. So the essence is can we find the balance? I'm a great admirer of the current security adviser, so this is not directed at current events, but this – if you're thinking about the role of the National Security Council, this is a key element to reflect on, how to strike that balance between the operation and the vision.

MR. HAMRE: I'm going to ask, I think, the hardest question. And Henry, I'm going to start with you. You know, America, because it's such a dynamic and – in one sense dynamic, but fractured society – we've got so many different traditions in our country – it's hard for us to develop a sustained geostrategic strategy, something that carries over from administration to administration to administration.

You've talked about how we get excited with our missionary impulses and take on new goals, but we lose it in the politics. How do we develop – what are the necessary preconditions for establishing a durable national strategy that would transcend over multiple administrations? Henry.

MR. KISSINGER: I think one of the biggest differences, maybe the biggest difference, between the United States and other great countries is that we have never had the experience of a direct national danger to our survival, except in the Civil War, when it was domestic.

For the greatest part of our history, after the first generation, we could conduct foreign policy as observers and as fixing immediate problems that impinged on us. So we tend to think of foreign policy as a series of fixable problems. And while you take, say, the Chinese, to them foreign policy is a continuing process. They don't think that you can fix a problem. A fixed problem is an admissions ticket to another problem to them. And it's one of the problems when our presidents talk to Chinese leaders.

So not having had that danger, but now we're living in a world of permanent danger because of new technologies and in which the judgments we made need not to be addressed only to an immediate issue, but in shaping – in shaping the future. That's a new experience for Americans. And we don't have trained personnel in that way that has had to do it for a sustained period of time.

And so some of the criticisms one can make of American foreign policy are very understandable. We have thought of America being a beacon whose internal performance would shape the world. And so we tend to think if we can reshape the domestic structure of other countries in our direction, that that will come into being.

Now we have to learn that we have to make progress in stages and that we have to learn the nature of nuance. And considering that we had to start all of this from scratch, it's amazing what's been achieved. And there's no other national security adviser in the world today who has the assignment that the American national security adviser has.

So, yes, I tend to criticize our failing strategic view, but it's also got us to where we are. Now we have to change it, to broaden it. That's a big challenge. And the NSC adviser now has to deal with all our current problems and with that new problem. And that's a huge assignment.

MR. HAMRE: Do you any of you care to – Steve?

MR. HADLEY: Well, I think it's a problem. I think if you look back and you say where have we come closest to doing what Henry has been talking about, I think it was probably in managing the Cold War and managing the response after 9/11 to the terrorist attack on the United States.

And I'm somewhat familiar with both of them. I think the Cold War is an example where we had common policy across a number of different administrations. 9/11 and the response there was more difficult. We had a lot of division within the country. But I think the formula is the same, to pick up Henry's point: Getting a vision endorsed by the president that seems to fit the times and be a focus of the strategy, and then taking that strategy and having a national debate and discussion and involving the Congress. And I think we succeeded in the Cold War with a lot of fights over the tactics, but the basic strategy had a lot of bipartisan support, was maintained over five administrations.

After 9/11, we had huge debates about the balance between what we need to do to safeguard the country and, within the law, what we needed to do to ensure that we stay the kind of society, an open society, we wanted to be. We had a lot of struggles about that in the courts, in the legislature and public opinion. But we've sort of come to a consensus. We're still struggling about the details. But it was interesting that there's a lot of continuity in terms of dealing with war on terror policies from the Bush administration to the Obama administration and now in the Trump administration.

So in our own untidy way, it's difficult. But we have been able to do it. And I think there's been a lot of continuity on China policy, for example. So – but it is hard and it takes work.

MR. HAMRE: Jim.

GEN. JONES: I think we're one of the few countries that publishes a national security strategy on a regular basis. I think that's an extraordinarily good thing to do, both classified and unclassified. And I think the departments that – the individual departments ought to publish their own strategy to support the national security strategy. I think that makes eminent sense. It provides for the information for the public in the unclassified sense. And it protects you from revealing too much in the classified side. So I think that's a very good thing to do, and it keeps people focused on the long ball instead of the short game.

MR. HAMRE: We're at the end of our time, colleagues, but I do want to save just a minute or two for General McMaster. He's currently the custodian of this remarkable institution. It's been – probably no other single institution in America is as important on a day-to-day basis than the National Security Council. We're now at the 70th anniversary.

What – you are currently the steward. What is your vision, and how do you look at the future for this, H.R.? And we'll wrap it up with that.

GEN. MCMASTER: Well, as Dr. Kissinger mentioned already, the stakes couldn't be higher. There are new dangers to national security. It's clear that in the middle of the last century that the age – what one historian called “the age of free security” was over. But what we see now is the democratization of destruction, new threats that are emerging, new battlegrounds in contested spaces involving very sophisticated campaigns of subversion, the use of cyber capabilities, for example.

And so that really requires us to really focus on our strategic competence. In recent years I think you can make the argument that we've swung from maybe unrealistic expectations about the degree of agency and control we have over very complicated situations to almost defeatism and withdrawal from certain contested spaces and battlegrounds.

So what the president has directed us to do is to approach the national-security challenges, the problems and opportunities, from a perspective of pragmatic realism, to prioritize the safety and security of the American people, to emphasize the connection between security and American prosperity in new ways such that we integrate what we're doing from an economic perspective with what we're doing from a military and diplomatic perspective in new and different ways to emphasize peace through strength, to explore new forms of deterrence against a broader range of actors that can do us harm, despite the oceans on either side of our continent, but then also to advance American influence in recognition that it's America's partners and allies and likeminded nations that give us our unique strength and influence across the world. So these are ideas that underpin the development of our integrated strategies and certainly will underpin the national-security strategy as well.

But I would just like to say, first of all, thank you to John and CSIS for this tremendous opportunity. And I would like to thank in particular former national security advisers from whom I've learned so much and benefited from your kind advice and mentorship as I took on this job in a quite unexpected way, from a cold start. And so thank you, John, and thanks to all of you.

MR. HAMRE: Before I let you say thank you with your applause, we've got a bunch of people here who have worked on the staff of the National Security Council in various positions, various times. Could I just ask those of you that have ever worked in the National Security Council, raise your hand? All right, thank you. (Applause.) And I will say thanks to all of you, finally. (Applause.)

(END)