Peter W. Rodman, Presidential Command: Power, Leadership, and the Making of Foreign Policy from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) 351 pp., $27.95

Presidential Command by the late Peter Rodman, a protege of Henry Kissinger, provides an insider's account of foreign policy-making in seven administrations. Having served in high position during five of those administrations, Rodman, an unabashed advocate of presidential authority, presents a personal perspective on the exercise of presidential statecraft. In conclusion, he offers a primer of practical lessons for future presidents.

Inheriting an NSC structure leaving policy implementation to the State Department, Richard Nixon determined to run foreign policy from the White House, using the NSC as the instrument of presidential control. A "committee of two" in the White House, Nixon and national security adviser Kissinger, would coordinate and implement foreign policy. This produced the notorious feud with Secretary of State Rogers, judged by Rodman as weak and unable to impose presidential will on the Foreign Service, as Kissinger asserted control over all official communications and devised an elaborate, secret network of back-channels centered on himself for Soviet affairs, China, SALT, and Vietman. Kissinger's strength in bureaucratic struggles and with foreign leaders derived from the President's authority. Although Nixon possessed "the deepest intuition and shrewdest strategic judgment" of any recent president, the exclusionary nature of his centralized system, Rodman believes, does not furnish a model for future presidents.

A self-confident, gregarious Gerald Ford adopted a model of cabinet government, delegating responsibility to heavy-weight cabinet officers loyal to his agenda. The "extreme collegiality" of the early administration, however, fostered White House indiscipline. Mutual confidence and candor existed between Ford and an initially dual-hatted Secretary of State and security adviser Kissinger, though external political forces buffeting the administration strained the relation. Kissinger reconciled himself to Ford's appointment in 1975 of his deputy, Brent Scowcroft, as security adviser, but Scowcroft's adroit performance of "honest broker" smoothed collaboration with the Secretary of State.

Wanting no repeat of Kissinger, Jimmy Carter initially welcomed competition between the "counterweights" of security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Vance. In time Carter, dissatisfied with Vance's weakness and inability to steer State, shifted to greater White House control and responsibility for Brzezinski, although Brzezinski never received the full presidential support Kissinger had. The flaw of Carter's "balanced" system, argues Rodman, lay in "the philosophical schizophrenia of the president," often resulting in an incoherent splitting of the difference between the hard Brzezinski and soft Vance. The fall of the Shah revealed Carter's policy ambivalence, as the White House failed to control State's policy implementation and Carter evaded to the end the issue of the use of force.

Rodman "admires" Ronald Reagan, but faults The Gipper's executive skill. Reagan too preferred cabinet government, where cabinet officers, not the president's staffers, would be his advisers and execute policy. The position of national security adviser was downgraded. The system's looseness, Reagan's aversion to personal confrontation with subordinates, and his detached management style bred turmoil, policy confusion, and a protracted struggle between Defense Secretary Weinberger and Secretary of State Shultz. Like Carter's Iran policy, Reagan's muddled Lebanon policy resulted from splitting the difference between conflicting strategies.

Rodman credits Bush I with the "smoothest-run" administration in his study. Here were a knowledgeable, experienced President in command, loyal Secretaries of State and Defense carrying out his policies, and security adviser Scowcroft serving as "honest broker and coordinator" fully supported by the President. An open, informal management style existed, with key subordinates having ready access to the President. Oval Office meetings of the "Gang of Eight" (Secretaries Baker and Cheney, Scowcroft, JCS Chairman Colin Powell, COS John Sununu, Baker deputy Lawrence Eagleburger, Scowcrogt deputy Robert Gates, and Vice-President Quayle) replaced regular NSC meetings.

Scowcroft was the "impresario and enforcer of this process," where a spirit of trust prevailed. His qualities - honest broker, intellectual weight, managerial acumen - became known as the "Scowcroft model." A Scowcroft innovation retained through Bush II was the Principals Committee, an NSC of key cabinet secretaries, minus the President, chaired by the security adviser, to settle interagency disputes before issues moved to the President.

Bill Clinton retained this structure, but his administration was plagued by lack of sustained presidential engagement and undisciplined proceedings, what Colin Powell likened to "graduate-student bull sessions." Clinton's second term improved, when he delegated to a strong individual (Rubin in international economic policy, Talbott in Russia policy, Holbrooke in Bosnia, Mitchell in Northern Ireland), or was personally involved as at Camp David II. Again, the lesson is that only direct presidential engagement can impart coherence to the policy process.

Bush II intended a collegial process, like his father's, with responsibility delegated to subordinates, but his CEO management style prevented him from addressing divisions and ensuring policy consistency. Rodman highly regards Colin Powell, whose deference to the Foreign Service, however, put him at odds with the White House; Powell never acquired a comfortable rapport with the boss. Though acknowledging Vice-President Cheney's unusual influence in the Oval Office, Rodman considers the Cheney-Rumsfeld "cabal" theory overstated, with the President often switching sides and sometimes deferring judgment altogether. Bush wanted a bureaucratic consensus to emerge, but failed to make it happen.

The cardinal lesson from Rodman's thoughtful study is the necessity of steady, personal presidential engagement in the policy process. Institutional structures offer no substitute. Bureaucratic consensus is a mirage; the President must decide key issues, then delegate implementation to loyal subordinates. The security adviser must check end-runs to the Oval Office, but secretaries need personal time with the President; these separate dealings, therefore, should be transparent to all concerned. Rodman favors a system with a strong, loyal Secretary of State to direct the Department. A security adviser on the Scowcroft model of fairness and trust, the President's strong right arm, is needed to protect the President's interests and oversee bureaucratic performance. The old adage that "personnel is everything" remains true. The paramount factor in government, Rodman maintains, is the character of people, above all the Commander-in-Chief.

What are the early signs for the Obama administration? Retired Marine General James Jones, the new security adviser, promises a "dramatically different" NSC from its predecessors.[1] Jones made clear his intention to run the process and be the primary conduit of advice to Obama, eliminating divisive back-channels and pledging transparency, with meeting agendas and results available to "the whole community." Each Department will appoint a monitor of the NSC to keep senior officials abreast of issues. NSC directorates will oversee implementation of decisions. Jones professes a spirit of collegiality, but plans to drive the process. "I believe in collegiality…in sounding out people and getting them to participate," Jones states. Nevertheless, "The most important thing is that you are in fact the coordinator and you're the guy around which the meetings occur. When we chair a principals meeting, I'm the chairman."[2]

Obama has created two types of national security orders: presidential policy directives, and presidential study directives to initiate policy reviews. Policy Directive 1 of February 13 adds the Attorney General, Secretaries of Energy and Homeland Security, and UN Ambassador to the formal NSC. International economic, counterterrorism, science and technology advisers will be "regular members," when their issues are on the agenda. A system of interagency committees will coordinate analysis and reviews of issues "for consideration by the more senior committees…and to ensure timely responses to decisions made by the President."[3] Study Directive 1 of February 23 orders an interagency review of the homeland security and counterterrorism structures.

Time will tell how former law professor Obama and the retired Marine General establish rapport and how Jones strikes all the delicate balances needed to manage a "team of rivals." The chief ingredient in maintaining these balances will be a condition of trust among all the principals and a deft talent for discipline and anonymity by the security adviser. As Brent Scowcroft once said, the adviser "should be seen occasionally, heard even less."[4]

Notes

1. Karen DeYoung, "Obama's NSC Will Get New Power," Washington Post (Feb. 8, 2009), A1.

2. Ibid.

3. Karen DeYoung, "National Security Structure Is Set," Washington Post (Feb. 27, 2009). A3.

4. Quoted in David Ignatius, "Welcome to the Toughest Job in Town," Washington Post (Mar. 1, 2009), B4. See also Ivo H. Daalder and I.M. Destler, "In the Shadow of the Oval Office: The Next National Security Adviser," Foreign Affairs, 88(Jan./Feb., 2009), pp. 114-129.