

Keepers of the Keys



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The NSC started out in 1947 under the National Security Act, the same bill that authorized the CIA. Truman rarely bothered to attend its meetings, but Eisenhower created the position of national security advisor. Kennedy strengthened the NSC when he used its staff and his advisors to deal with the Cuban missile crisis, and Johnson gave his advisors, McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, major roles in Vietnam policy.

Kissinger, who was Nixon's national security advisor, exercised a monopoly on foreign policy, making both the State Department and the NSC itself almost superfluous. Ford tried to restore the balance, but Carter's advisor Brzezinski regained much of the power that Kissinger once had. By the time Reagan sleepwalked his way into the oval office, the NSC was able to run with the ball in the President's name. This allowed an obscure lieutenant colonel named Oliver North to orchestrate U.S. policy under the protection of U.S. secrecy laws, and in the name of the American people (despite public opinion polls to the contrary). While journalists were generally content to doze under Reagan's spell, some eventually woke up.

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