



INTRODUCTION

POLICYMAKING IS POLITICS

ROGER HILSMAN

POLICY-MAKING IS POLITICS

*I*n this excerpt from his book *To Move a Nation*, originally written in 1964, Roger Hilsmann provides a thoughtful introduction to the politics of U.S. foreign policy. He discusses some of the common perceptions that many Americans acquire regarding American politics that must be confronted and overcome if the politics of U.S. foreign policy is to be really understood. In this sense, Hilsmann provides an introductory orientation for viewing and understanding the politics of U.S. foreign policy that will follow in the subsequent readings throughout this volume.

Many Americans tend to have a rather simple view of the foreign policy process: where foreign policy is defined and made at the top of the political hierarchy by the president. Hilsmann reminds us that the U.S. foreign policy process is complex and messy—that the president does not make foreign policy alone. Many other individuals and institutions are involved within the government and throughout society in the foreign policy

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process: presidential advisers, high-level officials within the executive branch, the bureaucracy, Congress, the courts, state and local governments, the public, political parties, interest groups and social movements, the media, and global actors. It is in this sense that the making of U.S. foreign policy is a complex process. It is also a complicated process because the variety of individuals and institutions that affect U.S. foreign policy do not stand still but they constantly interact and impact one another. In other words, the policymaking process is not static, but dynamic.

Many Americans also expect and hope that the making of American foreign policy should result in a rational process that is somehow above politics. From this perspective, politics is seen as a dirty word for it implies unsavory behavior in the political arena. Hilsman reminds us that the foreign policy process is very much a political process—that the nature of politics needs to be examined and understood for it is the essence of the foreign policy process. Bottom line, the politics of U.S. foreign policy involves competition among differently motivated individuals and groups, involves the flow of power and symbolism throughout government and society, and involves winners and losers. In other words, U.S. foreign policy tends to reflect the goals and priorities of those individuals and groups who are the most successful in influencing the political process within the government and throughout society. Such a foreign policy process may be more or less moral, depending on the type of value judgment that is made. Ultimately, however, the making of U.S. foreign policy is a political process inseparable from politics.

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“Washington,” I remember Secretary of State Dean Rusk saying when one of our colleagues was cruelly and unfairly attacked in the press, “is an evil town.” It is, but not because the people who inhabit it are evil by nature, but because of the struggle that is inherent in the fact that the capital of a nation is the nerve center of the nation’s power. Where power is, there also are conflict and turmoil. Thus the reasons that Washington is the way it is lie deep in the heart of both the nature of the business of Washington and of the political and governmental process by which that business is carried out.

DECISIONS

The business of Washington is making decisions that move a nation, decisions about the direction American society should go and decisions about how and where and for what purposes the awesome power—economic, political, and military—of this, the world’s most powerful nation, shall be used. The decisions are about social security and Medicare and labor laws and the rules for conducting business and manufacture. Or they are about moving a nation toward war or peace—a test ban treaty, intervening in Vietnam, the U.N. in the Congo, or Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. Where the power to move a nation is, there also are the great decisions.

What is decided is policy. It is policy about problems and issues that may make or break powerful interests in our society—organized labor or the medical profession or the massive interests represented by the “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower warned about in his farewell address. Or it is policy that will cost American lives in some foreign jungle and result either in our continued survival and success as a nation or, conceivably, in our downfall in a nuclear holocaust that takes much of the rest of the world with us. In the business of Washington, the stakes are high.

THE PROCESS OF POLICY-MAKING

The nature and importance of the business done in Washington are obvious. The process by which that business is done and the nation is moved is more obscure.

As Americans, with our flair for the mechanical and love of efficiency combined with a moralistic Puritan heritage, we would like to think not only that policymaking is a conscious and deliberate act, one of analyzing problems and systematically examining grand alternatives in all their implications, but also that the alternative chosen is aimed at achieving overarching ends that serve a high moral purpose. Evidence that there is confusion about goals or evidence that the goals themselves may be competing or mutually incompatible is disquieting, and we hear repeated calls for a renewed national purpose, for a unifying ideology with an appeal abroad that will rival Communism, or for a national strategy that will fill both functions and set the guidelines for all of policy. As Americans, we think it only reasonable that the procedures for making national decisions should be orderly, with clear lines of responsibility and authority. We assume that what we call the “decisions” of government are in fact decisions—discrete acts, with recognizable beginnings and sharp, decisive endings. We like to think of policy as rationalized, in the economist’s sense of the word, with each step leading logically and economically to the next. We want to be able to find out who makes decisions, to feel that they are the proper, official, and authorized persons, and to know that the really big decisions will be made at the top, by the President and his principal advisers in the formal assemblage of the Cabinet or the National Security Council and with the Congress exercising its full and formal powers. And we feel that the entire decision-making process ought to be a dignified, even majestic progression, with each of the participants having roles and powers so well and precisely defined that they can be held accountable for their actions by their superiors and eventually by the electorate.

The reality, of course, is quite different. Put dramatically, it could be argued that few, if any, of the decisions of government are either decisive or final. Very often policy is the sum of a congeries of separate or only vaguely related actions. On other occasions, it is an uneasy, even internally inconsistent compromise among competing goals or an incompatible mixture of alternative means for achieving a single goal. There is no systematic and comprehensive study of all the implications of the grand alternatives—nor can there be. A government does not decide to inau-

gurate the nuclear age, but only to try to build an atomic bomb before its enemy does. It does not make a formal decision to become a welfare state, but only to take each of a series of steps—to experiment with an income tax at some safely innocuous level like 3 percent, to alleviate the hardship of men who have lost their jobs in a depression with a few weeks of unemployment compensation, or to lighten the old age of industrial workers with a tentative program of social security benefits. Rather than through grand decisions on grand alternatives, policy changes seem to come through a series of slight modifications of existing policy, with the new policy emerging slowly and haltingly by small and usually tentative steps, a process of trial and error in which policy zigs and zags, reverses itself, and then moves forward in a series of incremental steps.¹ Sometimes policies are formulated and duly ratified only to be skewed to an entirely different direction and purpose by those carrying them out—or they are never carried out at all. And sometimes issues are endlessly debated with nothing at all being resolved until both the problem and the debaters disappear under the relentless pyramiding of events.

THE POWER OF THE PRESIDENT

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One result of all this is that in spite of the great power they wield, presidents can very rarely command, even within what is supposedly their most nearly absolute domain, the Executive Branch itself. President Truman, as he contemplated turning the presidency over to Eisenhower, used to say, "He'll sit here and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won't be a bit like the Army."²

Presidents, being human, sometimes find the system frustrating. Once at a press conference, President Kennedy surprised us all by answering a question about allied trade with Cuba with a promise to take certain measures that were still under discussion. "Well," he said afterward with some exasperation. "Today I actually made a little policy." But mainly, presidents maneuver, persuade, and pressure—using all the levers, powers, and influences they can muster. And most presidents recognize that this is what they must do....

On some occasions presidents do not succeed in getting the others to come around, and they must then either pay the political costs of public disunity or make some concession to achieve the unity of compromise. In the Kennedy administration, for example, the State Department was convinced that high-level visits to Vietnam were politically bad. They felt, in particular, that visits by so high-ranking an official as Secretary of Defense McNamara would get United States prestige hooked too tightly to the roller coaster of events in Vietnam in spite of the fact that we had only limited influence on those events. Visits by so high-ranking an official would also tend to make a bad situation look even worse by showing our concern too openly. And, finally, such visits would tend to make a Vietnamese struggle conducted with only our aid and advice look in the world's eyes like a purely American war.

The President was only too well aware of these probable consequences, but in the circumstances, he indicated that he was prepared to pay the price. For the only

way of keeping the higher-ranking military officers in the Pentagon from an increasingly public display of discontent with the President's decision not to enlarge the war was to keep the Secretary of Defense fully content with the policy. And the only way to do that, apparently, was to let him see for himself.

On some occasions, the President clearly makes the decision, even if he cannot make it exactly as he might wish. On other occasions, the decision is just as clearly made by Congress. But in action after action, responsibility for decision is as fluid and restless as quicksilver, and there seems to be neither a person nor an organization on whom it can be fixed. At times the point of decision seems to have escaped into the labyrinth of governmental machinery, beyond layers and layers of bureaucracy. Other times it seems never to have reached the government, but remained in either the wider domain of a public opinion created by the press or in the narrower domain dominated by the maneuverings of special interests.

TURMOIL

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Just as our desire to know who makes a decision is frustrated, so is our hope that the process of policy-making will be dignified. A decision, in fact, may be little more than a signal that starts a public brawl by people who want to reverse it. President Eisenhower's "New Look" decision to concentrate on air power at the expense of ground forces, for example, had no visible result for the first year except semipublic fights with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, an eruption of the so-called "Colonels' revolt," and frequent leaks of top secret information. The whole strategy was completely reversed when the Kennedy administration came into responsibility in 1961, and the reversal was fought by the same technique of leaks, but this time it was Air Force rather than Army partisans doing the leaking. At the very beginning of the Kennedy administration, for example, Rusk wrote McNamara a memorandum seeking an interdepartmental discussion of the basic problem, and a distorted version of the memo was promptly given to Air Force sympathizers in the press in an obvious attempt at sabotage.

Leaks, of course, are the first and most blatant signs of battle, and they are endemic in the policy process. When it became clear, for example, that the report of the Gaither Committee, set up by Eisenhower in 1957 to study civil defense in terms of the whole of nuclear strategy, would be critical of the "New Look" and the entire Eisenhower defense policy, the crucial battle between the different factions within the administration took place, not on the substance of the report, but on the issue of whether there would be two hundred top secret copies of the report or only two. For everyone knew without saying so that if the President did not accept the Gaither Committee's recommendations, it might be possible to keep the report from leaking to the press if there were only two copies, but never if there were two hundred. The committee won the battle, and two hundred top secret copies were distributed within the Executive Branch. The President did not accept the recommendations; and, sure enough, within a few days Chalmers Roberts of the *Washington Post* was

able to write a story, covering almost two newspaper pages, that contained an accurate and comprehensive version of both the top secret report and its recommendations.

Not surprisingly, it was these continual leaks that especially puzzled and angered Eisenhower. In 1955, he said, "For some two years and three months I have been plagued by interplecible undiscovered leaks in this Government." But so are all presidents, before and after Eisenhower. Not only are there leaks of secret information, but leaks that distort secret information so as to present a special view that is often totally false. There flows out of Washington a continuous stream of rumor, tales of bickering, speculation, stories of selfish interest, charges and countercharges. Abusive rivalries arise between the government agencies engaged in making policy, and even within a single agency different factions battle, each seeking allies in other agencies, among the members of Congress, from interest associations, and among the press. Officialdom, whether civil or military, is hardly neutral. It speaks, and inevitably it speaks as an advocate. The Army battles for ground forces, the Air Force for bombers; the "Europe faction" in the State Department for policy benefiting NATO, and the "Africa faction" for anticolonialist policies unsettling to our relations with Europe. All of these many interests, organizations, and institutions—inside and outside the government—are joined in a struggle over the goals of governmental policy and over the means by which these goals shall be achieved. Instead of unity, there is conflict. Instead of a majestic progression, there are erratic ziggs and zaggs. Instead of clarity and decisiveness, there are tangle and turmoil, instead of order, confusion.

SOURCES OF THE TURMOIL

But even though we deplore the disorder and confusion, the seeming disloyalty of leaks, the noise and untidiness, and all the rest, it would be well to look more deeply into the nature of the process before condemning it.

Partly, of course, the turbulence derives from the nature of our constitution itself. As Richard E. Neustadt has pointed out, the constitutional convention of 1787 did not really create a government of "separated powers" as we have been taught, but a government of separated institutions sharing powers.³ The Executive, for example, is clearly part of the legislative process—almost all major bills today are drafted and put forward by the Executive department concerned, and the President still has the veto. The courts, too, legislate—much to the annoyance of many congressmen, especially die-hard segregationists. And the Congress is equally involved in administration, in both its investigative function and its appropriation of money and oversight of spending. To the head of a department or agency, the Congress, with its power to reward and punish, is as much his boss as is the President. And some agency heads can build enough power on the Hill to put themselves beyond the reach of a President even to fire them—as J. Edgar Hoover succeeded in doing with his job as director of the FBI. Different institutions sharing powers, getting in-

involved in each others' business, provide the checks and balances sought by the founding fathers and many other benefits besides. But they also contribute to the phenomenon of turbulence.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF ACTORS

Still another dimension is the now familiar fact that many more people are involved in the process of government than merely those who hold the duly constituted official positions. It is no accident that the press, for example, is so often called the "fourth branch of government." The press plays a role in the process of governance. It performs functions which are a necessary part of the process and which it sometimes performs well and sometimes badly.

There are also lobbies, the spokesmen of special interests of every kind and description from oil producers and farmers to the Navy League and Women Strike for Peace. Their efforts on Capitol Hill are more familiar, but the lobbies work just as hard to influence the Executive, although in different ways. In any case, they play a role in the process of governance and perform necessary functions, often for good but sometimes for evil.

And there are others who play a role. The academic world, the world of research in the universities, has an influence and participates in the process, both formally and informally. In the presidential campaigns of 1960 and 1964, for example, no candidate could be without his own team of university advisers—Kennedy and Nixon each had such a team, and so did both Johnson and Goldwater. Most of the more effective senators on Capitol Hill have academic friends, experts in the universities, whom they regularly consult. And there is a whole new set of institutions doing research of all kinds on contract with the government, organizations staffed with people who have governmental clearances for secret work but who are neither in the armed services nor the civil service—quasi-governmental organizations such as the RAND Corporation, in Santa Monica, California, the Institute of Defense Analyses, in Washington, and the Hudson Institute, just outside New York. All of these people and organizations influence policy. Although not accountable to the electorate, they have power and they are as much a part of the governmental process as the traditional legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government. There are many more people involved in making policy than those who hold official positions, in sum, and they have more subtle ways for shaping policy.

POLICY CONVICTIONS

As we have said, in the business of Washington, the stakes are high and the issues fundamental, both to our society and to the question of war and peace for the entire world. In such circumstances it is not surprising that passions run strong and full. It is not even surprising that men occasionally feel so deeply that they take matters

give completely satisfying. As Americans, we aspire to a rationalized system of government and policy-making. This implies that a nation can pursue a single set of clearly perceived and generally agreed-to goals, as a business organization is supposed to pursue profits. Yet is this realistic? Is the problem of making policy in a highly diversified mass society really one of relating different steps in making a decision to a single set of goals or is it precisely one of choosing goals—of choosing goals not in the abstract but in the convoluted context of ongoing events, with inadequate information, incomplete knowledge and understanding, and insufficient power—and doing so, in all probability, while we are pitted against opposition both at home and abroad? If so, the making of national decisions is not a problem for the efficiency expert, or of assembling different pieces of policy logically as if the product were an automobile. Policy faces inward as much as outward, seeking to reconcile conflicting goals, to adjust aspirations to available means, and to accommodate the different advocates of these competing goals and aspirations to one another. It is here that the essence of policy-making seems to lie, in a process that is in its deepest sense political.

Recognizing the political nature of policy-making might help us to a better understanding of the diversity and seeming inconsistency of the goals that national policy must serve. It might also help us to understand the powerful but sometimes hidden forces through which these competing goals are reconciled, why the pushes and pulls of these crosscurrents are sometimes dampened or obscured, and why they are sometimes so fiercely public. Even the roles of such "unrational" procedures as bargaining and power might also become more clear.

President Kennedy once said, "There will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision-making process—mysterious even to those who may be most intimately involved²⁸ Yet it is equally true that we can understand better than we now do how a nation is moved and that better understanding can lead to more effective policy and perhaps even to improvements in the policy-making process itself. Understanding comes in looking at the vital stuff of events themselves, in the interaction of the President, the Congress, the press, and special interests and in the rivalries of the great Executive departments, State, Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency, as they clash in the actual making of policy, in the crucible of events.

NOTES

- 1 See Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through,'" *Public Administration Review*, XIX, 1959, and his book *The Intelligence of Democracy*, 1965.
- 2 Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 1960, p. 9.
- 3 Richard E. Neustadt, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- 4 In his foreword to Theodore C. Sorensen's *Decision-Making in the White House*, Columbia University Press, 1963.

PART ONE

THE GOVERNMENT AND THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS