

Reagan's biggest failure holds a lesson for Bush

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Much is being written about Ronald Reagan's successes in economics, politics and foreign affairs. Just as important was how he responded to his failures. In fact, Reagan's response to his greatest failure - the Iran-Contra disaster - offers important lessons for how policy is made today.

For the first six years of Reagan's presidency the foreign policymaking process looked very much like what we see today. The secretaries of state and defence pressed competing policy agendas, and their departments fought one another more than they collaborated. The president often allowed the differences to fester. The national security adviser (Reagan went through four in six years) either proved unable to forge agreement on policy or was not empowered by the president to do so.

Conflict in Washington sometimes brought disaster abroad. The greatest catastrophe of all was the Iran-Contra scandal, in which Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a junior National Security Council aide, orchestrated an arms sale to Iran in a futile bid to bargain for the release of American hostages, then delivered the proceeds to rebels seeking to overthrow Nicaragua's government. When these illegal acts were revealed in November 1986, Reagan suffered a greater one-month plunge in public support (from 67 to 46 per cent) than any president before or since.

But he bounced back. He appointed a presidential commission composed of people of unquestioned integrity and charged them to find out what had gone wrong. He ordered his administration to co-operate fully with the investigation, and made himself available for two long interviews. Within three months, the commission published a scathing critique, coupled with recommendations for restoring the NSC as the effective co-ordinator for foreign policy. Reagan went on national television to take "full responsibility" for the commission's findings. And he immediately set about implementing its proposals.

Under Frank Carlucci and his successor as national security adviser, Colin Powell, the NSC staff was reconstituted and its role clarified. Co-operation between agencies was restored. The organisational foundation was laid for the policy triumphs of Reagan's final years. He left office with his popularity and credibility restored.

Critical to this comeback was repairing the foreign policy machinery that had failed so disastrously. A strong NSC stood at the centre. And the national security adviser was empowered by the president to serve as an honest broker of differences between the departments of state and defence. This set the pattern for how national security policymaking would be managed in succeeding administrations - until the current one.

George W. Bush's foreign policymaking process is more akin to that which existed before the Iran-Contra affair than that that came after. Like Reagan, Mr Bush has failed to establish and empower a strong NSC capable of overcoming deep internal differences within his administration. He has anointed Condoleezza Rice as his closest foreign policy adviser, but he has not, by all accounts, pressed her to discipline his other unruly advisers. In any case, she has

not done so.

As a result, the debilitating policy battles that marked the early part of Reagan's tenure have been replicated in the current administration. Among the more egregious policy failings was allowing the defence department to ignore the extensive state department preparation for a postwar Iraq in spring 2003. The results have been making headlines ever since.

Unlike Reagan, Mr Bush has so far neither acknowledged his mistakes nor acted to change the way policy is made. Imagine how different US policy and the political situation would be today if, rather than waiting until pressure became overwhelming, Mr Bush had followed Reagan's example in appointing a strong, independent commission immediately after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 or once it became apparent that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The worst of these issues might now be behind him, not festering as he struggles for re-election.

What is the lesson here? The man elected (or re-elected) in November 2004 must return to the post-Iran-Contra model and re-establish an effective, White House-driven foreign policy process. Differences among his top advisers are fine; indeed, they are to be welcomed. But the president needs a strong NSC, headed by an adviser capable of forcing differences to the top for presidential decision and insisting that the battles end there. The president needs to support his national security adviser in this task.

In these days of fond Reagan memories, it is the sunny, happy times that come to mind. They seem far removed from today's 'war on terror' and the global crisis of confidence in American policy. But Reagan responded to adversity in a way that made him - and his nation - stronger. Perhaps today's leaders can do likewise.

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