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## Center for Space Policy and Strategy Policy Paper

# National Space Council: History and Potential

James A. Vedda  
The Aerospace Corporation

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*Jim Vedda is a senior policy analyst performing policy research and evaluation for various government agencies. He is the author of *Becoming Spacefarers: Rescuing America's Space Program* and *Choice, Not Fate: Shaping a Sustainable Future in the Space Age*. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Florida and an M.A. in science, technology, and public policy from George Washington University.*

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## Foreword

*This paper presents background and issues associated with the on-again, off-again history of the National Space Council. The bottom line is that a space council in the Executive Office of the President (EOP) can be a boon if it works well—aligning policy and strategy across the civil, commercial, and national security space sectors to serve national interests—or a wasteful exercise if it doesn't. The effectiveness of such groups has varied depending on their organizational structure and staffing, the president's level of interest, relationships with Congress and relevant agencies, the events driving the agenda, and individual personalities.*

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### A Brief History

For decades, the space community has watched each presidential transition to see how the new administration would handle decisionmaking on space policy and strategy. Specifically, would there be a dedicated space advisory group in the EOP, and if so, how would it be configured and operated? The question came up again in the wake of the 2016 election as the new administration announced that a national space council would be reestablished. It is instructive to look back at past experiences with a space advisory council serving the president.

**The Early Years.** The National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958 mandated an aeronautics and space advisory group chaired by the president and including the secretaries of State and Defense, the NASA Administrator, the chair of the Atomic Energy Commission, and up to four additional members appointed by the president, one from the executive branch and three from outside the government.<sup>1</sup> President Eisenhower had little interest in using this advisory mechanism and never hired any staff to support it. He preferred to address space issues in cabinet or National Security Council meetings.<sup>2</sup>

President Kennedy reestablished the space council about three months into his presidency, but made some changes. He recommended legislative revisions to the council's charter that made the Vice President a member and chair of the council, and eliminated the four appointed members. These changes were passed

by the Congress and signed by the president on April 25, 1961, putting Vice President Johnson in charge of the now five-person group. Its most active period was April–May 1961, as the administration deliberated the future of the civil space program and ultimately chose the moon landing goal.<sup>3</sup>

The council's activity and influence diminished in the years that followed, leading to its elimination (along with the Office of the Science Advisor) by President Nixon as he began his second term in 1973. The White House was without a space advisory group until the Carter administration, when the job was undertaken within the Office of the Science Advisor, which had been reinstated late in the Ford administration.<sup>4</sup>

**Reagan Administration.** In 1982, the Reagan administration set up a space advisory function in the National Security Council as part of its Senior Interagency Groups (SIGs). The membership of SIG(Space) included representatives from:

- National Security Council (chair)
- Department of Defense
- Department of State
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Transportation
- Central Intelligence Agency
- Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
- NASA

- Office of Science and Technology Policy (nonvoting)
- Office of Management and Budget (nonvoting)

This arrangement was considered unsatisfactory, even detrimental, by many observers, including members of Congress. The SIG(Space) members were not agency heads and did not have decisionmaking authority, resulting in many turf battles and few results. Also, the group did not report directly to the president. The output of SIG(Space) was filtered through the National Security Council, at which point it could be changed or even discarded before reaching the president.<sup>5</sup>

Congress members saw SIG(Space) as unproductive, sometimes counterproductive, and too secretive—a poor substitute for the space council originally created under NASA’s charter. Each year after SIG(Space) was formed, the NASA authorization committees tried to coax President Reagan to replace it with a new space council, but he resisted, one year even vetoing the NASA authorization bill solely due to an amendment requiring the reinstatement of the space council.<sup>6</sup>

**Bush (1) Administration.** By the time George H.W. Bush took over the White House in 1989, a space advisory group resembling the original statutory requirement had been absent for 16 years. Bush was more receptive to congressional demands for a space council, and in fact this had been one of his campaign promises. He followed through in April 1989, establishing the National Space Council (NSpC) to address the full range of civil, military, and commercial space issues.<sup>7</sup>

The NSpC membership consisted of the following:

- Vice President (chair)
- Secretary of Defense
- Secretary of State
- Secretary of Commerce
- Secretary of Transportation
- Secretary of the Treasury
- Secretary of Energy
- Director of Central Intelligence
- NASA Administrator
- National Security Advisor
- President’s Chief of Staff

- President’s Science Advisor
- Director of Office of Management and Budget
- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other agency and White House officials (if deemed appropriate by the chair)

The vice president, as chairman, provided a more direct link to the president than had been available to Reagan’s SIG(Space). The NSpC did not reinstate the original provision for appointment of members from outside the government, but did allow for ad-hoc committees to be set up. This resulted in the Advisory Committee on the Future of the U.S. Space Program (the Augustine Committee) and the Synthesis Group (the Stafford Committee). There also was a standing advisory committee of more than 30 members, but it never initiated any substantive activity.

Theoretically, the high-level membership and more direct line to the President should have yielded quicker, better decisionmaking. Early actions taken by the NSpC seemed to indicate that this would be the case. It was credited with saving two programs in its first four months: the Landsat remote sensing program (which was running out of operations funds) and the National Aerospace Plane (which was threatened by opposition from within the agencies responsible for the program). However, the Space Exploration Initiative (SEI) that Bush announced in July 1989 became a major effort that diverted attention from other space policy matters.

NASA Administrator Richard Truly wanted his agency to stay focused on the shuttle and space station, and openly expressed his disdain for SEI, which helped to sour the agency’s relationship with the space council. The NSpC’s relationship with Congress was frosty as well. The space council’s staff and congressional staffers were not cooperating, and concerned congress members came to view the space council—which they had endorsed a short time earlier—as a means of wresting control of space policy from Congress and NASA and consolidating it in the White House. Members began to call for more access to the inner workings of the NSpC and Senate confirmation of its executive secretary.

The staffing of the NSpC created some difficulties as well. Only the executive secretary and the director for Commercial Space were EOP staff; all others were on temporary assignment from agencies involved in space

activities. The result was that bureaucratic turf battles, like those experienced in SIG(Space), manifested themselves at the staff level as well, and an adversarial relationship developed between the staff and the executive secretary.

**Clinton Administration.** The NSpC did not survive into the Clinton administration, disappointing many who looked forward to a space council headed by Al Gore, the most space-savvy vice president since Lyndon Johnson as a result of his years of relevant congressional committee experience. Instead, it became a casualty of Clinton's promise to streamline the White House bureaucracy. There was no formal advisory mechanism dedicated exclusively to space policy, although a small staff contingent attached to the science advisor's office dealt with space issues.

**Bush (2) Administration.** George W. Bush set up a system of Policy Coordinating Committees (PCCs) similar to Reagan's Senior Interagency Groups. As the name indicates, their primary function was interagency coordination of crosscutting issues and policies. In the case of space, the Space PCC handled the development of the National Space Policy and four separate presidential directives on remote sensing, navigation, launch, and exploration. Specifically, this was done in working groups chaired by the NSC Director for Space Policy that included participation from the science advisor's office and midlevel representatives from the relevant agencies. The working groups were several steps away from the president. Their output would go to the full Space PCC, which included senior agency representatives (e.g., assistant secretary-level) and was chaired by the NSC Senior Director for Defense Policy. Next came the Deputies Committee, followed by the Principals (agency heads) Committee, both of which frequently conducted their work via email rather than meeting in person. Once signed off by the principals, decisions and directives would go to the national security advisor, who would review them and decide when and how they would be presented to the president.

This process, intended to capture all possible stakeholders in the executive branch, favored inclusiveness over efficiency. For example, the National Space Policy signed in August 2006 (and released a few weeks later) took three years to craft. For much of that time, there were weekly interagency meetings attended by more than 20 people, each representing a few to a few dozen people back at their agencies who were contributing to the document. The most senior people at the agencies

remained largely uninvolved until the end of the process, which not only isolated them from the early stages of creative input and debate, but also hindered their ability to intercede whenever the process got hung up due to the absence of executive intervention.

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**Obama Administration.** During an early August 2008 campaign sweep through Florida, Senator Obama pledged to reestablish the National Aeronautics and Space Council "so that we can develop a plan to explore the solar system—a plan that involves both human and robotic missions, and enlists both international partners and the private sector."<sup>8</sup> Two weeks later, his campaign released a space policy statement that reiterated his support for a space council.<sup>9</sup>

Also in summer 2008, the Independent Assessment Panel on the Organization and Management of National Security Space, spearheaded in Congress by Senator Wayne Allard and chaired by former aerospace executive Tom Young, issued its report. Its first recommendation was that "the President should reestablish the National Space Council, chaired by the National Security Advisor, with the authority to assign roles and responsibilities, and to adjudicate disputes over requirements and resources."<sup>10</sup>

But no space council emerged from the presidential transition. Proponents and opponents on the transition team argued their case, with both sides making valid points. A mechanism for integrating policy and strategy across all space sectors was considered potentially valuable, but also was seen as something that could be done within the NSC without adding to the Executive

Office bureaucracy. The transition team generally was trying to reduce staff levels, so the latter argument won the day. As a result, the Obama space policy approach closely resembled that of the previous administration: a Director for Space Policy on the national security staff who managed a multilevel interagency committee process and regularly collaborated with staff in the Office of Science & Technology Policy. The individual who held the director position at the end of the Bush administration stayed on for nearly two years in the Obama administration.

Some results came quickly. The administration conducted a reassessment of NASA's human spaceflight strategy and issued a new National Space Policy within the first 18 months. Revision of the national space transportation policy, however, wasn't finished until Obama's second term (November 2013) and an intended update of the commercial remote sensing policy was never completed.

### **Return of the Space Council?**

Late in the 2016 campaign, surrogates for Donald Trump indicated the candidate's intent to reestablish the National Space Council.<sup>11</sup> This idea may suffer the same fate as it did eight years previously, and for the same reasons. However, if the new administration considers it seriously, lessons from history should be weighed carefully.

Space advisory groups in the EOP have produced mixed results, more negative than positive. It should not be surprising that from 1958 through today, the senior management of NASA and DOD have not favored a national space council, viewing it as a barrier between themselves and the president that will do little more than slow things down.

This relatively unproductive history will be repeated if the administration establishes a space advisory mechanism that is too cumbersome, too far removed from senior decisionmakers, or poorly staffed. On the other hand, a National Space Council conducted properly could go a long way toward efficiently setting goals and

fixing problems that cut across the civil, commercial, and national security space sectors, and therefore across several agencies. (Note the space council successes of April–May 1961 and the second quarter of 1989.) Some of these crosscutting issues include export control, acquisition reform, the health of the space industrial base, space debris mitigation, space traffic management, facilitation of emerging commercial space industries, and determination of goals and priorities for space activities beyond low Earth orbit. The search for solutions to these

problems will drive the requirements and expectations of space-related agencies across the government, and a National Space Council could be driving that search and shaping the next generation of the nation's space activities. To be successful, such a council should consider lessons from prior incarnations:

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- ◆ The **president's level of interest** must be sufficiently high to allow space issues a place on the agenda and a reasonable expectation that the council's recommendations will be accepted and acted upon. The president's interest needs to be sustained even as other issues crowd the agenda over time.
- ◆ Productive **relationships with Congress and relevant agencies** must be maintained. Stakeholders in other parts of the government will not be fully supportive of policy implementation if they perceive that their interests are being undermined by a policy monopoly in the EOP.
- ◆ **Organizational structure and staffing** are critical to efficient operation of interagency policy-making mechanisms, achievement of sufficient status in the EOP, and follow-up on policy implementation. The council staff needs to have adequate size and expertise and a good relationship with the Office of Management and Budget staff working on space-related budgets. Additionally, it would be preferable to have dedicated staff rather than detailees from agencies to minimize the likelihood of turf battles within the council staff.



- ◆ The council and its staff must recognize that **events beyond their control drive the agenda**, so they must be agile enough to quickly adapt. Game-changing events like the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or the 2008 Great Recession can have effects lasting for years; other events, such as a launch failure, may have more limited effects but still require flexibility and responsiveness.
- ◆ Regardless of the formal mechanisms the council may adopt, **informal interactions and individual personalities matter**. Getting the chemistry right can mean the difference between smooth, successful operations and stalemate.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Public Law 85-568, National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958, Sec. 201(a). Signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on July 29, 1958.
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- <sup>3</sup> Logsdon, p. 71.
- <sup>4</sup> J.E. Katz, *Presidential Politics and Science Policy* (Praeger Publishers, New York, 1978).
- <sup>5</sup> Howard McCurdy, *Inside NASA* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> Dwayne A. Day, “Doomed to Fail: The Birth and Death of the Space Exploration Initiative,” *Spaceflight*, Vol. 37, 1995, pp. 79–83.
- <sup>7</sup> George H.W. Bush, Executive Order 12675, “Establishing the National Space Council,” April 20, 1989.
- <sup>8</sup> Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Town Hall on the Economy, Titusville, FL, August 2, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Barack Obama, “Advancing the Frontiers of Space Exploration,” August 16, 2008, <http://www.spaceref.com/news/viewsr.html?pid=28880>.
- <sup>10</sup> Independent Assessment Panel on the Organization and Management of National Security Space, “Leadership, Management, and Organization for National Security Space,” IDA Group Report GR-69, July 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert S. Walker and Peter Navarro, “Trump’s Space Policy Reaches for Mars and the Stars,” *Space News*, October 19, 2016 (<http://spacenews.com/trumps-space-policy-reaches-for-mars-and-the-stars/>).