

Historical Documents

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46. Memorandum From Crisis Management Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski)¹

Washington, December 10, 1977

SUBJECT

NSC Annual Report

This memorandum responds to your request, November 23, 2 for material which you may use in the NSC Annual Report.

Crisis Management at the nuclear level.

1. The situation as we inherited it.

Procedures. We found the White House Emergency Procedures neglected, rusty, and out of date. There was concern in the JCS that the NCA might not be able to respond effectively in the event of a surprise attack. The unsatisfactory OPAL III drill in March was symptomatic of the overall situation.

Doctrine. U.S. "crisis management" doctrine at the nuclear level had been evolving, particularly as a result of NSSM 169 and the ensuing NSDM 242 (promulgated in 1974) which provides for the first time a single statement of national strategic employment policy.³ The new policy was based on the judgment that (1) a massive retaliatory response is credible only at the upper levels of conflict and that (2) counterforce strikes will not reduce damage to the U.S. to low levels. A broader range of lesser responses was deemed necessary if a nuclear crisis was to be managed. Accordingly, the concept of "escalation control" at lower levels of conflict was introduced. To support it, "limited nuclear options" were required, and since 1974, a number of limited strikes have been planned and programmed. At the same time, the SIOP itself was being revised to include more than one option in line with the NSDM 242 guidance. In January the President was briefed on its "fifth" revision, SIOP-5.

2. Goals for this Administration.

The *first goal* was to put the WHEP in good order. The *second goal* was to help the President become familiar with the U.S. doctrine for [Page 209] nuclear "crisis management" as it relates to the WHEP and the National Command Authority.

3. The steps taken to implement these goals.

The WHEP. An extensive review memorandum for the WHEP was developed in February, and after some fumbling between the NSC and the Military Office, an ad hoc group, including representatives from the NSC staff, the Military Office, WHCA, the FPA, and the NMCC, was formed. It met about once a month through mid-summer to review the remedial steps taken by its members. This phase ended when Hugh Carter held a meeting with the President to brief him on the progress and to ask his guidance on unresolved issues such as the location of NEACP and the arrangement between him and the Vice President for emergency evacuation. On July 9, an “OPAL III with destination NEACP” was executed in 19 minutes, evidence that the system had indeed been put in reasonably good order.

Procedures and Doctrine. On March 31, you sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense asking him and the JCS4 to explain our nuclear war procedures and doctrine, including LNOs. The response on June 3, was set aside pending the outcome of PRM 10, and the follow-on response by Harold Brown arrived on August 19,5 after it was clear that PRM 10 produced no definitive basis for a change.

The Defense memorandum of August 19 spelled out the recent history of our doctrinal development and procedures. It elaborated the concept of “escalation control”—in the event of the failure of “deterrence,” and stated the rationale for “Limited Nuclear Options.” Your covering memorandum to the President6 pointed out some doubts about the feasibility of “escalation control,” especially in view of our command, control, and communications vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, the Defense memorandum provided a concise history of our efforts 1) to define “deterrence” in operational terms for targeting guidance, and 2) our concept of how we might respond if deterrence were to fail. If the President absorbed Harold Brown’s essay, he has a fairly clear idea of where we are in our doctrine, its ambiguities and its adequacies.

The impact of your memorandum of March 31 did not end with the August 19 response. Several other things also occurred:

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The JCS began a thorough review of LNOs/RNOs to prepare a Presidential briefing and to determine where they were going with the LNO concept in general. Although Harold Brown offered this briefing [Page 210] to the President, it never took place. A script of the briefing was submitted to the President in mid-November.

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The President accepted Harold Brown’s invitation to visit SAC Headquarters. His trip there on November 19,7 is the first such Presidential attention to the command and control of our strategic forces on recent record.

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Most important, IVORY ITEM drills were initiated.

Although the initiative came from Defense, it seems that our activity with the WHEP, our interest in LNOs, and the doctrinal questions raised by the memorandum of March 31 gave Defense a sense of urgency about both WHEP and doctrine. In fact, several people in Defense were surprised to discover that NSDM 242 calls for frequent and repeated interaction between the military planners and the NCA to ensure that military planning does indeed support the preferences of the NCA. Apparently, such interaction never occurred under the previous Administrations although they authored and endorsed the NSDM.

4. Difficulties encountered.

The WHEP. The organization of the White House makes it very difficult for the NSC staff to control or check the WHEP. All the operational control of the assets, which are key to the WHEP, belong to the Military Office: helicopters, communications, cars, etc. The administrative demands on these assets have, at times, caused serious neglect of WHEP criteria, especially in Presidential travel. The President's emphasis on emergency procedures, however, allowed us to work rather effectively in a "staff supervisory" role with Hugh Carter whose Military Office has "operational control." Hugh and I developed a "job description" for an "emergency procedures officer" last spring in an effort to clarify who has what responsibilities. It granted the NSC only a periodic "staff review" of the WHEP. The major part of the job is reserved for the Director of the Military Office. Marty Beaman, a lawyer from Florida, now occupies that post as Bill Gulley's successor. The JCS, you recall, was extremely nervous about having no one with military and command experience in that job. Their fears are not without justification, but I have moderated them by acting as an informal go-between and by getting Hugh Carter involved and concerned with the WHEP. In other words, we have a make-shift arrangement that operates on good will between the NSC and the Military Office. Speaking candidly, there is a residue of ill-feeling over there as a result of our pushing and shoving on WHEP reform.

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Doctrine. I use this word in the straightforward sense of generalized and specific guidance which relates strategic concepts to operations, to the world of realities and of one's capabilities.

The initial Defense response to the March 31 memorandum promised doctrinal change and improvements as a result of PRM 10 (the Force Posture Review), but it was a false promise. The PD-18 follow-on studies reassert the promise. In truth, it seems that nobody wants to address the "escalation control" concept critically. The same is true for LNOs/RNOs. There is a reluctance to think hard about "deterrence" failing, and there is a lot of foggy thinking about how to keep it from failing. In a sense, NSDM 242 was a declaratory measure (bluff?) to make the Soviets believe we might use "limited" nuclear strikes at lower levels of crisis of confrontation. Although we have made progress in developing the operational and staffing capability to deliver limited strikes tailored to a given situation, we have done nothing to

prepare our homeland for counter-LNOs. Some who realize this want to return to “minimum deterrence,” or “assured destruction.” Others want to build toward something like a psychologically meaningful nuclear “superiority.” Still others seem to believe that arms control measures will dissolve the central dilemmas of our nuclear doctrine.

In this milieu of doctrinal confusion, it has not been easy to clarify for the President “where we are and whither we are tending” with our strategic capabilities.

5. Accomplishments attained.

The WHEP. It is in better shape than at any time in several years, perhaps decades. Particularly WHCA has tightened up its procedures. The interface with the NMCC is greatly improved, and it should remain so in view of the continual interaction we now have on that front. The best indication of the overall WHEP condition came with the IVORY ITEM drill in which the President participated. The OPAL III went off with precision and speed.

The real capstone in accomplishments has been the President’s participation in IVORY ITEM. It has never been done before, and the *event triggered revisions and changes in the SIOP based on Presidential guidance for the first time in history. Heretofore, the SIOP designers have had to imagine what the President would want to see and know in an emergency.* The thick “Decision Handbook” is the product of years of speculating in J–3 about the President’s needs without a single clue from a President!

NEACP, OPAL drills, and the Vice President’s role have been clarified (although clarity has exposed yet new things to be done in some instances.)

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Doctrine. The implications from the IVORY ITEM discussions for doctrine are monumental.

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[3 lines not declassified]

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Refinement of SIOP options continues. Although no specific changes have yet been directed, the last IVORY ITEM meeting seems likely to bring about one or two more “alternatives.”

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The President is increasingly aware of the “escalation control” concept with its inherent weaknesses, as well as those of our communications and control posture. This was clear in the last IVORY ITEM scenario discussion he held with you, Secretary Brown, et alia.

6. Follow-on goals.

The major follow-on concern is keeping the IVORY ITEM subject on the agenda. As the President reacts, it is clear what steps to take. If he never addresses the IVORY ITEM and WHEP contingencies, we simply cannot know where he wants to go in future developments.

7. The next stage.

The concept of NCA interaction with the military planners for nuclear “crisis management,” as set down in NSDM 242, is sound.

Any new PD emerging from the PD–18 follow-on studies should retain it. I am preparing a separate memorandum on this point, one based on the President’s guidance on the Defense memorandum of August 19. I do not believe we should rush ahead with it now but rather let the IVORY ITEM discussions take their course. They are providing the interaction which eventually we might want to routinize in a more formal sense.

[Omitted here is material unrelated to national security policy.]

1. Source: Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Agency File, Box 11, National Security Council: 4–12/77. Top Secret; Sensitive Outside the System.↵
2. Not found.↵
3. NSSM 169 and NSDM 242 are printed in *Foreign Relations*, 1969–1976, vol. XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973–1976, Documents 4 and 31, respectively.↵
4. See Document 10.↵
5. See Tab A, Document 36.↵
6. See Document 36.↵
7. Carter visited Strategic Air Command Headquarters in Omaha on October 22. (Carter Library, Presidential Materials, President’s Daily Diary)↵