**Civics 101**

**Episode 6: NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] I'm Virginia Prescott. And this is Civics 101. The podcast refresher course on some basics that you may have forgotten or slept through in school. We also invite you to submit your questions about how our democracy works through our website or e-mail or Twitter. And our listener line which is how today's question came to us.

[00:00:36] My name is John and I'm a history teacher in Socko Maine. Can you help me explain the National Security Council to my students; who serves on it. How do they get on it? For how long? What do they do? And why is Steve Bannon's appointment such a big deal?

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:51] So Stephen do you think you can help John?

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:00:54] I hope so.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:56] Well before we get to your answer please tell us who you are.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:00:58] My name is Steve Sestanovich. I teach American foreign policy at Columbia University. And I'm a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:07] Well thank you so much for joining us. I guess you have firsthand knowledge of the National Security Council.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:01:13] I worked in the NSC staff in the Reagan administration and in the Clinton administration I worked at the State Department but dealt with the NSC staff all the time.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:25] Well so now we've got you here. Let's start with the basics. When was the National Security Council created.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:01:31] Short answer is in 1947 in the wake of World War II Americans understood that they had to modernize the process and the institutions by which they made foreign policy and national security policy. And there were a number of changes made. The CIA was created. There was the secretary of defense position created that replaced the old division between Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy. And there was a council created for the president for his top advisers Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense to formalize the process of bringing their recommendations to him and helping him to select among them. I should add one other thing to this picture though. In 1947 the position of national security adviser was not as big a job as we now envision. It was a kind of staff coordinator position the position of national security adviser was really in its modern form only created in the late 60s early 70s and the National Security Council staff itself has gotten bigger decade by decade.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:50] So it has evolved the National Security Council and the attendant staff has evolved over the years. What is the actual purpose of the NSC now.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:03:00] Well it's the body that meets with the president to decide on major foreign policy defense policy decisions and he can have other people in there besides the ones who were statutorily members of the NSC, representatives from other agencies participate. They're generally supposed to create a set of options for the president based on the positions taken by different agencies. Give him an orderly set of choices to make and then help him implement them.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:37] So since it's evolved is there any kind of rule or statute guiding who sits on the NSC.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:03:44] Well the National Security Act of 1947 does set out the members but they can be changed as that at the discretion of the president. I don't think there's ever been a time when this secretary of state and secretary of defense weren't on the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the head of the CIA are I believe according to the statute advisors rather than full members. But when you get around the table that doesn't really matter all that much. You know as Lincoln said the the president's cabinet doesn't vote. They tell the president what their views are and then he decides. So it doesn't. You know when you're sitting around the table and you'll notice this often when you see pictures of the president with his advisers in the Situation room sometimes the order of seating is is by prearrangement. But there can be a lot of people in the in the room the president can decide for example he wants to have the secretary of the Treasury there or he wants to have the attorney general there. But a lot of this is styled for the president's preferences and according to the kind of decision that they're going to make for example when the Bush administration was working on its decision to get into the war in Iraq. There wasn't actually a full dress and a C meeting to discuss this question and a lot of people have made the criticism that it was easier to kind of make a decision that wasn't fully thought through because there wasn't a full dress process with an options paper contrasting views that the administration in a in a way kind of worked on the decision but never in as formalized a way as critics have subsequently said they should have done. And even as some people at the time felt they should do.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:43] OK. So there was considerable shock when it was revealed that the White House chief strategist Steve Bannon would be appointed to the Principals Committee of the National Security Council and that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Director of National Intelligence would be removed from the principals committee. What is the principals committee?

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:06:03] The principals committee is the meeting of all of the members of the NSC without the president. And that can be preparatory to a full meeting with the president or it can be an occasion in which the memo the PC deliberates and then sends its recommendations to the president and he decides separately. That is a convention that has developed over the past couple of decades. But the core of it is it's not an NSC meeting unless the president is there. The principals committee meeting though does define the status of some of the of the participants and Bannon is now a full member of the principals committee meeting. So in that respect he is on a par with the secretary of defense and the secretary of state. It's not completely unprecedented for the president to have other advisers. There are cases going back to Presidents Eisenhower Kennedy Johnson where the president's would bring in other people for example in the meetings that led up to the decisions in the Cuban missile crisis. President Kennedy brought in Ted Sorensen his speechwriter as a full participant in the in the discussions and that was because he wanted to have his eyes and ears there. He wanted to have his speechwriter hearing what was discussed and other presidents have brought in their chief of staff or have brought in other domestic advisers so that they can understand better what the decisions are that are at stake and how to present them more appropriately to the Congress to the public and so forth. In that respect a president who wants to make sure that there is a kind of seamless continuity between foreign and domestic politics is doing something smart. The uproar created by the appointment of Steve Bannon has a lot to do with who Steve Bannon is and the views that he is thought to represent. There's a kind of unease because he seems like somebody who whose views are so contrary to some of the understood assumptions of American foreign policy over many many years that his appointment has stirred up more than the usual amount of anxiety that you'd have just because you know the guy isn't just the secretary of state or the secretary of defense.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:51] So you've answered some of John's question. You know that it is not unprecedented to have other members of the president's advisers cabinet even a speechwriter and in the case of Sorensen in a meeting. But is it. Let's say specifically Steve Bannon's inclusion or is it the exclusion of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of the national intelligence that's really the rub here.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:09:15] The the announcement that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the director of the CIA wouldn't be automatically members of the Principals Committee was a bit of surprise because actually over the past few years those two people have generally played a larger role in NSC discussions. And I can't really imagine that you would end up with those people not coming very often because the issues that they have real authority on and something to contribute are really the issues that the NSC takes up every day so I think you'll find in practice that those two guys are at at principals committee meetings all the time. What the significance is that they're somehow only to be invited when their issues are arise I can't judge that. And it's a puzzle but I suspect that in practice it won't really affect the way the NSC works.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:23] So this has caused an uproar even among some Republicans and and many who charge that Donald Trump is surrounding himself with the Yes Men he's the people who wouldn't necessarily agree with him. You said a little bit earlier that the kind of conversations reflect the style of the president. What do you see here in this NSC.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:10:45] Well this is a very unusual NSC to be honest. And what's very unusual about it is the following. You have a president with no background in national politics and he's appointed a senior group of advisers who have very little experience, many of them in running the agencies that they're now charged with so that this group the first time they sit around the table will probably be the first time that any of them has been at a table with any of the others and their knowledge of what the president wants their knowledge of how to work together is going to be a work in progress. That's what makes the appointment of Steve Bannon and I think seem rather unusual and disturbing to some people because this is the person who seems to have an unusual amount of influence over the president in this setting of basically quite inexperienced group of people the opportunity may exist for a kind of undue influence and I think that's what a lot of people worry about with Bannon's appointment because he has is associated with such strong views and such strong views that seemed to cut against the grain of traditional American foreign policy thinking that they wonder what role he will play. But let's not pretend that it's always been throughout history textbook process. No Richard Nixon didn't listen to very many of his advisers he listened to Henry Kissinger and it didn't matter all that much who else was around the table when he told them what his decision was. So in every administration you have to find out what the president wants whom he's going to listen to how the decisions are going to be presented to him and hope that it is a an orderly process in which views that should be heard are heard in which the people who know most about the subject are able to get through to the president and in which crazy ideas are if possible excluded. What we don't know this early in the administration is whether that's going to turn out to be the case.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:13] Stephen Sestanovich thank you so much for demystifying the National Security Council.

**Stephen Sestanovich:** [00:13:18] Pleasure.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:24] Stephen Sestanovich there talking about the inner workings of the National Security Council. In addition to being an NSC insider he's author of the book maximalist America in the world from Truman to Obama. And that does it for today's lesson. But before you go an assignment if you'd like to dive deeper into the topics that we cover Civics 101 is launching a newsletter called appropriately enough extra credit. This week's Extra Credit includes tips on the most effective way to contact your elected officials. A quiz that tests how much you learned from these lessons so far and a reading list that goes deeper into the history of the National Security Council to sign up for the news that our visit our Web site Civics 101 podcast dot org