

Official Versions Differ

NSC: Did It Meet Oct. 24?

11/29/73
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In popular mythology, the National Security Council is the nation's ultimate crisis forum.

It was in this spirit, perhaps, that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger referred to a National Security Council meeting on the night of Oct. 24 when American military forces were placed on world-wide alert.

Now the White House acknowledges that there was no meeting of the National Security Council on that night of putative international peril when the word was flashed to U.S. air, ground and sea forces to go into a high state of readiness.

"That meeting is not in our formal listing of National Security Council meetings," said NSC staff Secretary Jeanne W. Davis. This was corroborated by the White House press office.

Yet Kissinger, in his Oct. 25 press conference, said the President called "a special meeting of the National Security Council" at 3 a.m. that same day to order the precautionary alert.

Kissinger added that "all the members of the National Security Council were unanimous in their recommendations as the result of a deliberation in which the President did not himself participate, and

in which he joined only after they had formed their judgment...."

Defense Secretary Schlesinger, the same day, said it was he who initiated the alert after a meeting of the "abbreviated National Security Council," though he added that "the President was in complete command at all times during the course of the evening."

Kissinger said the NSC meeting took place at 3 a.m. on the 25th. Schlesinger timed it at 11 p.m. on the 24th. The President said it was he who ordered the precautionary alert shortly after midnight on the 25th after "we obtained information which led us to believe that the Soviet Union was planning to send a very substantial force into the Mideast, a military force."

White House records list only two meetings of the National Security Council during 1973. One was on March 8 and one on April 12. White House spokesmen would not divulge the topic of either meeting.

The meeting that occurred the night of Oct. 24 or the early morning hours of Oct. 25—depending on whose version is accurate—included only two of the four statutory members of the council, Secretary of State Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Schlesinger. The other two members are the President and the Vice Presi-

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Officials at Odds On NSC Meeting

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dent. Mr. Nixon was, by all current accounts, upstairs in the White House while his cabinet aides were meeting in the basement Situation Room.

There was no ready explanation of why two Cabinet officers, both famous for their Washington bureaucratic street wisdom and for their precision of public utterance, should be in disagreement

with the White House and NSC over whether the meeting in which they both participated was or was not an NSC meeting.

In practice, formal NSC meetings have become among the rarest of Washington phenomena. The two meetings this year compared with three meetings in 1972 when the administration was engaged in the complex exercises of detente summitry and extrication from Vietnam.

"The formal NSC meeting is a cosmetic, a fiction," in the view of a former high-ranking staff member. "As a forum it has become unwieldy. There are people there the President may not want to be there. Papers have to be written that bureaucrats receive and circulate."

"It hadn't been used in the original textbook sense since the Eisenhower years."

Nevertheless Presidents and their press spokesmen have persistently fostered the notion that in moments of national gravity the NSC, in its collective wisdom, has provided benediction to the policies finally adopted.

After the Tet offensive in Vietnam in January 1968, for example, President Johnson called an NSC meeting and invited news photographers in to record the high seriousness of the

occasion. It was not until days and weeks later that the policy responses to the Tet attack were decided.

More recently, in the controversy over falsified U.S. bombing reports in Cambodia, former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said the orders for falsification of the reports came from the National Security Council early in 1968. One former USC staffer, whose business it was to know the NSC agenda during that period, said he had no recollection of bombing policy in Cambodia being on the Council agenda.

Below the level of the full Council, the intensity of activity picks up. The NSC staff is a study in perpetual motion. Since the arrival of Kissinger as National Security Adviser to the President, its members have worked the longest hours in town.

Under Kissinger the Council staff divides and subdivides into various working groups dealing with the myriad issues—from the possibility of a government toppling in Latin America to the hardness of Soviet missile sites—which form the President's perceptions of national security.