

WHITE HOUSE MEMO

From George to Barack: A Look at Secret Bush Memos to the Obama Team

Newly declassified memos offer a window into how the world appeared as the Bush administration was winding down.



By Peter Baker

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WASHINGTON — The world was a volatile place when President George W. Bush was leaving office. So on the way out the door, he and his national security team left a little advice for their successors:

India is a friend. Pakistan is not. Don't trust North Korea or Iran, but talking is still better than not. Watch out for Russia; it covets the territory of its neighbor Ukraine. Beware becoming ensnared by intractable land wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. And oh yes, nation-building is definitely harder than it looks.

Fourteen years ago, Mr. Bush's team recorded its counsel for the incoming administration of President Barack Obama in 40 classified memos by the National Security Council, part of what has widely been hailed by both sides as a model transition between presidents of different parties. For the first time, those memos have now been declassified, offering a window into how the world appeared to a departing administration after eight years marked by war, terrorism and upheaval.

Thirty of the memos are reproduced in "Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama," a new book edited by Stephen J. Hadley, Mr. Bush's last national security adviser, along with three members of his staff, and set to be published by the Brookings Institution on Wednesday. The memos add up to a tour d'horizon of the international challenges that awaited Mr. Obama and his team in January 2009 with U.S. troops still in combat in two wars and various other threats to American security looming.

"They were designed to provide the incoming administration with what they needed to know about the most critical foreign policy and national security issues they would face," Mr. Bush wrote in a foreword to the book. "The memoranda told them candidly what we thought we had accomplished — where we had succeeded and where we had fallen short — and what work remained to be done."

The transition between Mr. Bush and Mr. Obama came at a fragile moment for the country, which was in the throes of a global financial crisis even as it was grappling with other foreign challenges. But even though Mr. Obama had assailed Mr. Bush's policies during his campaign, particularly the war in Iraq, their teams worked together with unusual collegiality during the turnover.

Each of the memos focuses on a different country or a different area of foreign policy, reviewing for the new team what the Bush administration had done and how it saw the road ahead.

In the book, Mr. Hadley and his team, led by Peter D. Feaver, William C. Inboden and Meghan L. O'Sullivan, add postscripts written in the current day to reflect on where the transition memos got it right or wrong and what has happened in the three presidencies since then.

Iraq was central to the Bush administration's foreign policy and still a festering problem as he was leaving office, but his surge of additional troops and a change in strategy in 2006 had helped bring down civilian deaths by nearly 90 percent. Those moves also paved the way for agreements that Mr. Bush sealed with Iraq to withdraw all American troops by the end of 2011, a time frame that Mr. Obama essentially adopted.

The Iraq memo, written by Brett McGurk, who went on to work for Mr. Obama, President Donald J. Trump and President Biden, offered no recapitulation of how the war was initiated on false intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, but it did acknowledge how badly the war had gone until the surge.

"The surge strategy reset negative trends and set the conditions for longer-term stability," the memo said. "The coming 18 months, however, may be the most strategically significant in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein," it added, putting that in boldface. Referring to Al Qaeda of Iraq, it said, "AQI is down but not out and a series of elections will define Iraq's future."

The memo warned the Obama team that the situation could still unravel again: "There is no magic formula in Iraq. While our policy is now on a more stable and sustainable course, we should expect shocks to the system that will require a flexible and pragmatic approach at least through government formation in the first quarter of 2010."

The memo included a warning that would figure in a later debate. While Mr. Bush's agreement called for a 2011 withdrawal, the memo reported that Iraqi leaders "have told us that they will seek a follow-on arrangement for training and logistical (and probably some special operations) forces beyond 2011." Mr. Obama tried to negotiate such a follow-on agreement, but talks collapsed and his allies later played down the notion that anyone had ever expected such an extension.

In her postscript to the Iraq memo, Ms. O'Sullivan skated lightly over the false predicate for the war ("intelligence that was tragically later proven wrong") and the mistaken assumptions ("an unanticipated collapse of order and Iraqi institutions"). But she was more expansive about the "shortcomings of the 2003-2006 strategy," which she defined as the "mistaken belief" that political reconciliation would lead to improved security, inadequate troop levels, "too aggressive a timeline to transition" to Iraqi control and "a failure to take on Iranian influence more directly."

"America's experience in Iraq demonstrates that it is neither all-powerful nor powerless," she wrote. "It has the ability to help countries make dramatic changes. But it should not underestimate the significant time, resources and energy that doing so requires — and the overwhelming importance of a committed, capable local partner." Moreover, she added, "significant efforts to rebuild countries should only be undertaken when truly vital U.S. interests are at stake."

The Bush team drew similar conclusions about Afghanistan. "Rarely, if ever, were the resources accorded to Afghanistan commensurate with the goals espoused," Ms. O'Sullivan and two colleagues wrote in a postscript for that memo. "Policymakers overestimated the ability of the United States to produce an outcome" and "underestimated the impact of variables beyond U.S. control."

Some of the memos underscored how much has changed in the last 14 years — and how much has not. Paving the way for administrations that followed, the Bush team saw India as a country ripe for alliance — and in fact its improved ties with India were seen as one of its foreign policy successes — even as it saw Pakistan as duplicitous and untrustworthy.

The Bush administration spent enormous energy trying to negotiate agreements to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons program and, to a lesser extent, Iran's, to no avail, much like its successors. But Mr. Bush's aides concluded that diplomatic engagement restrained North Korea from provocative acts and came to believe that their mistake may have been expecting too much from the talks.

"An argument could be made that the United States had too intense a focus on the North Korean nuclear problem," the postscript to the North Korea memo said. "Rather than seeking to contain or 'quarantine' the program, the Bush administration set a very high bar of eliminating the program."

The memos indicate how much American policymakers in both parties at the time still held out hope for constructive relations with Russia and China. The memo on China urged extensive personal engagement between leaders, crediting Mr. Bush's interactions with his Chinese counterparts with creating "a reserve of good will" between the two powers.

The memo on Russia concludes that Mr. Bush's "strategy of personal diplomacy met with early success" but acknowledged that ties had soured, especially after Russia's invasion of the former Soviet republic of Georgia in 2008. The memo presciently warned about Russia's future ambitions.

"Russia attempts to challenge the territorial integrity of Ukraine, particularly in Crimea, which is 59 percent ethnically Russian and is home to the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet, must be prevented," the memo warned five years before Russian forces would seize Crimea and 13 years before they would invade the rest of the country. The memo added that "Russia will exploit Europe's dependence on Russian energy" and use political means "to drive wedges between the United States and Europe."

As enlightening as the memos are, however, they also underscore that major challenges on the international stage are rarely solved for good, but instead are bequeathed from one administration to another, even in evolved form. So too are the successes and failures.