Who's in charge? Book looks at policy, power

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In 1993, at a breakfast with CIA Director James Woolsey, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin confessed that neither he nor Secretary of State Warren Christopher were getting together very often with President Clinton.

"Do you?" he asked his old friend.

"No," Woolsey replied.

Aspin glanced at the ceiling: "I wonder who is."

With a sprawling staff, infighting for access to the "decider," and State Department officials often at odds with their counterparts at the National Security Council, presidents have a tough time establishing control over American foreign policy. In "Presidential Command," Peter Rodman — who held high-level positions at the National Security Council, State Department and Defense Department under five Republican presidents — supplies an incisive, in-depth, and often firsthand examination of the successes and failures of the last seven administrations.

Presidents, he argues, must balance coherence and discipline in foreign policy with bureaucratic collegiality. But commanders-in-chief should also understand that "consensus may not be attainable (or even desirable, if it only masks hard choices that must be made)."

Focused more on process than substance, Rodman (who died in 2008) did not hesitate to assess the effectiveness of presidents as strategic commanders. His judgments are pungent, provocative, perspicacious, and, perhaps inevitably, partisan.

Though Richard Nixon's paranoid predilection for "backchannel" initiatives destroyed morale at the State Department, Rodman gives him high marks for coherent, consistent and courageous policies, including the decision to bomb Cambodia.

Although he "casts a modest shadow" in most histories, Gerald Ford had "important achievements" in foreign policy, including the restoration of Cabinet government, steps toward a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, the establishment of human rights as a component of detente with the Communist world, and the creation of the G-7 group of major powers.

Despite his weaknesses as a manager, Rodman claims, Ronald Reagan provided decisive leadership in ending the Cold War. George H.W. Bush "did articulate, repeatedly, the concept of a new world order," and Bush 43 had "the calcium in backbone" to order "a surge" of military forces to Iraq in 2007.

Democrats fare less well in "Presidential Command." Rodman dismisses Jimmy Carter as a philosophical schizophrenic who dominated foreign policy — and his Secretary of State — but "gave no clear direction."

Bill Clinton was better, especially in his second term, when he delegated to strong individuals (Robert Rubin, Richard Holbrooke, George Mitchell), but he lacked discipline, hesitated to spend political capital, and therefore tended to shy away rather than confront foreign policy challenges.

Having demonstrated that the machinery of government is ever more difficult to control, Rodman concludes, accurately, abstractly, and therefore not all that helpfully, that the "decisive factor," is not a particular procedure but "what kind of people" pull the levers and, "to a breathtaking degree, the qualities of the one person in charge."

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PRESIDENTIAL COMMAND POWER, LEADERSHIP, AND THE MAKING OF FOREIGN POLICY FROM RICHARD NIXON TO GEORGE W. BUSH
By Peter W. Rodman
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Associate Images:
President George W. Bush