

POLICY ANALYSIS AND PLANNING IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: INTERVIEW WITH DR. MITCHELL REISS DIRECTOR FOR POLICY PLANNING, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

On March 4, 2004, the Editor-in-Chief and Managing Editor of Policy Perspectives sat down with Dr. Mitchell B. Reiss, Director for Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State, to discuss the role of the policy analyst in U.S. foreign policy.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: What is the history of the Policy Planning Office within the State Department?

DR. REISS: The background and history of the office dates back to the early months of 1947. Secretary of State George Marshall had just returned from a trip to Moscow where he was persuaded that the Soviet Union was planning in terms of 5 or 10 or 20 year periods of time and that they had a coherent vision for how they wanted to address the challenges they saw in the world. His concern was that the United States had nothing similar, and thought all our responses were ad hoc and reactive. Therefore, when he came back, he decided to create an Office of Policy Planning to take a longer term perspective, lift our heads out of our daily inbox and look a little bit further down the

Dr. Reiss was appointed Director for Policy Planning by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell on July 21, 2003. Prior to his appointment, Dr. Reiss was Dean of International Affairs and Director of the Reves Center for International Studies at the College of William and Mary. Prior to his service at William and Mary, Dr. Reiss helped establish KEDO (the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization), a multinational organization created to address weapons proliferation concerns in North Korea. His other government service includes positions in the National Security Council at the White House and as a Consultant to the U.S. Arms Control & Disarmament Agency, the State Department, the Congressional Research Service, the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos National Laboratories. Dr. Reiss has degrees from Williams College, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Oxford University, and Columbia Law School.

road. George Kennan was the first Director of Policy Planning and when he heard of his assignment he asked the Secretary what guidance he could provide for this completely new office. Secretary Marshall sent back a two-word reply: "avoid trivia." I think that has really been a theme that all subsequent Policy Planning Directors and staffs have tried to embrace over the years.

Interestingly, there is a footnote to this story. Two weeks after Marshall established the office, Kennan handed him a memo on European reconstruction. That document became the Marshall Plan. All of us since then have been trying to meet those very high standards set by Kennan.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: What is the role of the Policy Planning Office today?

DR. REISS: The primary function of the office today is to help the Secretary of State think longer term about American foreign policy goals. We try to see things as an integrative whole and not piecemeal, as some of the bureaus do. We don't have any operational day-to-day responsibilities, which gives us more time than some of our colleagues to read broadly and think a little bit more about some of the issues of the day.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: Generally, what type of product does the Policy Planning office produce?

DR. REISS: We provide policy advice in the form of written memos most of the time, but sometimes it will be through conversations with the Secretary. It really depends on the issue and the timeframe. We also have the primary speech-writing responsibility in the building for the Secretary of State. This is extremely

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important because he is a unique voice with international credibility: his words count. We also work with other bureaus by suggesting events the Secretary might attend or themes he may want to emphasize when he visits a country. Longer term, we look at issues such as the President's vision to transform the greater Middle East. This was the speech he gave last November at the National Endowment for Democracy where he stated that the status quo in the Middle East was untenable, especially after September 11. His idea is to try to promote more dignity, more freedom and more economic prosperity for the individuals of the region.

Now how do you go about doing that? It's a magnificent vision, but there needs to be a policy component to it and one of the things we have been doing here is thinking very hard about how we can develop and implement the President's vision.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: Using the Middle East as an example, how does this office contribute to that vision and create the policies that we are starting to see?

DR. REISS: Well, it is still very early days in terms of transforming the President's vision into a reality. We have done an awful lot of thinking here at Policy Planning about the types of things we would like to see in the policy, we are still having interagency discussions on it, and we are talking extensively with people in the region.

There are a few hard truths that we have to recognize as we go forward. First of all, any approach that is seen as Western, as made in America, as top-down and imposed on the people of the Middle East, is just doomed to fail. It has to be grassroots, it has to be indigenous, there have to be local voices that are embracing the values that the President identified. These are not American values: we think these are universal values that are shared broadly throughout the Middle East. In order for this idea to gain traction, in order for the policy to have some currency, it has to come from the people in the region. What we are trying to do is to find ways in which we can encourage them, in which we can help give them voice, so that they can actually start to change their own societies. That is number one.

Number two, this approach is going to transcend the President's time in office. It's not a quick fix and none of us see it as a quick fix. The idea is that we need to get started right away, even though we realize that we may not achieve the transformation for many years.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: Building on the idea that this will take years, how do you involve non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other organizations into the policy planning process?

DR. REISS: First of all, part of what we do is talk to a lot of people in the NGO community, mostly American NGOs, but also foreign NGOs. We don't believe we have all of the answers; oftentimes, some people are closer to the issue than we are sitting here in Washington. So we welcome people coming in and sharing their ideas with us. In terms of the specifics of the greater Middle East, it is going to take a lot of efforts by a lot of individuals and organizations and what we are hoping for is that the governments will recognize they need to change. Some countries understand this already and some countries are on this path. I think there has been some significant success with respect to individual freedoms and greater economic opportunity in countries like Jordan, Qatar and Morocco. For example, Morocco has recently signed a free trade agreement with the United States; Jordan already has one. We want to give the individuals in those societies the tools they need to succeed — that is the real challenge. Again, there is a transcendent policy for the whole region, but for each individual country we are going to have to tailor the policy to adapt to local conditions.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: Looking at policy analysis in a post-September 11th world, do you have any comments on the changing role your office has had to play?

DR. REISS: This office wrote the first draft of the national security strategy that was released in September 2002, which really addressed this new world we all found ourselves in after September 11. We are continuing to try and adapt to this new environment. We have this global war on terror. We are fighting in Afghanistan and stabilizing the situation

there — that is going quite well — and we are trying to stabilize the situation in Iraq. You have these three issues that are right at the top of the agenda. In addition to that, we have the confluence of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and failed or failing states. Any one of those is bad enough, but it's the intersection of the three that really poses the greatest danger. So, in a sense, the challenge has become much greater for this office and indeed for the entire administration and the U.S. government. Some of these are new problems and we are still in the early stages of trying to understand them and trying to defeat them.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: The Office of Policy Planning is a small shop, relatively speaking. Where do you find most of the information and resources you depend on to develop your proposals?

DR. REISS: We have approximately 25 people on the staff here and they come from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Some are civil servants, some are foreign service officers, some are fallen academics like myself, some come from Capitol Hill and some come from the Pentagon. They bring their own sources of information and their own networks. We also rely on reports that are produced by the intelligence community.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: Do the analysts in your office with a more academic background have a different approach than those with a more “practical” background?

DR. REISS: Yes, that is absolutely true. Staffers with an academic background initially want to write voluminously about a certain topic, to research every single issue, to have memos with footnotes. That has its place, but that place isn't here. What we really need to do, and I think we are pretty successful at it, is to try and train them to write in a style, form and length most conducive to serving the Secretary of State. The most precious commodity he has is his time, and we must always be very mindful of that.

POLICY PERSPECTIVES: What skills should young people in college or grad school acquire if they are interested in this type of career?

DR. REISS: Great question. First, you have to make sure that you take advantage of the opportunity you have in college, whether it is at the undergraduate or at the graduate level. The faculty is there to serve you, the institution is there to serve you, and the people are at the institution because they feel a sense of satisfaction in helping students. So it is really up to the students to take advantage of the opportunity. That is number one.

Number two, it is not enough to have good feelings or say, “I really want to save the world.” All of us want peace on earth but that's not enough. You have to have skill sets that are valuable to people. There are a variety of skill sets that are valuable. It can be accounting, it can be a military background, it can be an intelligence background, it can be a legal background, it can even be a medical background — certainly, transnational health issues are enormously important today and we have an expert on our staff that deals with those. Whatever it is, you have to be able to develop a skill set, hopefully something that moves you passionately, so you'll be good at it, so you'll be invested in it, so you'll love it.

The third step is really to try to get some experience, whether it's through summer internships in the federal government, on Capitol Hill or in the NGO community. That is kind of the way the whole thing works. Take advantage of your education, refine your skills and then go out and get some experience and good things should happen. Sounds easy, doesn't it? But of course it's not.

