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OPINION

Big Government and Little Analysts

Frank von Hippel

Frank von Hippel, a professor of public and international affairs at Princeton University, from September 1993 through December 1994 he served as assistant director for national security to the acting director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

One view of the current political atmosphere is that we are witnessing a return to the policies of the Cold War. This is understandable given the current international situation. However, there are some important differences between the Cold War era and the present. One difference is that the Cold War was characterized by a clear definition of the enemy and a clear strategy for dealing with it. In contrast, the current situation is much more complex and unclear.

Another difference is that the Cold War era was marked by a strong commitment to technological innovation and a belief in the power of science and technology to solve problems. In contrast, the current situation is marked by a lack of investment in science and technology and a growing sense of skepticism about the ability of science and technology to solve problems.

There are also some important similarities between the Cold War era and the present. One similarity is that both periods were characterized by a strong commitment to national security and a belief in the importance of military power. In contrast, the current situation is marked by a growing concern about the use of military power and a growing recognition of the importance of diplomatic solutions.

The current political atmosphere is one of uncertainty and complexity. It is important to recognize the differences between the Cold War era and the present in order to develop an effective strategy for dealing with the challenges of the current situation.
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of their turf. I often muttered to myself in frustration, "They need help but they don't want help." That my position came without much turf turned out to be a blessing in disguise: I was able to spend much more time and energy on substance than could many of my colleagues.

In the national security area, at least, secrecy is also misused to impede participation in the decision-making process. For example, one office in the National Security Council regularly issues secret meeting notices that are "inadvertently" not distributed to White House offices holding a differing point of view and sends options papers marked "Eyes only" to high-level officials who have no time to read them. In fact, there are few real secrets in most classified papers—often because the same officials who insist on shrouding the policy-making process in secrecy systematically leak information to the press; this enables them to bypass the interagency process and present their own interpretation of the information, or "spin," to higher-level officials and Congress through the press. As Steve Aftergood, a freedom-of-information expert at the Federation of American Scientists, has observed, "If current trends are taken to the limit, everything will eventually be classified, but nothing will be secret."

These somewhat disillusioning observations helped me understand why the analyses prepared by small non-governmental groups are so often more well-researched and cogent than those prepared within the government. The conditions under which nongovernmental analysts work allow them to use the government’s vast resources of expertise much more effectively than distracted government officials are able to.

The overall situation reminds me of a conversation I had with my young son on a moonlit walk many years ago. He asked, "Dad, now that they have solved the problem of solar power, what about lunar power?" I responded (calculating quickly) that the light of the full moon is only about a hundred-thousandth as intense as sunlight. But, he suggested, "If one smart person can solve solar power, maybe one hundred thousand smart people could solve lunar power?" I responded with a question of my own: "Do you really think that one hundred thousand smart people can combine to be one hundred thousand times as smart as one smart person?" After a moment's thought, his response was, "Maybe not."