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Does General Jones Have a Future in National Security Reform?

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General James L. Jones, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, is under attack, with serious implications for the likelihood of national security reform in the Obama administration. For those who have not yet heard, General Jones is already a victim of the bane of Washington, D.C. political life—the dreaded whispering campaign from anonymous sources. The early spring 2009 chatter about dumping General Jones picked up enough momentum that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently went public to counter the rumors in an interview with reporter [David Ignatius](#) (*The Washington Post*, 6/7/09). A recent [Newsweek article](#) (Newsweek, 6/27/09) suggests the issue is not going away.

Several explanations have been offered for why Jones is being criticized. Some cast the development as a policy fight (see [Steve Clemons](#) article in *The Washington Note*, 6/12/09). Others question his leadership style (see [Secretary Gates](#) interview in the *Washington Post*, 6/5/09). We think Jones is sniped at because he envisions a role for the national security adviser that emphasizes the need to manage the entire national security system to a higher level of performance rather than just dominating the outcome of a small number of presidential priorities. Consider the complaints offered up anonymously about General Jones. They tend to fall into three categories that reflect conventional wisdom about what it takes to be an effective national security adviser:

- A close relationship with the president (Scowcroft, Rice);
- Bureaucratic and intellectual dominance on all issues (Kissinger, Brzezinski);
- And always work to exhaustion in crisis management mode (all Jones' predecessors).

To indulge in a little hyperbole, conventional wisdom suggests that good national security advisers should be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These expectations are unrealistic, but not surprising given the way the national security system currently works. Let's consider each in turn.

Unrealistic Expectation #1: Jones should be Omnipotent

Jones' greatest shortcoming, according to his critics, is insufficient proximity to the president and by extension, his ability to project the president's unquestioned constitutional authorities as commander-in-chief and chief executive. [Joe Klein](#) (*Time*, 4/23/09) cites an anonymous national

security executive who insists: “He has to be first among equals—the fact that Condi [Rice] couldn’t control Cheney and [Donald] Rumsfeld in Bush’s first term was disastrous. A lot depends on what sort of relationship develops between Jones and Obama.” David Rothkopf, an expert on the National Security Council, agrees. He told [Helene Cooper](#): “The national security adviser needs to be behind the president,” both literally and figuratively, but General Jones is not “seen as the guy in the room.” Who is? Well, [Robert Dreufuss](#) (*The Rolling Stone*, 5/14/09) explains Jones has to compete with Mark Lippert, Denis McDonough and Greg Craig—all of whom advised President Obama on national security during his grueling two-year race for the presidency. Lippert and McDonough now ostensibly work for Jones, and Craig is White House Counsel. Jones, who is known for his candor, acknowledged to [Karen DeYoung](#) (*Washington Post*, 5/7/09) that “it is ‘absolutely’ fair to say” it has taken some time for him to get used to the special access to President Obama others enjoy, but that it fits with his collaborative approach to decision making:

“When I first went into the Oval Office, I didn’t expect six other people from the NSC to go with me,” he said. Now, he said, “I think the president and I are very comfortable with the fact that I don’t have to be the shadow. I don’t have to be there all the time. I really have great people. I want them to be trusted.”

Unrealistic Expectation #2: Jones should be Omniscient

Jones’ penchant for managing collaboration rather than dominating debate is no virtue according to his critics, however. [Mark Landler](#) (*The New York Times*, 5/4/09) reports that anonymous sources complain Jones “has struggled with his transition from Marine commander to senior staff person, speaking up less in debates than Mrs. Clinton and not pushing as hard for decisions.” He is not seen within or outside the administration as a dominant national security figure who commands attention on every important national security issue. On the contrary, as Joe Klein (*Time*, 4/23/09) reports, Jones is self-effacing, collaborative, and generous in meetings. He doesn’t lead meetings, he attends them; or even sends others who are substantively competent and he trusts will represent his views. As Klein notes, Jones’ reliance on collaboration is worrisome even to his supporters:

“Obama has appointed all these high-powered envoys like [Richard] Holbrooke and [George] Mitchell, but we don’t know who’s going to really be in charge of setting the foreign policy priorities,” says a prominent foreign policy realist who admires Jones. “That should be Jim’s job. But he’s throwing off a sense of uncertainty.” Several sources say Jones seems to attend meetings rather than lead them. “He needs to drive the agenda,” the foreign policy expert adds.

[David Ignatius](#) (*The Washington Post*, 4/30/09) also worries Jones is too self-effacing: “This kind of NSC collaboration always sounds good in principle. The question is what to do when sharp disagreements arise about policy. Then the low-key style may not work, and the self-effacing retired general may have to summon his inner Henry Kissinger.”

Unrealistic Expectation #3: Jones should be Omnipresent

Third, and perhaps most offensive to young White House staffers who can easily get hooked on the adrenaline rush of constant crisis management, Jones maintains a steady pace and demeanor. He is not working a frenetic pace and encouraging a collective camaraderie forged under the miserably crushing weight of the NSC staff's collective inboxes. [Karen DeYoung](#) (*The Washington Post*, 5/7/09) reports the tension between the young NSC staff members and the older national security adviser politely: "In recent weeks, Jones has been portrayed in foreign policy articles and blogs as too measured and low-key to keep pace with the hard chargers working late hours in the West Wing." [Steve Clemons](#) (*The Washington Note*, 6/12/09) put it more bluntly: "His critics think that he's just too unable to animate nimble, high flex policy decision making products for a White House on a manic dash to get a lot of top tier issues dealt with." [Helene Cooper](#) (*The New York Times*, 5/8/09) discussed these complaints directly with General Jones:

He maintained his cool even when asked about sniping from staff members that he went biking at lunchtime and left work early, although he did, at one point, seem about to crush his coffee cup. "I'm here by 7 o'clock in the morning, and I go home at 7, 7:30 at night. That's a fairly reasonable day if you're properly organized," he said. What about officials who pride themselves on being at the White House deep into the night? "Congratulations," he said. "To me that means you're not organized."

To others, working a mere 12 hours a day means you can't do the national security adviser's job of managing the president's national security agenda. [Jonathan Martin and Ben Smith](#) (*Politico*, 5/8/09) report:

For weeks, Democratic insiders had been buzzing that Jones was strangely absent from key meetings, leaving to deputies the 'staffing' of Obama – the delicate task of sitting with the president and shepherding national security meetings, large and small. "That's very unusual," said a Clinton administration veteran. "The way that staff has always run is the deputy runs the council day to day, and the [national security] adviser is *in with the president all day*" (emphasis added).

What the Criticism of Jones Really Means

Critics look for a powerful, indefatigable genius to run the national security system because that is just about what it takes to do the job in the system's current configuration. As noted in the Project on National Security Reform's analysis of the U.S. national security system (*Forging a New Shield*, www.pnsr.org), the system has severe limitations. It is grossly imbalanced, supporting strong departmental capabilities at the expense of integrating mechanisms like the national security adviser and his staff. Only the President has the authority to compel collaboration among the powerful cabinet officials who run major national security organizations and who have their authorities codified in law. Thus it is not surprising that critics want Jones to be a close extension of the President and his power, because Jones' ability to lead the president's team to unified purpose and effort on any given issue is largely a function of the perception that he is acting with the president's complete approval and authority.

Similarly, it is not surprising that critics want Jones to be knowledgeable enough to control the agenda and debate on all national security topics for the president. Since only the president or a national security adviser acting with the president's complete support can compensate for the system's inability to adequately integrate and resource national security missions, these missions gravitate toward the White House for effective management. Unfortunately, both the president and his national security adviser, no matter how well they work together, have a limited span of control. Centralizing issue management in the White House helps secure a well integrated effort for some issues but also ensures that many other issues will be neglected. Practically speaking, the nation's ability to manage national security issues effectively cannot exceed the grasp of the national security adviser's effective span of control. Along with his or her relatively small staff, the national security adviser becomes a bottleneck constricting policy development and oversight of policy implementation, which explains why some issues are well managed in any administration but many are poorly managed in all administrations. The tendency to overburden the White House with centralized issue management also explains the criticism that Jones is not working hard enough; if he is not working around the clock on every major issue (and in the process exhausting his intellectual capital rather than building it), then by definition important issues are receiving insufficient attention.

Jones no doubt understands the rationale of his critics, but believes he has a mandate from the President to improve the performance of the national security system as a whole. In his speech on February 8, 2009 in [Munich](#), General Jones noted that President Obama has charged him with strategic reforms:

In our country, one of the institutions that is changing is the National Security Council, which like so much of our national and international security architecture was formed in the wake of World War II and during the Cold War. So let me say a few words about what the National Security Council does and how President Obama has asked that I approach my job as National Security Adviser. The President has made clear that to succeed against 21st century challenges, the United States must use, balance, and integrate all elements of national influence....Given this role, the NSC is by definition at the nexus of that effort....The NSC's mission is relatively simple. It should perform the functions that it alone can perform and serve as a strategic center -- and the word strategic is operative here -- for the President's priorities.

General Jones is pursuing the President's guidance by emphasizing the need to manage the entire national security system to a higher level of performance through collaborative effort rather than clinging to the president and attempting to personally dominate debate on every issue set.

With this background, it is easier to understand the bifurcated view of Jones captured in [Steve Clemons'](#) commentary (*The Washington Note*, 6/12/09) on Jones' "fragile" tenure as national security adviser:

James Jones is considered by his admirers to be a genius when thinking about management structures and decision-making processes. On the other hand, his critics see him as a plodding, slow-moving, out of touch retired general who was better prepared to think about the last era rather than the one we are moving into.

Which view of General Jones takes hold—the organizational genius or the out of touch retired general—may depend on whether Jones can implement meaningful national security reform. Currently Jones is finding both formal and informal reform of the system quite difficult. As [Laura Rozen](#) (*The Cable*, 4/23/09) reports, Jones was unable to force a common map on the national security system to improve cross-organizational collaboration. Since Rozen also reports anonymous sources claiming Jones was “having a problematic tenure at the NSC,” it is possible that this reform effort contributed to the “off with his head” atmospherics. Jones also was unable to merge the national and homeland security councils but did succeed in merging the staff for the two presidential advisory bodies.

Next Steps for National Security Reform in the Obama Administration

In the interest of full disclosure, we note that General Jones formerly was a Guiding Coalition member in PNSR. Our purpose here is not to defend General Jones, however, but instead to promote needed national security reform. We hope General Jones can bring his organizational acumen to bear in favor of national security reform because the nation needs it.

PNSR has made recommendations that support collaborative decision making, less centralized issue management, and strategic system management. However, PNSR did so in the context of a new national security act and statutory changes to the authority of the national security adviser. [General Jones](#) has indicated that system reform on this level is not under consideration by the Obama administration for the moment. Without such new authorities, necessary reform is unlikely. In fact, the campaign against Jones suggests his relatively low-key, incremental approach to reform may be unsustainable. Jones is trying to play the role of system manager without a statutory basis for doing so and without even a clearly understood informal mandate from the president for such a role.

It may be a good time for the national security adviser to ask the President if he is serious about national security reform. If so, it is an opportune time to make systemic changes so that collaboration is regularly rewarded and system capacity for effective decision making grows. The President and his party control both the executive and legislative branches of government, and national security reform is a bipartisan subject that the President could use to reach out to Republicans. The best option would be for President Obama and General Jones to work with Congress on a new national security act that would provide a bipartisan basis for reform. PNSR would readily support such an agenda, as would many others.

But if system reform is not on the president’s agenda, and especially if the anonymous attacks continue, Jones may have to meld his leadership style to the demands of the current system. In that case he needs to burnish those divine attributes that served his predecessors so well: omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. On that score, we can only wish him good luck.