

March 28, 1975



MEMORANDUM FOR: DONALD RUMSFELD
FROM: JAMES E. CONNOR
SUBJECT: MEETING WITH MAX RABB

Max Rabb and I spoke for about an hour last week. We talked primarily about his experience during the Eisenhower years, and he gave me several suggestions on the use of the Cabinet. The thrust of his suggestions was that the Cabinet should be the major discussion forum for issues immediately prior to Presidential decision. He argued that the present system of several separate bodies such as EPB, Domestic Council, ERC and NSC was not a satisfactory substitute for the Cabinet because none of these bodies provided a broad enough base for discussion and because they did not possess sufficient stature in the public mind to convey the gravity of important decisions.

Rabb was particularly interested in reviving the use of Cabinet papers as a vehicle for discussion prior to decision on an issue. Such papers would be prepared jointly by the appropriate department and staff offices concerned with the issue and submitted in advance to the Cabinet Secretary. They would then be circulated to all Cabinet members for comment. Comments and opinions would then be included in the final paper, which would serve as the basis for Cabinet discussion. During the Eisenhower Administration all Cabinet members were expected to participate in the discussion. Decisions were either made by the President at the meeting or reserved for later action.

Rabb was quite pleased with the caliber of the President's Cabinet appointees and the mechanisms we are developing for bringing them closer to the White House. He was particularly pleased with the linkage between the Cabinet Secretary's position and the scheduling function.

Comment

Rabb's suggestions would, of course, substantially strengthen the role of the Cabinet and would give the President a style of government markedly



different from his last three predecessors. Rabb demonstrated during the Eisenhower Administration that such a system could work, but to implement it would require a significant change in practices that have grown up since the Kennedy era. The changes are:

- more frequent Cabinet meetings (at least weekly).
- restraint of Executive Office staff tendencies to get Presidential decisions on an emergency basis.
- diminution of the role of special subject groups such as EPB and ERC.
- tighter control over membership and attendance at Cabinet meetings to ensure confidentiality.

A number of arguments against greater use of the Cabinet have been made. These generally came down to two basic complaints:

- Cabinet officers don't have sufficient knowledge or interest to participate usefully in discussions of subjects outside their own realms. Therefore, they would either make poor contributions to discussions or would waste their time by sitting around silently while issues that don't concern them were discussed.
- Cabinet officers don't have a proper "Presidential" perspective. Their advice and opinions will reflect their departmental and constituency interests and thus will pressure the President to make decisions which are not in his best interest.

The problem with these two arguments is that they are simultaneously patronizing, self-serving and self-fulfilling. They are patronizing in that they assume that Cabinet officers are no more than narrow specialists, self-serving in that they assume that there are others (usually Executive Office staff) who do appreciate the President's perspective, and self-fulfilling in that if Cabinet officers are treated as outsiders concerned only with their constituency narrow departmental interests and thus are excluded from serious broad policy discussions, they will probably begin to act as outsiders.

Most of Rabb's attention focuses on the Cabinet as a collegial body. He does not, I think, fully appreciate that the individual relationships between Cabinet officers, the President and the White House staff are as important as those of the body itself. Our efforts to date have focused on both the Cabinet as a body and on the individual relationships. In the former case

we have:

- regularized Cabinet meetings (every three weeks)
- lengthened them (90 minutes)
- eliminated "show and tell" type presentations
- developed agenda items which permit broader discussion participation (catalytic converters)
- used the meeting as a vehicle for effectively conveying Presidential concerns (inflation impact statements)
- encouraged regular briefings on topics of broad interest to all Cabinet members (foreign policy, congressional situation, economic outlook)

We have not, however, gone the next step which is to use the Cabinet meeting as the major forum for discussion of issues prior to Presidential decision.

In the area of individual relationships, we have taken several important steps:

- Cabinet officers are now regularly invited to White House meetings with Congress and outside groups.
- They are aware of their ability to get access to the President through the Cabinet Secretary.
- Each of the new Cabinet officers has met or is scheduled to meet with the President for a lengthy one-on-one session. The three who have already met with him were uniformly convinced that the meetings were extremely helpful to them. The meetings have also served to enhance the interest of White House staff in what the Cabinet officers are concerned about.
- From the President's perspective, these individual meetings seems to have enabled him to get to know the new Cabinet members and to let him convey to them his broad views on policy matters.
- Jim Cannon is working closely with me to ensure that Domestic Council activities fully involve the appropriate Cabinet members.

I have asked each of the new Cabinet members to think about ways in which Cabinet meetings might be used to greater advantage. Bill Coleman and John Dunlop are developing ideas on settings and subjects which appear promising.