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Book Review by Jesse B. Burnette of White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War, by John Gans

Burnette, Jesse B.

USAWC Press

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inclusive governance: a patron security service that threatens political rivals” (302).

Contemporary works in this genre of study are Michael A. Innes’ *Making Sense of Proxy Wars* (2012), Andrew Mumford’s *Proxy Warfare* (2013), and Geraint Hughes’ *My Enemy’s Enemy* (2012), as well as the more recent works—Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli’s *Surrogate Warfare* (2019) and Tyrone L. Groh’s *Proxy War* (2019). While most of these books are more engaging reads than *Proxy Wars*, this work does have greater scientific rigor to it. It will have immediate interest to the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute community as well as those professionals interested in the activities of violent nonstate actors and transnational organized criminals. Still, for other audiences, focusing only on the front and back elements of the work, with some case study analysis for data grounding, likely represents the best approach to reading it.

## White House Warriors: How the National Security Council Transformed the American Way of War

By John Gans

Reviewed by Jesse B. Burnette, master of science candidate, US Naval Postgraduate School



New York: Liveright  
Publishing Corporation,  
2019  
272 pages  
\$28.95

Those who lead the many to guide the decision-making of a few now have a newly defined shoreline to follow. Dr. Jon Gans’s *White House Warriors* sheds new light on the White House’s often-unmentioned, yet steadfast neighbors in the executive office building—the National Security Council (NSC). Following Gans’s tribute to the men and women of the NSC, Gans concludes, the NSC’s history is replete with both successes and failures. The great insight this history offers is that the NSC best serves both the president and the nation with the rightsized job; that is to say, better national security policy and process is a function of smaller writs, not bigger staffs.

Gans is eminently qualified to write this authoritative account of the American premier coordinating and policy body. The author’s eclectic background as a public servant has brought him to the highest steps of government. His key career highlights include serving as chief speechwriter to Defense Secretary Ash Carter, assistant to Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, and key postings with Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and US Senator Hillary Clinton. In what began as a doctoral dissertation at the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, Gans amassed numerous hours of personal interviews with senior NSC staffers—Morton H. Halperin, Philip A. Dur, Richard N. Haass, Alexander Vershbow, Meghan O’Sullivan, and Douglas Lute—to augment his considerable firsthand documents.

Gans's succinct but thoroughly documented 72-year history of the NSC, written in the form of a political thriller, performs three functions for the reader. First, Gans charts the origins of the NSC from its beta form in the Second World War, to the opening of the Cold War, through subsequent changes, to the present. Second, through this comparative history, Gans reveals how each commander in chief—from Presidents Truman to Trump—tailored the NSC to fit preconceived predilections for running the country within the broad guidelines of the National Defense Act of 1947. In doing so, Gans captures the NSC's coordinating role: responsible to the president and facilitating policy formulation, but without overseeing the execution of the policies it helps to create. Third, Gans tells the largely muted story of the leaders of the national security council staff from Sidney Souers, who served as executive secretary for the NSC (before the creation of the position of national security advisor in 1953) in the Truman Administration, to national security advisor John Bolton who served during the present administration.

*White House Warriors*, however, does not adequately describe the American pre-NSC foreign policy procedures and institutions—specifically those of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee. More on this pre-NSC period would have provided the reader with an enhanced comparative sense of the genesis and utility of the NSC and thereby bolstered his conclusions.

*White House Warriors* provides an easily digestible and nonpartisan account of how some of NSC staffers fared better than others and how some national security advisors, many of whom were senior military officers, shaped enduring processes that guided the United States through its most perilous journeys. If the future mirrors the past, Gans's *White House Warriors* will be a useful handbook prefacing any senior officer's tour of duty at the NSC.

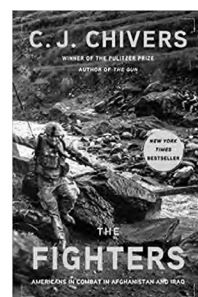
## The Fighters: Americans in Combat in Afghanistan and Iraq

By C. J. Chivers

Reviewed by MAJ Nathan K. Finney, East and Southeast Asia planner for the US Army Pacific

While reading *The Fighters*, the overwhelming emotions I experienced were gut-wrenching frustration and anxiety. This reaction was not the result of a failure on the part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, C. J. Chivers, but rather, it reflects how well he captured his subject—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as seen through the men and women who lived those conflicts. Notably Chivers recognized, “National failures and individual experiences, while inextricably linked, are distinct” (24).

My negative emotions stem from a place similar to that of the individuals covered by Chivers' reporting in the book. Of course experiences vary, but it is clear many of those Chivers covers in *The Fighters* were disappointed in the approach taken by our country toward the wars



New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018  
400 pages  
\$28.00