Twitter Thread by Dr. Jeffrey Lewis



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"National Security Directive-1" What the hell? A short

Listen, there has been a simple pattern for my entire lifetime. When Nixon and Ford issued presidential directives, they we called National Security Decision Memoranda or NSDMs.

When Carter took office, he renamed those documents "Presidential Directives." This kicked off a process in which Republican and Democratic Presidents used different naming conventions for presidential directives. It was childish, sure. But so what?

Republicans always started with "National Security." So, naturally Reagan changed it back:
National Security Decision Directives (Reagan)
National Security Directives (GHW Bush)
National Security Presidential Directives (GW Bush)
National Security Presidential Memoranda (Trump)

Democrats, by contrast, never ever used "National Security."
Presidential Directives (Carter)
Presidential Decision Directives (Clinton)
Presidential Policy Directives (Obama)

Maybe this reflects the tension between Democrats, who construe security broadly to include things like climate change, and Republicans who like to complain that Democrats think everything is a national security issue. More likely, it's like a dog meeting a fire hydrant.

Now, that pattern is broken. Biden went with the George HW Bush-era "National Security Directive." Biden could easily have picked Presidential Decision Memoranda (PDM). He didn't. Maybe from now on, Presidents will all use "NSD" no matter his or her political party.

A second pattern is also over. The first documents were usually about the organization of the NSC system. For most Presidents (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton) there were actually two documents -- one outlining the process and another renaming the series of directives.

Dedicating a whole document to naming your directives and abolishing the name of your predecessor's directives always seemed a little petty to me. George HW Bush got by with one organizational decision, as did George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

But the thing is, the first decisions were always about the process that would result in the substantive decisions to follow.

Donald Trump broke this patter -- his first directive, NSPM-1, is "Rebuilding the U.S. Armed Forces." The organizational decision was relegated to NSPM-2. Now, Biden has done the same, clearly preferring the symbolism of putting his #COVID19 response first.

This may be a trend -- The president will use the first "decision" to convey something symbolic about his or her administration, not waste it explaining how many sub-PCs will be established. I get it. Still, process matters. Logically, it should come first.

What does it all mean? Well, nothing. Nothing at all! These patterns were just little bits of Washington color that a brightened the place up, like bureaucratic cherry blossoms. I like them because I learned them young in life. Without them, DC just seems a bit grayer.

After four years of Donald Trump, I guess I can live with that. /end

PS: I would be remiss if I did not mention that @saftergood maintains an online repository of all these documents. https://t.co/eF7W3Snvzh