

Rules, Guidelines, and Practices

The following items describe important rules, guidelines, and practices of the Council on Foreign Relations, with which members and staff should familiarize themselves.

Rule on Foreign Policy Positions

The following has been the policy of the Council since its origin, reconfirmed by resolution of the Board of Directors on September 11, 1973:

“The Council shall not take any position on questions of foreign policy, and no person is authorized to speak, or purport to speak, for the Council on such matters.”

Rule on Non-Attribution

“The Council is a research and educational institution. Everyone who participates in a Council meeting is encouraged to use and disseminate ideas and information developed in the meeting. It is recognized, at the same time, that many Council guests and members are, by reason of their governmental or other institutional affiliations, subject to inevitable constraints upon their latitude to express opinions, take positions, or offer tentative judgments on public affairs issues if they are speaking in a public forum or if their statements will be later attributed to them in public media or a public forum.

“Full freedom of expression is encouraged at Council meetings. Participants are assured that they may speak openly, as it is the tradition of the Council that others will not attribute or characterize their statements in public media or forums or knowingly transmit them to persons who will. All participants are expected to honor that commitment.

“An appropriate officer of the Council may, however, by advance announcement declare this Rule inapplicable in whole or in part to any particular Council meeting, and the presentation portion of the meeting may be recorded and broadcast on electronic media and/or covered in the print media with the agreement of the speaker and advance announcement to other participants.

“Notwithstanding the above Rule, the Board of Direc-

tors may, from time to time, prescribe rules governing the subsequent release of any Council records.

“While the substance of the above Rule has been in effect since the formation of the Council, its present formulation was adopted by the Board of Directors on June 6, 1977, on the recommendation of a special Advisory Panel on the Non-Attribution Rule, and subsequently amended on June 7, 1994. The minutes of the June 1977 meeting contain the following explanatory comments about the Rule:

“The report recognizes that ‘media’ and ‘public forum’ are vague terms. But they can nevertheless be rationally interpreted in the light of the purpose of the Rule. For example, the reformulation would make it legitimate for a U.S. governmental official to report by memo to his colleagues and superiors what he learned at a Council meeting. Similarly, the reformulation recognizes that a lawyer may give such a memo to his partners, or a corporate officer to other corporate officers. It would not be in compliance with the reformulated Rule, however, for any meeting participant (i) to publish a speaker’s statement in attributed form in a newspaper; (ii) to repeat it on television or radio, or on a speaker’s platform, or in a classroom; or (iii) to go beyond a memo of limited circulation, by distributing the attributed statement in a company or government agency newsletter. The language of the Rule also goes out of its way to make it clear that a meeting participant is forbidden knowingly to transmit the attributed statement to a newspaper reporter or other such person who is likely to publish it in a public medium. The essence of the Rule as reformulated is simple enough: participants in Council meetings should not pass along an attributed statement in circumstances where there is substantial risk that it will promptly be widely circulated or published.”

Guidelines on Meetings

By resolution adopted on February 28, 1972, as subsequently amended, the Board of Directors has prescribed the following Guidelines governing Council meetings:

"The purpose of meetings sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations is to promote understanding of international affairs through the free interchange of ideas among participants.

"In order to encourage to the fullest a free, frank, and open exchange of ideas in Council meetings, the Board of Directors has prescribed, in addition to the Non-Attribution Rule, the following guidelines. All participants in Council meetings are expected to be familiar with and adhere to these Guidelines.

"1. Since the Council invites guests representing many different viewpoints, since it selects topics regardless of, or because of, their controversiality, and since there is a wide divergence of viewpoints among members, it is to be expected that Council meetings will sometimes be marked by sharp dispute.

"2. Meetings chairmen are expected to stimulate open expression of opinion by all participants and should not attempt to mute controversy or stifle differences of viewpoint where they exist. To this end it is the responsibility of chairmen to see to it that all viewpoints expressed are treated with respect and that parliamentary decorum is maintained.

"3. Principal speakers should expect to be questioned vigorously on any point relevant to their intellectual interest, experience, or expertise in international affairs. It is recognized, however, that some speakers, particularly those holding official positions, may not feel free to answer some questions, and, in such case, their declination will be respected."

Apart from the traditional meetings for spouses and for sons and daughters of the members, occasional meetings are also open to guests of members. Guest privileges are for those who have special expertise or experience that relates directly to the meeting, as well as the general qualifications of potential candidates for Council membership. Members bringing guests should secure the permission of the Council department organizing the meeting and acquaint their guests with the Council's Non-Attribution Rule governing what is said at meetings.

Rule on Conflicts of Interest

By resolution of the Council's Board of Directors, adopted January 28, 1992, the following policy concerning actual or potential conflicts of interest was approved:

"1. It is the policy of the Council on Foreign Relations that the Board, officers, and staff of the Council be sensitive to conflict-of-interest issues.

"2. Any potential conflict of interest shall be disclosed to an Officer of the Board by the person concerned. When relevant to a matter requiring action by the Board, the person concerned shall absent him- or herself from the final discussion of such matter, and shall not vote thereon, and the minutes of the meeting shall so disclose. When there is doubt as to whether a conflict of interest exists, the matter shall be resolved by vote of the Board, excluding the person concerning whose situation the doubt has arisen.

"3. This resolution shall remain in full force and effect unless and until modified by vote of the Board, and a copy hereof shall be furnished to each officer or director at the time of his or her election or appointment to or by the Board and any renewal thereof, and to each person who is now or hereafter may become a member of the staff. The policy shall in an appropriate manner be reviewed annually for the information and guidance of directors, officers, and staff."

Archival Practice

By resolution of the Council's Board of Directors, adopted June 3, 1999, all substantive records of the Council more than 25 years old are open for reference use during library hours at the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University, subject to the following proviso:

"As a condition of use, the officers of the Council shall require each user of Council records to execute a prior written commitment that he or she will not directly or indirectly attribute to any living person any assertion of fact or opinion based upon any Council record without first obtaining from such person his or her written consent thereto."