

NERVE CENTER

Lessons in Governing from the White House Chiefs of Staff

TERRY SULLIVAN

Editor's Introductory Chapter

Includes a foreword by
JAMES A. BAKER, III

Introduction —

Two Operational Dilemmas

Terry Sullivan, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*
James A. Baker III Institute

I started out in effect not having [a] Chief of Staff and it didn't work. So, anybody who doesn't have one and tries to run the responsibilities of the White House, I think, is putting too big a burden on the President himself. You need a filter, a person that you have total confidence in who works so closely with you that in effect his is almost an alter ego. I just can't imagine a President not having an effective Chief of Staff.

— Gerald R. Ford¹

The American White House sits at the nerve center of world history. Its policies reach into every part of the American experience. Its bustling daily routines become the subject of serious conversations the world over. At the core of this nerve center, a bureaucratic operation extends the reach and magnifies the voice of the American President. The White House Chief of Staff manages that operation. So important has that office become, that to ignore its requirements tempts presidential fate itself. As one of the last to eschew a Chief of Staff, President Gerald R. Ford's words on the subject carry a special message: What we do not know about this office imperils the republic.

The range of what we do *not* know astonishes. No systematic scholarly literature has ever developed sufficient to answer the critical questions facing a working White House. No systematic theory has developed, resting on the kind of articulated central principles now common in the study of all other American policy institutions. Because of these two gaps, presidency

¹ Interview with Gerald R. Ford, White House 2001 Project, White House Interview Program, Martha J. Kumar, Palm Springs, California.

scholars cannot “talk truth to power” when the subject turns to presidential transitions and the related topic of governing from the White House. Instead, scholars must rely upon the willingness of power to talk truth to *them*. The Forum on the White House Chief of Staff represents one of those rare instances when just that happened.

This essay outlines the gaps in knowledge that their discussions tried to fill. It describes these gaps by asserting two operational dilemmas facing a White House: one about discipline and the other about effectiveness. This book will return to these two dilemmas in a final chapter analyzing the George W. Bush presidential transition in 2001, the transition immediately following the Forum, as a part of the governing cycle these chiefs discussed. This introduction also highlights the rhythms of an administration’s tenure, from start to restart to reelection and closing out. While this book takes as a principal theme that no one can conduct a presidential transition properly without knowing the nature of governing itself, it also takes seriously the notion that presidential transitions lay on a seamless continuum along with governing throughout the presidential tenure, as well. Each of these portions of a president’s tenure presents its own special challenges to those Chiefs of Staff who stand their watches then. And, echoing the importance of these two dilemmas, each period presents persistent challenges common to every White House Chief of Staff who accepts the responsibility for the nerve center.

TWO FUNCTIONS OF THE WHITE HOUSE STAFF

The White House staff fills two presidential needs. First, it extends the President’s reach. It expands the breadth of presidential “awareness” – gathering intelligence, assessing information, and overseeing policy deliberations. It expands presidential strategic considerations – making it possible to consider a wider range of alternative scenarios simultaneously. The staff also expands opportunities for controlling implementation – requiring the Executive always to anticipate (rather than think improbable) the President’s reaction. In a way, then, the staff affords the President something akin to the advantages of the Congress, where its multitudes create a policy-making institution that “never sleeps.”

Second, the White House staff magnifies the President's voice. It creates a wider range of "presidential presence" by coordinating the administration's "message." And it provides the capacity to elaborate the President's position on issues, thereby increasing the likely force of presidential persuasion in public deliberations. The White House staff, then, insures that the President has the most forceful voice in public debate.

THE NERVE CENTER

The President's staff works in an extraordinary place. At one point during the forum, former Carter Chief of Staff Jack Watson told the audience that the skills a Chief of Staff uses to maneuver successfully through that special community involve nothing more than the common decency everyone learns from their parents. In effect, simply getting along dominates White House operations. Maybe so. That comment notwithstanding, everyone attending the Forum acknowledged that White House work differs from work elsewhere.

Often a critical mistake for a new staff becomes the way in which they project previous experience – in State government, business, or in Congress – onto their new White House responsibilities. They understand the White House as something different, but only *by degrees*. They talk about their past experience as having prepared them because they have experienced "the big leagues." In fact, they come to learn that thinking in terms of the human nervous systems would constitute a better analogy than this very popular baseball one. The human nerve center does not merely equal the sum of its appended parts; it does not differ only by degrees. As a consequence, understanding the senses does not lay a substantial foundation for understanding the brain. Instead, the nerve center differs *in nature* from the sum of its reporting subsystems. In this same way, the White House differs from other organizations; it differs in scale, surely, but it differs also in other ways as well; in scrutiny and in partisanship, from anything anyone has previously experienced.

SCALE

White House operations have a distinctive "scale." For one thing, they outpace work elsewhere. Operations accelerate as they approach the American government's center. At the Forum, former Clinton Chief of

Staff and private financier Erskine Bowles described the work pace as “faster than a dot-com.” Clay Johnson, III, himself a former executive for PepsiCo and at the time President Bush’s Director of Presidential Personnel described White House pace in similar terms. “At PepsiCo,” he recalled, “we had some times that were as fast-paced, whenever we were about to launch a new product we had invested a billion dollars in and whose outcome would either send our stock skyrocketing or crash-land it. The difference was that at PepsiCo, that pace might last for a week once a year. At the White House, it is *every* day, Saturday and Sunday, too!”²

In addition, as operations move to the center, they experience greater demands. In personnel, for example, the governor of a large state must find nominees for hundreds of State positions. To fill these positions, the governor’s staff must match a pool of potential applicants, ranging in the thousands but usually not more than 15,000.³ A presidential administration must fill slightly less than 8,200 positions. To fill those positions, the White House would maintain applications from hundreds of thousands of potential nominees. The Clinton database, for example, maintained 195,000 dossiers. A President-elect easily might receive 10,000 applications on the single day following election. Indeed, everything having to do with White House operations carries such an exclamation point. Without adequate preparations, the scale of White House operations can simply overwhelm a President’s staff.

The more challenging aspect of scale, though, derives not from sheer size but instead from the juxtaposition between what the staff has faced, and has some sense of, and what it now faces, and has no sense of. In personnel, again as an example, the fact of scale, daunting enough on its own, means that the initial *strategy* for handling applications can easily capsize White House operations. In turn, a foundering personnel operation can lead to a range of embarrassing and failed appointments. These in their turn undermine the President’s reputation for competence so critical to success in the complicated Washington policy-making community. So, a misunderstanding of the simple scale of presidential appointments quickly escalates into a reputational catastrophe for the President affecting not only the transition but the rest of the administration’s future.

² Conversation with the author, 5 May 2001, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³ Texas, to take an example, typically maintains a database of 15,000 resumes.

SCRUTINY

Simply put, the nerve center commands a worldwide audience. One former staff member described this scrutiny as if “you were naked in a glass house every minute.”⁴ This intense scrutiny lends special weight to the words and actions of those responsible to the Chief of Staff. The White House constitutes one pole of almost every news story. Scrutiny also makes it impossible for a Chief of Staff to remain a detached and shadowy figure in an administration. Moreover, since every misstep draws instant attention and since the pace of operations spins wildly, each misdirection diverts the Administration’s energies by unleashing often uncontrollable forces that not only complicate work but send secondary responses rippling through the policy-making apparatus. Scrutiny amplifies political stakes and places a premium on flawless eloquence. Misstatements tolerated in a national campaign or the State house suddenly wreck diplomatic initiatives and sap political allies of their legitimacy.

PARTISANSHIP

Despite the declining importance of party in determining who governs, partisanship has become the defining atmospheric of governing. From the convoluted web of ethical standards, to the easily escalating tensions in congressional deliberations, to the omnipresent threat of subpoena, White House work has taken on an extraordinarily partisan dimension. Governing in this new Washington environment places special strains on any Chief of Staff’s operation. For example, the omnipresence of escalating crises complicates the distribution of responsibilities. The constantly growing target on their backs undermines any Chief of Staff’s chances of remaining in office long enough to apply hard-learned lessons. And the tension inherent in poisonous partisanship skews every “normal” operational element, from staff meetings in which no one keeps notes to the necessity for “edgy” messages in public debate.

⁴ Interview with Alonzo MacDonald, White House 2001 Project, White House Interview Program, Martha J. Kumar, 15 February 2000, Washington, D. C. See also similar comments by President Ford’s Director of Presidential Personnel, Douglas Bennett, Interview with Douglas Bennett, White House 2001 Project, White House Interview Program, Martha J. Kumar, 15 November 1999, Washington, D. C.

TWO OPERATIONAL DILEMMAS

When the nerve center, with its scale, scrutiny, and partisanship, impinges on the White House staff two results occur. First, it presents the Chief of Staff with two operational dilemmas – balances to maintain between equally important forces. The first dilemma pits the individual's need for policy influence against the broader need for a disciplined decision-making process. The second dilemma pits the staff's ability to respond to crises against its need to effectively advance the President's agenda.

Second, the nerve center warps time. More than any other institution of American power, time enmeshes the Presidency. While Members of Congress must regularly stand for re-election and thus they feel the *rhythm* of tenure, the twenty-third constitutional amendment presents every President with time's inescapable limitations. And while the American public believes every administration deserves a successful start, it expects performance within a finite period. Keeping ahead of the changing environment presented by eroding tenure becomes every Chief of Staff's defining constraint. These two broad categories of effects, operational dilemmas and the passage of tenure, became the organizing tenet for the Forum's discussions.

INITIATIVE VS ORCHESTRATION

As Secretary James Baker pointed out in his foreword, every White House exists at the confluence of four forces: personnel, process, politics, and policy. Selecting and managing personnel constitutes the starting point for everything else. The people who become a President's Chief of Staff present an imposing figure when they take office – nothing at all like the “neutral-competent” bureaucrat yearning for anonymity so often associated with recommendations about White House staffs.⁵ Indeed, all the former Chiefs have come from successful careers in partisan politics, in business, in policy advocacy, or as fierce campaigners for one candidate against another.

⁵ Louis Brownlow, Charles Merriam, and Luther Gulick, *Brownlow Committee Report to President Franklin Roosevelt*, 1935. In their report, the committee described the central assets of those who would serve the President: “They should be men in whom the President has personal confidence and whose character and attitude is such that they would not attempt to exercise power on their own account. They should be possessed of high competence, great physical vigor, and a *passion for anonymity* [emphasis added].”

In their new positions, though, these previously successful individuals have to subrogate their past successes and experiences to the rigors of holding positions as mere staff, exercising “reflected” powers, and managing a collection of people with these same characteristics facing these same imperatives. Those who performed well in the job could adapt to these circumstances, disciplining their own policy interests in favor of the President’s.⁶

In effect, White House operations revolve around a dilemma reflected in this daunting personal challenge for Chiefs of Staff. The reach and voice of an administration draws its energy from the staff of policy advocates who pursue their personal ambitions for making policy through their advocacy and the President’s decisions. This ambition to have their views validated in presidential decisions brings them to work and compensates them for their arduous efforts. At the same time, this desire to have their views validated over the positions of others, what better way to underscore their value than to have the President adopt their advice, can undermine as well as invigorate. When thwarted by the kind of decision-making process that presents all important sides of an issue to the President for consideration, this creative force borne of personal ambition can, instead, generate a cold cunning and competition among advisors. Many a White House has benefited by the creative tension generated by such ambitions and many have faltered when those same ambitions turn inward against themselves.

We might characterize this dilemma as pitting initiative against orchestration. Individual ambitions create energy in the White House, initiative, reined in and controlled by a routine of orderly decision-making, orchestration. Call this dilemma “discipline,” because the balance developed between individual ambition and collective routine requires a discipline to maintain.

What hazards must a new Chief face in maintaining discipline for the President? Obviously, mid-course Chiefs, those brought in to put the administration on a new footing, face this dilemma’s most severe variants. President Clinton’s second Chief of Staff Leon Panetta alternated between characterizing his situation as “organizing a soccer team among elementary school kids” (everyone racing for the ball!) and as “taking a battlefield

⁶ Lloyd Cutler characterized the White House as similar to the Democratic party, “[It] resembles a city hall. It is very, very difficult to organize. It isn’t as if General Electric bought a company and sent in a management team that had worked together for twenty years and then they came to reshape this company that they bought.” See “Interview with Lloyd Cutler,” White House 2001 Project, White House Interview Program, 8 July 1999, Martha J. Kumar, Washington, D. C.

promotion” (restructuring business while taking fire). How can they build a team of advocates willing to forego their private motives in order to serve the President’s?

A particularly intriguing void in our knowledge entails how the habits of presidents affect the resolution of this dilemma. When the President’s own tried and true practices run up against the pressures of White House process and pace, what must give way? Does the White House staff reflect the President’s strengths or does the staff compensate for weaknesses? How much can a President contribute to or alleviate the Chief’s trials over discipline?

REACTION VS PROJECTION

A second operational dilemma involves the confluence of politics and process. As mentioned earlier, unbelievable pace constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the nerve center. The operational efficiency of the White House staff under this extraordinary pace becomes a common measure of the President’s capacity for leadership. Though a third of the Chiefs of Staff assumed office because a crisis had claimed their predecessor, every Chief of Staff has faced troubled times when the administration’s leadership began to erode. Every deployment of White House staff, then, must accommodate distractions. The ability to do so constitutes a critical element of an administration’s success. For example, former Chief of Staff Dick Cheney noted:

Stuff happens. Lots of times your presidency is more completely defined by how you deal with the stuff that happens than it is by how you deal with the regularly scheduled events that occur during the course of the year. If there’s an area where the transitions are inadequate, it’s this whole area of managing crises....⁷

Maintaining a focus on the President’s agenda becomes one of the central challenges of crisis management.⁸

⁷ Interview with Richard Cheney, White House 2001 Project, White House Interview Program, Martha J. Kumar, 29 July 1999, Dallas, Texas.

⁸ The seventeen who have held the office in the modern presidency compose three distinct groups: those starting an administration (transition), those who took over in a crisis (redirection), and those who inherited the relative calm after the righted ship (routine). Since James A. Baker, III, held the office twice, seventeen individuals have occupied eighteen regimes.

Maintaining a focus in the presence of great distraction, of course, poses an organizational conundrum. If an administration's current operations can accommodate those extraordinary challenges, then the staff system must have worked previously at less than full pace. In effect, the ability to accommodate a crisis perforce implies underutilization of normal capacity for normally projecting the President's leadership. On the other hand, if they cannot accommodate these challenges, then the President's team faces a hostile world in which they may lose their leadership when a crisis arises. Call this dilemma "effectiveness," for it underscores politics and policy.

Governor Sununu raised this concern during his discussion of the transition period, reflecting his and President Bush's choice in favor of slack resources (see page 73). His discussion of the problem clearly indicated the central role the President's judgment on this matter and his expectations played in setting the pace of White House staff work. How do Chiefs of Staff build a staff operation capable of handling crisis but fully utilizing their talents in normal operational times?

In addition, maintaining a focus on the President's agenda involves projecting that agenda, especially into the future. Just as the meaning of every candidate lies not in what they presently do but what they intend to do, the meaning of every presidency from the moment of its transition lies in its future. Yet, to carry out this planning for the future, again, presents the White House staff with a dilemma – planning inherently means sacrificing capacity in the here and now in favor of projecting success into a future which may never come. This planning variant on effectiveness can confound any administration. Ambitious White House staff do not want to find themselves assigned to long-term planning groups fearing to do so sacrifices operational involvement in the what has come to pass. Eventually, those who master the here and now come in turn to handle the responsibilities for carrying out the execution of future plans which may have derived from the work of others. So, the demands of the here and now always trump the potential for the future and always draw the attention of

Chiefs of Staff by Circumstances of Assuming Office		
Transition	Redirection	Routine
Haldeman, Jordan, J. Baker 1, Regan, Sununu, McLarty, Card	Haig, Rumsfeld, Watson, H. Baker, Skinner, J. Baker 2, Panetta	Cheney, Duberstein, Bowles, Podesta

those most responsible for daily operations. Inherent in this requirement for planning, then, planners must sacrifice their involvement in order to establish the precursors for others' decision-making. How might one create such a needed system of planning?

THE RHYTHMS OF PRESIDENTIAL TENURE

While the patterns of operations remain constant, the rhythms of White House work vary over time. For example, all of the pressures that result from the nerve center – its pace, scrutiny, and partisanship – vary little as time passes. On the other hand, the administration's capacity to deal with these pressures fluctuates as the White House team “ages” in office and then cycles out the door.

Nowhen does a Chief of Staff have more control over the job than during the presidential transition and the initial weeks of the new administration. Thus, the first discussion to follow directly addresses the interplay of operations with the rhythms of tenure. It focused on defining an effective White House from its starting point in the presidential transition.

Planning for winning, itself, presents a host of troublesome contradictions for operations. Each presidential candidate knows that the transition presents a limited window of opportunity that requires detailed plans to master. Yet, typically, candidates eschew the early planning necessary for mastery. They worry that planning to win distracts the campaign from winning. They worry that the public will see making plans to govern as presumptuous, yielding a distraction from the campaign's main themes. And they often have unbridled confidence in their ability to master the challenges of governing from the White House. After all, they have mastered what they have faced heretofore. For many reasons, candidates often cannot get beyond the fear that no matter how low-keyed they keep it, early planning will derail their campaign. Yet, few recommendations garner more universal appreciation than the former Chiefs of Staff's suggestion that transition planning must begin well before election day.

Planning for personnel issues poses a second set of challenges. For that reason, most of the Chiefs of Staff agreed that a substantial amount of the early planning effort should focus on personnel, both in terms of identifying critical positions and in creating a decision-making process. In that process, some observers and practitioners maintain that president-elects

must prepare to distance themselves from loyal campaigners favoring instead those “wiser Washington hands” that can contribute their experience in the governing community. Plenty of presidential transitions, the record shows, have stumbled through problems of their own making, easily avoided had they had wiser hands on the controls.

Others counter that Washington hands too easily give up on the President’s agenda favoring instead the “realities” of governing in Washington. They too willingly sacrifice policy for proper routine. Campaign hands, on the other hand, “know the President,” remember why they had gotten to the White House, and prefer to keep faith with that agenda. Clearly, then, this balance between campaigning and governing must trouble every Chief of Staff when starting a White House. What are the choices that present themselves in finding a balance? How can a Chief of Staff resolve this challenge?

The second discussion followed the administration through what Bill Plante called “a slight bump in the road or perhaps a train wreck.” In it, the former Chiefs of Staff discussed the stresses of coming to a White House under fire. Crisis management surely differs from normal management, even in the White House where crises arrive at the doorstep with the morning’s news summary. What critical reins of power did these Chiefs of Staff need to grasp to reverse the situation? What kinds of assurances did they seek from the sitting President? Must a new Chief of Staff control Oval Office access? Must a new Chief of Staff “clean house,” replacing the previous staff with a new group?

From reelection to legacy, the third discussion focused on the last act in White House tenure. How clearly can one delineate the responsibilities for governing and the demands of reelection? How clearly can the White House draw a distinction between its responsibilities to the country and its commitments to the party for successfully achieving reelection? What kinds of decisions or initiatives do they put on hold during a campaign? How can a Chief of Staff control the pressures for executive orders, regulatory actions, and pardons?

IN THE WASHINGTON COMMUNITY

The White House sits at the center of a great constitutional contrivance inside a city of that contrivance. The Forum’s last discussion concerned bridging the constitutional gap between Congress and Executive Branch.

This last discussion reflected more than a simple concern with Washington context. The former Chiefs of Staff covered an additional issue – how to plan for the anticipated constitutional change coming? The presidential election season of 2000 presented the nation with a clear opportunity to manage change – President Clinton’s tenure had become fully enshrouded in the constitutional requirements for succession. As Secretary Baker mentioned in his foreword, a morning would shortly arrive when someone yet unknown would awake to the awesome responsibility of building a *new* administration from the ground up. That Andrew Card, whom all of them *did* know and with whom most of them had served, would bear that responsibility for George W. Bush and Forum participant Dick Cheney did not minimize the challenge before the former Chiefs of Staff to reshape perspectives on transition planning. The Forum of former Chiefs of Staff set out to underscore that the country could not afford to forego this historic opportunity and to reiterate the Washington community’s expectations that transition planning should constitute the normal course of campaign business.

Built on momentum created by the Forum of former White House Chiefs of Staff and maintained by the coordinated efforts of the Baker Institute and other public interest groups, transition planning became a reality. Both of the major party campaigns quietly established planning groups, built up potential personnel rosters, and identified critical organizational decisions for their candidate’s consideration once elected. All of these plans and the momentum for planning that they realized played an important role in effecting a productive transition after the events of election-day 2000 and decision-day, December 12th. Without the message delivered by this group in that moment, a murky future could easily have unfolded from the Florida decision. Instead, as the last chapter will detail, the 2001 transition proceeded to set records for discipline and effectiveness, mastering personnel and process while merging politics to accomplish policy.