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## White House Staff

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## 8 White House Staff

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The American president is often viewed by outsiders and commentators as the singular impersonation of authority in the world's sole democratic super-power, capable of reordering realities across the globe and from state to state with the push of a button or a reach toward a red phone. In reality, however, the chief executive sits atop an immense bureaucratic structure that facilitates the president's policy and political leadership initiatives. That is accomplished by aiding him in gathering and processing the information he needs to make his decisions and implementing, to the greatest degree possible, both his preferences and the legislative dictates that emerge out of Congress and find a positive response upon crossing the president's desk.

The individuals who staff a president's White House are his greatest human asset as he spends every waking moment for the duration of his tenure in office working to lead the nation in a manner that will, in some cases, allow him to keep his job and, in others, keep him in the good graces of future historians. As such, his staffers occupy his mind from before he even becomes president-elect to his final moments in office, as was most memorably the case in Richard Nixon's famous farewell address to his staffers after resigning in 1974. Even when they are not strategizing over who to recruit to serve in the Executive Office of the President or thanking them for their service at the end (and during) their time in office, presidents constantly evaluate their staff and staffing structures, even if only to promise ways to cut the size and scope of the personnel apparatus.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, it is not just the presidents themselves who care about the employee-inhabitants of the buildings at and around 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue; increasingly, the media has taken an interest in the men and women who work for the president.<sup>2</sup> Articles and television coverage frequently assess which staffers are most influential, which are most controversial, and often which are most accessible to members of the press. Similarly, the study of different dimensions of the White House staff has long had a presence in presidency research. Today the subject is frequently debated and analyzed in high-profile scholarly arenas. For example, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, the leading academic journal dedicated to the study of the American presidency from multiple disciplinary perspectives, published in March 2009 a special symposium on "The Administrative Presidency" that considered the role of White House staff among other bureaucratic

dimensions of the executive branch. Similarly, organized panels at important political science conventions are often dedicated to the subject, including recent panels such as "Staffing the White House" (APSA 2009), "Development and Management of the Institutional Presidency" (MPSA 2010), and "Staffing and Decision Making in the White House" (APSA 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, leading scholars of the presidency have come together in key election years under the umbrella of the White House Transition Project ([www.whitehoustransitionproject.org](http://www.whitehoustransitionproject.org)). The purpose is to conduct research with the intent of advising incoming administrations on how to conduct their transition from campaigning to governing with a particular eye toward structuring and staffing the White House.

As the multi-dimensional nature of the serious attention being paid to White House Staff—from the president, the media, and the academy—makes clear, and as the importance of the staff has grown over recent decades, so has our scholarly dedication to understanding and explaining it. In this chapter, we evaluate the state of these efforts and offer commentary about the scholarly analysis concerning the White House staff, with particular attention paid to the expansion of the staff, centralization of key activities, and the expansion of knowledge about key personnel positions. We follow these discussions with a treatment of more recent research trends and some thoughts on future research directions.

### Function of the White House Staff

The range of positions in which individuals serve while working for the president is quite dramatic. Just as there are high-level policy advisers and easily recognizable press secretaries and chiefs of staff, there are also domestic workers like custodians, cooks, and porters. Although all of these positions and many others are technically considered members of the White House staff,<sup>4</sup> in this chapter we employ a more nuanced definition. Following Matthew Dickinson, we consider staff to be "those individuals and agencies within the Executive Office of the President (EOP), formally established in 1939, including the White House Office (WHO) and the other primary staff agencies; and the political secretaries heading the major executive branch departments and agencies that collectively constitute the traditional presidential 'cabinet.'"<sup>5</sup> Implicit in this conceptualization of staff is the concept of power. To be a member of the White House staff is to be a presidential employee directly involved in the business of politics, policy making, or some hybrid of both. Therefore, to Dickinson's institutional considerations, we also point out a parallel functional dimension.

This focus on function is not unique, nor is it clear-cut. According to Terry Sullivan, the White House staff serves dual functions:

First, it extends the president's reach. It expands the breadth of presidential "awareness" by gathering intelligence, assessing information, and overseeing policy deliberations. It expands presidential strategic considerations, which makes it possible to consider a wider range of alternative scenarios



simultaneously. The staff also expands opportunities for controlling implementation by requiring the executive always to anticipate the president's reaction. In a way, the staff affords the president something akin to the advantages of the Congress, where its multitudes create a policy-making institution that "never sleeps."<sup>6</sup>

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 ensures that the president has the most forceful voice in public debate."<sup>7</sup>

According to former White House advisor Bradley Patterson, now of the Brookings Institution, the modern White House staff serves more than a dozen principal presidential functions, including: integrating national security policy and operations, developing and overseeing domestic policy, coordinating foreign and domestic economic policies, providing legal advice to the chief executive, managing legislative affairs, informing the press, overseeing communications, speech-writing, building alliances with constituency groups, scheduling, collaborating with state and local governments, keeping president and party in harmony, recruiting and appointing noncareer officers, and advancing presidential trips.<sup>8</sup> Further, the staff must provide support for special circumstances (including emergencies and other initially unanticipated policy and political developments) while keeping the complex internal administrative system running, by attending to considerations such as superintending the president's paper flow, keeping the bridge open to the cabinet, and meeting the president's hour-to-hour needs.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, all the while the White House staff must provide support to the president's two primary "special counselors": the First Lady and the vice president.<sup>10</sup>

Over recent decades, as expectations of presidents have grown, so have the staffing needs to support the increased executive workload. As a result, the number of presidential employees exploded in the twentieth century and continues to grow today. In the next section, we discuss this expansion, identifying the roots of the growth and the dimensions of how it has transpired.

### Historical Dynamics of the White House Staff

"The president needs help." Such began perhaps the most important document written about the institution of the American presidency in the twentieth century, at least insofar as how the institution would come to be configured and endlessly reconfigured.

Authored by the Committee on Administrative Management, chaired by public administration scholar Louis Brownlow and henceforth referred to as the Brownlow Committee, the Brownlow Report, as history has come to know the 1937 document, advocated sweeping changes to the institutional dimensions of the presidency. Many of these changes were subsequently though not immediately

implemented, whether by congressional action or executive order, and the organizational face of the chief executive was forever changed. The president now had a mechanism through which to seek increased advisory and implementation capacity and made use of it, as did his successors for generations to come.

The primary influence of the Brownlow Report was the subsequent creation of the EOP in 1939. The EOP initially consisted of five main units—the WHO, the Bureau of the Budget, the natural resources and planning board, the office of government reports, and the liaison office of personnel management.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the EOP has expanded to eleven offices and several supplemental units. The main intent of the EOP was to provide the president a way of overseeing policy making by the executive departments and agencies. In reality, however, the EOP has actually served as a springboard for the president to take on greater responsibility and involvement in leading the policy making process.

### Expansion

Soon after the EOP's creation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt added six key administrative aides to work behind the scenes, often giving them overlapping assignments as a way of increasing inner-staff competition to help maximize the quality of information garnered and influence exerted.<sup>12</sup> Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower followed suit, though their staff structure was more hierarchical. Eisenhower in particular favored a more closed organizational approach, even adding a chief of staff to serve as a regulator of individuals and memoranda coming in and out of the Oval Office. By today's standards, such changes seem relatively moderate, particularly since they represented more of an extension of the president's staff than the broader *institutional* extensions observers have since witnessed.

The most profound changes occurred in the 1960s and led to a more comprehensive institutionalization of the White House that altered the operation of the entire executive branch. Subsequently, the institutionalization of the policy-making process in the White House has resulted in numerous gains in policy-making power for presidents. For one, presidents have gained more discretion over the policy-making process in general and are thus able to claim more credit for policy development. Employing their growing inner staff, presidents have also become less dependent on departments and agencies, making it possible to forgo outer executive input in cases where the president's views differ from that of executive branch civil servants. Consequently, the status of cabinet secretaries has relatively declined as the president's inner staff has grown in size and amount of delegated responsibilities.

Toward the end of the 1960s, the growth of the White House reached a point where even inner middle- and lower-level White House personnel experienced a decline in the amount of accessibility to and influence over the president. In particular, President Richard Nixon made a point to concentrate power among his most senior aides. Nixon applied a strict pyramid structure with clear lines of authority running through his chief of staff and two main policy aides. In fact, the



use of a chief of staff became fully institutionalized during the Nixon administration.<sup>13</sup> Later on, Nixon also moved to expand White House control over the outer bureaucracy by placing some of his most trusted aides in top positions across the various executive departments and agencies. However, once the Watergate debacle occurred and led to Nixon's resignation, belated insiders and Nixon's successors—particularly Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter—shied away, to a certain extent, from such concentrated levels of power within the White House.

The Ronald Reagan years saw not only a resurgence in concentrated and expanded power within the White House, they also culminated with an unprecedented amount of delegation of administrative duties from the president to his underlings. Reagan's chief of staff, Donald Regan, dominated White House lines of authority in a manner that both alleviated the president of a significant amount of managerial duties but also limited the president's access to much of his staff and other outside voices. As with Nixon's case, an overconcentration of power among the president's inner circle soon led to an unraveling of controversies, highlighted by the Iran-Contra affair.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, George W. Bush's White House earned praise (particularly early on) for employing a tightly organized, hierarchical structure. Though often considered highly secretive, Bush's organizational approach was seen as largely effective—particularly in the post-9/11 phase that saw the establishment first of a White House office and later of a new cabinet position for the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. Indeed, save for the controversy surrounding the Central Intelligence Agency leak scandal that implicated Lewis "Scooter" Libby (Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff), Bush's administration accumulated much power and influence over public affairs and policy in a manner that helped to avoid some of the mistakes his predecessors made.

Efforts to further focus power and influence within the president's inner circle have continued to grow over time. Barack Obama's administration, while outwardly promoting cooperation and transparency, has actually functioned under a more hierarchical structure, led by the dominant and highly political Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. Obama has also been quite aggressive in defending his staff's behind-the-scenes activities by claiming executive privilege on numerous occasions, including the refusal of having the former social secretary, Desiree Rogers, testify before Congress over the controversy involving party crashes at Obama's first state dinner. Nevertheless, given the growing challenges modern presidents face and the expansion of executive branch staff to deal with them, it is not surprising that more recent presidents have tended toward a more protected and centralized approach to staff management and policy development.

In summary, the expansion of the White House has provided a necessary framework for helping presidents to keep up with the growing demands of the public, as well as their own aspirations for leading the policy-making process. In the interim, presidents have become increasingly dependent on their inner staff in trying to manage information and take on the policy-making process. According to Bradley Patterson:

What began to be true in [Franklin D.] Roosevelt's time is even truer today; it is the White House that must supply the required leadership and coordination. The evolution that was required fully to implement that principle has taken place over sixty years, and has occurred on two fronts. First, the department and agencies have gradually come to accept the primacy of the White House in executive branch policy work; second, the White House staff itself has emerged as the lead engine of both policy development and interdepartmental coordination.<sup>15</sup>

With executive branch expansion in mind, we next discuss two strategies presidents employ—centralization and politicization—as a means for concentrating power and influence within the president's inner circle, and review how such strategies are intended to ease the president's managerial burdens in leading the policymaking process.

### *Centralization*

Presidents today operate in a context in which they are required to satisfy ever-growing leadership expectations while simultaneously pursuing their own policy preferences (as well as the preferences of their core constituencies). As Terry Moe notes, "The expectations surrounding presidential performance far outstrip the institutional capacity of presidents to perform."<sup>16</sup> To satisfy public expectations and accomplish their own preferred objectives, presidents avail themselves of an institution that has grown to be immense and unwieldy. Even the agencies that comprise the EOP—which are more within reach of the president's grasp than other aspects of the federal government—prove difficult to control, without the most persistent and effective efforts.<sup>17</sup>

In their managerial role, presidents must collect, organize, and sort out information because, as Richard Neustadt puts it, "a president is helped by what he gets into his mind. His first essential need is information."<sup>18</sup> Presidents have at their disposal two primary resources for policy making: "inner" White House personnel and "outer" civil servant personnel spread out across the executive branch agencies and departments. To manage the process, presidents may centralize policy development within the Executive Office, delegate its formation to the wider bureaucracy (i.e. decentralize), or employ a combination of the two.<sup>19</sup> Below is an ordinal breakdown of the different levels of centralization a president may employ in developing a policy proposal:

- (1) The product of executive branch agencies and/or departments (least centralized)
- (2) Of mixed White House and agency/departmental origin, with the agency/department taking the lead role
- (3) Of mixed origin, with the White House in the lead
- (4) The product of centralized staff outside the White House Office, such as in the Budget Bureau/Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA)
- (5) The product of staffers within the White House Office (most centralized)<sup>20</sup>



At its most extreme, centralization is a strategy presidents use to control federal agencies not directly enclosed within the president's sphere of influence. According to Andrew Rudalevige, "Centralization occurs when there is a shift in functions from the wider executive bureaucracy to the Executive Office of the President, particularly the White House Office itself."<sup>21</sup> In other words, to centralize a bureaucratic function is to make the bureaucrats responsible for that function constituents of the president and those most organizationally proximate to him (and only to those individuals).

Faced with the option of centralizing policy proposal development within the White House staff or delegating its development to executive agency actors, presidents prefer to centralize the process whenever possible because it lowers the front-end managerial costs of information gathering for policy development and helps maximize their personal preferences.<sup>22</sup> More specifically, centralizing the policy-making process eases a president's managerial burdens by reducing the amount of input to a small circle of White House staff. Centralization also helps presidents to maximize their personal policy preferences because the core duty of the "inner" White House staff is to serve the president's needs, whereas "outer" civil servant personnel primarily follow the mission of the particular agency or department they work for. As noted in the previous section, Richard Nixon stands out for his intense efforts to centralize power and politicize the executive branch in order to help maximize staff responsiveness.

In his seminal study, Moe argues that agency bureaucrats have their own personal preferences tied to the mission of the agencies they serve and thus lack incentive to be responsive to the president's policy preferences.<sup>23</sup> Moe posits that, "most all agencies impinge in one way or another on larger presidential responsibilities—for the budget, for the economy, for national defense—and presidents must have the capacity to direct and constrain agency behavior in basic respects if these larger responsibilities are to be handled successfully."<sup>24</sup> Instead, Moe suggests that presidents are better off seeking control over bureaucratic processes and outcomes by centralizing (as well as politicizing) the policy-making process whenever possible.<sup>25</sup> Concerning presidential policy development, Moe contends that the employment of centralized EOP staff is more likely to provide the kind of responsiveness to policy preferences that presidents need in preparing their policy initiatives for proposal to Congress.<sup>26</sup> As such, Moe and other scholars suggest that presidents can more effectively develop policy proposals that satisfy their personal preferences by seeking the "responsive competence" of their loyal inner circle of advisers.

### *Politicization*

To tighten their grip on the activities of these executive agencies, presidents have also long pursued a strategy of politicization. Generally speaking, politicization concerns active presidential efforts to undermine the neutrality of agencies in favor of realigning the agency's preferences—whether through redesign or repopulation—with the preferences of those at work in the Oval Office. More

specifically, presidential politicization can be defined as the addition of political appointees on top of existing career civil service employees or the placing of loyal political appointees into important bureaucratic posts formerly held by career professionals.<sup>27</sup>

Moe argues that presidential efforts to enhance one's capacity to effect political change are what drive persistent, albeit frequently unsuccessful, movements to reform the administrative apparatus. Moe observes that as political and bureaucratic opposition, along with institutional inertia and time constraints, have collapsed repeated attempts to create a more responsive bureaucracy, presidents have increasingly turned to politicization.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, presidents have increasingly employed politicization as a way of decreasing preference divergence between themselves and executive agencies since at least the early 1970s.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to making general observations of the frequency of politicization as a managerial tool, David Lewis authored a thoughtful essay on the conditional nature of presidential staffing. Examining presidential politicization of agencies within the EOP, he found that presidents politicize more when their preferences diverge with agency views, when civil servants lack incentives to abandon an agency for the private sector amid an increase in political appointees, and when the president's party holds a majority unified government.<sup>30</sup> In a more recent study, we find that policy-specific approval of presidential performance also encourages presidents to politicize.<sup>31</sup>

Over time, a paradox has emerged surrounding the growth of appointees and staff shortages. The number of political appointees has grown at an expansive, perhaps alarming, rate. As Paul Light notes, "the total number of senior executives and presidential appointees grew from 451 in 1960 to 2,393 in 1992, a 430 percent increase."<sup>32</sup> By 2008, the Obama administration had the task of filling about 500 appointments requiring Senate confirmation, and more than 3,000 positions overall. The number of political appointees has swollen to such an extent that it now takes longer than the first full year in office for the president to fill all the necessary positions. As new presidents struggle to complete the appointment process and move their ambitious agendas forward, civil servants across the federal bureaucracy are frequently left waiting for leadership and wondering whether their expertise and concerns can and will be addressed effectively by the time the empty slots are filled.

The rising number of political appointees makes it increasingly difficult for incoming presidents to carry out their transitions into office and have the necessary posts filled for them to be able to govern effectively, which subsequently impairs executive branch performance. For one thing, the absence of staff creates a gap between the president's upper-level cabinet appointees and the middle- and lower-level departmental and agency career civil service personnel. Without a strong sub-cabinet staff in place, the ability for the president to transfer information on his policy agenda down to the civil service and, in turn, have agency personnel respond by moving policy ideas back up to the president becomes severely limited.



## Key Personnel

Over time, as the institution of the White House staff has evolved through expansion, centralization, and politicization, the way political scientists have studied the institution has also grown more robust and methodologically diverse. In particular, scholars have an increasingly powerful conceptual grasp and historical understanding of key positions in the White House organizational apparatus.<sup>33</sup> In this section we discuss several of them, though certainly not all.<sup>34</sup>

### Chief of Staff

An ever-expanding institution with increasing political and policy authority demands masterful coordination. As David Cohen notes, “The size and responsibilities of the modern presidency demand that someone (or some small group of people) oversee the White House process—failure to do so leads to chaos (witness the first years of the Carter and Clinton administrations).”<sup>35</sup> In recent decades, this perhaps impossible task, which has been referred to as “the worst job in Washington,” has fallen to the White House chief of staff.<sup>36</sup>

As the modern presidency has become increasingly complex, the role played by the White House chief of staff has gone from one of welcome administrative support to that of leadership imperative. As the evolution has transpired, scholars of the presidency have noticed and continued to take stock of this most important administrative office. One of the leading authorities on White House chiefs of staff, David Cohen has identified three key dimensions of the chief of staff role. The first of these, the administrator, is both basic and crucial, and refers to the chief of staff’s responsibility to make sure information and activity within the White House is processed and structured in such a way that the president’s effectiveness and efficiency are maximized. The second role, the chief of staff as adviser, is arguably the most important source for the bulk of the position’s power, for it is in this capacity that the chief, as the president’s most trusted aide involved in the most dimensions of the administration, has the ability to suggest and support different decisions and courses of action versus alternative opportunities and possibilities. Finally, the third responsibility of the chief of staff is that of guardian. Specifically, the chief of staff must protect the president from inter-administration squabbles and other existential administrative threats. The chiefs of staff who perform well in each of these areas are the ones who tend to be viewed both subjectively and historically as the most successful overall; those that fall short of the mark in one or more are often considered forgettable, if not regrettable.<sup>37</sup>

### Czars

While chiefs of staff manage the entirety of the White House apparatus, sometimes despite even the strongest working relationships between presidents and their “javelin catchers,” presidents need more immediate, high-profile, and policy-specific administrative help.<sup>38</sup> In such situations, presidents can reach beyond the

White House to bring in talented leadership to help mitigate pending concerns. As Bradley Patterson notes, “when an overwhelming problem lands in the president’s lap or a new initiative is aborning, he can bring in a White House assistant—perhaps a ‘czar’ or ‘czarina’—to add the new, needed focus and energy to deal with it.”<sup>39</sup>

The usage of so-called czars has been present since the early part of the twentieth century, with presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt leaning on key individuals to help with war and economy-related problems. They became a beltway mainstay, however, only in the Richard Nixon era. More recently, in the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, czars have proliferated, to the point where two to three dozen serve in different capacities at the same time, though in many cases this perceived expansiveness is due to claims of czarism coming from multiple perspectives beyond just the president’s, including Congress, national political party leadership, and, more recently, oppositional political commentators. Over time, the media has followed suit and has often referred to certain appointees as czars even if the president or those actual government officials have not.

In many ways, the use of the term *czar* to describe certain appointees can be both confusing and misleading to the public. Presidents have typically adopted the term for appointees as a way to simplify their official titles while simultaneously showcasing the symbolic and substantive importance of the policy super-aide’s role. Consequently, the use of such lingo and the disparity in its use between administrations and the media has spurred debate over the growing number of czars, as well as their legitimacy and legal authority. In general, we posit that the term *czar* is less an issue than is the influence such personnel often enjoy, whether they exert their influence beyond their legal authority, and, if so, what—if anything—can be done about it.

Accordingly, Bradley Patterson puts the use of the term in perspective as follows: “‘Czar’ is not an official government title of anybody; it is a vernacular of executive branch public administration, harking back—in one account—at least to the Coolidge years. It is a label now used loosely hereabouts, especially by the media.”<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, czars often have different levels of administrative clout and access to the president. Further, some *czar* positions have seemingly become institutions unto themselves, as is the case with czars in charge of national policies toward the war on drugs or AIDS. Others deal with temporary but highly salient problems yet have significant presidential support and access, such as individuals like Kenneth Feinberg, the Obama administration’s *czar* in charge of overseeing Wall Street bonus pay and managing the BP escrow account for victims of the corporation’s Deepwater oil well blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico.

### Staff Secretary

The staff secretary of the White House is charged primarily with supervising the communication of messages and the circulation of memos and other documents between the president and his senior staff. In doing so, the staff secretary must



make key decisions concerning "what the President must see, what he should see to make informed decisions, and what he prefers to see."<sup>41</sup> Recommended by the first Hoover commission and eventually created during the Eisenhower administration, the staff secretary also oversees the offices of Executive Clerk, Records Management, and Correspondence.

As Karen Hult and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas point out, the material flowing into the staff secretary's office covers a wide range: presidential decision memos, bills that Congress has passed and associated signing or veto recommendations, drafts of presidential speeches, standard forms requiring the president's signature, the daily briefing book to prepare the president for the next day's schedule, White House guest lists, samples of personal mail from friends and colleagues, and presidential "night reading," "weekend reading," and "trip reading." More recently, the staff secretary has also played a key role in the speech clearance processes once a draft of a presidential address has been produced.<sup>42</sup>

### *Press Secretary*

One of the most difficult positions within an administration is press secretary. The press secretary serves four principal roles: information conduit, constituent representation, administration, and communications planning. Press secretaries are primarily responsive to news organizations and act as a main surrogate for the president they serve. In dealing with the media, press secretaries must be responsive to the president and White House staff in making sure the right information is prepared for transmission to news organizations. The Press Office is organized "into a two-tiered West Wing operation divided among the Upper Press and Lower Press and a unit located in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building."<sup>43</sup> The most difficult part of a press secretary's duties is arguably the hour or so a day one spends going on the record (often on live television these days) to answer media questions about an administration's most recent actions and level of performance. The most successful press secretaries are able to balance accuracy and speed when dealing with media questions. Also important to mention is that the press secretary also deals with contacting and communicating with certain specially and out-of-town press.

### *White House Counsel*

The White House counsel serves as the top advisor to the president when it comes to legal issues and oversees the president's interactions with other government and nongovernment actors with a watchful eye for any legal problems that might arise. There are many tasks that the White House counsel must consider when looking out for the legal interest of a president and his administration: monitoring ethics matters; coordinating the president's message and agenda within the executive branch units; negotiating on the president's behalf with Congress and other vectors; recommending actions to the president; and translating or interpreting the law in its broadest context throughout the executive branch. In short, the White

House counsel serves as the "president's lawyer" or, perhaps more accurately, the "presidency's lawyer."<sup>44</sup>

### *Director of the Office of Personnel Management*

The director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is in charge of seeking out those individuals who will serve in the president's administration. Newly elected presidents depend heavily on the OPM to help them hit the ground running with a strong foundation of staff recruited and ready to go by the time the president is sworn into office. The OPM is largely responsible for taking care of the security clearances necessary for personnel to pass before serving in an administration.

Specifically, the director of the OPM oversees the attainment of all the different types of presidential appointments, which include PAS (presidential appointee requiring Senate confirmation), PA (presidential appointee not requiring Senate confirmation), non-career positions in the Senior Executive Service (SES) and all "schedule C" positions below them, as well as all other White House staff position appointments. For schedule C appointments, which are established by the relevant departments or agencies, the director of the OPM must certify them as being "policy-making" or "confidential."<sup>45</sup>

### *National Security Advisor*

The national security advisor (also known as the assistant to the president for national security affairs) serves as chief advisor to the president on national security. Presidents have had much freedom in determining the role of the national security advisor across administrations. Generally speaking, the national security advisor role has been known as one of the most influential positions for having the president's ear and impacting policy. For Richard Nixon, for example, national security advisor Henry Kissinger greatly centralized control over national security policy.<sup>46</sup> In large part, the national security advisor serves as a source of personal advice and counsel to the president, often as a focal channel for information during situations of crisis. The national security advisor also organizes the president's daily national security briefing, taking care to communicate relevant information to and from other principals, and all the while looking out for the president's political interests concerning national security issues.<sup>47</sup>

### *Recent Research Trends and Future Directions*

Although scholars have been studying the individual personnel components of the White House staff for decades, and in the process creating a rich trove of descriptive knowledge, in recent years some scholars have been examining research questions that place the White House staff in the middle of more complex phenomena. For example, George Krause has linked White House personnel dynamics with an ongoing long-term decline in presidential domestic policy activities, concluding



that an ever-enlarging White House has hampered presidential efforts to engage the process, thus weakening the executive branch's institutional policy action advantage.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, Andrew Rudalevige has provided the first major quantitative study of when presidents are most likely to centralize, the implications and risks of centralization, and the trade-offs between presidential management of the policy development stage and policy success in Congress. He finds that although presidents prefer the approach, there is little evidence that centralization dominates presidential policy making and no evidence of an overall increase in the level of centralization over time.<sup>49</sup>

As we move forward with a new generation of White House staff scholarship, we should see a continuing dedication to both perspectives discussed previously: descriptive investigations into specific organizational dimensions of the White House staff and systematic empirical examinations of how the staff functions in complex political and policy environments. In particular, we have identified four fruitful areas of inquiry that merit pursuit. First, as Brandice Canes-Wrone has argued, scholars should take steps to link the politics of presidential staffing with the public presidency.<sup>50</sup> In previous research, we have shown a relationship between public opinion dynamics and presidential staffing decisions, but this work denotes only the tip of this analytical iceberg.<sup>51</sup>

Second, as the study of presidential transitions has been such an important dimension of the scholarly approach to the White House staff, we contend that a focus on administrative carry-over from one administration to the next is worth examining, both in light of explaining when it does and does not occur and what the consequences of the trade-off between expertise and loyalty are for a new administration.

Third, although presidency studies have moved in great strides away from their legalistic roots over the last several decades, this area of the institution would benefit from increased research synergy along the lines of evaluating the legal frameworks that guide and constrain presidential administrative decision making. For instance, projects making study of presidential policy czars and discussions of the extent to which presidents can delegate key decision-making authority to subordinates are both subjects that will be colored significantly by public law.

Finally, on a more ambitious developmental note, scholars would benefit greatly from an expanded disciplinary linkage with the White House, similar to what exists currently in the The American Political Science Association's Congressional Fellowship Program. By funding scholars to work professionally in the White House, academic understanding of the institution can grow in ways that currently do not lend themselves to empirical verification.

## Conclusion

The White House staff provides the bureaucratic framework that makes presidential leadership possible. Even though modern presidents continue to face constraints by the constitutional structure and political reality in successfully straddling

the expectations gap that continues to enlarge, the staff presents the president with his best opportunity to anticipate and exploit leadership opportunities in the best case, and manage crisis and cope with challenges in the worst. In recent decades, scholarly efforts to analyze the influence and importance of the White House staff has continued apace with the institution's own evolution. However, in order for the field to continue its intellectual advance, the analytical efforts in this area must also continue to evolve in scope and sophistication.

## Notes

- 1 For example, writing about Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign promise to reduce the White House staff size by 25 percent, John Hart remarked it was not a "particularly controversial comment, partly because [Clinton's campaign opponents] President Bush and Ross Perot had promised even larger reductions, and partly because, in the post-Watergate age, pledging to cut the size of the White House staff has become almost a ritual for all presidential candidates." See John Hart, *The Presidential Branch: From Washington to Clinton*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995), 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 The acronyms APSA and MPSA refer, respectively, to The American Political Science Association and the Midwest Political Science Association, both of which host significant national-level academic conferences attended by thousands of political scientists.
- 4 Bradley H. Patterson, Jr. provides an excellent example of scholarship that evaluates the non-strategic dimensions of the White House staff in a systematic manner. See Bradley H. Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), and *To Serve the President: Continuity and Innovation in the White House Staff* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).
- 5 Matthew J. Dickinson, *Bitter Harvest: FDR, Presidential Power and the Growth of the Presidential Branch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.
- 6 Terry Sullivan, "Two Operational Dilemmas," in *The Nerve Center: Lessons in Governing from the White House Chiefs of Staff*, ed. Terry Sullivan (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 4.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 4–13.
- 8 Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff*, 36–9.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 11 See John P. Burke, *The Institutional Presidency: Organizing and Managing the White House from FDR to Clinton* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
- 12 See Dickinson.
- 13 See Charles E. Walcott and Karen M. Hult, *Governing the White House: From Hoover through LBJ* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); and Walcott and Hult, "White House Structure and Decision Making: Elaborating the Standard Model," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (June 2005): 303–31.
- 14 See Dickinson.
- 15 Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff*, 10.
- 16 Terry M. Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," in *The New Direction in American Politics*, eds. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1985), 269.
- 17 See David E. Lewis, "Staffing Alone: Unilateral Action and the Politicization of the Executive Office of the President, 1988–2004," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (September 2005): 496–514.
- 18 Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 128–9.



- 19 Andrew Rudalevige, *Managing the President's Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy Formulation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 29.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 22 See Moe, "The Politicized Presidency"; Moe, "The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure," in *Can the Government Govern?* eds. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1989), 267–329; Moe and Scott A. Wilson, "Presidents and Political Structure," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 57 (1994):1–44; and Richard and Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency* (New York: Wiley, 1983).
- 23 See Moe, "The Politicized Presidency."
- 24 Moe, "The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure," 280.
- 25 See Moe, "The Politicized Presidency," and "The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure."
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 José D. Villalobos and Justin S. Vaughn, "Presidential Staffing and Public Opinion: How Public Opinion Influences Politicization," *Administration & Society* 41 (July 2009): 449–69.
- 28 See Moe, "The Politicized Presidency."
- 29 See Hart.
- 30 See Lewis, "Staffing Alone."
- 31 See Villalobos and Vaughn.
- 32 Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Accountability* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), 7.
- 33 Since 1997, the White House Transition Project has crystallized this information into usable information by providing resources to new presidents to aid successful transitions into office, as well as to students of the presidency for furthering understanding of the White House structure. We used this resource accordingly to develop short descriptions of certain key personnel serving in the White House.
- 34 For more information on some of the staff positions not discussed in this essay, we recommend Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, eds., *The White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003); Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff*, and *To Serve the President*, and James P. Pfiffner, ed. *The Managerial Presidency*, 2nd ed. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).
- 35 See David B. Cohen, "From the Fabulous Baker Boys to the Master of Disaster: The White House Chief of Staff in the Ronald Reagan and G.H.W. Bush Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32 (September 2002):463–83.
- 36 According to James Baker, who served as Ronald Reagan's first chief of staff (1981–1985) and George H.W. Bush's last chief of staff (1992–1993), "When you realize that even though the White House chief of staff has tremendous power, he or she, nevertheless, is not a principal but only a staffer—face it, it's right there in the title—then it is easy to understand why some people also characterize it not just as the second-toughest job in Washington but as the *worst* job in Washington. As the only person in history who was dumb enough to have taken the job twice in his life, I confess that I was sometimes inclined to agree with that characterization." See James A. Baker, III, "Governing from the White House," in *The Nerve Center: Lessons in Governing from the White House Chiefs of Staff*, ed. Terry Sullivan (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), xiii–xiv.
- 37 See Cohen.
- 38 Former Carter administration Chief of Staff Jack Watson once referred to the position as "javelin catcher," in reference to the position's need to handle severe problems so that their employer, the president, does not have to.
- 39 Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff*, 264.
- 40 See Patterson, Jr., *To Serve the President*.
- 41 See Hult and Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "Office of the Staff Secretary," *The White House*

- Transition Project*, Report #2009-23, 2008, taken from the White House Transition Project archives, <http://whitehoustransitionproject.org>, 1999–2009.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 See Kumar, "The Office of the Press Secretary," *The White House Transition Project*, Report #2009-31, 2008, taken from the White House Transition Project archives, <http://whitehoustransitionproject.org>, 1999–2009.
- 44 See Mary Anne Borrelli, Hult, and Nancy Kassop, "The White House Counsel's Office," *The White House Transition Project*, Report #2009-29, 2008, taken from the White House Transition Project archives, <http://whitehoustransitionproject.org>, 1999–2009.
- 45 See Patterson, Jr., Pfiffner, and Lewis, "The White House Office of Presidential Personnel," *The White House Transition Project*, Report #2009-27, 2008, taken from the White House Transition Project archives, <http://whitehoustransitionproject.org>, 1999–2009.
- 46 See John P. Burke, "The National Security Advisor and Staff: Transition Challenges," *The White House Transition Project*, Report #2009-02, 2008, taken from the White House Transition Project archives, <http://whitehoustransitionproject.org>, 1999–2009.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 George A. Krause, "The Secular Decline in Presidential Domestic Policy Making: An Organizational Perspective," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (December 2004):779–92.
- 49 See Rudalevige.
- 50 Brandice Canes-Wrone, "Administrative Politics and the Public Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39 (March 2009):25–37.
- 51 See Villalobos and Vaughn.