



Superstock – President Eisenhower Address to Congress, Washington DC.

## **What Congress Looked Like From Inside the Eisenhower White House**

**Stephen Hess**

---

**A**s a parting gift to each of us who served on President Eisenhower's staff, our colleagues Fred Fox and Jim Lambie compiled **White House...Staff Book...1953-61**. It was something like a high school yearbook, with photos and bios of the graduates. After nearly a half century, it's a useful place to start memory-jogging on who was there and how Congress looked to us.

It's also a way to keep in perspective the differences in White House staffs, then and now. First, there's the matter of size. Ours was tiny. On most days we could all have lunch at the same time in one small oblong room in the West Wing basement. In compiling their staff list, Fox and Lambie didn't give us the key to who was in and who was out, but my hunch is that they included only those with White House Staff Mess privileges. One hundred-three names made the A-List for serving at some point during Eisenhower's two terms. Exclude 15 military aides, such as the Air Force One pilots and the President's doctors, and this left just 88. The group included six college presidents, six who had been generals, five former governors, but only three who had been elected to Congress.

The burgeoning of White House staffs over time reflects two trends. One: Adding people to perform added functions. When I returned to the White House in 1969, for instance, I worked for a unit, the Urban Affairs Council, that hadn't existed when I left the White House in 1961. Two: A more rapid turnover rate among staffers. Had overheated White House operations produced more burnout, a different sort of person, or the lure of more opportunities outside of government? Of the 88 staffers at Eisenhower's White House, a dozen stayed for the full eight years, among them a core of such prominent aides as James Hagerty (press secretary), Bryce Harlow (speechwriting, legislative relations), Gerald Morgan (legislative relations, counsel), Wilton Persons (legislative relations, chief of staff), and Thomas Stephens (appointment secretary). Another dozen stayed almost as long.

The demographics reflect major differences from recent staffs. The 88 were almost all male, all white: There were three women and one African-American. When Kathryn Dunn Tenpas and I examined what we called "The A Team" of Bill Clinton (1993) and George W. Bush (2001), the percentages for women were 29 percent and 28 percent; for minorities, 8 percent and 11 percent, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

White House staffs now are also much younger. Between 1953 and January 1961 there were only five assistants in their twenties. I was the youngest at 25. Eleven were in their thirties, including Bradley Patterson, 33, who would become the leading authority on White House organization. I arrived at the White House shortly after Labor Day, 1958—having just been mustered out the army as a private first class—to assist my Johns Hopkins mentor, Malcolm Moos, recently named the President's speechwriter. My White House impressions cover only the last two-plus years of the administration. However, I did serve with 58 of the 88, again a reflection of Ike staffers' long tenure.

---

*What Congress Looked Like From Inside the Eisenhower White House*



**Stephen Hess** is a senior fellow emeritus in Governance Studies at Brookings.

Dwight Eisenhower had strong feelings about staffs and how they were expected to work. In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, he wrote, “For years I had been in frequent contact with the Executive Office of the White House and I had certain ideas about the system, or lack of system, under which it operated.” He would “organize the White House for efficiency....Organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent....On the other hand, disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster.”<sup>2</sup> Motivated by such apprehensions, Eisenhower started early by inaugurating several completely new offices that have since become standard features of a White House staff: the chief of staff, the assistant for national security affairs, the cabinet secretary and the staff secretary. Collectively, they would make sure that nothing fell through the cracks. These small, carefully contained compartments would be filled with experts solely responsible for their assignments. No White House ever had less leeway for kibitzers.

Eisenhower also greatly upgraded the office of congressional relations. He was fortunate to have an expert ready for duty. Major General Wilton (Jerry) Persons was a comfortable and conservative Southerner, who had been the War Department’s chief lobbyist during World War II. Bryce Harlow had worked for Persons at the Pentagon and then headed the House Armed Services Committee staff. Gerald Morgan, a Harvard-trained lawyer, had congressional experience drafting the Taft-Hartley Act. Harlow was soon commandeered by the President to be a speechwriter, and his slot was assumed by Jack Martin, the longtime assistant to Senator Robert Taft, who had died in 1953.

Over time there were other changes. Morgan became the President’s counsel in 1955. Martin was made a federal judge in 1958. And when Sherman Adams was forced out in 1958, Persons replaced him as the chief of staff and Harlow became the head of the congressional lobbying unit. Harlow was assisted by Jack Z. Anderson, a colorful former California congressman (and famous pear grower), and Edward McCabe, from the House Committee on Education and Labor, both of whom joined the White House staff in 1956. They were joined in 1959 by Clyde Wheeler, who had been working congressional liaison for the Secretary of Agriculture. Wheeler returned to Oklahoma to run unsuccessfully for Congress in 1960. Two other members of the liaison staff, Earle Chesney and Homer Gruenther, had duties that were more of the “goodwill” nature, such as taking VIPs on tours of the White House. As a group, the congressionalists cast a more conservative shadow than other staff units, a notable division during the 1954 conflict with Senator McCarthy.

Sherman Adams--Governor to everyone on the staff--had served one term in the House of Representatives. Several others also had had congressional experience. But while called upon from time-to-time, they were not meant to backstop the Persons/Harlow shop. They had jobs enough to keep them busy.

The modus operandi for dealing with Congress was to let the departments do the heavy lifting. Farming out the bulk of congressional relations to the agencies

helped keep down the size of the White House staff, a key element in Eisenhower's theory of management, and, importantly, also insured that the lobbying was done by experts in substance, rather than simply experts in lobbying. More important politically, it kept the President—and his reputation—out of the line of fire. The prime example of how this worked was the administration's agriculture proposals. Trying to reduce the 90 percent farm parity was hardly popular with farm groups. But Eisenhower's lightning rod was Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, and the President always seemed more reasonable when compared to Benson.

The departments' lobbyists had the day-to-day contact with the committees and members and took responsibility for getting legislation passed in a form acceptable to the President. The Persons/Harlow office only conducted a major assault on Capitol Hill once or twice a year. As Harlow told me, "It's rather axiomatic in this work that a president cannot have too many congressional issues that are 'presidential' at one time. Otherwise none of them are presidential, and all of them suffer." Presidential issues included major tax legislation, the interstate highway program, mutual security, Pentagon reorganization, and labor-management reform.

The departmental lobbyists gathered on Saturdays at the White House. Recalling these sessions from when he was at Agriculture, Wheeler said, "Bryce went around the room and asked each of us who we had been talking to on the Hill, who was backing our programs, and who was against us. He always let us have our say before smoothly setting out the Eisenhower agenda and how it affected each agency."<sup>3</sup> The White House staff also prepared a detailed agenda for the President to use in his weekly meeting with the Republican congressional leaders.

Part of what defined Dwight Eisenhower was reverence for the separation of powers, a West Point legacy. Most presidents spend their years in office pushing against the constitutional wall that separates Article II, Executive Powers, from Article I, Legislative Powers. It's what Louis Koenig called interpreting their "powers with maximum liberality." But this was not Ike's way. He had a strong sense of what belonged to the President and what belonged to Congress. Yet high regard for the legislature did not extend to members of Congress, whom Ike did not always understand or appreciate. At a Cabinet meeting in early 1956, after Eisenhower agreed to send a message on the National Park Service to Congress, Brad Patterson recalls he added, "Well, it's like laying pearls before certain animals..."

Where the Vice President—or the vice presidency—fit in Eisenhower's matrix has an antique feel as viewed through the experiences of more than a half-century. When Dick Cheney claimed in 2007 that he didn't have to comply with an executive order on safeguarding classified information because his office was part of the legislature, it was greeted as a laugh-line by late night comedians. After all, wasn't he the most powerful vice president in history? Yet Cheney's contention would not have been risible to Eisenhower, who wrote in his memoirs, "The Vice

---

*What Congress Looked Like From Inside the Eisenhower White House*

President of the United States, with the constitutional duty of presiding over the Senate, is not legally a part of the Executive branch and is not subject to direction by the President.”<sup>4</sup> He even included Vice President Nixon as part of a group coming to a White House meeting “from the Senate.”<sup>5</sup> Since Eisenhower placed the vice presidency in the legislative branch, everything Nixon did for him he claimed was on “a volunteer basis.”<sup>6</sup> He listed some of the tasks he asked Nixon to perform, such as being his personal representative abroad and chairing a committee to end discrimination in government contracting. Even though Nixon had been in both House and Senate, Eisenhower rarely employed him for cloakroom lobbying, a prominent job of subsequent vice presidents. Nixon did not have an office in the White House. He was housed at the Capitol, as was his staff, and their paychecks came from the Senate budget. He was often at the White House for meetings of the cabinet, national security council, and legislative leaders, but he was not a presence in the West Wing as is today’s vice president.

Dwight Eisenhower was entitled to have been more put off by the ways of Congress than any president since Ulysses S. Grant, the last elected president before Eisenhower not to have been a professional politician; that is, not to have first been a member of Congress, a governor, or in a president’s cabinet.

At his first weekly meeting with the Republican House and Senate leaders, less than a week after his inauguration in 1953, he tells them of his intention to redeem the pledges of the party platform and his campaign. “To my astonishment, I discovered that some of the men in the room could not seem to understand the seriousness with which I regarded our platform’s provisions, and were amazed by my uncompromising assertion that I was going to do my best to fulfill every promise to which I had been a party.” Thus was his presidential introduction to those he called “practical politicians” (two words he surrounded with quotation marks) “who laughed off platforms as traps to catch voters.”<sup>7</sup>

His next “sad” lesson came when making an appointment that required Senate confirmation. His choice for ambassador to India, former Nebraska Governor Val Peterson, was blocked by his state’s senators. “Their objections, they told me, did not involve his personal qualifications or character.” It was strictly political. “This seemed indefensible to me. I told both that I emphatically disapproved of their attitude but I was not going to embarrass Val Peterson and would appoint him to some responsible position where their attitude would be ineffective and his influence more pronounced.”<sup>8</sup>

Eisenhower noted in his diary that he was appalled by the “amount of caution approaching fright that seems to govern the action of most politicians.”<sup>9</sup> After more experiences with congressmen, he wrote, “These Legislative meetings were sometimes tiresome. Indeed, after a long and wearying discussion with the Legislative leaders one day, I remarked it was about time all of us did something about strengthening whatever sense of humor we might possess....I knew that a sense of humor, though not a guarantee of success, was at least indispensable to sanity.” He begins the next paragraph: “But it was not always easy to laugh.”<sup>10</sup>

What should have been troubling is that his party had a majority in only the first two years of his presidency. However, as he told a friend in 1953, “The particular legislators who are most often opposing Administration views are of the *majority party*.” (He italicized *majority*.) In this category he put Republican Senators Henry Dworshak and Herman Welker of Idaho, Hugh Butler of Nebraska, George W. Malone of Nevada, William Jenner of Indiana, and Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin.<sup>11</sup> He could have added John Bricker of Ohio and Styles Bridges of New Hampshire. Of 13 senators who voted against Charles Bohlen, his nominee for Ambassador to the Soviet Union, 11 were Republicans.<sup>12</sup>

There were some grim experiences for Eisenhower in his relations with Congress, notably when McCarthy turned his vitriol on Ike’s beloved army and during the Senate’s unsuccessful attempt to limit presidential treaty-making powers, the so-called Bricker Amendment. But overall the President’s legislative priorities fared well, founded on a remarkably harmonious relationship with Democratic leaders Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson.

Yet, as told by William Ewald, there was a subtext to the Eisenhower-Rayburn-Johnson trio that tells a great deal about Eisenhower’s charm, cunning and skills. Ewald helped Eisenhower write his memoirs. Then Ewald, a former White House speechwriter trained in English literature at Harvard, wrote his own book, a fascinating exercise in historiography as he explores what went into Eisenhower’s memoirs and what did not. Ike told Ewald that he hadn’t trusted Johnson or Rayburn. On Johnson: “That fellow’s such a phony.” On Rayburn: “That fellow would double-cross you.”<sup>13</sup> But in print Eisenhower preferred to tamp down his irritation with legislators, and find reasons to praise them. “You can’t trust Mundt,” says Eisenhower of the Republican senator from South Dakota; this assessment is in Ewald’s book, not Eisenhower’s.<sup>14</sup>

Because our White House was so compartmentalized, and we were so intent on not minding our colleagues’ business, the Staff Mess during the Eisenhower years may have played a more important role in creating an atmosphere of collegiality than in other administrations. For two years I ate there almost every day. The food was good, inexpensive, convenient, and it was a treat to be educated by the likes of George Kistiakowsky, the great chemist, who was the President’s science adviser; Clarence Randall, former chairman of Inland Steel and the President’s adviser on international trade, who became a special friend; Andy Goodpaster, already wise in his early forties, the future NATO commander, who would come out of retirement to rebuild West Point’s reputation after a cheating scandal; or Press Secretary Jim Hagerty, a man of firm opinions on everything.

After awhile, I started to jot down our conversations when I returned to my office. My notes are of jokes, recollections, oddities of the day, more serious on days when Eisenhower had a press conference and the audio tape was played for us while we ate. Our talk would not be mistaken for a think tank seminar. Yet this does help answer the question of what Congress looked like from inside the Eisenhower White House. When we talked of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson,

it was because they were running for president, not because they were senators. In over a year I recorded just one serious conversation about Congress (with Ed McCabe of the legislative relations staff).

This absence of Congress as a topic of conversation reflected, in part, how Eisenhower cordoned off congressional relations from other operations. This is not the way it had worked under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, which is exactly what Eisenhower had in mind when he designed his staff system.

Then too Eisenhower's men, in the manner of their boss, thought of themselves as executives, the Article II folks; they did not wish to be mistaken for coming from Article I, a somewhat louche crowd. In choosing his top White House aide, Ike used the model he appreciated and mastered in a long military career. He would love to have had Bedell Smith, Lucius Clay or Alfred Gruenther as his chief of staff, except that he knew it would cause "suspicion of excessive military influence."<sup>15</sup> So he chose the similarly inclined Sherman Adams.

The sharp edge between the legislative and executive articles in the Constitution as a governing principle for staffing the White House would start to bend modestly under John Kennedy. He was a senator, but a backbencher, whose time in office, at least since 1956, had been dedicated to running for the president. The personnel curve then bowed when Lyndon Johnson, the Ultimate Legislator, became the President of the United States, merging characteristics that distinguish a congressional staff from a presidential staff.

Dwight Eisenhower developed a highly effective system of working with Congress within a governing organization that he designed to suit the executive skills he had honed during a lifetime of public service in the military.

The model was really quite simple. On major matters, the President negotiated privately with the Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader of the Senate, routinely seeking the advice of his party's congressional leaders when they were in the minority. A small professional staff at the White House lobbied Congress only on issues judged to be of overriding importance, usually not more than one or two a year. Otherwise, cabinet secretaries and agency heads fought their own battles on Capitol Hill, after policy had been resolved at the presidential level, with the White House staff tasked to keep the players in sync. It was not Cabinet government, but it relied heavily on the secretaries in the domestic agencies.

When dealing with the congressional leaders, Ike's bargaining chip was his incredible popularity with the American people; what Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson brought to the table was their ability to make commitments that were bankable. Moreover, they were often not far apart.

The Eisenhower model didn't linger long after he left office. It was too structured for restless, young John Kennedy; for Lyndon Johnson, it was too remote from the congressional maneuvers of which he was the master; Richard Nixon couldn't delegate power to people he didn't trust, even his own appointees; Jimmy Carter at first didn't choose people with the necessary skills to understand

Congress, despite an overwhelming majority in both chambers; Ronald Reagan brought his own way from California, a state large and complicated enough to offer experiential models; President-elect Obama's transition, managed by a former Clinton White House chief of staff, mainly looked to the Clinton presidency for what to do and what to avoid.

Perhaps government had changed too much and grown too big to comfortably continue Ike's way as a useful model. Still, a long time ago Dwight Eisenhower distributed government's work load so as ease an overburdened center; pruned his agenda of questions that were better handled by agency specialists; produced an exceptional record of dealing with a Congress controlled by the opposition party; and buffed the presidential aura by keeping lose-lose issues away from the White House. It doesn't sound so bad.

**Governance Studies**

The Brookings Institution  
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202.797.6090  
Fax: 202.797.6144  
[www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx)

**Editor**

Christine Jacobs

**Production & Layout**

John S Seo

**E-mail your comments to  
[gscomments@brookings.edu](mailto:gscomments@brookings.edu)**

*This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.*



---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Dunn Tenpas and Stephen Hess, “Organizing the Bush Presidency,” in Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, editors, Considering the Bush Presidency (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, Mandate for Change (Doubleday, 1963), pp. 87 and 114.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Bob Burke and Ralph G. Thompson, Bryce Harlow (Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2000), p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Mandate for Change, pp. 540-41.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Dwight Eisenhower, Waging Peace (Doubleday, 1965), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Mandate for Change, pp. 194-95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119. Peterson was then named Federal Civil Defense Administrator.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Ken Collier, “Eisenhower and Congress: The Autopilot Presidency,” in Presidential Studies Quarterly, Spring 1994, p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Mandate for Change, p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.193.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> See William Bragg Ewald, Jr. Eisenhower the President (Prentice-Hall, 1981), pp. 27-28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> Mandate for Change, pp. 88-89.

---

*Adapted from a presentation to The Eisenhower Symposium, “Eisenhower and Congress,” American University, February 19, 2010. Stephen Hess wishes to thank Jim Thurber, Brad Patterson, and Bill Ewald for their “additions and corrections.”*