



White House Staff and Cabinet Appointments

IT WOULD BE PRETENTIOUS to offer an incoming administration extensive advice on what kinds of individuals should be considered for senior White House staff positions or as potential heads of cabinet departments. These appointments, or most of them, are some of the most personal that a president makes. They are at the same time among the most politically sensitive. Presidents usually know their own minds on recruitment at this level; they aren't noticeably receptive to suggestions launched from outside the circle of their political intimates.

But some general points can be made—and here are some notable ones, offered by well-known veterans of the campaign and transition wars and of high-level service close to the presidency:

—**Put the White House chief of staff in place on the day after the inauguration.** Do the same for other key staff members—at a minimum, the personnel director, general counsel, and legislative assistant. This means knowing well ahead of time who will take these jobs. It's a serious mistake to put them or other important staff choices off until a cabinet is chosen.

—**So-called cabinet government is not a good or a workable idea.** But an overly aggressive White House staff, so domineering that it drowns out the cabinet and other voices, won't fly either.

—**Avoid loading the White House staff with purely political people from the campaign.** The task now is to create and run a government.

—**Consult outgoing White House staff people.** They have an unmatched store of valuable advice to pass on.

—**Avoid creating new White House positions or restructuring the staff at the beginning.** Save this for later and do it with the benefit of experience.

The chief of staff is, of course, the pivot of an efficient, focused White House. One of the closest to the president in frequency of contact, the job is central to the processes of formulating decision options and regulating the flow of information to the president. It is responsible for overseeing the work and handling the individual concerns of several hundred substantive, operational, and administrative people on a staff of high turnover. A chief of staff must know the Congress, understand politics, function as a key presidential confidante, motivate and cheerlead the staff, and generally make the place run.

That's why this individual must be chosen early and be prepared and operational on the administration's first day. Former Bush White House counsel Boyden Gray made that point effectively at the third workshop for journalists convened, in June 2000, by the Council for Excellence in Government in its *Government from the Inside* series. "President Bush got an

early start before he was even nominated,” Gray recalled. The candidate “ran a sort of bake-off” among people he was considering as potential chiefs of staff, giving each of them a significant piece of responsibility for Bush’s activities at the nominating convention and in the ensuing campaign. As a result, Gray said, the future president knew who his chief of staff would be well before the person himself knew.

Moreover, says Katherine Higgins, who served as cabinet secretary in the Clinton White House, “you’ve got to have a chief of staff who really understands the importance of building a team.” What happens, Higgins told us, “is that people are so busy doing their jobs that it’s easy to get disconnected or not know what’s going on. If there is no regular way to manage the affairs of the White House so that everyone feels a part of it and knows what’s happening, people will go off on their own and try to figure it out as best they can. That’s very dangerous and counterproductive.”

White House staff and the people who process cabinet-level appointments “have to be in place early on,” Gray said at the Council workshop for journalists. It’s a point on which there is virtual unanimity. “Carter and Clinton got around to appointing the White House staff very late,” said Harrison Wellford, a Carter appointee who served in the transitions of both presidents, “and it hurt them badly in the first hundred days.” Leon Panetta, Clinton’s second chief of staff, underscored this urgency in comments at a Heritage Foundation roundtable discussion in 1999, “Running the White House” (part of the foundation’s *Mandate for Leadership* series entitled *Keys to a Successful Presidency*). Panetta noted a “natural tendency” to wait until after the cabinet appointments to focus on staff at the White House. He called that a mistake. “Appoint the key staff as soon as the president is elected,” he advised. “I can’t tell you how important it is to try to learn that lesson.” This should be as high on a new president’s agenda as cabinet selection, Panetta said, “because you need to have your personal team in place as you move forward.”

Accomplishing this, said former Reagan chief of staff Edwin Meese at a later Heritage session, in May 2000, is “a sign of confidence and sure-footedness.” In fact, Harvard professor emeritus Richard Neustadt argued in that discussion that staff appointments should actually precede those to the cabinet. Not only does the president need immediate support, Neustadt said, but some staff and cabinet appointments also should be “positioned” to provide a perspective almost as broad as the president’s will need to be. Should a new president and chief of staff establish new staff jobs or revise the White House staff structure? “Start filling the central positions pretty

much as you find them,” Neustadt counseled. “Do your innovating in terms of restructuring toward the end of the first term.”

On Panetta’s recommended list for early appointment were the chief of staff and deputies (in order to get the core management operation under way); the senior foreign and economic policy teams; the legal counsel; and the people who will run domestic policy, the budget, the press office, communications, and legislative affairs. There’s no indefinite honeymoon period for these appointments, he warned. A president who isn’t setting policy within the White House from Inauguration Day forward, who is not taking the offensive, will find out that others are. “It’s just the nature of this town,” he said.

Observers of White House operations agree that to reward political and other campaign staffers with jobs in the White House to any significant degree is unwise. The point has been made many times, but it bears exploring because the mistake in question seems to recur at regular intervals. Understandably, the instinct to stick with those who have brought you this far can be difficult to resist, and at least some campaign staffers can advance legitimate claims to jobs in the West Wing. Reflecting on this, Katherine Higgins says, “the campaign model is that you want to have the ear of the boss. It’s all about proximity. So everybody thinks the way to do it is to work in the White House—the closer you are to the Oval Office, ostensibly the more power you have. When in fact it can be argued that it’s the agencies, what happens outside the White House, that’s just as important, at least in terms of getting the work done.” But former Kennedy White House counsel Theodore Sorensen put his finger on reality at the Heritage discussion in May. “Forget about putting campaign staff in the White House,” he said. “You now have to govern.”

Margaret Tutwiler, a former Bush White House staff member, spoke tellingly to this at the Council’s workshop:

I had worked in the Bush campaign and was now working with Jim Baker who had been named chief of staff. And all these strange people began coming into my life, who had never worked in the campaign. I had slaved in the campaign for two and half years and remember asking Jim Baker one day who these people were. What have they done? How did they help get us here? And he said something I did not understand at the time: He chose these people to go into responsible positions at the White House in large measure because they had previous executive branch, preferably White House, experience. The [campaign] group were still finding their way around

the machinery of the executive branch nine months after we'd been there. The people Baker put into key positions already knew the machinery of the executive branch. It is something that definitely serves any president well—to have people who know how this massive machine works in reality.

The responsibilities of core senior staff positions imply the kinds of professional backgrounds they require. At the personal level, these should be individuals who already have generous amounts of experience with political, governmental, and media Washington. This is a different mix than is found elsewhere, even in state capitals. Candidates for the senior jobs should also demonstrate a high comfort level on the public platform and in media settings. They are just as essential as cabinet chiefs as spokesmen for and defenders of policy and, similarly, just as reflective of the president's judgment in choosing them.

“Being bright helps,” says Higgins. “It's not just your everyday people who can stay afloat. But it's also being agile. Things happen because you're operating in the real world, whether it's a plane crash or natural disaster or a foreign policy emergency or a crisis on Capitol Hill.” Many very bright people “get overwhelmed” in White House jobs, she says, “because it is not linear.”

In the realm of appointments to the cabinet, it's useful to recall for a moment the once-lively debate over the merits of what is called cabinet government as opposed to policy authority centralized in the White House. Definitions of cabinet government vary. Generally, the concept calls for department secretaries to enjoy wider discretion in choosing the people the president will appoint to high-level political management positions in their agencies, and somewhat greater control of decisionmaking within their own domains, with less command-and-control scrutiny from the White House. Whatever the precise definition of cabinet government, however, most observers agree that it doesn't work as a general operating approach or over the long term. “If the president says he wants cabinet government and wants to appoint the cabinet first and worry about the White House staff second,” Wellford told journalists at the Council's June 2000 workshop, “that's a clear sign that he's on the road to perdition.”

Cabinet government is “neither a good idea nor a workable idea in our system,” said Theodore Sorensen at that meeting.

From time to time, presidential candidates have said they would want to make the cabinet very important and we'll have regular meetings and the cabinet will vote on decisions. The truth of the matter is, none

of them have done so. Why, when you're going to decide on agriculture policy, do you want the secretary of defense or the secretary of the treasury or other very busy people sitting around the table when they have little or nothing to contribute? There are a few issues, such as the civil service or the upcoming budget, that are of interest to and involve every member of the cabinet. And for those purposes, cabinet meetings are worthwhile. Other than that, most cabinet meetings are usually quite boring and not all that useful.

In his 1996 book, *Reflections of a Radical Moderate*, the late Elliot Richardson asserted that the cabinet as presently structured "is incapable of being the kind of deliberative body to which presidents can usefully submit key issues." Virtually all the cabinet meetings he attended under three presidents, he wrote, "focused on bland common denominators like the economic outlook, displays of budgetary breakdowns, or the status of the administration's legislative proposals."

On the other hand, Sorensen said at the workshop for journalists, "if the only alternative to cabinet government is an aggressive White House staff, I would flash at least an amber light. Of course, the president needs people who see the government as he sees it—that is, governmentwide. He needs people who can help coordinate the views that come in from the departments. He certainly needs the best and the brightest. But let's not have too many of these aggressive types; let's not have purely political instead of substantive types in the White House."

The trend to centralizing core policy and decisionmaking in the White House has been clear for at least a generation. One major reason is that events have simply overtaken theory, as George Mason University's James Pfiffner reminded the Heritage audience in 1999. "Many things that used to be done outside of the White House" by cabinet departments and agencies "are now done inside," Pfiffner said. Among them are domestic policy, foreign policy, international trade policy, national security, legal advice to the president, outreach to interest groups, and personnel recruitment. Over the years, these functions and more have come to be coordinated, if not ordained, in the White House or by agencies in the president's executive office—the Office of Management and Budget, the National Economic Council, the National Security Council, the Office of the Legal Counsel, the Office of Presidential Personnel.

Several related developments spurred that migration of authority. The process of governing has faced growing complexities posed by rapid social change at home, by economic globalization abroad, by the rise of commerce

over the Internet, by seismic corporate integration across national boundaries, by ever-faster advances in biosciences and information technology, by the emergence of new protagonists on the international scene, and by new kinds of threats to global stability. On a different level, administrations have had to develop new strategies for pursuing their objectives during recurring bouts of unusually partisan conflict with the Congress. The emergence of financial surpluses challenges administrations to redefine the shaping and management of the federal budget.

Inevitably, under the press of factors like these, the White House has tightened the reins and reached instinctively for greater policy control of departments and agencies. Almost gone are the days of assertive, quasi-independent cabinet figures in the tradition of Harold Ickes Sr., Henry Morgenthau, Dean Acheson, or Henry Kissinger. It was in recognition of this evolution that Richard Neustadt, in the Heritage Foundation session in May 2000, offered some advice to incoming presidents. “Cushion cabinet members,” he said, “against the shock of discovering that they are not going to be the president’s chief policy advisers.” The fact is that cabinet departments have been gradually relegated to the implementation, not the design, of key policy and key decisions.

But exceptionally important roles remain to cabinet officers and heads of agency today, roles that suggest the personal qualities to look for in making appointments at this level. “People who are good at these jobs have a sense of vision, a sense of mission, and know what they want to accomplish,” says Katherine Higgins. “They care about the mission of the department, they can lead, they can put together an agenda and get people to endorse it and implement it.” Higgins—who was also chief of staff to the secretary of labor before she went to the White House and returned to Labor later as deputy secretary of the department—adds that effective cabinet officers are “pretty quick studies in figuring out how Washington works. They’ve got political common sense and are not tone deaf in terms of the press and politics. They are effective communicators and high-energy, driven people.”

As internal and external communicators, cabinet and agency heads are spokespersons—proponents and defenders of policy. To a very significant degree, they tend an administration’s relations and advocate its goals with the Congress. They travel tirelessly around this country and to others, as necessary. Ideally, they are innovative, smart about information technology, and sensitive to government’s work force deficiencies, especially in attracting capable young adults.

Constance Horner, who ran the White House personnel office for the last year and a half of the Bush administration, observed to us in 1996 that cabinet secretaries are chosen partly because they meet certain political needs of the president, partly because they send certain policy signals. As veterans of careers in fields like state or national politics, business, or law, cabinet leaders have political constituencies of their own. Some of those constituents support the administration, some of them don't. But both are important to the president. With these groups, cabinet members need leeway to sustain the relationships that are part of the reason they find themselves at the top of the government.

An effective cabinet team in today's circumstances should demonstrate the readiness and skill to operate as part of an integrated, collaborative group. Its members should be prepared to cooperate fully in advancing the president's goals, to communicate usefully—upward, downward, and with one another—and to subordinate their own agendas to that of the president. On the last point, Higgins says the issue is “not so much diverse opinions or divergence of opinions. It's how they get conveyed. No president can afford to have them aired in the press, as opposed to in the family. This is part of the conversation that any president and/or chief of staff has to have with the senior people from day one—the rules of the game.”

As she also points out, “all knowledge doesn't rest at the White House.” Cabinet members do have to be able to run their departments and service their customers. They do have some opportunity to come up with policy ideas that work. At the same time, “people have to be loyal to the president. He's the one who ran for office. He's taken the political risks. It's his agenda that people voted for. And everybody in the cabinet has got to know whom they work for.”