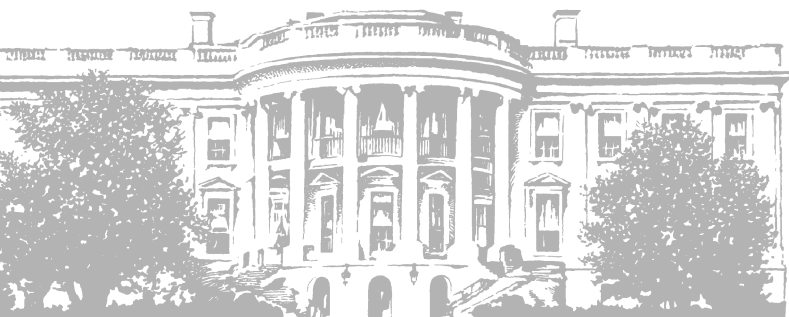


STEPHEN HESS

Organizing the Presidency

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with JAMES P. PFIFFNER

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CHAPTER 1

The Evolving Modern Presidency



This study examines the ways modern presidents have organized their administrations. Primarily it concerns the White House staff and secondarily those other avenues of advice—the Executive Office, the cabinet, the vice president, outsiders—on which presidents rely. The next chapter describes the context in which presidents work from the vantage point of those who have been president. It provides a frame of reference for the subsequent discussion of presidential administrations from Franklin Roosevelt’s to George W. Bush’s and why presidents have acted the way they have in handling such common duties as personnel selection, congressional relations, press relations, speechwriting, information gathering, and relations with their cabinets and between their department heads and White House assistants.

Presidents before Franklin Roosevelt did not run or manage the executive branch from the White House, at least not in the sense that a chief executive officer runs or manages a corporation. During Roosevelt’s first two terms, the White House staff was structured to serve his personal needs. It was considerably bigger though not significantly different from that of his predecessors. Because Roosevelt, in the manner of his cousin Theodore, conceived of the presidency as a “bully pulpit,” his assistants were mostly engaged in helping him try to shape public opinion.

There was no National Security Council or National Economic Council with responsibilities for departmental oversight. There was no congressional

relations office in the White House. Presidential assistants were considered utility infielders who were moved from one position to another as needed or as the president's fancy dictated.

While Roosevelt did not seek collective counsel from his cabinet, the cabinet officers still had the major responsibility for running their departments, drafting legislation, and lobbying it through Congress. At the same time, however, Roosevelt created myriad new agencies, reporting directly to him, that impinged on the jurisdiction of the cabinet departments.

During Roosevelt's third term some independent power bases were established on the White House staff. Subtly, the direction of decision-making changed. Certain major policies began to be devised in the White House offices of intimate advisers who frequently assumed the prerogatives of the department heads.

The new Executive Office of the President, created in 1939, vastly expanded Roosevelt's outreach, and he began to see a president's task as being chief manager of the executive branch. This alteration was crucial. Roosevelt lived in the White House for twelve years, during which the United States fought a great depression and a great war. As those events encouraged the growth of the central government, his long tenure meant that to an unusual degree his response to that growth and his distinctive style shaped the concept of the office of president. Thus by the time of his death in 1945, most of the elements of the modern presidency were in place, even if in embryonic form. The president, rather than Congress, had clearly become the center of federal attention.

Under Harry Truman, the atomization of the White House—the separation of staff by function—assumed modest momentum. While most of his assistants, like Roosevelt's, were generalists, some handled such specific assignments as labor-management relations or congressional liaison. Hierarchies also started to take shape as top presidential aides began to take on assistants of their own, precedents for the fiefdoms that later characterized the White House.

The distinction between cabinet officers, who advocated policy, and White House staff, who provided the president with personal services, was further obscured in Truman's administration. Moreover, the success of Clark Clifford, Truman's chief counsel, as the main architect of the Fair Deal, illustrated that proximity to the president was a blessing of no small value. The theoretical line between the institutional and personal presiden-

cies that separated the Executive Office from the White House also became more blurred as the Bureau of the Budget provided staff and services for presidential assistants. At the same time, two major units, the Council of Economic Advisers and the National Security Council, joined the White House complex, each giving the president a capability for overseeing important government activities that was not totally dependent on the departments.

The assimilation of power in the White House continued, if a bit more slowly, under Dwight Eisenhower. Having spent most of his life in the military, Eisenhower organized the White House along stricter lines that he found more familiar and congenial. He surrounded himself with a staff secretariat in charge of the flow of papers to and from the Oval Office and a secretariat in charge of the machinery of cabinet meetings. Experts rather than generalists advised on questions he felt were inadequately handled by the departments. An elaborate apparatus was invented to coordinate national security affairs, and a full-scale congressional relations office was added to the White House. Eisenhower's press secretary devised more sophisticated techniques for controlling the flow of news. A chief of staff was now responsible for the proper functioning of all these new offices, which had increased the size of the White House but not its operational capability. Eisenhower still expected cabinet officers to run their departments with a minimum of second-guessing from his staff.

John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson scuttled much of the machinery they found in the White House because they were told that it was unsuited to the needs of an activist liberal administration and because it made them uncomfortable. Yet even without the paraphernalia of staff and cabinet secretariats, a chief of staff's office, and an overblown National Security Council, the president's personal staff, Executive Office units, and presidential councils continued to grow. Because both presidents wanted government to do more faster, agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity were placed directly under the presidential umbrella.

A consequence of the trend toward more direct White House involvement in department operations was that presidential aides sometimes issued instructions to cabinet officers' subordinates. This reflected Kennedy's lack of interest in organizational maintenance, the energy and impatience of his White House staff, and his conception of the presidential office as the moving force of government. By the time the Johnson administration was fully

active, “the White House was no longer an antiseptic shrine where high policy was formulated and promulgated in dignity”; it had become, for the first time, “the operational center” of the executive branch.¹

The Rooseveltian model as adapted by Kennedy attracted some superior people to Washington, raised the level of debate on such issues as civil rights and disarmament, and produced several government initiatives. But the model seemed to have developed flaws. Kennedy took the nation on a roller coaster ride of failures and successes—the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis—and when the presidency was inherited by Johnson, who retained most of his predecessor’s advisers and who shared Kennedy’s faith in the Rooseveltian model, the result was a string of stunning legislative triumphs and massive involvement in Vietnam.

By Johnson’s time, the advantages of the personalized presidency and the centralized presidency had been well documented. Now the liabilities began to come under serious questioning. The personalized presidency largely depends on the president’s ability to mobilize public opinion to put pressure on the government to perform as he desires and to support what he believes is right. If the president lacks this skill or if his vision of “right” is flawed, he cannot compensate for long by relying on the inherent strength of the office. The centralized presidency largely depends on the president’s ability to keep lines open to those outside his immediate circle and to resist minutiae. If he is suspicious of cabinet members and relies too heavily on overworked assistants, he is apt to lose perspective and even his sense of reality. Such were the problems that would plague the Nixon presidency.

When Richard Nixon succeeded Johnson he became the first activist conservative president. In the White House, party and ideology had changed, but the direction of the personalized and centralized presidency had not. There was, however, an essential difference in style. Even when the Vietnam protest limited his mobility, Johnson had quested for contacts beyond the confines of the White House; Nixon sought isolation. He structured his White House staff to limit his associations to those with whom he felt most comfortable, his most loyal aides over whom he had greatest control. In the end, this Greta Garbo conception of the presidency proved unsuited to democratic leadership. But even putting aside the character of Richard Nixon and the question of how precedents, when pushed beyond the limits of legality, contributed importantly to Watergate and the resignation of a president, Nixon’s mode of operating illustrated the difficulties

of running the government through an overly personalized, centralized White House command post, a problem that in varying degrees has plagued the presidents who followed him.²

The nine chapters on the administrations of Roosevelt II through Bush II trace the development of four characteristics of the modern presidency.

The first is its prodigious growth. By the time Richard Nixon left office the number of people employed by the White House and the Executive Office was nearly twice that under Johnson, just as Johnson's staff was nearly twice that of Roosevelt's. In sixty-seven years the White House staff has grown from thirty-seven to more than one thousand, the Executive Office staff from zero to many thousands.³ With the bureaucratizing of the presidency, it is hardly surprising that the White House fell heir to all the problems of a bureaucracy, including the distortion of information as it passes through the chain of command and frustrating delays in decisionmaking.

The modern presidency has also been witness to presidents' increasing suspicion of the permanent government. This has led to a proliferation of functional offices within the White House and to a White House that carries out plans because the president does not trust the bureaucracy to do so. Blaming the bureaucracy is an easy way to gloss over the failures of government, yet trying to run a government without its support is like trying to run a train without an engine.

Another characteristic of the modern presidency is the rising influence of White House staff members on the president and the corresponding decline in cabinet influence. This has meant a serious separation of policy formulation from policy implementation. It also may have created more idiosyncratic policy, since White House aides often operate with fewer constraints and less feel for what can be achieved.

The fourth characteristic is that presidential assistants have increasingly become special pleaders. This trend began benignly enough when Truman gave an aide responsibility for minority group affairs, in a sense creating a presidential spokesman for those who were otherwise underrepresented in the councils of government. Each successive president added other representatives, until under Nixon there were White House assistants for the aged, youth, women, blacks, Jews, labor, Hispanic-Americans, the business community, governors and mayors, artists, and citizens of the District of Columbia, as well as such concerns as drug abuse, energy, environment, physical fitness, volunteerism, telecommunications, and national goals.

Where once the White House had been a mediator of interests, it now had become a collection of interests.

Ultimately the modern presidency has moved toward creating all policy at the White House, overseeing the operations of government from the White House, using White House staff to operate programs of high presidential priority, and representing in the White House all interests that are demographically separable. This attempt can never succeed. Even an overblown White House staff is simply too inadequate a fulcrum for moving the weight of the executive branch, which employs nearly 5 million people and spends over 2 trillion dollars annually.

In the final chapters of this study I propose a redefinition of the tasks of presidents, those activities that they must perform and that cannot be performed by others. The corollary is that the many other tasks currently performed badly by presidents must be performed elsewhere. My contention is that, starting with Roosevelt, presidents have made a serious mistake in asserting that they are the chief managers of the federal government. It is hard to find firm support for such an assertion in the Constitution. In fact, except in the case of the secretary of state and in certain emergency legislation, Congress gives the authority to run programs directly to department heads, not to the president to be redelegated to department heads.

Rather than chief manager, the president is chief political officer of the United States. His major responsibility, in my judgment, is each year to make a relatively small number of highly significant political decisions—among them setting national priorities, which he does through the budget and his legislative proposals, and devising policy to ensure the security of the country, with special attention to those situations that could involve the nation in war.⁴

Agreed, this is a considerably more modest definition of the presidency than national leaders and some scholars have led Americans to expect, and it does not guarantee that U.S. leaders will always make wise decisions. It is also a definition that may warrant rethinking at some future time and under different circumstances. For now, however, it is a definition for presidential conduct that is apt to provide more effective government services, fewer unfulfilled promises, and less alienation in our society.

To the extent that presidents undermine confidence in the presidency by burdening the White House staff beyond its capacity to effect change and deliver services, a different set of reciprocal relationships between presi-

dents, presidential staffs, and cabinet members must be devised. The final chapters of this study seek ways to arrive at a more functional presidency. These ideas do not relate to ideology: a liberal or a conservative president could operate equally well within this framework with markedly different results. My task is to make the case that these arrangements are both necessary and feasible.