

# *Introduction*

Why a factual book about the White House staff?

Because the 135 offices of the contemporary White House staff constitute the administrative center of the executive branch of our American government. There are books—many books—about the presidency, about presidential power, and about individual presidents, but it is the men and women on the president’s personal staff who first channel that power, shape it, focus it, and, on the president’s instructions, help him wield it. These 135 offices are the primary units of support for the president as he exercises executive leadership.

To most Americans the White House staff and its work are nearly unknown—largely because it is usually in the president’s interest to have staffers stay behind the scenes. A few senior staff members are in the public eye, but the vast majority of White House staffers do their indispensable work completely out of sight. Yet despite being curtained off from public view, staff members are public servants; in helping the nation’s foremost officeholder, they do the public’s business. The public thus deserves an account of why the modern staff is there, how it is organized, and what individual staff members actually do. Scandalmongering and kiss-and-tell chronicles do not meet that need.

## **The Surprising Unknowns**

The curtain that screens most of the staff from public visibility is thick with unexpected contrasts, false stereotypes, and even paradoxes. For example:

—The Constitution includes not a word about the White House staff, and they are barely mentioned in statute. Staff members have zero legal authority in their own right, yet 100 percent of presidential authority passes through their hands.

—A president or a presidential candidate typically promises that he will have only a small White House staff and will rely predominantly on the cabinet officers for policy guidance. These pledges, if made, are rarely kept.

— A president's next inclination is to emphasize how few staff associates he has, when in fact they are numerous. Veterans of past administrations typically look at the current staff and cluck disapprovingly: "We did it with a third of that number." Stung by this criticism, sitting presidents try even harder to mask the size of their personal team or make a show (as did President Bill Clinton) of cutting it back by some fixed percentage.

—Despite vows to cut back, presidents typically do just the opposite: they add to the menu of White House staff services. (George W. Bush created the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the Office of the USA Freedom Corps, and the White House Office of Homeland Security and Counterterrorism). Once instituted, many of the innovations turn out to be truly useful, and the added functions are carried over into succeeding administrations.

—Even if a cutback in staff numbers is instituted at the beginning of a president's first term, the staff's core responsibilities remain undiminished. They are met by requiring the remaining staffers to work unendurable hours, by adding detailees and consultants, and by bringing in volunteers and unpaid interns who are not included in White House budget totals. As the reelection campaign approaches, staff numbers begin to creep upward.

—From afar the White House staff appears to be a small group of broad-gauged generalists. A closer look reveals a very different scene: seventy-four principal offices engaged in specialized duties. Each of these units tells all the others to enter its guarded jurisdiction only with permission. The seventy-four are supported by twenty-one senior policy support groups.

—Supporting these ninety-five policy units, and almost totally invisible to the public, are forty additional offices that contain the three-quarters of the staff who are nonpolitical professionals. These men and women serve not just the president but the office of the president, enhancing the presidency while aiding the president. Indeed this dual loyalty—to the office as well as to the person—is found among the senior political assistants as well.

—Senior staff members are partisans of the president. But their political commitment cannot be allowed to override the intellectual integrity that they must bring to their work. Contrary to public belief, sycophants and crusaders, if tolerated briefly, are not long welcome at the White House.

—Citizens might assume that members of a White House staff are cut from the same pattern on issues of public policy. Wrong. Differences in background, experience, age, gender, race, and especially party faction arc across the White House. The environment is an intellectually electric one, which is to the president's benefit—unless the internal arguments become ad hominem or are fought out in public.

—Although the most senior White House staff members are sometimes regarded as a barrier, walling off the president from people who advocate different opinions or from papers that present unconventional ideas, they often do

just the opposite, insisting that dissenters be heard and challenging memoranda that tell the president only the welcome news.

—In the midst of the coterie composed of the president’s assistants, who serve entirely at his pleasure, are two key players whom the president cannot remove: the vice president and the president’s spouse. Their large and energetic staffs work, on the one hand, with a sense of independence from the presidential group; on the other hand, they must be tied into the whole team, or else their principals may be embarrassingly out of step. (A third such player, of only somewhat less stature, is the vice president’s spouse.)

—However intense the jurisdictions and differences within the White House may be, when a major presidential initiative is launched, each of those specialized offices has to play its role *in coordination with* every other one. Does this happen effortlessly? No, and hell no. A set of unifying offices—and especially a tough, all-seeing chief of staff—operating precisely as the president wishes, is indispensable in guaranteeing the necessary teamwork.

—Cloaked, as most of them should be, by anonymity; protected, as on occasion they must be, by executive privilege; and necessarily immersed in matters both delicate and confidential, staffers nonetheless do their work under the surveillance of an expert, unremittingly skeptical, and occasionally hostile press corps. Leaks are frequent; secrets are rare. Fortunately for our democracy, the White House is a glass house, with both light and heat streaming in.

—Within White House circles, the overriding ethical standard is so strict that it could be called unfair: the mere appearance of impropriety is itself the impropriety. A few White House incumbents, perhaps innocent in fact, have run afoul of that elevated criterion.

—The most exasperating paradox of all concerns a principle enunciated in the 1930s by Louis Brownlow, adviser to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Brownlow told President Roosevelt that White House assistants should never be “interposed” between the president and his departmental heads. But daily—yea, hourly—staff members fire questions, demand information, make pointed suggestions, summarize departmental views, add their own recommendations, convey and interpret directives—about all of which the harried cabinet recipient may complain, “Usurpation!” What is often unknown to both the recipients and the public is that these staff actions are generally, and sometimes specifically, *at the president’s own instructions*. This last and most pervasive “unknown” darkly colors the view that outsiders hold of the White House staff. In the eyes of the cabinet, the bureaucracy, Congress, the press, and the public, the staff is often seen as being unaccountable, out of control, pushing its own agendas. This is almost always a false view. Let there be a White House staffer who more than once (or maybe only once) misinterprets or subverts the president’s wishes, and he or she will be found on the sidewalk outside.

Shrouded in this miasma of misperceptions, the White House staff is but

dimly understood. Past and present scandals and kiss-and-tell self-serving screeds published by disgruntled or avaricious former colleagues have strengthened the popular inclination to paint the staff deep purple, if not black, and to view the place as crawling with miscreants and misbehavior.

But hold on, dear readers. That's a bum rap.

Of course there have been staffers who were heavy-handed, boorish, immoral, even criminal. Some within the White House ring of power are so seduced by the privileges they are afforded and so oblivious to the public's watchful eye that they not only do foolish things but believe that their actions will go unnoticed. The nation is, and always has been, rightfully skeptical about how presidential power is used and has become, properly, ever more attentive to the behavior of the president's agents.

Greatly outnumbering the dozens whose misdeeds have sullied their surroundings, however, are the thousands who have served their presidents, and the nation, with brilliance and self-effacing commitment. The miscreants are due no apologies, but the public's very watchfulness now calls for better illumination of the White House as a whole.

## The Whole White House

And it is the *whole* White House that this book describes—a concept rarely if ever employed by other presidential scholars. The White House staff community family, as the author prefers to term it, includes not just the ninety-five policy offices but the Executive Residence, *Air Force One*, Camp David, the White House Communications Agency, the *Marine One* helicopter squadron, the Situation Room, the Secret Service protective units, the Social Office, the Visitor Center, and the Commission on White House Fellows. It also includes certain elements or employees of the Office of Administration, the National Park Service, the General Services Administration, the National Archives and Records Service, and the U.S. Postal Service, plus cadres of detailees, interns, and volunteers. All of these men and women collectively make up the *whole* White House—135 separately identifiable offices working together and supporting each other in a set of such incredibly intense day-to-day relationships that they are bonded together in this one institution. (A chapter has also been added about the independent White House Historical Association.)

The “whole White House” is a part of the Executive Office of the President—the principal part. The Executive Office of the President has twelve organizational elements. Five of them (the White House Office, the Executive Residence, the Office of Policy Development, the National Security Council, and the Office of the Vice President) come under the author's definition of the “whole White House” and are the focus of this book. The other seven (six of them statutory) make up the rest of the Executive Office of the President, and while their relationships with

the White House are especially close and supportive, they are not discussed here. For readers' information, the seven are:

—*The Office of Management and Budget*. OMB, a statutory organization of some 500 men and women, originated as the Bureau of the Budget in 1921, a part of the Treasury Department. It was transferred into the new Executive Office of the President in 1939 and given its current name in 1970. OMB's principal responsibility is to prepare the president's budget and to supervise and control the budgetary administration of the executive branch. OMB also works to improve management and administration throughout the executive branch, clears departmental recommendations for proposed legislation, advises the president on what action to take on bills passed by Congress, manages government procurement policies, reviews all proposed departmental regulations, oversees statistical policy, and is responsible for implementing some fifteen financial and managerial statutes.

—*The Council of Economic Advisers*. Created by Congress in 1946, the CEA is a threesome of presidentially appointed (and senatorially confirmed) advisers, with a staff of thirty. It gives professional economic advice to the president, especially relating to the nation's employment, production, and purchasing power. It drafts the annual *Economic Report of the President*, which is sent to and defended before Congress.

—*The Office of National Drug Control Policy*. First established by executive order in 1971, the ONDCP was codified in 1988; it has a presidentially appointed and senatorially confirmed director and a staff of 123. It is the president's primary source of support for development and oversight of the federal drug control program. It develops and monitors a national drug control strategy and has the authority to review departmental budgets before they are submitted to Congress and to "review the allocation of personnel to and by such departments" to ensure that those departments have the right people—and enough of them—to carry out their responsibilities under the drug control strategy.

—*The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative*. The USTR, originally created by executive order in 1963, was made statutory in 1974, supplemented by a reorganization plan in 1979. It is headed by a director and two deputy directors, one in Washington and one in Geneva, all with the rank of ambassador, appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. With a staff of 229, the USTR is responsible for developing and coordinating the implementation of U.S. international trade policy; the director is the chief representative of the United States in bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations.

—*The Council on Environmental Quality*. The CEQ was originally created by the Environmental Policy Act of 1969 as a board of three members, appointed by the president, with Senate confirmation, charged with reviewing any and all departmental proposals for legislative or executive action to ensure that they are consistent with the principles and standards in the act. The council conducts

investigations and surveys, makes recommendations to the president on environmental policy questions, and over the years has been given responsibility for monitoring the implementation of a series of environmental statutes. The council's presidentially designated chairman is the director of the office; its staff numbers twenty-four.

—*The Office of Science and Technology Policy.* OSTP was established by statute in 1976 to advise the president on the scientific and technological aspects of important policy issues, to assist OMB in developing the federal research and development budget, and to coordinate and evaluate the effectiveness of these federal R&D programs. The director manages a staff of forty.

—*The Office of Administration.* The OA was established by a presidential executive order in 1977 to provide central administrative services—personnel, library, office supply, receiving and warehousing, duplicating, facilities management, telecommunications, and mail-messenger functions—to the Executive Office itself and to the Office of the Vice President.<sup>1</sup> The executive order specifies that “the Office of Administration shall, upon request, assist the White House Office in performing its role of providing those administrative services which are primarily in direct support of the President.” A certain proportion of the total OA staff of 222 is allocable to the White House in support of this special responsibility.

There are significant differences between the White House part of the Executive Office of the President and these seven units that make up the rest of the Executive Office. Four functionalities differentiate them.

First, all who work at the White House (except the president's spouse) in effect serve at the pleasure of the president. (Even the vice president's status as a member of the White House staff community, and his office location on the White House campus, are at the president's discretion.) No one has tenure in his or her job at the White House. Many career people are assigned or detailed to the White House, but their tenure is with their positions in their home departments. In the Executive Office agencies, by contrast, most employees have civil-service tenure in their jobs.

Second, no one in the White House, including the vice president and the president's spouse, has any legal authority to *do* anything—except to assist and advise the president. (In his functions at the Capitol, the vice president, of course, has constitutional duties in the Senate.) The other Executive Office units do have statutory powers of action.

Third, there is a strong tradition that men and women who work at the White House (except the president's spouse) do not testify before congressional committees. President George W. Bush, for example, held to that tradition when former governor Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania was first appointed director of homeland security at the White House in 2001 and the Senate Appropriations Committee demanded his testimony. Ridge later went up to Capitol Hill and

met with senators informally. The president may find himself forced to waive that tradition in cases of alleged scandal or criminality (such as Watergate or the Iran/Contra affair).<sup>2</sup> White House officers very frequently go to the Capitol and meet informally with members or staffs, but not for on-the-record testimony. (This tradition came into play when the 9/11 Commission, the independent panel investigating the al Qaeda attacks, requested testimony from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. The president at first said no, but the influence of the 9/11 families who lost loved ones in the attacks was of so much weight that he finally permitted her to testify, saying, however, that this was an exception pertaining only in this instance and only to Rice.)

Fourth, the papers of those who work at the White House (including the vice president) come under the Presidential Records Act and are not subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.<sup>3</sup> The papers of the statutory units of the Executive Office (except for those of the Council of Economic Advisers) come under the Federal Records Act and are reachable pursuant to the FOIA.<sup>4</sup>

These distinctions undergird the author's decision to limit the focus of this book to the White House as defined above. The author cringes at the frequent fuzzing up of those differences in the news media or elsewhere by referring to the "White House Budget Office," for example, or to the "White House Science Office."

## Where the Author Is Coming From

This is the author's third book about the organization and functioning of the White House staff.

The first, *The Ring of Power: The White House Staff and Its Expanding Role in Government* (Basic Books, 1988), discussed the White House staffs of Presidents Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and Jimmy Carter. The second, *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000), extended the coverage to include the staffs of Presidents George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton. The principal focus of this volume is the structure and process of the White House of President George W. Bush, with emphasis on his second term. References in this book to *Bush*, therefore, are to George W. Bush unless it is clear from the context that George H. W. Bush is meant.

The purpose of all three of these works is to describe the elements of the modern White House staff, the responsibilities and functions of each element, and how they are meant to be integrated into a coordinated body of advisers and operating assistants. All three books give little attention to, and pronounce no judgments on, issues of policy, foreign or domestic; the emphasis in these books is not on what the presidents did but on how the staffs were organized to support them. The objective here is not to judge the wisdom or success of any

president's policies; many other critics and historians are taking up that challenge. These three works are professional, nonpartisan, and with no first-person references whatsoever.

This book is the only known volume on the presidency that lays out the size and the budget of the whole White House (except for its classified elements)—a set of figures that have had to be pulled together from the several departments and agencies that, almost completely behind the scenes, contribute to financing the various parts of the modern White House (chapter 2).

The book contains several organization charts of the White House as it has been set up by President Bush. The charts, which portray the organizing schema of the Bush White House staff, represent a further unique compilation by the author; if the White House draws up an organization chart itself, it is never made public.

The author spent fourteen years on the White House staffs of three presidents and was close to the staff of a fourth. What follows is not a kiss-and-tell account, a personal memoir, or an exposé. It is the professional view, not of a theorist, not of an outsider looking in, but of a White House practitioner—a public administrator with intimate knowledge of how the entire White House really works. What knowledge the author has acquired from his past experience at the White House has been dramatically enriched by the nearly 100 interviews he has been privileged to have had with officers whom he has known for many years such as the vice president and the counsel to the president and with many others on or retired from the Bush staff. The president's spouse herself provided a personal commentary about her functions in the chapter describing her office. Some of the interviews were conducted in situ, such as an interview with the presidential pilot in the *Air Force One* hangar at Andrews Air Force Base (and in the plane itself) and with the commandant of the White House Communications Agency in his headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base. In the interests of accuracy, balance, and professionalism, the author not only submitted the attributed quotations for confirmation but also invited many of the interviewees to review the entire chapter(s) in which their work is described.

The author's nonpartisan aim is to illumine public administration at the apex of government, especially:

—To aid the presidential candidates in the fall of 2008, who even then are likely thinking about—or may have quietly commissioned one or two colleagues to think about—how they would structure the White House. For both of the 2008 presidential nominees, and especially for many of their advisers, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue will be terra nova.

—To provide the 2008 president-elect with an accurate picture of the contemporary White House, so that he can make informed choices and decisions about structure and staffing. That pre-inaugural decisionmaking environment will be long on flexibility but very short on time.



—To be of help to the 1,000 or so men and women who will have been selected during the winter of 2008–09 to take their places on the afternoon of January 20, 2009, as full-time members, detailees, interns, or volunteers of the new White House staff. Most of them will have never set foot in the White House, yet will have to learn, practically overnight, how to make a White House staff function, error-free, for the new chief executive.

—To inform the other 2,500 who, during the opening months of 2009, will be appointed to noncareer positions in the departments and agencies of the executive branch—the operating leadership cadre of the new administration. To most of them, the White House staff, which will have picked them, will look like a group of strangers who seek and need their swift cooperation but who won't impart very much about how their White House is organized or what it does with the information it is given.

—To paint a factual, nonpartisan picture of the White House at work for the other indispensable participants in the Washington environment—Congress, the media, the diplomatic corps, business and think-tank leaders, and state and local politicians, many of whom have inaccurate or negative stereotypes about that institution—impressions that the White House itself is slow to correct.

—To broaden the knowledge of those who are teaching civics and political science in the nation's high schools and universities and to stimulate the interest of their students who are contemplating careers in public administration.

