Introduction

Why a factual book about the White House staff? Because the 125 offices of the contemporary White House staff constitute the policy center of the executive branch of American government. There are books about individual presidents, the presidency, and presidential power, 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 125 offices are the primary units of support as the president 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 keep them out of sight. Yet despite being curtained off within the presidency, the staff are public servants—and in helping the nation's foremost officeholder, they do the public's business. The public thus deserves an account of why the modern staff are there, how they are organized, and what they actually do. Scandalmongering and kiss-and-tell chronicles do not meet that need.

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

—Despite providing essential support to the most visible person in America, almost all White House staff remain cloaked in anonymity (although a few key officers may be brought forward publicly to explain and defend the president's policies).

—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 pledges that he will have only a small White House staff and will rely predominantly on his cabinet officers for policy guidance. These pledges are not likely to be kept.

—The president's next inclination is to emphasize how few are his staff associates—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, a sitting president tries even harder to mask the size of his personal team, or makes a show (as did President Clinton) of cutting it back by some fixed percentage.

—Despite vows to cut back, presidents do just the opposite: they add to the menu of White House staff services. (Clinton's inauguration of the National Economic Council is an example.) Once created, 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 will remain undiminished. They will be 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 again 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 different scene: forty-six principal offices engaged in specialized duties. Each of these units tells all the others to enter its guarded turf only with permission. The forty-six are aided by twenty-eight senior policy support groups.

—Supporting the forty-six principal offices and the twenty-eight subordinate groups—and invisible to the public—are fifty-one additional offices that contain the three-quarters of the staff who are nonpolitical professionals. These men and women serve not just the person but the office of the president—in effect, enhancing the presidency while aiding the president. Indeed, this dual loyalty—to the person and to the office—is found among the senior political assistants as well.

—The senior staff 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 White House staff members are cut from the same pattern, with common views on issues of public policy. Wrong. Differences in background, experience, age, sex, 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 sometimes regarded as a barrier, walling off the president from people who advocate different opinions or from papers that present unconventional ideas, seniormost White House staff members often do just the opposite, insisting that dissenters be heard and challenging memorandums that tell the president only the welcome news.

—In the midst of the coterie composed of his own assistants, who serve entirely at the president's pleasure, are the vice president and the president's spouse: two key players whom the president cannot remove. *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 differences and distinctions within the White House staff may be, when a major presidential initiative gets underway, 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.

—Shrouded, as most of them should be, by anonymity; protected, as they often 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 more than sixty years ago by Louis Brownlow, adviser to Franklin Roo-

sevelt. Brownlow told President Roosevelt that White House assistants should never be "interposed" between the president and his department heads. But daily—yea, hourly—staff members fire questions, demand information, make pointed suggestions, summarize departmental views, add their own recommendations, and convey and interpret directives—about which the harried cabinet recipients 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 are often accused of being unaccountable, out of control, pushing their 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 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 hundreds who have served their presidents, and the public, with brilliance and with self-effacing commitment. No apologies are due to the miscreants, but the public's very watchfulness now calls for better illumination of the White House as a whole.

Just what is meant, in this book, by "the White House"? The author owes readers a clear delineation of the units that he regards as being within, and not within, that famous phrase.

Directly assisting the president, and separate from the line departments and agencies, is the Executive Office of the President, a collection of offices first created by Franklin Roosevelt in 1939. Not counting the president him-

self, these now number eleven. One of the eleven, formally referred to as the White House Office, includes the Executive Residence. Three other offices in the Executive Office of the President are so intimately tied to the work of the Oval Office that, for the purposes of this book, they have been included as de facto parts of the White House, broadly defined. These three are the Office of the Vice President, the Office of Policy Development (the president's domestic and economic policy staffs), and the National Security Council (here meaning the staff of the council, not the cabinet-level body itself).[1]

The other seven (the Council of Economic Advisers; the Council on Environmental Quality; the Office of Management and Budget; the Office of National Drug Control Policy; the Office of Science, Technology, and Space Policy; the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative; and probably half of the Office of Administration) are, in the author's judgment, Executive Office, but not White House, units and are therefore outside the focus of this book.[2]

The reasoning behind this delineation becomes clear if one keeps in mind the four cardinal characteristics that distinguish the White House units from the other institutions of the Executive Office.

First, except for the president and the vice president, no person in the "White House" parts of the Executive Office has any legal authority to *do* anything, other than to assist and advise the two principals. The other Executive Office institutions have specified statutory duties. Second, with a few exceptions, all those who serve in the White House units do so at the pleasure of the president; none have any tenure in their White House jobs (those on detail may of course have tenure in their original agencies).[3] Below the layer of politically appointed officers, employees of the other Executive Office units have career civil service status. Third, any papers generated by the four White House institutions are presidential records and subject to the provisions of the Presidential Records Act,[4] whereas the papers of the Executive Office units are agency records and come under the provisions of the Federal Records Act.[5] Finally, there is a strong tradition, rather strictly adhered to, that no persons serving in the White House are to appear before congressional committees and testify about their actions: nor do they, except in connection with criminal investigations (for example, Watergate, Iran-Contra) or allegations of wrongdoing that would create great political embarrassment for the White House if they refused to appear.[6] (White House staff may and often do, of course, visit individual legislators informally.) Heads of the other Executive Office units routinely give formal testimony.

Important as they are, these four distinctions are almost never clarified in public discourse, neither by the president nor by knowledgeable journalists. This lack of clarity about the distinction between the White House and the Executive Office has enabled President Clinton, for example, to say that he "cut the White House staff by 25 percent" when much of the cutting was done in the Office of National Drug Control Policy. No wonder the public is confused about what constitutes "the White House."

A final word of clarification: the White House that has just been defined in this introduction—and that is described in the first twenty-one chapters of the book—is the group of relatively small offices that serve the president in substantive policy areas; these offices are the first forty-six on the list that appears at the end of the introduction to part 2. In chapter 21 and part 3, the author introduces the broader concept of the "White House staff community," which includes the professional and technical support staffs for the presidency. In this wider, much more numerous, but indispensable "community" are the White House Military Office and the White House components of the Secret Service, as well as men and women from the National Park Service, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the General Services Administration. Hundreds of career employees are indeed in these ranks; hundreds more are interns and part-time White House volunteers. The public knows little about them; they belong, though, to the White House family—and they are therefore included in this volume.

How does this book differ from the author's 1988 work, *Ring of Power: The White House Staff and Its Expanding Role in Government*?

Perhaps for the first time in the history of presidential literature, readers will be given an encyclopedic look at the contemporary White House in its entirety, with its 125 separately identifiable offices. Parts 1 and 2 fully portray each of the White House's forty-six major policy offices (one such office, made up of the staff of the National Security Council, encompasses nineteen subsections; another, the National Economic Council, is a new outfit) and treat more briefly the twenty-eight units that immediately support the principal forty-six. A new chapter discusses the never-before-described office of the spouse of the vice president. The eighteen separate physical facilities of the modern White House are identified and described.

Part 3 illumines in greater detail the fifty-one professional and support offices of the contemporary White House, in which 87 percent of the staff do their indispensable work for the president and the country in almost complete obscurity and anonymity. Two of these offices are 135 years old; several

were instituted only in the Clinton years. This book describes the newly enlarged White House intern program as well as the National Park Service's recently published *Comprehensive Design Plan for the White House and President's Park*.

Part 2 and portions of part 3 not only describe the functions of the various White House offices and offer recent examples of their work but also analyze the problems and issues that each policy unit needs to address in the long term. The final chapter of part 2 addresses two aspects of the White House characterized by both controversy and concealment: the full size of the White House staff community, and the total White House budget; the latter is set forth for the first time in any publication about the White House.

Part 4 looks ahead. President Bush (1989–92), in managing national security affairs, and President Clinton, more generally (particularly during his second term), seem to have succeeded in dampening the old animosities between the cabinet and the White House staff. Will the animosities resurface? How much real freedom will the president of 2001—and those in the years beyond—have to make changes in the White House? What is the real limit on White House staff size, and what governs its accountability? Is anonymity still the universal desideratum? What new physical facilities are on the drawing board for the White House of the future? Part 4 addresses these questions.

Although this book draws some examples from presidents of the more distant past, it concentrates on the changes in White House operations that occurred during the Bush and Clinton administrations. The focus here is not on the president but on the staff; the emphasis is not on what the presidents did but on how the staff supported 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.

This new work is designed—and timed—to be of help to the most immediate newcomers: the White House staff of 2001 and other presidencies of the near future. Sad to say, in a presidential transition, White House file cabinets and bookshelves are typically devoid of any such guidance. Unless there are White House veterans among them, the incoming team rushes in to find nearly a tabula rasa when it comes to White House operations and procedures. The book also aims to be of interest and benefit to students, to scholars, to public administrators, and to the public at large.

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. Readers will need to turn to other sources to obtain an exhumation of the Lewinsky affair or other scandals or to revel in breathless, blow-by-blow accounts of who said what in inner White House conflicts.

This is the professional view, not of a theorist, not of an outsider looking in, but of a White House practitioner—a public administrator with an intimate knowledge of how the entire White House really works. Joined with the author's voice are those of some 130 others whom he interviewed during the past three years—and who have also lived through the heat and tension, the frustration and exultation, of White House service. Some interviewees have held positions in other agencies but have worked closely with the White House; a few are distinguished journalists, veteran observers of the White House scene.

In the interest 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 chapters in which their work is described. Many of the interviews were conducted in situ—in operating areas of the White House that are necessarily out of the public view, but adding new depth to the author's own previous experience in the halls of that institution.

The author's nonpartisan aim is to illumine public administration at the apex of government, at the center of policy: to open up the White House gates and describe what is within.