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THE EVOLVING MODERN PRESIDENCY

The modern presidency began with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his leadership of the United States through the Great Depression and World War II. Beginning with that extraordinary period, we will trace the evolution of the presidency from the perspective of how FDR and his successors have organized their administrations, with a focus on White House organization and presidential relations with the cabinet. This is the fourth edition of *Organizing the Presidency*. The first edition, 1976, took the presidency from FDR (1933–1945) through the administration of Richard Nixon (1969–1974). The second edition, 1988, continued the march of presidents through Ronald Reagan's two terms (1981–1989). The third edition, 2002, ended with the reaction of George W. Bush to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This edition continues into Donald Trump's first three years in office, as he sought to win the 2020 election.

The past ninety years have transformed the White House from a small, personalized office to a set of centralized bureaucracies (with hundreds of people) in charge of the much larger bureaucracies (of millions of people) in the broader executive branch. FDR did not try to run or manage the executive branch from the White House, at least not in the sense that a chief executive office runs or manages a corporation. During Roosevelt's first two terms, he structured the White House staff to serve his personal needs. His staff was considerably larger though not significantly different from that of his predecessors. Because Roosevelt, in the manner of his cousin Theodore, conceived the presidency as a "bully pulpit," his assistants were mostly engaged in helping him try to shape public opinion.

No National Security Council or National Economic Council existed then 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, 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, which impinged on the jurisdiction of the cabinet departments.

According to Joseph Alsop, in FDR's time:

> There literally was no White House staff of the modern type, with policymaking functions. Two extremely pleasant, unassuming, and efficient men, Steve Early and Marvin McIntyre, handled the president's day-to-day schedule and routine, the donkey-work of his press relations, and such like. There was a secretarial camarilla of highly competent and dedicated ladies who were led by "Missy" LeHand. . . . There were also lesser figures to handle travel arrangements, the enormous flow of correspondence, and the like. But that was that; and national policy was strictly a problem for the president, his advisers of the moment (who had constant access to the president's office but no office of their own in the White House), and his chosen chiefs of departments and agencies.[1]

The increased number of governmental programs and the large number of agencies created during the New Deal resulted in a fragmented system that FDR tried to rein in through the proposals of the Brownlow Committee, which declared, "The President needs help."

With new reorganization authority, FDR created the Executive Office of the President in 1939, which vastly expanded FDR's outreach, and he began to see a president's task as including management. In his twelve years in the White House, Roosevelt created many elements of the modern presidency in embryonic form, and by his death in 1945, the president, rather than Congress, had become the center of federal attention. The long-term result of the Brownlow proposals was an increasingly centralized capacity to control the executive branch from the White House, a trend that increased in momentum after 1960.

The office of the presidency reflected historic changes in international relations and technology. Just as the world would never be the same after the Great Depression, World War II, and the advent of modern communications, neither would the presidency. As the office adapted to the new realities of the mid-twentieth century, the capacity of the presidency to lead a much larger national government had to be enhanced. But the changes of the 1930s and 1940s merely laid the groundwork for the full development of the modern presidency. Since then, the institutional capacity of the office has been transformed beyond the dreams of Franklin Roosevelt.

As the size and complexity of the government grew, so did the dependence of the president on a more professional White House staff. The White House staff grew from about forty informal generalist aides to FDR to the highly specialized and bureaucratized White House Office of 450 staffers in the twenty-first century. The White House staff now has the capacity, in terms of expertise and power, to initiate policy in all areas of presidential concern. It even has the capacity to carry out presidential priorities, which has been valuable at times but also can lead to trouble for the president.

The growth in White House staff since FDR has been both a boon and a bane to presidents. Presidents now have the ability to do things in the White House that used to be done in other agencies of the executive branch (for example, foreign policy, trade policy, and legal advice) or by political parties (such as personnel recruitment and public liaison). While a large White House staff gives presidents a depth of policy and political advice that was not available before, it does not assure the quality of that advice. A large staff also creates the danger that White House aides will go off on their own, doing what they imagine is in the president's best interest. Without careful monitoring, this extended White House staff can lead to micromanaging the implementation of policy, to the frustration of cabinet secretaries, or to disaster, as it did in the Watergate (Nixon), the Iran-Contra debacle (Reagan), and presidential pressure on Ukraine in 2019 (Trump).

When Dwight Eisenhower became president in 1953, he drew from his vast organizational experience during World War II to organize the White House more formally than what he considered to be the haphazardly run White Houses of Roosevelt and Truman. 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 cabinet 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 function of all these new offices, which had increased the size of the White House, but not 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 they, as senators, were not used to running large organizations. Nevertheless, each had activist goals involving increasing the role of the government in the economy and social life of the nation. Their activist agendas led them to begin to centralize control of public policy in the White House. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy learned to distrust the national security bureaucratic consensus. He moved one of his White House advisers, McGeorge Bundy, into a West Wing office and told him to create "a little state department" in the White House to provide independent advice to the president. Kennedy's small group of advisers eventually developed into an expansive National Security

Council staff (first established by Eisenhower), which grew to several hundred staffers in the twenty-first century. The Cuban Missile Crisis further reinforced Kennedy's conviction that national security policy had to be tightly controlled in the White House.

Lyndon Johnson did not want to entrust his Great Society and War on Poverty legislation to the departments and agencies of the executive branch, and he tasked Joseph Califano with developing and coordinating social policy development in the White House. Because of Kennedy and Johnson's approach to the presidency as the moving force of government, presidential aides sometimes issued instructions to cabinet officers and their subordinates. The White House became for the first time the operational center of the executive branch.

The offices and procedures that presidents created in the 1950s and 1960s soon became institutionalized. Elements of this include an elaborate and more centralized national security apparatus, an enhanced White House Office of Communications, a large legal counsel's office, a professionalized Office of Presidential Personnel, a legislative liaison capacity, and others. This growth in capacity has occurred because presidents do not want to depend on the rest of the executive branch for advice. They want immediate response from people they trust implicitly, and they want that capacity available in the White House, not in cabinet departments.

After the beginning of centralization of White House control in the 1960s, Richard Nixon sought even tighter political and organizational control. He distrusted the career bureaucrats of the executive branch, considering them holdovers from the activist years of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who were "dug-in establishmentarians fighting for the status quo."[2] In seeking personal central control Nixon created, in effect, a counter-bureaucracy in the White House in his Domestic Policy Council and National Security Council staffs. He increased political control of the Bureau of the Budget by transforming it into the Office of Management and Budget and giving it more political appointees and greater authority to enforce his budgetary decisions.

Although presidents after Nixon have had discretion to organize their staffs however they wish, they cannot escape what Hugh Heclo calls the "deep structure" of the White House, which consists of the "web of other people's expectations and needs."[3] This deep structure includes the major White House institutions designed to provide presidents with the support and information they need to make decisions and ensure that they are carried out. Presidents (if they intend to be successful) are no longer free to ignore transition planning or refuse to engage a large personnel recruitment operation. Nor are they free to abolish or ignore the National Security Council, the domestic policy staff, the congressional liaison operation, national economic council, or office of intergovernmental affairs. And in order to use these support units effectively, they are no longer free to run the White House without a chief of staff. Some tried, but soon gave up.

While the increased size and scope of the White House staff gave presidents more direct control of the policies of their administrations, the greatly enlarged staff was a mixed blessing. A centralized presidency depends on the ability of the president to stay on top of the actions of numerous staffers, some of whom may wish to go into business for themselves in the president's name. Although President Nixon approved some of the funding for the "dirty tricks" that his staffers and their accomplices played in trying to assure his reelection in 1972, they went even beyond their (illegal) remit. President Reagan's White House staff decided to take the initiative in accomplishing the president's wishes in recovering several U.S. hostages in the Middle East. They decided to sell American arms to Iran in exchange for help with the release of hostages and to divert the funds from those sales to help the Contras, a right-wing group in Nicaragua, which was forbidden by law. The resulting scandal almost brought down the Reagan presidency.

As the importance of the White House staff grew, the cabinet declined in its immediate influence on presidents. The cabinet departments continue to be the operational arms of the federal government; their expertise and institutional memory remain essential to the conduct of public policy. But their influence on presidential policymaking has become overshadowed by White House staffers with proximity to the president. The "policy shops" in departments have been superseded by White House bureaucracies. Domestic policy, once developed in domestic departments, such as Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Labor, and Transportation, is now dominated by the domestic policy staff in the White House. Foreign policy is now directed by the National Security Council staff rather than the Departments of State and of Defense.

The following chapters will explore the details and dynamics of the gradual transformation of the presidency and will conclude with lessons abstracted from the fourteen modern presidents.