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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

ORGANIZING THE PRESIDENCY FROM ROOSEVELT TO BIDEN

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## PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated President in 1933, the White House staff numbered fewer than 50 people, and most federal departments were lightly staffed as well. As the United States became a world power. The staff of the Executive Office increased 20-fold and the staffing of federal agencies blossomed comparably.

On this episode, airing in the midst of the transition of President Elect Joe Biden, you'll hear Brookings Press Director Bill Finan's interview with Steven Hess and James Pfiffner, the authors of the Brookings Press Title: Organizing the Presidency.

In this fourth edition of the Landmark Volume, first published in 1976, Hess and Pfiffner argue that the successes and failures of Presidents from Roosevelt through Trump have resulted in large part from how the President deployed and used White House staffers and other top officials responsible for carrying out Oval Office policy.

In this conversation, Hess and Pfiffner reflect on earlier transitions, but also have a lot to say about President Trump's transition in 2016 and what is happening now.

Hess is a veteran staffer of the Eisenhower and Nixon Administration's, an advisor to Presidents Ford and Carter, and now a Senior Fellow Emeritus at Brookings. He's also the author of over a dozen books on topics ranging from the Presidency, US politics, political cartoons, and the news media.

Pfiffner is a Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University, and an author or editor of 10 books on the presidency in American government.

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Podcast, the Current, and our Events Podcast.

And now here's Bill Finan with Stephen Hess and James Pfiffner.

FINAN: Fred, thanks and Steve and Jim, welcome. Organizing the Presidency, fourth edition. The first edition appeared in 1976 and here we are 44 years and nine Presidents later, I think I have that right. That's an amazing lifespan for a book and it says everything about the value and worth of what's in it. So, congratulations on this new addition.

Steve, what was your goal originally in writing this book? What prompted you to want to do a book on organizing the presidency?

HESS: It seems so odd now, it would seem so odd to Jim, particularly, who has gone through the whole history of academic presidency study. And at that point, there really wasn't a book like this, organizing the presidency. People tended to write a history of a president, or a history of a president on a particular issue, or something like that.

The idea of writing the management of it was really unusual for academics who really weren't all that interested in questions of management. So, in a funny way, I had a very open field at that time, which is really why that first edition was so widely adopted.

FINAN: And it's continued to be adopted since then, we hope this fourth edition continues that trend.

HESS: The joy of having a book published by Brookings, the idea that 44 years ago, look I'm still around, I could write a book and we could live through a second edition. And then Jim joined us with the third edition and with the fourth edition. And it's wonderful to have a book that now concludes with presidents who myths weren't alive when we started the first edition.

So, it's really a very nice feeling for me, and to have my colleague Jim to have a book that has carried over presidency by presidency, so that we're now left with the whole history of

the modern presidency, Franklin Roosevelt through Donald Trump, 14 presidents.

And the wonderful part about it, I'm sure Jim would agree with this, was that those 14 presidents have seven were Republicans and seven were Democrats. So, this is not a book, while people may be busy arguing about ideology about being liberal and conservative, this has nothing to do with it. This is a book about presidents, Republicans or Democrats, on how successful they were at running the White House, the government.

PFIFFNER: I think Steve was really prescient to pick that time, because the presidency was just beginning to grow. And of course, in FDR's time, it was really informal. Eisenhower began to organize it. But then it began to grow larger, particularly during the Nixon Administration. And it became much more of an administrative and management challenge than it had been in the past.

And so the approach of the book has become more relevant to each president as you go on, because it continues to be larger policy direction gets more centralized into the White House. Its continued to do that. And that's what this book is about.

And I think one of the interesting aspects of this book is that Steve and I have shown that the presidents of both parties have been able to manage the White House quite reasonably. Of course, there have been mistakes and so forth. But have been able to do a good job. And the future presidents should also be able to do a good job with the example of the histories that we've looked at in this book.

HESS: Another thing, which is, you're such an optimist to express the good things that presidents have done. But the remarkable thing is also, and you're right of course, we've gone from president to president, but every one of them, with the exception of Trump, these people were all, had been governors, they all had been senators, many of them had been vice presidents

themselves.

And the errors that they've made. Each one did their own separate way. And I think that's sort of fascinating, not only what can we learn from how they organized the presidency, where they went wrong, where they fell off the track in their efforts. Often right at the beginning too, which is why that makes it's so interesting as we're in a transition period today.

PFIFFNER: What we've concluded is that there's no one way to run the presidency. Like there's many problems that different presidents have encountered, and that future presidents can try to avoid those problems that Steve was referring to.

FINAN: The book begins with FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And there's a quote from Joseph Allison that you used, a famous columnist, that was so concretely captured what you were just talking about this simplicity of the presidential office at that time, how basic it was. And I just want to read a bit of it.

There's literally was no White House staff at the modern type with policymaking functions when Roosevelt became president. Two extremely pleasant, unassuming and even efficient men, Stephen Early and Marvin McIntyre handled their president's day to day schedule and routine, the donkey work of the press relations and such like.

There was a secretarial Camaria, highly competent, dedicated ladies were led by Missy LeHand, were also lesser figures to handle travel arrangements, the enormous flow of correspondence and the like. But that was that.

It just sounds so very quaint. It sounds like the Washington DC old that many of us visited when it was just this quiet fallow spot it seemed. But that changed. That was soon changed, as you point out. What were some of the changes that FDR put in place, and that gave us a modern presidency, and why did he do it?

HESS: What the quote tells me it says, which is so fascinating, is that it was a little bunch. They could all sit around a table virtually at the White House staff, and a couple secretaries and so forth. And it was the question of how the organization became a bureaucracy, how it added on.

And in many ways, that's the story that we're telling as we go from presidents to presidents. Some adding their own offices, but also just adding where they wanted to control the government from. As the White House grew in that regard, the importance of the cabinet diminished.

PFIFFNER: And I think the tremendous growth of the United States economy. So, FDR coming in 1933 got the Great Depression, many, many agencies created to deal with the Great Depression, then World War II came along. And so that became a much greater management challenge just in terms of making policy.

And so in 1939, FDR was able to reorganize the government and created the Executive Office of the President in 1939. And also about 1940, the Bureau of the Budget grew to about 500 people. And those two entities, the EOP being in the Executive Office of the President, gave the president many more tools, people and ways of trying to organize and manage the Executive Branch.

FINAN: You point out in the book that Truman, when he came into the office, came with a totally different mindset than Roosevelt had on how to run the Office of the President. Can you tell us what that was? That different mindset?

HESS: Well, each one is different. It's so fascinating.

FINAN: Yeah.

HESS: How much the presidency reflected the president. How different each president

was, and how much they drew on, just as Roosevelt who was attrition, who went to Harvard, who had a law degree, okay, from the largest state. Followed by Harry Truman, who never went to college at all, became a very self-educated man, has experience in the army in World War I and made a difference.

Adam Courtney, of course, he was a politician who served in the United States Senate. And that was his major background. So, one had been an executive and one had been a legislator, and that very much influenced the way they proceeded.

PFIFFNER: And I think right after Truman, then Eisenhower really changed or established the administrative presidency, creating a chief of staff and a very logical, hierarchical order in the White House that he had dealt with the White House's, Supreme Allied Commander of both FDR and Truman, and thought that they were just a mess. So, when he came in, he wanted to straighten it out. And in fact, he did establish the basis of the modern administrative presidency.

FINAN: Steve, I'm assuming this is your chapter earlier on, on Eisenhower. You quote Eisenhower saying, coming in, that he wanted to create an atmosphere of greater serenity and mutual confidence. You were there. Was it that?

HESS: Yeah I should go into it, of course. But that's where I came personally into the story. I was just 25 years old when I became a member of Eisenhower's staff. And wow, I mean there was a man who knew how to run things. And each one of us knew what our place in that organization was. What was expected of us.

And he could be tough about it. I don't mean it was a jolly place. But it was a place at least when I was there, which was really toward the end of the administration, where the pieces fit together. And very often, unfortunately, that was not the case with some other administrations,

it took a long time, if ever for the pieces that fit together.

But for me, it was wonderful to have been a part of that well-functioning organization that really knew why it was there. Its desires were not brought, by our standard, had wanted to keep the peace of balance the budget. Today, that sounds pretty grand. But that's basically what we were all about.

PFIFFNER: And ironically, shortly after the Eisenhower Administration, he did not get much credit for running a very organized office, and people thought that he was sort of out of touch and so forth. But in more recent years, research has shown that, in fact, he was very on top of his whole administration, as Steve said. It ran well and he knew what was happening. And so the opinion of him in public opinion and scholars opinion, has increased greatly since the 1950's. And he's now one of the top presidents. Whereas before, immediately after office, he was not seen in that light.

FINAN: I was reading that chapter with that in mind, what Fred Greenstein, I think it was the author of The Hidden Hand Presidency of Eisenhower. And it comes through in that chapter too, that he did have his hand on the tiller, he wasn't just totally absent.

I'm going to jump to the present, because the newest addition brings us from the end of the George W. Bush presidency into the Obama and Trump presidencies. And since the last two are the freshest in our minds, and what you said earlier it's very, very true, like each president stamps with his character. What would you say the Obama years in organizing the presidency? what lessons can we draw from that?

HESS: Well, I think, of course, what fascinated me beyond that, of course, was that Obama was the first black president. And that was truly historic. And how that affected him in different ways, I think is very interesting. It's starting to come out now as his own memoirs are



there.

For example, at that time, of course liberals and blacks were very disappointed. They expected him to do all sorts of things that he understood, as he said, that he is not a president for blacks, he's a president for all Americans.

And I think ultimately, we give them higher marks than many other academics give him in terms of what he accomplished. Given, of course, at the time he didn't have a Congress with him. And of course, importantly, what we're living through now is the Obamacare is the health proposal.

PFIFFNER: And I think a real contrast between Obama's approach and his predecessor, George W. Bush, who characterized himself as a gut player in making decisions quickly. Whereas Obama was much more detached, much more analytical in the way he ran the White House. But it did not change the centralization of control in the White House.

An example, Eric Holder began the Administration as Attorney General, Obama was going to delegate to Holder part of the legal aspect of the administration. And after a mistake or two, Rahm Emanuel, Chief of Staff, formidable Chief of Staff, pulled it back in and said, no we're going to make sure you have a minder and the White House runs these things.

And also, and very much in contrast to Donald Trump, Obama was known as No Drama Obama, because he was always calm and collected and on top of things, did things in an orderly way in vast contrast with Donald Trump.

FINAN: Something that came through to the book for me is how essential, important and often, in the case of like say Rahm Emanuel, colorful too the chiefs of staff's could be in presidential administrations.

HESS: Very much so. And that's one of our key recommendations is the importance of

the chief of staff. And, of course, illustrates not only the ones that were successful, like James Baker, which is an interesting case under Reagan. Because there was a person who was not of his branch of the Republican Party. He came from California. He had his own people. He knew a lot about running things because he had been the governor of the largest state for eight years. But he went out of that realm, and picked somebody who had been very close to his predecessor, and who was brilliant in terms of how he ran the organization. So, that was the good chief of staff.

What was sort of fascinating with that, with the Reagan Administration, is having chosen the good chief of staff in the first administration, in the second administration they chose the bad chief of staff. What had they learned? And couldn't duplicate when they went to Reagan, who had been Secretary of the Treasury who was an example of being too forceful, too encompassing as the chief of staff.

So, again, we watch this office move back and forth until it got it right, and some did and some didn't.

PFIFFNER: Yeah, I think you have to have a chief of staff, but the person can't be too overbearing, as Steve said. And as good a job as Sherman Adams did for Ike, he became overbearing to other people, finally had to resign. Don Regan had to resign John Sununu for George H.W. Bush finally had resigned.

And so there has to be some sort of balance there. But I think you have to have one, and Bill Clinton realized intellectually that he needed to have a chief of staff, but he appointed Mack McLarty, miscasting him, and finally had to bring in Leon Panetta to tighten up the White House organization.

And Donald Trump did not learn that lesson about the chief of staff. He named a chief of staff, his first one, Reince Priebus, but was unwilling to delegate the authority to actually run the

White House. And then John Kelly, Marine general came in and tried to tighten things up in terms of the size of meetings, who had walk in privileges to the White House, and, or I mean to the Oval Office, and so forth. He couldn't do it. And then Mick Mulvaney came in. Could not assert any authority. And now Mark Meadows.

And so it's not the problem of those chiefs of staff, it was a problem in the sense of Donald Trump, who did not want to delegate enough authority, somebody short of the president has got to be in charge of managing the White House for the president.

FINAN: And that brings us to Donald Trump and I was going to ask about his four chiefs of staffs. I don't know if that's a record in terms of what you call it, the speed dating that seemed to be going on and has seemed to have gone on in this Administration. We're still at enough time left here, there might be a fifth chief of staff perhaps, but I don't know, we'll see.

HESS: Yes. Which is not only four chiefs of staff, it was four national security advisors, four press secretaries. And when you get down to the cabinet office, Homeland Security, there was five of them. Two confirmed by the Senate, three who were acting.

So, ultimately, they were either fired or they resigned. And so it really goes right back to the character of the president. In fact, again, if you looked at the chief of the national security advisors, the four of them, they were so utterly different. Each one had important characters and they have issues.

So, what was it that the President was seeing in choosing one who was a great intellectual, one who was a nonintellectual, and that sort of thing. One who is a military man or one who is not. So, all of this goes back to the question that we ultimately raised and it comes right down to who is the president of the United States?

PFIFNER: And I think that that's exactly right. And it's reflected in the turnover. About

10 people have turned over in the cabinet the first four years, a record in terms of turnover. And also Katie Dunn Tenpas, a Brookings scholar, has calculated the turnover of the top of what she calls the A team, the top people in the Executive Office of the President. And it's over 90%, much more than any other modern president.

HESS: This turnover, which creates chaos, which is what it's all about, it's not just one goes in and one goes out. You take the four national security advisors, everyone has a staff and when he goes out, so does his staff. So, another staff comes in. So, the ultimate change in any of these offices is not modest at the top, its severe as it goes down through the ranks.

FINAN: In the book, you attribute Trump's behavior to the fact that he had been a one person business in a sense, he had never been the administrator of a state, he had never been a senator. He never had any large staff beneath him that he had to organize. He basically was a single person corporation. And he tried to bring that to the White House, is that what happened?

HESS: Who wants to take that one, Jimmy?

PFIFFNER: Right, well he never had a boss aside from his father. And he was in charge of these large deals and corporations and stuff. But he never worked in a bureaucracy. So, he didn't pick up what's necessary in order to actually manage a large organization. Completely the opposite of Eisenhower, who understood how to do that. Trump did not. And he thought he could run things by making deals with people, and individually dealing with lots of individuals.

And that was one of the problems in the White House. And the chiefs of staff tried to get on top of it to set up an orderly policy process, so that every decision that went to the President for his decision would be staffed out, and there would be options laid out, and all the bases would be touched. But President Trump rejected all of that. And that, I think, explains some of the chaos in the White House. In addition to the turnover that Steve mentioned.

The Trump transition was set back greatly because Chris Christie had been running the transition operation, had vetted hundreds of people to present to the president elect for people that he could choose to make his appointments with. And all that was thrown out immediately after the election when Christie's work was thrown away.

And once in office, President Trump was not a traditional Republican, so he did not have the kinds of connections with experienced Republicans that had experience in the White House, and the Cabinet and so forth. That anybody other Republican candidate would have had.

In addition to that, anybody who had criticized President Trump, for instance, in the primary campaigns and a number of Republicans had done that, those people were persona non grata also. And so he had a very difficult time populating his administration with the kinds of experienced people that any other Republican would have been able to bring together in his administration.

FINAN: We now have the personal outlines of the Biden Administration's personnel. How do you see his presidency shaping up?

HESS: Well, let me say, I am very impressed at this point of how smoothly his transition is going, how professionally it's going. He's ticking off all the points that we know are important. Now, it is true that as it gets closer to January 20th, he has trickier and trickier questions to deal with. So, in some ways, you could say he's dealt with the easiest ones first.

But there's no question that, for example, he knew that you pick your White House staff first. Remember, Clinton was the one who waited virtually until the day he was inaugurated to pick his White House staff. You know that you have to know what your message is, your priorities are going to be. We know that his priority, key priority has to do with the pandemic. We tell them that they should deal with clusters. And we see how he dealt first with the national

security cluster, and the economics cluster and so forth.

Then there's the question of demographics and how they deal with that. So, so far, I'm really quite impressed with this guy. And I think it probably helps that he's been around Washington for 20 odd years or 40 years, been the Vice President. And many of the people that he's picked are people that he knows very well and knows how they work with each other.

PFIFFNER: Yeah, I think that that's really important that the experience that of course Biden has had. But the people that he's bringing in so far are very impressive and they're experienced. And it helped it that there's been only four years since the previous Democratic president. And of course, Biden was Vice President then.

I also think that he's wise in not reacting immediately reflexively to President Trump's attempts to overturn the election. He's just being very calm, going ahead with the plan the way that he should be. And of course, White House staffers. But also bringing out the Cabinet. The Cabinets are sort of the highest visibility, initial decisions of presidents. And he's going about that, I think very carefully, deliberately and bringing in very experienced people.

FINAN: Yeah, that's a good point. I didn't think about the fact that he's going ahead with his plans to become President of the United States on January 20th. And amid what this incredible tumult, not just rhetorically at this point too. Steve and Jim, thank you. Enjoyed our conversation today about the newest edition of your book, *Organizing the Presidency*.

PFIFFNER: Thank you, Bill.

DEWS: You can find the book, *Organizing the Presidency*, Fourth Edition, on our website [brookings.edu](http://brookings.edu) or wherever you like to buy books.

A team of amazing colleagues helps make the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks to Audio Engineer Gaston Roberto. To Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press who

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