



THE WHITE HOUSE
TRANSITION PROJECT
1997—2017

RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—33

THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director
the White House Transition Project

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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned in the Office of Communications are fairly standard throughout a White House.

1. Have People Around Who Are “Gray in the Temples”

In a White House you need to be flexible and have people around who have a sense of the way the ground shifts around you.

2. Talk to Your Predecessors and Others

3. It Is Difficult To Make Use of Lessons Learned

Once staff come into a White House, it is very difficult for them to apply the lessons they learn as they go along in their work. The pace of the work and the variety of the issues they work on make it difficult to stop, look back, and assess.

4. 4. Don't Mix Information and Persuasion

While the Press Secretary seeks to be distinguished by his objectivity and responsiveness in the handling of information, the Communications Director is a partisan who moves ideas and points of view. In the duality of persuasion and information, he represents using information for persuasion.

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

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“Communications is a total team effort in a sense because everything is about driving your agenda forward. A successful communications strategy is only one aspect of a successful presidency. You have to have a good solid sense of priority and where you’re going and mission, and everything is supportive of that. That involves good leadership from the Chief of Staff, good policy planning, good legislative relations on the Hill. It’s all part of a seamless whole. That’s what makes for a good presidency.”

Michael McCurry, Press Secretary to President Clinton¹

One of President Nixon’s early actions in 1969 was to create the White House Office of Communications. The office was tasked with sending information to the out of town press and news organizations targeted towards particular audiences and its director was made responsible for dealing with editors and publishers as well as the associations representing them. While the Office of Communications was established in part as a perch for Herbert Klein, a long time press associate of Richard Nixon and the widely respected former editor of *The San Diego Union*, the office fit in with President Nixon's interest in establishing a communications planning operation and a media contact organization for the

¹ White House Interview Program, Interview with Michael McCurry, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., March 27, 2000.

nation's news outlets. Thirty nine years later, the office is even more important today than it was in its early years.

The Office of Communications is one of several institutions crucial to the start up of the White House because of the central place of effective communications in a successful presidency. Of the five presidents elected to a second term in the post World War II period, each one had an effective communications operation in addition to being a personally successful communicator. What an effective communications organization bought them was the opportunity to publicly display in terms of their choosing the issues they wanted to focus on as well as to develop strategies designed to achieve the President's personal, policy, and electoral goals. The components of effective communications for Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush included personal attributes and a communications operation that incorporated daily press operations and an organization, or, in the case of President Eisenhower, an individual, Press Secretary James Hagerty, capable of planning ahead for presidential and for administration wide publicity. From Eisenhower's administration to the present, successful communications has evolved into a system where organization plays a key role in strategic planning with its mission the coordination of people, programs, and institutions. The Office of Communications is front and center in White House communications campaigns waged on behalf of a President and his programs. The coordination and production roles of the director of the office and of those who serve in it are central to successful White House publicity.

While the Office of Communications is vital to the communications of an effective presidency no matter who serves as Chief Executive, the position of Communications Director has proved to be a volatile one. In their paper, "White House Communications Director: Presidential Fire-Walker," Martha Kumar and Terry Sullivan observed that "when low poll numbers wounded President Clinton, the body that dropped was that of his Communications Director, George Stephanopoulos."² Since 1969 when it was created, there have been twenty three people who headed it with David Gergen serving twice as director. That is approximately a year and a half for each director to hold the post. There have been a similar number of press secretaries but that position has existed since 1929, forty years earlier than the Office of Communications. In the Clinton Administration alone, there were five Communications Directors, plus two other senior aides tasked with communications functions, while in the same time period there were four Chiefs of Staff and four Press Secretaries. The casualty rate of Communications Directors reflects the difficult environment he or she operates in as well as the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands placed on the person.³ George Stephanopoulos observed that his being relieved of the communications position was not a surprise. "By definition, if the President isn't doing well, it's a communications problem. That's always going to be a natural place to make a change."⁴ The Communications Director is held responsible for how a President is doing,

² See Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, "The White House Communications Director: Presidential Fire-Walker", a paper delivered to the Midwest Political Science Association, April, 1996.

³ See Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, "The White House Communications Director: Presidential Fire-Walker."

⁴ Interview with George Stephanopoulos, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, DC, September, 1995.

yet has little in the way of resources to affect the outcomes that form the basis for judging presidential performance. For that reason, his or her seat is the White House hot seat.

THE ENVIRONMENT WITHIN WHICH THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS FUNCTIONS

The important place of presidential communications can be seen in the manner in which the topic drives the agenda of daily staff meetings, the size of the commitment to it of White House and administration resources and people, and the way the function has insinuated itself into the operations of almost every White House office. From their earliest daily meetings in a White House, staff begin with presidential communications as the central item on their plate. An administration adopts both an offensive and a defensive posture in its communication of the President and his programs. Staff respond to information found in the media and, at the other end of the spectrum, plan to influence what it is news organizations print and air about the President and his policies and actions. To bring about their desired publicity, White House staff work in organized settings where coordination of people and programs are the central focus. The Office of Communications is the primary unit within the White House responsible for that coordination as well as for developing strategies to implement the publicity for programs, and then for managing the events showcasing presidential initiatives.

1. Successful Communications Is Linked to the Policy & Operational Aspects of a Presidency

Presidential communications relates directly to what it is a President does in office and how effectively the White House can use its organizational resources to publicize their goals and achievements. “A successful communications strategy is only one aspect of a successful presidency,” Mike McCurry observed.⁵ “You have to have a good solid sense of priority and where you’re going and mission, and everything is supportive of that. That involves good leadership from the Chief of Staff, good policy planning, good legislative relations on the Hill. It’s all part of a seamless whole. That’s what makes for a good presidency.”

Communications strategies and the staff developing them aim at building a perception among people that the policies of an administration have altered their lives in a positive manner. Ann Lewis, Communications Director under President Clinton, discussed the effectiveness of the Clinton communications operation in creating among the public a sense of their policies making a difference to how they live.

I think we’ve been particularly effective in getting across a commitment to making a difference in people’s day-to-day lives. People believe that; they know that, that we care about them.... I think we’ve been less effective in getting across the scope of this administration’s achievements which are, I believe, transforming in nature. It’s not just from a deficit to a surplus, the highest home ownership in history and the lowest unemployment in history, but the number of ways we’re making sure that every kid can get the first two years of community college; that education is going to be more available; that

⁵ Michael McCurry interview.

health care is more available. In an ironic way, we've done so much that's a very large piece out there. Now I do believe we've seen consumer confidence go up; we've seen people's confidence in their own economic future go up but there's not a lot of interest in talking about achievement overall. You always want to talk about what your agenda is, how are you moving forward. Now you can build it in and say we can do this because look at what we've already done. But I think we still have work to do when you talk about the scope of what's been achieved.⁶

Communications operations intersect with policy decisions at two levels, according to Don Baer, who handled communications strategy during the Clinton Administration.

There were two levels of policy or two kinds of policy. One was what you might call the large, macro-policy decision making, idea generation and decision making. Do you or don't you come out for a balanced budget in the late spring of 1995? How do you fight the Republican budget situation? What position do you take vis-à-vis Medicare in the fall of the 1995? How do you package—and this is policy and communications—your approach on Medicare, Medicaid, education and the environment going into that battle? Those are sort of the big, big decisions. Then there were sort of more specific things. Some of those have been derided a lot over time as kind of micro-policies. I never frankly saw them that way. I saw everyone of them as essential tools and ideas that were designed to help the American people help themselves in any number of areas whether it was education or fighting crime or raising their children, sending their kids to college. Those were all very important tools and, frankly, I think the enduring popularity of the Clinton presidency is as much about stepping up to and helping people have those kinds of things as it is about a good economy that also this administration has helped to dispel.⁷

2. Partisan Differences in Press and Communications Operations

While White House staff of both parties seek good coverage of their Presidents, they work towards their goal in ways that reflect established partisan patterns. When looking at the distribution of their resources associated with press and communications operations, Republicans and Democrats tend to strike a different balance as they start up their White Houses. Republicans think of the press in terms of communications while Democrats see communications through a focus on the press. Republicans develop communications strategies and consider where the press fits into them. For their part, Democrats come into a White House thinking in terms of assigning their resources to handling the press. Democrats are far more likely than are Republicans to think in terms of their relations with reporters and news organizations as a way of getting good publicity. While Republicans too want good publicity, they come at it from the vantage point of a centrally controlled message operation. The Republican front line team tends to be housed in the communications operation, however it is structured. Whatever their title, Republican senior staff specializing in communications are housed close to the President near the top of the hierarchy.

⁶ White House Interview Program, Interview with Ann Lewis, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., June 17, 1999.

⁷ White House Interview Program, Interview with Donald Baer, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., July 22, 1999.

President Reagan had a state-of-the-art communications operation reflecting the priority Republicans place on planning several months out. Michael Deaver led the operation from his position as Deputy Chief of Staff. He described their planning operation, which lay at the heart of their effectiveness. “You have to [plan] because you’re judged every day on what kind of job you’re doing. When I set up the Blair House Group, it was probably the smartest thing I did,” said Deaver.⁸ The group met across the street from the White House in the Blair House where the members would have less interference from staff and events of the moment.

It was [Richard] Darman [Staff Secretary] and [Craig] Fuller [Chief of Staff for Vice President Bush] and the scheduling guy, Fred Ryan and [Ken] Duberstein [Legislative Affairs], I think. We met uninterrupted for about three hours every Friday afternoon at the Blair House. We would take the three-month schedule and we would plan every day for three months. Then we’d take it for the next two weeks and we’d plan every hour. Then I’d take it back and give it to Baker to be sure he was okay with it. Then I’d give it to Reagan and be sure he was okay with it.

Their strategic approach brought them some certainty in how they were covered by news organizations. Their interest in news organizations was in terms of their overall strategic plan.

During the early part of the Clinton Administration, the Communications Director did the press work and served as the primary spokesperson for the President and his administration. The emphasis of the job was on its press work components. Don Baer, who held the post during the Clinton reelection campaign in 1995 and 1996, observed that communications in the early Clinton years was about press relations:

Everybody, whether they were called Communications Director or Press Secretary, basically thought their job was to be Press Secretary and not to really be a Communications Director in any sense of laying down strategy, helping the various output arms of the public face of the White House to know what their role would be in the context of the larger strategy for public communications. I think there was some dissatisfaction about that fact; that in fact what most people spent their time doing was the care and feeding of the press rather than thinking about the strategic communications objectives of the White House and how best to push those out. So there was a desire to reorient that role somewhat more in the other direction. Erskine Bowles I think played a big part because he had just come in as deputy Chief of Staff with communications or strategic communications—whatever it was called—and Scheduling and Advance and a few other things like that under him. The whole purpose and idea was to try to get those units coordinating better because all of those are very important bits and pieces of what the larger strategic objectives of the White House would be.⁹

In the Carter Administration, the President focused almost totally on communications as an aspect of press operations, which meant communications was under the wing of Jody Powell, Press Secretary to President Carter. Gerald Rafshoon, the only staff person to hold the title in the Carter years, served as Communications Director for only a relatively short period during the administration. Even then, he found long range planning to be a problem. “The point is even when I came in, we used to talk about long-range communications and

⁸ White House Interview Program, Interview with Michael Deaver, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., September 9, 1999.

⁹ Donald Baer interview.

long-range was [next week]. Next week is long range in the White House because every time I would say I'm going to stay in my office today and just write a communications plan for SALT [Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty] or Middle East peace and all that stuff something would happen. You can't just close your ears to it. I think I was probably the wrong person for that job because I was too close to the President so that I could not stay out of things that should have been done by his personal political [staff]."¹⁰

The two parties come to their different emphases because of the base of people they draw on for White House work and through the nature of their electoral coalitions. Michael McCurry commented on the differences in the two approaches:

In the Democratic Party because the pedigree is labor organizer, environmental activist, feminist, anti-war activist, some type of organizational being that believes that you have to speak truth to power and that therefore the press ought to naturally be your ally. That's kind of the assumption of a Democrat, that the press ought to be on your side after all. The Republican Party is exactly the opposite because their political culture is advertising, mass communications, the press is there to be handled and to be cordoned off and to be force-fed your message and you can never really view them as your friend.¹¹

When people from these different coalitions come into a White House, they take on the coloration of their previous experiences and relationships.

3. Maturing Communications: Central Control, Integration, Coordination, & Planning

As communications operations have become more central to a presidency, White House staff have become closer in how they handle communications. Mike McCurry refers to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "Iron Law of Emulation" in speaking about the manner in which people in the two parties have adapted their communications operations according to successful practices. Interested in controlling a message themselves, Democrats have adopted some of the same communications patterns as the Republicans.

That's really the kind of theory of how you communicate message. It really was distinctly different in the 1970's and 1980's because of the underlying differences in the political culture of the two parties, I think. Now, over time—[Senator Daniel Patrick] Moynihan's great essay the "Iron Law of Emulation"—organizations in conflict become like one another. I think we've just adopted a lot of the Republican techniques of mass communication in the Democratic Party.¹²

The techniques used by Republicans and Democrats alike in the latter part of their first term and in their second terms focus on the process for handling communications where control is maintained. The following characteristics are fairly consistently observed by those administrations known for their successful operations: central control, integration of policy, politics, and publicity, discipline, limited access, and planning ahead for events showcasing the President's themes and initiatives.

¹⁰ White House Interview Program, Interview with Gerald Rafshoon, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., December 29, 1999.

¹¹ Michael McCurry interview.

¹² Michael McCurry interview.

4. Communications Discussions Initiate the White House Work Day

Communications is central to the modern presidency and its position is reflected in what it is the White House senior staff do every day. That is true for Republicans and Democrats alike. In the Reagan and Bush Administrations, the day began with communications as an important item on the agenda. In his days in the Reagan and Bush White Houses, for example, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater wrote up a memo for senior staff that served as an indicator to them of the press issues for the day. “My role at the staff meeting would be always the same: ‘Marlin, what do we have to deal with today?’ Everybody’s got my memo around the table. ‘These are the issues. If any of you want to add anything to any of these or give me any advice come do it as soon as possible because I’m going to have to come up with answers.’” In the period from President Nixon forward, communications was featured as an important factor in how the day began.

For Democrats as well, press coverage of their administrations and how they should respond to news stories drives a day. The early morning meeting convened by Chief of Staff Leon Panetta was fairly consistent in its subject matter to similar sessions held in Republican White Houses. Chief of Staff Leon Panetta described his early morning meeting with core White House staff, dubbed the Managers Meeting. Its members included national security adviser, national economic council director, the Press Secretary, the Vice President’s Chief of Staff, the First Lady’s Chief of Staff, the OMB [Office of Management and Budget] director, and the Communications Director.

The first thing was to ask [Mike] McCurry and George Stephanopoulos what’s playing in the news that day, what’s happening that day, what do they think are the big issues. Then I’ve got a foreign policy report from the national security adviser and got a sense of what the hot spots were. Then my legislative person in the White House talked about what was happening with the Congress, what’s happening in the House, what’s happening in the Senate, what’s happening with regard to particular issues that are up there. In the course of that discussion you can make decisions about we’ve got a key issue up there, are you talking with the leadership, are you talking with these key members of Congress; do this, do that; maybe we have to have a meeting after this to talk about a particular issue.¹³

As the staff discussed issues, they made decisions on what would be done during the day and who would be involved. Communications decisions were among them.

But you’re making decisions as you go through it as to what are the areas where there are potential crises that you want to deal with and potential strategies that have to be laid out. We talked about economic policy after that and then usually had—by the way, even before that, usually at the top I went through the President’s schedule for that day as to what we were looking at for the President’s schedule. Again, some decisions might have to be made regarding the schedule as to these different places.... For example, something happens. What’s the best place to stage that for the President, the Rose Garden? Is it the press room? Is it to wait until the press goes in on an event and expect the question to be asked there? Those kinds of decisions don’t have to go to the President of the United States. They’re staging issues that you can make decisions on.... So I would do that kind of staff meeting and you had a pretty good sense then of what that day was going to look like both from the

¹³ White House Interview Program, Interview with Leon Panetta, Martha Joynt Kumar, Monterey Bay, CA, May 4, 2000.

President's perspective as well as the White House overall, what would be the key issues that you had to work with.¹⁴

5. A Position Defined by Its Relationships

While the Press Secretary is an official whose work is defined by the expectations of news organizations and the precedents of those who preceded him in the post, the Communications Director is an official whose position is defined by his relationships with officials inside the White House and political people outside of the building. His work is defined by those he serves. While the same is true in a general sense of the Press Secretary, in reality the Press Secretary serves the same three constituents no matter who is President or who is doing the reporting. In his role in addition to the communications function, he had control of those areas important to the President and First Lady: her office operations, his scheduling, the physician, and the military aides.

The President

The most important relationships for the Communications Director are those with the President and with the Chief of Staff. Michael Deaver said his work was defined by his relationships with the President and First Lady. "And I really sort of gained whatever control or power I had simply by my relationship. But I overlapped with a lot of Baker," Deaver said. "Baker basically gave me free rein. I spent most of my time on schedule and travel and the military office and all of the East Wing, which included the First Lady and the military. Then [I] had sort of an ad hoc seat on anything dealing with communications. When Gergen left, I took over officially the communications role."¹⁵

For David Demarest, who served as Communications Director for President George H. W. Bush, communications had a smaller scope to it than was true of the role played by Michael Deaver in the Reagan Administration. Demarest described the role President Bush wanted him to assume as his Communications Director: "I think the President saw me more as the guy that ran his speeches and his events. I don't think he saw that in terms of a communications message. I think that he saw the press as the vehicle for the communications message through Marlin and through his own interactions with the press."¹⁶ For Demarest, the job was more an administrative one than it was one where he developed communications strategies for the President. When the President decided he wanted Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater to do communications as well as his press relations, Fitzwater did so for a short period of time in spite of his own misgivings of combining the two jobs. Fitzwater commented on the advice he gave to a Clinton aide when they came into the White House. He spoke about their plan to cut off access to reporters to the Upper Press Office (the area where the Press Secretary and his close aides are located) and on their desire to combine the press and communications posts: "I tried to explain in some detail why I thought that was a terrible idea, not only cutting them off but why they couldn't combine the two jobs. I had just gone through that. I had been forced to take the communications job over my objections and finally just got out

¹⁴ Leon Panetta interview.

¹⁵ Michael Deaver interview.

¹⁶ White House Interview Program, Interview with David Demarest, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., September 9, 1999.

of it six, eight months later because it was a total failure.”¹⁷ Fitzwater discovered what Jody Powell had found before him, the daily operation consumes so much of your time and energy there is none of either left to perform the responsibilities of the Communications Director.

The Chief of Staff

The Chief of Staff is a key White House figure in the area of communications. Effective communications comes through coordination of people and offices with the integration of policy and political information. That process must be led out of the office of the Chief of Staff. Either the Chief does such coordination himself, as Leon Panetta and James Baker did, or it is done by deputies. When Erskine Bowles was Chief of Staff, for example, his deputy, John Podesta, took charge of communications and, following the senior staff meeting, held a meeting each morning devoted to publicity issues.

The Chief of Staff can come into the communications process as an on camera or background presence in the communications process. When James Baker was Chief of Staff, he spent a great deal of time explaining administration policy to reporters on a background basis. In an interview for this project, Baker read through his notes containing the advice given to him by his predecessors when he met with them before he came into the Reagan White House. Press briefings figured high on the list.

Be an honest broker. Don't use the process to impose your policy views on the President. He needs you to be an honest broker. You are the second-most powerful person in government. You have tremendous opportunities to impose your views; don't do that. That's not the role of the Chief of Staff. Talk to the press a lot; stay in touch with the press. Always do it on background. Just remember, you weren't elected to anything, and people don't want to read your name in the paper. But it's important for you to keep the press informed about what it is you're trying to do, and continually spend time with them.¹⁸

While James Baker spent a great deal of time with reporters doing background interviews, his successor could not understand why he did so. “When [Don] Regan replaced me as Chief of Staff,” he said, ‘I'm just amazed at the amount of time Jim Baker spent with the press.’ Some people equated that with leaking. That's not leaking; that's spinning, which is what the Chief of Staff ought to be doing on background. Not up front, because the Chief of Staff is not elected.” Baker related.¹⁹

Today the Chief of Staff is expected to be a regular presence on the Sunday television talk programs and sometimes on the morning shows as well. Beginning with Leon Panetta who was very used to appearing on such programs when he was chairman of the House Budget Committee, the Chief of Staff became a television presence explaining administration policies. Erskine Bowles eschewed such appearances when he was Chief of Staff, but John Podesta observed the Panetta model. In the early days of the Bush Administration, Chief of Staff Andrew Card has followed the Panetta – Podesta model.

¹⁷ White House Interview Program, Interview with Marlin Fitzwater, Martha Joynt Kumar, Deale, Md., October 21, 1999.

¹⁸ White House Interview Program, Interview with James A. Baker, III, Interview #1, Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, Houston, TX, July 7, 1999.

¹⁹ James Baker interview, Interview #1, July 7, 1999.

Some Chief of Staffs refused altogether to get involved in communications or, alternately, have others do it for them. David Demarest described the difficulties the Bush senior staff had dealing with outside groups and institutions. Their problem was Chief of Staff John Sununu who did not want anyone other than himself to do legislative strategy or communications coordination. In this instance the Chief of Staff represented a block to coordination, not a facilitator of it.

Fred [McClure] was about to set up a legislative strategy group, not a crazy idea, so that he would be able to pull all the elements together so that when President Bush wanted to move forward on some initiative we had a legislative strategy. Sununu said no, I'm legislative strategy. When I wanted to set up a communications strategy group, no, I'm communications. And so we all kind of maneuvered around that. I set up a weekly events meeting and, lo and behold, communications issues got raised at those weekly events meeting. But I pitched it as this is simply to go over the next week's events, make sure that everybody from around the agencies and from within the White House knows what's going on. So it was both informational to people and it turned up a bunch of missing elements each week of what needed to happen. There'd be somebody from Advance there and there'd be somebody from policy and somebody from the cabinet agencies, whatever. I made it kind of open to all.²⁰

The Press Secretary

The responsibilities of the Communications Director are considered in light of those exercised by the Press Secretary. In two instances, the Press Secretary takes over the communications function and exercises both responsibilities. In the Carter White House, for example, the only time there was a Communications Director was when Gerald Rafshoon was on the staff around the time leading up to the 1976 election. Press Secretary Jody Powell was expected to take the lead in the whole of the publicity area. Marlin Fitzwater took over the communications job for a period of a few months, which he had fought doing. Thus, of the eleven people who have served as Press Secretary, two of them have exercised the communications function. On the other hand, there is one instance when the Press Secretary reported to Communications. That configuration was the case when President Clinton's first Press Secretary, Dee Dee Myers, reported to Communications Director George Stephanopoulos. Most often, though, the relationship between the two officials is one of close contact over issues of mutual interest and responsibility but no organizational connection where one reports to the other. The functions of the two offices are separate from one another and when they mix, the audiences for both can be confused about what is persuasion and what is information. Of the eleven press secretaries, eight of them had an organizationally distinct relationship with the communications directors serving at the same time.

Other White House Relationships

The Communications Director regularly works with other White House offices and agencies and departments as they set up events with an impact on the partners to the events. In an instance of White House – agency coordination, Don Baer worked with Intergovernmental Affairs on setting up an event associated with a presidential appearance

²⁰ David Demarest interview.

at the National Governors Association. “Intergovernmental affairs knows that the National Governors Association is meeting,” he began. “That would be kind of their thing to coordinate but they’d want to get it on the President’s schedule. What then does the President want to do when he’s at the NGA? What does he want to say to the NGA? It’s a big, high profile event opportunity. So you’d have to have a lot of work and negotiation with them over what the governors were willing to hear from him versus what we wanted to do and say there, all those kinds of things. It was complicated.”²¹

6. A Calendar to Work With

There are rhythms to the year, the month, a week, and to an administration. Knowing what events take place on the policy side in Washington, a President can plan out some of the opportunities he has during the year to focus on his issues in a manner of his choosing. The presidential calendar, he and his staff soon find out, is composed of fixed events, most especially those associated with the congressional schedule. Two of the most important fixed events are the congressional schedule and the budget deadlines. Those are important for the pace of policy initiatives as well as for the consideration of appointments. The State of the Union message is held at the end of January, the first part of the congressional session goes from early January to the Easter recess. In the spring, commencement addresses offer an opportunity to set themes for defense and other issues a President chooses, such as technology and foreign policy. Clinton used them for all of these areas. Foreign policy comes to the forefront with the G-7 economic conference and with the APAC conference on Asian economic issues and in September with the opening of the session of the United Nations. In the fall, Congress again comes to the forefront with negotiations over the budget and bargaining on policies now in the committee and floor stages of consideration.

Congressional Session

The congressional session make a great deal of difference to the manner in which the White House functions and the shape of their agenda. Communications Director Ann Lewis commented on the link between the White House agenda and the congressional calendar. “When Congress is in and you’re close to the legislative session, you’re working on budget and legislation and that’s going to drive your day. Earlier in the year you have more freedom to sort of initiate and set the agenda. You try to get out most of the issues you want to make the case for early if you can.” Lewis believes the congressional calendar more than any other is the cycle influencing White House actions. “I think we are sort of like the moon and the tides in that way,” commented Ann Lewis.²² “At the beginning of the year we spend our time laying out our agenda and you know that by the fall we will be in the season where there will be action on it. In between we try, whenever possible, to call attention to the agenda and to get interest in it and action on it. As I say, the closer you get to October, November you’re going to see more action. I’d say that’s the only set of—that’s the season that means the most to me. I think that while we try to lay our broad

²¹ Donald Baer interview.

²² White House Interview Program, Interview with Ann Lewis, Interview #2, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., July 9, 1999.

themes in the commencement addresses, my sense is they don't significantly impact beyond the day they're given most of the time. So I wouldn't rate them as high in terms of the seasons of the year. Foreign policy and foreign trips now are likely to take place any time of year."

State of the Union

Each year the calendar presents the administration with an opportunity to present its policy priorities and to do so in a setting that commands substantial public attention. The State of the Union message is the most important regularly scheduled speech in the year. It brings together policy, politics, and publicity to focus on the President's policy agenda and how they are going to get it through. Presidential aide Sidney Blumenthal explained the place of the State of the Union address in the Clinton second term.

That's what the State of the Union is. That's the basic document. And people should appreciate how the State of the Union is produced because that is not simply a speech. It is the outcome of the participation of every department and agency filtered through the White House staff in which there is intense jockeying and bargaining and lobbying over policy, and decisions are taken ultimately by the President. It is how the program is developed and consolidated through the process that leads to that speech. That is the most extensive process in the Executive Branch, the State of the Union.²³

The Clinton Administration added to the importance of the speech by casting it as a series of events that began once the Congress left town and the President's congressional opponents fanned out to their home towns across the country. Left with approximately six weeks without congressional opposition, the Clinton team showcased the ideas placed in their State of the Union message in the weeks leading up to it. They left a couple of items to be announced in the speech itself, but for the other policy proposals there were stories focusing on the particulars of what the President would offer in the address and surrogates in the administration who elaborated on the need for his initiatives.

7. Communications Operations Reflect the Strengths and Style of a President

Those presidents who are comfortable with communications create an organizational structure to match. Those who believe they are not particularly good at communicating their ideas eschew such operations. Rather than use communications operations to fill in what may be an important gap for them, they do the opposite and avoid creating or using them to advantage. The most sophisticated communications operations in recent years were those of the Reagan and Clinton Administrations. Both presidents were comfortable with the notion of using key White House resources on their communications efforts. Both presidents committed a great deal of time to thinking through their communications and put in key places at the senior level those whose interests were compatible with his own. Those presidents who were not comfortable with committing such resources were chief executives who did not believe in the worth of such efforts. President Carter did not have such an operation, except for a relatively short period, and President Bush did not commit

²³ Sidney Blumenthal interview.

time to it. He preferred thinking about presidential publicity in terms of press operations and directed his attention to the work of the Press Office.

Presidents set a tone for their communications and adopt a style comfortable for them. Michael Deaver talked about how Reagan would not do anything he was not comfortable doing as it would not come across well with the public. “He talked to me more about [communications] when I would try to get him to do things he didn’t want to do. For instance, when he first became governor, NBC was going to come out and do ‘A Day in the Life of Governor Reagan’,” explained Michael Deaver.²⁴

This is pretty big to me. He was governor of a state and we were going to get a whole thing on the NBC News which in 1967 NBC News was forty million people a night or something. So I spent days on scripting this thing and I had a huge, big fold-out that I took into his office and spread on his desk. I started off by saying ‘you’ll take your jacket off and sling it over your shoulder and do sort of a pensive walk through the capitol grounds.’ He looked at me and said, ‘I can’t do that.’ I said, ‘What do you mean you can’t do it? It’s very Kennedyesque.’ He said, ‘That may be but I can’t do that.’ I said, ‘Why not?’ He said, ‘Let me tell you. I would be very uncomfortable. If I’m uncomfortable doing it, people are going to be very uncomfortable watching. So don’t ever ask me to do something that I’m uncomfortable with because it won’t work.’ That was a great lesson.

Deaver continued that by the time they reached the White House, he understood how President Reagan viewed communications and what was appropriate for him to do.

I never had to talk to him about those things anymore. I understood instantly what he was talking about. I never did anything ever again that I thought was out of character for him because it wouldn’t work. But we would have arguments about press availabilities, press conferences, whether we should do them or not. It was never based on ‘I don’t want to take questions; I don’t want to do that’. It was based more on ‘I don’t think the timing is right.’

President Reagan liked radio and believed that people would not tire of it. He had a good sense of timing and did not want to go before the public very often, but knew radio would not have the same impact. “He had a great belief and sense about timing. He thought you ought to be seen less than more, that the people would tire,” Deaver said.²⁵ “I knew I had a great ally in him because he loved radio. He loved radio because he would not be seen. He believed you could do a lot of things on the radio that wouldn’t tire people that, if you did it on television, it would.” Radio proved to be a good fit for President Reagan and for President Clinton as well. Both used it to lay out individual themes and to reach out to communities outside of the Washington environs. In addition, their statements and issues highlighted on Saturday often became the center piece of the agendas of the Sunday television talk shows and an item in the A Section of the Sunday regional and local newspapers.

8. Television Is Central to Communications Operations

Other than the Press Office, there is no place in the White House where television is so central to what it is an office does. In an era where people demonstrate little interest in

²⁴ Michael Deaver interview.

²⁵ Michael Deaver interview.

national politics, the first order of business is to get their attention. Ann Lewis discussed where television comes into their events. “What you’ve got to do every day proactively is figure out how do you talk to people about what you’re doing and why,” she said.²⁶

If what democracy says is based on the principle that people in their wisdom will make the right decision, that’s based on how much information they have. So every day our responsibility is to give them information of what policies we’re working on and why they should care. If we don’t do it, it won’t happen. Left to itself, the political system talks to itself. So my goal is every day, how do I reach that audience. What do we know about them? They’re busy. They’ve got a lot going on in their lives. They’ve got two jobs, two kids, two cars; they’re worried about Johnny’s in school and [inaudible]. We are never going to be as important to them as they are to us. We’ve got to reach them wherever they are and whatever else they’re doing. My second point is how do they get their news: most of them get it from television and they get it while they’re doing something else. They’re not sitting there taking notes. They’re making dinner, eating dinner, talking to one another. So we’re going to get, if we’re lucky, a minute on the evening news. Everything about that minute ought to emphasize and re-emphasize the same message. That’s why what the sign says, what the audience says, what the setting says, all of that is part of what they grasp as well as the words. So it’s about talking to people on television about what we care about.

The White House does not leave to chance the images people receive about what it is the President is doing as well as the interpretation of their events. In the Clinton White House, the Communications Office developed signs to accompany each of the events they staged. By using a sign in the event to highlight the theme, the White House is less dependent upon the television network correspondents for stating the message in their remarks accompanying the video.

We give you the opening paragraph, we give you the closing story and we even give you the headline. That signage is our headline. But it’s all because we’re talking to an audience where we’re in heavy competition for their attention and we need to use very possible means to break through.... Newspapers are where insiders and people who really care about issues read about them in depth. Insiders includes members of Congress and policymakers, so they’re very important. And they’re also where a lot of television stories come from. So I’m not knocking newspaper stories but they reach a smaller audience, especially the stories that are covered on A-17. While that’s important and I want it to be accurate and I want it to be full, it’s second choice for how we reach the voters we want, the people we’re trying to reach.²⁷

The public learns what is happening in the political system through television news, but getting to people means grabbing their attention while they are paying only limited attention to their television. That is a daily challenge the White House faces. The Communications Director is tasked with figuring out how to break through to the public with the President’s messages.

The Bush White House staff focuses on controlling those aspects of presidential communications that are possible for them to manage successfully.²⁸ How the president is

²⁶ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

²⁷ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

²⁸ The remainder of Point 8 is reprinted by permission from Johns Hopkins University Press from the author’s *Managing the President’s Message: The White House Communications Operation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 100-104.

portrayed in pictures is one of the areas in which the White House has both an ability to control what is released and an interest in doing so. Communications staff members think through how to explain what the president is doing, right down to the pictures they want to see on television. As in earlier administrations, especially those of Presidents Reagan and Clinton, communications staffers in the Bush White House invest heavily in producing memorable pictures. Because presidential appearances are now covered live from beginning to end on cable television, every detail of such events can affect their effectiveness at conveying messages.

Karl Rove traces the high point of media sophistication in this regard to the Reagan administration: "I think in the post-1980 era, we all owe it to [Michael] Deaver, who said, 'Turn off the sound of the television, and that's how people are going to decide whether you won the day or lost the day: the quality of the picture.' " He explains, "That's what they're going to get the message by, with the sound entirely off. And I think that's simplistic, but I think it's an important insight. There is a reason why that old saw, a picture is worth a thousand words--how we look, how we sound, and how we project--is important. So winning the picture is important, and [so is] having a president with the right kind of people to drive and hone the emphasis of the message, [so he will] be seen in a positive, warm, and strong way."²⁹

After White House strategists determine what themes they want to communicate, their implementation people decide how to structure an instructive event, and their operations people set everything up and frame the pictures so that they will communicate what the planners and implementers want to convey. Communications assistant Scott Sforza capitalizes on his background in television and his experience with White House policymakers to make sure that both sides are handled well. As he said, "I sort of use the rule of thumb, if the sound were turned down on the television when you are just passing by, you should be able to look at the TV and tell what the president's message is. If you are passing by a storefront and see a TV in the window, or if you are at a newspaper stand and you are walking by, you should be able to get the president's messages in a snapshot, in most cases."

Among other things, Sforza is the official who designs the backdrops that appear behind the president when he speaks in indoor locales around the country. For a speech about homeland security delivered in Kansas City, this "wallpaper" was lined with the phrase "Protecting the Homeland," interspersed with profiles of a firefighter. At the White House, where these message banners are only occasionally used, the preference is for scenic locales in and around the White House itself. In his effort to produce precisely the pictures he wants, Sforza leaves no detail to chance. The background before which the president appears is chosen with the aim of maximizing the impact of the "tight" shots that television cameras are most likely to use. And the president speaks from a special podium tagged "Falcon" because its top seems to hunch over a thin stem, which has been crafted to allow televised close-ups to show as much of a selected background as possible.

According to Sforza, "Falcon" is "designed so that you can see the lower portions [of a picture]. You can see around it. So it really opened up the shot for us, and you could see

²⁹ Interview with Karl Rove.

the process behind it." He continues, "It made for a much, much better event. When you look at the photos, you can tell it's really--it's a striking difference. So it has had just really terrific results. We have had great results with it, even in events where we have message banners. You can see the banners much better, because this sits lower, and it really plays well with that backdrop, so it doesn't dominate the show."³⁰

Until the end of the twentieth century, presidents had very few choices when they wanted to go live on television with a speech. Most of them used the Oval Office as their setting. In addition to the eleven addresses he delivered to Congress during his eight years in office, President Clinton made nineteen formal "Addresses to the Nation." Fifteen of them came from the Oval Office.⁵⁰ By December 15, 2006, in Bush's sixth year, setting aside his two inaugurals and his seven addresses to Congress, only five of his twenty "Addresses to the Nation" took place in the Oval Office.³¹ Seven of them were delivered in locales other than Washington, namely Crawford, Texas; New York; Cincinnati; Atlanta; New Orleans; Fort Bragg, North Carolina; and an aircraft carrier.³² The remaining eight were staged in other White House locations--three from the Cabinet Room; four in Cross Hall (located on the first floor of the White House midway between the East Room and the State Dining Room), and one from the White House Treaty Room.

Thanks to the fiber-optics technology that was in place by the time he was elected, thanks to the Clinton communications operation, President Bush can appear live on television in a matter of minutes from several locations in the White House itself, in the West Wing and on the White House grounds, such as the South Lawn and the East Garden. While the Clinton communications team was responsible for acquiring this technology, only the Briefing Room and the East Room were wired when Clinton left office.

On October 7, 2001, when President Bush addressed the nation to announce a campaign of military strikes against Al Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan, he spoke from the Treaty Room in the White House, so named because it was where President McKinley signed the treaty that ended the Spanish-American War. He began his speech at one o'clock in the afternoon. Through the window behind him one could glimpse the midday traffic on Constitution Avenue.

No president had delivered a speech from this room before. President Bush and his staff selected it because they felt the visuals themselves would convey important messages. "The president wanted to really address the nation in a different way than he had before," remembered Sforza. "He enjoyed the history of the room, and what it was all associated with." He also wanted the traffic in the background: "We wanted . . . [to] send a message to the world that we're still in business here."

³⁰ Interview with Scott Sforza, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, DC, June 27, 2002.

³¹ The *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office). The figures come from the Document Category, Addresses to the Nation, and counts of the individual items.

³² Figures come from counts of the following categories in issues of the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* from 2001 to January 2006: "Addresses to the Nation," "Addresses and Remarks," "Radio Addresses," "Bill Signings - Remarks," and "Meetings with Foreign and International Leaders."

In earlier times, a satellite truck arriving the day prior to the event would have been needed for a television broadcast, and it would have taken a lot of time to set up all of the necessary equipment. The existence of fiber optic lines "really enabled us to go on the air much quicker than we ever would have been able to the old way, the way it was ten years ago," said Sforza. "So this way it's a very short cable line. You just plug it in and you're ready to go. And with that speech in particular we had as little time as possible to notify the networks." Instead of the previously required hour-and-a-half warning, "we were able to notify them in fifteen minutes, twenty minutes before we would go on the air."³³

"Winning the picture" is important for any administration. But Bush's communication staffers are more sensitive than their predecessors of the need to reach particular segments of the public through television. Even though the Internet is attracting a large number of readers, television is an important source of news for most who follow it. The goal of "winning the picture" influences how departments and agencies showcase presidential policies as well as what the White House and the president do. The creation by outside contractors paid by government departments and agencies of video news releases to be shown at the regional and local levels in addition to the national one is a practice that builds on traditional efforts to shape newspaper coverage.

The "picture" is an area where the White House can make use of changes in technology as well. When asked the differences in broadcasting the presidential image between 2002 and 2006, Sforza pointed to some of the developments. "It's a lot easier to get a satellite signal out. It's easier to do the video taping, a lot of the networks, the locals have the ability to turn stories around much more quickly now that there is an advancement in the editing capability and the software that's available." These changes require staff to assess how networks and local television stations broadcast in order to make the most of their opportunities getting television time.

When President Bush announced what the administration considered to be the end of military operations in Iraq, he and his staff did so in a dramatic location. Through developments in video technology, they were able to broadcast live from the Pacific Ocean while the USS *Abraham Lincoln* was moving. That was something that previously was not possible, Sforza said, as the transmitters would "always hit black holes when . . . traveling through the ocean." For the USS *Abraham Lincoln* event where President Bush landed in a F-16 fighter jet, improved technology allowed a clear, stable signal for transmitting the president's arrival and his speech given at dusk: "That was the first time that we used this new technology, which was a Sea-Tel Antenna . . . that could lock in to a KU-band satellite signal while moving." That meant continued transmission for all news organizations without any loss of signal while they journeyed toward San Diego.

The USS *Abraham Lincoln* event demonstrated the problems that can arise when a communications operation focuses so heavily on the technology of an event that one misses the larger communications problems. The White House made a sign that served as a backdrop when President Bush spoke. The sign read "Mission Accomplished." Sforza said that the derivation of the sign was a request by the commander of the ship, who wanted it because the crew had been at sea for eleven months. The president's critics portrayed the

³³ Interview with Scott Sforza, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, DC, June 27, 2002.

sign as a presidential announcement that the war in Iraq was over, which proved to be far from the case. Sforza said that the sign "took on a life of its own, and to this day they still try to apply it like an anniversary of the 'Mission Accomplished' speech." Though the president was reluctant to declare an end to hostilities, the sign seemed to indicate that he had. The communications staff learned that "the image overrides even something the truth."³⁴

9. Bringing Campaign Technology and Related Strategies into the White House

Technology plays an important role in the flexible nature of the communications operation. Each White House identifies the communications tools it wants to use and then places them accordingly. When the Carter Administration came into office, staff brought in with them techniques they used on the campaign. One of their early actions in the communications area was to create a Radio Actuality Line, which had taped highlights of the President's speeches and remarks. Radio stations around the country could call into the line and take off the segments they found interesting. Jody Powell remembers its creation. "Actually, [it came] from the campaign. We'd been successful in getting the candidate on the air, talking about things by doing those sorts of feeds, and that sort of thing. Of course, I remember what an uproar there was about it back in those days."³⁵ While they did not have a campaign unit to deal with local press, the Carter campaign operation directed attention towards local and regional press during the campaign and once in the White House established a regular presidential press briefing with the local and regional press. "It was not something we had done directly in the campaign but the sort of idea behind it of the importance of local news, which nowadays is even more so, and that you ought to really invest some time in cultivating those relationships and using those outlets, too," Jody Powell remarked. The usefulness in setting up regular meetings and opportunities for the local is the coverage a White House got out of such sessions. Jody Powell commented on the productive nature of the President's meetings with local reporters. "We got—on the whole—pretty decent coverage out of those sessions that we otherwise wouldn't have gotten."

Other administrations have brought in technological innovations they used in their original campaign for the presidency. For the Clinton White House, that meant bringing in the internet and establishing a website as a point of contact with a growing electronic public. During the Clinton Administration, the White House regularly released information to reporters through the releases put on their website and through the West Wing press operation. Having the site meant they did not have to use staff time providing paper copies to reporters and could quickly get the material to reporters requesting it. In addition, the Media Affairs unit used email to send information tailored to its lists of local reporters to national ones as well. Technology provided the White House with the capacity to get in contact with fine tuned lists of news organizations and to do so with a click of a mouse. It also helped some reporters get releases from the Press Office they might not

³⁴ Interview with Scott Sforza, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, DC, May 9, 2006.

³⁵ White House Interview Program, Interview with Jody Powell, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., August 2, 2000.

otherwise have received. *Offense and Defense in the Bush Second Term: The Rapid Response Operation* Earlier we saw the way in which the Clinton White House operated to quickly respond to criticism or damaging events while the Bush White House openly eschewed such an operation. As Dan Bartlett said, his views changed in the second term when he realized they needed a hybrid operation that did long term planning, but was simultaneously capable of responding to whatever was in the current news cycle.

Following the 2004 election, Nicolle Devenish Wallace, the communications director for the campaign, came back to the White House where she earlier served as head of the media affairs office. She brought with her the design and the people who worked on the campaign's rapid response operation. "When we won re-election, and we looked at ... how do we marry the best practices from the campaign which obviously was successful, and the best practices from the White House which obviously was very successful. We have made changes now," Wallace said. "And for the first time, we have a rapid response office."³⁶

Housed in the Office of Communications, the Rapid Response unit is responsible for getting out information to a variety of selected audiences within the administration, on Capital Hill, among Republican party officials, television and talk radio producers and hosts, and interest group allies. Sent by email, the messages can quickly get into the news stream. "It is taking something good that is out there and distributing it in a different way," said Kevin Sullivan who heads the Office of Communications.³⁷ The information serves both offensive and defensive purposes depending upon the need. The messages are "very helpful without question to administration staffers who work in the agencies, on the Hill, when they are dealing with reporters," said Sullivan. Outside the White House, others can make use of them. "Talk radio producers are one of our key groups," he said. "It provides questions for their hosts to ask sometime that they might not have thought of...For a radio host who doesn't have time to drill down into military commission and know what it all means, you have a two page document that explains what it all means."

The basic activity of the rapid response operation is a set of email messages carrying the administration's positive and defensive messages. As the news cycle has gotten even faster than it was in the first term, the need to get into it is even greater than it was early in the administration when Internet news traffic was so much less. In the second term, newspapers, television networks, radio programs, and individuals in each, had a variety of

³⁶ Nicolle Devenish Wallace, interview for Towson University course, White House Communications Operations, May 9, 2006. http://www.ucdc.edu/aboutus/whstreaming_archive.cfm. This section on the Rapid Response operation is reprinted by permission from Johns Hopkins University Press the author's *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 136-143.

³⁷ Kevin Sullivan, interview with the author, November 30, 2006, Washington, DC.

websites and blogs that release information as they get it. That puts pressure on officials in the White House and elsewhere to come up with a fast response.

Rapid Response sends out messages with both positive and negative themes. The goal of the positive messages is to have people who are important in the Washington and administration community see items they might otherwise have missed, especially ones that pull together current information. Their negative messages are aimed at dousing developing fires. “If we think something is misleading or inaccurate, the key is we want to get our response out before it becomes accepted, conventional wisdom,” said Kevin Sullivan.

In the environment where there is so much information available to people in the Washington community as well as elsewhere, there is a need for sources that synthesize information. Letting allies and others know what the president is saying and what their priorities and responses are, and doing so throughout the day, is important for keeping them current. Josh Bolten said that White House staff have adapted to the profusion of information by having their own methods of synthesizing information, including within the administration. “We have adapted our mechanisms of coping,” he said. “Along with the explosion of information sources, there have also been an explosion of ways of propagating and synthesizing information. Email is that. This is a White House that emails each other very heavily. We do physically get together; it is a small place. There is a lot of emailing of information back and forth. I think most of us pay attention to what the Press Office is putting out. “In Case You Missed It” and things like that. And a lot of us rely on synthesizing sources.”³⁸

There are fourteen categories of emails distributed to the list of 2,000 recipients. The typically one or two page email messages fit both offensive and defensive White House communications needs. “Rapid Response by definition sounds like it’s a defensive thing but we look at it as a way of staying on offense,” Said Sullivan. “We’re going to affirmatively, proactively, put something out. Because it is not always responding to something. It is taking something good that is out there and distributing it in a different way.” [endnote: Kevin Sullivan, interview with the author, November 30, 2006] There are eight basic categories of messages that are offensive ones where they try to package information people might have missed. [endnote: “Morning Update,” “In case You Missed It,” “Straight to the Point,” “Fact Sheet,” “What They’re Saying,” “By the Numbers,” “Economy Watch,” and “Medicare Check-Up”] Those could include presidential speeches, cuts from Tony Snow’s daily press briefing, briefings by others, news articles, op ed pieces. The most frequently used categories are: “Morning Update,” “Fact Sheet,” “Straight to the Point,” and “In Case You Missed It.”

The “Morning Update” is a weekday daily sent at 8:00 am in time for people to see what the president’s schedule is, read newspaper articles with pertinent information the White House wants to get out, including clips from interviews the president may have had with radio, television, or print journalists. The messages print hotlinks to the articles or

³⁸ Interview with Joshua Bolten, interview with the author, Washington, DC, November 17, 2006.

audio for the interviews for those who want the longer version and to links for briefings and press releases. The longest of the emails, it is broken into three parts. First is the president's public schedule for that day. Second, "From the Morning Headlines," has perhaps ten lines of quotes from ten or so articles appearing that day. Third, "From the White House," has links one can use to read yesterday's daily briefing by the press secretary, personnel announcements, and presidential remarks from the day before. A second kind of positive email message, "Fact Sheets," provide background information on presidential initiatives or facts as positive trends, such as an increased number of jobs. "Straight to the Point" has excerpts from presidential statements as they happen. Most come out within an hour of when the president spoke. In one week, of the three sent out, one was within 23 minutes and another within 42 minutes of the conclusion of the president's remarks. The hour long presidential press conference with Prime Minister Tony Blair took an hour and twenty minutes to get into excerpt form.³⁹

"In Case You Missed It" is a targeted message that has one topic, with either a full text or excerpts. In four messages released during a week period, for example, they contained the following information: excerpts from remarks made in Washington to President Bush and to the U.S. Institute for Peace by Iraqi religious leader Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim; statements arranged by topic made by Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq in a press conference the day before; an interview with U.S. soldiers in Iraq conducted by talk radio personality Sean Hannity.⁴⁰ There are other more occasional emails – "By the Numbers," "What They're Saying" – that include information on polling ("8 of 10 Pharmacists, 7 of 10 doctors Agree: Medicare Drug Benefit Helps Seniors Save") and statements of by others about their initiatives ("Bipartisan Support for Gates").⁴¹ The Medicare prescription drug program has its own email message series ("Medicare Check-Up) as does the economy ("Economy Watch"). An example of the contents of several of those messages are the ones including favorable articles and editorials, such as the "Medicare Check-Up" containing a *Wall Street Journal* article, "Once Unloved, Medicare's Prescription-Drug Program Defies Critics, But Issues Remain."⁴²

The defensive messages sent out by Rapid Response aim to correct a portrait officials regard as incomplete or attack a story viewed as inaccurate.⁴³ The group of messages include the most frequently sent ones, "Setting the Record Straight," "The Rest of the Story," and, for its high impact, "Myth / Fact." If officials believe a story is inaccurate, they will do a "Setting the Record Straight" pointing out its errors. In a May 10th 2006 message, "Setting the Record Straight: CBS News' Misleading Medicare Report," officials called correspondent Jim Axelrod on the carpet. He was quoted as saying on the "CBS Evening

³⁹ December 11, December 6, and December 7, 2006.

⁴⁰ December 5, December 6, and December 12, 2006.

⁴¹ September 8, 2006 and December 4, 2006.

⁴² David Wessel, "Once Unloved, Medicare's Prescription-Drug Program Defies Critics, But Issues Remain," *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2006.

⁴³ "Setting the Record Straight," "The Rest of the Story," "The Briefing Breakdown," "Now and Then," "Myth/Fact," and "In Their Own Words."

News”: “Hoping to nail down at least one clear success story for Republicans to run on this fall, Mr. Bush wants to add another million seniors to the 8 million already signed up.” The heading for that segment was: “CBS News Misleadingly Reports That Only 8 Million Seniors Have Signed Up For Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage.” The message goes on to dispute the claim with short segments indicating 37 million seniors have prescription drug coverage, others could be program participants but don’t realize it, and the fact that the Department of Health and Human Services has signed up nine million for Medicare prescription drug coverage. While facts abound in these email messages, most often the difference between the articles and the White House response is a matter of interpretation and what the relevance of the facts included.

In addition to providing another take on an issue, a product of the messages is the mark it leaves with the reporter or reporters singled out. Five months later, that particular “Setting the Record Straight” was still on Axelrod’s mind. Howard Kurtz, media critic for the *Washington Post*, spoke with Axelrod. “CBS’s Jim Axelrod recalls how Snow once issued a press release assailing a story Axelrod had done on Medicare eligibility, ‘He basically sent out this report calling me a liar, and then showed up at the booth smiling, with a handshake, and we had a half-hour chat.’”⁴⁴ In reality, Tony Snow did not decide what the messages will be, but Axelrod continued to smart from its sting.

“Setting the Record Straight” has targeted news organizations for their reporting involving the success status of a variety of administration policies and programs: Iraq, Medicare, the economy, who benefits from tax cuts, status of military recruiting, hurricane preparations, President Bush’s foreign policy, stem cell policy, the administration’s climate change record, national guard troops and border security. In one four day period, the news organizations cited include the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, CBS News, and Associated Press.⁴⁵

When the White House sends out these messages, some news organizations take note of them. Perhaps the most successful of all of the series in its impact on a story where the White House adopts a defensive mode is the “Myth/Fact” put out to extinguish the flames coming from the book, *State of Denial*, by *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward. The message singled out five aspects of Woodward’s charges about the president’s understanding and handling of the war in Iraq. Together, they “myths” included: intelligence assessments; an alleged request by Paul Bremer for more troops in Iraq; Condoleezza Rice’s response to a CIA warning about Al Qaeda; comments attributed to

⁴⁴ Howard Kurtz, “Tony Snow Knows How to Work More Than One Room; It’s Gloves Off (and Pass the Hat) for Bush Spokesman,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2006.

⁴⁵ May 8, 2006 Associated Press, May 9th *USA Today*; May 10th CBS News, *New York Times*; May 11th *Washington Post*, Associated Press; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/setting-record-straight/>.

General Abizaid concerning Secretary Rumsfeld's credibility; supposed efforts to the remove Rumsfeld attributed to Chief of Staff Andrew Card and First Lady Laura Bush.⁴⁶

The message was used in a variety of places and ways. The *Washington Post* published excerpts from the book accompanied by a box with a Reuters story detailing the five myths in the White House release.⁴⁷ Tim Russert used the five myths when he questioned Bob Woodward about his book and Woodward brought them up himself on "Hardball with Chris Matthews" and "The Charlie Rose Show."⁴⁸ The myths also came up for discussion by the reporters or by Woodward in the morning and evening network news broadcasts, for example with "The NBC Nightly News" and the "Today Show."⁴⁹

In addition to being used as part of a news story and as a basis of questioning, the defensive messages have an additional impact. Some correspondents are concerned their reporting might be the subject of a Setting the Record Straight, observed Deputy Press Secretary Dana Perino. Perino is the Press Office staff member who is the point person for contacting reporters with complaints when White House officials believe an article is inaccurate. When she has called reporters about a perceived inaccuracy, commented Kevin Sullivan, "There have been times when the reporter has said, 'you're not going to do a Setting the Record Straight are you?'"⁵⁰

The decision to issue the releases is made in the morning communications meeting that includes approximately eleven people working in the communications area. They are: Dan Bartlett, who hosts the meeting; Kevin Sullivan, communications director; Scott Sforza, director of television production; Jeanie Mamo, who heads the media affairs operation; Dana Perino, deputy press secretary; Tony Fratto or Scott Stanzel, the other deputy press secretaries; Susan Whitson, press secretary to Laura Bush; Gordon Johndroe from the National Security Council; Ron Saliterman, who heads the rapid response unit; Eryn Witcher, who handles television; Blain Rethmeier, responsible for policy communications. In that meeting, "We all talk about the news of the day and what we are going to do," said Sullivan. "Rapid response is a big part of the decisions that get made." While the unit wants to respond to what they is misleading or inaccurate as well as put out good news, staffers don't want to put out too many of them. "We don't want to be like a barking Chihuahua in the middle of the night where you are always yapping," said Sullivan. "You have to pick your spots."

⁴⁶ "Myth/Fact: Five Key Myths in Bob Woodward's Book," September 30, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060930-5.html>

⁴⁷ Caren Bohan, "White House Lists Book's 'Five Key Myths,'" *Washington Post*, October 1 2006.

⁴⁸ "Meet the Press," October 8th 2006; "Hardball with Chris Matthews," October 4th; "The Charles Rose Show," October 3rd 2006.

⁴⁹ "The NBC Nightly News," September 30, 2006; "Today Show," October 2, 2006.

⁵⁰ Kevin Sullivan, interview with the author, November 30, 2006] Knowing that reporters can be sensitive to being singled out provides the White House with a perceived lever in dealing with journalists whether or not reporters regard it as such.

The messages have succeeded in getting White House information into the fast moving news cycle. In both offensive and defensive initiatives, the rapid response operation has gotten the attention of news organizations and insinuated the White House version of events into ongoing stories. While their efforts have gotten the president's words and explanations to the public through a variety of channels, there are limits to what the messages can accomplish. There is no guarantee the public likes what it hears in those messages. But at least the White House gets presidential words and thinking to the audiences the president and his staff want to reach.

10. Backgrounds of Directors of the Office of Communications

Directors of the Office of Communications have had a variety of backgrounds. Speechwriters, reporters, government affairs people, and business and public relations people have served in the post. In some ways, the variety of backgrounds people have is appropriate for an office that has so many different ways a President and his team can direct it.

Directors, Office of Communications – 1969-2008

Communications Directors	Office Status and Title of Director	Years in This Office	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
Herbert Klein - <i>President Nixon</i>	Director of Communications; Office of Communications created by President Nixon January, 1969	January 20, 1969 – June 1973	Press Secretary to Richard Nixon as Vice President and presidential candidate	Editor, Copley Newspapers' <i>San Diego Union</i> (1959-1968)
Ken W. Clawson <i>President Nixon</i>	Director of Communications, Office of Communications	January 30, 1974- August 1974	Deputy Director of Communications for the Executive Branch, February 1972-1973	<i>Washington Post</i> reporter
Gerald L. Warren <i>President Ford</i>	No Office of Communications, Warren title Deputy Press Secretary for Information Liaison, later Director, Office of Communications	November 1974- August 15, 1975	Deputy Press Secretary, 1969-1975	City editor, assistant managing editor, <i>San Diego Union</i> , 1963-1968
Margita E. White <i>President Ford</i>	Office part of Press Office	August 15 1975- September 22, 1976	Assistant Press Secretary, January 1975-August 15, 1975	Assistant Director, Public Information, U.S. Information Agency, 1973-1975
David Gergen <i>President Ford</i>	David Gergen, <i>Special Counsel to the President</i> , re-structured the re-emerging Office of Communications and shifted reporting level up one big notch from Press Secretary to Chief of Staff Richard Cheney	July 1976- January 20, 1977 as Director, Office of Communications	Special Counsel to the President for Communications, April-July, 1976; Special Assistant to Chief of Staff Richard Cheney, December, 1975-April, 1976;	Consultant to Treasury Secretary William E. Simon, November, 1974-December, 1975, Special Assistant to President speechwriting and research, 1973-November, 1974

Communications Directors	Office Status and Title of Director	Years in This Office	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
<i>President Carter</i>	No Communications Director, January, 1977-June, 1978 and August, 1979-January, 1981			
Gerald Rafshoon <i>President Carter</i>	Communications Director	July 01, 1978-August 14, 1979	Head of Atlanta, GA-based Rafshoon Communications	Handled media for Carter's two winning gubernatorial campaigns
Frank A. Ursomarso <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director title, but he ranked as Deputy Assistant and reported to Assistant to the President David Gergen	March 27, 1981-September 15, 1981	Television production, Governor Ronald Reagan's Presidential debates, 1980 and 1976	Advance man for Presidents Nixon and Ford; automobile business
David Gergen <i>President Reagan</i>	Director of Communications at Assistant to the President level	January 21, 1981-January 15, 1984	Special Counsel, Ford; Special Assistant, Nixon, 1973-1974;	(See Gergen, <i>President Ford</i> , above)
Michael A. McManus, Jr. - Acting Director <i>President Reagan</i>	Office of Communications reported to Michael Deaver, Deputy Chief of Staff,	January 1984-February 1985	Arrangements for the 1983 G-7 Summit, Williamsburg, VA,	Corporate law, Pfizer, and private law practice
Patrick Buchanan <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director	February 06, 1985-March 01, 1987	Executive assistant to former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, 1966-1969; speechwriter and senior advisor to President Nixon, 1969-1974	Syndicated newspaper columnist, commentator, 1975-1985
John Koehler <i>President Reagan</i>	Communications Director	March 2-March 15, 1987;	Transition from Chief of Staff Donald Regan to Chief of Staff Howard Baker	Associated Press executive and, previously, reporter
Thomas C. Griscom <i>President Reagan</i>	Thomas Griscom, Assistant to the President for Communications and Planning.	April 02, 1987-July 16, 1988	Ogilvy and Mather Public Affairs, President and Chief Operating Officer in 1987;	Executive Director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, 1985-1986. Press Secretary to Senator Howard Baker, 1978-1984.
Mari Maseng <i>President Reagan</i>	Assistant to the President and Director of Communications and Planning	July 01, 1988-January 30, 1989	Director, Office of Public Liaison, May, 1986-July, 1987; Assistant Secretary of Transportation, Public Affairs, November, 1983-April, 1985	speechwriting staff, January 1981-November, 1983; Vice President, Beatrice Companies, Chicago, IL.
David Demarest <i>President Bush</i>	Communications Director,	January 21, 1989-August 23, 1992	1988, manager, George H. W. Bush presidential campaign	Assistant Secretary of Labor, Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, 1987-1988;
Margaret Tutwiler <i>President Bush</i>	Communications Director	August 23, 1992-January 21, 1993	Assistant Secretary of State, Public Affairs, and Spokesperson, 1989-1992	Assistant Treasury Secretary, Public Affairs; Assistant to Chief of Staff James A. Baker III, and Deputy

Communications Directors	Office Status and Title of Director	Years in This Office	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
				Assistant to the President, Public Affairs, 1981-1989
George Stephanopoulos <i>President Clinton</i>		January 20, 1993- May 29, 1993	Senior political adviser, 1992 Clinton/Gore Campaign	House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt; 1988, Dukakis/Bentsen presidential campaign
Mark D. Gearan <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant Director to the President and Director of Communications and Strategic Planning	June 7, 1993-June 21, 1995	Deputy Chief of Staff; deputy to Transition Director Warren Christopher, 1992;	Al Gore campaign manager, 1992; national headquarters press secretary, Dukakis-for-President
Donald A. Baer <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant to the President and White House Director of Strategic Planning and Communications	August 14, 1995- July 31, 1997	Chief Speechwriter April, 1994-August 1995	<i>U.S. News & World Report</i> writer-editor, 1987-1994.; lawyer, magazine writer, New York City
Ann Lewis <i>President Clinton</i>	Communications Director	July 31, 1997- March 10, 1999	Deputy Campaign Manager and Director of Communications, 1996 Clinton-Gore Re-Election Campaign; Vice President for Public Policy, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 1994-1995;	;Assistant Secretary of Labor, Public Affairs, May 17, 1993; National affairs
Loretta M. Ucelli <i>President Clinton</i>	Assistant to the President and Director of White House Communications	March 10, 1999- January 20, 2001	Associate Administrator for Communications, Education and Public Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, March 2, 1993-March 10, 1999	Director of Communication, National Abortion Rights Action League, 1992-1993;
Karen Hughes <i>President Bush</i>	Counselor to the President, managed the White House Offices of Communications, Media Affairs, Speechwriting, and Press Secretary	January 20, 2001- July 29, 2005	Communications Director, 2000 Bush Presidential campaign; 1994 and 1998 Bush gubernatorial campaigns	Director of Communications, Texas Governor George W. Bush, 1994-2000Executive Director, Republican Party of Texas; TV news reporter,
Dan Bartlett <i>President Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications and White House Communications Director	October 02, 2001- January 5, 2005	Deputy Assistant to the President and Principal Deputy to Counselor Karen Hughes	Deputy to Policy Director, Governor's Office, Austin, 1994-1998; in 1998 re-election campaign,
Nicolle Devenish Wallace <i>President Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications – heads Office of Communications	January 05, 2005 – June 30, 2006	Communications Director, Bush-Cheney '04 Inc.; previously, Special Assistant to the President and Director of Media Affairs at the White House	Governor Jeb Bush's Press Secretary, 1999; Communications Director, Florida State Technology Office, 2000
Kevin Sullivan <i>President Bush</i>	Assistant to the President for Communications – heads Office of Communications	July 24, 2006 -	Assistant Secretary of Education for Communications and	Vice President for communications, Dallas Mavericks

Communications Directors	Office Status and Title of Director	Years in This Office	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
			Outreach; previously, NBC Universal and NBC Sports	

THE WORK OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

More than is true for most of the offices in the White House, the Office of Communications is fairly unique in the degree to which the organization of the office is dependent upon who the adviser is. There is substantial variation in what communications advisers emphasize as their basic role. The Clinton White House provided an example of the various ways in which communications can be organized. There were seven people who exercised the communications function though only five of them held the title of Communications Director. Among those holding the post, there were at least three ways of managing the job. Those three are: as an advocate with the press, as a strategist and planner, and as an events coordinator. While directors may perform all of those roles, they tend to emphasize one of them. Among the Clinton communications directors were George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan who handled the role in being primarily an advocate with the press, Don Baer who was a strategist and planner, and Ann Lewis and Loretta Ucelli who emphasized the events planner aspect of the job.

1. Three Models of Communications Directors: Advocate with the Press, Strategist and Planner, and Events Coordinator

The group representing the advocates with news organizations, composed of George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan, spent a great deal of time working with the press, including appearing on television and speaking with reporters for print organizations. Don Baer explained the work done in the early years and how the emphasis of the job changed.

Everybody, whether they were called Communications Director or Press Secretary, basically thought their job was to be Press Secretary and not to really be a Communications Director in any sense of laying down strategy, helping the various output arms of the public face of the White House to know what their role would be in the context of the larger strategy for public communications. I think there was some dissatisfaction about that fact; that in fact what most people spent their time doing was the care and feeding of the press rather than thinking about the strategic communications objectives of the White House and how best to push those out. So there was a desire to reorient that role somewhat more in the other direction. Erskine Bowles I think played a big part because he had just come in as deputy Chief of Staff with communications or strategic communications—whatever it was called—and Scheduling and Advance and a few other things like that under him. The whole purpose and idea was to try to get those units coordinating better because all of those are very important bits and pieces of what the larger strategic objectives of the White House would be.⁵¹

⁵¹ Donald Baer interview.

When Don Baer came in during the early phase of the 1996 reelection campaign, he took the communications job, which held the title of Director of Strategy and Planning. The strategy he worked on had as its goal President Clinton winning reelection in 1996. All of their strategies focused either directly or indirectly on a presidential win. Don Baer described how the position was something entirely different when he had it than what had preceded it.

The job I was promoted into was not the director of communication. That job had been ended; it no longer existed. Mark Gearan had been moved into a job title from director of communications sometime after the 1994 election into a new title. I think it was assistant to the President for strategic planning and communications. So that was the job that Mark had in the last nine months of his term and the job that I had the entire time that I was there pretty much.... But there was a specific decision made to end the traditional Communications Director role or at least the way it had been practiced in the first two years of the [Bill] Clinton presidency and to try to reorient it more as a strategic adviser's role rather than a communications role per se.⁵²

Once the election was over and Baer left the White House, Ann Lewis took the post. She used it to focus on staging events to showcase the President's policies as did her successor, Loretta Ucelli. Both Lewis and Ucelli held the title of Communications Director. Neither of them was regarded as a spokesperson for the White House in the same sense that Stephanopoulos and Gearan were. Lewis did appear as a defender of the President during the early stages of the Monica Lewinsky scandal but Press Secretary Mike McCurry was the central spokesperson. Loretta Ucelli did not appear publicly on behalf of the administration.

Then I was succeeded by Ann Lewis and Ann was succeeded by Loretta Ucelli and Loretta reverted to the title of director of communications which is what the office is now known as. So when I left it stopped being the director of strategic planning and communications. And it's important, I think, to note that every one of those people has treated the job somewhat differently in terms of where they fit within the overall operation and function of the White House and things that they emphasized.⁵³

The duties performed by the Communications Director in the Clinton White House depended upon who else was there working on communications, including David Gergen, the closeness to the reelection campaign, and the people who held the post as well as the desire of the President. These same roles can be found in earlier administrations. The press advocate role was exercised by Herb Klein and Ken Clawson in the Nixon Administration, Gerald Warren in the Ford Administration, and Patrick Buchanan in the Reagan Administration. The strategist role was performed by communications directors in office during presidential reelection campaigns, including David Gergen in the Ford and Reagan administrations, Gerald Rafshoon in the Carter Administration, and Thomas Griscom in the Reagan Administration. The role of event planner is found with Margita White in the Ford Administration, Mari Maseng in the Reagan Administration, and David Demarest in the Bush Administration.

2. The Responsibilities of the Communications Director

While the job of the Communications Director has varied as much as has its title, there are basic responsibilities performed by the Director and those who work in the office no

⁵² Donald Baer interview.

⁵³ Donald Baer interview.

matter whether the incumbent works as a press advocate, a strategist and planner, or an events manager. It can be a general post defined by the director's work with the President on developing the larger message of his presidency as is the case when the position includes strategy and planning in addition to communications. On the other hand, it can be a post that carries responsibilities for events management. The minimum the job entails is event management while the greater role is defining the message of a particular presidency with a strategic plan to match.

*Strategic Communications:
Message Development, Coordination, & Amplification*

Message is central to the communications operation in terms of developing messages for the President and others to deliver. In addition the tasks of coordination and amplification come in as well. The quality, strength, and the direction of the message depend upon the ability of the President and his team to focus on their agenda and not let the entreaties of others overshadow their own interests. "Strategic communications is a balancing act," Don Baer said. "There are different pressing constituencies who want this, that or the other." The Press Secretary might want a press conference "because he's got the press corps beating down his door. Your people, different interest groups or different folks who want your President to come and speak to them about their things or their issues. What you have to keep in mind is what you are trying to get done for the sake of the President and for the presidency and for your objectives and not for all of their objectives. It's a balancing act at all times." He continued: "That's what strategic communications is about is sort of balancing all that, the use of the available tools and resources to be able to keep getting that message out in a coherent way that's your way, not their way."

The work the Communications Director does integrates the political information and people they have outside of the building with the plans that are made by those working within the White House. Don Baer described where the Communications Director fits into the process of presenting a presidency.

There was a small group of people, some inside the White House and some outside the White House, who were about getting the various operations within the White House whose purpose it was to produce that public thing known as the Clinton presidency to all be feeding toward a sense of a common objective in terms of the political philosophy and ideals that we were putting forward...and how those policies met the needs of what our larger message purposes were; in terms of what speeches and the President gave and where he gave them; what he said when he gave them and to what settings and to what audiences he gave them; in terms of what those events looked like and how they were presented to the public; what message we were trying to convey by the very settings or the backdrops or the kind of people who were involved to the press office and the way they would talk to and deal with the press or the kind of press we were dealing with; which reporters or which journalists we were giving access to in determining what we would be doing.⁵⁴

Dealing with the policy people within the White House and in the departments is an important piece of the job of a Communications Director. The Communications Director

⁵⁴ Donald Baer interview.

as well as other staff will sift through proposals that best represent the President's goals and select ones appropriate to his message. Don Baer the process:

All those things right down to and—people are sometimes taken aback by this but it's in fact true during that period and largely I think still today—including what I would call the content people who are the policy people. They are the ones in essence who are providing the bits of information for the, if you'll carry the analogy forward, for the articles that are going into this thing known as, again, the magazine of the Clinton presidency. And the way I used to talk about—so there was a lot of involvement between the Office of Strategic Planning and Communications and the major policy units in terms of which policies we were going to put forward, when we were going to put them forward, in what sequence we were going to put them forward; how they were going to be presented, all of that; and whether frankly on any given day or night or morning they were actually ready, those policy points of view were ready, for presentation to the country.

Sifting through policy ideas means focusing on those central to the President's message and leaving behind the ones with only a tangential relationship to presidential goals.

I used to say that—and I think you can appreciate this—if there are a hundred things that you can do, if your universe of possibilities are a hundred things that you might do and in the Clinton presidency and an activist presidency that's probably true—there are probably a hundred things percolating out there in the departments that they want done—but fifty of those things, maybe half of them, would represent you to the public as being something other than what you say you want to be. If you say you are a new Democrat, if you say you have come not to promote big government for its own sake or big government solutions to the kinds of problems that are new for the country today but that you're going to present yourself as somebody who does things in a different way and uses government only as a lever to help catalyze people to do for themselves and, as the President says, make the most of their own lives. Maybe fifty of those things are the wrong message to be sending and maybe ten of them are really right on point and really get to the heart of it and maybe forty of them are in the middle and there's some room for it. You have to be careful about the ones you choose, that you allow to percolate up and come to the surface. That was a big part of it as well, weighing in on and having influence over which of those elements of our content were actually the things that became public.⁵⁵

Message Development

Message development begins with the most important resource a White House has: the President's time. A part of every scheduled event for a President is the message that attaches to it. Don Baer described the process of insinuating a message into events. "What happened was folks came to be trained to look to the communications operation for decisions, at least first-line decisions, recommendations that would go up then to the Chief of Staff and eventually the President for what the schedule would be, what the message aspects of each of the scheduled events would be; how those scheduled events once they then got scheduled would be implemented or executed. What else? To some extent although not as much as I would have liked what the sort of press strategy would be both in terms of a day-to-day strategy but a long-term strategy, those kinds of things."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Donald Baer interview.

⁵⁶ Donald Baer interview.

The State of the Union is an example of the development of a message that resonates throughout the year. Ideally it has all of the major elements of the President's policy agenda for a year. "I think it's true that two or three years ago we realized that there is so much in the State of the Union that rather than save everything for the State of the Union we could roll out some of the individual events leading up to it," said Ann Lewis.⁵⁷ "And we've done that every since. And it's really important because you may have twenty-five or thirty good ideas in the State of the Union. There's no way that they're all going to get attention otherwise. So this has worked out really well." They just roll it out bit by bit. Often it takes the major portion of the year to work through the items mentioned in the address.

Don Baer spoke of message development as encompassing the larger message about the impact, importance, and purpose of the presidency. "To me, the job very much was about helping to form and develop both the larger message for what the impact and the importance and the purpose of the presidency was at any given moment, that's a larger message. Then the specific messages and strategic messages for public consumption purposes that came out of what that message and themes and purposes of the White House were and to make sure that every office or every entity that had some role in conveying what that message and image was publicly, communicating that image and message and strategy publicly, that each one of them understood what their role was in doing that and in many cases working very directly and operationally with them to ensure that those messages, themes and strategies were in fact being conveyed."⁵⁸

Message Coordination

There is coordination that needs to be done within the White House, as with Intergovernmental Affairs. The Communication Director coordinates every office that has some role in conveying the message and working with units to make sure that was done. He or she coordinates people, events, and information. And then coordinates with departments on which policies to put forward, when to do so, what sequence, and how they are going to be presented. Don Baer described the constellation of offices he dealt with inside and outside of the White House.

Speechwriting. Scheduling. Advance. I dealt a lot with the National Security Council and within the National Security Council particular offices like...the office that really ran the operational side of the NSC.... But that would be about which trips are we going to take; what do we want to schedule when we're there. And I dealt a lot with the National Security advisers. This is actually one of the things I'm proud of. I was one of the few people from the political side of the White House that both Tony Lake [National Security adviser in the first term] and Sandy Berger [National Security adviser in the Clinton second term] thought well enough of to really bring into their decision process about what to do with foreign policy and how to convey it. And you know in this [Clinton] White House it has tended to be more of a divided thing. But I always did have good relations with both of them. The Chief of Staff's office. The press office. The office of someone like [George] Stephanopoulos

⁵⁷ Ann Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

⁵⁸ Donald Baer interview.

or Rahm [Emanuel], people who are in those roles which are very strategic kind of roles when they're done right.⁵⁹

Ann Lewis discussed the coordination involved in event planning under her watch. Those in the room included all of the White House shops. "It's the policy shop that comes up with the ideas; they come to tell you what you need to do, Scheduling and Advance, for literally what the timing will be of the day. Intergovernmental because they're going to talk to their constituents; political so people know what you're doing and Cabinet Affairs because there's always a cabinet officer. So you're literally going to have— And legislative. You are literally going to have every shop sitting in that room if you do it right so that everybody walks out of that meeting knowing what you want to achieve, what their responsibility is to make it work, and what they're going to say to their folks."⁶⁰

No matter who serves as Communications Director coordinating the message with department secretaries can be a problem. Don Baer spoke of the difficulties presented by Labor Secretary Robert Reich when he conceived and delivered his messages without consulting the White House at any stage in his message development process. "The President was in Hawaii for the fiftieth anniversary of V-J Day," Baer related about a particular event. "Reich, without really clearing anything with anybody I knew of in the White House, gave a speech and his whole perspective on the news that weekend as he rolled himself out was one of pessimism basically, that we're not doing enough for the poor; people are anxious and scared and nervous; middle-class squeeze. The old message which many of us thought was not the right message for the labor secretary of an incumbent President to be delivering three months before the beginning of the year when you're going to be running for reelection." Rather than describe the progress made during their years in office, Reich emphasized the campaign message of 1991 and 1992 that "we're not preparing ourselves for the new economy and the people who are working the hardest, the middle class, are the ones who are not getting ahead in this new economy. Well, first off, it did not comport with statistical reality and the direction of the country." Reining in Robert Reich never got any easier for the Communication Director or other members of the White House staff who wanted to see him follow White House direction.

Message Amplification

Ann Lewis discussed another aspect of coordination, which is amplification. "The role is really take whatever the President is doing today and get it to the largest number of people. Again, maybe that's through intergovernmental, through state and local elected officials; maybe it's back to a cabinet agency like HHS [Health and Human Services]. But it's every other way of communicating the message other than the press. The press has its own operation."⁶¹ Some of the coordinating work is accomplished through Cabinet Affairs. "I think they do a lot of it. But it's usually done either through Cabinet Affairs or in conjunction with Cabinet Affairs, put packages together, and sometimes for

⁵⁹ Donald Baer interview.

⁶⁰ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁶¹ Ann Lewis interview, June 17 1999.

intergovernmental,” said Ann Lewis.⁶² “But a lot of work is done to be sure. Thanks to our web site, for example, we get talking points up every day. We call it ‘The White House at Work’, which is something we started. So if you’re going out as a surrogate, you can just pull down what the President has done for the last week or two weeks and it’s there.” During her the time she served as Communications Director, Lewis added a person to the office to work on amplification. “The second person I added was an amplification staffer whose role is to get the message back out once it’s been done. How do we let everyone know it’s happened: get talking points out; maybe the local government might get more information on this so they in turn can spread it; taking the information, taking the President’s remarks and communicating them back out.”

Create and Administer Units

Carrying Out Communications Functions

One of the clues to the varied nature of the post of Communications Director is the lack of certainty of what units are within his or her domain. Don Baer discussed for whom he was responsible when he held the position of Assistant to the President for Strategic Planning and Communications.

What’s interesting is that the people who were in my direct management line or indirect management line would not be an accurate reflection of what I had to be responsible for because a lot of those didn’t report to me but I would have to be responsible for what came out of their shops. Directly or indirectly, definitely on any kind of a flow chart would have been thirty or forty people. Indirectly, if you throw in Scheduling and Advance—certainly the advance world in terms of what you saw on television and all that kind of stuff—another fifty or sixty people that I had to deal with.⁶³

Ann Lewis indicated under her watch, there were approximately 25 in the office. “I think it has twenty-five. That included speech writing (domestic), research, events—which is a small sub-office—and after that sort of individuals.... I will tell you, that is pretty much the structure as I found it and probably the only thing I did that changed while I was here was I built up our capacity on events because I thought that was the single most important way we proactively got our message out, events at which the President, in his own voice, was going to be delivering a message.”⁶⁴

In the descriptions below, the latest organizational configuration of the office was used to provide information on how many people worked in the office and what their job titles were. For most offices, the date used was the fall of 2000, but several, such as the Office of Media Affairs, have not existed as a separate unit for some while. For the Office of Media Affairs, the date used is the Spring of 1995, which was at a time when it was a strong unit within the Press Office.

⁶² Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁶³ Donald Baer interview.

⁶⁴ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

Office of Media Affairs - Spring, 1995⁶⁵

- Director of Media Affairs
- Regional Projects Coordinator and Specialty Press Director
 - Specialty Press Assistant
- Two regional coordinators
- Television Services Coordinator
- Radio Services Coordinator
 - Deputy Radio Services Coordinator
- Two News Analysis Coordinators

Media Affairs is an office that demonstrates the manner in which a division can be bounced around among White House units.⁶⁶ At the same time, it gives an example of the method by which publicity units are tied together with a common element being the staff's interest in reaching an audience outside of Washington through a planned and organized effort to send information favorable to the President to those reporting across the country.

In looking through the location of the office in recent White Houses under the various Chiefs of Staff, Press Secretaries, directors of the Office of Communications and the Office of Public Liaison, one can see that the unit is most associated with a general communications or publicity effort. Only in the Carter years and in the latter part of the Clinton administration has the unit been seen as a division of the regular press operation. At no time during the Reagan or Bush years was the unit found within the Press Office. That is because it is by nature a planning operation and recent Republican administrations have viewed that as an element of the Communications operation, which has often been associated with the Chief of Staff's operation. With the capacity of the unit to disseminate information outside of Washington and to coordinate information within the federal government, it is particularly useful as a resource of persuasion. With the interest of the Clinton White House in bringing persuasion into the Press Office, the placement of that unit there is telling. In the Carter White House, the opposite was true: it was housed in the Press Office because they had no persuasion.

Speechwriting and Research - Fall 2000

- Assistant to the President and Director of Speechwriting
 - Deputy Director of Speechwriting
 - Special Assistant to the Director of Speechwriting
- Special Assistant to the President and Senior Speechwriter
- Four Presidential Speechwriters
- Two Senior Speechwriters
- Director of Research
- Three Associate Directors of Research

⁶⁵ The office organization descriptions are based on *National Journal's The Capital Source*. It is published twice a year from Fall 1987 forward. Prior to the date, *National Journal* published a White House Phone Directory.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the Office of Media Affairs, see the essay on the Press Office by Martha Joynt Kumar. It is Report # 31 in the series of office essays of the White House 2001 Project.

The Communications Director has a role in what the President says, where he gives a speech, and what the audience is. All of that is part of the speech process, not just the words. It is the picture as well. It also means what press people to talk to about the speech. He controls the content of the speech and the selling of it as well. If he has control of speeches, his recommendations go to the Chief of Staff on the scheduling of speeches, the message aspects, and then how they would be implemented or executed. Communications chiefs have sought control over speechwriting as control over the message is critical to effective communications. Authority over speechwriting does not come with the job, it comes by assignment.

Speechwriting is both an offensive and a defensive enterprise. If an administration is not careful, the speech process can end up dictating policy rather than describing it. Often speeches dictate policy. "I used to think before I went to the White House, for example, that you made policy decisions and then you wrote a speech to describe the policy," observed a former Chief of Staff.⁶⁷ "Oftentimes it doesn't work that way. Oftentimes, the fact of scheduling the speech drives policy because you don't get to the point where decisions get made until the President's going to be on the tube at nine o'clock tomorrow night to talk specifically about his tax policy. You guys still haven't resolved this question of what we're going to do on capital gains or whatever it might be. It's the fact of having scheduled a time, a locale where he's going to talk about a certain issue that forces the policymakers in the administration, including the President himself, to make decisions. So speeches drive policy oftentimes rather than the other way around." Don Baer spoke about the same thing in the Clinton administration. They would have an event scheduled and then would call the group the President was appearing before and would ask what they wanted to hear.

[Scheduling and Advance - Fall 2000](#)

[Scheduling](#)

- Assistant to the President and Director of Presidential Scheduling
 - Senior Deputy Director of Presidential Scheduling
 - Deputy Director of Presidential Scheduling
 - Associate Director of Presidential Scheduling
 - Special Assistant to the Director
 - Three Deputy Directors of Presidential Scheduling
 - Presidential Scheduling Coordinators
- Director of Presidential Scheduling Correspondence
- Presidential Diarist
- Director of Scheduling and Advance for the First Lady
 - Two Schedulers
- Staff Assistant

⁶⁷ Background interview.

Advance

- Assistant to the President and Director of Advance
 - Deputy Director of Advance
- Two Trip Directors
- Eight Associate Directors of Presidential Advance
- Assistant Director of Advance

The Communications Director must have some control over the scheduling process in order to be effective in his or her job and also the process of advancing presidential trips to make certain he will appear in the right place to emphasize the message he and his staff want to communicate. Michael Deaver indicated he had control over scheduling President Reagan, which was critical to his notion of presidential communications. It was first and foremost a way of protecting the President. “By the time that you took care of getting that schedule going and keeping him on schedule and protecting him, as I saw my responsibility, for whatever people were going to do or say, I had a full time job with that,” said Deaver.⁶⁸ Ann Lewis discussed the scheduling meetings that were held once or twice a week in the Clinton White House. Those sessions involved a “significant number of people. The Director of Communications, now Loretta Ucelli; Scheduling; head of Scheduling—who walks us through what’s available and what’s doable—and then representatives from all the policy shops.”⁶⁹ Political Affairs was involved as well. Their planning is short and medium range, not long range. Lewis indicated that as interested as people are in long range planning, it is difficult to bring it about. In the Reagan White House, however, the Blair House Group provided them with the capacity to plan several months out. They did so during the first term and then returned to such planning later in the second term when Thomas Griscom served as the Communications Director.

Office of Public Liaison - Fall 2000

- Assistant to the President and Director of Public Liaison
 - Three Special Assistants to the Director
 - Deputy Director of Public Liaison
 - Assistant to the Deputy Director
- Eight Associate Directors of Public Liaison
- Chief of Staff
- Events Coordinator
- Director of Women’s Initiatives and Outreach

The Office of Public Liaison was created in 1974 in President Ford’s first month in office. Its genesis is found in the Nixon White House where people in the Office of Communications performed the function of contacting groups to provide them with information about administration achievements. The office is responsible for contacting groups with information the President and his staff want them to have, but it is also a main contact for groups wanting to get in touch with government officials. The office is divided

⁶⁸ Michael Deaver interview.

⁶⁹ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

with associates responsible for portfolios of groups important to the President's electoral and governing coalitions.

While the first director was a man, William Baroody, and another, David Demarest, served for a short period at the end of the Bush Administration, all of the other directors were women. There were two directors in the Carter White House, five in the Reagan White House, two in the Bush White House, including Demarest, and five in the Clinton years. Of the fourteen directors serving from 1977 onward, a man served for only a part of one year in the 24 year period.

When President Bush was in office, the Office of Public Liaison was lodged under the Office of Communications for some portion of the time. As the Communications Director, David Demarest was responsible for several units, including Public Liaison, Speechwriting, Media Relations, and Public Affairs. Public Liaison was responsible for regular dealings with interest group representatives in an effort to build coalitions and to respond to their needs. The Office of Public Liaison at the end of the Reagan Administration contained several of the communications functions, including Speechwriting and Research, Public Affairs, and Media and Broadcast Relations. While the Reagan and Bush administrations combined Public Liaison and Communications, the same was not true in the Carter and Clinton administrations.

Public Affairs - Spring 1991

- Assistant to the President for Public Affairs
- Director, Public Affairs
- Two Associate Directors, Public Affairs
- Staff Assistant

Public Affairs is a unit found in the Office of Communications that was tasked in the Reagan Administration with the responsibility to coordinate those speaking for the administration to reporters and appearing on television or radio. In the Bush Administration, the office created and maintained a television studio in the Old Executive Office Building down the hall from the auditorium where presidents and their surrogates often appeared for press events, including press conferences. The studio is used to tape presidential greetings to various groups he cannot meet in person, often ones meeting in conventions in cities other than Washington. The studio is occasionally used as well by the First Lady to do similar tapings. Even senior staff have used the studio to do interviews with the anchors of local television stations.

The unit also provides surrogates with information on what topics to speak about and which ones to avoid. For Communication Director David Demarest, the office served as an "interagency coordinating group."⁷⁰ The unit was responsible for making certain television appearances were coordinated and that those appearing on the media had information about the administration's achievements and recent good news. If, for example, there were some new good economic numbers, the office would let people know prior to their media appearances.

⁷⁰ David Demarest interview.

Political Coordination & Planning

Gradually as the political resources of a White House have included regular polling and consultants who take the President's political temperature, the Communications Director has become a link of the Chief of Staff to the outside political world. Don Baer took that position during the Clinton reelection campaign. To some extent, the duties of the Communications Director depend upon the time in the administration when the person is in the post. Beginning in the midpoint of the first term of a President, an important aspect of the job is to run the White House angle of the reelection campaign. If the Communications Director serves during the latter part of the second term, his or her job involves yet another campaign. The Legacy Campaign.

Presidential Reelection Campaign

The influence of the Communications Director is at its height in the White House during the early period before the campaign begins as at that point there is no campaign manager, the message is important, and he is the person who coordinates the message, people, events, and institutions. The Communications Director has an important role in the campaign as demonstrated by just about everyone of them in office during an election. David Gergen worked as a link to the campaign of President Ford in 1976, as did Don Baer for President Clinton in 1996, and Michael Deaver for President Reagan in 1984.

In addition to staging White House events for the President during the campaign, the communications person works on coordinating the message with the campaign and with its pollsters and consultants. In the Clinton reelection campaign, Don Baer had the role of coordinating the campaign with the governing operation. His duties included smoothing over problems in the White House that swept in from the campaign, such as the aggressive role in White House activities played by President Clinton's political consultant, Dick Morris. A good example of the volatile nature of the Communications Director's position is the way that Don Baer was caught between Dick Morris and Leon Panetta. Baer viewed Morris as someone who effectively "mined" the agencies for political and policy ideas for the campaign in 1995 and 1996, but Panetta was disturbed by Morris's actions as they involved end runs around the Chief of Staff. Panetta described the problem presented by Morris's political work inside of the White House.

I think if you think there's an end run going on—the first thing is to sense whether that's happening. It wasn't so much—the best example is Morris when he first came on suddenly decided he wanted to take charge of the policy operation and he started meeting with some of my staff. I immediately pulled him in and said you can't do that. Then he continued to do it and I went to the President. I said, 'Mr. President, this cannot happen. I can't have a campaign type coming between me and the staff. If he's got things he wants the staff to do, I'll make the decision whether the staff does it but I don't want him going around meeting with my staff.' The President said that's fine, do that and told Morris the same thing. So that fixed it. You have to be very sensitive to that. You've got to make sure that's not happening.⁷¹

⁷¹ Leon Panetta interview.

The Legacy Campaign

Beginning with President Eisenhower's Press Secretary James Hagerty who carried out the functions of a Communications Director without having a title, the person in a White House responsible for communications also takes on the responsibility of designing and implementing the Legacy Campaign. The point of the campaign is to showcase what the President has done during his term on the policy front and wrap it tight at the end with high public approval ratings for the President and his handling of his job. In the Reagan second term, Communications Director Thomas Griscom and then his successor Mari Maseng worked on pulling together information on the accomplishments of the President and his administration. They prepared briefing materials and held events emphasizing their policy work. Thomas Griscom described how he organized the legacy effort. "I started by asking people, "Those of you who were there in the first days of the Reagan Administration, I want to see the documents you put together because you defined what this presidency was all about." So I started that way and working back."⁷² In the last year, gradually they released information on the President's efforts on the domestic and foreign policy fronts. While there was some effort in President Clinton's final year to think about the President's legacy, such efforts were put aside as the President wanted to remain active until his final days.

Planning and Staging Events

Strategic planning lay at the heart of the communications operation of President Reagan. Michael Deaver discussed how they were able to get ahead of events by setting out time where they did long range planning. Most White Houses find it difficult to do, but their experience was it paid off handsomely. Deaver explained:

You have to because you're judged every day on what kind of job you're doing. When I set up the Blair House Group, it was probably the smartest thing I did which basically met every Friday. It was [Richard] Darman [Director, Office of Management and Budget] and [Craig] Fuller [Chief of Staff for Vice President Bush] and the scheduling guy, Fred Ryan and [Ken] Duberstein, I think. We met uninterrupted for about three hours every Friday afternoon at the Blair House. We would take the three-month schedule and we would plan every day for three months. Then we'd take it for the next two weeks and we'd plan every hour. Then I'd take it back and give it to Baker to be sure he was okay with it. Then I'd give it to Reagan and be sure he was okay with it.

The Reagan group had a strategic plan that had as its goal shaping the manner in which the news was delivered through newspapers and on television.

So we had a strategic plan. It wasn't getting up every morning and reading the *Washington Post* and saying, 'Oh my God, this is our day.' It was many times going to bed knowing what the *Washington Post* and, hopefully, having written the *Washington Post* headline by what we had done. So from a communications standpoint we had a strategic approach. We had control and we had that structure of what we called the Blair House Group that gave it a continuing review by all the people that really made a difference.⁷³

⁷² Thomas Griscom interview.

⁷³ Michael Deaver interview.

Putting on planned events involves coordination of featured players and the staging of the occasion. It is the Communications Office that stitches together events combining the resources and people of the White House with Cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, and groups involved in issues featured at the occasions staged at the White House. At the same time, he is a manager because he or she stages events. Ann Lewis created a small unit that dealt with events management.

It's two people but we would convene a message meeting for each event when I could talk about what is it we're trying to achieve here, what's the setting, what's the audience. And then after that it gets carried out.... Well, one, my deputy director, Stacie Spector, had principal responsibility after that meeting for following up on events. I think communications right now, the way Loretta Ucelli has it, she has two deputies, one of whom is doing events and one of them is doing more the strategy. Then we had George Caudill who we call sort of the big picture guy who really goes out and says what will it look like and how it should be done. Again, Stacie, George, probably one or two people working [together]. It was a cluster, let's say, that worked around how you put on an event for maximum advantage.... That's once the scheduling decisions were made.

Following the decision to schedule an event is the decision of where it will be held and whether the President will take part.

Once a decision has been made—we're going to do Medicaid on X date—sometimes that means you already know where you're going to do it; more often it doesn't. It just means we're going to roll out X policy on X date. Well, do you do it at the White House? Do you do it at a children's hospital? Who's the audience? Who gets invited? How do you structure it to get maximum attention? My working principle was the most valuable resource we have is the President's time and we'll never have enough of it. So if we're going to use—I should say amplification as the second thing I added for the same reason. If we've got an hour and a half of the President's time, we better make the most of it. So every thing from where it's held to what's the signage to what's the picture to what's the language, the goal is to decide all of that to strengthen the message.⁷⁴

An example of an event would be the gun control one held in the Rose Garden right before the interview I had with her. She went through how that event was set up.

That got set up pretty quickly. There are two kinds of events. [The first are] those in which we have the most time to plan and on which we have the most control because we're proactively rolling out a message that we care about. The second are events that are put together more quickly to maximize something that's happening. Here you've got a gun debate so it was decided I think the Friday before we would do an event on guns. In this case it was pretty easy for the setting. It was going to be the Rose Garden because we don't need to tell the story of guns; everybody knows what it is. We wanted to make the case that it was a presidential event and we began it as an event where women members of Congress would step forward and talk about why this was important to them. Now the day before we heard that their male colleagues wanted to be part of it to so it got adjusted.⁷⁵

Legislative Affairs was involved as people from that office chose the members. Lewis continued:

⁷⁴ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁷⁵ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

Legislative Affairs. Once you do the meeting then you say, ‘Okay, Leg[islative] Affairs you’ll tell us who the members are going to be.’ Again, because that was a concrete ‘here’s the issue, here’s what we’re talking about, this is about members of Congress,’ that was simpler. A more complicated one might be a kind of community policing. We’re still likely to do it in the Rose Garden because, again, for us saying this President cares about keeping you safe is important. We’ll have police officers in uniform around him. And then who is in the audience? Local government might invite people in for getting cops grants; representatives of police organizations will be there. So it’s a mix of people who are directly impacted by the announcement.

Policy is the focus of events but how it is presented depends on the stage in the policy process and whether the Congress is in session. “The meeting would last about an hour and the number of events to be discussed may depend on how many days we have to fill. We can look at a month and have five message opportunities; we can look at a month and have three. It depends on what else is there. The President is going to be in Europe for eight days, and three days are already filled in; you don’t have much time left. Or you can have a lot.... The second thing that makes it difficult is how much competition there is, how many of the policy shops have announcements that they are trying to put on the schedule.... Actually you’re a little more likely to do policy announcements when they’re out of session because there’s a little more space but you react to policy when they’re in session,” commented Ann Lewis.⁷⁶

Working the Press

An important aspect of staging events is to work the press. Coverage is what they want. In addition to bringing in television, the White House uses the wire services as the tie to the local community. “Sometimes the afternoon before you might give the wires—for example, if we’re going out with the story on community policing and here’s what it’s going to mean state by state, you can give that to the wires and they will run in each of their regions a story about what it means for this community,” commented Ann Lewis.⁷⁷

Newspapers are not so hard to deal with. Sometimes the White House operations aim at *USA Today* because of the newspaper’s interest in issues people are concerned with.

Very important because they like stories that are real and that have a real impact where they can show how it matters,” commented Ann Lewis. In that one there’s kind of a rotation, if we get a story in *USA Today* by sort of giving them some information—I’m not sure it’s a particular kind of story so much as it’s just high on our list that we placed it. Again, I don’t have to sit and plot how to do an event in order to get the attention of a newspaper. You can sit down and give a newspaper a story, work with them on the story, have the President give a speech. The reason I pay attention to events and the kind of setting I talked about is pictures for cameras. It’s a different strategy in reaching newspapers. [Press Secretary] Joe Lockhart’s briefing the day of an event in which he says the President’s going to speak and sort of walks people through what it’s going to be about will reach the newspapers. The combination of the President’s speech and a Lockhart or [Gene] Sperling [National Economic Council director] or somebody coming in and briefing on the issues, that reaches the newspapers.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁷⁷ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁷⁸ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

One of the major difficulties in presenting an administration is working with the criteria the press use to decide what is newsworthy. Lewis noted the press's interest in the future, what is going to be proposed rather than what has actually happened. "I think it is simply easier to—people are more likely to know what you're going to do. It's easier to break through on a story about a new policy, a new goal, a new agenda. It is impossible to get press attention for something that's already been done, virtually. Aside from the stock market figures. And, if you can't communicate it, people aren't going to know about it."⁷⁹

Measuring Success

One of the duties of the Communications Director is to measure the success of their operations. That is most often done through a combination of anecdotes and press clippings. Polling counts here as well.

It's a little bit more anecdotal than I'd like but you try to test—there's a lot of public poll data available and how well people think you're doing and what they know about what you're doing, that's useful. But the other is you can get clippings; is it being used? Is it appearing? Do people know what you're doing? It's anecdotal but it's sort of trustworthy because people ask for more of it. When you do something that works, you're going to hear that they want a lot more of it.... I'll go out some place and give a speech and people will talk about what they've heard that we're doing, what they think, what they know about, how it is they're getting their information.⁸⁰

In addition to anecdotal information, polling is a way of measuring success for an administration. When asked what polls tell the White House, Ann Lewis observed, "Like most institutions, polls can tell you, if you read them right, what people know about what you're doing, what they may not know and you want to work harder to get the message out," said Ann Lewis.⁸¹ Knowing what the public's assessment is of what they are doing worked in their favor as the Clinton White House designed strategy to move policy with a communications plan to accompany it.

MESSAGE RESOURCES: PEOPLE AND VENUES

In putting together events, messages, and the like, the staff works from a rich pool of resources and venues. Who they choose as speaker and what the person or persons will say depend upon the goal the President and his staff have for the event. Their choices of surrogates and venues include the following:

1. The President

- Addresses, including the Inaugural Address and the State of the Union,
- Oval Office televised addresses,
- Scheduled speeches, including the annual Economic Message, the opening of the United Nations in the fall, and constituent association conventions, especially those held in Washington,
- Speeches with a message searching for an event showcasing the President's ideas,

⁷⁹ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁸⁰ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

⁸¹ Ann Lewis interview, June 17, 1999.

Radio address on Saturdays,
Presidential events where he gives remarks in one of the following locations:

The Oval Office

The East Room

The Rose Garden

The Roosevelt Room

Room 450 in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building

Press events:

Interviews with a news organization or a particular correspondent

Press conferences

Appearances in the Briefing Room

2. The Press Secretary

Announcement or a response to a question in the morning in the informal session in the Press Secretary's office with reporters, known as the "gaggle",

Briefing with reporters in the afternoon as an announcement or as a response to a reporter's query,

Exclusive to a particular reporter,

Background information provided to a reporter or group of reporters,

Information provided in the above ways by a deputy.

3. Senior Staff

Chief of Staff regularly speaks with selected reporters on a background basis as well as sometimes in on the record sessions,

Sunday talk programs and morning news programs. The Chief of Staff or those designated by him to represent the senior staff position appear on such programs on a regular basis,

Senior economic, national security, and domestic policy staff appear regularly on television news programs throughout the day according to the message the White House wants to send.

4. Policy Makers

Senior staff on National Security Council, National Economic Council, Domestic Policy staff provide information to reporters as exclusives, on background, and on the record,

Department and agency heads sometimes provide reporters with information, including at White House appearances with the President and in the Briefing Room,

Vice President in some of the same settings as the President, including scheduled speeches and remarks in the above locations,

First Lady is sometimes involved in some of the presidential appearances, expressing a policy viewpoint of her own.

5. Outside Resources

Interest groups often figure into events at the White House where they can be used to emphasize an issue, such as providing a "victim" to take part in an event,

Pollsters regularly provide information to a small circle in the White House for use in designing political and communications strategies,

Political consultants to shore up the President's image from a point outside of the White House, as did James Carville during many rough points in the Clinton term,

Elected officials in the Congress, governors, and mayors often serve as witnesses supporting the intentions of the President and his administration.

DAILY ROUTINES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

The routines of the Communications Director include regularly scheduled morning meetings revolving around the schedule and interests of the Chief of Staff and in the afternoon random meetings focused on coordination activities dealing with scheduling people and arranging events. While the morning meetings are focused on senior staff, the afternoon ones are deputy level meetings carrying out the plans and interests developed and articulated in the morning meetings.

1. Morning Meetings

Ann Lewis described the rhythms of her morning. “There’s a 7:45, small senior staff meeting. I think it’s eight people. We then go to a senior staff meeting, larger, at eight o’clock. After that senior staff meeting about another dozen people go off into [Joe] Lockhart’s office to talk about sort of the press lines, who’s talking to who, what are the points we’re trying to make today and tomorrow basically. After that, every day varies.”⁸² She continued. “Days will vary. When Congress is in and you’re close to the legislative session, you’re working on budget and legislation and that’s going to drive your day. Earlier in the year you have more freedom to sort of initiate and set the agenda. You try to get out most of the issues you want to make the case for early if you can. I find it hard to say—it’s not as if every Wednesday is like this or every Friday is like that. After that they vary a lot.”

Don Baer explained his morning meeting schedule: “Every day, depending on what job you were in and what the regime was, you’d have a small group meeting at the beginning of the day with the Chief of Staff and then a larger senior staff meeting that the Chief of Staff or his designee would run. Then you have a communications group meeting that was sort of designed to give them a heads up on what was happening that day and all that kind of stuff. So those would be three things you’d try to do every day if you were in town. But there might well be what you would think of as subgroups of staff meeting at any time throughout the day.”⁸³

2. Meetings Throughout the Day

Don Baer sketched out his White House day once the early morning meetings were over. His afternoon, like those who preceded him, was composed of meetings scheduled for individual purposes rather than being regularly scheduled ones as the morning sessions were.

On an average day, there would probably be for me somewhere between ten and twenty meetings in the course of the day that I had to go to that were meetings I had to be at because someone there would be waiting to hear what my opinion was or my plans were for something we had to do. At some point you have to plan for those meetings, think through what you’re going to do. Of course, on this side would be the President’s schedule, some of which would require my presence to either prep him or brief him or be in an event with him. That schedule of meetings would take you usually until about 7:00 at night and that would not take into account emergency meetings or crises or just some new thing that

⁸² Ann Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

⁸³ Don Baer interview.

cropped up that required you to assemble a group of people in your office to talk about it. That would take you until about 7:00 at night.⁸⁴

3. Evenings of White House Work

White House work does not end in the early evening. Even if they are not working in the White House, communications staff members attend social functions where they might meet people in and out of government who can help with the administration's communications efforts.

For Don Baer, evening was the time he went over speeches written by his staff prior to their going to the President.

By 7:00 hopefully somebody had a speech that was ready that was going to have to be delivered the next day or the day after that. As Communications Director, I would need to look at that. Even though I had a lot of confidence in the people who were running the speechwriting operation and we would have talked over many times what it was supposed to be or what was going in to it, it's just always true that between the idea and the reality falls the shadow. So clearing away the shadow was part of what my job was supposed to be based on what I either could intuit or knew directly the President or his most immediate advisors on these things would want in the speech. So there would be the need to read and edit that and some negotiations over how it was going to be and if there was a policy that wasn't ready yet or came in differently than we had been told it would come in; all those things had to be made ready. It was rare that I would be ready to leave there before 8:30 at night and more common that maybe twice a week I would need to be there until 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 o'clock at night all to go home and be up again at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning.⁸⁵

For Democrats and Republicans alike, it is difficult to get out of the White House on the early side.

WORK LIFE IN THE OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

As difficult as life is in the White House for staff members, only at the end of an administration is there a shortage of qualified applicants. The benefits outweigh the various pressures that make up the disadvantages surrounding White House work life. Ann Lewis spoke for many when she summed up the opportunity working in the White House affords those interested in service there. "I get to work with people I admire, whose values I share, and who participate in making policy that's making this country a better place to live in."⁸⁶

1. Physical Stress Involved in Working in a White House

Ann Lewis discussed the physical side to working in a White House. "There is a physical stress which is grinding, every day. You come in at seven-thirty in the morning and you don't leave until after seven o'clock at night. The time constraints I think are grinding for people. You have to assume you're going to put in part of your time on the

⁸⁴ Don Baer interview.

⁸⁵ Don Baer interview.

⁸⁶ Ann Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

weekend, almost every weekend. That's a lot of time. And if there's a meeting or something comes up later in the evening, you're going to stay as long as it takes. So it is both tough physically on you and, for people with young children or young families, it is a very tough set of choices. It's very difficult."⁸⁷

Margita White, Communications Director in the Ford Administration, illustrated the physical stress involved in working in the White House. She left her post as Communications Director for a seat on the Federal Communications Commission. Much as she loved her White House work, she found it exhausting. She provides the details:

I was relieved when the FCC opening came up. I was exhausted going into the 1976 campaign. It's funny how this came out. It was in April, I think. I had been traveling all over the country on Air Force One or the press plane – a six state trip where I had arranged several regional briefings and other events for the President. I got home at three-thirty or four in the morning, went to bed, got up at six, knocked over a full pot of coffee on my lap, and ended up in the emergency room with second-degree burns all the way down my leg. As they peeled off the skin and I was in the emergency room, Dick Wiley, who was then the chairman of the FCC, tried to reach me to let me know that he had just been to the White House Personnel Office to urge I be appointed to an impending FCC vacancy he just had learned about that morning. When I got his surprising message as I came to, I thought this was something I wanted to do. Timing was everything. I'd drafted the proposal for the expanded Communications Office role in the campaign, but at that moment I knew I didn't have the strength to follow through.⁸⁸

While most people did not meet with exhaustion at quite that level, they do find they are worn out when they leave the White House.

2. On Call and in the Public Eye.

From the other side of the aisle, Thomas Griscom explained the way in which you bring the White House into your house when you work there: "You really are on call and accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You have no privacy. You do not go hide some place. The stories about a White House operator tracking you down even if you haven't told them where you're going to be are real because that's their job. For whatever period of time you're there, if you're in the White House—your time is contingent on White House events and everything else is secondary. And that's hard. If you're a parent, if you have children, when WHCA shows up and all of a sudden starts putting White House phones in your house, you get a sense real quick that everything has changed and that there is a new priority in your life. And that factors into some of the goals and things that you set for yourself."⁸⁹

There is special pressure associated with the scrutiny given a White House by the press, the public, and one's political opponents as well as allies. Ann Lewis observed: "The second is the emotional strain I assume when everything you may say and do is enormously important, is watched so closely, and has potentially the impact that a White House statement does." Ann Lewis discussed the pressure associated with the specter of lawsuits involving the work being done. "You add to that being in, as we are, a hostile political

⁸⁷ Ann Lewis interview, July 9, 1999.

⁸⁸ White House Interview Program, Interview with Margita White, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., October 26, 1999.

⁸⁹ Thomas Griscom interview.

climate in which the danger of lawsuits, special investigators, having your notes or papers sort of called in on any particular issue is ever present.”⁹⁰ Locating documents, meeting with lawyers, and preparing to testify all take their toll. Sidney Blumenthal, who was a senior adviser to President Clinton on communications, had some of his subpoenas framed and hanging on his office walls and others stored away. When asked what impact receiving subpoenas has, he indicated it makes life in the White House more difficult. “It’s harder. It’s much, much harder. I think it was unique and that people will understand it over time, when they see historically how unique it was.”⁹¹

3. The Responsibility Associated with White House Work

The stakes associated with a White House job are very high as they involve the reputation and career of the President. Thomas Griscom explained the pressures associated with taking actions impacting the President. “

Unless you have dedicated yourself to this as the only thing you want to do, it is mentally and physically demanding on you. When you’re in the middle of a scandal, you are making decisions on the run quite often, you hope they’re right but nothing is 100 per cent right. You will make a few miscues here and there. When you sit there and think about it, I’m sure this White House went through it. If I make the wrong call, if I say the wrong thing, if I look the wrong way, what happens if I’m the person who caused the President to be impeached. There is nothing I have found any place else that comes close to that level of responsibility that you can make a misstatement, you can make a bad judgment on an issue and it can backfire. When it does, the stakes are real high. I think corporate America has some of the same interactions as a White House. That’s what I found when I went on to a corporate job, but there you’re not always on call. Something comes up you deal with it. In the White House you never get away from it. You’re never away from it.”⁹²

Part of the pressure of working in a White House is being successful in your work. For Don Baer, in addition to the physical strain of the many long White House hours, there were others:

A lot of pressure and stress on you about, in the meantime, how did the thing that you planned a week ago play today when the President went out and did it? How did it play in the press? Did all the pieces of it fit together and go the way you had planned? How did he feel about it because you don’t always have the time in specifics and even if you do, he’s not going to remember most of them to tell him exactly what he’s doing and why he’s doing it and what his place in all this is; here’s what he’s going to say. What did he want to say? Did it come out the way he thought it would?⁹³

For David Demarest the stress of White House work life had to do with the pressure of knowing everything you need during a day meant something important to someone around the nation.

⁹⁰ Ann Lewis interview,

⁹¹ Sidney Blumenthal interview.

⁹² Thomas Griscom interview.

⁹³ Donald Baer interview.

The stress of the White House I think isn't the nastiest part. You've got politics in churches; you've got politics in corporations. My CEO got fired at [company name deleted] and that was pretty ugly. So I've seen some pretty gruesome things on the corporate side. I think where the stress comes in the White House is that every day is judgment day. You are constantly up against an event, a speech, an action, a statement, a press conference. There is something every day that is significant to somebody. It might not be significant to the nation but it is certainly significant to some subset of the nation that for whatever reason you have deemed or the White House had deemed important enough that there ought to be this engagement. All of that has to go right.⁹⁴

4. *Time to Leave*

When the "irritation level overwhelms the exhilaration level," its time to leave, says Don Baer:

I felt like the very clear end zone for me was the election in 1996. I felt committed. I had asked my wife—I felt it was important I stay through that election. And I wound up staying for another six to eight months or so; four or five of those were about Erskine Bowles and the President had asked me if I would stay that long in order to help them bridge from the operations and what we were doing in first term and the elections into the second term. Then two of them were about me trying to figure out what I wanted to do next and just sort of the cool down period. Even when I left, there was still the need at least for a year cool down period just for me as compared to my obligations on the other side of that ledger. You could say when your irritation level seems to overwhelm your exhilaration level that's when it's time to leave. That's in very personal terms.⁹⁵

In contrast, Thomas Griscom found he had no difficulty deciding when to leave, because he came in with a set of personal goals.

I knew it was time to leave. With any job I've had, I go in with a set of goals I want to achieve; they're personal goals. I don't print them or openly discuss them. Senator Baker and I did talk about them. I know what I want to achieve, and if I get them done then at that point I stop and ask myself is there something else now that is a reason to stay, or is it time to move on? To date, I have never had a second thought after achieving what I wanted to do going in, that I said I should stay longer. That's how I do it. But there were specific, personal goals that I had going into the White House.⁹⁶

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned in the Office of Communications are fairly standard throughout a White House. The White House is an institution unlike any other people have experienced

⁹⁴ David Demarest interview.

⁹⁵ Donald Baer interview.

⁹⁶ Thomas Griscom interview.

1. Have People Around Who Are “Gray in the Temples”

In a White House you need to be flexible and have people around who have a sense of the way the ground shifts around you. Don Baer spoke about the need to have in the operation people who have previously served in a White House:

I just think you need people who are a little bit older, with more experience. But people who are older with more experience also just can't be people who are set in their ways. You've got to be—one of the things about White House life, I think is true of any White House, is you've got to be enormously flexible and open to different ways of doing things and able and willing to go with the flow. Everything is going to change. The ground is going to shift completely out from under you. I'm for control, obviously. I'm for structures that help you to do that. But you've got to have a lot of play in those joints and you have to be willing to just go with that and not let that frustrate you. There's a fine balance between saying that's the way it shifted, let's just go with it, and, on the other hand, saying, no, we said we were going to do it this way; let's do it this way. Let's try to make that new set of circumstances work in our context rather than completely shift our context to do those. It's hard to find the people who have both the experience and a little bit of gray in their temples who at the same time can be flexible and open enough to new circumstances to find the right ways to accommodate them.⁹⁷

2. Talk to Your Predecessors and Others

Thomas Griscom spoke with his predecessors when he came into the White House as Communications Director in 1986. He came in with Senator Howard Baker who was tapped for the post of Chief of Staff when President Reagan was in substantial political difficulty over the Iran – Contra issue. Griscom spoke with his predecessors as he came in and then maintained contact with a group of outside people who provided him with some perspective:

But the first thing we had to do—we were always suspect because we were not identified as true believers—was what were those defining points? I talked to Jody Powell; so you get the benefit of his perspective of the [Jimmy] Carter Administration, what they had put in place. A person needs to understand that moment in time that you've got when you're occupying a certain office in a White House. You stop for a minute and reflect, 'There have been many people who came before me and many people who will come after me. I've got an opportunity to maybe leave an imprint where somebody years from now will look at something that we did.' But don't think you're inventing or creating the first snapshot of this. Many people have been here dealing with and thinking about these issues. If you're smart enough you go back and you look at them; you basically sort through ideas and you update them in some cases. But it's important to learn. You need to be a good reader, a good listener, interested in history, reaching out and opening your mind and acknowledging, 'This is a listening session. Here's what I'm trying to do. Help me.'⁹⁸

Once he established a practice of speaking with people outside of the White House, Griscom created a group he regularly spoke with for their perspective. “One of the things I did was have an informal group that I would talk to every week just to make sure you don't lose perspective,” he said. “Some of them had been press secretaries. Some of them

⁹⁷ Don Baer interview.

⁹⁸ Thomas Griscom interview.

were reporters. Some of them were policy people. They were both Republicans and Democrats.” He added:

I never put the whole group together. A lot of times because of the press of business they were telephone conversations. Sometimes you could sneak away for a little bit during lunch and catch up. But they were not formal sessions; they were more informal give and take. They worked because it was all kept private. This was not trying to say, ‘look who I can talk to’ or somebody on the outside saying, ‘Well, they’re asking my advice.’ I think that was important. It was really designed to understand what we’re doing right; what we’re doing wrong. That’s how they always started. The first piece of advice most of them gave—and they were right—is, you will come in there with your breath taken away when you look at the magnitude of what you have to deal with. And you come in from the outside and you’re not tainted by the White House but within a short period of time you’ll get consumed. What you’ll find is that your ability to carve out any time to think and look ahead will go away. Sure enough, that’s what happened. You get so consumed by the day to day management that you stop and want to know where you are, how you are doing and what you are missing.

Thomas Griscom found his informal group to be a useful sounding board, capable of alerting him to how their actions were playing outside of the White House:

If I made a mistake here, I’ve got to find a place to try and correct it if I can. The monitoring is easy: Tell me what’s going on politically? What are you hearing? What are our friends saying? What are our critics saying about us? Sometimes, believe it or not, the critics were not in the other party, they were with the same party. They were people with a more philosophical point of view. You needed information. What I would do, even if it was only for fifteen minutes, was stop and think a little bit right there. Then you’d come back and deal with them. I had a lot of discussions, as you would expect, during Iran-Contra. There was advice given that you’d say, ‘Thank you but I just can’t do that.’ But you wanted to hear what was on somebody’s mind. But it didn’t take away the fact that, in the final analysis you’re inside and they’re not. You can get the best advice and you should do that. You should never isolate yourself. I also believe you should never isolate yourself politically because there are a lot of smart Republicans and smart Democrats out there. You can reach out and get information. But then you ultimately have to make the recommendation and live with the decision.⁹⁹

3. It Is Difficult To Make Use of Lessons Learned

Once staff come into a White House, it is very difficult for them to apply the lessons they learn as they go along in their work. The pace of the work and the variety of the issues they work on make it difficult to stop and look back at where they are. A person who worked in the early Office of Communications in the early part of the Clinton White House explained:

Our people weren’t stupid so I think we had a sense in real time of what was working and what wasn’t working and why something wasn’t working. The pace of our lives and the pace of the President’s schedule didn’t engender a lot of opportunities to have lessons learned sessions after the conclusion of events because, particularly in the first year, we were a proposal machine. And as the economic plan was coming to closure, we were already planning launch events for NAFTA, launch events for healthcare and everything else you could possibly imagine. So there is insufficient time for reflection. I don’t know of a

⁹⁹ Thomas Griscom interview.

manager who ran the White House who suggested for more than a fleeting moment that we pay attention to the lessons learned in a formal and systematic way from a previous experience that could be thoughtfully applied to one experience moving forward.¹⁰⁰

4. Don't Mix Information and Persuasion

While the Press Secretary seeks to be distinguished by his objectivity and responsiveness in the handling of information, the Communications Director is a partisan who moves ideas and points of view. In the duality of persuasion and information, he represents using information for persuasion. In contrast, the Press Secretary deals with that duality in an opposite manner: he is most concerned with the authenticity of information and secondarily with persuasion. While he wants to present a case for the President and for his administration, in order to be effective he must do so in the context of the authenticity of information.

Mike McCurry talks about the difficulties of doing so. What that means to the Communications office is significant, as it should be the shop doing the persuasion while the Press Office is the place for information. Both are necessary and should work together. Mike McCurry discussed the way in which the persuasion function has come into the Press Office. “Now there is a persuasion function that is located in the office too and that is the one I’m increasingly ambivalent about, is part of the job of that office to participate in the selling of the program. I think that’s where you drift over to spin and you drift over to argumentation and opinion-based communicating. I think that’s a little more problematic. I’m not sure that’s a legitimate function of that office. I’ve even thought of going so far as to separating the political function out of that office entirely.”¹⁰¹

SUMMARY

The Office of Communications is an important White House unit for a President, and its director is vital to him as well, because communications is closely linked with a successful presidency. Formed in 1969, the Office of Communications has served for 32 years as a nuts and bolts operation delivering information beyond the White House environs, but also staging events in Washington, and serving as a location where communications strategies are developed and executed. The communications operation provides a President with the opportunity and the resources to coordinate the publicity for his administration and to shape his statements and explanations in a manner that will achieve his personal, policy, and electoral goals. While there are those who would characterize such operations as presidential fluff, the reality is that of presidents who were reelected in the post-World War II period all had state-of-the-art communications operations. Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton had people and organizations who helped their presidents coordinate information in the Executive Branch, develop targeted messages aimed at identified publics, and then amplify them in a manner capable of cutting through the fog that so often shrouds

¹⁰⁰ Background interview.

¹⁰¹ Michael McCurry interview.

the public's view of Washington politics and their President. For these reasons, the Office of Communications is a valued operation for the President and his White House staff.