



THE WHITE HOUSE  
TRANSITION PROJECT  
1997—2017

RICE UNIVERSITY'S  
BAKER INSTITUTE  
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

*SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER*

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Report 2017—10

## WHITE HOUSE STAFF AND ORGANIZATION: TEN OBSERVATIONS

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director  
*White House Transition Project*

Funded by the  MOODY  
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## WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

**The White House Transition Project.** Established in 1999 to provide information to incoming White House staff members so that they can hit the ground running, The White House Transition Project includes a group of presidency scholars from across the country who participate in writing essays about past transitions and the inner workings of key White House offices. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2009 and now the 2017 presidential transitions with the primary goal of streamlining the process and enhancing the understanding of White House operations. WHTP maintains an important, international dimension by consulting with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions. <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org>

**Rice University's James A. Baker, III Institute for Public Policy.** Founded in 1993 on the campus of Rice University, the Baker Institute has twenty programs that focus on a broad range of issues including energy, health, conflict resolution, science and technology, tax and expenditure policy and Latin America and China studies. With an eye toward educating and engaging the next generation of leaders, the Baker Institute collaborates with experts from academia, government, the media, business, and nongovernmental and private organizations. <http://bakerinstitute.org>

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO .....	II
WHITE HOUSE STRUCTURE .....	2
THE WHITE HOUSE STAFF.....	4
THE PRESIDENT .....	5
<i>Contact information</i>	5





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Governing from the White House has been a central feature of how recent chief executives launched their presidencies. Surrounding themselves with key aides who served the President as campaign and policy advisers, presidents brought their teams into the White House where they made many of their initial appointment and policy choices, developed and rolled out their strategic plans for their priorities, and established their leadership style. The White House is the wheelhouse when it comes to presidential decision-making. People, policy, politics, and publicity all come together in the White House as a President works to establish leadership and swiftly move an agenda. Departments and agency positions take time to fill and a President wants to proceed rapidly to take advantage of the good will that exists in the early days of an administration. In that effort besides a President's time, the second most valuable resource a President has is staff. The organization of White House staff offices as well as where and how a President distributes coveted top positions are key to understanding White House operations.

What follows are ten observations about White House staffing patterns, priorities, and effective practices over the course of several administrations. While not illustrative of all of these points, organization charts are helpful to understanding White House operations. The assembled dozen organization charts focus on the White House staff operations of Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton with a sample of three each for those presidents and one each from earlier Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. Together, they demonstrate two aspects of White House

organization.<sup>1</sup> First, they illustrate what White House offices existed under the six presidents and, second, how those presidents assigned their limited number of commissioned staff, the highest ranking White House staff members. A President is limited by law and budget to 25 Assistants to the President, 25 Deputy Assistants to the President, and around 70 Special Assistants.<sup>2</sup> How a President distributes staff among the offices reflects the chief executive's organizational choices and, by inference, decision-making structure. Staff organization tells us about who has access to a President and which offices are key to a President. Was there, for example, a strong Chief of Staff with political, communications, and policy planning units close-by as was the case with Leon Panetta in President Clinton's White House in 1994-1996, or, as in 1993-1994, the President's choice to have many top advisers report directly to him, not through the Chief of Staff? Such choices reflect important preferences about a President's decision-making process, a significant element in understanding White House operations.

## WHITE HOUSE STRUCTURE

1. White House staffing structures are more similar than they are different. Over the past fifty years, continuity characterizes White House operations. Offices develop constituencies and once established, it is difficult to eliminate them even though a

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<sup>1</sup> The White House Transition Project developed the organization based on White House phone books. Where we could locate them, we used internal White House phone books as the most complete source of White House information. The Obama White House no longer has internal phone books and we found only some years for the earlier administrations. Alternately as our next in priority, we used National Journal's *Capital Source*, which published White House phone book information focusing on top and midlevel staff. *Capital Source* regularly published from 1985-2007. Information from President Obama's White House comes from the *Federal Yellow Book*. Sources for each of our organization charts are listed in the lower right hand corner of the individual charts. The organization charts are also available on our website: [whitehousetransitionproject.org](http://whitehousetransitionproject.org).

<sup>2</sup> The relevant laws for White House staffing are: 3 USC 105. Assistance and services for the President. The numbers and salaries of Assistants are tied to the Office of Personnel Management's Executive Level compensation. Executive Level II limits Assistants to the President to 25. Executive Level III has a maximum of 25 as well. Executive Level IV controls for Special Assistants and others covering a significant span of salaries and skills.

Other laws relevant for White House staff hiring are: 3 USC 108. Assistance and services for the President for emergency needs; 3 USC 106. Assistance and services for the Vice President; 3 USC 107. Domestic Policy Staff and Office of Administration Personnel. 3 USC 3109 Employment of experts and consultants. The text of the statutory provisions can be found at: [uscode.house.gov](http://uscode.house.gov). The text of the statutory provisions is available at [uscode.house.gov](http://uscode.house.gov).

The USC sections are referenced in the annual budget request in the Budget Appendix and the annual appropriations act which includes the EOP appropriation, currently the Financial Services and General Government (FSGG) Appropriations Act. The FY2017 Appendix is available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Appendix>. The FY2017 text of the FSGG bill, as passed by the House, is available at [Congress.gov](http://Congress.gov) by placing HR 5485 in the search box and then reviewing the EOP section.

President could legally get rid of every office and the career people who come with many of them. Experience demonstrates they do not do so because most have constituencies that outlast an administration. With a staff member first assigned in 1929 to deal with the press, for example, the Press Secretary is the longest continuing White House staff operation. That continuity reflects the mutual need of presidents and the press, a kind of dependence that exists with other offices as well.

While White House offices are rarely eliminated, their reporting structure and duties can change depending in part on the nature of their constituencies and shifting presidential needs. Offices with specific, enduring constituencies, such as Legislative Affairs, have had similar divisions, functions, and tasks across administrations. Political Affairs, Communications, and Intergovernmental Affairs have not had the same stability and have shifted back-and-forth from being independent offices to subunits within others.

2. Rather than restructure White House operations, most presidents choose to layer new offices on to the existing White House framework. The greatest opportunity to make changes in White House organization comes in the early days, but the president and his staff rarely make major alterations to what they found when they came in. With a full policy agenda and pressure for a quick start, management structure is not a priority. Instead new offices find homes in existing ones. In the Obama White House, for example, staff added Digital Strategies into a previously existing White House communications structure rather than rethinking the whole communications foundation.
3. The Vice President and the First Lady are now integrated into West Wing operations and have become important sources of support for the President. The dramatic recent increase in commissioned staff assigned to the Vice President and First Lady speaks to the growing importance of the two positions as support operations for a President. Both the Vice President and First Lady have become important resources for West Wing staff as they plan strategies to advance the President's policy goals.
4. There is a noticeable increase in top level staff with a recent concentration in the office of the Chief of Staff and the loss of top status for traditionally important offices. In the Carter and Reagan White Houses, there were respectively a maximum of 11 and 15 Assistants to the President. There are now the maximum number of 25 filled at any one time with seven currently assigned to the Office of Chief of Staff. That means other offices lose senior staff. There have been downgrades in several important White House offices. Intergovernmental Affairs, for example, is no longer a top level office nor is the Staff Secretary, both important offices for the management of decision-making and implementing policy at the ground level.

5. There are partisan differences in how a White House is organized, particularly in the first year. Republicans are more likely to set up their White House with a hierarchical structure with clear lines of reporting. Democrats come in with a more horizontal White House staffing structure. They tighten up their ship a year or so in. The contrast is clear in a comparison of the Clinton 1993 chart with several senior people reporting directly to him and the one in 1996 where the Chief of Staff had all reporting to him. With an interest in gathering information from wherever he could, President Clinton set up a system that reflected his interest in hearing from everyone. After a year of a system where many staff used walk in privileges, Clinton brought in Leon Panetta who as Chief of Staff established a more disciplined system.
6. A well-functioning White House has three types of offices requiring staff with particular experiences and expertise: policy, process, external relationships. First, presidents need substantive policy experts in the areas of foreign, domestic, economic, and national security policy. Second, just as important are the process offices – Staff Secretary, Office of Management and Administration, Presidential Personnel – that work on staff structure, staffing positions, decision-making, and policy implementation. Management is central to achieving policy goals and that means having these offices as frontline operations staffed by people who have the appropriate knowledge and management experience. Third, several White House offices are based on relationships with institutions and individuals outside of the White House. Legislative Affairs, Public Liaison, Intergovernmental Affairs, and the Press Office are keys to a President's effectively using available resources, which most often works when the staff have credentials that include experience on the Hill, in lobbying operations, and working with news organizations.

## THE WHITE HOUSE STAFF

7. How and where to place campaign aides represents a challenge to every President setting up a White House staffing system. It is a challenge because those who campaigned for the President want to be in the White House, yet campaigning and governing call for different types of experiences and skills. Governing requires an ability to form shifting coalitions and a knowledge based on inside experience of how to do so. There are many good jobs outside of the White House in the departments and those without the appropriate experience for working in the White House can begin their careers there.
8. The most effective systems are those that blend five types of knowledge. Those are knowledge of: the President, the campaign, the rhythms of a White House, substantive policy expertise, and the Washington community, including Congress, the press, interest groups. That balance gives a President a decision-making system



that reflects her or his interests, has a memory of what the campaign goals, reflects a sense of how White Houses operate, contains the substantive knowledge presidents need to develop and follow up on their policy goals, and incorporates a sense of the Washington world a President needs to work in in order to meet policy needs.

## THE PRESIDENT

9. White House staffs most often mirror the strengths of a President and rarely fill in for the person's weaknesses. Presidents emphasize what they like and what they know. Building off his emphasis on communications, President Reagan had one of the strongest White House publicity operations in the modern presidency. President George H. W. Bush, on the other hand, had little interest in strategic communications and dismantled the operation found at the end of Reagan's presidency.
10. Presidents bring in with them the emphasis and the tools that got them to the White House. President Obama's mastery of digital strategies resulted in that campaign operation coming into the White House. In his reelection campaign, President George W. Bush had a strong rapid response operation, which he brought into the White House for his second term.

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