

# *The Contemporary Presidency*

## Energy or Chaos? Turnover at the Top of President Trump's White House

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*The group of approximately two dozen White House staff titled “assistant to the president” form a president’s core leadership team, making turnover at this level particularly important for the stability and direction of the presidential decision-making process. Among the assistants to the president group, President Donald Trump’s White House had the biggest turnover of top-ranked staff experienced by any recent president. At 20 months, two-thirds of assistants appointed by President Trump in his first year in office left or announced their imminent departure. That level of turnover led to leadership changes in the dozen White House offices that are key to the processing of presidential decisions; to the policies a chief executive develops, initiates, and implements; and to those units charged with managing a president’s relationships with those outside of the administration. Without a team working together, it is difficult for a president’s staff to coordinate its plans and work as well as develop and articulate commonly shared presidential priorities and goals.*

Keywords: White House staff, assistant to the president, staff turnover, President Trump, White House

In varying degrees, all government institutions are hierarchically organized with a key group of staff at the top managing the decision-making structure and personnel carrying out the orders coming from the top. In that way, the White House is no different from other institutions, with a core of approximately two dozen people atop a framework of around 450 paid White House staff and detailees assigned to the White House from other

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government agencies. The top-ranked White House staff are commissioned officers who carry the title of assistant to the president. Among people traditionally holding the title are the chief of staff, the national security advisor, the directors of the National Economic Council (NEC) and the Domestic Policy Council (DPC), and the press secretary. The group of approximately two dozen staff form a president's core leadership team, making turnover at this level particularly important for the stability and direction of the presidential decision-making process.<sup>1</sup>

Among the assistants to the president group, President Trump's White House had the highest turnover of top-ranked staff experienced by any recent president. At 20 months, two-thirds of assistants appointed by President Trump in his first year in office left or announced their imminent departure. All but one of the 27 left the White House, with the one staff member, Keith Kellogg, staying on the National Security

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several administrations, National Journal's *The Capital Source* that I also have collected during the period it was published, and the *Federal Yellow Book* of the Leadership Directories. This study comes out of my work in two areas: presidential transitions and White House communications. There is a direct connection between the quality of a presidential transition and getting a White House staff up and running on January 20. The more difficulties a president has assembling a staff that can make the transition from campaigning to governing, the greater his problems in governing. A stable and governing-appropriate leadership staff increases the possibilities a president has of taking advantage of early governing opportunities. Effective White House communications depend on a well-integrated staff where the three types of offices—process, policy, and managing relationships—work together. A president's communications operation requires top-level integration of the teams working on policy, politics, and publicity. In order to craft action, a president needs to have accurate assessments of the politics of the policy—can it get through—as well as how the White House staff can effectively explain the policy benefits. This study, by focusing on the assistant to the president, is distinctive in its approach, but its findings are similar to those of Kathryn Dunn Tenpas's study on Brookings Institution senior staff that saw record-setting turnover among President Trump's most senior staff members. Her most recent study with a sample of 12 assistants to the president can be found at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/06/27/trump-has-lost-the-vast-majority-of-tier-one-staff-members/> (accessed November 19, 2018). There are several differences. First, I track the top segment of the commissioned group of White House staff—assistants to the president—as defined in statute and budget as the highest-ranking advisors a president has. Second, I also track changes in position titles of assistants to the president. I observe the continuity of titles and identify which ones get dropped as the president and his team made the shift from campaigning to governing through their first 20 months in office. Third, I look at all of the assistant-titled staff at the same moment in an administration: 20 months. That is true for the staffs of Presidents Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan. The Brookings Institution study is based, first, on National Journal's "Decision Makers" definition of senior White House and Executive Office of the President (EOP) staff members that was published in the early months of an administration and staff identified by their reporters as potential influential voices and people. That means there are some assistants to the president, but deputy assistants and others as well, including ones who may not have a commissioned title. The Tenpas study released in January 2018 (with a link cited below) reaches beyond the White House Office to include several staff who are in the EOP. Second, our studies differ in the points in time when staff members are tracked. President Trump's senior staff members in the Brookings Institution study are tracked by month and then measured against the senior staff annual turnover of the staffs of Presidents Obama, Bush, Clinton, Bush, and Reagan at their two-year marks. Mine are tracked at a comparable point in time: 20 months. See Tenpas's description of the Brookings Institution study at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/why-is-trumps-staff-turnover-higher-than-the-5-most-recent-presidents/> (accessed November 19, 2018).

1. I do not count detailees from other parts of the government in my counts of assistants to the president, as they are not part of the constituted White House Office.

Council (NSC) staff in another assistant position. That level of turnover led to leadership changes of those heading the dozen White House offices that are key to the processing of presidential decisions; to the policies a chief executive develops, initiates, and implements; and to those units charged with managing a president's relationships with those outside of the administration. Without a team working together, it is difficult for a president's staff to coordinate its plans and work as well as develop and articulate commonly shared presidential priorities and goals. Additionally, staff losses at the top level bring about disruption at the levels below.

### Commissioned Officers: Assistants to the President Rank Highest among Aides

There are three levels of commissioned officers at the White House: assistant to the president, deputy assistant to the president, and special assistant to the president. The assistants form the highest-paid (\$179,700 for 2017 and 2018) core leadership group of principals making recommendations to the president while the deputy assistants are those who develop alternatives for the assistants to whom they report. The special assistants are the specialists who make arrangements and carry out plans decided on by the commissioned officers at the two levels above them. A president is currently restricted by law and budget to 25 assistants to the president; 25 deputy assistants to the president; and approximately 70 special assistants, though there is some room to add a few more at the top levels.<sup>2</sup>

Presidents have increased the number of assistants to the president, from one person in the Truman White House with the title "The Assistant to the President," John Steelman, and then Sherman Adams, who was the single staff member in the Eisenhower White House to hold the same title.<sup>3</sup> The number of people with the title "assistant to the president" has gradually risen to the current 25.<sup>4</sup> In President Trump's case, there

2. The relevant laws for White House staffing are as follows: 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 as follows: 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; and 3 USC 3109, Employment of experts and consultants. The text of the statutory provisions can be found at [uscode.house.gov](https://uscode.house.gov) (accessed November 19, 2018). The text of the statutory provisions is available at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BUDGET-2017-APP/pdf/BUDGET-2017-APP-1-24.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2018). The FY2017 text of the FSGG bill, as passed by the House, is available at [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) by placing "HR 5485 114<sup>th</sup> Congress" in the search box and then reviewing the EOP section.

3. *United States Government Manual*, 1948 (revised through June 30, 1948), Division of the Federal Register, The National Archives, Washington, DC; *United States Government Organization Manual 1954–1955*, Federal Register Division, National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, Washington, DC, 61.

4. Kellyanne Conway interview with Eric Bolling, CRTV, July 31, 2018, <https://twitter.com/CRTV/status/1024440663151017984> (accessed November 19, 2018).

have been staff at the top level who do not or did not take a salary (Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, Reed Cordish) and two who took \$30,000 instead of the top salary (Chris Liddell and Gary Cohn). The savings allow some flexibility in hiring top staff.

The staff in this study includes those who hold or have held the assistant to the president or an equivalent title at the highest pay level, counselor to the president, or senior advisor. I include in my numbers announced staff resignations and those who left because as soon as it is known that a staff member is leaving, the staff reshuffle begins. The jockeying for position does not wait until people walk out the door.

## White House Staff Turnover at the 20-Month Mark

It's a difficult pace for many to keep up with. Look at how many people no longer work here [White House]... [Now] I think it's a much more sophisticated, streamlined operation with fewer people.

—Kellyanne Conway<sup>5</sup>

Comparing the recent six administrations from President Reagan forward, the turnover rate among assistant to the president top-rank positions in the Trump White House was extraordinarily high at the 20-month mark when compared with the practices of recent administrations and, second, comparing those leaving the White House rather than taking another position there at the assistant to the president level. Basically, a change in White House jobs, as was the case in the Clinton White House, represents a lateral move where a staff person continues to hold the title of assistant to the president. Having the same people, even if they are sitting in different chairs, represents less disruption to White House operations than having the staff leave the building and new people take their places.

President Trump had the highest turnover of staff at the assistant to the president level of any of the most recent six presidents. Kellyanne Conway is correct that “many people no longer work here.” The figures for losses at the 20-month point for staff members at the assistant to the president level who were appointed during the first calendar year (January 20, 2017–January 20, 2018, and comparable dates for the five other presidents) follow. The numbers may seem small, but the impact of the loss of an assistant to the president heading a White House office can be high in terms of the stability of the operation. The percentages of loss and the numbers are as follows: Trump, 27 (66%); Obama, 5 (16%); George W. Bush, 3 (15%); Clinton, 13 (50%); George H. W. Bush, 3 (18%); and Reagan, 6 (32%). As of September 20, 2018, at some point during the first 20 months, 53 people titled “assistant to the president” served in positions on the Trump White House staff. That figure far surpasses those of the earlier presidents in a comparable 20-month period: Obama, 32; George W. Bush, 23; Clinton, 29; G. H. W. Bush, 18; and Reagan, 21 (see Table 1).

5. Kellyanne Conway interview with Eric Bolling, CRTV, July 31, 2018, <https://twitter.com/CRTV/status/1024440663151017984> (accessed November 19, 2018).

**TABLE 1**  
**Turnover of Assistant to the President Staff at 20 Months**

<i>President</i>	<i>% and Number of Assistants to the President Appointed in Year One Who Left Positions by 20 Months</i>		<i>Number of Assistants to the President Hired in Year One</i>		<i>Number of Year One Assistants Staff Remaining in Position at 20 Months</i>		<i>Number of Assistants Leaving Original Assistant Post and Remaining in Another Assistant Position at 20 Months</i>		<i>Number of Assistants Hired During the Eight Months Following the One-Year Mark</i>		<i>Total Number of People to Serve in Assistant to the President Positions in 20 Months</i>
	<i>Year One</i>	<i>Year One</i>	<i>Year One</i>	<i>Year One</i>	<i>at 20 Months</i>	<i>at 20 Months</i>	<i>at 20 Months</i>	<i>at 20 Months</i>	<i>One-Year Mark</i>	<i>20 Months</i>	
Trump*	66%/27	41	14	1	12	53					
Obama	16%/5	32	27	0	0	32					
G. W. Bush	15%/3	20	17	0	3	23					
Clinton	50%/13	26	13	8	3	29					
G. H. W. Bush	18%/3	17	14	0	1	18					
Reagan	32%/6	19	13	0	2	21					

\*Year One runs from January 20, 2017, to January 20, 2018, and a comparable 20-month time period for earlier administrations.

The turnover theme was repeated throughout the staff, with a high turnover of jobs from high (\$179,700) to low (\$40,800) salary levels. The July 2017 and 2018 “Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel” demonstrate the lack of continuity throughout the White House, with 40% of the approximately 375 people included in the lists in the 2017 report no longer on the staff as of the 2018 report.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there was a sizable number of staff, especially in 2017, who came and went between January 20 and June 1 when the staff numbers were tabulated and who were therefore not included in the surveys.

With the exception of Keith Kellogg, who in September worked at the same assistant level but with reduced responsibilities, 66% of those who held the title of assistant to the president when they came into the White House during President Trump’s first year in office were no longer there. During his first 20 months in office, President Trump lost 27 people who held the title of assistant to the president or the equivalent. He lost 20 of his Day One group of assistants to the president who came into the presidency with him. There are eight Day One assistants to the president who were in their positions at the end of 20 months into President Trump’s tenure. That high turnover brings with it disruption in an established decision-making process. Effective planning for events several months out is difficult to do when top staff leaders are in flux.

By mid-2018, the president and his chief of staff trimmed their top-ranked staff to people they knew and trusted, resulting in a slower turnover rate. From February, there were 12 assistants to the president who came into the White House or were promoted from lower-titled White House positions. Of those 12, six began their White House work only from the last four months of the 20-month period. One would not expect them to leave in such a short period of time.

### **Five Types of Knowledge: President, Campaign, White House, Substantive Policy, and Washington Community<sup>7</sup>**

One of the reasons for a brisk White House staff turnover was a failure by the president and his transition team to choose people who together represented a balanced White House staff. The White House is an engine of government that sends information, plans, and orders to all parts of the executive branch and elsewhere in government. With its place

6. Not all of the staff people who work in the White House are on these lists, as some employees are provided for through the vice president’s Senate staff salary and others through the NSC budget arrangements. These lists reflect a particular point in time: June 1 of each year. They do not include people who may have already left. See Rampton (2018). “2018 Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/07012018-report-final.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2018) and “2017 Annual Report to Congress on White House Office Personnel,” <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/119OjfVU9Uf0lqfwu8VCjKsD73dMb5owmai5Nec1OFBI/edit#gxml:id=0> (accessed November 19, 2018).

7. For a discussion of the backgrounds of White House senior staff working in the George W. Bush administration as he came into office, see Kumar (2002). The study focuses on a selection of 36 senior staff, including assistants, deputy assistants, and special assistants to the president.

as the central hub, a president gets off to a more effective start if he knows where the power levers are and has people in place who have backgrounds in how the White House and government departments and agencies work and have on the staff people who know the various outside communities a president deals with. The five types of knowledge associated with a good early start for an administration are knowledge of the president; knowledge of his presidential campaign; knowledge of the rhythms of a White House; substantive knowledge in the areas closely associated with presidential economic, foreign, and domestic policy initiatives; and knowledge of the Washington community. Each is crucial for the success of a president in harnessing the levers of power in his early days and months in the White House.

### **Knowledge of the President**

One of the first actions a president ordinarily takes is to set up a decision-making process. In what form does a president prefer to have information? Does he want memos of a certain page length, and at what point is a memo ready to go to the president with the information he wants and should see? Developing a system for processing decisions requires staff who know the president's habits, what types of people he wants to appoint, what initiatives he is interested in, and what the priorities are among them. To be able to accomplish those tasks, a president with elective experience assembles a staff who knows him well. Of the 53 people who have served as President Trump's assistants to the president, fewer than a quarter of them include people who predate the beginning stages of the campaign. Comparable figures for Presidents Obama and George W. Bush, ranging from 40 to almost 60%, demonstrate the political experience they brought to the presidency and their interest in including staff who served on their senatorial and gubernatorial teams, respectively. With no background in politics, Trump did not have a comparable team of people who knew his personal interests and could quickly get his White House up and running. His truncated transition further complicated his getting a quick start.

### **Knowledge of the Campaign**

It is important for a president to have people with a memory of the campaign and the promises made by him and by those who served as his surrogates. Again, Presidents Obama and George W. Bush had a larger percentage of people from their campaigns on their White House staffs as assistants to the president than was true of Trump. Only slightly more than a quarter of Trump's top-ranked staff served in the campaign, whereas figures for Obama and Bush were closer to half of their staffs. In Trump's case, Steve Bannon, his campaign executive, left his White House post a little more than six months into the administration. David Axelrod and Karl Rove, chief strategists for the Obama and Bush campaigns, stayed for two and six years in their assistant to the president positions, respectively.

## Knowledge of the White House

Nor does President Trump have a staff with prior White House experience. In the first year, barely a quarter of Trump's assistants to the president served on an earlier White House staff. That is important because White House operations are more similar from one president to another than they are different, as so many of the demands are similar and require the same office structures. Each president needs to put forward policy initiatives and establish productive relationships with his institutional and political world composed of Congress, executive branch departments and agencies, the courts, his political party, and supportive interest groups. Doing so calls for a White House staff attuned to the rhythms of these institutions in terms of their demands and supports. With approximately 40% of their assistants having prior White House experience, Presidents Obama and Bush were able to quickly get their staff teams in place. Both had chiefs of staff who had worked in earlier White House operations and knew how to set up a system able to realize their presidents' early initiatives.

## Knowledge of Substantive Policy

In the policy area, President Trump favored people with a military background for the national security areas. With over 10% of his assistants having military experience, they were in key areas for organization control (chief of staff, Office of Management and Administration) along with those with a military background serving in the NSC. Presidents Obama (General Jones headed the NSC) and Bush had little military presence among their assistants. At the same time, the two military leaders who headed the NSC are now gone. Except for the NSC and the NEC, all three of the presidents had staffs that were more generalists than they were defined by their specialties and earlier relationships with their presidents. What those two administrations did not have that is a factor in the Trump one is an overlapping of domestic policy responsibilities among two policy shops and a set of councils. Unclear lines of responsibility easily lead to confusion of policy ownership.

## Knowledge of the Washington Community

One of the most important relationships a president can have is the one with Congress. The importance of that relationship is generally reflected in the backgrounds of top-ranked White House staff. For President Obama, half of his staff members served time in Congress as a member (Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel) or as staff, particularly those who served on his Senate staff. Less than a quarter of the assistants working for Presidents Trump and George W. Bush had Capitol Hill experience as a significant part of their backgrounds. At the same time, Presidents Bush and Obama chose assistants with experience in executive departments and agencies. A third of their assistants had experience in administrative operations, whereas less than a quarter of Trump's assistants did. Knowing how departments and agencies function is important for policy development and implementation as well as for how best to make use of the over two million civilian staff as a resource in managing a presidency.

## The Impact of the Loss of Assistants to the President

Positions related to function are central to a stable White House operation, and continuity is a key to handling current situations and future planning. At some point during their first 20 months, presidents and their key advisors realize that the dozen top-ranked offices that preceded them are going to be important for them as well. They look at the posts related to the decision-making process (e.g., chief of staff, staff secretary, personnel, counsel), the key policy offices (e.g., NSC, NEC, DPC), and those that concentrate on managing a president's outside relationships.<sup>8</sup> Those are the offices of Legislative Affairs, Public Liaison, Intergovernmental Affairs, Press, and Communications. These offices are key to a stable White House because they organize the decision-making process, handle presidential policy, and manage a president's critical relationships. All of the above White House offices existed in the Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations.

Gradually as they work through a large staff bench, the Trump White House staff have followed their predecessors and focused on meeting the twin needs of satisfying the president and appointing people with the experience required to carry out a critical function. At 20 months, President Trump faced changes in who led all of these dozen offices. No recent president has faced such an across-the-board exit of the leaders of these basic White House operational units that form the core of a president's support staff.

*Process Offices* are ones dealing with the creation and management of the decision-making system as well as with its implementation. They have been particularly hard hit with changes in the chief of staff's position and his deputies as well as with the staff secretary leaving, a new presidential personnel director and the demotion of the title of its leader, and a new White House counsel. In the earlier administrations compared here, Presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush had one person serve continually through the 20-month period as assistant to the president heading each of four key process offices: chief of staff, counsel, personnel, and staff secretary. That has not been the case with President Trump, who is the only one of the six to lose a chief of staff at the six-month mark. The only other president to lose a chief in the 20-month period was President Clinton, whose chief of staff, Mack McLarty, became counselor to the president at the same title level at the 17-month mark. While Obama had a change in his counsel and director of presidential personnel, the other two offices were headed by the same appointee through the period. Clinton had changes in personnel and counsel as well as chief of staff. President Reagan replaced only his personnel chief.

A change in chief of staff means a new management team with an altered decision-making and enforcement structure. There were changes in the chief's office beyond moving from Reince Priebus to John Kelly as chief of staff. The position of deputy chief of

8. See Walcott and Hult (1995) for an excellent discussion of White House units in terms of outreach, policy, and coordination. My three categories of offices are similar to this breakdown, with a slightly different emphasis. I am looking at offices in terms of the assistants to the president relationships and what they can provide the president. Process offices control the information-gathering and distribution process as well as filling vacancies he has inside the White House and throughout the executive branch. The process offices provide structure to information and decision making while policy offices provide the expertise for him to serve as the policy initiator and implementer. A third group of offices manages a president's relationships with those who support his governing and political needs, including those in Congress, the bureaucracy, interest groups, the president's political party, and news organizations.

staff, with responsibility for carrying out the chief's orders, passed to four people within 16 months. Katie Walsh had the position when Reince Priebus was chief, and it passed to Kirstjen Nielsen when John Kelly took over the post. While she was there, the position was renamed to indicate her role as the principal deputy chief of staff among the three deputies. After Nielsen left the White House in the fall of 2017 to become secretary of homeland security in early December, the position remained vacant until February 2018 when a White House press release announced the appointment of James Carroll to the deputy position at the assistant level.<sup>9</sup> Then in June, Zachary Fuentes, the other aide Kelly brought with him when he came from the Department of Homeland Security, took over the position shortly after Carroll left for an administration post outside of the White House. Without a settled core leadership team of his own, Kelly had difficulty coordinating White House offices and staff. When Staff Secretary Rob Porter left the White House, Kelly lost a key lieutenant who knew well how a White House functions and how to coordinate policy and people. He also had useful firsthand experience on the Hill, which Kelly did not.

At the end of Year One in the Trump White House, the Office of White House Counsel and the Office of Presidential Personnel were the two offices headed by an assistant to the president to have their original appointee serving as head of each office. In February, though, John DeStefano, who headed personnel, was given a significantly expanded portfolio, and the presidential personnel position was reduced to the deputy level with DeStefano's deputy leading the team. For the counsel's office, President Trump tweeted on August 29, 2018, that White House Counsel Don McGahn would be leaving in the fall.<sup>10</sup> When McGahn left and Pat Cipollone took his place in December, there were already substantial legal talent losses in the counsel's office. There were 25 lawyers in an office that routinely in recent administrations had a legal staff of 50 lawyers (Leonnig and Helderman 2018). The staff status was important because the leadership change occurred at a time when there were significant legal issues facing the administration.

The Trump White House has few senior staff with White House experience from previous administrations, but one person who did, Joe Hagin, left July 20, 2018. His loss was a particularly important one because as the deputy chief of staff for operations in the George W. Bush White House as well as holding the same position in the Trump administration, Hagin knew the rhythms of a White House. He is an expert on security measures and arrangements and was at the center of White House structural and organizational changes in the Trump and George W. Bush administrations while also knowing how to arrange complicated events and presidential travel. For example, he organized the 2018 trip to Singapore, where President Trump met with Kim Jung-Un. Former Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten said of Hagin and his time in the Trump White House: "As turbulent as this White House often appears, without Joe Hagin there, I think it would be considerably more turbulent" (Diamond and Liptak 2018). In October 2018, well after Hagin left, when President Trump went to visit sites in Florida and Georgia damaged by

9. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-announces-appointments-executive-office-president/> (accessed November 19, 2018).

10. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter post, August 29, 2018, 9:30 a.m., <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive> (accessed November 19, 2018).

Hurricane Michael, it was unclear to reporters on the trip where they were headed. Mark Landler, a White House reporter for the *New York Times* and the trip pool reporter serving as the person who reported back to other reporters covering the president, commented in one of his reports from above the devastation in an Osprey following the president. He reported the ground location information was “drawn from using pool’s iPhone locator and Google maps. WH did not pre-brief us on the itinerary or what we were seeing” (Landler 2018).

*Policy Offices* in the Trump White House have witnessed a sharp turnover at the assistant to the president level more so than was true of Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, Clinton, and George H. W. Bush. President Reagan experienced turbulence in national security and domestic policy areas, as did Trump. In the last two administrations, there were four basic policy offices in a contemporary White House: the NSC, NEC, DPC, and the homeland security and counterterrorism advisor. In his 20 months in office, President Trump has had leadership changes at the NSC (three national security advisors or four if the acting national security advisor is counted), the NEC, homeland security and counterterrorism, which NSC adviser John Bolton brought into the NSC and did not fill with an assistant. Of the four policy offices, the DPC was the final unit to have the original assistant to the president, Andrew Bremberg, leading the office. In September 2018, President Trump nominated Bremberg to be U.S. representative to the Office of the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva. Thus, now all four policy shops changed leadership, which meant for most a change in emphasis in their priorities and, to some extent, their goals and strategies.

Four of President Trump’s predecessors—Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, Clinton, and George H. W. Bush—had no changes in who headed those offices. While the NEC and the homeland security and counterterrorism advisor did not exist for all of those years, their White House leadership teams in these economic and security areas were consistent, with no changes in the first 20 months. President Reagan, however, made leadership changes in both the NSC and his domestic and economic policy office. There were two offices then that cover the four current ones. He brought in a second national security advisor when Richard Allen left before the end of Year One and a domestic and economic policy advisor when Martin Anderson went back to California in early 1982.

Of all of the policy offices in the Trump White House, the NSC staff saw a constant swirl in its leadership level. With a third person, John Bolton (or fourth when including Keith Kellogg serving in February as the acting advisor), now serving as President Trump’s national security advisor, the turnover in the position represents the highest 20-month turnover in the history of the national security advisor position. For an office that requires consistency in managing foreign and national security policy, the staff changes represent a disruption in policy direction. Bolton and to a lesser extent H. R. McMaster both replaced many of the deputy assistants to the president and the special assistants heading the policy directorates, which meant a real change in direction for the office. Though not as dramatic as the NSC example, there was also a change in leadership at the NEC, where the president chose Larry Kudlow to replace the original director, Gary Cohn. Kudlow’s title—assistant to the president for economic policy—differs from

Cohn's—assistant to the president and director of the NEC. Kudlow's role has more of a public side to it than Cohn's did. Kudlow is explaining administration policy in his regular television appearances from the White House.

One of the factors complicating policy development in the Trump White House was the overlap that existed between offices sharing responsibilities as well as ancillary councils the president created. Bremberg's DPC, for example, shared policy responsibilities with Stephen Miller, who was assistant to the president and senior advisor for policy. Immigration policy, a signature item for President Trump, was one of Miller's responsibilities, not Bremberg's. Additionally, councils have been an alternate policy center. President Trump disbanded three policy councils he established in his first six months: the business-oriented Strategic Development Group (later renamed the Strategic and Policy Council), the American Manufacturing Council, and the Advisory Council on Infrastructure. Others are still operating, such as the American Innovation Council, National Space Council, and National Council for the American Worker.

*Offices Managing a President's Relationships* focus on White House connections with external institutions and groups. President Trump had more difficulty than his predecessors did settling on an organizational framework for handling outside institutions and finding suitable leadership for offices dealing with a president's outside relationships. Of the six key offices dealing with external groups and institutions—Legislative Affairs, Communications, Press, Public Liaison, Political Affairs, and Intergovernmental Affairs—President Trump had leadership changes that impacted all of these offices. The structure for handling relationships had multiple overlapping authorities. While these are offices managing the president's political, legislative, and intergovernmental relationships, the Trump White House layered over them two staff members dedicated to watching over their work. Reince Priebus gave his deputy, Rick Dearborn, the title of assistant to the president and deputy chief of staff for legislative, cabinet, intergovernmental affairs, and implementation. Once Dearborn left in mid-spring 2018, Kelly did not replicate the same responsibilities for the deputy chief of staff position but rather had Chris Liddell become a deputy chief of staff for policy coordination, retaining the title of assistant to the president.

Unhappy with the way the offices were working, in December 2017 President Trump charged John DeStefano, the director of the Office of Presidential Personnel, with overseeing Political Affairs, Public Liaison, and Intergovernmental Affairs. In February, he made permanent DeStefano's role focusing on the operation of several offices. His title changed from assistant to the president and director of the Office of Presidential Personnel to assistant to the president and counselor to the president. The announcement of the change described DeStefano's unusual role: "Mr. DeStefano will oversee the Office of Presidential Personnel, Political Affairs, and Public Liaison."<sup>11</sup> With this appointment, President Trump made permanent an overseer function for an area that was particularly troubled in delivering what the president wanted from the named offices. In effect, DeStefano was the assistant to the president for all three of these offices, which were then

11. "President Donald J. Trump Announces Appointments for the Executive Office of the President," February 9, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-announces-appointments-executive-office-president/> (accessed November 19, 2018).

headed by a deputy assistant to the president, not someone at the assistant level as was true early in the administration with Personnel and Public Liaison. Political Affairs was at the deputy level from the beginning of the administration. That makes a difference in a White House operation, as deputy assistants to the president are not routinely members of principals meetings as assistants traditionally are.

With changes to all of the six offices, at 20 months President Trump's experience was very different from that of his recent predecessors, except for President Clinton. Clinton had leadership changes in four of the six—Legislative Affairs, Communications, Intergovernmental Affairs, and Political Affairs—with President George H. W. Bush at the opposite end with no changes. Presidents Obama and George W. Bush had one change—Communications—and President Reagan had two—Congressional Affairs and Political Affairs. Consistency in the leadership of these offices is important for developing a long-range strategy to get initiatives adopted by Congress and elsewhere through long- and short-range communications and political strategies. Immigration legislation, for example, is an area that illustrates the difficulty of the relationships among the offices working together to first develop a coherent policy and then get it through two houses of Congress.

Until he left the White House on July 20, 2018, Legislative Affairs Director Marc Short provided an example of a stable structure and staff while other offices were experiencing changes in leadership. By appointing Bill Shine as deputy chief of staff for communications, the president created yet another official in the communications area but not in a position that previously existed. Not only was Trump experimenting with people, but he also was creating a new way for his White House to organize the communications function. Shine's appointment meant a change in leadership for a seventh time beginning with the pre-inauguration announcement of Jason Miller as the first director followed by his withdrawal and then sequential appointments of Sean Spicer, Michael Dubke, Spicer for a second time, Anthony Scaramucci, Hope Hicks, and then Shine. Having so many communications leaders in a short period of time resulted in poor communications strategy development and implementation. The same was true of the turnover in the Public Liaison operation, which focused on coordinating outside groups to support the president's initiatives.

### Assistant to the President Title Turnover

The turnover of assistant to the president position titles reflected a disruptive replacement pattern similar to staff leadership changes. Accompanying the turnover in staff was the pattern of many positions not being filled after the original occupant left. While recent presidents followed the hiring practices they came in with in choosing their assistants to the president for the first year or so, the Trump White House had a different pattern. No recent administration has chosen to discontinue so many positions that it originally established for the top-ranked staff. The Trump White House ran through a much larger number of assistant to the president titles than was true with earlier presidential assistant staffs. With no restrictions on the composition of assistant titles a president can create and

use, there have been 43 different assistant titles used in the Trump White House, whereas, except for Clinton with 32, other recent presidents used no more than 27. While other presidents had four or fewer titles that were not reused in a similar 20-month time period, Trump had 13 (see Table 2).

There are four aspects to the turnover of assistant to the president titles that speak to the turnover of staff as well. First, some of the titles have not continued in use because the specific persons they were designed for left the White House and there was no further need for them. Trump White House titles such as assistant to the president and director of communications for the Office of Public Liaison, assistant to the president and chief strategist and senior counselor, and assistant to the president for intergovernmental and technological initiatives all fell into disuse once the original staff members—Omarosa Manigault, Steve Bannon, and Reed Cordish, respectively—left their White House positions. Other posts, such as the combined one of press secretary and communications director, have not been repeated since Sean Spicer left. Dina Powell had two titles tailored for her—assistant to the president and senior counselor of economic initiatives—and then when she went to the NSC, she had the title of deputy national security advisor for strategy. Neither title has been used since she left the positions.

Second, some staff continued in the same job but had an alteration in their title, which sometimes signaled changes in the emphasis in their relationships or their work. Ivanka Trump, for example, had a 2017 formal title of first daughter and advisor to the president. In 2018, her title changed to advisor to the president and dropped her familial relationship as the defining aspect of her position. There were some who worked in the same office and in the same area of responsibility, but their title was either upgraded or downgraded. Marcia Lee Kelly, heading Management and Administration, moved from a deputy assistant to the president to the assistant level. On the other hand, after the first occupants left Presidential Personnel and director of the Office of Public Liaison, the posts were downgraded from the assistant to the deputy level.

Third, the title turnover points to a focus during the transition of creating White House staff positions for those whom the president-elect and his New York transition team wanted to reward. Rather than developing a staffing system based on functions associated with the patterns of past White House organizational needs, the Trump operation saw placing campaign and loyal Trump supporters as a top priority. Out of the six presidents studied here, those who extensively prepared for their transitions faced few staff resignations and almost no assistant title changes. They knew what their agendas were and how they planned to spool them out and implement them. Additionally, they thought through the qualities the staff they hired would need to carry out these responsibilities and did so swiftly to take advantage of the goodwill that exists in the early days. With well-planned transitions that led to low staff turnover, Presidents Obama and George W. Bush had among the most effective early months of the modern presidency, as reflected in their low staff and title turnover. On the other hand, Presidents Clinton and Trump experienced early staff turmoil. As his priority, President Clinton focused on selecting his cabinet and only announced his senior White House picks six days before the inauguration. President Trump fired Governor Chris Christie, his transition director, the day after the election and then with Vice President-elect Pence in charge, planning

**TABLE 2**  
**Turnover of Year One Assistant to the President Position Titles at 20-Month Mark**

<i>President</i>	<i>Total Number of Assistant Titles Used for 20 Months</i>	<i>Total Number of Continuing Year One Assistant Positions at 20 Months</i>	<i>Number of Year One Titles Discontinued/Not Filled</i>	<i>Number of Year One Titles Altered</i>	<i>New Assistant Positions After One-Year Mark</i>
Trump	43	20	13	6	4
Obama	27	24	0	2	1
G. W. Bush	23	17	2	1	3
Clinton	32	24	4	0	4
G. H. W. Bush	16	14	1	1	0
Reagan	16	11	0	5	0

began almost anew. The result of their lack of a well-planned White House entry was that both presidents had high staff turnover at the assistant level and, in Trump's case, title turnover as well. With both presidents, the staff turnover pointed to early leadership staffing decisions focused on whom to appoint, especially campaign workers, rather than concentrating on the functions associated with White House operations. Once a president is in office for a few months, he and his top staff realize, if they did not before they came in, that the White House follows particular organizational patterns no matter which party controls the executive branch because many presidential needs are similar. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama knew that coming in.

Fourth, the titles and positions that persist are ones that earlier presidents have found were associated with the governing needs of a chief executive. Titles that have survived intact point to the continuing rhythms of the White House. Most often, the president and his staff opt for offices and position titles similar to ones an outgoing administration had. Those titles were useful for carrying out the functions a president and those working for him needed to perform. Those are the ones associated with the three aspects of White House organization that I discussed above: process, policy, and relationships. Those are the key areas of White House organization. Without a good White House process operation, for example, it is difficult to staff an administration in the first 20 months. In a White House Transition Project study of the nomination of 1,000 top administration positions requiring Senate confirmation, President Trump ran behind Presidents Reagan through Obama by 10 months in identifying and nominating candidates for these executive branch positions (Ba, Schneider, and Sullivan 2018).

Fifth, a low turnover is important because the president and his team can spend their time articulating their goals and releasing their policy proposals rather than undoing errors. President Obama used his first month for an active legislative agenda that included the American Recovery Act, which was enacted by Congress less than a month after his inauguration. President Bush used his first week and subsequent months pressing for a bipartisan education initiative, No Child Left Behind. In his first week in office, President Trump became embroiled in controversy with his first speech to executive branch employees at the Central Intelligence Agency and his early executive order to limit the entry of Muslims into the United States. That order met with chaos at several airports where travelers were prevented from entering the country and with resistance from federal courts that led to multiple alterations in the executive action.<sup>12</sup> Soon thereafter, questions arose about Russian influence in the election and a 2016 meeting top Trump aides and relatives had with Russians who offered to provide negative information on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Trump's opponent in the November election. More than is true in any recent administration, what happened in the months preceding

12. January 27, 2017, Executive Order 13769, Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states> (accessed November 19, 2018). A temporary restraining order was issued by a federal district court on February 3, 2017, and upheld by the ninth circuit court of appeals six days later. Following several iterations of the order, the final one signed by President Trump on October 24, 2017—Executive Order 13815—was upheld by the Supreme Court on June 26, 2018. See <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/10/27/2017-23630/resuming-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program-with-enhanced-vetting-capabilities> (accessed November 19, 2018).

President Trump's inauguration shaped a major segment of the discussion swirling around him. With a loosely organized White House operation and major distractions to cope with, President Trump faced problems moving ahead without an experienced staff to guide public attention to items he considered to be priorities.

### Chaos or Energy: White House Staff Organizations Reflect the Choices of the President

They [fake news media] love to portray chaos in the White House when they know that chaos doesn't exist—just a “smooth running machine” with changing parts.

@realdonaldtrump, August 30, 2018, 6:44:28 a.m.

What many see as staff chaos, President Trump views as staff energy. Presidents view staff success on their own terms, where their highest priority may or may not be their capacity to develop and carry out policy sustainable among the branches and levels of government. Having a hierarchical system with clear lines of authority was an organizational priority for both Presidents Bush and to a lesser extent for Reagan. That has not been the case with President Trump. Under Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, many of the assistants to the president and some of their deputies reported to the president without first going through the chief. Similarly, under John Kelly, there were people inside and outside the White House who spoke directly with the president without checking in with the chief of staff. President Trump often acts and speaks publicly without first consulting his staff, for example, in an August 22, 2018, tweet about South Africa and the “large scale killing of farmers,” he said. “South African Government is now seizing land from white farmers.”<sup>13</sup> The president relied on Fox News's Tucker Carlson for this inaccurate information that he tweeted before checking with his State Department and intelligence community.<sup>14</sup>

While most presidents have chafed at the idea of having high staff turnover, President Trump has defended his staffing system and commented on his satisfaction with it. On August 30, 2018, he attacked news organizations for their portrayal of the White House: “They love to portray chaos in the White House when they know that chaos doesn't exist—just a ‘smooth running machine’ with changing parts.”<sup>15</sup> That is a theme Trump has emphasized throughout his presidency. What others see as chaos, President Trump views as energy produced by competing voices. “It's got tremendous energy. It's tough. I like conflict. I like having two people with different points of view, and I certainly have that. And then, I make a decision. But I like watching it, I like seeing

13. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter post, August 22, 2018, 7:28 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1032454567152246785> (accessed November 19, 2018).

14. See note 7.

15. Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter post, August 30, 2018, 6:44 a.m., <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive> (accessed November 19, 2018).

it, and I think it's the best way to go. I like different points of view."<sup>16</sup> While he says the White House is not chaotic, he does admit that he does not trust all of the staff there. In an October 2018 *60 Minutes* interview, he talked about staff trust: "I am not saying I trust everybody in the White House. I'm not a baby. It's a tough business.... Washington, D.C. is a vicious place. The attacks ... the bad-mouthing, the speaking behind your back. But, you know, and in my way, I feel very comfortable here."<sup>17</sup> It may be a rough-and-tumble environment, but President Trump feels little of the pressure previous presidents have felt to create a hierarchical system with clear lines of authority for staff permissions and reporting. Ultimately, it is the choices a president makes that shape his staff structure to suit his priorities, whether they be political or policy ones. In President Trump's case, with few reservations he chose a White House staff operation that was often in seeming disarray during his first 20 months in office. Closing in on the two-year anniversary, the "changing parts" approach appears to have produced questionable organizational results.

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16. See <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pxml:id=129483&st=&st1=> (accessed November 19, 2018).

17. Lesley Stahl, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, October 14, 2018.