



THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2021



**Kinder Institute on
Constitutional Democracy**
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 2021—30

OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director
The White House Transition Project

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The White House Transition Project. Begun in 1998, the White House Transition Project provides information about individual offices for staff coming into the White House to help streamline the process of transition from one administration to the next. A nonpartisan, nonprofit group, the WHTP brings together political science scholars who study the presidency and White House operations to write analytical pieces on relevant topics about presidential transitions, presidential appointments, and crisis management. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and now the 2021. WHTP coordinates with government agencies and other non-profit groups, e.g., the US National Archives or the Partnership for Public Service. It also consults with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions, worldwide. See the project at <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org>

The White House Transition Project produces a number of materials, including:

- **WHITE HOUSE OFFICE ESSAYS:** Based on interviews with key personnel who have borne these unique responsibilities, including former White House Chiefs of Staff; Staff Secretaries; Counsels; Press Secretaries, etc. , WHTP produces briefing books for each of the critical White House offices. These briefs compile the best practices suggested by those who have carried out the duties of these office. With the permission of the interviewees, interviews are available on the National Archives website page dedicated to this project:
- ***WHITE HOUSE ORGANIZATION CHARTS.** The charts cover administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama and help new White House staff understand what to expect when they arrive and how their offices changed over time or stayed the same.
- ***TRANSITION ESSAYS.** These reports cover a number of topics suggested by White House staff, including analyses of the patterns of presidential appointments and the Senate confirmation process, White House and presidential working routine, and the patterns of presidential travel and crisis management. It also maintains ongoing reports on the patterns of interactions with reporters and the press in general as well as White House staffing.
- ***INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT.** The WHTP consults with international governments and groups interested in transitions in their governments. In 2017 in conjunction with the Baker Institute, the WHTP hosted a conference with emerging Latin American leaders and in 2018 cosponsored a government transitions conference with the National Democratic Institute held in November 2018 in Montreal, Canada .

Earlier White House Transition Project funding has included grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and The Moody Foundation of Galveston, Texas.

The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history.

<https://democracy.missouri.edu> .

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO	II
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	V
LESSONS LEARNED	V
ENVIRONMENT WITHIN WHICH THE PRESS OFFICE FUNCTIONS	2
1. <i>Cooperation Among Reporters and Officials</i>	3
2. <i>Oldest Continuing Staff Office</i>	4
Rules Governing Release of Information: On the Record, Off the Record, Background, and Deep Background	5
3. <i>Constituents in the Building</i>	6
4. <i>Three Constituents to Serve: President, White House Staff, Reporters</i>	7
Table 1. Presidential Press Secretaries – 1929 – 2008	8
Tenure	8
Secondary Experiences	8
5. <i>Minimizing Presidential Vulnerability to Error</i>	9
6. <i>Backgrounds of Presidential Press Secretaries</i>	10
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PRESS SECRETARY	10
1. <i>Information Conduit</i>	10
Information Venues: the Gaggle and the Briefing	11
Official Responses and Statements: The Information Flow	13
Acquiring Accurate Information: The Fitzwater Solution	14
Presidential Information	15
2. <i>Representation of His or Her Constituents</i>	16
Building a Relationship of Mutual Trust	17
3. <i>Administration</i>	17
4. <i>Communications Planning: Selecting and Staging</i>	18
5. <i>Persuasion</i>	19
PRESS OFFICE ORGANIZATION & FUNCTIONS: WEST WING & EEOB OPERATIONS	19
<i>Who Worked in the Press Office: The Clinton, Bush and Obama Years</i>	20
<i>West Wing Operation</i>	21
<i>Upper Press Office During Clinton, Bush, & Obama</i>	22
Staff:	22
<i>Lower Press Office During Clinton, Bush, & Obama</i>	22
Staff:	22
Staff Functions for Upper and Lower Press Offices:	23
<i>Lower Press Office in the Bush and Obama Years</i>	23
<i>Media Affairs in the Clinton, Bush and Obama Years</i>	24
Staff in OEOB [Now EEOB] Clinton Years [1999]:	24
Functions	24
Operating Units of Media Affairs	25
DAILY ROUTINES OF THE PRESS SECRETARY	29
<i>Morning Staff Meetings in the Clinton Years</i>	30

WHITE HOUSE WORK LIFE	34
<i>Pressures of White House Work Life</i>	34
<i>Benefits of White House Work Life</i>	37
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	39
Contact Information:	39



REPORT 2021—30

OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director
The White House Transition Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Presidential communications is the focus of three White House offices: the Press Office, the Office of Communications, and the Office of the Chief of Staff. The Press Office gathers and disseminates official White House information while the Office of Communications is in the persuasion business where it targets and reaches audiences to persuade them to provide personal, electoral, and policy support for the President. The Chief of Staff works from his central location pulling together the skeins of policy, publicity, and politics to move the President's agenda. The environment of the Press Office is characterized by the cooperation between reporters and officials, the continuity of the office and its routines of operation, having its constituents in the building, and the Press Secretary having three constituents to respond to, but one boss: the President. The constituents are the President, the White House staff, and news organizations. The Press Secretary has four principal roles: information conduit, constituent representation, administration, and communications planning. In carrying out its tasks, the office is organized into a two-tiered West Wing operation divided among the Upper Press and Lower Press and a unit located in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Tasks relating to the daily gathering and distribution of information are centered in the West Wing. While the operations in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, most especially Media Affairs in the Obama White House, are focused on contacts with specialty and out of town press. The work associated with the Press Office puts special and continuing pressures on the staff, particularly the Press Secretary who speaks on the record for an hour a day when he is briefing. Accuracy and speed are fundamental elements of an effective Press Office operation but it is easy for them to conflict with one another.

LESSONS LEARNED

Those who have served in the office have some common observations about White House learning. No matter whether they are Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, or

come in at the beginning or middle of an administration, those who work in the Press Office as its head or as a deputy agree on quite a few points.

- a) **Talk to You Predecessors.** Press secretaries indicated they learned a great deal from those who preceded them. Jody Powell expressed the sentiment of the group. “the former press secretaries were very helpful in talking to me about, the importance and difficulty of gathering the information that you need to be able to deal with questions in a briefing every day and so forth and ideas on how you organize to do that. You can’t do it all yourself; different ways to handle Presidential approval on what you need to take to him, what you didn’t. There’s no way to set specific ground rules for that. You just have to develop an understanding between the two of you of what you need to run by him and what you don’t.”
- b) **Reducing Reporters’ Opportunities or Venues for Receiving Information Comes with a Cost.** You can add to what information reporters are given and opportunities there are to receive it, but you cannot subtract from it without paying a heavy cost. When the Clinton Press Office shut off to reporters the entry to the pathway they traditionally used to query the Press Secretary, resentment from the press was swift and strong. That fight was about information, not real estate. With an information routine well established, a Press Secretary courts trouble when altering the forums where information is delivered or reducing opportunities for reporters to acquire information about the President and his administration.
- c) **90% of Information You Are Dealing With Comes From the Press.** While it is natural to think information one is dealing with in a White House is exclusively held, the contrary is true. The White House staff like everyone else in town discovers in the press most of the information they have to deal with about a given issue and what is happening on it around town. It is important for a Press Secretary and his or her deputies to read the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* prior to the morning staff meetings. Mike McCurry said “Ninety per cent of the information about a given thing was coming from the press not coming from inside the government.” That is particularly true of foreign policy news.
- d) **Don’t Hire People You Don’t Know.** Marlin Fitzwater indicated he did not hire people he did not know because time is short and risk is high. “One lesson of management that I found in the White House was never hire somebody based on interviews and paper. If you don’t know them from some previous existence, it’s too high a risk. You don’t have time to train them; you don’t have time to make it work; you don’t have time to fail. You can’t afford a failure. And it’s really high risk hiring people that you don’t know,” he said.¹
- e) **An Inquisitive Press Corps Can Work in the Favor of the White House.** While the White House spends a great deal of its energy trying to stop stories it does not like as well as redirecting reporters to stories they want covered, it can come to haunt a President and his staff. McCurry spoke of the consequences of not having been asked about the fund-raising events taking place in the White House in 1996, an issue that later was to cause them difficulty. “I never got asked the question so I never stopped to get any answers about what is that all about. I honestly do believe, if we had gotten pressed early in 1995 and the press had started raising the issue of what are all these

¹ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

political events you're doing in the White House, I think we would have had to get on top of it and have the answers, we probably would have checked out a little more thoroughly what can you and can you not do with respect to fundraising activities. I just think it hadn't been that big of an issue so nobody paid a lot of attention to it. That's my general sense of it."²

- f) **Don't Sandbag the Press.** Ray Jenkins who worked in the Carter White House spoke of the importance of not playing games with reporters with their deadlines. "Now you didn't try to sandbag the press. This was something we were very careful not to do, was to play tricks with them. You didn't announce something, a very important initiative, at 5:30 in the afternoon, and say, 'Okay. Take it now and put it on the television or put it in the paper tomorrow.' You did try to respect their need for familiarizing themselves, getting the background for it, or even helping them get that insofar as possible."
- g) **There Are Many Ways to Say 'I Don't Know'.** All reporters want is to be able to get the information they need and have it right when they get it. To speak authoritatively when you don't have an answer rather than admit your lack of knowledge is a serious error. Pete Roussel described a typical situation where a press officer strikes an evasive note when talking with reporters. There was a front page story in the *Washington Post* indicated there was a plan to switch positions for some of President Reagan's senior aides. The *Post* story had James Baker becoming the NSC chief while Mike Deaver would take the post of Chief of Staff. The *Post* piece hit during a Presidential golfing trip to Georgia. Roussel went to President Reagan and worked out a response. As Roussel explains it, he had several points in mind in developing the response he did, including not going out on a limb when he did not have the answer and shifting the burden of authoritative response to those identified as changing jobs.

Reagan said something like, 'How does something like that get in the paper?' Finally, I said maybe the best thing for me to say is it serves no useful purpose for me to comment on speculative stories like that. He said that's fine. As you know, that's an answer where I'm neither confirming nor denying it because I didn't know; maybe there was something afoot. In that job the one thing you have to offer, the most important thing you have to offer, is your credibility and I wasn't going to knock it down hard because at that point I didn't know one way or the other for sure. That way, with an answer like that, I was safe to let the press, if they want to, get on the phone and chase it with Baker and Deaver let them do that, neither of whom were on that trip.³

- h) **Lying.** Providing reporters with misinformation is a cardinal sin no matter whether it is willful or unintentional. When a Press Secretary does not get the story straight and causes a reporter to air or write an inaccurate story, reporters will not trust the information provided to them and search around the White House for other sources. Pete Roussel stated the importance he attached to not misleading reporters and why. "The one thing you have to offer in that job in my view is your credibility, your honesty, your word, your bond. The first time you tarnish that either by misleading or knowingly lying, that press corps will be on you in a second and it will get around pretty quick," he said. "You're probably toast then." That happened to Scott

² Michael McCurry interview.

³ Pete Roussel interview.

McClellan, in spite of his efforts to learn and provide reporters with accurate information on the content of the contacts Bush Senior Advisor Karl Rove and Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Vice President Cheney’s Chief of Staff, had with reporters on the issue of the CIA identity of Valerie Plame, wife of former ambassador Joseph Wilson.

- i) **Be Wary of Adopting a Role of Persuader.** The Press Office is the setting where official information is released not a place where persuasion is the central task. Mike McCurry discussed the problem of using the briefing for persuasion rather than as a location to disseminate administration information. “In retrospect, think the whole spin, the propaganda, the looking like you’re trying to spin the politically attractive side of the argument I think is very unsettling. I think it also diminishes the authority that you need to have in that process so people understand this is good information they’re getting. It needs to be more of a session in which you just communicate basically information, so people can get their work done and leave the argumentation elsewhere. I think there’s too much argumentation in the process now.”⁴
- j) **Combining the Functions of Communications and/or Public Liaison with the Press Office.** More is not better. In fact, what happens when the Press Office is combined with Communications is there is less control over Executive Branch information and less strategic planning done than is the case when the offices are independent units. A Press Secretary cannot control the strategic planning function at the same time he is handling the requirements associated with providing reporters Presidential information on a constant basis. Ron Nessen talked about the need to combine communications and press but the impossibility of doing so. He said:” And the problem is that the communications director’s job ought to combine all the things that the Press Secretary does. The problem is that it takes the Press Secretary so long to get ready for the daily briefing, to make sure he knows everything, attend the meetings so he can soak up all the information plus all the logistics stuff—there’s a trip coming up; getting ready for the trip and making sure—there’s an enormous amount of reading matter. One person can’t do those two jobs and it should be one person.”⁵
- k) **Personality Needs.** Certain people work well as Press Secretaries while others do not. A cool temperament works somewhat better than a hot-tempered person. Ron Nessen explained his own situation: “I think my personality wasn’t exactly the right one for the White House. I had a temper; I was thin-skinned. I liked Ford as a person; I tended to be overly protective of him and those things.” Mike McCurry spoke of the importance of using humor to cool down a hot briefing room. Marlin Fitzwater spoke of the need for tolerance and patience. He said:

In terms of personality traits and character traits, I think patience and tolerance are pretty important. I mean people talk about a sense of humor which is good for technique and that sort of thing but the basic qualities that you have to listen to the requests of sixty or seventy people with different agendas, different publications, different needs for information and to give them credit for deserving that information requires an amazing amount of patient. Giving the same answer over and over and over again and realizing that it’s legitimate, that that’s your job; that if sixteen reporters ask you the same question, you have a responsibility to give to sixteen of them an individual answer even if it is the same. The tolerance side is you have to tolerate smart people, dumb people, early risers,

⁴ Michael McCurry interview.

⁵ Ron Nessen interview.

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

late risers, early callers, late callers, every kind of physical and personal abuse you can come up with. It's like being a waitress in a restaurant. You're going to learn every human foible about these fifty people out there and many of them are not attractive. That requires a lot of tolerance.⁶

He added: "And the same kinds of things happen on the inside of the White House too. There's always going to be arrogant people and there will be humble people. There will be smart people and some not so smart. You have to have patience and tolerance for both. I think those are the two most important qualities."

Even if a Press Secretary or his or her deputies have patience and tolerance, success is hard to achieve in running the Press Office. As in all offices, though, the more you know coming in about the rhythms and patterns of the office, the better off you are in getting purchase on the nature of the job and of the White House as an institution.

⁶ Marlin Fitzwater interview.



Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 2021—30

OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director

The White House Transition Project

From my standpoint, I'm trying to get the President's story out. I know they're [reporters] not going to use it just the way I gave it to them but my view is I paid the price for getting my President's position out. They listened; they took the information down so I did my best for the President. So, you try to weave that kind of fabric every time you deal with the press. If you ever get to the point where you start taking the press' role or they're asking you a question and you don't defend your President, then you're not doing your job for him.

– Marlin Fitzwater, Press Secretary⁷

Being Press Secretary involves walking on a high wire and doing so daily. As the official spokesperson for an administration, he or she is the person who presents Presidential information to many audiences, including the public, his special publics in Washington, and governments of nations around the globe. People look to the President for comment and it is the Press Secretary who most often presents it. While the President may be seen daily in official settings making formal presentations, it is the Press Secretary who daily delivers for the White House official comment and response to events and criticism as well as delivers messages through individual reporters and news organizations. The Press Secretary's role involves meeting the needs of reporters to be an effective spokesperson for the President.

The Press Secretary represents one part of a White House communications operation. Just as the Press Secretary must weave together the interests of reporters and the President, he or she must also work together with a variety of White House officials in creating the portrait of the President and his policies they want to publicly deliver. There are several offices tasked with working on developing support for the President's personal, policy, and electoral goals. Presidents are concerned with the leadership of public opinion and they do not leave to chance the images people have of their Chief Executives. Nor do their staff. As the new century is underway, the function of communications pervades almost every White House office and is a central concern to three of them: the Press Office, the Office of Communications, and the Chief of Staff. Secondly it involves almost every White House unit as publicity tactics are included in enactment or implementation decisions. The Press

⁷ White House Interview Program, Interview with Marlin Fitzwater, Deale, MD., October 21, 1999.

Office deals with the daily press needs of a President, manages his relationship with news organizations, and on a continuous basis throughout the day provides Presidential information to reporters covering him and his administration. It is an information operation and one responsive to the requests of the President and his staff as well as to those of reporters. The Office of Communications deals with information as does the Press Office, but it does so in a context of persuasion and planning. Staff there design and script events illustrating the President's message. The strength of this operation is found in its ability to come up with tactics carrying forward Presidential ideas and initiatives within specific communities he is interested in reaching. Strategy comes from the third office in the communications triumvirate, the Chief of Staff. It is in the Chief's office where politics and policy come together with publicity. A Chief of Staff is responsible for pulling together the initiatives of a President and orchestrating the strategies for accomplishing their goals.

ENVIRONMENT WITHIN WHICH THE PRESS OFFICE FUNCTIONS

There are five elements shaping the routines, organization, and responsibilities of the White House Press Office and the Press Secretary who heads it. First, cooperation characterizes the relationship between reporters and White House officials. Their cooperation is based on the need each side has for the other. Reporters require the cooperation of the White House in order to get the information they need to cover the beat. Officials need news organizations in order to carry Presidential messages to the audiences they want to reach. It is a relationship built on tacit understandings of what each side needs to accomplish its goals. Second, the relationship is a continuing one where routines have developed over the decades of the existence of the Press Office. It is the oldest continuing staff office in the White House.⁸ Since 1929 when George Akerson was appointed by President Herbert Hoover as the first staff member to focus solely on press related issues, Presidents have continually had persons serving in the position of what we now call Press Secretary. Third, the Press Secretary has one boss but serves three constituents who often have conflicting demands for him and his office. He or she must respond and satisfy the needs of the President, the White House staff, and those of reporters and the news organizations they work for. A fourth factor shaping Press Office operations as well as White House communications is the presence in the building of news organizations. Having reporters daily within 50 feet of the Oval Office presents the White House with opportunities as well as inherent risks. The fifth element shaping Press Office routines is the balance the President and his staff seek to reach where daily he is publicly available, but where having as little vulnerability to error as he and his staff can fashion. That places a special responsibility on the Press Secretary and his staff to provide information and counsel providing for that objective. These five factors drive the way a White House shapes its communications operations.

⁸ The Executive Clerk's operation is the oldest office in the White House established in 1865. See Bradley H. Patterson, Jr., *The White House Staff: Inside the West Wing and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), pp. 359-362.

1. COOPERATION AMONG REPORTERS AND OFFICIALS

Perhaps the most important factor characterizing the environment within which the Press Office functions is the cooperative character of the relationship between reporters and White House officials. Their public grumbling and complaining may mask it, but reporters and officials cooperate with one another as they search for and disseminate information. For the relationship to benefit both partners, the two must cooperate. The daily briefing demonstrates the ways in which they do so. Reporters want information for their stories and the White House wants publicity for its programs. Reporters publicly complain at the briefing about the amount of information they are receiving, but they ask the questions they want answered and have found ways in most administrations to insure the White House will give a useful response.

At the heart of cooperation is establishing a relationship of trust. Reporters need to believe the information the White House is providing them and have confidence in the officials who provide it. Roman Popadiuk, who served as Deputy Press Secretary in the George H. W. Bush White House, described the relationship he developed with reporters. “I operated under the personal notion of full disclosure, to have the reporter have, without giving away State secrets or things of that nature, as much information as possible because I felt that made a better story for us, built a trust by the reporter and me personally and in my office and as a result of that gave me more credibility in the future with that reporter if I needed something deleted I could argue,” he said.⁹ “So I always operated on the notion to have the parameters as wide as possible. ...It seems logical to do business that way because, first of all, you’re building your credibility, you’re building trust and you have something in the bank for the future. Many times I’ve had to tell a reporter ‘don’t do that’; ‘don’t print that’; ‘you’ve got to help me out on this one’ and they say ‘okay, we’ll take care of you.’¹⁰

Fruitful cooperation for the Press Secretary means knowing the needs of reporters as well as those of the White House. You want to get the right information to reporters at times when they need it. “I tried to make it my business to understand how the press worked, what they needed, when they needed it and to get our order in early if we had something to get in that first lineup of stories,” Larry Speakes stated.¹¹ “When they would move out what they called the daily log or the wires called it [inaudible] to get in that so editors out in middle America could see what was coming and deal with it knowing full well if you broke news later in the afternoon that it may or may not catch up with the middle America press. So that’s what I tried to do.”

Getting the President’s message to reporters also requires the Press Secretary respond to the information needs of the correspondents who regularly attend the briefing and call in with their queries. Mike McCurry pointed to what he believes to be the cost to President Clinton in his second term when the White House did not respond to reporters’ fundraising questions posed at the end of the 1996 campaign. He said:

I think in retrospect people didn’t realize how much damage we were doing to Clinton’s prospect of having a successful second term because they were creating such ill will with the press by basically being quite obvious about the fact we were not going to deal with the press’ agenda, period; we were only going to be putting on the events that we were putting on and trying to drive the story line in the direction we wanted to drive it. And, yes, we did get them. The press had to cover the events that we were putting on and the news that the President

⁹ White House Interview Program, Interview with Roman Popadiuk, Martha Joynt Kumar, College Station, TX., November 2, 1999.

¹⁰ Roman Popadiuk interview.

¹¹ White House Interview Program, Interview with Larry Speakes, Washington, D.C., June 26, 1999.

made every day about whatever particular subject but it was in a very contentious atmosphere because so much of what the press wanted to cover was the questions about financing and fundraising and all that. What happened was, you could probably even get some reporters to be candid about this, they decided they would get even in 1997. They basically said Clinton skated through this election, dodged the issues; he essentially ran unopposed because Dole was such a weak candidate; we're going to make him address these questions he should have addressed in 1996. I think that's what drove the story line in the White House in 1997.¹²

In addition to meeting their information needs, it serves the interest of the White House to have a strong relationship with reporters as they represent an important source of intelligence about the undercurrents moving in Washington. Larry Speakes said you need to “establish that two-way street between the press—because you learn a lot from the press. They called you and said I hear this is going on, you were getting information that was valuable inside the White House, something is brewing out there that you needed to prepare for.”¹³

2. OLDEST CONTINUING STAFF OFFICE

While today the Chief of Staff is the person who is central to the operation of the White House staff, it is the position of Press Secretary that has carried with it an expectation that it would survive from one administration to another. In the almost 90 years since the position was first created under President Herbert Hoover, there have been fourteen administrations that have had someone in that post from the beginning to the end of the President's tenure. The same cannot be said for the post of Chief of Staff. Of those same fourteen administrations, only nine of them have had a person in the Chief's post from the first days to the time when the lights were turned out. The differences in the two experiences result in a set of expectations surrounding the Press Office and the Press Secretary who heads it.

The continuity in the position has led to a creation of precedents and expectations held by reporters and officials. While their personalities have varied from a hot-tempered Robert Gibbs to a cool Josh Earnest, press secretaries have been more similar than different in the responsibilities they have assumed and the office functions they have observed. That is because of the built in expectations accompanying the office. Based on their needs and the practices observed by previous Press Office staff, reporters believe themselves to be able to tell newcomers to the White House staff what are the routines commonly observed by the Press Office. When a new team comes into place and thwarts expectations, they do so at their own peril. When George Stephanopoulos ordered off limits the ramp traditionally used by reporters to go from the Lower Press Office to the Press Secretary's suite of offices, the White House soon met with resistance from reporters. For them, the passageway represented access to information. Once they were no longer allowed to go up to the offices of Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers and Communications Director George Stephanopoulos, they lost walk in access to information. The President and his staff can add to what information reporters are given and opportunities there are to receive it, but they cannot subtract from them without a creating problems for themselves.

There is a stability to the Press Office that is reflected in the continuity of its chief and the relatively long tenure of service of the Press Secretaries to the President. In the nearly 90 years we have had a Press Secretary, there have been 30 people who have served in that post for at least a month. While not all of them have had the formal title of Press Secretary, Larry

¹² Michael McCurry interview.

¹³ Larry Speakes interview.

Speakes, for example, all were responsible for the same basic tasks and services. They may have delegated functions and viewed them in a different light from one another, but the same basic tasks of information gathering, packaging, and dissemination occurred in all administrations. Ron Nessen discussed how similar press secretaries are in their understanding of the basic way information should be distributed. He said:

I think most press secretaries, no matter what their background is, come to understand that the same set of rules always apply year after year, administration after administration: tell the truth, don't lie, don't cover up, put out the bad news yourself, put it out as soon as possible, put your own explanation on it, all those things. But a lot of times other members of the staff don't want to do that; they don't understand it. They're political strategists; they have a slightly different set of goals. Sometimes you have to fight that battle inside the White House and sometimes the President is reluctant to do that. It's probably true that all press secretaries understand the same set of rules. Whether they can get the rest of the people [in the White House staff] to go along with them is another question.¹⁴

Arising in large part through need and continuity, there are common understandings that underlie the relationship. Their understandings deal with the terms of the relationship between reporters and officials as well as the character of news and how it is handled. A basic principle of the relationship is that officials do not lie to reporters. The principles Nessen articulated are the ones press secretaries live by, but they sometimes die by them as well when White House staff do not follow through on them. Scott McClellan is an example of the high cost a press secretary can pay when he or she wittingly or unwittingly misleads reporters.

Rules Governing Release of Information:

On the Record, Off the Record, Background, and Deep Background

There are common understandings as well relating to the rules governing the release of information. There are four basic classifications of information: on the record, off the record, background, and deep background. Officially released information is on the record as in the case of information announced at the briefing. Released in a variety of venues, most information coming from the Press Office is released on the record. While on the record, there can be some restrictions accompanying the release. If, for example, a reporter has an exclusive interview with the President that interview is released by the news organization, not the White House. Off the record requires the reporters present to avoid using the information in their reporting.

The reality is the White House is a far more transparent institution than it was twenty-five years ago. More information is on the record with official transcripts provided for even Presidential small talk when there is a photo session in the Oval Office while the President is meeting with dignitaries. Briefings that were once off the record and limited to a small number of people, such as those once held prior to a Presidential trip, now are held in the briefing room and are done on at least a background basis. Today off the record is rarely so because the information most often travels beyond the limited number of people the President spoke with. Most reporters, for example, will report back the information to their news bureaus and quite often they share with their colleagues the President's comments. Since those not present are not covered by the exclusion of using the information, it rarely takes long for off the record comments by a President to make their way to the surface. When President Clinton held two dinner sessions with reporters on a March, 1999 trip to Guatemala, for example, it was less than three days before information from his

¹⁴ Ron Nessen interview.

conversations about the first lady's earning capacity found its way into print in *The New York Daily News*.¹⁵ The same was true in the Obama administration when President Obama was returning from an Asian trip and went to the back of the plane to talk to reporters. In his article, "The Obama Doctrine," Jeffrey Goldberg noted: "Obama would say privately that the first task of an American president in the post-Bush international arena was "Don't do stupid shit."¹⁶ As much as the White House could complain, there was no violation of any tacit understandings involved in the publication of the information. The other two classifications of information are background and deep background. Information given on background allows reporters to use the information but not the identity of the person. If the staff member providing the information is the Chief of Staff, for example, the reporters he gave the information to might refer to him in their articles as "a senior White House official." If on the other hand, the Chief of Staff were to provide the same information on a deep background basis, he might ask for the designation "an administration source said." The more sensitive the information provided to reporters, the greater the distance officials demand.

3. CONSTITUENTS IN THE BUILDING

The Press Office is unique among White House offices in an additional and related way: it is the only office that has its outside constituents housed within the building. Throughout the day, Press Office officials deal with reporters who are housed in the Press Room. In recent administrations, except for the Obama one, at approximately 9:30 reporters met with the Press Secretary who answered questions that built up overnight. Press Secretary Dana Perino halted the session on September 3rd 2008 near the end of the George W. Bush administration. Nowhere else in the White House is a constituent group brought in daily at an assigned time with the opportunity to question a staff member speaking on an official basis. In the afternoon, again the Press Secretary meets with those who write about the President, his policies, his program, and his person. While most White House offices make efforts to bring their constituents into their quarters in only the most occasional and regulated way, the Press Office lays out the mat for reporters and provides them with space they can use seven days a week.

The space reporters occupy is within eye shot of the Oval Office as reporters mark time outside of the Press Secretary's office waiting for the Gaggle to begin. Even when the reporters assigned to cover the White House are in their cubicles and booths, they are in White House space. That proximity to the activities of the President and his staff makes the relationship between the White House and the press corps a unique arrangement that shapes the way each deals with the other. In addition to being tied together based on location, the White House and the press are similarly brought together because of their need for one another. With a physical and substantive closeness, the two partners cannot afford to have a relationship characterized by hostility. There may be tension in the dealings each side has with the other, but their mutual need frames the way they interact with one another. Cooperation is at the core of their dealings although the interactions receiving air time are ones demonstrating the tensions that surface in public exchanges between the President, his staff members, and reporters covering them.

Having a defined constituency that is an appendage to White House institutional arrangements shapes the work load of a Press Secretary and those who serve on the Press

¹⁵ Kenneth R. Bazinet, "Hil Worth 20M Outside the Senate," *The New York Daily News*, March 12, 1999.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

Office staff. Reporters can easily make their requests directly to members of the staff by going directly into the Lower Press Office or even going to the Upper Press Office where the Press Secretary is berthed. They can voice objections to planned coverage of events and ask for responses from the President and his staff. While the work load responding to a constituency might be greater than normally is the case in other White House offices, the opportunity to take the pulse of reporters and their organizations can make for a fast turnaround in the presentation of information. In addition to having space in the building, reporters are regularly guaranteed time with the Press Secretary.

4. THREE CONSTITUENTS TO SERVE: PRESIDENT, WHITE HOUSE STAFF, REPORTERS

A Press Secretary has three constituents - the President, the White House staff, and the representatives of news organizations - and one boss: the President. Just as the President depends upon the Press Secretary to provide Presidential information and to respond to queries about his actions and plans, so too does the White House staff. They realize he makes their life easier and takes shots that might be directed their way. During the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, White House staff all over the West Wing were grateful to Mike McCurry for his handling of the scandal. Keeping the scandal located in the Press Office and in the Counsel's office as well as with lawyers outside of the White House, allowed the rest of the staff to focus on their jobs and not have to respond to each day's revelation. At the same time, it is true that White House staff offices are almost as reluctant to give bad news to the Press Secretary as are people in the departments. Historically there has been so much difficulty getting information out of the National Security Council's operation that there now is an NSC press person who handles defense and foreign policy information.¹⁷

Having reporters as constituents makes solid his base within the White House. If he has the support of the reporters who cover the President, then he can provide advice to the President and the White House staff that is more difficult for them to ignore. Weaving together the interests of the President and those of reporters is difficult but a Press Secretary does it daily in the briefing. Marlin Fitzwater discussed the need to remember his fealty to the President. "From my standpoint, I'm trying to get the President's story out. I know they're [reporters] not going to use it just the way I gave it to them but my view is I paid the price for getting my President's position out," he said. "They listened; they took the information down so I did my best for the President. So you try to weave that kind of fabric every time you deal with the press. If you ever get to the point where you start taking the press' role or they're asking you a question and you don't defend your President, then you're not doing your job for him."¹⁸

¹⁷ See interviews with James Fetig and Roman Popadiuk.

¹⁸ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

Table 1. Presidential Press Secretaries – 1929 – 2008¹⁹

Name	Tenure	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
George Akerson – President Hoover	March 4, 1929- February 5, 1931	Government public information officer – Department of Agriculture & 1928 campaign press for Hoover	Reporter, Minneapolis Tribune
Theodore G. Joslin – President Hoover	March 16, 1931 – March 4, 1933	Washington reporter, Boston Evening Transcript	
Stephen T. Early – President Roosevelt	March 4, 1933 – March 24, 1945 Franklin Roosevelt; April 1945- May 1945	Reporter, Associated Press & United Press & Paramount Newsreel Company	Advance work for Roosevelt in 1920 campaign
Jonathan Daniels- President Roosevelt	March 24, 1945 – April 12, 1945	Administrative assistant to President Roosevelt, 1943 – 1945	Assistant director, Office of Civil Defense, 1942; Editor 1933-1942 Raleigh News & Observer
Charles Ross – President Truman ²⁰	May 15, 1945 – December 5, 1950	Editorial page editor, St. Louis Post-Dispatch	Harry Truman childhood friend
Joseph H. Short Jr. - President Truman	December 18, 1950 – September 18, 1952	Washington correspondent, Baltimore Sun	
Roger Tubby - President Truman ²¹	December 18, 1952 – January 20, 1953	Deputy Press Secretary	Press officer, State Department
James C. Hagerty - President Eisenhower	January 20, 1953 – January 20, 1961	Press Secretary to Governor Dewey (R-NY) 1942- 1959 & campaign press secretary for 1952 Eisenhower campaign	Reporter, New York Times
Pierre Salinger - President Kennedy & President Johnson	January 20, 1961- March 19, 1964	Press Secretary for Senator John F. Kennedy & 1960 campaign press secretary	Reporter, San Francisco Chronicle & Collier's
George Reedy - President Johnson	March 19, 1964 – July 8, 1965	Aide to Vice President Johnson, 1961- 1964, Aide to Senator Lyndon Johnson, 1951-1961	Reporter, United Press
Bill Moyers - President Johnson	July 8, 1965 – January 1, 1967	Associate director & deputy director, Peace Corps	Staff assistant to Senator Lyndon Johnson
George Christian	February 1, 1967 – January 20, 1969	Staff assistant in National Security Council	Press Secretary to Governor John Connally (D-TX) & Price Daniels (D-TX)
Ronald Ziegler - President Nixon	January 20, 1969 – August 9, 1974	Assistant to Herb Klein in 1968 presidential campaign	J. Walter Thompson advertising agency working for H. R. Haldeman
Jerald terHorst - President Ford	August 9, 1974 – September 8, 1974	Reporter, Detroit Free Press	
Ron Nessen - President Ford	September 20, 1974- January 20, 1977	NBC reporter, covered Gerald Ford as President & Vice President	Covered White House for United Press International
Jody Powell - President Carter	January 20, 1977 – January 20, 1981	1971- 1975 Press secretary to Governor Carter & press secretary on the 1980 presidential campaign	
James Brady – President Reagan ²²	January 20, 1981 – March 30, 1981	Assistant to Senator William Roth (R-Delaware)	Worked in the Nixon & Ford Administrations
Larry Speakes - President Reagan	March 30, 1981 – February 1, 1987	Assistant Press Secretary to Jerald terHorst & Ron Nessen in the Ford Administration; press aid to Nixon lawyer James St. Clair during Watergate	Press Secretary to Senator James Eastland (D-Mississippi)
Marlin Fitzwater – Presidents Reagan & George H. W. Bush	February 2, 1987 – January 20, 1993	Assistant press secretary 1983 – 1985, press secretary to Vice President Bush 1985 – February 1987	Press aide for Appalachian Regional Commission, Department of Transportation, Environmental

¹⁹ This chart is an update for the chart found in Martha Joynt Kumar, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 188-191.

²⁰ At his April 17, 1945 press conference, President Truman announced that J. Leonard Reinsch “is going to help me with press and radio affairs” but he was not named as press secretary. At his April 20th press conference, Truman announced Reinsch would be returning to work for Governor Cox of Georgia.

²¹ There is a notation in Tubby’s file that he received an increase in salary commensurate with the press secretary position, but no documentation of having the position. Carol Martin, archivist, Harry S Truman Library, telephone discussion, September, 2005.

²² James Brady retained the title of press secretary throughout the Reagan Administration.

Name	Tenure	Primary Experiences	Secondary Experiences
			Protection Agency, & Treasury Department
Dee Dee Myers – President Clinton	January 20, 1993 – December 31, 1994	Press secretary for 2000 Clinton presidential campaign	Democratic campaigns in California
Mike McCurry - President Clinton	January 5, 1995 – October 1, 1998	Spokesperson at State Department	Press aide to Senators Harrison Williams, Daniel P. Moynihan, & worked for the Democratic National Committee & on the presidential campaigns of Senator Kerrey, Governor Bruce Babbitt
Joe Lockhart - President Clinton	October 2, 1998 – September 9, 2000	Deputy press secretary, 1997-1998 1996 campaign spokesperson at the Democratic National Committee	Television producer for NBC
Jake Siewert - President Clinton	October 1, 2000 – January 20, 2001	Assistant & deputy press secretary under Lockhart & economic aide under Gene Sperling	
Ari Fleischer - President Bush	January 20, 2001- July 14, 2003	Campaign press aide 2000 campaign	Press Secretary to Representative Bill Archer (R-CA), chairman, House Ways & Means Committee & to Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM)
Scott McClellan - President Bush	July 15, 2003-May 8, 2006	Principal deputy press secretary under Ari Fleischer	2000 traveling press secretary for Bush presidential campaign
Tony Snow - President Bush	May 8, 2006- September 14, 2007	Fox News Radio, Fox News Sunday,	Speechwriter, President George H. W. Bush, editorial page editor Washington Times
Dana Perino - President Bush	September 14, 2007	Principal deputy press secretary under Tony Snow & Scott McClellan	Director of communications, Council on Environmental Quality, press secretary to Rep. Dan Shaefer (R-Colorado)
Robert Gibbs – President Obama	January 20, 2009- February 11, 2011	Campaign communications director in 2008 presidential campaign and in Senator Obama’s office	Press Secretary for Senator John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign
Jay Carney – President Obama	February 11, 2011- June 20, 2014	Press Secretary for Vice President Biden	Time Magazine Washington, bureau chief, 2005-2008
Joshua Earnest – President Obama	June 20, 14 – January 20, 2017	Principal Deputy Press Secretary	Communications director for Senator Obama’s Iowa campaign, 2008; in 2007 worked in Governor Vilsack’s presidential campaign as communications director’.

5. MINIMIZING PRESIDENTIAL VULNERABILITY TO ERROR

The center of a White House news day for reporters and officials alike is a Presidential appearance. His presentations are the most important segment of the White House news day. The paper and emails released by the Press Office, the briefings his staff give and arrange, the statements made by officials of his administration, work around the President’s schedule. “It is a rare day at the White House when the president is not publicly visible in one or more events featuring some aspect of his presidency. All public events are available for media coverage under one or another set of rules,” commented Martha Joynt Kumar.²³ “As coverage by television of presidential events increased, the sessions where the President had to take reporters’ questions decreased. He and his staff want him to appear in settings where his vulnerability is minimal. No matter whether it is a Democrat or a Republican in the White

²³ Martha Joynt Kumar, “Source Material: The White House and the Press: News Organizations as a Presidential Resource and as a Source of Pressure,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (September) 2003, 676-677.

House, presidents and their staffs prefer to present him in settings where there is less chance of his being presented with surprises.”

The Press Office is responsible for arranging some parts of daily Presidential public appearances, the distribution of paper preceding and following the daily event, and responding to reporters’ queries for elaboration on the President’s statement or remarks.

6. BACKGROUNDS OF PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARIES

The backgrounds of the 30 press secretaries serving for any amount of time during the years of 1929 to 2016 reveal a trend away from selecting as press secretaries people with primary experience in the news media to a background in government public affairs operations. Some came in with both. James Hagerty is the first press secretary to have a substantial background as a press secretary as well as having been a reporter for the *New York Times*. His service for Governor Thomas Dewey of New York during his years in Albany as well as the Republican presidential candidate in 1944 and 1948 served Hagerty well when he came to Washington to serve as press secretary for President Dwight Eisenhower. Beginning with Bill Moyers in the Johnson White House, many press secretaries have experience in executive branch agencies and working for members of Congress. Such experience provides them with a sense of where information lies and how to get it. Marlin Fitzwater, for example, had long experience in the bureaucracy that proved effective in responding to queries from reporters during two administrations while balancing the needs and demands of Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush and their staff.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

There are four sets of responsibilities regularly associated with the position of Press Secretary. They are: information conduit, representation of his constituents, administration, and communications planning. Some Presidents have an additional and troublesome responsibility for their Press Secretary: persuasion. The information responsibilities include providing Presidential information to reporters on a regular basis in both formal and informal settings. There are two group sessions with reporters as well as many phone calls a Press Secretary takes from reporters as well as some he places to them. In addition, reporters sometimes drop by the Press Secretary’s office and have sessions with him. Representation refers to the role he plays representing his three constituents to one another. As the head of an office that spans two buildings and in many administrations includes approximately 30 people when the Media Affairs unit is included, the Press Secretary must devote time and resources to the administration of his office.

1. INFORMATION CONDUIT

The Press Secretary’s success depends upon the information he or she provides to reporters, to the President, and to White House staff members. Each of his three constituents assesses the quality of information through its own prism. The President wants the Press Secretary to use the podium to build support for himself and his programs. The White House staff want the Press Secretary to take the arrows for the administration as well as to present and explain policies and actions in a way favorable to them as well as the President and reporters want the Press Secretary to provide information they are seeking. The Press Secretary

provides information in two face to face sessions with reporters and then throughout the day in a constant flow of paper to the press working in the Press Room. At the end of the day, he meets with reporters on an individual basis and talks to them on the phone throughout the day. For reporters and to some extent for White House officials, how successful the press secretary is in providing information depends in large measure on his ability to get the correct information and news reflecting the President's thinking and responses.

While the two information sessions take up a great deal of energy, time, and attention from the Press Secretary and his staff, they are not the only venues where White House news is released during a day. With email to contact reporters and a capacity to easily stage events with little notice, the White House makes few official announcements at the briefing. The White House provides information and officials for appearances on the morning network news shows, the news programs run throughout the day by cable news organizations with cameras located on the North Lawn of the White House, such as CNN, Fox, CNBC, and MSNBC, and then in the evening for the network news programs and finally, ABC's "Nightline". Television news organizations have at least sixteen cameras located near the driveway ready to handle their regular news spots and any developing breaking news. White House officials regularly use the opportunities such technology provides.

Information Venues: the Gaggle and the Briefing

While a Press Secretary at one time informally could give reporters information in the briefing, now that is no longer the case. White House information has become official and formal, yet there remain some vestiges of the informal venues where reporters and officials once regularly talked on an off the record basis. The Gaggle represents the best complement to the formal briefing as there is still an opportunity there for reporters and officials to work through issues of mutual concern without their conversations reported in print and on the air.

Until midway through the George W. Bush administration, it was a session occurring most mornings when the President is in town. It was a session held in the Press Secretary's office for 15 to 20 minutes at 9:30. Then sometime around 1:00 pm there is a formal televised session held in the James Brady Briefing Room, which, in the Obama administration, regularly runs more than a half hour. The session is known as the "Gaggle", referring to the sessions held in the military where staff come together for an encounter where they get the latest news.

During the Clinton administration, at 9:30 am most every day when the President was in town, press secretaries beginning with Mike McCurry hosted reporters in their office. Ari Fleischer held a similar office session until September 11th when he moved it to the Briefing Room. Scott McClellan, Tony Snow, and Dana Perino continued the sessions until September 3, 2008, approximately four months before the end of the administration. On that date, Perino announced an end to the early morning session. Perino indicated her decision to end the sessions was based on changes in the news cycle. "And for several reasons -- but try to -- to see if we can try doing a briefing sometime between 10:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. every morning. I think we've proved to you over the past seven days that we respond to all questions at all hours of the day, all hours of the night. And I think the original intent of the gaggle was a great one and worked for many years, but the model is just not necessarily the best in a modern era," she said. "And we also have large international audiences that we are trying to reach that are several hours ahead of us." Less than a month after the Bush White House cancelled the session, the country faced a major financial collapse and the administration lost its early morning opportunity to respond to reporters' queries and get into the fast-moving financial

story before the financial markets opened. When the Obama administration came in, Press Secretary Robert Gibbs held a few gaggles, but decided against regularly holding them.

The Gaggle. The Gaggle is an example of the way both sides in the White House press relationship benefit from their sessions together. Held with around three dozen wire, radio, and television reporters clustered around the Press Secretary's desk with tape recorders running, the session is one of mutual advantage. Reporters get some answers for their rolling deadlines to overnight and breaking events and the White House finds out what is on reporters' minds. James Fetig, who was in the session as the press representative for the NSC for a good segment of the time while Mike McCurry was Press Secretary, explained the advantages of the session. He said: "Out of the Gaggle we would get a pretty good idea of what the stories of the day were going to be. You could tell by what they were pressing Mike on. That was the purpose of the Gaggle; it was intelligence gathering for the White House and a chance to get some spin on the early news as the news developed during the day. It was a two-way street. But we'd come back from that armed with all sorts of questions that we knew we had to get answers for because they were coming right back up in the briefing."²⁴

The Briefing. As the number and types of news organizations represented at the White House has increased and the flow of information has become a continuous one coming from the building, a Press Secretary's information responsibilities have grown. He or she must be prepared to deliver information reporters need when their routines call for it. Once daily when the President is in town he goes into the James Brady Briefing Room for a televised session with reporters. There are seven rows with seven seats all assigned to news organizations. While all the correspondents assigned a seat does not necessarily show up every day, when they do come in they often will assert their privilege and take it from whomever is sitting in it. Reporters believe they should represent their news organizations and do so from their official seats.

The briefing is a session that has several different elements to it. They are a mixture of purposes and activities served in that session including: announcement of policy, responses to the actions of others, including the President's critics and leaders in other nations, responses to queries of reporters on subjects of their interest, and providing information on breaking news. Mike McCurry discussed the range of information found in the briefing.

The problem with the format and the problem with the job is that you have to wear different hats at different moments. Sometimes you have to be giving a formal declaration of U.S. policy, particularly when it's a question of foreign policy and that has to be read in just the right way and has to be communicated in a way in which it's the government speaking. There are other times when you're sort of being political and doing combat with the other team. There are other times when you're just getting raw information in front of reporters so they can do the primal function of reporting the news. And there are other times when you're just basically trying to divert the attention or take the body blows for the President on stuff. I think the fact that one person is there wearing all those different hats at different moments in a briefing is a little unsettling to the public. They are never quite sure of what to make of this because one minute you're joking about something and the next minute you're taking a shot at Newt and the next minute issuing some challenge to a foreign government. It's like what is all of this?²⁵

With many possible topics to be covered, a Press Secretary often tries to shape the tone and direction of a briefing. Marlin Fitzwater consciously came to the briefing with a plan of how to reduce its inherent risks. His strategy was to know five things about the big issues and

²⁴ White House Interview Program, Interview with James Fetig, Rockville, MD., February 5, 1999.

²⁵ Michael McCurry interview.

to have an opening statement even if it is a reheat of a State Department guidance statement. He related:

One of the tricks I used to use when we had nothing else—and I hated going down there with nothing to say—I’d take a piece of State Department guidance on some issue, say Biafra hunger problems, because I knew it was absolutely spotless in terms of being correct. It had been reviewed by sixteen people at the State Department; it was absolutely safe policy. They never sent anything over that was so bland. I’d go down and I’d say, ‘I would like to read a statement this morning on behalf of the President concerning Biafra and hunger,’ and I would read the guidance no matter how bland it was. In effect, I just upgraded this guidance from State to make it a Presidential statement. That alone made it newsworthy as a Presidential statement. It gave them a little story to write. I didn’t have to worry about whether or not anybody would object to it because it had all been approved and cleared and everything or it wouldn’t be guidance in the first place. So sometimes I would do that until they got on to me and would say, ‘Hey, Marlin. Read us some more of that guidance from the State Department.’²⁶

Even the staff get into it when issues are hot or when the Press Secretary needs help. James Fetig discussed how he would slip information to Mike McCurry when he was briefing at the podium. He related that if a staff person was watching the briefing and noticed an error in what McCurry said, your pager would go off and the person would give the correct information. “That was an interesting way of slipping so that the question could be answered in real time before the briefing closed or if you made a mistake they would send down the correction. Maybe he used the wrong word or misdescribed something so he could correct it right there in the same briefing. So you didn’t have a bad news story result or one that would mislead or cause a problem.” Mistakes are immediately corrected where possible.²⁷

Official Responses and Statements: The Information Flow

Throughout the day the Press Secretary must issue official responses from the administration, provide background information on their initiatives, give schedules on Presidential appearances and arrangements, and distribute transcripts of official information sessions. Providing administration news doesn’t just occur at the time of the briefing and the Gaggle though those two sessions represents the most frequent issuance of major official statements. During the day the Press Office issues perhaps two dozen releases relating to nominations and appointments made by the President, background information on upcoming trips and on events taking place in the White House, transcripts of remarks by the President made in the Oval Office and elsewhere. The emails also include assorted op ed pieces and articles supporting the President and his policies. When the President has an event in the East Room announcing a policy, for example, there will be email messages provided reporters identifying the participants in the event and information on the groups associated with it as well as the details of what a policy initiative would do. When an event deals with a proposed policy, there are often fact sheets released providing background information on the issue. During a crisis of some order or prior to a Presidential trip or visit by a head of state, one or more White House officials will come to the briefing room with background information for reporters. Those sessions are typically transcribed and then distributed for reporters to use. Since reporters need to fairly quickly use the information given in the briefing, the Press Office tries for a fast turnaround time on transcripts. Press Office releases are the main source of

²⁶ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

²⁷ James Fetig interview.

information for quite a few reporters covering the White House. For that reason, staff pay attention to getting the information to reporters in a way and in time for them to make the best use of it.

People involved in a Presidential event, such as members of Congress, often appear at the “stakeout” outside of the West Wing entrance where microphones provide reporters an opportunity to question them about their meeting with the President. The “stakeout” is an operation run by reporters, not the White House. The Press Office provides sound from the “stakeout” through the “mult” [“mult” refers to “multiple feed” to describe a sound system providing audio to several points], but there are no White House transcripts made from comments given there.

Acquiring Accurate Information: The Fitzwater Solution

Whether it is in the Gaggle or briefing or in individual sessions with reporters, providing accurate information is the greatest challenge a Press Secretary faces and one where he must be creative in finding ways to acquire the facts he needs and make certain the information is factual. Marlin Fitzwater spoke of the need coming in to figure out ways of checking out information. He said: “I would have liked to have asked somebody about how you cover the government. If you find information is bad, how do you check it out with State and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]?” He said an important question for a Press Secretary to pose is: “What is the best way for me to check out the veracity of information?” That question gets to “the most crucial job in my area, the integrity of information. I developed a very, I thought, sophisticated but at least kind of intricate beat system for putting my staff in various places around the government to check out information.”²⁸

The process of acquiring and managing information is difficult. Fitzwater indicated: “it’s just a constant struggle to stay atop the information flow.” Getting information from those involved in the foreign policy and defense worlds is quite different from the challenges in the domestic arena. Fitzwater said: “The other phenomenon is that domestic agencies are so anxious to be a part of the White House because they so seldom get their nose in the door that when you ask them for something they’ll usually fall all over themselves giving it to you. State, Defense and CIA are the kings, the princes and princesses of government, and they want to protect their information and so forth. But if you call the Interior Department, they can’t wait to get over to you.”²⁹

For Fitzwater, getting information on specific topics meant dealing directly with the specialists in the departments, not the public information officers. In a White House, you need information quickly and you need information you can trust. He said:

Usually the PIO [Public Information Officer], although, I think because I was a line bureaucrat myself, I would always ask who’s the specialist on this and often would call them for specific stuff. The public affairs assistant secretary was always good at policies and what’s the secretary thinking and those kinds of issues, but the kinds of information I often needed were the nuts and bolts things like, ‘Okay, we’ve got a new education proposal here but tell me how many kids in America get Pell grants? How many new schools are there every year? How much money do we spend on new construction?’ Those kinds of things. The one thing that departments never understand about the White House—again, this goes back to the differences—is the time factor. In a White House almost everything you need you need that day, probably within two or three hours. Departments have a terrible time responding like that because they all have clearance processes and all that business. The quickest way to

²⁸ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

²⁹ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

circumvent that is to call up somebody and ask them specific questions. They'll say, "Let me get you a paper on that." 'No. Don't get me a paper. Just tell me this one thing: how many schools were built.' I only need about three facts or five facts to make my case; I don't need the whole thing. That's always the toughest part. So, what you have to do is go down the food chain far enough until you find the person who knows those kinds of answers. The irony is, of course, the more technical information you need the lower you have to go.³⁰

During a crisis, an effective way to get information is for the Press Secretary to have his staff fan out among the agencies and troll for information and have someone from the agency come into the White House. Larry Speakes described the way they did it following the incident of the U.S. action in Grenada when the Press Office was caught without accurate information:

we learned from that [Grenada] that when crisis occurred—the Qadafi stuff, the Challenger—that the minute something like occurred we would send somebody from our office to the Defense Department or to NASA, whichever; they would send somebody from their office to the White House. They would come to the White House in the morning at seven o'clock and leave when we got through at night. Vice versa for our guy going there. The deal that that gave us was, first of all, someone that was fairly knowledgeable about the subject from that department and knew the details but also knew if we had a question and we couldn't answer it they knew who to go to in the Defense Department or NASA or wherever. That really served us well to be able to have that immediate exchange and have those people on hand.³¹

During some of the crises, the people from the agencies spent several days in the Press Office answering questions. When the Challenger exploded, NASA had someone there for about a week. When there was a crisis with Libya that involved their shooting at U.S. naval ships, Speakes indicated the Defense Department person sent over to the Press Office was an important asset in responding to reporters queries in the briefing. "They asked what kind of fire power it had," said about reporters. "So he's sitting there with a book of the profiles of all the foreign ships and handed it to me and I'm able to tell them how many guns it's got on it, how much armament, how many people, length, width and all that. It really helped to be more knowledgeable on that subject." Sometimes, such as when a Russian seaman jumped ship in New Orleans, several departments were involved and each had representatives at the ready to answer queries, many of them jurisdictional ones.

Presidential Information

Reporters want information about the President and they want it from a Press Secretary who meets daily with the President. When Jake Siewert held his first Gaggle as Press Secretary on October 2nd, Helen Thomas queried him about his arrangements to meet with the President. Would he meet daily? He responded he had the same kind of access provided to Mike McCurry and Joe Lockhart when they held the post. Will that be daily access, she asked. Finally, he said he would be meeting daily with the President. From the viewpoint of reporters daily meetings with the President are crucial because reporters want information reflecting Presidential thinking, not that of the Press Secretary. Mike McCurry discussed his meeting with the President.

We invariably most days had an opportunity to talk to him and I would get some sense of how he wanted to answer certain questions so even if it didn't come up or he decided—often we'd just say there's no reason for you to get in to this so if you don't want to take a question you can just not take a question. Most days, for most of the time I was at the White House, he'd

³⁰ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

³¹ Larry Speakes interview.

have some kind of event that would be a photo opportunity, he'd get the big question on the news of the day and it would have addressed it. So that was then in the can by the time of my briefing. So you had the President shaping the answer or shaping the story and I was doing the background news around it by the time the briefing came. Occasionally it would happen that we had practiced how he was going to answer a certain question but it didn't come up in the photo opportunity. So, when the press raised it with me I gave the answer Clinton would have given if he had been asked. That happened a lot. That was the utility of really hearing him talk it through.³²

The daily sessions with the President are critical for a Press Secretary as they determine in part the quality of Presidential information his spokesperson is providing to reporters.

2. REPRESENTATION OF HIS OR HER CONSTITUENTS

In any relationship where each side has a great stake in its outcomes, the partners will be wary of one another. Because many people coming into work in a White House do not have experience dealing with news organizations and their representatives, the Press Office sometimes must run interference for reporters with White House staff members reluctant to answer the queries of reporters. Throughout an administration reporters will need White House staff to cajole the people working with sensitive information or in offices under scrutiny to talk with reporters or to get their information and make available to those requesting it the nuggets that can safely be released. It is the Press Office staff who make the judgment calls on what information is appropriate to release. At the same time, there is pressure on the Press Secretary resulting from all the unauthorized contacts staff have with reporters and the information leaking out from them. Presidents almost uniformly get upset when information the administration does not want released comes to the surface. With President Ford as the exception, other Presidents have tried tracking down leaks.³³ Press secretaries generally let it blow over and do little to discover the source as often it can be the President himself.

During the Clinton Administration, his press secretaries were particularly challenged in representing each side to the other. White House officials, most especially the President, have regarded themselves as challenged by their opponents through the press. While the President and First Lady did not want to release documents relating to the White Water real estate transaction, the White House later did release sensitive fund raising information. In the instance of congressional requests for information involving the fund-raising efforts of the President and Vice-President leading up to the 1996 election, the White House took a very different stance from the limited distribution of information at the time of the White Water investigations. There were several instances where the White House released over 500 pages at a time of documents and videos requested by congressional committees. By doing so, their opponents on the Hill argued, they could take the steam out of the congressional hearings by having previously released documents on their own terms. With 500 pages released at a time, whatever bad news was included in the documents would be written about at one time rather than spread over several days and weeks. The Press Secretary is one of the key officials working on communications strategies limiting the damage coming from bad news.

³² Michael McCurry interview.

³³ See Martha Joynt Kumar, "The President and the News Media," in Michael Nelson, editor, *Guide to the Presidency* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1996), pp. 875-876.

Building a Relationship of Mutual Trust

The better the relationship a Press Office staff member has with reporters on a daily basis, the better he can serve White House staff when trouble comes. And warn them if something was not right. Roman Popadiuk explained how it works. “This is egregiously out of line here,” he would say to a reporter.³⁴ “Sometimes you can’t deal with it on the phone too much. Or they would send you an early copy of a story that’s already been okayed. Now you have all those modern gadgets. Before you got it printed in hard copy; they had it on their wire service; they’d send you a copy of it as a courtesy so you see what’s coming out in hard copy newspaper.” A reporter might bring a story to a Press Office staff person to pass it by for authenticity. The staff person won’t tell him things to add to his story but, on the other hand, he could say you might want to work on that second paragraph or search around a little more on that paragraph. “That’s exactly how we would say it sometimes,” said Popadiuk. “You could either add to a story, which I didn’t mind at times saying you forgot some points here or your story would be fuller, or negative saying this is really off the wall and I’ll tell you why. So it worked both ways.”

3. ADMINISTRATION

Administration of the Press Office has often been the bane of the existence of press secretaries. Jokes are made about the difficulties involved in keeping a Press Secretary on schedule and on task. It often appears the administrators keep the Press Secretary in line and on schedule. In the Clinton White House one of the five deputy press secretaries had in her title Deputy Press Secretary for Operations. The deputy was tasked with attending meetings in place of the Press Secretary as well as making certain the Press Office was operating in an orderly manner. In the George W. Bush White House, there was no deputy tasked with operations. Instead, one had the title of Principal Deputy Press Secretary and both deputies served as spokespeople on issues assigned to them according to their specialties.

The administrative operation has several components associated with it. They are the delivery of information, the logistics associated with event and White House coverage, and selecting and coordinating with the public information officers in the departments and agencies. In the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, his role as an administrator involved the four daily meetings he or she had with his staff and those he attended representing his office and its interests. The Press Secretary is responsible for the delivery of information to reporters and the arrangements for covering the President when he is at home as well as when he travels. Reporters are circumscribed in their movements around the White House. The Press Office establishes the pool of reporters coming into the Oval Office or the Roosevelt Room where only a small number can be accommodated. The President’s relationship with the news media is one critically important to him as he campaigns and, perhaps more importantly, as he governs. It is through the media he keeps daily contact with the public and sends out his information in venues he chooses and in a form he selects. Presidents often feel they cannot satisfy the media, but in truth there is little they can do without their attention.

One of the first issues a Press Secretary must deal with as an administrator is his or her lack of control over his budget, the salaries of those under him, or the number of slots assigned to the office. Shaping an office lacking such controls is a difficult task. If a person comes into the office in midterm, the situation can make the organization of the operation difficult indeed.

³⁴ Roman Popadiuk interview.

Mike McCurry had difficulty bringing in a team because the salaries assigned to the office were so low. “If you’re not starting from scratch or building an office as part of a transition you just basically are confined by the arrangements of your predecessor,” said McCurry.³⁵ “I found when I went to the White House in 1995 I was very hampered by the budget that Dee Dee [Myers] had negotiated and that was the existing budget for that staff.” With George Stephanopoulos interested in a strong media affairs operation under Jeff Eller, the West Wing Press Office ended up with people of a low pay grade. “Dee Dee had sort of frozen in a budget that paid all these young kids that had worked on the campaign the best salaries they had ever had in their life but they weren’t the salary of a Senate Press Secretary or someone from a PR [public relations] company that had experience so you couldn’t go recruit people with a lot of talent,” McCurry commented. The result was McCurry could not meet the salary expectations of people he wanted to recruit and in the end promoted from within. “When we started the second term, I think I did go back in and say we wanted to do some reconfiguration, we wanted some new money, we wanted to restructure aspects of the press office,” he said. He could not recruit a staff coming from outside or structure the office until he had created his own base of authority and could leave behind the decisions associated with his predecessor.

4. COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING: SELECTING AND STAGING

While James Hagerty was the person who established the function of communications planning within the White House, the Press Secretary no longer is the primary staff member responsible for it. There are two reasons for the reduced role for the Press Secretary in communications planning. First, the demands of gathering and delivering information to reporters has become a daunting task with the 24 hour news day requiring a fairly constant flow of information from the White House as well as the increase in the types of reporters covering the White House as the number of reporters there. Just planning for reporters takes a great deal of staff time as does the need to deliver information to specialty reporters assigned to the White House, such as trade information for Dow Jones, budget information for Commerce and Trade and the Bureau of National Affairs. The growing transparent quality of a White House and of a presidency requires much more information be made available daily, which takes a great deal of staff time to do. Second, there are many White House officials now involved in communications planning and the Press Secretary defers to them to take the lead. He is very important in a secondary role. There would not be a communications plan put together without the input of the Press Secretary. His contribution is important but he does not generally take the lead on it. His work is focused on daily operations and the delivery of information to reporters. His deputies regularly participate in meetings where events are scheduled.

The heart of communications planning is to bring together three components for their events. Barry Toiv described the elements of a planned event that come together to create what he refers to as “the whole tableau.” “If you’ve got the people you want in the picture, plus whatever the backdrop is, the words—you’ve got the people and the words and you’ve got his picture. That’s what you’re looking for.”³⁶ Pulling together the three components of people, words, and pictures requires people in several White House offices as well as administration officials in the departments and agencies. Within the White House, the offices

³⁵ Michael McCurry interview.

³⁶ White House Interview Program, Interview with Barry Toiv, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., April, 12, 2000.

most often involved in the setting up of events are those in the Scheduling Office, the Chief of Staff's office, the Office of Communications, the relevant policy shops and the divisions within them. Most events staged at the White House include either the Domestic Policy staff, the National Economic Council adviser, or the National Security adviser. If the policy to be promoted in an event is prescription drugs, then the Domestic Policy adviser gets the staff person responsible for that area to identify and perhaps round up a person or group of people helped by the administration's policy. While the Press Secretary or one or more of his deputies participates in such discussions, the White House unit most often associated with the arrangements for such events is the Office of Communications.

5. PERSUASION

Increasingly in recent years the function of persuasion has come into the portfolio of the Press Secretary. "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," Mike McCurry said.³⁷ "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 [Press Office]. I've even thought of going so far as to separating the political function out of that office entirely. We really changed the nature of the office of the Press Secretary and the person in the Press Secretary a lot but if you had a career government employee or if you had some sense that this is the public information office and we don't do politics here, you have to go to the DNC or you have to go to the President's political operation in order to get political commentary, the result would be it wouldn't be a job I would be as interested in having." McCurry discussed how the position could be broken up in order to have the persuasion function performed by one person and the hard information one by someone else. "It's interesting. Clinton had an opportunity—they might have tried something like that if they had a Stephanopoulos in the position as chief policy/communications person and a Press Secretary junior. The Press Secretary could be the person who handled the flow of information, the detail work of government, presenting all the information necessary just to get the hard news right. Then you could bring in another official to talk about the background to the whole thing and the purpose and how it fits with the whole program. If I was waving a wand to change the way things worked, I think I would put much more premium on the flow of hard-core, factual information. People are definitely hungry for that."³⁸

PRESS OFFICE ORGANIZATION & FUNCTIONS: WEST WING & EEOB OPERATIONS

During the period since President Eisenhower organized the modern White House, the Press Office is perhaps the most consistent unit in the White House in terms of the tasks it performs no matter what party controls the White House or who is President. Since it has developed and retained the same clearly defined constituency – news organizations, White House staff, and the President, expectations have remained similar in terms of what the Press

³⁷ Michael McCurry interview.

³⁸ Michael McCurry interview.

Office provides to each. It can be divided along the lines of information development operations and units targeted to perform services for particular segments of the world of news organizations. The West Wing operations are defined by their tasks dealing with current information, one relating to the White House press corps, and support work for the Press Secretary. The offices and staff in the EEOB [Eisenhower Executive Office Building earlier known as the Old Executive Office Building or OEEOB] work with specialized groups in the news media, including the out of town press. Operations designed to facilitate television and radio coverage as well as plan advance work for the press corps are housed in EEOB, except those people advancing daily events at the White House and in the Washington area.

While there has been consistency of function exercised by the Press Office over the years, there has been some difference in the shape of the organization. Handling the needs of the White House press corps is at the core of the organization. The West Wing operation designed to meet the information needs of the press corps has varied little over time. What has varied are the “ad ons” related to the out of town press and the electronic media found in the Office of Media Affairs located in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. During most Democratic administrations, there is no communications czar who controls publicity for the Press Office as well as the Office of Communications. In the Obama years, however, there has been a Counselor who oversaw communications, though the Press Secretary Josh Earnest could operate directly with the President and the Chief of Staff. Under Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, there is a staff member who is involved in communications from his perspective, Assistant to the President and Senior Advisor Shailagh Murray, a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and communications advisor for Vice President Biden.

In the George W. Bush administration, there consistently was a Counselor to the President who coordinated all presidential publicity, including what came out of the Press Office, the Office of Communications, Media Affairs, and Speechwriting. First it was Karen Hughes and later Dan Bartlett followed by Ed Gillespie. The same was not true in the Clinton and George H. W. Bush administrations. Presidential publicity in the Reagan, Nixon, and Ford administrations was controlled at the top though there was no Counselor for communications. The Chief of Staff was more likely to be involved in doing the coordinating than a Counselor. That was true as well when Leon Panetta was Chief of Staff.

WHO WORKED IN THE PRESS OFFICE: THE CLINTON, BUSH AND OBAMA YEARS

During the Clinton years, the Press Office had approximately 30 people working in its two building locations. There were around 13 people who worked in the West Wing operation with another 17 in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. For the Bush and Obama years, there were fewer working for the Press Office who were in the EEOB operation, but the West Wing operations were of similar size. The Obama one is around two dozen total including the outreach operation to out of town and ethic press. The outreach operation under Bush was located under the Communications Director of, when there was one, a Counselor. Traditionally, the office has a hierarchical organizational structure topped by persons serving as Deputy Press Secretaries and Assistant Press Secretaries. Several of those hold or held coveted commissioned titles including the words: “to the President,” the highest White House staff rank. In all three administrations, each Press Secretary had the title Assistant to the President, but only one Deputy Press Secretary had a title of Deputy Assistant to the President in the Bush White House and none had it in the Clinton one or Obama ones. The Clinton and

Bush Press Offices had one Special Assistant to the President while the Obama office had four.

In addition to its paid staff, the Press Office had slots for unpaid interns who rotated on a schedule of three times a year. It is not an office using short or long term volunteers who are specialists in particular tasks as is the case in other White House offices, such as the Office of Presidential Personnel.

WEST WING OPERATION

In all recent administrations, the heart of the Press Office is the West Wing operation handles the basic daily information needs of the White House press corps who are in the building and those who call in from outside. While there are approximately 60 reporters who have assigned space in various Press Room warrens, there are perhaps 35 who use that space on a regular basis with the others calling in from outside or coming over when the need arises, such as for an interview or to take a reading of a Presidential appearance. Whether they are calling from outside or coming into the Lower Press Office, reporters expect to have their information needs met within a very short period of time. In addition to their information needs, reporters also have logistical needs for their coverage.

For those news organizations regularly covering a President and who are committed to following him outside as well as inside the building, there is a structured pooling operation rotating the assignments covering the President where ever he goes within the Washington area. In December 2016, the rotating pool has 38 publications the White House classified as “print” with 26 newspapers and 10 online, 11 radio, and 5 television. Those numbers contrast in the Clinton years with 28 print publications, 9 radio, 5 television, and 2 magazine photographers. Associated Press and Reuters are included in all pools as well. In addition to the individual reporters for each news organization, there are cameras as well. Once an event occurs and the print reporter writes up a description to share with other reporters, the White House distributes the reports through its several email press lists.

The staff divisions between the Upper and Lower Press Offices demonstrate the similarities between the office setup found in recent administrations. The offices are hierarchical with the Press Secretary titled at the highest White House rank: Assistant to the President. The rhythms of a day are organized around gathering and delivering information to reporters in a formal briefing setting and in individual office meetings and calls. Change in office operations comes about through developments in the media, such as the rise of digital media. While the Press Office has responded to those changes in the ways it deals with reporters, the Office of Communications is the one that has organized to take advantage of digital media as a publicity resource.

UPPER PRESS OFFICE DURING CLINTON, BUSH, & OBAMA

Staff:

- Press Secretary,
- Communications Director [in Obama White House only],
- Deputy Press Secretary [for Operations in Clinton years, Principal Deputy Press Secretary in Bush years, and Deputy Press Secretary in Obama years],
- Deputy to the Press Secretary,
- Assistant to the Communications Director [in Obama years],
- Deputy Assistant to the Chief of Staff [Clinton years only],
- Four assistants to the Press Secretary [number has varied in the three administrations],

The Press Secretary's office is located down the hall from the Oval Office and across a narrow hall from the Roosevelt Room. The Press Office is close to those with whom he must talk every day, most especially the President. In the Clinton Administration, housed with him in those quarters were his Deputy Press Secretary for Operations as well as an aide to the Chief of Staff and three assistants to the Press Secretary.

No administration since then has had staff who are part of the Chief of Staff's office housed in the Press Office. However, in the Obama White House the director of the Office of Communications is in the suite of rooms in Upper Press. That was true with Ellen Moran, Anita Dunn, Dan Pfeiffer, Jennifer Palmieri and Jen Psaki. All had the same room. Once Dan Pfeiffer became a Counselor, he moved to the West Wing second floor. One Deputy Press Secretary is located there and six assistants to the Press Secretary.

In the Clinton White House the Deputy Press Secretary for Operations oversaw Media Affairs as well as managing the office operations in the West Wing. He or she also represented the Press Secretary in various White House staff meetings, including scheduling, as well as occasionally responding in an official capacity to press inquiries. The deputy handling operations also coordinated with the public information officers. In the George W. Bush White House, the Counselor for communications was in charge of Media Affairs, not the Press Office. In addition, there is no Press Office official with an operations title.

Coordination of departmental public affairs officers was an assignment for the Counselor in the Bush White House, not the Press Office. The Principal Deputy Press Secretary in the Bush years was in Upper Press, but there were no officials there from the Chief of Staff. In the Obama White House, Communications Director but the Principal Deputy Press Secretary was located in Lower Press.

LOWER PRESS OFFICE DURING CLINTON, BUSH, & OBAMA

Staff:

- Two Deputy Press Secretaries [four in the Obama years, including the Principal Deputy Press Secretary located in Lower Press],
- Two Assistant Press Secretaries [in the Bush White House, three in Clinton, and four in Obama]
- Office Manager [in Clinton years and the Principal Deputy Press Secretary has this function in the Obama White House].
- Two of the assistants sit at the redesigned reception desk in the Obama White House,

- A press assistant in Clinton, five in Bush, and one in Obama.
- Five interns per semester [in the Clinton years and fewer since then].

Staff Functions for Upper and Lower Press Offices:

- Deputy Press Secretaries provide official responses for the White House 24 hours a day as well as gather information for the daily press briefing,
- Serve as traveling press secretaries when the President is on the road and the Press Secretary remains in Washington,
- Press Office management,
- Media Affairs management [in an administration when it is in the Press Office],
- Communications planning,
- Coordination with key White House offices and officials,
- Information gathering for press briefings,
- Scheduling the Press Secretary,
- Scheduling interviews and facilitating requests by reporters to others on the staff,
- Preparation for presidential press conferences,
- Coordinate with departmental public information officers and take part in their selection [this is a Communications Office function in most White Houses].
- Organize pools to cover events in Oval Office, Roosevelt Room, Cabinet Room, and events in Washington,
- Arrange set up of events including lighting set up and shepherding reporters to “open press” ones usually located in the East Room, the Rose Garden, and the South Lawn,
- Escorting reporters to White House events outside of the Press Room, including to the above locations as well as events occurring in the South Court Auditorium of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building,
- Credentialing reporters covering the White House, including dealing with their news organizations on the number of slots per organization and the processing of information to go to the Secret Service for clearance,
- Clearing reporters coming into the White House for an event,
- Producing and releasing official statements, transcripts, releases,
- Contacting reporters with updated presidential information on schedules and events,
- Distributing pool reports by email to reporters on several different press lists,
- Provide responses to events and statements.

LOWER PRESS OFFICE IN THE BUSH AND OBAMA YEARS

The Lower Press Office is the first line of defense in dealing with reporters coming in throughout the day posing queries ranging from policy positions to requests for statements, transcripts, and schedules. In the Clinton years, there were two deputies located in the space as well as two assistant press secretaries, a press assistant, a receptionist, and an office manager. In the Bush years, there was no one designated as an office manager and only one deputy was downstairs. The overall numbers are similar in the two administrations. There was more than one deputy press secretary during the George W. Bush administration, but one was designated as the Principal Deputy Press Secretary. The same was true in the Obama years where there is one Principal Deputy Press Secretary who has a commissioned title of Special Assistant to the President.

Much of the work in the unit deals with servicing the press who come in and those who call in. Calls to reporters on the timing of the briefing, events, pool arrangements, and the setup for events all come from these staff members. They record the message for the Press Office phone line so reporters can call in for updates on the schedule for the day and information on which news organizations are pool representatives that day.

It is the staff here who send out information updates to reporters through email keeping them up to date on changes in the presidential schedule. Staff in Lower Press also work on credentialing the approximately 800 reporters who cover the White House on a sufficiently regular basis that they hold “hard passes.” In recent years, the numbers of reporters holding a hard pass has dropped substantially. The number was approximately 1,700 figure in the Reagan White House and down to 1,500 in the Clinton ones. Those are the passes allowing reporters to come into the White House by sweeping their pass over the admittance mechanism controlled by the Secret Service at the Northwest Gate. Credentialing reporters involves getting them and the news organization to fill out information that is then sent to the Secret Service for their clearance. For those reporters who do not have clearance and who want to come into the White House for an event or an interview, arrangements are made in Lower Press for them to come in for the purpose. There is a computer form reporters fill out and send to Press Office staff requesting entry. The questions include the name of the reporter, their news organization, the person’s Social Security number, citizenship, gender, place and date of birth. After review by a person maintaining the credentialing process, the form is sent to the Secret Service in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and then into the system for the uniformed agents working at the Northwest Gate.

The other basic part of the Press Office operation is the Media Affairs operation housed in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

MEDIA AFFAIRS IN THE CLINTON, BUSH AND OBAMA YEARS

Staff in OEOB [Now EEOB] Clinton Years [1999]:

- Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy Press Secretary
- 3 Assistant Press Secretaries working on regional operations
- Director, Television News
- Director and Deputy Director, Radio Services
- Director, Internet News [in 2000 but not before then]
- OEOB [EEOB], Press Office Manager
- Director and Deputy Director, News Analysis
- Director, Television Production
- Director, Specialty Press

Functions

- Schedule White House staff appearances on television shows,
- Organize radio services, including sessions with White House senior staff for radio groups and individual reporters [the Clinton White House used the radio groups more than did the Bush and Obama ones],
- Arrange weekly radio address,

- Prepare News Summary [in the Clinton and Bush years],
- Put up on the internet site official White House releases, including the daily press briefing, Presidential statements, and speeches,
- Email distribution of information to selected groups of reporters depending upon their specialty,
- Maintain and arrange for the use of the television studio located in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building [heavily used in the G.H.W. Bush years, it was disbanded and replaced once fiber optic cables were placed in the White House and President could go live from rooms in the State Rooms, the residence, or the West Wing],
- Provide information to regional and local news organizations, including responding to their queries,
- Specialized briefings for press coming in from out of town,
- Set up interviews for regional and local press and for their coverage when they come into the White House for an event having a local angle,
- Deal with the specialty press, including those writing books, people representing news organizations with a specialty, such as ethnic and religious press,
- Arrange satellite hook ups for certain interviews,
- Arrange the television set-up for interviews with the President and White House officials, including television documentaries and special programming,
- Press advance work for trips.

Operating Units of Media Affairs

The service operations for the press and the organization handling relations with the out of town press are housed in the Eisenhower Executive Building, until recently known as the Old Executive Office Building. The most significant of the units found in the EEOB is Media Affairs, a shop that provides a White House line to numerous news organizations outside of Washington. In the Clinton Administration under Press Secretaries Mike McCurry, Joe Lockhart, and Jake Siewert, the heart of the EEOB operation was the Office of Media Affairs. While in most administrations the office is an identifiable unit, it was not from 1997-2000. Organizationally, it was placed under the Press Office with the Deputy Press Secretary for Operations directing its operations. In the George W. Bush years, the office was under the Counselor. While most of the functions are similar, one function, preparation of the News Summary, was outsourced in the Bush White House.

The unit plans for out of town press covering an event at the White House featuring local people as well as provides information to regional and local news organizations about Presidential events and actions. In addition, Media Affairs responds to queries from reporters outside of Washington as well as to specialty press. The ethnic press and professional publications are dealt with by people in Media Affairs.

There were approximately ten people working in the Media Affairs operation in the Clinton, Bush and Obama White Houses. Lorrie McHugh who headed that office during the mid-point in the Clinton White House discussed the breakdown of staff and their assignments. She said: "They are very specific calls, it is not a message of the day operation, this is the, why is the President disagreeing with section 102(a) in the blah blah blah. They get a lot more technical questions than probably anybody else in the press operation."³⁹ She explained what the people in that operation do: "we have two TV people, one that does all of our national TV bookings and

³⁹ Interview with Lorrie McHugh for *Wired for Sound and Pictures*, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., November 27, 1996.

then the other that does our satellite video services, two radio, and two people who do our News Summary, one who works overnight and the other comes in at 4:30 in the morning, and then two press advance people.” The regional press work has been consistent through all recent administrations, but in the Bush years the television work belonged to the Office of Communications under the Counselor.

Regional Press Contacts. “The Regional Desks are basically spokes people for those regions, they are on the record,” said Ms. McHugh, who supervised their operation as the Deputy Press Secretary for Operations and Media Affairs. In all recent administrations, they are the point of contact with people at the regional and local level and are available when the President travels. In addition, the regional desks provide media advisories to news organizations located outside of Washington and those with no regular White House correspondent. McHugh described the advisories. “Every event on the President’s schedule, for the most part, has a media advisor attached to it. Our two radio people deal with all the radio, book interviews. The deputy director for specialty press deals with all the religious, ethnic, publications.” If any of the organizations assigned to the Media Affairs wants to arrange an interview with the President or with any of the senior staff, they go through staff here.

News Summary and Analysis. Up until the George W. Bush administration, the News Summary unit prepared the daily compilation of news articles sent to the President and to senior White House staff. The News Summary began in the Nixon Administration as a document describing and quoting from articles in newspapers and on television. It reflected their interest in how they were covered, including providing a sense of what the major news stories were on any given day. In the Clinton White House, the News Summary was a compilation of stories Xeroxed from the major newspapers, including the New York Times and Washington Post. In earlier administrations articles from those papers were excluded as staff read both papers early in the day. Rather than duplicate their reading, the News Summary focused on articles found in the regional and local press, which staff were not likely to read. In the Bush years the product is somewhat similar but is developed outside the White House by a group of people who include ones who worked at the White House in earlier Republican administrations. By the Obama years, news articles were online

The News Summary has been transformed and downgraded in importance by the advent of newspapers found on the web. The White House staff read a newspaper late at night when it first goes up on the web. When the Monica Lewinsky story was about to break, senior White House staff waited around the building until 11:30 pm when Peter Baker’s story in the *Washington Post* was first made available through the web and with the first edition of the paper. While in earlier times the White House would send someone down to the Post for its early edition released late at night, the “bulldog” edition, today they view stories on the web throughout the day as press deadlines are no longer the traditional evening ones.

Press Advance. When the President travels outside of Washington, the Press Office plans for the press accompanying him. While news organizations pay for their travel, it is the White House that makes the arrangements for their coverage of events and for their stay. The Press Advance unit goes to a country or state prior to a Presidential visit and searches for sites meeting the needs of both reporters and the President. On a major foreign visit, the press has a representative who is involved in choosing sites and writing a detailed report for representatives of news organizations. Once they return to the White House, the Press Office distributes the person’s report. When President Clinton traveled to China and later when he went to India, Bob Deans of Cox Newspapers wrote both reports. In his reports, Deans

summarized for reporters the current political, economic, and social conditions and issues of both countries in a well-regarded 15 page report.

Public Affairs. Often perched in the same location as Media Affairs, Public Affairs is a unit in earlier administrations designed to coordinate with the White House information from the departments and agencies in the Executive Branch. The governmental institutions regularly provide information useful to the White House for inclusion in Presidential appearances. The staff here made certain to round up information for Cabinet secretaries and others who appeared on television and on the road representing the administration. In the Reagan White House, surrogates were given statistics to use drawing a favorable portrait of the administration's record and told what topics to stay clear of in their appearances. The operation was a key element during the Reagan years in coordinating information, but has not been replicated in any of the succeeding administrations.

Internet Link. During the Clinton Administration the internet came of age. The White House maintains a website where information can be released in lieu of the previous system observed by the Press Office where transcripts have to be ferried all over town and sent out to the regional and local press. Briefings, statements, and releases are put on the website for the public to read and swiftly put out to White House reporters by the Press Office staff. In addition, there are several email listings of reporters interested in particular subject areas who automatically receive information concerning their interests. In Clinton's last year, he had interviews designed primarily for websites with audio and video capability. EXBTV, a news outlet providing Executive Branch information on a website, was the pool handling the arrangements for the interview with the President and approximately six reporters representing news websites. In the Bush years, the web operation grew with technological advances and became ever more sophisticated. It was controlled by the Office of Communications under the Counselor.

Media Affairs is an office that demonstrates the manner in which a division can be bounced around among White House units. 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. The function of reaching outside of Washington was developed by President Nixon with the creation of the Office of Communications. That office was tasked with sending information to the out of town press and news organizations targeted towards particular audiences and its director tapped to deal 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, it fit in with President Nixon's interest in establishing a communications planning operation and a media contact organization for the nation's news outlets. Those functions have remained in a White House but often they have been dispersed. As the years have gone by and new technologies added and refined, Media Affairs picked up responsibilities, including developing and maintaining a television studio in the EEOB, creating phone lines with cuts from Presidential speeches for radio reporters, and developing internet links to provide a steady stream of White House information on their official website. In the George W. Bush White House, the office was home in the second term for a rapid response operation working on offense and defense for the administration.

During the Obama years, digital media came of age to the point where the White House created a separate office of Digital Strategies. It handles the social media presence of the White House. While the Bush White House had a website used to distribute information, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and Twitter became important resources only in the Obama years. Digital

Strategies is part of the Office of Communications, not the Press Office, and was key to White House long range planning of information distribution for the various issue campaigns they had, such as for the Affordable Care Act.

Locating the Office of Media Affairs Within the White House. The organizational location of the Media Affairs unit depends on who is associated with four positions: Chief of Staff, Communications Director, Press Secretary, and the Director of Public Liaison. The units in a White House that have contained Media Affairs since the creation of the unit during the Carter years are the following in the order of the frequency with which Media Affairs is associated with the larger shop. While the Press Office in the Clinton years was the perch for Media Affairs, for the longest number of years it has been housed under the Office of Communications. In the Bush White House, it was under the Counselor. The Press Office location comes in second. It has also been placed under the Chief of Staff and in the Office of Public Liaison. Only at the end of the George H. W. Bush Administration when James Baker was Chief of Staff and Dorrance Smith headed Media Affairs did it have an independent status. The following are the offices Media Affairs has called home in the last seven administrations.

Counselor – in the George W. Bush White House, Media Affairs was under the Counselor.

Office of Communications - in the Reagan White House under Gergen, Buchanan, Griscom; in the George H. W. Bush White House under David Demarest; in Clinton under George Stephanopoulos and Mark Gearan. Media Affairs was under the Counselor during the George W. Bush years and during the Obama years when Dan Pfeiffer had the Counselor title.

Press Office - throughout the Carter White House, in the Clinton White House under Mike McCurry and Joe Lockhart. At the end of the Obama administration, it was under Press Secretary Josh Earnest.

Office of Public Liaison - in the Reagan White House under Mari Maseng and Rebecca Range, in the Bush White House under David Demarest.

Chief of Staff - in the Clinton White House under Leon Panetta while Dee Dee Myers was Press Secretary.

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, and Counselors, 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 either 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 outfit, only the daily operation.

The Importance of Media Affairs: a Washington Bypass. Media Affairs has had so many organizational homes because it is such an important support operation for the initiatives a White House has to where they need the cooperation of the Presidents consistencies. Mike McCurry spoke of the design of the office in the first year of the Clinton Administration and hazards inherent in articulating a strategy of bypassing the White House

press corps. “The idea was it would create avenues to local press coverage and you’d sort of bypass the White House press corps. That created a lot of animosity because they were flagrant about it,” McCurry said.⁴⁰ “He [Jeff Eller, head of Media Affairs] was always very voluble about how they were going to run around Brit Hume and get the message to the people. Well, that was like waving a red flag at the press corps and the White House.” It was not long before Eller left the White House and returned to his public relations business in Austin, Texas.

The importance of the work of the Media Affairs unit could be seen in 1998 during the Lewinsky scandal. McCurry noted about the Media Affairs office: “When he [Eller] created that shop, he created a system of desks with high quality press people working those desks that became in effect the press office for the non-Washington-based journalists. That still exists. We had exactly the same arrangement when I was there. But if you were like a Joel Connelly at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* or Phil Trounstone down at the *San Jose Mercury News*, serious political reporters who otherwise fit in at the White House briefing room but they weren’t there because they were somewhere else, that was your press contact. So there were all these transactions going on getting information, getting story ideas, getting responses to inquiries out to the premiere political journalists around the country who were not Washington based. There was a lot of that all throughout the second term. I think arguably the fact that you still had some sense of a White House that was functional and working on these issues and substantively working on the problems of government that continued day in and day out. Then from the bully pulpit level we had [Bill] Clinton every day doing something that was reflecting his job. Even if it was just a picture or some little squib of information in the newspaper, not the main story of the day, people would at least have some sense that here’s the President of the United States, he doesn’t seem to be in a bunker, he seems to be doing what he is supposed to do.”⁴¹

DAILY ROUTINES OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

Press Secretaries in the administrations since Richard Nixon became President have observed fairly similar routines. Their day revolves around the briefings they have with reporters, including the time spent gathering information and then digesting it. Most all press secretaries indicate their days were driven by the news needs of the briefing. While their information gathering practices were somewhat different, they all spent their days directing their staffs on what information to acquire and then dealing with other senior assistants to the President about White House communications needs. In addition, most press secretaries met daily with the President prior to their formal briefing with reporters.

While all press secretaries meet with the President at some point during the morning prior to the Daily Briefing, there is a difference in the ways in which they learned about Presidential meetings. While Mike McCurry rarely sat in on Presidential meetings unless specifically requested to do so, Marlin Fitzwater regularly spent his afternoons in meetings the President attended.

⁴⁰ Michael McCurry interview.

⁴¹ Michael McCurry interview.

MORNING STAFF MEETINGS IN THE CLINTON YEARS

The morning is consumed with meetings with senior staff and with Press Office staff as well as a conference call with administration information officials. These meetings are a combination of reaction to what is coming in and planning what messages they want to send out. In the following section, we will walk through a day with Press Secretary Mike McCurry. We also will see where Marlin Fitzwater came in in his meetings with staff.

Meeting in the Chief's Office. 7:30 am. The first of the meetings held around 7:30 is generally one where the Press Secretary meets together with the Chief of Staff, the Chief's deputies, often the Communications Director, the domestic policy chief, and, if foreign policy is in the news, the National Security Adviser. Those who have issues in play are the ones who meet to plan the day. Mike McCurry called them the Management Team. He indicated Leon Panetta "used to call it the management meeting because the idea was—the way he kept some people out and other people in was the senior managers at the White House had to be present which was a clever way of excluding some people who thought they were important enough to be senior staff. So that was the real meeting at seven-thirty."⁴² The approximately 12 people who came "would be the assistants to the President, the people who had real functional moving parts of the White House operation that they had to deal with and Maggie Williams from the First Lady's office and someone from the counsel's office, someone from the Vice President's office, all the integral parts of the White House that kind of had responsibility for getting the business done." McCurry said: "The first meeting was a very candid assessment of what are we going to do today and how are we going to get through the day and how is this shaping up and how is that shaping up."

Senior Staff Meeting. 8:00 am. The Senior Staff Meeting that followed at 8:00 "was the expanded universe of people who were serious players in one way or another." The purpose of this meeting was different than the earlier one with the key players. McCurry explained:

Then the next meeting, there were two purposes. One was for Leon or Leon's designee to really give the marching orders to the entire staff, sometimes based on what had just been decided at the seven-thirty meeting. He'd come in and sort of describe here's what we're going to do today, here's how we're going to do it, here are the assignments for everyone. Then you'd go around the table and everyone could report in on whatever issues they were dealing with. So it had kind of a making sure the rest of the organization knew what your operation was up to that day and then making sure that the entire staff had some sense of what the primary purpose of the day was.⁴³

Marlin Fitzwater described the place he had in the senior staff meeting. When he came into the office in the morning, he wrote a "little memo of the stories that I thought we would have to respond to that 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.'"⁴⁴ By letting everyone know the stories to be dealt with that day, he let the senior staff know they had an opportunity to put in their oar and, thus, put the burden on them for responses. If they did not come up with one, they had little reason to complain if they later did not like the response he provided in the briefing.

⁴² Michael McCurry interview.

⁴³ Michael McCurry interview.

⁴⁴ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

Communications Meeting. 8:30 am. The Communications Meeting in the Clinton White House took place when John Podesta was Deputy Chief of Staff. McCurry describes its participants and purposes. “That communications meeting really did become kind of the way in which the public relations, public affairs, congressional affairs people then intersected with the legal team,” he said. “That was what it really was in 1998. Now prior to that when Podesta first had it, he had everyone who had some responsibility for communications, a communications function. We all kind of got together and just went through what’s the message of the day and how are we going to deliver it, who’s going to do what. That was usually a pretty good meeting and we usually came out of that with a good sense of who was going to have what assignments.”⁴⁵

Meeting with Press Office Staff. 9:00 am. “I went back and had a staff meeting with my staff so the press staff would know this was what they were going to have to do today and I could report on other things that they needed to know about. It was a way of keeping my team wired in.” Then he held the Gaggle, which took 15 or 20 minutes most days and was attended by a couple of dozen reporters from television, radio, and the wires. All reporters who had rolling deadlines.

The Gaggle. 9:30 am. Until the waning days of the George W. Bush administration, the first exchange of information between the White House and reporters was an informal one that suits the needs of both sides. A short meeting of approximately 15 minutes to a crowd of around 30 reporters standing around the Press Secretary’s desk in the Clinton years or in the Briefing Room during the George W. Bush ones, the Gaggle lets each know where the other stands. The Press Secretary can use the meeting to give reporters the schedule and take care of technical business while also letting them know the message the White House wants to get out that day. For reporters, it represents an opportunity to get an official response to overnight events and information in the morning papers and on the morning television shows. The reporters present are mostly people with rolling deadlines, most especially wire, radio, and television correspondents. While they put their tape recorders on his desk, the rules governing the session calls for them not to use the sound but reporters can quote from the Press Secretary.

Post Gaggle Meeting. 9:45 am. After the Gaggle, McCurry parceled out the assignments to his staff for gathering information for the daily news briefing. The Gaggle let them know what issues were on reporters minds and where they should head for information. Following the Gaggle, he said, “we had kind of the scratch-and-scrounge part of the day where you run around and look for the information I needed or read whatever I needed to read or study and get on top of an issue. One part of that was to read the news summary much more thoroughly, to really go through all the different stories. Ninety per cent of the information about a given thing was coming from the press not coming from inside the government. I would go down and read the intelligence down in the security room or in the situation room. I would generally talk to Clinton. I’d go and see Panetta and then Bowles and sort of go through my briefing book, sometimes with George, later with Rahm [Emanuel] or others and say here are the key questions today. When we needed to do that with Clinton, we’d go in and see Clinton.” Part of that work was to gather intelligence for the conference call.

Morning Meeting with the President. Mike McCurry provides a descriptive account of his daily meeting with the President prior to the briefing and the range of subjects and responses they worked on. Sometimes, but not always, that meeting was one he had alone with

⁴⁵ Michael McCurry interview.

the President. He said: “I would go down and read the intelligence down in the security room or in the situation room. I would generally talk to Clinton. I’d go and see Panetta and then Bowles and sort of go through my briefing book, sometimes with George, later with Rahm [Emanuel] or others and say here are the key questions today. When we needed to do that with Clinton, we’d go in and see Clinton.” McCurry related that if the President was going to “sign a proclamation in the Roosevelt Room, there’s going to be a photo opportunity. We’d take that same group, Panetta, Ickes, Bowles, McCurry, Stephanopoulos, sometimes Rahm, sometimes Don Baer, sometimes other people. Once the group was assembled,

We’d all go in and say Mr. President, you’re about to go face the press; based on what they asked at the Gaggle this morning, here is what they’re going to ask you. Clinton’s usual response is ‘what do I say.’ He wanted to hear how someone else was going to propose that he answer it even though he generally knew what he was going to give as the answer but he wanted to—he would usually say ‘what I’d rather say is.’ Sometimes if it was something he accepted the premise of the answer he’d go over it and say ‘let me get it right’.⁴⁶

In their conversation with the President, they could discuss just how involved the President should be in a response. “If he wanted to kind of go chapter and verse on something and we didn’t want him to do that because we wanted to save it for later or we didn’t want him to be the primary person carrying a message, we’d talk about how he could minimize an answer when it was necessary,” McCurry said. If answers they worked out were not used by the President, then McCurry could use them in his briefing.

We invariably most days had an opportunity to talk to him and I would get some sense of how he wanted to answer certain questions so even if it didn’t come up or he decided—often we’d just say there’s no reason for you to get in to this so if you don’t want to take a question you can just not take a question. Most days, for most of the time I was at the White House, he’d have some kind of event that would be a photo opportunity, he’d get the big question on the news of the day and it would have addressed it. So that was then in the can by the time of my briefing. So you had the President shaping the answer or shaping the story and I was doing the background news around it by the time the briefing came. Occasionally it would happen that we had practiced how he was going to answer a certain question but it didn’t come up in the photo opportunity. So when the press raised it with me I gave the answer Clinton would have given if he had been asked. That happened a lot. That was the utility of really hearing him talk it through.

In addition to substance, their discussions also included nuance. “Then there were times when it was really tonal quality,” he said. “If the suggestion was that I go out and mix it up a little bit with the Republicans or Gingrich on a certain issue I wanted to make sure I had clearance from the President on that. He more often dialed me back rather than torque me up. It was rather interesting but he was juggling all these conversations that he was having with Gingrich and he always wanted to be very careful about how much we frontally assaulted the Republicans and came at it from different angles sometimes.”⁴⁷

The meeting can take place early in the day as was the case with Scott McClellan and Dana Perino who met with President George W. Bush shortly after he came over to the West Wing at 7:00. Or it can occur later in the morning as it did when Mike McCurry and the other Clinton press secretaries met with the President in the Oval Office after 9:30. President Obama too came in after 9:00 and had later meeting at some point prior to the briefing.

Preparing for the Briefing. In the Reagan, G. H. W. Bush, Clinton, and Bush years, a staple of the briefing preparations was a conference call that brought together the public

⁴⁶ Michael McCurry interview.

⁴⁷ Michael McCurry interview.

information officers in the departments of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the US UN operation. During the time Lockhart served as Press Secretary, he had the State Department take the lead on the call because “generally the State Department takes the lead on that because they have a much wider brief. They sort of go around the world. The Pentagon will chime in; we’ll chime in,” Lockhart said.⁴⁸ The conference call can take up to an hour. That call is no longer a staple of the preparations for the daily briefing. With the need to respond to news throughout the day, today the Press Secretary and his staff make calls to departments and agencies prior to the briefing, but there is no

The conference call was followed up by a staff meeting where the deputy and assistant press secretaries report in on what they are finding to be of interest to reporters. “That’s generally the best guide for what’s going to get asked. Whatever Barry [Toiv], Amy [Weiss], Jim [Kennedy], David [Leavey] and P.J. [Crowley] are getting is going to be what’s going to come up at the briefing,” Lockhart indicated about the information coming from the deputy press secretaries.

The Briefing. 12:30 pm. The most important event in the day of a Press Secretary is the briefing. Running from between a half hour in the pre-televised period and now running up to 90 minutes, the session is held most days when the President is in town. When they are traveling, the daily sessions are held depending upon the President’s travel schedule. The briefing is a mixture of politics, policy, response, initiatives, and bluster on both sides.⁴⁹

Once held in the informal setting of the Press Secretary’s office, it moved to a newly created Press Room in 1969 when President Nixon called for converting the swimming pool area between the West Wing and the Residence into an area sufficient to house the ever-growing press corps. It soon became a not-too-organized collection of leather couches, chairs, and seating spaces where reporters perched for the briefing. The Briefing Room took on a more formal cast in 1981 when staff installed theater-style seating with six seats a row. Television and wire reporters sat in the front row with newspapers in the rows behind.

With television in the front row and elite newspapers in the row behind, in the latest administrations much of the briefing time is devoted to answering questions posed by people in the two front rows. In fact, under Press Secretaries Robert Gibbs and Jay Carney almost two-thirds of the time was taken up responding to queries from the fourteen reporters in those two rows. Josh Earnest, however, moves around the room rather than going down the seats seriatim as was the case with Gibbs and Carney.

Afternoon Calls and Appointments. 3:00 - 6:00 pm. In the afternoon in all recent administrations, the Press Secretary answers calls from reporters and news organizations, responds to reporters who walk into the office, and then does one on one interviews. On Thursday afternoon, he or she does a series of three sessions with the representatives of Time magazine, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report. The tradition of meeting seriatim on Thursday with the reporters from the three news magazine is one observed by all recent administrations. The information they receive, commonly referred to as “tick-tock”, provides context and color for the stories they produce for a Saturday deadline. Marlin Fitzwater described his afternoon.

⁴⁸ Interview with Joseph Lockhart for *Managing the President’s Message: The White House Communications Operation*, Martha Joynt Kumar, Washington, D.C., February 9, 1999.

⁴⁹ See Martha Joynt Kumar, “The Daily White House Press Briefings: A Reflection of the Enduring Elements of a Relationship.”

If I'm in meetings with the President, I would always go back in between to see if there's anybody who's trying to get to me. They come and go. It's just a constant stream of people usually after lunch, between 1:00 and 5:00. It might be reporters who need new quotes for a story update or one question or two questions for a story they were working on. Once a week you'd meet with the newsmagazines to get in the tick-tock business that they want. And every day about 4:30 or 5:00 each of the networks would call just to get an update: anything new happening? Anything I need to worry about? Anything I need to alert my desk to? We're running a piece tonight on this. Here's our view. They usually tell you what they're doing.⁵⁰

The end of the day is generally spent with Press Office staff. Fitzwater explained the routine he adopted. Other press secretaries have adopted the same practice.

That was a locked-door session. No outside guests; no other offices. The rule was this was the meeting before we all go home in which we hear every complaint, every gripe; everybody is mad at everybody. We let it all [out]; we deal with it. We deal with our problems. My admonition at the beginning was always, 'Look. I know how much abuse you have to take down here during the day, in the lower press office especially. You've got crazy [name deleted] and crazy [name deleted]. Not only that but mad press calling you. Everything is going wrong. By the end of the day you're going to hate the press; you're going to hate yourself; you're going to hate the person at the desk next to you because of something they've done to you. You're going to think the President is stupid and you're going to hate me.' I said, 'All that's fine. But you've got to conceal it. You don't talk about those things to the press or let anybody see it. You're on display and that's tough. So I want you to save it up. You come back in here at five o'clock and you can cuss and swear and call people names; call the President a bum or me a bum, whatever you want to do. But we're going to deal with it, get it out and start over the next day.'⁵¹

The day ended about the same for all recent press secretaries: well after 8:00 pm. After meeting with office staff, they returned calls and did email.

WHITE HOUSE WORK LIFE

The Press Office provides a good illustration of the pressures senior White House officials feel. When officials went through their schedules, not only the Press Secretary but several of his deputies as well reflect the strong pressures they work under. In this office, there are seven particular pressures:

PRESSURES OF WHITE HOUSE WORK LIFE

- a) **Time.** Because they must respond to news organizations throughout the day and, to a lesser extent, through the night when breaking news occurs, the Press Secretary and his deputies have little time to call their own. Marlin Fitzwater went through his day and found there are basically two hours he had to call his own. He said: "You usually leave about 7:30 or 8:00. This is the worst part. You get home at 9:00—it takes an hour to get home—have a drink and you realize that you have to be in bed by 11:00 in order to have enough sleep to deal with the next day. So basically your entire private life is boiled down to between 9:00 and 11:00. That's tough to take. That's the part that people can't understand. People ask, what's it like to work in the White House? How many hours do you work? But the idea

⁵⁰ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

⁵¹ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

that there's really only two hours a day where you can deal with yourself or your family, that's the tough part."⁵²

- b) **Physical Dimension.** Jim Fetig sketched out his day, which is perhaps the longest for a White House Press Office person but is not a unique one. "The most difficult thing that anybody ought to know when they come in is going to be physical. It's the lack of sleep. The phone rings most nights and you almost never have a night of uninterrupted sleep. You start averaging four to five hours of sleep and the rest of the time you're at work. When people say they leave to spend more time with their family, they're generally not lying; they're telling you the absolute truth. That's just something you have to be aware of if the opportunities are marvelous to serve your country in that way."⁵³
- c) **Family.** Ron Nessen discussed his day and its pressures on his family. "I worked every Saturday, most Sundays at least part of the day. If I didn't come in to the office, I took stuff home with me. I left home at 6:30 am ...and I, usually because I had this thing about returning phone calls, got home at 9:30 or 10:00 or later if there was something going on. My son was eighteen months old then. I never saw him. Sometimes I'd wake him up at 11:00 to play with him because that was the only time I'd see him."⁵⁴
- d) **Getting It Right.** Jody Powell discussed the pressure of getting things right. "Well, there's a tremendous amount of pressure to get things right, to not make a problem worse or create a new problem because you either got it wrong in terms of understanding it or you said it wrong. I didn't find that particularly onerous but it is probably the biggest source of pressure, that you need to be careful. You have to be careful but you can't be so careful that you're not communicating either. So you're balancing those two things."⁵⁵
- e) **Scrutiny.** Ron Nessen discussed the kind of scrutiny the words of a Press Secretary receive from the reporters listening in the briefing. "One time a reporter asked me about rumors that Bill Simon was going to resign as Secretary of the Treasury or he was going to be fired as Secretary of Treasury. And there was some discussion in the White House of whether he was going to stay or go. I knew about the discussion. The reporter said what about the rumors that Simon's going to be fired or something. I was trying to think how am I going to answer this; I don't want to lie about it. There is some talk but nothing's decided. So I just took a second to think about what I was going to say and the reporter starts scribbling down wildly because of this long pause, this long pause when I was thinking of what I was going to say. He interpreted that to mean something. There's a lot of scrutiny," he said." You have to be careful what you don't say or how quickly you say it."
- f) **No margin of error.** Ray Jenkins spoke of pressures in addition to the time one spends at the White House. He said: "It is a high-stress job but it is high stress not because of the long hours but because there is absolutely no margin for error

⁵² Marlin Fitzwater interview.

⁵³ James Fetig interview.

⁵⁴ Ron Nessen interview.

⁵⁵ White House Interview Program, Interview with Jody Powell, Washington, D.C., August 2, 2000.

whatsoever. Now you're going to make errors and then you spend the rest of your time correcting but you just have to remember that once a problem reaches the White House basically it has no solution. If it had a solution it would have been solved at some level lower down. It's so often a roll of the dice. Sometimes you roll seven and sometimes you roll eleven. The stress is not so much from the long hours—because the hours literally are twenty-four hours a day. It doesn't matter if you're at the White House or whether you're at home or in San Francisco or where. The stress arises from the burden of the job rather than the length of the hours." Marlin Fitzwater provided an example of an instance when a minor error by an entry level staff member in the White House quickly turned into a Presidential level decision on whether to fire her.

I remember once in the Reagan Administration there was a young woman [name deleted] and for some reason just by accident she gave a set of talking points that had been given to the President for a meeting to Sam Donaldson. The talking points, unfortunately, were written by some legislative affairs person and it said, "Greetings. Hello, members of Congress. Glad to have you here today. (Hold up your hand or shake hands or something)." This is really written by some guy who has never met the President probably, some kid who is trying to be thorough so he puts in all the instructions which happens often when you're writing briefing papers. Anyway, Sam got it, ran a story on the evening news about Ronald Reagan is so dumb he doesn't even know enough to say hello and shake hands. The President wanted to fire this girl. I'm thinking this is so innocent. This poor little girl sees this thing; she's twenty years old at the most. [She] doesn't know what it is; gives it to Sam by mistake, just a mistake in the wrong piece of paper in an envelope. She was sending something else to him at the time and just got the wrong document in it. Totally harmless and innocent. And yet it was a mistake of such magnitude and ramifications, it was on national television; the basis for a story and the President of the United States thought she should be fired. I remember going in to him with Howard Baker saying, 'Mr. President, this is just not that kind of an offense. It's an accident. It's a young woman who is totally loyal and cares about her job and her life here. I certainly will talk to her. We'll reiterate the need again about'— —'what we do, what we send to reporters and that sort of thing.' He said fine. But it was always a great example of the risk you face and the small margin for error. That's a lot of tension. If you think of a twenty-year-old kid taking a first or second job and having to live every day with the idea that if they happen to give somebody the wrong piece of paper their career is over.⁵⁶

- g) **Mentally you are always on the job.** Fitzwater discussed the need to keep up or you risk getting behind. He said: "But, as a Press Secretary, first of all, you can't get away from the news and you don't dare. You can't just say 'I'm not going to read about what's going on in the world' because you can't catch up. It takes you two more days to catch up. My basic rule was it takes a day for a day. If you're out three days, it's three days before you know everything that's going on again. So you still have to brief yourself. You still have to read all the papers on Saturday and Sunday morning; you still have to watch the talk shows; you still have to check the news. And then you always get calls. Even if you have a duty officer, there's always that one call that the duty officer can't handle. Or when the duty officer calls you for guidance in a sense it's less risk so you don't mind but you still have to take it. So if you're Press Secretary you just never can escape. If you do escape

⁵⁶ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

by some artificial means like going sailing or something, which is more impossible now that they have cell phones, but if you do escape you feel guilty about it.”⁵⁷

BENEFITS OF WHITE HOUSE WORK LIFE

While there are pressures associated with working in the White House, at the same time there are benefits unique to the experience.

- h) **The Importance and Impact of the Work.** Jim Fetig talked of the seriousness with which people took their work. He described the approach staff members took to important decisions. “The most interesting thing that I’ve noticed, I didn’t see anybody treating it lightly. I saw a lot of politics fall away when decisions were being made on behalf of the United States of America and all of its citizens. Very often you’d hear the question what’s the right thing for the republic as opposed to what ‘s the right thing for our party or what’s the right thing for some other reason. There’s an altruism that goes with that that’s worth experiencing.”⁵⁸
- i) **Respect Accorded to White House Work.** Not only is the work interesting, but there is a certain respect accorded to those working in the White House. Jim Fetig described the response of people outside of the White House to those working there. “But just to know you served, there’s a certain amount of panache that goes with it. Even in jaded Washington, people respect people who work there. And when people learn that you’ve been there or worked there, people give you a telling nod or a telling smile. Some people even thank you for having done it. They all seem to admire you even in spite of some of the scandals that have gone on in this particular case. And it’s neat to be part of the government. You feel the responsibility.”⁵⁹
- j) **Taking Part in History.** Jim Fetig spoke for many when he laid out several points: the importance of the work, the opportunity to serve one’s country and be a part of its history, the personal respect that comes with working there. He said: “The benefit as a citizen is to understand the glory of this republic and how it works, to have a chance to serve the American people and serve the Constitution and the highest office of the land first-hand, personally; to be there, to be part of history; to stand in places where history has been made. It’s a very uplifting and motivating thing to do. When you walk through the gate of the White House every morning, you have no question of why you’re at work. Getting motivated to go to work at the White House was never an issue, never a problem whatsoever. It was a delight to do no matter how frustrating it could be day by day, hour by hour.”

Pete Roussel discussed his first day on the job, which gives life to the assertion that one witnessed history at close quarters.

So, I started to work that Monday. I had just gotten there and [Chief of Staff James] Baker called me. It was like early afternoon. Baker buzzed me and said, “Come back to my office right away.” I went back to his office. He was on the phone. He hung up the phone. He said come over; we’re a little closer. Anybody who’s

⁵⁷ Marlin Fitzwater interview.

⁵⁸ James Fetig interview.

⁵⁹ James Fetig interview.

been around that environment enough you quickly get a sense that something's going on. He said, "Get on a plane right away and go to Phoenix, Arizona." I said, 'What on earth are you talking about? I just got here.' "Come a little closer," he said, "I just hung up the phone. Tomorrow morning at ten a.m. the President is going to walk into the briefing room here and announce the appointment of a woman named Sandra Day O'Connor to the United States Supreme Court, a historic appointment; the first female justice," he said. "I just hung up with her. She's going to be swamped with press when this gets out. I've told her you're on the way; you'll handle it." At that point I had two thoughts: basically the first one was, 'hey pal, your first day here and you've been handed an assignment that will never happen again; you'd been given a front row on history in a sense.' The second thought I had was a much less positive one and it was emphasized to me by Baker as I was walking out the door and—this goes to the whole issue of working with the press in the White House—what he basically said was in essence, these weren't his exact words, 'Right now only a handful of people know about this. You can count them on your hands. So, if this gets out before ten a.m. tomorrow morning, good luck.' Not a real reassuring thought at that point knowing that such things can happen.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Pete Roussel interview.



Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Contact Information:

The White House Transition Project

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director

by email: marthakumar1600@gmail.com

phone: 202-285-3537

Martha Joynt Kumar is Director of the White House Transition Project and an emeritus professor in the Department of Political Science at Towson University. Her most recent book is *Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power* [2015, Johns Hopkins University Press]. Her latest book on White House communications, *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation*, won the 2008 Richard E. Neustadt Award for the best book on the presidency published in 2007 [Johns Hopkins University Press]. The award was given by the presidency section of the American Political Science Association. Her published works include: *The White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operations* [with Terry Sullivan], *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* [1981, Johns Hopkins University Press] and a variety of articles on presidential-press relations, including ones found in the *Harvard International Journal of Press / Politics*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, and *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to the Presidency*.

She has received grants from the Moody Foundation, the Ford Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts and a fellowship from the Joan Shorenstein Center of the Kennedy School at Harvard University. In 1998 she received a University of Maryland System Regents' Award for Scholarship and in 2003-2004 and 2005-2006 Wilson Elkins awards to fund her interactive White House communications course and her research on presidential press conferences. She received her B.A. from Connecticut College and her Masters and Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and is a fellow and board member of the National Academy of Public Administration. She is on the Board of Trustees of Connecticut College and a member of the board and the executive committee of the White House Historical Association.