



THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
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**Kinder Institute on
Constitutional Democracy**
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 2021—33

THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC LIAISON

Joseph A. Pika, *University of Delaware*

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Public Liaison has been a specialized unit of the White House staff since the Ford administration, though the basic features of the staff assignment can be traced to FDR. OPL has helped presidents achieve their goals in multiple ways: to mobilize public support for presidential initiatives to help sell programs to Congress; to factor group views into White House policy-making; and to serve as an adjunct to the reelection campaign. The unit also has provided symbolic representation for groups in the White House, helping them with “case work” and interpreting their policy positions and internal group politics to administration decision-makers. Within the White House, the OPL staff has operated within different systems of reporting and coordination, but the generic roles played by the staff members tend to be similar across administrations, as are the strategic design choices that administrations must make.

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INTRODUCTION

Lobbyists and organized interests played unusually prominent roles in the 2008 and 2016 presidential election cycles. The contest for the 2008 presidential nominations highlighted the relationships between candidates, lobbyists and political action committees. Barack Obama resolutely refused to accept contributions from lobbyists and PACs, a policy adopted by the Democratic National Committee after Obama became the party's presumptive nominee. The media closely scrutinized John McCain's past and present relationships with lobbyists, and several prominent aides were forced to sever ties with the campaign while others continued on amidst controversy. Hillary Clinton dismissed a leading campaign strategist over a policy conflict between her official campaign positions and one of his lobbying clients.

In 2016, first Senator Bernie Sanders challenged former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination with the argument that powerful interests dominated the American political system, and he urged his supporters to launch a political revolution in order to wrest control back for the citizens. Donald Trump, the largely self-financed candidate who emerged from a highly fragmented Republican field, then argued that Hillary Clinton was controlled by special interests and campaign contributors whereas his own wealth shielded him from such pressures. Trump promised to shake Washington to its foundations even while attacking Clinton for being controlled by special interests.

Major candidates for the presidency have deemed it important to assert their ability to rise above narrow group interests. In the post-World War II era, most presidential candidates and all eventual winners have portrayed themselves as representatives of the American people, as the tribune of the public's collective interests, not as the representative of any segment's interests or even those of the victorious coalition (Hinckley 1990). Such a claim was critical to assert for both Obama in 2008 and Clinton in 2016 in order to overcome the possible perception that their historic candidacies represented the interests of a single segment of the

American public, blacks or women, respectively. Obama, McCain and Trump consistently presented themselves as champions of a new politics that would change Washington and marshal power in service of the public's interests rather than those of the special interests. Clinton, a candidate promising continuity with a popular president, had a more difficult time in making that argument.

Amidst such heightened media sensitivity and widespread appeals to national unity, some might wonder why any future White House would want to establish an office dedicated to working with interest groups. But "public liaison" has been a persistent, clearly identified White House staff specialization since the Ford administration, and experience suggests the next president will need to establish a way to oversee interest group relationships even if it would be politically unwise to give them high visibility.

ORIGINS OF PUBLIC LIAISON

The Nixon White House was the first to formalize a set of staff responsibilities to work with interest groups that had been unsystematically scattered among staff members during the presidencies of Franklin D. Roosevelt through Lyndon B. Johnson. The title "public liaison," however, officially emerged in the Ford administration. Of course, interest groups pressed their issues onto presidents even earlier in American history, but several factors conspired to encourage the creation of a White House staff for interest group liaison.

The growth in federal programs during and after the New Deal era was accompanied by a surge in group representation in Washington, D.C., particularly marked during the 1960s and 1970s (Gais, Peterson and Walker 1984). In addition to the wide range of civil rights groups seeking to advance the opportunities of African-Americans, women, seniors and Hispanics, citizen groups arose to represent the interests of consumers, environmentalists, and the physically disabled. The result was a transformed interest group universe that had been dominated to that time by more traditional corporate, professional and occupational interests. Simultaneous improvements in communication made it possible for group leaders to maintain contact with members in ways that had never before been available, producing a lobbying community using increasingly sophisticated techniques. At the same time, Congress became a more complex institution; party discipline declined and power was decentralized. As a result, it was imperative that presidents find a way to respond systematically to group requests and, in turn, enlist groups behind administration priorities that could no longer be advanced by simply negotiating with a few powerful party leaders. The White House specialists in legislative affairs/congressional relations had once sought to coordinate occasional group lobbying campaigns, but at the same time that the interest group picture was growing more complex, so did the job of working with Congress. Thus, the Office of Public Liaison was created and has continued in each administration since Ford, though not always with the same status or degree of staff autonomy.

For most of American history, groups focused their attention and lobbying efforts on Congress and on the bureaucratic agencies responsible for the programs most directly affecting them. Creating many of those agencies, in fact, had been the goal of groups' legislative efforts—the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, Commerce and Interior are examples. Those connections have not disappeared in the modern era, but as the modern presidency assumed new responsibilities in guiding the economy and for initiating programs, developments usually associated with the Roosevelt-Truman era, it became clear that the White House was a critical center of decision-making for groups to influence. Ultimately, both

organized groups and presidents drew benefits from creating a staff unit that would oversee these relationships (Pika 1999, 1991).

Starting with FDR, White House aides maintained connections with groups associated with their general responsibilities or with groups sharing their personal backgrounds or interests.¹ To name a few examples, David Niles became FDR and Truman's link with Jewish-Americans, his co-religionists; Phileo Nash was a contact for Indian tribes, arising from his training as an anthropologist and work experience in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Pika 1987-88); Jonathan Daniels, a progressive North Carolinian, headed the "minorities office" that oversaw race relations for FDR (Daniels 1975), and Philleo Nash did the same for Truman, not because of their racial identity (neither was black) but because of their staff assignments. Bernard Shanley, who stood out amidst a predominantly Protestant staff, was Eisenhower's link to Catholics, a part-time role that Ralph Dungan played during the Kennedy administration where there were many more Catholics on the staff. George Reedy, best known as LBJ's press secretary, also worked with organized labor, but so did Harry McPherson, John Roche and others, a product of their pre-White House political careers and a reflection of how closely the administration's interests were linked with those of the unions.

During the pre-Nixon period, then, liaison was not a full-time, sustained, formal assignment. Staff members assumed liaison responsibilities as the White House figured out who might have enough personal knowledge to deal with issues as they arose. Frequently, presidents turned to appointees elsewhere in the executive branch or officials in the Democratic or Republican parties to work with important groups. The major exception during this pre-Nixon period was David Niles, who at various times served as the contact in the Roosevelt and Truman White Houses for organized labor, blacks, and nationality groups as well as Jewish organizations. Niles's broader liaison responsibilities suggest how his position was the precursor of both the OPL and Political Affairs staffs which emerged as White House specializations decades later.

During this early period, simply sharing a group's characteristics or having organization experience did not ensure that a White House aide would serve as a conduit for information and advice as an administration formulated policy. A prime example is E. Fred Morrow, the first black appointed to a professional White House position, whose memoir makes his ambivalent feelings clear. On the one hand, he did not want to be pigeonholed as the White House civil rights person, but at the same time, when civil rights issues assumed greater prominence, he felt enormously frustrated at being left outside the president's decision-making on critical issues about which he had strong views (Morrow 1963; Walcott and Hult 1995, 124). For most of the Eisenhower years, Max Rabb handled civil rights issues as well as liaison with labor and Jewish groups.

FORMALIZING PUBLIC LIAISON: NIXON, FORD, AND CARTER

The foundations for public liaison were established by three administrations in the 1970s. Nixon virtually established the staff unit but did not apply the formal staff name. Ford formally created the OPL, and Carter explored new ways to link its activities to the administration's governing and electoral strategies.

¹ FDR's staff members held generalized not specialized assignments.

NIXON

At the outset of his first term, Nixon's White House followed the pattern of earlier administrations: many staff members assumed liaison responsibilities as part of their other assignments. For example, Peter Flanigan oversaw economic and financial issues, and his staff of five maintained close relationships with a broad range of business groups; Leonard Garment, Nixon's chief counsel, worked with Jewish groups as well as the elderly and handled many civil rights issues; Pat Buchanan was the link to Roman Catholics; liaison with women was assumed by Anne Armstrong and Patricia Lindh when they joined the staff; although the administration reversed a number of Democratic civil rights policies, African-Americans on the staff (Robert Brown, Stanley Scott) maintained regular liaison with blacks, much as LBJ had done late in his administration (Hobart Taylor, Clifford Alexander).

The exception to this pattern of occasional liaison was Charles Colson. Originally hired to support congressional relations, Colson's responsibilities became wide-ranging and included special assignments from the president, such as the "dirty tricks" undertaken during the 1970 and 1972 campaigns. However, Colson's most sustained task was to maintain positive relations with organized groups potentially supportive of the administration's policy and political goals. Colson's shop grew during the first term and included an impressive range of interest group liaison assignments. Business and organized labor dominated in the early years, but as the staff expanded, members were added to deal with Hispanics, youth, senior citizens, veterans, and white ethnics (Hult and Walcott 2004, chap. 4). In many ways, Colson was a pioneer in using these connections to advance the administration's program by coordinating congressional relations, the administration's media message, and interest group support at critical points. When Colson left the staff in late 1972, Bill Baroody took over his position and ultimately proposed that the interest group efforts be redirected and retitled, but no action was taken until Ford assumed office.

FORD

Living down the Colson years' reputation as the "office of dirty tricks" was an important goal of William J. Baroody, the urbane architect of the new Office of Public Liaison under Gerald Ford. Rather than being an instrument to push aggressively for passage of the president's program through strong-arm tactics, OPL became an instrument for projecting the image of a truly open administration (in contrast to Nixon's) and for securing Ford's reelection. Under Baroody's direction, the office incorporated outreach efforts with consumers and women that had been located elsewhere in the White House, and the overall staff grew to approximately thirty (Hult and Walcott 2004, 91). At the core of its activities was an aggressive campaign of regional conferences that enabled the nation's first unelected president to tour the country in a campaign-like atmosphere and prepare the way for an eventual re-election campaign. In Washington, D.C., Baroody also coordinated an extensive series of White House briefings for group and association leaders on a variety of policy topics that brought together group representatives and administration policy-makers. Baroody reported to Jack Marsh, a former Democratic congressman who served as Counselor to the President and primarily emphasized his responsibilities in the Office of Congressional Relations.

CARTER

The new OPL staff unit survived the interparty Ford-Carter transition, but Carter's group liaison efforts extended well beyond OPL. Midge Costanza headed the Office of Public Liaison until the mid-1978, but the White House also included several prominent staff members with liaison responsibilities. Louis Martin, Special Assistant for Black Affairs, was a longtime Democratic party activist on civil rights and continued to work with blacks, doing many of the same things he had done during the Kennedy-Johnson years in the DNC. Nelson Cruikshank, Counselor to the President on Aging, was a retired labor lobbyist who was instrumental in shaping Social Security and Medicare policy across more than two decades and who represented seniors in the Carter White House and worked heavily in those same policy areas. Esther Peterson, Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs, was a similar high-profile representative of consumer interests in the White House not officially located in OPL. Martin, Cruikshank and Peterson were members of the White House senior staff and met regularly with that group.

Costanza headed OPL for about fifteen months, attracting considerable criticism for her alleged abrasiveness and aggressive championing of peripheral causes. Anne Wexler took over most of the office's responsibilities as Assistant for Public Outreach, a slightly different title intended to spare the feelings of Costanza, who stayed on for a few months to deal with women's issues. Wexler's assignment was much more explicitly connected to pushing for passage of administration priorities by enlisting groups in supportive coalitions, using many of the same techniques used in previous administrations—issue briefings large and small, coalition-building with obvious and not so obvious partners (groups that did and did not normally work together), consultation on policy content during the drafting stage of legislation, and so forth. As Wexler described it shortly after leaving office, OPL under Costanza had functioned as an office providing “responsiveness” to interest groups, a form of White House case work, but had not taken enough initiative to enlist group support by building coalitions that would move the president's program on Capitol Hill (Wexler 1981, 3-6). Responsiveness was critical to success in selling the product; groups wanted to be in on the take-off as well as the landing of legislation, the two sides of public liaison. Selling legislation required the administration to create task forces that included representatives from the offices and agencies affected by legislation, working with supporters both in and out of D.C. The administration's success in selling the Panama Canal treaties became the model for later efforts. OPL also made an extensive effort during the budget-writing period, consulting with groups about their priorities during the Thanksgiving through January time frame when the budget was taking shape. OPL then conducted briefings on the budget after decisions had been reached and still later enlisted groups behind specific legislative initiatives. By the time Wexler left the White House, OPL had created a database with 39,000 names of group leaders with whom they maintained contact, largely in support of congressional relations.

Costanza's original responsibilities for liaison with women were assigned in October 1978 to a new Special Assistant for Women's Affairs, Sarah Weddington,² and her role expanded in 1979 to include liaison with the DNC (Weddington 1981). Group liaison grew even more broadly as the 1980 election approached. Carter named a Special Assistant to the President for Ethnic Affairs in early 1980 (Stephen Aiello) that supplemented the Office of Hispanic Affairs

² As part of her outreach efforts, Weddington created a monthly newsletter “White House News on Women,” mailed out to 14,000 recipients.

created in the summer of 1979 (Esteban Torres and five assistants).³ Edward Sanders joined the White House in mid-1978 to work with the Jewish community (Hult and Walcott 2004, 100). According to Wexler, she had been asked to oversee this expanded staff of group liaisons but declined in order to maintain her principal responsibility as “the President’s advocate” while the other staffers served as “group advocates” (Wexler 1981, 24). As Wexler recalled, when a group lacked a White House advocate, OPL attempted to shift the problem outside the White House.

REAGAN, G.H.W. BUSH, CLINTON

During this phase of OPL’s development, the staff expanded, and its fortunes in the White House advisory system were more closely linked to the Director of Communications. Reagan aggressively used OPL to advance his legislative priorities, while Clinton expanded its connection to the administration’s electoral coalition.

REAGAN

Under President Reagan, Elizabeth Hanford Dole was the initial head of OPL from 1981 to 1983 and started with a modest-sized staff that included one deputy, nine other professional staff members and a total staff of 18, more than twice the size of Wexler’s original staff (Wexler 1981, 7). Dole had been in charge of the 1980 campaign’s voter group effort, excellent preparation for heading OPL. Dole’s operation consolidated liaison with most of the groups that had remained outside Wexler’s shop in the Carter White House, and the staff continued to grow under Dole, who reported directly to the chief of staff. Dole was succeeded as OPL director by Faith Ryan Whittlesey, 1983-85, later appointed Ambassador to Switzerland; Linda Gerst Chavez, 1985-86; Mari Maseng, 1986-87; and Rebecca Range, 1987-89.⁴

Just as Reagan’s electoral coalition was different, so too were the office’s assignments fine-tuned to reflect this different constellation of political forces. While appointments to work with high-profile minority groups continued (for example, Thelma Duggin with blacks as well as youth and Henry Zuniga with Hispanics), there was now a staff member to work with fundamentalist Christians and veterans groups (Morton Blackwell). In addition to overseeing the office, Elizabeth Dole worked with women; Virginia Knauer initially worked with consumers inside the OPL structure but moved to head a separate unit after Dole left the job; Knauer also worked with seniors. Jack Burgess worked with white ethnics and Catholics, a responsibility he had also filled during the 1980 campaign. Dole organized her staff into two divisions headed by deputy directors. Jack Burgess oversaw commerce (business and labor), and Diana Lozano headed human services (blacks, Hispanics, membership groups, consumers, seniors, and women). It was hoped that this structure would reduce the demands on Dole’s time and the paper flow that she would be responsible for overseeing. Subsequent Reagan directors made modifications to this structure.

³ Finders aids can provide some sense of staff size and turnover. See “Historical Materials in the Jimmy Carter Library,” <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/library/guide.pdf>.

⁴ The extensive list of staff members who served at some point in OPL indicates the extent of the administration’s efforts. See “Key Reagan Administration Officials,” <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/keyofficials.html>.

Liaison with the Jewish community was unusually prominent for a Republican administration. Jacob Stein, a former president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations,⁵ was appointed Special Assistant to the President for Jewish Affairs within OPL, an important post given the relatively high support Reagan received from Jewish voters in the 1980 election (39 percent). Stein effectively assumed the role played by Leonard Garment during the Nixon years and worked as emissary to Jewish organizations during a difficult period when U.S. weapon sales to Saudi Arabia were perceived as endangering Israel (Laham 2004).⁶ Because of the sensitive nature of the issues in question, Stein also held positions with the Office of Policy Development and the National Security Council, a higher policy profile than held by most OPL staff members, although similar in scope to the role played by Edward Sanders in the Carter administration. After Stein left the White House in early 1982, he was replaced by Michael Gale, formerly a lobbyist with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and Deputy Director of the National Jewish Republican Coalition during the 1980 election.

Like the Carter group, Reagan's OPL conducted extensive consultation with groups prior to the State of the Union and submission of the president's budget message. Interaction was especially intense with business groups. Immediately prior to release of the president's budget, D.C. representatives of friendly groups were assembled to provide them with prior knowledge of the budget details. Reagan's OPL held fewer briefings for large groups (though there were some) and substantially reduced the effort devoted to White House conferences held outside D.C. The emphasis was clearly to build coalitions in support of the president's program—when Congress was out of session the staff's business slowed appreciably. During much of the 1983-1985 period, the administration unsuccessfully sought to mobilize group support behind the effort to provide funding for the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan groups known as the "contras" (Brownstein 1985).

In the second Reagan administration, Donald Regan, the new chief of staff, hoped to streamline some reporting lines and considered consolidating several political units under the direction of Max Friedersdorf, formerly Assistant for Legislative Affairs during the first year of the Reagan administration. Friedersdorf returned from a cushy ambassadorial appointment in the Caribbean to become Assistant to the President and Legislative Strategy Coordinator. This position was initially conceived to coordinate public liaison, legislative affairs and intergovernmental relations, but a different organizational structure emerged. Along with Friedersdorf, Regan hired Ed Rollins to manage political affairs and Pat Buchanan to direct communications, both high-profile conservatives who were Friedersdorf's equals. As a result, Friedersdorf stayed only until October 1985 after spending most of his time on congressional issues; OPL's status became ambiguous when both Friedersdorf and Faith Ryan Whittlesey left the White House. Rollins and Buchanan reportedly battled over the unit's large number of staff slots and finally agreed to divide the positions between them (Canon 1985). One account suggests that OPL officially fell under Buchanan's Communications Office and

⁵ This organization is described on its website as "the central coordinating body representing 50 national Jewish organizations on issues of national and international concern."
<http://www.conferenceofpresidents.org/>.

⁶ For a discussion of Reagan's relations with the Jewish community during a stressful period see Laham (2004). A December 15, 1981, memo from Jacob Stein to Elizabeth Dole summarized his activities during the first 8 months on the job: four meetings between Reagan and representatives of the Jewish community; three with Vice President Bush; four with members of the cabinet and senior White House staff; 87 meetings with Jewish groups in the White House; more than 20 speeches around the country (Laham 2004, 22).

thereafter largely engaged in outreach to the conservative parts of Reagan's coalition (Peterson 1992, 623). By the end of the Reagan administration, OPL staff members were officially performing functions directly associated with communications, including speech writing and research as well as media and broadcast relations (Kumar 2001, 630).

During most of the later Reagan years, then, OPL was one of several White House units under the Office of Communications, which provided an umbrella to coordinate the efforts of speech writing, media relations, public affairs, the press office and public liaison, the largest of the subunits. At its height, OPL reportedly had 38 staff members (another source says 56); because of high turnover at the director level, there was also considerable turnover within the unit overall. Thus, the list of former OPL staff members is extensive—at least sixty-four are included in the Reagan Library's finders aid.

G.H.W. BUSH

With such a large operation, OPL was almost destined for staff reductions when George H.W. Bush entered office promising to reduce the overall size of the White House staff. Public accounts suggest that the Bush operation included only 9 staff members at the administration's outset, though it is not clear whether this total included only professionals or the total staff (Peterson 1992, 623). Nor was OPL very influential within the White House. Barbara ("Bobbi") Kilberg served as the office's director and reported most of the time to David Demarest, director of communications, who also oversaw speech writing, media relations and intergovernmental affairs. When Samuel Skinner became Chief of Staff in late 1991, he had an outside consultant conduct an organizational assessment that set off a round of staff shakeups. In addition to several changes on the communications side (the consensus judgment was that Bush's message was not getting through to the public), Sherrie Rollins (wife of Ed Rollins, the Reagan political insider) joined the staff in January 1992 with responsibilities to oversee both OPL and intergovernmental affairs. Demarest's responsibilities were reduced substantially.

Other changes in Bush's OPL were afoot. After ongoing conflicts with Christian conservatives, Kilberg was moved in April 1992 to serve as director of intergovernmental affairs and a new OPL director was appointed in her place—Cecile B. Kremer. Earlier in the administration, Kilberg had repeatedly clashed with Doug Wead, the liaison to religious groups (the same Doug Wead who worked with George W. Bush during the 1988 campaign); Wead who was fired in 1990 after he publicly challenged a White House decision to allow gay and lesbian activists to attend a signing ceremony. His departure set off a firestorm of complaints fueled by continuing coverage in the *Washington Times* until Leigh Anne Metzger was named as his replacement in September 1990. But conservatives had not forgotten Kilberg's role, and she was later charged with being a supporter of pro-life women's groups. The situation changed again when Sherrie Rollins's husband accepted (though only for a month) a position in Ross Perot's campaign, the independent candidate running against President Bush. Rather than create continuing media controversy, Sherrie Rollins resigned from her White House position, and David Demarest once again emerged as the overseer of both OPL and intergovernmental affairs. For a time at the very end of the administration, Demarest served as director of OPL.

One innovation in Bush's OPL was to include an Asian-American on the staff, Sichan Siv. Siv's life story included an escape from Cambodia during the period of genocide and a journey to the United States, where he rose from a taxi driver to a White House staff position. When he left in 1992, he was replaced by Clayton Fong, thereby maintaining the same focus on a new voting constituency.

CLINTON

Clinton's OPL was headed during the first term by Alexis Herman, who was later nominated and confirmed as Secretary of Labor at the outset of the second term. She was succeeded as director during the second term by Maria Echaveste, Minyon Moore and Mary Beth Cahill. Herman's staff grew to approximately 16-20 members and, unlike her immediate predecessors in the second Reagan administration and the George H.W. Bush administration, she seemed to carry more weight in White House circles. Echaveste and Moore also rose in the administration. Echaveste increased her influence and assumed an expanded policy role after becoming White House deputy chief of staff in the final two years of the administration. Moore moved from OPL to become White House director of political affairs in 1999-2000. Cahill later became John Kerry's second campaign manager in 2004. In sum, all four of Clinton's OPL directors were closely linked to the DNC and/or electoral politics: Herman had directed the Democrats' 1992 convention; Echaveste had been National Latino Coordinator in the 1992 Clinton campaign; Moore was an activist/administrator in the Rainbow Coalition; Cahill had served five years as executive director of Emily's List before joining the White House. Thus, OPL's close link to political affairs is striking in this administration. That connection posed problems in 1997 when the Senate raised questions about whether Herman's staff had played an active role in campaign fund-raising by arranging group meetings with the president, the notorious White House "coffees" (Drew 1997). Herman had also headed an informal group of administration officials that helped design a strategy for mobilizing black support for the president's re-election. Another staff member, Doris Matsui, coordinated a similar group focused on Asian-Americans. Earlier administrations also used the outreach capacity of OPL as a way to create a "campaign in waiting"; thus, Clinton's efforts were variations on established themes.

Election-related activities are only one part of OPL's multiple roles, however. Standing at the intersection of party, groups and policy, the more prominent OPL role has been to mobilize support for the administration's goals between elections. In the course of the 2008 election, the Clinton Library released documents that illustrated the former First Lady's activities during her White House years. Among those was a memo completed by Alexis Herman and Mike Lux, an OPL assistant, detailing a proposed plan for selling the administration's anticipated health care reform proposal. Dated February 5, 1993, the memo reveals the forethought being given to creating a bill-drafting process that would aid in winning congressional approval (Herman and Lux 1993). The memo, written early in the administration, is not an account of what transpired, but it does give a good sense of what OPL foresaw as its potential role in what was anticipated to be a difficult process.

Looking ahead, OPL projected itself as the leader in a "targeted outreach strategy," but as unable to do it fully on its own. The collective effort would include "consultation meetings for small groups of organizational representatives" who would provide input into the policy formation process, a process we now know was not followed, as the administration opted for a largely secretive task force approach that did not consult broadly (Quirk and Hinchliffe 1996). OPL's list of assignments included parts of the interest group universe that might be expected to have strong interest in any reform proposal: relevant organized health professionals, insurance companies, hospitals, unions, both large and small businesses, single-payer advocates, rural health care advocates, and those concerned with health care for women, children and low-income groups. White House briefings conducted with representatives for these groups would seek to build on the "aura" of the White House to sell the administration's views as much as seek their input.

The administration was urged to form interdepartmental teams to work with “five key sectors in the health debate.” One would consist of the AMA, the Hospital Association, the Insurance Association and the largest insurance companies. The goal would be to gather “intelligence” from these groups to ensure that not all would oppose the final proposal. Small business was expected to be the most energized opponents and warranted a separate team. Big business and the major associations had to be enlisted as supporters, so soliciting their ideas would be critical. Single-payer advocates, generally supportive of reform, would need to be given concessions and wooed, thus deserving separate attention. Finally, the administration was urged to form a research team targeted on strategically placed groups with powerful congressional allies whose support was critical to passage. Done well, the authors concluded, success lay ahead. “If we have these five projects well-coordinated, we will go into this fight well prepared to take on the interest groups we need to take on, and it will be very tough to stop us” (Herman and Lux 1993).

OPL would take the lead in creating a database on groups interested in health care that would include records on group size, strength by region and congressional district, the groups’ policy positions, their record of consultation and support for the administration, and contact information for the groups’ leadership. None of this was very threatening, though it was the focus of conservatives’ criticism of the Clinton legacy when it surfaced during the 2008 election.

Rather than organizing a coalition of supportive groups through the White House, Herman recommended doing it through the DNC, which would form “an independent coalition staffed by the DNC.” Clearly, such an effort would be only nominally independent and would serve the president’s interests. Herman had served as deputy chairwoman and chief of staff of the Democratic National Committee from 1988 to 1991 and was well aware that a DNC-staffed effort could hardly be considered “independent,” but this would get the job done and keep it at arms length from the White House.⁷ OPL would assist in orchestrating the campaign of support to be generated by “‘inside’ and ‘outside’ surrogates,” a group consisting of administration officials who would speak in behalf of health care reform and allies outside the administration who would do likewise. These efforts would be targeted on “top-tier [media] markets,” though not exclusively, and be coordinated with the legislative strategy by targeting key congressional districts. It would be best to use “a format that allows for questions and comments” because “we need to be seen as listening.” Finally, they recommended holding a two-day health care summit outside Washington, D.C. (regional hearings were an alternative) where “there should be at least two or three people with specific horror stories,” and senior citizens “should be encouraged to talk openly about their insecurities about potential changes in medicare [*sic*] and their choice of doctors,” allowing these concerns to be addressed directly. One can hardly read this anticipated script without thinking of similar efforts launched by the Nixon and George W. Bush administrations.

G. W. BUSH

Public Liaison is one of several political liaison assignments in the White House. Other prominent ones mentioned above focus on relations with Congress, state and local governments, and the national party. The White House of George W. Bush addressed each of

⁷ On Herman’s general role in the Clinton White House, see Ifill 1994.

these areas with separate staff units but sought to coordinate them through an overarching structure, much as the Reagan administration had once considered doing. OPL, Intergovernmental Affairs, and Political Affairs were linked through the Office of Strategic Initiatives and External Affairs. Collectively, these units constituted about thirty staff professionals at the outset of the Bush administration. Inevitably, the activities of OPL and these other units overlapped. Thus, the Bush White House had a single director appointed to oversee all their activities. In this way, the Bush staff hoped to provide the coordination required to work with “external coalitions on major Presidential initiatives,”⁸ that is, generate support behind the president’s program.

At the outset, Bush’s Public Liaison staff included a director, Lezlee Westine, two deputies, and four associates. One deputy (Tim Goeglein) oversaw relations with conservatives, think tanks, Christian denominations, veterans, national security concerns, judicial nominations and Congress-focused coalition building. The other deputy (Kirk Blalock) oversaw economic, trade and budget issues. The associates’ assignments included education, African-American, Jewish, and women’s issues (Witham 2001). Westine, holder of an MBA with a law degree, had worked for Governor Pete Wilson in California and for TechNet, an advocacy group for high-tech businesses, the organization to which she returned after leaving the White House. She was co-chairwoman of Bush’s 2000 campaign in California and co-organized a multimillion dollar fund-raising event. Rhonda Keenum moved from a position in the Department of Commerce to become OPL director from 2005 to spring 2007, and Julie E. Cram took over the job in March 2007.

Westine was described as “the most prominent advocate for the new economy in the Bush administration,” a position important to an industry that had felt well received in the Clinton administration (Pressman 2001). Westine arranged several face-to-face meetings between the president and tech-industry executives early in the administration. Westine also moved quickly to counter criticism of the administration’s perceived de-emphasis of women’s programs (Leonard 2001). Bush “closed the White House Office for Women’s Initiatives and Outreach whose job was to coordinate the work of the women’s bureaus Clinton had placed in every federal agency. Under this arrangement, it was possible to assess the impact on women of virtually every federal reg” (Goldstein 2003). The administration’s stand on abortion rights, pressed aggressively into the international arena, was a topic that broached no compromise. But Westine opened lines of communication with her Clinton predecessors, assembled women’s spokespersons in the White House, and looked for areas of potential agreement (Enda 2002).

Karl Rove, George W. Bush’s principal political adviser and campaign strategist, headed the strategic planning effort created inside the White House, a systematic attempt to prevent short-term events from dominating the staff’s attention. About a dozen senior members met weekly as the so-called “strategery group” in an effort to maintain focus on larger issues while making short-term assignments.⁹ OPL’s efforts were coordinated with those of the other political offices as well as communications and policy (Milbank 2001). Rove was credited with

⁸ See the White House press release for September 4, 2007, that named Barry Jackson as Assistant to the President for Strategic Initiatives and External Affairs. Jackson’s background is instructive: before joining the White House, he had been Chief of Staff to Congressman John Boehner and Executive Director of the House Republican Conference. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/09/20070904-3.html>

⁹ The misspelling, of course, reflected the running gag on NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* that brought attention to President Bush’s malapropisms.

choreographing the president's first 180 days in office that featured many examples of bipartisanship (Berke and Bruni 2001); he later guided far more partisan tactics heading into the 2002 and 2004 elections. When Karen Hughes left the White House in 2002, Rove also began to oversee the public message functions. In the second term Rove became one of two Deputy Chiefs of Staff and assumed a broader portfolio that included policy planning. When he left the White House, Rove's coordination of the four political staff units fell to Barry Jackson, who had coordinated the strategy group and been responsible for especially sensitive outreach assignments (Abramowitz 2007).

Perhaps the closest working relationship with an outside group developed between Bush and business. Early in the administration, the Tax Relief Coalition was formed by a group of large and small business associations to lobby for the president's 2001 tax-reform package. Rove, Westine and the administration's lead liaison with business, Kirk Blalock, began planning strategy in mid-February with Dirk van Dongen of the National Association of Wholesale Distributors (Graetz and Shapiro 2005, 158). The National Federation of Independent Business, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and National Association of Manufacturers were enthusiastic supporters. The coalition generated phone calls, e-mails, and letters to Congress based on sample letters, as well as supportive editorials, radio messages, and television spots. Pop-up ads carried on a variety of websites facilitated the contacts with congressional offices. And the coalition continued to grow, doubling in size to more than 1,000 members representing nearly two million businesses by 2003, despite the fact that there was no effort to disguise the coalition's purpose: assemble support for the Bush administration's 2001, 2002, and 2003 tax proposals (Graetz and Shapiro 2005, 164, 166).

But not all of Bush's coordinated efforts were successful. The campaign to reform social security in 2005 paralleled in many ways the strategy outlined for reforming health care under Clinton. Bush's town hall meetings were carefully choreographed to include personal testimonials from citizens likely to benefit from the proposed reforms or examples of people who had been hurt by features of the current system. There was the appearance of interaction with the audience rather than the reality. Events were staged in states and congressional districts where the legislator's vote was considered "winnable." The White House worked closely in conjunction with corporate lobbyists, public advocacy groups, selected senior groups, and unions to form the Coalition for the Protection and Modernization of America's Social Security which organized support groups in 32 states (Lambro 2005). The effort included media advertising, town hall meetings, phone calls and information booths with most efforts focused on the members of congressional tax-writing committees. Karl Rove was the White House mastermind of the overall effort, which leaned heavily for funding on administration allies in the business community, particularly the National Association of Manufacturers, financial and securities trade associations, Progress for America, and the Club for Growth, which were collectively expected to contribute millions to the administration effort (VandeHei 2005).

OBAMA

The Office of Public Engagement extended virtually all the activities undertaken historically in the White House by public liaison staffs while adding some new dimensions. Digital communications stood at the center of the new strategies. Facebook, Twitter, and blogging supplemented more traditional means of communication. Described by the

administration as “the front door to the White House”¹⁰ when it was launched in spring 2009, OPE grew in size under Obama, and its range of assignments expanded, perhaps diluting its political focus. Valerie Jarrett provided continuity throughout the administration’s eight years, and her close relationships with both President Obama and the First Lady ensured that she would be a powerful force within the White House. It is less certain that she was a powerful force in Washington. OPE helped in the battle to secure approval of health care reform, but the office was less successful in other battles, including the campaign for gun control.

Organizationally, OPE was one of several units reporting through Jarrett. Its directors were Christina (Tina) Tchen, Jon Carson, and Paulette Ansikoff, all of whom held the title of Deputy Assistant to the President. As always, the way that this unit related to other White House offices was critical to its success. For example, how did OPE fit into the administration’s overall digital strategy? And how did individual staff members outside OPE with strong ties to important interest groups coordinate their activities back with the unit?

GENERIC OPL ACTIVITIES

Over the more than three decades of its formal existence, OPL staff members have consistently filled several generic roles.¹¹

Group representatives/advocates/case workers. Appointments in OPL have been a way for administrations to signal responsiveness to politically sensitive and important constituencies. In this way, organized constituencies came to expect a White House “representative” for attending to their interests. Some interests are inescapable—business and organized labor, for example. Other appointments were symbolic of an administration’s responsiveness to major demographic groups: blacks, women, Hispanics, and Jewish-Americans are examples. Finally, as specific issues arose or constituencies organized politically, there was a desire to show that the White House was attentive—seniors, youth, consumers, gays, and Christian fundamentalists fall into this category. By having such aides in the White House, presidents suggested that a group’s interests would be considered in administration policy-making. Some assignments are obvious—ones that cannot be overlooked. Others are short-run (youth in the 1970s) or intermittent (intellectuals).¹² Although there is no approved list of groups meriting attention, discontinuing an appointment can result in sharp criticism.¹³

Ambassadors. The flip side of representing group interests in the White House is representing the president’s interests to groups (Pika 1986). Whether this occurs in quiet meetings or at large national conferences, or through systematic news releases and newsletters, OPL staff members are expected to carry the president’s message to outside groups. They sort through the many requests for meetings that administration policy-makers receive as well as

¹⁰ White House Press Release, May 11, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-obama-launches-office-public-engagement>.

¹¹ For a related way of discussing these activities from a more institutional perspective see Peterson who argues that the White House approach to interest groups may be *inclusive* or *exclusive* and that the focus may be *substantive* or *representative*.

¹² Although the Bush administration has sometimes been portrayed as anti-intellectual, Peter H. Wehner in the Office of Strategic Initiatives became the catalyst for meetings between the president and historians as well as intellectuals and the White House staff. See the discussion in Baker 2007.

¹³ For example, the George W. Bush White House discontinued the Office for Women’s Initiatives and Outreach, a separate unit created inside the Clinton OPL in 1995. Vocal critics described the change as a “setback” (Leonard 2001).

the requests for speeches to national gatherings, help fashion the responses and make sure they are delivered with the necessary nuance.

Intelligence gathering/interpreters. In performing their ambassadorial role, OPL staffers interpret to the White House that segment of the interest group universe for which they have responsibility. A good part of this consists of gathering intelligence on what groups and their leaders are doing and saying, as well as the divisions that might exist within a community.¹⁴ Even more dangerously, groups sometimes feud, as when evangelicals objected to the George H.W. Bush White House inviting representatives of homosexual groups to bill-signing ceremonies (Murray and Archibald 1990). “Who are these people demanding an audience in the White House, and what is their position in the organized community?” “What policy statements or criticisms of the administration have they made?” “What are the ramifications of meeting with them?” “What message do they hope to hear from the administration?” Presidents will not possess adequate knowledge of the full array of associations, organizations, and their leadership to answer these questions on their own. Nor is the White House likely to be sensitive to all the nuances that might have political significance. As one Reagan aide explained, “Indian organizations prefer that ‘Indian’ be used as an adjective, not as a noun. And they don’t insist on being termed ‘native Americans’ . . . but they prefer to be referred to as ‘Indian people’ rather than as ‘Indians’” (Blackwell 1982). Someone has to raise the red flag on such nuanced issues when they arise in official testimony or in presidential statements. And the modern White House staff system benefits from having such expertise available in-house instead of facing the recurrent problem of finding trustworthy advisers within the political party or in the bureaucracy who can advise them, as was the case historically.

Firefighters. OPL staff members are the first line of defense when crises arise in relations with politically significant groups. Whom do you contact when a problem arises? How do we smooth over this difference with the least short-run and long-run damage? When gay activists threatened to denounce the Clinton administration in a noisy march on Washington for its 1993 retreat on gays in the military, OPL organized a quiet meeting with eight organizers designed to minimize the damage (Devroy 1993). Similar sessions have been held in the White House over time with civil rights leaders, women’s rights advocates, and labor leaders, among others, and will no doubt arise in other administrations. In one observer’s terms, the job consists of “dousing fires and soothing egos” (Ratnesar 1998).

Mobilizing support/building coalitions. During the Nixon administration, OPL became associated with Charles Colson, whose staff was colloquially termed the “office of dirty tricks” because of its involvement in unethical and illegal campaign tactics during the 1970 and 1972 elections. Less noticed, however, were Colson’s efforts to organize support on behalf of the president’s policies. For example, he organized highly visible support from hard-hat labor unions for Nixon’s Vietnam policies. Ever since, OPL has been involved in systematic efforts to mobilize interest group support for presidential initiatives. The strategies can vary from generating grassroots pressure on Congress to simply using the White House as the center point for coordinating group efforts. This became the principal mission of OPL during the Carter administration when Anne Wexler replaced Midge Costanza. It was also an important part of the Reagan administration’s first-year legislative victories on the budget and tax cuts; moreover, components of the legislative coalitions shift—the coalitions are usually issue-

¹⁴ To illustrate differences within communities, during the Clinton transition, some religious groups who felt that their views had been ignored under Reagan and George H.W. Bush, argued that the public liaison connection with religious groups should be abolished (Niebuhr 1992).

specific. Both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations sought to make mobilizing efforts still more systematic, as discussed above.

Public education. Because Gerald Ford entered the presidency without the benefit of a national election, he sought to use a series of White House town meetings to travel the country, introduce himself through local media outlets, and build momentum before the 1976 campaign. OPL was the staff charged with organizing and coordinating these events. In subsequent administrations, OPL has been involved in organizing White House summits and similar town hall meetings, though other White House units might take principal responsibility for the events. This “soft-sell” strategy draws on OPL staff members’ networks of connections to generate co-sponsors, participants and messages.

RECURRING ISSUES REGARDING OPL

In organizing OPL, future administrations must address several recurrent issues: establishing effective coordination with other parts of the White House staff; right-sizing the staff given its responsibilities; creating protocols for group liaison throughout the White House and Executive Office staffs; determining how extensive liaison with groups should be from inside vs. outside the White House; deciding on whether to maintain the historic focus on a woman to direct OPL; structuring opportunities for OPL to work with policy-makers; and coping with the problem of divided loyalties.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER WHITE HOUSE UNITS

Because it stands at the intersection of communications, congressional relations, political affairs, and public policy, OPL’s responsibilities need to be coordinated with a number of other units or, alternatively, might be made subordinate to another unit’s control. Leaving these relationships unclear could unleash the kind of struggle seen between Ed Rollins and Pat Buchanan in the Reagan White House when OPL suddenly found itself in a vacuum. Each administration’s solution to this issue has been the product of several factors, including organizational design, the influence and stature of the office’s director, and the preferences of the White House chief of staff.

Colson was something of a free spirit in the Nixon administration, reporting most clearly to the chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, and the president himself. In the Ford administration, OPL was most closely linked to congressional relations in the person of Jack Marsh, who was responsible for overseeing both offices. Though logical, that arrangement has not been repeated in any subsequent administration. Instead, the office has most frequently been overseen by the director of communications, who has often served as the hub of an administration’s outside message. This pattern emerged late in the first Reagan administration and was repeated under George H.W. Bush when the office was overseen by David Demarest. Later in Bush’s term, the office was linked to intergovernmental affairs, an outcome that appears to have been more a solution dictated by organizational design concerns—here were two offices that needed to be supervised—than by the need for functional coordination between two units whose work is not very closely linked.

Several administrations have sought to enhance coordination of multiple staff units (including OPL) in an effort to advance the administration’s legislative program. This became the responsibility of Vice President Mondale in the Carter administration after the staffing system underwent dramatic changes in mid-1978. Such a strategy was also proposed, though

not implemented, at the outset of the second Reagan administration when the need to bring strong conservative voices into the administration thwarted the plan to center coordination on Max Friedersdorf (*New York Times* 1985). Of these efforts, however, Karl Rove's responsibility for both the message and the political strategy of George W. Bush went the furthest as the Office of Strategic Initiatives and External Affairs coordinated OPL, political affairs, and intergovernmental affairs. Rove's reach gradually extended to include communication strategies more generally and then domestic policy development.

STAFF SIZE

The size of OPL has varied tremendously across administrations, though the figures on staff size are far from solid. Because some administrations have highlighted liaison with particular communities by giving them independent White House standing outside OPL, one really needs to gauge the commitment to group liaison overall rather than merely rely on OPL's size. As best we can gauge based on unsystematic data, Reagan's OPL staff totals were the largest in the staff's history and George H.W. Bush's the smallest, with the range in size being approximately 50 to 15.

CONSOLIDATING GROUP LIAISON IN OPL

Even after the office was created under Ford, aides outside the OPL structure continued to hold responsibilities for working with groups, a pattern that has persisted in later administrations. In the White House of George W. Bush, for example, the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives maintained close contacts with Christian conservatives, but Tim Goeglin also held that portfolio in OPL, following in the tradition of Morton Blackwell in the Reagan White House twenty years earlier (VandeHei 2004). Individual staff members in other parts of the White House and the EOP complex (for example, OMB and domestic policy staffs) inevitably become involved in group liaison when issues arise that affect a constituency where they have had firsthand experience. This happens all the time in working with Congress; congressional relations might be centered in the Office of Legislative Affairs, but many other staff members are likely to have a hand in the process based on previous political and employment experiences. The same thing happens in working with interest groups. Thus, it is unlikely that *all* group liaison will occur through OPL. This reflects the distinction made by Mark Peterson between "interest group liaison," as it is conducted by multiple staff members in the White House and EOP units, and "public liaison," the groups explicitly targeted in OPL (Peterson 1992, 613).¹⁵ Administrations have found it advantageous to heighten the visibility and potential significance of relations with particularly important groups by providing White House connections outside OPL. This is virtually certain to continue in the future.

A related issue is whether OPL should handle group casework or divorce those activities from enlisting support behind presidential priorities. Only in the Carter administration was liaison with high-visibility constituency groups separated from OPL. And as noted above, Wexler was adamant that this was critical for her effectiveness. If OPL is saddled with the need to handle complaints from unhappy groups about administration decisions, "you get dragged into a lot of issues and a lot of concerns and a lot of problems that really inhibit your

¹⁵ Peterson also provides evidence from the interest group side of the relationship that documents how widespread contacts are between groups and the White House.

ability to focus on things that are really important as a public liaison assistant, which is really building support for the president's program" (Wexler 1982). To create another tier of case-work assistants, however, increases size and complicates coordination.

INSIDE VS. OUTSIDE LIAISON

Is it better for the president to rely on group liaison performed from inside or outside of the White House? Since Nixon, successive administrations have chosen to locate it largely inside, rather than relying on the traditional avenues of liaison—executive branch officials and party officials. The prevailing view has been that only by bringing such sensitive questions inside the White House can presidents be certain that their priorities will prevail. Some argue, however, that bringing more work inside the presidency bogs it down by making coordination a full-time challenge. It also leads groups to expect that they will have a hearing with the chief executive on issues of strong concern. Moreover, where does one draw the line on representation? The group universe is far too diverse for all communities to warrant a staffer inside the presidency, so strategic decisions must be made. However, failure to provide groups with the level of representation that they have previously enjoyed runs the risk of being seen as a symbolic insult. And groups are enormously sensitive to perceived slights. Once the expectation has been established that a group will enjoy access to the White House, it is politically costly to violate it. For example, white ethnics complained when the Reagan administration did not appoint a Special Assistant for Ethnic Affairs, a position that Ford established in 1976 and Carter in 1980, relatively obvious efforts to win support on the brink of their campaigns. Despite these cautionary points, however, OPL has become a fixture in the post-Nixon era.

DIRECTOR'S GENDER

It is noteworthy that since its inception in 1974 only three times have men served as director of OPL—Bill Baroody at the outset, David Demarest for a brief time at the conclusion of the George H.W. Bush administration, and Jon Carson under Obama. Thus, 18 of 21 directors have been women; Demarest filled a brief vacancy late in the first Bush administration and Carson had a two-year stint in the job. Even in administrations where there has been considerable staff turnover, women have been chosen to replace women. Thus, as Helen Thomas noted more than a decade ago, OPL has become a White House staff position that has, for all intents and purposes, become the “traditional female slot in Republican and Democratic administrations.” It ensures that there will be at least one visible woman among the senior staff “but not [necessarily] in the high councils where the big issues are deliberated” (Thomas 1991).

CONNECTING OPL WITH POLICY-MAKERS

George H.W. Bush drew sharp criticism from the Jewish community when the administration sought to link loan guarantees to Israel with progress on talks with the Palestinians about West Bank settlements. There was the perception that these groups enjoyed far less access to policy-makers than they had in the Carter and Reagan administrations. While Barbara G. Kilberg, the OPL staffer responsible for liaison with Jewish groups, drew “high praise from Israel supporters,” the complaint was that she “is not a policymaker” (Rosenthal 1991). Groups, then, want assurance that they will be able to influence White House decision-

making on the issues of greatest significance to them. The first step is to have a contact in the White House, but the next step is to ensure that this contact can help shape policy. OPL staff members have seldom had the standing to shape policy, though the senior presidential adviser who oversaw their efforts usually did (e.g., Rove in the George W. Bush administration).¹⁶

Nonetheless, the question persists: How does the White House factor the views of groups into its decision-making? For Anne Wexler (and presumably for others), this required a critical balancing act. The policy-related part of her job meant consulting with groups that would be directly affected by a policy in order to secure their support when the initiative had to be sold. Alexis Herman argued the same point in her 1993 memo: it is critical to solicit group input during the policy formulation process if one also hopes to enlist their support on Capitol Hill. But groups also expect that their representatives in White House councils will advocate their interests. For this reason, Wexler wanted to keep the two staff units separated inside the White House. How could she consistently present herself as the “president’s advocate” if groups also expected her to be advocating their interests? Thus, she explicitly separated developing and selling the president’s programs from case-work activities. In essence, her unit expanded the White House capacity to assess the politics of policy-making. An alternative organizational strategy is Karl Rove’s “strategery” group: make sure that politics and policy-making are addressed through systematic staff coordination.

Regardless of how the role is structured, an aggressive program of group briefings enables an administration to bring influential policy-makers together with group representatives in the impressive surroundings of the White House. Many administrations have used these relatively intimate, ego-stroking sessions as a means to provide rich context for their policies and thus to avoid criticism. Done regularly, these briefings provide an ongoing forum for group leaders to hear first-hand the logic and rationale for administration actions. Large events can also be held at the White House, but there are logistical challenges that could cause great damage if they go wrong. For example, the George H.W. Bush administration invited 1,800 Cuban-Americans from around the nation to the White House in 1990 to observe the 88th anniversary of Cuban independence. The outside event was canceled just a few hours before its start due to an impending rainstorm. The resulting political storm was far greater (Devroy 1990).

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Many OPL aides have been drawn from long careers as activists in the movements or the constituencies with which they deal from the White House. The value of such staff members lies in their intimate familiarity with the nuances of a constituency—the players, the internal politics, the policy positions, and the group’s particular sensitivities. But that same experience poses a dilemma: Whom do such aides represent, the community with which they work or the president?

This question becomes critical when the administration’s policies are at odds with the community’s preferences. This can pose a personal dilemma for those staff aides who are committed to the positions of that constituency. Even when staffers are self-consciously committed to serving the president first, they can be subjected to enormous pressure from outside groups. As Jacob Stein, liaison with the Jewish community during the Reagan administration, pointed out, “I never thought I was here [in the White House] representing

¹⁶ Most OPL directors have been in the third tier of White House salaries, below assistants to the president and in the lower rung of deputy assistants.

the Jewish community. I thought I was here as an adviser to the president. . . . There was never an election in the Jewish community as to whom their representative should be here.” Yet after every incident when there was a major difference of opinion between the community and the administration’s policy, he was asked how he could possibly remain in his position. But as he explained, “I think that when there’s an issue [a conflict] that my advice is more sorely needed than when everything is running placidly. And for me to simply pick up and leave on every issue” would deny the president the benefit of that experience when it was most essential. “Don’t they understand that in order for you to be effective you gotta be here, when you leave a vacuum is created, don’t they want a point of view—which they must presume I generally share—presented so that it will change, modify, mitigate, affect, alter [policy], or do something?” (Stein 1982).

Similarly, Nelson Cruikshank broke openly with President Carter on several occasions when the administration adopted policies that he viewed as damaging to Social Security. Cruikshank was not included in discussions that cut the budgets of several programs that serve the elderly, changes that he regarded as being “wrong in principle. They were being done for the wrong reasons—they were being done for budgetary reasons and also for [Secretary Joseph] Califano’s personal drive . . . but he sold it.” Cruikshank was furious, contacted influential figures outside the administration (Wilbur Cohen and Bob Ball) to enlist them in a common effort, and launched a strategy to reverse the budget cutbacks, including an appeal to Mrs. Carter (Cruikshank 1982). He later offered to resign from the White House after he made arrangements to testify on Capitol Hill against the administration’s proposed cuts. Despite this open breach that was likely to embarrass the administration, Carter declined to accept the resignation. Such mini-dramas have involved other OPL staffers, for example, when movement conservatives working in OPL felt that Republican presidents have not moved the social agenda forward with sufficient speed.

STRATEGIC CHOICES

Thus, in designing the White House, an administration must make several key choices about public liaison.

How extensive will the liaison effort be? Some administrations have been far more ambitious (or inclusive) in establishing liaison efforts than others, trying to provide liaison staff not only for the key members of their own coalition but also for groups outside their supporting coalition. This pattern also tends to change over time; administrations expand liaison efforts as a re-election campaign approaches.

Will public liaison be primarily oriented toward selling the administration’s program on Capitol Hill or will it primarily be designed to provide symbolic reassurance that groups’ views are being considered and their concerns addressed? Peterson describes the former as a “governing party” strategy and the others as “outreach” or “legitimization” (Peterson 1992, 614). Few administrations are easily categorized as pursuing a single strategy. Instead, most administrations reveal a mix of motives and goals. It might be argued, however, that Carter’s efforts under Anne Wexler and Reagan’s attention to his governing coalition were probably most focused on creating a governing party; while this strategy has not been absent in other administrations, the later ones may have pursued the effort with less determination.

How will public liaison be factored into White House policy-making? Factoring group interests into policy-making is especially important in domestic policy but is also significant for trade policy and policy in the Middle East. Relations, then, must be established and

maintained with the domestic and economic policy staffs as well as selected members of the National Security Council staff. Optimally, the White House factors group views into the front end of the policy-making process. There will also be an interest in using OPL as a way to organize briefings designed to explain an administration's policy rationales to group leaders.

To whom will public liaison report? If it is conceived as part of a coordinated communication policy, as has frequently been the case, there has been one answer. If OPL, on the other hand, is viewed as part of a coordinated congressional relations effort or as a foundation for the re-election campaign, another answer has prevailed.

ADVICE FROM FORMER OPL STAFF MEMBERS

OPL has existed for nearly thirty-five years and many of its alums are still active as successful lawyers, lobbyists, and political activists. Most are likely to agree to be interviewed by incoming administrations about their responsibilities (see Appendix). Although much time has passed and administrations may vary in how the staff is organized, many of the unit's basic features remain unchanged, as illustrated by the following quotes from Carter and Reagan staff members.

On striking a balance between advocacy and selling policy:

“Don't do casework . . . it'll eat you alive.”

On the shifting nature of staff assignments:

“[Assignments] changed all the time depending on what the issues were.”

On responsiveness to groups' needs:

“We never turned anybody down when they requested a meeting.”

On the value of assembling community leaders from outside Washington to a White House briefing:

“One can never diminish the power of the White House—it's very substantial. People cherish a White House invitation. . . . They remember it all their lives” (Wexler 1982).

On the importance of providing prior notification to Washington insiders:

“Uppermost in our minds was that you get a lot of help from people by recognizing what their own system rewards. A Washington representative for a company or association or an organization has its rewards; part of that is ‘information is power’—being the first to know as a representative of a company that is very much affected by a White House proposal—he would like to call the chairman of the company before he hears it on the news to say ‘Guess what, I was just at a briefing at the White House and this is what we'll see.’ So we were conscious of that and did a good job letting people know about things before they were announced” (Carter OPL staffer [Anonymous 1982a]).

On helping White House policy-makers anticipate political reactions within a community:

“I tried to sensitize those staffs as to what would be the political reaction within the Jewish community to certain issues.”

On tensions between the White House and the community represented by a staffer:

“It’s always pleasant when you have great support, here [the White House] and in the community. You don’t have it all the time” (Stein 1982).

On the allocation of time devoted to different constituencies:

“Whoever squeals the loudest is the one that gets the most attention.”

On the dominant White House strategy in working with groups:

“The strategies we have developed are based on trying to keep the [voting] coalition together. In a sense you have two coalitions, an electoral coalition and a governing coalition and they don’t always necessarily gel.”

On whether staff members consider themselves a “representative” of the demographic group they work with or a “contact”:

“They write directly to me. I’m their person in the White House. ‘Can I help them? Can I do this for them?’ Especially with ———, ‘You’re our man in the White House. You should be able to get a letter or a proclamation’ or something like that. And besides, there’s no departmental counterpart.”

On coordinating groups’ lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill:

“You’ve got to be very careful. . . . There are coalitions out there. They will meet and I’ll go over to meet with them and sometimes they meet here [in the White House]. . . . It’s really more of a conduit [for information] but we’re very careful not to do active lobbying because there are the anti-lobbying provisions that we’re subject to and we just can’t go out and tell a congressman to do this or do that” (Reagan OPL staffer [Anonymous 1982b]).

APPENDIX: OFFICE OF PUBLIC LIAISON DIRECTORS, NIXON TO OBAMA

Administration	Director
Obama	Paulette L. Aniskoff Jon Carson Christina M. (Tina) Tchen
G. W. Bush	Julie E. Cram Rhonda Keenum Lezlee Westine
W. J. Clinton	Mary Beth Cahill Minyon Moore Maria Echaveste Alexis Herman
G.H.W. Bush	David Demarest (briefly) Cecile Kremer Barbara (Bobbi) G. Kilberg
Reagan	Rebecca Range Mari Maseng Linda Gerst Chavez Faith Ryan Whittlesey Elizabeth Hanford Dole
Carter	Anne Wexler (Office of Public Outreach) Margaret (Midge) Costanza
Ford	William J. Baroody
Nixon	Charles M. Colson (pre-OPL)

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